


# Explaining International Change: The Need for Greater Plurality in the Discipline of International Relations

Diogenes  
2022, Vol. 64(3–4) 121–137  
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DOI: 10.1177/03921921221127135  
journals.sagepub.com/home/dio



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## Abstract

In the third decade of the twenty-first century, the world is witnessing rapid changes in every field, and this refers not only to the accelerated pace of technological developments, social changes, economic booms and crashes, etc. but also to a major transformation in the international system from the post-1945 liberal international structure under the hegemonic stability provided by the United States to one that is marked with a larger number of major actors who do not necessarily subscribe to the tenets of free markets and electoral democracy. In this rapidly transforming world, efforts made by the scholarly inquiry of international relations fail to keep up with the speed of the empirical change. This paper asserts that the main reason of this shortcoming of the IR as a discipline is its lack of pluralism, meaning that mainstream IR theories continue to reflect Western viewpoints and interests while at the same time ignoring alternative, non-Western theories to large extent. This paper's argument is that such alternative IR theories and approaches have to emerge and reinforce the Western-centric mainstream so that the discipline can be in a better position to explain international change, as a multi-actor process cannot be adequately explained through the lens of one single actor. The potential offered by Chinese IR theory making is discussed within this context on the grounds that as China is one of the main proponents of change at the international level, Chinese perspectives produced through Chinese geocultural reference points are needed not to replace but to complement Western narratives in order to explain the change at the global level.

## Keywords

IR theories, international change, pluralism, China, non-Western theories

## Introduction

Heraclitus of Ephesus is often attributed the quote “there is nothing permanent except change”. The fifth century B.C. Greek philosopher indeed saw the whole universe “in flux like a river”.

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Accordingly, all was in progress and all was in change, at all times. Heraclitus' argument went beyond the obvious observation that the world is a place of change, as his point was that changes occurred in measures and thereby maintained the unity of the whole universe and the balance of its essential constituents. In other words, every single part of the universe was in constant change, but some changed more rapidly or more slowly than others and they were all involved in a process of becoming and perishing (Kirk, 1962: 379).

The Heraclitan concept of change can be useful for explaining the international system of states. The system is changing all the time; some powers rise, others fall; some achieve rapid progress, some remain behind and as the distribution of power and capabilities among the actors changes, so does the system. Everything is in flux. Sometimes the change can be so fast that individuals living within the system can find it hard to keep pace with it. Such is today's world; it is a world of profound change within a rapid transformation is observed in basically every aspect of human life.

The change in the international system is concrete and ubiquitous. Yet the scholars who are supposed to explain it are usually faring no better than the ancient Greek philosophers did with their less complicated world. Change remains as one of the most contested, yet also most inadequately treated concepts in International Relations (IR) theory, and far from reaching a consensus on how to define the concept and how to deal with it, practitioners of the discipline have so far tended to take the international system to be more or less static. As Wilbert E. Moore stated, "Paradoxically, as the rate of social change has accelerated in the real world of experience, the scientific disciplines dealing with man's actions and products have tended to emphasize orderly interdependence and static continuity" (Moore, 1968: 365, quoted in Gilpin, 1981: 3).

Individuals usually spot a major change, when they see it in the shape of a major event or a series of such events, such as the fall of the Berlin Wall or the terrorist acts of September 11, 2001. They then talk about "entering a new era" or living in "a new world", etc. However, when we attempt to explain what has changed or whether it is a fundamentally transformative change or not, our troubles begin. There are two problems related to the analytical tools that are at our disposal.

The first problem is that when we stick to mainstream theories and analytical tools that were devised in the previous period, i.e., before the change, we realize that they do not manage to capture what is new, let alone to explain how we moved from the old to the new. This rendering obsolete of the traditional tools and approaches take us to the second problem. When we spot a change and realize that it is difficult to explain the "new world" with "old tools", we feel the need to revise our tools accordingly and to create new ones. As Ole Wæver stated, "each major rupture in the international system triggers a swing away from whatever theory dominates" (Wæver, 1998: 691). New theories and new tools suit the new world better in terms of their descriptive and theoretical utilization, as did the old tools with the old world. However, this does not necessarily mean that they can also explain how the world moved from the "old" to the "new". Explaining the "outcome" of the change and the "process" of the change itself are not the same thing. There remains an ontological loophole between the "old" and the "new".

These two problems are merged by James N. Rosenau into one single concept of "conceptual jails". Rosenau points to the dilemma that whereas our frameworks, models, and paradigms serve us well as creative guides for framing and analyzing problems, they also blind us to the change that lies outside their scope (Rosenau, 1990: 37). What should be done then? Rosenau asks us to work with conceptual equipment that is relatively free of cultural bias and to embrace different cultures rather than reflecting only one of them (Rosenau, 1990: 39). This is also what Kalevi J. Holsti says in a more generalized way; we need to "reconfigure our conceptual equipment and to look at the world in new ways" (Holsti, 2002: 24). But it is not and it should not be about changing the way we look at the world after the world changes in the first place. If we want to break free from the conceptual jails, different ways of looking at the world have to be present and to co-exist at all times,

so that what remains outside the boundaries of our way of looking at the world, i.e., processes that lead to change in the international system, do not ever go unnoticed. This is not an easy task and requires a major reconfiguration in the discipline of IR.

## The Concept of ‘Change’

The concept of change poses a serious challenge against mainstream IR theories, since none of them have so far managed to agree on a definition of the concept, to conceptualize it and to devise ways for identifying it. As a result of their shortcoming in defining and conceptualizing change, they largely failed to explain (and forecast) major changes in the international system and their markers. Jack Snyder (2004) provides a summary of how three mainstream theoretical traditions failed to explain change, whereby realism failed to predict the end of the Cold War; liberalism explains what happens after democratic transitions take place but fails to explain the transition process itself; and constructivism, despite being good in describing changes in norms and ideas, fails to explain the material and institutional circumstances that are required for a consensus about new values and idea to take place.

This does not mean, however, that “change” is disregarded by theorists and left unexamined. On the contrary, ever since the birth of IR as a discipline, the great debates among theorists have included implicit arguments about the nature of change, the possibilities it offers, and its consequences (Buzan and Jones, 1981: 2). Moreover, there have been scholars from different schools who explicitly dealt with the issue of change.

Political realism has been and continues to be an important arena for arguments regarding the nature of change. For realists, the pattern of international politics is seen to have remained constant throughout history, as a “recurring struggle for wealth and power among independent actors in a state of anarchy” (Gilpin, 1981: 7). For this reason, the realist school of thought, especially its structural branch, argues that continuities in IR are more important than changes and limits change to such parameters like variations in the balance of power, polarization, and great power politics. In this respect, change is portrayed as the “perpetuation of difference and fragmentation” (Walker, 1987: 83) and the explanation of continuity is prioritized over theorizing on future changes and alternative world orders.

One of the most important contributions to the realist literature on change came by Robert Gilpin, who studied the relationship between war and change in the international system. Gilpin starts with the assumption that the fundamental nature of international relations remains unchanged, yet acknowledges that contemporary economic and technological developments have altered relations among states. As some countries benefit from these developments more than others do, it leads to uneven development, which Gilpin regards as the primary motor of international change. Accordingly, those who benefit most and gain power seek to alter the system in a way that would favor their own interests. The resulting system reflects the new distribution of power and the interests of its new dominant members, which are materialized in the form of new territorial, political and economic arrangements (Gilpin, 1981: 10–13). In other words, uneven development leads to a disequilibrium in the international system, and those states that gained the most power tend to reestablish the equilibrium in a way that would suit their interests. This leads to change.

In contrast with realism, the liberal school of IR emphasizes the variability of state interests and prospects for cooperation and progress. Scholars of liberal orientation portray change as a “move towards identity and integration” (Walker, 1987: 83), and argue that change can be achieved through growing interdependence of states and through international institutions established to foster cooperation. The state is not the only initiator of change; other actors as well as cooperative structures are also sources of change. As R.B.J. Walker argues in his critique of the realist approach

to the concept of change, forces of change in international politics might arise from “fragmented and peripheralized local and grassroots movements around the world” as well as “states or transnational economic structures” (ibid.)

According to James Rosenau, international politics is shaped by certain parameters (such as the hierarchical structure, cultural norms, and authority orientations) that set the context for interaction among the actors, prescribe the goals, means, and resources, and serve as the limits within which the system’s variables operate. Parameters rarely change whereas variables are continuously fluctuating – within the limits set by the parameters – in response to internal and external challenges. With regard to what triggers parametric changes, Rosenau emphasizes five sources of such change: (i) shift from an industrial to post-industrial order and the consequent growth in economic interdependence; (ii) emergence of issues that are direct products of new technologies and economic interdependence, such as pollution, terrorism, financial crises, etc.; (iii) reduced capability of states to provide satisfactory solutions to major issues; (iv) greater coherence and effectiveness gained by subsystems, and (v) shift in the skills and orientations of the world’s adults (Rosenau, 1990: 12–15). These five sources interact with each other in bringing about a transformation in the parameters of the international system.

Kalevi J. Holsti’s work, on the other hand, categorizes four different conceptions of change. First, there is “change as replacement”, where patterns and structures are replaced by novel conditions. In other words, the new replaces the old as its antithesis. In the second form, “change as addition”, old patterns and concepts are not replaced by new ones, they co-exist and there is increased complexity in the system. Thirdly, in “dialectical change”, the new builds on the old. They are combined without one replacing the other and there is both novelty and continuity. Finally, there is the “change as transformation”, where old institutions remain in place, but their functions change (Holsti, 2002: 29–31).

As Holsti explains, change can come as an accumulation of many little acts and trends, or it may come in the shape of great events, great achievements or significant social and technological innovations (Holsti, 2002: 26–28). These are all conceptualizations of “change”. The problem is that the different kinds of change discussed by Holsti do not help us to escape from Rosenau’s conceptual jails. They rather enlarge the jails and make them more spacious. They do not help us in looking at the world in new ways.

The failure to do so, to break free from the conceptual jails and to look at the world through different lenses, caused mainstream paradigms of IR to remain helpless in explaining (and predicting) major changes in the international system. One case that is frequently referred to in this respect is the end of the Cold War and the move from a bipolar world to a unipolar one. The dominant paradigm of the time, realism (particularly its structuralist version), was criticized for having failed to predict the end of the Cold War. In his critique of structural realism, John Vasquez wrote that whereas realism can “explain almost any foreign policy event”, its great defect was that “it tends to do this after the fact, rather than before” (Vasquez, 1998: 324). As stated earlier in this paper, realism can explain the old, it can also explain the new, but when it is about explaining how the world moved from the old to the new and/or predicting when this shift is to take place, it is helpless, as was the case when the Cold War ended.

In his analysis of how IR theory fared in the face of the end of the Cold War, John L. Gaddis explained why the mainstream approaches along structural, behavioral and evolutionary lines failed to explain the event. He pointed, among others, to a difficulty faced by IR theorists, which is the fact that human beings are not robots, but conscious entities that can react to and modify the variables and conditions they encounter (Gaddis, 1992/1993: 55). Values do matter and they need to be taken into consideration. In conclusion to his argument, Gaddis suggests that the mainstream

scientific approaches to IR should not be abandoned, but they should be updated by recognizing that scientists should make use of all the tools at their disposal in trying to predict the future. These tools do not only include theory, observation and calculation, but also narrative, analogy, paradox, irony, intuition, imaginations and style (Gaddis, 1992/1993: 57–58).

In their examination of how structural realism as the dominant IR paradigm of the time has failed to predict and explain the demise of the Soviet Union, Rey Koslowski and Friedrich V. Kratochwil adopted a constructive approach to system-transforming changes. Before turning to their analysis, it would be appropriate to have a look at the main tenets of the constructivist approach to IR. Constructivism considers the mainstream theories of realism and liberalism to be flawed since these are overly committed to materialism. It seeks to demonstrate how the core aspects of international politics are socially constructed, i.e., shaped through ongoing processes of the human practice of social interaction. This is a challenge against the mainstream theories, which take these aspects of international politics as given.

In the groundbreaking work of this field, Alexander Wendt (1992) pointed to two major tenets of constructivism. First, structures of human association are determined not only by material forces (such as economic and military power), but also and mainly by shared ideas (such as common values, ideologies, etc.). Second, the identities and interests of the actors are constructed by these shared ideas, rather than given by nature. Accordingly, anarchy can be a structural fact about world politics, however, it is up to the individual states to decide how to deal with that anarchy. The anarchic structure does not dictate their behavior to the states, nor does it result in uniform behavior. Rather it is the ideational factors, which determine how the states will respond – and since these factors may vary from state to state, different states can respond in different ways to the same structural conditions. Explaining the change therefore requires the ontological focus to be placed on the ideational factors, in addition to material ones, because they are the ones that define the identities and interests of the actors, and which lead to change.

Koslowski and Kratochwil (1994) insightfully developed a constructive approach to change and utilized it to analyze the end of the Soviet Union as a case of major international system change. Their argument is that international politics is not an autonomous sphere, but always a part of a larger endeavor of institutionalizing identities and political communities as well as their interactions. Changed practices arise from new conceptions of identity and political community. The international system can be changed, and a new one can be constituted through the changed practices of one of the major actors, since these practices are likely to have system-wide repercussions (Koslowski and Kratochwil, 1994: 222–227). Therefore, explaining change requires a careful focus on such actors' practices and motives.

The Cold War ended with the dissolution of the Soviet Empire, which, according to the constructivist approach, can be explained by investigating the inner dynamics of the Soviet Empire and the related change in interests and practices. Whereas the mainstream IR theories have remarkably failed to predict and explain the end of the Cold War, the constructivist project proved to be much more successful in explaining why and how this event and the corresponding major international change occurred.

All of the scholars whose work has been discussed in this part of the paper have implicitly pointed to need for the new approaches that were explicitly brought by constructivism. For instance, what Holsti has asked us to do, i.e., to look at the world in new ways, is what is at the core of the constructivist agenda. However, we are still far from explaining international change in an effective manner. If we need to look at the world in new ways and focus on the interests and identities of individual actors, can we really do this if we look at the world through only one single lens, that of a discipline which is dominated by the scholars of one single country, rather than a set of different lenses that could be offered by a more pluralistic discipline?

Before dealing with this question, a closer look at the current state of the discipline marked by the intellectual hegemony of a single geopolitical actor, which is the United States, is necessary.

## American Intellectual Hegemony in IR

Whereas there are several major actors who are playing important roles in shaping the current international system, the discipline of IR is under the intellectual hegemony of only one of them. Ever since the 1950s, when Alfred Grosser (1956) rhetorically asked the question whether IR is an American specialty, the discipline came to be regarded as monopolized by American academia. In his classic article on this subject, Stanley Hoffmann provided a detailed overview of the origins and the progress of IR as an “American social science”. He explained that the development of IR as a discipline in the United States resulted from the convergence of three factors (or circumstances), which are intellectual predispositions (such as the belief in science for solving all kinds of problems), political circumstances (US position as a great power), and institutional opportunities (academicians’ involvement in government affairs, think-tanks, research-oriented universities with large departments of political science; Hoffmann, 1994: 218–223).

The fact that the progress in IR theory since the end of the Second World War mainly originated from American universities needs no detailed examination here. It is important, however, to remember the famous remark made by Robert Cox (1986), who stated “theory is always for someone and for some purpose”. IR theory originating from the US, especially the Cold War realism, has indeed served American purposes and justified US involvement in global affairs. In the United States, as Hoffmann asserted, the policy makers wanted what was offered by scholars, whose research priorities blended with the priorities of the government (Hoffmann, 1994: 222). Theories served to solve the grand problems of the United States with regard to the maintenance of her hegemony in the post-Second World War world order and to justify its actions within this context.

There is no doubt that IR continues to be an American social science to a great extent. Several scholars have undertaken empirical studies to show that this is still the case. Wæver, for example, analyzed the patterns of publishing in major journals and found out there is a significant American dominance in sheer numbers. In four North American journals he investigated for the period between 1970 and 1995, Americans accounted between 66 and 100 percent of the authors, with an average of 88.1 percent. In comparison, the proportion of American authorship in journals of natural sciences is typically between 40 and 50 percent. On the other hand, in European journals, Americans still have a weight; they are equally represented with 40 percent (Wæver, 1998: 696–700). The situation is not different in IR textbooks. Kalevi J. Holsti (1985), who examined the citation patterns in IR textbooks published before 1981, found out that in American textbooks, 79 percent of all references were made to American scholars, whereas in all other cases, references to domestic scholarship were far less frequent than references to American scholars. Even British authors relied more on American literature than their own. Following in Wæver and Holsti’s footsteps, a more recent study by Ersel Aydınlı and Onur Erpul (2021), who investigated a total of 151 syllabi of IR courses from universities worldwide, has shown that mainstream, i.e., mostly American, core IR theories dominate syllabi globally, “regardless of region, language of instruction, or instructors’ educational/linguistic backgrounds”, and this domination also “extends to periphery scholars not using their own local products”.

According to this picture of the discipline, there is a dominant American core, a British semi-periphery, which is in decline, and a series of dependent peripheries; in other words, there is a “British-American intellectual condominium” (Holsti, 1985: 103). Whereas some scholars critically dealing with the universalism of IR discuss the domination of “Western IR” (e.g., Acharya and Buzan, 2007a, 2007b), others write that there is no homogeneous Western literature in the



field and focus on the differences between American and European practices of IR. For instance, Wæver (1998) argues that whereas American IR is more interested in rational choice approaches, European IR has a tendency towards constructivism and postmodernism. Smith (2002) concludes that the British IR community is in a far healthier state than the American one. Regardless of these “intra-West” differences, however, American and British academia are on the producing end of IR theorizing, whereas all the others are on the receiving end. Peripheries import their theories from the core, whereas the core is not really aware of what is going on in the peripheries. An intellectual exchange between the peripheries is also not the case (Friedrichs, 2004: 3).

As a result of this structure, the voice of the periphery, despite playing a major role in shaping international politics, is not heard in the discipline, which is consequently dominated, not only by American theories and approaches, but also by the specific American commitment to a realist view of the world, a commitment to studying that world behaviorally (Smith, 2002) and to extending rational choice theory to dealing with the questions of IR (Wæver, 1998). American IR comes to be seen as the transcultural and transhistorical standard of scholarship in the discipline, acquiring, in the words of Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan (2007a), “hegemonic status in the Gramscian sense”, which operates unconsciously in people’s minds, regardless of whether the theory in question is right or wrong. These conditions, when combined with the sheer size of American IR and the status of the English language as *lingua franca*, help the production and reproduction of American intellectual hegemony over time and which, as Steve Smith warns, might lead to inequalities in the discipline, where some issues (which are of greater concern for the United States) would be deemed to be more important, whereas other issues, no matter how much they matter for a great majority of the world’s population, would be labeled as irrelevant to the discipline (Smith, 2002: 82). At the end of the day, American intellectual hegemony makes it difficult for alternatives to enter the discipline and to reach the international audience, and as stated by Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan “it remains broadly true that contemporary mainstream IR theory is not much more than an abstraction of Western history interwoven with political theory” (Acharya and Buzan, 2019: 2), with the United States and American academia being the flag bearers of the West in this respect.

This paper’s argument is that this situation has to be reversed, and alternative IR theories and approaches have to emerge and reinforce the mainstream so that the discipline can be in a better position to explain international change. The next part of the paper will deal with the questions of how this is to be done and how the ideal state of the discipline could look like.

## The Ideal State of the Discipline

All of the scholars dealing with the issue of change, as discussed in an earlier part of this paper, provide clues about what we need in order to be able to better explain change in the international system. Holsti demanded us to look at the new world in new ways; Rosenau said we should work with conceptual tools that recognize the coexistence of several cultures rather than focusing on only one of them; Walker drew our attention to fragmented and peripheralized local and grassroots movements around the world as sources of change; Gaddis underlined the importance of human values; Koslowski and Kratochwil pointed to the internal developments of the major actors, which can trigger and lead international change.

Gilpin has been more explicit in drawing attention to the neglected sources of international change. He argues that the Western bias in the study of international relations is an important reason for the neglect of the study of change in the discipline. Stressing the parochial and ethnocentric nature of the discipline, Gilpin argues that IR is essentially a study of the Western state system, and

that the neglect of non-Western systems poses a formidable obstacle to the development of a theory of international political change (Gilpin, 1981: 5).

The points made by the above-mentioned scholars are today very important, because the world is now changing faster than ever. What Gilpin, Rosenau, Walker, Gaddis, and Koslowski and Kratochwil said demands now greater attention as we are facing the profound changes of the post-9/11 international order. In this new era, other scholars join them in pointing to the problems of the discipline and devising approaches that would enable us to better predict and explain international change.

For Steve Smith, the problem is that the discipline is underplaying the importance of issues of identity in theory making. According to Smith, there has been little work that has tried to understand the mind-sets and worldviews of non-Western “others”, and as a result a very specific view of the world has emerged. Because the discipline continued to a great extent to stick to assumptions of sameness, it has taken the agendas of the dominant (i.e., Western) powers, and hence the dominant identities in the world as if they represented the entire world, which is, of course, not the case. Smith suggests that puzzles of international relations have to be “unwrapped and understood from the viewpoints of the actors involved” (Smith, 2004: 511).

In a similar way to Smith, Stephen M. Walt (1998) points to the fact that we are facing a state of complexity in world politics and therefore it is important to understand how different groups conceive their identities and interests. Walt argues that we would be better off with a diverse array of competing ideas rather than a single theoretical orthodoxy.

In short, we know what the discipline of IR needs to do in order to be in a better position to explain change in the international system. However, there are problems. First of all, what has been argued by the above discussed scholars have fallen on deaf ears to a large extent, and the discipline is yet to experience a paradigm shift with respect to the concept of change. The other problem is, how can we understand how different groups, particularly the non-Western ones, conceive their identities and interests, if we do not “listen” to those groups? Change in the international system is the outcome of the actions of several actors. Therefore, in order to be able to explain change, the discipline has to examine the actions, as well as interests and identities of all of the actors playing a part in change, not only the most dominant actor; and moreover, the discipline has to give a voice to those actors and listen to what their scholars say, because what matters most is to understand how those actors see themselves, rather than how they are viewed from outside. There is actually an increasing number of non-Western thinkers and practitioners who are contributing to new concepts and approaches related to the way we think about global affairs. However, as Amitav Acharya wrote, “(t)heir ideas are often dismissed or downgraded in the West as imitation, or the product of the Western education of their creators, or of partnership with Western collaborators, governments, donor agencies and multilateral institutions dominated by the Western powers” (Acharya, 2016: 1156).

Global change can be explained better if the intellectual hegemony of American IR on the discipline can be broken, and mainstream theories can be reinforced with fresh perspectives to be provided by academia from other parts of the world. Changing historical circumstances and different human experience would always provoke new theoretical understanding (Jackson, 1996). Precisely for this reason, the discipline needs theoretical contributions from countries that are subject to changing historical circumstances (which does not necessarily have to be identical with those of the United States) and from individuals who are subject to different experiences. International change can be explained by international theory only if the theory is really international. Theories produced from one single source, from one single mindset, without the perspectives provided from other sources, can never be international. They can only lead to a narrow and superficial comprehension of world politics, which results in the tendency to see the world from



the perspective of one specific geopolitical actor without reflecting the diverse ways of thinking, questioning and problematization elsewhere in the world.

At this point, it is necessary to discuss what is meant with the “rest of the world”. The origins of international relations as a discipline can be found in the period between the two world wars and the early Cold War era. The United States has been a key player (if not *the* key player) in both of these periods, and it was the United States who produced the dominant theories of the discipline. Yet in later periods, new key actors emerged, they played important roles in international change, however, their scholars did not come up with new theoretical perspectives, as the Americans did, or whatever they had produced did not find a place in the international IR community, they were left unnoticed.

So, with the “rest of the world”, what is meant is that to progress, the discipline should open the way for theoretical work from other countries, particularly those that are increasingly playing a more assertive and decisive role in the process of change in the international system. American IR explained a world shaped by American domination, and the non-existence of Soviet IR (or rather the fact that it remained locked up inside the Kremlin) brought about the failure of the discipline to explain the demise of the Soviet Union and the end of the bipolar world order. Today, if we want to explain the change, in which, for example, China’s rise as a great power plays a crucial role, it can be only achieved by referring to the new perspectives brought by Chinese IR, because neither China’s rise itself nor the international change where China’s rise is playing a major role can be explained solely with American-originated theories produced by American scholars.

At this point, one issue needs clarification. What is American IR, or Chinese IR, or, for instance, Turkish IR? Does IR have nationality? There are certainly national perspectives on IR; as there is – to borrow a term from Ersel Aydınli and Gonca Biltekin – “homegrown theorizing”, which they define as “original theorizing in the periphery about the periphery” noting that “for any original theory to be homegrown, it should be based on indigenous ideas and/or practices” (Aydınli and Biltekin, 2018: 15-16). Studying the sociology of the discipline, Ole Wæver had argued that IR can develop in different ways in different societies due to national variations, such as the societal-political features of the country in question, the status of social science in that country, and the internal intellectual and social structures of the discipline in general (1998: 688–689). It is precisely those national variations that lay down the foundations of what Aydınli and Biltekin termed as “homegrown theorizing”, doing so by drawing on local modes of thinking and local practical challenges and conceptualizing them to produce “national IR”s. In that sense, “Chinese IR” can be defined as homegrown theorizing out of China, based on China’s national geocultural references, taking shape through the output of Chinese scholars, who are trained in China and working in China, whose lives are directly influenced by the developments in China and by the consequences of China’s rise in the international arena.

What would then the ideal state of the discipline look like in terms of the ability of explaining international change? Constructivists would argue that all of the actors who are taking part in the process of change should be examined by the discipline in terms of their actions, interests, and identities. Accordingly, in the ideal case, the discipline would look at not only the structure and a few main actors, but all the actors involved. However, as argued above, only “studying” them is not enough. They should be “listened to” as well. “Studying” them alone tells us “who we think they are” and/or “who others think they are”. This is, however, necessary but not sufficient, because it is about “who they are”. The picture has to be completed by information on “who they think they are”, and this can only be achieved by “listening” to them. Therefore, in the ideal case, the mainstream theories and approaches that are utilized to explain change should be taken together with the fresh perspectives and viewpoints offered by the academia of countries that are playing a role in the change and thus actively shaping the world in which we are all living in.

One question that might appear at this point is about deciding which actors matter most. In principle, the international system is in a constant state of change and every country, every state that is a part of it are also parts of the process of change. In a world where there are more than two hundred countries, is it feasible to expect all of them to produce their own IR literature and to expect the discipline to take all of them into account? Certainly, when it is about international change, some countries matter more and some matter less and the degree to which each of the countries matter with respect to international change varies over time. In order to determine the actors that matter most and therefore have to be prioritized by the discipline, a realist dose needs to be added to this constructivist project.

The assumption that this study builds on is that the greater the overall capabilities of a country are, the higher is its ability to shape/influence the change in the international system. As Gilpin argued, those who have greater power tend to change the system in a way that would suit their own interests (Gilpin, 1981: 10–13). Consequently, the distribution of capabilities among the actors determines the direction of change, since the more capable a country is, the more it can influence international change.

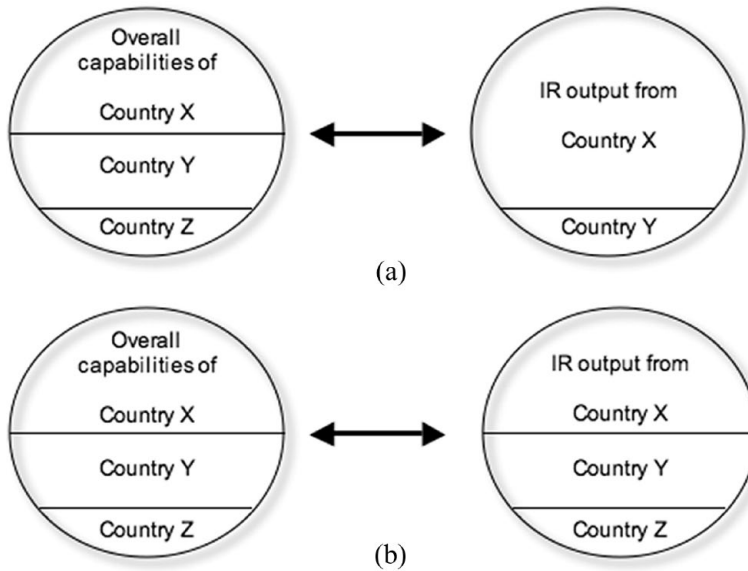
A note of caution has to be made here. The assumption that is made above sounds like a purely realist one. However, as mentioned before, one needs to resort to constructivism for portraying the ideal state of the discipline. Here the important point is that, in contrast with realists, the model does not limit “capabilities” to purely materialistic ones. Instead, it takes “capability” as the “capability to influence international change” and covers both material and ideational capabilities, including, but not limited to, economic, political, military, and cultural ones.

In the ideal world, IR scholarship arising from the “actors” of change would contribute to explanations of change, because explaining international change requires an examination of the actions, identities, and interests of these actors, and it is their own scholars’ task to explain these actors’ perspective to the international IR community. It is them and only them who are epistemologically and ontologically able to fulfill this task.

If the discipline is to “listen” to these scholars, i.e., to the homegrown theorizing from different “actors” of change, then, in the ideal world, the level of pluralism in international IR community would have to be proportional to the distribution of capabilities among countries. The more capable a country is of influencing international change, the greater should be that country’s IR theorists’ contribution to the discipline’s attempts to explain change. If the discipline is to have perfect ability to explain international change, this can be possible only when there is a full equilibrium between capabilities of a country and the contribution of that country’s academia to IR theory making.

This argument is illustrated in a simplified model. Let us assume a world composed of three countries, X, Y, and Z. The distribution of capabilities among these three countries can be seen in the Figure. Accordingly, X is the county with the greatest overall capabilities and it is the major actor with respect to change. On the right-hand side, the circles show two alternative cases for the level of pluralism in IR, i.e., the distribution of IR theories from these three countries’ academia. This distribution portrays to what extent each of the countries’ scholars contribute to the academic debate in the field IR. It is not only about how much they produce, rather it is about to what extend their produce goes beyond national boundaries and reach an international audience. It can be considered, for example, as the number of papers published in major international journals or entered into the syllabi in the world’s universities, such as the empirical evidence provided by Wæver, Holsti, Aydınlı and Erpul detailed above.

In Case A, which resembles the actual state of the world, there is disequilibrium between the distribution of capabilities among the countries in the world and the level of plurality in the discipline of IR. Both X and Y are playing major roles in international change, and Z has a significant share as well. However, the IR literature mainly consists of work arising from X’s universities,



**Figure.** Overall capabilities and IR theoretical output.

and there is only a little contribution from Y. Students of IR try to explain the international system mainly by using mainstream theories devised in X. Y's scholars add little to it and Z has no voice whatsoever. Since the students of IR would try to anticipate any change that would occur in the circle to the left by trying to understand Y and Z's actions, identities, and interests through X's lenses, they are likely to fail to predict when and how the change would happen. In Case B, on the contrary, there is an equilibrium between the two spheres, and this is the ideal state of the discipline of IR, which can perfectly explain and predict change in the international system.

It is important to note that when talking about the IR output from different countries, it is not about single-country theories, which explain the likely developments and/or choices of a particular country at critical junctures (Rosenau, 2006: 229–245). In other words, this paper does not suggest that the actions, interests, and identities of each country should be dealt with by theories arising from that country. Neither does it suggest that IR theories and approaches from those countries should replace the mainstream IR, i.e., theories of American origin. These would not help us to break free from Rosenau's conceptual jails; rather, they would transfer us from one prison to another. The discipline does not need to replace one paradigm with another; rather, it needs to become more pluralistic. To give an example, Chinese IR is not needed to explain China only. It is needed to complement mainstream IR theories in their attempts to explain a changing international system where China is one of the leading actors.

## Ex Oriente Lux

If the purpose is to make the voices of the main actor of change heard, and to support mainstream IR theories and approaches with national perspectives from these actors, one of the most important sources of such alternative IR would be the Asia-Pacific region. Several scholars have labeled our time as the "Pacific Century", pointing to the expectation that this region will significantly influence the history of the twenty-first century (Borthwick, 2007: 1). With its rapid economic

transformation and growth over the past decades, this region has indeed become one of the key actors in the world that is going through a process of profound change.

There is by all means a rich foreign policy, area studies and strategic studies scholarship on Asia-Pacific, however, when it comes to IR theorizing, the region is far behind the Western world. John Ikenberry and Michael Mastanduno (2003) see two problems. First, they argue that whatever theoretical arguments are made, they are made without the benefit of historical or comparative perspective. This is why they suggest that theoretical insights of IR in general need to be brought in contact with the “rich history and complex reality” of the Asia-Pacific. Secondly, Ikenberry and Mastanduno raise the question of the usefulness of Western theories for the Asia-Pacific region, especially whether they fit each other.

The arguments brought forward by these authors support the thesis of this paper. If IR theories are to be brought in contact with the realities of the region, and if Western theories fail in dealing with the Asia-Pacific region, what is needed is national theoretical perspectives from the region, in other words, Asian homegrown IR.

This does not mean that Asian IR is needed to explain the Asia-Pacific region and its rise, which is already and successfully done by area and strategic studies do that. Asian IR is needed to make generalizations about a world where the Asia-Pacific region is increasingly playing an assertive role, and only in this way one can understand the world, predict, and explain changes in the international system in which the Asia-Pacific region is a major player. David Kang (2003) argues that Asian IR might prove different from Western IR, because states in Asia do not function like states in the West, and they have followed a different historical path from the Western states as they became incorporated into the larger international system. Therefore, he suggests, elevating the Asian experience to a central place in the study of IR will provide the discipline with an excellent opportunity to “inject vitality into the stale paradigm wars that currently characterize the field”.

Amitav Acharya (2003/2004) discusses different paths to an engagement between IR theory and Asian experience. He is not in favor of turning Asia into a testing place for Western generated theories. Rather, he argues that students of IR should go beyond applying formal models to study cultural distinctions that lie at the core of area studies and use local knowledge to develop general insights and constructs to explain events and phenomena in the outside world. Both Kang and Acharya emphasize that local knowledge from Asia can be turned into new frameworks and support existing ones for analyzing larger processes related to the international system.

One important source for Asian IR can be China. This is not only because China is one of the major players in the contemporary international system and has a great influence in shaping the change the system is going through, both due to the favorable position it has attained in the distribution of capabilities among the countries in the world, but also because China has a strong philosophical tradition and a large IR community.

In the non-Western world, China is the most obvious candidate for an “independent IR tradition” building on a unique philosophical tradition, however, very little theorizing (independent from the Western mainstream) has taken place there so far (Wæver, 1998: 696). But why is it so? Qin Yaqing (2007) provides three answers, one of which is the unconsciousness of internationalness in the traditional worldview that still dominates the Chinese political life. The other two reasons mentioned by Qin are supporting this paper’s argument that it is the American domination of the field that erects barriers against the progress of the discipline. According to Qin, the development of Chinese international theory was hindered by the dominance of the Western discourse in the Chinese academic community and the resulting absence of a consistent theoretical core in the Chinese international relations research (Qin, 2007: 322–329).

China has a rich intellectual tradition and large numbers of IR professors, students and programs. However, there is still no significant contribution from China to IR theory. Qin explains the reasons

very clearly, arguing that the Chinese took Chinese learning as the end, but the Western learning as the means, and whatever Chinese scholars theorized about, its soul was Western (Qin, 2007: 325). The position of what Qin calls the “Western soul” is the very obstacle against the development of original Chinese theoretical research, which would enrich the discipline as a whole, if it had existed. It is also important to note that this is not the case only in China, but also in several other places that experience a great convergence between their increasing political/economic role in the world and their approach to international relation studies.

Song Xinning (2001) finds the reason for Chinese academia’s shortcomings in this area in the fact that IR studies in China are run according to the Communist Party line. He identifies a series of specific problems. Firstly, most Chinese scholars believe that the close relationship between IR research and government’s policy-making dooms Chinese IR studies to remain underdeveloped, because there is no academic independence. At this point, one should also remember that, as mentioned by Stanley Hoffmann in his classical article, one of the most important factors that led to the development of American IR was the close association between American academia and the government (Hoffmann, 1994: 223). Of course, China and the United States are two different countries, two different systems. Song’s opinion is that “ideological shackles” that are dominant in China, such as the traditional Marxist-Leninist theories and the difficulty of challenging the government’s policy, are the barriers against the development of IR in China. These ideological obstacles obviously did not exist in the United States. Other problems mentioned by Song are the deficiency of qualified scholars and scholarship, despite large numbers of academicians and students, and the deep divides between disciplines and institutions (Song, 2001: 72–73). In addition to Song’s remarks, in a more recent study, Kim Hun Joon (2016) identified the challenges faced by the emergence of Chinese IR as: (i) the tendency of Chinese exceptionalism claiming that China’s rise is peaceful and China behaves differently than other great powers do; (ii) a dichotomous understanding of the West and China; (iii) romanticization of things that are uniquely Chinese such as Chinese tradition, culture, history, and thought; iv) conceit beyond a self-consciousness of being a great power; and v) explicit promotion of national interest, i.e., the Chinese Communist Party’s interest (Kim, 2016: 73–76). All these issues discussed by Song and Kim are significant and continuingly valid.

Despite remarkable progress in recent years, the current state of the Chinese IR leaves much room for improvement. In the meantime, the discipline of IR needs the input by Chinese IR. Without China’s contribution, the discipline can still understand China *per se*, that would not be a problem because foreign policy and strategic studies scholars are already producing valuable work on this subject. However, without China’s theory contribution, the mainstream theories of the discipline would never be able to fully explain the change in the international system where China is one of the leading actors.

One specific example can be used to illustrate this argument. We know that China’s rise to a world power status posed a challenge against the dominant realist theories of IR. Realists predicted that China’s rise would influence the international systemic change in the sense that it would provoke balancing behavior among the other actors, due to China’s overall size and high growth rates (Kang, 2003: 64). This was, however, not the case; the realists’ predictions did not materialize. This failure resulted from the fact that they had no Chinese or in general Asian IR perspectives inside their analytical toolbox. Relations between Asian nations have historically been hierarchic, more peaceful, and more stable than those in the West (Kang, 2003: 66). Having ignored this difference and looking at the international system, in which China is a major part, only through Western lenses, realists predicted balancing against China, however, what happened was that Asian countries bandwagoned against this country. Realists could have anticipated this if they had supported their mainstream theories with Chinese/Asian perspectives.



Chinese IR perspectives draw on sources stemming from China's history and culture, and studying these perspectives as well as the different schools within the Chinese academia, Xiao Ren (2020) has offered a useful taxonomy of Chinese homegrown theories. Accordingly, there are four distinct theories of Chinese origins, i.e., *guanxi*/relational theory, moral realism, the *tianxia* worldview, and *gongsheng*/symbiotic theory.

The relational theory is based on the Chinese concept of *guanxi*, which refers to the system of social networks and influential relationships that facilitate business and other dealings. The leading proponent of this thought in Chinese academia, Qin Yaqing (2016) conceives the world of international relations as one "composed of ongoing relations, assumes international actors as actors-in-relations, and takes processes defined in terms of relations in motion as ontologically significant". Qin contrasts this form of relationality with the Western notion of "individual rationality" which forms the core of mainstream IR theory.

Moral realism approaches mainstream IR's realist notions of national interest and power with the concept of morality. According to the leading thinker of this school, Yan Xuetong, when a country's material capabilities have reached the level of those of a leading or rising power, what matters is whether the political leadership of that country possesses morality and to what extent this morality is projected at the international level, especially in terms of establishing international norms. According to Yan (2011), moral norms are "acquired standards of social behaviour that are formed on the basis of the common ethical standards of states". He argues that "as the international community consists in both natural and social characters, power norms and moral norms often simultaneously direct the behavior of states"; in other words, he does not reject mainstream IR's realist notion of power, but complements it with a theory of morality.

The *tianxia* (literally meaning 'all under heaven') worldview of the Chinese takes care of the whole world aiming at a harmonious whole. It implies a holistic worldview that contrasts with the Western dualistic view of "us" against "them" among which conflict is inevitable, emphasizes coexistence and positive-sum games rather than conflict and zero-sum games, and offers an ontological perspective that is above and beyond the level of the "state" which is at the centre point for mainstream IR theories. According to the Chinese thinker Zhao Tingyang, who is behind the reinterpretation of the ancient concept of *tianxia* into a modern IR perspective, within this framework "no difference is made between the internal and external, but (it is) rather simply a process of extending the same principles and ideals from inner to outer as a continuum, which ends up with a whole of combining the near and the distant" (Ren, 2020: 396, cf. Zhao, 2009).

*Gongsheng* (literally meaning 'symbiosis') is concept found in natural science, which was adapted by a number of Chinese scholars to the realm of IR. The idea is built on differences and diversity rather than similarities between and among things, observes plurality in all areas of human endeavor, asserts that differences can coexist peacefully and on the basis of equality, where countries pursue reasonable interests and satisfactory status rather than a form of maximization of power, interest or status (Ren, 2020: 406–407; Smith, 2018: 459–460).

All these different brands of Chinese brands of thinking on IR have their origins in the millennia-long Chinese experience, and according to Qin Yaqing (2007), in addition to the *tianxia* worldview discussed above, two historical currents have been milestones of China's ideational and practical development and therefore could prove to be crucial in shaping IR perspectives. The first is revolutionary ideas and practices since the mid-nineteenth century arising from the clashes between the modern and the traditional, such as clashes between the Chinese tributary system and the Westphalian system, clashes between Chinese philosophy focusing on human relations and order on one hand and Western philosophy focusing on competition and materialistic gains on the other, as well as clashes between the Chinese holistic approach of understanding the universe and Western individualistic ways. The other historical current having an impact on Chinese thinking

on IR according to Qin is and reform and opening-up in the People's Republic of China since 1978 (Qin, 2007: 330–332).

In short, China itself is changing, and with it the whole world changes. Without including Chinese perspectives produced by Chinese scholars through Chinese geocultural reference points in its analytical toolbox, the discipline of IR will not be adequately capable to fully understand and explain the changes in the world.

## Conclusion

In the world of the twenty-first century, international politics is changing faster than IR theories can keep up with; while at the same time mainstream IR theories continue to reflect Western (and to be more specific, American) viewpoints and interests. Under these circumstances, mainstream IR cannot predict and explain international change on its own, because the world does not consist only of the West or the United States, and it is not only them engineering and performing change. Other geopolitical actors have to be included in the picture as well.

At this point one needs to avoid falling into the trap of thinking that studying a wider range of geopolitical actors more rigorously would be enough to explain change. Area and strategic studies as well as foreign policy specialists are already doing this. What the discipline needs is rather to listen to those geopolitical actors, and to understand how each actor views itself. In other words, it is not about looking at the world through one single lens and directing this lens to various regions of the world, but looking at the same single world through different lenses.

It is also not about looking at every actor through its own lens. Rather, it is looking at all actors at the same time, using a set of different lenses. This means that mainstream IR should not be dropped and replaced by alternative theoretical perspectives. This would not bring any difference; the angle of view would change, but the narrowness of the vision would not change. What should be done is to widen this vision, regardless of what the angle of view is. In the current state of the discipline, which is defined by American intellectual hegemony, American IR need not be replaced by, but to be supplemented with, new perspectives from local vantage points in the world. Instead of speaking from one single point about the whole, different ways of thinking and practicing IR need to be incorporated into the epistemology, innovative feedback from new and hitherto ignored vantage points reflecting their own unique context and experience have to be taken into consideration, and dialogue between different sources has to be established and nurtured. In this paper, Asia-Pacific in general and China in particular was discussed as a prospective source that would make a significant contribution to the discipline.

In an ideal world, the pluralism in the discipline of IR would be proportional to the distribution of capabilities in international politics. The more important the role played by a particular country is vis-à-vis international change, the greater is the need for theoretical perspectives in order to explain the changing world; not to be used on their own but to complement and fill in the gaps in the mainstream and to establish a holistic body of international theory. In a post-Second World War world where international change was driven by the United States, American hegemony in the discipline of IR was understandable. In today's world, where international change is a multi-faceted and multi-actor phenomenon, IR has to be capable of studying international change through different actors' perspectives; not choosing one over others but using them eclectically in combination. With China a leading driver of change at international global level, inputs from Chinese IR emerge therefore as a vital component of the IR toolbox.

Today the IR discipline is regarded by many as being “globalized”, but not “universalized” (Acharya and Buzan, 2007b). This paper puts forward a case for a more universalized discipline, while at the same time supporting the argument brought forward by Amitav Acharya and Barry

Buzan (2019: 300–301) that this needs to be a pluralistic form of universalism respecting diversity in a fast changing world, rather than a homogenizing one, based on world history rather than Western history only, and supplanting existing mainstream IR theories rather than aiming to replace them. This a vital task because our lives are shaped by how the world changes, and without a universalized discipline of IR we cannot predict and explain change in the world. It is not about having an American or Chinese or any other national perspective on world affairs, but it is about being able to combine them to achieve a pluralistically universal perspective that takes into account similarities as well diversities. Failure to achieve this would not only be an academic disappointment, it might and it does have consequences, even fatal ones, for the humankind.

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