

Theory Talks

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THEORY TALK #42

AMITAV ACHARYA ON THE RELEVANCE OF REGIONS, ASEAN, AND WESTERN IR'S FALSE UNIVERSALISMS

Theory Talks

is an interactive forum for discussion of debates in International Relations with an emphasis of the underlying theoretical issues. By frequently inviting cutting-edge specialists in the field to elucidate their work and to explain current developments both in IR theory and real-world politics, *Theory Talks* aims to offer both scholars and students a comprehensive view of the field and its most important protagonists.

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AMITAV ACHARYA ON THE RELEVANCE OF REGIONS, ASEAN, AND WESTERN IR'S FALSE UNIVERSALISMS



Today's IR in its many variants is still, very much, a western social science. The claims it makes are however of universal purport. Amitav Acharya challenges western IR as predicated upon a false universalism. In his work, Acharya tries to undercut this problem by amending western IR theorizing with subaltern views on international politics. If IR theory is to remain relevant throughout the 21st century, Acharya argues, it needs to draw in the variety of pathways and experiences from outside the western world. In this Talk, amongst others, he discusses

'subaltern universalisms', how we can understand the international politics of ASEAN, and the importance of the Bhagavad Gita for IR theory.

What is, according to you, the biggest challenge / principle debate in current IR? What is your position or answer to this challenge / debate?

The biggest challenge today is how to make the study of IR more inclusive by moving it beyond its American-centrism or Eurocentric biases. IR theory as it stands now marginalizes the histories, voices and experiences of the non-Western world.

The debate is not so much on whether these biases exist, as I think that few people would dispute that, but regarding the genuine disagreement on how to address these biases.

There are some scholars that believe that the mainstream theories of realism, liberalism or constructivism are flexible enough and can be adapted to capture the voices and experiences of the non-Western world. They argue that we should use these theories and test their ability to adapt, and if there is anything missing, that we should revise these theories. For them there is no reason for anything new beyond what we already have.

Another point of view is that we really need to reject the premises and approaches of existing IR theories and methodologies and adopt radically different theories and methodologies.

My own position is somewhat in between, I don't think we should demolish or reject existing theories of IR whether be it realism or liberalism or constructivism, simply because they are derived from Western philosophy and a Western version of international history. What I argue is

that we can bring in new theories, methodologies and approaches from the South and the non-Western world and these new approaches should be allowed to interact and compete with what we already have.

The key goal for me is for everyone to feel at home and something to share in the house of IR. I should also probably stress that it is not my intention to promote a grand debate, like those between realism and idealism or rationalism and constructivism. I also recognize that the categories of Western and non-Western that I use are not homogeneous – conversations and debates occur inside those camps as much as they occur between them. What I would like to see is that the tendencies and biases that underpin Western IR to be recognized and overcome.

To elaborate, I am talking about four biases here.

The first bias is ethnocentrism. This is the tendency to theorize about key principles or mechanisms of international order derived from mainly a Western vantage point, using Western ideas, culture, politics, historical experiences and contemporary practice. Conversely it is also reflected in the marginalization of non-Western experiences – culture, politics, historical experiences and contemporary practice. Part of this ethnocentrism can be attributed to a sense of superiority of Western ideas and Western experiences over non-Western ideas and experiences.

The second bias is the false universalism in IR theory. There is a tendency to view Western practices as a universal standard while non-Western practices are viewed as particularisms or aberrations or something that is in some way inferior. Much of what happens in IR theory today is an extension of European diplomatic history and contemporary American foreign policy. These are considered to be the universal standard that everyone should try to emulate. We are told that the contemporary state system or regional/international order (such as the European Union's approach to regional integration) which is derived from the European model is the one that everyone should follow.

Third, there is a disjuncture between various elements of IR theory (derived from the Western experience) and what actually happens in the non-Western world. . You have hegemonic stability theory, or theories of interdependence which are supposed to capture the entirety of the world experience, but many simply do not fit or describe what happens in the non-Western world. A key example of disjuncture is seen in the concept of 'national security', which framed security studies for much of the Cold War. What you saw was a key concept which places a strong emphasis on the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the state from external military threats. This concept therefore had very little to say about the key security dilemmas of most developing countries which arise primarily from their domestic sphere. Thus there was a significant disjuncture between the main security discourse in West during the Cold War and the experiences of the Third World.

Finally I would identify agency denial as a strong current that runs through mainstream IR Theory. This involves denying the agency of non-Western societies in international relations. Thus, principles and mechanisms of international order building– e.g. democracy, state sovereignty, human rights - are seen as fundamentally Western contributions. The role or agency

of non-Western countries or societies is seen as marginal or inconsequential. To give you an example, the idea of sovereignty and the related norm of non-intervention is generally identified as being directly linked to Westphalia. What is missing from the picture is the way these norms were regionalized and adapted in Asia or Latin America or Africa giving rise to different types of regional orders.

How did you arrive at where you currently are in IR?

My work on IR has been shaped by two key factors, geography and people.

I have a broad interest in IR, encompassing Southeast Asian politics and IR, Asian regionalism, constructivism (norm diffusion), non-Western IR theories, comparative regionalism, Third World IR and global security including human security. My work straddles disciplinary IR and area studies (Southeast Asia). It also combines theory (especially constructivism) and policy relevant analysis. Each of these areas can be linked to the specific locations I have found myself in over the past few decades.

Growing up in India, I was always attracted to liberal internationalism, perhaps due to the influence on Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Indian Prime Minister. As long residence in Southeast Asia (where I was neither born nor educated) was very important in giving me a taste for research in the tradition of area studies, especially through the work of scholars like [Michael Leifer](#) and [Muthiah Alagappa](#).

But my work was shaped by a very eclectic and diverse group of scholars, majority of whom are not IR theorists, or even IR scholars. They include several distinguished historians of Southeast Asia, [Wang Gungwu](#), [Anthony Reid](#), [Anthony Milner](#), all of whom I came to know personally, and the writings of the late [O.W. Wolters](#) of Cornell University. It was the late Singaporean anthropologist of Southeast Asia, Professor [Ananda Rajah](#), who got me started in Southeast Asian studies through a series of conversations (often over a beer at the local *hawker* food centers) and collaborative writings.

Teaching at York University in Canada exposed me to critical theories, especially those of Robert W. Cox ([Theory Talk #37](#)) and his take on hegemony's material and ideational dimensions. Some of my work is policy-oriented, the foundations of which were laid through my collaboration with Canadian scholars with a similar orientation, notably [David Dewitt](#) and [Paul Evans](#).

A stint at Harvard, where I worked closely with sociologist [Ezra Vogel](#) and IR and China scholar [Alastair Iain Johnston](#), got me interested in constructivism, especially the importance of socialisation. Peter Katzenstein ([Theory Talk #15](#)), who was neither my professor nor colleague, became a central influence on my work on regionalism and norms. I could not but be inspired by his openness to alternative viewpoints, his own ability to move across theoretical paradigms and weave different regions and themes into his work, all this with his generous mentoring of relatively younger and relatively unknown scholars like myself. He is the one of the best defences

that the American IR community can provide against the charge of being a parochial and closed shop.

I must also mention [Richard Higgott](#), who back in the 1980s convinced me that an academic career in IR would be both intellectually satisfying and fun (he was right on both counts), and whose own work on Asian regionalism shaped my own thinking. [Mohammed Ayoob](#), with whom I share both a place of origin (Orissa, India), and alma mater, Ravenshaw College, now Ravenshaw University, was really the scholar who got me inspired by his pioneering work on Third World security, while Barry Buzan ([Theory Talk #35](#)), who really belongs at the very top of the pantheon of IR scholars worldwide, has been an wonderful collaborator in my work on non-Western IR theory.

So it is geography and people, rather than the grand traditions of IR, which have influenced my thinking. I have never instinctively been a realist or a liberal or a constructivist. I never became rigidly socialized into one way of thinking, but rather I was exposed to a number of very interesting people, many of whom were from disciplines other than IR.

What would a student need (disposition, skills) to become a specialist in IR or understand the world in a global way?

Four things: First, to accept that IR is more than an American or Western social science. We need to seek out other approaches to generate a more accurate world historical perspective. We need to consider alternative worldviews and locations of IR knowledge – for example to consider what IR theory would look like had come from the classical Indian Ocean maritime regions and the Asian heartland, rather than the classical Mediterranean and modern Europe and then test this against the biases I mentioned above.

Secondly, to develop a deep knowledge of one or more global regions. The traditional distinction between IR and area studies is irrelevant today. When I started my journey into IR, I felt that the most interesting scholars of IR are those who combine theory with empirical knowledge of one or more regions. This has become increasingly evident today. I started studying IR Theory from both and have kept a firm foot inside both doors. This also explains why I grew up preferring inductive to deductive approaches. I have little time for the Waltzian disdain for inductive work (see [Theory Talk #40](#)). I would alternatively find myself to be a discipline-based regional scholar or a region-based disciplinarian of IR. Moreover, I found the study of comparative regionalism to be especially useful. I was attracted to theories and cases which attest to the agency of the weak and the local, or what I might call the local constructions of global order, whether in norm making, institution-building and global governance.

One should not think of studies of Europe or America as the stuff of IR and that of Asia and Africa or Latin America as area studies. This is nonsense. As Steve Walt ([Theory Talk #33](#)) found out when relying on Middle East case studies to explain the origin of alliances, international relations scholars have long relied on historical cases and quantitative data drawn from European

diplomatic history without being accused of a narrow geographic, temporal, or cultural bias. Why should not one be allowed to build IR Theory out of the Middle East or Asia or Africa?

Third, is to be firm and even brutal in breaking down traditional disciplinary boundaries. For any scholar, some of the best and most creative ideas are likely to come from another discipline, rather than from rehashing the established and received wisdom of one's own. After an initial while, the latter becomes stale and boring. For me a lot of insight comes from historiography.

Fourth, one should look to frame questions fairly broadly – think about ideas of global heritage-try to find the meaning of ideas from different cultures or different parts of the world – for example, democracy – it is not easy but it is very important. [Amartya Sen](#) argues that dialogue and debate so fundamental to democracy is not unique to the West but is a global heritage. For example, the Indian practice of democracy grows out of a long and written-up argumentative tradition in India. Yet, we think and write international relations theory as if it springs almost entirely from an exclusively Western heritage.

You have written a great deal about the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) as an organization. Internationally there is an increasing flow of power to and within Asia, what sort of pressure has this put on an organization like ASEAN? How do you think this will affect ASEAN in the future?

For many IR scholars, ASEAN is an anomaly. It is a group of weak states that has managed to gain the attention of all the major powers. If you look at the list of ASEAN's dialogue partners, which includes all the great powers of the day: China, United States, Japan, the European Union, Russia, India and middle powers like Australia and Canada. This is really unprecedented, for a regional institution to engage all powers in this way. For realism it really is a structural anomaly; weak powers are supposed to be objects rather than subjects of great power attention. But in reality ASEAN has demonstrated the power of socialization rather than the alleged omnirelevance of power politics.

Long, long before there was anything called ASEAN, the societies of Southeast Asia were exposed to the cultural influences from India and China, but somehow managed to retain an identity which is very different from those of India and China. They did not blindly accept the cultural hegemony of these two powerful civilizations, but localized Indic or Sinic ideas that were relevant to the local context and helped legitimizing and empowering local societies. While deeply influenced by both India and China, South East Asia became quite distinctive and different from either of them. I have been developing a concept, what I call subaltern universalism (discussed below), which is an extrapolation from my study of Southeast Asia's past and the more contemporary agency of Southeast Asian societies. They speak to the possibility that the weak have agency; that they can construct regional and global order.

I would argue is that despite the rise of power in Asia, particularly that of China and India, ASEAN will survive if it manages to maintain a certain degree of cohesiveness. The major

powers of Asia do not trust each other enough to develop a Concert of Powers, instead these powers, including US and China, have accepted ASEAN's centrality in the regional security architecture. But ASEAN will be doomed if it loses its unity and takes sides with one great power against another. So ASEAN will need to provide the role of honest, neutral broker particularly when the great powers do not trust each other.

You have seen the ability of ASEAN to shift and adapt over the past few years. ASEAN in recent years has departed somewhat from its non-interference doctrine. It has adopted a Charter and it has developed mechanisms for dealing with transnational challenges and regional conflict. It has come out on the side of political reform in Burma, when traditionally it was very hands off, and has begun a limited regional mechanism for human rights. It has also developed mechanisms for engaging all the great powers of the world as we discussed above. So ASEAN is adopting and adapting but the question is whether it can adapt enough to keep up with the fast moving economic and political transnational environment – is ASEAN going to be too slow? At this stage it really remains to be seen whether it will be overtaken by events or whether it will be able to adapt.

Do you think that ASEAN as a form of imagined community has shaped the way in which the individual members of ASEAN or indeed other international fora based on the ASEAN base (like the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) or the East Asia Summit) have responded to the growing power of players in the Asia Pacific region, particularly China and India?

ASEAN is a very diverse group of countries in terms of size, wealth, power, culture, political systems, etc. But despite this it has survived for 45 years. This is a very important point about ASEAN as an imagined community – there is nothing natural or given about the ASEAN community, it has to be constructed through socialization, through interactions. This is why constructivism fits well with ASEAN.

When it comes to the wider Asia Pacific regional architecture, ASEAN faces challenges because of the rising power of both China and India. Around the time when ASEAN was established in 1967 China was in deep domestic turmoil and India after its 1962 border war with China had withdrawn into itself. Neither India nor China was a major economic player at this time. So ASEAN had space to grow and an opportunity to come into its own when its two largest neighbors were down and out. But now these two neighbors are back: where does this leave ASEAN? Will they squeeze ASEAN out? Here again, ASEAN's future depends on the quality of its socialization. If it remains cohesive and manages to engage all the relevant actors without taking sides in the rivalry this is possible. Now, these are big 'ifs', but they are not inconceivable either. If this happens then I don't think that ASEAN will be marginalized in South East Asia simply because of the rise of China, Japan and India.

Your work often engages with different security lenses, particularly that of human security. Do you think that security threats from less traditional sources, for example natural disasters and food security will create more space for approaches which engage with human security?

To an extent, non-traditional security and human security are very closely linked, as both cover issues like environment, natural disasters, poverty and underdevelopment, food shortages, pandemics and so on. But there is one major difference. Human security is people oriented. Its main referent is the human person. Non-traditional security, the way I understand it, can be state centric or regime centric. It is a label that can be adopted by governments to enhance their authority in relation to a number of threats to protect their own survival. For example the Chinese government is increasingly using the phrase non-traditional security but not human security. Unless you bring the human individual to the centre stage, the non-traditional security framework that we increasingly hear about will not have the same meaning as human security. In fact, it can have the opposite effect. For example a military dictatorship could use the phrase non-traditional security to expand into areas it had not operated in previously. Especially in non-democratic states the phrase ‘non-traditional security’ can be a very powerful instrument for the regime and there may be a conflict between human security and non-traditional security.

In your work you emphasize neither being overly pessimistic regarding the rise of China nor engaging in blind essentialism or orientalism, particularly in relation to the adoption of hierarchies or ‘the Asian way’. How are these views affecting IR currently?

Among realists, there is a tendency to view the rise of China by comparing it to the rise of Germany. But the conditions between these two periods are very different. Many of the European rivalries in the late 19th century and early 20th century were spurred by a competition for overseas colonies; this is not the case today. On the other hand I reject the essentialist view that Asia and Asian identity or culture will come to the fore and save the region from any severe conflict. There is a view that Asians are more hierarchical by nature and would naturally bandwagon with China to make peace with this rising behemoth. I think the key to stability would be a combination of forces, while cultural norms matter, economic linkages, political interactions and even a balance of power among the key players will be critical to Asia’s future stability. The emerging configuration of these forces suggest that Asia may evolve in the direction of power-sharing, rather than power maximizing behavior as predicted by “offensive realism”. My work on norms, institutions and socialization tells me that the rise of China can be tempered by these forces as well as by economic interdependence and the rise of a democratic neighborhood around China - China will be constrained by these forces.

Given your earlier discussion on the current biases that exist within the discipline of IR Theory, do you think that if IR fails to engage in a more integrative and inclusive

approach that its relevance will be increasingly sidelined in key issues of international debate?

If your question implies that IR needs to take greater cognizance of world history and the varieties of pathways and experiences from outside the Western world, then I would say absolutely. I have already suggested that IR scholars cannot really understand the implications of the rise of China and India by pulling out categories and concepts from the European past and the rise of Germany. If you say that everything that is happening in Asia has already happened in Europe you will not be able to convince a lot of people. To make sense of what is happening in China and India today you have to understand the local context, the local culture, the local history – and although comparative insights are helpful, the primary point of reference has to be local. This goes back to my earlier point that IR has to be inclusive and integrated otherwise it will be marginalized and sidelined.

Given this, what should the IR community do in response to this?

The first is to recognize what makes IR parochial. The other is to take steps to address this parochialism. What I propose may be the direct contradiction of Kenneth Waltz ([Theory Talk #40](#)) who was supposed to have said, ‘Denmark doesn’t matter’. I would say that Cambodia does matter, so does Timor Leste, Burma, Africa, the Middle East, South America, Central Europe – they all matter. One could derive IR theory from all parts of the world, not only the great powers. This is what I might call ‘subaltern universalism’.

So this is not merely an expansion of scope of our investigation to look at the middle powers, but rather the inclusion of even the smallest actors on the international stage.

Yes. And while I disagree with Kenneth Waltz I also disagree with elements of the post-colonial thinking in IR being the other extreme. [Spivak](#) famously asked – can the subaltern speak? I would say yes, the subaltern can most surely speak. I am reminded of James Scott’s ([Theory Talk #38](#)) classic book, derived from a localized Southeast Asian rural backdrop: *Weapons of the Weak*. It outlined the varieties of forms of resistance to authority. In relation to norm diffusion, the subaltern do have profound agency. If you do not have a great deal of material power, you may still rely on moral or normative agency.

To sum up there are two things that can be done to make IR more universal. The first is that we can construct IR theory from all locations: Denmark, Burma, everywhere. The second is that all local actors have agency in the global order making; it is not only the preserve of great or great Western powers.

To turn to more recent events, the beginning of 2011 has been notable in the uprising of Arab peoples against long standing dictatorships, with Tunisia and Egypt being seemingly successful examples and with the future of other countries like Libya being less certain. Do these movements reinforce the universality of IR or human rights theory (and undermine essentialist arguments?) What impact (if any) do you expect these kind of regional movements will have on other regions, in particular the Asia Pacific?

I speak here as an IR scholar, not as a specialist in those regions. What has been happening in Tunisia, Egypt and elsewhere in North Africa and the Middle East does attest to the universality of the desire for freedom as you suggest. Though the question I ask is what kind of universalism or whose universalism is it? In the United States, some George W. Bush era neo-cons are celebrating that this is a vindication of their democracy promotion agenda of the kind that gave us the war in Iraq. Others see the uprisings confirming Fukuyama's 'end of history' thesis. Both claims are ridiculous and if this is the kind of universalism we are talking about we are really doomed. One of the things about the Arab Spring was that it was a bottom up process; it was sought by the people of those states and societies. Its origins were local. They were not the outcome of the end of the Cold War or any other major global shock. This is what I mean by subaltern universalism.

The Arab Spring offers a powerful reason to dismiss the tendency to view everything about the West as universal and everyone and everything elsewhere as particular. If you look at the historical relationships between the dictatorships that are under popular challenge and the West – between Egypt and the US, Libya in relation to Italy and Britain, Tunisia and the French –the then French Foreign Minister was holidaying in Tunisia when the uprisings started and offered French security support to deal with the unruly crowd –you get a sense of my question: whose universalism are we talking about here? The Arab Spring is a perfect example of the subaltern universalism I have referred to. You see people (most if not all) cherishing and upholding democratic values against local regimes which had been backed in the past by the powerful 'protectors of universal values' in the West. This is not an example that vindicates George W. Bush or Francis Fukuyama – it is an example of the agency of people and shows how the subaltern can speak and act.

I think that the movement towards democracy will happen in Asia but it will happen according to local circumstances – hence the importance of studying regionalism. Asia is not the same as the Middle East – the drive for democracy has longer roots in Asia, notwithstanding China, North Korea and Burma. Southeast Asia invented the notion of "people's power". But further democratization in Asia may not happen in the same way as in the Middle East or North Africa because the local circumstances are different. Many Asian regimes have done a much better job than the Middle East in providing economic growth. That is not to say that Asia is going to remain authoritarian because of economic growth. But significant economic pressure opens to the door to more evolutionary forms of political change. . Subaltern universalism recognizes that the agency of the local actors may vary from region to region depending on local conditions. This is not a one size fits all kind of perspective.

In exploring ideas for the expansion of IR as a more inclusive discipline you have proposed the inclusion of a wider range of ‘legitimate sources’ including religious texts in your writings. Can you explain how you would seek to integrate these sources?

I am not a scholar of religion. I look to religion as a source of new ideas about IR, as a source of new IR knowledge. Sometimes we dismiss religious texts because they are unscientific or other worldly. This is very wrong. I see, for example, Hindu or Buddhist texts as examples of discourses in philosophy, politics and metaphysics and even statecraft. For example, the [Bhagavad Gita](#), Hinduism’s most sacred scripture, has many secular and rational elements as well as metaphysical and “otherworldly” elements.

In some of the key religious texts you can find different concepts of universalism and political organization that can compliment and challenge each other. For example, one might see the teachings of Islam as unsuitable territory for IR theory because it speaks of a caliphate, rather than a nation state. We think of Westphalian state as being the only possible political unit around which IR is, or should be based. We are beholden to Westphalia so strongly that we often fail to think of other possibilities. What might a caliphate look like? We may not think the outcome as being very pretty but an ability to recognize such alternatives can bring significant shifts in the way we think about statehood, statecraft or international relations.

The line between religious knowledge and Western philosophy, metaphysics and social science has been historically been a thin one. The philosophical texts that develop around the world’s great religions, and not just the core scriptures like the Bible, Quran, Gita, or Tripitaka, carry important clues about epistemology, or how knowledge is produced, which is perfectly applicable to social science disciplines like IR. They represent conceptions of universalism that can either compliment or challenge the insights from Western philosophy, from which much of existing IR theory derives.

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His books include *The Quest for Identity: International Relations of Southeast Asia* (Oxford University Press, 2000), *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order* (Routledge, 2001), *Crafting Cooperation: Regional International Institutions in Comparative Perspective*, (co-edited, Cambridge University Press, 2007), *Whose Ideas Matter?* (Cornell, 2009); *Beyond Iraq: The Future of World Order* (co-edited, World Scientific, 2011); *Non-Western International Relations Theory* (co-edited, Routledge, 2010); and *The Making of Southeast Asia* (Cornell, 2011).

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- Read Acharya's *Seeking Security In The Dragon's Shadow: China and Southeast Asia In The Emerging Asian Order* (2003, working paper) [here](#) (pdf)
- Read Acharya's *Will Asia's Past Be it's Future?* (*International Security* 28(3), 2004) [here](#) (pdf)
- Read Acharya's *Nonhegemonic International Relations: a preliminary conceptualization* (2008 working paper) [here](#) (pdf)