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Whose Ideas Matter? Agency and Power in Asian Regionalism

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Reading Amitav Acharya’s *Whose Ideas Matter?* is instructive in light of the reaction of Asian leaders to Kevin Rudd’s recent proposal for a new regionalism initiative, the Asia-Pacific Community. The largely negative reaction from members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), in particular, was strikingly similar to their initial reactions to previous attempts to challenge the regional architecture through initiatives like the Pacific Community and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum. Acharya argues that the successes and failures of such regional initiatives depended on the extent to which they conformed with, or could be ‘localised’ to align with, the norms associated with ASEAN, which include the norm of non-intervention, procedural norms of consensus, non-legalism, informality, non-binding resolutions and the avoidance of contentious bilateral issues. He builds the argument that these norms have their roots in early Asian and Afro-Asian meetings like the 1947 Asian Relations Conference and the Bandung Conference of 1955, and the articulation of these ideas in the speeches, writings and policies of Asian leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru, who Acharya credits with influencing other Asian leaders with his ideas on non-alignment and thereby strengthening the norm of non-intervention. In this way, he challenges those constructivist accounts of norm diffusion that place emphasis on external norm entrepreneurs, which have ‘ignored the ideational role of non-Western regional institutions’ and are ‘largely inspired by European personalities … and institutions’ (24). Employing the notion of ‘constitutive localisation’—a term which does not quite capture the complex processes of norm contestation and norm ‘repatriation’ that he details—Acharya argues that the way in which local actors engage with ‘external’ or ‘global’ norms determines their extent and the nature of their diffusion. In particular, he seeks to explain the lack of a strongly institutionalised multilateral security organisation in Asia, and suggests that conventional explanations, such as those which focus on US disinterest—due to the differences in material power between the United States and Asian states or the lack of a collective identity—are inadequate. He instead argues that a critique of collective defence pacts by key post-colonial Asian leaders, who were informed by both anti-colonial and anti-power politics beliefs, and ‘considered them threats to their sovereignty’, was consolidated as a norm, which continues to hold sway (70–1).

These arguments are convincing and the attempt to build a less Eurocentric, historised account of the normative basis of the international system in general, and Asian regionalism in particular, is long overdue. Recent events indicate that Acharya’s arguments about the nature of Asian regionalism continue to be relevant, since the failure to work within ASEAN’s normative structures was clearly a factor in the demise of Rudd’s Asia-Pacific Community idea. However, Acharya’s account of the history of the ideas of sovereignty and intervention in Asia also has shortcomings, for it does not fully reflect the complex engagement that Asian leaders had with these ideas. For instance, while they all rejected neocolonial interference and, in this respect, were staunch defenders of state sovereignty as Acharya suggests, this did not amount to support for an absolutist state sovereignty. As Roland Burke (2010) has argued in his *Decolonization and the Evolution of International Rights*, many Asian and African leaders, including Nehru, were vocal supporters of a universal and interventionist human rights regime, and this, too, was the product of their historical experience with colonialism and imperialism (see also Reus-Smit 2001). Indeed, the Bandung conference, which Acharya sees as a prime source of the ‘cognitive priors’ that underpin current ASEAN norms, prominently combined a focus on human rights with...
self-determination (21). In this respect, the norms embodied by ASEAN are a clear departure from those promoted at Bandung. Accounting for the marginalisation of these ideas is necessary for a more complete understanding of the history of sovereignty in Asia and for Acharya’s stated goal of ‘bringing Asia into the domain of international relations theory’ (144). As he argues, Asian ideas have played an important role in the development of global norms, but this is true not just of sovereignty and non-intervention, but also of democracy and human rights.

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Since the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, observers of international affairs have paid increased attention to the political ideology often referred to as ‘neoconservatism’. Leading proponents of the neoconservative view are often credited with shaping US President George W. Bush’s ‘War on Terrorism’. Renewed interest in neoconservatism brought about intense academic discussion. Some authors, such as John Ikenberry and Francis Fukuyama, maintained that the ‘neoconservative moment’ was coming to a close. The legacy of intervention in Iraq would dull the group’s enthusiasm for further war-making. Subsequent scholars, including Justin Vaïsse and Jacob Heilbrunn, argued, by contrast, that neoconservatism had staying power. Regardless of the outcome in Iraq, the neoconservatives would remain influential.

Each of these scholars made valuable contributions to the study of neoconservatism. Yet few of them sought to locate the outlook explicitly in the realm of political theory. Jean-François Drolet’s book, American Neoconservatism: The Politics and Culture of a Reactionary Idealism, aims to address this lacuna. A lecturer in international relations at City University, London, Drolet published four articles on neoconservatism while he developed his doctoral dissertation into his first book. In Drolet’s opinion, a fuller normative study of neoconservative thought has long been lacking. While writers such as Michael C. Williams and Gary Dorrien have attempted to place neoconservatism in the context of international relations scholarship and US intellectual history, the ideology remains ‘under-theorised’ (3).

Until recently, most students of neoconservatism have seen the ideology as heir to ‘classical’ liberal opinion. The so-called neoconservative ‘godfather’, Irving Kristol, often argued that neoconservatives sought to salvage ‘traditional’ liberal values from ‘late-modern’ thought. Drolet, however, questions the neoconservatives’ fealty to these beliefs. In his view, ‘to the extent that neoconservatism is committed to the Enlightenment discourse of liberalism, these commitments are firmly subordinated to an authoritarian form of cultural and philosophical conservatism that is in fact ferociously predatory on liberal values’ (7).