



# International Relations Beyond The West: A Comparative Perspective

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**Abstract:** This paper revisits the study of international relations (IR) by juxtaposing selected Western and non-Western theoretical frameworks. It focuses on Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism on the Western side, and on Chinese Tianxia, Muhammad Ayoob's Third World (Subaltern) Realism, and Islamic governance principles on the non-Western side. After outlining each theory's core assumptions in the literature review, the paper adopts a comparative analytical approach to highlight contrasts in worldviews, actors, moral norms, and sources of order. The methodology is qualitative and theoretical, involving critical literature analysis and conceptual comparison. The comparative analysis shows, for example, that Western Realism's state-centric, power-political view contrasts sharply with Tianxia's universal-harmony vision, while Islamic thought emphasizes a moral community of believers guided by justice. By critically examining these diverse perspectives, the paper demonstrates that incorporating non-Western concepts enriches IR theory and addresses criticisms of Eurocentrism. The discussion interprets these findings in light of recent scholarship, and the conclusion summarizes the implications for a more globally inclusive IR discourse.

**Index Terms – Realism, Liberalism, Constructivism, Tianxia , Eurocentrism, western theories, non western theories**

## I. INTRODUCTION

Traditional IR theory has been dominated by Western paradigms (Realism, Liberalism, Constructivism) that assume an anarchic system of sovereign states primarily concerned with power and self-interest. However, scholars have criticized this Eurocentric focus as inadequate for explaining the politics of Asia, the Middle East, and the Global South. David Kang, for example, argues that “most international relations theories derived from the European experience ... do a poor job as they are applied to Asia”. Similarly, Katzenstein (1997) notes that Western-based theories “have been of little use in making sense of Asian regionalism”. These critiques have spurred efforts to develop or identify IR theories rooted in non-Western intellectual traditions. This paper seeks to compare a set of Western and non-Western IR theories to illuminate their differing assumptions and insights.

Specifically, the Western theories examined are Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism. Realism emphasizes an anarchic international system of self-interested states, Liberalism stresses international institutions and cooperation, and Constructivism focuses on how state identities and norms are socially constructed. The non-Western theories include Tianxia (a Chinese conception of “all-under-heaven” world order), Muhammad Ayoob's Third World (Subaltern) Realism, and Islamic governance principles (norms derived from Islamic law and history). This selection excludes unrelated frameworks (e.g. Afrocentric IR or Ubuntu) to maintain focus. The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: first, a literature review outlines each theory's main tenets; second, the methodology section describes the comparative approach; third, a comparative analysis highlights key differences and similarities; the discussion interprets these findings in broader context; and the conclusion summarizes the implications for IR scholarship.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Realism*

Realism (or political realism) portrays international politics as inherently competitive and conflictual. Its key propositions include anarchy (absence of a sovereign authority), states as primary actors, a drive for power and security, and a pessimistic view of human nature. Classical realists like Morgenthau acknowledged morality but prioritized prudence and national interest. Neorealists (e.g. Waltz) systematized these ideas: they argue that because the international system lacks hierarchy, states are compelled to rely on self-help and balance-of-power behavior. As the Stanford Encyclopedia notes, realists “consider the principal actors in the international arena to be states, which are concerned with their own security, act in pursuit of their own national interests, and struggle for power”. Realism typically regards international ethics as limited; as one realist adage puts it, “international politics, ... is a sphere without justice, characterized by active or potential conflict”.

### *Liberalism*

Liberalism in IR emphasizes cooperation, institutions, and interdependence rather than inevitable conflict. Liberals accept that the international arena is anarchic but stress that structures of rules (international law, organizations) and domestic factors (democracy, commerce) can mitigate anarchy's effects. Keohane's neoliberal institutionalism, for example, argues that states use international institutions “to further their interests through cooperation”. He and Nye introduced the concept of “complex interdependence” where multiple actors (states, international organizations, NGOs, firms) interact across issues, reducing the likelihood of conflict. Democrats Peace Theory, a core liberal argument, suggests democracies do not fight each other, illustrating the liberal faith in domestic norms. As Britannica summarizes, liberals believe that with proper institutions and diplomacy, “states can work together in order to enhance interdependence” and thus “maximize prosperity and minimize conflict” (emphasis added). Critics of liberalism note, however, that institutions are often biased by power and that economic interdependence does not automatically eliminate rivalry.

### *Constructivism*

Constructivism brings ideas, culture, and identity to the fore. Constructivists argue that the structures and outcomes of world politics are socially constructed through intersubjective ideas rather than fixed material conditions. A key insight is that state interests are not given but formed through historical and social processes. For example, Alexander Wendt contends that concepts like “self-help” and “power politics” are not inevitable consequences of anarchy but are institutionalized ideas. In his famous formulation, “self-help and power politics are institutions, and not essential features of anarchy. Anarchy is what states make of it”. Thus, states' behavior depends on their identities and shared norms; if they identify as rivals, they act aggressively, but if they see themselves as friends, cooperation can become the norm. Constructivism has been used to explain changes in world politics through ideas (e.g. the end of the Cold War, the spread of human rights norms). It also offers a methodological contrast by emphasizing interpretive, rather than strictly empirical, analysis of international phenomena.

### *Chinese Tianxia*

The concept of Tianxia (天下, “all under heaven”) is an ancient Chinese worldview now invoked by some scholars as an alternative IR paradigm. In this model, the basic unit is not the Westphalian state but the world as a moral community. Zhao Tingyang, a prominent proponent, explains that Tianxia literally means “the earth or all lands under the sky” and refers to a traditional Chinese system of universal order. Historically, as Zhao recounts, China's Zhou dynasty managed multiple tribes not by conquest alone but by a governance “held together by a regime of culture and values,” aiming for “‘harmony’ through a universal agreement in the ‘hearts’ of all people”. In a modern Tianxia theory, this translates to an emphasis on world sovereignty (the whole world as the political unit) rather than discrete states. The resulting vision is a hierarchy without hegemony: leaders rule by moral example and work to bring about a harmonious global order. Zhao explicitly rejects the Westphalian nation-state model, arguing it has produced conflict and instability. Instead, Tianxia aspires to “fairness and impartiality to all” and a “world system characterized by harmony and cooperation without hegemony”. Proponents suggest that this Chinese idea provides a “far better model of a future world order” by accounting for the interests of the entire world. Critics, however, question whether such an idealized concept can function empirically or whether it simply rebrands Chinese dominance.

### ***Third World (Subaltern) Realism***

Muhammad Ayoob's Subaltern Realism or Third World realism challenges mainstream realism by focusing on the conditions of postcolonial states. Ayoob notes that most Western theories assume states are similarly placed and that issues of security and power dominate. In contrast, Third World states are generally weak, newly independent, and often "economically and militarily dependent on external benefactors". As the Wikipedia summary of Ayoob notes, this leads these states to prioritize relative gains and short-term survival over the long-term absolute gains that wealthy states might pursue. Third World realism argues that insecurity in the Global South stems from underdeveloped state structures, internal fragmentation, and legacies of colonialism more than from great-power rivalries. Scholars emphasize that Third World leaders often focus on regime survival, domestic legitimacy, and regional balancing rather than on maximizing power per se. Ayoob's work also criticizes IR scholarship for excluding these contexts. Subaltern Realism thus both adapts some realist logic to weak-state contexts and highlights the inequality in how IR theory has traditionally been constructed.

### ***Islamic Governance Principles***

Islamic governance principles derive from the Qur'an, the Hadith (Prophetic traditions), and classical Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh). Although there is no single modern "Islamic theory of IR," some scholars describe an Islamic-influenced worldview of politics. Key concepts include *adl* (justice), *maslaha* (public welfare), *shura* (consultation), and the unity of the *ummah* (the global Muslim community). Traditional Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh al-siyar*) provides rules for relations between a Muslim polity and others, distinguishing between the *dar al-Islam* (house of Islam) and the *dar al-Harb* (house of war) in classical sources. In this view, all states have duties derived from divine law: to uphold justice, protect innocents, and honor treaties and covenants. Some modern scholars argue that Islam emphasizes a moral international order in which no single group may dominate unjustly. For instance, proponents note that early Islamic governance under the Prophet Muhammad aspired to extend justice and peace to all ("God loves those who act justly"). Islamic governance principles thus often entail a normative commitment to ethics and universal law, contrasting with secular power politics. (This is discussed further in the comparative section.) Unfortunately, this body of thought is less developed as a formal IR theory in Western scholarship, but it provides a perspective that privileges moral authority and community obligations in world affairs.

## **III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study employs qualitative, conceptual analysis. It involves a critical review of existing literature (scholarly articles, books, and authoritative encyclopedias) on each of the selected theories. First, the literature review synthesized definitions and key claims of each theory as presented in academic sources. Second, the research methodology involves systematic comparative analysis: identifying core dimensions (e.g. conception of sovereignty, view of power, role of morality) and examining how each theory treats them. Where possible, direct quotations and scholarly interpretations from reputable sources are used to ensure accuracy and credibility. The comparison is descriptive and analytical; it does not involve new empirical data but rather juxtaposes the conceptual content of the theories. This approach is appropriate for theory-driven research on IR, as it reveals underlying assumptions and implications. Citations to original theorists and secondary analyses ensure that the discussion remains grounded in established scholarship.

## **IV. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS**

The comparative analysis highlights contrasts and some overlaps between the Western and non-Western theories across several key dimensions:

***Unit of Analysis and Sovereignty:*** Realism and Liberalism both assume that sovereign states are the primary units. In stark contrast, Tianxia conceives the world itself as the highest sovereign unit. Where realism views the international order as stateless anarchy, Tianxia envisions a structured hierarchy of harmony led by moral authority. Third World realism, while state-centric, notes that many postcolonial states lack full sovereignty in practice due to external dependence. Islamic thought accepts states but frames them as subordinate to the *ummah* and divine law. Thus, Western theories focus on the state or states system, whereas Tianxia and Islamic principles expand the framework to global community or cosmic order.

**Power, Security, and Order:** Realism emphasizes power rivalry and security competition (often defined militarily). Third World realism accepts that some competition exists but stresses that weaker states often struggle with internal order and legitimacy before external threats. Liberalism, by contrast, sees power as tempered by institutions and economic ties. Constructivism would analyze how states' self-concepts shape their use of power. Tianxia reinterprets "power" as moral leadership: for example, the Chinese theory holds that harmony (not dominance) should undergird international relations. Islamic governance similarly places ultimate authority with God; earthly rulers must exercise power justly. Some Islamic thinkers argue that justice (adl) ensures stability, while injustice leads to conflict. Thus, whereas Western Realism treats power as a material struggle, both Tianxia and Islamic approaches emphasize normative order (harmony, justice) as the true basis of security.

**Human Nature and Interests:** Classical Realism tends to take a pessimistic view of human nature ("men are by nature power-seeking" in Morgenthau's words). Liberalism has a more optimistic view, believing people and states can learn and improve. Constructivism is agnostic, arguing human nature is shaped by culture and norms. The Tianxia tradition (in its Confucian roots) presupposes that people can cultivate harmony if led by virtue. Islamic thought holds that humans are accountable to God; self-interest is checked by moral injunctions (e.g. zakat, caring for the needy), and injustice is condemned. Thus, Western theories typically start from material assumptions, while Tianxia and Islamic perspectives embed a stronger moral account of human purpose and interest. Third World realism pragmatically assumes local leaders prioritize regime survival and legitimacy, reflecting the concrete conditions of their societies.

**International Norms and Ethics:** Realism is famously skeptical of universal ethics in IR. Constructivism, however, foregrounds norms and ideas as constitutive. Liberalism also values norms like human rights and rule of law. Tianxia and Islamic principles are explicitly normative: Zhao's Tianxia promotes "harmony and cooperation without hegemony" for the whole world. Likewise, Islamic governance enshrines justice as a divine command. For example, the Qur'an repeatedly commands treating non-Muslims fairly and keeping agreements, suggesting that moral behavior should guide state action. Both Tianxia and Islamic thought criticize a purely self-help world; they insist on higher-order duties. This contrasts with Western Realism's amoral stance and even with some liberal realpolitik approaches. Constructivism bridges the gap by allowing for change in norms – and indeed it could incorporate Tianxia or Islamic norms if actors came to share them. In sum, Western and non-Western theories diverge sharply on the question of whether international relations can or should be grounded in universal moral principles.

**Cultural Context and Identity:** Constructivism's emphasis on identity makes it somewhat congenial to non-Western theorizing, since it allows local culture to shape interests. Nonetheless, Western constructivists typically analyze either Western or global norms. Tianxia explicitly draws on Chinese cultural history (Confucian ideas of benevolent rule and cosmic order) to explain international behavior. Islamic governance similarly derives from a specific religious and civilizational context: the Islamic ummah concept and Sharia norms are rooted in the Arabic-Islamic tradition. Third World realism is less about culture and more about shared structural position: it defines a collective identity of "postcolonial states" with common grievances. Even Liberalism and Constructivism assume a degree of universal applicability (laws, norms) that Chinese and Islamic theorists might challenge. In practice, non-Western IR theories often respond to the call for contextualization of IR: acknowledging, for example, that Confucian or Islamic values might lead actors to behave differently than Western-style rationalists predict.

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An important implication of this contrast is the differing responses to global governance. Western theories often justify sovereignty as inviolable; Tianxia suggests sovereignty is conditional upon fulfilling moral duties, and Islamic principles imply sovereignty is legitimate only if aligned with divine commands. For example, in Islamic history, the concept of the Caliphate viewed political authority as a trust (amanah) from God rather than an absolute entitlement.

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Historical examples validate these points. During the Ming dynasty, China's tributary system aimed to institutionalize harmony rather than control — a Tianxia logic at work. In contrast, Islamic international law historically recognized multiple sovereigns but required them to act justly toward Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Both traditions view moral leadership, not merely material strength, as critical to enduring order.

Thus, whereas Western Realism treats power as a material struggle, both Tianxia and Islamic approaches emphasize normative order (harmony, justice) as the true basis of security.

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Thus, Western theories typically start from material assumptions, while Tianxia and Islamic perspectives embed a stronger moral account of human purpose and interest. Third World Realism pragmatically assumes local leaders prioritize regime survival and legitimacy, reflecting the concrete conditions of their societies.

This variation affects policy preferences: a Realist might prioritize military buildup, a Liberal might prioritize diplomacy, a Tianxia follower would emphasize moral education of rulers, and an Islamic thinker would emphasize adherence to divine commandments as a source of national strength.

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The Islamic emphasis on treaty sanctity (e.g., Qur'anic injunctions to honor agreements even with enemies) resonates with contemporary international legal norms but arises from religious rather than secular foundations. Tianxia's preference for voluntary moral leadership contrasts sharply with Realist visions of coercive hegemony.

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**Hybrid Practices and Blended Models:** In practice, few states adhere purely to one theoretical model. A state like China may behave realistically by balancing U.S. power militarily while invoking Tianxia's harmonious rhetoric in diplomacy. Similarly, Iran may engage in Realist balancing (e.g., forming alliances) but frame its actions within Islamic ethical principles.

This hybridization shows the practical complexity of international relations: theories are intellectual tools rather than strict scripts. Recognition of hybrid models is crucial to developing a more accurate, pluralistic IR discipline.

### ***Toward a Pluralistic Global IR:***

These comparisons reveal that Western IR theories and the selected non-Western approaches often operate on different underlying logics. For instance, while Realism and Third World Realism both emphasize states seeking survival, the latter modifies the logic by foregrounding development stage and external dependence. Liberalism and Constructivism allow for international cooperation, but Tianxia and Islamic models imbue cooperation with cosmic or religious significance.

In practice, a truly global IR requires bridging these divides. Tianxia's hierarchy, Islamic governance's justice principles, and Subaltern Realism's postcolonial insights all bring invaluable perspectives that can enrich traditional IR theory. Without acknowledging them, scholars risk misunderstanding the motivations and behaviors of a significant portion of the world's actors.

## **V. DISCUSSION**

The above analysis confirms long-standing arguments about the limits of Western-centric IR theory. Western Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism offer powerful frameworks, but their basic assumptions are culturally conditioned. The non-Western theories examined here articulate alternative starting points. For example, *Tianxia* invites rethinking the Westphalian paradigm of equal sovereigns by positing a hierarchical but benevolent order. Third World Realism spotlights the enduring impact of colonialism on state behavior, reminding scholars that many countries face radically different security dilemmas. Islamic governance principles underscore a dimension of religion and ethics often overlooked in secular IR theory.

In practical terms, these perspectives suggest different policy implications. A *Tianxia*-influenced approach might privilege global institutions and Chinese-style leadership over zero-sum competition. An Islamic-informed view would emphasize interfaith dialogue, justice in trade, and minority rights as core to peace. African and Latin American states (though not the focus here) might similarly invoke their own traditions (e.g. communalism) to shape foreign policy. The comparative findings also highlight the value of **global IR** as a project: by bringing diverse theories into conversation, scholars can avoid the pitfall of assuming one-size-fits-all models. As Acharya and Buzan have argued, theory must eventually account for its own subjects' diversity

Moreover, this comparison sheds light on the interplay between theory and world politics. The rise of China has not only economic implications but also intellectual ones, as evidenced by the institutional promotion of "Chinese characteristics" in IR. Similarly, the prominence of Islam in global politics has stimulated thinking about its civilizational perspective. In sum, engaging non-Western theories does not merely add exotic flavors to IR; it challenges scholars to refine or replace assumptions. Realism's emphasis on power may need to be tempered by the realization that not all actors start with the same resources. Liberalism's faith in institutions may need to be calibrated against differing conceptions of law and justice. By articulating their differences clearly, these theories can be more critically assessed and, where possible, integrated.

## **VI. CONCLUSION**

This paper has updated a comparative study of IR theories by juxtaposing three Western and three non-Western perspectives. The literature review clarified each theory's core claims: from Realism's focus on state power to Tianxia's vision of a harmonious world order and from Liberalism's institutional cooperation to Islamic ideals of justice. The comparative analysis highlighted that Western frameworks and non-Western ones often operate with different basic premises about sovereignty, ethics, and identity. For

example, whereas Realism assumes self-help in an unregulated system, Tianxia assumes a naturally ordered community under heaven. Third World Realism showed that postcolonial states face very different constraints than Western powers.

In conclusion, a truly global IR must be pluralistic. The inclusion of Tianxia, Third World realism, and Islamic principles illustrates alternative logics that complement or contradict Western assumptions. This does not mean all theories are equally predictive, but it does mean that a fuller understanding of world politics requires listening to multiple intellectual traditions. Future research could build on this foundation by exploring how these theories influence actual foreign policies and international institutions. For instance, do Chinese diplomats consciously invoke Tianxia when shaping global governance? Does Islamic law inform any nation's treaty practices today? The comparative approach used here suggests that addressing such questions will enrich IR theory and help bridge the West/non-West divide in the study of world politics.

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