

## Global IR and Regional Worlds - Presidential Address to International Studies Association



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# **Global IR and Regional Worlds: A New Agenda for International Studies**

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It is a great pleasure for me to be back in the city of Toronto, where I lived for most of the 1990s to teach at York University. When I first arrived here, I was struck by the city's diversity, dynamism and cosmopolitanism... [M]y years in this great city were my first encounter with the global society that we live in.

But does our discipline, international relations, or international studies truly reflect that global society? To be sure, IR, once described by Stanley Hoffmann as an "American social science", is no longer so at least in the physical or geographic sense. Over the past decades, IR schools, departments, institutes and conventions have mushroomed around the world.

But our discipline still needs to overcome a central challenge.

To elaborate, let me go back a bit in history. In the year 1800 AD, the Marquis of Wellesley, the Governor-General of British India, set up a college in Fort William, in what is known today as Kolkata, the hub of the new British empire in India. The objective was to give young company civil servants "better instruction...in such branches of literature, science, and knowledge" that is "requisite for the good government and stability of the British Empire in India, and for the maintenance of the interests and honour of the Honourable the East Indian Company".

Among the subjects to be taught at the college were native Indian languages, and the rules and regulations of the company. The College was also to teach the “true and sound principles” of the British constitution and other curricula similar to that used for educating persons “destined for high office in Europe.”

Wellesley wanted to make the Fort William College the ‘Oxford of the East’, and its faculty the “interpreters of oriental civilization”.

In reality, the faculty of the college fell into “two separate categories”: the British Sahibs and the native Munshis. The Munshis, a Persian designation for native teachers, were needed principally to teach local languages, customs and the “history and antiquities” of India.

As a history of the college by Bernard Cohn notes, “There was...respect and some amicability in the relations between the two categories of persons, but it was the British who set the agenda and who had the authoritative voice in determining what was useful knowledge.”

The role assigned to the Munshis -and their Hindu colleagues, the Pundits- at Fort William was not only to act as teachers, but also as “informants”. According to another account of the college, “The Indian scholar knew he was superior to his European Master in respect of Indian languages, [but] he was primarily an informant, a mere tool in the exercise of language teaching...”

The College of Fort William did not survive. In 1805, the Directors of the British East India Company decided to set up another college to train colonial civil servants, not in India, but in Haileybury, England. The Fort William College itself went on for a few decades as a rump, but was finally closed down in 1854.

To many people outside the West, the history of IR would seem like a replay of the world of the Sahibs and the Munshis at Fort William. To be sure, in teaching and research, there has been a great deal of interaction between Western and non-Western scholars and institutions. But it is the universities, scholars and publishing outlets in the West that have dominated and set the agenda. IR scholarship has regarded the non-Western world as a place for “cameras”, rather than “thinkers”, and used it for fieldwork and theory-testing, rather than to look for indigenous ideas and approaches.

I do not imply that this particular underdevelopment of IR is entirely the product of Western intellectual neocolonialism. Much responsibility lies with the economic and political conditions in the developing world. Conditions such as scarce resources, political interference and lack of freedom of expression have also stunted the development of IR as a global discipline. But we the IR community also bear responsibility for this state of affairs.

Peter Katzenstein has observed that “The main event of the 20<sup>th</sup> century may well have been decolonization, rather than World War I and II, despite the unspeakable horrors they brought the world over.” Yet, how much of IR texts and theory is woven around the realities of colonization and decolonization, as opposed to the workings of the European international order, the ascent of the United States, and the Cold War?

IR as a discipline has neither fully accounted for, nor come to terms with colonialism and its legacy. We in the IR community are complicit in the marginalization of the postcolonial world in developing the discipline.

Let me pose a few questions:

Why do we view the Cold War as “long peace?” Because the hundreds of conflicts and millions of lives lost in the battle-deaths during the Cold War took place outside Europe, in the so-called Third World?

Why do we ignore colonial wars, or the so-called extrasystemic conflicts, in assessing the evidence on democratic peace theory, when there is compelling evidence that these extrasystemic wars have been fought by mainly by democracies?

When considering the ideas that have shaped international relations thinking, why do we make so much of Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke and Kant, but not Ashoka, Kautilya, Sun Tzu, Ibn Khaldun, Jawaharlal Nehru, Raul Prebisch or Franz Fanon and many others from the developing world?

Examples of ethnocentrism and exclusion in IR like these are many and increasingly well-known.

As I said earlier, IR as a subject of study is expanding and generating lots of excitement around the world. [Take, for example, the Annual Indian International Studies Convention in New Delhi in December 2013. With some 300 papers and 70 panels this was not a meeting to set up an Indian School of IR, but to discuss issues and themes of IR around the globe, covering all regions and all topics, in a way that could mirror any ISA convention albeit in a microcosm.

Yet, despite IR’s growing popularity, its dominant narratives, theories and methods fail to correspond to the increasingly global distribution of its subjects. Distinctions between West and Rest may be blurring in material terms but these are yet to fully register in the way IR is studied, published, discoursed, and located in terms of centers of learning.

How do we address this gap?

In a project undertaken nearly a decade ago, a group of scholars, led by Barry Buzan and myself, asked the question: “why is there no non-Western international relations theory?” The project explored the reasons for the underdevelopment of IRT outside of

the West, including cultural, political, and institutional factors viewed against the “hegemonic” status of established IRTs.

The project also identified some of the possible sources of non-Western IRT, including but not limited to indigenous history and culture, the ideas of nationalist leaders, distinctive local and regional interaction patterns, and the writings of scholars of distinction working in or about the region.

Subsequent debates on the state of IR in Asia, Africa, Latin America and other parts of the world have taken up and further developed these critiques and suggestions.

But the Non-Western IR Theory idea has also sparked controversy. Some would rather call the new project “post-Western,” with a more radical agenda to disavow and displace the existing “Western” IR.

I regard “non-Western” or “post-Western” as part of a broader challenge reimagining IR as a global discipline. I call this project Global IR.

The Global IR project transcends the distinction between West and non-West. While these categories might persist as terms of convenience, they lose analytical significance in the world of global IR.

It is also obvious that in using the term Global IR, I am not calling for renaming the discipline. So much for so long has been written of and about International Relations, that it can perhaps now claim to be a “heritage site” that in my view is worth preserving. Yet Global IR is not the same as traditional IR as we know it.

Broadly stated, the idea of Global IR revolves around the six main dimensions:

1. It is founded upon a pluralistic universalism: not ‘applying to all’, but recognizing and respecting the diversity in us
2. It is grounded in world history, not just Greco-Roman, European or US history
3. It subsumes, rather than supplants existing IR theories and methods
4. It integrates study of regions, regionalisms and area studies
5. It eschews exceptionalism
6. It recognizes multiple forms of agency beyond material power: including resistance, normative action, local constructions of global order

Let me briefly elaborate on each of these.

First and foremost, Global IR calls for a new understanding of universalism or universality. The dominant meaning of universalism in IR today is what I would call a monistic universalism, in the sense of "applying to all". It corresponds closely to Enlightenment universalism. As Robert Cox put it "In the Enlightenment meaning universal meant true for all time and space – the perspective of a homogenous reality."

And this universalism also had a dark side: the suppression of diversity and justification of European imperialism. In IR theory and method, such universalism has been pursued as a way of much arbitrary standard setting, gatekeeping and marginalizing of alternative narratives, ideas and methodologies.

Cox offers an alternative conception of universalism, which rests on "comprehending and respecting diversity in an ever changing world." This universalism rejects the false and politically-inspired dichotomy between universalism and relativism. The opposite of monistic universalism is not relativism, but pluralism. Pluralistic universalism views IR as a discipline with multiple, global foundations.

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. Global IR recognizes the voices, experiences and values of all people in all parts of the world

But "bringing the Rest in" does not mean simply using the non-Western world as a testing ground to revalidate existing IRTs 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 applying 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 recognize 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 in the forefront of efforts to recognize events, issues, agents and interactions outside the West and drawing theoretical insights from them to enrich the study of IR.

Realism, always ahead of Liberalism in drawing insights from the non-Western world, has added new variants: subaltern realism, neo-classical realism, and defensive realism. These have rendered realism more relevant to the non-Western world.

Constructivism has been especially important in opening space for scholarship on the non-Western world because of its stress on culture and identity.

Increasing trends towards economic interdependence, multilateral institutions and democratization, pathways to order that Liberalism identifies and prescribes, make that theory potentially more applicable to 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 civilizations 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 behavior that do exist in different local contexts, such that 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, to have Global IR as the designation of the field does not mean diminishing the importance of regions, regionalisms as well as the contribution of area studies. Instead, Global IR gives center stage to regions. While the world is not being fragmented into regions, it is also not moving inexorably towards a seamless globality.

Regions are no longer viewed as fixed physical, cartographic or cultural entities, but as dynamic, purposeful and socially constructed spaces. Regionalism today is less territorially based or state centric and encompasses an ever widening range of actors and issues. The traditional divide between regionalism and universalism may be breaking down.

The study of regions is not just about the how regions self-organize their economic, political and cultural space, but also about how they relate to each other shape global order. In addition, focusing on regions is central to forging a close integration between disciplinary approaches and area studies.

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 questionable not just because of the cultural and political diversity within nations and regions. Such claims are also 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”, which are rightly associated with authoritarianism.

Similarly, exceptionalism in IR often justifies the dominance of the big powers over the weak. American exceptionalism, seemingly benign and popular at home, can be associated with the Monroe Doctrine and its self-serving global interventionism. One strand of Japan's pre-war pan-Asian discourse which was founded upon the slogan of "Asia for Asians", also illustrate this tendency. Efforts to invoke the unique Chinese tributary system as the basis of a new Chinese School of IR are pregnant with similar possibilities.

While the development of national schools of IR can broaden and enrich IR, if based mainly on exceptionalism, it is a challenge to the possibility of Global IR. [Deleted during delivery- While identity-based knowledge, like the knowledge of the Munshis and their Hindu colleagues, the Pundits at Fort William College, deserve their place, it is also not a substitute for comparative and broader understandings of the local context.]

Finally, global IR takes a broad conception of agency. [Deleted from delivery -Various IR theories have denied the agency claims of the non-Western societies.]

Not so long ago, agency in international relations was viewed primarily in terms of a 'standard of civilization' 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 and ahistorical [Deleted from delivery - 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 civilizations.

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 [Deleted from delivery - including postcolonialism and dependency schools] actually thrived on this presumed marginality. They rightly criticized mainstream theories for excluding the South, but did little exploration of the alternative forms of agency in the South, since recognizing that agency might risk undermining the central part of their narrative.

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. It can describe acts of resistance to and localization of global norms and institutions. Agency also means constructing new rules and institutions at the local level to support and strengthen global order against great power hypocrisy and dominance. Agency means conceptualising and implementing new pathways to development, security and ecological justice.

Let me offer a few quick examples. Sovereignty was redefined and broadened at the Asia-Africa Conference in Bandung. Africa created a form of regionalism to maintain

postcolonial boundaries. India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, was the first to propose nuclear test-ban.

Some of these acts of agency are not just for specific regions or for the South itself, but are important to the global governance as a whole. Recent research shows that non-Western countries played a major role in crafting Bretton Woods institutions and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as well as global disarmament norms. The ideas of human development and human security were pioneered by South Asian development economists. The idea of 'Responsibility to Protect', usually attributed to a Canadian-sponsored commission, owes to the concept of "responsible sovereignty" developed under an African expert, Francis Deng, who was generalizing partly from an African context.

From climate change negotiations, we see the developing countries offering the idea of the "common but differentiated responsibility" norm.

Using this broader framework of agency, we can find that the South has had a voice, that the "subaltern could indeed speak" and act, even if IR theories ignore them. The idea of 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.

Lack of time and space precludes me from giving some detailed illustration of how the global IR approach might shape research. In the published version of my speech, I will elaborate on this theme further. *But I urge scholars of global IR to:*

- *Discover new patterns, theories and methods from world histories*
- *Analyze changes in the distribution of power and ideas after 500 years of Western dominance*
- *Explore regional worlds in their full diversity and interconnectedness*
- *Engage with subjects and methods that require deep and substantive integration of disciplinary and area studies knowledge*
- *Examine how ideas and norms circulate between global and local levels*
- *Investigate how civilizations learn from (not clash with) each other; there is plenty of historical evidence*

In his well-known 1963 commencement speech at my university, the American University in Washington, D.C., President John F. Kennedy said: "if we cannot end now our differences, at least we can help make the world safe for diversity." Three decades later, Nelson Mandela echoed Kennedy by committing himself to the promotion of



“institutions and forces that, through democratic means, seek to make the world safe for diversity.”

The study of international relations should not obscure, but celebrate the differences among its different theoretical, epistemological and methodological approaches. But in so doing it should also strive for greater respect for diversity in our knowledge sources and claims, historical experiences, beliefs and approaches about world order. The challenge is not just to make the study of IR “safe” for diversity but also be enriched by that diversity.

My fellow members of ISA, the IR of Sahib and Munshis is over. The time for Global IR has come. At the New Orleans Convention in 2015, I invite you to debate the project of Global IR and help move our discipline to a new frontier. [Deleted from delivery- Together we must ensure that the Global IR project does not suffer the fate of the Fort William College in British India.] I express my deepest gratitude to all of you for giving me the opportunity to lead our association at this momentous time of challenge and change. Thank you for your attention.

Posted 30th July 2015 by [Amitav Acharya](#)