

## Indian International Relations Studies: The Need for Integration with Global Scholarship

T.V. PAUL

**ABSTRACT** This article makes a case for increased engagement of India's scholars of international relations (IR), especially of the theoretical variety, with the global IR community. While India has increasingly been integrating itself in global economic and political orders, its IR scholarship is yet to become truly global. This article outlines the structural and domestic-level causes for the relative absence of theoretical IR works in India while arguing for rigorous theory-driven and theory-informed scholarship.

### INTRODUCTION

India is seeking a major power status in the international system and may well have made some progress. Yet the study of International Relations (IR) remains somewhat rudimentary and the IR scholarship is one of the least valued enterprises in Indian society. Only a few books or articles written by IR scholars from India have gained the attention of IR theorists or foreign-policy analysts globally. These are mostly those that deal with issues such as the India–Pakistan conflict, nuclear proliferation and deterrence.<sup>1</sup> Expatriate Indian scholars, especially in North America, have fared better.

However, this potential, too, has not been fully realised as native Indian scholars rarely cite or discuss their works. Unlike their compatriots in the hard sciences and economics, Indian IR scholars seldom publish through reputed global venues. In the areas of theory, both paradigm-driven and puzzle-driven works somehow elude Indian scholarship. While India has numerous universities and academic institutions devoted to political science and IR, the conditions of many of these social science departments and the scholarly works conducted in them are relatively poor. This is

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quite different from India's premier scientific and hard-science research institutions such as the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs), Indian Institute of Science (IISc) and other government and private R&D facilities and technology parks.

What explains the discrepancy between India's global ambitions and achievements, and the state of its IR discipline? This brief argues that a key reason is the low level of interaction between Indian IR and global IR, especially in the area of theory.<sup>2</sup> For any discipline, whether it is in social sciences or natural sciences, relevant scholarly debates are built around theory and theoretical approaches and paradigms. These debates, in turn, form the basis for empirical works, especially of the case study variety as hypotheses and propositions are often drawn from such theories. The brief argues for the need for Indian IR scholars to develop theoretical and theory-informed scholarship by linking their works with leading global theoretical scholarship in IR. Such a transition is necessary for lifting Indian IR to global standards and is commensurate with India's emerging position as a global power.

## WHY THEORY IS IMPORTANT

In any social science discipline, there are different values assigned to generic knowledge, largely developed in theories, as against pure policy-relevant ideas. Most disciplines have both applied and theoretical branches, with ideas developed in the latter having little immediate application. However, without theory, there can be no "discipline," be it in social sciences or in physical/natural sciences.

Theories, and models built around them, are replicas of reality, and no theory can or

should explain everything. Therefore, even if the current theoretical knowledge of some phenomenon is weak, it does not warrant abandoning the theoretical enterprise altogether. Theoretical ideas take time to embed themselves, as abstract ideas need intermediaries to convert them into practical propositions. Theoretical works allow accumulation of knowledge, and they offer a long shelf life to academic works, whereas publications based on pure policy analysis can become dated even before they appear in print. Moreover, good theories cannot develop in isolation from each other. Often, new theoretical paradigms emerge as criticisms of or alternatives to older ones. Most disciplines tend to have some core theoretical arguments that reflect the time and socio-cultural milieu of its prominent scholars. However, the theories that last are those that can transcend time and space, and have a broader international appeal.

A frequent criticism against theory in IR is that theory tends to be irrelevant to policy. While such criticism may be justified to a certain degree, it is not altogether well founded. Although IR is a young discipline, it has produced many theoretical ideas and findings from which policymakers have benefitted. Policymakers often draw on academic ideas from IR without realising that they were developed in the theoretical branch of the discipline. The democratic peace theory, balance of power theory, deterrence theory and the concept of "soft power" are only some examples. The latter is now part of the lexicon of policy analysis in many countries including India, and a former Canadian foreign minister even made it part of his country's foreign-policy approach without acknowledging the original proposer of the concept, Harvard Professor Joseph Nye.

Alexander George has argued that the theory–policy divide is due to the conflict between the two cultures, i.e., academics have a relaxed time frame, while policymakers have to act with imperfect information and often rely on intuitive judgment. He argues that “good theories provide relevant and useful conceptual frameworks by means of which to understand the general requirements of strategy and the general logic associated with its effective employment. Such theoretical–conceptual knowledge is critical for policy making. And as a matter of fact, all policymakers make use of some such theory and conceptual frameworks, whether consciously or not.”<sup>3</sup> George has identified policy-relevant theory, which he regards as “the type of knowledge needed for what historians used to refer as statecraft.”<sup>4</sup> George’s ideas are relevant to Indian IR as well.

## WHY IS THEORY-BASED IR WEAK IN INDIA?

This section outlines the causes for the weak state of Indian IR and offers some remedies, especially on how to link up Indian IR scholarship to global IR while retaining its distinctiveness. The answers lie in the multifaceted challenges in the field of IR in India.

### Constraints

**Global/Structural:** IR scholarship, especially IR theory, does not receive due importance in India because of a perception that IR is a Western or an American discipline. There is a historical reason for this. The pioneers of IR studies in India did not pay much attention (and were even antipathetic) to IR theory developed in the West. There was a patent lack of government support for high-calibre social

science research, except in economics.<sup>5</sup> The newly independent nation was focused on how to develop a scientific and technological base as quickly as possible. Many of the premier science and technology institutions were established during the reign of India’s first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, who held an avowed interest in making India a leading scientific nation, and through that, a global power.<sup>6</sup> Yet, this keen interest was missing when it came to the social sciences. For over 17 years, Nehru conducted foreign policy largely on his own,<sup>7</sup> with the help of selected officials, ignoring the need to develop a scholarly community of international stature, partly because such a community was not easily available.<sup>8</sup> Nehru’s stance may also have been due to his antipathy to “realism,” the dominant Western IR paradigm prevalent at that time, and the ideas underlying it, e.g., geopolitics, alliances, and balance of power, which he vehemently attacked in his writings and speeches. To Nehru, realism was akin to imperialism and colonialism, the two forces he fought throughout his life. He was an ardent supporter of idealism (even while pursuing a sort of realism in his foreign policy), a paradigm which, after rising in stature during the interwar period, had declined in the US following World War II. Successive Indian governments since the Nehru era followed this pattern, and the neglect has only worsened over the years. The result has been that for over 60 years of its independent existence, India has produced several distinguished diplomats, yet hardly any IR scholar who can claim a global standing.

The Indian scepticism of IR theory only grew during the Cold War era. Due to the increasingly conflictive relations between India and the US, especially during and after the Bangladesh war and the nuclear non-proliferation rift, Indian scholars became

increasingly disenchanted with American scholarship and cut themselves off from the larger IR scholarly world. However, the question arises as to why Indian scholars made no substantial efforts to theorise non-alignment, unlike Latin American scholars who developed dependency theory and successfully made it an important part of the comparative politics/IR literature during the 1970s. Today, the 'Bandung spirit' and non-alignment are attracting some attention and this author's forthcoming book treats this as a great example of soft balancing using institutional means by materially weaker states.<sup>9</sup>

A possible explanation for this absence of theory building is that this is an issue of supply and demand. IR scholarship has been (especially during and since the Cold War era) largely American, and the academic works produced in other parts of the world simply build upon one or another of the perspectives already developed in North America. The European variants have some global appeal, especially the English school. A general criticism is that American IR especially tends to be parochial and American scholars in general show a tendency to look down upon scholarship coming from abroad.<sup>10</sup> North American editors of journals and major presses are reluctant to read or send for review manuscripts that come from non-Western sources due to prejudices, even if inadvertent. Manuscript reviewers, too, tend to act as gatekeepers of the discipline, often making sure non-American perspectives do not get much attention. This tendency may be market driven, as American publishers tend to sell more books on US-centric issues than on any other topics.

Much of the IR scholarship in the US, especially in the past, has been driven by policy

or theoretical concerns that are seen as most pressing for the US and its position in the world.<sup>11</sup> Modern IR largely developed in the US after World War II, in response to the enormous challenges posed by the War and the need to create a post-war international order built around liberal ideals.<sup>12</sup> During the Cold War era, American/Western IR distinctively showed antipathy towards scholarship from countries that did not support Western positions on international issues. Therefore, Western scholars (whether from realist or liberal schools) viewed with hostility India's endorsement of non-alignment and, later, its somewhat pro-Soviet foreign-policy positions.

From an Indian perspective, many of the Western scholarly and policy positions ran contrary to India's national interests. Indian scholars and bureaucrats thus developed an adversarial approach toward Western IR, partly because its dominant theoretical paradigms did not address India's major concerns, i.e., security and development.<sup>13</sup> Later, even Western critical theorists, including feminists and post-positivists, rarely concerned themselves with issues affecting India or the developing world in general.

The situation began to change after the end of the Cold War and with India's economic liberalisation. India emerged as a favourable destination for world business and media. However, it is not the same for scholarship in social sciences. Indian IR is yet to make use of the window of opportunity produced by structural changes in the international system. It is a puzzle as to why Indian scholars—unlike their counterparts in Europe and, to a limited extent, in Southeast Asia and China—have not yet offered a powerful challenge to the American IR theories. The reason may be the failure of Indian IR scholars to focus on key theoretical literature, even in

areas where India has its own experience, such as democratic peace, nuclear deterrence, peaceful rise, nonalignment or strategic autonomy, and civilisational IR.

**Cultural:** An alternative explanation would argue that India's lack of focus in IR, and by extension IR theory, is largely due to socio-cultural factors within India. Indians tend to have a disparaging attitude towards social science disciplines, especially towards theoretical research in these areas. The middle-class Indian families want their children to become doctors or engineers and, failing that, to at least join science programmes. Social sciences are seen as a last resort. Most of the younger generation with potential for scholarly work seeks to appear for the national competitive examinations to enter one of the myriad engineering and professional schools with the intent of gaining employment in the burgeoning private sector. Before India's economic liberalisation began in 1991, the main goal of the middle/upper class youth was to enter the elite Indian bureaucratic institutions, like the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) or the Indian Foreign Service (IFS). There is no inherent advantage in studying the social sciences for these competitions, as candidates have the option to take examinations in a variety of fields. In India, unlike in the West, social science disciplines such as political science and IR become the last bastion for those who do not secure admission to professional courses or hard sciences programmes. Moreover, in the globalised era, the academy has lost much of its charm as a career path for many in India.<sup>14</sup> This means that the talent pool is limited and the calibre of most candidates entering the discipline of IR, along with other social science disciplines, is low. The dearth of good research programmes means a lack of

adequate number of good teachers and role models, and the vicious cycle continues.

Once again, with India's rapid economic development, this situation is likely to change. Great powers (in earlier times, empires) have been the greatest promoters of academic research. IR is a foundational discipline for any great or emerging power because it deals with, among other things, the acquisition, management and exercise of power. It also deals with issues relating to competition, conflict and cooperation, in addition to building order, institutions, norms and principles needed for a power to sustain its leadership role in the international system. India cannot continue to be indifferent to the IR scholarship if it is serious about its great power aspirations. A comprehensive national strength includes intellectual power, including theoretical knowledge in social science disciplines. An Indian theory of world order as well as peaceful rise is sorely needed, in particular as an alternative to the tributary model that China is promoting. This cannot be based on Hindu fundamentalism though, as there are no global takers for this conception of order.

**Institutional:** The cultural milieu also affects the institutional support provided in India to the social sciences, including IR. Most of the IR programmes are offered in political science departments, and those that specialise in the discipline, such as Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in New Delhi, are basically large teaching programmes. Theory is not emphasised in the curricula of these programmes. For many students who enter premier institutions such as JNU, the primary motive is to enter the IAS or IFS after completing their Master's or M.Phil. programmes.

Research, let alone theoretical research, is not adequately supported even at JNU, India's premier IR institution, comparable to what one finds in a small Western university. The lack of merit-based criteria for hiring, salary increases, promotion and retention all create a certain lethargic mindset among scholars early on when they enter the profession. In most institutions, promotion is part of a trade union or affirmative action right, i.e., even if one does not publish, one will be eligible for promotion after spending 10 years or so (if there is a position and if one is well-connected). "Publish or perish" is still not part of the vernacular of most Indian universities. Teaching, too, is not evaluated in most institutions as part of a candidate's promotion and merit dossier. Lack of adequate library holdings is another major issue. Much of the library resources in IR are concentrated in Delhi, which is a prohibitively expensive place for academics from distant cities in India to visit or live. However, this is fast changing as most journals and books are now available in electronic formats online.

#### **Governmental/Bureaucratic Approach:**

The Indian government's neglect of the discipline starts with the Indian bureaucracy, especially members of the diplomatic corps, who tend to have a low interest in academic wisdom. To diplomats, theoretical IR scholarship has little value in their day-to-day operations, and Indian IR scholarship, specifically, is not valuable because Indian scholars often regurgitate what the diplomats themselves say. Diplomats, for consultation or for soliciting opinions on crucial issues, seek very few Indian IR scholars. The stratified and hierarchical (class/caste) nature of the Indian bureaucracy means that even the most reputed scholar does not enjoy the same social status as a joint secretary in the foreign services, or an ambassador to a small country. Indian diplomats tend to be proficient in writing

reports and making policy analysis that rarely need any reference to key scholarly works. Even when the diplomats might benefit from deeper insight based on generic knowledge from scholarly literature, the tendency is not to pay attention to relevant academic works. Many people who enter the IFS do not come from a political science background, and without any classroom IR knowledge, they are unlikely to find IR scholarship useful. To them, intuition and common sense are better policy guides than academic wisdom. A 2007 speech by Indian Foreign Secretary Shiv Shankar Menon at the Foreign Service Institute, where young diplomats are trained, summarises the prevailing attitude. He urged the new recruits to not "get confused with all this international relations theory that is thrown at you all the time and the big words that are used. If you stick to the basic rules about dealing with people, I think you will do very well as diplomats even in a world that is changing at a pace which is quite bewildering for people of my generation..."<sup>15</sup>

The word "theory" repels practitioners even when many theoretical works can be policy relevant and they are inadvertently using theoretical ideas such as balance of power and deterrence. This attitude is common in the diplomatic world, not only in India but in the West as well. The US is perhaps the only place where diplomats and policymakers occasionally interact with academics and obtain ideas, even if they do not often implement them. The pervasive belief among many diplomats is that IR should be a discipline that offers them capsule-type analyses to conduct day-to-day affairs. If the discipline has no answers to the daily problems they confront, it may as well be a "useless" enterprise. Generic knowledge that the discipline produces is not valuable in the repertoire of assets that a diplomat can carry.

The problem is that the social sciences simply cannot offer daily policy advice; the role of a good social scientist is to critically analyse prevailing axioms and policy perspectives while offering alternative paths, which may or may not seem politically feasible or appreciable at the time of writing and publication. Moreover, scholars rarely get access to daily briefings or intelligence reports that are the key ingredients of bureaucratic decisions.


A good scholar should be above nationalistic or political/ideological biases and be willing to challenge established belief systems. Advancement of knowledge is and should be the core purpose of scholarship.

Official and media reports offer much of the wisdom that busy bureaucrats need for day-to-day operations. One must recognise that, over the years, the Indian media has done quite well as the arena for discourse on IR and foreign-policy issues. High-quality media analysts, especially in the security and economic fields, have made major contributions in this regard. Any visitor to India today will be baffled by the array of newspapers and television channels that the country offers. One can spend an entire day just reading the daily English newspapers available in metropolitan cities, and some of them carry excellent op-ed articles on global issues. However, the media does not pick up or review scholarly works, especially those

published abroad, unless they are bestsellers in the commercial market.

## CONCLUSION

A number of factors, including global/structural, cultural, institutional and bureaucratic approaches contribute to India's neglect of IR, especially theory-driven IR scholarship. However, there are changes taking place in several of these variables, especially those relating to global/structural approaches. The IR community in India is yet to make use of these changes and become a globally relevant disciplinary component, which would be consistent with India's potential emergence as a global power.

IR in India deserves much more attention from both the scholarly and the official worlds. As India's material power position advances in the international system, the country will need to make many decisions, both for its own interests and in the collective interest of the world. Good scholarly works developed in the academia can provide foundational ideas for new thinking, be it in policy or theory. It is imperative to integrate Indian IR along with India's rapid economic, political and strategic integration in the world system. This integration can take place only if Indian IR becomes theory-based, where rigour and sophistication are the key to the advancement of knowledge. 

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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**T.V. Paul** is James McGill Professor of International Relations, Department of Political Science, McGill University.

## ENDNOTES

1. Basrur, Rajesh M. "Scholarship on India's International Relations: Some Disciplinary Shortcomings", *International Studies*, vol. 46, nos 1–2, January and April 2009.
2. Although I realise much of the global IR is dominated by American and British scholars, the mainstream approaches to the study of IR have changed dramatically over the past two decades or so. Today, many scholars in North America and elsewhere devote their attention to non-traditional IR, and global engagement has increased thanks to the work of International Studies Association (ISA) and other national associations to organise conferences and publications on themes that were not considered worthy of study in the past. Reasonably strong schools of thoughts are emerging in East Asia, Southeast Asia and Europe, especially as a result of China's increased interest in IR scholarship. These works are not developing in isolation, but in tandem or in collaboration with existing IR scholarship.
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4. Peter Feaver, "The Theory-Policy Divide in Political Science and Nuclear Proliferation," *National Security Studies Quarterly* (Summer, 1999): 69–82.
5. Sanjay Baru, "Can Indian Think Tanks and Research Institutions Cope with the Rising Demand for Foreign and Security Policy Research?", *International Studies*, vol. 46, nos. 1&2, January and April 2009.
6. Baldev Raj Nayar and T.V. Paul, *India in the World Order: Searching for Major Power Status* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
7. Nehru's own writings showed a deep sense of history and an appreciation for social science knowledge despite his mostly scientific training in England. See, e.g. Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989 [8th Edition]).
8. Navnita Chadha Behera, "Reimagining IR in India," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 7, no. 3 (2007): 341–68. It is contended that Nehru supported the establishment of the Indian School of International Studies in 1955, which later became the School of International Studies (SIS) at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), and that he held the founder, A. Appadorai, in high respect. M.S. Rajan, "Golden Jubilee of the School of International Studies: An Assessment," *International Studies* 42, no. 3 and 4 (2005): 195–204. However, the schools have been more devoted to area studies rather than pursuing theoretical approaches. On this, see M.S. Rajan, ed., *International and Area Studies in India* (New Delhi: Lancers Books, 1997).
9. T.V. Paul, *Restraining Great Powers: Soft Balancing from Empires to the Global Era*, New Haven: Yale University Press, forthcoming, 2018, ch.4.
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15. Text of Speech by Shiv Shankar Menon, Foreign Secretary, Foreign Service Institute, Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi, 17 August 2007, file://G:\RA - India IR\Indian foreign sec speech.htm.



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