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# IR-UI COMMENTARIES

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## *An Indonesian School of International Relations?*

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### **Summary**

In March 2022, the International Studies Association, one of the oldest bodies for international relations research in the world, established a Global IR Section (GIRS). The project aims to advance International Relations theories outside of the West, thereby transforming the US-dominated discipline into a global one. To this end, some countries have embarked on projects of advancing local thought following the model of the English School, such as the Chinese School and Japanese International Relations. While there is generally collective agreement about the need for a less Western-dominated IR, are national schools a fruitful endeavor? Is there opportunity for an Indonesian school of International Relations? The author argues that building an Indonesian School of International Relations could motivate commitment to local, theory-based research and is an important step for Global IR.

**Keywords:** *global IR, indigenous theory-building, Indonesian school*

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## **Moving on from Western-centrism in IR**

International Relations as a discipline was first established in the UK and has since been heavily dominated by thinkers from the US and other Western countries. As a result, these theories are sometimes deemed insufficient to understand international politics in other parts of the world, such as Asia. In particular, US-originated theories are perceived as lacking in giving enough consideration to regional history, civilization, classical traditions and philosophy, religious thought, and cultural resources as factors that shape international relations (Acharya & Buzan, 2010; Eun & Pieczara, 2013; Shih, 2013). Yet, these “soft” concepts could significantly alter how state leaders view IR concepts of power and equality (Eun & Pieczara, 2013, p. 373), in turn influencing how foreign policy is conducted.

To answer this discrepancy, there is increasing demand for non-Western voices in IR, as evidenced by the creation of a Global IR Section by the International Studies Association, one of the oldest bodies for international relations research in the world. Non-Western scholars are expected to highlight their own experiences and philosophies in interpreting international phenomena, rather than simply continuing the assumptions and traditions of the more dominant schools in International Relations.

## **Naming schools of IR**

The Chinese School of International Relations is arguably the most prominent attempt at bringing a national, non-Western approach to IR. Its naming follows the trend of other distinct schools of IR based on locality, such as the English School, the Copenhagen School, and the Frankfurt School. However, what these latter schools have in common is that their “name” was assigned by others after their theories were well known. Securitization theory became the Copenhagen School because Buzan, Waever, and others formulated it at the Conflict and Peace Research Institute in Copenhagen (Stritzel, 2014). The Frankfurt School is an alias for Critical Theory because its founding theorists were initially based at the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt (Sinor, 2022).

Therefore, it can be concluded that naming alternative schools of IR is only credible once their distinct works have been established, and not prior. According to Jiangli & Buzan (2014), this is the main problem with the ‘Chinese School of International Relations’, which self-declared in 1991 even though it has yet to produce a key theme of research or a distinct conceptualization of the state of the world. Without this clarity, it is difficult for others to identify the school.

## **International Relations research in Indonesia**

Noting this need for distinctiveness, are there opportunities for an Indonesian School in IR? In Southeast Asia, some distinct themes of research have already emerged. These include the impact of a weaker state agency on international relations, regional order, and small state strategies – the last topic inspiring some notable works on institutional hedging and alignment policies (Thalang, 2022).

A brief look at international conferences on IR held by Indonesian campuses shows similar focuses. A recent conference by Universitas Parahyangan encouraged the study of small and middle powers as well as a self-sufficient foreign policy (Suara UNPAR, 2022). Meanwhile, an international

postgraduate conference by Universitas Indonesia highlighted non-state actor roles (societal change, technological disruption) in impacting international dynamics, concluding that “regional governance” is the way forward (Wibisono, Virgianita, Silvey, Wu, & Spandler, 2019). As Indonesia is often posited as the leader of ASEAN, many Indonesian scholars also emphasize researching regionalism and regional dynamics, with Mochtar Kusumaatmadja developing a concentric circle model of foreign policy that explains the prioritization of ASEAN (Wicaksana, 2018). Another well-noted concept by Indonesian scholars is national and regional resilience (Hadiwinata, 2008; Wicaksana, 2018).

While these works show the valuable contributions of Indonesian scholars, most IR papers produced domestically generally continue Western schools of thought – especially Realism – and make no apparent desire to distinguish themselves (Wicaksana, 2018). Alternatively, some scholars pursue an atheoretical approach and focus on description – either through Area studies or Historical Realism – or policy recommendations. This is partly due to the lack of available funding for purely theoretical research, as much of IR research in Indonesia is project-oriented and relies on support from international donors or government agencies (Hadiwinata, 2008).

Nonetheless, there have recently been calls for building distinct indigenous schools of IR. Evi Fitriani of Universitas Indonesia recently rallied colleagues in Depok to build upon Juwono Sudarsono’s concept of 5G geographical spaces: local, provincial, national, regional, and global (Fitriani, 2022). If successful, this will be a welcome addition to IR literature, similar to how the English School’s distinct taxonomy of international society has spurred many theoretical possibilities and conversations (Buzan & Lawson, 2018).

### **Challenges to overcome**

Developing indigenous theories of International Relations from the Indonesian perspective is a worthy endeavor, and its success requires three main dedications from scholars.

Firstly, a commitment to theory-based research. While there is a plethora of empirical and policy-oriented IR research in Indonesia, often these do not engage with existing IR theories or attempt to create their own abstraction for generalization (Hadiwinata, 2008; Thalang, 2022). Yet, according to Thalang, theory-based research is the main way to advance Global IR. Considering that the lack of theory-based research is impacted by the lack of support, establishing an Indonesian School of International Relations may help to mobilize funding from government agencies that are concerned with raising Indonesia’s stature internationally.

Secondly, engagement with the works of other Indonesian scholars. To receive recognition as a distinct school of thought, a pre-concept, philosophy, or theory must first receive engagement from scholars within its locality. This would generate a body of work that builds upon distinct concepts with either more theoretical analysis or supporting empirical evidence. However, as scholars typically aim to get published in high-ranking journals – this unintentionally deters them from straying too far away from mainstream IR foundations or even criticizing those concepts (Thalang, 2022). Yet, building distinct theories often requires criticism – not only towards Western assumptions and theories but possibly even towards Western epistemology.

Finally, ensuring the relevance and applicability of local ideas beyond Indonesia and Southeast Asia. One way is through creating general theories from aspects of local history, culture, and identity – a successful example is Dependency Theory, which was based on phenomena in Latin America but became applicable elsewhere (Thalang, 2022). However, scholars need to take care, as Asian exceptionalism-style theories may have limited applicability in time or place (Acharya & Buzan, 2017).

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