

In Conversation with Amitav Acharya

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Amitav Acharya is the UNESCO Chair in Transnational Challenges and Governance and Distinguished Professor at the School of International Service, American University. He's written multiple books on international relations theory, global governance and world order. He has received awards for his 'contribution to non-Western IR theory and inclusion' in international studies. In 2020, he received American University's highest honour: Scholar-Teacher of the Year Award.

CJLPA: Could you tell me about your journey to becoming a renowned scholar of international relations?

Professor Amitav Acharya: I never see myself that way—rather, I would say I'm a reluctant academic.

I embarked on a PhD because it would take me to Australia, which sounded like a fun place to be, rather than going with the aim of being an academic.

Once there, I began to like the idea of being an academic, because it seemed freer, you get to meet very interesting people and can travel a lot, attending conferences and doing field work. So, I grew into academia, rather than having a lifelong ambition for it.

The moral of the story is that sometimes you don't know what you want to be. I decided to stay as an academic maybe after 10 years of doing different things—being a research fellow or being a lecturer—only then did I settle into this.

If there's one thing that drove me to write and do my best, it was the need to challenge the Western-dominated knowledge and literature that we have in the field. That was almost personal. Growing up in India, in the Global South, it hits you when you start reading all these textbooks, articles, and journals that a lot of it is just *not right*. They are trying to impose theories and ideas that were originally developed in a European or US foreign policy context onto the rest of the world.

I almost instinctively rebelled against it—and I'm not the only one. I thought that there must surely be better explanations that capture the voices, experiences, and histories of the people who are being written about.

For instance, theories like realism or liberalism claim to be universal but they mostly come out of what happened in Europe centuries earlier. Or consider the theory of Hegemonic Stability, which really

captures and legitimises the role of United States as 'the manager' of the world order, with a pronounced bias to accentuate its benign effects while downplaying its dark sides, such as intervention in and exploitation of weaker and poorer nations.

Hearing that made me a sceptic—and gave me the energy and drive to publish. Even now, my writing is always driven by the idea that I need to challenge what people are talking about in the mainstream media and literature.

Challenging that has been my main motivating force. Almost every major thing I've written and all the concepts I've created around my work—like norm localization, global international relations (IR), post-hegemonic multilateralism, the multiplex world order—are driven by the same push from within myself to challenge Western-centric IR theories and concepts.

CJLPA: That leads very well into my next question. You've explored the Global South, and you've sought to counter the dominating influence of European history and international relations theory development. Do you think that IR teaching today has managed to move past Eurocentrism?

AA: Oh, far from it. In fact, I see a backlash coming up now.

Certainly, a lot depends on where you are. If you are in Asia or Africa, you challenge it but are constrained by the fact that most of the textbooks, literature, and journals are produced in the West—that knowledge production is intimately focused and concentrated in the West.

In the West, especially the United States and more specifically the elite US universities which produce the bulk of the PhDs, those who will be the next generation of teachers, the majority remain very much beholden to the same Western narrative.

Although there's now a growing demand for globalising IR, which I have been pushing for, there's still considerable backlash against it. There was a 2014 survey by the College of William and Mary, of scholars in the US, Europe, and some other parts of the world.¹ The first question was: 'Do you think international relations is American-centric/Western-centric?'. The majority of the people said yes, it is. The second question, crucially, was: 'What can we do about it? Should it be reversed?'. The answers are slightly patterned: non-white IR scholars were far more likely to support the challenging of Western or American hegemony in IR teaching.² So, it's one thing to recognise what's happening and quite another thing to do something about it. There is a kind of a Gramscian hegemony, and a collective vested interest in keeping the discipline as it is.

People find all sorts of ways to suppress alternative voices, especially those that emphasise decolonization of the discipline. I can see it in the way universities or journal publishers hire, fire, and promote their faculties. The big universities and the places of academic privilege see the alternative work of scholars in a negative light, not worthy of recognition.

This affects students. My students ask me: but can we get a job 'doing' global IR? At the American University, where I teach, we had several seminars and roundtables inviting IR stars from around the world to get answers to these questions. Some of them say that it's possible, but most of them think that there is a lot of gatekeeping, a lot of resistance to accepting globalising IR in elite Western universities.

I'm afraid it may be getting worse in some ways. How many universities, especially the big places of knowledge production, have scholars from the Global South or racial minorities holding prestigious chairs in IR? IR remains very much white.

I became more conscious of it as I got into the question of race in international relations. The paper in *International Affairs'* 100th anniversary issue gave me a greater opportunity to think about how racism is reproduced in academia.³ I realised not only that the curriculum is racist in many ways, directly or indirectly, but also that there's an attempt to deny when problems arise and to suppress voices that speak to issues like colonialism and race.

Universities and IR departments pay lip service to diversity, equity, and inclusion, buzzwords now in academic circles, especially managers and administrators, out of political correctness. But when it comes to hiring non-white people into their departments, or when it comes to encouraging research and publications by these scholars, and when scholars from the Global South want to use alternative narratives derived from their own cultures, traditions, and contributions, there is much gatekeeping, overt or implicit. The establishment bites back; it is in a privileged position that it does not want to give up.

I'm not saying that because I'm cynical. I've done quite well for myself, but I'm concerned about the scholars who live in the Global South—who are increasingly becoming the global majority in the study of international relations—who are struggling to get recognised, or to get their voices heard.

1 Wiebke Wemheuer-Vogelaar et al, 'The IR of the Beholder: Examining Global IR Using the 2014 TRIP Survey' (2014) 18(1) *International Studies Review* 16-32.

2 Amitav Acharya, 'Advancing Global IR: Challenges, Contentions and Contributions' (2016) 18(1) *International Studies Review* 8.

3 Amitav Acharya, 'Race and racism in the founding of the modern world order' (2022) 98(1) *International Affairs* 23-43.

CJLPA: I'm going to move away from your experience of teaching and look towards your published work. Your book *Constructing World Order* is about how a world order was established in the post-Second World War era, and its development into the 1990s. It's known for advancing a new perspective on the role that non-Western, postcolonial states have played in the process of creating that world order by showing that they weren't as passive in the process as we have been told. Could you talk me through the crux of your argument and how you reached your conclusion?

AA: The contributions and agency of the Global South—some of them would be in creating norms of human rights, for instance—have been hidden from view.

We are told continuously that the West invented all human rights, that the Universal Declaration on Human Rights was led by Eleanor Roosevelt. But if you study the records, the documents, you'll find that if Mrs. Roosevelt had had her way the Universal Declaration of Human Rights would say rights of all *men*, not all *human beings*.⁴

The reason it was changed to refer to the equality of all human beings is due to an Indian delegate to the UN Convention—Hansa Mehta—who argued with Mrs. Roosevelt. I think billions of people around the world owe it to her, for standing up and saying that we can't have this male-dominant expression.

Similarly, a challenge to the traditional way of looking at development and security, which is very GDP-centric, was originally proposed by a Pakistani economist, Mahbub ul Haq, who worked with a like minded Indian scholar (the two first met at Cambridge University as students) and Nobel Laureate in economics Amartya Sen. They looked at their own countries, India and Pakistan, and found that these countries were spending too much money on defence and too little on human development.

They came up with the idea that we have to ignore the idea of economic growth measured exclusively using GDP. Instead, we should look at human potential, by taking care of education and public health. It's a very inspiring story, which gave birth to the UNDP's widely used Human Development Index and Human Development Report, yet hardly anyone knows about it. Unless you are an expert, it's not in the mainstream books or in the introductions to international relations.

I wrote about it in the chapter on human security for the *Globalisation of World Politics* textbook, among Britain's most popular textbooks, and I put in a case study of my home state in India: Orissa.

I found that there are many more examples of Global South agency—in sustainable development, in human rights, in security, in disarmament. In fact, the first person in the world to talk about a ban on nuclear testing was Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of India.

A lot of this is hidden from view, partly because of the structural bias against the Global South in our academia, especially in textbooks and in the institutions that teach and train in international relations.⁵

4 Acharya (n 2) 2.

5 Cf. Amitav Acharya, *Constructing Global Order* (Cambridge University Press 2018).

CJLPA: In the same book, there are two pillars—security and sovereignty—on which the global order is developed. Are there more pillars that you would consider today, such as sustainability, newer concerns on which the global order is being shaped?

AA: I mainly talk about security and sovereignty because those are the two areas that I am most familiar with, but sustainability is touched upon in the book's last chapter, and in the context of the discussion of human security.

The whole idea of *Constructing Global Order*, and my earlier work on which the book drew, was to develop a theory of agency beyond the traditional narrow view which equates agency with the material power of Western nations. The book holds that agency is also ideational and normative, and comes as much from the Global North as from the Global South. I now see that scholars have been increasingly applying this broader view of agency to all kinds of issue areas. For example, I was involved in a project at SOAS University which looked at the role played by women in the making of the UN. My theory of agency fit well in this research, and that is where the story of Hansa Mehta and her contribution came up.⁶

You can find much evidence of non-Western or Global South agency in a whole variety of elements of the global order, whether it's security, sovereignty, development, ecology, human rights.

And not just today, or in contemporary times, but throughout history. My latest project is focused on a history of world order, where I find key institutions and ideas of world ordering, such as humanitarianism in war or freedom of seas, while credited to the West, had other points of origin, in non-Western civilizations.

For example, the Roman empire is often credited with promoting freedom of the seas and free trade. But it was underwritten by Roman imperialism, which incorporated all the major states of the Mediterranean. By contrast, in the Indian Ocean, where there was no hegemony like Rome's over the Mediterranean, there were no restrictions on who could trade where. The jurisdiction of empires like those of the Moghuls never extended to the sea. Instead, a group of trading states maintained a vibrant and open trading network, the largest oceanic trading system in the world until the Atlantic trade created by European imperialism in the Americas. That was freedom of the seas in practice without anyone's hegemony. In fact, when the Portuguese first went to the Indian Ocean, they found out that there was no division of the sea into the spheres of influence—anybody could trade as long as you paid customs.

The idea of freedom of seas has also been credited to Hugo Grotius, but Grotius had been exposed to the practice of maritime openness that had prevailed in the Indian Ocean through papers supplied to him by the Dutch East India Company, on whose payroll he was. The Dutch East Indian Company initially fought against Portuguese monopoly in the Indian Ocean, but then itself went on to impose an imperialistic monopoly over what is today Indonesia, with its actions defended by Grotius himself. How many IR scholars know about this?

⁶ Cf. Amitav Acharya, Rebecca Adami, and Dan Plesch, 'Commentary: The Restorative Archeology of Knowledge about the role of Women in the History of the UN - Theoretical implications for International Relations' in Rebecca Adami and Dan Plesch (eds), *Women and the UN: A New History of Women's International Human Rights* (Routledge 2021).

Regarding humanitarian principles of warfare, or what is today called just war, the injunctions against, say, torture, killing of civilians, or harming combatants who have surrendered that one finds in the so-called Geneva Conventions can be found almost principle by principle in ancient India's Code of Manu.

There are many such examples of agency out there which are not captured in the mainstream literature, so it has been my passion to uncover this and bring it to the IR field. I'm sure there are other scholars, especially historians, who are doing similar work. But putting it in a global IR context has not been done, and I hope more people will get into this field.

CJLPA: In your conception of international relations, you've coined the term 'multiplex world' and used the analogy of modern cinema. Could you elaborate on this term, and the curious analogy for it?

AA: I was thinking about how we can sit in different movie theatres under the same roof and choose to see from a wide-ranging bunch of themes, plots, actors, styles. This is unlike the times of the monoplex, where there was only one movie in one theatre—we had to wait until it had run before we could go to see another one.

Even if you take the view that Hollywood dominates the multiplex cinema today, in countries like India, people watch more Bollywood and regional movies than Hollywood ones. In China, which is becoming one of the world's most lucrative markets for foreign movies, there are more and more Chinese-produced and directed films. Hollywood increasingly relies on markets like China's for its earnings. Hence it must cater to the local tastes of an increasingly global audience.

When applying this to the world order, it means that the world also has more choices to build it with. They're not just going to look at the Western-dominated or American-led 'liberal international order'. It's partly because it was never very peaceful for the developing world. It was also not very economically beneficial to many postcolonial nations. It led to uneven development, inequality, and resource exploitation. It benefited mostly the Western countries. There were a lot of military interventions, and a lot of double standards in promoting democracy, human rights, and development in the Global South.

Hence, non-Western countries have started to look for alternative ideas—sometimes from their own historical contexts or by looking at other, more successful developing nations like China. In this multiplex postcolonial order, the rising powers like China, India, or others are trying to develop their own ideas and approaches to development, stability, and ecology, sometimes with pathways that fit their own history and culture.

The world is being decentralised, becoming post-hegemonic as the relative power of the West is declining.

The second thing we see is that in global governance, the UN and related institutions are no longer the only leaders. We see the rise of a lot of other types of institutions, including regional groups, whether in Africa, in Southeast Asia, or for that matter in the West itself, as in Europe, where the EU now governs many aspects of life in its member nations. There are also newer development bodies like the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). In that sense, there is an ongoing decentring from what was at one

point (in the 1950s) supposed to be a universal system of global governance. Now we have non-state actors, transnational civil society, corporations, foundations getting into the business of global cooperation.

Culturally, it's not just one set of ideas—liberal ideas, or democracy, or capitalism—that are the only sources of progress for many nations. We also have communitarian ideas, more nationalistic ideas, which are not necessarily conforming to liberalism and democracy, for better or for worse. To put it simply, the idea of an 'end of history' that Francis Fukuyama once talked about, that capitalism and democracy will prevail over everything else, is far from happening. The world order today is best understood through the hybridity of ideas: the Western liberal ideas and non-Western ideas interacting with one another. Ideationally, we are not in a hegemonic world. We are in a post-hegemonic or multiplex world. We have different types of ideologies and ideas—communitarianism, liberal individualism, socialism, extremist, radical ideas—and they all need to be acknowledged. We have a mix of regional and inter-regional orders, connected yet distinct from each other, instead of a single, overarching so-called universal global order.

Bringing all this together—the relative erosion of American hegemony; the rise of new powers like China, India and their ideologies; as well as the decentralising of global governance—you get a much more pluralistic world order, rather than a singular Western-dominated, American-imposed world order. This is the essence of what I have called a multiplex world.

A world of multiple agents, multiple ideas, manifold dimensions: that's what the application of the multiplex concept to world order looks like.⁷

CJLPA: In this moment of time, with a war in Ukraine and a highly economically interconnected world dealing with the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, how do you think the global order is changing, if at all?

AA: Both the pandemic and Ukraine have challenged the existing liberal international world order.

They certainly haven't finished world order—one shouldn't conflate the liberal international order under Western dominance with world order generally—but both cases have given more ammunition, more strength, more force to this idea of a multiplex world.

The events in Ukraine, and the swift and comprehensive Western sanctions against Russia, led many Western pundits to gloat over how 'the West is coming back'. These people see this as the victory or triumph of the idea of the West. Yet, one should not forget that Ukraine also represents a failure of the West to lead and manage peace and stability with the help of the ideas and institutions, including the EU and NATO, that the West itself built. It specifically means that major war is back in Europe—something that we haven't seen since World War II.

I, on the other hand, argue that this is another nail in the coffin of the liberal international order because the majority of the Global South don't back either side. Whilst many of them condemned Russia, some key players like South Africa, India, and China, did not. Also, whilst Brazil and Mexico voted for the UN General Assembly

resolution against Russia, they rejected the West's sanctions that came with it. And condemning Russian invasion is not the same as accepting Western dominance, especially as many non-Western countries keep in mind the provocation of NATO's post-Cold War expansion as a factor in the conflict.

The NATO-Ukraine-Russia war will accelerate the trend towards a multiplex world as non-Western countries lose trust in both the West and Russia to deal with future conflicts.

Regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a similar dynamic where many Global South countries did not like what they saw in China. China's denial of COVID when it broke out, its refusal to take early action that might have limited the spread of the virus, and the fact that it still refuses to allow a thorough investigation of the outbreak, all this mean that China is not the model for the rest of the world, and it has undercut China's soft power quite a bit.

The United States also behaved in a most selfish way, under Trump, who was basically blaming China, blaming everybody except himself, while letting Americans get infected in the millions and die in the hundreds of thousands.

What do people outside say when they see this? They say, 'neither USA nor China'. We have to find another model, maybe a New Zealand model or maybe South Korea, Japan, or Taiwan. I see multiplexity in all this. In this sense, a 'third way', neither the West nor the Russia/China bloc, is the path to the future stability and well-being of the world.

CJLPA: In this increasingly multiplex world, how can states ensure better outcomes for humanity, whether that's people that they're directly responsible for within their state and/or other parties they take an interest in caring for? Can we guarantee less conflict and less uncertainty?

AA: We cannot guarantee either less conflict or less uncertainty going forward, but keep in mind that there was a lot of conflict in the previous world order.

Although one cannot predict the future, that doesn't mean everything is gloom and doom. There's a lot of scaremongering going on, claiming that the whole world is now on fire. I've heard this repeatedly for the last 30 years, before COVID-19 and Ukraine. But ironically, whereas most Western analysts predicted a major war in Asia for a long time, such a war has already happened in Europe first. Outside of Europe, we would continue to see more internal wars than inter-state wars.

At the same time, even though the idea of the liberal world order may be weakening, it doesn't mean people are just breaking away from institutions and interdependence.

I also think that what is happening now need not be permanent. We will ultimately see some sort of resolution to the Ukraine conflict. We will also see some sort of revival of multilateralism. Because it's not just a normative moral aspiration, it is in the self-interest of the actors.

CJLPA: You say you don't want to jump to conclusions, but I'd still like your thoughts on the multiplex world and the challenge of climate change. Are there going to be more kinds of solutions or is it going to become more chaotic?

⁷ Cf. Amitav Acharya, *The End of American World Order* (2nd edn, Polity Press 2018).

AA: In my edited book, *Why Govern? Rethinking Demand and Progress in Global Governance*, contributed to by specialists on global governance, we found that pluralization and multiplexity—sometimes called complexity and fragmentation—is already happening in climate change.⁸

Look at the Paris Accords: it doesn't work the way normal multilateral organisations do. It is based on voluntary compliance—which is the ASEAN way of doing things, not the European way. By adopting a consensus-based ASEAN-style decision-making and compliance model, the international community was able to achieve consensus and co-operation that had eluded it for a long time, because it had been looking for strict legalistic standards and measures.

Also, it was done not by governments only. There are a lot of expert groups, NGOs, corporations, parts of civil society involved. The whole idea of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change is that they are not bureaucrats, they're scientists, who operate within a governmental-plus framework. I call it 'G-plus global governance'. In a G-Plus model, leadership in global governance is not the monopoly of big powers and their national governments. In fact, the most striking example is that it was the European Union that really got it together, not the US, nor China, the largest economies in the world. Leadership also depends on the issue areas. So maybe the European Union leads in climate change. China certainly leads in international development. The United States, when it wants to, can play a role in collective security, like Iraq in 1990-91. However, today in the case of Ukraine, the US is playing the power bloc, or alliance game. India can play a role because its largest vaccine manufacturer in the world and also one of the largest manufacturers of generic drugs—so in terms of scientific and technological contribution, India is a big leader.

We see the G-plus model in action, which is an integral feature of multiplexity, rather than singularity, or hegemony in global governance and world order. That world is going to be ruled and operate very differently from 40 years ago, but that doesn't mean all hell is going to break loose. Countries and leaders are not going to get into conflict with each other just because they are non-Western and do not buy typical Western liberal ideas.

The idea that only the West can manage stability because the West has the best ideas and approaches to peace and development, and that all the other countries are incapable of producing peace and development, is a legacy of the colonial and racist origins of the present world order. It is time to reject them, and move past them. Only then can one establish new and much needed ways of managing world order.

CJLPA: Thank you Professor, that's a good note to end on. Thank you for your time and your expertise.

⁸ Cf. Amitav Acharya (ed), *Why Govern? Rethinking Demand and Progress in Global Governance* (Cambridge University Press 2016).

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