

# The English School in a Nutshell<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The central tenet of the English School (ES) is that there is a considerable degree of order, and some degree of justice, in world politics sustained by its formal structure as an anarchical society of sovereign states governed by international law and other mechanisms and communicating among themselves through the institution of diplomacy. More may be done to study the structures and the dynamics of the contemporary world system and regional sub-systems but quintessentially ES contributions will continue to focus on the questions of order and justice at these levels hitherto relatively neglected by its key figures.

**Key words:** The English School, anarchy, sovereignty, pluralism, solidarism

## Introduction

In this paper, I wish to outline the works of the English School of International Relations, focusing mainly on some of its key figures. By the 'English School' I have in mind a cluster of scholars comprising a number of inter-related groupings.<sup>2</sup>

The first of these consists of the English School's early figures. They are: C.

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2. What follows in this introductory section is based on my close personal knowledge, accumulated over a number of decades, of the individuals associated with the English School and of their interrelationships, on which I have written extensively elsewhere. See Suganami 1983, 2001, 2010b and Linklater and Suganami 2004.

A. W. Manning, Martin Wight, Hedley Bull, Adam Watson, Alan James, and John Vincent. Herbert Butterfield is sometimes added to this list (Dunne 1998). These scholars are in turn subdivided into two partially overlapping circles: (1) those who, at some point in their respective careers, taught in the Department of International Relations at the London School of Economics, headed by Manning and (2) those who were members of the British Committee on the Theory of International Politics, inaugurated by Herbert Butterfield (Vigizzi 2005).

Wight, Bull and James fall into the first sub-group and Wight, Bull, Watson and Vincent to the second. Vincent, the youngest among those listed here, was Bull's doctoral student at the Australian National University, taught in the Department of International Relations at Keele University, then headed by James, moved to Oxford, and subsequently held the Montague Burton Professorship at the LSE.

Within this first grouping, Manning's influence is especially conspicuous in James and Bull's in Vincent; Bull's thinking about international relations develops Manning's and Wight's; and Butterfield's and Wight's influence on Watson is clear.

The second grouping consists of those upon whom the founding figures had exerted a formative influence directly or indirectly. They include: Andrew Hurrell, one of the last of Bull's Oxford pupils, Tim Dunne, Hurrell's doctoral student at Oxford, Nick Wheeler, Dunne's close collaborator at one time and a critical follower of Vincent's work, and David Long and Peter Wilson, both of whom studied International Relations under James at Keele University. David Armstrong and Paul Keal, both of whom were Bull's doctoral students at the ANU, also fall into this group. Perhaps I should count myself in this group inasmuch as I was initially James' doctoral student at the LSE, where I also learnt from Manning; for many years, I taught in the Keele Department of International Relations headed by James, and through him and my colleague, Vincent, I got to know Bull closely. But, like everyone else, I came under the influence of many scholars, not all of whom are associated with the English School.

The third grouping consists of those who have established their academic careers quite independently of the English School but who have incorporated into their works some of its founding figures' key ideas and approaches. Andrew Linklater and Ian Clark are prominent examples, the former developing Wight's work and the latter Wight's and Bull's.<sup>3</sup> Robert Jackson is another example of

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3. Andrew Linklater's and Ian Clark's works are found in <http://www.aber.ac.uk/en/interpol/staff/academic/iic/> and <http://www.aber.ac.uk/en/interpol/staff/academic/adl/> respectively.

this grouping.

The fourth grouping is led by Barry Buzan and Richard Little, who were inspired by Adam Watson's work in particular. By declaring their wish to 'reconvene the English School' (Buzan 2001), they came to lead what might be called the 'new English School', a worldwide network of like-minded scholars, building on the achievements of the founding figures of the English School and exchanging their ideas regularly at various international conferences ([www.leeds.ac.uk/polis/englishschool](http://www.leeds.ac.uk/polis/englishschool), accessed 31<sup>st</sup> October 2010).

It is not the aim of this paper to examine comprehensively the very many publications which have emanated from a cluster of scholars now commonly known as the 'English School'. Its purpose, rather, is to outline the school's basic orientations and contentions. This can be done in the light of a standard tripartite classification – structural studies, functional studies, and historical studies. However, since I have written extensively on the third of these in my article, 'The English School, History and Theory', published in *Ritsumeikan International Affairs* (2010a), here I shall focus my attention on the first two areas.

## Structural Studies of World Politics

One of the earliest contributors to the English School tradition, C. A. W. Manning, who was a major force in shaping the study of International Relations (IR) in the United Kingdom in the 1960s, suggests that there are, in IR, two kinds of structural study: a study of the formal structure of world politics and a study of global social dynamics (Manning 1975). Writing in the 1960s, however, he was already aware of the gradual growth of a global society, consisting of all kinds of entities.<sup>4</sup> Bull, writing in the 70s, spoke of the 'world political system' to refer to this phenomenon (Bull 1977). But neither of them engaged with this subject in any detail. They simply acknowledged the fact that the world contained entities other than states and that all these different kinds of entity together formed some sort of social system exhibiting complex interactions. Their focus was firmly fixed on the formal structure of this global social complex which they saw as an international society of sovereign states governed by international law,

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4. In the English School vocabulary, it is common to distinguish between (1) 'international', meaning 'inter-state', which may be worldwide or regional, and (2) 'world' or 'global', which is not only 'worldwide' in scale but more wide-ranging in that non-state actors are brought to the attention of the world/global perspective.

communicating among themselves through the institution of diplomacy.<sup>5</sup> This, in their view, was the constitutional structure of the world in which, by their own admission, many kinds of entity, other than sovereign states, interacted.

But this society of sovereign states is not an ordinary kind of society. It does not consist of flesh-and-blood individual human beings and it has no centralised governmental structure as we normally see inside well-governed sovereign states. It is an anarchical society of sovereign states.

The beginners in the field of International Relations are apt to raise two questions at this point: (1) how is it possible for the world to be ‘anarchical’ and ‘social’ at the same time?; and (2) how is it possible for ‘sovereign’ states to be governed by international law? These, in fact, are the questions that some founding figures of the English School first aimed to address. And their approach embodies an orientation which is distinctive of their style of engagement. They follow the line that our understandings of society could be improved if we analysed and elucidated the concepts used to make sense of it.

### **An anarchical society**

One of the most elementary ways in which we can try to analyse concepts is to check a dictionary. And, interestingly, this is what Hedley Bull did when he wrote one of the foundational papers of the English School, entitled ‘Society and Anarchy in International Relations’, presented at a British Committee meeting and subsequently published in one of the English School’s principal publications, *Diplomatic Investigations: Essays in the Theory of International Politics*, edited by Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wight (Bull 1966a). Here is what appears on the first page of that article:

Anarchy: ‘Absence of rule; disorder; confusion’ (*O.E.D.*) The term here is used exclusively in the first of these senses. The question with which the essay is concerned is whether in the international context it is to be identified also with the second and the third (Bull 1966a:35).

Bull’s answer is that whereas social order *normally* presupposes the state, the same logic does not apply to the *international* context. This is because, according to him, states are not like flesh-and-blood individuals, they are much

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5. James (1978) held a similar view. Bull (1977) adds ‘the balance of power’, ‘great powers’ and ‘war’ to ‘international law’ and ‘diplomacy’ as the key institutional features of international society.

more self-sufficient and far less vulnerable to physical threats than are individual human beings, and they can therefore survive reasonably well without the sort of protection normally accorded by the state and its centralised institutions (Bull 1966a). Moreover, the society of states which developed in the West, according to Bull, has evolved a set of rules and institutions which, while unlike those of the state, are capable of sustaining a tolerable degree of order among states (Bull 1977).

Bull's conclusion therefore is that whereas 'anarchy' in the first sense of the term normally means 'anarchy' in the second and third senses, internationally, this does not necessarily follow; in the international context, anarchy sense number one (the absence of rule) does not entail anarchy in sense number two or three (disorder and confusion).

Now, of course, this conclusion cannot be arrived at merely by checking the *Oxford English Dictionary*. But noticing the different senses of the word 'anarchy' in the first place and *enquiring the material conditions under which the connections between them emerge* is an important step in enabling us to see certain features of the world which might otherwise escape our attention.<sup>6</sup> It is this move which led Bull to argue that, despite its formally anarchical structure, what we observe in the world of states can be captured by the idea that they form a society, an anarchical society of sovereign states.<sup>7</sup>

### **Sovereignty and international law**

One important feature of this society is that it is governed by international law. But how is it possible that *sovereign* states be bound by international law at all – for, surely, it may be supposed, 'sovereignty' means that the 'sovereign' body is above the law, that it is not bound by any existing law. Here, again, the starting point of the English School is with the meanings of a key word ('sovereignty' in this case). And they draw a very sharp distinction between things domestic and things international.

The word 'sovereignty' was initially associated with 'God' or 'the King' (or 'the Queen'). The absolute power of sovereign God, the law-giver, was thought to include an ability to suspend the laws of nature at will – in the form of what to

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6. Here Bull follows the method employed by his Oxford teacher, H. L. A. Hart (1961), who, among other things, investigates the material conditions under which the concept of law has come to be associated with the idea of sanctions and enforcement.

7. Bull's line of argument runs parallel to those who consider international law to be law properly so called (or properly functioning law, in any case). See, further, Suganami (1989).

humans are *miracles*. The authority of the secular sovereign was explained by analogy. He or she was not only the source of law but had the power to suspend its operation. Hence Carl Schmitt's famous characterization of the sovereign as 'he who decides on the state of exception' (1985: 5).<sup>8</sup>

This clarifies the sense in which the sovereign body or person is inside and outside a legal system at the same time. But this means that the sovereign's subjects are also inside and outside a legal system, giving rise to the notion that sovereignty entails a possibility, or even inevitability, of arbitrary violence (Agamben 1998). In any case, this line of thinking is hardly consonant with the idea that sovereign states, despite their sovereignty, are still bound by international law. So, how do the English School, or its key contributors in this area, square this jurisprudential circle?

They do so by noting that the adjective, 'sovereign', when it is used to refer to a characteristic of a (sovereign) state, means different things from when it is used to refer to a quality of a (sovereign) person or body inside a (sovereign) state. When used in the latter context, it may indeed mean an absolute power to make *and* override the existing law, but when used in the former context as a predicate of a state, it means something quite different.<sup>9</sup> What it means is not something we can work out by checking a dictionary, but it can be distilled from the practice of sovereign states themselves, or from the way they talk and act in the world political arena.

According to the interpretation offered by Manning (1972, 1975) and James (1986), the chief English School contributors on this subject, there are at least two internationally-relevant senses of the word 'sovereignty', that is, 'sovereignty' means at least two different things in the international, as opposed to the domestic, context.<sup>10</sup>

One of these refers to the extent of international legal freedom which a sovereign state possesses at any time. This way of talking about state sovereignty presupposes a hypothetical international state of nature where there is no

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8. He saw an analogy between the secular idea of the state of exception and the theological notion of miracles.

9. The 'sovereignty' of the *king* and the 'sovereignty' of his *kingdom* denote quite different qualities.

10. It is important to note here that what they offer can only be their interpretations. But 'interpretations' are what we produce when we try to understand a society, its culture and institutions, and express our understandings in our own language. This is the anthropologists' method, which Manning (1975) strongly recommended and which is found endorsed, for example, in Wendt (1999).

international law at all, and hence no international legal obligation whatsoever. In such circumstances, all sovereign states are 100% sovereign since their legal freedom is totally intact. However, as sovereign states evolve legal relations among themselves, through the development of customary law and conclusion of treaties, they begin increasingly to be bound by legal obligations and therefore their legal freedom (or ‘sovereignty’) begins to diminish.<sup>11</sup>

But there is something unsatisfactory in this way of talking. For one thing, sovereign states gain legal rights *as well as* legal duties by entering into legal relationships among themselves. In addition, there is a sense in which a state remains a sovereign state despite a large number of international legal obligations it acquires. The key question therefore is what distinguishes states which are ‘sovereign’ from those which are not.

The answer offered by Manning and James is straightforward. A state remains a sovereign state regardless of the extent of its international legal obligation so far as it does not become incorporated into another sovereign state, that is, in so far as it remains legally independent of another sovereign state. Sovereign states, understood in this way, are what we usually mean by ‘states’ in the context of the world of states. They are constitutionally independent of one another in the sense that all of them have their constitutions (written or otherwise) and none of them is subsumed under another as its province. ‘Sovereignty’ here means a state’s status as a constitutionally independent political community.<sup>12</sup>

Such a community would not cease to be ‘sovereign’ unless it is absorbed by another sovereign state or forms a federal union with another; and the world of states will continue to be a world of sovereign states unless it transforms itself into a world federal union.<sup>13</sup>

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11. It is important not to conflate legal *freedom* and a legal *right*. I am legally free to obtain a Rolls Royce, but I have no legal right to have one unless I have paid for it or someone has given it to me. That is, there is no legal prohibition against my obtaining a Rolls Royce, but I cannot say that I have a legal right to possess one because that will mean that someone else, perhaps the government, has the legal duty to provide me with one, which, needless to say, is not the case.

12. To speak of their ‘constitutional independence’ is simply to refer to their legal status as not forming part of another sovereign state. A sovereign state whose constitution (determining how the laws are made and applied within the land) is no longer functioning effectively still counts as a sovereign state in so far as it has not been absorbed by another sovereign state. See James (1986) and Jackson (1990).

13. Between a federal union (itself a sovereign state) and a society of sovereign states, there are confederations with some *supranational* competences accorded to their central organs. The European Union is an advanced form of this at the regional level. See Forsyth 1981 and

And here follows an important conclusion. There is nothing in the meaning of the expression ‘constitutionally independent’ that makes us say that such entities cannot be bound by international law. And it is a social fact, an institutional fact of the society of sovereign states which evolved historically, that there is such a thing as international law which sovereign states themselves take seriously as creating obligations for themselves (Manning 1975). It might have been otherwise (Bull 1977), but that is what happened, and we must begin by acknowledging that historical fact, according to the English School’s key contention.<sup>14</sup>

All this, however, relates to what the English school authors regard as the formal structure of world politics. They rightly acknowledge that the description of the world as a society or system of sovereign states misses out non-state actors. ‘Within, beneath, behind and transcending, the ... society of states, there exists, and for some purposes fairly effectively, the nascent society of all mankind,’ wrote Manning (1975: 177). However, such a society, consisting of ‘the peoples, and the people, and the groups, the organisations, and associations not yet articulated for effective action’ (1975: 201), was a difficult one to analyse. James effectively treated it as lying outside the main concern of IR (1989: 223). Bull (2000, 252) importantly conceded that there is now a global political system of which the system or society of states is only an element and that many of the issues arising within this global political system cannot be dealt with satisfactorily in a framework that confined our attention to the relations of sovereigns states alone, but did not make any detailed enquiry into the structure or workings of the contemporary human universe as a whole.

Among the writings stemming from the English School, Buzan and Little’s *International Systems in World History* (2000) is the first to analyse this human universe. According to them, the contemporary world system is marked by the rise of a variety of non-state, non-territorial actors against the background of the increased stability in states’ territorial boundaries. There is also the emergence of post-sovereign states, most clearly within the European Union. There is a sharp disparity in the global system between the zone of peace, comprising powerful industrialised democracies, and the zone of war, containing much weaker modern and pre-modern states. Great power wars are now largely obsolete and there is a shift from military-political to economic processes as the dominant form of

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Suganami 1989.

14. The connection between this line of thinking and the Schmittian conception of sovereignty is explored in Suganami 2005.

interaction. There is much thickening of the international rules, norms and institutions especially in the economic sphere where the capitalist system survives through a series of crises. However, the global system is faced with a possible environmental catastrophe and there is a possible qualitative change in its economic, social and political features brought about by the ever expanding use of the Internet (2000: ch.16).

How are we to relate this picture of the contemporary world, which after all is not a remarkably novel one, with the idea of the society of states, associated with the English School's formal structure studies?

An important point to notice here is that explaining, understanding, describing, characterising, conceptualising and theorising are what we do to represent the world, to make knowledge-claims about the world, but our representations are not a transparent medium through which we are enabled to see the world as it is. It is in fact a mistake to think of 'the world' as the object of our knowledge; *the questions we ask about the world are*. And there must be some reasons why we want to ask certain questions and not others. When we keep this very elementary point in mind, the difference between the English School's thin, formal, description of the world as a society of sovereign states and a more multifaceted depiction of the contemporary world found in Buzan and Little's work becomes intelligible.

The English School's formal characterisation of the world as a society of sovereign states was a response given to a very specific question: how is it that, despite the absence of a centralised authority in the world, there is a considerable degree of order in the relationships between sovereign states? This was the chief concern of the English School writers early on. But even they noticed that there are many *issues* arising in the world that cannot be dealt with satisfactorily in a framework that confined our attention to the relations of sovereign states alone and that there are a variety of non-state actors which exist quite effectively for certain *purposes*. There are things happening in the world, other than formal interactions between states, which closely affect our lives, shape what we take to be our issues, and influence our means of addressing them. What are these things, how are they affecting our lives, what are the issues on our agenda, and how are we addressing them? These are the questions Buzan and Little are asking, or guided by, when they offer their sketch of the contemporary world. Admittedly, it is hardly more than a sketch, but contains a set of answers markedly different from the one offered by the English School's formal structure

studies because their respective concerns are different.<sup>15</sup>

## **Functional Studies**

‘What functions does the government play and how might it be made to work better?’ These are important questions for the students of Politics (also called ‘Government’). Students of International Relations may ask similar questions regarding, for example, the workings of the UN or the European Union. However, the English School’s focus is not on any particular international organization but on what they regard as the institutions of international society, such as international law and diplomacy, which have their historical origins in the European ‘family of nations’ but which came to encompass the whole world through the process of colonialism and decolonisation. More fundamentally, they are interested in whether the society of sovereign states itself is functioning satisfactorily (and whether it is in need of some radical transformation).

Now, clearly, these questions cannot be answered without first setting out the standards which a given governance structure must meet. It is with reference to such standards that it makes sense to discuss (1) whether the society of sovereign states is, or is not, an appropriate way of organizing the world politically and (2) what kind of institution is possible and desirable within the framework of the society of sovereign states to improve its performance in meeting the standards.

Order and justice are the two key standards, according to the English School, by which we can measure the workings of the society of states. Their central question therefore may be formulated as follows: how far is the society of sovereign states able to meet the demands of order and justice and how far can the society be expected to improve its performance in delivering these goods?

Even though there are some disagreements among the authors associated with the English School on the latter question, they are broadly united in thinking that the division of the world into sovereign states is a tolerably satisfactory way of organizing the human race politically and that it is probably better than other possible alternatives, such as the world state, in particular (Manning 1975; Bull 1966a, 1977; Watson 1990).

Bull (1977: 255) has suggested that the society of sovereign states and the world state are not the only options and toyed with the idea that the world might

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15. Needless to say, Buzan and Little’s sketch is much richer than the deliberately thin characterisation of the world found in the neo-realist analysis of the international system (Waltz 1979) which they (2000) set out self-consciously to transcend.

one day come to have the governance structure similar to medieval Europe. He was, however, somewhat sceptical that this 'neo-medievalism' necessarily offered a better response than the society of sovereign states to the problems of order and justice. In his view, the division of the world into sovereign states is not itself the problem because they, or at least some of them, can come to govern their relations amicably and in a manner more conducive to the achievement of their common goals, such as order, justice, economic efficiency and environmental control (1977: ch. 12).

However, Bull was concerned that there might well be a limit to what could realistically be achieved in the contemporary world of states because it was marked with the lack of consensus on many issues. The world lacked the degree of solidarity necessary to make it realistic for us to expect high standards of behaviour and collaboration on the part of the sovereign states. He was conservative in his estimation of the degree of solidarity that already existed in the world of states and favoured a view that it is still at a *pluralistic* stage, a stage where the states disagreed on higher values such as human rights and distributive justice but nevertheless showed commitment to the live-and-let-live principle of coexistence (1966b; 1977).

Such a line of thinking led Bull to draw a line between two positions, or what he called 'pluralism' and 'solidarism'. He was not fundamentally opposed to solidarist goals; he simply held them to be still somewhat premature for the society of sovereign states to pursue. His later writings, however, suggest that he was becoming somewhat more 'solidarist' than he was in the 1960s (Bull 2000b).

A key component of the pluralism/solidarism divide has to do with the issue of humanitarian intervention, i.e., whether the society of sovereign states should accept the practice of unilateral military intervention as a legitimate response to massive violations of human rights by a regime against the people it governs. Contemporary international law does not in fact allow such a use of force but there are some who argue that humanitarian intervention ought to be made legal or ought at any rate to be accepted under certain strict conditions or that it has already become plausible to suggest that it is legally permissible under certain exceptional circumstances. Those who argue in this way are called 'solidarists' or form the 'solidarist' wing of the English School. Nick Wheeler (2000) is the foremost example of this group of thinkers.

In dispute with the 'solidarists' are the 'pluralists', including Bull, early Vincent (1974), and most notably Robert Jackson (2000). Their line, basically, is that the society of sovereign states is better off focussing on the minimum goal of

the orderly coexistence of sovereign states and that straining this society with too high an ideal, such as, in particular, the universal enjoyment of human rights through their international guarantee and protection, is destined to have negative side-effects, a view that Nick Wheeler (2000) attempts laboriously, and to some extent successfully, to refute. However, Wheeler, in turn, spoils his case somewhat by offering a vision of the world which is vastly idealistic – by his own admission (2000, Conclusion).

There is an important sense in which the pluralist-solidarist divide within the English School is not an insurmountable one. The two sides disagree mainly on what is feasible within the contemporary society of states as a whole. Even pluralists would not deny that there may be some regional groupings of states within which higher goals, such as the guarantee and protection of human rights, may be pursued effectively. Neither could (or should) they insist on some *a priori* grounds that the world, as a whole, would (or should) never become solidarist, however sceptical they may be of such a transition in the near future.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, the very category of ‘pluralism’ itself is an unstable one. Bull, for instance, was explicitly critical of ‘solidarism’ and expressed his reservations concerning the pursuit of human rights in international relations (1966a, 1977). Yet, his (1977) defence of the political structure of the world, organised as a society of sovereign states, was based on the idea that this, in his judgement, was an effective means of securing ‘world order’, defined in terms of human individuals’ enjoyment of certain basic human needs, such as freedom from violence, stability of property and fulfilment of contractual obligations. Solidarism, then, is immanent in the form of pluralism as endorsed by Bull. Perhaps it is not an exaggeration to say that most English School thinkers are solidarists at heart<sup>17</sup> – although they may disagree about the degree of solidarity which they claim to witness in the world they study.

## Concluding Remarks

There are a number of ways in which it is possible to develop the English School’s line of enquiry further by building on its early figures’ achievements.

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16. This, in my view, is Jackson’s mistake. He (2000) is committed to the idea of the pluralist society of states not as a plausible interpretation of contemporary reality but as a timeless ideal. His objection to solidarism is based on his wholesale rejection of anything that strikes him as ‘paternalism’.

17. See Vincent (1986) in particular.

One is to leave behind its formal structure studies at the global level and focus on the structures and functions of regional international institutions. Another is to focus on the world as a whole but investigate the interactions of a wide range of actors, state and non-state. However, in order for such works to be seen to constitute contributions from the distinctively English School angle, they will most probably need to show a concern for the School's traditional preoccupations. Needless to say, 'order and justice' will have to be a key theme. How are these possibly contradictory goals pursued and realised in various regional settings? Are there differences across different regions or do they show some similarities? What does it mean to pursue 'order' and 'justice' in a world containing a variety of actors, state and non-state? What are the institutions that promote such goals and how do they work? These are some of the questions which require much hard work and thinking within the English School or elsewhere.<sup>18</sup> The achievement of the English School is to have inaugurated a distinctive style of enquiry into a distinctive set of issues, combining empirical and normative dimensions, but there are several questions that they still need to address if they are to continue to be a vital force in IR students' intellectual makeup.

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18. See Buzan and Waever (2003), Hurrell (2007), Clark (2007), Walker (2010).

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