5. International Relations

I INTRODUCTION

International Relations, the study and practice of political relationships among the world's nations, especially their governments. International relations may also refer to the interactions between nongovernmental groups, such as multinational corporations (companies that operate in more than one country) or international organizations such as the Red Cross or the United Nations (UN).

International relations is a broad and complex topic both for countries engaged in relationships with other nations, and for observers trying to understand those interactions. These relationships are influenced by many variables. They are shaped by the primary participants in international relations, including national leaders, other politicians, and nongovernment participants, such as private citizens, corporations, and nongovernmental organizations. They are also affected by domestic political events and nonpolitical influences, including economics, geography, and culture. Despite all of these other influences, the primary focus of international relations is on the interactions between nations.

To understand these interactions, scholars look at the world as a system of nations whose actions are guided by a well-defined set of rules. Scholars call this system the *interstate system*. The interstate system has existed for less than 500 years and is based on a common understanding of what a nation is and how it should treat other nations. But recent changes in technology and international norms have caused some scholars to question whether this system will continue in the future, or be replaced by some other system of relationships that is not yet known.

Until the 1970s the study of international relations centered mainly on international security studies—that is, questions of war and peace. Scholars believed a nation's military power was the most important characteristic in determining how that nation would relate to others. As a result, scholars focused on the relative military strength of one nation compared to others, alliances and diplomacy between nations, and the strategies nations used to protect their territories and further their own interests.

Since the 1970s the importance of economics in international relations has grown and the study of international political economy has received increased attention. Scholars in this field believe that the primary force driving the interaction between nations is economic, not military. They focus on trade and economic relations among nations, especially the political cooperation between

nations to create and maintain international organizations which benefit all nations involved, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

In both security studies and international political economy, scholars strive to explain patterns of conflict and cooperation among nations. Conflicts among nations are inevitable since their political and economic aims and interests often diverge. Cooperation does not refer to the absence of conflict but to the ability of nations to peacefully resolve their differences in a way that is acceptable to all parties involved. When cooperation fails, conflicts often escalate into coercion and ultimately war.

II THE STUDY OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Over time, scholars have developed a number of approaches to the study of international relations. These approaches include realism, neorealism, idealism and liberalism, neoliberalism, and Marxism.

A Realism

The most widely accepted approach to understanding international relations is called realism. Realists believe that nations act only out of self-interest and that their major goal is to advance their own positions of power in the world. The ideas of realism come from the writings of such historical figures as Sun Tzu of ancient China, Thucydides of ancient Greece, and Renaissance Italy's Niccolò Machiavelli. All of these thinkers argued that the leaders of nations use their power to advance the interests of their own nations with little regard for morality or friendship. In order to survive, realists believe leaders must build their power and avoid feelings of friendship or morality that might make them vulnerable to more ruthless adversaries. They believe conflict and war are inevitable. For one nation to gain something, another must lose. This means alliances with other nations cannot be counted on and cooperation between nations cannot last. Realists believe nations should always be heavily armed and ready for war. Friendships, religions, ideologies, cultures, and economic systems matter little. Nations act selfishly and do not answer to a higher authority.

Realists generally believe that the actions of individual nations have the biggest influence on international relations. They believe that nations act rationally, not impulsively, and that nations weigh the benefits and drawbacks of all their options before choosing a course of action. They

believe nations are not driven by psychological or cultural influences. Instead, they act with the knowledge that they live in a world where there is no central government over all nations that they can appeal to for justice or protection. Without that higher authority, nations must protect themselves and look after their own interests. Realists believe that these characteristics have applied to all nations throughout history.

As a result, realists think that international relations is primarily influenced by international security and military power. They consider military force the most important characteristic of any nation. Other characteristics, such as wealth, population, or moral beliefs, matter primarily because they affect military strength. They see international trade as a potential source of national power, because nations can accumulate wealth by controlling trade. They believe a nation's *relative power* compared to other nations is more important than the well-being of its citizens. In a world with an ever-present possibility of war, winning matters above all.

The realist approach has been criticized for being too simplistic and for failing to capture the complexities of international relations. Because a nation's power typically is very difficult to measure, realists have been criticized for their belief that nations strive only to accumulate power. Critics also argue that a nation's actions result from the conflicting pulls of various interest groups, constituencies, agencies, and individuals. They maintain that the *national interest* of any nation may be impossible to define because so many different constituencies exist, and a nation's pursuit of its interests may be far from rational. One glaring example is World War I (1914-1918), which seems irrational because almost all participants lost more than they gained.

B Neorealism

Neorealism explains international events by looking at the distribution of power among nations rather than the military might of individual nations. Neorealism is also called *structural realism* because it looks at the power structure of the entire system of nations. Neorealists believe that events unfold according to general laws or principles. Neorealists often use game theory and other models to predict the behavior or the participants in international relations. Game theory is a mathematical analysis of any conflict that calculates the best course of action under given conditions. However, neorealism lacks some of the richness of traditional realism, which weighs many complex elements—such as geography, willpower, and diplomacy—to understand the relationships between nations.

C Idealism and Liberalism

Idealists believe international law and morality are key influences on international events, rather than power alone. International law refers to principles and rules of conduct that nations regard as binding. Idealists think that human nature is basically good. They believe good habits (such as telling the truth in diplomatic dealings with other nations), education, and the existence of international organizations—such as the UN to facilitate good relations between nations—will result in peaceful and cooperative international relationships. Idealists see the world as a community of nations that have the potential to work together to overcome mutual problems.

Idealists were particularly active in the 1920s and 1930s, following the painful experience of World War I. United States president Woodrow Wilson and other idealists placed their hopes for peace in the League of Nations, an international organization that existed from 1920 to 1946 to promote world peace and cooperation. These hopes were dashed when the League failed to stop German and Japanese aggression in the 1930s, which led to the outbreak of World War II in 1939. Realists blamed idealists for looking too much at how the world should be instead of how it really is.

Although the term *idealism* fell out of use, related liberal approaches to international relations continued after World War II ended in 1945 (*see* Liberalism). Liberals believe international relations evolved through small changes over time. Liberals focus on the interdependence of the world's countries and the mutual benefits they can gain through cooperating with each other. Unlike realists, liberals believe that by cooperating together, all nations could win. They also think gaining actual wealth is more important than acquiring more power relative to other countries. Liberals tend to see war not as a natural tendency but as a tragic mistake that can be prevented or at least minimized by international agreements and organizations.

D Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism, also called neoliberal institutionalism, emerged in the 1980s as a new liberal response to realism. Neoliberals believe that the UN and other international institutions can play an important role in resolving conflicts and that it makes more sense for nations to cooperate and work toward long-term mutual gains rather than focusing on short-term individual gains. Neoliberals agree with realists that nations act only out of self-interest, but they do not share the pessimism of realists about the possibility for international cooperation. Instead, neoliberals believe nations can cooperate fairly often because it is in their best interests to do so.

E Marxism

The theories of 19th-century German philosopher Karl Marx have provided alternatives to both realism and liberalism. Marxist theories have received much less attention since the collapse of Communism in the Soviet Union in 1991. Marx focused on the inequities between the rich and poor in society and the tendency for the wealthy, more powerful classes to exploit the poorer, weaker ones. Marxists view international relations as an extension of the struggle between the classes, with wealthy countries exploiting poorer, weaker ones. Marxists mainly study imperialism—that is, the practice of stronger nations to control or influence weaker ones. They look at the unfair and exploitative aspects of relationships between the world's rich and poor nations. This approach is rooted in the theory of imperialism developed by Vladimir Lenin just before the 1917 Communist revolution in Russia (*see* Russian Revolution). Marxists tend to see economic relationships as both the cause of and potential solution to the problem of war.

F Other Approaches

In the 1980s and 1990s, a number of new approaches to international relations emerged. *Feminist* theories of international relations emphasize the importance of gender roles among the politically powerful in understanding how foreign policy is developed and why nations behave the way they do. *Postmodern* approaches call into question the basic categories and methods by which international relations has traditionally been studied, arguing that international relations scholarship is an arbitrary discipline invented by powerful special interests to advance their own agendas. *Peace studies* is an interdisciplinary approach to questions of war and peace, openly promoting peace over war. Peace studies teach that scholars can learn more about certain aspects of international relations, such as diplomacy, by becoming involved in them.

III ACTORS IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

The participants in international relations, often called *actors,* have a great influence on the relationships between nations and on world affairs. The major participants include the nations themselves, the leaders of those nations, *substate actors* (groups or organizations within a nation), *transnational actors* (organizations operating in more than one country), and international organizations.

A Nations

The nations themselves are the most important actors in international relations. A nation is a territory with a defined border and a government that answers to no higher authority than its own. All or part of the population shares a group identity, often based on a combination of common ancestry, language, or culture. In 1997 there were 186 recognized nations in the world. There also are a number of political entities sometimes thought of as nations. These include territories that function independently, such as Taiwan, which is officially considered a province of China; colonies, such as Martinique; and nations that are not yet recognized, such as Palestine. Also included in this list is Vatican City, which does not fit into any of these categories.

Nations vary in size and power—from the United States with a $7 trillion economy and China with more than 1 billion people to nations with fewer than 100,000 people, such as Andorra and Greenland. Size and power are two important variables in determining a nation's relationships with other countries and its influence in international affairs. The handful of the most powerful nations that control most of the world's military and economic strength are called great powers. The great powers include the United States, Great Britain, Russia (formerly the Soviet Union), France, China, Germany, and Japan. These powers are the most important actors in international relations.

B Leaders of Nations

The most important individual actor within a nation is the top leader of that country. The top leader is the person who has the primary political power or authority in country. For example, the top leader in Great Britain is the prime minister, who is the head of government and has the most political power, even though the king or queen of that country is considered the head of state. The top leader in the United States is the president.

C Substate Actors

Besides the top leader of a nation, there are other groups and individuals within that nation that influence its international relationships. These domestic actors, called *substate actors,* include particular industries with distinct interests in foreign policy (such as the automobile or tobacco industry) and ethnic constituencies with ties to foreign countries, as well as labor unions, cities, and regions. All of these actors may be affected by international events differently from each other or the country where they operate. These groups can influence a nation's foreign policy in several

ways, such as by lobbying political leaders, donating money to political candidates or parties, or swaying public opinion on certain issues.

D Transnational Actors

Organizations operating in more than one country are known as transnational actors. They often have specific interests in international issues that differ from those of any nation. Transnational actors include multinational corporations. They also include nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), such as Planned Parenthood and the Roman Catholic Church, which promote their interests across international borders. NGOs often align themselves with particular nations that support their interests, and come into conflict with those that show lack of support. Intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) are groups whose members are national governments. Examples of intergovernmental organizations include the European Union (EU) and the Intelsat Satellite Consortium. They are usually created to promote cooperation between different nations on a particular issue or in a particular geographic region. Nongovernmental organizations and intergovernmental organizations together are called international organizations.

E Evaluating the Influence of Actors

Scholars of international relations have divided the various influences on international events into different categories, or levels of analysis. There are three widely used levels of analysis: (1) individual actors, (2) domestic influences, and (3) interstate influences. Some scholars also study a fourth level of analysis, global influences.

In the individual level of analysis, scholars study the concerns, perceptions and choices of the individual people involved—great leaders, crazy leaders, activists, or individual citizens. For example, if the assassin of Archduke Francis Ferdinand in 1914 had bungled the job, World War I might not have broken out when it did.

In the domestic level of analysis, scholars look at how international relations is influenced by domestic actors, including special interest groups, political organizations, and government agencies. Scholars study how different kinds of societies and governments behave, such as democracies versus dictatorships. They also look at the politics of ethnic conflict and nationalism, both of which can lead to international conflict and war. The domestic level of analysis is also called the *state* or *societal* level.

In the interstate level of analysis, scholars focus on the interactions of states themselves, without regard to their internal makeup or the particular individuals who lead them. For realists, this is the most important level because it looks at how a nation's relative power compared with other nations affects its behavior. The interstate level of analysis is also called the *international* or *systemic* level of analysis.

Some scholars also look at the global level of analysis. In this analysis, scholars study how global trends and forces, such as technological change and the global environment, affect international relations. They also study how the lingering effects of colonialism influence international relations.

IV THE INTERSTATE SYSTEM

Scholars studying international relationships look at the world as a system of nations that interact according to a set of well-defined and long-established rules. They call this system the *interstate system.* The rules of the system govern how nations treat each other. The rules are based on common understandings of the rights of a nation. For example, according to the traditions of the interstate system, one nation should not infringe upon another nation's rightful territory or interfere in another nation's internal affairs. Many of these rules were codified in the Peace of Westphalia, which ended the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648) in Europe.

The system evolved because nations realized it was in their best interest to develop basic ground rules for dealing with each other in the absence of a central authority that could set and enforce rules worldwide. The lack of a central authority is the most important characteristic of the interstate system. It has meant that nations must look out for themselves first and has shaped the way they relate to each other. They cannot rely on any higher power to enforce the rules or make sure other nations play fairly. Instead, they must enforce the rules by themselves or form alliances with other nations and collectively enforce them. The rules are also enforced by the power of world censure.

One of the most important rules of the interstate system is that nations should respect each other's internationally recognized boundaries. Almost all of the world's land falls under the control of existing nations except Antarctica. Under the interstate system, no nation has the right to invade or take over another's territory or interfere with the actions of a government within its own territory. But defining the borders of a territory is more complicated than it may first appear. For example, many of today's borders resulted from wars in which winners expanded their rule by taking territory from losers. Some nations have borders that were imposed upon them by another

nation that colonized them before they gained independence. These borders can create many problems. They can create oddly shaped nations that lack ports or other resources. They can also split up previously existing nations or ethnic groups so that they are in different nations. This division has become a major source of conflict and war.

A Membership in the Interstate System

A nation is considered a member of the international system if other nations recognize the authority of its government. Other nations can formally extend this recognition by establishing diplomatic relations with that nation. A nation can also become recognized by being admitted as a member of the UN. Recognition does not imply that a government has popular support, only that it controls the territory within its borders and has agreed to assume the nation's obligations in the international system. These obligations include respecting the internationally recognized borders of other nations, assuming the international debts of the previous government, and not interfering in the internal affairs of other nations.

B Development of the Interstate System

Before the development of the modern interstate system, people were organized into more mixed and overlapping political units, such as city-states, empires, and feudal fiefs. The modern interstate system arose in Europe, beginning after about AD 1500, when France and Austria emerged as powerful nations. The system grew to encompass the European continent over several centuries, although it long coexisted with other systems such as the Holy Roman Empire. With the colonization of much of the rest of the world by European nations, the European idea of nations was exported globally. After European colonies in Africa and Asia began to win their independence, they also aspired to become recognized as nations in the international system. Today, the legal basis for the universal application of these principles is the charter of the UN. The UN charter, adopted in 1945, explicitly recognizes the central principles of the interstate system.

C Structure of Relationships

Throughout the history of the interstate system, the relationships between nations have been structured in various ways, depending on how power was distributed among them. For example, power may be concentrated in one or two nations, which then set and enforce the rules for other countries. The predominance of one nation is called *hegemony.* Historical examples of hegemony

include Great Britain after 1815 and the United States after 1945—periods when these nations were the most powerful in the world, dominating trade and military relationships.

Power may also be distributed more equally among a half-dozen great powers and other somewhat weaker nations. In this case, alliances between nations play a crucial role in structuring their interactions. Power can also be distributed relatively equally among nations or alliances of nations. This is called a balance of power. Some scholars and political leaders believe that peace is best preserved this way because no one nation can win a war easily. The evidence for this theory, however, is not strong. The opposite proposition, called *power transition theory,* has more support. This theory suggests that peace is most likely when one nation predominates, or when two opposing but equally powerful nations do. In this theory, major wars are likely when a challenger starts to surpass a dominant nation in power.

D Future of the Interstate System

Today, many of the foundations of the interstate system are being challenged by changes in technology and international norms. The idea of territorial integrity and a nation's sovereignty—that is, its absolute authority over its own internal matters—are being undermined. Neither ballistic missiles nor television signals respect borders. Television, the mass media, telephones, and the Internet are erasing the boundaries between nations, blending once-distinct cultures together and expanding transnational connections. Mass communication is also drawing worldwide attention to domestic issues that in the past were of little concern to other nations, such as human rights, the status of women, environmental practices, and democracy. In addition, the territories of nations are changing. Some nations are becoming integrated into larger entities—for example, the European Union. Others are fragmenting into smaller units, as did the Soviet Union.

These changes have led to a debate among scholars about whether the interstate system will survive in its current form or evolve into another system that does not yet exist. Some scholars believe nations—with their different cultural identities, boundaries, and governments—are becoming obsolete. They believe economics is becoming the driving force in international relations, encouraging increased cooperation among nations. They believe that cooperation, along with technological changes, will continue to blur the distinction between nations and the importance of national borders. Other scholars think that the interstate system will endure because nations have military force, and military force still determines what happens in the world and always will. Both are right to some extent. The interstate system of nations remains intact, but it is increasingly overlaid with new forces and realities that respect neither the idea of sovereignty nor borders.