


From Trans-Atlantic Order to Afro-Eur-Asian Worlds? Reimagining International Relations as Interlocking Regional Worlds

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The apparent transition underway from a trans-Atlantic, liberal world order to one of multiple, overlapping orders has caused much policy, scholarly, and public anxiety. In tandem with this structural development, in the field of international relations (IR), heated contests are underway between alternative visions of how to read this transformation. In this introduction to the special forum, we outline an approach for grappling with these dynamics. Our overarching question is: How to make sense of emergent regional imaginaries, the ways that they interlock, and the implications for IR theory and practice? To begin answering, we first challenge the increasingly widespread view that the return of great power politics—or what we call the “great game” vision of multipolarity—is the only or best register with which to read emerging patterns. Instead, we propose the idea of “interlocking regional worlds,” a notion inspired by “Afro-Eur-Asia” as a site that evokes multiple meanings. A historically sensitive and sociologically nuanced analytical modality, we argue for theory as “itinerant translation” across regional worlds. This relational framework, we contend, can help to better understand and explain, observe and encounter one another, the problems that collectively embroil us, and the transformative processes to which we are bearing witness. The exercises in itinerant translation across the interlocking regional worlds of Afro-Eur-Asia on offer in this special forum likewise reveal the globe as a pluriversal space where multiple realities can and do coexist (and always have).

On assisterait actuellement à une transition d'un ordre mondial libéral, transatlantique, vers un chevauchement de multiples ordres. Cette transition a engendré beaucoup d'anxiété tant dans le domaine politique, académique que public. Conjointement à cette évolution structurelle, dans le domaine des relations internationales (RI), on observe actuellement des débats animés entre des visions de lecture alternatives de cette transformation. Dans cette introduction du Special Forum, nous présentons une approche pour comprendre ces dynamiques. Notre question centrale est la suivante : comment donner un sens aux imaginaires régionaux qui apparaissent, aux liens qui s'établissent entre eux et aux implications pour la théorie et la pratique des RI ? Pour ébaucher notre réponse, nous commençons par remettre en question l'opinion de plus en plus partagée selon laquelle le retour de la politique des grandes puissances, vision de la multipolarité aussi appelée « Grand Jeu », serait le meilleur, et le seul, moyen de comprendre ces schémas émergents. Nous proposons plutôt l'idée de « mondes régionaux imbriqués », notion inspirée par « l'Afro-Euro-Asie » comme site évoquant de multiples significations. Modalité analytique sensible historiquement et nuancée sociologiquement, nous soutenons la théorie de la « traduction itinérante » des mondes régionaux. Ce cadre relationnel, selon nous, peut aider à mieux comprendre et expliquer, observer et rencontrer les autres, les problèmes dans lesquels nous sommes tous impliqués et les processus transformateurs dont nous sommes les témoins. Les exercices sur la traduction itinérante dans les mondes régionaux imbriqués de l'Afro-Euro-Asie proposés dans ce forum spécial présentent également le globe tel un espace pluriversel, où de multiples réalités peuvent coexister et coexistent (et l'ont toujours fait).

La aparente transición en curso, desde un orden mundial transatlántico y liberal a uno de órdenes múltiples y superpuestos, ha causado mucha ansiedad política, académica y pública. Paralelamente a este desarrollo estructural, en el campo de las Relaciones Internacionales (RRII) se están produciendo acaloradas contiendas entre visiones alternativas de cómo interpretar esta transformación. En esta introducción al Foro Especial, perfilamos un enfoque para abordar esta dinámica. Nuestra pregunta principal es: ¿Cómo dar sentido a los imaginarios regionales emergentes, las formas en que se entrelazan y las implicaciones para la teoría y la práctica de las RRII? Para intentar responder, primero cuestionamos la opinión cada vez más extendida de que el retorno de la política de las grandes potencias—o lo que llamamos la visión del «gran juego» de la multipolaridad—es el único o el mejor registro con el que se pueden interpretar los patrones emergentes. En su lugar, proponemos la idea de «mundos regionales entrelazados», una noción inspirada en «Afro-Euro-Asia» como un lugar que evoca múltiples significados. Mediante una modalidad analítica históricamente sensible y sociológicamente matizada, defendemos la teoría como «traducción itinerante» a través de los mundos regionales. Este marco relacional, sostenemos, puede ayudar a comprender y explicar mejor, observar y encontrarnos, los problemas que nos envuelven colectivamente y los procesos de transformación de los que somos testigos. Los ejercicios de traducción itinerante a través de los mundos regionales entrelazados de Afro-Euro-Asia que se ofrecen en este foro especial revelan igualmente el globo como un espacio pluriversal donde pueden coexistir (y siempre lo han hecho) múltiples realidades.

Introduction

Writing in 1794, the English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge sketched a hopeful outlook for the coming century: “Where dawns, with hope serene” will replace “the tear of woe,

the gloom of sad despair,” as a new age of “bliss” and “peace” is inaugurated across the “transatlantic shore.”¹ Yet, the “transatlantic” nineteenth century was hardly blissful or

¹ Coleridge quoted in *Co-operative Magazine* (1826, 133).

peaceful. If anything, its beginning was defined by the tears and despair of millions still being pressed into the “middle passage” from homes in Africa to slavery in the “new world.” Nevertheless, elements of Coleridge’s benign vision of transcontinental expansion seeped into the nascent theory of international relations (IR) through what Gaddis has called the “fable” of the nineteenth century’s “long peace” (Gaddis 1986). According to this story, the balance of power established at the 1812 Congress of Vienna meant that, at least among Western great powers, no state would “take up arms against another great power in order to expand into the *politically empty spaces* of Africa and Asia” (Morgenthau 1948, 369; emphasis added). The ensuing centuries brought significant changes to the international system; yet, the foundational dominance of Western actors—and erasure of those deemed to be non-Western—remained relatively unchallenged.

Today, however, this version of the trans-Atlantic world faces unprecedented challenges, driven in part by the diffusion of geoeconomic power to regional hubs across greater Eurasia (Kavalski 2006; Kaplan 2019). Often labeled as “global power transition,” these processes may be read as exercises in “world-making”: transformative narratives and practices to promote new forms of connectivity that, for better *and* for worse, portend alternative ways of being in, reading, and shaping the world (Ling 2017; Walton and Kavalski 2017; Lothian 2018). Sites of world-making include large-scale connectivity platforms such as China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Indo-Japanese “Asia-Africa Growth Corridor,” Turkey’s “Middle Corridor,” the American “Build Back Better World,” and the European Union’s “Global Gateway.” This special forum examines the world-making aspirations of such projects and their consequences. Yet, unlike the many frenetic attempts to make sense of these moving targets, we take a step back, inviting a deeper, historically sensitive and sociologically nuanced dive into the simultaneously world-rupturing and world-redefining processes to which we are bearing witness. The goal is to better understand the geocultural and “cognitive” (Adler 1997) elisions associated with the widely acknowledged structural shift from trans-Atlantic hegemony to multiple centers of gravity.

The transition that we are witnessing is not a linear process. Eurocentric imaginaries not only are ebbing, but have also been internalized by states and societies around the globe. At the same time, novel perspectives and relationships are forming. In contrast with the alarmed thrust of much commentary in the West, we do not seek to securitize these dynamics. Nor do we romanticize them like many a commentator in (re-)emerging powers. While we incline toward pluralism, analytically and normatively, we are well aware that the dusk of Eurocentrism brings a new “tournament of the shadows” (as Russian commentators describe rival hegemonic projects) with troubling implications for diversity in and beyond greater Eurasia. Yet, to make sense of challenges and opportunities alike, we must learn to read emerging powers on their own terms, not only through *a priori* Western concepts. Doing so demands attention to the role of histories—real but also imagined—of eras before and beyond the encounter with Western hegemony. At the same time, we register contingent responses to contemporary vicissitudes from transformative technologies to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In order to make sense of these complex dynamics, the contributions to this collection draw on the toolkits of historical sociology and global IR. The former opens our eyes to the complex sources, processes, and mechanisms of past

adaptation to—and contemporary renegotiation of—trans-Atlantic hegemony. The global IR lens, in turn, helps to upload historical and sociological insights into a theoretical apparatus attuned to non-Western perspectives. Taken together, our approach offers a timely heuristic for reading nascent multipolarity as it appears from positionalities beyond the conventional “West,” while also drawing out co-constitutive connections across regional worlds. We grapple with these dynamics by asking the overarching question: “How to make sense of emergent regional imaginaries, the ways that they interlock, and the implications for our theories and practices of IR?”

In this introductory article, we begin to answer by first parsing the signifiers surrounding what we label as “Afro-Eur-Asia,” underscoring their socially constructed yet power-laden meanings (Kubáľková 2016). The contention is that regional tags are not merely descriptive tools, but that they *produce* both history and possible futures in particular ways (Kavalski 2021; Winter 2022). We then show that of the many registers in which Afro-Eur-Asia has been recorded, a frame that is (re)gaining influence is that of the “great game”: the site par excellence of great power rivalry. Three features of mainstream IR theory, we argue, bolster the great game logic, inhibiting, in turn, our ability to think in plural about emergent orders. These include (1) the general neglect of “non-Western”² voices (including longstanding relationships of co-constitution and connectivity), (2) the tendency for non-Western actors to register only when they command the material capacity to (potentially) disrupt trans-Atlantic prerogatives, and (3) the inscription of perceived threats onto binary, analytical templates that bake expectations of conflict into the study and practice of IR. Given the intersubjective nature of identity construction, the upshot, we contend—and as seen vividly in cases such as Vladimir Putin’s Russia—is the internalization of conflictual binaries by actors across Afro-Eur-Asia in dialectical response to the experience of stigmatization by the West.

Having acknowledged the power of binaries, we propose an alternative way of reading world historical change as “itinerant translation” across emergent, regional ecosystems and the multiple, jostling imaginaries to which they are giving rise. The polysemic trope of Afro-Eur-Asia offers a site, after all, from which to simultaneously theorize and empirically investigate “the unity-in-civilizational-diversity” of transcontinental, dialogical relationships (Hann 2016, 8–9; Zolkos 2022). By registering historical and contemporary forms of connectivity across Africa, Europe, and Asia, we seek to offer a fuller picture of how our emergent world order(s) look from beyond the West. As noted above, and in pointed departure from much mainstream analysis, in the process, we neither *a priori* securitize the “rise of the Rest” nor do we romanticize revisionism. We simply seek to offer a more nuanced optic onto our interlocked, “Afro-Eur-Asian” worlds.

Our argument is that far from a stark choice between “cooperation versus competition,” “democracy versus authoritarianism,” or “East versus West,” the polysemy of “Afro-Eur-Asia” offers an opportunity to make sense of our historical, contemporary, and future diversity. Our very need as editors to deploy these terms in contextualized ways across this introduction is evidence that we are grappling with not one Afro-Eur-Asia—a reified rival in a great game—but with a multiplicity of places, actors, ideas, and processes. To explore this surplus of meaning is a task appropriate to a

²In the first, nonqualified usage of each term, we deploy quotation marks to underscore our recognition that terms such as “West” and “East” are social constructs, not reified entities. For narrative flow, in subsequent usage, we refrain from using the quotation marks.

“world-of-worlds” (Onuf 2013), a “multi-order” (Flockhart 2016) or “multiplex” (Acharya 2017) international system characterized not only by crises and uncertainties, but also by opportunities to reimagine IR in terms of relational transformation. In this regard, we seek to compliment Onuf, Flockhart, and Acharya’s frames by attending to how world-making projects across (and beyond) Afro-Eur-Asia deploy connectivity in ways that can be weaponized to be sure, but that also may create opportunities for mutual empowerment. Such processes are in sync with the syncretic but fraught coproduction of norms and practices, goals, and institutions that have been an indelible part of the material and intellectual history of greater Eurasia’s interlocking regions for millennia (Frankopan 2019). We call, in short, for recognition that the long, arduous, scenic, adventurous, death-stricken, awe-inspiring routes of Afro-Eur-Asia mandate not only conflict but also interdependence, a basic humility and adaptability, and the need to learn relationally across regional worlds.

What Is in a Name? A Short History of the Concept(s)

Labels are powerful devices, especially when institutionalized. They delimit cognitive fields and spheres of action. Yet, their significations also shift depending on how, why, when, where, and by whom they are deployed. The term “Eurasia,” our primary referent in this piece, is familiar, at one level, as a (post-)Cold War area studies category marking the Soviet sphere of influence and its geopolitical footprint today from the Russian Pacific to the contested borderlands of Ukraine and the Caucasus. It further flags a nineteenth-century set of ideas associated with Anglo-American geostrategists such as Halford Mackinder whose “Heartland” theory envisaged control of Eurasia as *sine qua non* of superpowerhood. “Eurasianism,” in this vein, is also associated with strands of geopolitical thought in early twentieth-century Russia, which engaged with Mackinder’s reasoning—along with subsequent German geopolitics—and their reprisal today in a body of strategizing about the country’s multiregional power of projection (Laruelle 2008; Tsygankov 2015).

As will be developed below, this approach to Eurasia entails a competitive logic and evokes the trope of the “great game”: historical competition between land power Russia and sea powers such as Britain and the United States. At the same time, it serves as a metaphor for great power rivalry in general. The framework not only ignores smaller actors, but also other major entities and forces that have shaped Afro-Eur-Asian spaces, such as imperial successor states China, India, Iran, and Turkey (Fisher-Onar 2013, 2018, 2020). Yet, the de facto fuzzy borders and plural protagonists of even this relatively restrictive reading are attested to by unresolved debates over whether or not to include in today’s definition of “Eurasia” the countries and peoples of eastern and southeastern Europe—not least Ukraine, the Caucasus, and Central Asia (Zolkos and Kavalski 2007; Matsuzato 2010).

Plasticity—and the power to include/exclude—likewise characterize the other geographic referents featured in this collection: “Africa,” “Asia,” and “Europe.” In English, all have etymological origins in ancient Greek and Roman engagements with the peoples of the southern and eastern Mediterranean (with the foundation myth of Europa’s rape and abduction from “Asia minor” by Zeus exemplifying both the violence of classical connectivities and their syncretic generativity). The terms’ usage ebbed and flowed in ensuing centuries, coalescing into contemporary associ-

ations during the early modern era of colonial expansion (Delanty 1995; Korhonen 2012; Neumann and Wigen 2018). At this juncture, Europe’s centrality in nascent imaginaries of the “global” was concretized by cartographic conventions such as the Mercator Projection (1569)—the popular map via which we graph globality to this day.

The ascription of exceptional(ist) importance to “Europe” as continental in its own right (even though it is geologically but a peninsula of greater Eurasia) proceeded apace during what Hobsbawm called the “long nineteenth century.” The scramble to survey and administer “Africa” and “Asia”—geographies that then and now house the vast majority of the world’s peoples—have profoundly impacted the generation of knowledge and policies vis-à-vis these diverse spaces. For one, they were labeled in terms of proximity to Europe (e.g., the “Near,” “Middle,” and “Far” East), even as the categories’ capacious contents were grouped, in turn, under the one-size-fits-all label “Orient.” Likewise written out of the script of “Euromodernity” (Hutchings 2019) were the manifold material and ideational contributions of “Africans” to trans-Atlantic ascendance (e.g., Vitalis 2005; Bernal 2020). These fraught yet silenced connectivities are attested to by “countless streets, statues, parks and edifices that honor empire-builders” while avoiding the question of colonialism, “as if they conquered an empty world and miraculously extracted its riches through sheer force of vision” (Fisher-Onar 2022, 118). Similarly overlooked are the multidirectional paths via which globality has been constituted more generally (e.g., Hobson 2004; Tickner and Smith 2020). As a large body of critical scholarship has documented (e.g., Blaut 1993; Bhambra, Gebrial, and Nişancıoğlu 2018), such erasures were present at the creation of the modern academy. They enable to this day a characteristically imperial “wheel” pattern of knowledge production that centers Western perspectives (the “hub”) and peripheralizes others (the “spokes”), even at the dawn of a post-Western world.

Meanwhile, naming repertoires vis-à-vis Afro-Eur-Asia evolved with the post-World War II disbanding of formal colonization, and the pivot from eastern to western Atlantic primacy. It was at this Cold War juncture that our contemporary area study categories were institutionalized. Imagined in sync with the material imperatives of Marshall Plan grand strategy, world regions were (re)conceptualized in terms of geographic contiguity. The choice muted, for better or for worse, alternative transnational frames that were also in circulation during this period such as Hodgson’s (1974) “Islamicate” world, or the “non-aligned” world of Asian-African solidarities. In this context, “Asia” in its eastern, southern, and southeastern iterations coalesced as a securitized space at the interstices of communist continental and capitalist sea powers (Katzenstein 2000; Chen 2010). On the other side of Afro-Eur-Asia, the status of liminal states such as Turkey was similarly shaped by Cold War containers. Thus, an Ankara that had long served alongside Russia as a constitutive “Other” of the European geocultural imagination (Morozov and Rumelili 2012) was able to embed in the trans-Atlantic security architecture (a status that would be overshadowed by the return of civilizational reasoning after 9/11) (Bilgin 2004; Yanik 2011; O’Hagan 2020).

The path-dependent power of geographic reifications from one world historical period to shape knowledge and power well into later eras is attested to by the ways that Cold War constructs continue to inform regional institution building (Acharya 2009; Kavalski 2013; Adler-Nissen and Zarakol 2021). Examples include the post-Cold War recalibration of older projects such as the African Union

(AU), the European Union (EU), and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Playing impactful regulatory and coordination roles in areas from trade and peacekeeping to environmental governance (Prys 2010; Hurrell 2016; Cho and Kavalski 2018; Cudworth, Hobden, and Kavalski 2018; Bell et al. 2023), regional institutions both amplify and constrain Afro-Eur-Asian agencies. In the process, they also inform Afro-Eur-Asian contributions to the maintenance of our global liberal order (despite the increasingly unpredictable commitment to global liberalism among key constituencies in the West).

Similarly, but in an idiom of resistance, labels associated with Afro-Eur-Asia have long informed counter-hegemonic platforms. The consequences for war and peace have been significant. Historical permutations include nascent Islamist mobilization within and beyond the Ottoman Empire. Another case in point was Japan's pan-Asian "co-prosperity" sphere. The project presaged its counter-colonization of Asia when Western powers balked—on racial grounds—at bestowing the great power status that was commensurate with Tokyo's hard power capacity (Aydin 2017; Shani, in this collection; Shimizu, in this collection). That these early programs have had multiple afterlives is attested to by challenges mounted by radical Islamist movements to the Western-dominated world order well into the twenty-first century.

By and large, however, revisionist bids for empowerment have sought not to overturn but to transform trans-Atlantic primacy. This has been pursued by mobilization within international institutions, as well as by seeking autonomy from great powers. The strategy was evident among participants at the 1955 Asian–African Conference in Bandung. Solidarities thus generated continue to reverberate across the United Nations (UN) and other forms of multilateral activism from the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) to subsequent forms of South–South summitry (Pham and Shilliam 2016).

These antecedents offer context within which to read new attempts to rewire international patterns via projects such as the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, South Africa) architecture, the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB), and the BRI. To be sure, there are significant differences between the historical and current iterations of region-building endeavors (and also between each of these institutional initiatives). Nevertheless, they share several, key features from their multilateral thrust to the attempt to circumvent trans-Atlantic-dominated, economic relations. In this regard, the architects of these projects envisage them as emancipatory attempts to achieve voice, autonomy, and prosperity (Mayer and Xin 2021) within a global political economy in which they have long been subjected to racialized hierarchies (Mattern and Zarakol 2016; Sabaratnam 2020). However, as the next section will address, attempts to reconfigure (multi-)regional economic, political, and security orders do challenge the status quo. They are often read, as such, by Western analysts as evidence of either fragmenting global governance (Cho and Kavalski 2015; Duggan et al. 2021) or explicit threats to Western power, rules, and norms (Nicolaidis et al. 2014).

And with this securitized logic, we come full circle to a story about Afro-Eur-Asian momentum that is being (re)told in the halls of power: the "great game" vision of the meta-region as the quintessential, geostrategic chessboard. First articulated in the context of Anglo-Russian rivalry over their imperial ambitions in India and Central Asia, in today's telling, the narrative gathered force as China gained economic gravitas. Soft power anxieties in the

United States—and many quarters in Europe—with regard to the West's *relative* economic eclipse, mingle with hardening calculations in an age of strategic competition over paradigm-changing technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) and quantum computing. These fears have been exacerbated profoundly by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Moscow's exercise in unreconstructed military power and atavistic desire for territorial expansion is a frontal challenge to trans-Atlantic primacy. In the next section, we lay out why this latest chapter of the Great Game epic, while no doubt driving major change, is more like to reproduce rather than dismantle binary and conflictual habits of reading world order.

Internalized Binaries and Multipolarity as Great Game

The tendency to code engagement of Afro-Eur-Asian dynamism as a challenge rather than opportunity for reinvention is associated, we submit, with at least three features of IR theory and practice that hamper our ability to read the world in plural. First, as noted above and acknowledged by a growing number of scholars, IR as a discipline was forged in the crucible of trans-Atlantic hegemony and continues to reflect Eurocentric and US-centric priorities (e.g., Kang 2003; Shani 2008; Acharya and Buzan 2010; Tickner 2013). As such, the centrality of Europe and its settler outposts to our systems of knowledge production reverberates in theories, categories, questions, and answers that emanate from Western standpoints but are expected to apply universally. Therefore, "non-Western" perspectives, problems, and solutions tend to be ignored, including the historical and contemporary processes of co-constitution via which our global order, in practice, has been constructed (Barkawi and Laffey 2006; Tickner and Blaney 2013; Hansen and Jonsson 2014; Bhambra 2015; Capan 2020; Hobson 2020; Niang 2020; Trowsell et al. 2021; Kavalski 2022; Wolff et al. 2022).

The analytical excision of the "non-West," we contend, is both practically and ethically ill-advised. Even from a traditional, cost–benefit perspective, the complex calculus of multipolarity demands an understanding of actors' bounded rationality, lest one misread counterparts' positions. Normatively, moreover, the universalization of Western, great power prerogatives, and a corresponding inability to understand how the world looks from multiple subject positions (and assemblages thereof), inhibits a "pluriversal" (Kavalski 2009; Hutchings 2019) sense of the aspirations and grievances that shape international behavior. By provincializing one's own perspectives and engaging with others—including fraught forms of past and present co-constitution—IR arguably can be reconstructed for both greater efficacy *and* inclusivity (Chakrabarty 2008; Kavalski 2012; Fisher-Onar and Nicolaidis 2013, 2021).

A second problematic pattern with default IR settings is that when non-Western agencies do register, it tends to be only because the actors in question command sufficient material capacity to (potentially) challenge Western priorities. The focus is on economic or military might, including the ability to play spoiler. As a result, China's material wherewithal and Russia's revanchism attract the lion's share of attention. Rising India is co-opted. And hands are wrung regarding the unpredictable pivots of (multi-)regional players such as Turkey and Iran. Meanwhile, smaller-sized states and societies beyond the trans-Atlantic geography remain, by and large, ignored in the theory, and dominated in the practice of IR (Vale and Thakur 2020). This habit of only attending to possible challengers is further evident in the racialized anxieties that manifest when otherwise marginalized

actors from the global South—such as migrants from the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa—physically seek to penetrate privileged, trans-Atlantic spaces (El Qadim et al. 2021; Zardo and Wolff 2022).

This selective reading of the non-West in terms of materially defined ability to impact trans-Atlantic concerns is often uploaded, in turn, to binary templates (which supply much of the ontological/epistemological basis of Western thought) (Blaney and Inayatullah 1994; Derrida 2016; Kavalski 2017). To be sure, not all analysis in the West follows a binary pathway. This is attested to by the productive “relational,” “reflexive,” and “practice” turns in the IR academy (e.g., Jackson and Nexon 1999; Adler-Nissen 2016; Alejandro 2021), all of which capture complex interactive processes between humans and their environments, as does the “complexity” turn per se (e.g., Kavalski 2015; Fisher-Onar 2023). And while there are significant variations in the substance and implications of western IR binaries, a cross-cutting motif is the assignation of causal primacy to trans-Atlantic actors in shaping eastern/southern “peripheries” (or what Blaut seminally called Eurocentric “diffusionism”; Blaut 1993). In these readings, the West and the non-West function as “master signifiers”—that is, “as totalizing abstractions through which meaning and discourse can be organized” (Sayyid 1997, 47; Euben 2006, 8). Variations of a culturally or racially defined trans-Atlantic “us” versus eastern/southern “them” have thus shaped theorizing of the international since the dawn of European colonialism (Said 1979; Vitalis 2000; Jackson 2009).

In contrast, the thrust of this special collection is that encounters with plural conceptions and practices across Afro-Eur-Asia—and reflection on how such performances are produced in concert with trans-Atlantic, among many other actors—can help to shed light on real-world dynamics in all their generative friction. By challenging binary logics, we seek to pluralize the sites, genres, and practices of theorizing (Kavalski 2007; Pan and Kavalski 2018, 2022; Nordin et al. 2019). This is by no means a call to relativism, nor apologetics for aggressive forms of revisionism. Our plea is simply to engage a plurality of “actually existing” perspectives—and the ways that they are coproduced by “us” and “them”—for a more nuanced understanding of the varied terrain upon which we march toward multipolarity.

Otherwise, the binary categories upon which we so often rely inform, in turn, a third and crucial dynamic: the dialectical uptake of dualistic frames for international engagement within political communities that historically have been on the receiving end of European imperialism. This process of “socialization” has long been animated by a will to survive and thrive in the trans-Atlantic-dominated Westphalian system (McCulloch and Kavalski 2005; Suzuki 2005). The dialectic has engendered, in many contexts, a sort of “subaltern realism” (Ayooob 2002) where *realpolitik* operates in contexts of systemic marginalization. Often accompanied by ontological insecurity—and even a sense of acute “moral injury” (Subotic and Steele 2018)—at the experience of subordination to Western power(s), eclipsed actors attempt to reassert agency (Fisher-Onar, this collection). Cases in point include variants of “African realism” (Henderson 2015) and the revisionist, neoimperial imaginaries increasingly propounded by leaders across greater Eurasia (Fisher-Onar 2009, 2015; Morozov 2015; Oskanian 2018). The upshot, in many cases, has been that rather than dismantle Eurocentric dualisms, revisionists all too often reproduce—but inverse—binary frames. Thus, Occidentalism is weaponized against Orientalism, assigning moral prerogative and world historical momentum to an equally

reified “East” or “South” vis-à-vis the cruel and degenerate agendas attributed to the “West” or “North.” Putin’s rationale for aggression in Ukraine—as retaliation for decades of perceived denigration by the West—attests tragically to the power of internalized binaries.

Leading contestants in today’s great game of mirrored binaries include aggressive Moscow and prickly Beijing that seek multiregional influence vis-à-vis entrenched powers such as the United States, the European Union (EU)/Europe, and their defense apparatus, namely the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO; Kavalski 2008; Zolkos and Kavalski 2008; Cunliffe 2017; Neumann and Wigen 2018; Ohanyan 2022). The statelets squashed in-between these “post-imperial” powers (Nicolaidis and Fisher-Onar 2015) constitute the “pawns,” “rooks,” and “knights” of the great game. Local “kings” and “queens” may mark rivals but, ultimately, only the “great powers” win (or lose) (Ling and Perrigoue 2018). On this board, there is some room for strategic cooperation between status quo and revisionist powers. Engagements, however, are as likely to entail the ad hoc and easily abandoned alliances of the Risk board, as sustained multilateral engagement (much less earnest attempts at relational learning).

How then to think and do IR differently?

Internalizing Relationality: Multipolarity as Interlocking Regional Worlds

Our “interlocking regional worlds” approach is inspired by the polysemy of “Afro-Eur-Asia” itself, a site that, as we have shown, evokes multiple meanings of which the “great game” is but one. “Afro-Eur-Asia” is a fluid and contingent, spatial category that has long facilitated multidirectional movements of peoples, materials, and ideas. These movements operate in context-specific ways. And while patterns are discernible, each interaction entails an element of surprise. Consider that wherever there are problem-driven exchanges across porous boundaries, there are transformative relationships. Borders are not only sites of tensions, but also gateways to learning.

The itinerant and translational nature of knowledge production invited by Afro-Eur-Asian polysemy is embedded in the very etymology of the word “theory” (*theoria*). In its Greek original, the term signified “a journey or a pilgrimage,” which involved a willingness to travel to foreign locales that simultaneously informed and transformed the “home” of the traveler (Nightingale 2004, 4–9). Taking this meaning to heart, we envisage theorists as creative agents who even—and perhaps most urgently—in a world of great-game-*politik* offer windows onto other empirical dynamics that may be “out there,” but that have yet to be named. The theorist’s role, in this regard, is to facilitate the interaction between different bodies and cultures of knowledge, translating and arranging the subject material. In so doing, s/he provides dynamic openings, however unnerving, to worlds that literally are otherwise unthinkable. By helping to show that there is more than one way of seeing, hearing, and responding, theorizing as itinerant translation reveals the globe as a pluriversal space where multiple realities can and do coexist (and always have).

In this final section, we draw on the contributions to this special forum to suggest that by serving as itinerant translators, analysts can mediate between Afro-Eur-Asia’s interlocking regional worlds. Via the three steps depicted in figure 2, we push back against binary habits—not because

we naively deny conflict propensities but because we recognize that interactive frictions can be generative as well as destructive.

Step 1: Ontological Pluralism

To foster a pluralistic point of departure, we begin with the notion of regional worlds as unit of analysis. A worlding³ approach involves the study of global life as operating according to the geocultural logics of situated ecosystems, while simultaneously reading localities as coterminous and overlapping (Agathangelou and Ling 2009; Ling et al. 2019). By thus recognizing the “extensive ways in which we are connected” (Ivanhoe 2017, 33), we set the ontological stage for a “substantive and textured inquiry into how particular imaginaries and identities are ... articulated and transfigured by way of jagged and unpredictable exchange[s] with other practices and peoples” (Euben 2006, 7). Our contention is that shifts in material capabilities do not in and of themselves reveal much about patterns of world politics unless these are assessed in their contingent, interactive settings. In other words, our relational capacity to participate across the “interlocking ‘circuits’ ... of the Afro-Eurasian world” and beyond (Sen 2017, 122) entails contextualized opportunities to learn as we act, rather than acting without reflection.

This pluralistic ontology enables our collection to offer timely suggestions regarding the very language that we use to describe nascent multipolarity as seen from Afro-Eur-Asia’s interlocking regional worlds. *Benabdallah’s* contribution, for instance, situates relationality at the heart of Afro-Eur-Asian “view[s] of global politics”—a view onto connectivities that is invisible to the unreconstructed Western gaze. She does so by critically engaging the concept and practices of “gift-giving,” decentering entrenched readings of aid and development assistance in general, and Chinese “debt diplomacy” toward Africa in particular. *Forough*, for his part, probes the claims to civilizational authenticity that increasingly animate geopolitical contestation across and beyond Afro-Eur-Asia. His contribution compares and contrasts narrative attempts to produce essentialized, civilizational “souls” from Beijing and Tehran to Brussels and Washington. This timely assessment of both established and aspirant, great power exceptionalism resonates with *Fisher-Onar’s* conception of the “capitulations syndrome” as a hybrid positionality between the “postimperial” and “post-colonial” conditions. Emanating from the experience of “moral injury” during fraught transitions from Ottoman, Persian, and Chinese empire to nation states under the long shadow of the West, Afro-Eur-Asia’s thick imperial histories are filtered through the prism of nationalism. The result today is an exceptionalist sense of neoimperial nostalgia that leaders can and do leverage toward domestic power consolidation and expansive foreign policies. *Zarakol*, for her part, explores why the very category of “Asia”—and its interconnected spaces—is erased in contemporary narratives. Arguing that the much-maligned Chinggisid empire and its successors are to Asia what Rome was to Europe, she

³We envisage “worlding” as allied with the projects of “globalizing” (e.g., Acharya 2014), “decentering” (e.g., Nayak and Selbin 2010), and “decolonizing” (e.g., Shilliam 2021) IR. To be sure, we recognize that there are significant differences between these approaches. Frictions can arise regarding, for example, the degree to which capitalism is part of the problem, and whether to pursue reformist versus radical strategies for dismantling global inequalities. Yet, in the spirit of our own call for active listening to situated visions of the world, we believe that each of these approaches resounds—cacophonously perhaps, but nevertheless meaningfully—with the broader goal of a more inclusive IR.

notes the perils of reifying and romanticizing the past. Nevertheless, she asks, “instead of accepting the particularistic Turkish, Russian, Chinese or Hindu versions of history, why not remember the shared experiences and institutions that make Asia a connected rather than a fragmented space” for a more “pluralistic vision of community”?

Step 2: Registering Empirical Pluralism

Abandoning the “hegemony of the singular worldview” (Blaney and Tickner 2017) opens the eye to what many emic accounts of Afro-Eur-Asia have long registered: the continuous ricochet of “worldviews, traditions, practices, institutions, and norms that have interwoven peoples, societies, and civilizations across this vast space for millennia, making world politics what it is” to this day (Chen et al. 2009, 744). Historically, this multiplicity of worlds—and the context-specific realities that characterize their interstices—was perhaps more obvious (Kavalski 2011; Fisher-Onar 2021). Our current regional and national categories would have made little sense prior to the Westphalian system that was imposed onto Afro-Eurasia’s diverse spaces only in the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Smith and Richardson 2017). By any reckoning then, Westphalian logics have only (partially) described the experiences of the majority of people in this vast space for a fraction of the time that it has been inhabited and governed. It follows that by attending, like this special forum, to the interlocking worlds of Afro-Eur-Asia, we can begin to recover lost but relevant pasts, hidden presents, and as of yet unimagined futures characterized not by essential differences, but by processes of co-creation.

While it is impossible to do justice to the many forms and transformative power of these connections, there is ample evidence of Afro-Eur-Asia’s role as a facilitator of multidirectional learning via not only conquest, but also trade, marriage, and ideational exchange. Examples range from the proverbial Silk Road(s) to the lesser known “Nirvana Way” (via which pilgrims radiated Indian/Buddhist innovations across regional worlds in conversation with Hellenistic legacies and Han prerogatives; Acharya 2021). Similarly, Islamicate circuits conjoined the classical and medieval periods, and the Greek, Persian, and Arab worlds. The results included sublime architectural synthesis, and philosophical and scientific instruments without which the West would not have thrived (Hobson 2004, 2012). The early modern Indian trade in textiles and peoples likewise furnished, for better and for worse, the foundations of our globalized economy (Hobson 2020). This commercial system coexisted with religious and dynastic circuits, cultivating the cultural overlap and diversity that characterizes the Indian Ocean to this day (Ho 2006; Phillips and Sharman 2015). Far from a *tabula rasa* upon which today’s infrastructural or irredentist projects are inscribed, Afro-Eur-Asia’s interlocking regional worlds have long been webbed by the “movement of people, the translation of texts, the use of medical and astronomical knowledge, [and] the re-imagination/reinterpretation of knowledge and long-distance commercial activity” (Sen 2017, 106).

Pardesi’s insightful contribution puts these historical patterns into conversation with IR theory. Parsing fifteenth-century Malacca’s navigation of its position at the interstices of the Chinese and Islamicate “worlds,” he shows that smaller states are anything but squashed. Mustering relational agency, they circumvent stark choices between bandwagoning and balancing, managing to strategically navigate complex power asymmetries and actively shape their

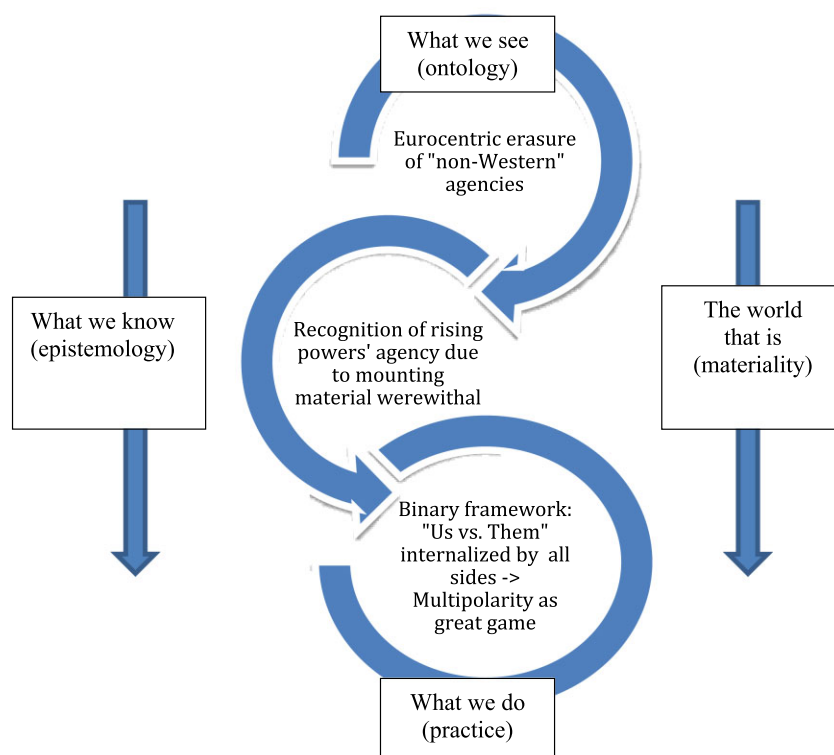


Figure 1. Revisioning multipolarity: internalized binaries and the great game.

environment. The result is coexistence *within* and *among* multiple world orders.

Shimizu and *Shani*, in their respective contributions, likewise probe the possibilities—and pitfalls—of opening the mind to trans-regional engagement. They do so via two different strands of pan-Asianism in the early twentieth century: interwar Japan under the auspices of the Kyoto School and Rabindranath Tagore’s pan-Asian program. Both articles show that pan-Asianist attempts to pluralize international thought and ethics were responses to Orientalist occlusion of Asian agencies. *Shani*, in particular, posits the interlocking regional worlds of Afro-Eur-Asia as an “imaginary anchoring point” with which to critique the Westphalian imaginary and the “methodological nationalism” of trans-Atlantic IR. Yet, both articles also caution against the utopian temptations of counter-hegemonic projects. Attempts to (re)assert “Oriental” agency in the face of “Occidental” erasure, they argue, should not substitute one civilizing mission for another. The tragic consequences of doing so are attested to by Japan’s ill-fated challenge not only to the West, but also to neighboring states and societies—with consequences for regional dynamics to this day.

Hobson and *Zhang*’s contribution to this collection likewise examines the persistence of the past in the present. Exploring echoes of the tributary system within the Belt and Road Initiative, they uncover a distinctly Chinese modality of domestic, politicosocial legitimation that is served by internationalization. In this reading, Beijing’s international overtures are not, as some suggest, a Greek gift bent on razing those who would bring China’s horse into their Troy, nor are they altruistic exercises in mutual empowerment. Instead, Chinese grand strategy is read as neo-tributary performance: a relational and reciprocal but also hierarchical logic that demands junior partners’ compliance in exchange for

access to Chinese capital and markets. This historically and sociologically informed approach complexifies realist notions of competition, and liberal logics of interdependence, while speaking frankly to the power at play.

This finding speaks to our argument that lenses limned by geopolitics and nationalism—while necessary perhaps to read the world that is (figure 1)—blind us to the worlds that are and could be (figure 2). If and when we set aside such frames, we behold a richer picture made up of multiple levels of analysis, plural forms of agency, and complex causal pathways. At the elite level, for example, if we can look beyond the hyperbolic agency that is imputed to leaders of great powers, we see a cast of characters who wield their own capacities to shape (inter-)regional governance (Baciu 2022). Their ranks include states—small and medium, as well as large—whose endeavors within international institutions help to keep the idiom of justice alive in the lexicon of international affairs. They further encompass politicians, bureaucrats, parties, bankers, journalists, artists, and students, as well as cosmopolitan networks of global civil society who are semi-nested in their host societies. Peering still closer, our eyes register more marginalized actors such as religious, ethnic, and sexual minorities, workers and their unions, women, migrants, refugees, and prisoners. And while such groups have subaltern features, activists among their ranks find ways to speak—often through strategic invocation of global protest repertoires. As attested to by Iranian women’s mobilization as we write, such calls resound with progressive social movements in the West, opening doors to transnational alliances. All this diversity amid connection affirms, in short, that the people and practices that functionally constitute our interlocking regional worlds are far more varied than can be captured from a singular standpoint (Terzi 2022).

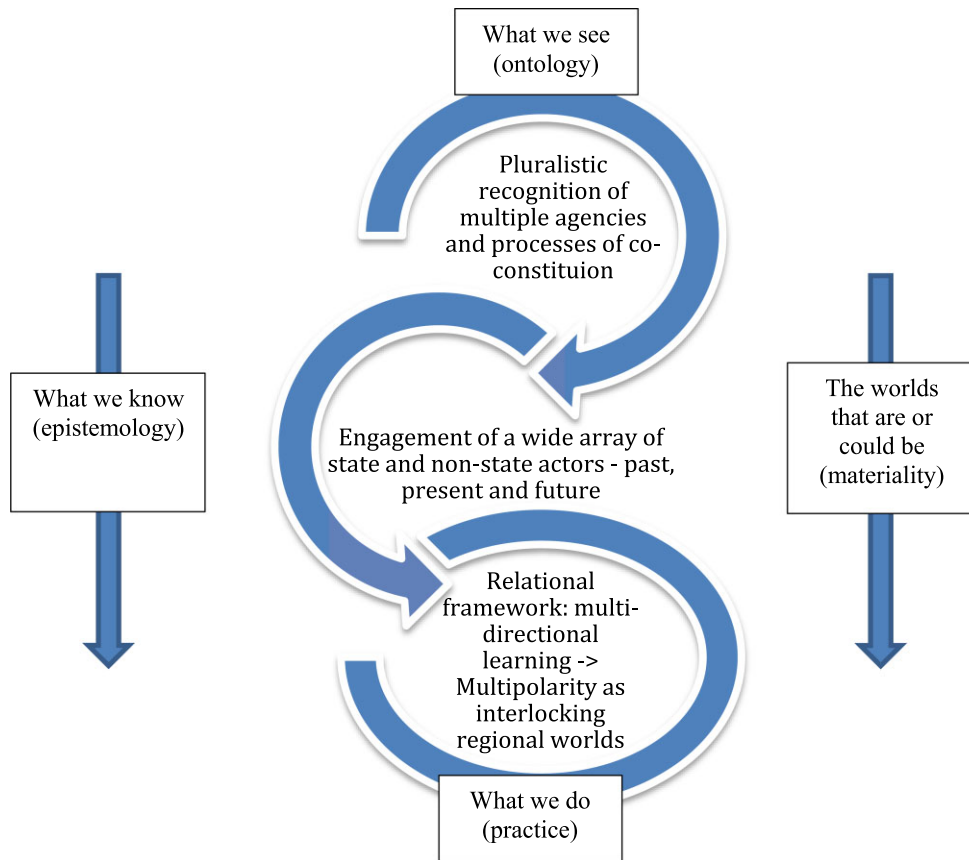


Figure 2. Reimagining multipolarity: relationality and interlocking regional worlds.

Why then persist in privileging closure over openness?

Step 3: A Relational Template for Action

To register the plurality of peoples, purposes, and processes that animate Afro-Eurasia is to resist the either/or logics that dominate current patterns of analysis and action. A pivot to relationality could not be more timely. We increasingly bear witness to the bloody consequences of binary frames touted by key figures in the Afro-Eur-Asian space (and their mirror images—the restive, right-wing nationalists of the trans-Atlantic world; Fisher-Onar 2021). Deployed combatively, binary reasoning has contributed to the deaths of thousands defending the (battle)fields of Ukraine as hapless Russian conscripts are pressed into service, and civilians within the conflict’s radius—and beyond—contemplate the possibility of tactical nuclear weapons radiating from the war.

To be sure, and in keeping with our call to respect causal complexity, Putin’s calculus can hardly be explained by epistemology alone. Nevertheless, as anyone familiar with the toolkit of foreign policy analysis (FPA) can attest, the basic worldview, formative experiences, cognitive biases, narrative templates, select advisors, and political (sub)culture that shape a leader’s vision and actions (Hudson and Day 2019) are all inflected, in Putin’s case, by Russian Eurasianist engagement of Schmittian geopolitics (Laruelle 2008). Thus, the absolutist logic of Germany’s historic “friend vs. foe” paradigm is internalized, enabling the equation of Ukrainian and NATO agendas with the Third Reich’s quest for *Großraum*. This frame, in turn, authorizes Moscow’s

attempts to “defensively” expand Russia’s sphere(s) of influence. Carl Schmitt is likewise well received in Beijing (Specter 2022), imperiling minorities—and those with minoritarian views—who might question Xi Jinping’s version of the “China Dream,” as well as anyone externally who challenges the party state’s “balance of history” (Pan and Kavalski 2018; Erling 2021). As noted above, binary frames likewise underwrite the politics of nostalgia in imperial successor states such as Iran and Turkey, where government invocations of former grandeur and multiregional connectivity increasingly serve as grist to the mill of great game revisionism (in spite—and sometimes to spite—the more inclusive demands of citizens on the ground) (Fisher-Onar 2012).

As Benabdallah in this special forum reminds us, a relational rather than binary template for policy *practice* could draw instead on emic norms of “solidarity” and “reciprocity” rooted in what Zarakol argues are the “shared histories” of the vast geography. Active (re)discovery of cultural and historical processes of co-constitution can resonate forward, helping to uncover present-day linkages and future connective possibilities. No panacea, it is our hope that mindfulness of being in relationship with others, at the least, can help to call out today’s trend of weaponizing *both* borders and interdependence across Afro-Eur-Asia. As we have argued via the notion of “itinerant translation” as the theorist’s calling—and as Shani suggests in his survey of Tagore’s dream—the mere act of imagining alternative forms of political community is potent. Via situated, contingent, and open-ended interactions, we open the policy door to a wide range of interlocutors, from activists and artists to workers and women,

across the over one hundred states and billions of people who constitute Afro-Eur-Asia (Fisher-Onar 2022). Indeed, by recognizing that geocultural identities are contextual, fluid, and plural, we apprehend that “Europe”—like the “West”—is not singular but a multiplicity of actors and an integral part of Afro-Eur-Asia. Similarly, the Americas—while animated by myriad, situated logics appropriate to continental conjectures—are active participants in trans-Pacific spaces.

Our engagement then with the interlocking regional worlds of Afro-Eur-Asia is an attempt to recover the conviviality of dense networks of relations in resistance to pundits across the global “East” and “West,” “South” and “North” alike who seek to deny and expunge historical, contemporary, and future pluralism (Gleason 2010; Horesh and Kavalski 2014; Mações 2018). As Subrahmanyam (1997, 761–62) puts it, “a more textured history of our present, complex, overlapping, disjunctive order” can be achieved by not only comparing “from within our boxes,” but also spending

some time and effort to transcend them, not by comparison alone, but by seeking out the at times fragile threads that connected the globe, even as the globe came to be defined as such. This is not to deny voice to those who were somehow “fixed” by physical, social, and cultural coordinates, who inhabited “localities” ... and whom we might seek out with our intrepid analytical machetes ... [It is to affirm that] even if we get to “them” ... the chances are that it is because they are already plugged into some network, some process of circulation.

In Lieu of a Conclusion, Open-Ended Reimagining ...

In our “age of anxiety” (Subotić and Ejodus 2021) at the apparent transition from a liberal to a plural global order, the exercises in itinerant translation across Afro-Eur-Asia on offer in this collection are an invitation to learn about different ways to observe and encounter our world(s), ourselves, and the problems that collectively embroil us.

In the process, we also seek to broker a comparative conversation across spaces traditionally studied apart due to the siloed position of African, East European, Middle Eastern, and Asian studies within the trans-Atlantic academy (Fisher-Onar 2013, 2020; Köllner et al 2018; Kavalski 2020). The contributions from prominent and rising IR scholars with intensive situated expertise leverage insights from history, sociology, and genuinely global takes on IR in conversation with more familiar academic lexicons such as regionalism and power transitions. Without wishing to impose homogeneity on the special forum, the contributions all gesture toward a relational approach. This analytical disposition disrupts attempts to press-gang messy, multiple, and interpenetrated histories, identities, experiences, and knowledges into the service of Us versus Them binaries. Instead, this collection offers contextualized perspectives on the plural ways of being and doing, remembering and hoping, that animate our planet of interlocking regional worlds.

Our overarching goal is to offer an alternative vision of IR at the dawn of multipolarity that, while not without frictions, does not presume that conflict with “Others” is inevitable.

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