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Yildiz, Tunahan

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Re-imagining International Relations: World Orders in the Thought and Practice of Indian, Chinese, and Islamic Civilizations

Tunahan Yıldız*

A Review of the Book
Barry Buzan and Amitav Acharya, *Re-imagining International Relations: World Orders in the Thought and Practice of Indian, Chinese, and Islamic Civilizations*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2021.

Barry Buzan and Amitav Acharya's *Re-imagining International Relations: World Orders in the Thought and Practice of Indian, Chinese, and Islamic Civilizations* is a theoretically well-designed and empirically-rich outline of pre-modern thinking and practice of world order/international relations beyond the West. The book attempts to incorporate the Indian, Chinese, and Islamic international thought and practice into International Relations (IR) theory and world history. The authors claim that the study of classical civilizations can enrich the discipline of IR by questioning the dominant status of a set of key ideas, such as sovereignty, by revealing the alternative origins of some key concepts, e.g., international law, by offering a better understanding of how certain cultural contexts work, and by broadening the horizons of IR theory and method.

Buzan and Acharya's latest collaborative piece is built on their previous work on non-Western IR and Global IR. On the one hand, the authors have sustained their combined interest in the non-Western concep-

* PhD. Candidate, Department of International Relations, Middle East Technical University, Ankara (Turkey). [tunahan@metu.edu.tr.]; [https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2516-8024].

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tions and histories of the international since their 2007 forum articles (Acharya & Buzan, 2007a; 2007b), which culminate in an edited volume on Asian IR in 2009 (Acharya & Buzan, 2009). The book is an extension of this long-running effort to open space for non-Western international thought and history and overcome Eurocentrism in the discipline. Although the explicit question of their previous work is the seeming absence of non-Western IR, it searches for a set of distinctive sources from Asia to theorize the international. Their digging into non-Western IR is an attempt to reveal what they find hidden, to unchain what they see suppressed, and to systematize what they consider unsystematic.

On the other hand, Buzan and Acharya's latest piece skillfully channelizes their interest in non-Western IR into Acharya's broader call for Global IR as their 2017 critical review does so on a more limited scale (Acharya & Buzan, 2017). Global IR is an extensive, burgeoning, and ambitious research agenda, contributed to by many following Acharya's calls since 2014 (Acharya, 2014a; 2014b; 2016; 2017), to broaden and pluralize the discipline beyond Western IR, resting substantially on a set of ways to incorporate non-Western international thought and practice into the discipline. Against this backdrop, the latest piece is a prequel to their 2019 book (Acharya & Buzan, 2019), which covers the histories of international relations and IR from the nineteenth century to the present from the perspective of Global IR, arguing that the evolution of IR has mirrored that of modern international relations.

This latest book emerges in this broader context of research. It is built on two initial observations, transferred from the previous work of the authors. On the one hand, as the West has dominated world politics, the practice and thought of non-Western actors have remained silent/marginal/secondary in IR theory and history. On the other hand, the singular dominance of the West has been in decline for decades as the world has moved into what the authors call "deep pluralism", and non-Western actors "are thus being reinserted into the contemporary world order, with China, India, and the Islamic world being in the vanguard" (p. 1). Accordingly, the aim of the book is to reveal the multiplicity of international practice and thought beyond the Western domination of world politics and the Eurocentric examination of world history and to predict a set of cultural elements of the emergent post-Western world order.

It is also an effort to find "via media solutions" for a set of theoretical, methodological, and analytical problems in IR, which the authors not only discuss throughout the book, but also exclusively address in Chapter II and VI. First, while they highlight the currency of postcolonial analysis to reveal the conceptual and historical world of the non-West, they deliberately focus on the pre-modern non-Western cases, considered more "authentic" with their immunity from "the dual encounter with the West and modernity" (p. 14). Second, they feature the "substantial differentiation" (p. 16) in the international thought and practice of their cases as proof of the importance of culture in international relations in contradistinction to the assumptions of mechanical similarity and repetition across time and space in materialist accounts. That said, they

also draw attention to the agency of material factors, which shape the patterns of similarity.

Third, the book also sheds light on a set of similarities between modern Western IR and pre-modern non-Western international thinking, and thus, it contributes to a broader project of the cosmopolitan origins and multiple genealogies of key "Western" ideas, such as power politics. Fourth, the authors spotlight the cultural contexts and dictionary meanings of non-Western concepts to avoid the artificial universal codes of tempocentrism, but they also emphasize the need "to develop and use a shared vocabulary" to be operationalized by both Western and non-Western scholars for the sake of "a truly Global IR" (p. 22). Last, the authors underscore the analytical problem of the difference between the main unit of their analysis, empires, and the dominant analytical unit of modern IR, the state. The difference renders the extrapolation of their concepts toward each other problematic.

Building on this framework, Buzan and Acharya devote Chapter III, IV and V to their respective examinations of Indian, Chinese, and Islamic civilizations. On the one hand, they identify main strands of thinking about IR in each case. As for India, their discussion of classical Indian ideas on the international revolves centrally around Kautilya's realist *Arthashastra*, Ashoka's moralist doctrine of *Dharma*, and natural and divine causality. In classical China, the authors extract a hierarchical worldview, *Tianxia*'s ontology of universal order and coexistence, the Mandate of Heaven's performance legitimacy, *zhongyong* dialectics' relational epistemology, and material and moral positionality in the concept "face". When it comes to the Islamic world, their investigation diagnoses the *umma*, *Dar al-Harb*, *Dar al-İslam*, *Dar al-Ahd*, *jihad*, just war, and rationalist epistemology as the defining elements of Islamic international thought.

On the other hand, the authors subsequently focus on the practice of the international in each case. They divide the history of each civilization into two periods/trends. In the case of India, they address the era of small independent polities, *Mahajanapadas*, as "the practical foundations for what became India's version of realism" (p. 45), and the spread of Indian culture as "perhaps the best example in history of the peaceful diffusion of ideas" (p. 47). As for China, they see the warring states period as "an extreme form of power politics" (p. 71) while they consider the tribute system epoch as the hierarchical ordering of China's international relations. The authors read the history of the Islamic world on a similar fragmentation-unity spectrum, with the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates representing the unity of the *umma*, succeeded by the multiplicity of universal empires, namely, the Ottomans, the Safavids, and the Mughals.

In their concluding analysis, the authors operationalize six fundamental concepts to reveal difference and similarity across these cultures and modern IR: hierarchy, power politics, peaceful coexistence, international political economy, territoriality/transnationalism, and modes of thinking. First, they see hierarchy as "perhaps the most obvious difference between our three case studies and contemporary IR theory" (p. 117) since it is prevailing in the former while anarchy substantially predominates modern IR. Their cases also suggest that the

anarchy-hierarchy spectrum is a continuum, not rigid and mutually exclusive categories. Second, power politics characterizes all three cases, aligning with modern IR. That said, those cultures offer a more open, not deterministic, view of power politics (p. 128) in that anarchic multiplicity is not a permanent condition due to the classical tendency toward universal empires.

Third, those cases also incorporate some elements of peaceful coexistence or pluralism partially owing to such components as recognition of local autonomy and shared identity, and partially due to universal empires being a system of peaceful coexistence by themselves. Fourth, the authors regard trade "as one of the crucial elements of peaceful coexistence" (p. 134). Merchant activity is a defining feature of these civilizations, particularly in India and the Islamic world. Fifth, while the authors observe a looser and more flexible conception of territoriality in empires, they identify "the principle of strong, autonomous social structures" (p. 141) as another model of world order. Finally, the authors reject the dichotomous view of the West as this-worldly and the East as other-worldly, with each "containing ideas about both divine and non-divine, rational causation" (p. 143).

Re-imagining International Relations features multiple strengths. For one thing, it is yet another macro-scale operationalization of the objectives of Global IR, subsequent to *The Making of Global International Relations*, and thus, it shapes the prospects of this new research agenda. Moreover, even though the book is "exploratory and preliminary" (p. 26) considering its broad scope, it is a thought-provoking effort to discover and anticipate what those non-Western cultures "might bring to Global IR" (p. 113). In so doing, it does not rely solely on archival material to reveal what has remained unknown to date. While much of its empirical material has already been in use in several ways for years and it typically employs secondary sources, the book skillfully makes room for mutual learning and engagement between comparative history and theory.

The book also generates a fruitful conversation between classical international thought and practice and modern IR. It is not only a brief examination of classical Indian, Chinese and Islamic thinking and making of the international, but also it is an attempt to compare "similarities and differences in the way world order and international relations have been thought and practiced across time and space" (p. 26). Furthermore, the conservation does not ignore the agency of the non-West and does not establish an analytical hierarchy as the authors claim that "the ideas and institutions of non-Western societies deserve to be studied on their own terms" (p. 155). In so doing, the book does not squash into the ambiguous boundaries of the non-West, but rather it successfully operationalizes "pluralistic universalism", the core normative and analytical concept of Global IR.

The book has also its own problems. In the first place, the authors underestimate the multiplicity of conceptual meanings they extract from the non-West. When they discover a set of concepts in the classical thought of those civilizations, the operationalization of their meanings often relies on a singular interpretation of those concepts, which might

be understood, and indeed have been understood, in several other ways. Furthermore, the authors attempt to "purify" their cases from the West, with their purposeful exclusion of the modern international practice and thought of those civilizations. In so doing, they render the pre-modern history as more representative of the non-West. However, when those "authentic" histories are employed, "remembered" or re-invented in the modern contexts of those non-Western cultures, they become part of the politics of authenticity, and thus, do not smoothly travel through time.

Furthermore, their discussion on the Islamic world seems perhaps the most undertheorized part of their investigation. Importantly, the authors attribute a high degree of "Islamicness" to the Islamic world in their search for the Islamic concepts of world order. This conceptualization obscures a powerful current of secular thought in the Islamic world (see, for instance, Yücesoy, 2023). In addition, while they see Islamic civilization's theory and practice of world order as highly diverged from each other, they ignore the subordination of the Sunni thought to the authority. One should also pay attention to the alternative conceptualizations of this political space. For instance, a recent work (Zarakol, 2022) defines the world orders of Eurasia from the thirteenth to the seventeenth century as the Chinggisid, post-Chinggisid, post-Timurid world orders, including the substantial parts, actors, and periods of the Islamic world as well as China and India.

In conclusion, one should note that *Re-imagining International Relations* does not correspond to any glorification of the non-West and any devaluation of the West as their key concepts are "pluralistic universalism" in normative terms and "post-Western world" in historical terms. This is actually why the earlier emphasis of the authors on the term "non-West" has gradually given its place to the term "global" in their works although it is still employed. In any case, the book would offer much to any reader interested in the ambitious research agenda of Global IR. It should be read along with the broader literature on Global IR, and particularly, *The Making of Global International Relations*. It is yet another concrete step toward challenging the Eurocentrism of IR and developing a more pluralist, inclusive, and global discipline in its study of history, theory, and method.

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