

Before the West: The Rise and Fall of Eastern World Orders

Ayşe ZARAKOL

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In the last decade, there has been a growing interest in Global International Relations (IR), which calls for a non-Western approach to IR, an endeavor that has produced several books and articles. One recent such work is *Before the West: The Rise and Fall of Eastern World Orders* by Ayşe Zarakol in 2022. This book differs from other studies on Global IR with its alternative narrative based on the Chinggisid world order, which challenges Eurocentrism from an Asian angle with the help of the IR terminology that we use today.

In the introduction, Zarakol lists and touches upon the objectives and terminology of the book. Accordingly, *Before the West* has objectives including challenging the Eurocentrism in the field of IR by calling into question concepts like sovereignty and rise/fall of great powers and to understanding why and how the West replaced the East. To answer these questions, the author focuses on “the Chinggisid Sovereignty Model” (a label similar to Westphalia) that prevailed in Eurasia starting from 13th century and extending to the 17th century, which is an ideal type based on Genghis Khan’s empire: extreme centralization at the hands of Great Khan, obsession with territorial reach and astrology/astronomy, and the notion of world conqueror (p. 18-20). Additionally, Genghis Khan’s model assumes a role of “lawgiver” by not claiming prophecy. In the following four chapters, Zarakol pays attention to how various polities in Eurasia utilized this model from 13th century and argues that “the world was dominated and ordered by Great Houses who justified their sovereignty along Chinggisid lines” (p. 26).

In the second chapter, the author directs attention to 13th and 14th century Asia with references to Ibn Battuta and Marco Polo to demonstrate that Asia was much more connected than presumed in IR and that the main characteristic of the Asian continent was not its colonial legacy but the Chinggisid Empire that created an Asian world order, which shaped the continent in the following centuries by ending the centuries-long fragmentation (p. 57-8). After providing details of Genghis Khan’s expansions, attention is directed to his successors. The empire fragmented into his four domains ruled by his sons – Golden Horde-Russia, Chagatai

Khanate-Central Asia, Ilkhanate-Middle East & Iran, and Yuan Khanate-China – but they did not last as internecine war broke out. At the beginning of the 14th century, the Ilkhanate and Yuan were gone, while Chagatai Khanate led to the rise of the Timurid Empire, and the Golden Horde remained in its territory. In this vein, Zarakol claims that Asia was characterized by Great Houses, not “tribes” as presumed in Eurocentric IR (p. 77), and Genghis Khan formed a world order characterized by extreme centralization and the world conqueror ideal (p. 81). However, the Chinggisid world order was shattered by structural factors and the internal contradiction of universal sovereignty (p. 86-7)

Zarakol, in the third chapter, turns her focus to two actors in the “post-Chinggisid world order”: the Timurids and the Ming Dynasty, which shared the characteristics of the Chinggisid world order in the 14th century. However, it is easier to link this continuity in the former one, which coined the title “*Sahibkiran*” and has a millennial understanding and reconciling Islam, which limits the absolute power of the sovereign, with the Chinggisid notion of sovereignty, extreme centralization (p. 97-9). In China, the distribution of aristocratic titles to form a hierarchy in eastern Eurasia with the Ming at the top reveals this sovereignty model. The use of astrology and conquests were also the commonality between these two houses with references to Zheng He’s marital campaign into Indian Ocean, the Ming campaign into Inner Asia, the use of Muslim astrologers in the Ming Dynasty, and the Timurid campaigns towards the West (Aq Qoyunlu, Ottomans and Mamluks). However, these two dynasties became more inward-oriented and marked by their religious affiliations (Islam and Confucianism, respectively), which ended the post-Chinggisid period.

In the fourth chapter, the book shifts the attention to the post-Timurid world orders: the Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals (15th to 16th century), with the first one being the strongest practitioner of the Chinggisid world order (p. 132). Yet all three acted in accordance with the Chinggisid sovereignty model as they exhibited extreme centralization and universal sovereignty claims. In this chapter, what is most striking is that Zarakol demonstrates how Asia and the Muslim world were perceived as “travelling alone” bodies in IR literature while this is not the case due to the political, economic, and artistic links between these houses. In the fifth chapter, the focus is placed on the lands beyond Eurasia (from Muscovy with Ivan the Terrible and Europe with the Habsburgs and Charles V), with an emphasis on the Habsburgs, who were shaped by the Chinggisid world order expanding into Europe. The author also demonstrates, as a part of this chapter, how centralized sovereignty did not emerge out of thin air in Europe: the 1648 Westphalia Treaty and how Asia and Europe communicated, which is not provided in IR accounts, and how ideas spread across borders with several differences, such as the existence of homogeneity in Europe and heterogonous society in Asia (p. 187) all influenced these developments. In the last parts of the chapter, the author focuses on the decline of this order by referring to the General Crisis of the 17th century, which had, economic, political, and structural repercussions like the Little Ice Age which disrupted the trade and other kind of flows across the houses. As a result, the notion of the Chinggisid world order disappeared while the houses across the Asia did not decline in economic terms (p. 214)

In the last two chapters, Zarakol aims to understand the benefits of “macro history” for general IR. The emphasis on the use of terms with (little) adjustments can be used for

different periods like focusing on the “great houses” rather than “great powers” for the 15th or 16th centuries (p. 222). On the other hand, the stress on the “rise & fall of world orders” is interesting since IR mainly focuses on “great powers” in material terms, not the rise/fall of the “world order” as happened in the case of Asia, which can be a tool for the “fall of the East,” according to Zarakol’s account.

The last chapter is wholly devoted to the importance of the macro-historical approach in a field dominated by micro-level studies with an emphasis on “abuses of macro-history” with references to three Eastern figures (Seamatsu Kencho, Ziya Gökalp, and George Vernadsky), who aimed to locate their nations in the Western-dominated world, and three Western figures (Arnold J. Toynbee, Karl Wittfogel, and Owen Lattimore), who intended to understand the contact between the West and the rest of the world. Zarakol claimed that she aimed to create an Asian history not owned by one religion or nation but a counter-narrative against Eurocentric IR since micro-works are not enough to dismantle the Eurocentric narrative.

Before the West, with its easy-to-follow structure and clear order of complex historical events, opened novel venues for Global IR and upgraded the “rise/fall” dichotomy to the “world orders” level. Zarakol’s analysis of Asian history can clarify the benefits of macro-historical approaches in IR, the debates of fall of the East, and using concepts such as great power, as well as world order in various historical settings such as the Asian context. However, the book suffers from a major flaw which is the lack of clarity of how this Chingissid world order disappeared. Zarakol emphasizes the General Crisis of the 17th century, which disrupts the flow of goods and ideas, but its impact on the fall of world order remains unanswered. Nevertheless, overall, *Before the West* is a great book to grasp ongoing developments of non-Eurocentric approaches in the field, and the necessity of macro-histories for IR together with micro-studies.