

ISA 2015

## **Global IR Challenges and Prospects Roundtable**

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Summary of Comments by Barry Buzan

How one thinks about the challenges to, and prospects of, global IR depends on how one defines IR. My position on this still hotly contested question is that IR is NOT just world politics: i.e. the macro end of political science. For me, IR is multi-disciplinary, comprising, and interweaving, the macro ends of most of the social sciences as well as world history.

One reason this view matters is because the current West-centrism of IR derives from the fact that much of mainstream IR theory is simply an abstraction of European/Western history. History and the social sciences are interwoven not just in the nature of IR's subject matter but in the very process of its theorising. Thus, realism universalises Westphalia and the anarchy model. Liberal institutionalism reflects the Western style of intergovernmental organizations and regimes that dates from the later 19<sup>th</sup> century; and IPE, the Western-created capitalist global economy put in place from the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The English School sees global international society mainly through the institutions that the Europeans imposed on the rest of the world. Marxism theorises the world in terms of the dynamics of industrial modernity that the West again imposed on the rest of the world. This analytical apparatus is then retro-fitted, both normatively and structurally, onto other times and places.

A useful mental gymnastic is to ask yourself: 'What would IR (the discipline) look like if it had been invented somewhere other than in Europe/West?'. In other words, what difference would it make if the history of peoples other than Europeans was what underpinned the discipline? There are of course other times and places where other histories looked a bit similar to the European one. This is true of both China's Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods from 722-221 BC, and of the South Asian world represented in the work of Kautilya 4<sup>th</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BC. For that reason these two get paid disproportionate attention in Western IR.

But what if IR theory had been derived from China's history after 221 BC, when it was mainly a unified polity at the centre of the so-called tribute system? Or from the history of the Chola empire in India, that carried Indian culture, religion and trade into Southeast Asia? Or from the history of the Islamic world, where, as the 14<sup>th</sup> century travels of Ibn Battuta from Spain to China suggest, there was a powerful world society structure covering an enormous expanse?

Or from the high cultures of the Aztec or the Maya? Or, as Neta Crawford suggests, from culture and history of the first nations of North America?

There is beginning to be work along these lines. Some in the English School and elsewhere have started to recover the stories of the international societies that existed before the European expansion, that interacted with and shaped the development of Europe, and that were eventually over-ridden by the European expansion. Perhaps the biggest development along these lines is happening in China, where work is underway to recover the history of the Sino-centred East Asian 'international system' and to understand it as a novel form of hierarchical international society. This is not just a matter of paralleling the Western practice of privileging its own history, though it is that too. Yan Xuetong's project at Tsinghua University seeks also to recover the Chinese philosophical classics, and apply them to normative IR theory just as the West applies its own philosophical tradition in the same way. Japan is also revisiting its own independent philosophical resources, most notably the Kyoto School. China will probably lead the game in providing alternative historical and philosophical foundations for theorising about IR, but there is no reason why other cultures cannot get in on the act, and IR would be the stronger for it if they did. Other histories and other philosophies may or may not undermine core assumptions in the current IR canon, but they will almost certainly generate new concepts and new ways of thinking about the ethics and structures of global international relations.

One potentially worrying development accompanying this move is the emergence of so-called national schools or IR. There are strong calls for a Chinese School of IR, and similar voices can be heard also in Japan, Korea India, Brazil and elsewhere. The name of the English School is often invoked to justify such moves: if the English can have a national school, why can't we? The driving logic behind this is a Coxian one that theory is always for someone and some purpose. In this reading, neorealism and neoliberalism are American theories designed to perpetuate US primacy, and the English School is a theory for a declining power still nostalgically trying to punch above its weight. This link is mistaken in as much as the English School is hardly English in that sense. It is white commonwealth more than English, has a Dutch legal theorist (Grotius) as its icon, and takes little interest in the particular foreign policy concerns of the UK. Likewise realism is as much German as American. But however mistaken, the link is an effective legitimator.

There are reasons to worry about this development. National schools of IR might enhance the problem of IR being a discipline divided by language, history and culture. It might produce inward-looking thinking that put the globalisation of IR into reverse. At worst, national schools of IR might become,

or be seen to become, tools of government in the service of the national interest. Whether fairly not that was the fate of Japan's Kyoto School, and its idea of post-white power, which became tainted by its association with Japan's imperial project.

But although these are valid concerns, national schools might also contribute towards the globalisation of IR by helping to unravel the Gramscian hegemony of Western thinking (as demonstrated by the fact that 1648 is still taught in China as an important benchmark date!). National schools might help to mobilise thinking and enthusiasm for exploring alternative approaches. They could help get other histories and other philosophies into play in a more global IR, and thus inject new concepts and new framings into the way we think about global problems and possibilities. They could provide resources for supporting world-class, English language IR journals to compete with the best ones based in the West, as China and Japan already do.

It will be a difficult balancing game to get these benefits without paying too high a price in terms of costs. The fact that rising powers like China and India might well want to promote national schools will cut both ways. If national schools lead to a Balkanisation of IR, that would be a backward step. IR needs globalising, and I hope that those promoting national schools will keep a steady eye on the goal not of creating a national ghetto, but on getting their voices, histories and philosophies into the global game.