BOOK REVIEW

Constructing Global Order: Agency and Change in World
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Constructing Global Order: Agency and Change in World

Amitav ACHARYA

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The number of academic papers criticizing the discipline of international relations (IR) for neglecting states and societies outside the core Western countries in the establishment, consolidation, and maintenance of international systems is steadily increasing.[1] However, these texts focus considerably more on the marginalization of the non-Western world than on identifying its positive agency. *Constructing Global Order: Agency and Change in World Politics*[2] differs from these texts in that it focuses on the role of non-Western states, particularly postcolonial ones, in legitimizing and transforming the US-led Western international system into a genuinely global order. In this context, Amitav Acharya's book considers the pluralization of agency in the global order to be important for fostering and managing such transition and change.

Amitav Acharya, professor of International Relations at Washington University, argues that a truly global order would be impossible or incomplete without the consent and participation of actors other than the core group of Western countries, particularly the postcolonial states. Normative agencies of international and global systems, contrary to what socialization theory argues, include not just the powerful states, but also weak/small ones with functions that go beyond a passive acceptance of Western ideas and values. While powerful Western states constructed the postwar system, newly independent states, particularly those in the Global South, were not passive, but active participants. These

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1   See, Anna M. Agathangelou and L. H. M. Ling, *Transforming World Politics: From Empire to Multiple Worlds*, London, Routledge, 2009; Muthiah Alagappa, "The Study of International Order", Muthiah Alagappa (ed.), *Asian Security Order: Instrumental and Normative Features,* California, Stanford University Press, 2003; Michael Barnett, "Social Constructivism," John Baylis, Steve Smith and Patricia Owens (eds.), *The Globalisation of World Politics,* 4th edition, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008; John M. Hobson, *Multicultural Origins of the Global Economy: Beyond the Western-Centric Frontier,* UK, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2021.

2   This book is a combination of Amitav Acharya's previous studies on the agent subject. See, "How Ideas Spread, Whose Norms Matter: Norm Localization and Institutional Change in Asian Regionalism", *International Organization,* Vol. 58, No 2, 2004, p. 239-275; "Norm Subsidiarity and Regional Orders: Sovereignty, Regionalism and Rule Making in the Third World", *International Studies Quarterly,* Vol. 55, No 1, 2011, p. 95–123; *Whose Ideas Matter: Agency and Power in Asian Regionalism*, Ithaca NY, Cornell University Press, 2009; *East of India: South of China: Sino-Indian Encounters in Southeast Asia,* New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2017; and "R2P and Theory of Norm Diffusion: Towards a Framework of Norm Circulation", *Global Responsibility to Protect,* Vol. 5, No 4, 2013, p. 466-479.

states challenged many of the postwar global order's leading ideas, norms, and institutions. This book makes the case that these challenges significantly contributed to the expansion and reinterpretation of the norms of sovereignty and security.

Acharya's book is divided into seven parts. The first section theorizes both the agency of world orders (normative) and the process of norm dissemination. The main argument is that norm agencies involve not just powerful states, but also small ones, and that norm formulation is a matter of ongoing contestation and circulation. Acharya refers to historical incidents in the remaining chapters to support his arguments. He highlights the active involvement of non-Western states, notably in Asia, Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East, in localizing Westphalian norms of sovereignty and security, while establishing new subsidiary norms of non-intervention and positive security.

In the early years of the Cold War, the definition of sovereignty, which originated in the West and endorsed by the United Nations (UN), was used in a very narrow sense: "states are the sole authority on the borders of their lands (positive sovereignty)."[3] However, non-Western states challenged this narrow scope. The 1955 Bandung Conference occupies a significant place in this challenge since the principle of sovereignty was its main topic. Despite ideological differences, states from the Global South (e.g., Egypt, India, etc.) came together at the Bandung Conference and its successor, forming the Non-Aligned Movement. They wanted to expand their influence over the postwar international system and prevent the violation of the so-called universal norms (sovereignty) by powerful actors. The conference participants considered that, while the UN was necessary, it was not sufficient in protecting national sovereignty. According to them, sovereignty needed both positive and negative aspects. Negative sovereignty focused on the non-intervention principle, which was critical for survival and regime security of the Third World. While the Bandung participants had considerable influence on the global dissemination of the sovereignty norm, they did not receive sufficient attention by further studies on sovereignty. Later in the 1990s, the Third World countries sparked another debate by bringing up whether humanitarian intervention breaches the principle of sovereignty. Acharya's book successfully highlights these tangible contributions to the sovereignty norm.

Security is the second concept tackled in the book. During the Cold War, the US-centric definition of security was limited to the national level, which meant protection against external threats (i.e. absence of any foreign threat against the survival of the state). The security concept in this limited sense largely addressed military threats and other primary security concerns of the United States and the West, while neglecting distinctive security predicaments faced by Third World countries. By the 1970s, global circumstances had changed, further revealing the concept's limitations. The 1973 oil crisis prompted calls to redefine security in economic terms. By the 1980s, concerns over global ecological health had given rise to concepts of environmental security. Furthermore, by the 1990s, security studies, especially from the non-Western countries, had adapted to the post-Cold War reality and stated that the majority of conflicts in the Third World were intra-state in nature (i.e., civil wars, anti-regime insurrections, tribal conflicts, etc.). Thus, the security predicament of the Third World states broadened the "dominant understanding of the security."[4] As a result, the Third World became more prominent and was incorporated into new security thinking and approaches, and the notion of "global security" began to emerge.

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3   Acharya, *Constructing Global Order: Agency and Change in World Politics*, p. 24-25.

4   Acharya, *Constructing Global Order: Agency and Change in World Politics,* p. 128.

Acharya presents two additional results in the conclusion. First, the reluctance of the United States and the West to accept Third World countries' objections to the Western system's rules and norms. This keeps the order from attaining a genuinely global structure. Overcoming such an obstacle requires redefining the agents of the US-led system. Second, active historical and current challenges from non-Western states (e.g., China and Russia) to the US-led Western order and its norms have undermined the widespread belief that international systems are solely Western or American creations, while strengthening the belief that they were created in a pluralistic manner.

In sum, Amitav Acharya's book stands out for its theoretical analysis of the pluralization of agency in the formation of the Western order and its transition into a global order. It focuses more on the challenges of the Cold War era and the 1990s. The discussion could be enriched by including more recent cases of regional powers such as China, India, Russia, and Turkey, and examining their challenges to various Western order norms (for example, human rights). Then, additional questions follow: How likely is it for these countries to gain normative agency within the Western order? Do these challenges have the potential to transform this order? As it stands, these questions remain unanswered, but they could be addressed in future research.