16.1: The Basics of Asian Perspectives

IR theory is primarily based on assumptions derived from Western modes of thinking and viewing the world. This, in turn, renders it ‘too narrow in its sources and too dominant in its influence’ (Acharya and Buzan 2010, 2). The result of this is that non-Western perspectives and theoretical insights have been systematically neglected or ignored altogether by the discipline. For many scholars, this silence of non-Western IR voices constitutes a profound cause of concern, and one that casts a doubtful light on the utility of mainstream theories as a lens to make sense of a complex and culturally diverse world. Consider the English school of IR. The key concepts underpinning the English school and its conception of ‘international society’ – for example, the principles of national sovereignty and sovereign equality – are founded upon the historical European experience. China, for one, only learnt these concepts through its encounter with the colonial-era European powers, as was also the case for other Asian countries. The Chinese empire had, until then, conducted its dealings with other nations on the basis of a Sinocentric worldview, where it acted as the political and cultural centre of the world, with the Chinese emperor seen to rule over Tianxia or ‘All-under-Heaven’ (basically, the rest of the world). Sovereign equality never existed as a concept to the Chinese mind until the nineteenth century. Given the distinctive histories, cultures and interstate dynamics seen in Asia, we clearly cannot take for granted the universality of the assumptions and concepts prevalent in IR scholarship.

Asian perspectives on interstate politics exist – and have existed – for millennia. Ancient Indian and Chinese political theorists like Kautilya (circa 300 BCE) and Confucius (551–479 BCE) have provided some salient observations on foreign policy. It would only be in the mid-1990s, when efforts began to make IR scholarship more representative, that the contributions of these thinkers started to be taken seriously by the discipline. In the years since, we are seeing language barriers being broken down along with growing theoretical innovation challenging old thinking in IR. Discussions have converged on the feasibility of constructing various schools and theories of Chinese, Japanese, Korean and Southeast Asian IR – among other possibilities. As such, though still mired in debate and a degree of uncertainty, the ultimate outcome of these discussions will prove central to the future of IR as a global discipline.
At present, there is no single, unifying, pan-Asian school or theory of International Relations. Various reasons can be given for why this is the case. For example, the ‘hidden’ nature of non-Western IR theories, referring to the difficulty of recognising non-Western perspectives even when we see them (Acharya and Buzan 2010, 18) – or the failure to challenge the theoretical ‘imports’ and acknowledge the value of non-Western theory-building (Puchala 1997, 132; Chun 2010, 83). There is, of course, nothing inherently ‘Western’ about IR theorising. But whether we can rightly speak about an Asian IR theory depends in large part on how we define ‘theory’ and understand ‘Asian’.

In this light, Asian IR should not be viewed as a self-contained, monolithic discourse, nor as an intellectual enterprise aimed purely at the production of grand theories. Although having garnered plenty of attention in non-Western IR scholarship, the Chinese and Japanese schools of IR represent but two strands of Asian thought among several others. Rather than ‘theory’ in the sense of advancing testable observations about how the international system operates, it may be better to describe the bulk of Asian IR approaches as perspectives for making sense of the world. This, in turn, raises the important question of whether a unified Asian IR theory is in fact desirable. Siddharth Mallavarapu (2014), for one, is less interested in putting forward monolithic theories, being more ‘curious about how the world is viewed from this particular location’. Navnita Chadha Behera (2010, 92) likewise rejects the notion of creating an Indian school of IR out of concern that such an undertaking would result in a ‘self-other binary’ that simply pits Indian IR (self) against Western IR (other). This speaks to a broader concern that the construction of unified schools of thought risks creating grossly simplified and polarising categories that end up supplanting one dominant body of knowledge with another. Similar sentiments also pervade debates on the Chinese school, with some scholars remaining sceptical about the feasibility of a single school representing the diversity of Chinese perspectives.

Conceptual pluralism better serves the original intention of non-Western IR theorists – that is, to bring diversity back into the study of world politics. Following from this, it is also important that we don’t overstate the differences between Western and Asian IR approaches. Indeed, a common attribute of Asian and Western approaches lies with their normative qualities – that is, their interest in how the world ought to be. Kautilya, for example, noted the necessity of waging a just war (for example, for a king not to take the land of an ally), whereas Confucian scholars were concerned with how to sustain ‘harmony’ (peace and stability) in the world through able statecraft.

Much like Western IR theories, Asian perspectives have deep roots in political thought. In many cases, it is a matter of transposing theories of statecraft, society and human nature to the global realm. Just as Enlightenment-era philosophers like Thomas Hobbes and John Locke were central to the development of IR theory, ancient and modern philosophers from Confucius and Sun Tzu (544–496 BCE) to Shiratori Kurakichi (1865–1942) and Nishida Kitarō (1870–1945) are important sources of inspiration for Asian scholars.

According to Benoy Kumar Sarkar (1919), early Hindu political theorists already had an indigenous conception of sovereignty that recognised the importance of ‘self-rule’ and national independence to the exercise of state authority. The Indian statesman and philosopher Kautilya, who is often lauded as one of the world’s earliest realists, is a critical figure in this regard. In setting out the principles of conduct central to the task of empire-building, his mandala (spheres of influence) theory advanced ideas as to how a king should manage alliances and relations of enmity with surrounding countries. It acknowledged, for instance, the utility of non-intervention as a means for building confidence between kings and avoiding unnecessary foreign entanglements, having also proposed an early conceptualisation of ‘strength’ as a tool for attaining ‘happiness’ (Vivekanandan 2014, 80).

Similarly, elements of Confucian thinking on power, order and statecraft can be distilled from how China conducts its
The importance of maintaining harmony to safeguarding the global order is a Confucian concept that remains a popular refrain in China. Similarly, the notion that to wield power a state must shoulder commensurate domestic and international responsibilities is one that defines China's contemporary identity as a responsible stakeholder. It has also served as the basis for the corresponding 'responsibility thesis', which advances the notion that China has certain unavoidable duties and obligations as a rising power, particularly with respect to managing and securing global order and stability (Yeophantong 2013).

In seeking to identify its own unique contributions to the field, Japanese IR has also drawn extensively upon the works of celebrated philosophers, including Nishida Kitarō, who was the pioneer of the Kyoto School. Often labelled as a 'proto-constructivist' due to the prominence he gave to cultural factors and identity construction, Nishida advanced a philosophy of identity for addressing a fundamental Japanese conundrum of whether Japan belongs to the East or the West. Here, he adopted a dialectic approach, arguing that Japanese identity exists within a 'coexistence of opposites, Eastern and Western', which consequently allows it to cultivate a universal appeal (Inoguchi 2007, 379). In other words, Japan is accorded a special role in the world, as it is positioned to encourage both Eastern and global awareness. This argument fits with Nishida's broader vision of a multicultural world, where a 'true world culture' was to be achieved through the recognition of cultural difference and the union of these differences (Krummel 2015, 218).

Despite criticism against their hegemonic position in the discipline, it warrants note how mainstream IR theories have helped to provide fertile ground for new ideas and approaches to germinate among Asian IR scholars. South Korean IR scholars, for example, have been heavily influenced by mainstream IR – specifically, its theories that are focused on addressing real-world issues. The rationale behind efforts to build a Chinese IR School also stems from the desire to better represent Chinese ideas and interests within an American-dominated discipline. It is possible, however, to divide Chinese IR scholars working in the pre-1949 period and during the 1980s-90s into two camps (Lu 2014): those who sought to learn from and emulate Western theories and those who used Western IR as the basis for critique and the development of alternative perspectives.

It is interesting to recall how Samuel Huntington's 1993 'Clash of Civilizations' article, which argued that culturally driven conflicts will invariably define the post-Cold War world, had sparked heated discussion within China during the mid-1990s due to its controversial speculation of a coming conflict between the West and 'Confucian-Islamic' states. Not only did this lead to a deepening of Chinese dissatisfaction with Western theories and their misrepresentations of Eastern cultures, it also gave Chinese scholars renewed impetus to establish a Chinese school of IR.

You are probably wondering, if there is no Asian IR theory, then can Asian perspectives really provide a (more) compelling account of interstate dynamics than mainstream IR theories?

Certainly, we can view the lack of a unifying set of core theoretical assumptions as a sizeable limitation of current Asian IR approaches. While we can easily identify the major tenets of realism or constructivism, Asian perspectives tend to exhibit a greater degree of conceptual fluidity and context-specificity. In practical terms, however, there are instances where Asian IR has made noteworthy contributions to 'middle-range theorising' (the formulation of fact-driven theories to explain a specific real-world phenomenon) and 'soft IR theory', which refers to the policy-driven theories informed by the 'thinking and foreign policy approaches of Asian leaders' (Acharya and Buzan 2010, 11). These are normally relied upon to generate policy prescriptions, as well as insights into the factors that motivate the foreign-policy behaviour of Asian states.
An influential middle-range theory is Akamatsu Kaname’s ‘flying geese model’ of regional development. Not only has the theory been used to justify Japan’s economic leadership within Asia (Korhonen 1994), but it also serves as the rationale behind the country’s economic assistance to developing countries. Kaname posited the theory in the 1930s to explain how a developing country can catch up with industrialised countries through their interactions. With Japan’s rapid industrialisation from the late nineteenth century onwards and the remarkable economic development of East Asian countries in the post-Second World War period, Japan came to be depicted within this theory as the ‘lead goose’ in a V-shaped formation comprised of emerging Asian economies. Here, Japan helped to stimulate regional industrialisation and economic growth by passing down its older technology and know-how (through economic assistance programmes, for instance) to other developing countries.

An example of a soft theoretical contribution is the concept of ‘non-alignment’ (not taking sides). Developed by India’s Jawaharlal Nehru against the backdrop of divisive Cold War politics, non-alignment became an influential policy framework adopted by Asian and African countries that had sought to occupy the middle ground between the rival powers during the 1950s and 1960s.