

## Interview - Amitav Acharya

Written by E-International Relations

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Professor Amitav Acharya is the UNESCO Chair in Transnational Challenges and Governance and Professor of International Relations at the School of International Service, American University, Washington, D.C., and the Chair of its ASEAN Studies Initiative. He served as the President of the International Studies Association during 2014-15. He is author of *Whose Ideas Matter?*, *The Making of Southeast Asia*, *Rethinking Power*, *Institutions and Ideas in World Politics* and *The End of American World Order*.

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

The most exciting trend in IR is the growing dissatisfaction with the current status of IR “as an American social science” (to quote the late Stanley Hofmann’s term) and the growing demand for countering this dominance. Consider, for example, the 2014 TRIP (Teaching, Research and International Policy) Survey on the state of IR. When asked if IR is an American-dominated discipline, 49% of the respondents (from 32 countries, although mostly American and European) agree and 11% strongly agreed, totaling 60%. When asked if IR is a Western-dominated discipline, the result was that 53% agreed, and 22% strongly agreed. Thus an overwhelming 75% of the total number of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that IR is a Western-dominated discipline.

By Western dominance, I do not mean any sort of intellectual neocolonialism or discrimination, although there are some who would think that these exist. For me, the dominance can be seen in the fact that the dominant theories and narratives of IR usually draw from Western history, practice, ideas, and scholarship. This is not some sort of deliberate conspiracy by Western scholars and institutions, but the result of how IR as a discipline has emerged and evolved, and where and how IR knowledge is produced, and the material or resource advantages enjoyed by Western scholars and institutions. Most unfortunately, it also has to do with “prevailing and deep-rooted assumptions in the field about what constitutes authentic and proper knowledge, including theory and method. These assumptions have formed through and are supported by the evolution of IR mainly in the Anglo-Saxon world...It is also a function of the concentration – both in terms of numbers and prestige – in the U.S. of the journals, publishing houses and institutions of learning and training in IR.” [1]

It is against this backdrop that I became interested in the idea of non-Western IR theory and later Global IR. The main reason was acute dissatisfaction with existing IR theories, especially their neglect or marginalization of the non-Western world. I was also struck by the failure of these theories, rooted as they are in a narrow Westphalian, European, and American ontology, to explain what’s happening in the non-Western world, especially in security, governance and regionalism. For example, the failure of regional integration theory to explain Third World regionalism, the limitations of the concept of national security to capture the security predicament of the Third World, and the focus on international development theory on economic growth at the expense of human development needs. Another issue that impressed me was that how little space the international relations literature, whether mainstream or critical theories, gives to the agency of non-Western countries in building the international and global order after World War II. Most of the credit goes to the West, ignoring the role of non-Western actors in creating supporting and diffusing international norms.

So the lack of recognition of Southern agency is a key gap in the existing literature. I was also motivated by the lack of representation of Global South scholars in professional associations like the ISA, in editorial boards of major

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journals and book series and in big international academic gatherings.

I feel especially pleased since as President of ISA in 2014-15, I had proposed as the theme of the 2015 ISA Annual Convention in New Orleans the theme: "Global IR and Regional Worlds: A New Agenda for International Studies". The idea of Global IR calls on the IR community to embrace diversity by recognising the places, roles, and contributions of "non-Western" peoples and societies. As I have said before, "Global IR draws from a broad canvass of human interactions, with their multiple origins, patterns and distinctions, to challenge IR's existing boundary markers set by dominant American and Western scholarship and encourage new understandings and approaches to the study of world politics." Global IR does not reject existing IR theories, but challenges them to be more inclusive, broaden their horizons and capture the voices, ideas and experiences of the world – the West and the Rest – as a whole.

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

Growing up in India, I believed that the West has always been the dominant shaper of the world, and countries like India are destined to play second fiddle. The academic curriculum is either too nationalistic to be believable or too deferential to the idea of Western supremacy. Hence theories of IR (or World Politics) coming from the West, and the writings of people like Morgenthau, Hedley Bull, Kenneth Waltz, Robert Keohane, to mention but a few, seemed sacrosanct and seemed to explain how the world works.

But with more readings and travel, also thanks to the shifts happening in the world, I became increasingly convinced that the world of IR has multiple and global origins. Civilisations, empires, states, societies and peoples, other than those from what we now call the West, such as Sumer, Egypt, China, Islam, India, Africa, the pre-Colombian Americas, and Southeast Asia, have made varied and important contributions to ideas and approaches about peace, justice, and world order over time. The West has been dominant for the past five hundred years or so, but the history of World Politics is much longer. I start my undergraduate seminar on World Politics by telling students this: If one studies world politics in terms of the Westphalian nation-state, one has less than 500 years to look at, during which the West – itself a relative new and problematic term, constructed by itself to assert its superiority over others – has been materially dominant. But if one studies world politics in terms of civilizations, then one has 5000 years cover, during which many other civilizations and societies have made and left their mark. It is absurdly limiting for IR/World Politics to ignore its global heritage and confine itself to the events and ideas from last few hundred years.

I got increasingly frustrated with IR theory in particular, especially its incredibly narrow base, as if all major events and concepts come from Europe and later the US. The ethnocentric assumptions in IR are mind boggling.

The world is changing now. With the reemergence of China, India, as well as Asia more generally, the relative decline of the West, combined with the realisation of how Western writers have exaggerated the idea of the West and marginalized the role of the rest. With new scholarship increasingly focusing on these, my idea of what IR is and should be has changed. I call it a Multiplex World.

### **In your book *The End of American World Order* you foresee the emergence of a "multiplex" world. What does this entail?**

The concept of a Multiplex World is partly but not entirely based on a multiplex theatre. It connotes a diversified or decentered world order with a variety of actors, plots (ideologies), producers and directors that go into the making of global order. Below are the five main features of the multiplex world concept:

- Whereas the traditional conception of multipolarity (derived from Europe) assumed the primacy of the great powers, actors (or agents) in a Multiplex World are not just great powers or only states (Western and non-Western), but also international institutions, non-governmental organisations, multinational corporations, and transnational networks (good & bad). As with a multiplex cinema, or its living room variants of streaming and Netflix, a Multiplex World gives its audience a wider choice of plots, actors, producers and

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directors.

- There is a variety of plots, or ideas and ideologies, as ways of realising them, some of which differ from and challenge the cultural and political narratives and instruments of the American-dominated liberal international order. The world is not homogenous, but one of enduring diversity. There is no 'End of History' here, except the relatively short history of Western dominance, bearing in mind that China was still the world's number one economy until the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.
- It is marked by complex global linkages including not just trade but also finance and transnational production networks, which were scarce in pre-World War European economic interdependence. While that interdependence was mostly intra-European, with the rest of the world being in a dependent (colonial) relationship with Europe and the USA, today's interdependence is truly global and increasingly reciprocal. It binds players all around the world, as exemplified by the G-20 membership, a product of global financial interdependence. Moreover, interdependence today is not only economic in nature, but also covers many other issue areas, such as the environment, disease, human rights, and social media.
- It has multiple layers of governance, including global, inter-regional, regional, domestic, sub-state. Regionalism is a key part of this, but regionalism today is open and overlapping, a far cry from 19<sup>th</sup> century imperial blocs which are unlikely to reappear.
- It is a decentered world. While power hierarchies remain; hence metaphors like "apolar" (Niall Ferguson) or "nonpolar" (Richard Haass), while closer to the truth than multipolar, are a bit misleading. But the overall architecture of a Multiplex World is non-hegemonic. No single power dominates the globe the way first Britain and then the US have done for the past hundred and fifty years or so. Such dominance by a single power may never happen again.

### **How do you think the relationship between rising non-Western states, such as China and India, and what is considered by some, to be a Western dominated international society will evolve?**

I have argued that the emerging powers cannot be simply co-opted into the existing liberal international order, or what has been also called the "American-led liberal hegemonic order". This is notwithstanding the fact that the emerging powers like China, India etc. have benefitted from that order. I think co-opting is the wrong word. A better way of conceptualizing what might happen is mutual accommodation. This is to say that the traditional liberal powers like the US and Western Europe must be willing to engage in give-and-take. Instead of simply expecting the new powers to accept its leadership and institutions without significantly reforming them. In order to accommodate the new powers, the old powers must be willing to accommodate their interests and preferences to those of the new powers. This means that there would have to be major changes in the existing liberal order, including democratisation of international institutions, more tolerance for political, and cultural and normative diversity.

### **How important is the role of regional institutions and regional cooperation for emerging powers to influence international politics?**

Regionalism – especially what I would call "open regionalism" that engages positively with outside actors – is key to the decentering and pluralisation of world politics. It allows different actors, regions and institutions to play a role in building global order. Regionalism is not by itself an agent of global fragmentation; it can also be a building block or be complimentary to global institutions and processes. Regionalism today is more open, dynamic, interactive and progressive than 19<sup>th</sup> century economic or geopolitical blocs which contributed to the two world wars.

For emerging powers, open regionalism is key to legitimation. In fact I have argued that emerging powers must have regional legitimacy before their can play an effective role in global governance and global order-building. Without regional legitimacy and support, countries like China and India could be constrained by regional conflicts and rivalries that will impede their progress as global powers. It is happening to China now, which has disputes with many of its neighbours, which is a huge distraction for it. On the other hand, by accommodating its neighbours and using their support, an emerging power can be better placed to play a global leadership role.

### **Do you feel that there has been a significant increase in attention to non-Western IR theory since you edited *Non-Western International Relations Theory* (with Barry Buzan)? What trends do you see**

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### emerging?

I think there has been. In New Orleans, the number of panels offered directly under the Convention Theme of Global IR and Regional Worlds or co-sponsored with other ISA Sections and Caucuses totaled over 300, or almost a quarter of the total number of panels and roundtables at the Convention, setting a historic record and showing the level of interest that the idea of Global IR generated among ISA members.

At the same time, it is significant and heartening that scholars in the field, especially the new generation of scholars in a field that is rapidly spreading around the world, seek to counter American and Western dominance. The TRIP Survey shows that among those who acknowledge American dominance in the field, 64 % also agree on the need for countering it, while 62% think it's important to counter Western dominance of the field. What this suggests, at the very least, is that a great number of IR scholars do not want the status quo to continue and that they do not think US and Western dominance of IR is benign.

Whether people call it Non-Western IRT, or Global IR, or post-Western IR, etc. I think there is a growing desire to address the neglect of the non-Western world or Global South through writings, conferences, and networking. I have not made any specific counts, but not a week passes when I am not receiving communication from scholars, especially younger scholars around the world with questions, suggestions and requests for advice on their work-in-progress, dissertations and papers on these topics, i.e. topics that explore IR beyond the West or to develop IR into a truly universal discipline.

### **You have argued the need for a Global IR rather than just an IR for the Global South. Why is this important and what are the challenges in opening up the field of Global IR?**

What I mean here is that I think scholars from the Global South should not just confine their research agenda to the traditional signature issues for the Global South, such as underdevelopment, development, race, and internal conflicts, but also get engaged with *all* the big issues and debates in IR, including climate change, security, and global governance. They should perhaps embrace theoretical and methodological pluralism, not just Postcolonialism, Marxism, or Dependency theory, but also Constructivism, Realism, and Liberalism. In engaging the big issues of world order, scholars from the Global South should not only offer the perspective of the Global South, or develop theories and concepts that only captures the position and role of the Global South, but also capture and explain how world politics in general unfolds. In doing so their impact and contribution can reach a broader audience and they may even win over or coopt some traditional scholars to their cause. As I told the Global South Caucus of the ISA while accepting their kind nomination of me as the Distinguished Scholar for 2016, while they should act as a “pressure group” institutionally, i.e., in demanding greater inclusion and participation of Global South scholars in IR forums and networks, like the ISA, intellectually, they should function as a “peer group” within the general IR community of scholars, developing ideas and making contributions that are relevant to the study of world politics as a whole.

### **What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Politics?**

Try to broaden your horizons, challenge the narratives – open or hidden – of not only Western dominance, but also the West-versus-the-Rest narrative in theories and mainstream literature and develop new research themes that seek to make IR a truly inclusive and universal discipline.

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*This interview was conducted by Jane Kirkpatrick. Jane is Associate Features Editor at E-IR.*

[1] This paragraph also appears in Prof. Acharya's recent Introduction to the Presidential Issue of International Studies Review