

No. 2

**International Relations and Area Studies:
Towards a New Synthesis?**

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the changing relationship between area studies and international relations with specific reference to Asia. I focus on two new developments which may point to a fusion between traditional area studies and the discipline of international relations. The first may be termed “Disciplinary Area Studies”, which includes scholars who are “regionally-oriented disciplinarians (or social scientists, to use an American term)”, and “discipline-oriented regionalists”. The former’s main specialization is theory (usually drawn from Europe and the US global role), but they have been attracted to Asia for a variety of reasons, including its economic rise, and the growing importance of Asian powers, China, Japan and India and Asian regional institutions. This in contrast to the earlier attention to Asia from international relations scholars, which was mainly due to its role as a Cold War flashpoint. The latter category, “discipline-oriented regionalists”, includes scholars whose initial primary focus might have been on regional affairs, but who have now increasingly embraced theory, not the least because of the entry of the “regionally-oriented disciplinarians” whose contribution has been to inspire younger scholars from the region to undertake theory-guided research.

The development stems from the impact of globalization, which has called into question the relevance of areas (regions) as units of analysis. The practitioners of “transnational area studies”, who may be called “transnational regionalists”, are primarily trained in regional affairs, but they are also increasingly interested and involved in comparative research on trans-regional phenomena, especially those linked to the effects of globalization.

These two approaches are not mutually exclusive. Unlike disciplinary Area Studies scholars, transnational regionalists are not necessarily theory guided, but are interested in looking beyond their respective areas and hence in comparative studies of issues which are transnational in scope, such as Aids, terrorism, etc. I argue that Area Studies will continue to be important despite the challenge posed by disciplinary perspectives and the effects of globalization. What is of real concern is not the end of Area Studies, but the need for it to engage new approaches that straddle and synthesize Area Studies and disciplinary social sciences in an era of globalization.

There is an enormous potential for a creative synthesis between Area Studies and disciplinary perspectives which will advance the frontiers of knowledge in international relations. The challenge for both Area Studies and disciplinary approaches to international relations is to engage and accommodate these approaches.

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Acharya's publications include 12 books (including five self-authored and seven edited or co-edited), an *Adelphi Paper* for the International Institute for Strategic Studies, a *Pacific Strategic Paper* for the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, and numerous other monographs, book chapters and articles in such journals as *Pacific Review*, *Journal of Peace Research*, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, *International Security*, *International Organization and Survival*. Among his academic books are: *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001, Chinese transnational published by Shanghai People's Press, 2004), and *Regionalism and Multilateralism: Essays on Cooperative Security in the Asia Pacific*, 2nd edition (Eastern Universities Press, 2003). His earlier book, *The Quest for Identity: International Relations of Southeast Asia*, (Oxford, 2000) was reviewed in the journal *Pacific Affairs* as the "as the best work on Southeast Asian regionalism available." He is co-editor of *Reassessing Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific*, (MIT Press, 2005).

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Acharya is also a regular writer and commentator on key developments in international public affairs. His public interest books include *The Age of Fear: Power Versus Principle in the War on Terror* (New Delhi: Rupa & Co and Singapore Marshall Cavendish, 2004). His international media appearances include interviews with CNN, BBC World Service, CNBC and Channel News Asia (Singapore). His recent op-eds have appeared in *Financial Times*, *International Herald Tribune*, *Straits Times*, *Far Eastern Economic Review*, *Japan Times*, and *YaleGlobal Online*, covering such topics as Asian security, regional cooperation, the war on terror, the situation in Burma, and the rise of China and India.

His areas of specialization include regionalism and multilateralism, Asian regional security and international relations theory.

**International Relations and Area Studies:
Towards a New Synthesis?
(With Special Reference to Asia)¹**

Amitav Acharya

*(Revised version of a paper presented to the “Workshop on the Future of
Interdisciplinary Area Studies in the UK”, St Anthony’s College, Oxford University,
6-7 December 2005)*

This paper reflects on the changing relationship between area studies and disciplinary approaches to international relations with a focus on Asia. Despite this particular geographic and disciplinary focus, this paper has relevance for other regions and disciplines. In particular, it discusses two challenges that the traditional area studies approach has faced in recent years. The first comes from disciplinary (or what is known in the US as the social science approach) perspectives on international relations, especially those informed by theory. The second stems from the impact of globalization, which has called into question the relevance of areas (regions) as units of analysis.

The main argument of this paper is that while neither has rendered area studies obsolete, they have confronted it with new and creative approaches that combine the strengths of both. One such approach may be termed as “disciplinary area studies” whose members include both “regionally-oriented disciplinarians” (primarily disciplinary scholars looking at regional phenomena, often comparatively), as well as “discipline-oriented regionalists” (primarily area specialists who have accepted and adopted theoretical frameworks from a particular discipline). A second trend is the emergence of “transnational area studies”

¹ This paper draws from the author’s keynote address to the inaugural workshop of the Asian Political and International Studies Association (APISA), 1-2 November, 2001, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. It is also informed by the author’s involvement, as a member of the International Editorial Boards, of four journals: *Pacific Review*, *Pacific Affairs*, *Global Governance* and *European Journal of International Relations*, as well as his co-editorship of Stanford University Press’s *Studies in Asian Security* series.

which is interested in studying phenomena linked to the impact of globalization on issue areas and “victim communities” across regions. The classical area studies perspective, instead of defending its turf and taking a narrow, exclusionary attitude towards these phenomena, can do well to accommodate these perspectives in order to revitalize and strengthen itself.

Area Studies versus the Discipline

The relationship between what David Ludden (1998:1) of the University of Pennsylvania has called “universal disciplinary knowledge” and “area-specific, inter-disciplinary knowledge”, has attracted much controversy in the West, especially in the US. Area studies is distinguished by an emphasis on field research, a certain amount of multi-disciplinarity, and, above all, life-long devotion to studying a nation or region. A disciplinary approach, by contrast, seeks to identify “lawful regularities, which, by definition, must not be context bound.” (Bates, 1997:166) Discipline-based scholars aspire to be social scientists, who “do not seek to master the literature on a region, but rather to master the literature of a discipline.” (Bates, 1997:166)

In the US, area studies was conceived in the post-World War II period as a way of identifying America’s “next” enemies. It evolved more as a response to the “Sputnik” than to sentimental curiosities about Balinese dance. The end of the Cold War thus deprived area studies of its strategic rationale. Taking full advantage of this situation are the proponents of formal theory (especially rational choice) in American academia. Formal theorists see the primary function of area studies to be the provision of raw data for theory testing. They attack area specialists for being little more than “‘real estate agents’ with a stake in a plot of land rather than an intellectual theory”. Their work has been described variously as “a-theoretical”, “journalistic”, and “mushy”. They are faulted for not knowing statistics, for “offering resistance to rigorous methods for evaluating arguments”, for not generating “scientific knowledge” and for being “cameras”, rather than “thinkers”. (Shea, 1997:A12-A13) In contrast, disciplinary social science was seen, in the words of the former President of the Social Science Research

Council David Featherman, as being more “universally applicable and globally useful.”
(Cited in Ludden, 1998:2)

One of the more balanced criticisms of area studies in the US has been offered by Arjun Appadurai:

The area studies tradition is a double-edged sword. In a society notoriously devoted to exceptionalism, and to endless preoccupation with “America”, this tradition has been a tiny refuge for the serious study of foreign languages, alternative worldviews, and large-scale perspectives on socio-cultural change outside Europe and the United States. Bedeviled by a certain tendency toward philology (in the narrow, lexical sense) and a certain over-identification with the regions of its specialization, area studies has nonetheless been one of the few serious counterweights to the tireless tendency to marginalize huge parts of the world in the American academy and American society more generally. Yet the area-studies tradition has probably grown too comfortable with its own maps of the world, too secure in its own expert practices, and too insensitive to transnational processes both today and in the past. So criticism and reform are certainly in order, but how can area studies help to improve the way that world pictures are generated in the United States? (Arjun Appadurai, 1996, p.17)

While this has been an American debate, as Winichakul (AAS, 1997:7), points out, it has implications beyond the US and is a helpful starting point for identifying some of the challenges facing the relationship between area studies and international relations in Asia. There are many reasons why one must reject the criticism of area studies in Asia by discipline-oriented scholars. (See AAS, 1997) Especially pertinent is James Scott’s warning that purely disciplinary approaches centered on formal theory would fail to illuminate “real societies and the conduct of historically situated human agents.” (AAS, 1997:2) Moreover, the crisis in area studies should not be exaggerated. John Coatsworth of Harvard University argues that area studies in the USA, far from being dead or obsolete has simply become institutionalized in the universities. Embedding area studies in the universities, he suggests, also helped to promote more basic, as opposed to applied research, which was key feature of earlier “Title 6” area studies.²

² Remarks at the Oxford Area Studies Conference, 6-7 December 2005.

On the other hand, the area studies approach shows three tendencies, which are especially problematic for students of international relations. First, area studies scholars (at least in so far as Asia is concerned) are somehow reluctant to recognise the importance of scholarly studies of region-wide trends or patterns undertaken from a discipline-based theoretical perspective. They seem to be skeptical of work whose main focus is the study of the region as a whole, rather than its individual countries. This tendency comes naturally in relation to Asia, a continent whose sheer physical, cultural, political and linguistic diversity makes it difficult to for anyone to claim credible specialization on more than one country. Hence, scholars who study the international relations and security of the region as a whole (using theoretical concepts as tools of generalization) have not been viewed favourably by their area studies colleagues. The relative non-recognition of international relations scholarship is also aggravated by the fact that area studies associations, especially those related to Asia, and their conventions in US, Canada, Australia are thoroughly dominated by scholars from the humanities such as history, geography, and anthropology. These scholars often dismiss works on Asian international relations and security issues that engages the literature of the discipline, rather than just the literature of the region only and especially when such work has policy relevance. While area specialists in America justifiably complain of discrimination in the hands of discipline-based scholars, they also routinely look down upon writings on regions undertaken by the latter.

Second, the area studies approach suffers from a tendency towards exceptionalism. Exceptionalism is the tendency among scholars to reify and essentialize shared characteristics and relationships to counter and exclude outsiders' perspectives. Such exceptionalism is a poor and sometimes dangerous basis for scholars to organize themselves. Claims of exceptionalism, whether individual or collective, national or regional, often do not stand up to rigorous scholarly scrutiny. They shut the door to genuine ideational intercourse between the global and the regional, or between regions. Even more importantly, academic exceptionalism is vulnerable to governmental abuse. This is a point made by the critics of the "Asian Values" concept, which they see as an ideology of authoritarianism in Asia. Some area specialists on Asia have promoted the

“Asian Way”, to slow down progress towards more institutionalized multilateral political and security cooperation in the region.

Third, one cannot ignore the “a-theoretical” (and anti-theoretical) nature of traditional area studies. Indeed, it can be said, arguably, that the basic distinction between area studies approach and disciplinary approaches boils down to the question of theory, especially the former’s lack of interest in it.

This assertion must be qualified though, because not all area studies scholarship has been without a theoretical framing or contribution. For example, Hans Evers, in an interesting essay titled “The Challenge of Diversity: Basic Concepts and Theories in the Study of South-East Asian Societies,” pointed to a number of concepts, such as J.S. Furnivall’s “plural societies,” J.H. Boeke’s “dualistic economies” or “dual organization”, Clifford Geertz’s “agricultural involution” and J. Embree’s “loosely structured social systems”, which are generated from Southeast Asian area studies but which could be and was indeed used by other scholars as the basis of their own inquiry into their own respective regions. (Evers, 1980; Acharya, 2000) An interesting feature of some of these works was their comparative focus: Geertz’s “agricultural involution” compared Javanese social development with that of Japan, while Embree’s “loosely structured social systems” contrasted Japanese and Thai rural society. Another aspect was the attempt to develop distinctive typologies of social and political organization; thus, Furnivall’s “plural societies,” described a distinct Southeast Asian form of social organization, which had developed in Burma, Malaya, and the Netherlands Indies toward the end of colonial rule. Boeke’s “dualistic economies” or “dual organization” presented a model describing how capitalist economic development under colonial rule, including the influx of mass products from the metropolitan countries, produced an economic duality in which the lower stratum of society sank into greater poverty while the upper stratum became richer, urbanized, and Westernized.

Nonetheless, among the students of comparative politics in Asia, attempts to develop and engage even the so-called mid-range theories popular with their Western counterparts

have been sparse. Moreover, an observation can be made that area studies' engagement of theory and the theoretical import of such scholarship has been more evident in comparative politics, sociology, geography and anthropology than in international relations and security studies, reflecting, as noted above, the dominance of these disciplines in Asian studies. Area studies scholars on Asia have been noticeably inhospitable to any theory, not just the rational choice variety, especially in the discipline of international relations and security studies. In international relations, theoretical work has been dreaded and despised. Across Asia, the mere mention of the word "theory" is sure to induce panic attacks in the classrooms.

A chief reason for this is the persisting Western dominance, including Americanocentrism of international political theory. (Acharya and Buzan, 2005) The irony here is that while "area" in the US has traditionally meant areas besides the US, "theory" in the US has meant the distinctive experiences of Euro-North Atlantic countries. (Acharya, 2000; Alagappa, 1998: 9) Ethnocentrism, whether deliberate or inadvertent, can lead to alienation; defined as feeling estranged or lacking a sense of belonging. Aversion to, or rejection of theory, is commonplace in Asia because scholars often "find the great debates and theoretical breakthroughs...[of their discipline] taking place with complete disregard for the totality of world culture – especially of their own. (Acharya, 2000:1)

A second reason for the lack of interest in theory is what Ben Anderson (1984:43-44) has called the "proximity to power" enjoyed by academics in the region. While Anderson referred to indigenous Southeast Asian scholars then, this can be applied to the whole of Asia now. Today, this proximity to power is reflected in the abundance of policy-oriented and policy-relevant (the two are different) research, which in turn inhibits the need for, and interest in, theoretical work.

Not only have area studies scholars shunned international relations theory, among those who have embraced the latter have mostly done so without any conscious attempt to discern or draw upon non-Western traditions and thinking. In addressing the question,

“why is there no non-Western international relations theory” under a project bearing the same title, Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan found that the problem is not just one of Western dominance, but also of lack of institutional resources as well as a belief that Western social science and international relations theory has already provided answers to the central questions about Asian regional relations. (Acharya and Buzan, 2005)

Increasingly many scholars in Asia recognize the need to move beyond a traditional area studies approach to the study of Asia’s international relations. Two main perspectives on how to accomplish this have emerged. Alagappa (1998: 9) suggests one path when he points out that: “Asia is fertile ground to debate, test, and develop many of these [Western] concepts and competing theories, and to counteract the ethnocentric bias.” While I agree with this observation, I also see this as a partial response to the challenge we face. The problem of ethnocentrism will not disappear by using the Asian empirical record primarily to “test” available North Atlantic theories. This will merely reinforce the image of area studies as little more than provider of “raw data” to American theory, whether rationalist or post-rationalist.

Scholars in Asia, especially younger scholars, if and when they see the need for theoretical construct, often turn instinctively to American theoretical debates first. When there is a misfit between their empirical observations and American theory, we see some revision or modification of that particular theory. But the terms of the modification are already decided by American debates and modeling. This inhibits independent and creative analysis of Asian patterns and trends. It also leads to questionable generalizations, such as the image of Asia as a “dangerous place”, or the claim that the Asian world-view and the Asian pattern of international relations are quintessentially realist. This has perhaps less to do with reality than to the state of theoretical play in America from which Asian writers, as most other writers about Asia, derive their assumptions and models. Such dependence also means that patterns of interactions in Asia which lie outside of the theoretical debates in the USA or North Atlantic are seldom recognised or analysed.

Recent years has seen the emergence of a new type of scholarship, which engages Asian international relations from a disciplinary perspective. The economic rise of Asia, the growing importance of Japan, China and India as global actors, and the new regionalism in Asia, have drawn the attention of Western scholars of international relations who were not trained in the Asian studies tradition. Such scholars in the US include Peter Katzenstein, Etel Solingen, Miles Kahler, and John Ikenberry, and in the UK, Barry Buzan. Their contribution to the study of Asian international relations have been significant, nonetheless, offering novel insights, helping to develop tools for comparative analysis and most importantly, helping to redress exclusion of Asia from the mainstream of international relations theorizing. These scholars may be termed “regionally-oriented disciplinarians.”

A second perspective that looks beyond the traditional area studies approach holds that regional world views or patterns of interaction should be highlighted and generalized from, on their own terms, whether or not they fit a particular American/Western theoretical perspective or paradigm. In this view, Asian scholars could derive original theoretical insights from indigenous political traditions. Hence, the Chinese Warring States period and the Tributary System has increasingly become a source of theoretical generalizations in China as an alternative to the Westphalian model of inter-state relations. This approach could also work with Asian political thinkers, both classical and modern that seeks to develop insights from the thoughts of Kautilya and Confucius, or the practices of Nehru or Sukarno, just as Western IR theory has developed from the works of Machiavelli and Marx or the policies of Woodrow Wilson and Henry Kissinger. Taken together, those who have turned their attention to this sort of approach may be termed “discipline-oriented regionalists”. Although their work is primarily on a region, it does have a strong disciplinary orientation, in the sense that they not only use international relations theory to guide their analysis of regional events and patterns, but through their analysis of regional events, they also hope to contribute to the developments of theoretical and analytical tools for international relations as a discipline. One can find examples of this in scholars working in regional academic centers in Asia, where a significant contributing factor is the fact that the original training of these scholars was in

the discipline of international relations at Western institutions before their return to their home countries. Some of the more important names in this category include Takashi Inoguchi in Japan, Qin Yaqing in China, Chung In-Moon in South Korea and Muthiah Alagappa, a Malaysian working on Southeast Asia at the East-West Center in the USA.

The debate over area studies in the US has ended in stalemate and compromise rather than the outright defeat of area studies, as some had initially expected or even hoped for. Advocates of area studies were sufficiently persuasive for even the pro-discipline Social Science Research Council to accept the need for combining the universality of social science with the area specificity of the humanities, in a framework that came to be called “context-sensitive social science.” (Ludden, 1998:4) Even one of the hardest opponents of area studies, Harvard’s Robert Bates (1997), has called for developing “analytic narratives” that marry “local knowledge” with rational choice theory. Bates proposes that formal models, such as rational choice approaches, could be applied to study cultural distinctions which lie at the core of area studies. On the opposite end, scholars have called for the use of “local knowledge”, such as cultural variables, to illuminate the sources of “rational” state interests and preferences. This has been a key claim of constructivism in the study of foreign policy and international relations, which, under the hegemony of neorealism and neoliberalism, assumed, rather than investigated state preferences.

A challenge for discipline-oriented regionalists is to engage in comparative work that seeks to develop general insights and concept constructs from one regional experience to explain events and phenomena in the outside world. After all, if European and North Atlantic regional politics could be turned into international relations theory, why not Asian regional politics? Ben Anderson’s work on nationalism and James Scott’s work on resistance offers important examples of how “local knowledge” can be turned into definitive frameworks for analyzing global processes. One could also think of similar contributions from other disciplines, such as anthropologist Edmund Leach’s *Political Systems of Highland Burma*, (1954) which is now used to underscore fluid notions of ethnic identity. There are many other aspects of Asian politics and international relations

that offer opportunities for similar efforts. For example, studies of Asian regional institution-building, which has received increasing attention lately, is a rich source of generalizations about the process dynamics of regional and international cooperation. (Acharya, 2001)

It is possible to make important contributions to the study of global phenomena from a regional vantage point without being unduly exceptionalist. European international relations scholarship offers a good example of how this can be done. In international relations, we have the “English School” (on international society) and the “Copenhagen School” (on security-identity nexus). Asia can claim no distinctive perspective on politics and international relations. We do not have a New Delhi, or a Tokyo or a Bangkok School. A partial exception might be the “Singapore School” once associated with the “Asian Values” concept, but its distinctiveness was more in the policy arena than as a contribution to a theory of politics. Many of the European schools are important counters to dominant US perspectives, the English School against American rationalist-realist scholarship, the Copenhagen school against American realism and American constructivism. They have challenged Americanocentrism without falling into the trap of exceptionalism. The development of similar perspectives in Asia is an important challenge.

The dangers of exceptionalism and parochialism discussed above can be further avoided with certain institutional responses. Two are especially noteworthy. The first is that any attempt at bringing the two together should involve not only encouragement of the study of political and international studies *of* Asia, but also of politics and international studies *in* Asia. The vast majority of political scientists and international relations scholars living and working in Asia happen to be specialists on the region. It will be unfortunate if we are to neglect those, however small in number, who study the outside world from their vantage points in Asia. The best approach should be as much to encourage Asia-based scholars who specialise on politics and international studies in general, as of those (whether Asia- or outside-based) who are specialists on the politics and international relations of the region.

The second challenge concerns the extent to which regionalization (read “Asianization” in the context of this paper) should be advocated as an antidote to Western dominance. If by Asianization we mean securing greater participation by indigenous scholars in research, teaching and debates in various related fields, then one ought to embrace it strongly. The need for greater Asianization of funding of political and international studies is also evident. Social science research and networking in Asia today receives more support from foundations and government agencies from the West than from Asian foundations and donors, who seem far more eager to endow chairs at prestigious Western academic institutions than contributing to their local counterparts in Asia. But if Asianization becomes an excuse for narrowly delimiting the field, or to discourage the participation of non-Asian scholars and discussion of non-Asian (Western) ideas, then we must reject it firmly.

Nonetheless, although encouraging scholars and promoting institutional conditions for research and teaching within Asia, and securing greater Asian participation in seminars, conferences, and language studies, and generating more resources for Asian scholars are important tasks, these activities should not exclusively benefit Asian, or Asia-based scholars. Moreover, while one should encourage more journals and monographs on politics and international studies which are published and edited in Asia, this must not discourage Asian scholars from publishing in the West. One should not turn Asian journals into being mere outlets for work that could not be published in the West. Such regionalization/Asianization, in my view, would lead to a decline of the quality of Asian scholarship.

Globalization and Trans-regionalism

The second problem faced by area studies approach to Asia concerns the impact of globalization. “The whole globalization discourse has benefited the social sciences, not area studies”, claims David Ludden.³ The rise of globalisation has presented area studies with at least three main challenges.

³ Remarks at the Oxford Area Studies Conference, 6-7 December 2005.

The first concerns the argument that globalization has produced shared experiences across regions and created transnational communities of affected people (victims) across issue areas which cannot be examined strictly in terms of geography or national origins. In a powerful summary of this perspective, Willa Tanabe (Undated, 3-4) writes:

“Area study scholars perhaps failed to recognize the importance of global forces because they misconstrued the geography of cultural areas. The geography of the Philippines is no longer bounded by oceans surrounding the Philippine islands; rather, we can map Filipino culture as a flow chart that includes Hong Kong, Saudi Arabia, N. Marianas and Los Angeles. We must recognize that communities and areas can be mapped in very different ways. The Thai bar girl in Tokyo and the Filipino bar girl in Palau must be examined in terms of what they have in common as part of the community of foreign workers as well as how they differ because of the local responses to foreign workers. If we see that our notion of area can no longer be a bounded system of social, national or cultural categories and that the most critical issues today are those that cross borders, then we face the question of how to recognize and reconceive the ways we do scholarship. Area studies must cross borders to remain relevant.

Globalization also challenges the importance of some of the more salient traditional concerns and orientations of traditional area studies. One issue is the emphasis on language studies. In the past, area specialists used to complain about the dearth of learning facilities for Asian languages at Asian academic institutions. It was far easier to study Mandarin in the USA than in Thailand, to learn *Bahasa Indonesia* in Australia than in Singapore. Now, the concerns have shifted to question about the very need for language expertise. English has unquestionably emerged as the language of globalization. One of the most powerful demonstrations of this fact came in 2001 when the then Chinese President, Jiang Zemin, conducted the entire proceedings of the APEC summit in Shanghai in October 2001 in English, rather than in Mandarin.

A third key challenge posed by globalization, one that is especially important to scholars of international relations, concerns the relevance of “region” as a unit of analysis. Some perspectives on globalization hold that it is not only undermining the nation-state, but also rendering the concept of “region” less distinctive and hence analytical less useful.

Yet, two recent books, the first by Barry Buzan and Ole Waever and the second by Peter Katzenstein, argue forcefully that regions' have not only retained their importance, but might also have acquired a greater salience as units of analysis and policymaking in the post-Cold War era. (Buzan and Waever, 2003; Katzenstein, 2005) They argue that post-Cold War international system is increasingly regionalized, and that regional level or analysis and regional actors/institutions have an increasing autonomy which cannot be understood simply by focusing on developments and forces at the global level. These works thus challenge both the hyper-globalisation perspective on one extreme and those who insist on the continued centrality of the nation-state on the other.

Just as globalization has not rendered the nation-state irrelevant, it has not dampened discourses about regional identity. But it warrants going beyond the traditional conception of regions as relatively self-contained politico-cultural units. During the Cold War, political scientists used the term "subordinate systems" to link regional dynamics with dominant global structures. A more appropriate way of looking at "region" today would be to view them as "regional worlds", coined by a University of Chicago project which encourages regional thinking about global forces without assuming the automatic dominance of the latter. As Arjun Appadorai notes: "all world areas now produce their own pictures of the world and not just of themselves." The challenge for Asian scholars should thus be to "recognize that areas are not just places, but are also locations for the production of other world-pictures, which also need to be part of our sense of these other worlds." (AAS, 1997:6) In responding to the challenge of globalization, area studies scholars could offer regional perspectives on wider world issues, and not just concentrate on explaining Asian dynamics.

Instead of being discouraged by globalization, some area specialists have welcomed its impact in liberating the study of politics and international relations in Asia from the remaining vestiges of Orientalism. As Don Emmerson (2001:19) points out, globalization is especially beneficial to Southeast Asian Studies, which has been noticeably anti-Orientalist in recent decades. To this end, James Scott credits globalization for promoting greater indigenous scholarship in Southeast Asia. As he puts

it: “There was a time not long ago when many Southeast Asianists in Europe and North America lived in an intellectual world confined largely to their own nation or metropolitan language. Now, however, virtually every nation in Southeast Asia has a vibrant, creative scholarly community which, if anything, is producing the bulk of path-breaking work.” (AAS, 1997:1)

The prospects for area studies have improved of late as a result of two factors: a backlash against “globalisationology”, and the 9/11 attacks. Before the attacks, there was a growing recognition among scholars that the marginalization of area studies at the hands of “globalisationologists” has raised questions about the reliability of evidence for social science research. Too much focus on globalization has led to a “thinning of knowledge” owing to a bias towards data that fit global scenarios without taking into account regional realities.⁴ The 9/11 attacks led to a greater recognition of the problems created by lack of access to reliable knowledge about different areas of the world. John Coatsworth of Harvard University points to a post 9/11 revival of area studies as manifested in the substantial increase in the Fulbright program in the USA which saw some 3500 Americans funded for overseas travel last year, while 3500 foreigners were brought to US.⁵

There is an emerging breed of scholarship, which might be labeled as “transnational area studies” (and whose practitioners “transnational regionalists”) whose main contribution has been to use area studies knowledge to investigate transnational and trans-regional issues. These have the potential to offer the most effective response to the challenge posed by globalization to traditional area studies. These scholars may be experts on one region, but their research is informed by theory and thus is able to include or engage transnational phenomena across traditional area boundaries. One way trans-regionalists have responded to globalization is through comparative research. These scholars and institutions develop research programs that meet the increasing demand for teaching and research programmes that focus on transnational issues and institutions. Examples of

⁴ Remarks at the Oxford Area Studies Conference, 6-7 December 2005.

⁵ Remarks at the Oxford Area Studies Conference, 6-7 December 2005.

such trans-regional research programs in the West include the Centre for the Study of Globalization and Regionalization at the University of Warwick, which has focused on studying the causes and dynamics of globalization (and regionalization) in Europe and Asia, especially in the political economy arena. Others, such as the gender studies centre at the University of Chicago, have studied the impact of globalization on specific social groups. In both cases, the response has been to combine the resources of *both area and disciplinary scholars* in order to develop new lines of enquiry. The comparative regionalism project undertaken by Harvard University's Weatherhead Center and the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies in Singapore exemplifies the kind of collaborative research program involving Western and Asian academic centers that can effectively bridge area studies approaches with disciplinary ones.⁶

Conclusion

Area studies will continue to be important despite the challenge posed by disciplinary perspectives and the effects of globalization; witness the demand for Middle East and Islamic Studies specialists in the wake of the 11 September terror attacks. What is of real concern is not the end of area studies, but the need for it to engage new approaches that straddle and synthesize area studies and disciplinary social sciences in an era of globalization.

This paper has pointed to the emergence of two such approaches. The first is “disciplinary area studies” combining two orientations. This includes scholars who may be termed “regionally-oriented disciplinarians (or social scientists, to use an American term)”, and “discipline-oriented regionalists”. The former's main specialization is theory

6 While the organizing framework of this project draws heavily from international relations theory (theories or institution-design and change), the contributors comprise of those who are of a primarily area study orientation, such as Jeff Herbst (Africa) and Jorge Dominguez (Latin America), as well as scholars who do area studies from a pronounced international relations disciplinary orientation, such as Michael Barnett (Middle East), Khong Yuen Foong (Southeast Asia-security studies), Helen Nesadurai (Southeast Asia-IPE), Etel Solingen (Middle East), Jeff Checkel (Europe) and Frank Schimmelfenig (North Atlantic). The editors, myself (Southeast Asia and Asia Pacific) and Iain Johnston (China and East Asia), also belong in the later category (Acharya and Johnston, 2005). This should be instructive to Asian political scientists and international relations scholars as they come under increasing pressure to look beyond strictly Asian issues.

(usually drawn from Europe and the US global role), but they have been attracted to Asia for a variety of reasons, including its economic rise, and the growing importance of Asian powers, China, Japan and India and Asian regional institutions. This in contrast to the earlier attention to Asia from international relations scholars, which was mainly due to its role as a Cold War flashpoint. The latter category, “discipline-oriented regionalists”, includes scholars whose initial primary focus might have been on regional affairs, but who have now increasingly embraced theory, not the least because of the entry of the “regionally-oriented disciplinarians” whose contribution has been to inspire younger scholars from the region to undertake theory-guided research.

A second category of hybrid scholarship may be called “transnational area studies”, whose practitioners may be called “transnational regionalists”. These scholars are primarily trained in regional affairs, but they are also increasingly interested and involved in comparative research on trans-regional phenomena, especially those linked to the effects of globalization. These two approaches are not mutually exclusive. Unlike disciplinary area studies scholars, transnational regionalists are not necessarily theory guided, but are interested in looking beyond their respective areas and hence in comparative studies of issues which are transnational in scope, such as Aids, terrorism, etc.

The foregoing analysis points to several key features of these new approaches:

1. Increasing attention to theory by area specialists and vice-versa. This involves scholars adopting both “outside in” (looking at the region from a theoretical perspective) and “inside out” (looking at theory from a regional perspective) approaches.
2. Related to the above, the emergence of a new breed of scholars who are at the forefront of theory, but who also have deep grounding in the language, history, culture and politics of a country of region.
3. The increasing contribution of scholars based in regional centers of learning, relative to regional scholars based on Western centres of learning or western

scholars. Much of this goes unrecognized, however, even by those who rely on these regionally-based scholars and institutions.

4. Growing interest in comparative studies of regional dynamics, including comparative regionalization (focusing on political economy), regional institutions, and regional security orders.

Taken together, these new approaches offer enormous potential for a creative synthesis between area studies and disciplinary perspectives which will advance the frontiers of knowledge in international relations. The challenge for both area studies and disciplinary approaches to international relations is to engage and accommodate these approaches.

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