

IN SEARCH FOR AN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORY IN SOUTH EAST ASIA

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Abstract. *A recovery and valorization of tradition into the IR theory is important for the nations in Asia, because it gives them comparative advantage and a strengthened position and individuality in a Globalized World. However, the entire call for “de-westernization” of social sciences and “indigenization” must not go to extremes, must not be an artificial “aseptic” endeavor which would rather further isolate the new “indigenous” IR theory from the main streams instead of integrating it. This article is attempting to investigate the main political thinkers in the region and the possibilities of articulating a specific regional Asian IR theory with universal circulation and use.*

Keywords: *International Relations, South East Asia, Theory of International Relations.*

The theoretic dimension of International Relations is overwhelmingly “Western”, or being “Western”, even in the Globalization era, it does not always fit “Asian” specificities. We know little about the perspectives of our Asian counterparts when it comes to the theory of International Relations or Security Studies applied to a specific Asian or South East Asian context. By commodity, often we intend to put aside something we do not understand or simply something which does not fit properly into a preexistent, prefabricated “Western” IR theoretical framework. The new social and political evolutions triggered by Globalization are calling for the use of cultural variables in order to investigate national preferences and strategic options. For most social scientists, this is the Constructivism’s legacy. At the beginning of XXIst century Asia still cannot claim a distinctive International Relations School. The Copenhagen School or the English School does not have as counterparts an eventual “Tokyo School”, “Singaporean School” or “Thai School”. For instance, the development of such perspectives in Asia would be an essential and necessary step forward towards

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an integrated IR Theory. The presumptive future Asian School of IR is not expected to replace the preeminence of Western schools. Today, English is the language of International Relations and Globalization and the US, UK, Australian and NZ universities and their graduates are there to harvest the “first pick” of most professional opportunities within the field of IR, in a way no Asian University can do in the near future (with the notable exception of Singapore) unless they will succeed in creating a “main stream” *Asian IR Theory*.

The *Neorealist* theorists of IR tend to generalize their theoretical assumptions and *de-historise* states for which their theories are applied. The foundation of legitimacy upon which modern Western states were built does not have a direct counterpart in the Asian political philosophy and tradition. According to Holsti, the “Third World” states did not meet the legitimate foundations found in the Western World (legitimate foundations being “civic” or “natural”)¹. Holsti do not define the concept of “Third World” but, if he includes here Asia, South East Asia and states like Cambodia, Thailand, Vietnam, Korea (with several centuries of “natural” foundations behind), he may be wrong. Also, the Western theorists of IR tend to ignore the societal heterogeneity of Asia and South East Asia as it tends to create specificities which would rather destroy the beauty of a predefined IR scheme and implicitly its popularity among fellow theorists. From this perspective, the “Universal” label attached to Western IR theories in explaining other cultures and political realities is unjustified. At the other end of the IR theoretical spectrum are those calling for a total lack of relevance of Western theories regarding Asia and South East Asia, calling in general for an “Oriental exceptionalism”. Designing unique conceptual frameworks for each country and culture is as elusive as the tentative to design universal conceptual frameworks. In my view, predefined theoretical frameworks must be replaced, or at least must go hand in hand with rigorous case studies.

The creation of an *Asian Integrated Theory of IR* has to deal with several obstacles, beginning with a certain reluctance of Asian scholars towards any kind of IR theoretical framework. There is also an often-unspoken fear of colonialism and Western economic, politic and cultural dominance as a common denominator of many Asian political thinkers. Derek Gregory talks about the Globalization and its agents like transnational corporations as vehicles driving present-day colonialism². Another issue is a certain identity crisis claimed by some political thinkers. They are arguing that the end of colonialism and independence were not followed by the end of social fragmentation, the political borders of former colonies being drafted by former colonial powers ignoring local history, tribal boundaries etc.³

Too often concepts like *International* or *Global* are seen to suit only the great political and military powers, and implicitly the theoretical emulations emanated

¹ K. J. Holsti, *The Dividing Discipline: Hegemony and Diversity in International Theory*, London, 1985.

² Derek Gregory, *The Colonial Present*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 2004.

³ *Ibidem*.

by them. The result is an aseptic and a seriously impoverished theoretical framework, unable to explain key specificities affecting IR in many parts of the Non-Western world. Once more, within the Asian academic community can be noticed a certain “resistance” towards the relevance of IR theory. In the poorer countries, it is perceived as a highly theoretical elitist discipline conceived in an *Ivory tower* without much concern about the real needs of the people at the *grass roots* level. *Theory* is often seen as the opposite of *problem – solving* and an escape through speculation from the *Real Reality*. IR theory is also seen as Western colonial or post-colonial emulation only rich nations can afford an evasion from social responsibility. As a logical consequence, a Western intellectual emulation the IR theory under its various forms is meant to justify Western interests. The integration theories in IR, well encouraged and fashionable by the European integration process, were often seen with suspicion in a world dominated by newly independent states whose main concern was the avoidance of any possible new hegemony. *Realism* was somehow appealing because it presented the world as anarchic and uncontrollable, as a community of independent nations, each pursuing its own selfish national interests.

Without their own International Relations theoretical framework recognized as such, Asian countries are approached as annexes of the *Big Players* with a usually passive and at most reactive attitude into the Global IR. Being treated as an object and not subject of IR within a prefabricated theoretic framework obliges Asian scholars to do something about it. This is not only a matter of regional pride, but rather a matter of necessary objectivity as regional specificities are too complex to be properly explained either by the Cold War or by ideological dichotomy. It involves creating its own IR related concepts and theoretical framework, coming from an Asian context, culture and historical experience. In order to “penetrate” the mainstream of IR theory, those concepts must have (and must be presented as such) universal value and applicability to other parts of the world. The entire call for *de-Westernization* of social sciences and indigenization must not go to extremes, must not be an artificial, aseptic endeavor which would rather further isolate the new Indigenous IR theory from the main streams instead of integrating it. There are some attempts to build a Chinese School of IR directly derived from the Chinese traditions and historical practices of engaging in International Relations. Considering that often is difficult to “reinvent the wheel”, existing Western IR theory can be infused with Asian philosophies and practices.

Among Western IR theoretical constructs probably *Constructivism* offers the best framework which can be adaptable for a future *Asian Integrated Theory of International Relations*. Namely, Constructivism explains the different forms of regionalism and specificities and their role within the IR System. Constructivism may be sensitive to the cultural traditions of Asian states, their system of collective identities mirrored in the construction of post-colonial independent states and the way they act in the IR System. The Constructivist perspective may

explain the origins and evolution of ASEAN as compared with EU, NAFTA or MERCOSUR somehow outside the *Realist perspective* (built to justify an international construction as a result of a perceived security threat) or the *Liberal perspective* based on a functional interdependence among members⁴. In 1967, when ASEAN was created, the founding members were not interdependent or under the pressure of a common perceived security threat. The *ASEAN Way* is already a concept with some notoriety in IR based on some shared values: *non-intervention, non-membership* in military blocs governed by Global Military Actors. It can be seen as a form of regionalism which is deliberately *un-regularized* and rather weak in order to fit various forms of governance and political beliefs. All of these shared norms based on common cultural values and traditions had helped ASEAN and South Asia in general in initiating the creation of a recognizable common identity in IR. Compared with the European Regionalism characterized by imposed strict norms which can be controlled bureaucratically, Asian regionalism appears as rather informal and consensual⁵. Comparing them in terms of functionality and performances is tempting, and often used by various theorist of IR and political analysts. The Constructivist approach tend to favor the local specificities and to discourage the “brute” use of European criteria in an Asian context. For various reasons Constructivism, as a Western theoretical platform, seems to fit best a certain political correctness, as understood by authoritarian political systems in SE Asia. Also, it fits well core ideological assertions such as *Chinese way, Chinese specificity* etc.⁶

Realism as a theory emphasizes the notion of a *power vacuum* which needs to be filled by a regional or global hegemon after the end of Cold War in order to prevent regional anarchy. The fast rise of China seems to provide a new candidate for the hegemonic role of the US. Most Asian nations are not comfortable with the *Realist* and *Neo-Realist* approach⁷. On contrary, because it favors China as a candidate for the new hegemon in SE Asia the *Realism* in IR was unsurprisingly accepted in China within the framework and “well dressed” within the Marxist-Leninism and Maoist boundaries.

The historical experience and culture of the Asian nations has to offer ideas and experiences with universal reach. It is also truth that most of those ideas come from debates around Western born concepts (*nationalism, xenophobia, dialectic materialism, class struggle* etc.). It would be interesting here to emphasize the native infusion into these ideologies, this infusion being little know even at local levels.

⁴ Waheeda Rana, “Theory of Complex Interdependence: A Comparative Analysis of Realist and Neoliberal Thoughts”, in *International Journal of Business and Social Science*, Vol. 6, No. 2, February 2015, pp. 290-296.

⁵ Giovanni Capannelli, “Asian Development Bank’s Office of Regional Economic Integration”, in VOX CEPR’s Policy Portal, available on line: <http://voxeu.org/debates/commentaries/asian-regionalism-how-does-it-compare-europe> accessed in 0.03.2017.

⁶ Yaqing Qin, “Why is there no Chinese international relations theory?”, in *Int Relat Asia Pac* (2007), 7 (3): 313-340.

⁷ Yong Deng, “The Chinese Conception of National Interests in International Relations”, in *The China Quarterly*, Volume 154, June 1998, pp. 308-329.

There are several universal patterns of inter-civilizational relations originated in Asia and in need to be conceptualized in order to be introduced into the mainstream of IR theory, and from there into international political practice. Dipesh Chakrabarty in the book *Provincializing Europe* (2000), debates the issue of second rank Asian histories as a part of the former the Indian History labelled as such by the Eurocentric-Western scholarship. Indeed, the entire periodization of History and build of IR theory is based on a Eurocentric culture in which Asian cultures are reacting subalterns of the main streams. Chakrabarty is proposing a new approach equalizing *de facto* European-Western cultures with other cultures⁸. For sure, it is a revolutionary endeavor, politically correct and more adaptable to a future, globalized international society, but difficult to handle from a pedagogical point of view and a challenge for social scientists in search of some rigor and meaning within the universal historical evolution of humanity.

The balance of power is the key and the main concern of Asia's international relations, in particular a concern of the smaller countries having to navigate between present and rising giant powers. Countries like Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines played the US card, with various results, from spectacular in the case of Singapore to less convincing (but still visible) in the case of the Philippines.

Another issue is the role of democracy in the *algorithm of development*. The authoritarianism combined with open markets and foreign investments as practiced in Singapore and later on in China proved to be the functional strategy for fast economic growth and visible improved living standards. Within the region, "Enlightened" *Authoritarianism* so far proved to be more productive than the various forms of nationalism, protectionism, "free speech" and democracy as practiced in India. Apart from the economic facts, there is a "feeling" among local social scientists that insufficiently prepared democratic transitions may intensify the danger of war, civil war, domestic strife and economic downturn.

Probably another specificity of a regional Asian IR theory may be depicted from the attitude towards collective defense structures. In Asia, collective defense was delegitimized by nationalist authoritarian rulers, who view them as a threat to their new gained independence, or as a new form of foreign interference. The fear of a new hegemon may explain the absence of regional collective defense structures. Also, the end of bipolar systems had marked, not the end of history but rather a restructured International System in which the dominance of military blocks was replaced by the dominance of trading blocks and the preeminence of the trading state. Access to world markets, preferential tariffs and fast economic growth has also gained preeminence in front of territorial security. Correspondingly, there is no South Asian project comparable with the European project; and even if there would be one, its political and ideological tools would be weak.

⁸ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton University Press, eBook, 2000.

In the following section I will attempt to depict some of the best known political ideologist in Asia, individuals whose political thought had a global reach and notoriety. This notoriety may provide the ground for a future *Asian Theory of IR*.

Both Sukarno and Nasser are known as theorists of the so-called *State Nationalism* or *Internationalism rooted in the soil of nationalism*. The ideology of *Asian Internationalism* was a blend of Marxism, mixed with anti-colonialism and well adapted to the Muslim world, as it was often officially proclaimed as non-secular. Nasser reaffirmed on several occasions its faith in God. State nationalism in this case was adapted to the geopolitical situation after WWII but reminiscences of this doctrine are still very present in the ideology of those states. In his case, though opposed ideologically to Western capitalism, Arab socialism also developed as a rejection of communism, which was seen as incompatible with Arab traditions, and the religious underpinnings of Arab society⁹. Much of this political ideology was incorporated by Sukarno in Indonesia.

Mahatma Gandhi is the father of non-violence as a form of international relations, although several forms of non-violence doctrine within the Gandhian philosophy can be also found in Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain and then in Christian Democracy (a doctrine with several implications also within the IR as practiced by some of the most influential powers like West Germany)¹⁰. Probably the most influential legacy of Gandhi as a thinker of IR theory at the global level is as a forerunner of *Political ecology* as an alternative movement. The relevance of Gandhian Political Ecology gained prominence in the early 70', as a result of the first main post-WWII global economic crisis which emphasized the search for alternatives to liberal capitalism. Most green movements outside India are also placing Gandhi's philosophy as an important ideological root. Its presence is not necessary based on a particular deep study of Gandhian philosophy, but rather on Gandhi's transformation in a symbol of non-violence, passive resistance to oppression and simplicity. This is based on Gandhi's conceptions regarding the modern technological civilization based on greed, exploitation and abuse of natural resources¹¹. The instrumentalization of human thinking and intelligence towards technologies used to abuse the nature is particularly condemnable at Gandhi. Materialism, consumerism beyond real needs, the individualism and logic of market, all basic stones of liberal capitalism, are condemned by Gandhi¹². Also, competition based on survival of

⁹ Ajami Fouad, "On Nasser and His Legacy", in *Journal of Peace Research* (Sage Publications, Ltd.), 1974, 11 (1): pp. 41-49.

¹⁰ Nicholas F Gier, *The Virtue of Nonviolence: From Gautama to Gandhi*, State University of New York Press, 2004, p. 41.

¹¹ George Jioseph M, "Gandhi – The Meaning of Mahatma for the Millennium", in *Cultural heritage and contemporary change*, Series IIIB, South Asia, volume 5, Washington DC, 2001, p. 147.

¹² Ashok Bhise, "The effect of Mass Production and Consumerism – A Gandhian Approach", Bombay Sarvodaya Mandal & Gandhi Research Foundation, available on line at <http://www.mkgandhi.org/articles/massproduction.htm>, accessed 13.03.2017.

the fittest is immoral and provokes human alienation under the forms of domination, exploitation, greed and egoism. The adaptation of those values by the Indian ruling elites as a form of modernity and a path towards modernization is, for Gandhi, a recipe for disaster. A nature friendly model of development is Gandhi's – and through him India's – legacy to the theory of International Relations, emphasized as such by the Club of Rome¹³. Also, the concept of non-violence as a method of struggle, *Satyagraha*, has an undeniable relevance within the IR. Passive resistance movements in Czechoslovakia and Poland, against Soviet hegemony, were inspired by *Satyagraha*.

So far there is little account on Lee Kuan Yew's (the father of *Singaporean miracle*) legacy in foreign policy, the vast majority of writings and accounts being on his domestic policy and governance¹⁴. Lee Kuan Yew is today a leading political figure in the entire South East Asia, and also a figure whose legacy is well acknowledged on the World stage. Although this article is attempting to depict the South East Asian legacy on IR Theory in the case of LKY is worth to mention that he never depicted himself as an ideology driven man but as a pragmatist. In fact, in several occasions LKY has expressed its antipathy towards anything theoretic or pre-prescript in what concerns the regional or the world view¹⁵. The daily personal life experience was for him the best theory. Affirming that its knowledge relies on experience some theorists labelled him as a Lockean. Also in some interviews, he called himself an "utilitarian", interested not in the philosophy as such, but in what it really works, usually because it was previously tested empirically. Probably most great leaders did not start their political career with much ideological sophistication but the academia just labeled them as adherents to one or another school of political thoughts. In his case, he was labelled as a kind of "soft realist", having to navigate a small country within the regional interests of world stage powers¹⁶. He is one of the few leaders of a small independent country who succeeded in arranging functional relationships with its huge neighbors and even to exercise direct influence towards them in order to pursue its objectives. He was not a dreamer, knowing that he cannot expect much from regional multilateral organizations such as The Movement of Non-Aligned Nations or even ASEAN. He preferred to make real core arrangements with the superpowers, being well aware about their role in the International System¹⁷. As a pragmatic, despite the Singaporean *Britishness*, he preferred to cultivate the United States instead of Britain; and later on, with great

¹³ Kavita Y. Suchak, "Development and Environment Issues with special reference to Gandhian Perspective", Bombay Sarvodaya Mandal & Gandhi Research Foundation, available on line at <http://www.mkgandhi.org/articles/massproduction.htm>, accessed 13.03.2017.

¹⁴ Karen B. Brooks, "Lee's Lasting Legacy", Interview for the Council on Foreign Relations, March 23, 2015, published on line at <http://www.cfr.org/singapore/lees-lasting-legacy/p36313>, accessed March 13, 2017.

¹⁵ Carlton Tan, "Lee Kuan Yew leaves a legacy of authoritarian pragmatism", in *The Guardian*, 23 March 2015, available on line at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/23/lee-kuan-yews-legacy-of-authoritarian-pragmatism-will-serve-singapore-well>, accessed 13.03.2017.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷ Ang Chen Guang, *Lee Kuan Yew's Strategic Thought*, Routledge, London, 2013.

care, the relationships with China. Balancing between a rising China and the US is still the main issue of Singaporean diplomacy, well above multilateralism and regional policies¹⁸.

Many would expect Singapore, a country where three quarters of inhabitants are of Chinese origins (just like the LKY himself), will stand by China and will play the *Chinese card*. It is not the case, Singapore implementing independent pragmatic policies often perceived as being against Chinese positions, including sensitive issues in the South China Sea. Even more, the Singaporean preference for an increase of US economic and military presence in South East Asia in order to counterbalance the rise of China caused outrage in China. Although the fratricide conflict and antipathy between two countries as unequal brothers (one small – Singapore and the other one huge – China) is known and debated in IR theory, it is unsurprising that small countries like Singapore are given preference for a more balanced presence of the superpowers in the region. The ethnic and cultural affinities with China are also not necessary a matter of advantage in IR, but rather a supplementary reason to be worry about a possible threat to national independence.

According to Pavin Chachavalpongpun, pragmatism and flexibility are the core principles of Thai foreign policy, and those techniques may explain the maintenance of Thai national sovereignty¹⁹. Thai international politics offers an interesting case for study, since we are talking about a country which was never subject to colonial rule, with a long stability and as a consequence never being in the situation to *reinvent* itself²⁰. What characterizes Thai contemporary and recent History is stability and continuity in the structures of its political elite (by definition conservative and traditional). Most IR theorists are characterizing Thailand as a country with a strategy of survival involving the un-conditionate submission to the major politic and economic powers, namely United States, and before that, the British. This image is simplistic. What is called “unconditional submission” by some may be called smart and realistic policy and survival strategy by others. Thai elites in IR seem to have chosen the most practical and *economically favorable* solutions from the regional hegemon powers, expecting in exchange protection and financial returns. The over-critics seem to forget the necessary comparative perspective with the situation of other small or middle size countries in the region. Thailand is not India and India’s partition and civil war, together with the independentist policy based on a balance between US and USSR, was neither attractive nor applicable to Thailand. The strategy adopted by other independent and revolutionary regimes in the region, such as Vietnam,

¹⁸ Chen Nahui and Xue Li, “Lee-Kuan-Yew’s legacy for China Singapore relations”, in *The Diplomat*, December 05, 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/12/lee-kuan-yews-legacy-for-china-singapore-relations/>, accessed 04.03.2017.

¹⁹ C., Pavin, “Reinventing Thailand: Thaksin and his foreign policy”, Singapore Chiang Mai, Thailand: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies; Silkworm Books, 2010, pp. 67-72.

²⁰ Dmisa Malaroat, “The Thai polity, State and International Relations”, published in 03.05.2016, <http://katehon.com/article/thai-polity-state-and-international-relations>, accessed 04.03.2017.

Cambodia, Laos or Burma, involving civil war and endless social unrest, was not attractive either. The US retreat from Vietnam caused a reconsideration of the relationships with China²¹. Corrine Phuangkasem²² exposes three Thai specific IR behavioral types: a) accommodation to the demands of any great power which has the direct means to threaten national suzerainty, b) practicing a *divide et impera* strategy among regional hegemony, connected with cultivating the one with the strongest military presence and economic means, c) within any major conflict, adopt the wait and see attitude and join the camp of the winners as soon as their victory can be assumed as a certitude. Nothing condemnable in that, apart from a certain dose of *opportunism* for some, *realistic policy* for others. Thailand has, unsurprisingly, taken advantage of its unique geostrategic position allowing control over both the Indian and the Pacific Ocean. “Bending with the wind policy” or “bamboo diplomacy” is an ironic characterization of *Thai Realism* applied in International Relations²³. A certain diplomatic opportunism is unavoidable for any responsible government which cares about the fate of its own citizens more than about its own interest and personal pride.

Even more complicated was the case of those countries who failed to adapt themselves to either camp during the Cold War, namely Cambodia and Burma, both being subject to rather exotic personal ways of interpreting the *National Original Ways* to Socialism. Both countries had an unpredictable path of IR, characterized by isolation, and a war against everyone; from one side the Western imperialists and their puppets like Thailand, and from the other side the deviationist from Socialism’s right cause, namely China and Vietnam).

Conclusions

Without a solid regional theoretical framework, most IR in Asia is done through “Western eyes” with several unfortunate consequences not only in terms of *political correctness* but also in terms of accuracy and applicability into the real world, that world beyond the gates of *Academia*. Western theories are a result of a certain culture (Judeo-Christian) and historical experience (European or American), which does not always fit Asian regional specificities, evolving from a different culture and historical experience. It is ideologically comfortable to generalize and apply European and American experiences to the entire world. It goes hand in hand with the old colonial ideology favored today by Globalization. The influence of the Cold War and US-Soviet Union politic, economic and ideological confrontation is still used as a framework to explain all geopolitical evolutions in Asia, underestimating regional specificities and evolutions coming directly from the regional historic and cultural experiences.

²¹ Peera Charoenvattananukul, “Rethinking Approaches to the Study of Thai Foreign Policy Behaviors”, in *Kyoto Review of South Asian Studies*, Kyoto University, Issue 21, March 2017, <https://kyotoreview.org/yav/thai-foreign-policy-behaviours/>, accessed 04.03.2017.

²² Corrine Phuangkasem, *The formulation of Thai foreign policy*, Thammasat University Press, Bangkok 1999, pp. 2-3.

²³ *Ibidem*.

The fact that most IR theories come from an Anglo-American environment is not because SE Asia would lack theoretical reflection. Theoretical reflection indeed exists, but is less privileged and for instance less visible within the international academic community. At the beginning of the XXIst century, in an International System dominated by traditional as well as new forms of power, most East Asian nations are growing fast. Some nations, like India or China, are well on the way to claim the Super Power status. It is time for those nations to articulate an Asian inspired Theory of International Relations, capable to locate itself within the main stream of political thinking at a Global level.

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