Preface: Why is there no non-Western IR theory: reflections on and from Asia
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The special issue brings together a selection of the papers that were originally presented at a workshop on ‘Why is there No Non-Western IR Theory: Reflections on and from Asia’, organized by the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies (now S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies) in Singapore on 11–12 July 2005. The original idea for this project came out of a conversation between the editors, which started in the early 1990s. Acharya’s work on Third World and Asian security led him to realize the striking lack of fit between his subject areas and international relations theory (IRT). Buzan’s sporadic engagements with Asia left him with the impression that there was little if any indigenous development of IR theory there. In addition, his collaborative work with Richard Little underlined to him the dependence of much IRT on a specifically Western history. Taken together, these two insights generated in him the sense not just of a major gap in IRT, but also a major flaw, yet one that he was unable to address himself because of lack of the necessary language skills.

The special issue is aimed both at the Western and Asian audiences interested in IRT. To the Western audience, its aim is to reinforce existing criticisms that IRT is Western-centric and therefore misrepresents and misunderstands most of world history. Its claims to universalism are rooted in a rather narrow
and particular historical experience which, aside from being worrying in itself, stands in the way of thinking about the future outside of the Westphalian box. This project aims to introduce the Western IR audience to non-Western traditions, literatures, and histories relevant to how IR is conceptualized. To the Asian audiences, it poses the challenge of why there is so little distinctive non-Western theory, and shows what resources are available to redress this imbalance. It also opens up a cross-cultural comparative perspective on how and why thinking about IR has developed in the way it has. The ultimate purpose of the special issue is to stimulate non-Western voices to bring their historical and cultural, as well as their intellectual, resources into the theoretical debates about IR. Given that the world has moved well beyond the period of Western colonialism, and clearly into a durable period in which non-Western cultures have regained their political autonomy, it is long past time that non-Western voices had a higher profile in debates about IR, and not just as disciples of Western schools of thought, but as inventors of their own approaches. Western IR theory has had the advantage of being the first in the field, and has developed many valuable insights. But only a few extremists would defend the position that it captures everything we need to know, or gives us a firm grip on the full reality of world politics.

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