

Imagining Global IR out of India

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Honourable Minister for External Affairs of India, Mr Salman Khurshid, Vice Chancellor of JNU Professor Sopory, Dean of School of International Studies, Professor Pant, distinguished guests, participants, ladies and gentlemen.

Allow me at the outset to thank the organisers, led by Dean Girijesh Pant, for inviting me to the Annual International Studies Convention 2013. It goes without saying that being asked to deliver the keynote speech at any gathering like this is a great honour, but when the host happens to be your alma mater, then it is truly a rare privilege.

The theme of this convention: “Re-imagining Global Orders: Perspectives from the South”, is very timely and important. But it is also challenging.

This is because there is very little agreement on what the future holds. Pundits and policymakers have described the changing global order in a variety of ways: “multipolar”, “polycentric”, “nonpolar”, “neopolar”, “apolar”, “post-American” and “G-zero”. All these labels take us into the realm of speculation and controversy.

But one thing is unmistakably clear. The unipolar moment is largely over. More debatable is whether the “American-led liberal hegemonic order”, as Princeton scholar John Ikenberry puts it, is going to wither away. He and some other scholars and pundits believe that the order that America built will survive and may even co-opt its potential challengers.¹ This to me is wrong. As I argue in a soon-to-be published book², the American-led liberal hegemonic order is coming to an end, whether the US itself is declining or not.

This is not because the emerging powers have not benefitted from the liberal order. But this does not mean they will want to support it in its present form, because of its unjust nature, and the problems of including its inequality, unilateralism, and

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, U.K.: The Polity Press, 2014).

exclusion of the Rest. Some features of the liberal order will continue, including relatively open economies, multilateral institutions and the advance of democracy. But its institutional structures, leadership and management will change. The new order is not going to be an American hegemony. Indeed, it will be no one's hegemony.

Instead, we are likely to see what I would call a multiplex world. Not a multipolar world, but a multiplex world, like a multiplex cinema. The term multiplex is defined as "a complex that houses several movie theaters". In a multiplex, there are several movies running in different screens in a single complex.

In this multiplex world, some are thrillers and Westerns, with violence, crime, ruggedness and heroism as prominent themes, like the Hollywood type. Others would have passion, tragedy, song and dance, like the standard Bollywood fare. We would have Kung-fu films produced in Hong Kong and Taiwan, and Chinese patriotic and propaganda films made in the mainland since the communist revolution. There would be plenty of scope for "indy" films alongside those from established houses like the Universal studios or Columbia Pictures. No single director or producer would monopolize the audience's attention or loyalty.

In a multiplex world, the audience has a choice of shows. They can also watch and compare several or all of them.

In re-imagining global order today, we are shifting from watching movies in a conventional single screen theatre to a multiplex. The liberal hegemony story is like watching one movie at a time in one theatre. After the run of the British, the American movie has been showing for a while. That movie was scripted, produced and directed by the US, with itself as the lead actor. In the multiplex world, the American show is joined by a variety of plays with different plots, producers, directors and actors. The management of order is more diversified and decentralized 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 promoting human rights and environmental protection and villains such as Al-Qaeda, drug lords, people smugglers and greedy corporations.

In a multiplex world, there will be hits and flops, like some of the emerging powers currently so hyped, fading away because of middle income trap, domestic instability, or the hangover from regional conflict. (India, China, Russia, Brazil, each have such a potential). The American show may continue to dominate the box

office for a while, although the audience may 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 means sharing a common architecture and being in an interdependent relationship. Security screening is done at the entrance to the entire complex, implying collective and common security mechanisms at play.

What does this multiplex world mean for international relations/studies in India? A multiplex world requires a different conception of international relations/studies. Let me tell you how, with reference to the ongoing discussion of the state of international relations in India. A caveat here: 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.

State of IR in India

In the discussion of the state of IR in India, especially at this very institution,³ one contributor, Kanti Bajpai argues that India led the developing world, certainly Asia, in IR studies from 1947 to the late 1980s. But 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 on the state of Indian IR. In his view, while “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 Bajpai finds the reasons for the stagnation of Indian IR in problems peculiar to the discipline itself and its scholars, Mattoo’s diagnosis has more to do with institutional factors that plague Indian higher education system as a whole.

As with the causes of the stagnation or even decline of Indian IR, there has been plenty of discussion of the remedies. Some remedies are institutional and relate to providing more resources and funding, while others call for conceptual shifts.

³ The references to Bajpai, Mattoo, Paul and Mallavarapu are their articles in the Special Section of *International Studies*, Vol. 46, Nos. 1&2 (2009). These essays were initially presented at a workshop held at JNU.

Most suggested remedies stress the need for the Indian IR community to take a greater interest in theoretical work. T.V. Paul suggests “the need for rigorous theory-driven and theory-informed scholarship.” Navnita Behera has explored a number of specific classical and contemporary sources of theory development.⁴ And Siddharth Mallavarapu has encouraged “Indian scholars to build on existing paradigms and developing new critical ones.”

I believe the causes of the underdevelopment of Indian IR and the ways to redress them have been well-discussed by others to require further elaboration here. But we still do not have a sense of what sort of overarching direction the field of IR in India should take? Here I do have a suggestion, drawing upon the theme for my impending presidency of the International Studies Association. I call it *Global IR*.

What is Global IR?

In a project launched almost a decade ago and published in 2007 in the *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, a group of scholars, myself included, 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 this convention. First, it 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 IRT outside of the West, which include cultural, political, and institutional factors when viewed against the “hegemonic” status of established IRTs. Third, the project 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 China, India and Asia more generally, have taken up and further developed these above aspects.

The naming, if not the intent and substance, of the NWIRT approach has caused some controversy. Some would rather called the new project “post-Western,” with a more radical agenda to disavow the existing “Western” IR. I view both “non-Western” and “post-Western” as part of a broader challenge reimagining IR as a global project. I call this project Global IR.

⁴ “Reimagining IR in India,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* (Special Issue on “Why is there no Non-Western IR Theory” ed. by Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan), Vol.7, No. 3 (2007).

It is 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 has now become a “heritage site” that deserves to be preserved. 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:

First and foremost, Global IR is inclusive. It 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.

But “bringing the Rest in” does not mean simply using the non-Western world as a testing ground to revalidate Western-derived 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.

Second, Global IR subsumes, rather than supplants Western IRT. When it comes to dealing with the non-Western world, IRT is hardly monolithic or unchanging. Constructivism has been especially important in opening space for scholarship on the non-Western world because of its stress on culture and identity. New variants of realism, such as 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 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 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 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, 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 unrealized challenge.

Third, to have Global IR as the designation of the field does not diminish 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. A global IR calls for the acknowledgement of regional diversity and agency. Regions are no longer viewed in material terms or as fixed geographic 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 other physical and ideational spaces and shape global order. Relatedly, 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 justification of European imperialism. Rejecting this, I accept Robert Cox's alternative understanding of universalism, which involves "comprehending and respecting diversity in an ever changing world."⁵ I call this syncretic universalism and as I will argue later, it 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 international relations are 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 a

⁵ Robert W. Cox, "Universality in International Studies: A Historicist Approach," in Michael Brecher and Frank P. Harvey, eds., *The Essence of Millennial Reflections on International Studies: Critical Perspective* (University of Michigan Press), p. 53.

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 which was founded upon the conception of “Asia for Asians”, also illustrate this tendency. China’s evoking of the tributary system is pregnant with similar possibilities, since the pacific nature of that system remains seriously 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 the non-Western countries. This was and remains true not just of the mainstream theories, such as realism, liberalism and constructivism, but also of the critical theories including post-modernism, postcolonialism and dependency theories. To be sure, they did it for different reasons. The mainstream theories started out as deeply ethnocentric. For them, the South was marginal, the object, rather than the subject of the games nations play. The critical theories actually thrive on this marginality. They criticized mainstream theories for ignoring the South, but did little exploration of the agency of the South, since that would undermine their central narrative.

But neither approach was right. Both took a narrow view of agency. But agency, especially in building global and regional orders, can be both material as well as ideational. It can be exercised at both global as well as 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 to support and strengthen global order. Agency means conceptualising and implementing new pathways to development, security and ecological justice.

Using this broader framework, we can find that the South has a voice, the subaltern can indeed speak. And it has done so.

To give some examples: Latin American states led creation of global human rights norms. India, 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. 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 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. The ideas of human development and human security were pioneered by South Asians. The idea of Responsibility to Protect, usually attributed to a Canadian inspired commission, actually has a strong African lineage. It owes to the concept of “responsible sovereignty” attributed to an African diplomat, Francis Deng, who was generalizing from an African context.

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 North-South relations. Exploring agency using the broader framework is an exciting but productive task which I hope this convention will take up.

In sum, international relations has a multiple and global heritage that must be acknowledged and promoted. The Global IR perspective is inclusive in every sense and across the traditionally understood but increasingly blurred East-West and North-South lines.

And it is this conception of Global IR that I would propose for the Indian academic and policy community.

Re-Imagining Global IR Out of India

Why so?

This brings me to perhaps my most controversial argument today. We all know that India is an inclusive nation. What we do not care to admit is that India does not have a very unique or exceptionalist culture.

India is rich in traditions and history, ideas and practices which constitute a key source of Global IR. At the same time these ideas and institutions have proven to be highly exportable and compatible with the cultures and norms of other societies.

India is a veritable microcosm of world history, more universalist in its cultural and civilizational ethos than many other cultures.

Thanks 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 Southeast Asia and Central Asia. A powerful example of syncretic universalism is Sufism, as anyone who has visited the Dargah of Nizamuddin in old Delhi would know.

It is therefore not surprising that there is little movement towards an Indian School of IR. And I very much hope it stays that way. This is in marked contrast to the growing demand for a Chinese school. The Chinese school is based on the Confucianism, the *Tianxia* (“all under heaven”), the tributary system and other very distinctive elements of Chinese civilization, politics and mode of interactions with the outside world. These have some resonance with its neighbourhood, but not much beyond. This makes the idea of a Chinese school limited in its relevance. 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 comes with it, just as Chinese scholars are creating a Chinese School of IR focusing, 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 has been a democracy, unlike China. There have been powerful voices against narrower forms of nationalism, which is a cousin of 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 UN and Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Indian non-alignment has been interpreted as both realism and idealism, but what is often forgotten is that it proved highly exportable to so many countries around the world. If Indian foreign policy was truly exceptionalist, then it is unlikely that so many countries would have accepted non-alignment.

The Indian IR community should unabashedly embrace and promote this syncretic universalism, rather than create a distinct Indian School of IR. It is in this sense that India offers a potentially rich source of the development and advancement of the Global IR. The Global IR approach is especially important in avoiding the trap of exceptionalism and parochialism as Indian IR strives to overcome its hitherto limitations. This is the central message that I urge you to take from this convention. Thank you for your attention.