International Theory (2025), **17** (2), 287–293
doi:10.1017/S1752971925100055

International Theory

REPLY

Reply to 'How (not) to advance Global IR: a rejoinder'

Michael Barnett[1] and Ayşe Zarakol[2]

[1]The Elliot School of International Affairs, George Washington University, Washington, DC, USA and [2]Department of Politics and International Studies, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK
Corresponding author: Michael Barnett; Email: barnett@gwu.edu

(Received 29 March 2025; revised 11 May 2025; accepted 13 May 2025)

Abstract
This reply responds to criticism of our original symposium, 'Global IR and the Essentialism Trap.' We respond to four particular charges and end with a call for Global IR to move beyond its current emphasis on creating a more diverse, equal, and inclusive discipline to identifying specific research programs that demonstrate the necessity of moving beyond the West. We nominate global order and disorder.

Keywords: Global International Relations; Essentialism; Disciplinary Pluralism; Global Order and Disorder; Mainstream Theories

In 'How (not) to advance Global IR: a rejoinder,' Eun, Kristensen, and Shahi criticize the 2023 *International Theory* Global IR symposium[1] from numerous angles. At issue are four main charges against our Introduction and the other contributions: (1) presenting a one-dimensional view of Global International Relations and failing to provide an 'up-to-date coverage of the fast-evolving and expanding landscape on which Global IR unfolds'[2]; (2) unfairly tarring the Global IR movement with the apostasy of essentialism; (3) conflating the movement's methods and goals; and (4) performing a gatekeeping role and lecturing others in Global IR to become more historical and sociological if the movement is to progress. Because of space constraints and general agreement on various other points they raise, we limit our response to these four lines of critique. We conclude by emphasizing that Global IR will have to make some tough choices if it intends to be more than a movement against the mainstream. We appreciate the opportunity to continue the conversation about the present and future of Global IR. Our response is ours and does not speak for the other contributors to the original symposium.

[1]Barnett and Zarakol 2023.
[2]Eun et al. 2025, 268.

© The Author(s), 2025. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752971925100055 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Before we start, however, we want to reiterate what the symposium's goals were and were not. The symposium came together organically from papers that were drafted independently. In putting them together, our goal was never to provide a comprehensive overview *or* a sweeping indictment of Global IR. Neither did we hope to spin the Global IR movement in a particular way. Our intent was to identify some tendencies in works associated with Global IR that *could* lead it into an essentialism trap and to propose not *the* solution but one possible way of avoiding that outcome. However, if Global IR falls into the trap, it will betray its stated normative and ontological commitments. We offer this warning because we support these commitments and hope Global IR succeeds in providing compelling research themes at this critical moment in the discipline and global affairs.

Does the symposium mischaracterize Global IR as one-dimensional?

Eun, Kristensen, and Shahi argue that the symposium reduces Global IR to Amitav Acharya's corpus with cherry-picked sprinkles of Chinese IR, and therefore misses the vast body of work undertaken under the aegis of this label. We agree that Global IR is a very big tent.[3] By no means did we intend to insinuate that the examples discussed in the symposium were representative of the entire field. As stated in the symposium, the specific examples discussed were chosen to illustrate the tendencies and slippages that Global IR needs to address more explicitly to successfully avoid an essentialism trap.[4]

Global IR's pluralism is highly commendable, but it comes at a cost. The International Studies Association's Global IR Section, for example, presents itself as having no boundaries. According to the Section statement, Global IR is not a theory or 'ism' but rather intends to

> facilitate genuinely global conversations about contemporary global issues and challenges, about different conceptual approaches and interpretations, and about how we teach our subject… Global IR is a way of thinking that stresses a self-conscious reflection on the world from different vantage points. It celebrates diversity and proceeds from the assumption that the non-judgemental interplay of the differences of perspectives constitutes the creative potential of our subject. It also promotes a recognition that knowledge produced everywhere, including outside the 'West,' is critical in order to understand our complex world.[5]

In this spirit, Eun, Kristensen, and Shahi applaud a 'movement' that produces a 'more global and diverse IR [that] encompasses a multitude of interventions that aim to address IR's historical "Western-centric" biases, decentre and open up the discipline, and incorporate a wider array of epistemic authorities beyond the "West."'[6] At first

[3]See e.g. Tickner 2003, 2008, Çapan 2016, Sevilla 2017, Kavalski 2018, Shahi 2023, Doak 2019, Dübgen and Skupien 2019, Kristensen 2021, Shimizu 2022, Chu 2022, Layug and Hobson 2022, Fierke 2022, Eun 2023, Watanabe 2023, as also cited by the rejoinder. There are many others still.

[4]We also avoided singling people out – except for a few, generally senior, scholars we see as representative of Global IR – because the issue is not anyone's scholarship but rather broadly shared tendencies in the movement that require more introspection and less defensiveness (which we found to be the case in the tone of the rejoinder).

[5]Https://www.isanet.org/ISA/Sections/GIRS.

[6]Eun et al. 2025, 269.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752971925100055 Published online by Cambridge University Press

blush, this seems like an innocuous statement. Who can be against a discipline that operates with a 'big tent' and aims to tear down the existing obstacles to an open and inclusive society? Global IR is writing against a discipline that exudes disciplinarity. All disciplines are disciplinary and decide what should be included and excluded, what is good and bad research, who has the authority to speak, and what the research agenda should be. Global IR could be characterized as a protest movement by those who have faced various exclusions because of a mainstream that focuses on the West – Western ideologies, Western interests, Western readings of history, Western standards of normal science, a Western standpoint epistemology, and Western-trained and located scholars. Global IR wants the discipline's power elite to live up to its own principles and create a discipline of diversity, equality, and inclusion. We emphatically agree that Western-centrism is a major problem that must be tackled. But the question is whether geographical representation is enough to solve it.[7]

Does the symposium mischaracterize Global IR as essentialist?

The symposium most definitely did not argue that Global IR has a *prima facie* commitment to essentialism (though we would not be surprised if some in the movement do). We argued, instead, that Global IR must think about its steps to avoid an 'essentialism trap.' For reasons discussed in the Introduction to the symposium, the potential missteps reside in how many who use the label do their work. Specifically, we argue that normative goals of Global IR towards representation can contradict its theoretical commitments to relationalism, bending the project towards an essentialism.

In our original article, we highlighted how many of the leading scholars of Global IR embrace some version of relationalism. Relationalism takes many forms, from the familiar (some varieties of constructivism) to the avant-garde (quantum-inspired hyper-humanism).[8] Although the differences between forms of relationalism are considerable, all relational approaches recognize that relations are prior to and produce entities. Or, as Charles Tilly puts it, there are no 'coherent durable monads' and scholars must be attentive to the 'contingent, transitory connections among socially constructed identities.'[9] There is much at stake in the relationalism versus essentialism binary – 'whether to conceive of the social world as consisting primarily in substances or in processes, in static "things" or in dynamic unfolding relations.'[10] As is also stated in the symposium, relationalism presents a major challenge to essentialism and its auxiliary claims of substantialism, internalism, and methodological nationalism. A relational starting point thus leads to a focus on transboundary connections, structural entanglements, and systems of stratification. It means that entities are forged relationally and are continuously shaped by ongoing logics of reproduction and contestation – they are 'entities in motion.'[11] And yet, there are analytical and empirical reasons why actors' interests, goals, and identities can be treated as relatively stable. The West, for example, is not a fixed entity. The idea of the

[7]On this issue, see also Barkawi et al. 2023.

[8]Katzenstein 2022; Kurki 2020. For useful overviews of relationalism, see Emirbayer 1997, Guzzini 2017, Guzzini 2024.

[9]Tilly 1995, 1595, 1695.

[10]Emirbayer 1997, 281.

[11]Go and Lawson 2017.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752971925100055 Published online by Cambridge University Press

West and the institutions that support it are regularly reassessed, contested, and reproduced. And yet, for analytical and empirical reasons, we do reference and reify *the* West, but we also remember that the reified idea is not the reality. Apparently, this position worries the authors, who suggest that we are poised to exclude '*pre-formed*' cultures, religions, cosmologies, and worldviews. This assertion is evidence of exactly what worries us – the possibility that scholars of Global IR risk slipping into essentialism.[12]

Many who count themselves as part of Global IR have spent considerable energy debating the social ontology of relationalism and its forms; we doubt that they will fall into an essentialist trap. The trap is more of a threat for those who engage in concept formation, theory building, and especially empirical research. We raise two important points in this context and their relationship to the essentialism trap. First, when we move from the ontological to the empirical, there is a strong tendency to reify the actors to do empirical work. It is difficult to know how to do otherwise. The ontological defence of this move is that while the world is socially constructed and in flux, it is certainly not in flux all the time, nor are many of the objects of concern. Second, we argue that this type of empirical work tends to be stronger when it is historically inclined. We are not sure why this plea set off alarms for Eun, Kristensen, and Shahi, who seem worried that we are force-feeding global history and global historical sociology down the throat of Global IR. That was most certainly not our intention. We do not see ourselves as hawking for one school or another but rather advocating the sort of work that can help us understand the processes that are responsible for producing and reproducing the structures that are behind agency. Different approaches can produce the same result.

Does the symposium conflate the means and ends of Global IR?

Eun, Kristensen, and Shahi take issue with the symposium for arguing that Global IR, at times, values geographical representation over genuine transformation of the discipline and its contexts. As they write, Global IR 'works with existing approaches as a *means* to attain a greater diversity, *not as an end in itself*.'[13] In other words, the lack of diversity is owing partly to the politics and power of knowledge production in the discipline. We agree. But it did not take Global IR to make this point; many scholars, including some who later lent their support to Global IR, had been registering this concern independently and for quite some time. Nevertheless, Global IR has made this a central focus of concern, and there is reason to think that it has made a difference; indeed, it might be one of the most concrete achievements of the movement thus far.[14]

It is unfortunate that the authors think we are ridiculing the goal of greater diversity of thought and nationality in top journals such as *International Organization*. As a current and former Associate Editor of *IO*, we and the board have worked to increase diversity. There is a long way to go, and it is worthwhile to assess the various reasons for the unacceptable state of affairs. But the focus on *IO* misses the broader

[12]Eun et al. 2025, 270; italics are ours.

[13]Ibid., 279, emphasis in the original.

[14]One of us has in fact argued precisely this in a debate on Global IR (against a much more severe critic of the Global IR project than us). See Zarakol and Aydınlı 2025.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752971925100055 Published online by Cambridge University Press

point: *IO* and other top journals could perfectly reflect the worldwide national distribution of IR scholars, but that would not guarantee a Global IR that transformed the discipline. A central observation of the essentialism trap is that Global IR could become co-opted and become not an agent of transformation but reproduction. If geographical representation is not the goal but the means, then we and the authors are in heated agreement. But then we should also be in agreement that the time has come for Global IR to examine how to achieve diversity in knowledge production and how such diversity would open up doors to a better understanding of how the world hangs together.

The intellectual journey of constructivism provides grist for our mill. As we explained in the symposium, 'American' constructivists (and others) have experienced this rodeo before. In the beginning, many pioneering scholars of constructivism focused on the foundations of IR, including styles of science and inquiry, relationships between parts and wholes, and different ways of conceptualizing processes. Much of this work remained at the metatheoretical level, leaving it open to the charge that constructivists were asking others to learn a second language without an empirical payoff. The end of the Cold War happened at a highly opportune moment; here was a major, world-turning event that left the mainstream speechless. First-generation constructivists barged into this space, offering alternative explanations with clear research designs and evidence. By meeting the mainstream on its own turf, constructivists demonstrated their value added and theoretical insights.

What will become of Global IR? Must it use global history?

Global IR faces similar choices. It could remain just as the International Studies Association (ISA) mission statement for the Global IR section states: something of a social movement that advocates for diversity, equality, and inclusion (DEI) and identifies how knowledge production in the discipline defeats this goal. It could aim to become a symbol and practice of genuine pluralism. But what would this mean for Global IR? Would it become nothing more than a set of slogans organized around themes of DEI? Would it become an outlet for creative work that possibly transformed the discipline? Most subfields do not sustain themselves or 'progress' this way. Instead, they usually have some sort of boundary and a research programme that allows for knowledge cumulation in a particular area. Thus far, other than maintaining that the discipline should look beyond the West, Global IR has refused to lay down a position on what should be studied and how it should be studied, perhaps worried it will risk its pluralism. But a Global IR without anchors is not a movement that will last very long. In our view, Global IR has arrived at a critical juncture.

Imagine there is a choice between two different doors. Behind Door #1 is a Global IR that continues down the path of DEI, hammers this theme in the realm of knowledge production, and provides a legitimation device for scholars working in marginalized topics and regions without changing much else in the field. Global IR has made inroads here. It has an ISA section, a stamp of disciplinary approval. It has caused the discipline to take a critical look at itself and its exclusionary practices. It is helping scholars who have experienced exclusionary practices and publishing barriers.[15] With luck, someday an article about Korea, Nigeria, or Peru will be treated the

[15]For more on such uses of Global IR, see Zarakol and Aydınlı 2025.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752971925100055 Published online by Cambridge University Press

same way as an article about the United States or the United Kingdom. If that were all Global IR became, it could certainly claim to be a success.

Door #2 is compatible with Door #1 but goes further. It recommends finding some sort of core that is typical of a research program; it could be theory, epistemological and ontological commitments, normativity, or theme. Our modest suggestion is that Global IR seems well-positioned to contribute to the current debates on global order and disorder, where it has already made some inroads. Much of the current debates on order are focused on the United States and the West and are historically and spatially constricted. Global IR has a lot to offer here. It is committed to a relationalism that offers an alternative to much of the discipline's essentialism. There is a growing body of scholarship that takes a much more global-historical view of order and disorder, along with a more sophisticated view of the relationship between structures and agents. It recognizes that the world is made and remade by states and non-state actors such as missionaries, trading companies and global capital, normative commitments and visions, and the like. This global historical and sociological approach seems quite compatible with Global IR's insights into the emergence, reproduction, and possible transformation of a global order (and discipline) defined by hierarchies, stratification, and discourses of superiority and inferiority. This is why we recommended that Global IR seriously engage with global entanglements, circulations, and transboundary relations to say something new and meaningful about the big debates in IR.

In recommending that Global IR become more historical and sociological, we were not attempting to play gatekeepers. At the end of the day, we have very little stake in what becomes of Global IR. We did not need Global IR to tell us about the importance of diversity, equality, and inclusion, and if it vanished, it would not change our commitments. It appears that Eun, Kristensen, and Shahi want Global IR to walk through Door #1. Because they did not offer a hint of an alternative to the suggestions posed by the symposium, their attitude seems to be, 'Don't worry, be happy.' Maybe they are right. Door #1 has the advantage of requiring little more of anyone involved in the Global IR movement. It is hard to imagine any IR scholar disagreeing with the broad goal of representation. But we worry this wastes Global IR's potential and could lead to a dead end. Door #2 offers a vision of a Global IR with grander ambition: using research of non-Western settings to reconsider the building blocks and major themes of the discipline. If Global IR decides to choose Door #2, those in the movement will have to think about how to form a research program that speaks to broader debates. The theme of global order and disorder is one, but it is not the only one. If Global IR scholars are not persuaded by our promotion of Door #2, then they should find another. But Door #1 could be its own kind of trap.

References

Barkawi, Tarak, Christopher Murray, and Ayşe Zarakol. 2023. "The United Nations of IR: Power, Knowledge, and Empire in Global IR Debates." *International Theory* 15 (3): 445–61.

Barnett, Michael, and Ayşe Zarakol. 2023. "Global İnternational Relations and the Essentialism Trap." *International Theory* 15 (3): 428–44.

Çapan, Zeynep Gülşah. 2016. *Re-Writing International Relations History and Theory Beyond Eurocentrism in Turkey*. London and New York: Rowman and Littlefield.

Chu, Sinan. 2022. "Fantastic Theories and Where to Find Them." *Millennium* 50 (3): 700–29.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752971925100055 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Doak, Kevin M. 2019. *Tanaka Kōtarō and World Law Rethinking the Natural Law Outside the West*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
Dübgen, Franziska, and Stefan Skupien. 2019. *Paulin Hountondji*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
Emirbayer, Mustafa. 1997. "Manifesto for a Relational Sociology." *The American Journal of Sociology* 103 (2): 281–317.
Eun, Yong-Soo. 2023. "Knowledge Production beyond Western-centrism in IR: Toward Global IR 2.0." *International Studies Review* 25 (2): 1–19.
Eun, Yong-Soo, Peter Marcus Kristensen, and Deepshikha Shahi. 2025. "How (Not) to Advance Global IR: A Rejoinder." *International Theory* 17 (2): 268–86.
Fierke, Karin M. 2022. *Snapshots from Home: Mind, Action and Strategy in an Uncertain World*. Bristol: Bristol University Press.
Go, Julian, and George Lawson, eds. 2017. *Global Historical Sociology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Guzzini, Stefano. 2017. "Afterword: International Political Sociology, or the Social Ontology and Power Politics of Process." In *The Routledge Handbook of International Political Sociology*, edited by Xavier Guillaume and Pinar Bilgin, 368–77. London: Routledge.
Guzzini, Stefano. 2024. "Relationalism(s) Unpacked: Engaging Yaqing Qin's Theory of World Politics." *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 17 (2): 187–205.
Katzenstein, Peter. 2022. "Worldviews in World Politics." In *Uncertainty and Its Discontents: Worldviews in World Politics*, edited by Peter Katzenstein, 1–70. New York: Cambridge University Press.
Kavalski, Emilian. 2018. *The Guanxi of Relational International Theory*. London: Routledge.
Kristensen, Peter Marcus. 2021. "The South in Global IR." *International Studies Perspectives* 22 (2): 218–23.
Kurki, Milja. 2020. *International Relations and Relational Cosmology*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Layug, Allan, and John M. Hobson. 2022. *Globalizing International Theory*. London: Routledge.
Sevilla, Anton Luis. 2017. *Watsuji Tetsurô's Global Ethics of Emptiness*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
Shahi, Deepshikha. 2023. *Global IR Research Programme: The Futuristic Foundation of 'One and Many*. Cham: Springer Nature/Palgrave Macmillan.
Shimizu, Kosuke. 2022. *The Kyoto School and International Relations*. New York: Routledge.
Tickner, Arlene B. 2003. "Seeing IR Differently." *Millennium* 32 (2): 295–324.
Tickner, Arlene B. 2008. "Latin American IR and the Primacy of lo práctico." *International Studies Review* 10 (4): 735–48.
Tilly, Charles. 1995. "To Explain Political Processes." *American Journal of Sociology* 100 (6): 1594–610.
Watanabe, Atsuko. 2023. "A Way to Transcend Boundaries." *Telos* 202: 84–102.
Zarakol, Ayşe, and Ersel Aydınlı. 2025. "All Azimuth Debate: Gradual Reform or Revolution? Pathways to Global IR." *All Azimuth* 14 (2): 1–15.

Cite this article: Barnett, Michael, and Ayşe Zarakol. 2025. "Reply to 'How (not) to advance Global IR: a rejoinder'." *International Theory* **17** (2): 287–293, doi:10.1017/S1752971925100055

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752971925100055 Published online by Cambridge University Press