

Interview – Rohan Mukherjee

Written by E-International Relations

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Dr. Rohan Mukherjee is an Assistant Professor of International Relations at the London School of Economics and Political Science and was previously an Assistant Professor of Political Science at Yale-NUS College. His research focuses on the grand strategies of rising powers and their impact on international security and order, with an empirical specialization in the Asia-Pacific region. His book, *Ascending Order: Rising Powers and the Politics of Status in International Institutions*, shows that whether rising powers cooperate with, challenge, or try to reform an international order depends on the extent to which its core institutions facilitate symbolic equality with the great-power club. His regional focus is on the Asia-Pacific, particularly how major powers such as India, China, the United States, and Japan, and smaller states in South and Southeast Asia, manage the regional effects of global transitions. Dr. Mukherjee received his Ph.D. from the Department of Politics at Princeton University, holds an MPA in International Development from Princeton University's School of Public and International Affairs, and a B.A. in Philosophy, Politics, and Economics from the University of Oxford.

Where do you see the most exciting debates/research happening in your field?

This is a busy time to be studying international order because there's so much excellent work coming out on it. Scholars are focusing their attention on inequality, exclusion, and injustice in the so-called liberal international order with a greater sense of urgency now. A previous generation of scholarship on international order focused on challenges from 'without', i.e., from emerging powers and non-Western states. Ironically, this scholarship has gained more traction today because of the crisis of international order *within* the West. Anyone interested in all of these subjects can read a host of excellent work today by scholars such as Ayşe Zarakol, Zoltán Búzás, Adom Getachew, Meera Sabaratnam, Matthew Stephen, Matias Spektor, and Courtney Fung, to name just a few.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

I spent almost a decade in the United States doing postgraduate studies, first for a master's in international development and then for a PhD in political science. In this time, I developed a rather US-centric way of thinking about the world at an intellectual level and in terms of the profession. This is by no means unusual, since we all carry background assumptions in our heads about what subjects are interesting and deserving of study, how we should study those subjects, and how we should collect and analyze data about the world. My training and socialization led to a set of assumptions about the centrality of the US—more broadly, the West—and what it represents in the international order and world politics. My thinking changed after I moved to Singapore for my first academic job. I began to understand how different things look when you take a different vantage point, and how there is a multitude of vantage points “out there.” This is of course an easy thing to grasp intellectually while still inside US academia. But to truly internalize it through experience is a wholly different thing.

In *Ascending Order* you state that the future of the global order “depends on the ability of international institutions to address the status ambitions of rising powers such as China and India”. Do avenues for “rising powers” to assert themselves within these institutions exist? Can these assertions be on their own terms, or are they in accordance with pre-existing norms?

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The status ambitions of rising powers typically involve joining the club of great powers that manages the international order and being treated as an equal of the members of this club. Since the international order is managed through a set of rules and institutions, this demand for inclusion and equality translates into a demand for openness in international institutions to new leadership, as well as fair procedures for rising powers relative to the great powers. This is why countries such as China and India demand greater representation and recognition in the current international order at par with the United States and its mostly Western allies, and Japan.

Historically, when these demands for inclusion and equality are not met, rising powers begin to push back against the status quo by disregarding the rules and procedures of existing international institutions, trying to delegitimize them through diplomacy or the creation of new institutions, or even outright undermining them by trying to sabotage their functioning. This was also the case for the United States as a rising power in the mid-19th century and Japan in the period between the two World Wars, therefore it is not a uniquely contemporary phenomenon.

If we care about the current international order surviving into the future, it stands to reason that we must be attentive to the status ambitions of today's rising powers. Various avenues exist for accommodating their status concerns. Looking at international financial institutions (IFIs), for example, the World Bank has never had a non-American head, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has never had a non-European head, and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) has never had a non-Japanese head. More representation for countries such as China, India, and Brazil at the very top of these institutions may seem symbolic, but that is precisely what status ambitions are about—symbolic equality between the more powerful or privileged and those who aspire to join their ranks.

Some other areas for reform in the international order include the permanent membership of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC); the allocation of responsibilities in the Conference of Parties (COP) negotiations over climate change; and the official designation of who counts as a nuclear power in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

These reforms would take place within existing institutional parameters and therefore be in accordance with pre-existing norms. But this is not a bad thing, because the health of the order will depend on rising powers reinforcing its norms or at least reforming them in productive ways. If the inclusion of these countries makes the order more representative in general for the Global South, thus bringing more non-Western ideas into global governance, that is an even better outcome. But it is not at the core of what is necessary for minimizing great-power conflict at this time of global power shifts.

Do you think that international institutions allow for the adequate representation of smaller states with regard to pressing issues like climate change and COVID-19?

This is a 'glass half empty' kind of situation. On paper, we would be hard pressed to find a historical international order that is more democratic and equal than the contemporary international order, which is a global version of what the West built and maintained from 1945 onward. The UN General Assembly operates on the principle of 'one country, one vote', the UN Security Council has rotating non-permanent members, voting rights in IFIs can change with the shifting relative economic weight of member countries, and small countries like Nicaragua can sue big countries like the US in the International Court of Justice (ICJ) or bring a dispute to the World Trade Organization (WTO), to name a few examples.

Yet the international order is also suffused with formal and informal inequality. This is particularly visible when we look both at the degree of voice smaller countries actually have over decision-making in international institutions, as well as how the international bureaucracies that run the international order treat smaller countries. Climate change is a case in point, where small island states have received many pledges and commitments from both great powers and rising powers, without seeing much actual change in terms of either the quantum or the efficiency of climate finance. In negotiations, a large country like the United States or China has the luxury of holding up agreements that are effectively a matter of life and death for smaller countries.

We saw similar dynamics play out regarding vaccine distribution at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. The WHO

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was paralyzed by recriminations between large countries, and the UN's vaccine development initiatives did not produce much. Meanwhile, large countries with the resources to develop vaccines did so but mostly hoarded them for their own populations while smaller countries were left at the mercy of the global market. Of course, smallness is not always a curse—tiny rich countries like Singapore were able to pay top dollar to vaccinate their entire populations. These exceptions in fact prove the general rule that international institutions failed smaller countries during the pandemic.

In your co-edited volume *Poised for Partnership*, you posit that Delhi and Tokyo can “build a truly lasting partnership for the 21st century, which can rightly be called the Asian Century”. What would this entail for ‘developing countries’ across Asia and do you envision this relationship to be more hegemonic or collaborative?

Japan and India are still fleshing out what their joint approach to economic development in Asia might look like, especially because it now appears this approach will be embedded in broader institutional structures such as the Quad. Considered individually, Japan's emergence as an aid and development superpower in Asia has been marked by a collaborative approach and an emphasis on environmental standards and local benefit. India is nowhere close to Japan in terms of the scale of its economic engagement with Asia, yet New Delhi also emphasizes local benefit and collaboration in its projects.

It remains to be seen, however, how the growth of Japan-India relations will play out for developing countries in Asia. On the one hand, they have an incentive to not be hegemonic or domineering in their approach, given their need to compete in markets where China is already dominant. On the other hand, both countries may be subject to rising nationalism at home, which will partially overlap with an expectation that poorer and smaller countries should defer to them abroad. India has been on this path for some time, even before the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power in 2014. Rising power leads to rising self-confidence among a country's leadership and populace, which often translates into an expectation that others ought to recognize, if not defer to, one's growing eminence in international affairs.

You have suggested that “India's predisposition toward strategic autonomy” has complicated the process of it becoming a global leader. What do you mean by “strategic autonomy” and how has this negatively influenced India's efforts at global leadership?

In its simplest version, strategic autonomy refers to the extent to which a country is free from external interference and able to make independent decisions regarding its foreign policy. This fairly common understanding of the term was on display recently in French President Emmanuel Macron's remarks on the need for the European Union to cultivate its strategic autonomy lest it be compelled to make decisions that are not its own in the context of increasingly acrimonious US-China relations.

Most countries would subscribe to this ideal of strategic autonomy in their foreign policymaking. India, a rising power with status ambitions, goes a step further and views strategic autonomy not just as *freedom from* external interference but the *freedom to* pursue specific goals such as attaining great power status (this distinction is based on Isaiah Berlin's distinction between negative and positive liberty). Thus, while the EU understands that a US alliance is necessary for its security and seeks autonomy within that framework, India sees no US allies that enjoy equal status with the US. As a result, India prefers to take care of its own security needs without getting into alliances—even though this strategy is very risky—because to do so would be to compromise its status ambitions.

This approach, however, creates an important tradeoff for India. There is a world in which a less status-conscious India could accept US leadership and form a close alliance with Washington whereby India would receive the same military benefits as Western Europe or Japan and Korea. This would free up India's resources to pursue global leadership in international institutions and through bilateral relations. In our world, however, the pursuit of strategic autonomy places significant burdens on India in terms of national security, which naturally reduces the resources available for exerting global leadership. In a sense, the easy path would be to bandwagon with the United States and enjoy relatively cheap security as many countries do. India chooses otherwise. This is not a fatal drawback in India's

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global ambitions, but there are tradeoffs.

When analysing global politics, our focus tends to be on ‘influential’ countries, like India, China, and the US. How does decentering these countries impact our understanding of the processes shaping the world? What does a non-state dominated approach, that focuses on civil society and other socio-cultural transactions, offer insofar as thinking about the ‘world’?

A non-statist view of the world illuminates entirely new domains of inquiry and real-world levers of action that a purely statist view obscures or ignores. For example, the canonical work of Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink has shown how highly motivated individuals and organized groups can bring about far-reaching and deep normative change in the international system. Anne-Marie Slaughter, Deborah Avant, and others have shown how networks of government and non-government actors often produce global governance outcomes that state parties in international institutions cannot by themselves achieve. Scholars such as Adom Getachew and Sinja Graf have focused on cultural production and ideas as the core unit of analysis, studying how colonial and anti-colonial ways of thinking about fundamental concepts such as self-determination, sovereignty, war, and humanity can reshape the international order. So yes, states are by far not the only important actors in international politics, though in the way we study IR and the way the media reports it, we often end up privileging them as the most important actors.

In what manner has the growth in the importance of China in the sphere of political economy among ‘developing countries’ impacted conventionally-held notions about the world order, particularly international institutions?

The conventional understanding of international institutions is that so long as they produce material benefits for countries, the latter will join them and self-interestedly comply with them (broadly speaking). Institutions are also viewed as reasonably efficient solutions to the challenges of international cooperation. They thus produce self-reinforcing equilibria—even if a country is unhappy with an institution, the individual cost of taking an alternate path is high enough that no country has an incentive to do so until a large number of others take that path. Every country faces this conundrum, therefore no one has an incentive to move first and lose the benefits of the status quo.

The rise of China as a major actor in the political economy of Global South countries has changed this dynamic in a couple of important ways. First, even though it is benefiting significantly from existing institutions in material terms, China is willing to pay high costs to set up new institutions that in fact replicate the functions of existing institutions. It does so to create institutions where it can be the highest-status actor. Although they operate at smaller scales, in functional terms, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) is not so different from the ADB, the New Development Bank of the BRICS countries is not so different from the World Bank, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) is not so different from the UNSC. The lesson here is that the conventional view of institutions as producing only material benefits is incomplete. We need to account for status ambitions as well.

Second, by developing substantial economic ties with Global South countries, particularly by engaging political elites, China has created a sizeable constituency for an alternative ‘order within the order’ for now. All the countries that have signed up to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and other China-led initiatives remain members of traditional international institutions as well, as does China itself. But again, political economy is only part of the story. There is also a counter-hegemonic project here among Global South countries, many of whom resent the continued dominance of the West as the so-called guardians of the international order (and many have asked, naturally, who guards the guardians in the absence of world government?). Endorsing Chinese international institutions thus serves a double purpose, material and ideological. The lesson here is that rather than switching from one institutional equilibrium to another, most states will support both existing and new institutions in an effort to benefit from both. There are of course some areas such as technological standards where this is not going to be possible, but when it comes to economic development in the Global South, the pattern is evident.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

It sounds trite to say that there are great benefits to interdisciplinarity because interdisciplinarity has become

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somewhat of a fetish nowadays. So I will say one should read widely and read in adjacent disciplines, or even far off disciplines. Chances are you will find that people are thinking about the same things as IR is, but in different contexts. This discovery can result in extremely productive insight, exchange, and dialogue.

The big paradigms of IR have all done this, be it neorealism and microeconomics, neoliberalism and public economics, or constructivism and social theory. The academic discipline of history itself is the foundation of so much work in IR. Although we don't operate in the realm of grand theories of IR anymore, and that's probably for the best, it is worth remembering that the social sciences broadly share a common goal of trying to make sense of how individuals and groups interact. The worst thing we can do is close ourselves off in our own disciplinary silos, especially when IR has benefited so much from engaging with other disciplines.