Finding Your Separated Cousin: Similarities and Global IR

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The idea that existing international relations (IR) theories are overly dependent on European experiences, disregarding the history of polities in other regions, is increasingly gaining support among IR scholars today. To tackle the issue of Eurocentrism and achieve a better representation of non-Western international systems in history, scholars have been calling for the "globalization" of international relations (see other articles in E-International Relations by Acharya 2017 and Bilgin 2018).

Much of the global IR (or non-Western IR) literature is based on the assumption that Europe and non-Europe were remarkably different. Because they are different, we need different theories to explain non-Western international systems.

According to Acharya and Buzan (2009, 3)

IR scholarship in Latin America, Africa, the Middle East and Southeast Asia is showing a growing disconnect between the dominant IR concepts developed in the West – including the nation state, power, institutions and norms – and the realities that local scholars perceive and analyse in these different regions.

In fact, recent studies of non-Western international orders have found that diverse forms of international orders existed outside of Europe in history. The tributary system dominated much of East Asia (Kang 2010), while areas formerly controlled by the Mongols developed "Chinggisid sovereignty" which is distinct from the European concept of modern sovereignty (Zarakol 2022). In the Indian Ocean international system, states, company sovereigns, and empires coexisted for centuries (Phillips and Sharman 2015). It is, therefore, indeed the case that non-European polities were often different from their European counterparts.

However, finding differences is not the only way of addressing the issue of Eurocentrism. The opposite can also be an equally powerful approach to tackle the same issue: finding similarities. At the same time as arguing that theories based on the European experience are universal, conventional IR theories also assume the uniqueness of Europe. The development of modern sovereignty, diplomacy, international organizations, etc., occurred only in Europe. Non-Europe was just integrated or socialized into the European system. If we can find a parallel development of what we associate only with Europe, we can question these assumptions. That is what I did in my new article, "The Eastern cousins of European sovereign states? The development of linear borders in early modern Japan" published in *European Journal of International Relations*.

Territory is a central feature of a modern state. Weber described a state as "a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force *within a given territory.*" Territory is a necessary condition for statehood. It is a bundle of different factors, and although recent studies have found that territoriality or territorial rule was not unique to Europe, they still largely agree that the demarcation of linear borders was. I questioned this assumption by investigating the case of early modern Japan.

I saw early modern Japan as a hierarchical international system and examined boundaries between domains rather

than borders between, say, Japan and China or Japan and Russia. Although the Tokugawa shogunate, which was based in Edo, present-day Tokyo, was the central government that officially had authority over the entirety of Japan, it directly controlled only a small portion. Most of the rest was under the rule of more than 200 feudal lords called the daimyō. Officially, the daimyō were vassals of the shogun, but in practice, they had a high level of autonomy and political power within their domains.

Although it was not universal throughout Japan, boundary demarcation developed significantly during the Edo period, especially in the realms of some powerful tozama daimyō (outsider lords), who became Tokugawa vassals after the Battle of Sekigahara, including former opponents or reluctant supporters of the Tokugawa clan. Boundary-making was especially crucial when the borders were contested. In some cases, the daimyō negotiated with each other and reached an agreement. In other cases, they failed to find a solution and accordingly filed a lawsuit. When they finally resolved the issue, they exchanged a map and built boundary markers to perpetuate the borderline. Boundary markers were often a product of such boundary disputes, as the featured image at the top of the article show. Numerous cases of boundary disputes can be found, especially in the 17th century.

Domanial governments not only demarcated borders with these markers but also policed them. They built guardhouses on both sides of the borders and stationed soldiers to control the entry of people and goods. Different domains that were strictly separated by these boundaries also operated under distinct systems of rule without overlapping with each other.

In a nutshell, many of the changes associated with the development of territory in Europe also happened in early modern Japan, and there is no evidence to suggest that they were the results of European intervention. This makes them parallel developments rather than a story of “Europe first, non-Europe later.” By focusing on similarities rather than differences, I questioned the uniqueness of the European sovereign state system in ‘The Eastern cousins of European sovereign states? The development of linear borders in early modern Japan‘ (2022, published open access in *European Journal of International Relations*).

Globalizing IR is an urgent task for everyone in the field, and finding similarities between Europe and non-Europe (before the West) is as good a way of achieving this goal as demonstrating the historical diversity of international systems.

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