

Imagining a Global IR Out of India

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ABSTRACT The global order is fast-changing; the field of International Relations (IR), less so. Despite the rise of other countries in economic and geopolitical terms, the field of IR continues to be dominated by the West and its theories, methods and policy concerns. The idea of 'Global IR' proposed in this brief aims to make the field more inclusive and universal. After outlining the major elements of a Global IR paradigm, the brief suggests that Indian IR can make a vital contribution to Global IR. But the temptation to develop an "Indian School of IR", mimicking the "Chinese School of IR", must be resisted. Rather, India can make a more significant contribution by rejecting singularity and refraining from becoming a legitimising device for the official foreign policy of India.

INTRODUCTION

Pundits and policymakers have described the changing global order in a variety of ways: "multipolar," "polycentric," "nonpolar," "neopolar," "apolar," "post-American" and "G-zero." There is little agreement on what the future holds, and it will not be an overstatement to point out that all these labels verge on speculation and controversy.

The one thing that scholars agree on is that the unipolar moment is largely over. Whether

the "American-led liberal hegemonic order," as Princeton scholar John Ikenberry puts it, is going to wither away is still heavily debated. Ikenberry and other scholars believe that the order that America built will survive and may even co-opt its potential challengers.¹ However, as this author has argued in *The End of American World Order*,² the American-led liberal hegemonic order is coming to an end, whether the US itself is in decline or not.

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REDEFINING 'LIBERAL ORDER'

The liberal order is in decline not because the emerging powers have not benefitted from it, but because they no longer want to support it in its present form, which they deem to be unjust, unilateral and exclusionist. While some features of the liberal order will likely remain (relatively open economies, multilateral institutions, the advance of democracy), its institutional structures, leadership and management will have to change. The new order will not be an American hegemony. Indeed, it will be no one's hegemony.

Instead, there is likely to be what can be called a “multiplex world,” like a multiplex cinema. The term 'multiplex' is defined as “a complex that houses several movie theatres.” In a multiplex, there are several movies being screened in different theatres in a single complex: thrillers, with violence, crime, ruggedness and heroism; drama, with passion, tragedy, song and dance. In addition to mainstream movies, there is plenty of scope for “indie” films too, or independent cinema that is produced by smaller production outfits and not monolith studios. No single director or producer can monopolise the audience's attention or loyalty. In re-imagining the global order today, the world is shifting towards a similar multiplex model.

The liberal hegemony is like watching one movie at a time in one theatre, wherein one country has monopoly. In the multiplex world, on the other hand, the management of order is diversified and decentralised, with the involvement of established and emerging powers, middle powers, global and regional

institutions, corporations, and transnational non-state actors. The latter includes heroes such as norm entrepreneurs who promote human rights and environmental protection, and villains such as al-Qaeda, drug lords, human traffickers and villainous corporations.

In a multiplex world, there will be hits and flops, e.g., emerging powers fading away because of middle-income traps, domestic instability or prolonged regional conflict. India, China, Russia, Brazil, each have such a potential. The US hegemony may continue to dominate the box office for a while, but the audience will likely lose interest, especially when faced with more choices. Leadership in a multiplex world is plural and is conducted in different styles and modes. Yet, being under one complex ensures that they share a common architecture and are in an interdependent relationship with each other. Just as security screening in a multiplex cinema is done at the entrance to the entire complex, in a multiplex world, common security mechanisms must be at play.

THE NEW WORLD ORDER AND THE STATE OF I.R. STUDIES IN INDIA

What does a multiplex world mean for international relations/studies in India? A multiplex world requires a different conception of international relations (IR).³ In the discussion of the state of IR in India, one JNU contributor,⁴ Kanti Bajpai, states that India led the developing world, specifically Asia, in IR studies from 1947 to the late 1980s. However, since then, it has lost ground to China, Korea and Japan. He lists “five key

obstacles” to the advancement of IR in India, including “the neglect of theory; the failure to define a series of animating puzzles, problematiques and problem-solving agendas; the lack of methodological training; the quality of teaching; and the mismanagement of professional life.”

Another JNU scholar, Amitabh Mattoo, is even more scathing about the state of Indian IR. In his view, “There have been, of course, and continue to be, islands of excellence and inspiration, but these are overwhelmed by mediocrity that seem to define the discipline as it exists today.” While, according to Bajpai, the stagnation of Indian IR is due to problems peculiar to the discipline and its scholars, Mattoo's diagnosis holds responsible the institutional factors that plague Indian higher-education system as a whole.

As with the causes of the stagnation, or even the decline of Indian IR, there have been numerous discussions about the possible remedies. Some remedies are institutional and call for increased resources and funding, while others demand conceptual shifts. The most suggested remedies stress the need for the Indian IR community to take a greater interest in theoretical work. T.V. Paul emphasises on the “need for rigorous theory-driven and theory-informed scholarship;” Navnita Behera has explored several specific classical and contemporary sources of theory development;⁵ and Siddharth Mallavarapu has encouraged Indian scholars to “build on existing paradigms and develop new critical ones.”

The underdevelopment of Indian IR and the ways to redress them have been well-discussed by others. However, there has not been much discussion on the overarching

direction the field of IR in India should take. Drawing upon the theme of the author's impending presidency of the International Studies Association, this paper proposes what can be called “Global IR.”

WHAT IS GLOBAL I.R.?⁶

In a project launched a decade ago and published in 2007 in the *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, a group of scholars addressed the question: “Why is there no non-Western international-relations theory?” Three aspects of that project's legacy remain highly relevant to the theme of the convention. First, the project argued that the main theories of IR are too deeply rooted in, and beholden to, the history, intellectual tradition and agency claims of the West to accord little more than a marginal place to those of the non-Western world. Second, it explored the reasons for the underdevelopment of IR theory outside of the West, which include cultural, political and institutional factors when viewed against the “hegemonic” status of established IR theories. Third, the project identified some of the possible sources of non-Western IR theories, including 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 China and India (and Asia, more generally) have taken up and further developed the aspects addressed in the project.

The naming, if not the intent and substance, of the Non-Western International Relations Theory approach has caused some

controversy. While some would rather call the new project “post-Western,” with a more radical agenda to disavow the existing “Western” IR, it is prudent to view both “non-Western” and “post-Western” as part of a broader challenge of reimagining IR as a global project, i.e., the Global IR project. In using the term “Global IR,” the focus is not on renaming the discipline. So much for so long has been written of and about IR that it has now become like a “heritage site,” which deserves to be preserved. However, Global IR is different from traditional IR. Broadly, the idea of Global IR encompasses six major aspects.

First, Global IR is inclusive. It calls for IR to be more authentically grounded in world history—instead of only Western history—and in the ideas, institutions, intellectual perspectives and practices of both Western and non-Western societies. However, “bringing the rest in” does not mean simply using the non-Western world as a testing ground to revalidate Western-derived IR theories after a few adjustments and extensions. Global IR must be a two-way process. A key challenge for Global IR theories and theorists 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.

Second, Global IR does not merely supplant Western theories; it subsumes them. In dealing with the non-Western world, IR theories are hardly monolithic or unchanging. Constructivism has been especially important in opening spaces for scholarship in the non-Western world because of its stress on culture and identity. New variants of realism —subaltern realism,

neo-classical realism, defensive realism—have rendered realism more relevant to the non-Western world. Increasing trends towards economic interdependence, multilateral institutions and democratisation—pathways to order that liberalism identifies and prescribes—make that theory potentially more applicable in the non-Western world. At the same time, Global IR also affects the mainstream theories, i.e., realism, liberalism and constructivism. It urges them to rethink their assumptions and extend their scope. For realism, the challenge is to look beyond national interest and the distribution of power, and acknowledge other determinants of foreign policy and world order. For liberalism, 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, and 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 and as yet unrealised challenge.

Third, Global IR emphasises the importance of regions, regionalisms and the contribution of area studies. Currently, although the world is not fragmenting into regions, it is not moving inexorably towards a seamless globality either. A Global IR calls for the acknowledgement of regional diversity and agency. Regions should not be viewed in material terms or as fixed geographic or cultural entities, but as dynamic, purposeful

and socially constructed spaces. Regionalism, today, is less territorial 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 how the regions organise their economic, political and cultural space, but also about how they relate to other physical and ideational spaces and shape the global order. Moreover, the study of regions is central to forging a close integration between disciplinary approaches and area studies.

Fourth, Global IR calls for a new understanding of universalism or universality. The dominant meaning of universalism is “applying to all.” It is the “perspective of a homogenous reality.” This is the essence of Enlightenment universalism, whose dark side was the suppression of diversity and the justification of European imperialism. Robert Cox's alternative understanding of universalism, which is more suited under Global IR, involves “comprehending and respecting diversity in an ever-changing world.”⁷ This is syncretic universalism, as later argued in this paper, that blends well with the Indian tradition.

Fifth, a truly Global IR cannot be based solely or mainly 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 in IR are questionable, not only because of the cultural and political diversity within nations and regions but also because such claims are frequently associated with the political agendas and purposes of a ruling elite, as evident in concepts such as

“Asian values” or “Asian human rights” or “Asian democracy,” all of which are rightly associated with authoritarianism. Similarly, exceptionalism in IR justifies the dominance of the big powers over the weak. US 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, founded upon the conception of “Asia for Asians,” illustrates this tendency. China's evoking of the tributary system is pregnant with similar possibilities, since the pacific nature of the system remains contested. While the development of national schools of IR can broaden and enrich IR if based mainly on exceptionalism, they are a challenge to the possibility of Global IR.

Finally, Global IR takes a broad conception of agency in global order-building. For a long time, IR theory denied the agency of non-Western countries. This was and remains true not just of the mainstream theories, but also of the critical theories including post-modernism, postcolonialism and dependency theories. The mainstream theories started out as deeply ethnocentric. For them, the South was marginal, the object, not the subject of the games that nations play. The critical theories, on the other hand, thrive on this marginality. They criticise mainstream theories for ignoring the South, but do little to explore the agency of the South, since that would undermine their central narrative. However, neither approach was right as both took a narrow view of agency. Agency, especially in building global and regional orders, can be both material and ideational. It can be exercised at a global level as well as regional and local levels. It can take multiple forms and

can describe acts of resistance to and localisation of global norms and institutions. Agency also means constructing new rules and institutions to support and strengthen global order, and conceptualising and implementing new pathways to development, security and ecological justice. Under this broader framework, the South has a voice and the subaltern can speak. And it has done so. For instance, Latin American states led the creation of the global human rights norms; India and China were on the forefront of creating development norms; sovereignty was redefined and broadened at Bandung; Africa created a form of regionalism to maintain postcolonial boundaries; and India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, was the first to propose a nuclear-test ban.

Some of these acts of agency are not just for those regions or for the South itself, but are important to the global governance as a whole. From climate-change negotiations, we see the example of the “common but differentiated responsibility” norm. South Asians pioneered the ideas of human development and human security. The idea of “responsibility to protect,” usually attributed to a Canadian-inspired commission, actually has a strong African lineage. Its concept originated in the “responsible sovereignty,” attributed to an African diplomat, Francis Deng.

The idea of Global IR gives a central role to the voices and agency of the South, to Southern perspectives on global order and to North–South relations. Exploring agency using this broader framework is an exciting and productive task. IR has a multiple and global heritage that must be acknowledged and promoted. The Global IR perspective is

inclusive in every sense, across the traditionally understood but increasingly blurred East–West and North–South lines. And it is this conception of Global IR that the Indian academic and policy community should turn to.

GLOBAL I.R. & INDIA'S UNIVERSALISM

India is an inclusive nation. It does not have a very unique or exceptionalist culture. India is rich in traditions, history, ideas and practices that constitute a key source for Global IR. These ideas and institutions have proven to be highly exportable and compatible with the cultures and norms of other societies. The country is a veritable microcosm of world history, more universalist in its cultural and civilisational ethos than many other cultures. Due to its geography, history and culture, a syncretic universalism thrives in India. India has received ideas and culture as much as it has given them to others. In the past, Indian ideas found their way to South East Asia and Central Asia. A powerful example of syncretic universalism is Sufism, seen, for instance, at the Dargah of Nizamuddin in Old Delhi.


It is, therefore, unsurprising that there is little movement towards an Indian school of IR. This is in marked contrast to the growing demand for a Chinese school of IR. The Chinese school is based on Confucianism, Tianxia (“all under heaven”), the tributary system and other very distinctive elements of Chinese civilisation, politics and mode of interactions with the outside world. These have limited relevance for its neighbourhood, which makes the idea of a Chinese school inadequate. This is also one of the key limitations of Chinese

power. While China is materially growing more powerful, it does not offer an exportable and attractive ideology for others.

What about India? Some argue that Indian IR should develop by focusing on the rise of India, including the distinctive concerns and status that come with it, just as Chinese scholars are creating a Chinese school of IR that focuses, among other things, on the “peaceful rise” of China. While some of this is understandable and inevitable, pushing this as the central basis of Indian IR would be a terrible intellectual mistake.

As with its history, Indian domestic politics and foreign policy resonate with universalistic norms. India is a democracy, unlike China. There have been powerful voices against narrow forms of nationalism—closely related to exceptionalism—in India. Tagore was a leading example of such universalist ethos. Most, though not all, of India's post-war leaders accepted values of political liberalism

and security universalism. Nehru was the developing world's most articulate critic of ideological blocs, and a key defender of the UN and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Scholars have interpreted Indian non-alignment as both realism and idealism, but often forget that it also proved highly exportable to so many countries around the world. If Indian foreign policy was exceptionalist, then so many countries would not have accepted non-alignment. The Indian IR community should unabashedly embrace and promote this syncretic or pluralistic universalism, instead of creating a distinct Indian school of IR. If it does so, the country can be a rich source for the development and advancement of Global IR. The Global IR approach is especially important in avoiding the trap of exceptionalism and parochialism, as Indian IR strives to overcome its past limitations. 

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ENDNOTES

1. John Ikenberry, *The Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).
2. Amitav Acharya, *The End of American World Order* (Cambridge, UK: The Polity Press, 2014, 2nd edition 2018). See also, Amitav Acharya, "After Liberal Hegemony: The Advent of a Multiplex World," *Ethics and International Affairs*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (Fall 2017), 271-285. <https://www.ethicsandinternationalaffairs.org/2017/multiplex-world-order/>
3. I use "international studies" and "international relations" interchangeably, although I am mindful of the difference. "International studies" is a wider conception that also stresses the contribution of area studies.
4. The references to Bajpai, Mattoo, Paul and Mallavarapu are their articles in the Special Section of *International Studies* 46, nos. 1-2 (2009). These essays were initially presented at a workshop held at JNU.
5. "Reimagining IR in India," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* (Special Issue on "Why is there no Non-Western IR Theory," eds. Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan) 7, no. 3 (2007).
6. For further elaboration of Global IR, see: Amitav Acharya, "Global International Relations (IR) and Regional Worlds: A New Agenda for International Studies," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol.58, No.4 (2014): 647-59. (This article is an expanded version of my Presidential Address to the International Studies Association Annual Convention in Toronto, March 26-29, 2014). Available at: <https://academic.oup.com/isq/article/58/4/647/1807850>
7. Robert W. Cox, "Universality in International Studies: A Historicist Approach," in *The Essence of Millennial Reflections on International Studies: Critical Perspective*, eds. Michael Brecher and Frank P. Harvey (University of Michigan Press), 53.



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