International Relations Theory after the Cold War: China, the Global South and Non-state Actors

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Virtually every nation goes through critical junctures. These are usually milestones in a country's history that are momentous enough to fundamentally change the course of that country and, possibly, its relations with other countries. In the ensuing article I argue that theorizing International Relations has had developments similar to such critical junctures. I proceed further, in tandem with John Hogan (2006: 657) but for a different reason that more prominent conceptions of critical junctures "lack rigour, weakening our ability to define critical junctures." I argue that critical junctures need not be an instant when a seismic change is discerned. They could be a process that, with hindsight, could be a turning point in the history of a nation and the world.

In international politics, one event that could qualify as a critical juncture was Woodrow Wilson's idealism, as expressed through the establishment of the League of Nations. It was to a large extent shaped by the aspiration to create a world of internationally intersecting ideals that would stave off the specter of war. However, the resumption of war in 1939 injected another juncture in International Relations theory, one that claimed to acknowledge the inherent selfish nature of human beings and nations and that conflict was almost inevitable in a world of immanently self-interested players. Hans Morgenthau (1946: 1949) and E.H Carr defended this discernment of international relations, referred to as realism. However, realism has also come under scrutiny after the end of the Cold War and constructivism appears to be one of the biggest beneficiaries. However, there is a common thread that runs through all the tapestries and theories of international relations from the end of WWI to date; they are all driven by Western theorists and they look at nations as the basic units of analyzing international relations. This article attempts to demonstrate how this Western dominance is no longer the sole influence of international relations theory. The article does this by noting the advances, perhaps developments, of theorizing and analyzing international relations in the current international political system. The two main questions driving this piece could be framed thus: Firstly, what have been the major advances in IR theory since the end of the Cold War? Secondly who are likely to be the main players in shaping and advancing IR theory in the post-Cold War international political system?

The first section will look at the rise and embryonic influence of the global South in post-Cold War international relations and expose the waning appeal and dominance of Western monopoly on IR theory. The second section will be an outline of moral and cultural relativism in IR. It also manifests an activist variant of international relations. That section will be a tacit endorsement of Samuel Huntington's (1993) "clash of civilizations" thesis as the global South, with its different worldviews, is becoming an influence on an international system that has hitherto been dominated by Eurocentric worldviews, The first two sections will follow the cue of other IR theories because they accentuate the influence of states as units of IR analysis. The third section will then branch out and explore the growing influence of non-state actors on IR theory. The main claims of this article are as follows: firstly, western monopoly on dictating IR theory is slipping; secondly, new IR theories will be louder than ever in proffering relativist interpretations of divisive issues such as democracy and human rights; and thirdly, nations are no longer the sole authors of foreign policy and international relations and hence IR analysis will increasingly take cognizance of, or be influenced by, non-state actors.

Advances in the field of IR Theory

From the end of WWII to 1989, the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) sat atop the international pecking order as the global hegemons. Their competition drew what Winston Churchill called the Iron Curtain separating the West i.e. the United States and its North Atlantic Treaty Ocean (NATO) allies and the East, comprising the USSR and its allies. During the tussle of the Cold War, the developing world was largely ignored as a fount of ideological value. The importance of the developing world was instrumental. The hegemons used it as means of converting it to either of the camps or as a means of thwarting the influence of a rival superpower. In shaping theories of International Relations, realism was prominent, supported, as it was, by influential Western theorists. There is always a strong correlation between economic strength, military power and ideological influence. Where ideology is not accepted by smaller powers, bigger powers – with requisite wherewithal – are never shy to foist their worldviews on an unwilling player, with the ever-present threat of punishment in the absence of compliance. The proselytization of structural adjustment programs and neoliberal democracy towards the end of the Cold War are probably the most glaring examples of how military and economic heft can be used to promote and enforce ideology.

The end of the Cold War changed the global architecture in ways that are proving tectonic. The dissolution of the USSR left the United States as the undisputed hegemon. However, the emerging global order also created a niche for players that hitherto were on the fringes of shaping global politics. Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa seem to be the most prominent of emerging regional powers (Nkoana-Mashabane, 2009; Li and Zhang 2018). With the passage of time, these powers of the global South have augmented their influence in their respective regions, and their participation in groups such as the G20 and BRICS suggests that they envision themselves as emerging global leaders. In fact, in the case of China and India, Mthembu (2018) has argued that they have since defied the 'emerging power' moniker and have asserted themselves as 'southern powers.' This will have an impact on theorizing international relations because the global South has unique experiences and conditions which inevitably shapes its outlook on international relations.

Western monopoly over dictating the theorization of IR (see Carr 1956; Morgenthau 1946; Waltz 1979) is thus under threat, or at least is being joined by an emerging trend. The developing world is now an active and increasingly influential agent/actor in theorizing international relations. It is no longer a bystander or an ignored nonentity. This is so because theory is usually a product of lived experience. It is noteworthy that the pioneers in theory that challenge the rational/positivist theories have also come from the West. The names that come to mind are Robert Keohane (1989) and his differentiation between rationalism and reflectivism, and Alexander Wendt (1992; 1998; 1999) through his extensive work on constructivism. A crucial aspect of international relations where clashes are probable if not ineluctable between the age-old theorists and the new entrants is on human rights and democracy.

IR takes place in the social science sphere and one of the ontological assumptions of this piece dovetails with Steve Smith's (2004: 499) observation "that there can be no such thing as a value-free, non-normative social science." Even though the Western-oriented IR theory comes in the realist mold that is materially driven, it is also bent towards ideas of neoliberalism which entail freedoms of assembly, independent thinking and suffrage. Seen from this perspective, Western IR theory and behavior are tilted towards political activism. Furthermore, America, most especially, sees itself as carrying the messianic and missionary mandate to pontificate about the universal applicability of its values (Talbot, 2008; Kissinger, 2011). This, no doubt, stems from America's conviction that its values are superior. However, the growing amplitude of voices from the South will bring the American attitude into sharper scrutiny.

The social, political, economic and cultural experiences of the global South are markedly different from Western ones. Expectedly, this has always differentiated the worldviews of the developed world and the developing one. In *Clash of Civilizations*, Huntington argues that different cultural worldviews will be the main accelerants of conflict and discord in the post-Cold War international system. The rise of religious fundamentalism against the West, and difference in political outlook between the West and rest are formidable points of divergence in international relations. However, what will make these differences even sharper is that certain members of the developing world are becoming more influential. Western values of democracy and neo-liberal capitalism are not wholly shared by members of the developing world, chiefly among whom is China. In this area, the global South is likely to become even more implacable in its resistance to Western dominance. As a caveat, though, China seemingly appreciates the trappings of capitalist accumulation even though it is still loath to espouse the political system of many capitalist

societies. The brand of international relations that is emerging, with China as one of the main harbingers, is expected to accentuate the importance of alleviating the plight of the developing world. For this reason, interaction among nations will be expected to focus on matters such as improving the material needs of developing nations by building infrastructure and other key drivers of actual – that is economic – growth. Writers and scholars such as Zhang Weiwei (2011) and Dambisa Moyo (2009; 2012) have added impetus to this development.

IR will thus be more about material interests and this, in activist circles, will likely lead to calls for an IR theory that problematizes the meaning of growth and development. Those advocating for an IR of growth are enamored with the Chinese formula that has been very successful in igniting and maintain impressive economic growth. Those that call for development are more holistic in their approach in that, more than economic dividends, they also pursue political liberties as enjoyed by Western citizens. This divergence will likely pit different players, even within the developing world, against one another, and it is here where the voice of non-state actors, as active participants in influencing IR theory, comes in.

The Importance of Non-State Actors

Picking up from the previous section, state actors are more likely to emphasize the growth dimension of IR because it is readily observed by citizens on whom most governments in the developing world depend for votes. However, the rise of non-state actors in the form of influential advocacy and civil society organizations, multinational corporations, even terrorist organizations, betokens the emerging reality that while IR by its nature is assessed from state-level perspectives, states no longer enjoy the monopoly of governing the tenor of relations. Joseph V. Montville (1990) has written extensively about what has come to be known as track 2 diplomacy. Track 2 diplomacy is a type of diplomacy that does not necessarily involve state actors. In international relations, this is characterized by interaction among groups or individuals belonging to different countries. In both Orwellian, authoritarian and liberal states, leaders usually act in such a way that their actions will not provoke a public and popular avalanche of criticism against their tenancy of power. In authoritarian states, there is always a fear that individual initiatives by leaders, bereft of general consent, could not only be politically dangerous but could be personally fatal (Montville 1990: 163). In liberal and democratic states, leaders could forfeit popular support if their policies, decisions and actions do not chime with popular sympathies. For these reason, non-state actors enjoy latent power on state actions.

Track 2 diplomacy will become salient in IR theory in the developing world where there is increasing sub-national and non-state interaction. As an example, the burgeoning numbers of Chinese nationals in certain African countries has been a source of tension (Mohana and Tan-Mullins 2009; Sautman and Hairong 2009; Park 2013). Predictably, due to massive Chinese state involvement in Africa and the near certainty that Chinese numbers in Africa will continue growing, tension between Chinese and Africans, albeit at the level of non-state actors will command the attention of state actors and theorization of this emerging IR dimension among scholars. A few interesting possibilities are likely to play out. In as far as activists on international relations have been vocal in democratizing the international space, to the delight of controversial regimes from the developing world that take umbrage at Western censure, a more democratized international system is likely to compel activists to criticize errant regimes in the developing world that are at variance with what are considered as democratic norms. For this reason, IR theorization will possibly be a cocktail of factors with a clan of actors whose stance straddles and endorses both the age-old inklings of the Western world and theorists, but also of the developing world. Thus, theory, to the extent that it will be promulgated by non-state political activists, will be critical of Western theory if it does not take into consideration the dynamics of the developing world; but, this brand of theory will also be critical to leaderships and international relations in the developing world, if they do not endorse democratic ideals that go beyond economic progress.

Conclusion

The international system, the national players that construct and comprise it, and the players that in turn construct and comprise national players, are living organisms, capable of growth, change and death. This assumption is drawn from the argument that social systems do not have an objective existence, impervious to human agency and influence. It follows, then, that relations among nations, and the theory that at times drives these relations, will be a product of social dynamics. IR theory is changing because of changes in the fortunes of the players involved in those

relations. In terms of economic relations, the somewhat general consensus among players of consequence at both national and international level seems to be a reluctance endorsement of market economics. Political systems have also mostly shifted towards Western democracy, save for countries such as China. However, in the developing world, IR theory will develop in a manner that will accentuate intersecting standpoints, such as similar voting patterns at the United Nations and mutual suspicion towards the West, while eschewing divergent issues such as multiparty democracy as a lynchpin for international relations. Thus far, China has ensconced itself in the developing world by, ironically, presenting a seemingly democratic temperament that claims to respect the sovereignty of all nations and does not export its political template. This being said, the article acknowledges that though there are differences even among countries of the global South, their seemingly unified stance on IR theory at the global level will be driven by the most powerful South players such as China and India. Through soft power, minor players of the South will likely bandwagon with these players. Non-state actors will also likely influence IR theory in ways hitherto unknown because of the nascent international nature of political, cultural and economic interests that transcends national borders.

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