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Theoretical innovations in international relations from the perspective of “Global South”

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Abstract: “Global South” is undoubtedly a broad term that typically refers to developing countries with varying degrees of economic, cultural and political influence. The rise of the Global South signifies the importance of reassessing the existing international order. In terms of international relations theory, this should be an innovative, progressive and reflective field of study. However, this research is predominantly led by the Western mainstream international relations theories. This often neglects the internal and external factors in the development processes of other countries, the formation of relationship frameworks, foreign policy formulation, and the need of foreign relations. Despite the ongoing and intense debate over the innovation of international relations theory, it is difficult to see it keeping pace with contemporary developments. Various schools and thoughts frequently innovate only within their foundational frameworks. Therefore, for Global South countries, there is the need for international relations theories that can reflect their specific needs and actual conditions. This does not only require breaking away from the westcentric theoretical framework, but ensuring that the innovation process is aligned with practical realities that recognize mutual interests and encompass both local and global perspectives. This approach should involve a comprehensive reflection on international relations, allowing innovation of international relations theories to genuinely “enter” the Global South countries.

Keywords: Global South; international relations; theoretical innovation; theoretical diversification

1. Introduction

For a long time, research in international relations has been dominated by theories and perspectives originating from the Global North. Whether it is realism, liberalism or constructivism, these discussions have typically taken place within a westcentric framework. It is crucial to note that the reason why international relations theories are difficult to universally recognize as “mainstream” theories lies in the failure of their fundamental concepts to accurately reflect the realities of many Global South countries. The fact is that a number of academic discussions on international relations theories fall short of accounting for the diverse realities and needs of the Global South. These theories are not able to fully encompass the issues that are vital to these countries. In other words, current international relations theories do not engage sufficiently with critical issues of the Global South. This partially reveals the limitations of mainstream Western theories, which often overlook the voices and perspectives of Global South countries and fail to embody a truly global viewpoint in interpreting global political and economic landscapes.

Nowadays, as academic horizons gradually broaden, an increasing number of studies are focusing on international relations theories and the unique interpretations based on the realities in Africa, Asia and Latin America. These studies aim to uncover

the rich and diverse experiences of the Global South in international relations. This challenges and enriches the scope of traditional international relations theories. The contributions of these Global South theories are crucial for the development of “global international relations”, marking a positive progress towards a more inclusive picture of the diverse world.

The core purpose of this study is to explore the theoretical innovations in international relations from the perspective of the Global South. It aims to address the gaps and limitations in traditional theories by incorporating the unique experiences, challenges, and perspectives of Global South countries. This paper is structured as follows: First, it reconfigures international relations from the perspective of the Global South, followed by an examination of the significance and relevance of the Global South in international relations. Next, it delves into the need for innovative international relations theories and provides a critical reflection on traditional theories. Subsequently, it explores the methodology and pathways for theoretical innovation from a Global South perspective, and finally, it offers conclusions and recommendations for future research and practice.

2. The global south perspective

In reimagining the context of contemporary international relations, the term “Global South” is no longer confined to geographical boundaries. Instead, it has expanded into a multidimensional concept that encompasses major parts of Africa, Latin America, Asia and the Pacific Islands. These regions, despite their differences in economic development, political structures and social processes commonly face challenges such as economic inequality, poverty, social injustice and environmental changes. In this context, Global South transcends physical location to encompass a crucial perspective for analyzing inequality development and governance systems.

The concept of the Global South challenges the traditional global binary division and advocates for examining the complex economic, political, cultural and environmental interactions among different countries and regions in the globalization process. This concept does not simply refer to the geographical “South”, but rather to countries and regions that experienced colonial oppression, remain marginalized in the global economic system, and face issues of development and justice. Its significance lies in challenging inherent inequalities within the international system, subverting traditional northcentric perspectives and preventing a full understanding of the complex international relations on the global stage.

Studying the Global South can reveal the fundamental structures of global inequality and demonstrate how more equitable international trade and economic policies can create a truly equitable world. through in-depth analyses, have proposed decoloniality and world-systems theory. This further emphasizes the necessity for incorporating the perspective of the Global South into international relations as a more effective way of addressing global inequalities. These theoretical frameworks not only challenge the westcentric biases in international relations, but also offer new paradigms of global governance and international cooperation.

2.1. The Global South relevance

In the field of international relations, the significance of the Global South lies not only in its unique impact and perspectives on global economic, political, cultural and environmental issues, but also in its profound challenges and contributions to international relations theory and practice. The countries and regions of the Global South, with their distinctive historical backgrounds, development stages and challenges provide rich material and new perspective for the study of international relations. These experiences and viewpoints challenge some of the core assumptions of traditional international relations theories, particularly those constructed on Western experiences and perspectives.

When discussing international relations theory, the Morgenthau Realist Theory, proposed in 1984, emphasizes the centrality of national interest and power. Additionally, Kissinger's (1994) analysis of foreign policy reflects a distinctly Western realist perspective. In terms of liberal theory, Keynes' (1936) contributions to economic policy and Kennan's (1946) emphasis on international cooperation in the "long telegram" are both situated within the Western economic and political framework. However, the perspective of the Global South offers crucial supplements and challenges to these traditional theories.

Arturo Escobar (1995), in his exploration of development issues, critiques the westcentric perspective, highlighting the unique developmental challenges and historical contexts faced by Global South countries. Similarly, the Mignolo Decolonial Theory (Mignolo, 2000) underscores cultural differences and the inequitable structures within global history, pointing out the distinctive strategies and pathways adopted by Global South countries in globalization.

Chinese scholars have also shown a keen interest in the issues of the Global South. Sun (2015), in his research, emphasized the complex impact of globalization on the economic development of Global South countries. The study highlights the inequalities inherent in globalization process and calling for a more comprehensive reflection and innovation in international relations theory. Zhang (2017) analyzed how the perspective of the Global South provides a new framework for understanding and analyzing international relations. This particularly holds in the mechanisms of global governance, development policies and international cooperation; showcasing the active roles and contributions of Global South countries in the international system. Li (2019) discussed how Global South countries adopt unique strategies and policies to address these challenges and seek more just and effective participation in the global governance system.

Yan (2005) argued that realism should pay greater attention to moral and cultural factors among states. Qin (2011) suggested that realism should focus more on relationships and processes, rather than merely outcomes and states. Zhang (2014) emphasized the importance of localization of international relations theory, advocating for the incorporation of China's cultural and historical uniqueness into the theoretical framework of international relations. Meanwhile, Zhu (2010) explored the impact of China's peaceful rise on the international political landscape and on realism itself.

Based on the above, traditional international relations theories generally have a significant limitation. It overemphasis Western experiences and perspectives and

neglects the diversity and complexity of the real world, especially those of the Global South. This complexity is mainly manifested in two aspects. Firstly, Western scholars commonly stress the explanation of power and conflict within the international system, overlooking critical factors such as the construct of culture and identity in international relations. Secondly, Chinese scholars place greater emphasis on the value of relationships, interdependence, and the cultural and moral dimensions in international behavior.

2.2. Innovative international relations theories

Innovation in international relations theory is not only an inevitable academic pursuit, but also a practical necessity for adapting to an increasingly complex global political and economic environment. With the rise of emerging powers within the international system, the evolution of global governance structures and the increasingly dynamic transnational issues, existing theoretical frameworks become more challenging in terms of explanatory power and adaptability. These changes require international relations theories to not only explain traditional power politics between states, but also to fully consider the roles of non-state actors, the multi-level nature of global governance, and the implications of international laws.

The necessity for theoretical innovation also lies in the critical reflection on the assumptions of existing theories. Traditional theories in international relations, such as realism and liberalism, while providing robust explanatory frameworks for the operation of the international system, often fall short when addressing new phenomena and issues in international relations within the context of globalization (Rousseau, 2006). The root of this phenomenon is the longstanding dominance of Western perspectives and theories in academia, heavily influenced by Western philosophical giants like Hobbes and Kant, making realism and liberalism the mainstream approaches and theoretical foundations in the study of international relations.

However, this traditional viewpoint centered around the Westphalian system has not gone unchallenged. Some revisionists argue that the so-called Westphalian narrative is more of a “historical myth” rather than an accurate reflection of objective facts. Another perspective contends that the Westphalian system and its associated historical events laid the foundation for the dominance of Western states on the world political stage (Kayaoglu, 2010). Traditional theoretical perspectives often overly idealize Western values, elevating them to universal principles that all nations must follow.

In other words, Western centrism has established a parochial mode of traditional international theory, which is unable to address the complex and intertwined international relations of the entire world, particularly those involving the “Global South.” Therefore, the necessity for innovation in international relations theory includes among others the following aspects:

The influence of Western centrism is evident in many traditional international relations theories, which are rooted in historical, cultural and philosophical traditions of the West. These theories often overlook the historical experiences and political practices of the non-Western world, particularly those of the “Global South.”

Traditional theories often view states as the sole or primary actors in international

relations, neglecting the significance of non-state actors such as multinational corporations, international organizations and non-governmental organizations in contemporary global politics.

Traditional theories tend to conceptualize power primarily in terms of the possession of material resources such as military and economic strength, while overlooking non-material forms of power such as soft power and cultural influence.

Traditional international relations theories seldom take into account the perspectives and experiences of Global South countries, particularly their unique experiences with colonialism, the Cold War, and globalization.

3. Traditional international relations theories

3.1. Western hegemony over international relations

The development and evolution of international relations theories are deeply rooted in Western political philosophies, economic models and cultural values. Furthermore, there is the need to deepen the existing understanding of the complex and intertwined historical and contemporary influences behind these theories.

From the political perspective, since the end of the Cold War, the unchallenged dominance of the United States and its allies in the international system has called for the elevation of Western democratic governance and free-market economies as symbols of development and progress. These models are often used as benchmarks for assessing the political and economic systems of other countries. This reflects a profound power imbalance, where the political ideals and governance models of Western countries are prioritized and promoted, hugely overlooking the historical backgrounds, cultural differences and practical needs of the Global South.

From an economic perspective, the construction of the international trade and financial systems is markedly biased towards the interests of developed countries, significantly exacerbating economic inequalities between the Global North and the Global South. This design not only reflects the imbalanced distribution of power in the international economic order, but also highlights the neglect of the challenges and needs of the Global South. In particular, global trade rules and the policies of financial institutions often constrain the ability of developing countries to achieve economic growth through fair competition, further entrenching their marginalized status in the international system.

From a cultural perspective, the global spread of the English language and the widespread reach of Western media have further solidified the dominance of Western culture. This has created an implicit inequality in linguistic communication and a unidirectional flow in the global cultural landscape. This cultural hegemony not only affects the self-perception of cultural identity and values in various countries, but also to some extent undermines the development and diversity of local cultures.

3.2. Traditional international relations theory limitations

Interestingly, as Tickner (2003) pointed out, although Western theoretical frameworks are widely regarded as the primary tools for explaining the world political landscape, these traditional international relations theories have not effectively

addressed many of the questions faced by non-Western scholars. Consequently, the limitations of these theories have become increasingly apparent in the process of globalization, particularly in their ability to reflect the needs and perspectives of Global South countries.

Classical realism and neorealism are often criticized for their excessive emphasis on national sovereignty, national interest, and military power. Narrative Citation: Acharya and Buzan (2010) argues that these theories extend the core narrative of international anarchy and balance of power, originating in Europe, to other areas of world history, treating this condition as an eternal and universally existing structural feature.

Buzan (2016) posits that constructivism and postmodernism also originate from Western epistemology and social theory. In studying international relations theory, constructivism is often credited with fostering the development of non-Western thought by addressing norms, ideas, culture, and identity. This is because constructivism, by focusing on local issues and contexts, creates opportunities to include non-Western regions in research, thereby opening new avenues for studying non-Western societies, politics, and cultures. However, it overlooks the broad perspective of the “Global South,” which can provide new insights, theories, and frameworks for the development of international relations.

Postcolonialism, compared to the aforementioned theories, broadens our understanding of the international system in the context of the Global South and international relations theory. Scholars like Walter Dignolo and Arturo Escobar have provided significant perspectives on how Western hegemony has formed through language, culture, knowledge production, and economic activities. Postcolonial theory amplifies the voices of the Global South, challenging the unequal structures within international relations and emphasizing the necessity of achieving plurality and justice in global politics.

3.3. Western root of traditional international relations theories

In terms of international relations, the Global South’s way of thinking as a research field began to be discussed in the 1990s. However, it wasn’t until the early 21st century, particularly after 2007, that this concept gained widespread recognition and attention. Amitav Acharya’s contributions have been especially significant in advancing this field.

Acharya (2000) pointed out that although the theoretical frameworks and conceptual systems of international relations aim to explain global political phenomena and cover all countries, they are, in fact, incomplete. Furthermore, Narrative Citation: Acharya and Buzan (2007) argued that a significant portion of current international relations theories seem to be produced by and for the West. These theories are developed based on an underlying assumption that the historical experiences and development models of the West represent the global historical trajectory.

This phenomenon prompts reflection on why the theoretical foundations of international relations are almost entirely rooted in Western intellectual soil, while neglecting the diverse historical and cultural backgrounds of the world. The reasons

for this can be attributed to several factors:

The inherent flaws of Western centrism lie in its limitations, deeply rooted in global knowledge production and international relations discourse. As a result, extending Western theoretical concepts and practical models to Global South countries is far from straightforward.

This suggests that these viewpoints and theories operate largely on a subconscious level, disconnected from the objective realities of international relations. Moreover, this results in a cultural and ideological “internalization,” turning these theories into widely accepted “common sense.”

It is evident that theoretical perspectives from the Global South do exist, but they are often not widely recognized. The reasons for this are largely due to language and cultural barriers, which result in these theories not being classified as part of the Western-defined academic field and thus considered less “orthodox.” This leads to inequalities in global academic exchanges and the perpetuation of a center-periphery structure.

In Western-dominated international relations, the definition of a state is often surprisingly narrow and biased. It typically considers state fragility as characterized by a lack of national identity, weak socio-political cohesion, and security vulnerabilities. Based on this understanding, Third World countries are frequently labeled as weak states, quasi-states, failed states, or incomplete states.

The claimed “universality” of Western theories is often based on the assumption that culturally specific concepts and values are globally applicable. This perspective ignores global diversity and the uniqueness of non-Western societies, leading to a false sense of universality. When concepts like democracy, human rights, state systems, and regional order are defined and derived by the West, it implies that those who do not adhere to these definitions are undemocratic or disrespectful of human rights.

In summary, Global South countries, through their international relations practices, have highlighted numerous blind spots and limitations of Western theories. For instance, these theories often fail to adequately account for the inequalities and injustices present in the international system, including the unevenness of economic development, inequitable resource distribution, and issues of representation and voice within international institutions. Moreover, Western theories frequently overlook the profound impact of culture, history, and social structures on international relations, factors that play a crucial role in the foreign policies and international interactions of Global South countries.

4. Global south perspective of theoretical innovations

The term “Global South,” as an encompassing concept, has garnered significant attention from the international academic community and policymakers over the past few decades. However, understanding its precise definition and implications remains fraught with differences and controversies. The Global South is not merely a collection of countries located in low-latitude regions; it more profoundly represents an economic and political stance that is non-Western, signifying a collective of developing nations. These countries, by sharing similar economic systems, developmental stages, and political experiences, have forged a complex network of

cooperation and opposition on the international stage.

Furthermore, the scope of the Global South extends far beyond the geographic notion of the “south.” It encompasses countries and regions that have historically endured colonial oppression, occupy a weaker position in the global economy, and face challenges related to development and justice. This collective, by sharing analogous developmental stages, economic structures, and political experiences, forms a multifaceted, cross-regional dynamic network that presents new perspectives and challenges to the understanding of international relations. The diversity and unpredictability of political systems are also defining characteristics of Global South countries. The heterogeneity in their political transitions—from democracy to autocracy to single-party systems—reflects the coexistence of various governance models within these nations. The inconsistencies in democratization processes further contribute to the complexity of their international relations and external cooperation.

4.1. Theoretical innovation methodology

Hobson (2007) posited that the understanding of international relations is fundamentally skewed due to its conceptualization being almost entirely framed from a European perspective. Cox (1981) introduced a highly influential notion that theories are always for someone and for some purpose. In other words, the formulation of international relations theory is often a political act, closely tied to the interests and positions of specific times and places, including the advocacy for national status and the safeguarding of a nation’s rights and prosperity. Traditional international relations theories tend to analyze inter-state relations from a macro perspective, often neglecting the unique historical backgrounds and socio-economic realities of Global South countries.

Thus, the Global South challenges the inherent theories and practices in international relations, emphasizing the diversity of historical experiences and the deep-seated structures of global inequality (Buzan and Little, 2000). It represents a liberation of international relations by advocating for a recognition of the Global South’s dual role in the international system: as both victims of the inequitable structures of international politics and economics, and as active participants and reformers in global governance and international law.

To reconcile traditional theories with the realities of the Global South, international relations research must acknowledge the Global South’s dual role within the international system. This includes being both the victims of structural inequalities and the proactive participants and reformers in global governance and international jurisprudence. In the pursuit of innovation in international relations theory, research must delve deeply into the unique historical and political experiences of these regions, extracting and developing universally applicable concepts and theoretical frameworks, rather than being confined to the existing paradigms of traditional international relations theory. This approach necessitates a profound re-evaluation and innovation of fundamental concepts, theoretical assumptions, and analytical methods within international relations (Connell, 2007). Not only should it involve a reassessment of notions like power, interests, and security, but it should also consider issues of international cooperation, development, and justice from the perspectives of these

countries. Scholars refer to this innovative approach as the “subaltern approach” or “indigenous research methodology.”

The subsystem research approach provides new pathways for theoretical innovation from the perspective of the “Global South,” challenging the traditional dominance of Western methodologies and theories. Narrative Citation: Acharya and Buzan, (2007). Indigenous research methodologies should become the core battleground for subsystem theory research. Indigenous theories are those rooted in local experiences and contexts. While they may draw on existing theoretical frameworks, the analysis must incorporate local experiences and perspectives (Hobson, 2007). Thus, theoretical innovation based on the “Global South” perspective should combine these two approaches, focusing on how to integrate the experiences and needs of the Global South, broaden theoretical horizons, and construct more inclusive and diverse analytical models.

This path of theoretical innovation involves not only incorporating the historical experiences and cultural practices of the Global South but also embedding a profound reflection on inequality and injustice in the theoretical construction. Additionally, it requires a renewed recognition of the Global South as a significant actor in international relations. This integrative approach aims to create a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of global dynamics, moving beyond the limitations of traditional Western-centric theories and methodologies.

4.2. A new path to theoretical innovation

It is essential to recognize that the current global landscape’s cultural connections, political dialogues, and economic cooperation have paved the way for innovation in international relations theory. In today’s ever-evolving global context, it is foreseeable that countries within the “Global South” will pose unique questions and provide distinct insights aligned with their developmental trajectories. This is a crucial foundation for contemporary theoretical innovation in international relations.

For the Global South, the development of a theoretical framework that reflects its distinctive characteristics is an urgent necessity. The key element to be introduced in the innovation of international relations theory is “locality” (Chatterjee, 2012). In other words, there must be a profound consideration of multiple factors such as local culture, history, and civilization. This research approach delves into the unique local dynamics of each country, which directly influence their political, economic, and security landscapes. Theoretical innovation from the Global South perspective requires an in-depth analysis and critique of the inequitable structures within the international system, particularly how Global South countries confront and respond to economic, political, and cultural challenges in the globalization process. This includes a critical examination of the international trade system, financial institutions, and international laws and rules, exploring how to achieve fairer and more equitable international cooperation mechanisms (Capasso, 2023). Such theoretical explorations can provide Global South countries with the theoretical support needed to secure greater developmental space and a more just international status.

For instance, the core of South-South cooperation lies in mutual assistance and collaboration among Global South countries (Gray and Gills, 2016). This cooperation,

based on principles of equality and reciprocity, aims to collectively address challenges in economic development and reduce dependence on the developed countries of the Global North. Through sharing developmental experiences, technological exchange, trade cooperation, and cultural interactions, South-South cooperation not only deepens mutual understanding and trust among Global South countries but also offers a means to bypass traditional dependency models and directly access developmental resources and support. This cooperation model has played a positive role in promoting economic growth and social progress among Global South countries, while also providing new research perspectives and practical cases for the development of international relations theory.

New regionalism, as a strategy for inter-regional cooperation and integration, emphasizes fostering regional economic cooperation organizations, political alliances, and socio-cultural networks within the broader context of globalization. Compared to traditional regionalism, new regionalism focuses more on finding internal developmental drivers within regions amidst the pressures and opportunities of globalization (Ethier, 1998). It underscores the importance of regional cooperation in maintaining regional security, promoting economic growth, and facilitating cultural exchanges. Through the practice of new regionalism, Global South countries can enhance their positions within the global economy and form more robust collective actions and discourses in international politics.

Thus, while Global South countries actively seek autonomous development pathways through these cooperative models, they also provide rich material and case studies for the innovation and development of international relations theory. This requires us to engage in profound theoretical and practical reflection and proactive actions, continuously exploring new theories, models, and strategies that meet the needs of contemporary international relations development. This pursuit aims to contribute wisdom and strength towards achieving long-term global stability and shared prosperity.

4.3. A new perspective on theoretical innovation

From the perspective of the Global South, innovation in international relations theory is not only a reflection of the academic pursuit of theoretical diversification and deepening but also a necessary critical reflection on the inequalities and injustices presents in the current international system. The Global South, as a complex group that has endured colonial oppression and post-colonial challenges, offers unique developmental experiences and perspectives that provide rich resources for international relations theory, driving exploration into the deeper issues of international politics, economic dynamics, and cultural exchanges.

Therefore, theoretical innovation based on the Global South perspective necessitates the incorporation of a “locality” centered research approach. This perspective demands a reevaluation of the structures and operational mechanisms of the international system, paying close attention to the voices and needs of countries and regions marginalized or overlooked by traditional theories. Nkiwane (2001) posits that such theoretical innovation underscores that the development of international relations should not be viewed merely as a game of great power politics; Global South

countries play equally significant roles. By highlighting these countries' agency in the global political economy, we can challenge and expand the research boundaries of international relations theory, providing new perspectives and explanatory frameworks for understanding international relations in the era of globalization.

In other words, theoretical innovation from the Global South perspective essentially bridges the "gap" between nations and is manifested in several keyways:

The perspective should be centered on the foundation of pluralistic universalism. It should integrate the diversity and universality of regions worldwide to form a more inclusive theoretical framework. By transcending the limitations of a single culture or region and drawing from the unique perspectives and experiences of the Global South and other non-Western societies, we can collectively explore new international relations concepts that are applicable to the entire global community.

When constructing new theories, deeply explore and reflect on the global development and interactions of human history. Focus on the exchanges, clashes, and fusions between different civilizations, societies, and nations. Unearth the universal principles and diverse practices in international relations across various historical periods.

The goal of theoretical innovation is not merely to uncover new perspectives but to build a more comprehensive and integrated framework. This framework should amalgamate the strengths of different theories to provide a deeper understanding of international phenomena.

Enhance and deepen existing global or national-level theories by incorporating regional perspectives. This approach provides new analytical dimensions and understanding frameworks, capturing the multi-layered and multi-dimensional phenomena within the international system. Emphasize the importance of regional perspectives and the integration of regional studies.

In the process of innovating international relations theory, rejecting exceptionalism is a crucial step towards promoting theoretical diversity and globalization. Viewing the experiences of different cultures and regions as foundational for constructing theories enhances the plurality and inclusiveness of international relations theory.

Traditional international relations theories often overemphasize the material power comparisons between states, neglecting cultural influence, political ideas, value dissemination, soft power, and the roles and impacts of international organizations or NGOs. Expanding the theoretical perspective to include these non-material forms of agency not only provides a more comprehensive understanding of the international system but also uncovers more profound and nuanced dynamics in international relations.

In summary, the innovative research perspective of international relations theory from the Global South should include the redefinition and reinterpretation of core concepts in traditional international relations theory, such as power, security, development, peace, and cooperation. By examining the meanings and manifestations of these concepts in the specific practices of Global South countries, this approach can enrich and complicate the theoretical construction of international relations. This will make the theory more aligned with the realities of international politics in the globalization era and more reflective of global diversity and complexity.

5. Establishment of a system of theoretical innovations in international relations

Theoretical innovation in international relations entails seeking new cooperation models and mechanisms in global governance to better reflect the interests of Global South countries and enable them to play a more active role in international affairs. It also represents a call for critical reflection and positive transformation of the current international order. This process of theoretical innovation is essential for building a more just, balanced, and inclusive international relations system, thereby achieving long-term global stability and shared prosperity.

5.1. Independent international relations theory innovations

Within the framework of “Global South and International Relations Theory,” rethinking sovereignty and development demands a deeper understanding and application of these core concepts from a Global South perspective. This is not only essential for theoretical innovation but also crucial for determining the position, role, and developmental pathways of Global South countries in the international system. In traditional international relations theory, sovereignty is seen as the cornerstone of state independence and autonomy, representing the ultimate authority and freedom of action within a state’s territory.

Therefore, in the process of innovating international relations theory, it is necessary to question the blind veneration of the “eternal essence” of sovereignty. This involves scrutinizing the norms and practices that give sovereignty a misleadingly prominent and mythical status in social “truth.” As Barkin and Cronin (1994) argued, traditional state-centric international relations theories uncritically treat sovereignty as the fundamental starting point for analyzing global political phenomena. In many studies, sovereignty is often regarded as the core principle for constructing international organizations and order.

Historically, state-centric international relations theories have obscured the historical context in which the concept of sovereignty emerged and evolved, let alone how sovereign states were established as core elements in international relations. For the innovation of international relations theory, “sovereignty” is not fixed in meaning nor a permanent feature of political life and international relations. Sovereignty has been seen as the “core essence” of traditional international relations theory and the foundation for understanding state behavior and the structure of the international system. However, as the field of international relations continues to develop and evolve, relying solely on the concept of sovereignty to explain the complexities of global politics is no longer sufficient. As Williams (1996) noted, it is possible and even necessary to differentiate between “state sovereignty” and “national sovereignty” in theoretical development. Similarly, Devetak (1996) highlighted that traditional state-centric international relations theories often overlook the participation and exploration of other countries and regions. Ironically, these theories, while centering on the state, fail to understand the most basic components of the state itself. This sovereignty-based state-centric perspective constrains the political imagination of international relations theory development. The rigid adherence to the concept of sovereignty in traditional theories neglects the realities of historical and structural

changes.

Therefore, in the process of innovating international relations theory, international relations should be reinterpreted as part of the discourse system and sovereignty-constructing practices unique to modern states. Narrative Citation: Acharya and Buzan, (2010). Maintaining sovereignty is not just about political independence; it also encompasses economic autonomy, cultural dignity, and social development. One of the greatest challenges faced by Global South countries is how to maintain and enhance their agency within the broader context of globalization, ensuring that their developmental pathways and models reflect their actual needs and characteristics while adapting to changes in the international economic and political systems (Chaturvedi, 2016).

Development, as another core issue in international relations, is of paramount importance. The changes and development in the world order can be glimpsed through globalization but understanding “development” should not be confined to the scope of globalization. Particularly for innovating international relations theory, interpreting globalization from an ideological perspective can yield deeper insights. In this context, the innovation of international relations theory based on the Global South can effectively improve the political landscape and discourse system dominated by Western countries, blurring the traditional boundaries between subject and object, public and private, and domestic and international.

The innovation of international relations theory from a Global South perspective can be anticipated as a prolonged “postmodern challenge.” This challenge is not only a critical reflection and transcendence of traditional international relations theories but also a fundamental questioning of the existing global order, knowledge structures, and power distributions. It aims to bridge the gaps between different countries, regimes, and regions.

5.2. Cultural diversity and communication

In the process of innovating international relations theory, the importance of cultural diversity and cross-cultural communication cannot be overlooked. Culture, as Birukou (2013) noted, is the hallmark of a group or society, encompassing beliefs, values, practices, customs, artifacts, language, religion, social organization, art, and technology. As Polletta and Jasper (2001) suggested, culture shapes both individual and collective identities and influences their behaviors and modes of communication. Culture is dynamic, continuously evolving, and influenced by globalization, migration, technological advancements, and socio-political changes, resulting in significant differences between societies and countries. In essence, understanding cultural diversity and cross-cultural exchanges is crucial for comprehending the complex interactions between states and regions.

Global South countries, historically subjected to colonial oppression and cultural deprivation, have developed diverse and complex cultural identities. Integrating perspectives of cultural diversity and cross-cultural communication into international relations theory is thus critical for reconstructing these theories to enhance their universality and inclusivity. Understanding and exchanging cultures is an effective means of overcoming obstacles and challenges in international relations

(Berenskoetter, 2010). Therefore, leveraging cultural differences, understanding these differences, and strengthening cultural exchanges can more effectively mitigate the impacts of imperialism and nationalism in the innovation of international relations theory.

Cultural diversity emphasizes recognizing the differences and uniqueness of cultures across countries and regions worldwide (Fearon, 2023). Innovation in international relations theory should advocate for the values of multiculturalism and developmental models that respect these cultural differences. For example, addressing international conflicts and cooperation should consider the cultural characteristics and historical contexts of all parties to seek more universal and effective solutions. Introducing cultural factors into the theoretical framework can redefine core concepts such as sovereignty, development, security, and cooperation. This approach enables international relations theory to more comprehensively reflect the real experiences and needs of different countries and regions in the globalization process.

Key areas for theoretical innovation

(1) Innovating international relations theory requires moving beyond traditional frameworks centered on national interests and material power (Lemke et al., 2023). It involves exploring how cultural factors and identity influence state behavior, the construction of international relations, and the evolution of global political landscapes.

(2) The innovation of international relations theory must acknowledge the interplay of material power between states and understand how cultural factors influence international political dynamics. This includes bridging the divide between material and non-material analyses and promoting cross-cultural communication and understanding.

(3) The Global South, including developing countries and emerging economies, possesses rich and diverse cultural traditions and social practices. These provide valuable perspectives and deep insights for international relations theory (Barnett and Zarakol, 2023) Incorporating the cultural diversity of the Global South into theoretical innovation can make the theory more pluralistic and inclusive, reflecting a wide range of perspectives and experiences in a globalized world.

(4) Facilitating mutual understanding between different cultures through theoretical innovation can enhance cooperation between nations to jointly address global challenges. Integrating perspectives and experiences from various cultures into international relations theory can help theorists and policymakers better understand the behavior and decision-making logic of states with different cultural backgrounds.

(5) Theoretical innovation should support the utilization of cultural resources by these countries for international exchange and cooperation. Encouraging the development of cultural industries through international trade policies, including Global South cultural content in international education programs, or providing platforms for cultural exchange within international organizations can create space for the internationalization of cultural industries and cultural showcases from Global South countries.

In conclusion, strengthening and deepening cultural diversity and cross-cultural exchanges will infuse international relations theory with new vitality. It will transform the field from a cold power game into a stage for international cooperation and shared

humanistic development. In this process, the cultures and perspectives of Global South countries will no longer be marginalized but will become active forces in shaping a peaceful and prosperous international society.

5.3. Global governance and authority

As Ikenberry (2001) posited, most countries adhere to almost all of their obligations most of the time. Following rules is, in fact, quite common. Contemporary international relations can be likened to a painting; from a distance, it appears dominated by major powers, demanding adherence to established norms and forming a “compliance model.” However, upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that each country or region is following its own set of requirements, striving for fairness in global governance yet often overlooked. So, what exactly is global governance?

Global governance, as a concept, holds multiple meanings. Governance refers to the exercise of power by an actor within a specific area. As Milner (1991) suggested, this power can be wielded by governments, families, clans, religious groups, professional associations, and various other actors. Supranational power can have its mandates executed by national governments (Hewson et al., 1999). Private power also establishes binding obligations for community members. Therefore, governance encompasses a broader range of actors.

In other words, global governance involves a series of actors exercising power across national boundaries, including states exerting power over others (establishing hierarchies), international organizations wielding power over their member states (reflecting supranationalism), and NGOs exercising power over communities spanning two or more countries. Ideally, global governance should be an evolving process where international conflicts and contradictions are effectively managed, promoting broader international cooperation and harmony (Biersteker, 2009).

But is this the reality? The challenges facing global governance are far more complex. Reconciling conflicts and contradictions is no easy task, especially when considering national interests, varying interpretations of international laws and rules, power imbalances between states, the structure of the international political economy, power politics, and cultural differences. The concept of global governance often appears “narrow” for several reasons:

Global governance rules and standards are often set by major powers, not necessarily taking into account the realities and interests of all countries, leading to “unfair rules.” Resources and aid distribution is often politically influenced rather than based on actual needs and fairness, resulting in “unfair resource distribution.”

The absence of a voice means decision-making processes lack transparency, making power operations in international relations insufficiently open and accountable. This lack of transparency exacerbates distrust and hinders effective international cooperation. Similarly, international rules and standards may not fairly reflect the interests and perspectives of all parties, exacerbating global inequalities.

These barriers, based on race, economic status, gender, culture, or political differences, undermine the foundation of international cooperation and hinder the effectiveness of global governance.

Genuine international cooperation and global governance should not be based

solely on displays or coercion of power but should be built on consensus, legitimacy, and moral authority. This involves focusing on how to establish and maintain international order through dialogue, cooperation, and mutual respect, rather than relying solely on power politics.

Vested interests often use “authority” to tilt governance processes in their favor, creating significant bias in policy and governance.

Therefore, for international relations theory innovation, it is imperative to advocate for a more open and transparent global governance system, including reforms of international financial institutions and trade agreements, and supporting Global South countries in their pursuit of autonomous development paths. This includes encouraging the active participation of Global South countries in international policymaking, allowing them to play a more significant role in global governance.

Global South countries often face unjust trade practices and financial inequalities in economic globalization. International relations theory innovation should aim to make international economic policies more focused on reducing inequalities in trade, investment, and technology transfer, providing more development space and autonomy for Global South countries. The innovation of international relations theory should deepen the concepts of fairness and justice, strengthen the role of Global South countries in global governance, and ensure they have an appropriate voice in international decision-making. This involves promoting a balance of power structures in the international system, making global governance not just about maintaining the existing power order but also about fostering fairness and justice globally. Such theoretical and practical efforts will not only support the development of Global South countries but also contribute to more enduring and stable global peace.

5.4. Incorporation of “new concepts” in contemporary international relations

Innovating international relations theory requires the introduction of new concepts, theoretical models, and accurate portrayals of global diversity to facilitate substantive changes in international policy. It is essential to recognize and incorporate the historical experiences, political system diversity, economic development heterogeneity, and cultural uniqueness of the Global South in the theoretical framework.

The experiences of Global South countries remind us to consider different development stages and specific national contexts, avoiding the simplistic application of Western models. In other words, theoretical innovation must deconstruct and reconstruct international relations theories that overlook the actual conditions of the Global South. This necessitates the inclusion of “new concepts” in contemporary international relations. The following aspects are key:

Emphasize that the international system is not solely composed of state actors but includes international organizations, NGOs, multinational corporations, and civil society, recognizing the multiplicity of actors involved.

Acknowledge the rise of China and its implications for challenging and transforming the current international order.

Recognize the critical role of cultural differences and cultural exchanges in

international relations, advocating for the resolution of international conflicts and the promotion of cooperation through enhanced understanding and respect among different cultures.

Stress the importance of sustainable development in discussions on international relations, ensuring that this principle becomes a core consideration in the analysis and formulation of international policies.

By integrating these aspects, the innovation of international relations theory can better reflect the realities and needs of the Global South. This approach promotes a more inclusive, diverse, and equitable understanding of international relations, facilitating the development of policies that are more responsive to the global community's varied experiences and aspirations.

5.5. "Regional" theories of international relations

The role of the Global South in theoretical innovation is pivotal in reshaping the framework of international relations theory. This new framework transcends the limitations of Western experiences and emphasizes the diversity of historical experiences, cultural identities, and development paths. The Global South perspective introduces a new way of understanding and analyzing international politics, incorporating several critical factors such as challenging traditional great power politics, embracing non-Western experiences and viewpoints, and recognizing the importance of intercultural interactions.

The dominant position of the Westphalian system in the international order has led to the widespread neglect of other systems and orders. However, each region has its unique concepts and practices of international order, which are essential for rethinking and redefining contemporary international relations. The following points highlight the Global South's contributions to theoretical innovation:

By emphasizing the diversity of historical experiences and cultural identities, the Global South challenges the traditional Eurocentric framework and proposes a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of international relations.

The Global South perspective questions the dominance of great power politics and highlights the importance of considering the roles and experiences of smaller and non-Western states.

The inclusion of non-Western experiences and perspectives enriches international relations theory, providing a more diverse and accurate representation of global political dynamics.

The importance of intercultural interactions is underscored, promoting a deeper understanding and respect for cultural diversity in international relations.

By acknowledging the unique concepts and practices of international order in different regions, the Global South perspective encourages a reevaluation of the Westphalian system and its applicability to contemporary global politics.

By incorporating these elements, the Global South plays a crucial role in the innovation of international relations theory, contributing to the development of a more inclusive, equitable, and comprehensive framework that better reflects the realities and complexities of the global community. This approach not only enhances theoretical diversity but also promotes the formulation of more effective and fair international

policies, ultimately fostering global stability and prosperity.

6. Conclusion

The Global South perspective provides a new understanding of international relations theory, challenging the Western-centric biases of traditional theories and promoting theoretical diversity and a broader global vision. Examining the innovation of international relations theory from the Global South perspective means rethinking the basic assumptions of state behavior, the structure of the international system, and the rules of interaction between states.

Innovating international relations theory to incorporate the historical experiences of Global South countries requires transcending existing paradigms to explore theoretical foundations that better reflect the histories and cultural characteristics of these nations. Furthermore, this innovation must also encompass the agency of Global South countries within the international system.

In the process of innovating international relations theory, it is crucial to delve into world history to uncover new patterns, theories, and methods. History is not only a record of human social development but also the foundation and reflection of current international relations. By thoroughly analyzing and understanding history, we can discern the patterns of past international system transformations, comprehend the complexities of interactions between different civilizations, and uncover the deep-rooted causes of cooperation and conflict among nations.

The shifting distribution of global power and thought signals the formation of a multipolar world order and the deepening of global intellectual exchange. The relative decline of Western hegemony and the rise of regions such as Asia and Africa have not only reshaped the power dynamics of international politics and economics but also fostered the blending of diverse cultures and ideologies.

Every region possesses unique cultures, histories, and development paths. This diversity enriches global civilization and provides multiple perspectives for addressing global issues. Additionally, the close interconnections between regions reflect the interdependence of the modern world system. Whether through economic trade, cultural exchange, or political security, regional development and cooperation are vital for maintaining global stability and prosperity.

By embracing these aspects, the innovation of international relations theory can better reflect the realities and needs of the Global South, promoting a more inclusive, diverse, and equitable understanding of international relations, and fostering the development of policies that are more responsive to the varied experiences and aspirations of the global community.

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