

## *Contributor Introduction: Does International Relations Need Area Studies?*

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Thirty years ago, to study the international relations of an area was mainstream. Today, with the turn in International Relations (IR) and Political Science away from historicisation and contextualisation, scholars and students in the so-called ‘mainstream’ of the discipline confront a greater need to justify an area focus in their research. While much of the recent debate about the place of Area Studies within Political Science has focused on comparison and on comparative politics, only some of these concerns have carried over into IR. Conceptualisations of connectivity and the global; what counts as an area in IR, to whom, how, and why; and how we might reconstruct dominant modes of theorising in our discipline through a serious engagement with areas, all demand sustained attention. At a moment of ‘reconvening’ the discipline, embodied in the project of Global IR, this forum presents a set of distinctive yet interlinked answers to the question of how the localised study of ‘areas’ (understood as including North America and Europe) matters to IR.

As five contributors who share an institutional centre of gravity and a common commitment—the University of Oxford and the defence of pluralism in IR—we find ourselves not only at a moment of disciplinary reformation, but at a wider moment of reckoning. This forum’s publication against the backdrop of renewed student and faculty activism around our University’s past, particularly its legacies and memories of slavery and colonialism, serves as a potent reminder: the study of IR at Oxford, as in many other universities grown out of colonial and imperial centres, has distance to travel in the diversity of its faculty and, with some recent and encouraging exceptions, the coverage of its curriculum. Across sites of knowledge production and across the producers and reproducers of our discipline, the wider project of reconvening IR also demands a foundational shift in the frames through which we work, and it is here

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<sup>i</sup> This forum emerges from a panel session at the 2019 ISA Annual Convention in Toronto. We would like to thank Neil MacFarlane for early inputs into our conversations, and Amitav Acharya for his generous and searching role as chair and discussant in Toronto. We are also grateful to the three reviewers of this forum whose detailed and excellent feedback we have sought to incorporate as far as space allows.

that we place our focus in this forum.<sup>ii</sup>

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Situated in and reckoning with the history of Oxford as a flagship centre of IR and Area Studies in the UK, Europe, and the world, the pieces that follow debate the mutually dependent relationship between IR and Area Studies, a relationship forged in the shadow of empire and the Cold War. Drawing on what for most of us has been a long, prior engagement with Global IR, Area Studies, and a decentring agenda, we suggest new pathways forward. At the same time, we recognise at this pivotal moment that we are at a new beginning. There is much to learn, both as we aim to include others and as we hope for our own inclusion in rich debates taking place elsewhere—in other places and disciplines, some of which we draw upon below.

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ii Our thanks to one of our reviewers for underscoring the importance of diversity in the producers of IR scholarship and to Nayanika Mathur for her insight that disciplinary self-examination must accompany such efforts. See: Nayanika Mathur and Liana Chua, 'Introduction: Who are 'we'?', in: Nayanika Mathur and Liana Chua, eds., *Who are 'We'?: Reimagining Alterity and Affinity in Anthropology* (New York: Berghahn books, 2018), 1-34.

# INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND THE MIDDLE EAST: BRINGING AREA STUDIES (BACK) IN

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## Abstract

*The call for more dialogue between Area Studies and International Relations has gathered momentum and is particularly relevant to today's Middle East. The revolutionary events of the Arab uprisings, the volatile regional balance of power, and the performance of regional institutions are just three examples of where the fields of Middle East Studies and International Relations intersect and demand constructive scholarly engagement. And while scholars have responded to this call, much more needs to be done to break down disciplinary divides. As a recent symposium on this topic demonstrates, the origins and outcomes of the Arab uprisings 'have been manifestly and profoundly shaped by international factors, with which IR theory has yet to fully engage.<sup>1</sup> This paper first offers some reflections on the state of the International Relations-Area Studies debate and then moves to examine some Middle East-specific cases which illustrate this point. In doing so, it shows how 'bringing Area Studies (back) in' helps to contribute to the decentring of International Relations or making it more global.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, 'decolonising IR' as an inherently Western-centred discipline cannot take place without serious engagement with Area Studies scholarship which provides a 'road map' and tools to engage with alternative sites of knowledge.<sup>3</sup>*

## What's the problem and how to fix it?

The general reader might rightly feel bemused by the bigger question posed here. Surely all International Relations (IR), if it is indeed *International Relations*, depends to some degree upon the study of 'areas', or at least clusters of states in areas and their inter-relationships.

The world, for all the claims of 'globalisation', or to use the latest buzzword, 'connectivity', is a collection of areas or regions with often quite distinctive properties—not watertight compartments,

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<sup>i</sup> This paper draws on Louise Fawcett, "Introduction: The Middle East in International Relations," in *International Relations of the Middle East*, ed. Louise Fawcett, (Oxford: OUP, 5th edition, 2019): 1-17.

Louise Fawcett, "International Relations and the Middle East: Bringing Area Studies (back) in," *St Antony's International Review* 16 no. 1 (2020): 8-14.

to be sure, but belying any notion that the world can be treated as one seamless whole. ‘Universalism in the study of world politics’, as Laurence Whitehead writes, provides ‘a flat view of political reality’.<sup>4</sup> In International Relations, the local and global are in constant dialogue, as contributors to this section show. The region known as the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), at the heart of key global problems and issues, demonstrates well the importance of maintaining this interaction and resisting disciplinary divides and silos.

Interestingly, the title question would not have been posed fifty or more years ago, when both IR and Area Studies recognised their then, highly interdependent, relationship. Interdisciplinarity was a by-word for interwar IR exemplified by the English School, drawing as it did on history, political ideas, law, and diplomacy.<sup>5</sup> Early IR accommodated the study of world regions and their societies and histories even if these were viewed then from a predominantly European perspective. In the Cold War, as that perspective became an increasingly US-centred one, Area Studies consolidated its place in IR, not least because areas were important as sites of influence and control.<sup>6</sup> Many students of that time studied an area—the Middle East in my case—as an arena of Cold War competition.<sup>7</sup> However, as that competition waned, interest in areas diminished accordingly. Such was the early post-Cold War hubris of the West, that some proclaimed that the Third World no longer mattered.<sup>8</sup>

Such ‘mattering’ was selective, however, as Benedict Anderson writes: ‘if a country or region is regarded as a “problem” then area studies gets more airing. China studies is fine... Islamic studies is fine. African studies doesn’t matter’.<sup>9</sup> The Middle East, an area with continuing geopolitical relevance, whose conflicts spilled over borders, still commanded world attention, albeit with varying results. Meanwhile, to compound the problem, mainstream IR increasingly rejected interdisciplinarity in search of more generalising or universal theories and scientifically grounded explanations, contributing to the flattening phenomenon referred to above. Now characterised by ‘isms’ and grand debates alongside the growth in quantitative methods with large-n studies, area specialists, like international historians, were pushed to the margins. Area Studies, for its part, chastised for its failure to be policy relevant in the face of major events like the Iranian Revolution, the 9/11 attacks, and the Arab uprisings, retreated into narrower specialisation. Indeed, the Middle East provided evidence of where Area Studies was seen to have ‘failed’.<sup>10</sup>

This state of affairs—the retreat of Area Studies from IR—has continued despite notable efforts by some scholars and the fact that the world, and our understandings of it, have visibly changed, meaning that those areas once believed to be at the centre of the theory and practice of IR—and indeed at the centre of the world—no longer hold such dominance. A multipolar world is a reality today. This fact should make

us question the privileging of perspectives and understandings that come from only one pole. The so-called ‘Third World’ (to use Cold War language) matters today just as much as the former ‘First’ or ‘Second World’; all demand equal attention. The fact that labels like ‘Third World’, ‘less developed countries’, or the ‘South’ exist is indicative of the persistence of hierarchy in IR and the othering of areas that do not belong to the West or North. And it is not just the areas themselves that are othered—it is also their potential contributions to knowledge and understanding. The emergence of a Chinese IR school has shown precisely how such othering might be addressed.<sup>11</sup> One of the novel features of the Chinese-led Belt and Road Initiative is precisely that it offers an alternative vision and perspective, not only of older ideas of interdependence, but of the foundations of IR itself. Billed by the World Bank as ‘an ambitious effort to improve regional cooperation and connectivity on a trans-continental scale’, it places China at the centre of the world.<sup>12</sup>

The reference to China reflects its uncontested position as a major pole in the contemporary international order, though it is often presented as a challenge to that order and its institutions, but China is representative of one world area or region that both demands attention for its contributions and has the potential to reset or to ‘decentre’ IR. The same may be said for Africa, Latin America, or the Middle East—all regions which, historically and at present, offer unique and alternative perspectives on the international and contribute to the assembling of global IR. It is time for IR to catch up with the world as it is, embrace the meaning of the word ‘international’ in its broadest sense, and re-engage creatively with more plural approaches and understandings. The demand to decentre IR has been growing in recent years, though, as Andrew Hurrell points out, identifying the problem has not produced a common response on how to achieve this, or how best to study global IR.<sup>13</sup> The loosening of disciplinary boundaries, particularly in respect of Area Studies broadly conceived, is an important part of that endeavour—of which studying a region closely and learning its languages, for example, is an integral part.

In making the above argument, it is not necessarily the case that a complete deconstruction is required, though some critical and post-colonial scholars would argue that the very language and history of IR militate forcefully against the equality of states and peoples.<sup>14</sup> A less radical and incremental approach, following the work of scholars who advance the global IR agenda, is to open up and progressively break down and reconstruct hitherto dominant modes of thinking. Global IR is an invitation to accommodate a plurality of views and perspectives on any given question, both to rethink and ‘think past’ Western IR, as Pinar Bilgin has argued.<sup>15</sup> Such an exercise is unlikely to result in the tidy or parsimonious theorising beloved by IR theorists. It requires the hard work of ‘analytical eclecticism’: to explore connections between different

paradigms to generate new theoretical insights.<sup>16</sup> Work at the interface of Area Studies and IR is necessarily both eclectic and interdisciplinary, combining as it does the rich contextual analysis of Area Studies with the cross-cutting logics of IR theories and approaches.<sup>17</sup>

### **Lessons from the Middle East**

Studying the particularities of the Middle East as one of a number of areas operating within an overarching global structure, is particularly helpful in informing the whole and unsettling dominant theories.<sup>18</sup> Whether we consider the making of states and institutions, regional security, or the balance of power, the Middle East provides its own unique contributions and insights. The Middle East came late to the international system and on terms dictated mostly by others; its very territorial extension was defined by Western powers. Even to the most casual observer the particular problems attendant on post-imperial state formation require thinking ‘beyond Westphalia’; wars and alliances cannot be stripped down to any neat, realist model, but neither can the International Relations of the Middle East be simplified into a constructivist narrative, which has served to compartmentalise and (re-) essentialise MENA, bringing orientalism back in.<sup>19</sup>

Speaking of state formation, MENA shows how the Ottoman Empire, a once stable and prosperous imperial domain, and the envy of other world powers, became a fragmented post-colonial reality—a zone of predation but also of opportunity—with consequences for IR theory and practice. But this is not a simple story of external penetration and the construction of artificial, later to become ‘failed’, states. Rather it is a story of how both old and new states emerged into a competitive international society that was both hostile and facilitating to their emerging power. From Turkey’s extensive refashioning after Ottoman collapse and Egypt’s leadership role from the 1950s through the 1970s, which extended far beyond MENA, to Israel’s tenacious state and nation-building and Iran’s rise alongside the parallel emergence of the rentier states of the Gulf, the Middle East has seen the production of strong states. True, the 2003 Iraq War and the subsequent Arab uprisings have exposed symptoms of state failure (which civil wars do not?) but the overall picture remains one of state durability, challenging the notion that the artificial and colonial origins of MENA states have simply left them chronically weak, prone to collapse, and ripe for continuing intervention.<sup>20</sup>

In considering strong regional powers and regional alliances, the MENA case is illustrative in other ways. External powers are highly instrumental in influencing regional outcomes (think of Iraq, Libya, or Syria), but regional states themselves can be powerful ‘veto’ players at the regional and international levels, as Iran’s negotiations over the nuclear issue have shown. And the capacity of regional powers to reshape alliances

along new lines to suit their purposes, cutting across traditional Arab-non-Arab divides, and to instrumentalise sectarianism is illustrative of an extraordinary agility to balance regional threats and bypass supposedly deep-held ideological positions, whether in respect to supporting co-religionists or aligning with long standing enemies.

In the case of Iran, the contrasting positions of scholars is illustrative. There are two dominant narratives. On the one hand, Iran, past and present, displays many of the elements of a highly pragmatic regional power, asserting its authority and leadership both regionally and even globally among its allies. On the other, Iran is portrayed as irrational, revolutionary, and revisionist, a danger to the region and the wider world; a power to be contained.<sup>21</sup> The irrational behaviour label, favoured by some IR scholars and practitioners, does not assist understanding or serve as a helpful guide to policy. It legitimises punitive sanctions and weakens state capacity. The continued contestation of the Iranian state by outsiders has exacerbated regional tensions and invites further cycles of intervention.

Turning to the global politics of regionalism, MENA provides an interesting case which exposes the complex regional architectures of world politics. Rather than following models of integration or security community prescribed by IR scholars and EU practitioners, the region, like other areas, has performed according to a set of different criteria—at times adhering more closely to identity-based script (at the height of the Pan-Arab movement, for instance), at others to the simple exigencies of regional politics (as in the current Gulf Cooperation Council split). As with Asia, Africa, and Latin America, a sovereignty-first approach to regional cooperation is often favoured. Another key feature of MENA regionalism is the interdependence between regime security and regionalism, with the latter often reinforcing the former. Over time, the politics of identity appear to have loosened in favour of the construction of alliances for security purposes. Yet, MENA regionalism is not simply a study in failure. In revealing the deficits of rationalist approaches, it offers insights into more critical perspectives of regionalism and regional security.<sup>22</sup>

Exploring such illustrative cases reinforces the call for a more regionally informed and locally sensitive approach to IR where areas speak for themselves. It challenges scholars to resist generalising theories and consider the region on its own terms, and on a level playing field with other world regions—this is the core message of global IR and one embedded in Chakrabarty's call to 'provincialise' Europe.<sup>23</sup>

## **Conclusion**

This contribution has explored one arena for the improvement of the IR-Area Studies dialogue by considering the MENA region as a highly

fruitful zone of exchange and one that can contribute to relearning IR and a better understanding of region. It is not the case, either historically or at present, that IR scholars and Middle East specialists have failed to connect. Indeed, the recent contributions of scholars to the symposium referred to above, offer ‘a portrait of a new type of a new IR theory emerging from Middle East studies and the specific experience of the Arab uprisings.<sup>24</sup> Such contributions are timely and welcome. But few would disagree that 21st century IR needs to do better to respond to the still highly Western-centric approaches that continue to dominate the field and provide a distorted view of international reality. From the perspective of 2020, it is evident that events in the Middle East continue to present huge challenges for the regional and international order and yet remain poorly understood by scholars and policymakers alike. The IR of the region, like its politics, stubbornly resists generalisation. It is not enough simply to embrace and celebrate diversity by acknowledging the roles of the non-West. This belies a still unequal playing field. First, terms like non-West should be dropped; second, the roles and performances of all world regions need to be re-evaluated and incorporated into a more egalitarian and global IR narrative.

## Notes

1 Paul Lynch and Curtis Ryan, “The Arab Uprisings and IR Theory,” *Political Science and Politics* 50, no. 3 (2017): 643–646; Andrea Teti, “Bridging the Gap: IR, Middle East Studies and the Disciplinary Politics of the Area Studies Controversy,” *EJIR* 31, no. 1 (2001): 117–145; Moreton Valbjörn, “Towards a ‘Mesopotamian Turn’: Disciplinarity and the Study of the International Relations of the Middle East,” *Mediterranean Studies* 14, no. 1–2 (2004): 47–75.

2 Amitav Acharya, “Advancing Global IR,” *International Studies Review* 18 (2016): 4–15.

3 See Maiken Gelardi, “Moving Global IR Forward—A Road Map,” *International Studies Review* (2019). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viz049>.

4 Laurence Whitehead, “Depth Perception: Improving Analytic Focus through Cross-and Interregional Comparisons,” in *Comparative Area Studies* eds. Ariel Ahram, Patrick Köllner and Rudra Sil (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018): 45.

5 Lucian Ashworth, “Interdisciplinarity and IR,” *European Political Science* 8 (2009): 16–25.

6 Hans Morgenthau, “Area Studies and the Study of International Relations,” *International Social Science Bulletin* 4, no. 4 (1952): 647–55; Robert Vitalis, *White World Order, Black Power Politics* (New York: Cornell UP, 2015).

7 Louise Fawcett, *Iran and The Cold War: The Azerbaijan Crisis of 1946* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

8 Stephen Van Evera, “Why Europe Matters, Why the Third World Doesn’t: American Grand Strategy after the Cold War,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 13, no.

2 (1990): 1-59.

9 Benedict Anderson, "Comparatively Speaking. On Area Studies, Theory and 'Gentlemanly' Polemics," *Philippine Studies* 59, no. 1 (2011): 109.

10 M. Kramer, *Ivory Towers on Sand: The Failure of Middle Eastern Studies in America*, Policy Papers 58 (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2001); F. Gregory Gause III, "Why Middle East Studies Missed the Arab Spring: The Myth of Authoritarian Stability," *Foreign Affairs* (July/August 2011).

11 Hun Joon Kim, "Will IR theory with Chinese Characteristics be a powerful alternative," *Chinese Journal of IR* 9, no. 1 (2016): 59-79.

12 "Belt and Road Initiative," *The World Bank*, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/regional-integration/brief/belt-and-road-initiative>.

13 Andrew Hurrell, "Beyond Critique: How to study Global IR," *International Studies Review* 18, no.1 (2016): 149-51.

14 Sanjay Seth, "Postcolonial Theory and the Critique of International Relations," *Millenium* 40, no. 1 (2011): 167-83.

15 Pinar Bilgin, "Thinking past Western IR," *Third World Quarterly*, 29, no. 1 (2008): 5-23.

16 Rudra Sil and Peter Katzenstein, "Analytical Eclecticism in the Study of World Politics," *Perspectives on Politics* 8, no. 2 (2010): 411-31.

17 Ariel Ahram, Patrick Köllner, and Rudra Sil, *Comparative Area Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

18 For one early contribution see Leonard Binder, "The Middle East as a Subordinate International System," *World Politics* 10, no. 3 (1958): 408-429; for a more recent example, see Michael Barnett, *Dialogues in Arab Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

19 Ewan Stein, "Beyond Arabism vs. sovereignty: relocating ideas in the international relations of the Middle East," *Review of International Studies* 38, no. 4 (2012): 881-905.

20 Ellen Lust and Ariel Ahram, "The Decline and Fall of the Arab State," *Survival* 58, no. 2 (2016): 7-34; Louise Fawcett, "States and Sovereignty in the Middle East. Myths and Realities," *International Affairs* 93, no.4 (2017): 789-807.

21 Louise Fawcett, "Iran and the Regionalization of Insecurity," *International Politics* 52, no. 5 (2015): 646-656.

22 Pinar Bilgin, *Regional Security in the Middle East* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

23 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2007).

24 Lynch and Ryan, "The Arab uprisings and IR theory," 645.

# 'I'LL TELL YOU SOMETHING ABOUT CHINA': THOUGHTS ON THE SPECIALIST STUDY OF THE INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

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I was a bloody mess. Literally. I had just been involved in an accident on the Chicago lakeshore and was in an ambulance to the hospital. The paramedic at my side was asking me questions, apparently trying to keep me awake. Finding out I worked on international relations, he asked me if I studied anything specific. I mentioned China. The questions stopped as I triggered a ferocious monologue. My slightly hazy recollection is that it began with the phrase, 'I'll tell you something about China...'

These days everyone seems to have an opinion on China. The field of international relations is certainly no outlier in this respect. The amount of work on the rise of China, U.S.-China relations, and China's place in the world has exploded.<sup>i</sup> This is to be expected. The People's Republic of China (PRC) is now the world's second largest economy in nominal GDP terms and also enjoys the dubious honour of having the world's second largest military budget. The number of countries for whom it is the largest trading partner exceeds that of the United States by a significant margin. And it has become a far more active presence internationally, be it in the United Nations, at Davos, or on the open ocean. China is now a hot topic for scholars of great power politics, international order, and the future of the international system more generally. The recent pandemic has only intensified this trend.

In what follows, I discuss the implications of this moment for specialists who study the international relations of the PRC. As I will outline, increasing popular interest and generalist engagement bring both many opportunities and frustrations. More crucially, however, specialist contributions are needed now more than ever to combat both simplistic, 'surface readings' of PRC behaviour as well as those that purport to read into its essence. Such contributions are not just correctives, but provide

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<sup>i</sup> A Google Scholar search for the terms 'rise of China' + 'international relations' returns over two thousand English language results for 2019 alone. A Google Scholar search for the Chinese equivalent of those terms, '国际关系' + '中国崛起' returns nineteen hundred results for the same year.

the field a larger service, diversifying our understandings of state forms and behaviours without exoticising them.

To begin with, for those international relations scholars who have spent their careers focusing on the PRC, this is a bittersweet moment. On the one hand, increased prominence brings with it increased demand. Indeed, generally speaking, for scholars pursuing their careers in English-language institutions but whose regional focus is not the United States or Europe, it is frequently the case that they find their social capital rising and falling not with the quality of their scholarship but the perceived significance of their object of study.<sup>ii</sup> The said significance of any given state or region (the United States and Europe again excepted) in the English-language field is, in turn, often a reflection of the pre-occupations, anxieties, and fads of the North American and European international relations commentariat and elite. Where such attention is on the rise, so too are core job opportunities, possibilities for publication, student interest, and resources. When on the decline, core jobs and course offerings dwindle, and the respective regionally-focused scholars are reduced to trading observations and findings within insulated cliques. One might think increased calls for a more global IR have ameliorated this. The truth remains, however, that when not enjoying a moment of prominence, the detailed debates of regional experts attract about as much interest from IR generalists as would discussions between devoted philatelists concerning the attributes of a particular stamp.

But prominence also attracts interlopers, and those whose focus has long been the PRC now find themselves needing to respond to an ever-growing mass of claims and arguments forwarded by newly-interested generalists and pundits. There has been a massive proliferation of books, articles, and op-eds on the People's Republic of China, many of which seek to adjudicate the questions of whether or not China's rise will be peaceful and what China wants. Not a few are pulpy and breathless, rehearsing well-trodden memes and advancing essentialised claims. Acutely cringe-worthy are those that refer to the PRC as 'the dragon', repeat clichéd tropes about 'five thousand years of history', and make sweeping generalisations beginning with the phrase, 'The Chinese think...'

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ii In what follows, I focus on the experiences of scholars of the international relations of the PRC within English-language academic institutions. This author's location — the University of Oxford — finds itself at the intersection of European and North American approaches to international relations, and disciplinary incentives both inside the institution and within the United Kingdom more broadly privilege the ability to show relevance to the broader English-speaking field. Needless to say, the opportunities, obstacles, and changes recent developments have entailed for those who study the international relations of the PRC within the PRC, or, alternately, in countries such as Japan or South Korea, involve a whole different set of dynamics that are topics in their own right.

Certainly, not all such work is so awful, and the dismissive responses of some PRC specialists towards their generalist colleagues may admittedly contain a tad bit of territorial defensiveness and resentment. Studying the international relations of the PRC in depth is not easy. It often requires engaging with mountains of mind-numbing official-speak; navigating the numerous obstacles the PRC erects for access to documents, people, and facts; and living with the constant awareness that when you attempt to stare into the abyss of the party state, it very likely is staring back.<sup>1</sup> For many it also means surmounting the hurdles of language acquisition, and attaining specialist fluency in both Chinese and English is no easy task.<sup>iii</sup> The glib newcomers whose arguments rely on official GDP statistics, secondary English-language articles, and conversations at an invited conference or two in China thus may appear not to have fully paid the price of admission. They have not spent the time pouring over documents and sources, they have not sought to amass and parse partial and fragmented evidence of the actual workings of foreign policy within the PRC, they do not have to worry about risks to themselves or those with whom they interact, they have not even had to deal with the frustrations of being punished by word-limits for using Chinese-language source material (the titles have to be provided in the original and in translation). It jars a bit then, when the new-comers start taking up prime real estate in top journals and basking in citations.

So what are the possible responses? One is simply to continue to cede the territory of the top English-language journals and remain focused on the nuanced questions. This entails writing detailed, close examinations of certain elements, episodes, and developments within PRC foreign policy making and behaviour with the foreknowledge these will likely be confined to more regionally focused journals or specialist publications that generally are lower-ranked in the field. Another is to attempt to reframe one's work to speak to the wider questions as they are being defined in the so-called 'mainstream literature', and by this I mean the extremely competitive territory of a select number of journals that rank highly in terms of citation counts and esteem within English-language political science departments.<sup>2</sup> To do so, however, one must often sacrifice some of the nuance, attention to specialist debates, and hard-won minutiae that is of little interest to the latter's target reader readership.

Both have their pros and cons, and in some rare cases, there are scholars that manage to bridge the two. But there is a further form

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iii As one insightful reviewer noted, this also touches upon issues of 'language and knowledge production in IR' and an entire book could be written on this topic as pertains to the PRC. Importantly, while work written by Chinese scholars in English may be engaged as part of the disciplinary conversation, work published in Chinese is often treated not as scholarship itself but as an object of study for insights into the PRC.

of engagement that is needed. As their subject matter assumes an ever-larger role in an English-language field that has traditionally taken North American and European experiences and contexts as the normalised point of departure for understanding the world, the expertise of those who have spent their careers studying the international relations of the PRC is necessary now more than ever as an antidote to two frequent problems appearing in writings on China: surface reading and essence reading.

First: the problem of surface reading. There are many things which, when taken at face value, may appear to be homologous across contexts. These include the roles of certain actors or institutions, the manner in which decisions are made, the significance of certain policy choices or processes, statistical outputs, and so forth. But appearances can be deceiving. For one, there may be actors, power relations, informal or submerged processes, internal battles and so on that may not be evident at first or even second glance, and yet crucial for understanding what is occurring. This is particularly true for the PRC. There is a complex set of interactions between the party and the state, across domestic political interest groups and constituents, and within intra-party struggles, the details of which are often far from clear at the time. Sometimes these pierce the surface, as was the case with the dramatic fall of Chongqing party boss Bo Xilai in 2013.<sup>3</sup> But even then, the particulars of such incidents remain sketchy and will likely remain so for the foreseeable future; to wit, there still remains disagreement over the details of much better known party struggles almost half a century old, such as the death of alleged coup-plotter Lin Biao.<sup>4</sup>

What is more, the meaning and significance of certain gestures, statements, policies, data and the like may vary widely by context; absent an understanding of this context one may seriously misread what is occurring. There is a clear hierarchy of actors in the PRC system — one not necessarily corresponding to other states — and the authoritativeness of their statements vary widely. The PRC Foreign Minister, for instance, holds a relative low-ranking position in the foreign policy making establishment. And a commentary by Hu Xijin at the Global Times, for example, has a much different value from something written by Zhong Sheng at the People's Daily, even if both are ostensibly under the supervision of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).<sup>iv</sup>

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iv Hu Xijin, the editor of the Global Times, is a firebrand known as someone who both pushes borders and at times releases insights into the thinking of portions of the CCP elite, but he and his paper are also dismissed by many within China. At times, he has been accused of being overly provocative in an effort to elicit foreign attention and advertising revenue. In contrast, Zhong Sheng is not a person but rather a homophonic pseudonym for the ‘voice of the centre’, and thus represents more authoritative statements of CCP policy. See: Samuel Wade, “How Seriously Should You Take Global Times,” *China Digital Times*,

On top of this, the informants, sources, and data one uses may also be seriously biased in ways that are not immediately obvious to those coming from outside that context. The combination of censorship and incentives to misrepresent (such as for cadres to over-report their accomplishments) in the PRC system exacerbate this to an extreme. It has long been the case, for instance, that PRC provincial economic growth data has added up to more than the national total.<sup>v</sup> To be clear, this is more than just an entreaty for nuance. It is rather the observation that contextual variation may be significant and massive and yet obscured by seemingly familiar surface appearances.

Second: the problem of reading into an essence. We need to avoid essentialising or exoticising difference, playing into ‘you just cannot understand’ self-orientalising exceptionalism, or reifying variation within static and nation-state-shaped bubbles of purported cultural otherness.<sup>vi</sup> Mine is a plea for context not culture. Even the most of alien-seeming manifestations of difference from the perspective of outsiders have their own logics; these logics are intelligible when given context. Power, legitimisation, status, bureaucratic or parochial interests, self-justificatory myths, human fallibility and frailty, and historically-ingrained practices — these are factors and dynamics not unique to any polity, and indeed ubiquitous to the phenomena we study in international relations. The PRC and, more specifically, the CCP seek with few exceptions to maintain party discipline and an outward appearance of super-human unity and rationality. But this is not the same as being a unitary actor, and discipline is a never-ending battle.<sup>5</sup> The PRC is a huge state, with all variety of domestic, bureaucratic, regional, and factional pressures, dynamics, and disunities.<sup>vii</sup> With more than a billion

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August 3, 2016, accessed February 10, 2020, <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2016/08/seriously-take-global-times/> and Samuel Wade, “Who Does the Global Times Speak For?” *China Digital Times*, August 11, 2016, accessed February 10, 2020, <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2016/08/global-times-speak/>; on Zhong Sheng and other pseudonyms within the PRC system, see: Michael D. Swaine, “Chinese Leadership and Elite Responses to the Us Pacific Pivot,” *China Leadership Monitor* 38, no. 5 (2012): 1-2, fn.2-4.

<sup>v</sup> For an excellent introduction to the problems of data in the PRC, see James Palmer, “Nobody Knows Anything About China,” *Foreign Policy*, March 21, 2018, accessed February 10, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/03/21/nobody-knows-anything-about-china/>

<sup>vi</sup> In the context of the PRC, William Callahan refers to such a discourse as ‘Sino-speak’. See: William A. Callahan, “Sino-Speak: Chinese Exceptionalism and the Politics of History,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 71, no. 1 (2012).

<sup>vii</sup> To cite just one example, see Min Ye’s excellent work on the Belt and Road Initiative in China: Min Ye, “Fragmentation and Mobilization: Domestic Politics of the Belt and Road in China,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 28, no. 119 (2019).

people how could this not be the case? These phenomena are, of course, shaped by institutional incentives, historical path dependencies, and shifting developments. They all have their own logics, and those logics are comprehensible even if not immediately perceptible or legible. And to be crystal clear, presenting a logic as comprehensible, however, in no way means that it constitutes a morally acceptable rationale. (Unfortunately, failure to recognise this distinction too frequently results in specialists being tarred as apologists.)

Compounding the problem of essentialist readings, the CCP elite sees itself in a constant struggle to perpetuate its predominance, and in doing so has itself embraced a variety of stark, essentialised characterisations of Western versus Chinese cultural difference. Othering conflicting viewpoints as foreign is a crude tactic of delegitimation by no means limited to the PRC, even if the CCP lays it on particularly heavily. In reality, the PRC is host to a myriad variety of different forms of political thought and reasoning, ranging from liberals to nostalgic Maoists.<sup>6</sup> Just because the internal debates, disagreements, and divergences are not always overtly visible, that does not mean they are not occurring, and specialists are often best placed to bring these to light.

To conclude, among area-focused international relations scholars writing for English-language audiences, those who work on the PRC may count themselves lucky as the so-called wider field has taken an interest in their object of study. But they are also finding themselves contending with ever-more ‘I’ll tell you something about China...’ generalist commentary claiming to explain PRC behaviour. In this context, said specialists can (1) offer a means of interpreting and reading that highlights the potential expanse of variation within political organisation and behaviour, meaning-making practices, and perspectives that exists inside the PRC; (2) provide potential explanations that supply a demystifying, de-essentialising intelligibility to the logics in operation within PRC rhetoric and practices; and (3) point out the limits of our ability to make definitive claims based upon available evidence.

The above may not seem at first sight to be contributions to the wider field of general English-language international relations theorising. But they are. Generalists and pundits frequently employ language that reduces the PRC to familiar categories such as ‘rising power’, ‘authoritarian’ or ‘revisionist’ that, while not necessarily inaccurate, can simplify or essentialise in unhelpful ways. If a little knowledge can be dangerous, broad generalisations that stem from it can be even more so. The work of PRC specialists can challenge the field to refine its categories and assumptions to better reflect a more complex picture, while also encouraging greater humility and restraint where that picture remains unclear.

- 1 Isabella Steger, “A New Study Shows The Growing Perils For Academics Researching China,” *Quartz*, 5 September 2018, accessed February 10, 2020, <https://qz.com/1379245/study-of-academic-freedom-in-china-shows-perils-for-researchers/>
- 2 For the journals, see: Brian J. Phillips, “Ranking IR Journals,” January 7, 2014, accessed February 10, 2020, <https://duckofminerva.com/2014/01/ranking-ir-journals.html>
- 3 For a fascinating rendition of this, see: Carrie Gracie, “Murder in the Lucky Holiday Hotel,” BBC, March 17, 2017, accessed February 10, 2020, [https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/idt-sh/Murder\\_lucky\\_hotel](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/idt-sh/Murder_lucky_hotel)
- 4 “45 Years Later, Lin Biao’s Mysterious Death Continues to Haunt Party Leadership,” *Shanghaiist*, May 5, 2018, accessed February 10, 2020, [https://shanghaiist.com/2016/09/13/lin\\_biao\\_death\\_anniversary](https://shanghaiist.com/2016/09/13/lin_biao_death_anniversary)
- 5 “China Focus: CPC further enhances Party discipline,” *Xinhua*, August 28, 2018, accessed February 10, 2020, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-08/28/c\\_137424747.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-08/28/c_137424747.htm)
- 6 See: William A. Callahan, *China Dreams: 20 Visions of the Future* (Oxford University Press, 2013); David L. Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power* (Oxford University Press Oxford, 2013), 13-44.

# WHY INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND AREA STUDIES NEED EACH OTHER

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The place of Area Studies in academia has been the subject of recurrent debate. One round took place in the 1960s as the focus of the Cold War shifted to the Third World; another occurred in the 1990s with many Western academics making strident claims about the universality and universal applicability of Western social science. The ensuing arguments were often intense, sometimes ill-tempered, and ranged across many disciplines. More recently, there has been a very welcome increase in cross-regional comparative research and the methodological problems involved. By contrast, the links between Area Studies and International Relations (IR) have been relatively understudied. In this short article, I will focus on, first, what is specific to International Relations and, second, on some of the reasons why IR and Area Studies need each other.

The development of Western academic International Relations was often deeply hostile to Area Studies. The core goal, after all, was to understand the international system as a whole. This was true of classical realists such as Hans Morgenthau, and it was true of Hedley Bull and writers on international society. IR was seen as an integrating and synthesising field of enquiry. It analysed how things hang together, and it was driven by central perennial questions—above all, of patterns of war and peace, and of order and disorder at the level of the system as a whole.

Second, and closely related, International Relations is naturally the domain of the strong and the powerful, and, as Kenneth Waltz and so many others argued, theory building needed to reflect this. Realists concentrated on the balance of power and on conflicts amongst the great powers. Others (including many historical sociologists) stressed the extent to which major power relations are also fundamental to understanding the evolution of capitalist globalisation and the changing character of transnational social relations. But the core message was clear: IR was, and would remain, about major states and the rise and fall of great powers.

Third, traditional Western International Relations ignored Area Studies because of a particular view of the globalisation of international society. The core image is of a European international society that had

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<sup>i</sup> I would like to thank the three anonymous reviewers for their very helpful comments.

Andrew Hurrell, “Why International Relations and Area Studies Need Each Other,” *St Antony’s International Review* 16 no. 1 (2020): 22-27.

developed its own set of institutions and that then became the core of a historically unprecedented global order. For the first time in human history, there is a single global political order. Both the logics of geopolitical competition but also the institutions of (Western) international law and society have come to be reproduced on a now global stage. From this perspective, there is no outside and few alternatives. Instead, there is one unavoidable, if heavily contested, language of international order and of global political life.

But this neglect has come at a very high cost. Without a sensitivity to Area Studies, academic International Relations cannot deliver on its promise to provide a satisfactory historical account of how global international society evolved, nor an adequate analytical account of its dynamics, nor a plausible normative account of how it might be reformed or re-structured. Why not? There are four reasons.

In the first place, even on its own terms, the ‘top-down systemic account’ is profoundly misleading. What happens on the ground matters as much to the big picture as balances of power between major states—think of decolonisation, the failures of the superpowers in Afghanistan and Vietnam, or the extent to which the US, with all its military might at the height of the supposed ‘unipolar moment’, suffered successive defeats in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria. In addition, the international order is not just about clashes of power and shifting prudential calculations of interest amongst the strong; it has to involve the analysis of weaker states and societies, their understanding of fairness and justice, their concerns for status and recognition, and the ways in which their conceptions of international order have varied across time and space.

Second, a major trend in the study of International Relations over the past thirty years has been to unpack and debate the importance of the regional. From the early 1990s, work on the ‘new regionalism’ and on the international relations of particular regions of the world grew apace. This is a rich field of enquiry. Here, I would simply emphasise that once one opens up the need to understand regional international societies in their own terms, then all of the claims of Area Studies come directly into play—above all, the fundamental role of context in discerning the meanings that actors ascribe to their actions, and the complexity and inter-relatedness of politics, history, and culture.

Third, there are the powerful critiques of eurocentrism—from post-colonialism, from critical IR, and from global history. The central arguments are well known: (a) to underscore the importance of positionality: Whose history? Seen from where? Written by whom?; (b) to demonstrate that neither time nor geography are ever politically innocent and that there is a constant need to understand the historical construction of notions of time and history, and of space and globality—notions without which modern Western understandings of global order and of international relations would make very little sense; (c) on the other side,

to give far fuller accounts of the agency of those previously condemned to sit in what Chakrabarty called the ‘waiting room of history’; and (d) to revise and critique Eurocentric accounts of how international society became global and of the normative changes involved in that process. The way in which this story is now told has been extensively revised.

And fourth and finally, there are the ways in which the global itself has been changing. The focus on the post-Cold War period and on the apparent naturalness of a Western-dominated, self-described ‘liberal’ order has led to a foreshortening of history. The global is undergoing dramatic changes. The COVID-19 pandemic illustrates the threat to human societies caused by the deep and structural interconnections between an unequal and unstable global economy, an ecological system characterised by immense complexity and poorly understood tipping points and feedback loops, and a global political order in which global governance institutions are weak and have to live alongside the return of geopolitics and power-political competition between the major states of the system. But we can only make sense of these changes by placing contemporary debates within a longer-term historical perspective and a far more strongly global perspective.

The danger, however, is that the search for ‘non-Western’ ideas and for regional and cultural ‘perspectives’ on global order has its own limits. Uncovering the culturally specific character of different ways of understanding the world undoubtedly encourages greater pluralism and reflexivity. But it can also lead to a cultural and regional inwardness that works to reproduce the very ethnocentricities that are being challenged. The search to understand what is distinctive and different has involved a retreat from the global—or at least thin and one-dimensional characterisations of the dynamics, forces, and logics at work at the global level. Given the very power of the global, there are no longer (if there ever were) any non-Western country, regional, or cultural perspectives that can be gathered together in any straightforward or unproblematic manner. The sheer power of the global means that attempts to identify a ‘Chinese’ or an ‘Indian’ perspective on global order will face severe methodological difficulties.

So the question remains: how do we give due weight to the power of the changing global whilst building on the importance of regional and area knowledge? We—all of those engaged in different locations, trying to make sense of the modern global and international—certainly need to pluralise, to relativise, and to historicise. And, for all of the reasons given above, we need to recognise the continued power of Chakrabarty’s claim that Western analytical and theoretical categories remain indispensable but inadequate. We cannot escape from the disciplinary and theoretical Western mainstream, but dominant concepts and ideas never travel unproblematically. And we need work that de-centres other regional or cultural perspectives and that problematises unreflective ‘non-Western’

The option of not confronting what is happening at the global level out of a suspicion of grand narratives and big historiographical stories, or a culturalist dislike of thinking about material structures, is not sufficient. In some cases, perhaps most plausibly China, understanding Chinese engagement with the global may well involve a questioning or re-casting of the fundamental social categories of Western social thought—state, market, and civil society. In other cases, we need to be constantly alert to what Cardoso once labelled the ‘originality of the copy’.

Few are likely to dispute the proposition that contemporary international relations are being re-shaped by the revival of geopolitical rivalries. But this does not mean a return to a crude realism built around an essentialised ‘international’. To understand power, nationalism, and geopolitics, we need to develop a far more social view of the system. Exceptionalism and nationalism, for all of their particularist claims, are the product of systemic forces and dynamics and need to be compared and connected. The crucial point is surely that stressed by Rogers Smith: as students of politics, we must be especially attentive to the politics of identity: explicitly politicising identity claims, de-naturalising identity claims, and historicising identity claims. We constantly need to be suspicious of culturalist accounts—not because culture does not matter, but because it is with the politics of culture that we need to be most concerned.

A second important goal is to develop concepts and conceptual frameworks out of varied regions and contexts, but to seek their more general application and relevance. Comparison reigns methodologically supreme, and we spend much less time thinking about connectivity and about how comparison and connectivity relate to each other. Even if the language is shared, the real meaning may be very different. As other contributors in this issue note, rather than concentrate on the ‘radically different’, it is the ‘nearly the same’ that is often of greater importance in the analysis of non-Western International Relations. Iain Johnston makes the crucial point that Area Studies is not about the exotic and the esoteric; it is part of how we can do good social science.

A third important issue concerns normative theory and the global study of political ideas. The normative analysis of global order has been the most Western-centric of all. Cosmopolitan liberal global governance, for example, was about achieving justice for individuals; it was about what ‘we’ in the rich world owed distant strangers. Very little of this work made reference to the self-understandings of the ‘objects’ of justice in the non-Western world. One part of the challenge is political: listening and noting the views and values that are expressed and argued in all parts of the world and by the most marginalised voices. Another part of the problem is methodological. The study of Western political theory has advanced significantly in methodological terms: contextualism,

conceptual history, reception theory, theories of ideology, etc. For all the increased interest in how IR is studied in different parts of the world, the study of global political theory remains in its infancy.

International Relations has a strong claim to be ‘the’ academic field where there is the richest tradition of analysing how the global evolved historically, how different systemic and global factors and forces interact (especially global capitalism and the distribution of inter-state power), and how the political and normative constructions of global order can best be understood and debated. It is in this sense that Fred Halliday suggested that International Relations is the capstone discipline of the social sciences. Yet it is also a field which can suffer most from the flight from reality and especially, the flight from a sense of reality grounded in regional or area-specific knowledge and understanding. It is therefore on this basis that International Relations and Area Studies need each other. At the same time, the quest for a global IR will remain a domain of contestation. It is a mistake to think that there is an easy solution, or indeed any stable endpoint in an ever-changing global system. Rather, there needs to be a shared willingness to engage critically and constructively in the debates about what the global study of International Relations is all about and how it might best be taught, researched, and organised. This will need to involve ongoing critical reflection (including of the subject’s colonial and imperial connections); the participation of an increasing plurality of voices; and the engagement with insights and cases from outside of the West. But it will also entail finding new ways to move ‘beyond critique’, especially in terms of combining theoretical and conceptual innovation with the highest quality historical and area-grounded empirical knowledge.

## Notes

1 For a rich account of the Cold War period, see Benedict Anderson, *A Life Beyond Boundaries* (London: Verso, 2016). For a flavour of the post-Cold War controversies, see Ian Lustick, Contribution to “Controversy in the Discipline: Area Studies and Comparative Politics,” *PS: Political Science* 30, no. 2 (1997): 166-179.

2 See, in particular, Ariel Ahram, Patrick Köllner, and Rudra Sil, eds., *Comparative Area Studies: Methodological Rationales and Cross-Regional Applications* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

3 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

4 Andrew Hurrell, “Cardoso and the World,” in *Democracia, crise e reforma: Estudos sobre a era Fernando Henrique Cardoso* eds. Herminio Martins and Maria Angela D’Incao. (São Paulo: Editora Paz e Terra, 2010): 473-499.

5 Rogers M. Smith, "Identities, Interests and the Future of Political Science," *Perspectives on Politics* 2, no. 2 (2004): 301-312.

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6 See also Pinar Bilgin, "Thinking past 'Western' IR?", *Third World Quarterly*, 29, 1 (2008): 5-23.

7 Alastair Iain Johnston, "What (if anything) does East Asia tell us about International Relations Theory?" *Annual Review of Political Science* 15 (2012): 53-78.

8 For a recent overview of perspectives see Leigh Jenco, Murad Idris, and Megan C Thomas, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Political Theory* (Oxford: OUP, 2019).

9 Fred Halliday, "International Relations in a Post-hegemonic Age," Text of valedictory lecture, LSE 30th January 2008, available at [http://www.lse.ac.uk/assets/richmedia/channels/publicLecturesAndEvents/transcripts/20080130\\_FredHalliday\\_tr.pdf](http://www.lse.ac.uk/assets/richmedia/channels/publicLecturesAndEvents/transcripts/20080130_FredHalliday_tr.pdf)

10 Amitav Acharya, "Advancing Global IR: Challenges, Contentions and Contributions," *International Studies Review* 18, no. 1 (2016): 4-15.

# BRINGING EUROPE BACK IN: GLOBAL IR, AREA STUDIES AND THE DECENTRING AGENDA

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## **Europe@Ox: Unfinished business**

When I arrived in Oxford in the late 1990s to teach International Relations and European studies, coming from North America where the idea of studying specific regions of the world in multi-disciplinary academic clusters was slowly but surely withering away, I was thrilled to discover this University's unique commitment to Area Studies. To be sure, if IR developed as the 'American Social Science', European contributions to the field have tended to be more pluralistic. But even in the British context, Oxford seemed relatively unique, starting with the kind of multi-disciplinary mindset encouraged by the collegiate system. Perhaps most importantly, and certainly ironically, the University's historic role in supporting Great Britain's colonial project had laid the foundation for its continued engagement with the global south and its regions. From my IR standpoint, I could only bank on the hope that Oxford's partaking in the 'civilising mission' of yesteryear had given way to a true scholarly commitment to mutual recognition.<sup>1</sup>

But to my surprise, one piece of this puzzle was missing: in Oxford, Europe (along with the United States) did not seem to count as a 'region' or an 'area' to be taught alongside others under the broad umbrella of Area Studies. Instead it figured safely at the heart of humanities and social science disciplines, as the core material for teaching history, politics or international relations. This state of affairs is common in European universities, as well as in the US, where in any case all area studies have been radically culled in favour of narrow disciplinary anchoring.

In the twenty intervening years in Oxford, some things have stayed the same and some things have changed. Area Studies has grown and consolidated as the Oxford School of Global and Area Studies, the

i In addition to the insightful STAIR review and the Oxford colleagues who have contributed to this special issue, this article has benefitted from my work with many collaborators under the Rethinking Europe in a Non-European World (RE-NEW) programme (2005-2020), including doctoral students Nora Fisher Onar, Tobias Lenz, Gabi Maas, Gjovalin Macaj, Sizwe Mpofu-Walsh, Claire Vergerio, and Juri Viehoff.

Kalypso Nicolaïdis, "Bringing Europe back in: Global IR, Area Studies and the Decentring Agenda," *St Antony's International Review* 16 no. 1 (2020): 28-37.

largest community of Area Studies scholars anywhere in the world. But in spite of efforts on the part of many of us, Europe and the EU remain outside Area Studies (except as part of Russian and East European studies). In the meanwhile, we have deepened our commitment to teaching and research under the broad umbrella of 'global IR', an agenda encapsulated in Amitav Acharya's keynote lecture at ISA in 2014.<sup>2</sup> In a nutshell, this commitment is both epistemological and ontological. Epistemologically, as a scholar committed to global IR, I apprehend my field as an interdisciplinary space where explorations of the global meet from a multiplicity of disciplinary perspectives from game theory to international law, global history,<sup>3</sup> global sociology,<sup>4</sup> or political theory. Area Studies represents geographically-bound spaces for the multilogical exploration of these knowledge boundaries. IR's global reach is predicated on taking in these areas not only as resources or 'cases' but as sources or 'voices'.<sup>5</sup> Ontologically, global IR is grounded on an understanding of the world through the lens of diversity and interconnection, amenable to comparisons across space and time, be it as a world of regions,<sup>6</sup> or as a multiplicity of systems, from empires to federations, leagues of city states, or state systems, vying for survival or pre-eminence across historical eras.

In this perspective, the relationship between global IR and Area Studies can be seen as a subset of the need for more general critical engagement between the Social Sciences and Area Studies, which Börzel and Zürn for instance have labelled 'double reflexivity', e.g. the need, on the one hand 'for generalizing social scientists to consider the impossibility of analysing global processes with impartiality because their own perspectives are always contextualized', and on the other hand 'for localizing area studies to acknowledge methods and mechanisms that allow moving towards generalization'.<sup>7</sup> I would go further and argue that from an IR perspective, such mutual engagement requires not only self-reflexivity (acknowledging that one always speaks from somewhere) but radical decentring and 'reversing the gaze' (acknowledging the centrality of those speaking from elsewhere, wherever your 'elsewhere' happens to be). In other words, it needs be not only synergistic but symbiotic, one of mutual constitution, epistemologically and ontologically, where Area Studies does not only play the role of contextualising side-kick to IR generalisers but is itself the locus of emergence of generalising approaches to the socio-political.<sup>8</sup> Needless to say that such an understanding of mutual constitution is best thought of as a branch of critical theory, which is where I situate my work.<sup>9</sup> Some would call it analytical 'tough love'.

To be sure, this is a game of infinite mirrors, as one decentres to other loci of knowledge which might in turn one day themselves become self-centric and hegemonic. Indeed, be it a national or a regional mantra, there is nothing less exceptional than exceptionalism claims – whether

we treat exceptionalism as an ontological statement in the Area Studies debate (are the defining features of particular regions so unique to be usefully compared or generalised?) or as a politicised narrative grounded on what I would call *nationalist regionalism*.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the risk in global IR is to reify non-Western loci of authority, and to forget to decentre *within*. Nevertheless, Euro-exceptionalism talk is exceptional to the extent that it structures the distribution of epistemic as well as material power in the international system. (I am not to expand here on the necessary comparison with US-exceptionalism.)

I consider it more urgent than ever, therefore, to bring Europe back to the embracing fold of Area Studies, in Oxford, for sure, but also beyond in the epistemologies of power. And in doing so to use European studies to better serve the global IR agenda. Why should Europe (or the United States) be the core referent if you study, say, constitutionalism? Why can't you reverse the gaze and start with the transformative constitutionalisms of South Africa or India and ask what these experiences tell us about European constitutionalism?<sup>11</sup> This premise inspired the launch of Oxford's RENEW programme (Rethinking Europe in a Non-European World) in 2005 at a time when our emergence from post-Cold War complacency combined with the fall-out from the Iraq war inspired EU scholars to travel 'out there' and ask 'how do they see us?' In contrast, RENEW's ambition was based on the simple diagnosis that we live in an increasingly post-Western world, and certainly in a non-European world, and that it was worth revisiting the old critique of Eurocentrism, ultimately from a policy-oriented perspective. Our mindset was informed by a broader commitment to reconsider the sources and expressions of our flawed and multiple modernities, a despondency in equating the West, or anywhere else for that matter, with progress, and a commitment to listening to the voice of the less powerful, the subaltern, from within and from without.<sup>12</sup> I turn here to three strands of a broader agenda.

### **Europe's Colonial DNA, standards of civilisation and the post-imperial**

One first strand of RENEW had to do with exploring the double meaning of Europe's 'post-imperial' condition in a *longue durée* historical and comparative perspective, including through a seven-year-long collaborative project between historians and political scientists at Oxford resulting in *Echoes of Empire*.<sup>13</sup> On one hand, and empirically, *post* refers to post as reproduction, or the idea that the EU's relations with the rest of the world cannot be understood short of engaging with the colonial inheritances of its member states, whether as colonising or colonised states. As we move from national to transnational and multi-site entangled memory, we also need to acknowledge the blind spots of our European memory, where more often than not the referent 'Europe as a community of memory' refers to Europe's global civil war of 1939-

45, rather than the wars it inflicted onto the rest of the world decades and centuries earlier. Hence the need to deconstruct the myth of the EU's virgin birth and its politics of denial since 1958 when assessing its foreign policy, especially in Africa.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, and normatively, *post* refers to *post* as transformation, the normative horizon of truly overcoming this colonial past through self-reflexivity and engagement with the historical legacies that colour the gaze of others. Indeed, what is the point in exploring the darker side of western modernity, if not to overcome its ongoing and entrenched consequences today?<sup>15</sup> Ultimately, our aim was also prescriptive, e.g. to ask what a post-colonial approach to EU external relations might look like.

To be sure, we adopted a social scientific approach to exploring historical legacy, rejecting blanket statements about neocolonialism, asking instead when and under what conditions would we recognise these legacies when we see them. Indeed, while imperial ideologies underwent profound change in the course of the 19th and 20th century, we continue to be confronted with similar questions raised by the relationship between liberalism and imperialism.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, while some denounce the legacies of colonialism they discern in the EU's practices and discourse, others believe these accusations to be unfounded, thus raising the question: how apt is the analogy between the 19th-century standard of civilisation and the EU's narratives and modes of actions today? In response, we developed a 'new standards typology' articulated around two axes: agency denial and systemic hierarchy, referring respectively to the unilateral shaping of standards applicable to others, and to the salience of Eurocentrism in the way the standards are enforced and structure the international system.<sup>17</sup> And we argued that in transforming their 'continent' from a metropolis to a *microcosm* – from a cluster of colonial capitals to an EU that contains many of the world's tensions within itself – Europeans have only partially succeeded in transcending their colonial impulses. If the EU's suffers today from geopolitical solitude it may also look for a way out in its ability to become a post-colonial power which calls for those acting in its name to reflect upon the 'standards' that inspire their action.

### **The Decentring Agenda**

A second strand to our research programme has been to spell out in greater detail – from the standpoint of European Studies – the more general 'decentring agenda' called for by global IR.<sup>18</sup> Critically, such a decentring approach is both epistemological and prescriptive, targeting the motives and forms of the EU's external relations. It starts with operationalizing Chakrabarty's call for 'provincializing' Europe, e.g. questioning Eurocentric accounts of world history and politics;<sup>19</sup> moves on to 'engaging' other perspectives in which Europe may or may not figure;

and then aims at ‘reconstructing’ an EU approach to the rest of the world that recognises delegitimising patterns. To be sure, we sought to assuage concerns that such a decentring agenda may only end up empowering other power centres in the world and their own hegemonic, and at times violent, practices, by stressing our goal to eschew neocolonial habits which demand from others full convergence with European practices without giving up the EU’s cutting-edge project of empowerment via democratisation, rule of law, and support for the rights of the vulnerable. One central area of concern is Europe’s so-called neighbourhood where the transformative potential that comes with engagement with the EU has been considerably dampened by its propensity to reproduce old patterns of sphere of influence, and to support regime stability over democratisation.<sup>20</sup>

As a result, and although it does privilege an examination of inter-state relations, the decentring agenda is attuned to the risk of ‘methodological nationalism’ on two counts. First, it is fair to say that beyond decentring to other national viewpoints, we are ultimately committed to what we have labelled ‘double decentring’, namely a commitment to opening the black box of other states and engaging with the viewpoints of groups and individuals within, whether that of LGBT communities,<sup>21</sup> gendered perspectives through the lens of decolonial feminism,<sup>22</sup> or citizens’ agendas in conflict prevention.<sup>23</sup>

Second, ultimately, external decentring calls for internal decentring. Much of what we are after has to do with patterns of social relations within European countries themselves. In this sense, it is right to question the ways in which famous social theorists – Habermas and Beck, for instance, call for both the re-affirmation of cosmopolitanism as a central feature of the European project while eschewing what they refer to as multiculturalism – or beyond labels, the empowerment of internal ‘others’, whose scapegoating is one aspect of the populist threat to the very European integration they seek to save from itself.<sup>24</sup> As Gurminder Bhambra has argued, ignoring the colonial histories of Europe enables the dismissal of its multicultural present and thus unwittingly reproduces features of the populist political debates they otherwise seek to transcend. Against an EU story which renders invisible the long-standing histories that connect those migrants with Europe, decentring must start from within. The danger is a form of neocolonial cosmopolitanism that legitimises policies of domination both within and outside Europe.

### **A Critique of ‘EU-as-Model Talk’**

A third strand of our research critically appraised the idea, both descriptively and normatively, that the EU system can and should serve as a model for governance beyond its own borders for other national,

regional, or global spheres of governance. In doing so, we partake in a broader critical theory approach to the EU, targeting both dominant political and academic discourse.<sup>25</sup> We argue for a problematisation of the label ‘model’ without denying the value added by EU governance for the rest of the world. We start by developing an analytical heuristic that builds on three semantic meanings of the term ‘model’ and outline the challenges of interpretation and translation that are associated with each: a) a representation of something meant to support its reproduction (architecture, engineering); b) an object of aspiration, worthy of imitation (psychology and role models); c) that which serves as an inspiration and the object of re-interpretation (figurative art for instance). Here again we advocate for greater reflexivity on the part of Europeans, that is, to systematically question assumptions behind their model discourse and practice. And we argue that if the cosmopolitan promise is to be retrieved from the radical critique of Eurocentrism, Europeans need to infuse the EU’s message and practice with an ethos of mutual recognition as a crucial feature of a post-colonial agenda for the EU’s role in the world.

It is worth noting that the recent poly-crisis that has bedevilled the EU makes it harder than ever to ignore the intimate link between internal and external critique. Doesn’t the ‘migration crisis’, exploited by right-wing populist parties in many EU countries to trigger anti-EU sentiments find its roots in part in the EU’s Middle East policy and its trade policy with Africa?<sup>26</sup> If the EU’s poly-crisis and Great Britain’s bailing out altogether from the club have undoubtedly affected the EU’s image beyond its borders, how should it change the way it ‘exports’ its standards? Is it possible to speak of the EU as a model without invoking its quality as an experiment, which fails as often as it succeeds? If the EU is to claim anew some leadership in reforming global governance in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, from the WTO to the WHO or the Bretton Woods institutions, it must pursue this global debate on governance with humility and self-awareness.

## **Conclusion**

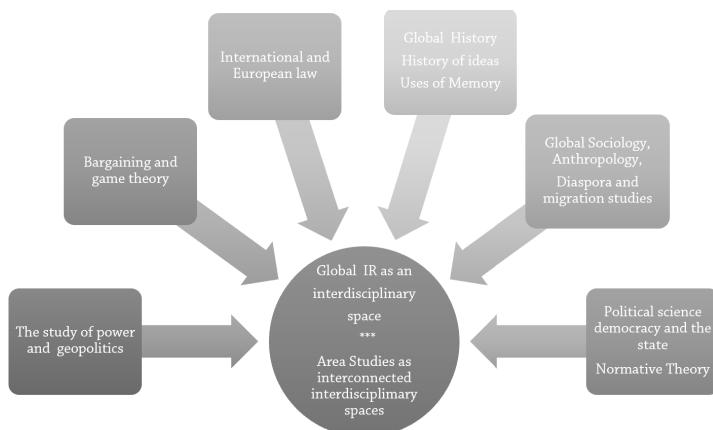
Many of us have chosen to ‘do IR’ for its emancipatory potential. But if history has taught us anything, it is that it would be foolish to believe that moral progress can happen simply as a result of polite conversations in our classroom without being backed up by living and breathing democratic contestation and social struggle.

I started this short overview of Area Studies, and the place of Europe within it, by reflecting on my time in Oxford. It might be apposite to conclude, therefore, by coming back to our own grounds. In 2015, and again in 2020, students at Oxford demanded the removal of a statue of Cecil Rhodes which adorns Oriel College and overlooks passers-by on Oxford’s High Street. In doing so, they followed in the footsteps

of University of Cape Town students who had successfully expelled the 19th century imperialist business magnate from their campus under the battle cry ‘Rhodes Must Fall’, thus sparking an international movement calling for the decolonisation of universities across the world. ‘Destruction’, the accusation which their critics enjoyed making, was not the point. Instead, this agenda is about the ‘re-construction’ of our shared social space, starting with the places, our University, where knowledge is created and appropriated according to entrenched patterns of power distribution which must be disrupted for progress to happen. Since then, and alongside more than a hundred Oxford colleagues, students and staff, I have been involved in multifaceted efforts for our University to acknowledge, further explore and remedy its own colonial legacies, to address the ways they reverberate today in its physical and mental environment, its curricula, hiring or admissions practices.<sup>27</sup> As this special issue goes to press in the summer of 2020, we are regaining momentum as part of the global protests led by *Black Lives Matter*. The hope is for radical pedagogical, disciplinary and institutional change, not only in Oxford, but around Europe, to encourage the next generation to learn more about the present of their colonial and imperial past.<sup>28</sup> For if a university like ours, at the very heart of the former coloniser’s space, fails to engage in decolonial work, what hope is there for our society at large?

## Annex

Figure 1: Global IR and Area Studies as Interdisciplinary Spaces



- 1 Laurence W. B. Brockliss, *The University of Oxford: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).
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- 5 Maiken Gelardi, "Moving Global IR Forward — A Road Map," *International Studies Review* (2019): doi: 10.1093/isr/viz049.
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- 10 Kate Sullivan in this volume.
- 11 See footnote 8.
- 12 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Can the Subaltern*

- Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*, ed. Rosalind C. Morris (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010): 21-78.
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- 14 See inter alia: John M. Hobson, *The Eurocentric Conception of World Politics: Western International Theory, 1760-2010* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Peo Hansen and Stefan Jonsson, *Eurafrica: The Untold History of European Integration and Colonialism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014); Kalypso Nicolaïdis, "Southern Barbarians? A Postcolonial Critique of EU-niversalism" in *Echoes of Empire: Memory, Identity and Colonial Legacies*, Kalypso Nicolaïdis, Berny Sèbe, and Gabrielle Maas, eds. (London: Bloomsbury, 2015): 281-302; Félix Krawatzek, "Collective Memory," *Oxford Bibliographies* (2020); Toni Haastrup, "EU as Mentor? Promoting Regionalism as External Relations Practice in EU–Africa Relations," *Journal of European Integration* 35, no. 7 (2013): 785-800; Olivia Rutazibwa, "From Conditionality to Operation Artemis: Humanitarian Interventions in Sub-Saharan Africa and Local Agency," *Studia Diplomatica* 59, no. 2 (2006): 97-121; Thomas Diez, "Normative power as hegemony." *Cooperation and Conflict* 48.2 (2013): 194-210.
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## IR'S REOURSE TO AREA STUDIES: SILOISATION ANXIETY AND THE DISRUPTIVE PROMISE OF EXCEPTIONALISM

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Area Studies is the typically interdisciplinary and close study of specific geographical areas of the world. In its more successful forms, it engages in knowledge production that is self-reflexive, methodologically and theoretically aware, and wary of the application of generalised models to localised conditions.<sup>ii</sup> Area Studies promises the deep empiricism that can access local-actor theorisations of the international and undo the Western-centrism of International Relations (IR). At the same time, IR's recourse to Area Studies throws up perceptions of risk among some thinkers of the international: of fragmenting the discipline into regional or national silos and thereby producing new parochial formations, an alternate politics of domination and silencing, and ultimately, theoretical degeneration. It is the perception of these risks that I refer to in this short essay as 'siloisation anxiety' and to which I seek to respond by embracing an unlikely analytical resource and counterforce: exceptionalism. I make two analytical moves: framing exceptionalism first, as inherently extra-local and second, as a useful method of casing. Then, to illustrate my argument, I draw briefly on narratives of nuclear exceptionalism in South Asia and examine the relational work they do in framing the global in the local.

The tension between emancipation and risk within scholarly debates over the diversification of the discipline of IR is not new. Disciplinary pluralism has been championed for its potential to remake the boundaries of the field and to challenge its dominant assumptions; it has also been critiqued as a conduit to incoherence, and as an impediment to the accumulation of unified knowledge.<sup>1</sup> The same tension resurfaces in the nascent Global International Relations (Global IR) scholarship.

<sup>i</sup> My thanks to Christopher Gerry and Gilberto Estrada Harris for detailed and thoughtful feedback on this essay. I am also grateful to the three anonymous reviewers of this guest section for their excellent literature recommendations.

<sup>iii</sup> Again, my thanks to Christopher Gerry for discussions around the promise and power of Area Studies in the context of departmental planning within the Oxford School of Global and Area Studies (OSGA), as well as to the participants of the European Area Studies Networking event convened by Timothy Power, Head of OSGA, from 30 to 31 January 2020.

Kate Sullivan de Estrada, "IR's recourse to Area Studies: Siloisation Anxiety and the Disruptive Promise of Exceptionalism," *St Antony's International Review* 16 no. 1 (2020): 38-45.

Global IR seeks both greater inclusiveness and richer understandings of world politics.<sup>2</sup> Its concern is to understand the ways in which a diversity of actors ('we' IR scholars included) co-produce the global from different locations and with varied intentions, aspirations, and power resources.<sup>3</sup> By privileging multiple socially and historically contingent constructions of the international, Area Studies can deliver the first of the two steps in the reconstruction of the discipline that Global IR imagines. However, if Area Studies only prioritises the particular and the exceptional, it can less obviously take the second step, of convening multiplicity into a unified project that contributes to the development of global theory. Implicit assumptions about the insular nature of Area Studies provoke nervousness that 'going local' will lead to a proliferation of multiplicities and therefore disciplinary decentralisation, rather than conventional grand or mid-range theorising. Recent Global IR scholarship has argued that the development of national schools of IR – a Chinese, Indian or Brazilian IR – and the production of exceptionalist national or regional claims, presents a specific kind of fragmentary threat.<sup>4</sup> These exceptionalist narratives, so the warning goes, siloise the discipline and function as an obstacle to the ideational interchange that is needed to globalise IR.

Here, I argue that exceptionalist narratives can be leveraged as a significant analytical resource within Global IR. Specifically, they offer one solution to the challenge of bridging general IR theories<sup>iii</sup> and local-actor theorisations of the international. Exceptionalist narratives can reflect the global as much as the local, respond to hegemony, and manifest resistance. This is because beyond the hegemonic core of mainstream IR and its spatial, political, economic, cultural, and racial substrate, 'the West', we very often find that the global is embedded in the local. If the hegemonic structures and logics at work at the global level in part *constitute* the local, then to study the local is also to study the global. What is required is a method through which to engage global-in-local narratives in a way that purposefully disrupts and remakes global theories.<sup>iv</sup>

The first part of my argument rests on the claim that while exceptionalist narratives may *appear* parochial, they are always in some way extra-local – that is, they reach beyond the local to embrace parts of a wider context. While we might find it intuitive to differentiate between exceptionalist framings produced by policymakers on the one hand, and scholars on the other, exceptionalism-as-practice by definition does the work of highlighting the unique and the particular against one or more

<sup>iii</sup> Of course, there is an argument that general IR theories, too, most often emerge from local-actor theorisations.

<sup>iv</sup> While Gerlardi proposes 'different applications', 'revised versions', and 'homegrown theories' as three very useful strategies for 'going local' in Global IR, none aim for this form of radical disruption, see: Gelardi, 'Moving Global IR Forward—A Road Map,' 9–12.

objects or contexts of comparison. In the practice of exceptionalism – whether narrated by scholars, practitioners or scholar-practitioners – we see not only things that people are doing, thinking, or observing in a particular location and time, but also the ways in which they place their doing, thinking, or observing comparatively within a broader global and historical context.

Numerous scholars have argued that exceptionalism is unexceptional, but it is also the case that not all exceptionalisms are created equal.<sup>5</sup> Narratives of exceptionalism as they have been produced within the United States and Western Europe have worked to silence the non-West. American exceptionalism elevates the United States above the rest of the world both in discourse and in practice, seeking to transform the global in the image of the United States. But even US exceptionalism validates the point I seek to make about the global in the local. The emergence of US exceptionalism centred on a mapping of the global: distinguishing the United States from other nations, in particular from ‘the historical trajectories... attributed to Europe, to the Soviet Union, and to the Third World’.<sup>6</sup> Like other forms of national and civilisational exceptionalism, US exceptionalism carries with it a particular evolution and empirical content rooted in politicised modes of differentiation from other nations and other civilisations.<sup>7</sup> It was (and perhaps still is) inherently comparative.

Exceptionalism elsewhere might be different. Exceptionalist self-narratives can function as a response to hegemony as much as a tool of domination. Exceptionalist framings offer an important strategy for scholars and practitioners alike who seek to construct narratives within and about subordinate states and societies that are positioned in a global hierarchy structured by patterns of material, institutional, and ideological hegemony.<sup>8</sup> If we agree that global dynamics and logics are nearly everywhere, in the form of ‘geopolitical competition and of new security threats; logics of global capitalism... and logics of social and technological change’, then wherever we study, we will find variations of these global dynamics and logics.<sup>9</sup> It is unsurprising then that attempts to narrate and order the self, or to make sense of a given state and society from within, will also respond to, and develop narratives, no matter how implicit, about global dynamics and logics.

If exceptionalist framings are narratives of both the local and the global, how do we turn this observation into a method that contributes to theory building at the global level, and why might exceptionalism be particularly well suited to such a method? The second part of my argument draws on a conception of *casing* developed in the work of social theorist Michael Burawoy. Burawoy builds on the methods of the Manchester School, where a case study is selected not to illustrate a theory or extract a general rule, but on the basis of its disruptive potential.

Important is not to seek to establish a ‘case’ as typical or representative. Instead, we choose a case on the basis that it is an anomaly that *requires* a modification of existing theory.<sup>10</sup> This is quite distinct to the idea of looking for a misfit between theory and empirical observations while at the same time remaining tied to the terms of existing debate and the frames of an existing analytical model. The onus is on producing theoretical change: dominant theories and concepts *must* evolve and respond to the challenge presented by the case, or even be replaced. Here we find a means to reconstruct general theory.

If our core objective is to seek out the cases that disrupt the narrative of casing implicit in a ‘grand’ or general theory, then exceptionalism does part of this work for us. Exceptionalism’s focus on uniqueness places local doing and thinking comparatively and along lines of similarity within a broader global and historical context but is intended to highlight difference. For this reason, exceptionalism pre-cases the local in reference to dominant understandings of the global: it already alludes to the most different. Indeed, exceptionalist narratives, either as an object of study or the first step in our own efforts to read the local, not only tell us how local narratives frame the primary deviations from, or disruptions to, general global or grand theoretical narratives. They also contain important information about what local narratives consider those general global or grand theoretical narratives to be.

To illustrate the value of exceptionalism as an analytical resource, I draw briefly on narratives of Indian and Pakistani nuclear exceptionalism to explore some of the ways in which exceptionalism can function as an analytical resource. What is clear is that aspects of the global are a core feature of the local in these exceptionalist narratives. This must be so, because a central function of these narratives is to do the work of resistance in relation to hegemonic nuclear narratives.

India’s exceptionalist narratives of moral superiority in relation to its stewardship of nuclear materials span several decades and have evolved from claims of self-restraint through the renunciation of nuclear weapons, to restraint in the possession of nuclear technologies, and, more recently, to restraint in the testing and possession of nuclear weapons.<sup>11</sup> Restraint claims persist as a mechanism of differentiating Indian behaviour within the global nuclear order, centring more recently on what Rajesh Basrur has referred to as ‘minimalist’ doctrine and practice, for example through the maintenance of small nuclear arsenals, a public commitment to no-first-use, and de-alerting.<sup>12</sup> Moral superiority is just one feature of India’s nuclear exceptionalism, but it possesses great disruptive potential in view of the implicit assumption of much nuclear discourse, particularly in the United States, that implicitly frames non-Western states as irresponsible stewards of nuclear technology.<sup>13</sup>

Certain exceptionalist ideas about Pakistan’s nuclear programme

also resist and challenge the ways in which Muslim countries have been disproportionately subject to anxiety about the spread of nuclear weapons. The connection between Islam and the bomb originated in Pakistan in the early 1970s, where nuclear weapons held promise to enhance the country's status within the so-called Muslim world.<sup>14</sup> From the late 1970s, 'Islamic Bomb' became a term used by Western states to express fears around, and justify control of, the spread of nuclear weapons to Muslim countries, with attention paid to Iran in particular.<sup>15</sup> After Pakistan tested nuclear weapons in 1998, some scholars drew attention to the status of Pakistan's bomb as the first in the Islamic world.<sup>16</sup> The idea of a bomb for Muslims gained salience for its resistance to historical assertions in the West of Muslim irresponsibility with nuclear technology.<sup>17</sup> The irony of the idea of a bomb for Muslims is that it resists and challenges the dominant Western narrative that an 'Islamic Bomb' is inherently more dangerous.

How can we use these insights to purposefully disrupt general theorising about nuclear proliferation behaviours? Scott Sagan's well-known theoretical model of the spread of nuclear weapons rests on three explanations: national security, domestic political logics, and normative symbolism. Despite engaging with norms and drawing on cases across the globe, Sagan's account does not transcend Western-centrism in terms of its theoretical assumptions. To explain weapons acquisition, the model relies on linkages between national security, prestige, and nuclear weapons embedded firmly in a realist tradition. To engage with decisions to enact restraint in weapons acquisition, it draws on assumptions about the power and attractiveness of ordering ideas and institutions of the 'international' liberal order. Sagan's 'norms model' in particular, examines how state behaviour is shaped by shared understandings of legitimacy and appropriateness.<sup>18</sup> Nowhere does this framework engage seriously with the political contestation around these norms that emanates from subordinate positionalities in the global nuclear order, and the behaviours of resistance and selective compliance that follow as their consequence.

Exceptionalist narratives of Indian and Pakistani nuclear weapons decisions render visible the role of resistance to externally imposed racial and religious hierarchies, and strongly held convictions not just about the value of nuclear technologies themselves but also about the right to equal access to technologies of the modern. They also problematise implicit assumptions about the inherent moral value of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) regime and any sense of a clear choice between its acceptance or rejection. Indian and Pakistani elites alike have criticised how the regime tolerates unequal outcomes and is permissive of selective nuclear excess, even as they have instrumentally leveraged parts of the regime themselves in efforts to legitimise their own and delegitimise one another's stewardship of nuclear technology.<sup>19</sup>

This is because the NPT regime is not simply a site of moral and political contestation, but as a core hegemonic structure of global nuclear order, it is also a powerful resource.

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Amidst my effort to argue that exceptionalism can manifest as a practice of resistance as well as domination, I remain aware that we should not read that resistance in a sanitised way. As a practice of resistance, exceptionalism can seek relationships of solidarity, or it can (re)produce forms of hegemony that exclude the less powerful. In both the case of India and Pakistan, below the level of the state, these exceptionalist narratives themselves enact dominance: whether we engage with state repression, justified through dominant developmental and nationalist discourses in the context of local resistance to the construction of nuclear power plants in Maharashtra, India; or with the ways in which Indian official narratives about racial exclusion in the global nuclear order under the Bharatiya Janata Party-led governments of the 1990s also drew on racist discourses about Islam and Muslims; or consider how anti-bomb lobbies in both India and Pakistan have been infantilised, branded anti-national, and ultimately silenced.<sup>20</sup> To point to the analytical utility of exceptionalist framings in subordinate states in the global hierarchy is not to ignore their real world potential for domination, as well as resistance.

In this short essay, I have proposed that one means through which to alleviate siloisation anxiety is to embrace its imagined core risk: exceptionalism. We should do so with care, being sure to leverage exceptionalism as a means to disrupt dominant narratives of the global (or general IR theories) and being sure not to ignore its capacity for both resistance and domination. The disruptive analytical potential of exceptionalism moves us towards an understanding of the global and the local not as two separate things in need of dialogue or reconciliation, but as already coexisting in a specific place and time, and in constant co-constitution.

## Notes

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## FEATURE INTERVIEW WITH AMITAV ACHARYA

Amitav Acharya  
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In this feature interview for STAIR's Guest Section on the relationship between IR and Area Studies, STAIR spoke with Amitav Acharya, the UNESCO Chair in Transnational Challenges and Governance and Distinguished Professor at the School of International Service, American University in Washington, DC. Professor Acharya is the first non-Western scholar to be elected (for 2014-15) as the President of the International Studies Association (ISA), the largest and most influential global network in international studies. He has received two Distinguished Scholar Awards from the ISA, one in 2015 from its Global South Caucus for his 'contribution to non-Western IR theory and inclusion' in international studies, and another in 2018 from ISA's International Organization Section that recognises 'scholars of exceptional merit...whose influence, intellectual works and mentorship will likely continue to impact the field for years to come'. STAIR spoke with him about disciplinary debates within IR and Area Studies, how the COVID-19 pandemic might shape global IR, and his advice for younger IR scholars.

**St Antony's International Review (STAIR):** Thank you for joining us for this interview, Dr Acharya. Could you explain for the readers of STAIR where the contemporary debate on Area Studies versus disciplinary studies such as International Relations [IR] stands? What are the common arguments that proponents of each field of study put forth?

**Professor Amitav Acharya (AA):** To be clear, when I mention 'discipline', I am speaking here only about International Relations and its relationship with Area Studies. But much of this can apply to other branches of social sciences and humanities.

The debate you talk about, which was pretty intense in the 1990s, seems to have cooled down a bit. But a little background is useful here. I first dealt with the debate in my 2001 keynote speech to the founding of the Asian Political and International Studies Association [APISA], 'Identity without Exceptionalism', which became my motto for exploring what a regionally-based knowledge community can do to engage with a disciplinary approach like IR without falling into the trap of culturalism and exceptionalism.<sup>1</sup> Some of my responses below are drawn

Amitav Acharya, "Feature Interview with Amitav Acharya," *St Antony's International Review* 16 no. 1 (2020): 46-53.

At the risk of simplification, a stark way to describe the earlier tension between IR and Area Studies would be that the former saw Area Studies spending too much time in the field, disdaining theory and concepts or being ignorant of it, shunning comparative work, and spending more time with their cameras than with their minds. Area specialists for their part took the view that disciplinary scholars were nothing more than ‘armchair’ philosophers who applied bookish knowledge to history or contemporary developments to develop or test big abstract concepts without bothering to see or experience things for themselves. This earlier tension was always exaggerated, although I can think of area specialists who stayed away from conceptual or theoretical work and IR scholars who were scarcely interested in the traditions and developments in the non-Western world.

Let me offer a little personal reflection here. To be honest, when I first came across this so-called debate, I could not quite understand what the fuss was all about. To me, there was no clear separation, except perhaps that IR scholars were interested in IR theory, and area specialists were more interested in concepts and theories from a variety of disciplines, including political science, history, sociology, anthropology, and even IR! I myself was interested in both, for example, my ‘localisation’ model of norm diffusion drew from Constructivism—itself with a close affinity with sociology and art history—especially diffusion of Hindu-Buddhist art from India to Southeast Asia. Hence a great deal of my field-work involved travelling around the magnificent monuments and ruins of Angkor, Borobudur, Champa (southern Vietnam today), Bagan, to see how Hindu-Buddhist monuments and imagery travelled and adapted from place to place, which shows the primacy of local initiative and local agency over foreign ones.

It’s also important to keep in mind that this sharp distinction between IR and Area Studies was always more of a debate in the United States than elsewhere. The vast majority of the IR community outside the United States and the West does not care about that divide. In many parts of the world, including Europe, there was never a clear separation between Area Studies and IR. Indeed, throughout the Global South, such as India, the arrival of IR as a discipline rode on the back of Area Studies. I can give you examples, such as the late Michael Leifer of the London School of Economics, whose work on Southeast Asia and the Association of South East Asian Nations [ASEAN] was a major inspiration to me, and who I always thought stood above the Area Studies-discipline divide.

Now, even in the United States, there is a realisation that the two—i.e., Area Studies and disciplinary approaches—are closely linked. Some would say even symbiotically linked. A new generation of scholars have combined disciplinary IR with deep Area Studies expertise. Speaking about IR, the advent of Constructivism, with its emphasis on culture

and identity, facilitated this trend, as did the move away from parsimonious IR theorising, or the inter-paradigm debates such as between Idealism and Realism, or similar big debates between rationalism and Constructivism. The decline of big debates meant the rise of middle range theorising, which is good for reconciling Area Studies and disciplinary approaches to IR.

A related point: one of the reasons for the pessimism about the future of area studies in the 1990s was the rise of globalisation. We now know that globalisation did not 'end' Area Studies, but moved it into new directions.

**STAIR:** In your leadership of the International Studies Association [ISA], you have also advanced the idea of a 'Global International Relations' and have published a number of works advancing this field. How does Global IR situate itself within this debate on Area Studies and IR?

**AA:** Global IR is deeply interested and embedded in Area Studies. Indeed, Global IR brings IR and Area Studies together. As you know, ISA is the *International Studies Association*. It is much broader than IR. But as someone who was trained in and committed to both disciplinary IR theory as well as Area Studies (mine being Southeast Asia), as ISA President, I wanted to integrate the two as much as possible. My Presidential theme was 'Global International Relations and Regional Worlds: A New Agenda for International Studies'. The 'Regional Worlds' concept was my code for Area Studies. Indeed, it was originally developed by Area Studies scholars from the University of Chicago, such as Arjun Appadurai.

In the Regional World concepts, I wanted to give a place of prominence to those who study regions and regionalisms, a good number of which are likely to be area specialists. Hence a core element of Global IR is that it integrates the study of regions, regionalisms, and Area Studies. Some people asked me why I did not call it Global International Studies. I had agonised much about this before settling for the term and decided for Global IR because I wanted to target IR theory and IR scholars. The idea of IR theory is more commonplace than theories of International Studies. International Studies is already more multidisciplinary and more inclusive of Area Studies than IR, which was, and remains, behind the curve. IR theories, with exceptions such as postcolonialism, are Euro- and American-centric and needed to be exposed and challenged. And it is these theories and their theorists who are most uncomfortable with Area Studies and this is part of the reason behind the discipline-Area Studies divide. It was time to bring them out of their own comfort zones.

**STAIR:** Another critique that arguably applies to both IR and Area Studies is that both fields of study are rooted in Western-centric approaches and can often reproduce ethnocentrisms. Can these two fields interact

**AA:** There are two separate if related questions here. One is about the Western-centric approaches to IR and Area Studies; the other is how these two fields (IR and Area Studies) can work together.

When we say IR is a Western-centric—European and United States—discipline, it means many of its foundational concepts or theories are derived from European or US experiences. Hence, for IR scholars in the West, Area Studies often meant looking at Europe, the US, and other Western countries. Without too much exaggeration, one might say that IR, which Stanley Hoffmann once described as an ‘American social science’, has also been an area studies of the trans-Atlantic sphere. Theories such as Hegemonic Stability Theory, Liberal Internationalism, and much of Neo-Realism and Democratic Peace, are popular in the US because they reflect the life-history of the United States and its cultural progenitor, Western Europe, including Great Britain.

Area Studies may seem a little freer from Western-centrism, but some of the concepts that have influenced research in the Area Studies tradition, such as the concept of state, development, nationalism, to give a few examples, mirror IR’s Western-centric bias. In this sense, the field of Comparative Politics, which is a major approach for Area Studies scholars, is similar to IR.

Turning to the second part of your question, how IR and Area Studies can work together, there are different ways, but in my own work, I have suggested two potential avenues for a creative synthesis between the two, which I would call ‘disciplinary area or regional studies’ and ‘transnational area studies’. These were first proposed in my paper for the 2005 St Antony’s Workshop on the Future of Interdisciplinary Area Studies in the UK in December 2005.<sup>2</sup> Let me borrow the language of that paper a bit.

Disciplinary regional studies includes scholarship that studies a region or area primarily from a disciplinary perspective, be it IR, comparative politics, sociology, etc. Disciplinary Area Studies itself has two orientations. This includes scholars who may be termed ‘regionally-oriented disciplinarians, or social scientists, to use an American term’, and ‘discipline-oriented regionalists’. The former’s main specialisation is theory, although as is usually the case in IR, much of it is usually drawn from Europe and the US global role, but they have been attracted to a region for a variety of reasons.

If we think of Asia as an example, these attractions may include including its economic rise, and the growing importance of Asian powers—China, Japan, and India, and Asian regional institutions. This in contrast to the earlier attention to Asia from International Relations scholars, which was mainly due to its role as a Cold War flashpoint. The

latter category, discipline-oriented regionalists includes scholars whose initial primary focus might have been on regional affairs, but who have now increasingly embraced theory, not the least because of the entry of the regionally-oriented disciplinarians, whose contribution has been to inspire younger scholars from the region to undertake theory-guided research.

Transnational Area Studies—it may also be called ‘Transnational Regional Studies’—scholars are primarily trained in regional affairs, or in the Area Studies tradition, but they are also interested and involved in comparative research on trans-regional phenomena, especially those linked to the effects of globalisation. And they do so not necessarily from any particular disciplinary perspective, even though some might have been so trained. Unlike disciplinary Area Studies scholars, transnational regionalists are not necessarily theory-guided, but are interested in looking beyond their respective areas and hence in comparative studies of issues which are transnational in scope, such as nationalism, pandemics (AIDS or COVID-19), terrorism, etc.

These two above approaches are not mutually exclusive. One could combine these types of intersections and hybridity to think of a Global Area Studies approach. I am aware of the Global and Area Studies framework, but Global Area Studies keeps some of the original flavour of the rich Area Studies tradition; perhaps as a constituent element of Global IR that I have discussed above. To me, the terminology is less important than the purpose, which is make sure that concepts derived from Western experience are not imposed upon other societies, but we develop approaches from different societies on their own terms, compare and contrast them, and develop more general but differentiated frameworks for area studies.

**STAIR:** You situate yourself within the field of IR. Can you outline how you and other senior scholars engage with Area Studies? How does an Area Studies perspective influence and enrich your own research? In what ways, if any, does it complicate your research?

**AA:** There are so many good examples of senior scholars engaged in both IR and Area Studies, each broadly defined. Going by the principle of a person is known by the company he/she keeps, I would give examples of people I know well or interacted with, but I should warn you that any such attempt to classify or characterise scholars is always a bit uncertain and may not be acceptable to them. It is also important to keep in mind is that IR is a broad field and not all IR scholars do theory but their work has its place in IR, especially if it is based on rigorous empirical work and addresses big topics, such as regionalism, regional order, nationalism, revolution, development, and power transition, and addresses them in a highly analytical manner, engaging in academic debates, addressing key

unresolved puzzles, and pointing to long-term trajectories. To me, this is where Area Studies' knowledge and approach, and IR become allies, not enemies.

For examples, you have Iain Johnston and Tom Christensen in the USA who combine IR theory and the study of China. I would call them regionally-oriented disciplinarians, as mentioned above. Thomas Risse and Tanja Börzel in Germany are prominent examples of a vast number of scholars who do IR theory, comparative regionalism as well as Europe/the EU. On the other hand, we also have Evelyn Goh at the ANU [Australian National University] working on China and Southeast Asia from an IR perspective. Scholars like her are strongly grounded in a region but are at ease with IR theory. I would call them discipline-oriented regionalists.

Many IR scholars at Oxford have a regional focus, and I would include here Andrew Hurrell (Brazil), Louise Fawcett (Middle East and Latin America), Rosemary Foot (China and East Asia), Kalypso Nicolaïdis (EU). They would fall into such hybrid camps—again I hope I am not offending anyone. I would also place Chinese scholars such as Qin Yaqing and Yan Xuetong in this category, working on IR theory and China.

If you look at postcolonial IR scholars, many of them work on theory while also focusing on specific regions, and beyond. Shankaran Krishna (South Asia), Robbie Shilliam (Caribbean and Africa), and Randolph Persaud (Caribbean and United States); in the United Kingdom, Rahul Rao and Sanjay Seth are important postcolonial scholars with a regional interest in South Asia. In India, Navnita Behera at Delhi University, Kanti Bajpai, now based in Singapore, are fine examples of scholars who combine IR and South Asian studies who are not postcolonial theorists.

John Ikenberry and Peter Katzenstein are two American scholars who are not area specialists per-se, but have a strong focus on East Asia, admittedly developed a bit later in their careers, but significant nonetheless. In that sense, they are very different from Robert Keohane, Stephen Krasner, or the late Kenneth Waltz, and Robert Gilpin, whose interest in a particular region beyond the United States or Europe is unknown to me.

**STAIR:** How do you see the emerging COVID-19 pandemic as reshaping the global world order, particularly as it relates to discussions about Area Studies and IR?

**AA:** A caveat here is that it is too early to make any generalisations, much less predictions. A lot depends on how long COVID-19 might last and how effective the vaccine and treatment for the disease would turn out to be. But if the virus persists, even with some prevention and mitigation, it might still reorient Area Studies fundamentally. It would discourage and restrict classic fieldwork, which is absolutely essential to not just to Area

Studies scholars, but also to many, if not all, IR scholars. This might mean a turn to more digital fieldwork, remotely carried out. Luckily, we now have excellent technology which was not available to past generations of area specialists. But would this satisfy area specialists who love travel and being in the field so much?

The pandemic could also induce greater reliance on archival work, especially those archives that offer digital access. But these tend to be more in the developed countries, which means work on countries that have poorly digitised archives, will suffer. There could be a trend to do fieldwork among migrants and diplomats in one's country of residence, which might still be good, but again not a substitute for going to the country of research itself. Also, there would be more interest and focus on countries with fewer entry or quarantine restrictions. This would be really unfortunate; apart from skewing interests and research, my fear is that authoritarian countries might use the pandemic to restrict access to researchers from outside. If this persists, it might make IR and Area Studies less global.

The pandemic might increase interest in and understanding of how the existing world order is changing. This was already happening before COVID-19, especially with the crisis and decline of the Liberal International Order. If COVID-19 puts a further brake on globalisation, as is likely in the short-term at least, this could accelerate trends towards a more regionalised, pluralistic world, with a more diversified system of global and regional ordering and governance. In other words, we might see more multiplexity in world order, rather than multipolarity, which focuses mainly on great power material capabilities.

I have argued before in *The End of American World Order* that the emerging world order would be post-hegemonic.<sup>3</sup> No single power can dominate it the way Britain once did and then the US has since the nineteenth century. I do not see China replacing the US in that role as a global hegemon. COVID-19 has called into question the standing of both the US and China, neither of which could arrest the virus in the early stages of its spread in their own countries, and then engaged in a war of words blaming each other, to the horror of the rest of the world.

With growing transnational challenges, arrested globalisation and lack of trust in either US and China, or even the self-anointed 'role model' of regionalists, the EU—whose initial response to COVID-19 was also questionable—we could see a more diverse or pluralistic world. The Area Studies scholarship could have new opportunities to look at other actors, topics, and approaches that might define the relationship between the local and the global, or regional and world order.

**STAIR:** STAIR, as a student journal, tends to attract both authors and readers who are emerging scholars, including graduate and doctoral students as well as early career researchers. What are your suggestions for

**AA:** First, try to keep in mind that the so-called Area Studies-discipline debate was to some extent a false debate, overstated, very US-centric, and while it may persist to some degree, it has lost its relevance. One should view the two approaches not as mutually exclusive, but complementary. Second, look for new ideas and concepts from non-Western sources, including histories and contemporary trends to mitigate the Western-centric nature of current theories of major disciplines. Third, take a serious look at the hybrid approaches, combining disciplinary and Area Studies, such as the what I have described above as Disciplinary Area Studies and Transnational Regional/Area Studies. Fourth, despite the challenges posed by COVID-19, do not abandon the classic Area Studies mindset and approach, such as learning a new language and doing fieldwork wherever possible. Fifth, be optimistic. Change is painful but also exciting. The global transformation happening right before us now is opening up new horizons of research, a richer menu of themes and new possibilities of advancing knowledge. There is also the possibility that the setback to, or possible reversal of globalisation might increase demand for Area Studies knowledge as it might increase the importance of regions and regionalisation. Finally, think of alternative careers. Being an author, translator, think-tanker, and journalist are terrific ways to make good use of Area Studies knowledge. There is nothing new about these careers, but new technology for online education, conferencing, and working at home will have an impact on professional opportunities, both good and bad. Make the most of the new opportunities presented.

### Notes

1 Amitav Acharya, 'Identity Without Exceptionalism: Challenges for Asian Political and International Studies' (Keynote Address to the Inaugural Workshop of the Asian Political and International Studies Association (APISA), Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, November 1-2, 2001).

2 Amitav Acharya, 'International Relations and Area Studies: Towards a New Synthesis?' (paper presented at the Workshop on the Future of Interdisciplinary Area Studies in the UK, St Antony's College, University of Oxford United Kingdom, December 6-7, 2005).

3 Amitav Acharya, *The End of the American World Order* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Polity Press, 2014).