

Can we understand the other before we understand ourselves?: Creating a non-Western International relations theory

Introduction

The study of International relations is a relatively new academic discipline, only appearing in the early parts of the twentieth century. While throughout international history, many groups have been the centre of international trade, commerce and technology, since the start of the international relations, the West has enjoyed the position of world hegemon, in fact, the discipline itself was started in the West. International Relations Theory (IRT) of the twentieth and twenty-first century is grounded in Western style governments, Western modernity, and Western views of the world. Non-Western International relations theories are disorganised and largely unknown. The compilation Non-Western International Relations Theory: Perspectives on and Beyond Asia edited by Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan of American University and the London School of Economics, respectively, seeks to highlight these gaps in IRT. Acharya and Buzan call on scholars from Asia to discuss the lack of non-Western IRT, specifically lack of an Asian IRT. Their conclusions range from the idea that current theories are correct, to the reasoning that the West solidified their perspectives much earlier and thus other nations' academics are still working to develop their theories.¹ While it is commendable to work with non-Western scholars to broaden the discipline Acharya and Buzan fall into the same trap they attempt to move beyond by perpetuating Western international relations theory.

This paper will examine Acharya and Buzan's attempt to deepen the discipline and try to identify why they fail, focusing on how they frame the problem and how their question reinforces the hegemony they are trying to move beyond. First, their depiction of the 'theory' they hope to move beyond is quite limited. Second, their desire to highlight "countries" and "areas" of political thought is in the Western image of state sovereignty and Western views of the borders of the world. Finally, their question looks to expand the discipline from the wrong perspective, they attempt to understand the West by moving beyond it rather than attempting to look inward at what about the West perpetuates the hegemony. These flaws in their question and framing of the issue disallow them to overcome the problems they identify and find new perspectives within the discipline.

Acharya and Buzan's Goals

Acharya and Buzan begin their book explaining their understanding of IRT and outlining the various 'isms' that international relations employs: positivism, constructivism, Marxism, etc. They identify how each of these perspectives is bounded by Western values and history. The models are exclusive and do not allow for the expression of non-western

¹ Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan. *Non-Western International Relations Theory: Perspectives on and Beyond Asia* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 221.

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experiences in IRT.² They specially state their focus is Asia due their own expertise and its, “concentration of power and wealth even remotely comparable to the West” and “long history of international relations that is quite distinct from that of the West.”³ The compilation includes scholars from India, China, Japan, South Korea, and well as from Southeast Asia who attempt to understand how Western IRT came to be, how it has affected modern scholar’s understanding of the world, and examine the limits of Western theories and the mind-sets that they perpetuate.⁴ It is important to note that their attempt is not to overthrow the current theories and perspectives, merely to “challenge the dominance of Western theory... because... Western IRT is both too narrow in its sources and too dominant in its influence to be good for the health of the wider project to understand the social world in which we live.”⁵ They continue to highlight what they perceive is specifically Western IRT using the question: “why is there no non-Western international theory?”⁶ In the end, Acharya and Buzan reproduce the same answers as other scholars: there are not currently any non-Western theories as strong as the Western theories. However, by probing and bringing these issues to light, the more likely there could be a non-Western theory in the future.

How to look at theory?

Acharya and Buzan provide a broad definition of a theory: “... Theory is about abstracting away from the facts of day-to-day events in an attempt to find patterns and group events together into sets and classes of things. Theory is therefore about simplifying reality.”⁷ However, they delimit their understanding of IRT to the current popular theories and immediately dismiss them as being too bounded in Western thought and Western thinkers.⁸ Part of moving toward a non-Western focused international relations is broaden the current language and perspectives and incorporate non-Western views of history and standpoints into those theories.

While their definition is broad and allows for a broad idea about what a theory is, a set of organising principles that create a lens, allowing scholars to more succinctly discuss and understand the world. They present prominent theories in current international relations literature and proceed to highlight how each theory is bounded in Western thinkers and Western political thought: positivism, classic realism, strategic studies, liberalism and neoliberalism,

² Acharya and Buzan, *Non-Western International Relations Theory*, 4, 6-10.

³ Acharya and Buzan, *Non-Western International Relations Theory*, 2.

⁴ Acharya and Buzan, *Non-Western International Relations Theory*, 22

⁵ Acharya and Buzan, *Non-Western International Relations Theory*, 2.

⁶ Acharya and Buzan, *Non-Western International Relations Theory*, 1.

⁷ Acharya and Buzan, *Non-Western International Relations Theory*, 4.

⁸ Acharya and Buzan, *Non-Western International Relations Theory*, 6-10.

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Marxism, The English School, historical sociology, critical theory, and constructivism and postmodernism. This understanding of IRT immediately proves their point, narrowing the idea of theory beyond the point where it can be useful outside of the West. While their criticism may be true, as the West has a tendency to look at its own intellectuals and philosophers, ignoring great thinkers from other areas of the world, Acharya and Buzan criticise these theories, which they argue are presented as “universal,” “parochial and Eurocentric” imposing the West onto the non-West.⁹ In their desire to create a new IRT, they are in danger of falling into the very trap they claim these theories produce. If the new theories are only sought after in direct opposition to the current, Western theories, then this new scholarship has only succeeded in solidifying Western hegemony.

Acharya and Buzan’s compilation calls on important Asian political scientists of the day to present their views about the lack of non-Western IRTs. Perhaps it would be more useful to look at current theories, understand their histories, how they came to be, and what about them fails to represent non-Western countries. Instead, they attempt to create new theories, apart from current views using non-Western scholars.

Inanna Hamati-Ataya, a prominent political theorist, looks at ways in, which we can broaden understanding of current IRT. In her article “The ‘Problem of Values’ and International Relations Scholarship: From Applied Reflexivity to Reflexivism”, she writes that any perspective in IRT should be looked at in their “social/institutional fixation,” which guarantee their “intellectual legitimacy” to question those institutions and the legitimacy.¹⁰ This means that political theories are only as valuable as their ability to be contextualised and in some cases, criticised, by the scholars who use them. If we know the historical implications surrounding these theories, we can better understand how they do and do not fit into the larger international, non-Western, context.¹¹ Using Hamati-Ataya’s method, we can find the gaps in current theories, and how they might only define the Western experience. Current IRT could take into account international history, incorporate non-Western scholars from today and from history to create a more inclusive and representative worldview, which is partially what international relations attempts to do. Using the perspectives of the non-West we can use knowledge to break down the walls of Western IRT.¹²

Borders of the hegemony

Prominent demonstrations of Western hegemonic power are maps, borders, and the West’s insistence that all land be crushed into sovereign nation states. Acharya and Buzan’s

⁹ Acharya and Buzan, *Non-Western International Relations Theory*, 6-10.

¹⁰ Inanna Hamati-Ataya, “The ‘Problem of Values’ and International Relations Scholarship: From Applied Reflexivity to Reflexivism,” *International Studies Review* 13 (2011), 262.

¹¹ Hamati-Ataya, “The ‘Problem of Values,’” 259-262.

¹² Hamati-Ataya, “The ‘Problem of Values,’” 281.

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focus on Asia and Asian countries in their attempt to present or understand non-Western IRT undermines the very foundation of their argument. Acharya and Buzan acknowledge that Asia has been moulded into a pale imitation of the Western state system but that it “is not performing a Westphalian play.”¹³ Picking an area as bounded as they do contradicts their argument of creating a more inclusive IRT because it perpetuates the separation between areas created by the West. The idea of the nation state and sovereignty is a relatively new and a Western brainchild. Their recognition of the differences in governing style between Asia and the West is a small acknowledgement to the significance of understanding areas and cultures beyond the sovereign nation state system. Although they provide adequate reasoning for excluding Africa and the Middle East, they present Asia as the West presents itself, singularly and exclusively. Their insistence on using Western understanding of land and space weakens their argument and further Western systems.¹⁴

It can be difficult to imagine and describe the world without the borders that it currently possesses. Martin M. Lewis and Kären E. Wigen discuss this very issue in their book *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography*. Their book argues that the seven continents in their current positions have only been accepted since the middle of the twentieth century.¹⁵ Many philosophers and geographers throughout history attempted to compartmentalise the landmasses. Through Western hegemony the Western system became the dominant system, despite Japanese and Southern Asian continental map systems.¹⁶ The current border and continent system can be difficult to move away from, however to start this process requires an acknowledgement of the system itself, and an attempt to view the world outside of nations, continents, and areas, which Acharya and Buzan fail to do. Despite their attempts to open up the discipline, they continue to use the same language and methods of the West.

Looking beyond the West

The last flaw in Acharya and Buzan’s attempt to give the non-West a voice is their central question. “Why is there no non-Western international theory?”¹⁷ The problems with the question are evidenced in their conclusion, which contains five points, perpetuating the very foundation of Western political thought since the beginnings of the exploration period.¹⁸ They echo the Western hegemonic system from the idea that most of the great thinkers have come from the West therefore their perspectives must be correct, to the idea that non-Western

¹³ Acharya and Buzan, *Non-Western International Relations Theory*, 5.

¹⁴ Acharya and Buzan, *Non-Western International Relations Theory*, 2.

¹⁵ Martin M. Lewis and Kären E. Wigen, *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography*, 21.

¹⁶ Lewis and Wigen, *The Myth of Continents*, 32-33.

¹⁷ Acharya and Buzan, *Non-Western International Relations Theory*, 1.

¹⁸ Acharya and Buzan, *Non-Western International Relations Theory*, 221.

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scholars would be unable to produce sufficient IRT because their countries or their academic environments are prohibitive. Perhaps if their question were more reflective, they would have been able to more successfully overcome the myopia of Western political thought. Their question seeks to look beyond the West, without first examining how the internal Western structure has become so domineering over all other ideas and theories. To put it another way, how can we look beyond the West before understanding how the hegemony came to be and has since perpetuated itself?

One way to understand the hegemony is to look beyond the common Western historical narrative. H.J. Mackinder, a distinguished geographer of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, presented a paper “The Geographical Pivot of History,” which highlights the intermingled history of the West and non-West. He wrote that his purpose was to, “exhibit human history as part of the life of the world organism,” attempting to show how at every point in history groups from the far east were provoking actions from the West.¹⁹ He asks the reader to, “look upon Europe and European history as subordinate to Asia and Asiatic history, for European civilisation is, in a very real sense, the outcome of the secular struggle against Asiatic invasion.”²⁰ He argues that the Angles and the Saxons likely moved into England due to pressure from Attila the Hun. That the Seljuk Turks, rode from Central Asia into the middle east, into Jerusalem, which spawned the Crusades.²¹ Overall, Mackinder believes that Asia is the geographical pivot point in history and to ignore that is essentially ignoring how Western civilisation came to be. Unfortunately, today in the twenty-first century the West perpetuates the narratives of world history with itself as the central focus.

Kenneth Pomeranz, a history professor at the University of Chicago, furthers Mackinder’s attempts to do this in his book, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe and the Making of the Modern World Economy*. He argues that the West was able to industrialise quicker than the rest of the world due to their ability to take advantage of resources from abroad, specifically in the Americas. He also writes that, up until the period of exploration, both the West and the non-West had similar levels of advancement and living standards, challenging many other scholars’ narratives on the history of Western dominance.²² This novel perspective gives scholars a new take on Western exceptionalism, which is that it might not be so exceptional, it might just be an ignorance of historical details. Opening history to include the experiences beyond the West, in fact, showcasing the experiences of the Non-West might allow

¹⁹ H.J. Mackinder, “The Geographical Pivot of History,” *The Geographical Journal* 170 (2004), 299.

²⁰ Mackinder, “The Geographical Pivot of History,” 300.

²¹ Mackinder, “The Geographical Pivot of History” 307-308.

Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), ProQuest ebrary, accessed 3 October 2014, <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/aber/detail.action?docID=10031973>, 1-4.

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a more complete perspective on the world hegemon. Pomeranz's focus on real, but not known or acknowledged history is a significant part of understanding both the West and the non-West.

Acharya and Buzan fall into the problems of reliving the classic narratives of history. They continue to drive a wedge between the West and the non-West through their rejection of Western IRT as a way to view the world and a desire to parallel it with a non-Western IRT. Their question and thus their conclusion highlights the problems of looking immediately outward from popular ideas rather than looking inward and understanding how those popular ideas came to be. They hope to create an IRT that incorporates the experiences of the many instead of the few, however their method, and their question, becomes just as biased as the IRT they are trying to overcome.

Conclusion

Acharya and Buzan make a valiant attempt to bring IRT out of its exclusive and hegemonic structure. However, ultimately their question and the foundation they use to ask that question is flawed and continues to frame IRT in the West's image. Calling on exclusively non-Western scholars is commendable but their conclusions criticise Asian countries, politics and academic environments, furthering the Western ideas and perspectives of the non-West. That IRT is Western focused is true, however, in order to bring it beyond the Western perspectives they should have looked within Western IRT to determine what about the discipline makes it so exclusive. Their insistence to immediately look beyond the West to discover why no non-Western scholars have made as significant contributions to the discipline does not acknowledge how dominant the Western history and narrative is in so many parts of the world.

This work is significant because it is one of the few pieces that highlights the inequities between Western IRT and non-Western IR. Although they do not ultimately present conclusions that radically change the discipline, supporting the voices from prominent scholars outside of Europe and the United States creates an environment where non-Western perspectives can be explored. Despite the weaknesses in Acharya and Buzan's question and argument, their determination to highlight non-Western ideas and create a forum to present these perspectives is important for IRT. This is a small step to widen the discipline. Despite the argument's reinforcement of some of the problems in Western IRT, it does add a new set of considerations for scholars attempting to transcend the limits of a Western dominated discipline.

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