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## Defining IR: Is it Asia's Turn?

As a discipline, international relations has traditionally been dominated by the West. However, with the continued shift of economic and political power to the East, Robert Kelly argues, the time for a non-Euro-Atlantic tilt in IR studies has finally arrived.

By Robert Kelly for ISN

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It is widely understood that international relations (IR) relies significantly on modern (post-Columbus) and North Atlantic cases as the research base for its general theory. Graduate students in the field are well-versed in a heavily researched set of cases such as the Napoleonic Wars, World War I, or the Cuban Missile Crisis. While this is arguably 'Eurocentric' training – white, Western practitioners feigning to build 'universal' theory from just the cases and languages they know best from their own civilizational background – it might be also reasonably excused by Western dominance of world politics for so many centuries. So long as the West (including the USSR as a basically Western leftist project) so overawed the planet's politics, then a modern and Atlantic prejudice was perhaps less narrow than it seems. Whatever the cause, this is likely to change in the coming decades.

The rise of Asia will likely challenge Eurocentricity for two reasons. First, as Asian states become more consequential in world politics, IR will be forced to grapple with these cases more clearly. Policy concerns frequently drive IR's research interests: 9/11 and the European Union, for example, implicitly motivate work on terrorism and international organization respectively. Similarly, Asian growth will push us to learn Asian history and cases as Asian concerns increasingly set global priorities. Second, as Western institutions struggle under austerity, comparatively flush universities and think-tanks in Asia will have greater resources for recruitment, conferences, research, and journals. This will inevitably pull the field toward Asia.

### **A 'Globalizing' Discipline**

This development should be generally welcomed for two reasons. First, IR is something of a strange beast, insofar as much of it is conducted within the West about the West while claiming nevertheless to be 'international.' IR is dominated by English: many important scholars are anglophones, most major programs are in anglophone countries, and the best journals are all in English. Some of this is excusable – a lingua franca is an important collective action resolution, and there is a 'first mover' legacy. The origins of IR as a discipline distinct from history, and as a 'science' (a part of empirical political science), lie in the US after the Second World War.

Nevertheless, most political scientists would likely agree that IR should be more globalized, and that rich, new questions could be uncovered by pushing our empirical work 'vertically' back through time

and/or 'horizontally' across (non-European) space. Not knowing much about non-Western places and pre-modern periods has little bearing on their usefulness as test cases. And this need not apply solely to Asia. For many centuries, Native American polities interacted in pre-Columbian America. An IR exploration of such cases could be fascinating. Unfortunately, there are few if any efforts to do so. At this point, it is often argued that many non-Western, pre-modern polities did not keep records and that mapping conventional theories onto these cases would be nearly impossible. Perhaps, but this may also be a convenient fig-leaf for Eurocentric ignorance of places like pre-Columbian America or pre-colonial Africa.

Further, this will not wash in Asia, as literacy and record-keeping go back many centuries, most obviously in China. These records make the testing of Western theories against Asian history possible, an exciting development represented by scholars such as [David Kang](#), Alastair Iain [Johnston](#), and Victoria [Hui](#). Our excuses for not knowing these cases are running out. (Readers curious for a longer and more academic treatment of the issues raised here can turn to Johnston's very helpful recent [review essay of East Asia in IR.](#))

A second advantage of expanding IR from its current Western seat to include newer schools and institutions in Asia is innovative theoretical challenges not yet seen today. Just as Latin American scholars helped push leftist international political economy theories into contention, most obviously *dependencia*, it seems likely that the growth of IR in Asia will push enriching new issues and approaches into our field. In Asia, there seems to be [significant interest](#) in constructivist and culturalist approaches. This is just the beginning. In this vein, it should be hoped that further reviews of the IR discipline by the '[Teaching and Research in International Relations](#)' project (TRIP) from the College of William and Mary will include scholars from Japan and South Korea. It currently includes Hong Kong and Singapore. Given the ideological constraints on Chinese scholars (despite their well-known 'track II' openness), it is perhaps better that China not be included yet.

### **Distinctly Asian Constraints**

And China's exclusion from TRIP - despite the country's remarkable rise - brings up one of the challenges of the Asian expansion of IR as a discipline. Traditions of free academic inquiry are less deeply-rooted in Asian academia, with the possible exception of Japan. In South Korea, colleagues frequently suggest that the best history and political science on Korea is written outside the country, in English, because of the strong - if informal - domestic political pressures to conform to ideologically-desired findings. These include tough anti-communism at the expense of the North, the nationalist assertion that ancient Korea was a 'bridge' of Sinic thought to Japan (and therefore the 'root' of Japanese culture) for historiographic 'revenge' on Korea's erstwhile colonialist, and a teleological, nationalist-statist understanding of Korean history to bolster the 'stateness' of the current half-country republic in the South. One can imagine similar pressures in places such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore, and indeed, the express lack of academic liberalism in China is likely the reason it is not included in TRIP and is a long-term constraint on IR's growth there.

A second constraint on an Asian rise within IR is the policy-relevant tradition of the scholar in Asia. Most of us are vaguely familiar with the notion of the mandarin - the sage who passed punishing exams to enter the bureaucracy and serve the state. This tradition continues and is quite flattering to Western PhDs accustomed to exclusion from power, policy irrelevance, and the perception that they are absent-minded egg-heads. Whereas the American right is frequently openly hostile to academia (over Darwinism and global warming, for example), the scholar in Asia enjoys a high level of social prestige. While this can be flattering, it also creates concerns that scholars are too close to the state and too interested in joining the policy process.

This may sound like a good thing to many Western IR academics. It is often observed that IR is now so

technical that it needs bridges like *Foreign Affairs* and *Foreign Policy* to communicate its findings to the 'real world.' IR scholars often lament that they are policy-irrelevant. Perhaps, but public policy schools, area studies and international studies programs, think-tanks, and popular journals can provide 'relevance.' IR, the specific sub-discipline of political science, is the only part of the broad study of 'international affairs' that focuses on basic research in world politics. For many in IR, this is what separates them from the larger, hazier study of 'international affairs' characteristic of so many IR-lite, 'international studies' or 'global studies' programs. For Asian IR programs to compete more seriously against Western programs, deep pockets will not be enough. Asian IR programs will need to focus more systematically on IR as a 'science,' and a 'speaking truth to power' role will need to be cultivated which will inevitably generate tension with the traditional mandarin role. This will be difficult given the statism of many Asian countries and the dominance of national university systems. If IR programs in Asia retain their attachments to both the state and the policy-making process, basic theory IR will likely maintain its Western center.

### **Distinctly Asian Opportunities**

Finally, the Asian shift will push methodological changes – most obvious toward currently underemphasized training like language-learning and in-country residence/experience. Acultural, 'universalist' approaches such as statistics, game theory, and rational choice theory will come under pressure as they are applied to new cases where Western-reared analysts have little on-the-ground knowledge. Much of the coming work will be qualitative case studies as researchers collide with cases that simply have not been studied before. The clash between a generalist like John Mearsheimer and China experts like David Shambaugh over whether China is another rising hegemon comfortably fit under standing covering laws in IR about hegemony, or is something fairly new, requiring theoretical expansion, is just the start of the methodological and conceptual struggle to absorb these under-researched cases with thousands of years of history generally unexplored by IR. This is not a call for Edward Said's 'orientalism' – suggesting that Asia is so different that general theory is impossible. Rather, 'concept stretching,' if not outright reformulation, will happen as IR theory moves beyond the time-space (modern North Atlantic) world in which it was built. (See [Kang](#) on this important point.)

Broadly, these developments should be cheered. *International* relations should obviously be less dominated by the US, the English language, Western institutions, and Western cases. This is not a politically correct 'multiculturalization' of the field, but rather an effort to truly universalize theory. Realism posits inter-state competition as a timeless constant. Is it not a good question to ask if the long histories of China and India support this contention? How many of IR scholars know the relevant history well enough to make those judgments? (What about the earliest city-state systems of Mesopotamia, or pre-Columbian America?) Not only are these interesting questions in themselves, they help test the limits of existing generalizations – a widely shared social science goal.

Finally, the rise of Asian universities, and IR programs, brings new blood and new resources into the discipline. As austerity bites in the West in the coming decades, university funding is an obvious target. In the US, National Science Foundation funding for political science may be cut this year, and public support for state university systems has been declining for decades. Asia can help the discipline through the approaching belt-tightening. Well-ranked Asian schools like Tokyo (*Todai*), the National University of Singapore, or Seoul National University, in wealthy, modern countries, will increasingly leverage their resources and prestige to attract Western scholars. A circulation of Asian and Western scholars back and forth can only strengthen the international character of IR research and the discipline more broadly. It should be welcomed.

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