Interview – Saloni Kapur

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This interview is part of a series of interviews with academics and practitioners at an early stage of their career. The interviews discuss current research and projects, as well as advice for other early career scholars.

Saloni Kapur is Assistant Professor of International Studies in the Department of Social Sciences at FLAME University. Her research interests include critical security studies, international relations theory, and the politics of South and West Asia. Saloni holds a PhD in International Relations from Lancaster University, an MA in International Relations from the University of Warwick, and a BA in Economics from the University of Pune. Her PhD thesis utilised English School theory to explore the responsibility of the great powers towards insecurity in Pakistan. She is currently working on two research projects focused on relations between South and West Asia. She is the author of *Pakistan after Trump: Great Power Responsibility in a Multi-Polar World* and co-editor (with Simon Mabon) of *Securitisation in the Non-West*.

What (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking or encouraged you to pursue your area of research?

There have been several events and people who pushed me to start thinking about the political world in new ways and helped me to develop my critical thinking skills. Probably the most significant shift took place in 2001, when I was a student at the University of Minnesota, only two weeks into my undergraduate programme in Fisheries, Wildlife and Conservation Biology when the 9/11 attacks took place. The experience of being an Asian student in the United States during that traumatic time is the single-most important factor that led me to become interested in international relations, security, and terrorism.

Individuals who prompted important shifts in my thinking about international relations are Faisal Wani, my Kashmiri classmate at the Symbiosis College of Arts and Commerce in Pune after I abandoned my undergraduate programme in the United States and returned to India; Maja Zehfuss, who taught a course on poststructuralist international relations at the University of Warwick during my Master's programme; and Nauman Malik, a Pakistani government official who was my flatmate during my PhD programme at Lancaster University. All these individuals forced me to question my previous assumptions and challenge the dominant narratives I encountered in the media, among my friends, and within my family.

In your book *Pakistan after Trump: Great Power Responsibility in a Multi-Polar World*, you have used the concept of great-power responsibility to interpret insecurity in Pakistan. Why did you choose a normative approach for this research?

Several scholars within the social sciences, political science, international relations, and the English School have argued that there is a need for more normative and praxeological scholarship that actively pursues policy relevance. The idea is that political philosophers going back to Aristotle, Plato and Socrates saw political inquiry as fundamentally about ethics, about justice, and about how to attain a good life for citizens of a polity by putting in place the right kind of ruler or political system. However, as the social sciences have sought to imitate the natural sciences, they have distanced themselves from questions of policy, justice, and ethics to present themselves as rational and

scientific. Authors such as Bent Flyvbjerg, Jacques Derrida, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, John Gerring, Joshua Yesnowitz, and John Williams have argued powerfully in favour of nurturing and furthering the normative tradition of scholarship within the social sciences, political science, and the English School of international relations.

Furthermore, I situate myself as a critical indigenous qualitative researcher, drawing on Smith's work. This means that as a South Asian and an indigenous person of Pakistan, my research does not seek to fit into the Western mould of "objectively" studying the dark-skinned Other. Rather, I actively seek to benefit the objects of my research and explicitly pursue social justice through emancipatory research. This requires the adoption of a normative approach.

How can an English school approach enhance our understanding of security in Pakistan? Does this approach provide a Eurocentric lens through which to view South Asian politics?

The English School is a theoretical approach that is traditionally and inherently normative, despite efforts by recent scholars such as Barry Buzan to reinvent the school in structural terms. Order and justice are the two central aims of international life for Hedley Bull, and the great powers have special rights but also a special responsibility to help secure the international system. Furthermore, the English School's interlinked concepts of an international system, international society, and world society provide a fascinating way of understanding globalisation and the proliferation of non-state actors, including transnational terrorist groups, in our interconnected world. Buzan's work on world society opens the way to understand terrorists as social actors interacting with other actors through violent means.

The English School has sometimes been criticised as Eurocentric. It has been argued that the institutions of international society are institutions imposed by the West on the non-West. However, I agree with Yongjin Zhang's assessment that the shared norms, values, interests, and institutions of international society are in many ways a result of interaction and communication among different cultures through history. This suggests that non-Western states, including illiberal ones, have played a role in the negotiation of these shared values and norms, and history cannot be seen as a one-way street of Western domination and imperialism. Indeed, this is a view that denies the agency of non-Western states and peoples and represents an amnesia regarding world history prior to colonialism. Institutions such as law, human equality, and war cannot be seen as purely Western inventions since they have historically existed in various forms in other cultures. Furthermore, as Kwame Anthony Appiah provocatively puts it, "there is no such thing as western civilisation," since the ideas that are often associated with Western civilisation are ideas that were preserved by Muslim scholars in Asia while Europe underwent its so-called "Dark Ages."

In your book you write about the dehumanisation of terrorists in the official discourse on the "war on terror." How is this portrayed and what are the implications?

Richard Jackson, who has done crucial work in the field of critical terrorism studies, points to the dehumanisation, demonisation, and depersonalising of terrorists in the official discourse of the "global war on terror." This has entailed presenting them as "evil' and "crazy," as less than human, and de-politicising their goals by ignoring the politics within which terrorism is embedded. Colin Wight highlights this further by showing how terrorism scholarship after 9/11 has focused on psychological factors motivating terrorism while neglecting structural factors such as politics and history. My book uses the English School concept of world society to situate terrorists as social actors within Pakistani society who interact with other state and non-state actors through violence. I pay serious attention to the history of the evolution of terrorist groups and the politics underlying their rise after 9/11, including the terrorists' own discourses, which are powerfully captured by Mona Kanwal Sheikh in her book *Guardians of God*, as well as Jessica Stern in *Terror in the Name of God.* Finally, in terms of policy prescriptions, my book focuses on the army's terrorist rehabilitation programme as a "soft" counterterrorism approach that is as deserving of international aid as "hard" military operations.

What role can regional cooperation play in countering terrorism in South Asia?

My chapter on South Asia focuses on Pakistan, India and Afghanistan, whose security is interlinked due to the Kashmir conflict and the operation of transnational terrorists across the borders of these three states. These phenomena have their roots in decolonisation and the uncertain boundaries that postcolonial India and Pakistan were

born with, which led to long standing territorial disputes between Pakistan and India, Pakistan and Afghanistan, and India and China.

I use the English School's concept of international society to assess the strength of regional society in South Asia. This forms the basis for hypothesising on the potential for regional security cooperation. Surprisingly, I find that regional society is resilient, and that Pakistan, India and Afghanistan have consistently and repeatedly turned to the institutions of international society to seek to resolve their conflicts. This suggests that there is a strong institutional framework that could serve as the foundation for regional security cooperation if regional political leaders decide to embark on a process of peacebuilding and conflict resolution. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation provides a promising forum for counterterrorism cooperation mediated by Asia's great powers. Ultimately, contemporary terrorism is a transnational phenomenon that must be addressed through regional cooperation for counterterrorism measures to be successful. However, the pattern of securitisation, mutual mistrust, and counter-allegations that is embedded in security relations in the Pakistan-India-Afghanistan triangle is challenging to break due to history, geopolitics, religious differences, and ideological conflicts. De-securitisation would entail political leaders choosing to treat terrorism as a political issue with political roots and a political solution — i.e., taking it off the security agenda.

What are you currently working on?

I am currently working on two projects pertaining to relations between South and West Asia using regional security complex theory (RSCT). The first is a book I am co-editing with Umer Karim from the University of Birmingham that uses RSCT to explore the linkages between South Asia and the Arab Gulf states. The second is a special issue of the journal *Global Discourse* co-edited with Umer Karim as well as Simon Mabon from Lancaster University, which broadens the scope to study regional linkages between South Asia and the broader Middle East. These are exciting projects drawing in scholars from both regions (and beyond) to understand the implications of recent developments for interregional dynamics, including the reimposition of sanctions on Iran, India's rising power, and the United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan and waning interest in the Middle East.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars?

The most important advice I could give to young scholars is to value intuition and emotion as much as rational inquiry. As Flyvbjerg points out, intuition, experience and context are as important to research as analysis, rules, and rationality, and in fact intuitive knowing is a sign of mastery of a subject. Furthermore, normative questions of justice and ethics represent a balance between mind and heart that is critical to producing social scientific knowledge that has a positive impact on society. There is an exciting new body of research on emotions in international relations that seeks to incorporate affect and emotion into our understanding of international politics, conflict, and security. I would encourage young scholars to explore these fascinating new avenues of research within the field of international relations.