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Reaching for allies? The dialectics and overlaps between international relations and area studies in the study of politics, security and conflicts

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Abstract
This article sets the scene for the Special Issue 'Reaching for allies?' by setting out the research questions and structure of the Special Issue. Specifically, this introduction reviews the state of the art of dialectics interweaving International Relations and Area Studies. Specifically, it focuses on tracing the genealogy of these debates, identifying the actors engaged with them, as well as, mapping those sites where such transdisciplinary knowledge is produced and circulated. We also provide an assessment of the interaction between the two disciplinary traditions as scholarly disciplines by reviewing the field as it had developed in the last decade since 2013. In order to do so, we present data on the brokers of this dialogue by ana- lysing top-ranked Journals across regions, dedicated Special Issues on the matter as well as main inter- national conferences and participants. Overall, this article provides a threefold contribution: first, we provide an account of the globalization of knowledge production and circulation that has also increasingly decentred, valuing local peculiarities and epistemological traditions beyond the Western academia(s). Second, we assess and discuss how Western and non-Western academics have contoured concepts which demand and entail site-intensive techniques of enquiry, exposure to complexities on the grounds, ethnographic sensitivity, and, at the same time, comparative endeavours going beyond area specialisms. Third, by looking at international and regional policy-making milieus with attention to context-specificity, we believe critical policy-relevant implications can be discussed, specifically in relation to local ownership and bottom-up approaches.

Key words: Area studies; eurocentrism; global IR; global south; international relations; regionalism

Introduction

During the summer of 2019, while the co-editors and the contributors of this *Special Issue* first convened in the framework of the Annual Conference of the Italian Political Science Association (SISP), the newly established Working Group on the Proposed Globalizing IR Section published a petition addressing the governing bodies of the International Studies Association (ISA). The aim of the petition was to call for the creation of a new ISA section specifically devoted to intellectual and academic engagement within Global International Relations (IR)[1]. While a shared commit- ment for 'broadening, diversifying, and globalizing' the disciplinary field of International Relations predated that move and have been enshrined in a number of key pieces of scholarly

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[1]https://kmsd.vse.cz/english/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/post/250/Petition-Globalizing-IR.pdf; https://kmsd.vse.cz/english/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/post/250/GIRS_call_mail-2.pdf.

work (Jones, 2006; Acharya and Buzan, 2007; Bilgin, 2008; Zarakol, 2010), that call expressed the urge of being recognized as a collective and institutionalized strand within one of the focal sites for knowledge production and dissemination of international studies. That call might be also interpreted as a milestone in a longer-term trajectory of IR scholars discussing about the 'non-Western', the 'post-colonial'/'de-colonial'– a trajectory that saw other venues and moments of aggregation and public legitimation/outreach. In 2015, acting as President of the ISA itself, Amitav Acharya in his Presidential Address put forward the need for 'a new agenda for international studies' that would have built on the past 'three decades of worlding IR'[2], challenging IR's Eurocentric limitations and shedding light on the worldviews, approaches and perspectives of the ones having been marginalized, peripheralized or even exoticized by Western academia – that is, the subaltern and indigenous voices relegated, depending on the history, to the East or South.

This line of engagement has a longer historical journey: already in 1961 George Modelski wrote 'International Relations needs Area Study' (Modelski, 1961); and IR theories have indeed benefited from interdisciplinary approaches for a long time (Katzenstein, 2002; Teti 2007; Sil and Katzenstein, 2010; Aalto *et al.*, 2011; Long 2011; Fawcett, 2017). Further, not only the evolving debate on 'Global IR' promises to breathe new life into joint intellectual enterprises and interdisciplinary efforts (Bilgin, 2016); the emergence of the field of 'comparative regionalism', too, is paving the way to a renewed dialogue between 'regionally-oriented disciplinarists' (i.e., disciplinary scholars looking at regional phenomena, often in comparative terms) and 'discipline-oriented regionalists' (i.e., area specialists drawing on theoretical frameworks from a particular discipline, Acharya 2006).

This *Special Issue* collects theoretically innovative as well as empirically focused contributions on multiple 'regional worlds'[3] with the expectation to study the diverse nature of internationally relevant political agencies, security matters and system of governance across the international system. Hence, this *Special Issue* presents both single-case and comparative case studies committed to expanding the horizons of both IR and Area Studies (AS), underlining their historical and contemporary interconnectedness.

In particular, we are interested in exploring a number of questions that, we believe, remain still largely unexplored or rarely addressed in a comparative manner. For instance, what is the role of regional actors in the international system? How can we use and apply IR scholarship in the analysis of different international events across world regions? What can case studies from 'Comparative Regionalism' and 'Non-Western IR Theory' research agendas have to say about current international events?

By addressing these questions via six articles, travelling from Africa, Europe, Middle East and Asia, this *Special Issue* represents an important contribution to the existing debate in a twofold way. First, this *Special Issue* introduces a number of innovative theoretical debates as well as methodological and epistemological puzzles, trying to unpack and reflect upon the way(s) international affairs are discussed and interpreted. Specifically, going beyond traditional states-based IR, this *Special Issue* offers unexplored conceptual inputs able to account for multi-actor and multi-level perspectives.

Second, this *Special Issue* offers an important empirical contribution by analysing these debates in a variety of case studies, dealing with political dynamics and security issues such as conflicts, state instability across different international regions. It does so, by questioning the way different areas of the world have been politically as well as cognitively constructed. Specifically, this *Special Issue* includes both contributions considering the 'IR/AS dialectics' in

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[2]This was the name of a roundtable which took place on the occasion of the International Studies Association Annual Convention in 2015.

[3]Or, in the words of Thakur and Smith (2021), multiple 'births' of International Relations, multiple disciplinary histories, and multiple voices and actors that have contributed to the development of 'local' IRs and nonetheless have been subject to erasures and exclusions.

terms of disciplinary development (e.g. Dian 2021; Raineri and Baldaro 2021; Costantini and Hanau Santini 2021) and contributions empirically building bridges between IR and AS through case studies (e.g., Selenica 2021; Buscemi 2021). It also includes an article implicitly seeking to see 'Europe' with an Area Studies mindset (De Franco 2022), thus de-exoticizing and de-orientalizing the deep-seated meaning of Area Studies themselves. The expectation is indeed to provide a complementary comparative perspective on threats, forms of political contestation and security policies across different areas of the world.

The aim of this introduction is to set the stage for the different contributions, by presenting the main rationale of the *Special Issue* and the theoretical starting points. Indeed, we proceed by first introducing the main sources of contestation within international studies and we continue by exploring the methodological, pedagogical but also policy-relevant implications of the abovementioned dialectics. However, we also provide an in-depth assessment of the interaction between the two disciplinary traditions as scholarly disciplines by focusing on brokers of debate and present data on academic collaboration via top ranked journals and main international conferences[4]. Indeed, while calls for bridging these two disciplinary fields have resulted in different dynamics and inputs, we still know quantitively very little about shapes and formats of this dialectics. Finally, we conclude the introduction with an overview of the *Special Issue* and by emphasizing expectations and added value of each article.

From western roots to global IR?

Cooperation with AS is probably a useful antidote for two of the major biases of contemporary IR theory: the American dominance and Euro-centrism. These two biases, we show in the following, are connected but distinct. The first is associated with the development of the discipline in the post-war period, while the second has deeper historical and intellectual roots.

Stanley Hofmann in the 1977 described IR theory as an 'American discipline' (Hoffmann, 1977). The development of the discipline in the US in the post-war period was characterized by several elements. First, IR needed to be a social science. Consequently, the main assumption was the needed to embrace a positivist and scientist epistemology and very often a quantitative and statistical methodology.

The purpose of searching for covering laws and regularities was shared by most IR scholars, especially in the United States (Kratochwil, 2006; Li, 2019). Even those who disagreed with the use of quantitative methods, and preferred to continue using qualitative and historical methodologies such as Morgenthau and Waltz, embraced the idea of finding universal 'covering laws' and regularities. As underlined by Evelyn Goh, American IR, with its preference for positivism and the search for 'covering laws' has promoted an 'hyper-westernized framework of cognitive biases and normative assumptions' (Goh, 2019), regarding states' behaviour, the stability of the system, balance of power, the nature of the international order, as well as epistemological assumptions the alleged neutrality of the knowledge produced by IR scholars (Colgan, 2019).

Second, as clarified later, the US academia acquired since the late 1940s a centrality in terms of resources, the number of scholars, the proportion of highly-ranked journals and role of key associations and conferences (described below) that still endures today (Wemheuer-Vogelaar *et al.*, 2016; Cheng and Brettle, 2019; Hendrix and Vreede, 2019; Lohaus and Wemheuer-Vogelaar, 2021).

Third, the US dominance of the field universalized and naturalized another main development: considering IR theory as a subfield of political science rather than an autonomous discipline. This means that IR theory needed to meet the alleged standard of the scientificity of political science, very often inspired by the reliance on statistical enquiry and large *n* (Walt, 1999; Bush

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[4]In doing this, our article seems to flow into a very current debate on how to empirically examine instances in which epistemic hierarchies and divides replicates or are instead overcome (Kaczmarska and Ortmann 2021).

2019). This has foreclosed the possibility of a mutual dialogue not only with Area Studies but also with cognate disciplines such as political philosophy, history, geography, and sociology. The search for neutrality and covering laws and the premium put on statistical significance has often created incentives to neutralize all the influence that could get in the way of the creation of allegedly neutral and verifiable theories. On the contrary, where IR has developed as an autonomous discipline, it has been able to continue a necessary and productive conversation with other social and human sciences (Levy, 1997; Rosemberg, 2016).

In his article Stanley Hoffmann points to another feature of IR theory at the time. As a social science, IR was considered useful to 'solve problems' and bring about 'solutions' both in terms of advices to the leadership, or to the promotion of social arrangements that could foster the conditions of peace and development. This inspiration cut across the paradigms and approaches and could be found both among liberals who studied the link between democracy, development and peace, or realists as Schelling that sought to apply the rational instruments of game theory to coercion and the deterrence (Schelling, 1960; 1966, 2005; Hoffmann, 1977).

This inspiration to produce 'usable knowledge' has largely got lost in contemporary IR, caught in the crossfire of different *methodenstreit*s and great debates that have characterized the field. On the one hand, the positivist mainstream has further embraced the tendencies towards formalization and methodological 'sophistication', at the cost of losing relevance for the real world (Walt, 1999; Nye 2008; Green, 2017). On the other hand, the part of the field that opposes the positivist mainstream tends to criticize the 'problem solving' theories. Critical theorists in particular point out how mainstream theories have a 'disciplining effect' on policies, fostering expectations, suppressing diversity, imposing intellectual and political uniformity. Mainstream theories are therefore considered to be an intellectual manifestation of a political and cultural hegemony, as mere superstructure of power. Consequently, large part of the anti-mainstream, particularly critical, post-structuralist, and post-positivist approaches, have considered their purpose that of deconstructing, criticizing, dismantling, and de-colonizing (Jones, 2006; Seth 2011; Sabaratnam, 2013; Tickner, 2013; Capan, 2017).

It can be argued that this process was necessary for contemporary IR to recognize its own biases, its own limits, and the need to open to the ideas and the perspectives of different areas of the world. As it will be discussed in the next pages of this introduction, the *critique* represented an important step to address the other fundamental bias of contemporary IR, namely Eurocentrism. However, the centrality of *pars denstruens*, the effort to deconstruct, the idea that all theories have a disciplining effect, led to think that IR theory – as many other theories and field of inquiries – can have a problem-solving function and produce 'usable knowledge' (Jackson, 2016).

Euro-centrism is the second key bias for contemporary IR theory. This is only in part associated with the American dominance in the discipline. Positivism and preference for quantitative methods only reinforced existing tendencies to consider the European and Western institutions, and political and social development as universal.

As John Hobson has argued,

'international theory largely constructs a series of Eurocentric conceptions of world politics […] it does not so much explain international politics in an objective, positivist and universalist manner but seeks, rather, to parochially celebrate and defend or promote the West as the proactive subject of, and as the highest or ideal normative referent in world politics'. (Hobson 2012, 1)

As it will be discussed by several of the articles of this *Special Issue*, the Eurocentric vision of international politics leads to embrace several assumptions, such as the 'myth of Westphalian' and the 'myth of 1919' (Bell 2009; De Carvalho *et al.*, 2011; Costa Lopez *et al.*, 2018).

Historiography of IR, as well as most undergraduate teaching tends to begin presenting 1948 and 1919 as key foundational dates. The peace of Westphalia in 1648 is considered as the first key benchmark date, or the first 'big bang'. Allegedly, in that moment European states agreed on several key principles defining the modern international system, such as sovereignty and non-interference, the separation between State and Church, the equality between 'Leviathans' (Osiander, 1994, 1999; Krasner, 1999; Teschke, 2003; Kayaoglu, 2010; Blachford, 2021). As Hans Morgenthau argued in its *Politics among Nations* that 'the Treaty of Westphalia brought the religious wars to an end and made the territorial state the cornerstone of the modern states system' (Morgenthau, 1948: 252).

1648, as the birth year of the modern state, is also considered the final year of empires and other hierarchical forms of political organizations. Evidently, while within Europe, the principle of formal equality could seem realistic, the relations between European states and the rest of the world will remain characterized by formal and practical inequality for three more centuries, in the shape of imperialism and non-recognition of the rights of non-European (non-Western; non-white; non-Christian) states to have their own statehood recognized (Zarakol, 2018).

The myth of Westphalia has been completely internalized by Realist scholars in two steps. First, the vast majority of IR has been built on cases associated with the European, or in some cases Western, history. This has led to a strong 'selection bias', since theorists were conducting their research only on cases that reflected the key features of the Westphalia international politics: the presence of formally equal states, an intense security competition, a tendency to pursue 'balance of power'.

The tendency to look mostly at European modern history, or later at the competition between great powers in the Cold War as a 'empirical samples' has led to assume that the key features of the Westphalian system were universal and immutable, rather than historically contingent and associated to several economic, political, social and ideological conditions.

As a consequence, anarchy, equality, functional undifferentiation and the primacy of security become key assumptions of realist international relations theory through the work of classic realists such as Morgenthau and Carr, and especially with the development of structural realisms (Carr, 2016; Morgenthau, 1948; Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2001).

These assumptions left many significant questions unanswered. The most important regarded the reasons why in the three centuries between the Peace of Westphalia and the process of decolonization following World War 2, the vast majority of the interaction between the core of the system, constituted by great powers and other Westphalian, fully sovereign, behaving-like-units states and the rest of the world could not be explained using the analytical categories employed by realism. The imperialist world order that characterized the world in those three centuries could be described by elements of equality between European and Western states, but the relations between the European-Western core and the rest was clearly characterized by hierarchy, unevenness, and exploitation (Buzan and Lawson, 2015; Mattern and Zarakol 2016; Raineri and Baldaro in this *Special Issue*)

The structural realist answer to this issue is, for the most part, that 'it does not matter'. By putting the emphasis on power, structural realists and classic realists, assumed that international politics is a discipline that studies the interaction between great power, therefore is not necessarily concerned with the periphery of the system or with the fate of small states, people living in ungoverned spaces, or allegedly pre-modern forms of political organization. Kenneth Waltz for instance solved the issue of the global diffusion of the modern state arguing that the competition between states lead to socialization. This meant that those who would not conform to the logic of power and competition for security perish, while the others would continue to be involved in the immutable struggle for security and survival (Waltz, 1979).

Other approaches sought to address this issue more systematically and more seriously. First generation of the English School promoted the idea of the 'Expansion of the International Society'. From this point of view the key primary institutions of the international society, such

as sovereignty, international law, war, and diplomacy were developed in Europe and later exported to the rest of the world (Bull and Watson, 1984; Buzan, 2014).

Authors such as Hedley Bull, Adam Watson, and Martin White had the fundamental merit to bring the relationship between Europe and 'the rest of the world' as well as at the centre of the theoretical debate, in a moment in which large part of the mainstream IR theory was focusing largely on concerns associated with topics and concerns associated with the realities of security competition of the Cold War.

Nevertheless, this first step remains strongly anchored to a Eurocentric vision of international politics. The 'expansion story' presented by the English school suffers from the same biases that characterized realist theorizing. First, it considers the process of globalization of the modern state as one of learning and socialization. In doing so it fails to provide any account of the colonial experience and its legacies, and to incorporate the unevenness and the relations of hierarchy that characterized that process.[5] Moreover, it considers the expansion of the modern state and of the international society as a one-way process and not a dialectic process of the creation of multiple modernities (Persaud and Sajed, 2018).

The lack of attention to the periphery, imperialism and the 'colonial international politics', is associated with the second 'myth of IR', that of 1919. That year is both considered the foundational moment of the discipline, with the opening of the first IR department at the University of Wales at Aberystwyth and the beginning of the 'first great debate' between utopian liberals and realists (Ashworth, 2002; Quirk and Vigneswaran, 2005; Schmidt, 2013).

The myth of 1919 is instrumental to the exclusion of colonization and imperialism in two different ways. Firstly, it locates the birth of the discipline in a particular time and space in which the debate is exclusively centred on how to 'solve' the problem of war, with realists such as Carr restating the harsh realities of power politics and utopian idealists pointing to legal and institutional arrangements.

As de Carvalho, Leira and Hobson point out IR theory as a discipline had already moved its first steps, as testified by the works of Norman Angel, John A. Hobson, Woodrow Wilson, as well as Vladimir E. Lenin (De Carvalho *et al.*, 2011). Furthermore, the urgency of 'solving the problem of war' stemming from the conclusion of World War 1 tended to exclude an effort to theorize the role of imperialism and colonialism.[6]

Second, the myth of 1919 contributes to current biases of IR theory also in another way. Later reconstructions of the 'first great debate' generally maintained that interwar idealism failed to prevent the rise of Nazism and contributed to World War 2, leading to ignore the realities of power and favouring policies such as the Chamberlain's appeasement. Consequently, after 1945 realism became the dominant approach since it was willing to see things 'as they are' and study them 'scientifically'. In the following years, these assumptions merged with the emerging trends towards positivism, consolidating the tendency to equate realism, positivism and 'science' (Schmidt, 2002; Thies, 2002; Ashworth, 2006).

As stated by Amitav Acharya in the ISA Presidential Address, in order to face the challenge of understanding an increasingly plural and diverse world, IR theory should seek to overcome both its existing biases and promote a dialogue with area studies (Acharya, 2016).

In doing so both IR and area specialists face a number of challenges. The first one is probably the necessity of re-assessing the role of colonialism and its legacies. For IR theorists this entails an effort to expand both of the time-frame and the geographical scope of the studies. While early modern Europe has been the empirical historical reference for most theories of balance of

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[5]Most recent developments of the English School largely overcome its initial Euro-centric biases and have produced a much more balanced account of the process of expansion of the international Society. See Keene 2002; for a synthesis, Buzan 2014.

[6]A significant exception is the work of the Lenin and Hobson on the role of imperialism in the contemporary capitalist development and its role in the origin of World War 1.

power and security competition, the relations between core and periphery and the encounter with 'the rest' have been much more marginal (examples are Schroeder, 1994; Levy and Thompson 2005; Cesa, 2010).

A recent and interesting example of this efforts is the work of Barry Buzan and George Lawson on international politics in the XIX century and its consequence for the contemporary understanding of international politics (Buzan and Lawson, 2015). This is one of the most significant examples of works that seek to locate the relationship between core and periphery at the centre of IR theory, together with the horizontal dimension of competition between great powers (Chakrabarty, 2000; Rosemberg, 2010; Osterhammel, 2014).

This effort to incorporate the vertical dimension of international politics also leads to a renewed attention for the receiving end of imperialism and colonization. A new wave of studies has started to investigate the effects of colonialism and imperialism from the perspective of the people and the states that suffered from them. Seen from the perspective of Asia, African, Middle Eastern peoples and states, the age of empires was not simply a process of importation of costumes, rules and norms, nor to socialization to the realities of international politics. It left deep traces on social and economic structures and it created forms of economic, and political dependency[7] (Acemoglu, Johnson and Robinson, 2001; Michalopoulos and Papaioannou, 2016).

Incorporating the legacies of imperialism and colonialism is crucial to understand contemporary non-Western perspectives on human rights, democracy, sovereignty, self-determination and the nature of international politics more in general (Pyle, 2007; Suzuki, 2009; Zarakol 2010, 2018; Acharya, 2011a, 2011b; Zhang, 2016; Acharya and Buzan, 2019).

The incorporation of core-periphery relations in IR theory also entails the necessity to rethink the development of contemporary modernity. Liberalism, constructivism, and the 'classic' English School tend to assume that the modernity should be identified with capitalism, democracy and international law, developed in the West and later transferred to other regions. On the contrary, several more recent studies invite to describe the development of political and economic modernity as a dialectic process, in which the colonial experience and the interaction with 'others' is crucial (Chakrabarty, 2000; Philips, 2016).

Bridging the gap(s) between IR and area studies

Tensions and dialectics between International Relations and Area Studies unfold not only in relation to what kind of knowledge is produced, but also how this knowledge is generated, circulated, and transferred. Complementing, challenging, contesting or emancipating from Western-centric IR, or striking a balance between nomothetic and idiographic approaches (Hollis and Smith, 1990; Jackson, 2016) are matters of not only concepts (Tickner, 2003) but also methodology and methods – that is, how research proceeds to achieve which purpose, and what techniques for gathering and analysing evidence are deployed. These dimensions are all interweaved.

Within the canons of mainstream IR, research has been generally driven by the quest for regularities transcending spatio-temporal confines, to be explained across a universe of cases. On the contrary, AS have traditionally valued the mastering of primary sources and the endeavour 'to decipher the subjective understanding actors attach to their practices and discourses within their immediate contexts' (Köllner *et al.*, 2018: 4), even against the standard of replicability. Brought to the extremes, this divergence has often translated in the acceptance of each other's intellectual enterprise with a degree of scepticism. More specifically, Area Studies scholars have been reproached of 'horizontal ignorance', promoting and defending exceptionalisms and descriptivism as well as leaving little room for generalizability beyond the particular case

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[7]The idea that colonialism generated forms of dependency that made the process of economic development more difficult is already present in neo-marxist approaches and in the *dependencia* theory of the 1970s and 1980s. See A dialogue between IR theory and area studies Wallerstein, 1979; Dietz, 1980; Smith, 1981

under study to which researchers devote their entire life; reversely, the main limitation of IR allegedly consists of 'vertical ignorance,' failing to shed light on 'real societies and the conduct of historically situated human agents' (AAS 1997: 2), conveying a superficial knowledge of cases, relying on weak cultural and language skills, and implicitly or even explicitly using hegemonic worldviews as a yardstick for comparison, whereas ethnographic immersion would ensure thick and context-bound accounts (Köllner *et al.*, 2018). Such mutual circumspection has a rather long history[8], yet it revamped in the wake of the Arab Springs, that provided an occasion for Middle Eastern Studies specialists to demonstrate the failures of theories building on oversimplified notions of the state, sovereignty, nationality, citizenship, legitimacy, anarchy, order, border and the separation between the domestic and the international realms.

En amont of methodological considerations, bridging IR and AS may thus mean finding a middle ground between context-sensitivity and theory-portability. Specularly, the ambition of embarking on a broad (scholarly and political) project of 'provincializing' Western IR may lead to the deconstruction of often orientalized, nativist and essentialized accounts of non-Western societies, accounts which tend to replicate relations of hegemony and domination (binary logics of 'us' and 'them', First World–Third World, West-East, North–South, centre and periphery).

In that respect, the abovementioned venture of globalizing IR (i.e., recognizing the existence of alternative cosmologies, philosophical and intellectual traditions, theoretical and normative references) move from a critique of - or at least the dissatisfaction vis-à-vis - the assumption that some Western concepts could be universally acceptable and valid. Let's take the example of the state and its role in theorizing in IR, which is by definition considered as the field of study of the relationships among states. Far from overlooking the contributions of IR scholars drawing on historiographic or sociological intuitions, or engaging with normative questions, the IR field tends to naturally accept that the international system is, for all times and places, 'inhabited' by sovereign states, equipped with borders and central governments. In other words, the ontology of IR starts with the Westphalia Peace and with the state-system having come into being. Already in 1993 Ruggie acknowledged that some forms of political community (i.e., the state) are the expression of Western modernity and reified accordingly by IR mainstream scholarship (Ruggie, 1993). Yet, only within circumscribed strands of literature the relevance of the state has been questioned and unpacked with reference to non-Western contexts, where it may be considered as an artifice of colonialism or the result of a violent imposition. Across a number of cases multiple and hybrid sites of governance where power, authority, territory and loyalty overlap and co-exist. Similarly, state-to-state interactions may be less significant than transnational or intercommunal relations. However, when the nexus between sovereignty and statehood has been problematized, this was done by scholars from outside the IR disciplinary field (i.e., the idea of 'stateless societies', Fortes and Evans-Pritchard 1940), or IR scholars with a remarkable engagement with area specialisms (Shadian, 2010; Neumann and Wigen, 2012). On the other hand, not all contexts and case studies lend themselves to a relativization of IR's alleged state-centrism. Yet even there context-sensitivity may guide us to where to look for the state, from the point of view of territoriality and spatialization, institutional infrastructures as well as the recognition of multiple forms of agency and rationalities (which actors enshrine it and from which logics of action they proceed, for example).

In some instances and at some latitudes, this possibly provides voice opportunities for the weak, excluded, and underrepresented agencies; accordingly, efforts at 'decentering' IR aim at adopting 'others'' perspectives including not only non-Western decision-makers but also viewpoints of those beyond the policy-making elites. The latter dimension is particularly visible in what could be dubbed the 'non-Western IR theories agenda', that indeed bears a Coxian

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[8]Area Studies were originally devoted to the study of 'faraway places that needed to be better understood in the world centres of power' (van Schendel 2005).: 290 cited in Köllner et al. 2018).

understanding of theory (Acharya and Buzan, 2007, 2019) and premise on the assumption that IR theories are always situated. All in all, both the engagements with non-Western IR and the call for building a Global IR represent possible declensions/articulations of bridging IR and AS, by not only opening up to contributions from the 'Third World' or the 'Global South'[9] but also subverting concepts such as 'progress', 'modernity', 'development', 'transition', and the assumption that international socialization equals to a teleological process of westernization.

How to translate these conceptual scaffolding into research practices? Are there methodologies incorporating the programmes of decentring, decolonizing, globalizing provincializing IR? Are there methodological bridges between IR and AS? Two other possible declensions/articulations of bridging IR and AS may rescue us from that slippery slope.

The first one, the 'Comparative Area Studies agenda', tends to envision multi-sited fieldwork research and site-intensive techniques of enquiry, aimed at the 'exposure to local complexities on the ground, to intellectual traditions of native scholarship, and to ongoing debates within relevant area studies communities' (Köllner *et al.*, 2018: 15). Within that approach, area specialism is extrapolated to recognize the relevance of contextual attributes outside of one's primary area of expertise; while the comparative would bring the researchers to uncover cross-case and cross-regions commonalities or to theoretically refine differences between conventional areas by means of translation. On the one hand, travelling theories and their inter-area itineraries (Said, 1983) may dangerously result in instances of conceptual overstretch; on the other, they may overcome the main sources of suspicions between disciplinary scholars and area specialists: theoretical 'parochialism' (that is, the same phenomenon being discussed in different regional settings, using different terminology); the geographic confinement of academic communities (rarely liaising each other on a 'South-South' basis and therefore replicating a post-colonial dimension of knowledge production and dissemination); theorizing about the world from the veranda (Eckl, 2008).

The second one involved the study of international and regional organizations beyond their institutional shape, performance and policy outputs, paving the way to a political sociology approach. Inspired, among others, by the so-called 'practice turn' in IR, this approach entails ethnographic endeavours, bottom-up and grounded perspectives, micro-level analyses, attention to agency and informality in organizational contexts as well as to power configurations across different contexts.

Far from romanticizing fieldwork activities and making 'the local' a fetish, a bottom-up approach may reconstruct the study of areas that are not so inaccessible and remote, by calling into question EU-centric approaches to the European Union itself. Studying EU's encounters with local actors and domestic contexts may entail 'leaving the armchair and exploring the EU from the point of view of the people actually producing it' (Adler-Nissen, 2016: 87–88), both within the EU and beyond it. After all, shedding light on interlocutors' perceptions of the EU and Europe at the empirical level may be a necessary step towards 'decentering'/'provincializing' Europe (Onar and Nicolaïdis, 2013), and indirectly, EU-centric IR through Area Studies' toolkits and sensitivities (De Franco in this *Special Issue*).

Bridging IR and AS is policy-relevant

Meta-theoretical considerations and conceptualizations are not necessarily detached from the nuts and bolts of empirically-grounded work and the practical questions of studying world politics. The theoretical lenses employed by scholars have an impact on the reality they meant to analyse and describe. They can construct the categories of thought within which we explain

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[9]Bilgin (2016) in that respect clarifies that the task is 'not additive but reconstructive' and that 'what is being sought is not telling 'multiple stories', but 'excavating' […] multiple layers to already existing stories with an eye on power/knowledge dynamics' (138).

the world, help reinforce hegemonic practices of government and support specific social forces while cornering others[10].

As a consequence, bridging IR and AS may become particularly relevant in the context of the paradigm shift investing the deployment of global templates by international organizations in crisis-thorn settings as well as of international interventions. One-size-fits-all recipes for development, assistance and reforms, on the one hand, and liberal peace-building, on the other – both premised on the promotion of democracy, rule of law, civil society and market economy – attracted much criticism among scholars and practitioners for failing generate resolved, long-term and sustainable outcomes (Richmond, 2011). For example, EU's presence in the Western Balkans, in the forms of state-building, peace-building and integration of the region into the Euro-Atlantic community has been challenged on the grounds that inadequate consideration was given to local ownership and domestic expectations and views (Belloni, 2019: 175; Visoka and Musliu, 2020; see also Selenica in this *Special Issue*). Rethinking large-scale, transformative, normatively-connoted involvements by external actors has resulted in a renewed call for pragmatism and situation-specific stabilization strategies. Specifically, this entails a renewed focus on the local context with adaptation to the circumstances on a case-by-case basis and, possibly, emphasis on self-organization and the strengthening the resilience of local social institutions (de Coning, 2016; Belloni and Moro, 2020).

In addition to this, a number of scholars have been increasingly influenced by sociological and anthropological perspectives (Autesserre, 2014) and have been calling for a conflict-sensitive approach to overcome the pitfalls of the liberal paradigm. Accordingly, the literature on peace-building has been more and more imbued with area studies sensitivities to such extent and extent that an actual 'local turn' (Donais, 2009) has taken hold in the last years (Mac Ginty, 2008, 2011; Mac Ginty and Richmond, 2013), advocating for the acknowledgement of a plurality of agents, modes of actions, perceptions and normative references in areas of conflict. This 'local turn' paves the way to investigating not only 'the supply side of intervention' (Belloni, 2017: 21) but also how international policies are implemented or contested, or, more broadly, how governance instruments, norms and practices are embraced, adapted, resisted and rejected by local actors.

The reception of international policies, norms and practices and how the latter may be moulded by 'local filters' have been widely studied, often with the endeavour of unveiling the agency of translation and localization (Zimmermann, 2016). However, top-down, these local filters have also been interpreted as local obstacles to the full adoption of global templates, produced by backwardness and producing pathological deviations.

In the context of the above-mentioned welcome 'local turn', AS sensitivities seem to be crucial and worthy of being integrated into policy considerations for at least three reasons. First, for understanding 'the international' and 'the local' in their multilayeredness and irreducibility to a deterministic centre-periphery divide – in other words, reflecting on who is and where is 'the local' (in the framework of not only research missions but also fact-finding missions, need-assessment missions etc.). Second, for challenging the expectation that intervention paths are ultimately unidirectional and proceed from West to East, from the Global North to the Global South[11]. Third, for valuing the constitutive potential of potential of resistance and contestation vis-à-vis internationally derived schemes and global scripts, seeing new venues for agency in the alleged incomplete download.

Brokers of debates: IR & AS knowledge circulation in the academic world

As it stands out from the previous paragraphs, the systematization of the research in AS for the analysis of international affairs has been for a long time, and for many countries, driven by geo-

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[10]See for example Cox 1981; Walker 1993.
[11]See the 'Special Issue: The Agency of the Governed', *Third World Thematics: A TWQ Journal*, Vol. 2 No. 5, 2017.

political interests. Many universities and research institutions in Europe have been founded with the purpose of gathering information and knowledge of key areas of the world for expansive and colonialist ends. As a consequence, they often transmit a sense of European essentialist regard. The School for Oriental and African Studies, previously named School of Oriental Studies, was indeed founded in 1916 with the expectation of researching the main dynamics in the Middle East to support Foreign Affairs offices. Similarly, since its institution, L'Orientale (literally The Oriental) University in Naples has been a key institution for the studies of Area Studies.

With the colonialist project gone, today there are still some important cases of the governmental interest in strengthening the AS research agenda. In the UK, besides the United Kingdom Council for Area Studies Associations founded in 2003, the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the British Academy, five other important centres have been founded, as the 'Centres for Excellence in language-based Area Studies' where important research is conducted about China, Japan, the Arabic- speaking world, and the former Soviet Union area. In Germany, since 2009, there has been a relaunch of initiatives supported by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research targeting AS by incentivizing centres such as the German Institute of Global and Area Studies (GIGA) or internationally based networks and research centres in South Asia, Latin America, China, and in Sub- Saharan Africa. The private sector has also contributed to this effort by supporting think tanks and by providing important grants for research[12] (Köllner *et al.*, 2018).

In order to map the contemporary dialectics between IR and AS, we look for main venues of exchange of the field, hence we explore proxies of the academic traction of the field by focusing on top journals and conferences. By collecting data on the top world scientific journals in IR we intend to see the main fora where driving scholars aspire to publish their work. We aim to see this internationally but also across world regions. Here, we are also interested in showing what kind of space and special attention has been dedicated within these fora to alternative regards on the discipline and specifically to the AS agenda. Hence, we search for and include those Special Issues interested in representing the different formats of collaboration. Instead, by looking at conferences, we aim at showing what kind of representation this debate, and key driving scholars, have within one of the most critical spaces of academic exchange by definition.

Table 1 provides a first overview of the top ten Journals for SPS/IR internationally. The table confirms a quite stable dominance of the Anglo-Saxon academic lead with British and American Journals firmly at the top with little variance in a whole decade.

In order to see the main drivers of academic excellence across world regions, we also collected data on the top five journals per region. Figure 1 visualizes the main journals per world region comparing 2015 and 2019. Also in this case, we notice little variance across time and within the region but some significant ones across regions. While Northern America and Western Europe are represented at the top of international rankings with top-ranked Journals such as *Journal of Conflict Resolution* and *International Security* or *Political Analysis* and *American Political Science Review* as shown in Table 1, Africa displays only one top-ranked journal, i.e. *Africa Development* and the Pacific Region only three, i.e. *Asian Economic Policy Review*, *Landfall* and *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs*.

Among these Journals, only few of them sponsored Special Issues aiming at strengthening the connections between IR and AS (Table 2). Interestingly, the majority of these Special Issues, meaning eight out of thirteen have been published by Asian-based Journals, especially by *China Perspective*.

The research on the main international conferences yields some similar results. In particular, we focused on the five main international conferences for SPS/IR, namely American Political

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[12]See for instance Mercator Institute for China Studies; Centre for East European and International Studies; Volkswagen Foundation's funding initiative for research on Central Asia and the Caucasus or the Gerda Henkel foundation.

Table 1. Top Ranked Journals in SPS/IR

	2010			2015			2020		
Rank.	Journal	SJR	Country	Journal	SJR	Country	Journal	SJR	Country
1	Political Analysis	8.839 Q1	GB	Political Analysis	9.622 Q1	GB	American Journal of Political Science	6.347 Q1	GB
2	American Political Science Review	7.096 Q1	GB	American Political Science Review	8.764 Q1	GB	American Political Science Review	5.878 Q1	GB
3	International Organization	6.570 Q1	GB	American Journal of Political Science	8.311 Q1	GB	International Organization	5.513 Q1	GB
4	American Journal of Political Science	5.725 Q1	GB	International Security	5.546 Q1	US	Political Analysis	3.953 Q1	GB
5	World Politics	5.438 Q1	GB	International Organization	5.482 Q1	GB	British Journal of Political Science	3.364 Q1	GB
6	Journal of Conflict Resolution	3.550 Q1	US	Journal of Peace Research	3.892 Q1	GB	Perspectives on Politics	2.898 Q1	GB
7	British Journal of Political Science	3.398	GB	World Politics	3.646 Q1	GB	Journal of Peace Research	2.781 Q1	US
8	International Security	2.975 Q1	US	Perspectives on Politics	3.516 Q1	GB	Quarterly Journal of Political Science	2.757 Q1	US
9	International Studies Quarterly	2.770 Q1	GB	British Journal of Political Science	3.317	GB	International Security	2.690 Q1	GB
10	Quarterly Journal of Political Science	2.452 Q1	US	Journal of Conflict Resolution	3.306 Q1	US	Journal of Conflict Resolution	2.871 Q1	GB

Source: Scimago.

Science Association (APSA), European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR), European International Studies Association (EISA)[13], International Political Science Association (IPSA), International Studies Association (ISA) and Millennium. By analysing their programmes, between 2015 and 2020, we found that 21 editions of these conferences displayed at least a panel dedicated to the debate between IR and AS with a total of 127 panels. In total, we count 781 scholars or experts participating to these panels[3]. Figure 2 visualizes the participation flow of these conferences between 2015 and 2020.

In terms of participation per affiliation, Northern American and Western European Universities confirm their centrality. As Table 3 displays, the majority of participants to IR&AS related panels are scholars affiliated to American University, University of Oxford, German Institute for Global Affairs (GIGA) and London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). The only non-Western University among the top seven is Ryukoku University, based in Kyoto.

Overall, the data seem to suggest that, while Western -Northern American and Western Europe- academic institutions remain key drivers in the development of the discipline of IR, and especially traditional approaches, recent developments highlight a number of interesting insights. First of all, the dialectics between IR and AS is a topic of interest in the international academic debate, occupying important spaces both in terms of publications via Special Issues and academic exchange within major conferences. Also, it is interesting to notice that much of the efforts to establish non-Western perspectives is driven by Asia based institutions.

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[13]Information about participants' affiliation to EISA were only available for 2018.

Figure 1. Top 5 ranked Journals per world region in 2015 & 2020.
Source: Authors' elaboration based on data from Scimago and visualized with RAWGraphs

Conclusive remarks and special issue overview

This *Special Issue* addresses the important question of the dialectics between International Relations and Area Studies. Particularly, we believe, this *Special Issue* provides an important milestone within a crucial seminal debate that is increasingly relevant and discussed but still remains at the margin of the specialized literature.

Our conceptual review and mapping endeavours ultimately call for overcoming the compartmentalization of hyper-specialized knowledge production – a logic that seems to govern the young scholars' careers and professions at different latitudes, especially in the context of neoliberal, bureaucratized, academia. Whereas our contribution is not to be considered a 'manifesto', it invites the readers to consider whether the intellectual and cultural work as articulated nowadays actually accomplishes the mission of understanding the complexity of the transnational field and of global/local encounters; and ultimately, how disciplinary contaminations may become a professional practice.

Indeed, this *Special Issue* brings together scholars interested in various dynamics that are relevant within any discussion of international politics but that are also committed in looking at how various effects are unpacked in different regions of the world. The different contributions point to similar theoretical and conceptual issues within traditional IR debates, offering alternative lenses to understand key political and security affairs. Specifically, the contributions gathered here touch upon the 'IR/AS dialectics' in terms of disciplinary development and menage to explore idiosyncrasies and key remaining dilemmas across regions of the world (e.g., Raineri and Baldaro 2021; Costantini and Hanau Santini 2021; De Franco 2022). The case of Europe analysed by Chiara De Franco, for instance, applies an AS approach to the region and it is functional to de-exoticize and de-orientalize the deep-seated meaning of AS itself.

Table 2. IR/AS Special Issues published within top 5 ranked Journals per region

| Year	Region	Journal	Focus of SI	Guest Editors
2015	Asiatic Region	China Perspective	IR&AS	S. Arsène
		Economic and Political Weekly	AS	–
		Journal of Southeast Asian Economies	IR&AS	T. Siew Yean, S. Basu Das,
	Eastern Europe	Mezhdunarodnye Protsessy	IR	–
	Middle East	Uluslararasi Iliskiler	IR&AS	M. Aydin and S. Akgül Açikmeşe
	Northern America	Journal of Conflict Resolution	IR	C. Jentzsch, S. N. Kalyvas, L. Isabella Schubiger
		Conflict Management and Peace Science	IR	A. P. Owsiak, M. Melin
2016	Asiatic Region	China Perspective	IR	J.P. Cabestan
		China Perspective	IR&AS	S. Billioud
	Western Europe	Journal of Peace Research	IR	M. Wilson. D.R Davis. A. Murdie
		Contemporary Southeast Asia	IR&AS	E. Aspinall. W.Mas'udi
		Economic and Political Weekly	AS	–
		Southeast Asian Studies	AS	K. We Koh, L.J.K. Bonate
	Asiatic Region	Economic and Political Weekly	AS	A. Jayadev, V. Vakulabharanam
		Journal of Southeast Asian Economies	IR(IPE)	C. Lee, Francis E Hutchinson
		Journal of Southeast Asian Economies	IR&AS	C. Lee, D. Ardiyanto Narjoko, S.Oum,
		Issues & Studies	AS	A. Armony, A. Pérez-Liñan
	Latin America	Columbia International	IR&AS	M. Delgado Barón
	Middle East	Uluslararasi Iliskiler	IR	H. Akin Ünver
		European Union Politics	AS	C. Erisen; C. Kentmen-Cin
	Northern America	Conflict Management and Peace Science	IR	B. Prins, K. Wiegand
		Politics and Society	AS	A. De Juan, J. Henryk Pierskalla
		International Organization	IR	E. M. Hafner-Burton, S. Haggard, D. A. Lake, D. G. Victor
	Western Europe	Journal of Peace Research	IR	–
		Journal of Peace Research	IR	–
		South Asian Survey	IR&AS	M.Kumar Barai. R. N. Kar
		Economic and Political Weekly	AS	–
		Economic and Political Weekly	AS	–
2018	Asiatic Region	Southeast Asian Studies	AS	W. Anderson, R. Roque
		China Report	AS	Chih-Yu Shih
		Journal of Southeast Asian Economies	IR(IPE)	H. Hill, S. Dharma Negara
		Issues & Studies	AS	Y. Kitamura
	Latin America	Columbia International	IR&AS	J. Andrew Mcneish
		Columbia International	AS	C. Nasi
	Middle East	Uluslararasi Iliskiler	AS	M. Editörden
		Uluslararasi Iliskiler	AS	K. Ifantis, D. Triantaphyllou
	Northern America	Conflict Management and Peace Science	AS	T.E Flores, J. F Vargas
		Conflict Management and Peace Science	IR	K. M Kadera S. Shair-Rosenfield
	Western Europe	Journal of Peace Research	IR&AS	LBalcells, C. M Sullivan
2019		Contemporary Southeast Asia	IR&AS	K.E. Schulze. J. Chernov Hwang
		Economic and Political Weekly	AS	A. Sengupta, I. Mukherjee
		Southeast Asian Studies	AS	Ia. G. Baird
	Asiatic Region	Journal of Southeast Asian Economies	IR&AS	L.Hwok Aun, C.Choong,
		Journal of Southeast Asian Economies	IR(IPE)	F. Kimura, S. M Thangavelu, C. Findlay, L. Chen,
		Issues A Studies	IR&AS	G. V. C. Naidu And Mum in Chen
		Issues & Studies	IR&AS	S. L. Kastner
	Middle East	Uluslararasi Iliskiler	AS	B. Özkan
		European Union Politics	AS	F. Wasserfallen
	Northern America	Conflict Management and Peace Science	IR	C. R. Conrad, Jacqueline H.R. Demeritt, Daniel W. Hill, Ryan M. Welch And Joseph K. Young
	Western Europe	Journal of Peace Research	IR&AS	A.Braithwaite, I. Salehyan, B.Savun
	Pacific Region	Asian Economic Policy Review	IR&AS	T. Ito Kazumasa I. Jong-Wha Lee C. Mckenzie M. Noland S. Urata
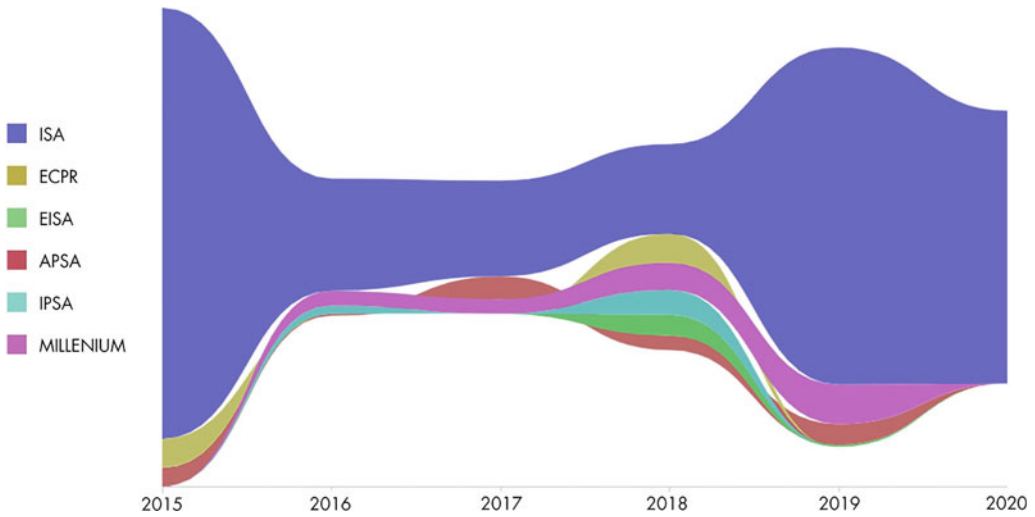
Figure 2. Participation flow (per no. of participants) 2015–2020.
Source: Authors' elaboration with RAWGraphs

Table 3. Top 7 Universities per participants (2015–2020)

American University	17
University of Oxford	15
LSE	14
GIGA	14
York University	9
Aberystwyth University	9
Leiden University	8
Ryukoku University	7

From these different analyses, it becomes apparent that multiple elements contribute to the unfolding of international politics, not necessarily a new development but rather something traditionally overlooked by traditional debates in IR. By looking at regional policy-making and realities from an internationalist perspective, we believe, critical theoretical and policy-relevant implications emerge, specifically in relation to local ownership and bottom-up approaches.

The article by Edoardo Baldaro and Luca Raineri, for instance, suggests that Africa has never really occupied a marginal place in international politics and in the study of IR. Rather, the authors show, African politics represented a rich and differentiated analytical space, able to offer a central contribution to the advancement of IR discipline. However, via a process of external and internal configuration of frontiers, margins and boundaries, Africa has been constructed as a peculiar political identity as well as field of study in international politics.

Similarly, Matteo Dian concludes that the traditional approach of building 'national schools' of IR, such as the Chinese School might simply concur in reinforcing new exceptionalist visions of international politics. Indeed, by analysing Eurocentrism in IR studies dedicated to East Asia, his contribution shows how China represents, on the one hand, a textbook example of traditional IR approaches in light of its political economic and military ascendency. On the other, it is a case that allows to put into question the way simplistic Western theories have traditionally analysed and interpreted its national and international politics. In order to better understand the Chinese contribution to IR today it would be necessary to investigate when and how leaders

referred to and adhered to national defining values such as Confucianism, or how they interpreted their role in a given historical setting and how they fit in their political narrative.

The case of the Middle East also functions as an important test of the relationship between Global IR and New Security Studies on the one hand and Regional security and Area Studies on the other. Irene Costantini and Ruth Hanau Santini specifically focus on the interpretation of security and on what different aspirations to pursuit had both in academic terms for what concerns the development of Middle Eastern Studies (MES) as well as in relation to practical political and social dynamics of the area. The article by De Franco also has a broad theoretical aspiration but, differently from the previous three, she analyses the case of Europe by relying on and developing an alternative theoretical agenda, meaning International Practice Theory (IPT). Specially, this contribution allows to shed light on different aspects of the debate within IR, especially in relation to European Studies. By relying on IPT, the article proposes an analysis of the EU as a constellation of communities of practice.

In many instances, the article by Ervjola Selenica functions as a transition towards the final part of the *Special Issue* as it posits itself within an important theoretical effort while addressing the specific case study of post-war education reconstruction in Kosovo. Specifically, the article expects to study IR from a non-IR field and sector-based perspective while shedding light on the role of international actors in traditionally national sectors and the multi-layered, transnational and hybrid governance.

The final paper of the *Special Issue*, instead, allow us to present a focus on the practices and experiences of one country, highlighting the contribution that an attentive analysis to the history and domestic politics of a country can make to IR. Specifically, Francesco Buscemi brings us to Myanmar with a fieldwork in the Ta'ang areas of northern Shan State. The article explores borderlands literature in a case where weapons become a field of struggle for different governable orders that confront themselves along rationalities, techniques and practices of humanitarian arms control.

On a conclusive note, we believe this collection represents an important effort contributing to the future debate and research agenda. International politics is a substantially complex and interrelated matter that should not be analysed merely via specialisms or rigid disciplinary canons.

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