

## The Quest for ‘Global International Relations’: Where Will It Lead Us?

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Barry Buzan, Charles Jones and Richard Little, *The Logic of Anarchy: Neorealism to Structural Realism*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1993.

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Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan (eds), *Non-Western International Relations Theory: Perspectives on and Beyond Asia*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2010.

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This review article provides a survey of the literature on non-Western International Relations (IR) theory and looks at the recent movement towards developing what Amitav Acharya (2014) calls ‘Global International Relations’. It outlines the background to the movement, traces its development, and considers some of the problems it faces. The article will focus primarily on Acharya’s and Barry Buzan’s works on this topic since they have been highly influential in entrenching the movement in contemporary IR scholarship.

The origins of this movement can be traced back to the publication of *The Logic of Anarchy: Neorealism to Structural Realism* in 1993 (Buzan et al. 1993). This book, co-authored by Barry Buzan, Charles Jones and Richard Little, sought to rework and remould Kenneth N. Waltz’s neorealism which had been systematically set out in his *Theory of International Politics* (Waltz 1979). Waltz’s book foregrounded the idea of the *structure* of the system of states as a key factor shaping state behaviour. *The Logic of Anarchy* took this idea as its point of departure since, according to the authors, it provided ‘a solid foundation for’ addressing ‘the uniquely difficult question of how to theorize the totality of intersocietal relations in all their forms’ (Buzan et al. 1993, p. 6). The authors saw value as well as problems in Waltz’s conception of structure because, while its excessive focus on the distribution of material capabilities among the units or actors in the international system made Waltz’s neorealism unable to explain significant changes and transformations in history (see Ruggie 1983), it could serve as a foundational core of a grand theory which was ‘neither slave to nor master of a particular historical period, and [could] engage with all of human history’ (Buzan et al. 1993, p. 12). It was this quest for a grand theory and universalism that characterised their

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collaboration. To overcome the ahistoricism of Waltz's neorealism, they set out to develop what they called 'Structural Realism' (ibid., p. 6) that would reform the Waltzian conception of structure by taking into account 'the functional differentiation of political units' (ibid., p. 88) and by introducing the concept of 'interaction capacity' (ibid., pp. 69–80), viz. the ability of units or actors in the international system to interact and communicate with one another, which is largely conditioned by the material and technological factors of the time.

The quest for a grand theory in IR scholarship continued into the twenty-first century. Seven years after the publication of *The Logic of Anarchy*, Buzan and Little published *International Systems in World History: Remaking the Study of International Relations* (Buzan and Little 2000). The purpose of this book was to synthesise IR theory with world history in the hope that 'the marriage of theory and history' would lead to the development of a grand theory (ibid., pp. vii, 1). They started from the premise or belief that IR theory could enrich the understanding of world history and, conversely, world history could help sophisticate IR theory (ibid., p. 407), and they sought to develop a grand theory that could cover the whole history of humanity from ancient times up until the present. For example, while it is often explained that the origins of the international system date back to the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, Buzan and Little argued that they could be traced back to the emergence of the Sumerian city-states in ancient Mesopotamia (ibid., pp. 163–240). This book scrutinised and sought to advance the idea of the international system 'as a framework for studying world history' (ibid., p. 8). At the same time, however, Buzan and Little cast critical eyes at the idea of the international system, as it had been conventionally understood in IR scholarship. Firstly, according to Buzan and Little (ibid., pp. 2, 5), the international system had almost invariably been conceptualised in terms of the Westphalian states-system, thereby making it impossible to capture other types or forms of international systems in world history. Secondly, Buzan and Little (ibid., pp. 2–3) pointed out that the prevailing habit of associating the international system with the Westphalian states-system stemmed from the fact that the former had been conceptualised in too narrow a manner. As they remarked:

Mainstream conceptualizations of international systems in IR remain 'thin' and unidimensional ... Although parsimony in theorizing is a virtue, we argue that without a 'thicker' form of theorizing, a complex phenomenon like international systems simply cannot be adequately understood. (ibid., p. 17)

In order to *thicken*, as it were, the conception of the international system, Buzan and Little introduced a series of theoretical tools that could be used to analyse the international system: 'level of analysis', 'sectors of analysis' and 'sources of explanation' (ibid., pp. 68–89). They went on to discuss how international systems could be defined and identified in these terms (ibid., pp. 90–110).

Explaining here what these tools were and how they transformed the understanding of the international system is a tall order given that Buzan and Little devoted two chapters to set them out. In fact, herein lied one of the problems with their work. In trying to present

a thick conception of the international system, Buzan and Little seem to have inadvertently overcomplicated the concept of the international system; such was the complexity of their conceptualisation of the international system that they did not, or perhaps could not, include the term 'international system'—the core concept on which their arguments are based—in the glossary provided at the end of the book (*ibid.*, pp. 440–442), although they did provide a fairly general definition of the term 'system' there.

However, the complicatedness of their conception of the international system was not the only problem. Even more problematic was their failure to consider the possibility that the idea of the international system itself might be Western-centric or that the habit of thinking about international relations in terms of this concept might be peculiar to Western IR. Related to this is their rather uncritical acceptance of 'a fairly orthodox view of world history' (Buzan and Little 2000, p. vii). This was problematic given that there are different interpretations of world history and suggested that their attempt to throw off Eurocentrism had not been thorough enough (see Buzan and Little 2000, pp. 20–21).

Aware of these problems, Buzan, in collaboration with Amitav Acharya, began a quest for non-Western IR theory, and they co-edited a special issue of *International Relations of Asia-Pacific* in 2007. In the preface to the special issue, Acharya and Buzan (2007, p. 285) remarked that *International Systems in World History* had 'underlined to him [Buzan] the dependence of much IRT [International Relations Theory] on a specifically Western history'. They went on to explain that the aim of the special issue was:

to reinforce existing criticisms that IRT is Western-centric and therefore misrepresents and misunderstands most of world history. Its claims to universalism are rooted in a rather narrow and particular historical experience which, aside from being worrying in itself, stands in the way of thinking about the future outside of the Westphalian box. (Acharya and Buzan 2007, pp. 285–286)

These remarks suggest that Buzan had become well aware of the shortcomings and limitations of his earlier works.

*Non-Western International Relations Theory: Perspectives on and Beyond Asia* (Acharya and Buzan 2010a) reproduces as chapters six papers originally published in the special issue of *International Relations of Asia-Pacific* mentioned above, including Acharya's and Buzan's oft-cited paper entitled 'Why is There No Non-Western International Relations Theory? An Introduction' (Acharya and Buzan 2010b).<sup>1)</sup> In this chapter, Acharya and Buzan problematise Eurocentrism in IR scholarship, arguing that most mainstream IR theories are Eurocentric in their origins and in their reliance on Western history (*ibid.*, p. 6). Their recognition of 'the Eurocentric framing of world history' (*ibid.*) contrasts markedly with the acceptance of 'a

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1) This paper was first published as Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan, 'Why is There No Non-Western International Relations Theory: An Introduction', *International Relations of Asia-Pacific*, 7/3, 2007, pp. 287–312.

fairly orthodox view of world history' in *International Systems in World History* (Buzan and Little 2000, p. vii). Acharya and Buzan address the question why non-Western IR theories have had relatively little presence and why Western dominance has long persisted in the discipline of IR, and set out several possible explanations for this imbalanced cultural representation in the IR community (Acharya and Buzan 2010b, pp. 16–22). After reviewing the findings from the case studies of the development of IR in Asian countries such as China, Japan, Korea and India, Acharya and Buzan (2010c, pp. 221–225) conclude that there has not been much of an attempt to develop distinctive non-Western IR theories in this region due to the fact that Gramscian hegemony has been established in Asia, with Western IR theories constituting the dominant frame of reference, and because there are local conditions that are hardly conducive to the development of local IR theories based on local knowledge and experiences. In light of this, they (*ibid.*, p. 236) argue for a more inclusive IR scholarship that can accommodate different voices and cultural perspectives.

Acharya has been instrumental in *globalising* this academic movement in two different senses: firstly, in the sense of setting the tone for future research to be conducted by the global IR community; and, secondly, in the sense of overcoming the binary thinking based on a rigid dichotomy between Western IR theory and non-Western one. In 2014, Acharya, in his capacity as President of the International Studies Association (ISA), delivered a Presidential Address at the ISA Annual Convention held in 2014 on the topic of Western dominance in the discipline. The speech was subsequently revised and published as an article in *International Studies Quarterly* (ISQ) (Acharya 2014). Since the ISA is the largest academic association in the discipline of IR, and ISQ is one of the most influential IR journals, this speech/article will likely have a huge impact on research trends in IR for some time in the future. In this speech/article, Acharya (2014, p. 649) calls for 'Global IR' that 'transcends the distinction between West and non-West' and strives for a more inclusive and diverse IR scholarship. Global IR aims to promote what Acharya calls 'pluralistic universalism' that emphasises diversity in the discipline, and it requires to be 'grounded in *world history*' (*ibid.*, emphasis in original).

In an article titled 'Why is There No Non-Western International Relations Theory? Ten Years On', Acharya and Buzan (2017) expand on the rationale behind promoting Global IR. The use of labels such as 'non-Western IR' and 'post-Western IR', they argue, runs the risk of alienating those working within Western IR theories and approaches, and the label 'Global IR' is intended to avoid such a risk (*ibid.*, pp. 353–354). As they explain:

Global IR is not a theory but a way of understanding and reshaping the discipline of IR. It does not seek to displace existing Western-dominated IR knowledge. Unlike some critical theories and postcolonial scholarship, Global IR does not reject the mainstream theories, such as realism, liberalism, the English School and constructivism, but challenges their parochialism and urges them to accept the ideas, experiences and insights from the non-Western world. (*ibid.*, pp. 354–355)

The quest for non-Western IR theory and Global IR has spawned a huge number of literatures. At the risk of oversimplification, those works can be categorised into two groups. In the following, I shall explain what these groups of works are trying to achieve and what their problems are.

The first group of works seeks to historicise IR and to explain how historical events and developments have informed the agendas, concepts and approaches in the discipline. Since treating IR as a historical being is the fundamental premise of the quest for Global IR, this group of works serves to strengthen the rationale behind this quest. Barry Buzan's and George Lawson's *The Global Transformation: History, Modernity and the Making of International Relations* can be understood as belonging to this group (Buzan and Lawson 2015). The main goal of this book is to show how a series of economic, political and intellectual changes which had taken place in the West in the nineteenth century provided historical conditions for the construction of modern international relations characterised by the power gaps between the countries in the core and those in the periphery. The authors argue that these nineteenth-century changes, which they call 'global transformation' (ibid., p. 1), and their consequences are important not only for understanding contemporary international relations which IR seeks to understand, but also for how we understand IR itself. According to the authors (ibid., pp. 46–64), many of the agendas, ideas and approaches in IR scholarship have their origins in nineteenth-century Western discourses on, and practices of, international relations, including those closely related to colonialism/imperialism and racism, but the connection between nineteenth-century international relations and contemporary IR scholarship is often forgotten in the discipline of IR because the myth that the discipline was founded around 1919 with a view to preventing a repetition of the Great War had enjoyed wide acceptance until fairly recently.

Picking up on this, Acharya's and Buzan's (2019) recent work entitled *The Making of Global International Relations: Origins and Evolution of IR at its Centenary* demonstrates how much of the nineteenth-century global order characterised by the division between core and periphery was carried over into the twentieth century and how this affected the institutionalisation and development of IR in different parts of the world. Acharya and Buzan not only repeat the claim that 'contemporary mainstream IR theory is not much more than an abstraction of Western history interwoven with Western political theory' (ibid., p. 2), but also take the debate a step further by trying to explain 'when, how and why' (ibid.) this state of affairs—i.e. the marginalization of non-Western discourses on international relations—came about, and how this situation has been changing in recent years. Acharya and Buzan (ibid., pp. 49–51, 53) argue that the study of international relations before the First World War was reflective of the standpoints of imperialist great powers, and, at that time, the issue of the management of the core-periphery relationship was considered as important as that of the management of relations among great powers. The catastrophe of the First World War, however, foregrounded the latter as a top-priority issue from the point of view of the core, relegating the former to the back-burner (ibid., p. 66). The end of the Second World War ushered in an era of decolonisation, and this was followed by the emergence of dependency theory and post-colonialism and by the resurfacing of issues surrounding the

core-periphery relations in IR scholarship (ibid., pp. 165–173). That said, however, these developments did not significantly alter the fact that IR theory was largely Western-centred, and much of it was still focused on problems surrounding the management of great power relations and war—the trend which was strengthened by the intensification of the Cold-War rivalry and the advent of nuclear weapons (ibid., pp. 138–139, 154). Acharya and Buzan (ibid., pp. 179–260) argue that Western dominance in IR scholarship has finally started to erode in response to the progress of global power transition and the pluralisation of centres of power and wealth in the twenty-first century, as symbolised by the rise of BRICS and especially by China’s ‘peaceful rise’.

The historicising of IR scholarship helps us to increase the awareness of our own historicity and therefore has undeniable merits. E. H. Carr (1987, p. 44) remarked in *What is History?* that ‘Man’s capacity to rise above his social and historical situation seems to be conditioned by the sensitivity with which he recognizes the extent of his involvement in it’. While his remark concerned the practice of the historian, the same thing can be said about the practice of the IR theorist. However, the historicising of IR theory carries a risk, albeit a small one, of discouraging and stifling free expression by those who continue to work within the Western intellectual traditions. Such an intellectual authoritarianism would completely defeat the purpose of Global IR and is, therefore, something to be avoided at all costs.

The second group seeks to create distinctive national schools of IR theory. Yaqing Qin’s *A Relational Theory of World Politics* published in 2018 is arguably the most important of the works belonging to this group. In this book, Qin develops a ‘Chinese’ approach to theorising world politics, drawing on the concept of ‘relationality’ (Qin 2018, p. 107). Qin derives this concept from Confucian philosophy and contrasts it with the concept of rationality which has underpinned Western IR theory (ibid., pp. 75–103). According to Qin (ibid., p. xi), Western IR theory ‘see[s] the world as composed of discrete and independent entities acting and interacting’ and assumes that ‘individual actors are entities independent of one another and each is endowed with a priori properties and attributes’. In contrast, Qin’s relational theory of world politics lays stress on relations between actors as a key determinant of their behaviour and action in society (ibid., pp.107–151). Qin goes on to argue that ‘the *yin-yang* relationship’ constitutes ‘the meta-relationship’, which he defines as ‘the prototype and the simplest form representing all relationships’, and he brings into the discussion ‘the *zhongyong* dialectics’ as a ‘way to understand and interpret the nature of this meta-relationship’ (ibid., p. 152). In Part III of the book, Qin discusses how his relational theory can alter the understanding of key concepts in the discipline, such as power, cooperation and governance.

As indicated earlier, Global IR emerged as a reaction to the limitations of grand theories in IR scholarship, or, to borrow Chris Brown’s (2013) phrase, ‘the poverty of grand theory’. It is, therefore, necessary to consider what Global IR means for grand theory in the discipline. To begin with, Global IR must not be confused with theory; Global IR is to be understood as a *movement* aimed at the construction of a more inclusive IR community that respects cultural diversity. This movement, with its emphasis on the significance of culturally diverse perspectives and approaches to understanding world politics, may well work as a brake against the construction of grand theories characterised by a high level of abstraction

and generalisation. Moreover, the historicising of past grand theories in IR scholarship may well have the effect of discouraging new generations of scholars from constructing grand theories of their own in fear of being accused, whether rightly or wrongly, of their pretense to universality, although the awareness of his own historicity has far from discouraged Buzan from continuing his pursuit of a general IR theory (see Buzan and Schouenborg 2018).

Putting aside the question of grand theory in IR, what does Global IR mean for IR theory in general? As Qin's work mentioned above suggests, Global IR opens up opportunities for various national and regional IR theories to emerge and establish themselves in IR scholarship. While the development of national and regional schools of IR theory represents an important step forward towards Global IR, there are pitfalls too. Taking Russian IR as an example, Andrey Makarychev and Viatcheslav Morozov suggest that if national schools become intent on establishing different ways of theorising world politics to an excessive degree, they could be caught up in an 'epistemological relativism' which would render them 'parochial and irrelevant in the global context' (Makarychev and Morozov 2013, p. 329).

Diversity is certainly one of the most important values that must be respected by the IR community, but it is not always easy to draw a clear line between diversification and fragmentation. Efforts to get on with developing Global IR must be accompanied by a continuous search for unity in diversity. The long-term success of the quest for Global IR and a more inclusive IR community depends largely on whether at least a modicum of unity can be found and maintained in the absence of overarching grand theories linking different elements of knowledge in IR scholarship. If this condition cannot be satisfied, this quest could become self-defeating by throwing the discipline into disarray. The current movement towards Global IR has yet to find a way to achieve and maintain the vital balance between unity and diversity in terms of theoretical construction and progress, and this is a crucial question that requires immediate attention.

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