

Interview – Sahil Mathur

Written by E-International Relations

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This feature is part of a series of interviews with the contributing authors of *Foundations of International Relations*.

Sahil Mathur is a PhD candidate in International Relations and an adjunct instructor at the School of International Service, American University. He is the co-author (with Amitav Acharya) of 'Towards a Global International Relations', in McGlinchey, S. *Foundations of International Relations* (2022: Bloomsbury).

You chapter in *Foundations of International Relations*, co-authored with Amitav Acharya, deals with Global International Relations – how did you first get involved in thinking about this particular issue?

I first began thinking about 'globalizing' the field of International Relations as an MPhil student in India. Most of my academic training was based on the traditional schools of thought in IR, which derive primarily from Western history and thought. Yet, the research questions that animated me dealt with the role and contributions of the Global South in international relations. In trying to find frameworks that would help me better articulate problems related to the Global South, I came across Prof. Acharya's work on Global IR. Prof. Acharya's ideas intrinsically appealed to me. I was fortunate to get the opportunity to directly work with Prof. Acharya when I joined the International Relations PhD programme at American University. Prof. Acharya and I began collaborating on our chapter with the aim of showcasing a broader, more global, scope for IR than is typically portrayed in introductory textbooks. We researched concrete examples of the contributions of the Global South in international affairs, which produced the chapter's two case studies.

In terms of your academic journey, how did you find your way, and can you give a brief summary of your career thus far?

I am still very much a student: I am currently a PhD Candidate at American University. As a young student in India, I had always been interested in the 'international'. Every day, I would pore over the 'international' section of the newspaper. But what fascinated me in particular was the apparent prominence of international organisations in international affairs, amid an 'anarchical' world of sovereign states. That such organisations were not only surviving but thriving in some regions of the Global South was even more interesting. During my Integrated Master of Arts degree at the Indian Institute of Technology Madras, I took coursework in International Relations and wrote a thesis explaining the prominence of ASEAN in Asian regionalism. I followed this up with an MPhil in International Organization at Jawaharlal Nehru University, where my dissertation focused on explaining change and adaptation in ASEAN. I am currently working on my PhD dissertation, which examines regional organisations' responses to crises. I hope to continue conducting research and teaching with a focus on the Global South and its role in global governance.

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

Still a doctoral student, the period of time that I have been closely looking at the 'world' is relatively short. But there are some noticeable changes in how I have approached studying and understanding the world. When I made my

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initial forays into IR as an undergraduate student, prevailing geopolitical alignments and the foreign policies of great powers appeared predominant in explaining world politics. However, as I began to gain further expertise in the subject over the next decade, I found that scratching the surface of the dominant perspectives provides a richer understanding of world politics. For example, when trying to understand the behaviour of international organisations, the preferences of the great powers may be important, but other factors ranging from norms to culture to organisational design are also significant.

Do you think it is more important for academics (and students by extension) to dedicate most of their time to understanding the world, or instead actively to working to change it?

I think both of these objectives of understanding the world and working towards trying to change it need to be balanced, with the balance tilting in the favour of 'understanding'. Often, these aspects flow from each other. As academics, our first goal is to try to explain phenomena in international relations. What we choose to research is, in turn, often tied to some positive change we would like to see in that specific area. The power of a sound understanding, then, is that it puts you on a solid footing to advocate for change. For example, *understanding* the factors that enable international organisations to respond well to crises lays the foundation for offering policy advice on what does and does not work. In this manner, the goals of understanding and bringing about change are intricately tied together.

Where do you see the most exciting research and debates happening in and around the discipline of International Relations?

There are two streams of research that I think are currently the most exciting in International Relations, both of which aim to make the discipline more inclusive. First, there has been a push to integrate the experiences of the Global South into the core of IR, in both theory and empirics. Global IR lies at the forefront of this 'broadening' of the field. Second, in the subfield of global governance, recent research has sought to go beyond studying just a handful of prominent international organisations headquartered in the West and has begun exploring the role of other international governance actors such as NGOs, informal groups, and private actors as well as of regional organisations located in the Global South.

What is the most important advice you could give to students who are starting their journey with International Relations?

One piece of advice I would offer is to keep an open mind and try to get a grasp over the multitude of varying perspectives that are out there. I think it is important to not bind oneself to a particular school of thought early on. Doing this may cloud the learning process and prevent full absorption of opposing arguments. Another piece of advice is to read and absorb material with a critical mind, as there is always scope to enhance knowledge. Global IR emerged to fill a sort of vacuum, where existing IR theories contained deficiencies in helping observers understand how international actors, especially in the Global South, behave. Adopting an open, yet critical, approach to the subject will similarly foster new perspectives that better explain the world.

Those who read your chapter in *Foundations of International Relations* will take away many ideas and thoughts with them, but is there something specific you would like to leave in their minds?

The one thing I might expect students to leave with perhaps falls beyond the chapter itself: I would like students to continue to think of ways in which actors from the Global South have shaped and influenced the world. The chapter is peppered with examples and two detailed case studies, but its overall aim is provide a framework to understand and explain Southern contributions and propel students to think about such contributions in various aspects of international relations.