



Eileen Doherty-Sil, “New Area Studies, Global IR and International Human Rights,” *New Area Studies* 5:1 (2025).

New Area Studies, Global IR and International Human Rights

Eileen Doherty-Sil

University of Pennsylvania

<https://orcid.org/0009-0002-0702-9204>

Abstract

This article uses the study of international human rights to examine the potential of New Area Studies (NAS) to enhance the efforts of scholars in Global International Relations (GIR) in their quest to re-vision international relations theory. GIR, which was founded as an explicit commitment to de-centering Western-dominated IR theory, embraces interdisciplinary knowledge from and about different areas of the world as a key part of its effort to understand the complexities of – and relations among – multiple localities, states and regions. Yet, while successful as a critique of dominant theory, GIR has not fared as well in cumulating insights across different localities, states and regions. Nor has it managed to go much beyond engaging with its original home discipline, political science. Both of these limitations are evident in recent scholarship on international human rights. This article shows how NAS can help GIR scholars move past these limitations while also illuminating hidden aspects of the discourse and practice of human rights across various regional settings. This is evident in three defining features of NAS: its commitment to area-specific expertise (broadly defined and reconceptualized beyond traditional categories); its emphasis on eliminating disciplinary silos to encourage conversations that span geographic space and area expertise; and its insistence on full inclusion of non-elite communities of scholars in the production of knowledge.

Keywords: New Area Studies, Global IR, International Relations, Human rights, Non-western regions

Introduction

In his 2014 presidential address to the International Studies Association (ISA), Amitav Acharya issued a challenge to mainstream international relations (IR) and laid out the foundation for a new research agenda. Though many of the themes in his address were not new, Acharya's presidential address offered a vision for more inclusive international relations scholarship that moves beyond concepts and theories developed mostly on the basis of Western experience, while embracing a multiplicity of "voices, experiences, knowledge claims and contributions" from states as well as societies throughout the world (Acharya 2014, 647).

What emerged from that talk was a bold, alternative research tradition—Global International Relations (GIR)—that seeks to not only expose the limitations of dominant international relations theories, but also to re-vision international relations itself on the basis of fundamentally new understandings of universality; a focus on world history rather than Western history; and greater attention to regions in international studies (Acharya 2014, 2017). That is, international relations concepts are to be constructed and developed as they are actually experienced, problematized and theorized in distinct parts of the world (Smith and Tickner 2020). For GIR, the meaning and practice of "international relations" must be viewed in multiple localities, states and geographic regions, which also requires closer attention to different areas of the world and a commitment to move beyond the emphasis on general, neopositivist social science theory that has dominated mainstream much of international relations (especially in the United States).

This article acknowledges the contributions GIR has made to exposing Western-centric assumptions and hierarchies of knowledge within dominant strands of IR theory. GIR has also done well to draw attention to cases in particular locales and regions where different understandings and lived experiences of international relations do not match the assumptions behind the theories, models and research traditions in mainstream IR. Yet, while effective as a critique of mainstream IR, there are other respects in which GIR has yet to meet its potential, especially when it comes to a deep, contextualized understanding of the experiences and worldviews of different groups, communities and nation-states. This is where New Area Studies (NAS) is uniquely positioned to help GIR make more progress in realizing its agenda. First, NAS can help GIR generate a deeper, more context-sensitive



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engagement with area-specific knowledge (even if the particular boundaries of any given “area” may be socially constructed) so as to better understand complex regional and local dynamics in contemporary international relations. Second, NAS pushes beyond existing disciplinary boundaries in ways that Global IR has sought but not ultimately managed to do given its rootedness in political science. And third, NAS prioritizes new strategies to ensure inclusion of non-elite communities as partners in the co-production of scholarship, which is a challenge that continues to plague contemporary international relations scholarship.

The article uses the study of international human rights to explore the limitations of GIR and the potential value of NAS. The following sections begin with a discussion of the contributions and current challenges of GIR. The next section turns to the case of international human rights scholarship to more concretely lay out the contributions and challenges of GIR as well as the additional leverage that NAS can provide. Finally, the article discusses the potential for NAS to support the agendas of both GIR writ large and the study of international human rights.

Global IR’s “Pluralistic Universalism”

International relations scholars have long noted the absence of non-Western theories in “mainstream” IR scholarship (Acharya and Buzan 2017; 2019; Puchala 1997; 1998), and the disproportionate influence of European historical experience in informing concepts and theories thought to be universally useful (Chakrabarty 2008; Tickner and Wæver 2009; Hobson 2012). Furthermore, the predominant role of U.S. scholars and scholarship in the field led to Stanley Hoffman’s famous designation of IR as an “American social science” (Hoffman 1977; Walt 2011). As Tickner and Wæver wrote in the abstract of their 2009 book *International Relations Scholarship Around the World*:

[I]t has become widely accepted that the discipline of International Relations (IR) is ironically not ‘international’ at all...[T]heorizing gravitates around a number of concepts that have been conceived solely in the United States.

Thus, even before the emergence of the GIR research tradition, there was no shortage of scholars who countered the hegemony of Western IR scholarship,

though as Anderl and Witt (2020) note, their efforts have come under a variety of labels: non-Western (Acharya and Buzan 2010; Tickner 2003; Shilliam 2011), post-western (Bilgin 2008; Shani 2008; Vasilaki 2012), “worlding” (Tickner and Wæver 2009; Tickner and Blaney 2012) or decolonization (Agathangelou and Ling 2009; Jones 2006; Sabaratnam 2011).

In this regard, Acharya’s 2014 ISA speech built on a rich body of existing scholarship that marked the field as contested terrain (Biersteker 1999). What was new was Acharya’s call for the aggregation of these approaches into a new research agenda of “Global IR” scholarship. Importantly, he argued that goals should *not* be to develop one new GIR theory, but rather to build inclusivity and diversity into international relations with a focus on six key elements:

1. Pluralistic universalism, not relativism, as the alternative to Enlightenment-based universalism—with an understanding of the international world as a “large, overarching canopy with multiple foundations” (649).
2. Scholarship that focuses not just on Western historical experience, but also on non-Western societies on their own terms.
3. The subsumption, rather than supplanting, of existing IR theories (including mainstream approaches such as realism, liberalism and constructivism).
4. Center stage for regions, regionalisms and area studies, with regions understood not as fixed geographic or cultural units, nor essentially state-centric, but rather as complex, dynamic and overlapping socially constructed spaces.
5. Rejection of exceptionalism and essentialism, especially in light of the diversity that exists within nations, regions and civilizations.
6. Recognition of multiple forms of agency, including those related to material resources as well as the acts of resistance and rejection that involve local constructions of the global order.

It is worth emphasizing the high value placed on area studies in this approach. Putting area studies “center stage” stands in stark contrast to mainstream IR



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scholarship’s focus on generalizable social science theory-building, which effectively downplays area-specific knowledge and focuses on drawing inferences from correlations among variables. Too often, mainstream IR engages non-Western histories and experiences as case studies to test theories originating from Western experience, with “area studies as little more than provider of raw data to Western theory” (Acharya 2014, 650). GIR does not prioritize either IR theory or area studies, but instead promotes engaged dialogue between the two:

Global IR effectively synergizes disciplinary IR (with its theoretical interests and innovations but perceived lack of empirical richness) and the area studies tradition (with its strong emphasis on field research but which is seen by its critics as atheoretical). This new synthesis and synergy give true meaning and substance to the idea of “international studies” (Acharya 2014, 650).

Acharya’s 2014 speech was so influential that as of 2022, it had emerged as the most read article in *International Studies Quarterly* (ISA 2022c). Further, the growing prominence of the GIR research tradition was reflected in the creation of an ISA Global IR Section; this occurred after nearly eight percent of ISA members (536 ISA members from 54 countries) signed a petition in support of the initiative (ISA 2022b). The stated purpose of the GIR section is to encourage “genuinely global conversations” that focus in a self-conscious manner on international relations from different vantage points and the diversity of lived experiences to produce interactions that are “inclusionary, multi-perspectivist, and include knowledge produced globally” (ISA 2022b).

GIR’s re-visioning of international relations is a much-needed corrective to a longstanding problem. Yet the call for “genuinely global conversations” raises key questions. What exactly does a “genuinely global conversation” entail? Within the confines of social science, can we imagine GIR research insights being aggregated into systematic comparative analyses, or even more generalizable theory? How might that change when we move past categories and concepts that are dominant in contemporary scholarship and practice—most prominently, the category of “sovereign state”? And can the emphasis on “regions and regionalism” and “multiple forms of agency” engage effectively with state-centered mainstream IR theory - or is GIR fundamentally subversive to that mainstream?

On this question, there is little agreement among GIR scholars. Acharya's ISA address noted that global IR is "not a theory but an aspiration for greater inclusiveness and diversity in our discipline" (Acharya 2014, 649). This statement appears to be deliberately agnostic on the question of what methods or research strategies are appropriate for scholars who identify as being part of this tradition. Barnett (2021) has gone so far as to suggest that GIR may be more of a social movement than a research tradition, in that it remains primarily oppositional in nature, is not associated with a central argument other than the importance of inclusion, and is characterized by normative rather than intellectual commitments.

This lack of consensus is in part a function of the emergence of two discrete strands of GIR scholarship that do not necessarily complement each other. One strand calls for nothing less than a sweeping, fundamental reconceptualization of the ontological bases of concepts in dominant international relations – and thus offers alternative concepts and arguments that are incommensurate with dominant theories. Rooted in traditions such as critical, postmodernist and postcolonial theory, this strand emphasizes the role that power relations have played in the shaping the ontological and epistemological foundations of the field. With that in mind, the objective must be to deconstruct and re-vision the entire enterprise of IR theory. For example, Shahi (2018, 2019) uses the concept of subject-object merger from the Indian philosophical tradition of Advaita to calls for a GIR that transcends the "epistemological dualism" of universalist (Eurocentric) and particularistic (post-colonial/de-colonial) theories. Fierke and Jabri (2019) argue that the notion of dialogue between research traditions itself is grounded in an individualist ontology, while GIR would be better served by a relational ontology that presumably encourages more expansive and inclusive "global conversations." And Blaney and Tickner (2017) embrace a decolonial project that recognizes the existence of a pluriverse based on ontological differences, a project that is only possible by first *undoing* the "one-world world" as understood by monistic universalism and then moving toward an IR based on encounters across ontological differences (298). These are not simply calls for more diversity or inclusion of previously-marginalized perspectives; they reject the ontological foundations of mainstream IR from its very inception.

The second strand of GIR emphasizes the potential of "subsuming rather than supplanting" existing IR knowledge, which requires incorporating or engaging

influential concepts and dominant theories, methods, and claims. In fact, Acharya and Buzan even suggest that GIR is likely to fail if it does not bring in as broad a spectrum of scholars as possible, including those in the mainstream (2017; see also Foulon and Meibauer 2020). In this view, the refusal to engage dominant theory risks the creation of separate theoretical narratives of "Western/non-Western" experiences (and "Western" and "GIR" professional silos), thereby reproducing precisely the dichotomization that GIR itself challenges. This strand of GIR is therefore not seeking a wholesale rejection of dominant Western theories, but rather a more expansive research agenda in which elements of those theories can be incorporated into novel frameworks and problematics. While there is by no means consensus on how best to ensure dialogue across geographies or theories (Hutchings 2011), the goal for this strand is to promote strategies and methodologies that do not erase marginalized perspectives, yet also do not further fragment the field or lapse into "narcissistic turf wars" (Eun 2018; 2019).

To date, however, neither strand appears to have made much of an impression on mainstream IR (Barnett 2021; Mearsheimer 2016). Perhaps one reason for this is the challenge GIR faces in generating a coherent set of principles for navigating the vast chasm between universalism and cultural diversity. Despite the emphasis by some GIR scholars on dialogue and mutual learning, what we often see under the rubric of GIR is an array of area- or civilization-specific studies that fragment knowledge and undermine the dialogical possibilities among scholars seeking to compare or aggregate insights drawn from different regions in the world. Consider, for example, the emergence of the "Chinese School of IR" (Qin 2007; 2016; 2011; Zhang 2012; Zhang and Chang 2016). While at first glance this appears to be a promising step toward GIR's de-centering goal of embracing non-Western histories and experiences, the idea of "Chinese IR" is not without risks. Dian (2022, 264) warns against:

a sort of 'positive orientalism' by which scholars tend to emphasize the uniqueness of ideas and practices promoted by non-Western and often non-democratic regimes. For instance, concepts such as win-win, new type of great power relations, respect for the principle of non-interference, communitarian spirit, and primacy of the community over the individual can be romanticized as 'uniquely Chinese concepts'

or also be understood as elements of a narrative aimed at consolidating non-democratic and authoritarian norms and practices.

In the same vein, Acharya (2018, 7) cautions us that calls for an "Indian school of IR" would be result in parochialism and exceptionalism, and in short, be a "terrible intellectual mistake":

Indian domestic politics and foreign policy resonate with universalistic norms. India is a democracy, unlike China. There have been powerful voices against narrow forms of nationalism closely related to exceptionalism in India. Tagore was a leading example of such universalist ethos. Most, though not all, of India's post-war leaders accepted values of political liberalism and security universalism. Nehru was the developing world's most articulate critic of ideological blocs, and a key defender of the UN and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Scholars have interpreted Indian nonalignment as both realism and idealism, but often forget that it also proved highly exportable to so many countries around the world. ... The Indian IR community should unabashedly embrace and promote this syncretic or pluralistic universalism, instead of creating a distinct Indian school of IR. If it does so, the country can be a rich source for the development and advancement of Global IR.

Acharya's endorsement of "pluralistic universalism" rather than an outright rejection of global liberalism aligns well with Raineri and Baldero's 2022 assessment of IR in the African context:

[IR scholars should] embrace a dialectical approach to regional and Area Studies, one which sees particularism and specialisation as the result of interactions endowed with ontological precedence. Consequently, studying Africa would not only serve the 'decentralisation side' of the Global IR agenda; knowing Africa's history, exploring African politics, and listening to academic voices from the continent itself are all necessary strategies for understanding the origins, development, and functioning of the other regions of the world too, starting with the West (247).



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What these views suggest is not a replacement of Western-centric mainstream IR by an array of region-specific IR theories, but rather a deeper and more sustained engagement among various area studies communities, and between these communities and general IR scholars. Such engagement promises to more fruitfully set the stage for incorporating the experience of non-Western regions and exploring patterns that can tell us which sets of experiences are truly distinctive and which are simply at variance with the experience of the West. The following section turns to one field of study—international human rights—where such an exploration may be especially useful for moving beyond stale debates about universalism and relativism, without ignoring the diverse worldviews that can emerge within and across regions.

Universality and Diversity in Human Rights

The question of Western hegemony, specifically the universality/relativism of rights, has plagued the human rights project since the 1947 drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). This is evidenced by the famous UNESCO “philosophers committee” that was constituted to establish the philosophical foundations of rights through a worldwide survey of intellectuals, religious leaders and other major figures (Havet 1948; UNESCO 1948; Goodale 2018) and the equally famous denouncement of that survey by the American Anthropological Association (1947; see also 2020). Further, there is the question of the role that non-Western (and especially post-colonial) actors have had in shaping human rights discourse and instruments, both at the global and regional levels. The UDHR is written in undeniably Western philosophical language; moreover, it was adopted in a world of only fifty-six voting states, with most of today’s non-Western states still under colonial rule. On those grounds alone, it is easy to dismiss the project as a Western invention that was simply imposed on newly independent states.

GIR’s emphasis on pluralistic universalism and multiple agencies sheds important light into how scholars can move beyond stale, dichotomous categorizations such as universalism/relativism and Western/non-Western. In fact, as will be discussed below, much existing human rights scholarship already sits comfortably in the “subsuming” strand of GIR, even when not self-identifying with the GIR research tradition.

Pluralistic Universalism in Human Rights - Is human rights a Western project, or rather, an articulation of universal values in admittedly Western philosophical language? On the one hand, every country in the world has ratified at least one of the nine core international human rights treaties (with eighty percent ratifying four or more); furthermore, the UDHR holds the record for being the most translated document in the world (United Nations). But the project has never been without controversy. For example, although the UDHR was adopted unanimously in 1948, the thin nature of the 1948 consensus was illustrated by UNESCO member Jacques Barrington’s comment that state parties could agree on the passage of the universal declaration “as long as we did not ask why” (Witte 2009). Similarly, the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights adopted by consensus a Declaration and Program of Action (the “Vienna Declaration”) emphasizing that human rights are “indivisible, interdependent and interrelated.” The Vienna Declaration was hailed as a unanimous post-Cold War reaffirmation of the relevance of human rights as a universal standard. Yet this too was not without controversy. Despite the surface appearance of international consensus, international negotiations such as the one at Vienna coexisted with arguments about cultural diversity, relativism, and the role of economic rights in the broader human rights regime (Tan 2016; Burke 2020).

In the decade that followed the Vienna Conference, Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew and Malaysian President Mahathir Mohamad emerged as prominent advocates for an “Asian values” argument, which explicitly tied the Asian economic miracle to a communitarian rather than individual-based vision of rights (Zakaria 1994; Barr 2000). While critics maintained that the concept of Asian values was a political tool to counter charges of authoritarianism and political repression, the Asian values argument opened debates about whether communitarian values were not only different than the individualism of Western liberal democracy, but also a key factor in driving regional economic growth and development. Perhaps because the argument was linked so clearly to the economic growth of the region, it largely faded after the 1997 Asian economic crisis – but not before it came to symbolize the broader universalism/relativism debate, and to launch a wave of empirical research on the overall “universalism/relativism” question (Welzel 2011; Dalton and Ong 2005; Kim 2010).

Similarly, “African values” arguments begin with the premise that the international human rights project is essentially Western in nature. Similar to the Asian values

narrative, these arguments have stressed the communal rather than individualistic foundations of African society, stressing that this different starting point manifests as differences in rights associated issues like private (versus communal) land ownership (Cobbah 1987; see also Pollis and Schwab 1979). Furthermore, arguments exist about distinctive "Islamic values," though these arguments range from those that stress the narrowness of the distance between Islamic and Western culture (Mazrui 1997) to those predicting the inevitability of a coming civilizational clash between Islam and the West (Huntington 1993).

More recently, the universalism/relativism debate has re-emerged in full force, but this time led mainly by China. What China has called its "people-centered philosophy" focuses on national sovereignty and civilizational diversity, with a particular emphasis on the greater importance of a development-focused "right to subsistence" compared to Western political liberalism (Zhang and Buzan 2020; Sun 2016). Foot (2020) has suggested that China's goal is to transform the normative foundation of the UN itself, that is, to move the three key pillars away from their traditional focus on development, peace and security, and human rights to a new focus on development, strong state, and stability. And within the UN Human Rights Council specifically, China is actively pushing an alternative human rights model privileging socioeconomic rights and national sovereignty (Piccone 2018; Foot 2022), a move that has affected country voting behavior (Pauselli, Merke and Urdíñez, 2023).

Concepts like the "right to subsistence" are not new; recall, for example, Senegal President Léopold Senghor's famous assertion that "human rights starts with breakfast." Nor is there a shortage of scholars who emphasize the importance of recognizing the normative force of development-focused rights discourse. For example, Makau Mutua warns of the legitimacy dangers of putting liberal democracy as the "northern lights" of the global human rights regime, a reality that he argues obscures the more compelling issues of economic justice in much of the world (2017). The normative force of the development discourse only increases the importance of avoiding simplistic dichotomies such as universalism/relativism in thinking about the co-existence of civilizational diversity and universal rights. In this regard, Sen's (1997) "Human Rights and Asian Values," which is perhaps the most prominent rejection of cultural relativism arguments (and specifically the

Asian values debate), is explicit about the need to understand and embrace cultural diversity, not only between cultures but also within them:

The recognition of diversity within different cultures is extremely important in the contemporary world, since we are constantly bombarded by oversimple generalizations about 'Western civilization,' 'Asian values,' 'African cultures,' and so on. These unfounded readings of history and civilization are not only intellectually shallow, they also add to the divisiveness of the world in which we live (31).

Sen's emphasis on cultural diversity has been echoed by others, including Donnelly's (2007) work on the "relative universality of human rights," discussions of "universality, diversity and cultural rights" (Bennoune and Soyinka 2018), and (as will be discussed in more detail below) Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im's emphasis on the need for a cross-cultural approach to the universal cultural legitimacy of human rights.

From a GIR perspective, these debates suggest two main interventions. First, GIR demands a fuller examination of non-Western actors' agency vis-à-vis the international human rights regime as defined by international legal instruments and mechanisms (e.g., UN human rights treaties). Second, the idea of human rights itself must be decentered, by moving away from the international level of analysis and toward an emphasis on regionally- or even locally-rooted strategies and understandings of rights.

Multiple agencies – On the question of non-Western agency vis-à-vis the international human rights regime, important correctives already exist that highlight the role of non-Western actors in the development of international human rights law. While not identifying as GIR scholars, each of these studies fits neatly into the GIR call for the understanding of multiple agencies. For example, there is rich scholarship on the influence of Latin American (Sikkink 2014; 2017)¹ and other small countries both

¹ For some GIR scholars, Sikkink's work is not uncontroversial. Blaney and Tickner (2017, 295) argue that Sikkink's historical analysis "inadvertently recreates the ethnocentrism of IR and flattens multiplicity as variation on Western/Northern norms."

before and during the drafting of the UDHR. Sluga (2013) notes that the Haitian delegation proposed that the word “universal” be added to the declaration of human rights, and Bhagunan (2013) has explored the central role of India in launching a transnational campaign against South African apartheid. Scholars have also highlighted the role of individual non-Western leaders, notably Kuomintang Chinese delegate P.C. Chang’s emphasis on the way that Confucian ideas relate to rights (Roth 2018), Nehru’s strong support of the international human rights regime (Acharya 2018); and Hansa Mehta’s role in ensuring gender-neutral language was included in the UDHR (Sikkink 2017; Glendon 2001).

Moving to the post-colonial era, Burke (2010) disputes the idea that the human rights regime was simply imposed on newly independent states, arguing instead that they played a leading role in the passage of the first binding human rights treaties, and were centrally responsible for institutionalizing the norm of national self-determination as the first and foundational article in both the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights. Similarly, Jensen (2016) traces the leadership of Jamaica, Liberia, Ghana, the Philippines and other post-colonial countries during the 1960s in pushing for human rights instruments on race and religion. And Acharya (2016) explicitly uses a GIR lens to examine the Bandung Conference as a forum where newly independent states challenged Western dominance, but also affirmed and strengthened global norms of universalism and human rights as articulated in the UDHR and UN Charter (especially p. 350; Reus-Smit 2013). While not all these scholars place themselves in the GIR tradition, each reflects the spirit of Acharya’s call for recognizing the reality of multiple agencies as well as re-thinking of scholarship with regard to the universalism/relativism.

Decentering Human Rights - The preceding studies focus on the level of international law and institutions. While important, that lens misses a second and perhaps more fundamental aspect of decentering: the need for “center stage” to be given to regions, regionalisms and area studies rather than a Western epicenter of what we imagine to be “international relations.” This kind of decentering requires human rights researchers to move the lens away from the world of international institutions. Though not identifying as a GIR scholar, Hopgood (2013) articulates this proposition in his discussion of the tensions between what he calls *Human Rights*, the largely professional, globalized superstructure of Western-based norms,

institutions, and organizations that essentially constitute a human rights "industry," with *human rights*, community and culturally-rooted actions to reduce suffering, which are often rooted in religious, nationalist, ethnic or family structures rather than global liberal norms.

GIR scholarship is of course premised on the decentering project. Here, Tickner and Smith's edited volume *International Relations from the Global South* textbook (2020) is instructive as an impressive example of an introductory IR text that begins by locating "international relations" in multiple regions and communities, with the aim of identifying differences and diversity, and creating space and strategy to speak across regions. The book eschews systematic empirical analysis, preferring to spotlight what it calls "the transgressive power of diversity and difference" (p. 4) and the value in comparing concepts and ideas across regional and historical contexts (e.g., Ling and Pinheiro, especially p. 322). The text begins with a warning of the "epistemic violence" (Spivak 1988) that emerges from hegemonic narratives that dismiss, silence or erase other non-dominant perspectives. To illustrate, they lead with the following quote from Kenneth Waltz:

It would be as ridiculous to construct a theory of international politics based on Malaysia and Costa Rica as it would be construct an economic theory of oligopolistic competition based on the minor firms in a sector of an economy (Waltz 1979, 72 as quoted in Tickner and Smith, 1).

With this stark beginning, the authors offer a text that makes no mention of "paradigm" in the index, and only scant textual references to the IR "isms" (e.g., realism, liberalism, constructivism). Instead, the book is structured around *concepts* (i.e., order/ordering/disorder, war and conflict, state and sovereignty, religion/secularism/nationalism, security, foreign policy) and *issues* (globalization, inequality, migration, resistances, socio-environmentalism). Each chapter problematizes a concept or issue to interrogate its use in dominant discourse as well as to consider the concept in relation to IR in the global South (p. 8). The strategy aligns with Bilgin's call for a GIR methodology of "contrapuntal reading" that seeks not not to tell multiple stories, but rather to "excavate" multiple layers of existing stories with an eye on power/knowledge dynamics (2016, 138; Said 1975). Importantly, "human rights" is not included as one of the textbook's key concepts of investigation but rather as parts of other chapters: *ubuntu* as an example of non-

western human rights theory (Wemheuer-Vogelaar et al. 2020, 22); the role of non-Western actors in drafting the UDHR (Smith 2020, 84); and rights in relation to state-building (Tickner 2020, 125), to gender and security (Bilgin 2020, 189); and to socio-environmentalism and rights of nature (Inoue and Franchini, 301, 307).

The text does not attempt to unpack the broader issue of rights in the context of GIR theory or practice. Comparisons are embedded in the chapters; indeed, the project is at heart comparative. But there are no systematic comparisons of differences within and between regions. Indeed, the authors are explicit in their desire to avoid such a starting point by using stories or anecdotes to highlight diversity, to illustrate the inadequacy of conventional IR theory, and to create opportunity for new ways of thinking (Smith and Tickner, 4).

Moving to human rights scholarship specifically, Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im's comparative approach lays out the challenge that "extreme relativism" poses to the legitimacy of the international human rights project. Drawing on his work on the human rights in the African context (2003; An-Na'im and Deng 1990) and in Islamic societies (1991), *Human Rights in Cross-Cultural Perspectives* (1992) argues that the solution lies in reinterpreting and reconstructing universal standards both in the context of specific cultures and also across cultures. More recently, *Decolonizing Human Rights* (2021) takes a stronger position in rejecting external coercive enforcement of rights under international law, and instead embraces what he calls "self-determined universality" relying on a people-centered practice of human rights norms through cultural transformation and political mobilization. This, he argues, would "reclaim the glorious rationale and vision" of the UDHR. Though not self-identified as a Global IR perspective, it could well be seen that way.

In sum, though GIR scholarship has generally had an ambivalent attitude toward the concept and institutions surrounding international human rights, its premises have much to offer human rights scholarship, and in fact, have been embraced by some IR scholars who would not necessarily place themselves in the GIR tradition. On the universalism/relativism debate, GIR's emphasis on pluralistic universalism is an important frame to avoid unhelpful simplifications or dichotomies such as "Western/non-Western" or "Chinese/non-Chinese." Furthermore, GIR's focus on multiple agencies and the importance of de-centering pushes human rights scholars at two levels. First, GIR highlights the need to spotlight the agency of non-Western actors in what are too easily seen as Western-dominated forums. Second GIR



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reminds us to give center stage to regionalisms, and in so doing, to examine rights within specific contexts.

What New Area Studies (NAS) Brings to the Table

GIR has done a magnificent job of highlighting difference and diversity, but has contributed less in terms of systematic comparisons across regions, and indeed, has done very little to cumulate insights across different states, regions and localities. In that regard, GIR is useful for reframing the starting point of discussion about what “universal” means, and for highlighting the need to look beyond Western-dominated global institutions to locate human rights meanings and actions. Yet GIR alone risks simply stopping at the point of just saying that the world is complicated and diverse, rather than problematizing and searching for explanations of regional differences and commonalities. Furthermore, much of mainstream human rights scholarship focuses on international law, global institutions and transnational activism, which effectively spotlights the participation by non-Western actors in the global human rights regime, but has had less success in understanding questions of commonality and diversity across nations and regions as it applies to the universality of rights. Where, then, are opportunities for dialogue and bridgebuilding across these communities of scholars?

Enter New Area Studies, which holds potential for GIR generally, and human rights scholarship specifically, in at least three key ways. First is the emphasis that NAS puts on the importance of area-specific expertise being broadly defined and re-visioned to adapt to the complexity of our current world (Milutinovic 2019; Mielke and Hornidge 2017; Hodgett and James 2018). Second is the commitment to blurring disciplinary boundaries to identify and address problems in more comprehensive and context-specific ways. Third is the prioritization of non-elite communities as partners in the co-production of scholarship (Hodgett and James 2018; Clowes and Bromberg 2016).

There is little doubt of the importance of vibrant area-specific expertise to illuminate lingering questions about the international realm. Importantly, the pursuit of area-specific knowledge and IR theory-building must not be seen as a zero-sum game (Sil 2020, 269), but rather as complementary and collaborative



pathways toward identifying and answering critical real-world problems. Put simply, area-specific knowledge is fundamental to our ability to understand the increasingly complex, interconnected world that we live in. As Hodgett and Smith (2020, 1) note:

Context still matters, now more than ever; Area Studies, positioned at the intersection of the local and the global, the macro and the micro, can uncover and interrogate political, cultural and social contexts more fruitfully than any other conglomeration of disciplines.

This paper is by no means the first call for more collaboration between IR and area studies (e.g., Modelski 1961; Onar and Nicolaïdis 2013), nor even for areas studies to serve as a mediator between GIR and mainstream IR communities (D’Amato, Dian, and Russo 2022). What should be highlighted here is the “New” in “New Area Studies.” NAS involves a fundamental turn away from geographically and territorially fixed “areas” toward more dynamic understandings that incorporate trans-regional and interdisciplinary inquiry and collaborations (Mielke and Hornidge 2017) in ways that “reproblematise” what we think we already know (Hodgett and Smith 2020). This latter point is critically important, since GIR has been criticized for the ways it might reproduce the very hierarchies and essentialized structure of IR knowledge production that it aims to challenge (e.g., Barnett and Zarakol 2023). This had led to calls at least in some quarters for a “Global IR 2.0” (Eun 2023) that builds on GIR’s success in identifying Western-centrism and calling for theoretical pluralism, but in a way that more successfully identifies and dismantles essentialist approaches. This vision of “Global IR 2.0” aligns closely with the commitment by NAS scholars to reconsider old ideas about global power structures in ways that expose and challenge epistemic hegemony (Barrios Aquino 2024).

Second, NAS involves embracing genuine interdisciplinary collaborations – or even what Houben (2020) has called “post-disciplinary” approaches - based on knowledge production and research practices that break through disciplinary boundaries. In this sense, NAS is intended to be a “meeting place” where scholars can move out of disciplinary silos to engage in conversations about global challenges as they are understood in different localities and from different perspectives to create an expansive and *human*-centered approach to explore the world of international politics. (Hodgett 2020, 3-5). Of course, area studies



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programs have always been multi-disciplinary in the sense of bringing together scholars attached to different disciplines. But this is not enough to realize “the possibility that knowledge about social and international phenomena is essentially interdisciplinary in character” (Sil 2000, 6). Indeed, the persistence of disciplinary structures in the production of knowledge and the significance of disciplines in marking the professional identities of scholars has been limiting what the most committed proponents of area studies can do. This is precisely the hurdle that NAS seeks to overcome with its embrace of a more fundamental sort of interdisciplinarity that goes beyond the juxtaposition of discipline-bound ideas.

This effort is not only consistent with but stands to greatly benefit GIR given the latter’s commitment to a more interdisciplinary rethinking of what international relations encompasses. Yet from an institutional perspective, there is much work to be done. As mentioned above, GIR emerged from—and remains largely within—the academic discipline of political science. True, GIR was “born” at an annual meeting of the International Studies Association, which describes itself as an interdisciplinary association focused on understanding with members from 100 countries. In that sense, the ISA scholarly community self-consciously crosses disciplinary boundaries much more than discipline-based peer organizations such as the American Political Science Association, the Political Studies Association or the International Political Science Association. Even so, ISA’s membership remains heavily concentrated with political scientists, especially those from the Global North. This predominance of political scientists within the organization inevitably shapes the nature of scholarly exchanges, privileging certain research questions over others, rewarding some approaches and being skeptical of others, and taking certain concepts and assumptions as fundamental while eschewing others.

Extending the issue to human rights scholarship, there is little doubt that more interdisciplinary engagement – especially between the social sciences and the humanities – would deepen our understanding of the nexus between the global human rights system and the ways that rights are conceptualized, contested and discussed in different spaces. This requires channels of communication between human rights scholars and practitioners and country/area experts (and not only those in the West) who can provide a context-sensitive understanding of local norms and practices, which in turn can lead to an authentic “pluralistic

universalism” that takes seriously non-Western ideas, norms, institutions, and experiences on their own terms (Doherty-Sil 2025).

Just one example of the power of interdisciplinarity emerges from a recent examination of the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights (ACHPR), which was adopted in 1981 by the Organization of African Unity. This charter is widely heralded as one of the three institutionalized regional human rights systems (with Europe and the Americas being the other two), as well as the first non-Western declaration of human rights. It also exists as a critically important member of the constellation of global organizations and instruments to promote and protect international human rights (Chekol Doğan 2024; Amnesty International 2006). But viewing the ACHPR only through the lens of international law and politics may tell a misleading story of its meaning. To interrogate the genesis of the ACHPR and the meaning of rights in the African context, Rubner (2023) probes multiple strands of African identity, including debates within newly-independent Africa about the meaning of colonialism and post-colonialism for literature, religion, identity (*negritude*), education and language. By situating human rights in broader African political and cultural debates, Rubner offers a powerful corrective to much contemporary human rights discourse; far from being a simple corollary to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, he argues that the ACHPR rather emerged from a *rejection* of Western so-called universalism and a desire for content driven by the needs and realities of Africa (Rubner 2023, 645).

The point here is not to determine here whether Rubner is fully correct in his analysis, but rather to emphasize the way that the entire analysis was transformed by incorporating the debates that were animating public and intellectual discourse in other domains in post-colonial Africa. To be sure, critically important political debates among states were unfolding at the United Nations and at the Organization of African Unity, but equally important debates about African identity and rights were at the heart of discussion in domains that we normally think of as within the humanities. Putting these “humanities” debates in conversation with political events offers a different lens into the motivations and meanings that newly independent African actors attached to human rights and to their role of post-colonial Africa in the international system.

Disciplinary boundaries and silos can make this kind of holistic analysis challenging. In human rights scholarship, for example, the disconnect between “global” and



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“local” -- or “top down” and “bottom up” -- analyses are palpable. (Recall Hopgood’s distinction between globalized *Human Rights* and localized *human rights*.) Within university settings, disciplinary structures even within the social sciences tend to reinforce this tension, as is evident in the different framing of substantively similar issues in different disciplines. That is, disciplinary boundaries do not merely structure (and limit) research (Sil and Doherty 2000); they influence teaching as well. In teaching about human rights, for example, syllabi in anthropology or sociology courses are radically different from those found in typical political science or international relations courses.

Transcending the disciplinary divide requires a focused effort to bring different voices and perspectives together. One promising discipline-crossing approach is the work of Sally Engle Merry (an anthropologist) on “mapping the middle” (2006) between international and local human rights discourses, especially through “vernacularization” strategies that adapt international human rights language to national and local communities (Levitt and Merry 2009). Merry’s work is not just an example of crossing disciplinary boundaries within a research program; it also highlights the ways that dialogue between the “global” human rights activists and local actors can result in transformation for all involved. Importantly, transnational engagement offers opportunities for those in more privileged or hegemonic positions to change their own views as a result of a deeper understanding of what James Scott (1998) refers to as *metis*, local knowledge as seen in long-standing local practices. Admittedly, Merry’s work is a very limited example of interdisciplinarity in that it exists only within the social sciences. For GIR as well as human rights scholarship, there is much more to be done in moving past the disciplinary silos that separate social sciences from other fields.

Finally, NAS is centrally premised on the importance of collaborations with local actors—especially those in non-elite communities—in the co-production of research. It would be hard to find any disagreement with this premise among GIR and human rights scholars; yet in both domains, there is a long way to go. Institutional barriers continue to impede the ability of scholars from the Global South to participate fully in research opportunities that are available to scholars of the Global North. For example, the preeminence of English-language journals constitute daunting obstacles for scholars whose



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first language is other than English. Furthermore, international conference travel is prohibitively expensive for too many scholars. And despite calls for greater inclusivity in IR, there is a sense among many scholars from the Global South that non-Western regions are too often considered to be *objects* of study rather than sources of knowledge production themselves (Global South Caucus 2016). For example, after the 2025 annual meeting of the International Studies Association, Gustavo de Carvalho (a Brazilian researcher based in South Africa) published a blog post with the telling title, “Global IR’s Unfinished Revolution: Empire of Theory, Periphery of Practice.” In it, he emphasizes what he called parallel worlds of knowledge at the conference:

The implicit hierarchy of knowledge was evident in how traditional security discussions on NATO dynamics and American strategic doctrines appeared positioned as central to the discipline, while equally pressing issues—Sahelian food insecurity, Pacific Island climate vulnerability and African Union peacekeeping innovations—were structured primarily within specialised regional tracks.

This created an intellectual stratification ... While panels on decolonial theory and indigenous epistemologies certainly existed, their relative separation from what is perceived as “mainstream” conversations suggests that ISA’s journey toward genuine intellectual pluralism remains incomplete (de Carvalho 2025).

NAS can provide an intellectual umbrella for those who seek to overcome such hierarchies and bridge these very different intellectual projects. One development that may help in this regard is the enhanced ability of researchers in the regions of the Global South to generate and share deep knowledge about their own countries and regions (Sil 2020). One can hope that this trend will continue and eventually provide an institutional foundation for what NAS and GIR both hope to achieve: to expand interdisciplinary area-specific knowledge, to leverage this knowledge for an in-depth understanding of diverse locales and regions, and to encourage closer and more balanced intellectual engagements with scholarly communities embedded in different countries and regions (particularly those of the Global South).

Conclusion



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This article has argued that New Area Studies (NAS) stands as a natural ally in efforts to advance and increase the impact of Global International Relations (GIR). NAS and GIR share some key starting assumptions— including the importance of regions, regionalism and area studies for understanding the international world, as well as the importance of ensuring that scholars from non-elite communities to play a stronger role in the production of research. Furthermore, both traditions share a stated commitment to interdisciplinarity, though the disproportionate role of political scientists in GIR has made it less successful than NAS in this regard. Finally in their quest to uncover *both* diversity and commonalities across different places, GIR and NAS are positioned to offer deeper insight into what Hodgett and Smith call the “profoundly global experience of being human” (2020, 4).

Within the context of human rights, these areas of overlap may prove particularly useful to getting beyond the stale debates over universalism and relativism. Indeed, closer attention to the lived experiences of actors in different areas and to the discourses generated within scholarly communities in those areas can provide a natural middle-ground between ardent proponents of universalist and particularistic visions of human rights interpretations. And the emphasis on a more essentially interdisciplinary conception of international human rights can help get beyond problematics that are too closely tied to specific disciplines such as political science and international relations, paving the way for more open-ended explorations of such fundamental questions as the origins and meanings of specific human rights institutions or practices.

To date, NAS and GIR have followed separate paths in improving the prospects for more expansive and fruitful intellectual dialogues across research communities. Such dialogues will be critical over the long-term to give us a better understanding an increasingly complex (and often turbulent) world. However, there is more to be done, particularly when it comes to the co-production – and balanced exchange – of knowledge among scholars and actors situated in different regions and with different levels of resources and access. While this is a problem that NAS and GIR both recognize and seek to address, the vast material differences within and across regions—particularly between the Global North and Global South – continue to stand in the way of more inclusive and impactful engagement among scholarly communities situated in different parts of the world, limiting the possibilities for novel insights and creative explorations. The efforts of scholars identifying with



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NAS and/or GIR provide some hope for gradually increasing the scope for global collaborations and conversations that are not chained to existing institutional structures and do not reinforce existing hierarchies of knowledge.

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