
Culture and International Relations: Rethinking the Cultural Foundations of Global Politics

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Abstract

Culture occupies an increasingly visible place in contemporary International Relations (IR), yet its theoretical status remains unsettled. While scholarship on constructivism, Global IR, cultural diplomacy, international order, and postcolonial approaches has demonstrated that meanings, identities, norms, and historical experiences shape international politics, culture is still frequently approached as a contextual variable, a resource of state influence, or a source of national identity. This article argues that such approaches do not fully capture the constitutive role of culture in international political life. Culture is not simply something that states possess or mobilise; it contributes to the formation of interests, identities, legitimacy, authority, status, and understandings of international order. Drawing on recent scholarship on cultural diplomacy, cultural heritage, relational approaches to IR, and the pluralisation of international theory, the article develops the concept of cultural relationalism as a framework for understanding how international actors construct political meaning through historically and culturally embedded relationships. The argument also addresses the dangers of cultural essentialism. Recognising cultural plurality should not require treating societies as internally homogeneous or assuming that non-Western perspectives are inherently more authentic than Western ones. Instead, culture should be understood as dynamic, contested, relational, and politically consequential. The article therefore proposes a culturally relational approach to IR that moves beyond both Eurocentric universalism and simplistic cultural relativism.

Keywords: Culture, International Relations, Cultural Relationalism, Global IR, Identity, International Order, Postcolonialism, Cultural Diplomacy

Introduction

Culture has never been entirely absent from International Relations (IR), but its place within the discipline has remained conceptually ambiguous. International politics has traditionally been explained through concepts such as power, security, sovereignty, institutions, interests, and strategic interaction, while culture has often appeared as a secondary influence on these processes. In some approaches, culture is treated as part of the domestic background from which states formulate foreign policy; in others, it appears as a source of norms and identities that shape state behaviour. More recently, culture has become increasingly visible through scholarship on international order, cultural diplomacy, heritage politics, status, civilizational narratives, and Global IR. Phillips and Reus-Smit's work on culture and order, for example, demonstrates that cultural diversity is not simply an external condition confronting international orders but has historically been connected to the constitution and legitimation of political authority itself (Phillips & Reus-Smit, 2020). More recent scholarship similarly argues that cultural heritage, status, and symbolic practices deserve greater attention within IR because they can shape international authority, recognition, alliances, and geopolitical relations (Kalaycioglu & Subotić, 2025; de Carvalho & Leira, 2026).

The growing visibility of culture in contemporary scholarship therefore makes it increasingly difficult to sustain the assumption that international politics can be adequately understood without attention to culturally embedded meanings. Yet an important theoretical question remains unresolved: **what exactly does it mean to take culture seriously in International Relations?** Treating culture as an additional variable does not necessarily challenge the deeper assumptions through which international political reality is understood. A state may be described as culturally distinctive while its interests are still assumed to exist independently of cultural interpretation. A diplomatic strategy may be labelled cultural diplomacy while culture remains primarily a resource that governments deliberately deploy to achieve pre-existing foreign-policy objectives. Likewise, cultural differences may be acknowledged while the underlying categories of sovereignty, legitimacy, authority, rationality, and international order remain conceptually unchanged.

This article argues that culture should be understood more fundamentally. Rather than viewing culture simply as a variable that influences international behaviour, it proposes that culture is **constitutive of international political meaning**. Culture contributes to the processes through which actors understand who they are, what they value, which interests they regard as legitimate, whom they recognise as authoritative, how they interpret political events, and what kinds of international arrangements they consider acceptable. The argument does not suggest that material power, strategic interests, institutions, or economic structures are unimportant. Rather, it suggests that these dimensions of international politics are themselves interpreted through culturally situated frameworks. Military capabilities, for example, do not possess identical political meanings in every historical or cultural setting. Similarly, concepts such as sovereignty, security, justice, dignity, order, and cooperation acquire political significance through particular histories, identities, institutions, and social understandings.

This argument builds on but also extends constructivist insights into the role of norms, identities, and shared meanings. Constructivism demonstrated that international politics cannot be reduced to material capabilities and fixed interests because actors understand their interests through social interaction. Yet the broader question of how culturally situated experiences shape the construction of those meanings remains particularly important in an increasingly plural international system. The contemporary debate over Global IR has made this question more pressing by challenging the tendency of the discipline to present theoretical categories derived from particular European and North American historical experiences as though they possess universal validity. The issue is therefore not simply whether different cultures should be added to an existing body of IR theory. It is whether the discipline's understanding of international

politics can be enriched when culturally diverse experiences participate in the production of theory itself.

Recent scholarship illustrates why this distinction matters. Research on cultural diplomacy has shown that culture can operate as a mechanism of international influence, but has also cautioned against collapsing the concepts of culture, cultural diplomacy, and soft power into one another (Zanella, Neves Junior & Ribeiro da Silva, 2024). Cultural diplomacy may involve exchanges, representation, education, heritage, arts, media, or other forms of engagement, but the existence of these practices does not mean that culture is reducible to an instrument of state influence. Similarly, research on Qatar's diplomacy demonstrates how cultural initiatives, media, sport, tourism, and other symbolic practices can become part of broader strategies of regional and international engagement (Ullah, 2024). These studies are important because they demonstrate that culture can function as a resource of international politics. The present article takes the argument one step further by asking how cultural meanings can shape the political objectives and relationships within which such resources become intelligible in the first place.

The distinction between culture as a resource and culture as a constitutive structure is particularly important. When culture is treated primarily as an instrument, the underlying assumption is often that political actors possess relatively stable interests and subsequently choose cultural tools to advance them. A constitutive approach reverses part of this analytical sequence. It asks how identities, relationships, historical memories, moral understandings, and social expectations help produce the interests that actors subsequently pursue. The distinction can be illustrated through the concept of status. International status is not determined exclusively by material capabilities. Recognition, prestige, symbolic practices, historical narratives, cultural production, and perceptions of appropriate behaviour can all influence how states and other actors are positioned within international society. Recent work on the relationship between culture and status reinforces the importance of examining these symbolic dimensions of international hierarchy rather than treating culture merely as an instrument of influence (de Carvalho & Leira, 2026).

Culture also matters because international order is not simply a collection of formal institutions and rules. Orders depend upon understandings of legitimate authority, acceptable behaviour, membership, recognition, and political obligation. The historical organisation of cultural difference has therefore been connected to the formation of international orders themselves. Phillips and Reus-Smit (2020) demonstrate that different international orders have developed distinctive ways of organising cultural diversity, while more recent research on cultural heritage shows how museums, archaeological sites, restitution claims, international institutions, and competing interpretations of history have become sites of international status and authority (Kalaycioglu & Subotić, 2025). Culture in this sense is not external to international order. It can become part of the very process through which order is constructed, contested, and legitimised.

At the same time, taking culture seriously introduces a significant analytical danger: **cultural essentialism**. The critique of Eurocentrism can easily become another form of simplification if “Western” and “non-Western” cultures are treated as internally coherent and mutually opposed entities. Societies contain competing identities, institutions, political interests, generations, classes, ethnicities, religions, and interpretations of tradition. Culture changes through migration, technological transformation, political contestation, economic exchange, and international interaction. It is therefore misleading to assume that a particular society possesses a single cultural logic that determines its international behaviour. A serious cultural approach to IR must recognise difference without turning difference into determinism.

This problem is especially relevant to the development of Global IR. The project of pluralising IR has opened important intellectual space for examining theories and concepts generated outside the traditional centres of the discipline. Yet the objective cannot simply be to replace one fixed hierarchy with another. A culturally plural IR should not assume that everything associated with Western theory is problematic while

everything identified as non-Western is inherently emancipatory or authentic. Instead, the task is to create conditions under which different intellectual traditions can encounter one another critically and contribute to the development of concepts capable of explaining international political realities more adequately.

Recent scholarship on relational approaches provides an especially useful illustration of this possibility. Rochat's (2025) analysis of **guanxism**, grounded in Chinese social thought and Confucian ethics, presents relationality as more than an empirical feature of Chinese diplomacy. It is examined as a possible theoretical perspective that challenges assumptions of individualism and legalism within mainstream IR. This is significant because it illustrates what happens when culturally grounded concepts are treated not merely as contextual information but as potential sources of theoretical innovation. The question consequently shifts from whether a particular cultural concept can be fitted into existing IR categories to whether engagement with different intellectual traditions can reveal limitations within those categories themselves.

The article develops this argument through the concept of **cultural relationalism**. Cultural relationalism refers here to an approach in which international political identities, interests, meanings, and forms of legitimacy are understood as emerging through relationships that are historically and culturally situated. It does not suggest that culture determines political behaviour or that all political differences can be explained culturally. Nor does it imply that cultural groups are internally homogeneous. Rather, cultural relationalism directs analytical attention towards the processes through which actors interpret themselves and others, construct political boundaries, negotiate legitimacy, and attach meaning to international practices. Culture is consequently treated as dynamic and relational rather than as a fixed national attribute.

The argument has both theoretical and practical implications. At the theoretical level, cultural relationalism challenges approaches that separate culture from the supposedly more fundamental structures of international politics. At the practical level, it suggests that diplomacy, international cooperation, conflict management, cultural exchange, and institution-building may be less effective when they assume that political concepts have identical meanings across different contexts. This does not require abandoning universal principles. Instead, it requires greater sensitivity to the cultural and historical processes through which principles acquire legitimacy and are interpreted by different actors.

The article therefore asks a central question: **what changes in our understanding of International Relations when culture is treated not as a secondary influence on international politics but as a constitutive dimension of how international political reality is produced and understood?** It addresses this question in several stages. The next section examines the historical development of culture within IR theory and considers why culture has occupied an unstable position within the discipline. The article then moves beyond the treatment of culture as a variable to examine its relationship with identity, interests, power, legitimacy, and international order. It subsequently considers the relationship between culture and the production of IR knowledge, paying particular attention to postcolonial and Global IR debates. The analysis then addresses the problem of cultural essentialism before developing cultural relationalism as a conceptual framework. The final sections consider the implications of this framework for IR scholarship and international practice.

The central claim is deliberately modest but theoretically consequential. International Relations does not need to become a theory of culture, nor should culture be treated as an explanation for every international phenomenon. The more defensible proposition is that international political life is always interpreted through culturally situated meanings and relationships. Recognising this does not diminish the importance of power, institutions, interests, or material structures. It makes their operation more intelligible. A more culturally attentive IR can therefore move beyond the choice between universalism and relativism and

towards an understanding of global politics in which cultural difference is neither ignored nor romanticised, but examined as part of the constitutive processes through which international relations are made.

Culture and the Intellectual Development of International Relations

The relationship between culture and International Relations has never been entirely absent, although its analytical significance has varied considerably across the major traditions of the discipline. International politics has traditionally been explained through concepts such as power, security, sovereignty, institutions, interests, and strategic interaction, while culture has often appeared as a secondary influence on these processes. This tendency was partly connected to the discipline's search for generalisable explanations of international behaviour. Classical and structural realist approaches, for example, placed considerable emphasis on power, security, anarchy, and the distribution of capabilities, while liberal approaches focused more heavily on institutions, interdependence, cooperation, and domestic preferences (Morgenthau, 1948; Waltz, 1979; Keohane, 1984). Culture was not necessarily absent from these traditions, but it rarely occupied the same analytical position as material capabilities, institutional structures, or strategic interests.

Realism provides a particularly useful illustration of this tendency. Classical realism recognised the importance of history, political values, and human motivations, but its central concern remained the struggle for power and the political constraints generated by international insecurity (Morgenthau, 1948). Structural realism subsequently moved towards a more abstract explanation in which the organisation of the international system and the distribution of material capabilities provided the principal foundations for explaining state behaviour (Waltz, 1979). From such perspectives, cultural differences could influence how states responded to systemic pressures, but culture was not generally treated as constitutive of the international system itself. This distinction is important because it helps explain why culture could remain analytically peripheral even when scholars acknowledged that states possessed different historical and social characteristics.

Liberal approaches created additional space for cultural and ideational factors by emphasising institutions, domestic preferences, economic interdependence, and cooperation. Keohane's (1984) analysis of international institutions, for example, demonstrated how cooperation could persist despite the absence of a central authority, while later liberal scholarship examined the domestic foundations of state preferences. Yet the incorporation of domestic preferences did not necessarily resolve the deeper question of how culturally embedded meanings shape the formation of those preferences. Culture could still be positioned as part of the domestic environment from which states formulate interests rather than as part of the constitutive processes through which interests themselves become intelligible.

The constructivist turn significantly altered this intellectual landscape. Wendt's (1992, 1999) intervention challenged the assumption that international structures and state interests could be understood independently of social interaction and shared meanings. Constructivist scholarship demonstrated that identities, norms, and interests are shaped through processes of social construction rather than simply given prior to interaction. Katzenstein (1996), for example, showed how culture and identity could shape national security practices, while Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) demonstrated the importance of norms in shaping political behaviour and standards of appropriate action. These contributions created an important theoretical opening for culture because they established that international political behaviour cannot be explained exclusively through material capabilities or fixed preferences.

Constructivism nevertheless contains different understandings of what constitutes the social world of international politics. In some applications, culture operates primarily through norms and identities that influence behaviour. In others, social meanings are understood more fundamentally as part of the

constitution of actors and structures themselves. This distinction matters for the argument developed here. If culture is treated simply as another source of norms or identity, it can still be incorporated as an additional variable within an otherwise established theoretical architecture. If culturally situated meanings help constitute the categories through which actors understand interests, authority, identity, legitimacy, and order, culture assumes a more foundational position. The latter interpretation provides the starting point for the concept of cultural relationalism developed later in this article.

The significance of culture also became increasingly visible through scholarship examining the relationship between identity and international politics. Katzenstein's (1996) edited volume on national security demonstrated that security practices are shaped not only by material capabilities but also by cultural and institutional environments. Wendt's (1999) broader constructivist theory similarly positioned identities and interests within processes of social interaction. These approaches challenged the assumption that states simply calculate their interests under fixed systemic conditions. Yet the cultural dimension of this argument remains broader than the study of national identity alone. Culture can shape the categories through which actors interpret historical experience, political authority, legitimacy, social obligation, and relations with others. It therefore has implications beyond the conventional study of national identity and foreign-policy preferences.

Postcolonial approaches have pushed this critique further by questioning the historical and epistemological foundations of the discipline itself. Rather than treating colonialism as a historical episode external to modern international politics, postcolonial scholarship has demonstrated how colonial encounters contributed to the production of categories through which political communities were represented, classified, governed, and incorporated into international society (Said, 1978; Tickner, 2003; Hobson, 2012). This perspective is particularly relevant to culture because representations of political communities have never been culturally neutral. The distinction between the "civilised" and the "uncivilised," for example, was historically connected to European claims about political maturity, rationality, sovereignty, and legitimate authority. Cultural difference could therefore become a basis for political hierarchy rather than simply a descriptive feature of international society.

Recent postcolonial scholarship has continued to examine these relationships while shifting greater attention towards the production of knowledge. Sajed (2024) develops the concept of an "epistemology of domination" to examine how colonial encounters produced enduring patterns in representation, including the privileging of Western agency and the portrayal of colonised societies through particular temporal and cultural categories. Pingeot and Pouliot (2024), meanwhile, argue that agency in global politics is positionally distributed through structures shaped by histories of colonial domination and exploitation. These interventions suggest that the cultural foundations of IR cannot be separated from the historical structures through which some actors acquired greater authority to define political knowledge than others.

This issue becomes especially visible in the contemporary Global IR debate. Acharya (2014) argues that the discipline does not adequately reflect the experiences, knowledge claims, and contributions of the majority of societies and states in the world. His Global IR agenda calls for a more pluralistic discipline capable of recognising multiple historical and intellectual foundations while avoiding both ethnocentrism and exceptionalism. The significance of this intervention is not simply that more countries or scholars should be represented within IR. More fundamentally, it raises the possibility that theoretical concepts themselves can be generated from societies and intellectual traditions that have historically been treated primarily as empirical cases rather than as sources of theory.

The problem of knowledge production also has a linguistic dimension. Aydinli and Aydinli (2024), analysing 135 journals across 39 countries, demonstrate the continuing dominance of English in IR

knowledge production and dissemination. They argue that linguistic dependence contributes to a core–periphery relationship in which non-English intellectual communities face structural disadvantages in developing and circulating concepts within the discipline. This finding is significant for the cultural argument advanced here because language is not simply a technical medium through which ideas are communicated. Language carries concepts, categories, historical experiences, and culturally embedded meanings. When a single linguistic environment dominates theoretical production, some forms of political meaning may become easier to express and circulate than others.

The Global IR project therefore raises an important question about the direction of theoretical influence. Historically, theoretical concepts have often travelled from dominant academic centres to other parts of the world, where they have been applied to different empirical contexts. Acharya (2014) explicitly challenges this one-directional model by calling for theories to be developed from societies that have previously been marginalised as sources of IR knowledge. The implication is that cultural diversity should not simply expand the number of cases to which established theories are applied. It should also create opportunities for theoretical categories to be reconsidered, modified, and sometimes generated from different intellectual traditions.

The contemporary relational turn in IR provides an especially useful illustration of this possibility. Relational approaches challenge conceptions of political actors as autonomous units whose identities and interests exist independently of their relationships with others. Qin Yaqing’s work on relational theory, for example, places process, relationships, and contextual interaction at the centre of international political analysis (Qin, 2018). More recently, Rochat (2025) has examined **guanxism** as a potential paradigm for international relations theory. Grounded in Confucian ethics and Chinese social thought, guanxi is presented not merely as a cultural practice but as a relational system involving moral obligation, trust, and role-based reciprocity. Rochat argues that guanxism can challenge assumptions of individualism and legalism embedded in mainstream theories and therefore illustrates how culturally grounded concepts can contribute to theoretical development rather than simply serve as empirical examples of existing frameworks.

The importance of such scholarship extends beyond the particular case of China. The broader issue is whether IR should treat culturally grounded concepts as objects to be explained by established theories or as potential sources of theoretical explanation themselves. If concepts such as guanxi, Ubuntu, communal authority, indigenous sovereignty, or culturally specific understandings of obligation are introduced only as empirical variations within pre-existing theoretical categories, the hierarchy between universal theory and local experience remains largely intact. If such concepts can instead interrogate and reshape existing assumptions about agency, identity, authority, and international order, cultural diversity becomes theoretically productive.

Culture has also become increasingly visible through the study of international order. Phillips and Reus-Smit (2020) demonstrate that cultural diversity is not simply an external condition confronting international orders but has been connected historically to the constitution and legitimation of political authority. Their analysis shows that different international orders have developed distinctive “diversity regimes” through which cultural difference has been organised, accommodated, or excluded. This perspective is important because it moves culture beyond the realm of domestic background conditions. The organisation of cultural difference can itself become part of the construction of international authority and order.

This insight has implications for how contemporary international order is understood. International orders depend not only upon formal institutions and distributions of material power but also upon understandings

of legitimate authority, membership, hierarchy, obligation, and appropriate conduct. Cultural differences can therefore affect how actors interpret the legitimacy of an international order and whether they regard its institutions and practices as authoritative. Culture is consequently connected not only to how actors behave within international orders but also to the processes through which those orders acquire legitimacy and become contested.

The growing literature on cultural diplomacy provides another illustration of the changing place of culture within IR. States increasingly employ education, language, heritage, media, sport, arts, tourism, and cultural exchange as instruments of international engagement. Scholarship on cultural diplomacy has therefore explored the relationship between cultural practices, foreign policy, and soft power (Nye, 2004; Goff, 2013; Zanella, Neves Junior & Ribeiro da Silva, 2024). Such research is valuable because it demonstrates that culture can function as a resource through which political actors pursue international influence. Yet an exclusively instrumental understanding risks reducing culture to something that states simply possess and deploy.

The distinction between culture as a resource and culture as a constitutive structure is therefore essential. When culture is treated primarily as an instrument, political actors are assumed to possess relatively stable interests and subsequently select cultural resources to advance them. A constitutive approach asks a prior question: how are those interests themselves produced and interpreted? A government may use cultural heritage to improve its international reputation, for example, but the political significance attached to heritage may also shape how that government understands national identity, historical entitlement, recognition, and international status. Culture therefore does not merely provide tools for achieving political objectives; it can influence what political actors understand those objectives to be.

The relationship between culture and international status illustrates this point particularly well. Status is not determined exclusively by military or economic capabilities. Recognition, prestige, symbolic practices, historical narratives, cultural production, and perceptions of appropriate conduct can influence how states and other actors are positioned within international society. Recent scholarship has consequently begun to examine culture as part of the production of status and international hierarchy rather than merely as an instrument of attraction. Such approaches reinforce the argument that symbolic and cultural dimensions of international politics can have material and institutional consequences because they shape recognition, expectations, and access to political authority.

The development of cultural approaches within IR should therefore not be interpreted simply as a movement from a discipline that ignored culture towards one that now fully incorporates it. A more accurate interpretation is that the analytical meaning of culture has progressively expanded. Realism and liberalism generally placed greater emphasis on power, institutions, security, and interests; constructivism demonstrated the importance of norms, identities, and shared meanings; postcolonial scholarship exposed the relationship between culture, representation, and colonial hierarchy; Global IR questioned the concentration of theoretical authority within Western academic centres; and relational approaches have increasingly examined whether culturally grounded concepts can contribute to the reconstruction of IR theory itself (Wendt, 1992; Acharya, 2014; Sajed, 2024; Rochat, 2025).

The unresolved issue is therefore not whether culture matters. There is now considerable evidence across different strands of IR scholarship that meanings, identities, norms, historical experiences, language, and cultural practices influence international political processes. The more consequential question concerns **the level at which culture matters**. If culture is treated as an external influence on otherwise established actors and structures, its analytical significance remains relatively limited. If culture is understood as part of the processes through which actors, interests, relationships, legitimacy, and political orders are

constituted, its implications become considerably deeper.

This distinction provides the foundation for the next stage of the argument. The objective is not to replace material or institutional explanations with cultural explanations, nor to suggest that every international political outcome should be interpreted through culture. Rather, the argument is that culture should be incorporated into IR at a more constitutive and relational level. Such an approach requires attention to how actors acquire identities, how interests become meaningful, how authority is recognised, how relationships are interpreted, and how international orders become legitimate or contested. The next section develops this argument by moving beyond the treatment of culture as a variable and examining culture as a constitutive dimension of international political life.

Beyond Culture as a Variable: Culture as a Constitutive Dimension of International Relations

Treating culture as relevant to international relations is not the same as treating culture as constitutive of international political life. Much of the existing literature acknowledges that culture influences foreign-policy preferences, strategic behaviour, diplomatic practices, and perceptions of other states. The more demanding question is whether culture also helps produce the identities, interests, categories, and relationships through which international actors understand the world. This distinction moves the analysis beyond the familiar proposition that “culture matters” and towards a more fundamental question concerning how political meaning is constructed. Constructivist scholarship has already demonstrated that international actors and interests are socially constituted, while more recent relational approaches emphasise that actors cannot be fully understood apart from the relationships through which their identities and interests develop (Wendt, 1992, 1999; Qin, 2018; McCourt, 2020).

A useful starting point is to distinguish three ways in which culture can enter IR analysis. First, culture can operate as **context**: a social and historical environment within which states and other actors formulate policy. Second, culture can function as a **resource** that governments and organisations deliberately mobilise through diplomacy, heritage, language, media, education, sport, or the arts. Third, culture can be understood as **constitutive**, meaning that it contributes to the production of the identities, interests, expectations, and categories through which actors interpret international politics. The first two approaches are valuable, but the third provides the theoretical foundation for the argument developed here.

The distinction becomes clearer when considering national interests. A conventional approach may begin with the assumption that states possess interests and subsequently examine how culture affects the way those interests are pursued. A constitutive approach asks how actors come to understand particular objectives as interests in the first place. Security, prestige, sovereignty, justice, recognition, and legitimacy do not possess identical meanings across political communities. Their significance emerges through historical experiences, social practices, institutional arrangements, and shared interpretations. Wendt’s (1999) constructivist argument that identities and interests are produced through social interaction provides an important foundation for this position, while Katzenstein’s (1996) work demonstrates how cultural and institutional environments shape national security practices.

Culture should therefore not be treated simply as a collection of beliefs possessed by individuals or societies. It is also a repertoire through which political actors interpret experience and organise social meaning. Recent work outside IR similarly emphasises that cultural attributes acquire meaning through wider configurations and political struggles rather than existing as isolated and unchanging characteristics (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2025). This insight is relevant to international politics because it cautions against treating culture as a fixed national attribute. A cultural practice can acquire different meanings in different political contexts, and actors can reinterpret inherited traditions in response to changing circumstances.

This dynamic quality is especially important for understanding identity. International actors do not possess identities that exist entirely prior to interaction. Identity is continually produced through distinctions between self and other, historical memory, political narratives, institutional practices, and relationships with external actors. Constructivist scholarship has demonstrated that such processes influence how states understand security and appropriate behaviour (Katzenstein, 1996; Wendt, 1999). A cultural-relational perspective extends this insight by asking how the meanings through which identities are constructed are themselves historically and culturally situated. Culture therefore does not merely give an actor a particular identity; it provides resources through which identity can be interpreted, contested, and reconstructed.

This perspective also changes how international relationships are understood. If actors are relationally constituted, then relationships are not simply interactions between already formed units. The relationship itself can influence how the participants understand who they are and what they want. Qin's relational theory of world politics provides an important example. Rather than beginning from autonomous actors and subsequently adding relationships, relational approaches place relationships and processes closer to the centre of analysis (Qin, 2018). Recent scholarship engaging Qin stresses that relationality can operate simultaneously as an ontology, a theory of political action, and a means of interpreting culturally situated understandings of world politics. Importantly, this scholarship also cautions against treating Chinese or any other cultural tradition as internally homogeneous; intellectual traditions are multiple, contested, and capable of generating different theoretical positions (Dai, 2024).

This qualification is essential to the argument advanced here. A constitutive understanding of culture should not become a cultural determinism in which societies are assigned fixed characteristics and their international behaviour is explained accordingly. There is no single "African culture," "Asian culture," "Western culture," or "Islamic culture" that mechanically determines political behaviour. Cultures contain competing interpretations, social divisions, historical transformations, and political struggles. Cultural meanings are also constantly reshaped through migration, economic exchange, technological change, colonial encounters, and international interaction. Culture is therefore better understood as a field of meaning and contestation than as a stable causal variable.

The relationship between culture and international order further demonstrates why the constitutive approach matters. International order depends upon more than material capabilities and formal institutions. It also requires understanding of authority, membership, hierarchy, obligation, and legitimate political conduct. Phillips and Reus-Smit (2020) demonstrate that cultural diversity has been deeply connected to the constitution and legitimation of political authority across different international orders. Their analysis of "diversity regimes" shows that political communities have historically developed different ways of organising, accommodating, or excluding cultural differences. Culture in this sense is not simply something that international orders encounter from outside; the organisation of cultural difference can become part of the process through which international order itself is constructed.

The same logic applies to international legitimacy. Institutions may possess formal authority without being perceived as culturally or politically legitimate by all actors subject to them. Conversely, practices without extensive formal recognition may acquire legitimacy through social relationships, historical experience, or shared understandings of obligation. This does not mean that cultural legitimacy should automatically override legal or institutional authority. Rather, it suggests that legitimacy is partly constructed through culturally situated interpretations of what constitutes appropriate authority. Understanding this process is particularly important in an international system in which states and societies increasingly contest the legitimacy of established institutions and norms.

Culture can also function as a source of power, but the constitutive perspective distinguishes this from a

purely instrumental conception of cultural influence. Cultural diplomacy, for example, involves the deliberate use of cultural resources to establish relationships, improve international perceptions, and advance diplomatic objectives. Soft-power scholarship has made an important contribution by showing how attraction and symbolic resources can affect international influence (Nye, 2004). Yet the political meaning of cultural resources cannot always be separated from the identities and historical narratives through which they are interpreted. A cultural object, historical memory, language, or artistic practice may simultaneously represent identity, communicate status, establish legitimacy, and reproduce contested interpretations of the past.

Recent scholarship on strategic culture illustrates this broader understanding. Fomin (2023), for example, reconceptualises strategic culture through a social-semiotic framework, treating culture as a meaning-making system rather than merely a collection of ideas or behavioural tendencies. This approach is significant because it demonstrates how symbols and meanings can constrain and organise political interpretation without reducing culture to a deterministic explanation of state conduct.

The constitutive approach consequently does not require abandoning material explanations. Military capabilities, economic resources, institutions, and geographical conditions continue to influence international outcomes. The argument is instead that material structures acquire political meaning through social and cultural interpretation. A military capability can be understood as defensive, threatening, prestigious, illegitimate, or necessary depending upon the relationships and interpretive frameworks within which it is situated. Similarly, an institution may be regarded as legitimate in one setting and intrusive in another, not necessarily because its formal rules have changed but because actors interpret its authority differently.

This leads to the central proposition of **cultural relationalism**. Cultural relationalism understands international political identities, interests, and meanings as emerging through relationships that are historically and culturally situated. It therefore combines the constructivist insight that political realities are socially constructed with the relational insight that actors cannot be fully understood independently of the relationships through which they are constituted. Culture provides part of the interpretive environment within which these relationships develop, but culture itself is also transformed through interaction.

The concept is therefore deliberately different from cultural determinism and from a simple “non-Western” corrective to mainstream IR. Cultural relationalism does not claim that one cultural tradition offers a superior theory of international politics. Nor does it assume that cultural difference necessarily produces incompatible political worlds. Its purpose is to encourage analysis of how different historical and cultural experiences generate particular understandings of identity, authority, obligation, legitimacy, and international order, while recognising that these understandings remain contested and capable of change.

The analytical value of cultural relationalism lies precisely in this combination of **culture, constitution, and relationship**. It asks not only how culture affects what international actors do, but how culturally embedded relationships influence what actors understand themselves and others to be. This shifts the study of culture from the margins of IR towards the analysis of how international political meanings are produced. The following section develops this argument further by examining the relationship between culture, identity, and the construction of international interests.

Culture, Identity and the Construction of International Interests

If culture is constitutive of international political life, one of its most important effects concerns the formation of identity and interests. International actors do not simply enter world politics with fully formed preferences and then respond to external incentives. Their understanding of who they are, what they value,

whom they trust, and what they consider threatening or legitimate develops through social interaction and historically situated processes of meaning-making (Wendt, 1999; Katzenstein, 1996). Culture is important within these processes because it provides languages, narratives, memories, symbols, and social expectations through which political actors interpret themselves and others. Interests are therefore not always prior to culture; in important respects, they are shaped through it.

This proposition represents a significant departure from approaches that treat interests as largely predetermined. Realist and rationalist theories have generated important insights into strategic behaviour, but their analytical starting point often involves actors whose basic interests can be specified independently of the social meanings attached to them. Constructivist scholarship challenged this assumption by demonstrating that identities and interests emerge through interaction rather than existing entirely before it (Wendt, 1992, 1999). Culture deepens this argument by directing attention to the historical and social environments within which those identities are interpreted. Recent foreign-policy scholarship similarly argues that culture and identity should not be treated as static or purely ideational categories but should be examined through their historical and material formation (Kaarbo & Thies, 2024).

Identity consequently operates at several levels of international politics. It can provide a sense of collective belonging, establish distinctions between political communities, shape perceptions of external actors, and influence the legitimacy of particular foreign-policy choices. A state may understand itself as a regional leader, a postcolonial state, a defender of a particular religious tradition, a member of a civilizational community, or a representative of a particular historical experience. None of these identities automatically determines behaviour. Rather, they provide interpretive frameworks through which political choices become intelligible and legitimate. Contemporary research on Turkic identity, for example, demonstrates how cultural affinity can be transformed into diplomatic institutions, educational exchanges, and regional cooperation rather than remaining merely a symbolic cultural inheritance.

Historical memory is particularly important in this process. Political communities do not interpret international events only through present circumstances; they also draw upon narratives about the past. Historical experiences of colonialism, war, occupation, migration, revolution, partition, or resistance can become part of contemporary political identity and influence how actors understand international relationships. Memory can therefore connect domestic identity formation with foreign policy and geopolitical interpretation. Recent scholarship on memory and geopolitics demonstrates how collective memories provide frameworks through which societies position themselves and interpret international events, while political leaders can selectively mobilise, reinterpret, or suppress particular versions of the past (van Vree, 2024).

This relationship between memory and international politics is important because historical narratives are rarely politically neutral. Competing interpretations of the past can generate different understandings of responsibility, victimhood, recognition, and justice. A historical event that one political community understands as liberation may be remembered by another as dispossession or defeat. Such differences can affect diplomatic relations even when the original event occurred generations earlier. Culture therefore provides a temporal dimension to international relations: contemporary political behaviour can be shaped by meanings attached to events that are no longer occurring but remain politically present through memory, commemoration, education, monuments, and public discourse.

Culture also influences how actors categorise others. International relations depends upon distinctions between friend and adversary, insider and outsider, legitimate and illegitimate actor, civilised and uncivilised, partner and threat. These categories are not produced exclusively by material calculations. They are also shaped by narratives, historical experiences, cultural representations, and assumptions about

political identity. Constructivist scholarship has long demonstrated that the meaning of anarchy and security depends partly upon the social relationships through which actors interpret one another (Wendt, 1992). A culturally attentive approach extends this insight by asking how historically embedded narratives influence those relationships and why particular actors become associated with trust, suspicion, familiarity, or threat.

This does not mean that culture inevitably produces conflict. Cultural identity can generate boundaries, but it can also facilitate cooperation. Shared language, religious traditions, historical experiences, regional identities, or cultural practices may provide foundations for diplomatic relationships and regional institutions. The important analytical point is that cultural similarity does not automatically generate cooperation, just as cultural difference does not automatically produce conflict. Political actors interpret and mobilise cultural identities under particular historical and institutional conditions. The same cultural relationship can therefore support solidarity in one context and political competition in another.

The relationship between culture and interests is consequently reciprocal. Cultural narratives help shape political interests, but political actors also reinterpret culture in response to changing strategic circumstances. Governments can emphasise particular aspects of national history while marginalising others; regional organisations can construct narratives of shared identity to support integration; and political movements can redefine cultural traditions to legitimise new foreign-policy positions. Culture should therefore be treated as dynamic rather than static. It is continually reproduced through political practice.

This point is especially important when analysing nationalism. National identity is often described as though it were an established characteristic of states, yet nationalism itself involves ongoing processes of cultural construction. Symbols, language, education, historical narratives, commemorations, and political institutions help reproduce ideas about who belongs to the national community. These processes can extend beyond domestic politics into foreign policy. Leaders may invoke national history to justify territorial claims, diplomatic positions, military action, or international alliances. Culture consequently connects the domestic construction of identity with the international projection of political interests.

Civilizational narratives represent a more expansive form of this process. Political actors sometimes construct international identities around broader claims concerning religion, history, civilization, or shared cultural heritage. Such narratives can influence how states understand their position within international society and how they interpret existing institutions and norms. Barry Buzan's recent analysis of global identity patterns, for example, identifies nationalism, religion, core-periphery distinctions, and emerging civilizational identities as important forms through which political communities differentiate themselves in world society (Buzan, 2025).

Yet civilizational identity must be approached carefully. It can illuminate how political actors construct broad categories of belonging, but it can also encourage the assumption that civilizations are coherent political actors with fixed interests. Cultural relationalism rejects this assumption. Civilizations are internally diverse and politically contested, and the boundaries between them are neither permanent nor impermeable. Individuals, institutions, and states participate in multiple cultural and political relationships simultaneously. A state may therefore construct itself as simultaneously national, regional, religious, postcolonial, economic, and international. These identities can reinforce one another, but they can also conflict.

The political use of culture therefore involves questions of power. Actors with greater institutional or communicative resources may possess greater capacity to define which cultural narratives become authoritative. States can promote particular interpretations of history through education, museums,

diplomacy, media, commemorative practices, and international institutions. Cultural identity is consequently not simply inherited; it can become an object of political contestation. Recent research on cultural heritage politics demonstrates how museums, archaeological sites, restitution claims, and international heritage institutions have become sites of struggles over status, authority, and geopolitical relationships (Kalaycioglu & Subotić, 2025).

This relationship between culture and power also helps explain why cultural recognition can become an international political demand. Recognition is not limited to formal diplomatic acknowledgement. It can involve demands for recognition of historical suffering, cultural ownership, indigenous authority, religious identity, linguistic rights, or national heritage. International politics therefore involves struggles not only over material resources but also over whose historical narratives, cultural identities, and interpretations of legitimacy receive international recognition.

Culture thus contributes to the construction of international interests through a continuous interaction between identity, memory, relationships, and political power. The process is neither deterministic nor uniform. Political actors can reinterpret inherited cultural narratives, contest dominant identities, and construct new forms of belonging. Culture should consequently be understood less as a fixed explanation for behaviour than as a field within which political meanings and interests are produced and renegotiated.

This perspective also reinforces the distinction between **culture as possession and culture as process**. States do not simply possess cultures in the same way that they possess territory or military capabilities. Cultural meanings are reproduced through social interaction and can cross national boundaries. Diasporas, transnational religious communities, international organisations, media networks, educational institutions, and civil-society movements all participate in their circulation. International relations therefore does not merely occur between culturally distinct states; international interaction itself contributes to the transformation of cultural identities.

The implications extend to international cooperation. Cooperation becomes easier when actors share sufficiently compatible understandings of obligation, reciprocity, legitimacy, and appropriate behaviour. But such compatibility does not necessarily require cultural sameness. Actors can cooperate across cultural differences when they develop shared interpretations through interaction. This reinforces the relational dimension of cultural analysis: international cooperation can itself generate new identities and meanings rather than simply reflecting identities that existed beforehand.

The central implication is therefore that culture should be incorporated into IR not simply as an explanatory variable alongside power, institutions, or material interests, but as part of the processes through which those interests acquire meaning. Identity helps actors interpret their position; memory connects contemporary politics with historical experience; cultural narratives define relationships with others; and recognition gives political meaning to struggles over status and legitimacy. Together, these processes demonstrate why international interests cannot always be treated as fixed preferences independent of culture.

A culturally relational understanding of international relations consequently asks a different question from conventional approaches. Rather than asking only **how culture affects what states want**, it asks **how culturally embedded relationships shape what states understand themselves to be, what they regard as legitimate interests, and how they interpret the international environment in which those interests are pursued**. This shift does not make material power irrelevant. It makes the relationship between material power and political meaning more intelligible.

Culture, Power and International Order

If culture contributes to the construction of identity and interests, it also has implications for how power operates in international relations. Power is commonly associated with military capabilities, economic resources, institutional authority, and the capacity to influence the behaviour of others. These dimensions remain fundamental, but international politics also involves struggles over meaning, recognition, legitimacy, prestige, and representation. Culture becomes significant within these struggles because it provides symbolic resources through which actors can establish identities, claim status, construct legitimacy, and contest existing hierarchies. The relationship between culture and power should therefore not be reduced to the proposition that cultural attractiveness produces influence. It also concerns the capacity to shape the meanings through which international political relationships are understood.

The literature on soft power provides an important starting point. Nye (2004) famously conceptualised soft power as the capacity to obtain desired outcomes through attraction rather than coercion or payment, identifying culture, political values, and foreign policy as important sources of attraction. Cultural diplomacy subsequently became one of the principal mechanisms through which states attempted to translate cultural resources into international influence. Yet the concepts of soft power and cultural diplomacy should not be treated as synonymous. Recent scholarship demonstrates that they have different analytical origins and should be distinguished in terms of their objectives, actors, practices, and mechanisms (Zanella, Neves Junior & Ribeiro da Silva, 2024).

This distinction matters because cultural practices can have political consequences that exceed deliberate state strategy. Cultural exchange, education, heritage, language, sport, and artistic production may strengthen relationships even when they are not directly controlled by governments. Conversely, cultural diplomacy can fail when externally projected images are disconnected from how audiences interpret them. The effectiveness of cultural influence therefore depends partly upon relationships, credibility, historical experience, and the meanings that audiences attach to cultural practices. Culture is not a political instrument whose effects can simply be determined by the actor deploying it.

Contemporary diplomatic practice illustrates this complexity. Governments increasingly integrate cultural initiatives with broader diplomatic, economic, and foreign-policy objectives. Comparative research published by the British Council in 2024 found that soft-power strategies across a range of states were becoming more closely connected to national foreign-policy priorities and, in some cases, to the promotion of national identity itself. Research on Qatar similarly demonstrates how media, sport, tourism, cultural initiatives, and mediation can operate together within broader strategies of international engagement (Ullah, 2024). These developments indicate that culture has become increasingly embedded within contemporary diplomatic practice. They also demonstrate why culture should be analysed as part of broader political relationships rather than simply as a collection of symbolic assets.

The relationship between culture and power becomes even more apparent when considering international status. Status involves recognition of an actor's relative standing, prestige, or social position within an international community. While material capabilities can contribute to status, recognition cannot be reduced to material power. Actors may seek recognition as regional leaders, civilisational centres, responsible powers, cultural custodians, or legitimate representatives of particular historical communities. Recent scholarship on the power of recognition similarly challenges purely instrumental understandings of status by showing that recognition can itself constitute a form of power in world politics (Røren, 2025).

Culture contributes to this process because cultural achievements, historical narratives, heritage, language, artistic production, and symbolic institutions can become markers of prestige. States may seek international recognition not only for their economic or military capacities but also for their perceived

cultural significance. This helps explain why governments compete over museums, heritage designations, international exhibitions, sporting events, cultural festivals, and historical narratives. Such practices can communicate claims about who a political community is, where it belongs, and what position it deserves within international society.

The recent emergence of cultural heritage as an explicit IR research agenda is particularly significant. Kalaycioglu and Subotić (2025) argue that heritage politics has received insufficient attention within IR despite its widespread use by states and international institutions. Their analysis shows that heritage can contribute to international status, authority, alliance-building, and geopolitical competition, operating through institutions such as UNESCO and the International Criminal Court as well as through museums, archaeological sites, restitution claims, and other cultural objects.

Heritage therefore demonstrates that culture can operate simultaneously at domestic, regional, and international levels. A heritage site may contribute to domestic national identity while also becoming an object of international recognition. A museum collection may represent national prestige while becoming the subject of transnational disputes concerning ownership and restitution. A historical narrative may strengthen domestic legitimacy while simultaneously supporting international claims about cultural authority. The political significance of culture consequently cannot be contained within the boundaries of the state.

The 2025 scholarship on the geopolitics of heritage makes this point particularly clearly. Hisarlioğlu and Yanık's analysis of the international politics surrounding traditional Turkish archery shows how the process of turning cultural practices into heritage can become a multiscalar political process involving domestic identity, moral authority, geopolitical narratives, and international order. They distinguish this process from conventional understandings of cultural diplomacy and soft power by demonstrating how heritage-making can transform the political meaning attached to cultural practices themselves. This supports the broader argument of cultural relationalism: culture does not simply transmit pre-existing political meanings; political processes actively produce and reshape those meanings.

Culture can also reproduce international hierarchies. Claims to cultural prestige are not made within a neutral environment. Historical inequalities have shaped which societies have been able to collect, preserve, classify, display, and define cultural objects as globally significant. The politics of museums, archaeological collections, heritage institutions, and restitution therefore raises questions about who possesses the authority to define cultural value. Recent research on global heritage politics highlights precisely this relationship between cultural authority and international hierarchy.

The historical relationship between empire and cultural extraction is particularly important here. European imperial powers did not acquire cultural objects solely for aesthetic reasons. Collections, museums, archaeological knowledge, and claims to custodianship could also contribute to international prestige and claims of civilisational authority. Contemporary debates over restitution consequently involve more than the physical return of objects. They concern recognition, historical responsibility, ownership, and the distribution of authority over cultural heritage. Culture therefore becomes a site through which past and present international hierarchies intersect.

This also demonstrates why cultural power cannot be separated from knowledge. The authority to classify an object as art, antiquity, heritage, or archaeological evidence can have political consequences. Institutions that possess the expertise and authority to make such classifications can influence which histories become internationally visible and which interpretations receive legitimacy. Cultural power consequently operates partly through epistemic authority: the ability to establish categories through which cultural significance is recognised.

The relationship between culture and international order follows from these dynamics. International order depends not only upon formal institutions and material distributions but also upon shared and contested understandings of legitimate authority. Cultural practices can support existing orders by reinforcing narratives of legitimacy, but they can also challenge them by providing alternative accounts of history, identity, and political authority. Cultural heritage politics illustrates this tension particularly well because heritage can simultaneously promote international cooperation and generate disputes over ownership, recognition, and historical interpretation.

Culture can therefore contribute to international order in at least two different ways. It can help construct common identities and shared narratives that facilitate cooperation, but it can also provide resources for challenging dominant understandings of international legitimacy. Neither function should be assumed to be inherently positive or negative. Cultural narratives can support inclusion and dialogue, but they can also reinforce exclusion, nationalism, hierarchy, or political mythmaking. A culturally relational approach therefore requires attention to the political consequences of cultural claims rather than treating culture as intrinsically peaceful or cooperative.

This point is particularly important for avoiding an overly celebratory understanding of cultural diplomacy. Cultural exchange can create opportunities for communication and mutual understanding, but cultural initiatives can also become instruments of strategic competition. The growing connection between soft power and national identity illustrates this tension. When cultural diplomacy becomes closely aligned with state interests, cultural representation may be carefully selected to produce particular images of national identity. The result can be greater international visibility, but it can also generate contestation when external audiences perceive a gap between projected identity and political practice.

Culture and power are therefore best understood relationally. A cultural resource becomes politically significant through the relationships within which it is interpreted. A historical monument acquires international significance through recognition and institutionalisation. A language can become a diplomatic resource through the networks in which it circulates. A cultural festival can strengthen international relationships when participants attach positive meanings to it. Conversely, the same cultural symbol can become politically divisive when different communities associate it with competing historical memories.

This relational character also explains why cultural power cannot simply be measured through the quantity of cultural resources possessed by a state. A country may possess considerable cultural assets without generating corresponding international influence. Conversely, relatively small states or non-state actors can achieve significant international recognition by constructing compelling cultural narratives or developing institutions that acquire symbolic authority. Power therefore emerges partly through interaction between cultural resources, institutional recognition, political credibility, and audience interpretation.

The argument also expands the meaning of international power. If power involves the ability to shape the political possibilities available to others, then the capacity to influence the categories through which international actors understand legitimacy, identity, status, and history can be politically consequential. This does not replace material conceptions of power. Rather, it reveals another dimension through which material and institutional power acquire meaning and durability.

Culture should consequently be understood as part of the architecture of international order rather than as a peripheral supplement to it. It influences how actors seek recognition, how states construct international identities, how institutions establish authority, and how political communities interpret their place within global society. The recent growth of scholarship on heritage politics, cultural diplomacy, and status demonstrates that these questions are no longer confined to the margins of IR.

The broader implication is that international power cannot be adequately understood through material capabilities alone. States and other actors compete not only for territory, resources, and institutional influence but also for recognition, legitimacy, prestige, and authority over political meaning. Culture participates in each of these processes. Yet the significance of culture lies not simply in its capacity to attract others. It also lies in its ability to shape the narratives through which international actors understand themselves, their histories, and the order within which they operate.

This leads to a further dimension of the argument. If culture contributes to international power and order, then the production of knowledge about culture also becomes politically significant. Who defines cultural categories, whose historical interpretations become authoritative, and which cultural experiences are incorporated into international theory are questions of epistemic power. The next section therefore turns from **culture as a source of international power** to **culture and the production of international knowledge**, connecting the cultural argument to postcolonial IR and the Global IR project.

Culture, Coloniality and the Production of International Knowledge

Taking culture seriously in international relations also requires examining how knowledge about international politics is produced. The question is not simply whose culture is represented in IR, but how cultural assumptions shape the categories through which international reality becomes intelligible. Concepts such as sovereignty, authority, modernity, development, order, security, and even “the international” are not culturally neutral descriptions. They emerge from particular historical experiences and intellectual traditions, yet can acquire a universal appearance when incorporated into dominant disciplinary frameworks. The problem, therefore, is not that IR lacks knowledge of different cultures; rather, it is that the conditions under which cultural knowledge becomes recognized as legitimate theory remain uneven.

This concern is central to the Global IR project. Acharya (2014) argues that a genuinely global discipline requires more than adding cases from different regions to established theories. It requires reconsidering the sources from which international theory itself is constructed, including intellectual traditions, historical experiences, and regional understandings of international order that have often remained outside the disciplinary mainstream. Global IR therefore challenges the assumption that theoretical innovation must necessarily originate from a relatively narrow set of intellectual centres. Its significance for the present argument is that culture enters IR not merely as an empirical object of study but as a potential source of concepts through which international political phenomena can be understood.

The politics of language illustrates this problem particularly clearly. Aydinli and Aydinli’s (2024) analysis of 135 IR journals across 39 countries demonstrates the continuing dominance of English in international knowledge production and dissemination. Their findings show that even scholarship produced outside the English-speaking core frequently relies overwhelmingly on English-language sources and Anglo-American theoretical frameworks. They argue that this linguistic dependence can encourage conceptual homogenisation by making scholars more likely to formulate locally relevant questions through concepts already familiar to dominant publication communities. The implication is important for cultural analysis: language is not simply a medium through which pre-existing ideas are communicated. It can influence which concepts travel, which arguments become visible, and which forms of knowledge acquire disciplinary authority.

Coloniality adds a further dimension to this process. The continuing influence of colonial structures does not require the formal continuation of colonial rule. It can persist through classifications, representations, institutional hierarchies, and assumptions about whose knowledge is authoritative. Pingeot and Pouliot (2024), for example, show how the possibilities for agency in global politics are unevenly distributed

through macrostructures inherited from histories of colonial domination and exploitation. From this perspective, international actors do not enter the global arena from equivalent epistemic and structural positions. Their capacity to define problems, establish categories, and have particular interpretations recognized as authoritative is partly shaped by historically produced relations of power.

Sajed's (2024) discussion of an "epistemology of domination" sharpens this point by focusing on the politics of representation in colonial encounters. Her argument draws attention to how the production of knowledge about colonized societies could simultaneously construct the object being studied and privilege the perspective of the observer. Questions of who represents whom, whose historical experience is treated as authoritative, and whose agency becomes visible therefore become questions of international politics rather than merely methodological concerns. For IR, this suggests that cultural difference cannot be adequately addressed simply by expanding the number of societies included in empirical research. The categories through which those societies are interpreted must also remain open to interrogation.

This does not mean that all established IR concepts should be rejected as inherently Western or that every culturally specific concept should automatically be treated as an alternative theory. Such an approach would simply replace one form of essentialism with another. Cultural traditions are internally contested, historically transformed, and frequently shaped by interactions across societies. Moreover, concepts developed within European or North American intellectual traditions can travel beyond their original contexts and acquire meanings that are neither identical to their origins nor reducible to them. The challenge is therefore not to replace one intellectual centre with multiple isolated centres, but to create conditions under which concepts can enter theoretical dialogue without being forced into a single hierarchy of knowledge.

This is where the cultural argument developed in this article differs from a simple call for greater representation. Representation is important, but inclusion alone does not necessarily alter the conceptual architecture of the discipline. A study may examine African, Asian, Middle Eastern, or Latin American cases while still explaining them almost entirely through categories developed elsewhere. Conversely, a culturally grounded concept can contribute to international theory when it reveals relationships, forms of authority, or understandings of order that established concepts do not adequately capture. The distinction is between **including culture as an object of knowledge and recognizing culture as part of the production of knowledge itself**.

Cultural relationalism consequently treats knowledge production as part of the same relational process through which international identities, interests, and orders are constructed. Cultural concepts do not exist outside political relationships; they acquire meaning through historical encounters, institutional practices, linguistic communities, and struggles over recognition. This perspective also prevents the argument from becoming a search for supposedly pure or authentic "non-Western" knowledge. The objective is instead to examine how different intellectual and cultural resources interact, compete, travel, and become authoritative within international political relations.

The consequence is a more demanding conception of pluralism in IR. A plural discipline is not simply one containing more countries, cases, or authors. It is one in which different cultural experiences can influence the questions asked, the concepts employed, and the theoretical conclusions reached. The continuing challenge identified by Global IR scholarship is therefore simultaneously cultural, linguistic, institutional, and epistemological.

Yet recognizing the importance of cultural knowledge creates another analytical danger. If cultures are treated as coherent and bounded entities, the critique of Eurocentrism can reproduce a different form of reductionism in which "Western" and "non-Western" cultures become fixed explanatory categories. The

next section therefore addresses the problem of **cultural essentialism**, asking how IR can take cultural difference seriously without treating cultures as internally uniform, timeless, or determinative.

Cultural Difference Without Cultural Essentialism

Taking culture seriously does not require treating cultures as fixed, internally coherent, or territorially bounded entities. Indeed, one of the central challenges for a culturally grounded approach to international relations is to avoid reproducing the very categories it seeks to question. If Western IR has sometimes universalized historically specific experiences, replacing “the West” with an equally fixed “non-West” would provide only a symmetrical form of reductionism. Culture must therefore be treated as historically produced, internally contested, and continuously reconstructed through interaction.

This problem has become particularly visible within Global IR. Acharya’s (2014) call for a more inclusive discipline sought to broaden the intellectual and geographical foundations of IR by bringing greater attention to regional histories, intellectual traditions, and experiences outside the Western core. Yet subsequent debates have emphasized that the project must avoid turning “Western” and “non-Western” into stable analytical categories. Barnett and Zarakol (2023) describe this danger as the “essentialism trap”: attempts to challenge dominant categories can inadvertently reproduce fixed assumptions about cultures, regions, civilizations, and their supposedly distinctive characteristics. They argue instead for greater attention to relationalism and global history, through which identities are understood as products of historical connections rather than as pre-existing entities.

This distinction is fundamental to the concept of cultural relationalism advanced in this article. Culture is not understood here as something that states or societies simply possess. It is a process through which meanings are produced, negotiated, contested, and transformed. Political actors inherit historical narratives and symbolic resources, but they also reinterpret them in response to changing circumstances and relationships. Consequently, cultural explanations should ask not simply what a culture is, but how particular meanings become authoritative, who contests them, how they travel across social boundaries, and how interaction with others contributes to their transformation.

Such an approach also avoids cultural determinism. The claim that culture is constitutive does not mean that cultural beliefs mechanically determine political behaviour. Actors operating within the same cultural environment can hold competing understandings of authority, justice, sovereignty, religion, identity, or international order. Governments may invoke cultural traditions strategically, while social movements may challenge official interpretations of those traditions. Cultural meanings can therefore constrain political possibilities without eliminating agency. The relationship is one of interpretation and contestation rather than simple causation.

The same principle applies to the distinction between Western and non-Western political thought. There is no single Western culture that generates one coherent understanding of international politics, just as there is no unified non-Western alternative. Intellectual traditions within Europe and North America have historically disagreed over sovereignty, empire, capitalism, nationalism, religion, and international order. The same internal diversity exists across Africa, Asia, the Middle East, Latin America, and other regions. Contemporary scholarship on Global IR increasingly recognizes this complexity, including arguments that attempts to construct distinct national or civilizational schools of IR can themselves become vulnerable to essentialist assumptions.

Culture is also shaped through historical interaction. Colonialism, migration, trade, religious exchange, education, warfare, diplomacy, and globalization have produced extensive cultural entanglements. Consequently, the boundaries between supposedly separate cultural worlds are rarely as clear as analytical

categories suggest. Political ideas may emerge in one setting, be translated into another, and subsequently return in transformed form. Institutions and concepts that appear culturally distinct may therefore contain multiple historical influences. A relational approach is better equipped to capture these processes because it begins with connections rather than assuming that social entities exist independently before entering into relations.

This point has particular significance for international theory. If cultures are treated as bounded containers of knowledge, scholars may search for an authentic African, Asian, Islamic, European, or Indigenous theory that can simply be inserted into the discipline. Cultural relationalism takes a different approach. It asks how concepts emerge through encounters between intellectual traditions and how those concepts change as they move across contexts. This does not diminish the importance of cultural specificity. Instead, it makes specificity analytically meaningful without turning it into an immutable essence.

The distinction between culture as property and culture as practice is therefore crucial. Culture as property suggests that a community possesses a stable set of beliefs that can explain its political behaviour. Culture as practice directs attention to the ways people continually reproduce and revise meanings. The latter perspective makes room for disagreement, hybridity, generational change, political manipulation, and creative adaptation. It also recognizes that individuals and institutions can participate simultaneously in multiple cultural environments. International political actors are consequently better understood as situated within overlapping cultural relationships than as representatives of sealed civilizational blocs.

This perspective does not make cultural difference irrelevant. On the contrary, it provides a stronger basis for analyzing difference because it explains how differences acquire political significance. Cultural meanings become consequential when they shape interpretations of legitimacy, authority, recognition, status, obligation, or appropriate conduct. What matters is therefore not cultural difference in the abstract but the political work performed by particular interpretations of difference. A diplomatic gesture, historical narrative, religious symbol, heritage claim, or conception of legitimate authority can acquire international significance because actors attach meaning to it within particular relationships.

The relational approach also helps explain why cultural meanings can change without assuming that cultures are simply replaced by new ones. Actors reinterpret inherited traditions in response to political circumstances, and external encounters can become incorporated into existing cultural frameworks. Cultural change is therefore neither a straightforward process of Westernization nor a simple recovery of an authentic pre-existing tradition. It is an ongoing process of negotiation in which actors selectively retain, reinterpret, reject, and combine different sources of meaning.

Cultural relationalism consequently occupies a position between universalism and relativism. It rejects the assumption that one historically specific cultural experience can provide a universal template for understanding international politics. At the same time, it does not imply that every cultural interpretation is equally valid or that political practices are beyond critical evaluation simply because they are culturally grounded. Cultural meanings remain open to contestation, empirical investigation, and normative debate. Recognizing their cultural situatedness does not require suspending questions of power, inequality, violence, or responsibility.

The broader implication is that cultural difference should be treated as relational rather than oppositional. Instead of asking whether Western or non-Western culture provides the more appropriate foundation for IR, the analytical question becomes how different cultural formations have encountered one another, how those encounters have shaped political identities and institutions, and how particular meanings have gained authority within international relations. This shifts the discussion from the search for cultural essences toward the study of cultural processes.

Such a move is particularly important for the broader argument of this article. If culture is understood as dynamic, contested, and relational, it can no longer be reduced to a background variable or a fixed attribute of states. It becomes part of the processes through which actors interpret themselves, construct interests, negotiate legitimacy, and reproduce or challenge international order. Cultural relationalism therefore provides a conceptual basis for bringing culture into IR without abandoning the analytical insights of constructivism, relational theory, postcolonial scholarship, or Global IR. The remaining question is what this approach changes for the study and practice of international relations. The next section therefore considers the broader theoretical and practical implications of treating culture as a constitutive dimension of global politics.

Toward Cultural Relationalism in International Relations

The preceding discussion establishes that culture occupies a more consequential position in international relations than its treatment as background context, national attribute, or diplomatic resource suggests. Constructivist scholarship has demonstrated that identities, interests, and norms are socially constituted; Global IR has questioned the geographical and intellectual boundaries of the discipline; postcolonial scholarship has exposed the historical power relations embedded in international knowledge; and recent work on heritage, status, diplomacy, and international order has demonstrated that cultural meanings can have tangible political consequences. What remains less developed is a conceptual framework that brings these insights together while treating culture as a relational process rather than as a fixed characteristic of political communities.

This article proposes **cultural relationalism in international relations** as such a framework. Cultural relationalism begins from the proposition that international political identities, interests, meanings, and claims to legitimacy emerge through relationships that are historically and culturally situated. Culture is therefore neither an independent variable added to existing models nor a deterministic explanation for political behaviour. It is part of the relational environment through which actors interpret themselves, interpret others, define appropriate conduct, and negotiate the meaning of international political practices. This proposition builds on constructivist insights concerning the social constitution of interests and identities while extending them through relational approaches that place interaction, rather than isolated actors, at the centre of analysis (Wendt 1992; Qin 2018).

The first implication is a shift in the unit of cultural analysis. Rather than beginning with states as culturally constituted entities, cultural relationalism asks how cultural meanings are produced within relationships among states, institutions, communities, and transnational actors. This makes it possible to examine culture without assuming that a state possesses one coherent national culture. Diplomatic practices, historical narratives, religious traditions, public memories, artistic representations, and claims to heritage can all become sites in which meanings are negotiated. Recent research on cultural heritage, for example, demonstrates that heritage operates across domestic and international arenas and can contribute to status, authority, alliances, and geopolitical relations.

The second implication concerns the construction of interests. Conventional approaches often begin by identifying actors and their interests and then explain how those interests shape behaviour. A cultural-relational perspective asks an earlier question: **how do actors come to understand particular objectives as legitimate interests in the first place?** A state's desire for recognition, prestige, historical restitution, cultural influence, or diplomatic solidarity may involve material considerations, but the significance attached to those objectives is also culturally mediated. Status research similarly demonstrates that recognition is not simply an instrumental resource but can constitute a source of power in world politics. Cultural relationalism therefore does not replace material explanations; it investigates the

processes through which material and symbolic concerns become politically meaningful.

The third implication concerns international order. If international orders depend partly upon shared understandings of authority, legitimacy, identity, and appropriate conduct, then culture cannot be separated from the processes through which those orders are constituted. Phillips and Reus-Smit (2020) demonstrate that cultural diversity has historically been connected to the constitution and legitimation of different political orders rather than existing outside them. This insight allows cultural relationalism to move beyond the assumption that culture merely influences an already existing international order. Cultural meanings can participate in defining who belongs within an order, what forms of authority are considered legitimate, which histories are remembered, and which claims receive recognition.

The fourth implication is that cultural power should not be reduced to state-controlled influence. The language of soft power has been useful in demonstrating that attraction and symbolic resources can affect international outcomes (Nye 2004), but a relational approach draws attention to processes that extend beyond deliberate state strategy. Cultural meanings circulate through universities, museums, religious networks, diasporas, media, civil-society organizations, artists, intellectuals, and international institutions. Contemporary work on heritage diplomacy similarly suggests that heritage can operate as a mobile and relational process that is continually reworked through institutions, publics, and transnational platforms rather than simply functioning as a state instrument.

Empirical operationalization requires researchers to trace a culturally relational process as a sequence rather than simply coding the presence of cultural language. A study could begin by identifying the material and institutional conditions facing actors, then trace how those conditions are interpreted through historically situated narratives, symbols, categories of identity, and relationships of recognition or obligation. Evidence might include diplomatic correspondence, speeches, policy documents, archival records, interviews, media discourse, ceremonial practices, and institutional decisions. The key test is whether changes in culturally embedded meanings precede and help account for changes in interests, preferences, or behaviour. Process tracing can therefore distinguish a relational mechanism from mere cultural correlation: the researcher should be able to show who articulated a meaning, which audiences accepted or contested it, how institutions or relationships reinforced it, and how the resulting interpretation altered a political choice or interaction.

Cultural relationalism also generates observable implications that can be evaluated against rationalist bargaining or material-balancing explanations. Comparative designs can select cases with broadly similar material capabilities, economic incentives, or strategic constraints but different histories of recognition, identity, or culturally grounded relationships. If a rationalist account is sufficient, comparable actors facing comparable payoffs should make broadly similar choices regardless of culturally framed interpretations. If a material-balancing account is sufficient, shifts in capabilities should systematically predict the relevant policy response. By contrast, evidence for the cultural-relational explanation would include patterned differences in behaviour under similar material conditions that are traceable to differences in relational meanings, as well as observable changes in policy following processes of recognition, reinterpretation, or identity contestation. The framework should therefore be treated as falsifiable: where material incentives and capability shifts explain outcomes without meaningful variation in cultural interpretation, or where actors invoke cultural narratives only after decisions have already been made, the independent explanatory leverage of cultural relationalism is weakened.

The fifth implication is methodological. A cultural-relational approach requires researchers to examine meanings alongside observable political behaviour. This can involve discourse analysis, historical interpretation, interviews, ethnographic research, archival investigation, comparative analysis, or mixed

methods. The purpose is not to search for a single cultural explanation of international outcomes but to reconstruct the relationships through which meanings become politically consequential. Researchers might therefore ask how a particular concept of sovereignty is understood by different actors, how historical memory enters diplomatic disputes, how cultural symbols acquire international status, or how competing interpretations of legitimacy influence institutional cooperation.

This approach also creates space for comparison without assuming cultural equivalence. Comparative research can examine how similar international practices acquire different meanings across contexts, or how apparently different practices perform comparable political functions. Such comparison is preferable to the search for universal cultural laws because it recognizes both difference and relational similarity. It also makes cultural analysis compatible with broader IR theory. A cultural-relational explanation can complement research on institutions, power, security, political economy, international law, and strategic behaviour rather than treating culture as a substitute for them.

Importantly, cultural relationalism should not be understood as a claim that culture explains everything. International politics remains shaped by material capabilities, institutions, economic structures, coercion, geography, technology, and strategic calculation. The argument is instead that these dimensions are interpreted and politically organized through socially and culturally situated meanings. A military capability, for instance, does not possess an identical political meaning across all contexts; its significance depends partly on historical relationships, perceptions of threat, status, identity, and expectations concerning legitimate conduct. Culture consequently operates neither above nor outside material politics but through the interpretive and relational processes that give material conditions political significance. This claim, however, does not require treating material forces as incapable of producing immediate effects. Extreme military asymmetry, sudden economic shocks, or severe resource constraints can impose hard limits on available choices even when actors disagree about their meaning. Cultural relationalism therefore allows material constraints to operate with partial causal independence at the level of physical or economic possibility while arguing that their political consequences are rarely exhausted by those constraints. Actors still interpret the threat, obligation, legitimacy, urgency, and appropriate response associated with a material shock through historically situated relationships. The framework thus distinguishes between material constraint and political meaning: the former may narrow the range of possible action, while the latter helps explain which options are selected, how they are justified, and how relationships are subsequently reconfigured.

Cultural relationalism also provides a way of connecting Global IR with mainstream theoretical debates without constructing a simple opposition between them. Qin's relational theory demonstrates how culturally grounded philosophical traditions can generate alternative conceptions of actors and international relations, particularly by emphasizing relations and processes of mutual constitution rather than atomized actors. More recent debates over Global IR likewise emphasize the need to move beyond simply celebrating diversity toward sustained theoretical dialogue and evaluation. Cultural relationalism follows this direction by treating cultural perspectives as potential sources of theoretical insight while maintaining the need for conceptual comparison, empirical examination, and critical debate.

The framework therefore rests on four interconnected propositions. First, culture is **constitutive** because it contributes to the formation of identities, interests, legitimacy, and political meaning. Second, culture is **relational** because meanings emerge through interaction rather than existing independently within bounded communities. Third, culture is **contested** because political actors continually disagree over the interpretation and authority of cultural meanings. Fourth, culture is **dynamic** because historical encounters, institutional change, migration, globalization, and political struggle continually reshape cultural practices.

Taken together, these propositions provide a more precise answer to the question posed at the beginning of this article: what does it mean to take culture seriously in international relations? It means moving beyond asking whether culture influences international behaviour and examining how cultural relationships participate in producing the actors, interests, meanings, and orders that constitute international political life. Culture is therefore not simply another variable to be inserted into existing explanations. It is part of the social and historical processes through which the international itself becomes meaningful.

The value of cultural relationalism ultimately lies in this shift in analytical emphasis. Rather than asking whether culture matters, it asks **how culturally situated relationships make international politics possible, intelligible, and legitimate**. This formulation avoids both the marginalization of culture and the temptation to turn culture into a deterministic master variable. It also provides a conceptual bridge between constructivist, relational, postcolonial, and Global IR scholarship. In doing so, it offers a framework through which culture can be studied as a constitutive dimension of global politics while preserving attention to power, contestation, historical change, and material structures.

Implications for IR Theory and International Practice

The argument developed in this article has implications for both the theoretical study of international relations and the interpretation of contemporary international practice. Its central claim is not that culture should replace material power, institutions, or strategic interests, but that these dimensions of world politics are themselves interpreted and given meaning within culturally situated relationships. Cultural relationalism consequently requires a shift in analytical emphasis: from asking whether culture affects international outcomes to examining how culturally embedded relationships contribute to the construction of political identities, interests, legitimacy, authority, and international order.

For IR theory, the first implication concerns the relationship between material and ideational explanations. Much of the discipline has historically organized theoretical debates around competing explanations based on power, institutions, interests, or ideas. Constructivism challenged this separation by demonstrating that identities, norms, and shared meanings contribute to the social construction of international political reality (Wendt 1992, 1999; Finnemore and Sikkink 1998). Cultural relationalism develops this insight further by asking how cultural meanings enter the processes through which material conditions themselves become politically significant. Material capabilities do not carry identical meanings across contexts. Military strength, economic resources, territorial claims, diplomatic recognition, or technological capacity can signify security, prestige, vulnerability, obligation, or legitimacy depending upon the historical and cultural relationships in which they are interpreted.

The second implication concerns the analysis of actors. Cultural relationalism challenges the tendency to treat states as pre-constituted units whose interests can be identified before their interaction with others. Relational approaches instead emphasize that actors acquire meaning through relationships. Recent scholarship on relationalism has similarly emphasized the importance of examining how identities, purposes, and political meanings emerge through interaction rather than assuming autonomous actors as the starting point of analysis. This does not eliminate the state as an important analytical actor. Rather, it encourages scholars to examine how states construct particular identities and interests through historical relationships with other states, societies, institutions, and transnational communities.

Third, the framework broadens the study of international power. Power is not exercised only through coercion or material dependence. It can also operate through recognition, classification, representation, legitimacy, and the capacity to establish meanings. Recent scholarship on cultural heritage illustrates this particularly clearly. Heritage politics can influence international status, authority, alliances, and institutional relationships, while cultural practices can simultaneously reproduce distinctions between

recognized and marginalized forms of political identity. This suggests that cultural resources should not simply be added to inventories of state power. Researchers should examine the relationships through which particular cultural meanings become authoritative and acquire international consequences.

Fourth, cultural relationalism has implications for the study of international order. International order is often examined through institutions, rules, regimes, and distributions of power. Yet these arrangements depend upon shared understandings concerning legitimate authority, appropriate conduct, membership, hierarchy, and recognition. Contemporary relational scholarship has increasingly emphasized that international order may be understood through multiple, overlapping social practices rather than as a single uniform structure. A cultural-relational perspective adds that these practices are themselves embedded in historically situated systems of meaning. The legitimacy of an international institution, for example, cannot always be understood solely through its formal rules; it also depends upon how different communities interpret its authority and whether its categories correspond with historically developed understandings of justice, obligation, or political membership.

Fifth, the framework has consequences for comparative research. Conventional comparative approaches can unintentionally treat one conceptual framework as universal and then measure other political contexts against it. Cultural relationalism encourages a different strategy: concepts should be examined through their movement across contexts and through the meanings actors attach to them. This makes comparison less about identifying which society most closely approximates an assumed model and more about examining how similar political practices acquire different meanings under different historical relationships. Such an approach can generate more precise explanations of variation while avoiding the assumption that difference necessarily represents deviation.

The approach also has implications for the study of diplomacy. Diplomatic interaction is frequently analyzed through strategic bargaining, signalling, institutional rules, and national interests. These remain important, but diplomacy also involves interpretation. Diplomatic gestures, ceremonial practices, historical references, cultural exchanges, and symbolic recognition can communicate meanings that are not reducible to material incentives. Cultural diplomacy therefore should not be understood only as an instrument through which governments increase attractiveness or influence. It can also be a relational arena in which actors negotiate identity, recognition, memory, and belonging. The distinction is important because it shifts analysis from the resources governments possess to the relationships through which cultural meanings acquire diplomatic significance.

A further implication concerns international conflict and cooperation. Cultural differences are often invoked as explanations for political tensions, but cultural relationalism cautions against treating difference itself as the cause of conflict. Cultural meanings become politically consequential through interpretation, historical experience, institutional structures, and relationships of power. The same cultural connection can facilitate solidarity in one context and generate exclusion in another. Likewise, shared cultural practices do not automatically produce cooperation. What matters is how actors interpret cultural similarities and differences and how those interpretations interact with broader political relationships.

This insight is particularly relevant to the study of international legitimacy. Legitimacy is rarely established through formal rules alone. Actors must also regard institutions, practices, and authorities as appropriate or justified. Cultural meanings can influence those judgments without determining them. A culturally grounded approach can therefore help explain why formally similar institutions receive different levels of acceptance across political communities and why actors sometimes reject arrangements that appear institutionally rational from an external perspective. This does not mean that every culturally articulated rejection should be accepted as legitimate. Rather, it means that the social foundations of

legitimacy require empirical examination rather than being assumed in advance.

Cultural relationalism also offers a way of connecting Global IR to broader theoretical debates. The expansion of IR beyond its traditional intellectual centres has created opportunities to reconsider concepts, histories, and assumptions that were previously treated as universal. Yet the challenge is not simply to multiply the number of cultural perspectives represented in the discipline. As debates over the essentialism trap demonstrate, an attempt to diversify IR can reproduce fixed categories if cultural or civilizational identities are treated as internally homogeneous. Cultural relationalism responds by treating cultural perspectives as historically connected and theoretically interactive rather than as isolated intellectual territories.

This has an important methodological consequence. Researchers should be attentive not only to what actors say but also to the relationships within which particular cultural claims become authoritative. A discourse may appear culturally dominant because it reflects broad social acceptance, but it may also reflect institutional power, elite interests, historical inequalities, or exclusion of competing interpretations. Cultural analysis therefore requires attention to contestation. It should ask whose interpretation of culture is being advanced, which actors accept or reject it, what institutions reinforce it, and what political consequences follow from its recognition.

The framework also encourages greater methodological pluralism. Historical research can reveal how cultural meanings have changed over time; discourse analysis can examine how actors construct identity and legitimacy; interviews and ethnographic approaches can uncover locally situated interpretations; comparative research can examine variation across contexts; and quantitative methods can investigate whether culturally framed meanings correlate with attitudes or behaviour. Cultural relationalism is therefore not tied to one method. Its distinctive feature lies in the questions it asks about the relationships through which meanings acquire political significance.

Finally, the framework has implications beyond academic theory. International organizations, diplomats, mediators, development agencies, and policymakers frequently operate in environments where institutional models encounter different historical understandings of authority, legitimacy, identity, and social obligation. A cultural-relational perspective does not suggest that practitioners should simply adapt every international norm to local preferences. Instead, it encourages greater awareness of the interpretive relationships through which policies are received, negotiated, accepted, or contested. Understanding these relationships can improve the analysis of policy implementation while also revealing situations in which apparently technical disagreements are actually disagreements over meaning, recognition, or legitimacy.

The broader contribution of cultural relationalism is therefore analytical rather than prescriptive. It does not provide a formula for managing cultural difference or a universal model of international conduct. Its contribution is to make visible a dimension of international politics that becomes obscured when culture is treated only as context, resource, or national attribute. By placing culturally situated relationships alongside material structures and institutional processes, the framework provides a more complete account of how actors construct political meaning and how international orders are reproduced and challenged.

The resulting perspective is neither culturally deterministic nor culturally relativist. It does not claim that culture determines behaviour, that particular civilizations possess fixed political characteristics, or that all culturally grounded practices should be treated as equally legitimate. Instead, it treats culture as a contested field of meaning through which actors interpret interests, negotiate identities, establish legitimacy, and construct relationships. This allows IR to recognize cultural difference without turning difference into destiny.

The theoretical implication is ultimately straightforward but significant: international relations should be studied not only as relations among materially situated actors but also as relations among actors whose identities, interests, expectations, and claims to legitimacy are culturally constituted. Such an approach does not displace existing theories. It creates a conceptual space in which their material, institutional, ideational, and historical insights can be examined together. Cultural relationalism therefore offers not another rigid paradigm for IR, but a way of asking more precise questions about how culture participates in the making of global politics.

Conclusion

Culture has long been present in international relations, but its theoretical status has remained uneven. The development of constructivism, Global IR, postcolonial scholarship, relational theory, and research on cultural diplomacy, heritage, status, and international order has made it increasingly difficult to treat culture as peripheral to global politics. Yet the presence of cultural variables within the literature does not necessarily mean that culture has been fully incorporated into explanations of how international political reality is constituted. The central argument of this article has therefore been that culture should be understood not simply as a contextual factor or resource possessed by political actors, but as part of the processes through which international identities, interests, legitimacy, authority, status, and order are constructed.

The distinction between culture as context, culture as resource, and culture as constitutive has been central to this argument. Culture as context recognizes that political actors operate within historically specific social environments. Culture as resource emphasizes the strategic use of symbolic practices, narratives, heritage, diplomacy, and identity. Both perspectives are valuable, but neither fully captures the deeper role of culture in shaping what political actors understand to be possible, appropriate, legitimate, or desirable. A constitutive approach instead asks how culturally situated meanings participate in the formation of political identities and interests themselves.

This argument does not imply that culture determines international behaviour. International politics remains shaped by material capabilities, institutions, economic structures, geography, strategic calculation, and coercive power. Nor does it imply that cultures are coherent, bounded, or internally homogeneous. The analysis has repeatedly emphasized that cultural meanings are contested, historically changing, and produced through interaction. Cultural difference therefore cannot be treated as destiny, just as the critique of Western universalism should not produce an equally simplistic opposition between Western and non-Western worlds.

The conceptual framework proposed here—**cultural relationalism**—addresses this problem by bringing together three insights. First, constructivism demonstrates that identities and interests are socially constituted rather than simply given. Second, relational approaches emphasize that political actors acquire meaning through relationships rather than existing as completely autonomous units. Third, postcolonial and Global IR scholarship demonstrates that these relationships are historically unequal and that the production of international knowledge itself is culturally and politically situated. Cultural relationalism connects these insights by arguing that international political meanings emerge through historically and culturally situated relationships.

This perspective also changes how the relationship between culture and international power can be understood. Culture matters not simply because governments can employ cultural resources to increase influence, but because cultural meanings can shape recognition, status, legitimacy, authority, and the interpretation of international conduct. Research on cultural diversity and international order demonstrates that the organization of cultural difference has historically been connected to the constitution and

legitimation of political authority. Relational approaches similarly encourage scholars to examine how political meanings emerge through interaction rather than treating actors and their interests as fully formed before relationships begin.

The argument also has implications for the future development of IR theory. A more culturally attentive discipline should not simply add more cases from different geographical regions to theories whose conceptual foundations remain unchanged. Nor should it search for isolated “non-Western” alternatives that reproduce fixed cultural or civilizational categories. Instead, theoretical concepts should be allowed to emerge from dialogue among historically diverse intellectual traditions. This means treating culture not only as an object that IR studies but also as a condition influencing the concepts, categories, and assumptions through which IR produces knowledge.

Such an approach offers a different understanding of theoretical pluralism. Pluralism does not require abandoning comparison, empirical testing, or critical evaluation. Nor does recognizing culturally situated knowledge require accepting every culturally justified political practice as legitimate. It requires acknowledging that theoretical categories themselves have histories and that concepts acquire meaning through particular intellectual and political relationships. Cultural relationalism consequently seeks neither a universal theory detached from culture nor a collection of disconnected cultural theories. It seeks a relational theoretical space in which different intellectual traditions can interact, contest, modify, and enrich one another.

There are limits to the argument. Cultural relationalism is primarily a conceptual framework and therefore requires further empirical development. Future research should examine more systematically how culturally embedded relationships shape particular areas of international politics, including diplomacy, security, international institutions, global governance, international law, status competition, and conflict resolution. Comparative studies could also investigate whether culturally relational mechanisms operate differently across regions and historical periods. Such research would help determine where cultural meanings have the greatest explanatory significance and how they interact with material and institutional variables.

The broader contribution of the article is therefore not to claim that culture has been absent from international relations. Such a claim would overlook several decades of important scholarship. The contribution is instead to clarify the level at which culture matters. Culture is not merely something international actors possess, invoke, or encounter. It is part of the relational processes through which they become intelligible to themselves and to others, define their interests, establish claims to legitimacy, negotiate recognition, and participate in the construction of international order.

Taking culture seriously in international relations ultimately means taking seriously the possibility that the international is itself culturally constituted. International politics is not conducted in a conceptual vacuum. Actors interpret power, sovereignty, security, justice, authority, status, and cooperation through historically developed systems of meaning, while those meanings are continually transformed through interaction. Culture therefore belongs neither at the margins of IR nor above its material and institutional foundations. It operates through them.

The resulting proposition is deliberately modest but theoretically consequential: **international relations should be understood as culturally situated relationships through which political meanings, identities, interests, and orders are continually constructed and reconstructed.** Cultural relationalism provides one way of making that proposition analytically explicit. Rather than asking simply whether culture matters to global politics, it asks how cultural relationships help constitute the very political realities that international relations seeks to explain. That shift—from culture as an additional variable to

culture as a constitutive relational process—opens a broader conceptual space for understanding global politics in a world characterized not by cultural uniformity, but by continuous interaction, contestation, and transformation.

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