INTRODUCTION TO INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS



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Introduction to International Relations

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Instructor Resources

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1: THINKING ANALYTICALLY IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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1.1: Introduction

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to:

- Define international relations and formulate research questions appropriate to the subfield.
- Differentiate between common terms used in international relations, such as state, political regime, and government.
- Explain and apply the major levels of analysis in international relations (individual, state, systemic, transnational) to interpret real-world events.
- Distinguish between unipolar, bipolar, and multipolar distributions of power in the international system.

Note

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Gebhard, C. (2016). "One World, Many Actors." In S. McGlinchey (Ed.), International Relations (pp. 32-45) [CC BY-NC 4.0]. E-International Relations.

Why do countries sometimes go to war despite knowing that the costs may be catastrophic, such as the Russia-Ukraine War? Are individuals who choose to engage in acts of terrorism acting in a rational manner, such as al-Qaeda members who perpetrated the September 11 attacks? Why do problems like climate change persist, despite treaties like the Paris Agreement? Why do some countries remain poor despite years of foreign aid and development efforts, such as Afghanistan, Haiti, and Liberia? Why does the international community repeatedly fail to protect human rights among the most vulnerable, such as in the Syrian Civil War and the ongoing conflict in Sudan? Who has the power in world politics today—is it powerful countries (e.g., the United States), international organizations (e.g., the United Nations), multinational corporations (e.g., Apple), exceedingly rich individuals (e.g., Elon Musk), or some other actor altogether?

These questions are not simply theoretical. They shape real-world decisions about conflict, environmental policy, international development strategies, and human rights, which affect billions of people. These questions also all fall within the realm of international relations.

International relations is a subfield of political science that focuses on interactions that cross borders. Sometimes referred to as international affairs, international studies, or world politics, international relations traditionally focused on interactions between countries (often referred to as "states" in political science, a term we will define in the next section). Yet, over time, this conventional view broadened to include relationships between various political entities, including international organizations, multinational corporations, and citizens. As illustrated in the opening paragraph, the study of international relations captures a vast array of themes, ranging from diplomacy to conflict, from international law to human rights, and from trade and finance to international development. The sheer number of actors and issues that are relevant to international relations can be overwhelming, making it seem a daunting field to study.

Yet scholars have developed various analytical tools to make studying the complexity of international relations more manageable. In international relations, this kind of analytical sense-making often takes the form of theories, which help us focus on certain aspects of an inherently complex world while filtering out others.

Scholars use theories to explain and interpret real-life events in the form of abstract interpretations and generalized assumptions. On the one hand, theories can be **empirical**, meaning based on measurable experiences, usually through observation or experimentation. For example, a researcher may develop a theory that answers the following: Why did the conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War remain largely nonviolent? This type of theory is empirical; it uses evidence to explain how the world actually works.

On the other hand, theories can be **normative**, meaning that they can build on principles and assumptions about how social interactions should occur. For instance, a researcher may develop a theory that answers the following: Should international organizations force wealthy countries to redistribute their resources to combat global poverty? This type of theory is normative;

it asks how the world *should* work.

Before researchers develop or adopt any specific theories, however, they select the focus of their analysis. Because world politics involves so many different actors, interactions occur at multiple levels: between individuals, between countries, between international institutions, and between groups that cross borders. For example, a researcher might explain the occurrence of a war based on a leader's personality, a country's internal politics, the structure of the international system, and/or the existence of cross-border militia groups. In this chapter, we will formalize these interactions as occurring within various "levels of analysis," a method to structure a researcher's thinking when studying international relations. First, however, we must define a key term—and its related foundational vocabulary—in international relations: the state.

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1.2: The State

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Bozonelos, D, J. Wendt, C. Lee, J. Scarffe, M. Omae, J. Franco, B. Martin, & S. Veldhuis. (2022). "Introduction to States." In Introduction to Comparative Government and Politics [CC BY-NC 4.0]. LibreTexts.

While the previous section repeatedly referred to "country," one of the most frequently used words in the study of political science is "state." As sociologist Max Weber (1946) described during a lecture in 1919, a **state** is "a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory." In simpler terms, a state is a central authority that has the ability to make and enforce laws, rules, and decisions within a specified territory (Frieden, et. al, 2022).

States are the major political actors in global politics. The United Nations (UN), in fact, includes 193 member-states. Yet statehood is contentious. Kosovo, Palestine, and Taiwan are but three examples of contentious statehood; not one of these examples is a UN member-state (though Palestine has non-member observer status). While Kosovo declared independence in 2008, Serbia continues to not recognize it as a state. While Palestine seeks recognition as an independent state in the West Bank and Gaza, Israel opposes this move. And, while Taiwan has its own political and economic systems, China maintains that Taiwan is Chinese territory.

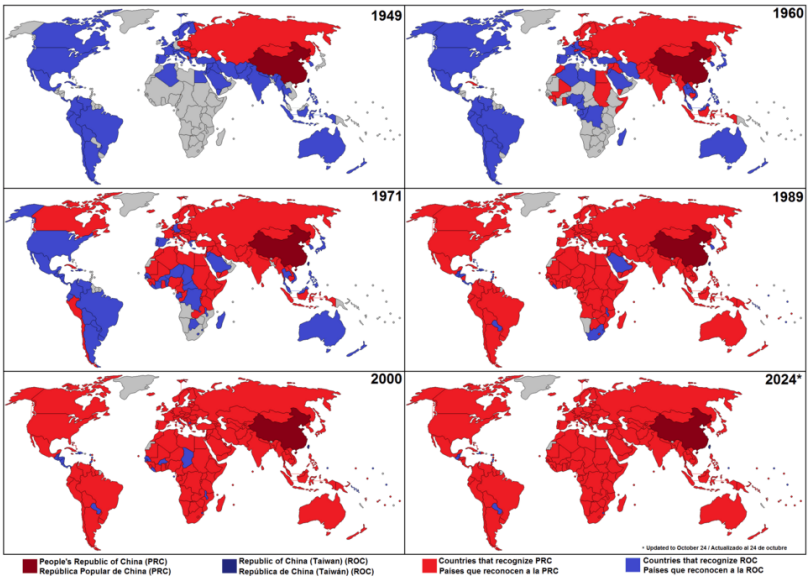


Image 1.2.1: Maps illustrating the struggle between China and Taiwan for international recognition. *(Source: "China vs Taiwan, global struggle for recognition" by Universalis is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0.)*

As the maps above illustrate, the debate over Taiwan (Republic of China, ROC) spans decades, with the number of states recognizing the statehood of either the ROC or the People's Republic of China (PRC) changing significantly over time. In 1949, many states recognized the ROC, yet by 1989, this number dwindled, with the vast majority of states instead recognizing the PRC. By 2024, over 90 percent of UN member-states (181) recognized the PRC.

The contentious nature of statehood makes formalizing its definition of paramount importance. A state must have four defining features: territory, institutions, sovereignty, and legitimacy. Outside of international relations, people often use the terms state, nation, country, political regime, and government interchangeably. Yet within international relations (and political science more generally), each of these terms is distinct.

While a state relates specifically to how a designated territory operates politically through institutions (e.g., legislatures, courts,

the military), a **nation** is broadly defined as a population of people joined by common culture, history, language, and/or ancestry within a designated region or territory. It is therefore possible for a nation to exist without a state. A **country** is similar—and the term that most people tend to use colloquially—but this term can encompass aspects of *both* the nation *and* the state. A **government** is the group of people in charge of running a state. The government therefore changes over time. A **political regime** is the set of rules that structures access to political power within a state, which is typically institutionalized through a state's constitution. If a state has a democratic political regime, for example, political officeholders will access political power through elections.

Spain provides an example to help differentiate these terms. Spain, meaning all of the political institutions that manage the Spanish territory, is a state. Within Spain, there are several nations with unique languages, cultures, and traditions, such as the Basques, the Catalans, and the Galicians. When we speak of Spain as a country, we include both the political institutions making up the state and the diverse nations within the Spanish territory. The leadership in power at a given time—namely, a prime minister and their cabinet—is the Spanish government, which exists within a democratic political regime. When a new election takes place, the government may change, but the state and regime (assuming a peaceful transfer of power) remains the same.

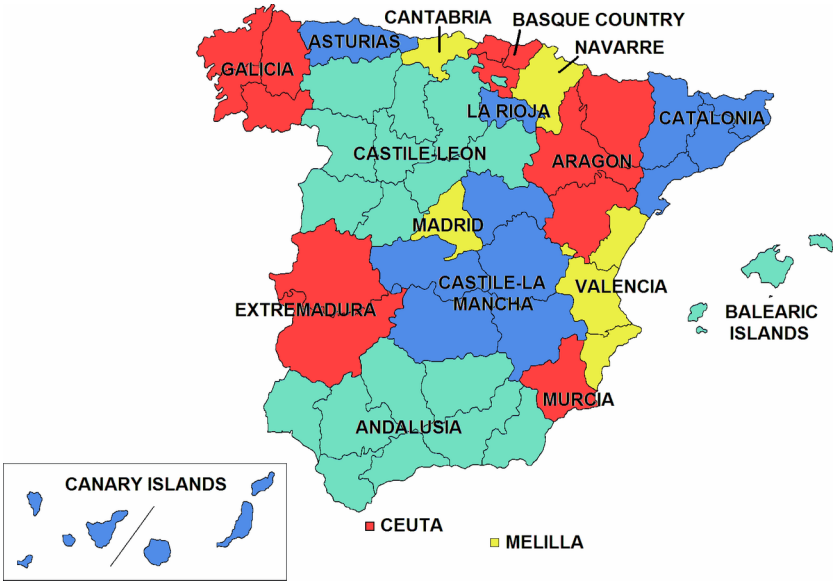


Image 1.2.2: Map showing the nineteen autonomous communities included within the country of Spain. *(Source: "Ccaa-spain" is licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0.)*

Beyond territory and institutions, a state also requires sovereignty and legitimacy. As defined above, a state has the ability to make and enforce laws, rules, and decisions, which requires sovereignty, the ability to independently organize its policies and goals (a term we will cover in more detail in Chapter 2). A state must have **external sovereignty**, the ability to manage the state's affairs independently from outside interference, and **internal sovereignty**, the ability to deflect internal resistance. If a state does not have the ability to manage its own affairs and issues, it will not be able to maintain power.

Whether a state has power, and whether it can operate effectively, depends on its legitimacy. **Legitimacy** is the state's ability to establish itself as a valid power over its citizens. A state's leaders (i.e., its government) can garner legitimacy through multiple means. **Traditional legitimacy** occurs when states have the authority to lead based on historical precedent. For example, the legitimacy of a king may stem from the passing down of the throne through one family over time. **Charismatic legitimacy** occurs when citizens follow the rules of a state based on the charisma and personality of the current leader. **Rational-legal legitimacy** occurs when states derive their authority through firmly established laws, rules, regulations, and procedures.

With these foundational definitions in hand, we shift now to consider how researchers use different "levels of analysis" to explain why events happen in global politics.

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1.3: Levels of Analysis

When we try to understand and analyze highly complex issues, it helps to abstract and group the explanations into a few categories. We call these categories **levels of analysis**, which are simply different ways of explaining why something occurs in world politics. These explanations may focus on individuals, on groups, on states, on groups of states, or on international organizations.

Specifying the level of analysis allows researchers to be clear about what they are most interested in understanding. Depending on which level of analysis a researcher employs, they will come up with different theories and use different analytical tools to learn about the research question that they are trying to answer. The level of analysis will determine the type of information, or evidence, that a researcher needs to gather. It will also ensure that a researcher is aware of the potential gaps in their analysis.

In any research project, there is no "best" or "correct" level of analysis. Rather, looking at explanations across various levels of analysis provides different ways to understand a puzzle. Each offers a unique perspective. These explanations often interconnect and, when considered together, provide a more nuanced and complete explanation for why an event occurred.

Individual

To explain an outcome of interest, a researcher employing the individual level of analysis will focus on the actions of individual decision-makers. These explanations are specific to a person. They may detail how an individual's ego, fear, desire for power, or misperception led to some event. They may also focus on an individual's role in policy-making or diplomacy. Or they may highlight an individual's personal experiences, values, beliefs, or ideology.

As an example, consider the Syrian Civil War that began in March 2011 following protests against the ruling authoritarian regime. At an individual level of analysis, a researcher may focus on the role of former Syrian President Bashar al-Assad (in office from 2000-2024). In response to the protests, Bashar al-Assad chose to swiftly and violently suppress protesters, which escalated the conflict. Bashar al-Assad's use of brutality, eventually leading to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Syrians and the displacement of nearly 14 million people, illustrated his commitment to maintaining an authoritarian regime (CFR Editors, 2024).

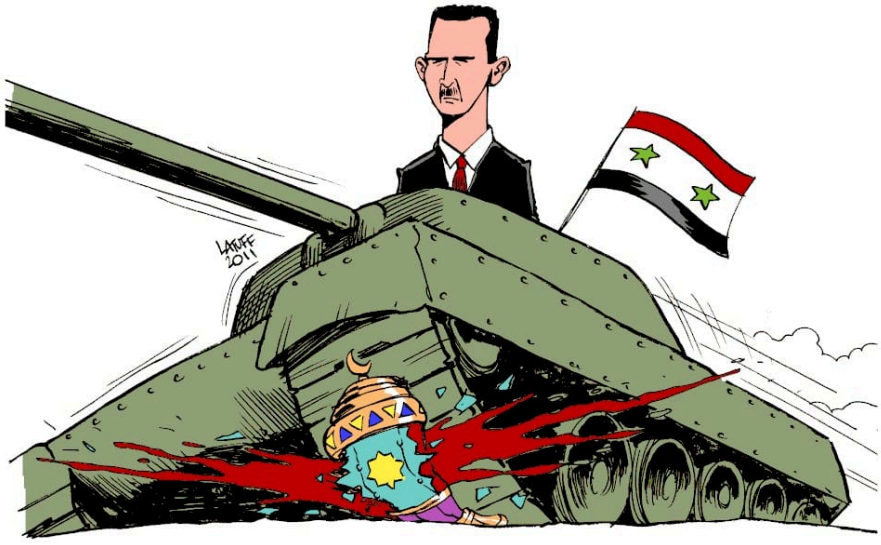


Image 1.3.1: Political cartoon from 2011 places Bashar al-Assad in the driver's seat of a tank enforcing the nationwide crackdown in response to protests against the government. *(Source: "Ramadan Massacre" by Carlos Latuff is in the Public Domain.)*

This explanation focuses on how the motivations and actions of an individual decision-maker influence the outcome of interest (civil war).

State (Domestic)

Zooming out from the focus on an individual, explanations at the state (or domestic) level of analysis focus on a state's internal characteristics. This level of analysis closely examines what is happening *within* a state, such as by analyzing its political regime, domestic institutions, economy, political ideology, or public opinion.

Returning to the Syrian Civil War example, an analyst might focus on Syria's economic woes, including a patronage system that doled out resources to the Alawi Muslim minority (Syria is a Sunni Muslim-majority state) and individuals closely connected to the government. They may also detail agricultural mismanagement and high rates of unemployment (Wendle, 2015). Or, an analyst may focus on Syria's domestic institutions of repression, such as the power of its military, its vast network of intelligence agencies (*al-Mukhabarat*), and its unofficial militias (*shabiha*) (Gardner, 2012).



Image 1.3.2: A social media post in March 2011 calling for a "Day of Rage" protesting conditions of poverty, unemployment, government violence, and corruption in Syria. *(Source: "SyrianAngerRevolution" by Michael Thompson from One Love, Earth is licensed under CC BY 2.0.)*

In each case, the explanation focuses on how internal state dynamics influence the outcome of interest (civil war).

Systemic (International)

Zooming out from explanations focused on the internal makeup of states, explanations at the systemic (or international) level of analysis consider how the international system operates. These may include either regional or global considerations, such as the relative power positions of states (i.e., which states are stronger and which states are weaker), alliance structures, or interactions that occur within international institutions like the United Nations or the World Trade Organization.

In the Syrian Civil War, an analyst might focus on the impact of geopolitical rivalries shown through the competing interests and involvement of external powers. While France, the United Kingdom, and the United States supported anti-regime forces by training and arming rebel fighters, Iran and Russia supported the regime diplomatically and militarily (CFR, 2024).



Image 1.3.3: Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad hold a joint press conference following Russian-Syrian talks in 2010. *(Source: "Dmitry Medvedev in Syria 11 May 2010-4" by Presidential Press and Information Office is licensed under CC BY 4.0.)*

This explanation relies on an understanding of systemic-level forces; that is, how geopolitical rivalries influence the outcome of interest (civil war).

Transnational

The final level of analysis focuses on explanations that are specific to groups whose members span state borders. These are non-state actors and may be multinational corporations, such as Amazon or Coca-Cola; terrorist organizations, such as al-Qaeda; or transnational advocacy networks, such as Amnesty International or Greenpeace. In all cases, these groups pursue their interests by trying to influence *both* domestic *and* international politics.

We can also explain the Syrian Civil War from a transnational level of analysis by focusing on how the rise of Jabhat al-Nusra (al-Qaeda's Syrian franchise) and the Islamic State (also referred to as ISIS, ISIL, and Daesh) influenced the war. These transnational terrorist organizations pulled in foreign recruits, controlled large swaths of territory, fractured rebel forces, and brutally terrorized populations (CFR, 2024).



Image 1.3.4: Jabhat al-Nusra claimed responsibility for bombings in Aleppo, Syria, in October 2012. *(Source: "Saadallah al-Jabiri square, Aleppo, after the explosion of October 2012" by Zyzzzzzy is licensed under CC BY 2.0.)*

Integrating Levels

Each of the explanations at the four levels of analysis above helps an analyst to understand the dynamics influencing the Syrian Civil War. But each level also provides only part of the picture. Comprehensively understanding any event within international relations requires considering multiple levels of analysis. If we focus *only* on Bashar al-Assad, for instance, we will expect to gain insight into his decision-making strategies and leadership style. Yet we may also exaggerate his impact by overlooking the broader influences of the Syrian security forces, international actors, and transnational terrorist organizations. By explicitly acknowledging the level of analysis, an analyst can principle their thinking and identify potential gaps in their explanation. And, over time and by layering insights from different perspectives, researchers can build a more comprehensive understanding.

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1.4: IR in the Real World

On January 3, 2026, the United States (U.S.) launched strikes on Venezuela, capturing and arresting President Nicolás Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores, on allegations related to narco-terrorism, drug trafficking, and possession of weapons. Maduro's ouster came after months of U.S. strikes on boats allegedly transporting drugs and seizures of ships carrying sanctioned Venezuelan oil (Seelke, 2026a).

Yet, in reality, the arrests followed a decade-long economic, social, and political crisis that began in the mid-2010s. In 2013, President Hugo Chávez, who had been in power since 1999, died. During his rule, Chávez enacted many social reforms, using Venezuela's vast oil reserves—the world's largest—to provide subsidized goods and services. Yet economic mismanagement and corruption also characterized his rule, and Venezuela's economy overrelied on its oil exports.

Maduro won the presidency after Chávez's death in 2013 and oil prices began to plummet worldwide soon after. In 2014, oil prices were more than $100 per barrel; in early 2016, oil prices plunged to under $30 per barrel (Roy & Cheatham, 2024). To address the ensuing economic crisis, the Maduro government printed money, which—combined with the effects of international sanctions—led to an increase in unemployment; a collapse in gross domestic product, shrinking by roughly three-quarters between 2014 and 2021; and a surge in hyperinflation, with estimates in 2018 ranging from an annual rate of over 65,000 to over 130,000 percent (Roy & Cheatham, 2024; Statista Research Department, 2026).



Image 1.4.1: Street vendors selling crafts made of "worthless" Venezuelan banknotes, illustrating hyperinflation, in November 2019. *(Source: "Venezuelan Refugees in Bogotá Selling Crafts Made of Worthless Venezuelan Cash (49070277587)" by Reg Natarajan from Vancouver, Bogotá is licensed under CC BY 2.0.)*

Beyond economic impacts, Venezuelans experienced increases in human rights violations and suffered through food, medicine, and electricity shortages. The humanitarian crisis led many Venezuelans to flee (Center for Preventive Action, 2026). As García Arias (2024) reports, "The recent Venezuelan exodus represents the largest displacement of people in Latin American history, comparable in magnitude to the 2015 crisis in war-torn Syria when 23 percent of Syrian nationals fled to neighboring nations."

Politically, claims of fraudulent elections plagued the state throughout this period. Venezuela's National Assembly declared Maduro's reelection in 2018 illegitimate, with opposition leader Juan Guaidó being temporarily recognized as the legitimate interim president by numerous states. The 2024 election faced similar electoral fraud, with clear evidence that opposition candidate Edmundo González Urrutia won. Despite this, Maduro again claimed victory and began his third term.

The complicated nature of the Venezuelan example allows us to see how explanations at different levels of analysis can layer on top of one another. It also provides valuable insight into the **distribution of power**, the allocation of authority and influence among states in the international system (that is, whether power is evenly distributed or concentrated among one or a few states).

We will briefly look at each within the Venezuelan context.

Levels of Analysis

At the individual level of analysis, we can understand Venezuela's crisis through the lens of Maduro's decision-making. By refusing to step down following the elections in 2018 and 2024, and by responding to protests with violent repression, Maduro exacerbated the existing crisis (Berg & Hernandez-Roy, 2024).



Image 1.4.2: Nicolás Maduro at his swearing-in for a second term as president of Venezuela following the contentious 2018 election. *(Source: "Nicolás Maduro 2019 Inauguration" by Presidencia El Salvador is marked with CC0 1.0.)*

At the state (domestic) level of analysis, we can explain Venezuela's crisis through the lens of economic mismanagement, particularly its overreliance on oil exports, and the erosion of democratic institutions and concentration of power in the presidency.

At the systemic (international) level of analysis, we can highlight how the Venezuelan crisis deepened due to the involvement of major competing powers: China, Russia, and the U.S. While China and Russia supported Venezuela economically, buying and investing in its oil industry, the U.S. imposed wide-reaching economic sanctions on any actors involved with antidemocratic actions, corruption, drug-trafficking, human rights violations, the oil industry, and terrorism (Jackson and Li, 2026; Seelke, 2026b). We see that the system-level rivalry among major powers is playing out within Venezuela.

At the transnational level of analysis, we can focus on the role of humanitarian organizations, such as Amnesty International, in reporting human rights abuses and calling for action by the international community. In July 2025, for example, the organization called on the International Criminal Court to investigate enforced disappearances by Venezuelan authorities (Amnesty International, 2025).

Distribution of Power

Above, we considered how each level of analysis can help us to understand the crisis in Venezuela. The systemic (international) level explanation depends fundamentally on the distribution of power in the international system, and this requires a bit more explanation.

The current distribution of power in the international system is **unipolar**, meaning one state (the U.S.) is the dominant superpower. In this system, power is not evenly distributed across the globe. The dominant superpower is often referred to as a **hegemon**. Under the system of U.S. hegemony, the U.S. has exerted significant influence in Venezuela that affected the ongoing crisis, including through its imposition of sanctions, support for opposition movements, diplomatic pressure, military strikes, and forcible removal of a sitting president.



Image 1.4.3: U.S. National Security Advisor John R. Bolton and Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin announcing sanctions against PdVSA, the Venezuelan state-owned oil company, in January of 2019. *(Source: "Mnuchin and Bolton announced sanctions against PDVSA" by The White House is in the Public Domain.)*

Despite the U.S. influence, there remain other strong powers within the international system. Considering the actions of China and Russia, for instance, the Venezuelan crisis appears in some sense to be occurring within a **bipolar** power structure, meaning there are two centers of power (states or blocs of states) with roughly equal influence—in this case, with the U.S. on one side and China and Russia on the other.

Looking regionally rather than globally, we can also see what appears to be a **multipolar** distribution, with three or more states holding roughly similar amounts of power. Within Latin America, states including Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, and Mexico all influence the Venezuelan crisis through their decisions surrounding diplomatic relations, trade relations, and their approaches to dealing with the Venezuelan refugee crisis.

Thinking Analytically

This chapter introduces methods by which researchers aim to think analytically in studying international relations. In the Venezuelan example, the levels of analysis layer upon one another to help explain why the crisis persists. We cannot understand the crisis without considering Nicolás Maduro's leadership, Venezuela's economic and political systems, the geopolitical rivalries between major powers, and the role of transnational actors like humanitarian organizations.

Beyond levels of analysis, we also must consider the distribution of power, both in the international system and regionally, as these power structures influence how the Venezuelan crisis plays out.

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1.5: Conclusion

This concluding section outlines the remaining chapters in the textbook.

The textbook includes four units: foundations of international relations (Chapters 1-2); theoretical approaches to international relations (Chapters 3-5); practice of international relations (Chapters 6-13); and the future of international relations (Chapter 14).

In the foundations unit, Chapter 2 builds on the terminology introduced in Chapter 1 by examining the modern global order through a historical lens. It explores the emergence of the sovereign state, the development of the international system, the causes and consequences of imperialism and colonialism, and the growth of nationalism.

The unit on theoretical approaches introduces major frameworks for understanding international relations. Chapter 3 focuses on realism, highlighting the role of power among states in an international system without a central government. Chapter 4 contrasts realism to liberalism, another major theoretical approach that emphasizes cooperation among states and international institutions. Chapter 5 turns to constructivism and critical theories, including Marxism and feminism, all of which challenge and identify limitations inherent in realism and liberalism.

Moving from theoretical approaches to practical applications, the next unit contains three sub-units: decision-making and conflict (Chapters 6-8); organizations, law, and norms (Chapters 9-11); and international political economy and development (Chapters 12-13).

The first sub-unit begins with foreign policymaking in Chapter 6, then examines the methods, motivations, and justifications used in interstate and interstate war in Chapter 7 and Chapter 8, respectively. The second sub-unit describes international organizations in Chapter 9, then introduces international law and norms in Chapter 10 and human rights in Chapter 11. The third sub-unit shifts to economics, with Chapter 12 describing trade and finance within the international political economy and Chapter 13 examining efforts at international development, including issues of inequality, environmental challenges, and disparities between the Global North and Global South.

In the final unit, the future of international relations, Chapter 14 tackles contemporary global challenges. By examining recent examples related to health, migration, and the rise of non-state actors, the chapter describes how these contemporary challenges are intersecting to redefine the role of the state moving forward.

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1.6: Student Resources

Summary

International relations is a subfield of political science that focuses on interactions that cross borders. Scholars within this subfield use theories to explain and interpret real-life events in the form of abstract interpretations and generalized assumptions. Theories can be empirical, meaning based on measurable experiences, usually through observation or experimentation, or theories can be normative, meaning that they can build on principles and assumptions about how social interactions should occur.

Many theories in international relations focus on the state. The state is a central authority that has the ability to make and enforce laws, rules, and decisions within a specified territory. States are the major political actors in global politics, and their definition differs from terms such as nation, country, government, and political regime. A state requires territory, institutions, sovereignty (internal and external), and legitimacy (charismatic, rational-legal, or traditional).

When creating theories in international relations, there are many different ways of explaining why something occurs. Specifying the level of analysis—whether individual, state (domestic), systemic (international), or transnational—allows researchers to be clear about what they are most interested in understanding. There is no "best" or "correct" level of analysis. Rather, looking at explanations across levels of analysis provides different ways to understand a puzzle.

Beyond the levels of analysis, researchers must consider the distribution of power in the international system when analyzing world politics. They must consider the allocation of authority and influence among states in the international system, whether that distribution is unipolar, bipolar, or multipolar.

Key Terms

- **Bipolar** distribution of power occurs when there are two centers of power (states or blocs of states) with roughly equal influence in the international system.
- **Charismatic legitimacy** occurs when citizens follow the rules of a state based on the charisma and personality of the current leader.
- **Country** is a term often used colloquially to refer to what political scientists call a "state," but it is less precise as it can encompass aspects of both the nation and the state.
- **Distribution of power** is the allocation of authority and influence among states in the international system (that is, whether power is evenly distributed or concentrated among one or a few states).
- **Empirical**, in terms of research in international relations, means based on measurable experiences, usually through observation or experimentation, and aiming to explain how the world *actually* works.
- **External sovereignty** is the ability of a state to manage its affairs independently from outside interference.
- **Government** is the group of people in charge of running a state.
- **Hegemon** is the dominant superpower within a unipolar distribution of power (note that there can also be regional hegemons).
- **Internal sovereignty** is the ability of a state to deflect internal resistance.
- **International relations** is a subfield of political science that focuses on interactions that cross borders.
- **Legitimacy** is the state's ability to establish itself as a valid power over its citizens.
- **Multipolar** distribution of power occurs when three or more states hold roughly similar amounts of power in the international system.
- **Nation** is broadly defined as a population of people joined by common culture, history, language, and/or ancestry within a designated region or territory.
- **Normative**, in terms of research in international relations, means built on principles and assumptions about how social interactions should occur, and aiming to explain how the world *should* work.
- **Political regime** is the set of rules that structures access to political power within a state, which is typically institutionalized through a state's constitution.
- **Rational-legal legitimacy** occurs when states derive their authority through firmly established laws, rules, regulations, and procedures.
- **State** is a central authority that has the ability to make and enforce laws, rules, and decisions within a specified territory.
- **Traditional legitimacy** occurs when states have the authority to lead based on historical precedent.

- **Unipolar** distribution of power occurs when one state acts as the dominant superpower in the international system.

Critical Thinking Questions

1. Consider one of the examples provided showing contentious statehood (Kosovo, Palestine, Taiwan). Given the four required characteristics of a state (territory, institutions, sovereignty, and legitimacy), is this example a state? Why or why not?
2. Choose a recent international event. How can you explain it using each of the four levels of analysis (individual, state, systemic, transnational)? Which explanation do you find the most compelling?
3. Which distribution of power—unipolar, bipolar, or multipolar—do you expect to be the most peaceful? In the future, which distribution of power do you think is most likely?

Suggestions for Further Study

Websites

E-International Relations (open access website covering international relation)

Journal Articles

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2: RISE OF THE MODERN GLOBAL ORDER

2.1: Introduction
2.2: Concert of Europe
2.3: World War I, World War II, and the Cold War
2.4: A New Era of Geopolitics
2.5: IR in the Real World
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2.1: Introduction

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to:

- Trace the development of the modern global order.
- Identify major historical events that shaped the contemporary system.
- Understand the modern concepts and ideologies of nationalism and fascism.
- Analyze the post-Cold War era to assess how recent global events reshaped the international system.

The modern global order has its roots in medieval Europe, with several major events marking its rise and its consequences. For the purposes of this chapter, we will focus on three of these rooting events. The first is the Fall of Constantinople in 1453, where the Ottoman Empire defeated the ailing Eastern Roman Empire. The second is the conclusion of the Thirty Years' War and the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, which ended religious supremacy in Europe. The third is the rise and fall of Napoleon, which convulsed the entire European continent. Each of these events left a lasting impact on the modern global order.

Before discussing these events, it is crucial to note that history did not only happen in Europe. Great civilizations flourished around the world—in China, in India, and across many areas of the African continent (among other locations). Why emphasize Europe? Both in theory and practice, contemporary international relations roots itself in the European experience.

Several major attributes of the modern global order were born in Europe. These include the emergence of the sovereign state as the most powerful political unit; the development of the international state system; the causes and continuing consequences of imperialism and colonialism; and the growth of nationalism, resulting in World War I and World War II. In this section, we will describe the Fall of Constantinople, the Thirty Years' War, and the Napoleonic Wars, connecting these rooting events with the themes of sovereignty and nationalism. In subsequent sections, we will expand on how these themes evolved and expanded as key attributes of the modern international system in the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries.

Fall of Constantinople

The first major event is the Fall of Constantinople in 1453, today known as Istanbul in modern Turkey. Constantinople was the capital city of the Eastern Roman Empire, also referred to as the Byzantine Empire, which survived for over 1,000 years. In 1453, the Byzantine Empire fell to the Ottoman Empire.



Image 2.1.1: This painting, circa 1460, depicts the siege of Constantinople, which had occurred just a few years before. *(Source: "Siege constantinople bnf fr269," attributed to Philippe de Mazerolles from the Bibliothèque nationale de France Manuscript Français 2691 folio CCXLVI v [2], is in the Public Domain.)*

The lands that the Byzantine Empire controlled, mostly Anatolia and the Balkans, contained major trading routes to the Chinese Empire and to the Indian subcontinent, including the Silk Road. Once the Ottoman Empire completed its conquest of the former Byzantine lands, they largely cut off European access to these roads and ports. This led European states to begin exploring alternative ways to reach Asia, such as by journeying by sea around the southern tip of Africa to arrive at the Indian Ocean. However, this voyage was quite perilous and fraught with complications.

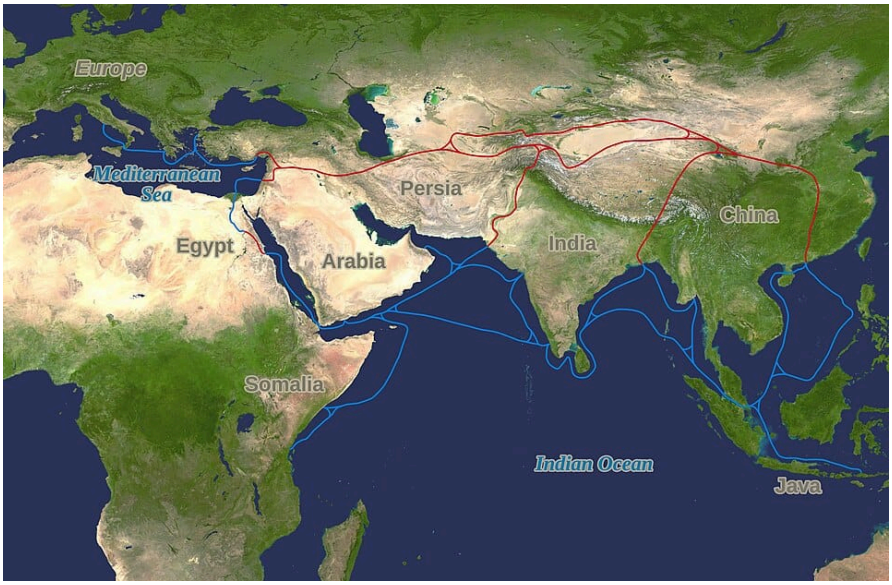


Image 2.1.2: The Silk Road as it extended from Europe through Asia, with overland routes shown in red, and maritime routes shown in blue. *(Source: "Silk Route" by NASA/Goddard Space Flight Center derivative work: Splette (talk) is in the Public Domain.)*

The lack of access to land routes to Asia and the difficult sea routes around Africa led Europeans to explore new ways to trade, often referred to as the Age of Discovery (or Age of Exploration), a period characterized by trade and colonization. This period illustrates two major interconnected developments that characterize the modern global order: imperialism and colonialism. **Imperialism** is the expansion of authority over territories and their residents, usually distant, typically achieved through military conquest. **Colonialism** is the settlement of people from a colonizing state within territories inhabited by indigenous populations, typically carried out in conjunction with imperial expansion and the assertion of political and economic control.

While imperialism is not a new approach, the modern European variant was set apart for three reasons. The first was the aforementioned search for trade routes to Asia for high-value commodities. The second was the desire to strengthen the European home state through a military buildup. The third was European superiority in technology, most notably in shipbuilding and weaponry. Indeed, the revolution in seafaring was critical to the success of European imperialism, serving as a safety valve for a rapidly growing population that needed access to scarce resources.

Historically, most empires were isolated from one another and geographical limitations existed on their possible territorial expansion. These empires often concentrated on control of trade routes, such as the Silk Road. The rise of European empires in the 1500s inexorably globalized world politics as few regions or peoples could isolate themselves. Given their military advantages, Europeans emphasized territorial conquest to consolidate their wealth, the impetus for colonization. Colonialism generally took two forms: settler colonialism, where immigrants displaced indigenous populations and established dominant societies, and elite colonialism, where European powers replaced local rulers but left the native population largely intact.

North America and Australia are prime examples of settler colonialism, while South Asia experienced elite colonialism. The Caribbean saw settler control through plantation economies reliant on enslaved Africans, and Latin America reflected a hybrid model. In Africa, settler colonialism occurred mainly in places like South Africa, Kenya, and Algeria. In Asia, Siberia was settled by Russians, while states like Indonesia and the Philippines were governed by European elites. Japan modernized rapidly to avoid colonization, and China, though not formally colonized, was subjected to foreign spheres of influence and unequal treaties.

Thirty Years' War

The second major event is the conclusion of the Thirty Years' War, which ended religious supremacy in Europe. The Thirty Years' War originated as a religious conflict between Catholics and Protestants within the Holy Roman Empire and brought widespread devastation to Europe. Over time, it evolved into a broader political struggle involving multiple European powers. Ultimately, the war ended not through decisive victory, but through mutual exhaustion and financial ruin.

The **Peace of Westphalia**, consisting of two main treaties, formally ended the Thirty Years' War in 1648, a pivotal moment for the study of international relations. Three important concepts came out of this treaty: the notion of sovereignty, the establishment of national militaries, and the rise to prominence of certain European states that shaped the modern world order through imperialism and colonialism.

First, the notion of sovereignty emerged from the Peace of Westphalia. **Sovereignty** is the principle that each state is fundamentally equal in legal terms and free to act independently without the consent of any higher authority. Before the Peace of Westphalia, the Catholic Church—through its ecclesiastical hierarchy of bishops, archbishops, and ultimately the Pope—held political power; royal and military leaders needed the blessing of their respective religious authority. After the Peace of Westphalia, sovereignty formally shifted to the secular authorities within each area, with kings, princes and other political monarchical leaders often taking the title of "sovereign" to reflect this power. With this secular shift, the Peace of Westphalia required that the constituent states of the Holy Roman Empire tolerate private worship, respect liberty of conscience, and allow religious minorities and dissenters the freedom to emigrate.



Image 2.1.3: "Sovereignty" is included among the allegorical figures in the 1654 painting, "Allegory of the Peace of Westphalia" by Jacob Jordaens. *(Source: "Allegory of the Peace of Westphalia" by Jacob Jordaens - Nasjonalmuseet is in the Public Domain.)*

Second, after observing the devastation wrought by mercenaries in war, the Peace of Westphalia led states to establish their own permanent national militaries. The growth of national militaries directly led to the centralization of power in national governments and weakened the power of subnational actors (e.g., clan leaders). Because governments had to collect taxes to pay for these militaries, national leaders assumed absolute control over the troops. This led to the development of strong state structures, which in turn meant stable states with large standing national armies.

Third, an increased warmaking capacity developed after the Peace of Westphalia, which allowed certain European states to become geopolitically powerful through war, ultimately creating "empires," such as the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Russian Empire, the Prussian Empire, the French Empire, and the British Empire. Well-known sociologist Charles Tilly wrote that "war made the state, and the state made war" (1975, p. 42). Through military force, these states conquered, annexed, and sometimes colonized other parts of the world in order to create vast empires. European military dominance helps to explain why these large worldwide empires lasted well into the 1970s.



Image 2.1.4: This 1888 American cartoon depicts the long reach of the British Empire, showing John Bull (England) as an Imperial Octopus with its hands extending into various regions of the world. *(Source: "English imperialism octopus" by unknown artist is in the Public Domain.)*

Napoleonic Wars

The third major event is the rise of Napoleon Bonaparte, which convulsed the entire European continent. The rise of Napoleon is a result of the French Revolution, which began in 1789 as a response to immense poverty and famine among the people. While the aristocracy and clergy lived relatively comfortable lives, the poor suffered hardships. The French Revolution led to a decade of instability and the removal of the French monarchy. This instability led to the rise of Napoleon, a military commander, who was able to rally the French troops and the French people around their state.



Image 2.1.5: Napoleon in his role of First Consul of the French Republic. *(Source: "Napoleon Bonaparte (1798) Andrea Appiani" by Ed Bierman is licensed under CC BY 2.0.)*

Napoleon unified a fractious France and believed that expanding French influence throughout Europe would solidify France's position as a world power. Led by Napoleon, France fought seven major conflicts in the span of approximately 12.5 years (1803-1815), conquering most of Europe. Despite having, at times, a smaller army than his adversaries, Napoleon employed

the concept of mass conscription and brilliantly used military tactics. He also embraced **total war**, a form of war in which a whole society becomes involved in a conflict, by shifting the entire economy to support his battlefield victories. These and other revolutionary military developments set the stage for modern warfare.

Throughout the Napoleonic Wars, Britain often played spoiler, blockading France with its Royal Navy or forming various coalitions with other states to prevent Napoleon from achieving his strategic goals. In response, Napoleon created the Continental System, where he prohibited any trade between Britain and areas of Europe that France had conquered. In 1812, Napoleon invaded Russia, one of Britain's few trading partners in Europe. He believed that cutting off Russia would finally cripple Britain economically and thus end British hegemony on the open seas. Napoleon's invasion, however, was an unmitigated disaster. Even though he led a force of close to 500,000 soldiers and encountered smaller opposition forces, the Russians employed a scorched earth strategy, denying French soldiers adequate supplies for the winter. By the time Napoleon's troops reached Moscow, they included fewer than 100,000 soldiers, and only a fraction of those survived in their return march to Paris. This strategic miscalculation by Napoleon eventually led to his final defeat at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815.

An important development for the modern international system that came out of the Napoleonic Wars was the rise and spread of nationalism. **Nationalism**, according to Britannica, is "an ideology that elevates one nation or nationality above all others and that places primary emphasis on promotion of its culture and interests as opposed to those of other nations, nationalities, or supranational groups." A **nation** is broadly defined as a population of people joined by common culture, history, language, and/or ancestry within a designated region or territory. The Napoleonic Wars promoted French nationalism, yet also ignited anti-French sentiments in the areas conquered by Napoleon, promoting a desire for national unity and autonomy within those areas. The Napoleonic Wars therefore helped to spread the idea that each nation should have its own independent state.

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2.2: Concert of Europe

Following Napoleon's defeat in 1815, Europe entered a period of relative peace for almost 100 years (until the start of World War I in 1914). The **Concert of Europe** describes the geopolitical order in Europe during this period, characterized by agreement to maintain the existing balance of power among the so-called "great powers."

Congress of Vienna

The Concert of Europe came out of the **Congress of Vienna**, a landmark diplomatic gathering (1814-15) among representatives of Austria, France, Great Britain, Prussia, and Russia that aimed to reshape Europe, restore order, and prevent future upheaval in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars. The Congress of Vienna aimed to reestablish a balance of power, contain France, and reinforce conservative monarchies. France's borders were rolled back to their 1789 lines, and successive French governments were forced to pay indemnities. Surrounding nations were fortified to curb French aggression, and the German Confederation was created as a loose alliance of German-speaking states. These decisions helped to guarantee the neutrality of buffer states.

During the resulting Concert of Europe, a cooperative period, leaders of the major powers periodically met to discuss military aggression on the continent. "The Congress," as they were called, based their efforts on the idea that collective security would maintain the political status quo and preserve the strategic balance of power in Europe. **Collective security** is an arrangement where states agree to defend each other against any aggressor. The fact that no major continental war occurred is surprising given the vast changes taking place during this time period. In addition, industrialization spread throughout Western Europe, leading rural masses to flock to cities, scrambling for an economic advantage. As these new middle classes gained power, they focused on internal struggles for independence, rather than on international war efforts.

The spread of nationalism during this period fueled this internal focus, convincing many that they would be better off with their own political structure in the form of an independent state. The Greek Revolution, lasting from 1821-1830, was the first of many wars of independence that took place in the 1800s, particularly in the Ottoman and Russian Empires, which were multiethnic and multireligious in their composition. Other nationalist struggles included the successful Serbian, Romanian, Bulgarian, and Albanian efforts to secure independence. Similarly, many ethnolinguistic groups within the Russian Empire objected to the Russification imposed by imperial authorities, leading to wide-ranging resistance movements—from Polish, Ukrainian, and Finnish groups in the western areas; to the Tartars in Crimea; to various nationalist groups in the Caucasus region, including Armenians, Azeris, and Georgians.



Image 2.2.1: Artwork representing a pivotal moment of the Greek Revolution when a small fire ship ambushed and destroyed the Ottoman frigate 'Mansourija' on the evening of May 27, 1821. *(Source: "The burning of the Ottoman frigate at Eressos by Dimitrios Papanikolis" by Konstantinos Volanakis is in the Public Domain.)*

Even when not conducting wars of independence, groups of people with ethnolinguistic similarities who were scattered across imperial borders, or were fragmented into smaller entities, pushed for political unity. One notable development was Italian unification, or "Risorgimento," where through a series of military conflicts, almost all Italian-speaking regions in Europe were unified into one polity: the Kingdom of Italy. Another development was the unification of Germany, where most of the German-speaking areas of Central Europe united under the leadership of a Prussian Diplomat, Otto von Bismarck. The unification of two larger geographical states in Europe scrambled the existing great power dynamics and led Italy and Germany to start their own colonial empires.

Scramble for Africa

The so-called **Scramble for Africa** was an era in which European powers divided the African continent through conquest and conflict. While the colonization of Africa existed for centuries, most notably by the Portuguese, prior to the late 1800s, most of this action centered on ports and the exportation of certain crops and slavery to the Americas. By the late 1800s, European explorers had traveled throughout most of the continent, revealing its extant wealth, including natural resources and minerals necessary for further industrialization. These discoveries led to a series of conflicts between European powers on the African continent, prompting calls for a conference to avoid all-out war. The **Berlin Conference** was a series of negotiations, extending from November 15, 1884 to February 26, 1885, that legalized the partition of Africa. Representatives from 14 states attended the Berlin Conference, yet the conference excluded indigenous African leaders.

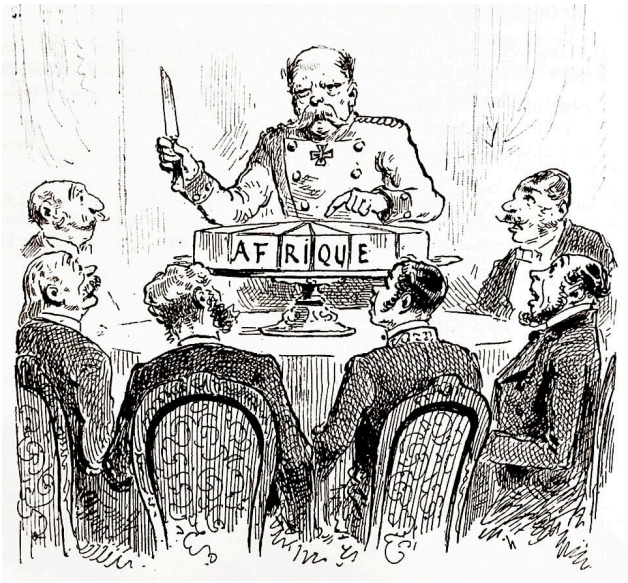


Image 2.2.2: A political cartoon from the time of the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885 depicts the Chancellor of Germany, Otto von Bismarck, cutting a cake labeled "Africa," while other conference delegates watch in shock. *(Source: "Berlin Conference, 1884–85" by Jackinthelight is dedicated to the public domain under CC0.)*

The Berlin Conference had a lasting effect on Africa and on African societies, rapidly accelerating colonization. In 1880, approximately 10 percent of the African continent was colonized; by the time of World War I, nearly 90 percent of Africa was under European control. European powers looted the continent, transporting immense quantities of natural resources; subjugated cultures; and imposed European social systems in the name of "civilization."

Such imperial conquest and colonization of African territories set the stage for future political violence. French West Africa, for example, was a federation of French colonies that encompassed the current states of Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Senegal from 1895 to 1958. Located in the Sahel region, where the Sahara Desert transitions into savannah grasslands, some of these states experience ongoing instability—such as military coups d'état and terrorism—today.

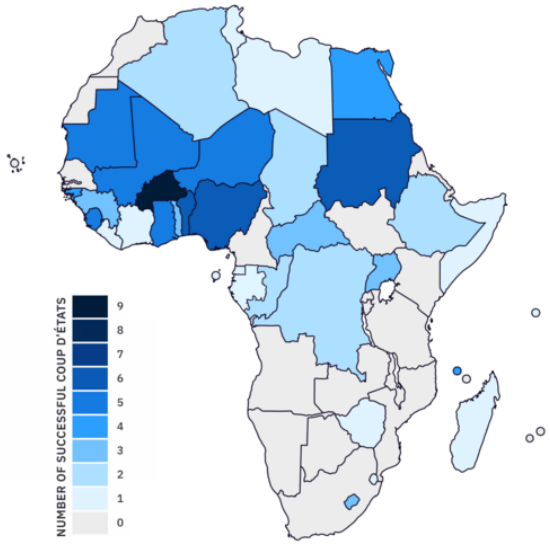


Image 2.2.3: This map represents the high number of successful coups d'état, as of August 2023, concentrated in what is referred to as the "Coup Belt" across West, Central, and the Sahel region of Africa. *(Source: "Coup-detats-in-Africa-Aug2023" by Jgcab is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0.)*

Decline of the Ottoman Empire

While European states were scrambling to become global empires, another was crumbling. The Ottoman Empire was a major force in European politics for more than 500 years, conquering not only Constantinople, but the rest of Asia Minor, Greece, and the Balkans. The Ottoman Empire also neutralized Persia and conquered most of the Middle East, including the two holiest cities in Islam, Mecca and Medina. By consolidating much of the Islamic world under one banner, the Ottoman Empire made a strong claim to being the protector and benefactor of Islam.

While the Ottoman territorial conquests brought significant economic gains, they also led to the creation of a bloated bureaucracy and an untenable political structure where governance was by religious community, rather than by territory. Called the Millet System, this governance structure provided wide autonomy in which religious groups, such as Orthodox Christians, could govern their own affairs on religious matters, including marriage, legal disputes, and taxation.

This inefficient bureaucracy, combined with constant internal political turmoil and a failure to industrialize, led to the perception that the Ottoman Empire was weak and vulnerable. Referred to as the "Sick Man of Europe," the Ottoman Empire experienced economic decline and military weakness, leading to significant territorial losses. In the 19th and 20th centuries, independence movements in the Balkans, Russian imperial conquests in the Caucasus region and present-day Ukraine, and Austro-Hungarian advances in Bosnia and Herzegovina combined to destabilize the Ottoman Empire. Finally, in the Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913, the Ottomans lost almost all of their territory in Europe. This chaos helped sparked World War I and the eventual end of the Ottoman Empire.

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2.3: World War I, World War II, and the Cold War

Complex relations among the European states before 1914 created the context for WWI. The first was the rise of Germany in Central Europe. Germany's unification and growing power worried its neighbors, especially France and Russia. At the same time, Germany felt encircled by potential enemies. Germany's ambitious naval construction program alarmed Great Britain and precipitated a naval arms race that only increased tensions. After 1890, the system of flexible alliances that developed out of the Congress of Vienna began to be replaced by rigid strategic alignments, including the Russo-French Alliance, the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, and the Anglo-French Entente. These alliances were designed to prevent a major war, but their net effect was that if two of the great powers went to war, the rest would quickly follow.

Economic changes also contributed to competition between European powers. These included population growth and industrial capacity development throughout much of Europe in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. However, some states grew much faster than others. For example, Germany progressed rapidly, easily outdistancing Great Britain as the world's leading economic power (along with the United States). As Germany challenged Great Britain for political influence, the British shifted their overall strategy from containment of Russia and France to containment of Germany.

Adding to the competitive atmosphere, the great powers felt that resources from their colonial empires were vital to their security. They often clashed over spheres of influence that extended from their colonies. They also played **realpolitik** with nationalism, focusing on pragmatic rather than moral objectives. By suppressing independence movements within their own borders while encouraging them in their neighbors and rivals, great power competition threatened not only domestic state security but also the states' multinational empires.

Finally, European powers developed several military strategies that contributed to the outbreak of World War I. One example is the "cult of the offensive," a belief in the superiority of offensive forces and weapons, coupled with a complete disregard for defensive positions. Another example is the Schlieffen Plan, where Germany planned for victory in a two-front war. The plan was to quickly defeat France and then turn their attention eastward toward Russia. However, once war began, both military strategies quickly failed.

Dissolution of the Imperial System

World War I started with the assassination of Austro-Hungarian Archduke Franz Ferdinand by a Bosnian Serb nationalist, leading Austria-Hungary to declare war on Serbia. What was expected to be a regional war in the Balkans quickly spread when alliance obligations kicked in. When the war started in 1914, the great powers expected a short and relatively bloodless war. However, the initial offensives all failed and, by 1915, all fronts had bogged down into static trench warfare. The stalemate on all fronts, the scale of the war, and new military technology resulted in horrific casualties, with estimates (excluding those who were killed in concurrent national revolutions) of over 37 million casualties, including 8.5 million deaths (Britannica, 2026).



Image 2.3.1: A few minutes after this photograph was taken on June 28, 1914, Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria and his wife, Sophie, were assassinated while being driven through Sarajevo. *(Source: "Postcard for the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo" by Walter Tausch is licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0.)*

The end of major combat in November 1918 led European powers to pursue traditional realpolitik goals at the Paris Peace Conference, which convened in January 1919 to establish the terms of peace. While U.S. President Woodrow Wilson hoped to use the conference to create a new world order based on mutual respect and cooperation, the document formally ending the war, the Treaty of Versailles (1919), did not accomplish these goals. It led to the creation of the League of Nations, intended to provide for collective security. However, the League was mostly powerless and consistently failed to punish aggressors, such as during Japanese invasions of China in the 1930s.

In addition, World War I had major implications for the imperial system. The Russian Revolution, for example, led to the dissolution of the Russian Empire. In November 1917, continued political and economic crises in Russia, combined with Russian defeats in the war and huge casualties, precipitated the Bolshevik Revolution. The victorious Communists signed a peace treaty with Germany and German forces occupying parts of the Russian Empire, such as Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and Finland.

The Treaty of Versailles, moreover, forced Germany to cede the border region of Alsace-Lorraine to France and the territory to create a new Poland as a buffer state between Germany and the newly formed Soviet Union (USSR). The Austro-Hungarian Empire dissolved entirely into smaller states and the Ottoman Empire collapsed in the ensuing years, leading to the independence of Arab territories in the Middle East and the creation of an ethnically Turkish state.

Defeating Fascism

The Treaty of Versailles angered many and satisfied no one. Some national groups were given self-determination, such as the Czechs, Serbs, and Poles, but others were not, such as Arabs who remained under British and French protection, and German linguistic groups, which came under the control of newly independent states. The new government of Germany, the Weimar Republic, was forced to sign the treaty, which many Germans saw as humiliating. In addition, the U.S. refused to sign the Treaty of Versailles, later signing a separate peace treaty and embarking on a period of isolationism in foreign affairs. The U.S. therefore did not join the League of Nations, effectively ensuring the failure of a collective security system.

Under the Treaty of Versailles, the German government had to pay reparations to the victorious Allied Powers, but was financially unable to do so. The stock market crash in 1929, the ensuing contraction of world trade, and the subsequent economic depression led to an era of hyperinflation in Germany. **Hyperinflation** is when there is a rapid increase in the price of goods and services, usually measured as exceeding 50 percent in a given month. With paralysis in Germany's political and economic systems, many Germans looked toward the strong hand of Adolf Hitler, the leader of the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP), also called the Nazi Party. The Nazis won parliamentary elections in 1933, and Hitler was appointed as chancellor. Hitler immediately began to rescind parts of the Treaty of Versailles, promising to restore German national pride.

World War II began in earnest when Germany and (shortly thereafter) the USSR invaded Poland in 1939, formally partitioning the country. This, in turn, led Britain and France to declare war on Germany, and the conflict spiralled. Japan had moved aggressively in East Asia and the Indo-Pacific in the preceding years, annexing vast territories in their bid to create an empire. For example, the Japanese invasion of Manchuria, modern northeastern China, began in 1931. However, it was the Japanese bombing of the U.S. Naval Base at Pearl Harbor that led the U.S. to declare war on Japan in 1941, formally entering the conflict. Over the period 1939-1945, World War II led to the deaths of 40 to 50 million people. Germany unconditionally surrendered on May 8, 1945. A few months later—and only after the U.S. detonated atomic bombs over the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, killing anywhere from 150,000 to 246,000—Japan formally surrendered on September 2, 1945.



Image 2.3.2: On May 8, 1945, in Berlin, Germany, military generals signed the Act of Unconditional Military Surrender of the German Armed Forces. *(Source: "WWII, German Surrender, General P. F. Stumpf, Luftwaffe Commander (left), Field Marshall Wilhelm Keitel, General Admiral Hans George Friedburg" by photolibrarian is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.)*

The Superpower Confrontation

Elation over the end of World War II quickly turned to tension as the U.S. and the USSR, the two remaining superpowers, came into confrontation in a bipolar international system. With an "Iron Curtain" dividing Europe—with non-communist states in Western Europe aligned with the U.S. and communist states aligned with the USSR in Eastern Europe— the U.S. aimed to prevent the USSR from further advancing communism. The Cold War emerged, with the two superpowers engaging in intense diplomatic and military rivalry, characterized by distrust, engagement in proxy wars, and the buildup of nuclear weapons.

As one example of the U.S. approach in the early Cold War period, the Truman Doctrine of 1947 promised to provide U.S. aid to any state resisting communist insurgencies; as another, the Marshall Plan provided massive economic aid to war-demolished European states. The Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan were based on the U.S. strategic doctrine of containment, which aimed to prevent communist expansion. The Marshall Plan, in particular, had three lasting effects: It revitalized Western European economies, which proved to be a valuable market for U.S. goods; it thwarted communist influence in Western European democracies; and it facilitated European economic and political integration, helping to reduce underlying tensions that had previously led to war.

Distrust characterized the interactions between the U.S. and the USSR during the Cold War. One example of this distrust was the 1948 Berlin Blockade, where the USSR closed all land access routes to the Western-occupied sectors of the split city of Berlin. The U.S. responded by successfully organizing a massive airlift of basic necessities, reinforcing the USSR's aggressive reputation in the West. The USSR and the Western Allies took independent steps to set up governments in their occupied zones of Germany, eventually leading to two independent states of West Germany and East Germany. Another example of distrust stems from the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1949, an alliance including Canada, the U.S., and Western European states. In response, the USSR created the Warsaw Pact in 1954, an alliance between the USSR and its client states in Eastern Europe.



Image 2.3.3: Lieutenant Gail Halvorsen, "The Candy Bomber," greets children of isolated West Berlin sometime during 1948-49 after dropping candy bars and gum from the air on tiny parachutes during the Berlin Blockade. *(Source: "Berlin Airlift" by Airman Magazine is licensed under CC BY-NC 2.0.)*

Proxy wars, armed conflicts where one or more major powers support opposing sides through funding, weapons, or training, rather than fighting directly themselves, additionally characterized this period. As only three examples, in Korea (1950-53), the U.S. backed non-communist South Korea while the USSR and China supported communist North Korea; in Vietnam (1954-75), the U.S. supported non-communist South Vietnam while the USSR and China backed communist North Vietnam; and in El Salvador (1979-92), the U.S. backed the non-communist government in the Salvadoran Civil War (1979-92) while the USSR backed a left-wing rebel group. By supporting the opposing sides, the two superpowers avoided direct confrontation.

By avoiding direct confrontation, the superpowers also avoided potential nuclear war. The 1950s, in particular, saw an arms race—the buildup of nuclear (and conventional) weapons on both sides. This led to a situation of **mutually assured destruction (MAD)**, where each side had enough nuclear weapons to completely destroy the other. MAD was coupled with having **second-strike capability**, where each side had nuclear weapons that could survive a first strike, thereby disincentivizing a surprise attack. Both the U.S. and USSR aimed to develop enough nuclear weapons to destroy the other side, even if the other side was the first to strike. MAD was therefore seen as a deterrent to nuclear war, though it created a dangerous situation (particularly during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, an event we will return to later in this textbook).

In May 1972, U.S. President Richard Nixon and Soviet Premier Leonid Brezhnev met at the Moscow Summit, leading to a situation of détente, an easing of hostilities, between the U.S. and USSR. As one example, the two states agreed to cooperate on arms control, culminating in the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT I) and the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty.

Yet the U.S. and the USSR had different goals and expectations for détente. By giving the USSR a "stake in the system," the U.S. hoped to avoid confrontations and challenges to each other's vital interests. The USSR regarded détente as a recognition of political equivalence and expected the Cold War competition to continue. Soviet leaders saw no contradiction between détente and continued support for "national liberation movements." As one example, the USSR invaded Afghanistan in 1979 in an attempt to install a strongly pro-Soviet regime. Western states and those in the developing world widely denounced this action, with Western states placing economic sanctions on the USSR and the U.S. withdrawing its athletes from the 1980 Moscow Olympics. Eventually, Soviet forces withdrew from Afghanistan in 1988 after failing to defeat an insurgency.



Image 2.3.4: The last Soviet troop column crosses the Soviet border after leaving Afghanistan on February 15, 1989. *(Source: "RIAN archive 58833 Withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan (cropped)" by A. Solomonov / А. Соломонов is licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0.)*

The election of U.S. President Ronald Reagan in 1980 changed the trajectory of the Cold War. Referred to as the Reagan Doctrine, the new president pledged to return to a more assertive form of containment by abandoning détente. Reagan labeled the USSR as the "evil empire" and increased U.S. support for anticommunist insurgencies, including those in Angola, Cambodia, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua.

In 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev assumed leadership of the USSR. He ushered in new policies to try to reverse what he perceived as a decline in Soviet power. Glasnost (openness) and Perestroika (economic restructuring) led to liberalization of political and economic affairs in the USSR, eventually spreading to Eastern Europe. Mass uprisings resulted in the collapse of communist regimes as the USSR refused to prop up their allies. In 1989, the Berlin Wall fell. In August 1991, an abortive coup d'état by hardline communists in the USSR failed. At the end of December 1991, the USSR ceased to exist, formally ending the Cold War.

A New World Order?

The end of the Cold War ushered in an era of American hegemony, with U.S. culture, economics, and military and diplomatic policies dominating global affairs. Parallel to the unprecedented rise of American power was the intense rise of **globalization**, the acceleration and intensification of global interconnectivity, interdependence, and integration processes. These processes included the development of a global financial system, increasing trade, foreign direct investment, and financial flows, and leading to global supply chains.

With the conclusion of the Cold War in the late 1980s, a number of thinkers and policymakers in the West argued that liberal democracy and market capitalism had emerged as the dominant—and perhaps final—form of political and economic organization. In this optimistic outlook, a "new world order" would arise, characterized by peaceful international cooperation and the integration of nations into a single global marketplace. Countries would still pursue national interests, but only within a shared framework of values emphasizing human rights, democratic governance, and economic openness.

At the heart of this vision was the belief that economic liberalization, democratization, and global prosperity could go hand in hand. As global trade and investment flows increased, it was expected that broader segments of the world's population would benefit from economic growth. Interdependence—both political and economic—was seen as a stabilizing force that would discourage violent conflict, align national interests, and encourage mutual support for liberal democratic values. International institutions were to serve as key vehicles for this process of globalization. Bodies such as the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, and the International Monetary Fund were envisioned as platforms through which global norms could be negotiated and upheld for the collective good. In this hopeful scenario, globalization promised not only material wealth but also a new sense of global solidarity. The expansion of market-based policies, the proliferation of democratic systems, and the recognition of individual rights were expected to enhance human welfare on an unprecedented scale, offering the prospect of a more

interconnected, prosperous, and peaceful world.

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2.4: A New Era of Geopolitics

Yet this utopian vision has been punctuated by a number of crises that have led many to question if globalization has merit. The first crisis is the September 11, 2001 (9/11) terrorist attacks in the U.S., orchestrated by Osama bin Laden and his terrorist organization, al-Qaeda. The destruction of the World Trade Center in New York City and the damage to the Pentagon was the first direct attack on U.S. soil since the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941. The World Trade Center was specifically targeted as it represented the nerve center of the global financial world. The response to the 9/11 attacks was extensive. Referred to as the War on Terror, the first action was a multinational military campaign against the Taliban in Afghanistan that same year. The second action was the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, which toppled the authoritarian regime of Sadaam Hussein, but ultimately descended into a civil war between various subnational actors. U.S. forces pulled out of Iraq in 2011 and out of Afghanistan in 2021.



Image 2.4.1: Six months after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, military representatives from 29 states of the worldwide coalition on the war against terrorism are shown here, with U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld speaking at The Pentagon. (Source: "Defense.gov News Photo 020311-D-2987S-018" By Helene C. Stikkel for the United States Department of Defense is in the Public Domain.)

The War on Terror extended into the 2010s with the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS, also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant and the Islamic State), a terrorist organization that emerged from the end of the War in Iraq and the pullout of U.S. troops. ISIS differed from most terrorist organizations as it was the first to control territory, self-financed through the sale of oil assets. ISIS leadership claimed religious authority centered in the proclamation of a caliphate, an area under the leadership of an Islamic authority. Close to 15,000 foreign fighters from 80 different countries fought for ISIS, attracted by its utopian goals. Yet the organization was brutal in its tactics, which included beheadings, mass executions, rapes, sexual enslavement, taking hostages for ransom, and the destruction of cultural antiquities. ISIS was largely defeated in the late 2010s by a combination of security forces in Iraq and Syria, backed by outside military powers.

The second crisis is the Global Financial Crisis of 2008, which highlighted the vulnerabilities of economic interdependence. A housing market bubble burst in the U.S., caused by risky policies and bad assumptions, including subprime mortgages and a belief that housing prices would continue to rise. This economic crash led to a global economic downturn as European banks were heavily invested in U.S. housing mortgage securities. Referred to as the Great Recession in the U.S., it was the worst market decline since the Great Depression in the 1930s. The consequences of the Great Recession were immense: massive unemployment, evictions and foreclosures, downturns in global stock markets, business failures, and an overall decline in trade. The crisis did not only affect the U.S., but also deeply affected other areas. In Greece, for example, the government was unable to finance its sovereign debt, leading to reliance on bailout programs from the European Union and International Monetary Fund that came with harsh austerity measures that angered the public and led to massive economic contraction.

The third crisis is the COVID-19 pandemic, which accentuated how fast diseases can travel. On December 31, 2019, Chinese authorities alerted the World Health Organization of pneumonia cases in Wuhan City, Hubei Province, China, with an unknown cause. What started as a mystery disease was first referred to as 2019-nCoV, then named COVID-19 as the virus quickly spread. Per the World Health Organization, as of 2026, there have been over 776 million known global cases and over seven million known global deaths, including 1.2 million deaths in the U.S., over 700,000 deaths in Brazil, over 530,000 deaths in India, over 400,000 in Russia, and over 335,000 deaths in Mexico. The COVID-19 pandemic raised concerns not only about the speed at which a disease travels, but also worries related to information suppression, data underreporting, inconsistent preparedness across states, lack of accurate tracing, shortages of medical equipment, and equitable access to vaccines—all concerns that can undermine international cooperation to stem a global pandemic.

These crises have led to a reevaluation of globalization and the accompanying high levels of interdependence. Many citizens in the world have adopted anti-globalization attitudes, espousing an “Our Country First!” approach, modeled after the phrase “America First” popularized by U.S. President Donald Trump in 2016. These expressions of nationalism represent the most direct threat to the modern global order developed in the aftermath of World War II. At the 2026 World Economic Forum, Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney declared that the “rules-based order” has faded, and that the “strong can do what they can and the weak must suffer” (World Economic Forum, 2026). Whether or not Carney is correct, only time will tell.

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2.5: IR in the Real World

Why did the Cold War end? This simple question is not so easy to answer. There are two main responses. The first is that the Americans “won” the Cold War. The second is that the Soviets “lost” the Cold War. Knowing the difference is important as it could guide policymakers when it comes to other international events. For the first statement, that the Americans “won” the Cold War, analysts often start with Reagan’s pursuit of a military buildup. His assertive policies, such as the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), pushed the USSR to the brink. SDI was a proposed missile defense system that would prevent a nuclear attack, thereby shifting away from MAD and nullifying second strike capability. Another variant is that economic and military competition with the West was the deciding factor in the collapse of the Soviet system. In this analysis, the USSR ceased to be strong enough to challenge the U.S. globally, and other states gained economic and political strength.

For the second statement, that the Soviets “lost” the Cold War, analysts often start with Gorbachev’s leadership, suggesting that his policies of glasnost and perestroika pushed the USSR toward collapse. Others focus on the failures of communism, where the inefficiencies of the command economy had become apparent. The demonstrable failure of the Soviet system signaled the triumph of capitalism over communism and thus an end to global ideological conflict. Others contend that the Soviet Union became too weak to challenge the U.S. and collapsed. Ultimately, the doctrine of containment and using “counterforce” to stop Soviet expansion prevailed without the need for direct military confrontation.

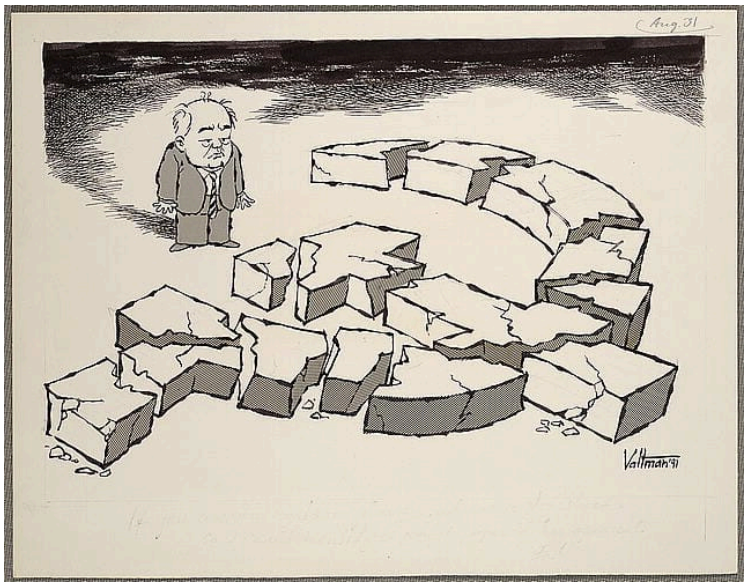


Image 2.5.1: This cartoon from 1991 shows Soviet leader Mikhail S. Gorbachev looking in dismay at a massive stone hammer and sickle, now shattered into many parts, symbolizing the breakup of the USSR. *(Source: “[Gorbachev beholds a shattered hammer and sickle]” by Edmund S. Valtman, Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, [reproduction number, e.g., LC-USZ62-12345] is dedicated to the public domain.)*

Ultimately, this debate has no single right answer. What is known is that few, if any, experts correctly predicted the end of the Cold War, or that the conflict would end peacefully. Also, no one imagined that the Soviet Union would collapse in 1991, only two years after the fall of the Berlin Wall. This is a good reminder that the “experts” are not always correct and that history does not always go as planned.

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2.6: Conclusion

The modern global order did not emerge suddenly, nor was it the product of a single moment. Instead, it took shape through a series of transformative events rooted largely in the European experience, each leaving enduring marks on international politics. The Fall of Constantinople in 1453 signaled a decisive shift in power and trade, accelerating Europe's outward expansion. The Peace of Westphalia in 1648 fundamentally redefined political authority by entrenching the principle of sovereign states and curtailing religious supremacy as a basis for rule. The rise and fall of Napoleon, in turn, reshaped Europe through war and reform, spreading ideas of nationalism that would reverberate far beyond the continent.

While Europe was not the sole center of historical development—as advanced civilizations flourished across Asia, Africa, and elsewhere—the European experience proved especially influential in shaping the theoretical and practical foundations of contemporary international relations. From this context emerged key attributes of the modern global order: the sovereign state as the primary political actor, the international state system, the legacies of imperialism and colonialism, and the rise of nationalism that ultimately culminated in the world wars of the 20th century.

Taken together, these rooting events illustrate how sovereignty and nationalism evolved from historical contingencies into defining features of the modern international system. Their consequences continue to shape global politics today, forming the basis upon which later developments in the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries would build. This history can then help in analyzing contemporary events in today's international system.

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2.7: Student Resources

Summary

The modern global order developed largely from the European experience through three key events: the Fall of Constantinople in 1453, the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, and the Napoleonic Wars. While advanced civilizations existed worldwide, Europe's historical trajectory shaped core features of contemporary international relations, including sovereignty, the state system, imperialism, colonialism, and nationalism. The disruption of trade routes after Constantinople's fall encouraged European exploration and empire-building; the Peace of Westphalia established sovereign states and centralized authority; and the Napoleonic Wars transformed warfare and spread nationalism. Together, these events laid the foundations of the modern international system.

After Napoleon's defeat in 1815, Europe experienced nearly a century of relative peace under the Concert of Europe, a balance-of-power system established by the Congress of Vienna to preserve stability among the great powers. While this arrangement limited major wars, nationalism and industrialization reshaped European societies, fueling independence movements in multiethnic empires, the unification of Italy and Germany, and the emergence of new great powers that disrupted the existing order. These changes coincided with intensified imperial expansion, most notably the Scramble for Africa, formalized by the Berlin Conference, which rapidly placed most of the continent under European control and left lasting political instability. At the same time, the Ottoman Empire steadily declined due to internal weaknesses, nationalist revolts, and territorial losses, culminating in its near-total expulsion from Europe and contributing directly to the tensions that ignited World War I.

From the buildup to World War I through the early 21st century, the global order was shaped by recurring cycles of conflict, power shifts, and attempts at cooperation. Rivalries among European great powers, driven by alliances, economic competition, nationalism, and militarism, produced World War I, which dismantled empires and failed to establish lasting peace, helping pave the way for fascism and World War II. After 1945, a bipolar Cold War system emerged between the U.S. and the USSR, marked by ideological rivalry, proxy wars, nuclear deterrence, and periods of tension and détente, before collapsing with the end of the Soviet Union in 1991. The post–Cold War era initially fostered optimism about globalization, liberal democracy, and international institutions, but major crises—including terrorism after 9/11, the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, and the COVID-19 pandemic—exposed vulnerabilities in interdependence and fueled renewed nationalism, raising doubts about the durability of the modern, rules-based global order.

Key Terms

- **Berlin Conference** was a series of negotiations among non-African rulers (extending from November 15, 1884 to February 26, 1885) that legalized the partition of Africa and, in doing so, accelerated the pace of colonization.
- **Collective security** is an arrangement where countries agree to defend each other against any aggressor.
- **Colonialism** is the settlement of people from a colonizing nation within territories inhabited by indigenous populations, typically carried out in conjunction with imperial expansion and the assertion of political and economic control.
- **Concert of Europe** describes the geopolitical order in Europe during the nearly 100-year period of relative peace after Napoleon's defeat in 1815 until the beginning of World War I in 1914, characterized by agreement to maintain the existing balance of power among the so-called "great powers."
- **Congress of Vienna** is a landmark diplomatic gathering (1814-15) among representatives of Austria, France, Great Britain, Prussia, and Russia that aimed to reshape Europe, restore order, and prevent future upheaval in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars.
- **Globalization** is the acceleration and intensification of global interconnectivity, interdependence, and integration processes.
- **Hyperinflation** is when there is a rapid increase in the price of goods and services, usually measured as exceeding 50% in a given month.
- **Imperialism** is the expansion of authority over territories and their residents, usually distant, typically achieved through military conquest.
- **Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD)** is where each side in a conflict has enough nuclear weapons to completely destroy the other.
- **Nation** is a population of people joined by common culture, history, language, and/or ancestry within a designated region or territory.
- **Nationalism**, according to Britannica, is "an ideology that elevates one nation or nationality above all others and that

places primary emphasis on promotion of its culture and interests as opposed to those of other nations, nationalities, or supranational groups."
- **Peace of Westphalia**, consisting of two main treaties, formally ended the Thirty Years' War in 1648, enshrining the concept of sovereignty in the international system.
- **Proxy war** is an armed conflict where major powers support opposing sides through funding, weapons, or training, rather than fighting directly themselves.
- **Realpolitik** is an approach in foreign policy based on practical and pragmatic objectives, rather than moral or ethical objectives.
- **Scramble for Africa** was an era in which European powers divided the African continent through conquest and conflict.
- **Second-strike capability** is a situation in which each side in a conflict has nuclear weapons that could survive a first strike, thereby disincentivizing a surprise attack.
- **Sovereignty** is the principle that each state is fundamentally equal in legal terms and free to act independently without the consent of any higher authority.
- **Total war** is a form of war in which an entire society becomes involved in the conflict. Civilians, industries, and national resources are directed toward the war effort.

Critical Thinking Questions

1. How did European imperial expansion in the 1500s contribute to the globalization of world politics?
2. What was the most significant political consequence of the Peace of Westphalia for the modern international system?
3. Why did the alliance system before 1914 increase the likelihood that a regional conflict would escalate into a world war? What lessons does this example provide for practitioners of modern international relations?
4. What common themes link the Cold War, post–Cold War globalization, and the crises of the early 21st century?

Suggestions for Further Study

Websites

- Historical Overview of World Order
- The Peace of Westphalia and Sovereignty
- Beyond the Nation-State
- Pursuing Global Order in the Twenty-First Century

Journal Articles

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3: REALISM

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3.2: Core Assumptions
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3.1: Introduction

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to:

- Articulate the meaning and significance of scientific theory.
- Identify and explain the core assumptions of realism and their implications for explaining processes in international relations.
- Trace the historical roots of realism as a theoretical approach.
- Critique realism's explanatory strengths and weaknesses.
- Analyze and illustrate important concepts within realism, such as the security dilemma, by providing historical or contemporary examples.

Scientific theory, as a concept, differs radically from the everyday use of the term "theory." Most people tend to think of a theory as an unproven guess or a supposition. For example, if someone says, "I have a theory about why the traffic is bad today," they are likely offering an untested, personal hypothesis based on limited observations. In science, however, **theories** are well-substantiated frameworks that explain observable phenomena based on hypotheses, evidence, and thorough testing. As such, a theory serves as a "proven" (for lack of a better word) explanation of a particular question or puzzle. It is never fully finalized, however, and theories remain open to retesting and reevaluation. A theory's strength lies in its ability to adapt and evolve with new data. In fact, it is the very process of continual testing and retesting that distinguishes a scientific theory from a mere guess. Examples from the world of sciences include the theory of evolution, the theory of relativity, and cell theory. Each of these provides a comprehensive and well-supported explanation of its respective natural phenomena. Yet, each remains open to modifications as new evidence and research deepen our understanding of these phenomena.

In the social sciences, including the field of international relations, we aspire to the same level of rigor and comprehensiveness. Unlike the natural sciences, however, theories within international relations often deal with complex forms of human behaviors and societal structures that are not readily testable within controlled environments. The objective nonetheless is the same: Researchers aim to create theories that systematically explain evidence-based patterns and processes in international politics. These different theories try to answer a variety of questions on a scale from big, wide-ranging questions (e.g., Why do wars start? How can we achieve global peace?) to smaller, more narrow questions (e.g., Why, or when, are diplomatic negotiations successful? How does economic interdependence affect state behavior?).

Take, for example, the Democratic Peace Theory. While we will cover this theory in detail in Chapter 4, in short, the theory posits that democracies are unlikely to go to war with one another. Historical evidence supports this theory; empirical evidence shows that, over time, democracies tend to avoid conflict with each other. Yet this theory is also constantly reevaluated in light of new political developments and data. Just like theories in the "hard sciences," theories in international relations undergo ongoing testing and refinement, often using case studies, statistical analysis, and historical comparisons to develop their explanatory power.

Because international relations deals with human behavior, theory development is not a straightforward proposition. As researchers try to explain how states interact on the world stage, they must take into account many variables, such as the diversity of global cultures, political systems, and economic conditions (among many others). This variety means that, while theories provide a general framework, their application may differ across different geopolitical contexts. For example, the way economic interdependence shapes relations between Western democracies might differ significantly from how it impacts relationships between developing nations in the Global South. As such, theories in international relations must aim for a balance between offering broad, universal explanations and allowing for specific, context-based variations. In addition, scholars of international relations should remain committed to the idea of constant testing and evolution (something known as "falsifiability," which is the ability to test and potentially disprove a theory). This process of constant scrutiny, debate, and empirical validation reinforces a theory's credibility.

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3.2: Core Assumptions

With this understanding of scientific theory, we begin our analysis of the main theories of international relations. In this chapter, we cover realism; in Chapter 4, we cover liberalism; and, in Chapter 5, we cover constructivism and critical theories.

One of the earliest developed major theories is **realism**, which explains state behavior and the configuration of the international system based on the distribution of power and the current non-hierarchical world order. States are the dominant actors, and the central idea behind realism is the belief that the international system is anarchic. However, when realists reference "anarchy," they do not mean chaos or disorder. Instead, in the context of international relations, **anarchy** refers to the absence of a central (world) government that regulates the interactions between states. For example, domestically, within a state, there are laws and a governing authority that enforces those laws, whether they deal with issues of economics, human rights, or general behavior. This system of control within states is hierarchical; there is a clear structure of authority that regulates citizen behavior and enforces order. In contrast, the international system lacks such a governing structure. States are not subject to any overarching authority that can enforce rules across borders. As a result, the international system is anarchic.

Realism further assumes that, in this non-hierarchical international system, states operate on a principle of **sovereignty**, meaning that each state is fundamentally equal in legal terms and free to act independently without the consent of any higher authority. This concept of sovereignty places each state at the center of its own foreign policy and security decisions, often guided by the "national interest." The **national interest** refers to the goals and objectives of a sovereign state. The absence of an international police force means that states are responsible for their own defense and security. This creates a "self-help system." A **self-help system** is one in which states must rely on their own capabilities—military, economic, or otherwise—if they wish to ensure their survival. For example, if a large state threatens a smaller, less powerful neighbor, the smaller state cannot turn to an international police to guarantee its protection (though it may seek international support or diplomatic backing). The idea of self-help is one of the core tenets of realist theory: In an anarchic world, no state can afford to rely on others for security, and thus, each state must take steps to ensure its own safety.

Realism therefore places particular emphasis on the concept of power, viewing it as the primary determinant of state behavior in the international system. That is, realists see power as the main "currency" that states accept and respect. Assessing, evaluating, and measuring power allows for accurate explanation or prediction of state behavior. For example, China's rapid military and economic rise relative to its neighbors led analysts to predict increasing regional tensions in the South China Sea, where Beijing's growing power has led it to assert its influence and potentially challenge the existing balance of power in the region. This realist prediction of China's behavior focuses on power—in particular, shifting distributions of power—as a key determinant of state behavior.

Realists evaluate power in relative terms. What matters most is not how powerful a state is on its own (or in absolute terms), but how a state's power compares to other states. This focus on relative power stems from the assumption that no state can ever be entirely certain of another state's intentions, thus making competition and relative assessment of power inevitable. States cannot simply be content with acquiring power; without comparing its amount of power to others, a state has no means to assess whether it has enough power to safeguard its interests. Realists will therefore assess any interaction between states in terms of **relative gains**; they will examine the amount that one state gains in comparison to other states.

Related to this focus on relative gains, realists tend to prioritize short-term capabilities over long-term potential, focusing on military strength, economic resources, and strategic advantages that can affect immediate survival and security. In an anarchic system with no overarching authority to provide protection, states must be constantly aware of how quickly power can shift in the short term.

Armed with these fundamental assumptions about the world—anarchy, self-help, the centrality of power, and the importance of relative gains—realists argue that the primary concern of any state is the pursuit of security, an aim often viewed as synonymous with survival. In this view, states are "unitary and rational actors." As a **unitary actor**, the state is a single entity that speaks with one voice. As a **rational actor**, the state makes decisions based on its self-interest, aiming to maximize benefits and minimize costs. The state therefore makes decisions based on their needs to protect themselves from potential threats, both real and perceived. The inherently insecure nature of international affairs, due to the lack of a central authority, predisposes states to behave in a conflict-prone manner. This means that states are constantly vigilant, always preparing for the possibility of conflict, even when they are not actively engaged in war. The absence of war, in other words, does not mean peaceful coexistence; it only means a continuous preparation for war in the future.

In terms of behavioral predictions, according to realism, the anarchic nature of the international system leads to a "security dilemma." A **security dilemma** occurs when one state's efforts to increase its security—such as expanding its military or forming alliances—causes other states to perceive this buildup as a threat. This perception then leads to an arms race or a cycle of escalating tensions, even when no state intends to initiate conflict. Realists argue that this makes conflict an inevitable aspect of the international system. As such, realist theory offers a relatively pessimistic view of international politics. It emphasizes competition, distrust, and the potential for conflict, rather than cooperation, diplomacy, or mutual understanding.

As an example, we can consider the Cold War, a period of intense rivalry between the U.S. and the Soviet Union that spanned from the end of World War II to the early 1990s. The Cold War highlights realist principles, as both superpowers were locked in a "zero-sum" competition for global influence. **Zero-sum** means a situation in which a gain for one side entails a corresponding loss for the other side. How would a realist explain the behavior of these two states, locked in an arms race, and constantly expanding their military capabilities to deter each other?

According to realist theory, the Cold War rivalry was primarily a result of states acting out of their self-interest, driven by the need to secure themselves in an anarchic world. After World War II, both the U.S. and the Soviet Union emerged as superpowers, each with their own vision of the global order. Neither state trusted the other, and both states perceived the other as a potential threat to their security and survival. Each state therefore needed to prevent the other side from gaining strategic advantages.

From a realist perspective, the U.S. and the Soviet Union were trapped in a security dilemma, with each state believing that the other state's growing military capabilities were a direct threat to their own safety. In response, both states embarked on an arms buildup, particularly with nuclear weapons, in order to deter each other from any aggressive action. This policy of **deterrence**, any strategy used to prevent an adversary from taking an undesirable action, was based on the idea that the possession of overwhelming military power—especially the threat of mutually assured destruction—would prevent either side from launching a nuclear attack.

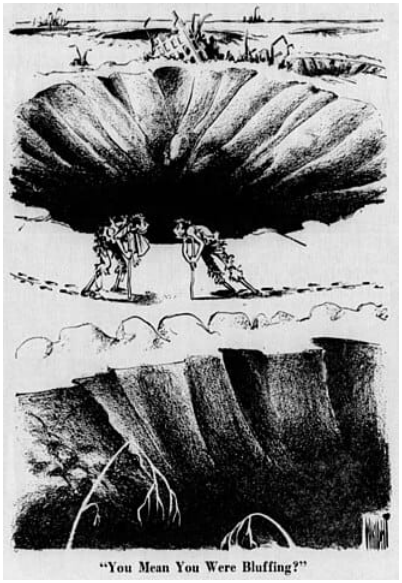


Image 3.2.1: This editorial cartoon by Don Wright, which won the 1966 Pulitzer Prize for Editorial Cartooning, illustrates U.S. national anxiety about possible consequences of the nuclear arms race during the Cold War. *(Source: "You Mean You Were Bluffing?" by Don Wright is in the public domain.)*

In addition to building massive nuclear arsenals, both sides pursued proxy wars around the world—from Korea to Vietnam to Afghanistan—and engaged in covert operations to undermine each other's influence. The Cuban Missile Crisis, for example, was a direct result of both powers' pursuits of dominance, where the U.S. sought to contain Soviet expansion, and the Soviet Union aimed to challenge U.S. influence by positioning nuclear missiles close to American shores.

While diplomacy did play a role during the Cold War, realists argue that the overriding strategy of both superpowers was to ensure their own security through military strength rather than trusting in international institutions or diplomatic solutions. The Cold War, therefore, demonstrates how realist assumptions about anarchy and self-help can explain state behavior, where competition for security leads to a continuous cycle of military buildup and the potential for conflict.



Image 3.2.2: Reflecting the realist foreign policy doctrine of the U.S. President Ronald Reagan during the Cold War, “Peace Through Strength” is the official motto of the nuclear-powered naval aircraft carrier USS. Ronald Reagan. *(Source: “200701-N-ML137-1031” by U.S. Pacific Fleet is licensed under CC BY-NC 2.0.)*

In this context, realist theory is not just about the inevitability of war, but also about how states navigate the world with an eye always on their security. It helps explain why states form alliances, why they invest heavily in defense, and why they are often reluctant to fully trust international institutions, which might not have the means or authority to enforce security.

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3.3: Historical Evolution

Note

The author adapted portions of the following section from one existing source (noted by parenthetical citation at the end of all relevant paragraphs):

McGlinchey, S. (2016). International Relations [CC BY-NC 4.0]. E-International Relations.

Realism gained momentum during World War II when it appeared to offer a convincing account for how and why the worst conflict in known history originated after a period of supposed peace and optimism. Although it originated in named form in the 20th century, many realists trace its origins to earlier writings. As the name suggests, advocates of realism purport it reflects the "reality" of the world.

Classical Realism

This reality stems from human nature, and realists do not typically believe that human beings are inherently good. Instead, realists claim individuals act in their own self-interests. For realists, people are selfish and behave according to their own needs without necessarily taking into account the needs of others (McGlinchey, 2016).

In this way, realism draws inspiration from the classical realists of human behavior and statesmanship, such as Niccolò Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes. For these philosophers, negativity largely characterizes human nature, with individuals motivated primarily by the pursuit of security in a world filled with threats and potential exploitation. For Machiavelli, for instance, moral concerns had no place in political decision-making.



Image 3.3.1: Macchiavelli's political writings advocated for rulers to behave amorally as necessary to gain and retain power for the security of the state. Today, the term "Machiavellian" has become synonymous with unscrupulous acts regardless of ethical concerns in governance, and more generally, as in this illustration for a type of internet troll "cyberpsychology." *(Source: "Machiavellian" by iPredator is marked with CC0 1.0.)*

Hobbes, moreover, when describing the brutality of life during the English Civil War (1642–1651), pointed to human beings as living in an orderless "state of nature" that he perceived as a war of all against all. To remedy this, Hobbes proposed the need for a "social contract" between a ruler and the people of a state to maintain relative order (McGlinchey, 2016).



Image 3.3.2: In this detail from the title page of Thomas Hobbes' Leviathan, a giant figure carrying both sword and Bishop's staff wears armor composed of numerous smaller human figures, symbolizing the social contract between the individual and the sovereign power of the state. *(Source: "Detail from the title-page of Thomas Hobbes's Leviathan (1651)." Public Domain. Source: Public Domain Review.)*

Today, we generally take the idea of a social contract for granted; it is usually clear who rules a state, and each government sets the rules and establishes a system of punishments for those who break them, providing citizens with a sense of security and order. As no social contract exists internationally and there is no sovereign in charge of the entire world, realists argue that disorder and fear rules at the international level, making war inevitable (McGlinchey, 2016).

In sum, classical realism, rooted in the political philosophies of Machiavelli and Hobbes, is based on the assumption that human nature is flawed and self-interested (selfish), and that states can be understood through this behavior. Classical realism treats international politics as a constant struggle for power driven by fear, ambition, and the desire for survival, just like the human condition in the state of nature. Unlike structural realism that prioritizes non-human explanations (discussed below), classical realism attributes the source of political actions to human nature and the limitations of political leaders.

Structural Realism

While classical realism grounds its analysis in human nature, structural realism shifts the focus to the international system itself, arguing that the anarchic structure of that system—rather than the flaws of human nature—drives state behavior and the pursuit of power. Structural realism is also referred to as "neorealism." Just as humans cannot trust one another, neorealists suggest that states cannot trust other states and will do everything in their power to enhance their security. In a condition of anarchy, states can rely only on themselves. As prominent neorealist Hans Morgenthau (1948) famously stated: "All politics is a struggle for power." For neorealists, politics is primarily about domination, and not cooperation, between states (McGlinchey, 2016).

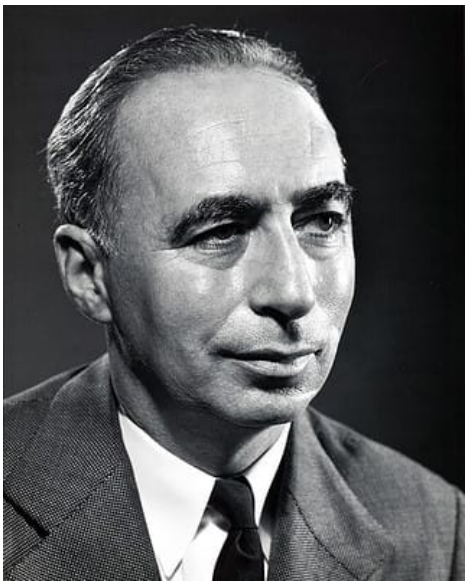


Image 3.3.3: Hans Morgenthau was a highly influential 20th century theorist in the school of political realism. *(Source: "Hans Morgenthau, 1953" is marked with Public Domain Mark 1.0.)*

Yet under these conditions, cooperation is sometimes necessary. It is prudent for any state to either constantly build up its defenses or enter into a pact—a contract for protection. This contract involves surrendering some degree of independence in exchange for a form of collective security. Similar to humans in an implicit social contract, states may form "alliances" to improve their collective security against states they perceive as potential threats. As defined by Britannica, an **alliance** is "a formal agreement between two or more states for mutual support in case of war." For instance, the formation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) after World War II exemplifies a case in which states formed an alliance to bolster their collective security in response to perceived threats from the Soviet Union. In response to NATO, states in the Eastern Bloc formed the Warsaw Pact–another alliance–to protect themselves against the threat posed by NATO. These actions were driven by the anarchic structure of the international system, prompting states to continually enhance their security.



Image 3.3.4: Realism predicts the formation of military alliances like the formation of NATO, where each state, alone in an anarchic world order, acts cooperatively only in its own security interest. Surrounded by representatives of several European states, President Truman signed the North Atlantic Treaty on August 24, 1949. *(Source: "Truman signing North Atlantic Treaty" by Abbie Rowe is in the public domain.)*

When seeking alliances as in the example above, states will choose their actions depending on the distribution of power in the

international system. That is, a state will choose to join forces with or oppose other states based on the power configuration, rather than based on determinants like culture, ideology, or political regime. Realists emphasize that the **balance of power** in the system, where states act to prevent any one state or coalition from becoming too dominant, will determine with whom states form alliances and for what purposes.

States may choose to "bandwagon" with or "balance" against stronger powers in response to perceived threats. A state engages in **bandwagoning**, or joining forces, when it aligns itself with a stronger power (to gain some benefit, such as protection or resources). This is generally a tactic of weak states that face limited options. For example, during the Gulf War in 1991, several small Arab states including Bahrain, Kuwait, and Qatar bandwagoned with the U.S. against Iraq. Facing the threat of Iraqi aggression and lacking the military capacity to defend themselves independently, these states aligned with a stronger power to ensure their survival and security.

As another response to a perceived threat, a state engages in **balancing** when it joins other states to oppose a stronger power. These strategies aim to mitigate threats and improve state security by preventing any one state from dominating others and maintaining a relatively equal distribution of power. For example, Australia, India, Japan, and the U.S. formed an alliance called the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or "the Quad." This alliance reflects a balancing attempt to counter the rise of China and provide regional stability.

There may also be a power distribution in which one state overwhelmingly dominates the system, leaving no opportunity for others to join forces against it. The dominant state in such a scenario is called a **hegemon**, and its presence influences how other states are likely to behave. **Hegemonic Stability Theory** suggests that overwhelming dominance allows a state to set and enforce the "rules of the game" in the international system, thereby promoting stability and cooperation (albeit maintained largely under the authority and interests of the hegemon). For example, the United Kingdom's dominance during the 19th century, often referred to as the "Pax Britannica," helped sustain relative peace and open trade by enforcing international norms and suppressing rival powers. Similarly, "Pax Americana" occurred during the immediate decade after the end of the Cold War, a time during which the U.S. was the only superpower. Many scholars argue that the U.S. defined the post-Cold War era in liberal and democracy-focused terms (although competing powers, such as a resurgent Russia and a rapidly rising China, challenge American hegemony).

Each of these scenarios describe, predict, or explain potential state behavior in the international system based on the power distribution. Realists will ask: Who holds power? Where is power concentrated? And, how much power does each actor have? Depending on the configuration of power, realists provide simple yet powerful explanations of global political processes.

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3.4: Critiques

Despite its simplicity and powerful explanatory potential, realism faces substantial challenges from alternative theoretical approaches, such as liberalism (Chapter 4) and constructivism (Chapter 5). In this section, we will explore two of the most compelling critiques of realism.

Unpredictable Events

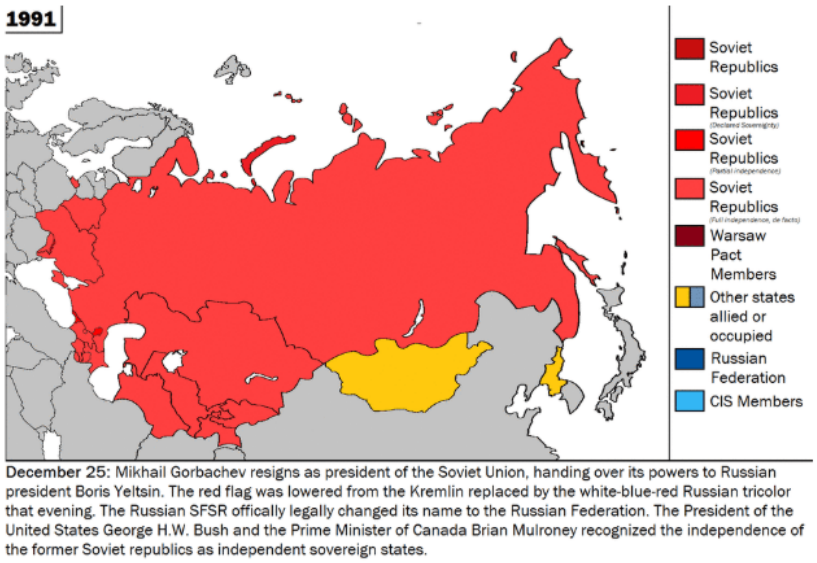
The first criticism of realism stems from its inability to explain—or predict—some of the most important global events that have profound implications for the international system. Realists argue that states, driven by the quest for power and security, operate in an anarchic system where survival is the primary objective. The theory's focus on the balance of power as a central determinant of international politics suggests that the behavior of states can be understood by looking at their relative capabilities—namely, military strength and economic power.

However, in practice, this approach has been unable to account for dramatic events that do not fit into its predictions. For example, consider the sudden collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 under the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev. Realism would have suggested that the Soviet Union, as one of the two superpowers during the Cold War, should have remained a central player in the global order. After all, its military and nuclear capabilities were immense, and it controlled vast resources. With that much raw power, the theory would predict that the Soviet Union would persist as a major global actor, likely continuing its competition with the U.S. for influence and power.

Yet, the Soviet Union collapsed quickly and without the kind of violent conflict or military confrontation that realism would have anticipated. From a realist perspective, the breakup of the Soviet Union–ultimately separating into 15 independent states–should not have happened.



March 11: Mikhail Gorbachev takes power



December 25: Mikhail Gorbachev resigns as president of the Soviet Union, handing over its powers to Russian president Boris Yeltsin. The red flag was lowered from the Kremlin replaced by the white-blue-red Russian tricolor that evening. The Russian SFSR offically legally changed its name to the Russian Federation. The President of the United States George H.W. Bush and the Prime Minister of Canada Brian Mulroney recognized the independence of the former Soviet republics as independent sovereign states.



December 26: The Soviet Union officially dissolved by the Supreme Soviet which recognized the independence of the former republics and ratified the Belavezha Accords thus the superstate permanently ceased to exist completely. This event has also ended the Cold War.

Image 3.4.1: Territorial maps compare the day Mikhail Gorbachev assumed power of the Soviet Union in 1985 with two pivotal days toward the end of December 1991, illustrating the sudden and rapid dissolution of the Soviet Union after decades of unification. *(Source: "USSR Map timeline" by FreshCorp619 is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0.)*

As the map above illustrates, when Mikhail Gorbachev took power in 1985, the Soviet Union traversed vast territory, yet faced major political and economic crises. Despite reform efforts aimed at promoting openness ("glasnost") and restructuring ("perestroika"), the Soviet Union continued to struggle. In 1991, numerous independence referendums were held across the territory; an attempted coup d'état against Gorbachev occurred; and, on December 25, Gorbachev resigned, handing powers over to Boris Yeltsin, the new President of the Russian Federation. The following day, the Soviet Union officially dissolved, resulting in the recognition of independence for the former Soviet republics and the creation of a regional intergovernmental organization, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

The dissolution of a superpower, so rapid and unexpected, challenges the very foundations of realist thought. Realists were left without a convincing explanation for this event, highlighting a key weakness of the theory: Realism cannot fully account for the complexities of domestic political factors, ideology, or the internal dynamics of states. While realism emphasizes external power struggles, it fails to provide the tools necessary to understand why or how states might change internally in ways that drastically affect international affairs.

Defining National Interest

The second major critique of realism concerns its vagueness around the concept of "national interest." National interest is a core idea in realist theory, as it helps explain why states engage in certain behaviors to ensure their survival and security in an anarchic international system. However, the problem lies in the lack of clarity about what exactly constitutes a state's national interest. If realism is to be a useful theory, it must offer a clear, consistent definition of national interest that can guide our understanding of state actions. Yet, realists struggle to provide such a definition.

The idea of national interest is subjective and can vary greatly depending on who is defining it. For instance, the national interest of a military general in Washington, D.C. might focus on providing safety for U.S. military forces abroad, while the national interest of a single mother in rural Alabama might center around affordable healthcare and the safety of her children. Realism struggles to explain how these vastly different perspectives on national interest are supposed to fit within its framework or why one understanding of national interest should prevail over the other.



Image 3.4.2: The decades-long protests in the U.S. over the controversial Keystone XL Pipeline project illustrate myriad competing conceptions of "national interest." Beyond military security, and depending on who defines it, the national interest may encompass energy security, business interests, environmental concerns, indigenous land rights, and national credibility and leadership in global affairs (among other concerns). *(Source: "Tar Sands Action 8/22/11" by chesapeakeclimate is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0.)*

Realist theorists often take a rather simplistic view of national interest, assuming that it is mainly about state security. But this leaves out many important considerations, such as economic interests, environmental concerns, or the desire for cultural or ideological influence. Moreover, realism typically frames national interest as something externally-driven, shaped by the international environment, rather than something that could be shaped internally by domestic factors, public opinion, or political ideologies. This makes the concept of national interest in realism highly ambiguous and, at times, difficult to apply in real-world scenarios.

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3.5: IR in the Real World

Realism is a dominant theoretical approach due to its simplicity and ability to explain complex international processes. To recap, realism emphasizes the centrality of power, national interest, and the inevitability of conflict within the largely self-help international system, which lacks a hierarchical governing structure. Realists argue that the international system is anarchic, meaning there is no overarching authority to regulate state behavior. In the real world, this often manifests in states pursuing their own security and survival through military might, strategic alliances, and the pursuit of national interests.

Imperial Japan in the late 19th and early 20th centuries provides an example of realism in practice. During this period, Japan rapidly modernized its military and economy to secure its position as a dominant power in East Asia. The competition for influence and resources with neighboring states, especially China and Russia, demonstrates core realist principles. Driven by the need to survive in an anarchical system, Japan engaged in conflicts such as the First Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905), both of which were fought to prevent rival powers from gaining strategic advantages. These wars exemplify the struggle to maintain a balance of power, with Japan aggressively expanding its influence to protect its interests (for example, in Korea and Manchuria). This underlines the realist idea that states act primarily to secure their own survival and power, and they often do this through conflict rather than cooperation.



Image 3.5.1: A political cartoon from 1904 illustrates the battle for the "Championship of the Far East" as Japan and Russia waged war for control of the region. *(Source: "Satterfield cartoon about the Russo-Japanese War as a boxing match" by Bob Satterfield is in the public domain.)*

In addition to regional wars, realist theory helps explain the formation of strategic alliances during times of heightened power competition. These alliances are not always rooted in shared values or hopes for long-term cooperation, but rather in short-term calculations for survival and balancing against stronger threats. For instance, the 1971 Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship, and Cooperation emerged as a strategic alignment in response to regional instability and the perceived threat of cooperation between China, Pakistan, and the U.S. Despite ideological differences, India and the Soviet Union found common ground in countering the growing influence of rival powers in South Asia, and this partnership provided India with diplomatic and military support during subsequent wars with its rival Pakistan. Realism explains this behavior as a rational response to an anarchic international system. States form alliances not for idealistic reasons, but to maximize security, deter threats, and protect national interests.



Image 3.5.2: U.S. President Nixon and Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, meeting in strained diplomatic conditions just a few months after Gandhi signed the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship, and Cooperation with the Soviet Union. *(Source: "Indira and Nixon (cropped)" by Robert LeRoy Knudsen is in the public domain.)*

Realism also helps explain contemporary conflicts such as the ongoing tensions in the South China Sea. China's assertive military build-up and territorial claims in the region can be understood through the lens of realist theory: China is seeking to secure its national interests—particularly control over critical maritime trade routes and natural resources—while challenging U.S. influence in Asia. The U.S., in turn, maintains a military presence to preserve its dominance in the Pacific and prevent any shift in the balance of power.



Image 3.5.3: Fiery Cross Reef is one of China's artificial islands in the Spratly Islands with significant military infrastructure, representing a continued military presence in the South China Sea region. *(Source: "Fiery Cross Reef 2020" by SkySat is licensed under CC BY 2.0.)*

These real-world scenarios demonstrate that, in a world defined by competition for power and security, the behavior of states is often driven by the harsh realities of an anarchic international system, where survival comes first.

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3.6: Conclusion

Despite the critiques identified in 3.4, realism remains a dominant framework in the study of international relations. One of its greatest strengths is its simplicity. Realism's foundational assumptions—states are the central actors, the international system is anarchic, and states seek power to ensure their survival—are straightforward and easy to grasp. This simplicity is what makes realism so appealing. As a theory, it offers a parsimonious outlook, meaning it seeks to explain complex global dynamics with a small number of core assumptions. This makes it an attractive tool for predicting state behavior, particularly when states face security dilemmas or conflicts of interest.

Realism's simplicity also gives it substantial predictive power. By focusing on the centrality of power and security concerns, realism is often able to predict that states will act in ways that protect their sovereignty and pursue military advantage when necessary. This kind of prediction is appealing to policymakers who need clear guidance in a world that often seems chaotic and uncertain. As such, realism is a helpful framework for understanding certain aspects of state behavior, particularly in periods of international tension.

Interestingly, after experiencing a period of decline following the end of the Cold War, there has been a resurgence of realist theory in recent years. As states question the value of international institutions, interdependence, and global cooperation, the principles of realism—such as the pursuit of power, national security, and self-interest—have gained renewed attention. For example, states like the U.S., China, and Russia are increasingly acting in ways that prioritize their own national interests, often at the expense of multilateral cooperation or international norms. This trend has led many scholars and policymakers to revisit realist ideas, seeing them as useful tools for understanding contemporary international dynamics.

In this sense, realism offers a simple, pragmatic lens through which to interpret state behavior, especially when the international system feels more uncertain and competitive. Realism's emphasis on power, security, and survival remains relevant in a world where states often perceive themselves as being in competition for limited resources and influence.

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3.7: Student Resources

Summary

Theories are well-substantiated frameworks that explain observable phenomena based on hypotheses, evidence, and thorough testing. In international relations, realism is one of the major theoretical approaches. Realism, an approach rooted in a pessimistic view of human nature in which individuals are inherently self-interested, explains state behavior and the configuration of the international system based on the distribution of power and the current non-hierarchical world order. States are the dominant actors, considered rational and unitary, and they operate on the principle of sovereignty. The international system is anarchic and power—namely, relative power—is the primary determinant of state behavior. Because cooperation is sometimes necessary, state behavior may take the form of bandwagoning or balancing, depending on the distribution of power in the international system. Despite realism's simplicity and explanatory potential, it suffers from multiple critiques, including difficulty in explaining some important global events and a simplistic view of national interest based only on security.

Key Terms

- **Alliance** is "a formal agreement between two or more states for mutual support in case of war" (Britannica).
- **Anarchy** is the absence of a central (world) government that regulates the interactions between states.
- **Balance of power** is when states act to prevent any one state or coalition from becoming too dominant.
- **Balancing** is when a state joins other states to oppose a stronger power that it views as a threat.
- **Bandwagoning**, or joining forces, is when a state aligns itself with a stronger power (to gain some benefit, such as protection or resources).
- **Deterrence** is any strategy used to prevent an adversary from taking an undesirable action.
- **Hegemon** is a state that dominates in the international system.
- **Hegemonic Stability Theory** is a theory arguing that the overwhelming dominance of a hegemon allows that state to set and enforce the "rules of the game" in the international system, thereby promoting stability and cooperation.
- **National interest** refers to the goals and objectives of a sovereign state.
- **Rational actor** is a realist assumption that the state, a unitary actor (see definition below), makes decisions based on its self-interest, aiming to maximize benefits and minimize costs.
- **Realism** is a theory that explains state behavior and the configuration of the international system based on the distribution of power and the current non-hierarchical world order.
- **Relative gains** refer to the amount that one state gains in comparison to other states.
- **Security dilemma** occurs when one state's efforts to increase its security—such as expanding its military or forming alliances—causes other states to perceive this buildup as a threat. This perception then leads to an arms race or a cycle of escalating tensions, even when no state intends to initiate conflict.
- **Self-help system** is one in which states must rely on their own capabilities—military, economic, or otherwise—if they wish to ensure their survival.
- **Sovereignty** is a principle under which each state is fundamentally equal in legal terms and free to act independently without the consent of any higher authority.
- **Theory** is a well-substantiated framework that explains observable phenomena based on hypotheses, evidence, and thorough testing.
- **Unitary actor** is a realist assumption that the state is a single entity that speaks with one voice.
- **Zero-sum** means a situation in which a gain for one side entails a corresponding loss for the other side.

Critical Thinking Questions

1. How does the concept of anarchy lead realists to predict that conflict is inevitable in international relations? What factors within this anarchic system contribute to the idea that states will prioritize their security over cooperation?
2. How does the security dilemma show the challenges states face in an anarchic world, and what can states do to reduce the risks that come with it?
3. Think about how relevant realism is in today's world. How much do you believe its ideas about human nature and how states act are still true when we look at current global issues?

Suggestions for Further Study

Web Resources

- Brief video summation: "Theory in Action: Realism"
- Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy – Political Realism
- Project Gutenberg: Thucydides, Machiavelli, and Hobbes (primary texts from thinkers often cited as intellectual inspiration to realism)
- The Wilson Center: Cold War International History Project (documents and analysis relevant to realist behavior during the Cold War)
- The National Security Archive (declassified U.S. documents offering real-world cases of realist foreign policy)

Journal Articles

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4: LIBERALISM

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4.1: Introduction

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to:

- Define Democratic Peace Theory and identify its limitations.
- Discuss complex interdependence and how it can prevent war.
- Identify the main assumptions of liberalism.
- Compare liberalism with realism.

While Chapter 3 introduced realism, this is not the only theoretical approach to international relations. Liberalism is another major theoretical approach, and it emerged as the default model for international politics at the turn of the 21st century. **Liberalism** is a theory that explains state behavior and the configuration of the international system by emphasizing the mutual benefits of cooperation and international institutions. The recommendations stemming from liberalism shape our governments, our economies, and how states and other actors conduct international affairs. In this chapter, we will examine the development of liberalism, discuss its implications for state behavior within international politics, compare the assumptions of liberalism and realism, and analyze liberalism's critiques.

Development of Liberalism

Liberalism emerged from the Enlightenment in the 17th and 18th centuries. Unlike realism's pessimistic view of human nature, liberalism stems from the view that human nature is generally good and, with sufficient laws and institutions, cooperation is possible. John Locke, Adam Smith, and Immanuel Kant are prominent theorists from this tradition who contributed to liberal thinking regarding individual rights, economics, and the pursuit of peace.



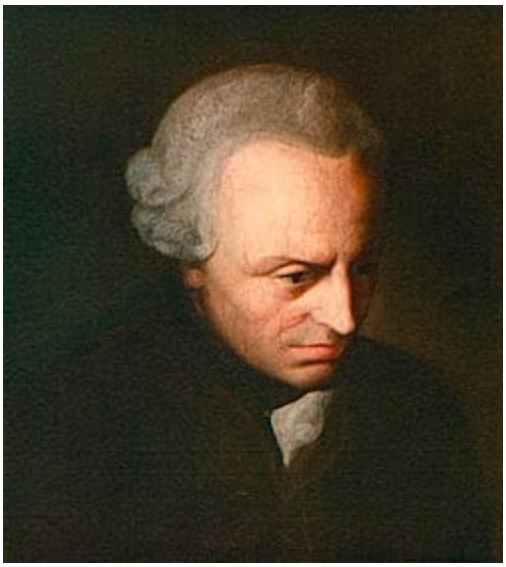


Image 4.1.1: From left to right, portrait of John Locke, Adam Smith, and Immanuel Kant. *(Sources, from left to right: "John Locke" by Godfrey Kneller is in the public domain; "Adam Smith: The Muir portrait" by Unknown Artist is in the Public domain; Immanuel Kant, painted portrait, c1790, By Unknown, possibly Elisabeth von Stägemann (Anton Graff school) - original from the Norwegian Digital Learning Arena (NDLA), Public Domain.)*

John Locke (1632-1704) argued against the realist perspective; as articulated by Hobbes, the cruel state of nature requires an all-powerful sovereign to provide peace. Yet in Locke's view, humans have natural rights to life, liberty, and property. In society, people voluntarily agree to the social contract, giving up some freedoms in exchange for protection of those natural rights. However, if this agreed upon authority fails to provide these rights and protections, then the people have the right to disobey their society's laws—in other words, if authority systems do not hold up their end of the bargain, individuals do not have to either. Locke's recognition of individual rights and state accountability were foundational to the development of classical liberalism, and we see these rights cemented in most democratic constitutions today.

Beyond individual rights, Adam Smith (1723-1790) contributed to liberal economic thinking. Smith argued that state-managed economies, a prominent feature in his time, were not able to produce consistent economic growth. He instead argued that allowing businesses and individuals to operate autonomously would promote economic growth. Through a free market system, business owners voluntarily enter into agreements with each other out of self-interest, and free trade allows businesses to specialize in producing goods and services based on efficiency. This leads to a system, led by the "invisible hand" of the market, centered on the efficient production of goods and services. Smith's belief that self-interest guides market interactions and allows for the development of wealth is a foundational concept behind liberal economics, and it is a justification for free market capitalism (for additional discussion of economic liberalism, see Chapter 12).

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), a third major liberal thinker, argued that states could achieve peace by embracing reason and self-interest. He argued that states should make the actions of their leaders accountable to the public, and that they should commit to shared principles of sovereignty and self-determination. With these shared principles, states should establish international institutions to mediate disputes. Kant's belief that peace comes from shared values and institutions was essential for the development of institutional liberalism and international law, and it is the foundation for the United Nations (UN).



Image 4.1.2: Flags of member states at the UN Office in Geneva symbolize liberal principles of internationally shared values and institutions. *(Source: "United Nations Office at Geneva" by Falcon_33 is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0.)*

For many years, theorists debated these principles, but they had limited impact on the international stage. In the wake of World War I, however, the President of the United States (U.S.), Woodrow Wilson, created a 14-point plan advocating for the creation of a League of Nations to manage international disputes. This plan stemmed from liberal principles, but its popularity was short-lived; the international community's failure to prevent World War II discredited liberal ideas.

Liberalism did not reemerge as an important perspective for international affairs until the rebuilding of Western Europe after World War II, when a desire to avoid nuclear war between the U.S. and the Soviet Union motivated states. Decades later, the collapse of the Soviet Union and dominance of the U.S. led many developing states to adopt democratic forms of government in the 1980s and 1990s. Even some authoritarian regimes sought to legitimize their actions with liberal principles of accountability and responsibility to their citizens in the form of elected bodies.

In the late 20th century, many states with diverse economic systems—from the welfare state of the United Kingdom (U.K.) to the state-led economy of China—embraced economic reform following decades of stagnant growth. States across the world lowered taxes, privatized industries, and expanded trade with foreign markets. Liberal principles served as the foundation to establish institutions including the UN, the World Trade Organization (WTO), and the European Union (EU). The vast majority of states signed on to human rights treaties, laws surrounding environmental protections, and treaties banning certain types of military conduct.

The 21st century has been far more challenging for liberal ideas. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan made people question the feasibility of liberal ideas and increased skepticism of international institutions. The 2008 Great Recession and Eurozone crisis left millions unemployed, and states adopted austerity programs to try and get public debt under control. This led many to question the supposed benefits of greater integration and the financial benefits of continued economic liberalization. Political regimes that had seemed to be slowly liberalizing, such as China and Russia, changed course. Moreover, domestic nationalist movements that view other states and peoples as threats, rather than collaborators, increasingly challenge liberal democratic states.

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4.2: State Behavior in the International System

The previous section describes the development of liberalism, and it highlights challenges facing liberal ideas in recent years. What specifically are these liberal ideas? What advice does liberalism offer states as they navigate the international system? Liberals argue that states should democratize, embrace economic liberalization and trade, and enter into international agreements and organizations.

Democracy Matters

Liberal theorists are advocates for democratization and individual rights. Returning to the ideas of Locke: States exist with the consent of the governed and, therefore, citizens should have a say in how their government runs. Liberals advocate for freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and an open press. Liberals believe that democratic systems allow for the sharing of ideas and the expansion of rights, and they believe that democracy's emphasis on idea-sharing can lead to greater industry and economic growth. The liberal commitment to democracy is so strong that some liberal theorists have even been associated with international actions to incentivize, or compel, states to democratize (move from a non-democratic political regime to a democratic political regime), believing democratization would lead to positive domestic and international results.

Internationally, a theory called "Democratic Peace Theory" sums up the liberal perspective: **Democratic Peace Theory** asserts that democratic states do not go to war with one another. Liberal theorists posit that democratic states have incentives to pursue peace in order to maintain their citizens' standard of living and to avoid the casualties inherent in conflict. Democratic states also have norms informed by their own internal politics of pursuing collaboration above the use of force. Moreover, the public can hold the leaders of democratic states accountable for their actions (i.e., through elections). According to this perspective, these qualities do not hold true in states under authoritarian regimes. Instead, these states may exhibit expansionist foreign policies, have no method through which the public can hold leaders accountable for costly actions, or provide outsized influence to a small group of resource-driven elites or the military.

As one example, we can consider the 2021 Russian invasion of Ukraine. With the support of Russian oligarchs, President Vladimir Putin, an authoritarian leader, invaded Ukraine. The invasion was motivated by a desire for regional supremacy over a neighboring state with large amounts of natural resources which had been pursuing integration with Western Europe. This conflict has continued despite large military casualties, steep economic costs of sanctions on Russia's economy by Western states, and the moral condemnation of much of the world.

Economic Liberalization and Trade

Liberals argue for the importance of economic liberalization. States, for example, should empower individuals to start businesses with low taxes and few regulations. By developing their domestic industries, states can provide goods and services for international trade. Liberals see trade as a **positive-sum** interaction in which the producer and consumer mutually benefit. Unlike a zero-sum interaction (as a reminder from Chapter 3, one in which a gain for one side entails a corresponding loss for the other side), a positive-sum interaction means all sides gain. Liberals argue that states should pursue **absolute gains**, the total amount of benefits that all parties in an exchange gain (rather than relative gains, absolute gains focuses on the idea that, in an exchange, all states can be better off than they were before). By pursuing absolute gains, trade can spur investment, jobs, specialization, and economic growth benefitting all involved states. Over time, continued trade of goods and services between states can allow for the sharing of cultural values. These shared values can, in turn, facilitate other forms of cooperation.

The development of India's economy provides an example of the benefits stemming from economic liberalization. Following decades of state-planned economics and stagnant growth, India shifted course to embrace economic liberalization in the 1990s under Prime Minister Rao. By promoting business development, increasing trade, specializing in information technology, and embracing cultural ties to western states with large Indian immigrant communities, India lifted millions out of poverty and emerged as an economic power in Asia with the fourth largest GDP in the world.



Image 4.2.1: As shown in this 2014 photograph of the Mumbai city skyline described as "an Indian city that never sleeps," India's economy has seen significant growth in the years since the liberalization of its economy beginning in the 1990s. *(Source: "Mumbai City Nightscape" by Alok Kumar is licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0.)*

Beyond facilitating economic cooperation, liberal theorists further argue that trade over time will lead states not to go to war with each other. This stems from the broader concept of "complex interdependence." **Complex interdependence** is a theory that emphasizes the importance of the interconnectedness and mutual dependence between actors (both state and non-state), such as the multiple ways through which cultural, economic, and political relationships may connect states. Related to trade, liberal theorists assert that long-term trade between states connects them so closely that any pursuit of war would become economically ruinous; conflict would inevitably result in a sort of mutually assured economic destruction that would threaten the free flow of goods and services and crash markets within the respective states. Western Europe is a prime example of this phenomenon. Following centuries of bloody conflict, Europe in the 1950s began a slow process of economic integration, starting with the European Coal and Steel Community and the European Economic Community (and later the European Community and the EU), which led to peace among these trading partners.

International Organizations and Law

Liberal theorists assert that states should create institutions to mitigate conflict, promote trade, and expand human rights. International agreements and institutions function as a scaffolding for long-term cooperation and, when states set up agreements, they promote future deals. This belief in scaffolding stems from the liberal argument that "reciprocity" motivates states to comply with agreements. **Reciprocity** is the principle that states respond to the actions of other states in kind. States will respond to cooperation or trade with increased cooperation or trade; states will respond to non-compliance or aggression with tariffs, sanctions, or aggression. Over time, reciprocity will lead states to recognize that they benefit from continued cooperation. While it may not be in a state's short-term best interest to comply with an individual trade deal, the prospect of beneficial dealings in the future will provide an incentive for state cooperation in the present.

Beyond trade, liberal theorists assert that international institutions can contribute to solving major global challenges, such as those related to the environment, conduct during war, and post-conflict reconstruction. As an example related to the environment, when the world became aware that chemicals were contributing to ozone depletion, which would lead to harmful levels of ultraviolet radiation from the sun, the international community collaborated to create the Montreal Protocol. This international treaty (signed in 1987) established methods for regulating how states were contributing to ozone depletion and, due to these efforts, ozone depletion is no longer a major concern. The international community has taken action to outlaw some of the worst elements of war in the curtailing of chemical weapons, land mines, and the use of child soldiers with the Chemical Weapons Convention, Mine Ban Treaty, and the Optional Protocol. Finally, as an example of post-conflict reconstruction, following the violent breakup of the former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s and the signing of the Dayton Accords (a peace agreement) in 1995, the international community, led by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), sent multinational peace enforcement and peacekeeping missions to Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Implementation Force (IFOR), followed by the Stabilization Force (SFOR), aimed to (among other things) guarantee the end of hostilities and prevent a resumption of hostilities within Bosnia and

Herzegovina.



Image 4.2.2: The Stabilisation Force (SFOR) was a NATO-led multinational peacekeeping force deployed to Bosnia and Herzegovina after the Bosnian War. *(Source: "File:Army Photography Contest - 2004 - FMWRC - Arts and Crafts - SFOR Surveillance.jpg" by U.S. Army is licensed under CC BY 2.0.)*

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4.3: Comparing Liberalism to Realism

As the previous sections make clear, liberalism predicts more cooperation in the international system than realism. How do the two theoretical approaches differ in their core assumptions?

Anarchy

Like realists, liberal theorists acknowledge that anarchy exists; there is no central authority to enforce rules on the international system. However, liberal theorists argue that international organizations are able to manage conflict within this anarchic system. From this perspective, many of our greatest challenges such as terrorism, climate change, and refugee crises exist beyond borders and require cooperation. Contrary to the perception of realists, liberals argue that the international community has been very successful in preventing wars between states, advancing human rights, and promoting cooperation on environmental protections.

Centrality of States

While realists see the state as the central actor in international relations, liberal theorists assert that states are not the only relevant actors. Liberals acknowledge that states, such as the U.S. and China, exert powerful influence on the international stage, yet other actors also affect the international system. Intergovernmental organizations, such as the UN, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the WTO, make decisions that affect the vast majority of states. Supranational organizations, such as the EU (an institution comprising 27 states), have the potential to politically and economically rival the most powerful states. And, many multinational corporations, such as Apple, Google, and Starbucks, have resources and influence that surpass those of states.



Image 4.3.1: Representatives and flags of several states at this multilateral UN General Assembly meeting on Venezuela in 2019. *(Source: "#UNGA" by The White House is marked with Public Domain Mark 1.0.)*

Pursuit of Power

Realists and liberals assume that states pursue power, but liberals observe that states do not only pursue military strength; they additionally pursue economic development and the well-being of their people. Many states choose to spend money on social services rather than national defense and continue to thrive in the international system. States such as Germany and Japan have limited military presence despite the presence of neighbors like Russia and China, with large militaries and a history of expansionist foreign policies. Furthermore, as noted when discussing economic liberalization and trade, liberal theorists disagree

with the realist focus on relative gains. Liberals argue that states do not always operate within a zero-sum game; rather, between-state interactions can benefit all sides. This shows the liberal focus on absolute gains. For liberals, the gains on each side are based on the absolute change in condition of each state, rather than the relative condition of the states in comparison to one another.

States as Unitary and Rational Actors

Though realists assume that states are unitary and rational actors, liberals argue that not all states make decisions using the same rational calculus. Liberals contend that internal politics such as bureaucracies, interest groups, and the preferences of citizens influence states' decision-making, resulting in more complex outcomes than what might be predicted by realists. Liberals assert that states have different economic structures, religious traditions, and historical relationships that affect how their leaders interact with the broader world. In particular: liberals argue that democratic states have internal incentives to avoid conflict with other states, but non-democratic states, which are less accountable to their people, are more prone to pursue wars of aggression or conflict over natural resources.

Security Dilemma

In the previous chapter, we discussed the security dilemma, which holds that states, due to a lack of an authority, imperfect information, and a desire for security, will build up their military capability and have incentives to attack one another. However, liberal theorists argue that we do not see this consistently in the international system. Through cooperation over decades or even hundreds of years, states that had once been bitter enemies, such as France and Germany, or the U.S. and the U.K., continue to cooperate when from a purely power-based standpoint, they should see each other as a threat. Liberals believe that these alliances are not temporary reactions to a balance of power. They are built up over time and reinforced by international trade and cultural exchanges.

Liberal theorists assert that states respond to situations like the security dilemma with tit-for-tat. This reciprocity-based strategy advises responding to an act of aggression with aggression, cooperation with cooperation, which over time inevitably will lead to states working with one another as states recognize that aggression also puts their interests at risk.

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4.4: Critiques

Criticisms of liberalism come from across the political spectrum.

Analyzing Democratic Peace Theory, critics observe that democracy, as understood today, is a relatively new concept. We therefore lack the case studies necessary to say definitively that democracies will not go to war with each other. Additionally, critics of liberalism observe that democracies still go to war with non-democracies; democracies are not more peaceful overall. Democracies have expansionist foreign policies and use their power to force compliance from developing states. The invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan in the early 2000s, for example, resulted in the deaths or displacement of millions and fostered ongoing instability in the region.

From a Marxist or socialist perspective, critics argue that liberalism's economic recommendations undermine government social policies. The emphasis on low taxes and regulations diminishes the power of the welfare state and gives businesses too much power in domestic policy. These critics further argue that the international consensus around economic liberalism drives environmental damage, resulting in climate change and deforestation. The emphasis on efficient specialization, moreover, leads to poor environmental and labor standards, as states rush to the bottom with lax standards to attract international businesses.

From a nationalist perspective, critics argue that trade, intergovernmental organizations, and supranational organizations undermine the sovereignty of states. Institutions, such as the UN and the EU, do not respect a given state's culture, religion, history, or domestic industries. Rather, these institutions force a state to adopt liberal values, which may support unrestricted immigration, environmental regulations, and an undermining of religious authority.

Finally, from a perspective articulated by many within developing states, international organizations perpetuate a history of interference by more powerful states in less powerful states' affairs. Critics highlight the activities of the World Bank, the IMF, and the WTO, in particular, as exerting influence over less powerful states through their development-focused loans and trade policies, which can perpetuate or exacerbate inequalities across states.



Image 4.4.1: Numerous protests against the WTO have taken place all over the world, including this one at the WTO Hong Kong Ministerial Conference in 2005. *(Source: "Protest" by Simon Shek is licensed under CC BY 2.0.)*

The structure of the UN, as another example, demonstrates the inequalities present in international organizations. While the UN General Assembly—the UN's main policymaking body—provides equal representation to all members, the UN Security Council (UNSC) contains only 15 member-states. Of those 15, ten are non-permanent positions, elected by the General Assembly. Five, however, are permanent positions for the founding members. Referred to as "the P5," China, France, Russia, the U.K., and the U.S. enjoy veto power. Any controversial topic, such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, or even a potential invasion of Taiwan by China, can be unilaterally blocked by one of the P5. This is true no matter how popular the topic is among

the General Assembly, again illustrating a critique against liberalism's assertion that international organizations serve to solve major global challenges.

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4.5: IR in the Real World

Climate change is a great threat to the international system. Wildfires, droughts, floods, and hurricanes cause devastating levels of infrastructure destruction and human displacement, and these events increasingly threaten the stability of developing states. Economic activity, livestock, and energy usage by wealthier, more industrialized states produced increased carbon emissions, resulting in climate change. Developing states, as they work to increase economic development, now follow suit. The international community knows that continued carbon dioxide (CO2) emissions will lead to greater warming, which will in turn lead to increased climate disasters. No one state's actions are sufficient to deal with this problem, and all states must cooperate to achieve the common goal of mitigating the effects of climate change.

Climate change is therefore a classic collective action problem. For developed states, shifting to different energy sources and restricting domestic emissions will be costly and politically perilous. For developing states, cost concerns also exist, and citizens will continue to desire to "catch-up" in terms of economic development and higher standards of living. Across all states, there will be an incentive to free ride; if some states cooperate on technological innovation and conservation efforts, other states will be able to enjoy these benefits without paying the costs.

From a liberal theoretical approach, states should cooperate to lower CO2 emissions while ensuring that individual states do not cheat. How can this happen?

Liberalism offers the prospect of using international organizations, access to trade, and laws as methods to gain compliance. International organizations can negotiate deals, gather information, and adjudicate disputes. Trade deals can incentivize states that worry about the economic cost of compliance. Wealthy states can work to lower emissions and develop technologies that can offset the increases of developing states. States can price CO2 emissions into the cost of goods through taxation or financial incentives for companies to switch to new technologies or lower their emissions.

And, in fact, the international community created the 2016 Treaty of Paris, which embraced many of these climate-related ideas with a goal of limiting climate change to under 2°F. States such as China, India, Japan, the U.K. and the U.S. signed on, committing to lower their CO2 emissions and assist developing states in their efforts.

While efforts to mitigate the effects of climate change illustrate the potential for international cooperation, they also show deep challenges to the liberal theoretical approach. Though numerous climate-related agreements exist, states continue to fail to meet their respective emissions targets, and some states do not always willingly comply. The U.S., for example, either signs on or withdraws from climate agreements depending on the presidential administration. In 2016, under the Obama Administration, the U.S. signed the Paris Agreement; in 2020, under the first Trump Administration, the U.S. withdrew; in 2021, the U.S. rejoined under the Biden Administration; and, in 2025, under the second Trump Administration, the U.S. again initiated the withdrawal process.

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4.6: Student Resources

Summary

Liberalism has been a driving force behind the actions of the international community over the past several decades. Critics and proponents alike have seen world politics moving in the direction of liberal consensus on economics. States have continued to pursue lower taxes and regulations in order to promote economic growth. Trade between states is a given and developing states have attempted to build up their domestic industries to compete on the international level. The creation of institutions like the United Nations, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and World Trade Organization affect the majority of states and have spurred greater levels of cooperation. Liberalism's promotion of democracy has seemed to have a lot of momentum with even many non-democratic states giving lip service to notions of representing the public good. However, politics seems to be shifting internationally. Nationalist movements are on the rise across the world. Many believe that these organizations have undermined sovereignty, increased inequality and destroyed the environment. China, once liberalism's great economic success story, has shifted course to cracking down on foreign companies and giving protections to their own industries.

Key Terms

- **Absolute gains** refer to the total amount of benefits that all parties gain (without focusing on the relative distribution of those benefits).
- **Complex interdependence** is a theory that emphases the importance of the interconnectedness and mutual dependence between actors (both state and non-state), such as the multiple ways through which cultural, economic, and political relationships may connect states.
- **Democratic Peace Theory** asserts that democratic states do not go to war with one another.
- **Liberalism** is a theory that explains state behavior and the configuration of the international system by emphasizing the mutual benefits of cooperation and international institutions.
- **Positive-sum** means a situation in which all sides can gain.
- **Reciprocity** is the principle that states respond to the actions of other states in kind.

Critical Thinking Questions

1. How does liberalism's view of human nature differ from that of realism?
2. What is complex interdependence, and how does it prevent conflict?
3. What are absolute gains, and how do they differ from the realist emphasis on relative gains?
4. What is reciprocity, and how does it help prevent conflict from a liberal perspective?
5. Select a state within the international system. How would its approach to the international community differ under a realist versus a liberal framework?

Suggestions for Further Study

Websites

- Brief video summation: "Democratic Peace Theory - A Short Introduction"
- Full text of the UN Charter: UN Charter - United Nations
- Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) offers articles and videos on international institutions, and world politics from a liberal perspective: Global governance

Journal Articles

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Wilson, W. (1918, January 8). “Address to Congress on the Fourteen Points.” The American Presidency Project. Retrieved from https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-congress-the-conditions-peace.

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5: CONSTRUCTIVISM AND CRITICAL THEORIES

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5.1: Introduction

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to:

- Distinguish between traditional and critical theories of international relations.
- Identify how critical theories critique the assumptions of traditional theories of international relations.
- Describe the major tenets of constructivist, Marxist, and feminist approaches to international relations.
- Apply one or more critical theories to a contemporary event in international relations.

The previous two chapters introduced the traditional theories of international relations: realism and liberalism. The chapters also identified pointed critiques of these theories, showing that each fails to account for certain outcomes in international relations. These shortcomings led scholars to subsequently contribute to **critical theories** of international relations, which encompass a range of perspectives challenging traditional views on world politics.

Critical theories emerged as a response to the limitations of realism and liberalism, particularly by questioning the theories' underlying assumptions. For example, the realist theoretical approach (Chapter 3) focuses on power politics and the anarchic nature of the international system. Yet critical theorists critique realism's deterministic view of state behavior and its neglect of broader social and economic factors. As another example, the liberal theoretical approach (Chapter 4) emphasizes cooperation and international institutions. Critical theorists critique liberalism's idealism and its assumption that global governance mechanisms can foster true cooperation that leads to problem-solving.

Critical theories seek to expose and address these blind spots by offering alternative perspectives that emphasize the importance of historical context, social structures, and marginalized voices in shaping international relations. For instance, Marxist theories emphasize economic class and capitalist exploitation, arguing that the capitalist system inherently leads to global inequalities and conflicts. Feminist theories focus on how gender dynamics and patriarchal structures influence international affairs. However, before we examine each of these theories, we will first consider constructivism. While not generally considered a critical theory, it similarly highlights the limitations of realism and liberalism.

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5.2: Constructivism

Note

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- *Theys, S. (2018). "Constructivism." In S. McGlinchey, R. Walters, and C. Scheinpflug (Eds.), International Relations Theory (pp. 36-41) [CC BY-NC 4.0]. E-International Relations.*
- *Behravesh, M. (2011). "Constructivism: An Introduction." e-International Relations (e-IR) [CC BY-NC 4.0].*
- *Lee, C. (2018). "Week 3: Marxism and Constructivism." In Introduction to International Relations. Canvas Commons [CC BY-NC 4.0].*

We often associate constructivism's arrival in the study of international relations with the end of the Cold War (1947-1991), an event that the traditional theories of realism and liberalism failed to predict. We can link this failure to some of the theories' core assumptions, such as the conviction that states are self-interested actors that compete for power. Because of this focus on the state, traditional theories tended to underestimate the agency of individuals and especially those who are not political elites. It was the actions of ordinary people that ensured the end of the Cold War, not just those of states or international organizations. In the 1980s, ordinary people took part in protests, civil disobedience campaigns, and other mass movements throughout Eastern Europe that called for new political freedoms.



Image 5.2.1: A protest rally in Prague, Czechoslovakia during the Velvet Revolution in 1989. *(Source: "1989 November Prague Velvet Revolution protester crowd fingers in air general shot" by RobbieIanMorrison is licensed under CC BY 4.0.)*

Constructivism accounts for these oversights by arguing that the social world is of our making. Actors (usually powerful ones, like leaders and influential citizens) continually shape—and sometimes reshape—the very nature of international relations through their actions and interactions.

Materials Versus Ideas

In 1989, Nicholas Onuf introduced the term constructivism to the field of international relations, contending that states are living in a "world of our making," where "social facts" are made by human action, as opposed to "brute facts" that do not depend for their existence on human action. In the middle of 1990s, additional alternative works combined to develop and present constructivism as a substantive theory of international behavior.

Constructivism, a "social theory of international politics," argues that the world, and what we can know about the world, is socially constructed. Whereas realists regard the distribution of material capabilities—that is, the relative power possessed by states—as central to understanding international relations, constructivists hold that material and ideational considerations of "shared knowledge, material resources, and practices" are paramount (Wendt, 1995).

As an example, from the perspective of the United States (U.S.), 500 British nuclear weapons are less threatening than five North Korean nuclear weapons. Why is this the case? As Alexander Wendt (1995) explains, this perception ("social reality") does not stem from the physicality of the nuclear weapons themselves (the **material structure**), but rather from the meaning given to the material structure (the **ideational structure**). The U.S. has a much more contentious relationship with North Korea than with the United Kingdom, and these social relationships create shared understanding (or "intersubjectivity") that forms the basis of the states' interactions. Constructivists argue that nuclear weapons have no meaning unless we understand the social context.



Image 5.2.2: Constructivist theories help explain why relatively small nuclear capabilities, such as those demonstrated at the North Korea Victory Day Parade in 2013, might lead to concentrated sanctions. *(Source: "P-15 - North Korea Victory Day-2013 01" by Stefan Krasowski is licensed under CC BY 2.0.)*

Constructivists go beyond the material reality by considering the effects of ideas and beliefs on world politics. This suggests that reality is always under construction; meanings are not fixed but can change over time depending on the ideas and beliefs that actors hold. Compared to the relentlessly repetitive nature of history and human behavior for realists, constructivists offer a theoretical basis for explaining change.

Constructivists argue that agency and structure are mutually constituted, which implies that structures influence agency and that agency influences structures. **Agency** is the ability of someone to act and **structure** is the context within which a person acts. In international relations, structure is the international system that consists of material and ideational elements.

Returning to Wendt's example discussed above, the social relationship of hostility between the U.S. and North Korea represents the intersubjective structure (that is, the shared ideas and beliefs among both states), whereas the U.S. and North Korea are the actors that have the agency to change or reinforce the existing structure. Any change in that social relationship–whether toward greater enmity or toward a reduction of tensions—ultimately depends on the beliefs and ideas held by both states. This stance differs considerably from that of realists, who argue that the anarchic structure of the international system determines the behavior of states. Constructivists, on the other hand, argue that "anarchy is what states make of it" (Wendt, 1992). This means that actors can interpret anarchy in different ways depending on the meaning they assign to it.

State Identity

Another central issue to constructivism is identities and interests. Constructivists argue that states can have multiple, socially-constructed identities that arise from interactions with other actors. **Identities** are representations of an actor's understanding of who they are, which in turn influences their interests and actions. For example, a state that identifies as "small" implies a set

of interests that differ from a state that identifies as “large.” Arguably, a small state must focus more on its survival, whereas a large state can focus on dominating political, economic, and military affairs. Furthermore, the actions of a state should align with its identity; if a small state’s interest is survival, it should take actions to ensure that. A state should not act contrary to its identity because this will call into question the validity of that identity (and its corresponding interests).

We can apply this framework to China. China’s identity as a large, resource-rich state with a distinct cultural heritage dictates its interest in being a regional (and perhaps global) power. This, in turn, explains its actions during the late 20th and early 21st centuries: China assumed high profile positions in international organizations, such as the United Nations, and sought to spread Chinese culture worldwide. The emergence of TikTok, for instance, illustrated China’s interests—China seeks to not merely be an economic powerhouse, but also a cultural force.



Image 5.2.3: China’s participation in UNESCO’s World Heritage Sites is an example of its efforts at cultural diplomacy during the 20th century. *(Source: “Huanglong Sichuan China UNESCO Site-marker” by CEphoto, Uwe Aranas is licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0.)*

This emphasis on identity stands in contrast to the focus of realists and liberals. Realists view international relations as driven by states’ security and material interests defined in terms of power. Liberals focus on the interdependency of international actors and their operation within institutional constraints.

Constructivists, however, consider international politics as a sphere of interaction shaped by actors’ identities and practices and influenced by constantly changing social reality. Constructivism maintains that states’ identities are what generate their goals—whether material, such as security and economic development, or subjective, such as international recognition and standing. What matters most is how states view themselves in relation to other actors in the international community, and this view can change over time. Proponents of realism and liberalism argue that international actors’ interests are fixed, and they initiate interactions solely for material gain and strategic purposes. For constructivists, however, actors are intrinsically social beings whose identities and interests take shape through interactions with others.

Social Norms

Social norms are an additional concept central to constructivism. A **social norm** is “a standard of appropriate behavior for actors with a given identity” (Katzenstein, 1996, p. 5). Social norms imply that some types of behavior and action are more acceptable than others and, when considering expectations within the international system, states that conform to a particular identity will comply with the associated norms. This process is also known as “the logic of appropriateness,” in which actors behave in certain ways because they believe the behavior is appropriate (March and Olsen, 1998, pp. 951-2).

Before being widely accepted, norms go through a “life cycle.” First, “norm entrepreneurs” who seek to create new beliefs and accompanying practices promote a new norm. Over time, that norm may be accepted by increasing numbers of states or other key actors. If a critical mass of relevant actors adopts and internalizes the norm, the norm becomes an expected behavior. Over time,

it is possible that norm may fade in acceptance, and a new norm (eventually, though it may take a long time) can then replace it (for more details on the life cycle, see Chapter 10).

As an example, a constructivist would argue that the bulk of states coming together to develop climate change mitigation policies is due to a shared understanding that it is the right thing to do for the survival of humanity. This social norm came about after norm entrepreneurs, such as environmental advocacy groups, scientists, and political leaders, persuaded states that addressing climate change was a moral imperative. These entrepreneurs pointed to rising global temperatures and extreme weather events to show the impact of climate change and build momentum for states to act. This social norm has, after decades of diplomacy and advocacy, become viewed as an appropriate, expected behavior by large numbers of citizens within states and continues to be reinforced by international organizations, social movements, and private actors (Sikkink, 2024, p. 38).



Image 5.2.4: In an example of multinational cooperation focused on the survival of humanity, 196 parties adopted the international "Paris Agreement" climate change treaty at the UN Climate Change Conference of 2015. *(Source: "they did it!" by UNclimatechange is licensed under CC BY 2.0.)*

In comparison, a liberal might reject the notion of climate change politics in favor of continued economic growth and the pursuit of innovative scientific solutions, while a realist might reject it due to the damage that climate policies may do to short-term national interests.

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5.3: Marxism

Note

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- *Lee, C. (2018). "Week 3: Marxism and Constructivism." In Introduction to International Relations. Canvas Commons [CC BY-NC 4.0].*

Marxism is a critical theory that questions the traditional approaches to international relations. It is also a classical approach grounded in the social science tradition of its namesake, Karl Marx (1818–1883). Of the range of great thinkers available, Marx is not the most international in focus and, in fact, most of Marx's work did not examine the interactions between states. What connected his interests to international relations, however, was the Industrial Revolution. As Marx witnessed this complex process unfolding in Europe, he sought to understand it.

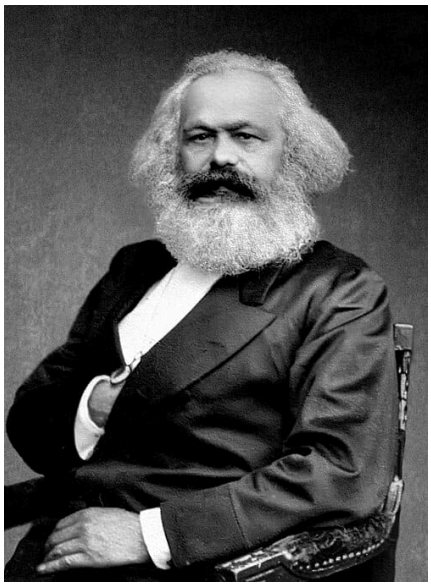


Image 5.3.1: Portrait of Karl Marx. (Source: Portrait of Karl Marx painted by John Jabez Edwin Mayall - International Institute of Social History, is marked with Public Domain Mark 1.0.)

With co-writer Friedrich Engels, Marx developed a revolutionary approach to history, economics, sociology, and politics, outlining a set of concepts that transcended national differences while also providing practical advice for building a transnational movement. Workers from factories across the world were to organize themselves into a politically revolutionary movement to counter the exploitative and unequal effects of capitalism, which were accelerated and expanded by the Industrial Revolution. This vision of a potential transnational link between workers—a vantage point quite different from other theories—is how Marxism enters international relations.

Historical Materialism

Marxists argue that the capitalist mode of production and the modern sovereign state system are not natural or inevitable events. They are interdependent products of particular historical conditions and social relations. The work of Marxists is to map and retrace those conditions and social relations and to figure out how the capitalist mode of production and the sovereign state system emerged. Marxism also advises that its concepts are not just meant to help us understand the world—they should also help us change it.

To explain Marxism in international relations, we need to start with Marx's main theory on the development of capitalism: historical materialism. Most simply, **historical materialism** asserts that human beings—including their relations with others and their environments—are determined by the material conditions in which they can survive and reproduce. Material conditions refers to the physical world around us and the tangible circumstances in which we exist: Are we sheltered? Are we living in comfort? Are our bellies full? Marxists stress that international relations is not just about states' foreign policy or the behavior of politicians, but about survival, reproduction, technologies, and labor.

Marx is thus interested in the economic foundations of society, seeing this as the base from which all politics and social relations spring. The actions of human beings, historical events, and environmental factors (e.g., natural disasters, climate change) can change material conditions over space and time. Yet, importantly, material conditions always depend on (and are often hampered by) what preceded them.

Layered over this interest in the material world is an assertion by Marx that human history proceeds in stages. The first stage of human history was the primitive stage: a time before written text and characterized by nomadic foraging societies. The next stage was feudalism, followed by our present historical stage, capitalism. Capitalism, Marx predicted, would eventually collapse and usher in the next stages of history: socialism, then communism.

Marx characterizes each stage of history as having a "dialectical relationship," or a relationship between two opposing social forces connected by certain "relations of production." **Relations of production** refers to how the two opposing social groups connect in the production of goods and services. During the feudal stage in history, for example, the two major social groups were lords and serfs, and their interests were in conflict. Lords, who owned land and had assets on that land, benefited disproportionately from the labor of serfs. Serfs, in turn, wanted security and prosperity, but lords denied these desires due to the exploitative nature of feudal relations of production. When new technologies emerged under capitalism (e.g., steam power, mechanization), a new dialectical relationship emerged between the "bourgeoisie" and the "proletariat." The **bourgeoisie** are the owners of capital (e.g., land, factories, technologies of production) and the **proletariat** are those who provide labor. The bourgeoisie relies on the exploitation of the proletariat to maximize profits. Because capitalism is not constrained by state boundaries, Marx argued that the global proletariat would rise up against capitalists worldwide once they understood their common cause.

World Systems Theory

One application of Marxist ideas to international relations was put forth by Immanuel Wallerstein, who developed **world systems theory** to counter the way traditional approaches, such as realism, tended to understand imperialism as a state-led process. For Wallerstein, imperialism (which, as a reminder from Chapter 2, refers to the expansion of state power and territory, often at the cost of another state's territory or sovereignty) was also an economic process. While Wallerstein used Marxist concepts such as historical materialism and class struggle, his analysis is not of domestic class relations (i.e. between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat) but of groups of states in the larger global capitalist system. Examining how states developed since the 16th century in relation to each other, he distinguished three groups of states: the core, the semi-periphery, and the periphery.

The "core" (e.g., Western Europe, North America) refers to democratic governments providing high wages and encouraging high levels of investment and welfare services. The "semi-periphery" (e.g., Latin America, parts of the Middle East, parts of Southeast Asia) refers to non-democratic governments that provide low wages and poor welfare services for their citizens. The "periphery" (e.g., sub-Saharan Africa, Central Africa, South Asia) refers to non-democratic governments where workers mostly expect wages below subsistence levels and where there are no welfare services.

By understanding the world through broader units than states, world systems theory identifies the relations of dependency between groups based on the specific types of economies and industries they specialize in. The core is able to produce high-profit consumption goods for itself, as well as for the semi-periphery and periphery, because the periphery provides cheap labor and raw materials. Core states (which can be viewed as the global bourgeoisie) exploit the economic conditions of the periphery (the global proletariat), while the semi-periphery engages in both exploitative and exploited functions.

Although historically some states have changed groups (e.g., China moved from the periphery to the semi-periphery), world systems theory argues that capitalism always needs a peripheral region to provide the means for the core to sustain a high level of consumption and security. This critical theory, then, asserts that relations of dependency and inequality are essential to capitalism, and they cannot be significantly reduced.

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5.4: Feminism

Note

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- *Lee, C. (2018). "Week 4: Feminism and Asian Perspectives." In Introduction to International Relations. Canvas Commons [CC BY-NC 4.0].*

Feminism challenges the near complete absence of women from traditional theories and practice of international relations, as shown through the marginalization of women in decision-making and the assumption that international relations does not impact women's day-to-day lives. Feminist theories recognize, and then challenge, assumptions about masculine and feminine gender roles that dictate what men and women should or can do in global politics. Feminist contributions additionally deconstruct gender, identifying it as both a socially-constructed identity and a powerful organizing logic.

Rather than suggest that traditional theories of international relations are gender-neutral—that is, that gender and international relations are two separate spheres that do not impact each other—feminist theory shows that traditional theories are gender-blind. Feminist scholarship therefore takes both women and gender seriously; in doing so, it challenges the foundational concepts and assumptions of international relations.

Gender Visibility

One of feminism's major contributions to international relations is to make women visible. As an example of an early contribution, feminist theorists revealed that women were (and are) routinely exposed to gendered violence.

Violence is a central interest of international relations given the focus of traditional theories in interstate conflict (realism) and democratic peace (liberalism). In making violence against women visible, feminists exposed an international system that tacitly accepted a large amount of violence against women as a normal state of affairs. For example, the United Nations launched a campaign in 2008 called "UNiTE to End Violence against Women," which estimated that up to seven out of 10 women will experience violence at some point in their lives and that approximately 600 million women live in countries where domestic violence is not yet considered a crime.



Image 5.4.1: The UNiTE Campaign to end violence against women and girls has led to annual demonstrations worldwide, such as this silent protest held in Jamaica, 2016. *(Source: "International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women 2016 - Jamaica" by UN Women Gallery is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.)*

Violence against women is prevalent globally and is not specific to any particular political or economic system. Jacqui True (2012), for example, demonstrates the links between violence against women in the private sphere and the kinds of violence women experience in public in an increasingly globalized workplace and in times of war. In short, nowhere do women share the same economic, political, or social rights as men, and everywhere there are prevalent forms of gendered violence (e.g., domestic violence, sexual violence).

By looking at violence against women in such a way, it is possible to see a continuum of gendered violence that does not reflect neat and distinct categories of "peace" and "stability." Many societies are thought of as predominantly peaceful or stable despite high levels of violence against a particular portion of the population. This theoretical contribution therefore presents a very different image of violence and insecurity to that viewed through the traditional security-focused agendas of states.

By making women visible, feminism additionally highlights women's absence from decision-making and institutional structures. For example, in 2015, the World Bank estimated that globally women composed just 22.9 percent of national parliaments. One of the core assumptions of traditional perspectives, which feminism challenges, is the exclusionary focus on "high" politics—for example, topics like sovereignty, the state, and military security. The traditional focus on states and the relations between them overlooks the fact that men are predominantly in charge of state institutions, dominating power and decision-making structures. This is a gendered exclusion, as women contribute in essential ways to global politics even though they are less likely to populate the areas of high politics. Over two million women entered the U.S. workforce during the early years of World War II, for example, to support war industries. The world of high politics ignores these essential contributions.

Traditional perspectives that ignore gender not only overlook the contributions of women and the impact global politics has on them, but also perpetually justify this exclusion. If women are outside these domains of power, then their experiences and contributions are not relevant. Feminist theorists work to demonstrate that previously excluded areas are central to the functioning of international relations, even if they are not acknowledged, and that the exclusion and inclusion of certain areas in traditional international relations thinking is based on gendered ideas of what does or does not count.

Gender Norms

A second major contribution of feminism is to expose and deconstruct socially-constructed gender norms. In making sense of international relations in a way that takes both women and gender seriously, feminism demonstrates the construction of gendered identities that perpetuate normative ideas of what men and women (and additional genders) should do.

In this regard, it is important to understand the distinction between "sex" as biological and "gender" as socially constructed. Not all gender considerations rest on the analysis of women, nor should they, and gender relates to expectations and identities attached to all genders. **Gender** refers to the socially-constructed assumptions assigned to bodies—for example, behavior assumed to be appropriately "masculine" (male) or "feminine" (female). Observers often associate masculinity with rationality, power, independence, and the public sphere; they associate femininity with irrationality, the need for protection, domesticity, and the private sphere. These socially- and politically-produced gender identities shape and influence global interactions.

International relations as theory, and global politics as practice, also produces gendered identities in perpetuating assumptions about who should do what and why. Because patriarchal power underlies these gender identities, women and feminine gender identities are subordinate to men and masculine gender identities. This means that socially-constructed gender identities determine distributions of power, which impact the position of women in global politics.



Image 5.4.2: Women protesting gender violence in Mexico City in 2022 also challenge gendered assumptions about aggression, violence, and political roles for women, with a sign suggesting violence against "machote" or domineering men. *(Source: Photo by María Fuentes on Unsplash.)*

In an influential essay, Cynthia Enloe (1989) asks: "Where are the women?" Enloe deconstructs the distinctions between the international and the personal, showing how global politics impacts (and is shaped by) the daily activities of men and women. In turn, Enloe illustrates how these activities rest on gendered identities. As an example, observers traditionally see military and war-making as masculine endeavors, linked with the idea that men are legitimate armed actors who fight to protect those in need (i.e., women, children, and non-fighting men). In practice, this means that observers treat the contributions and experiences of women in conflict peripherally, largely outside the realm of consideration of international relations.

For instance, the issue of sexual and gendered violence in conflict has only recently been reinforced as an important item on the international agenda. And, while the 2002 Rome Statute recognizes rape as a war crime, its existence did not lead to the curtailment of conflict-related sexual violence. This form of violence remains endemic in many conflicts around the world, as does impunity for its occurrence.

These issues highlight the importance of intersectionality, an understanding that multiple identities (e.g., gender, class, race, ethnicity) shape international politics. **Intersectionality** refers to the areas in which these identities overlap and interact to shape the experiences of different groups and individuals. For example, a black South African woman from a wealthy suburb of Johannesburg will likely have different experiences and perspectives than a black American woman from a poor section of Chicago, though superficially an observer might identify both as women, or even assume they have common cause as black women.

Intersectionality considers the ways in which marginalization occurs for different groups of people, suggesting that we must consider identity categories in tandem rather than in isolation. In examining wartime rape, Lori Handrahan (2004, p. 437) shows the intersection of gender and ethnic identities, where the enemy's women become constructed as "other" and violence against them consequently comes to represent the "expansion of ethnic territory by the male conqueror." This rests on gendered constructions that occur at the intersections with other forms of identity, such as ethnicity or race. Applying feminist theory to the issue of the wartime rape of men also shows the gendered logic that informs its occurrence, in particular that the rape of male opponents is seen to "feminize" (that is, humiliate or defeat) them. Such lines of inquiry highlight the contribution of feminism in understanding how gender influences international relations and how the feminine is undervalued or devalued.

While feminism exposes gender violence and women's marginalization in global politics, it also challenges gendered constructions of women as inherently peaceful, as needing protection, or as victims. Feminists see these constructions as further evidence of gender inequality and also as contributing to the exclusion of women from traditional perspectives on international relations. If observers assume women are victims rather than actors, or peaceful rather than aggressive, or only existing in the domestic realm rather than the public sphere, then it is easier to ignore and marginalize their experiences and perspectives on global politics. Accounts of women disrupting these gender identities, such as being agents of political violence for example, challenge these assumptions. Taking feminism seriously is not simply about upending the historical marginalization of women. It

also provides a more complete picture of global politics by taking into account a broader range of actors and actions.

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5.5: IR in the Real World

On February 24, 2022, Russian military forces launched an invasion of Ukraine, representing the largest conflict between two European states since World War II. The invasion followed several years of tension between Russia and Ukraine, including Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea (a territory in Ukraine that had been previously part of Russia prior to 1954) and support for separatists in parts of eastern Ukraine.



Image 5.5.1: Russian president Vladimir Putin announcing the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. *(Source: "Vladimir Putin (2022-02-24)" by Presidential Executive Office of Russia is licensed under CC BY 4.0.)*

Early on in the war, Russian President Vladimir Putin issued statements that were interpreted as threats to use nuclear weapons against North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member states. These states have continued to provide weapons and other military resources to Ukraine in the effort to maintain Ukrainian sovereignty and resist Russian aggression.

Threats that contain references to nuclear weapons have tested one constructivist social norm—the nuclear taboo. According to Nina Tannenwald, the nuclear taboo is a normative prohibition against nuclear weapons use that has developed across the global system since 1945, the last time a nuclear weapon was used in active warfare. This norm stigmatizes the use of nuclear weapons by categorizing it as unacceptable weapons of mass destruction. While a realist approach to nuclear non-use is often based on deterrence (i.e. a nuclear weapons state will not attack another nuclear weapons state for fear of nuclear retaliation), Tannenwald argues that deterrence alone fails to capture larger societal beliefs about the immoral use of nuclear weapons. These beliefs came about through grassroots movements in many states that resulted in the creation of green parties and anti-nuclear parties that then subsequently put pressure on political leaders to adhere to the nuclear taboo and seek out treaties that limited the proliferation of nuclear weapons.

While threats made by President Putin sparked concerns that nuclear weapons could be once again used in warfare, these threats were also accompanied by widespread criticism from the United States and other countries. For some constructivist scholars, President Putin's threats may suggest the nuclear taboo is experiencing "norm decay" that will result in less adherence to nuclear non-use. For other scholars, the condemnation of nuclear use, including by states traditionally aligned with Russia (such as China), may also speak to the strengthening of the norm. As the war in Ukraine continues, constructivist scholars will continue to monitor the rhetoric and actions taken by the Russian government to determine how well the nuclear taboo is being adhered to in the 21st century.

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5.6: Conclusion

So far, this chapter has discussed the constructivist, Marxist, and feminist approaches to international relations. These critical theories reject some of the assumptions that make up the traditional approaches to international relations: realism and liberalism. However, the focus on social identity, economic conditions, and gender are not the only ways to critically view geopolitical events. Instead, there are several other critical theories in international relations. These include two contemporary critical theories: green theory and post-colonialism theory.

For green theorists, traditional frameworks for international relations have provided an anthropocentric worldview that is unconcerned with environmental degradation, even though this degradation may ultimately lead to new security concerns between states. Instead, many green theorists have called for a reimagining of international cooperation beyond state-centric models, including a rethinking of sovereignty in a post-Westphalian system. For post-colonial theorists, traditional frameworks for international relations have been grounded in a Western-centric understanding of global governance, which serves to perpetuate a Western-dominated international system. Instead, post-colonial theorists have called for a recognition of the impact colonialism has had in shaping the modern hierarchies of the international order, one that has continued to marginalize non-Western perspectives.

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5.7: Student Resources

Summary

Constructivism emerged in the field of international relations toward the end of the Cold War, challenging traditional theories like realism and liberalism. Constructivism holds that international politics is socially constructed, shaped not just by material capabilities (such as geography, natural resources, and military resources), but also by ideas and beliefs, holding that perceptions can significantly influence the meaning of material capabilities. Central to constructivism are the concepts of identity and social norms.

Marxism is a critical approach to international relations, rooted in the philosophies of Karl Marx. This perspective holds that the capitalist system and the modern state are not inherent but rather products of specific historical and social conditions. In the late 20th century, Immanuel Wallerstein further developed Marxist thought through world systems theory, which categorizes states into core, semi-periphery, and periphery groups based on their economic roles.

Feminism highlights the importance of gender as a factor to examine in global politics. It exposes the pervasive nature of gendered violence and emphasizes women's absence in decision-making processes. Feminism argues that traditional frameworks of international relations ignore significant contributions women make in sectors considered peripheral to global politics, reinforcing their exclusion from power structures. Feminists also focus on deconstructing gender norms that shape identities and expectations for all genders.

Key Terms

- **Agency** is the ability for a person to act.
- **Bourgeoisie** is a group of people who are the owners of capital, such as land, factories, and other means of production.
- **Critical theories** are a set of theories of international relations that challenge traditional views on world politics.
- **Constructivism** is a theory of international relations that argues that international politics is socially constructed.
- **Feminism** is a social and political philosophy that, in the context of international relations, centers gender as a consideration in politics.
- **Gender** is socially constructed behaviors and expectations that are assigned to men and women.
- **Ideational structure** is the distribution of ideas and knowledge in the international system, according to constructivism.
- **Identity** is a representation of an actor's understanding of who they are, which in turn signals their interests.
- **Intersectionality** is the overlapping and interaction of multiple identities with one another that often provide advantages or disadvantages for individuals or groups holding those identities.
- **Historical materialism** is a Marxist theory of history that explains how economic activity shapes political and social conditions.
- **Marxism** is a political, economic, and social philosophy that, in the context of international relations, holds that economic factors shape relations between states.
- **Material Structure** is the distribution of physical capabilities in the international system, according to constructivism.
- **Proletariat** is a group of people who provide their labor in exchange for wages.
- **Relations of production** is the Marxist view that two groups are connected in the production of goods and services, often in an opposing fashion.
- **Social norms** are standards of appropriate behavior for actors with a given identity.
- **Structure** is the context in which a person acts, including the material and ideational structures of the international system.
- **World Systems Theory** is a multidisciplinary framework that analyzes the world as a system made up of three interdependent groups: the core, the semi-periphery, and the periphery.

Critical Thinking Questions

1. How do constructivist, Marxist, and feminist approaches to international relations challenge traditional theories of realism and liberalism?
2. Consider the concept of anarchy. How do constructivists view anarchy and how is this different from the realist and liberal approach to anarchy?

3. Choose a contemporary geopolitical event. How does a Marxist or feminist approach uncover aspects of the event that a realist or liberal perspective may miss?

Suggestions for Further Study

Websites

- Brief video summation of constructivism: Theory in Action: Constructivism
- Nina Tannewald's talk on the nuclear taboo: The Nuclear Taboo - ICAN Act On It Forum

Journal Articles

- Hopf, T. (1998). The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations Theory. *International Security*, 23(1), 171-200.
- Prügl, E., & J.A. Tickner. (2018). Feminist International Relations: Some Research Agendas for a World in Transition. *European Journal of Politics and Gender*, 1(1-2), 75-91.

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6: FOREIGN POLICY-MAKING

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6.1: Introduction

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to:

- Define and differentiate between foreign and domestic policy, explaining how foreign policy decisions originate within states but extend outward to influence interactions with other global actors.
- Analyze foreign policy through multiple levels of analysis, using historical examples to illustrate how each level shapes outcomes.
- Identify and evaluate the roles of key actors in foreign policy, including states, international organizations, multinational corporations, non-governmental organizations, and diaspora communities, and explain how these actors influence a state's pursuit of its national interest.

Foreign policy is "the sum of official external relations conducted by an independent actor (usually a state) in international relations" (Hill, 2003). Foreign policy involves decisions made domestically within a state that impact affairs outside of its borders, such as the relationship it has with other states, international organizations (IOs), non-governmental organizations (NGOs), multinational corporations (MNCs), and other global actors. These decisions often necessarily entail a measure of secrecy to protect a state's interests.

Though foreign policy decisions originate domestically, they are not unidirectional; rather, they take into account other actors' interests. One state's actions will depend on its perceptions of other actors' interests, and the subsequent reactions and responses from other actors will then provide information to the original state. If State A changes its foreign policy in a manner that impacts State B, State B will respond, as will any relevant IOs, NGOs, and MNCs. Depending on the responses, State A may further change its foreign policy posture. Foreign policy is therefore an iterative process, in which repeated interactions between actors over time lead to specific outcomes.

We often distinguish foreign policy from domestic policy. **Domestic policy** refers to the set of decisions and actions undertaken by a government that directly impacts the lives of people within its borders. These policies encompass a wide range of issues, including economic regulations, social welfare programs, healthcare, education, and law enforcement, all of which aim to maintain stability domestically (and hopefully promote the well-being of the state's citizens).

Though a clear topic of interest in political science, the study of foreign policy (also referred to as foreign affairs) is interdisciplinary, with economists, geographers, and historians all providing theoretical perspectives. Political scientists—particularly those who study international relations—conceptualize foreign policy as transcendent across historical periods and differing political societies. These scholars look for patterns in the behavior of a state or an organization that they can generalize, regardless of the historical context. Before examining such foreign policy patterns, we must first review the levels of analysis, define the key actors in foreign policy, and discuss the concept of "national interest."

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6.2: Foundations of Foreign Policy

Levels of Analysis

As a reminder from Chapter 1, research in international relations often relies on identifying and studying events at a particular level of analysis: international (systemic), state (domestic), and individual. Due to the complexities in global politics, each level of analysis offers unique explanatory power, allowing scholars to differentiate between presumed causes operating at different scales (Matthews & Callaway, 2017).

This framework is particularly useful in examining how actors formulate foreign policy, from the decision-making processes of individual policymakers to the broader interactions among states that ultimately shape foreign policy outcomes. Consider Table 6.2, which lists each level of analysis, its corresponding focus, and an example from the Cold War. Recall from Chapter 2 that the Cold War was a period of tense relations between the United States (U.S.) and the Soviet Union—including intense economic, ideological, military, and political competition marked by proxy wars, a nuclear arms race, and competing spheres of influence—that lasted from the end of World War II until the fall of the Soviet Union (1991).

Table 6.2: Levels of Analysis and Foreign Policy

Level of Analysis	Focus	Cold War Dynamics	Foreign Policy Outcome
international	systemic power distribution	The two superpowers, the U.S. and the Soviet Union, struggled for global hegemony.	The U.S. strategic doctrine of containment aimed to prevent communist expansion.
state	domestic characteristics of states	The U.S. was a capitalist democracy while the Soviet Union was a communist authoritarian regime.	The U.S. intervened in a series of proxy wars on behalf of pro-Western capitalist governments to prevent the spread of communism.
individual	actions, decisions, or perceptions by leaders	U.S. and Soviet leaders wanted to project strength while avoiding nuclear war.	U.S. President Ronald Reagan introduced the Reagan Doctrine in the 1980s, signaling a move away from détente in favor of a more assertive form of containment.

Each level of analysis offers unique explanatory power and insight into foreign policy decisions, and the levels are not mutually exclusive. For example, suppose we wanted to understand Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. One scholar may contend that Russia invaded its neighbor to counter the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). This explanation utilizes an international (systemic) level of analysis, arguing that Russia sees potential Ukrainian membership in NATO as a geopolitical threat. Another scholar may posit that resurgent nationalism within Russia drove Russian aggression. This explanation is at the state (domestic) level of analysis, highlighting that Russian nationalists view Ukraine's embrace of Western states and their organizations as a direct challenge to their belief that Ukraine is a historic part of Russia. And yet another scholar may argue that responsibility lies with Russian President Vladimir Putin. This explanation is at the individual level of analysis, highlighting Putin's ego or personal ambitions to return Russia to a great power status as the key motive behind the invasion.

All three of these explanations provide insight simultaneously, yet each fundamentally approaches the question of Russian invasion from a different level of analysis. Identifying an explanation at a particular level of analysis, therefore, is an analytical tool that scholars use to simplify hugely complex foreign policy issues into manageable, analyzable pieces.

Actors

Foreign policy involves many different actors, and states are the main actors. Because states are sovereign—each state is fundamentally equal in legal terms and free to act independently without the consent of any higher authority—states are at the center of their own foreign policy decisions, guided by their "national interest." The national interest refers to the goals and objectives of a sovereign state (more on this below).

Within states, there are many actors that influence foreign policy. Political parties and interest groups (particularly in a democratic

state) may take specific foreign policy positions, and individual constituents may also voice strong foreign policy positions. This is especially true when foreign policy affects a diaspora community. A **diaspora** refers to a population that resides in states outside of its ancestral or historical homeland. These communities maintain cultural, linguistic, or social ties to their origins while adapting to their host states. Examples include the Jewish diaspora, the Armenian diaspora, and the Indian diaspora, each of which established significant communities worldwide due to historical migration, trade, conflict, and/or economic opportunities. Often diaspora communities residing within a state can exert significant influence over that state's foreign policy toward their historical homeland.

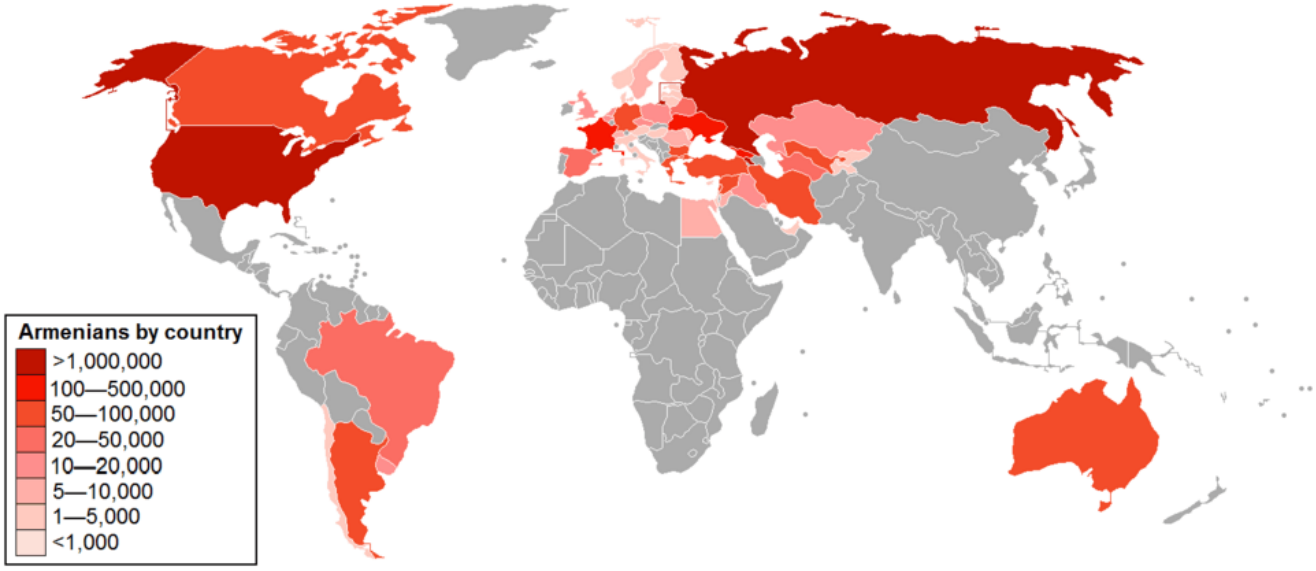


Image 6.2.1: Millions of people of Armenian descent currently live in a diverse and complex diaspora across the globe. *(Source: "Armenian Diaspora" by Manger555 is licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0.)*

Though states are central, other actors are able to influence foreign policy, such as international institutions. These institutions can be formal or informal. An **international organization (IO)** is a formal international institution, created by and composed of states, in which representatives relay their government's interests in independent governing bodies. The United Nations (UN) is an example of an IO. The UN provides a neutral and depoliticized space where diplomats can meet to discuss and potentially solve problems. UN officials can also help mediate bargaining and negotiating between states as a neutral third party, providing thematic experts in areas such as criminal matters, cultural heritage, and reparations.



Image 6.2.2: The imposing Berlaymont building in Belgium is the seat of the European Commission, the primary executive arm

of the EU. Formal international institutions typically have a physical building in which representatives conduct their work.
(Source: "Belgique - Bruxelles - Schuman - Berlaymont - 01" by EmDee is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0.)

States also create informal international institutions, which can influence foreign policy as states pursue cooperation in different issue areas, such as the environment. Informal international institutions typically lack independent governance bodies, and they often address public goods and collective action problems. A public good is a product or service available to all individuals without restrictions—at the international level, examples include the ocean and the ozone layer—which face collective action problems. Informal international institutions attempt to develop a set of norms and expectations to mitigate collective action problems. As one example, the Law of the Sea governs all aspects of oceans, seas, and coastlines, including maritime zones, while regulating seabed mining, fishing, and navigational rights. The People's Republic of China claims a wide swath of the South China Sea through a nautical map that is referred to as the "Nine-Dash Line." China's government contends that these are the state's historical waters and, thus, they assert economic exclusivity in the maritime region. Neighboring states, such as the Philippines, Malaysia, and Vietnam, disagree and counter that China's Nine-Dash Line violates the Law of the Sea.

Beyond international institutions, transnational actors can also influence a state's foreign policy, including multinational corporations and non-governmental organizations. **Multinational corporations (MNCs)** are for-profit organizations with financial activities outside of their home state's borders (e.g., Amazon, Apple, McDonald's, Toyota). Some of the MNCs have resources larger than states and their commercial activities can dictate how a state behaves internationally. The transnational oil company Royal Dutch Shell, for example, has operations in the Niger River Delta. Shell's operations generate significant revenue for Nigeria, giving the corporation strong enough political influence to dissuade Nigeria from pursuing closer relations with China and Russia.

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are organizations that operate independently of a government, with private and voluntary membership. NGOs form to achieve a common purpose, usually to protect a common good, such as the protection of the environment, or to promote a set of values or principles, such as human rights. Greenpeace is an example of the former; its activists have pressured states, including Japan and member-states of the European Union, to limit their fishing activities. Amnesty International is an example of the latter, authoring reports on human rights abuses in states ranging from Myanmar to Saudi Arabia.

Other transnational actors that can influence state behavior include organizations that engage in illicit behavior, such as narcotic cartels and transnational terrorist organizations. For years, as one example, the Medellin Cartel was a powerful narcotics syndicate that used violence, including high profile attacks and bombings, to influence Colombian foreign policy. The cartel's efforts aimed to thwart government coordination with American anti-narcotics efforts in the region. As another example, the Islamic State, also known by its acronym ISIS, strongly pressured states throughout the Middle East. By occupying territory in Iraq and Syria, ISIS forced both governments to involve foreign militaries to help end their presence.

In sum, while states remain the main actors in foreign policy, the internationalization of major issues, the growth in global and transnational networks, and the weakening (or lack of development) of domestic institutions in some states has strengthened the influence of international organizations and transnational actors.

The "National Interest"

While domestic constituencies, IOs, MNCs, and NGOs exert pressure on states in an effort to influence foreign policy, the state's government fundamentally defines its **national interest**, the core principles and aims of a state's foreign policy (Hastedt, 2023).

The state's foreign policy establishment typically identifies its national interest, a group that usually includes sets of elected officials, bureaucrats, and academic and policy experts. At times, decisionmakers can include senior members of the military, economic and business elites, and cultural actors, such as religious clerics and religious interest groups. In democratic states, elections can (though do not always) shift a state's national interests and, depending on the new leadership, this change can be dramatic. This is less the case with authoritarian states, where changes in leadership are less frequent and national interests remain more stable.

The national interest varies dramatically from state to state, and is therefore difficult to define without taking many factors into account. For example, an island state like Kiribati faces increasing flood risk due to surging sea levels, with NASA suggesting that over the next 30 years, oceans will rise at least 6 inches (15 centimeters). This dramatic change in sea levels may directly threaten the survival of the state itself. For Kiribati, climate change, global warming, and rising oceans are clear national interests. Yet sea level rise will vary from location to location; while some states will endure flooding and damage to infrastructure, others will face less intense consequences.



Image 6.2.3: Representatives from states vulnerable to sea level rise, including Kiribati, sit at a negotiating table submerged in the waves during an action by a global grassroots environmental organization. *(Source: "350.org Action for Survival" by 350.org is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0.)*

In terms of a state's foreign policy, the most important boundary is between "vital interests" and "less than vital interests." **Vital interests** are a state's core interests or conditions that are non-negotiable, such as those vital to national sovereignty and security. States are unwilling to compromise on vital interests, and may even resort to the use of force to protect or achieve them. **Less than vital interests** are not a state's core interests or conditions, and these interests are (at least to some extent) negotiable. States are unlikely to use force to defend less than vital interests.

China's foreign policy toward other states regarding the island of Taiwan offers a clear example of a vital interest. The government in Beijing sees Taiwan as an integral part of its territory, referred to as the "One China Principle," and rejects any attempts by Taiwanese leadership for independence. If a state recognizes Taiwanese sovereignty, China responds by isolating it diplomatically and economically. For China, reunification with Taiwan is non-negotiable.

Whether an interest falls in the "vital" or "less than vital" category depends, in part, on a state's perception of threats. As Hastedt (2023) describes, "A-list threats" pose a direct and immediate challenge to a state's survival; "B-list threats" involve challenges to immediate interests but not survival; and "C-list threats" indirectly or only gradually affect a state's national interests. Referring back to the example above, China views Taiwan's independence movement as an A-list threat; it challenges China's survival as a unified state.

More generally, threats can be either physical or psychological. A physical threat, for instance, may stem from the direct use of military force by one state against another or from the perception that one state is willing to use force (Snow, 2019). Psychological threats may take many forms. As one example, a psychological threat may stem from a fear of terrorism. Though a terrorist attack may not threaten the survival of a state, it has the potential to induce mass panic and widespread fear among the state's population. It also has the potential to affect foreign policy. Consider, for instance, a series of train bombings that occurred in Madrid, Spain on March 11, 2004, killing nearly 200 people. The bombings took place three days before Spain's general elections and shifted public sentiment on Spain's involvement in the Iraq War. The bombings spurred public protests, illuminated discontent with the incumbent government, contributed to the electoral victory of the opposition party, and led to the speedy withdrawal of Spanish forces in Iraq.



Image 6.2.4: Anti-war protests followed the 2004 Madrid train bombings, including this one the day after the bombings, March 12, in Barcelona. *(Source: "File:Manifestació 12 de maig de 2004 a Barcelona.JPG" by Kippelboy is licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0.)*

In sum, determining what falls within a state's national interest, and how this changes over time, is central to understanding a state's foreign policy. States will pursue goals and implement strategies that protect their interests.

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6.3: Tools of Foreign Policy

There are many tools of foreign policy available to states, including economic, military, and diplomatic. A state's choice of foreign policy tools in a given context fundamentally depends on its national interest.

Exerting Power

Each state's capability to promote or secure its national interests rests on its **power potential**, determined by the resources it can utilize to exert influence. The availability and strategic use of these resources shapes the state's ability to impact international relations and policy decisions. Power is important as it "enables an actor to shape his environment to reflect his interests. In particular it enables a state to protect its security and prevent, deflect, or defeat threats to that security" (Huntington, 1993, pp. 69-70). There are two main types of power: hard power and soft power.

Hard power involves a state's use of its available power resources to compel other states into aligning with its interests through coercive means. Coercion typically relies on military or economic power. **Military power** encompasses the use or threat of armed force as a means for a state to pursue and achieve its strategic foreign policy objectives. **Economic power** refers to a state's ability to leverage financial incentives or impose economic restrictions—such as through loans, foreign aid, sanctions, and trade agreements—to influence and secure conformity with its foreign policy objectives.

Both military and economic power rely on several sources of power potential, such as physical resources like geographic size, geographic position, natural resources, and size of population. A state with an abundance of natural resources (and all else equal), for example, has more power potential than a state with few natural resources. Natural resources (e.g., raw materials, energy sources) are essential for economic activities and development. An example of a state that relies on physical resources is Russia, which uses its natural gas and oil reserves as a "stick" (a form of hard power) on its neighbors in Eastern Europe. Another example is China, which uses its control of 70 percent of the world's rare earth minerals to force concessions in other economic arrangements, such as access to local markets for Chinese exports.



Image 6.3.1: Rare earth element deposits at a mine in South China, 2016. (Source: "REE deposits" by Kevnmh is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0.)

Soft power is the ability of a state to influence other actors by encouraging them to adopt its preferred actions, values, or policies through persuasion and the perceived legitimacy of its conduct. Rather than coercion through physical resources, soft power implies attraction—attraction to a state's culture, values, or ideology. In practice, soft power entails building good will and enhancing relationships through the extension of values, ideals, and cultural influence beyond a state's borders.

While governments play an active role in fostering and utilizing soft power to advance their interests, soft power also often emerges from non-governmental sources, such as NGOs, educational institutions, and religious organizations. Cultural elements like music, sports, media, and influential industries (e.g., Bollywood in India) also shape soft power.

Conducting Diplomacy

Engaging in diplomatic relations is an integral component of soft power. **Diplomacy** is the practice by which states seek to influence the actions and policies of other states through negotiation, bargaining, and strategic communication. This process involves engaging in non-coercive measures, such as diplomatic agreements, economic incentives, or public appeals, to shape international relations and garner support for specific positions while avoiding the use of force.

Depending on the state, numerous actors can engage in diplomacy. At the highest level, this includes elected or appointed leaders, such as presidents and prime ministers, who meet during summits to discuss their concerns or to address issues. The annual Group of Seven (G7) Summit, for instance, involves leaders from seven of the world's industrialized democracies (Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the U.S.) who meet to discuss global issues, such as economic governance and international security.

Right below this highest level are the **diplomats**, or individuals designated by a national government to represent its interests; engage in official negotiations; and manage political, economic, and social relations with foreign states. Diplomats play a crucial role in fostering international cooperation and advancing their state's foreign policy objectives. For almost all states, the diplomatic corps resides within a Ministry of Foreign Affairs; in the U.S., the Department of State handles these duties, with the Secretary of State considered the top U.S. diplomat. Diplomatic efforts by formal diplomats are referred to as **Track One diplomacy**, as the participants represent the official positions of their government.



Image 6.3.2: A peace education workshop held in Haiti, conducted by the NGO Teachers Without Borders. *(Source: "File:Haiti Fenel wikipedia.jpg" by Nicolekteach is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0.)*

Diplomatic efforts can also mix Track One and Track Two. For example, **cultural diplomacy** is a strategic approach that leverages the exchange of ideas, values, traditions, and other cultural elements to foster relationships, enhance socio-cultural collaboration, and promote national interests. Governments, private entities, or civil society organizations can carry out cultural diplomacy. Because culture is a fundamental pillar of soft power, it plays a crucial role in shaping a state's global image and identity. For example, states such as South Korea, through the worldwide influence of its pop culture phenomenon known as the Korean Wave ("Hallyu"), and China, via its Confucius Institutes, have successfully employed cultural diplomacy to strengthen their international reputations and influences.



Image 6.3.3: "Hallyu," or the Korean Wave, refers to the remarkable spread of Korean culture—including film, television, video games, K-pop, food, cosmetics, and fashion—which has been explicitly used as a form of public diplomacy by South Korea to promote Korean interests, tourism, and consumption of Korean products globally. *(Source: "Korean wave, hallyu in Singapore" by KOREA.NET - Official page of the Republic of Korea is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0.)*

A second example is **religious diplomacy**, which is a strategic approach that leverages the moral authority and legitimacy of religious leaders, institutions, or values to foster dialogue and resolve conflicts. By drawing on shared religious history, symbols, values, and heritage—or by promoting interfaith dialogue—states utilize these elements to advance trust and promote understanding, particularly in post-conflict situations. The Holy See, the central governing authority of the Roman Catholic Church, for example, conducts religious diplomacy, with formal diplomatic relations with over 180 states. In 2019 at a spiritual retreat at the Vatican, Pope Francis exerted his moral authority to call on the leaders of South Sudan's government and its opposition to remain peaceful one year after signing a peace agreement. He stated, "There will be fights among you, but let these be inside the office…in front of the people, hold hands" (Horowitz, 2019).

Video description: Pope Francis, wearing white robes at the Vatican, walks through a group of previously-warring South Sudanese leaders in 2019. Getting help from his minister, the pope kneels down and kisses the feet of each of three South Sudanese leaders, urging them not to return to civil war.

A third example is **public diplomacy**, which is the strategic use of media and cultural programming to influence foreign publics and their elites. This is different from propaganda, which is the strategic spread of information—whether factual, misleading, or entirely false—in order to shape public opinion. Propaganda utilizes mass media as a primary vehicle for distribution, influencing societal perceptions and attitudes through facts, arguments, rumors, half-truths, or outright fabrications. Public diplomacy, rather, engages in activities like educational exchange programs for scholars and students, visitor initiatives, language training, cultural events, and international broadcasting. These activities serve as key instruments in shaping global perceptions, and they aim to enhance the image and reputation of the originating state.

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6.4: Approaches to Foreign Policy

The tools in the previous section provide options for how leaders conduct foreign policy, but leaders may also vary in terms of their general approaches to foreign policy. On issues related to foreign affairs, do a state's leaders want to collaborate with others or go at it alone? In what follows, we discuss two general approaches to foreign policy.

Lateralisms

The first approach we will call the choice of "lateralism."

Unilateralism is the predisposition for a state to act alone when it comes to solving a problem or protecting its interests. Unilateralism can come in many forms, ranging from adopting neutrality legislation to stand-alone military action. States that adopt a unilateral approach tend to eschew international institutions, viewing their actions as antithetical to the state's national interests. While the exercise of unilateral actions provides a state with control over the decision (assuming they wield enough power), the full burden of any failures simultaneously lies with the state.

As a military example, in the U.S. in 2003, the Bush Administration launched military action against Iraq without support from the UN, and with members of the UN Security Council vetoing a resolution authorizing the use of force. As a trade example, unilateralism occurs when one state takes an action against another—such as imposing sanctions against a state that violated trade terms—under the rules set up by the parties to a trade agreement.



Image 6.4.1: U.S. President George W. Bush introduces the Joint Resolution to Authorize the Use of United States Armed Forces Against Iraq on October 2, 2002. The resolution was passed by both houses of Congress and signed into law two weeks later. *(Source: "U.S. President George Bush introduces the Joint Resolution to Authorize the Use of United States Armed Forces Against Iraq, October 2, 2002" by Paul Morse for The White House is in the Public Domain.)*

Bilateralism is when two states work together to address a foreign policy problem or address a collective goods issue. It occurs when two states' interests align, leading to an agreement or formal treaty, in which both states commit to their joint decision for the long term. This often occurs between neighboring states with similar interests, such as shared resources (e.g., water, minerals), but it also occurs in non-neighboring state scenarios. Bilateralism is typically completed case-by-case and does not conform to a uniform set of standards; that is, a state may have a particular agreement with one state on a foreign affairs issue, but a completely different arrangement with another on the same issue.

Such a scenario was common during the Cold War, where both the U.S. and the Soviet Union drafted favorable agreements with states that supported their foreign policy agendas. For instance, Colombia was a principal recipient of American economic and

technical aid because the U.S. viewed Colombia as a stable democracy that was inherently anti-communist. This geostrategic importance prompted intense foreign aid to successive Colombian governments to combat communist guerrilla movements and subsequent drug cartels that sought to destabilize the state.

Multilateralism is the predisposition for a state to act in unison with other states and/or organizations, forgoing individual action. States achieve multilateral action by signing on to multilateral treaties (for more on multilateralism within international law, see Chapter 10) and participating in international organizations; cooperation within the UN, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund, for instance, all show multilateralism.

A potential issue with multilateralism is the free-rider problem—for instance, states may choose to enjoy the outputs from a multilateral institution without contributing in a meaningful way (i.e., without paying costs). It is often the case that wealthy, strong states financially support multilateral institutions in disproportionate amounts. This can lead the financially-contributing states to enmesh themselves in the foreign policy interests of smaller, less powerful states. Alternatively, stronger, more powerful states may determine that the free-rider problem is so extreme that there is little value to remaining a member of the multilateral institution. For example, the U.S. has historically been the largest funder of the World Health Organization (WHO), the global health agency tasked with responding to epidemics and other health emergencies. In early 2025, the Trump Administration announced that it plans to withdraw from the WHO, halting funding to the organization due to the "unfairly onerous payments…far out of proportion with other countries' assessed payments" (The White House, 2025). The Trump Administration's assessment leans away from a multilateral, and toward a unilateral, approach of addressing global health issues.

Isolationism and Internationalism

The second approach depends on a state's level of involvement with the international system, typically characterized at one of two extremes: isolationism or internationalism. **Isolationism** is, at its most extreme, when a state fully disengages with global systems and retreats into self-sufficiency. **Internationalism** is, at its most extreme, when a state fully engages within global systems, becoming interdependent with other states.

In practice, no state is either fully isolationist nor fully internationalist, and every modern state has vacillated between desiring to be "left alone" and "involved." Generally, states are only able to seriously pursue isolationist strategies when they have the autonomy and capacity to do so; these are often territorially large states with extensive resources or geographically-isolated states. Historical examples include the late medieval/early modern dynasties in China, beginning with the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), and the Tokugawa Shogunate (1603-1868) in Japan. In both of these examples, the kingdoms resisted foreign influences and outside challenges to their authority. Actions included closing ports to foreign traders, restricting foreign contacts through state-controlled entities, and using substantive defenses to fend off potential incursions and invasions. A modern example is the U.S. in the period between World War I and World War II, during which the American public preferred that the government withdraw from global politics given the complex alliance system that preceded World War I. American isolationism only ended with the surprise Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941.

In each example, the state was able to maintain some level of economic independence, allowing its diplomats to spurn overtures from foreign officials. The Shogunate in Japan was especially successful given Japan's geography as an island. The U.S. had a similar dynamic. Even though the state is not an island, it is surrounded by two large oceans, sheltering it from the political violence seen elsewhere. As a large, land-based empire, China did not enjoy the same luxury and, over time, was unable to maintain its isolation as European powers demanded access to its large market.

States that lack both the autonomy and the capacity to endure isolation are much more accepting of internationalism. This tends to include small states that face external pressures from large neighbors, or those states that are unable to independently support themselves economically. Examples include the smaller states of Europe, such as Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and Belgium. Often referred to as the Benelux countries, these states are ardent proponents of internationalism, professing strong support for international institutions, such as NATO and the European Union.



Image 6.4.2: The Benelux countries share borders with their large and powerful neighbors, Germany and France. *(Source: "Benelux" by Shaund is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0.)*

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6.5: Models of Foreign Policy Decision-Making

The features defining the various levels of analysis—the systemic power distribution; the domestic characteristics of states; and the actions, decisions, or perceptions of leaders—influence decisions by the various actors described in earlier sections. State actors must fundamentally consider the national interest while internationally-based actors (e.g., leaders of IOs, MNCs, or NGOs) must consider their own interests or the interests of the international system as a whole. Foreign policy is complicated; the problems and issues that policymakers must address are often ongoing, changing as political and economic contexts change, and shrouded in secrecy. These decision-makers do not have full and complete information when making their policy choices; rather, policymakers make foreign policy decisions with partial information, offering much room for error. With such complicated issues, such varied and competing interests, and such incomplete information, how does foreign policy decision-making actually occur?

Several models exist when discussing foreign policy decision-making: the rational actor model, the bureaucratic politics model, and the small group decision-making model.

Rational Actor Model

The first model is the **rational actor model**. This foreign policy process operates on an action-reaction dynamic, where leaders formulate foreign policy as a deliberate response to the behaviors and decisions of other actors. This model assumes that the state is a unitary and rational actor. As a reminder from Chapter 3, the unitary actor assumption is that the state is a single entity that speaks with one voice; the rational actor assumption is that the state makes decisions based on its self-interest, aiming to maximize benefits and minimize costs. In foreign policy, a state will consider possible outcomes, order them based on its national interest, and then act to maximize benefits to the state.

The rational actor model is attractive as states often have little information on how another state's foreign policy process works. Given this, the state formulating policy has no choice but to assume that the other side is also rational, ranking decisions based on their best possible outcome. However, following this model sometimes leads foreign policymakers to pick a "good enough" option, rather than an optimal option, a process known as "satisficing."

An example showing a state making decisions based on its self-interest is the 2021 U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan under President Joe Biden. The U.S. invaded Afghanistan after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. The ruling Taliban provided refuge to al-Qaeda, the transnational terrorist network that was responsible for the attacks. At first, the U.S. national interest was clear: Remove the Taliban from power and punish those who perpetrated the attacks. However, as time went on, the U.S. redefined its national interest, no longer seeing a military presence in Afghanistan as vital to its national security. In August 2021, President Biden directly made this argument in a speech. He stated, "Our only vital national interest in Afghanistan remains today what it has always been: preventing a terrorist attack on American homeland. I've argued for many years that our mission should be narrowly focused on counterterrorism—not counterinsurgency or nation building... And that's why, as President, I am adamant that we focus on the threats we face today in 2021—not yesterday's threats" (Biden, 2021).



Image 6.5.1: U.S. President Joe Biden delivers remarks on the drawdown of U.S. troops from Afghanistan on Thursday, July 8, 2021, in the East Room of the White House. *(Source: "P20210708AS-0744" by Adam Schultz for The White House is in the Public Domain.)*

Bureaucratic Politics Model

The second model is the **bureaucratic politics model**. This foreign policy process is primarily driven by conflict resolution rather than problem-solving. Political dynamics heavily influence decision-making, with power distributed among multiple actors within a state. These individuals, positioned in different institutional roles within a state's government, often have conflicting perspectives on the issue, leading to disagreements on the appropriate course of action.

Given this, the bureaucratic politics model relies heavily on conflict resolution and political bargaining, rather than optimizing outcomes. This push for compromise may lead to a "minimalist decision," one that allows every party to claim victory, yet one that simultaneously may dilute policy effectiveness.

Looking again at the 2021 U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, we can identify dynamics illustrating the bureaucratic politics model. For years, the U.S. prioritized strengthening state capacity and nation-building, seeking an Afghanistan that could be part of a larger defense network. This led to the involvement of different agencies, including the Department of Defense, the Department of State, the Intelligence Community, and the National Security Council. Key decisionmakers in each bureaucracy differed in regards to timelines and withdrawal plans, with military officials seeking a conditions-based withdrawal. In contrast, State Department officials insisted on a full withdrawal, with funding that was allocated for the U.S. Armed Forces to be redirected to the State Department for assistance in the withdrawal. Few predicted that the Afghan government would fall so quickly (in only approximately ten days) to the resurgent Taliban, which complicated the State Department's planning and the chaotic withdrawal that ensued.



Image 6.5.2: Taliban fighters in a captured Humvee after the Fall of Kabul in August 2021. *(Source: "Taliban Humvee in Kabul, August 2021" by Voice of America News is in the Public Domain.)*

Small Group Decision-Making Model

The third model is the **small group decision-making model**. This foreign policy process focuses on the dynamics of a small, often (though not always) informal, circle of individuals, rather than a large bureaucracy. This small group does not reach decisions based on a ranked optimization process stemming from an expectation of rationality. Instead, it makes foreign policy choices swiftly and decisively (and usually with a certain amount of secrecy).

A major concern with this model of foreign policy decision-making is the tendency toward "groupthink," a psychological phenomenon in which a group's desire for consensus may prevent individuals from presenting important objections or suggesting alternative courses of action. While a foreign policy decision may at first appear optimal to a small group, groupthink may ultimately result in a flawed decision.

Again, the 2021 U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan can illustrate small group decision-making. The decision to end the conflict was made almost exclusively by U.S. leaders, without input from allied NATO states.

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6.6: IR in the Real World

In 2009, Chinese President Hu Jintao expressed the importance of public diplomacy in Chinese foreign policy, stating "[China] should strengthen public diplomacy and humanities diplomacy and commence various kinds of cultural exchange activities in order to disseminate China's great culture." In 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping added the corresponding concept of "telling a good story of China and disseminating the voice of China" (Tai-Ting Liu , 2018). These public diplomacy initiatives illustrate China's use of **smart power**, the combination of hard power and soft power.

Smart power is an example of foreign policymaking at the international (systemic) level of analysis. Per Joseph Nye (2009), the academic who developed the term, smart power requires combining multiple instruments—such as diplomacy, defense, development, public outreach, and economic partnerships—to strengthen a state's influence, credibility, and effectiveness within the international arena. Nye argues that exceptional leaders are those who can balance hard and soft power, creating "smart power" that allows them to cultivate trust and inspire collective action around forward-looking agendas.

On the continent of Africa, for example, China effectively wields hard power, particularly economic power. Through its Belt and Road Initiative, China has invested billions of dollars in financial aid and infrastructure development, especially in strategic ports. They also created a myriad of resource extraction agreements and opened the first overseas military base in Djibouti, a former French colony located in the Horn of Africa, near the strategic chokepoint of the Bab-el-Mandeb. A majority of the products shipped from China to European ports now pass through this narrow waterway on routes through the Suez Canal.

China also effectively utilizes soft power, investing heavily in the promotion of Chinese culture and values in African states using Confucian Institutes. These institutes—more than 60 across almost 50 African states—promote Chinese music, art, and literature. China also provides tens of thousands of scholarships to African students for technical and professional training, and the Chinese Global Television Network (CGTN) broadcasts Chinese films and movies to African states, often translated into the major languages within African societies. Indeed, CGTN (founded in 2016) has three production centers, with one of them in Nairobi, Kenya, which films news programs on African developments.



Image 6.6.1: The Confucius Institute at the University of Zambia. *(Source: "UNZA BRANCH LIBRARY" by Zachary1969 is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0.)*

How successful is China's smart power approach to foreign policy toward African states? The answer to this question depends on how you measure "success." If measured in terms of international trade volume and signed economic agreements, China's smart power approach is successful. If measured through cultural diplomacy, the success of China's smart power approach is unclear. Is Chinese music and television programming as popular as the alternatives? While its influence is growing, English language programming remains dominant. If measured through military capabilities, China's smart power approach appears less successful. Does a military base in Djibouti represent true power projection? Perhaps not yet, but it is a step in that direction.

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6.7: Conclusion

A successful foreign policy involves pulling on all of the levers described in this chapter, though the perceived relative importance will depend on a practitioner's theoretical approach to international relations.

Realists, for instance, contend that power projection is key, and that hard power is one of the most effective methods to achieve power. Having a robust military and a well-funded national security framework is key to self-preservation. Being able to shape the foreign policy outcomes of other states can therefore lead to foreign policy success.

Liberals, alternatively, acknowledge the importance of hard power capabilities, and they also point to the use of soft power tools as effective. One of the most widely used forms of soft power involves educational exchanges, including international academic collaborations and student exchange programs. Both efforts help create a state's "brand," which can influence negotiations and bargaining tactics regarding bilateral and multilateral agreements.

And while some may prefer the use of one approach or one type of power over another, the truth is that all approaches and both types of power are necessary, depending on the context. Exclusive use of one approach or one type of power over another can be counterproductive, especially if it prevents a state from protecting its national interests and from accomplishing its foreign policy objectives.

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6.8: Student Resources

Summary

Foreign policy refers to the official external relations conducted by an independent actor, typically a state, and involves domestic decisions that impact international affairs. These interactions are dynamic and shaped by responses from other states, IOs, NGOs, and MNCs, making foreign policy an iterative process. A core element of foreign policy is defining national interests, including vital (non-negotiable) and less-than-vital (negotiable) interests, which vary significantly between states and depend on real and perceived threats.

Foreign policy tools include those of hard and soft power. Hard power—military and economic coercion—relies on tangible resources like geography and military strength, while soft power—cultural, ideological, or religious influence—shapes global opinion through values and culture. Diplomacy is an additional tool of foreign policy. It is the strategic practice through which states seek to influence others using non-coercive means like negotiation, economic incentives, and public communication to advance national interests.

Foreign policy approaches include unilateralism (acting alone), bilateralism (cooperation between two states), and multilateralism (collaborating with three or more states or within international institutions). States also vary between isolationism, favoring disengagement, and internationalism, favoring global involvement, depending on their size, capacity, and strategic needs.

Foreign policy decision-making is complex and often occurs under conditions of uncertainty, incomplete information, and evolving political and economic contexts, making flawless decisions rare. The rational actor model assumes states act logically to maximize the best outcomes, though in practice officials often settle for “good enough” solutions. The bureaucratic politics model emphasizes internal government conflicts and political bargaining among competing interests, often resulting in compromises that may dilute policy effectiveness. The small group decision-making model centers on quick, often secretive, decisions by a select few, which risks groupthink.

Key Terms

- **Bilateralism** is when two states decide to work together to address a foreign policy problem or address a collective goods issue.
- **Bureaucratic politics model** is a foreign policy process primarily driven by conflict resolution, rather than problem-solving, among multiple actors within a government.
- **Cultural diplomacy** is a strategic approach that leverages the exchange of ideas, values, traditions, and other cultural elements to foster relationships, enhance socio-cultural collaboration, and promote national interests.
- **Diaspora** refers to a population that resides in states outside of their ancestral or historical homeland, but maintains cultural, linguistic, or social ties to their origins.
- **Diplomacy** is the practice by which states seek to influence the actions and policies of other states through negotiation, bargaining, and strategic communication.
- **Diplomats** are individuals designated by a national government to represent its interests; engage in official negotiations; and manage political, economic, and social relations with foreign states.
- **Domestic policy** refers to the set of decisions and actions undertaken by a government that directly impact the lives of people within its borders.
- **Economic power** refers to a state’s ability to leverage financial incentives or impose economic restrictions to influence and secure conformity with its objectives.
- **Foreign policy** is “the sum of official external relations conducted by an independent actor (usually a state) in international relations.”
- **Hard power** involves a state’s use of its available power resources to compel other states into aligning with its interests through coercive means.
- **International organization (IO)** is a formal international institution, created by and composed of states, in which representatives relay their government’s interests in independent governing bodies.
- **Internationalism**, at its extreme, is when a state fully engages within global systems and is interdependent with other states in these systems.
- **Isolationism**, at its extreme, is when a state fully disengages with global systems and retreats into self-sufficiency., at its

extreme, is when a state fully disengages with global systems and retreats into self-sufficiency.
- **Less than vital interests** are not a state's core interests or conditions, and these interests are (at least to some extent) negotiable.
- **Military power** encompasses the use or threat of armed force as a means for a state to pursue and achieve its strategic objectives.
- **Multilateralism** is the predisposition for a state to act in unison with other states and/or organizations, forgoing individual action.
- **Multinational corporations (MNCs)** are for-profit organizations with financial activities outside of their home state's borders.
- **National interest** is the core principles and aims of a state's foreign policy.
- **Non-governmental organizations** are organizations that operate independently of a government, with private and voluntary membership.
- **Power potential** is each state's capability to promote or secure its national interests, determined by the resources it can utilize to exert influence.
- **Public diplomacy** is the strategic use of media and cultural programming to influence foreign publics and their elites.
- **Rational actor model** is a foreign policy process that operates on an action-reaction dynamic, where foreign policy is a deliberate response to the behaviors and decisions of other actors.
- **Religious diplomacy** is a strategic approach that leverages the moral authority and legitimacy of religious leaders, institutions, or values to foster dialogue and resolve conflicts.
- **Small group decision-making model** is a foreign policy process that focuses on the dynamics of a small, often informal, circle of individuals, rather than a large bureaucracy.
- **Smart power** is a combination of hard power and soft power approaches.
- **Soft power** is the ability of a state to influence other actors by encouraging them to adopt its preferred actions, values, or policies through persuasion and the perceived legitimacy of its conduct.
- **Track One diplomacy** refers to formal diplomatic efforts by diplomats who represent the official positions of their government.
- **Track Two diplomacy** refers to informal diplomatic efforts by individuals outside of the government, such as academics, leaders of civil society groups, corporate executives, and/or media professionals.
- **Unilateralism** is the predisposition for a state to act alone when it comes to solving a problem or protecting its interests.
- **Vital interests** are a state's core interests or conditions, considered vital to national sovereignty and security, that are non-negotiable.

Critical Thinking Questions

1. Choose a state. Which type of diplomacy makes the most sense for that state? Should that state pursue a unilateral or multilateral response to global challenges? Why?
2. Why is power potential important for a state's foreign policy? In your response, explain the differences between power and power potential. Which form of power, hard or soft power, do you think a state should focus on?
3. Which model of foreign policy decision-making do you find most appealing? In your response, compare and contrast the various models and then explain your choice.

Suggestions for Further Study

Websites

- American Foreign Policy Council
- Council on Foreign Relations, Diplomacy and International Institutions
- Foreign Policy Research Institute

Journal Articles

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7: WAR BETWEEN STATES

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7.1: Introduction

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to:

- Describe states' motivations for going to war.
- Identify the characteristics that make a war just.
- Explain why states want nuclear weapons and describe the risks they pose.

In this chapter, we examine armed conflict between states, or **interstate war**. War stands as one of the most consequential subjects in political science. Wars between states have played a central role in achieving independence, establishing new borders, and redefining the structure of the international system. Interstate war also occupies a powerful place in political culture. Societies repeatedly return to war in film and media, from countless documentaries recalling the intricate details of interstate war to dramatic films shaping how societies remember these conflicts and their adversaries. War also influences everyday language. People use war metaphors to describe personal struggles, sporting events, and political campaigns. They also invoke war imagery as a source of courage, exemplified by moments such as the storming of the beaches of Normandy in World War II. At the same time, war produces mass suffering and civilian casualties, realities that mobilize citizens to protest and to challenge state authority.

In the following sections, we will analyze shifts in how states fought wars historically, then assess how states use militaries and technologies today. We will then discuss states' motivations and justifications for interstate war and conclude by applying these concepts to the Russia-Ukraine War.

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7.2: The History of Interstate War

As described in Chapter 2, since the Treaty of Westphalia (1648), the greatest threat to international security was interstate war. War has existed since ancient times, occurring between tribes, kingdoms, and empires. It also shaped the modern world, being rooted in the creation of many of our states. In the 17th century, European powers fought limited wars over coveted lands, colonies, or personal prestige. These conflicts were waged between monarchs with small, professional militaries governed by rules of conduct. The outcome of these wars typically left governments intact, with exchanges of property or wealth.

As a brief review from Chapter 2, war intensified following the outbreak of the French Revolution, when surrounding states viewed the revolutionary regime as a contagious ideology and a threat to the balance of power. The French used mass conscription (levée en masse) and nationalism as mobilizing forces, ultimately dominating Western Europe. Future leaders took note throughout the 19th century, tapping into nationalism to mobilize the public and establish new states. Otto von Bismarck, as perhaps the greatest example of this trend, used nationalism to unite the German states with Prussia into a unified Germany.

Entering the 20th century, the European powers pursued conflict based on nationalist motivations, the desire to preserve alliances, and the desire for colonial expansion. The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand along with the belief that quick mobilization would be decisive led to the outbreak of World War I. Empires mobilized their populations across the world to fight in this conflict, which quickly devolved into a defensive slog synonymous with trench warfare, barbed wire, machine guns, and mustard gas. Millions of soldiers were killed, injured, or taken prisoner, which contributed to the collapse of the Russian regime under the weight of its international and domestic failures.

After Germany's surrender and the signing of the Treaty of Versailles, the hope was that peace could last, but Nazi, imperialist, and fascist ideologies, fueled by perceived humiliation and the loss of territory, resulted in the rise of the Axis Powers under Adolf Hitler. During World War II, Hitler utilized a combination of infantry, armored vehicles, and air support to overwhelm France, knocking it out of the war, and to surprise invade the Soviet Union, plunging the world into another long-lasting global conflict. Germany became bogged down attacking the Soviet Union, and the United States' (U.S.) involvement following the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor led to the occupation of Italy, the subsequent defeat of Hitler's Germany, and the only use of atomic bombs in warfare against the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Throughout these expanding conflicts, nationalism paired with industrialism gave rise to **total war**, where entire societies were mobilized to support the war effort. Conflict escalated from battles involving thousands during the mid-18th century, to tens of thousands in the Napoleonic Wars, and eventually to hundreds of thousands and even millions during World War I and World War II. The interconnectedness between states and their people made civilian targets increasingly common in warfare, as attacking these targets could disrupt production and weaken morale. Notable examples include the bombings of London, Dresden, and Tokyo during World War II. The end of World II saw Europe, along with many parts of Asia and Africa, in ruins with years of rebuilding ahead.



Image 7.2.1: The city of Dresden in ruins after WWII bombings,1945. *(Source: "File:Fotothek df ps 0000010 Blick vom Rathausturm.jpg" by Richard Peter is licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0.)*

The escalation in violence was finally reversed after Japan's formal surrender in September 1945, following the previously-mentioned atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The international system then shifted to a conflict between the Soviet Union and the U.S., where these powers could not directly engage in large-scale war without risking nuclear escalation. Conflict became characterized by **proxy wars** fought through smaller states in order to expand influence. In the 1950s, the Korean War pitted North Korea, backed by the Soviet Union and China, against South Korea, supported by the U.S. and its allies. The 1960s and 1970s saw the Vietnam War, where communist forces received Soviet and Chinese support while the U.S. intervened on behalf of South Vietnam. Similar dynamics emerged in other states, including Afghanistan, Nicaragua, and South Africa. Revolutionary and counter-revolutionary movements alike sought financial, military, and intelligence backing from one superpower or the other. This era of proxy wars largely came to a close after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, as the U.S. emerged as the international hegemon.

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7.3: How States Fight Modern Wars

In this section, we will move to modern warfare and explore the tools that states currently use when waging war. We will examine how states structure their militaries and discuss some of the shifts in the functioning of these traditional branches. We will then analyze several of the most powerful weapons that states can possess, their effects, and the relevant arguments about their use.

Conventional Militaries

Modern interstate warfare relies on the use of conventional militaries. The size and structure of these militaries varies widely across states. The U.S. consistently spends more than any other state on defense, with annual expenditures exceeding $800 billion. China maintains the world's largest army with approximately two million soldiers. Some states, like the U.S. and the United Kingdom, maintain professional, all-volunteer armies, while others, such as Israel, North Korea, and South Korea, use mandatory service, or conscription.

The size of most militaries has shrunk as technology has improved and the need to hold land in war has diminished. The **army** is often the largest branch of a state's military, with its primary responsibility being land-based operations, including the defense of territory. Armies are often organized into infantry, armored units, artillery, and engineers.

The **navy** is responsible for maritime operations. Historically, naval power was the foundation of global influence, with Great Britain's dominance of the seas in the 17th and 18th centuries allowing it to build an empire. Today, navies are responsible for protecting shipping lanes, deterring piracy, enforcing blockades, and operating submarine fleets.

The **air force** emerged in the mid-20th century. Air forces utilize fighter jets, bombers, reconnaissance aircraft, drones, and planes to conduct bombings, logistics, and gather intelligence. China, Russia, and the U.S. maintain large, technologically advanced air forces, while smaller states operate fleets focused on defense and support.

Drone warfare over the past two decades has transformed how states use air power. Drones, or unmanned aerial vehicles, are used for surveillance and armed strikes. The U.S. advanced drone operations during the mid-2000s in counterterrorism campaigns in states such as Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen. While drones were commended for reducing risks to American soldiers and enabling targeted strikes, they were also denounced for causing civilian casualties and for their lack of compliance with international law. Today, drones are increasingly being used in warfare. Their widespread availability makes them an attractive option for smaller states, and their ability to monitor and conduct strikes in uncontrolled areas while minimizing loss of man power are increasing their use by powerful states.



Image 7.3.1: Ukrainian Soldiers calibrate an unmanned bomber "octocopter." *(Source: "UA Vampire UCAV 01" by АрміяІнформ*

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In 2019, the U.S. created the Space Force as a separate branch of its military. Its mission includes protecting satellites, managing communications, and preparing for orbital conflict. Although the U.S. is the only state with an independent space force, other states like China, France, and Russia have established military space commands.

Nuclear Weapons

Conventional militaries have access to a wide range of weaponry. An often-discussed element of modern warfare is **nuclear weapons**. The first nuclear bombs, developed during the Manhattan Project, relied on fission (splitting an atom) to create explosions. These weapons cause far greater destruction than conventional bombs and produce long-lasting radiation effects that can cause cancer and other health problems decades after an attack.

Obtaining the materials needed for nuclear weapons remains an obstacle for non-nuclear states. Only 10 to 100 pounds of fissile material are required for a bomb, but enriching uranium or plutonium to weapons-grade quality is time-consuming and costly. The proliferation of nuclear weapons has been a major topic of international discussion ever since they were first used on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The U.S. was the first to develop nuclear weapons, followed by the Soviet Union (via espionage), France, the United Kingdom, China, India, and Pakistan. Israel is believed to have nuclear weapons, although it has not officially acknowledged this. Today, major powers such as the U.S., China, and Russia possess thermonuclear bombs, which are far more powerful than those used on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Iran and North Korea have been pursuing nuclear capabilities, prompting widespread international condemnation and fears of further proliferation. In response to these states gaining nuclear weapons, other regional powers may likewise pursue nuclear weapons to protect themselves. North Korea has since obtained nuclear capability, though there are still questions about its ability to deliver a nuclear weapon across continents, while Iran has continued its enrichment efforts and is poised for nuclear capability in the coming years.



Image 7.3.2: Anti-aircraft guns guarding Natanz Nuclear Facility, Iran. *(Source: "tod natanz" by openDemocracy is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0.)*

Nuclear weapons provide states with a significant position in the international system, being seen as a way of obtaining international respect. They can also serve as a bargaining chip for obtaining needed aid. Primarily, they ensure security against surrounding powers. Iran is surrounded by historic military threats in Iraq, Israel, and Saudi Arabia. North Korea is still threatened by South Korea, which has a substantially larger economy and greater technological advancement, and it still holds longstanding ill will toward Japan. North Korea has leveraged its program to receive aid and increase its international profile.

Realists argue that the concept of mutually assured destruction (MAD), where states have second-strike capability, creates rational incentives for avoiding direct conflict, as a nuclear exchange would be catastrophic. This can be credited with the shift

away from total war and the historically low number of wars between states today.

Many other theorists disagree, arguing that nuclear proliferation increases the risk of mistakes. Organizational theorists, for example, have shown how standard operating procedures can inadvertently lead to nuclear catastrophe.

The Cuban Missile Crisis brought the U.S. and the Soviet Union perilously close to nuclear strikes. In 1983, Soviet Lieutenant Colonel Stanislav Petrov chose not to report what appeared to be an incoming U.S. nuclear strike, believing that the alert was a computer error—a decision that may have prevented nuclear war. Later, under Boris Yeltsin's leadership in the 1990s, a reported false alarm nearly led to a nuclear launch. The danger of nuclear proliferation is that it increases the likelihood of such close calls. While it may be unlikely that states intentionally use nuclear weapons, the possibility of accidental or miscalculated use represents a catastrophic risk that cannot be ignored.

This is particularly concerning in regions of ongoing conflict, such as between India and Pakistan. These two states, separated by a narrow geographic border and with a long history of both "cold" and "hot" wars, would have only minutes to assess and respond to a potential launch.

This is without even considering the fact that these weapons could fall into the wrong hands, including into those of non-state actors or terrorist organizations. Military units could gain these weapons, or ethnic-religious groups could use them for their own means. Internal groups may have different incentives and could use these weapons to gain concessions or provoke a response.

The international community has long argued against the existence of these weapons, recognizing the overwhelming effects on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the growing threat of today's more powerful weapons. States have worked to curtail nuclear weapons. The U.S. and the Soviet Union worked on Strategic Arms Reduction Treaties (or START) in the 1990s to mutually reduce their stockpiles of nuclear weapons, which has continued with the relationship between the U.S. and Russia. Over 190 states have signed on to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Some states have chosen to take preemptive military actions to eliminate threats or delay progress of other states' pursuit of nuclear weapons. Israeli attacks on Iraq, Syria, and Iran are examples of actions taken to prevent proliferation.

Chemical Weapons

Chemical weapons are another category of weapons available for use. These weapons affect blood flow, respiration, and the nervous system. They became prominent during World War I, when states used chlorine and mustard gases, leaving lasting memories of the horrors of chemical warfare. These weapons harmed not only soldiers but entire civilian communities, causing severe burns, blindness, respiratory failure, and organ damage. Chemical weapons are relatively inexpensive to produce, as they can be made using facilities designed for household chemical or fertilizer production.

The Geneva Protocol of 1925 banned the use of chemical weapons, and today most states have signed the Chemical Weapons Convention of 1992, which prohibits their production and possession. However, several states have refused to sign on and are still believed to maintain stockpiles of chemical weapons. During the Iraq-Iran War (1980-1988), Iraq used chemical weapons against Iran and against Kurdish populations within northern Iraq, most notably in the town of Halabja. Syria used chemical weapons against dissident groups during the Syrian Civil War (2011-2024), leading to widespread international condemnation. There have also been fears of terrorist or non-state actors using these more accessible weapons. This occurred in Tokyo, Japan in 1995 when Aum Shinrikyo, a cult with apocalyptic ideologies, carried out a series of coordinated sarin attacks on subway lines.



Image 7.3.3: Japan Ground Self-Defense Force troops (with dark-green clothing) and Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department officers (with white clothing) decontaminating the area at the Tokyo subway sarin attack, 1995. *(Source: "【地下鉄サリン事件】除染を行う自衛隊員と警察官" by 陸上自衛隊 (Japan Ground Self-Defense Force) is licensed under CC BY 4.0.)*

Biological Weapons

A third category of weapons is **biological weapons**. These use toxins, viruses, or bacteria to cause disease and death among humans, livestock, or crops. Unlike chemical weapons, biological agents can spread beyond the initial target, making them much more devastating. The effects of a biological attack may not be immediately apparent, complicating containment efforts.

Biological weapons have been developed in the past by several states, with use by Japan in World War II on several Chinese villages. Leaders have often seen them as too risky, as they may not be contained to their target population. The Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) of 1972 prohibits their development, production, and stockpiling.

Currently, states conduct research on biological weapons but claim to do so only for defensive purposes. The U.S., for example, is believed to have isolated smallpox. Despite the BWC ban, concerns remain about the potential use of biological weapons by rogue states, especially given advances in biotechnology. The COVID-19 pandemic, while natural, demonstrates how quickly biological threats can disrupt society.

Cyber Warfare

A final category of weapons is those used to conduct cyber warfare, which involves obtaining information through espionage or attacking a rival's digital infrastructure. One example is the U.S. and Israeli Stuxnet virus that clandestinely sabotaged Iranian nuclear enrichment facilities from 2007 until the virus' discovery in 2010.\

While Stuxnet is an example of an offensive weapon, defensive cyber capabilities also exist and focus on protecting a state's infrastructure from attack. This includes protecting government databases, military communications, electrical grids, and financial systems. Militaries cooperate with government agencies and private companies to protect infrastructure vulnerable to attacks.



Image 7.3.4: U.S. specialists provide cyberspace operations support to a training rotation at the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, California, Jan. 13, 2019. *(Source: "Cyber support to 1st Cavalry Division at National Training Center" by Steven Stover for U.S. Army Cyber Command is in the Public Domain.)*

Cyber warfare's strategic advantage lies in its inexpensive and plausible deniability compared to conventional military operations, which increasingly makes cyber war an arena accessible to smaller states and non-state actors.

The Future of Interstate War

In this section, we examined ways in which states conduct interstate war, but these methods are constantly evolving. Reliance on manpower continues to retreat, while drones and cyber warfare are increasingly attractive due to cost, risk to life, and potential deniability. It is likely that artificial intelligence will contribute to the use and effectiveness of these emerging technologies. Development and geopolitical shifts will also likely lead more states to pursue new categories of weapons, as can be seen in increasing conversations regarding nuclear weapons in Japan and South Korea.

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7.4: Motivations for Interstate War

Why do states go to war with one another? There are many motivators for why states go to war; states do not go to war for just one reason. The motivations listed below often compound and deeply intertwine with one another.

Individual-Level Explanations

Some theories for why states go to war focus on the psychology of the decision-makers responsible for foreign policy. One perspective, rational choice theory, asserts that war is a rational decision made by leaders who perform a cost–benefit calculation. In essence, they take action because they believe it will benefit their state.

Other theorists argue that leaders often make poor decisions, influenced by misperceptions about their chances of success or by underestimating their opponent's strength. Groupthink, in which a group suppresses dissenting opinions, can reinforce these errors, while in-group versus out-group biases may lead leaders to view their own side as more moral or capable and their opponents as hostile or inferior. These assumptions oversimplify complex geopolitical issues and increase the likelihood of miscalculation.

Leaders may also have motivations that differ from what is best for their state. They may view war as an opportunity to rally the country behind them, crack down on rivals, or distract from domestic problems.

State-Level (Domestic) Explanations

Other theories look at internal dynamics within states. As discussed in Chapter 4, liberal theorists argue that democracies are less likely to go to war with one another due to domestic incentives for peace. In contrast, non-democratic regimes can be pushed into conflict by elites who are not accountable to the public.

Marxist critics argue that capitalist or imperialist states are more prone to war due to their pursuit of economic power and desire for control over resources, while social constructivists focus on shifting norms, identities, history, and elite decisions that lead a state to adopt an aggressive foreign policy.

International-Level (Systemic) Explanations

Many explanations for war stem from the concept of anarchy in the international system. As discussed in Chapter 3, realists argue that shifts in the balance of power can lead to increased conflict. An example can be seen in the shift in polarity that occurred with the rise of Germany in the late 19th century.

Marxist and post-colonial explanations argue that the history of resource extraction by wealthy states has left political turmoil in its wake, and that many of today's conflicts are rooted in the West's continuing pursuit of economic benefit.

Conflicts Over Ideas

Many interstate conflicts stem from conflicts over identities, such as ethnic, religious, or national, and political ideologies.

Ethnic identity encompasses shared elements of history, religion, territory, and language. These markers often underpin violent conflict. States may invade or intervene in the domestic affairs of other states either to seize territory or to support allied ethnic groups in their struggle.

Religion can be a strong motivator for conflict, leading states to intervene if they believe like-minded groups are being discriminated against. States may also hold negative views of the intentions of other religions.

Religious conflict has shaped the origins of international politics in profound ways. The wars between Protestants and Catholics in Europe, which produced atrocities on all sides, ultimately culminated in the Treaty of Westphalia and the principle of separating church from state authority.

Nationalism represents a more expansive form of this dynamic, involving the desire for ethnic identity to align with state boundaries. Nationalism can foster strong in-group favoritism and out-group prejudice, motivating states to discriminate against minorities within their borders or to wage war in pursuit of territory. It can also make political movements seek to prove themselves and pursue aggressive foreign policies.

Competing ideologies have historically been a major source of conflict. During the revolutionary era, clashes between liberal movements and conservative forces defined much of Europe's turmoil. Later, the Cold War exemplified this struggle on a global scale, as capitalist and Marxist ideologies competed for influence. Both the U.S. and the Soviet Union intervened in conflicts and supported proxy movements in states such as Cuba, Nicaragua, and Vietnam.



Image 7.4.1: The Contras, Nicaraguan right-wing guerilla fighters at war against the Marxist Sandinista National Liberation Front, were organized and funded in part by the CIA under the anti-communist Reagan Doctrine of the 1980s. *(Source: "Smoke break el serrano 1987" by Tiomono (talk) is licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0.)*

Although the Cold War ended, ideological conflict remains a part of international politics today with conflict between liberal democracy and authoritarian governance.

Wars are also fought for reasons of prestige, pride, or perceived virtue. Leaders and the publics they represent often hold strong expectations regarding their state's rightful place in the world, rooted in ideas of ethnicity, nationalism, or historical grievances.

Leaders may perceive disrespect, humiliation, or weakness as an affront requiring a forceful response. In many cases, such motivations are also linked to domestic concerns, including the desire to strengthen their own position at home.

An example can be seen in China following the 1949 Revolution. China views the previous century as one of humiliation, in which Western powers asserted control and seized resources and territory. Since then, China has asserted its rights through the use or threat of force in Hong Kong, Tibet, and today, Taiwan.

Conflicts Over Territory and Resources

Interstate conflict may also stem from disagreements over or desires for territory, which can hold strategic importance. Control of high ground, for instance, has long been a factor, as seen in battles over the Golan Heights between Israel and its neighbors. Access to the sea is also critical, allowing states to protect themselves from blockades and to project power internationally. Russia's determination to control Crimea and maintain access to the Black Sea through its conflict with Ukraine demonstrates this concern.

Territory can also hold historical or religious meaning. Some regions are seen as inherently belonging to one state or people based on longstanding cultural, ethnic, or religious ties.

The rivalry between Germany and France over Alsace-Lorraine fueled repeated wars in the 19th and 20th centuries, while the conflict between India and Pakistan over Kashmir reflects claims rooted in rival religious traditions.

These disputes are particularly difficult to resolve, as land considered sacred or historically indivisible cannot easily be partitioned. A key example is Jerusalem, home to the Temple Mount and the Al-Aqsa Mosque, which hold profound significance for Muslims and Jews. For each group, control by others is often perceived as a threat to their faith and identity.



Image 7.4.2: Approximately 300,000 people gathered for Ramadan prayer in the Mosque of Al-Aqsa, Jerusalem. *(Source: "Ramadan prayer, 1996" by Gideon Markowiz is licensed under CC BY 4.0.)*

Another major source of conflict over land lies in competition for natural resources. States fight for access to commodities such as oil, diamonds, gold, and rare earth minerals, which can provide funding for the state and enhance its global influence.

Agricultural land itself can become a flashpoint, as access to reliable food supplies may determine whether a state can feed its population and maintain political stability. Today, competition over oil in the Middle East and control of rare earth minerals in parts of Africa and Asia continue to fuel instability.

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7.5: Justifications for Interstate War

In the previous section, we examined motivations for interstate war. A rational explanation for war, for instance, is that states go to war because it benefits them. Some traditions, however, reject war entirely.

Pacifist movements argue that violence is never acceptable. Early Christians often refused military service, believing that following Christ's teachings of peace was incompatible with killing. The Quakers later became known for their refusal to fight wars, stressing peaceful resolution of conflict. Mahatma Gandhi opposed war as part of his philosophy of nonviolent resistance, arguing that the use of force creates more cycles of violence, and that true political change must be achieved through peaceful resistance. A wide range of secular groups have also opposed war, with socialist organizations often arguing that wars are fought for imperial power rather than the interests of ordinary people.

When states *do* choose to go to war, then, how do they justify this decision to their citizens and the international community?

Just War Theory

Most international debates draw on Just War Theory, which provides a middle ground between pacifism and the ancient Greek historian Thucydides' belief that "the strong do as they will and the weak suffer as they must." The roots of this tradition go back to early Christian thinkers.

Saint Augustine (4th–5th century) argued that while war was tragic, it could be justified if fought to preserve peace, especially when authorized by legitimate rulers. Thomas Aquinas (13th century) refined the theory by laying out the key criteria, or **jus ad bellum**, for a "just war." These criteria included requiring a just cause, such as self-defense or protecting the innocent; authorization by a legitimate political authority; and that war should only be used as a last resort. In addition, there is **jus in bello**, or the rules for conduct in war. These include limiting violence, protecting civilians, and using proportional force rather than indiscriminate destruction.



Image 7.5.1: Saint Thomas Aquinas painted by Fra Bartolomeo, circa 1510. (Source: "Saint Thomas Aquinas Reading" by Fra Bartolomeo is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0.)

Today, these ideas tie closely to international law. Under the United Nations (UN) Charter, the use of force is considered legitimate in cases of self-defense or when authorized by the UN Security Council. Many scholars and diplomats argue that, without UN approval, a war cannot be considered "just" by today's global standards, even if a state claims moral reasons for fighting.

However, securing UN authorization is often impossible, since any one of the five permanent members of the Security Council

(China, France, Russia, United Kingdom, U.S.) can veto action.

Examples from Recent History

Kosovo (1999): In the late 1990s, Kosovo, then a province of Serbia, experienced conflict between the Serbian government and ethnic Albanians seeking independence. The Serbian government carried out widespread attacks against civilians, including mass killings and forced displacement. These atrocities prompted the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to intervene, launching air strikes against Serbia with the stated goal of stopping the ethnic cleansing of Albanians. Supporters argued that the intervention was justified by the principle of protecting innocent lives. Critics, however, asserted that the operation lacked approval from the UN Security Council, as Russia, a permanent member, vetoed action against Serbia.



Image 7.5.2: Anti-NATO graffiti questioning NATO's legitimacy during the bombing of Novi Sad, Yugoslavia, in 1999. *(Source: "Графити на новосадским улицама током Нато бомбардовања СР Југославија" by Darko Dozet is licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0.)*

Afghanistan (2001): Following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, the U.S. and its allies launched a military campaign in Afghanistan. The goal was to dismantle al-Qaeda, the group responsible for the attacks, and remove the Taliban regime that had provided them safe haven. Proponents of the war argued that this was a case of self-defense, aligning with Just War Theory and the UN Charter's allowance for force in response to an armed attack. Critics continue to question whether the military engagement, which lasted over two decades, was proportional to the threat and whether the resulting civilian casualties and destruction could be justified.

Iraq (2003): In 2003, the U.S., under the leadership of President George W. Bush, along with a coalition of allies, invaded Iraq, claiming that Saddam Hussein's regime possessed or was developing chemical and nuclear weapons and posed a threat to international security. Leaders argued that preemptive action was necessary to prevent potential attacks. However, subsequent inspections failed to find chemical or nuclear weapons. The war resulted in tens of thousands of deaths, mass displacement, and ongoing regional instability. Critics assert that the invasion was not justifiable, violated international law, and lacked UN Security Council authorization.

These cases show that while Just War Theory provides a framework, its real-world application is often disputed. Governments frame their actions as "just" to win domestic and international support, while opponents highlight hypocrisy and ulterior motives.

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7.6: IR in the Real World

In February 2022, Russia launched an invasion of Ukraine—an interstate war—beginning the most significant military conflict in Europe since World War II. Russian forces advanced from multiple directions, deploying hundreds of thousands of troops. Initial operations focused on seizing key cities, airports, bridges, and energy facilities. Russia achieved early gains in areas such as Kherson, Mariupol, and parts of Eastern Ukraine. However, rather than collapsing, Ukraine reorganized its military, mobilized its civilian population, and won international support that strengthened its ability to resist.



Image 7.6.1: In an example of resistance from the civilian population, a group gathers to make Molotov Cocktails to be used against Russian troops in Kyiv, Ukraine, Feb. 25, 2022. *(Source: "Reporter's Notebook - Thriving Kyiv Becomes Battle Zone, Almost Overnight 03" by Yan Boechat for Voice of America is in the Public Domain.)*

Modern Militaries in Action

Russia deployed infantry, tanks, and artillery to capture strategic points and major cities. Its navy enforced blockades and threatened Ukrainian ports, while its air forces targeted power grids, communications, and supply lines.

Ukraine, facing a technologically advanced adversary, adapted quickly. The army slowed the Russian advance by combining conventional maneuvers with **guerrilla warfare**, a type of unconventional warfare in which small forces use the local terrain to conduct ambushes, hit-and-run attacks, and sabotage against an opponent. The navy used patrol vessels to contest access to ports, while Ukrainian air forces relied on Western-supplied missiles to challenge Russian air superiority. Additionally, Ukraine used commercial drones for reconnaissance and precision strikes.

Ukraine launched a series of counteroffensives aimed at reclaiming occupied territory and pushing Russian forces back toward their own borders. In regions such as Kharkiv and Kherson, Ukrainian troops used speed and targeted strikes to regain ground lost early in the war. Despite these tactical successes, broader offensive operations stalled against entrenched Russian defenses.

Motivations

From a rational-choice perspective, seizing Ukraine or installing a puppet government could enhance Russia's regional influence, secure access to natural resources, and hinder NATO and European Union (EU) expansion. Ukraine's strategic location, energy infrastructure, and agricultural production would strengthen Russia's hand internationally.

The invasion may also have been intended to distract from economic challenges, neutralize potential rivals, and justify crackdowns

on dissent. Russian President Vladimir Putin and his advisers likely underestimated Ukraine's will to resist, assuming that Russia's larger military would achieve a rapid victory.

From a liberal perspective, Russia's lack of democratic constraints, such as free and fair elections, an independent press, and a strong civil society, make it more prone to aggressive military action. Social constructivists would agree, pointing to past Russian interventions in Georgia (2008) and Crimea (2014) as evidence of a consistent pattern of asserting control over neighboring territories. Ukraine, meanwhile, has pursued democratic governance and closer integration with European institutions. This positioning has helped cement Ukraine's support from Western powers that classify themselves as liberal democracies.

From an international standpoint, realist theory frames the conflict as a struggle over the balance of power. NATO expansion since the end of the Cold War has diminished Russia's sphere of influence, aligning former Soviet neighbors with Western alliances. Russia views Ukraine's growing ties with NATO and the EU as a threat, prompting efforts to reestablish a buffer zone.

The conflict can also be seen as a proxy war, in which liberal democratic states such as the U.S. and NATO members support Ukraine, while authoritarian states, including China and North Korea, provide support to Russia. Each side contributes intelligence, weaponry, and funding to advance their strategic interests.



Image 7.6.2: Russian Defense Minister Andrey Belousov with North Korean Defense Minister No Kwang-chol on November 29, 2024. *(Source: "Andrei Belousov and No Kwang-chol, 2024" by Ministry of Defence (Vadim Savitsky) is licensed under CC BY 4.0.)*

Conflict Over Ideas, Territory, and Resources

Ethnic and national identity remain central to the conflict. Putin presents the invasion as an effort to protect ethnic Russians allegedly discriminated against in Ukraine, citing cultural suppression. Ukraine points to past interference by Russia in its elections, support for pro-Russian parties, and efforts to undermine its democratic institutions. Ideology also plays a crucial role: Russia challenges liberal democratic norms internationally, while Ukraine seeks alignment with the EU and NATO.

Prestige and honor further shape perceptions. Crimea, historically important to the Russian Empire and symbolically significant during the Soviet era, remains central to Russian narratives of national greatness. Ukrainians, however, emphasize their own history of repression under Russian rule and of successfully resisting external domination. Ukraine often references past instances of Russian abuse, such as the Holodomor famine, caused by Soviet policies under Stalin that killed millions.

Ukraine's territory has many strategic, historic, and resource based advantages. It is an access point to the Black Sea that allows for trade and the projection of naval power. Ukraine also functions as the "breadbasket of Europe," producing substantial agricultural exports to Europe and Africa. The region also contains vital oil and gas pipelines that control significant portions of the energy supply for Russia and Europe.



Image 7.6.3: Expansive wheat fields contribute to Ukraine's agricultural resources. (Source: “Wheat fields in Ukraine-5961” by Raimond Spekking is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0.)

Justification

The Russian government portrays the conflict as a defense of ethnic Russians and a response to what it perceives as an illegitimate Ukrainian government influenced by far-right elements. International observers overwhelmingly reject this justification, recognizing Ukraine’s democratically-elected government and its right to self-defense. Ukraine emphasizes protecting its citizens and preserving freedom and self-determination.

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7.7: Conclusion

Given the various facets of interstate war discussed in this chapter, how can states work to preserve peace in the international system? We conclude this chapter by briefly reviewing ideas from realism and liberalism.

As discussed in Chapter 3, realist scholars view the international system as anarchic, where states must rely on their own power to survive. The central strategy for maintaining stability in this environment is the maintenance of the balance of power. When military and economic power are balanced among states, actors are not incentivized to dominate others. Realists argue that this deters aggression and encourages states to act cautiously. In the Ukraine-Russia War, Russia perceives NATO and EU expansion as a threat to the balance of power. A realist would argue that Ukraine should either accept Russia's control in order to preserve peace or seek a compromise such as giving up territory or committing to not join NATO.

Realists also focus on deterrence as a strategy to preserve peace. Deterrence relies on the threat of retaliation to prevent an adversary from attacking. By making the costs of war unacceptably high, deterrence creates stability based on fear of retribution. Russia, for example, has stated that it would use tactical nuclear weapons if its territorial integrity were threatened. Even a limited nuclear strike would have catastrophic humanitarian and environmental consequences extending far beyond Ukraine's borders, making it an effective deterrent. Meanwhile, Ukraine has unsuccessfully sought to obtain Tomahawk cruise missiles and other long-range systems from the U.S. and its allies, arguing that such weapons would weaken Russia's ability to sustain the war. This deterrence imbalance follows Ukraine's decision to give up its nuclear weapons under the Budapest Memorandum, in which it received assurances from the U.S., the United Kingdom, and Russia that they would respect its sovereignty. The 2014 annexation of Crimea and the 2022 invasion have since confirmed for Ukraine and the broader international community the ineffectiveness of these guarantees and the risks of nuclear disarmament.

As discussed in Chapter 4, liberal scholars argue that democracy, trade, and international institutions can reduce the likelihood of war by changing the incentives of states. They argue that democratic states do not go to war with one another because their leaders are accountable to the public. The spread of democracy, therefore, is seen as a way to create a more peaceful international system. Liberals see economic interdependence as another method for preserving peace. When economies are intertwined, the costs of war become self-defeating, as conflict destroys the markets that produce prosperity. Intergovernmental organizations such as the UN, NATO, and the EU additionally provide forums for diplomacy, create expectations for reciprocity, and reduce uncertainty among states.

A related liberal idea is collective security. Collective security seeks to deter aggression by guaranteeing a united response from member states through a commitment to mutual defense. NATO's Article 5, a principle stating that an attack on one member is considered an attack on all, represents the clearest expression of this idea. This principle has helped preserve peace among NATO members and deter potential aggressors since World War II.

Russia has rejected many of these liberal ideals, becoming increasingly authoritarian and distrustful of institutions like the EU and NATO. Ukraine, however, has been pursuing many strategies recommended by a liberal approach. It operates as a democratic system and has sought integration with organizations such as the EU. Ukraine is also attempting to join NATO, though many NATO members remain reluctant to take this step, as it would require them to guarantee Ukraine's security against a nuclear power.

Preserving peace among states is a complicated endeavor indeed.

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7.8: Student Resources

Summary

Interstate war is armed conflict between states. Historically, limited conflicts gave way to total war in the 19th and 20th centuries. The development of nuclear weapons reshaped the international system by discouraging direct war between major powers and contributing to an era of proxy conflicts.

Today, interstate wars rely on conventional militaries, including armies, navies, and air forces, as well as newer forms of warfare such as drone operations, cyber warfare, and space-based capabilities. In addition, weapons of mass destruction exist, including nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons, which enjoy strategic value yet pose great risks to international security.

The motivations for interstate war include explanations at the individual, state, and systemic levels, highlighting the roles of misperception, regime type, and competition over territory and resources. Ideas such as ethnicity, nationalism, religion, ideology, and prestige shape state behavior and make some conflicts especially difficult to resolve. When interstate war occurs, states attempt to justify it based on Just War Theory and its influence on international law, yet these justifications are often highly contentious.

Key Terms

- **Air Force** is the branch of the military that conducts operations in the air, including bombing and surveillance.
- **Army** is the branch of a nation's military responsible for land operations, including infantry, armor, and artillery.
- **Biological weapons** are weapons that use living organisms or toxins to spread disease among humans, animals, or crops.
- **Chemical weapons** are toxic substances designed to harm or kill through poisoning or chemical reactions. Their use is banned under international law.
- **Cyber warfare** is the use of digital attacks to damage or disrupt another state's information systems, infrastructure, or networks.
- **Guerrilla warfare** is a type of unconventional warfare in which small forces use the local terrain to conduct ambushes, hit-and-run attacks, and sabotage against an opponent.
- **Interstate war** is armed conflict between states. These wars involve militaries and are often fought over territory, power, or political control.
- **Intrastate war** is armed conflict within a state, often between the government and organized groups such as rebels or separatists.
- **Jus ad bellum**, in Just War Theory, is the criteria for a "just war," such as requiring a just cause like self-defense or protecting the innocent, authorization by a legitimate political authority, and that war should only be used as a last resort.
- **Jus in bello**, in Just War Theory, is the rules for conduct in war, such as limiting violence, protecting civilians, and using proportional force rather than indiscriminate destruction.
- **Navy** is the branch of the military that operates at sea, protecting shipping lanes and projecting power through ships and submarines.
- **Nuclear weapons** are explosive devices powered by atomic reactions. Their immense destructive power and long-term radiation effects make them central to global security debates.
- **Proxy war** is an armed conflict where major powers support opposing sides through funding, weapons, or training, rather than fighting directly themselves.
- **Total war** is a form of war in which an entire society becomes involved in the conflict. Civilians, industries, and national resources are directed toward the war effort.

Critical Thinking Questions

1. How have conventional militaries traditionally been structured, and how are they changing in the 21st century? What do these changes suggest about how interstate wars may be fought in the future?
2. What are the potential benefits and risks of nuclear weapons for states and for the international system as a whole?
3. What motivates states to initiate interstate war, and how should we think about the relative importance of these motivations?
4. How do states justify the use of force? Under what conditions, if any, do you believe such justifications are legitimate?

Suggestions for Further Study

Web Resources

- Council on Foreign Affairs: Backgrounders on War and Security
- Correlates of War Project
- Stockholm International Peace Research Institute

Journal Articles

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8: CONFLICT WITHIN STATES

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8.1: Introduction

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to:

- Discuss how these conflicts are fought by states and opposition groups.
- Identify what terrorism is and why it is a difficult term to define.
- Explain the motivations for intrastate war.

In 2011, a series of protests in Syria quickly escalated into one of the deadliest conflicts of the 21st century. What began as domestic unrest became a prolonged civil war, displacing millions and destabilizing an entire region. This pattern is characteristic of the 21st century. Today, most conflicts occur within states rather than between them.

Civil wars, or armed conflicts between a government and organized domestic challengers, have become a dominant feature of global insecurity, particularly since the end of the Cold War. These conflicts are often longer, more violent, and more difficult to resolve than interstate wars. The humanitarian consequences are severe, frequently producing refugee crises and regional instability.

In this chapter, we focus on the different forms of intrastate conflict by examining both government and opposition actors. We explore how government leaders employ the military; how coups d'état occur; and how opposition groups engage in insurgency, terrorism, and revolution. We analyze the motivations behind these conflicts and examine how actors can pursue peace, using South Africa's transition after apartheid as an example. Finally, we apply these concepts to a case study of the Syrian Civil War.

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8.2: How Actors Engage in Intrastate Conflict

Intrastate conflict is frequently synonymous with brutal violence, including sexual violence, the targeting of civilians, and **ethnic cleansing**—the deliberate removal of a population from a territory through violence or forced displacement (for more on ethnic cleansing, see Chapter 11). These acts are often aimed at undermining support for rival factions.

Many civil wars are fought over control of the state, with rival factions seeking to capture the national government, as seen in conflicts such as the Syrian Civil War. Other civil wars are **secessionist conflicts**, where a group attempts to break away and form a new state, such as Kurdish movements across Turkey, Iraq, and Syria. These conflicts are commonly tied to ethnic, religious, or regional grievances.

Government Actors

Before widespread violence occurs, governments often rely on legal and institutional tools to suppress opposition. These include censorship, control of the press, bans on political parties, and prohibitions on public gatherings or protests. By limiting speech and organization, states attempt to prevent collective action before it can escalate into conflict.

Organized violence is often carried out by groups aligned with or authorized by the government. Police and security forces enforce state authority in areas under government control and are often responsible for identifying and suppressing groups assisting opposition movements. Arrest, detention without trial, and torture are sometimes used in civil conflicts to intimidate opponents and extract information, as seen in Egypt under Hosni Mubarak during the 2000s, when security forces detained activists, employed harsh interrogation tactics, and conducted extensive surveillance of opposition groups.



Image 8.2.1: A family post a note in Cairo's Tahrir Square appealing for information about their 17 year old son missing since Egypt's Central Security Forces (riot police) clashed with protesters in November, 2011. *(Source: "Appeal for a boy who went missing during the deadly dispersal of the Mohamed Mahmoud protests - Egypt 2011." by alisdare1 is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0.)*

One of the biggest advantages governments hold in internal conflicts is the military itself. Soldiers have better access to weaponry and logistics and possess extensive training. Military structures maintain a clear chain of command and expectations of obedience, enabling rapid decision-making that non-state actors often struggle to match. The military's presence can also serve as a deterrent, signaling to potential opposition groups the high cost of rebellion. However, the use of military force against domestic challengers can backfire, reducing a government's legitimacy, particularly in states with preexisting regional or ethnic divisions.

Governments may also rely on paramilitary forces or private security contractors to extend authority into areas where state capacity is weak. These groups often operate outside formal legal structures and therefore do not respect principles of due process or the distinction between civilian and combatant, as seen in Serbia's campaign in Kosovo in the late 1990s, where paramilitary units played a central role in ethnic cleansing against Albanian civilians. These paramilitary forces provide the state with flexibility and plausible deniability.

In some cases, the military itself becomes a central political actor. A **coup d'état** occurs when political elites or members of the armed forces remove a government through force, the threat of force, or other unconstitutional means. Coups are most likely in states where civilian control of the military is weak and when civilian leadership is already facing challenges of legitimacy.

Nigeria offers an example of repeated military intervention in politics. From independence in 1960 through the late 1990s, coups and counter-coups reflected regional divisions and competition over state resources. While military rulers justified intervention as necessary to restore order, repeated takeovers normalized military rule as a response to crisis.

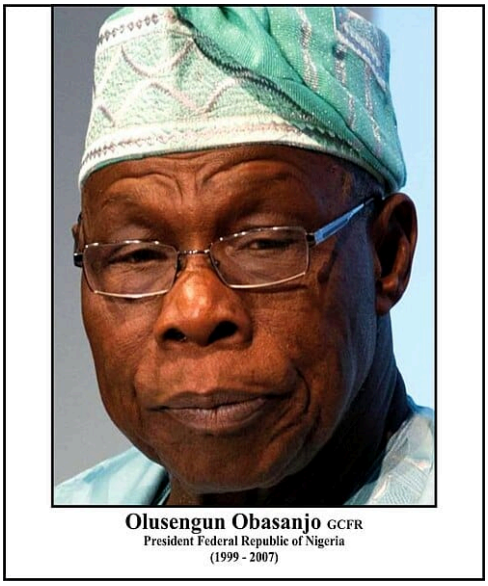


Image 8.2.2: Following decades of successive coups and counter coups, General Olusegun Obasanjo was democratically elected president of Nigeria in 1999. *(Source: "Olusegun Obasanjo GCFR" by National Library of Nigeria is marked with Public Domain Mark 1.0.)*

Not all coups involve opposition elites seizing power. Some are carried out by governments seeking to avoid a loss of authority during a political transition. Such an action, referred to as an **autogolpe (self-coup)**, occurs when elected leaders dissolve legislatures, suspend constitutions, or use security forces to maintain power. Leaders often justify these moves as responses to alleged election improprieties, political gridlock, corruption, or security threats. Autogolpes blur the line between political authority and unconstitutional rule.

Outside actors also frequently shape government behavior in civil wars. Foreign states may provide military aid, intelligence, funding, and sometimes direct intervention to secure access to resources or support shared ideological, ethnic, or religious ties.

Non-State and Anti-Government Actors

Opposing the government are a range of non-state actors operating outside state control.

Resistance does not always begin with armed violence. Opposition movements often rely first on strategies such as protests, strikes, boycotts, and civil disobedience to challenge state authority and mobilize support, as demonstrated by Mahatma Gandhi's leadership of mass nonviolent resistance against British rule in India, including protests and boycotts of goods.

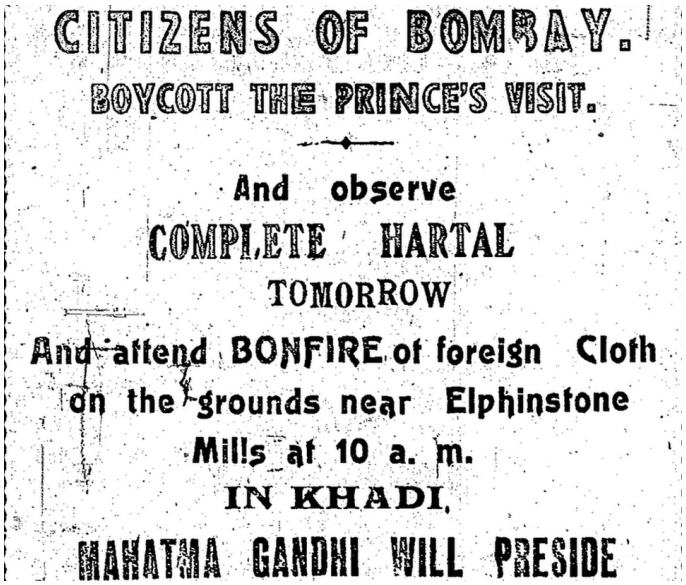


Image 8.2.3: A pamphlet, issued in Bombay and referencing Gandhi, calls for a boycott of the Prince of Wales' 1921 visit along with other protests. The text reads "Citizens of Bombay. Boycott the Prince's visit. And observe complete Hartal tomorrow. And attend bonfire of foreign cloth on the grounds near Elphinstone Mills at 10 a.m. in Khadi. Mahatma Gandhi will preside." *(Source: "1921 bombay foreign cloth bonfire" is in the Public Domain.)*

In addition to organized protests, opposition groups may employ what political scientists refer to as **weapons of the weak**. These are everyday forms of resistance used by oppressed populations, including work slowdowns, sabotage of infrastructure, or the refusal to comply with state policy. For example, workers may intentionally reduce production or damage equipment as a way to undermine control without directly engaging in open confrontation. However, repression often pushes opposition groups toward violence as a perceived necessary response.

In some cases, rebel leaders are former military officers or political leaders who once served the state. Some non-state groups maintain organized forces with training and command structures, sometimes supported by outside states. As an example, in Libya in early 2011, Khalifa Haftar, a former general under longtime dictator Muammar Gaddafi, emerged as the leader of a rival, anti-Gaddafi armed faction.

External support is also essential for the survival of many opposition groups. Rebel movements may receive weapons, funding, training, or safe haven from foreign governments seeking influence over the conflict. Others draw support from outside ideological, ethnic, or religious networks that portray the conflict as part of a broader struggle.

In many civil wars, violence is carried out by militias and **warlords**, or armed groups organized around local leaders rather than formal state institutions. These actors pursue their own political, economic, or territorial interests and may cooperate with the government or oppose it, depending on their goals. **Militias** are locally organized armed groups operating in areas where state authority is weak. They control towns or provinces and may enforce local rules or provide security. Warlords use armed force to maintain personal power, control resources, and secure loyalty from local populations. They often provide protection and services in exchange for support, but their authority is based on coercion and local influence rather than official state authority. For example, in Iraq, Muqtada al-Sadr emerged as a powerful militia leader whose Mahdi Army played a central role in post-U.S. invasion (2003) violence and later became an important political force within the Iraqi government.



Image 8.2.4: Supporters of Muqtada al-Sadr's alliance in Liberation Square, Baghdad celebrating after a 2008 successful election campaign. *(Source: "The joy of the supporters of various Iraqi parties after the parliamentary elections 08" by Zoheir Seidanloo is licensed under CC BY 4.0.)*

Insurgents share many characteristics with militias and warlords. However, they often alternate between open militia tactics and blending in with the population. **Insurgency** is a prolonged effort by a non-state group to challenge the authority of the state by combining armed violence with the political mobilization of a population. Insurgencies seek to weaken state control over territory rather than the immediate overthrow of the existing government. **Guerrilla warfare** refers to the tactics commonly used by these insurgent groups. These tactics include ambushes, sabotage, and hit-and-run attacks to offset the government's military advantages, as seen in conflicts ranging from Vietnam to Afghanistan.

The boundary between insurgency, guerrilla warfare, and terrorism is often blurry. Insurgent groups may alternate between targeting military personnel or conducting terrorist attacks on civilians depending on the relative strength of their opponent. **Terrorism** consists of acts committed by non-state actors against non-combatants for a political motive. At its core, terrorism is rooted in identity and belief systems that actors feel are being suppressed or ignored. Violence becomes a method of forcing public attention in order to provoke change.

Terrorism has had a profound impact on international security because even small attacks can provoke large military responses, draw in external actors, and destabilize regions beyond the original conflict, as seen in actions taken by the United States (U.S.) in Afghanistan and Iraq following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. Although some attacks target foreign states, terrorism is most frequently used within a state's own borders.

Terrorism presents a unique challenge in the study of international security, and its nature has changed over time. The term was first popularized during the Reign of Terror in the French Revolution, when the state used violence against suspected reactionaries. Later, terrorism evolved into an anarchist model characterized by assassination, as seen in the killing of Tsar Alexander II of Russia in 1881 and Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria in 1914. In the mid-20th century, terrorism often included hijackings and bombings aimed at achieving international recognition, usually tied to nationalist or territorial disputes. The Irish Republican Army and the Palestinian Liberation Organization were prominent examples. Today, terrorism is increasingly linked to extremist religious ideologies, including groups such as al-Qaeda in the Middle East, Abhinav Bharat in India, and Christian nationalist movements in the U.S.



Image 8.2.5: "Army of God" is an active Christian terrorist organization, formed in 1982, and responsible for perpetrating anti-abortion violence. *(Source: "Donald Spitz holds Army of God Banner" by RevSpitz - Army of God event is marked with Public Domain Mark 1.0.)*

One of the key challenges in defining terrorism is its politically charged nature. States frequently label violent opposition groups as terrorists, while those same groups often view themselves as freedom fighters struggling against oppression. To them, the term is a political weapon used to delegitimize their cause and justify state violence. Governments, in turn, use the label to frame their actions as legitimate efforts to maintain order.

While terrorism targets non-combatants to achieve political goals, **revolutions** seek to not only achieve political goals, but also to fundamentally transform political authority and overthrow an existing regime. A **political regime** is the combination of norms, laws, and institutions that make up political power in a state. Unlike coups, which replace leaders without significantly altering state structures, revolutions seek lasting change.

Revolutions have often been among the most significant threats to international security because they reshape alliances and alter the balance of power. The French Revolution prompted coalitions aimed at restoring the Bourbon monarchy, while the Russian Revolution removed a major power from World War I and set the stage for decades of ideological conflict. The Iranian Revolution (1978-1979) similarly transformed Middle East politics and led to sustained confrontation with the U.S.



Image 8.2.6: Large crowds protested during the Ashura gatherings early in the Iranian Revolution. Many here hold posters depicting Ayatollah Khomenini, who founded the Islamic Republic of Iran and served as its first supreme leader after the revolution. *(Source: "Tehran Ashura Demonstration, 11 December 1978" by iichs.ir (Unknown photographer) is in the Public Domain.)*

In recent history, revolutions have posed threats not only through direct conflict but also through the instability and displacement they generate. The Arab Spring, a wave of anti-government protests and uprisings that started in Tunisia in December 2010 and then spread to other Middle Eastern and North African states, produced large refugee flows that placed strain on neighboring states and European political systems.

While often imagined as uprisings of the poor, revolutions are frequently driven by disaffected elites who feel excluded from power. They tend to arise when vulnerable regimes face shocks that expose state weakness, such as economic crises, failed wars, or environmental stresses.

Following regime change, revolutionary leaders face the challenge of consolidating their authority while attempting to meet the high public expectations created during the revolution. Many revolutionary governments reintroduce the same coercive practices they once condemned. When elites fail to deliver promised reforms, they can create space for more radical movements to pursue change through renewed intrastate conflict.

With an understanding of the actors and tactics in intrastate conflicts, we can now examine the motivations that drive both state and non-state actors to resort to violence.

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8.3: Motivations for Intrastate Conflict

Intrastate wars, like wars between states (interstate wars), often have many compounding reasons for their occurrence (for a review of interstate wars, see Chapter 7). Political scientists examine the internal dynamics that prevent state leaders from maintaining control. They also explore why groups reject state authority and resort to violence.

Individual-Level Explanations

Why do leaders within states choose violence?

At the individual level, government leaders can benefit from maintaining the status quo, relying on patronage, or fostering **clientelism** in which individuals or groups remain loyal to a leader in return for continued benefits. For example, a ruling party may reward loyal ethnic or tribal leaders with government positions or development funds in exchange for their continued support. Leaders may use conflict to distract from failures, rally the majority behind the government, or eliminate political rivals. These leaders may perceive compromise as weakness and may fear being undermined by rivals within their own political party or ethnic group.

Minority faction leaders, by contrast, may see little benefit in cooperating with the government. They may believe that war offers a strategic opportunity to access resources, gain authority, or win autonomy. Attacks are used to force governments into concessions or to provoke overreactions that alienate moderates and create sympathy for the cause. However, other theorists note that these tactics often backfire, leading to ethnic cleansing, expanded state repression, and the loss of political rights for the group's supposed supporters.

Alternative perspectives view political violence, such as terrorism or revolution, as emerging from poverty, inequality, or the lack of opportunity. Yet studies have shown that many perpetrators come from middle- or upper-socioeconomic backgrounds, often educated professionals acting on behalf of communities they perceive as oppressed.

At the individual level, in-group and out-group prejudices—those that frame one's own group as noble and reasonable and the opposition as irrational and violent—also contribute to a leader's decision to engage in violent conflict.

State-Level (Domestic) Explanations

State weakness is a common explanation for civil war. These conflicts are rarely seen in states with effective governance. Instead, they emerge in states with weak institutions, low legitimacy, and historic divisions. Minority groups often lack meaningful forums to voice concerns. They may be banned from participating in politics, face discrimination in government, or view elections as manipulated. Peaceful protest is often met with repression, leaving violence as the only perceived option for achieving change, as seen in cases such as Syria in 2011, where initial demonstrations were met with force and mass arrests.

International-Level (Systemic) Explanations

International explanations often come from Marxist or world systems perspectives, which point to histories of colonialism and imperialism (for a review of critical theories, see Chapter 5). Western powers frequently drew borders with little regard for ethnic, religious, or tribal divisions. Infrastructure and institutions were underdeveloped, and governance was often focused on extracting resources. Today, these perspectives point to foreign corporations' continued exploitation of resources in many post-colonial states, fueling inequality and instability.

Conflicts Over Ideas

Ethnic identity is one of the most common explanations for internal conflict, especially when groups feel politically excluded or discriminated against. These grievances can lead to demands for autonomy or secession, as seen in the Kurdish resistance in Turkey or the Tamil insurgency in Sri Lanka. In some cases, **ethnic outbidding** occurs, where leaders adopt increasingly extreme positions or use violence to present themselves as the only authentic representatives of their group, especially when moderates are discredited for working with the state. For example, militant factions may attack civilians or government targets

to overshadow moderate leaders who support negotiations. Government repression often backfires, increasing sympathy for extremist movements among previously unaligned members of the ethnic group.



Image 8.3.1: Members of the militarized insurgent group Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam take part in a parade in Killinochchi, Sri Lanka, in 2002. *(Source: "Tamil Tiger women at war" by marietta amarcord from italy is licensed under CC BY 2.0.)*

In some post-colonial states, minority groups once privileged under colonial rule now face resentment from newly-empowered majorities. This dynamic has fueled ethnic cleansing, as seen in Rwanda, as well as the refusal of minority-led governments, such as in Syria, to relinquish power without a fight.

Religious divisions also fuel civil wars, particularly when the state privileges one group. Persecution, restrictions on worship, or biased education policies can all provoke conflict. The role of religion in society can also be a driver of conflict in secular cultures. Fundamentalist movements perceive secular encroachment as a threat. These movements are often fueled by a desire to restore religion to its perceived rightful place in government, supporting religious education, separation of genders, and restrictions on alcohol or meat. Examples include Hindu movements in India seeking bans on cow slaughter or post-revolutionary Iran imposing limits on women's education and public behavior.

Ideology has played a central role in many civil wars. During the Cold War, internal conflicts often became proxy struggles between capitalism and communism. In Angola, rival factions were backed by the U.S. and the Soviet Union, transforming a local power struggle into a prolonged war. Even today, ideological movements can be seen in Marxist insurgencies in Colombia.

Nationalism is a powerful force in many civil wars, motivating both insurgent groups and governments. States often use nationalism to promote unity, portraying minority identities as threats to the cohesion of the nation. By emphasizing a singular national identity, governments justify repression of groups whose ethnic, religious, or cultural identities are seen as divisive. Conversely, minority groups may pursue autonomy or independence to preserve their distinct identity, seeking a nation that reflects their own religious, ethnic, or cultural values. This dynamic can produce intractable conflicts, as both sides claim historical or moral legitimacy for their actions. For example, in Turkey, the government has long resisted recognition of Kurdish identity, framing Kurdish aspirations for autonomy as a threat to national unity. In response, Kurdish movements, most prominently the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), have sought the creation of a Kurdish homeland through political efforts and armed struggle.

Conflicts Over Territory and Resources

Many minority factions are geographically concentrated in regions they view as ancestral homelands. These areas often carry deep historical or cultural meaning and are not easily negotiable. Granting autonomy to one group can spark demands from others, making governments reluctant to concede control.

Natural resources, such as oil, diamonds, and rare earth minerals, are both a cause of conflict and a way to sustain it. In resource-rich but weak states, leaders often see little incentive to share power. Holding office guarantees access to wealth, making political

power a zero-sum game. Minority factions likewise use resources to enrich themselves and to finance operations through control of these commodities. This dynamic, known as the **resource curse**, has enabled violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria, and South Sudan. Outside powers may become entangled to secure access, intensifying the conflict.

Each of these dynamics reinforces the others. As violence continues, grievances deepen, moderates are sidelined, and cycles of revenge and repression become more difficult to break. After interstate wars, resentments linger and trust is slow to be rebuilt, but rivals are not expected to live alongside one another. In intrastate wars, violence must cease in order to reestablish order, because former enemies must share territory, institutions, and political authority. To see how a society can navigate these challenges, we turn to the example of South Africa's transition from apartheid.

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8.4: The Challenge of Achieving Peace

South Africa's transition from apartheid demonstrates both the possibilities and limits of post-conflict peace. The apartheid regime, in power from 1948 to the early 1990s, upheld institutionalized racism and state repression for the benefit of the white minority and was supported by many Western states during the Cold War. The African National Congress (ANC) was composed of diverse ethnic groups and employed a mix of strategies, ranging from nonviolent resistance to armed struggle, and received support from the Soviet Union and other anti-apartheid allies.

The apartheid state relied on police violence, detention without trial, censorship, and surveillance to maintain control. At the same time, the regime depended on economic privilege to maintain loyalty among the white population and the business community.

The ANC initially emphasized nonviolent resistance, including strikes, boycotts, protests, and appeals to the international community. After continued repression and bans on political activity, such as the Sharpeville massacre in 1960, when police opened fire on a peaceful protest against Pass Laws, killing 69 unarmed Black demonstrators and wounding hundreds more, the movement shifted strategy. In the aftermath, the ANC turned to armed struggle through its military wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe. This campaign focused largely on sabotage of infrastructure and attacks on state facilities, sometimes involving tactics described by the apartheid government as terrorism, that was intended to raise the costs of apartheid rather than wage a full-scale civil war. The ANC also pursued international pressure by encouraging diplomatic isolation, and economic sanctions to force the regime to the negotiating table. The decline of the Soviet Union and the end of Cold War politics altered the strategic environment for both sides. Western governments no longer viewed the apartheid regime as a necessary anti-communist ally and increasingly treated it as illegitimate. At the same time, the ANC faced diminishing prospects for external support, reducing incentives for prolonged armed struggle.

Strong leadership, especially from Nelson Mandela and F.W. de Klerk, was essential in guiding negotiations and preventing renewed violence. De Klerk, the last president of apartheid-era South Africa, initiated reforms that dismantled apartheid laws and released political prisoners, including Mandela. Mandela's leadership, legitimacy, and charismatic authority enabled him to call his allies toward peace.



Image 8.4.1: F.W. de Klerk and Nelson Mandela jointly received America's Liberty Medal for effecting the transition to black majority rule. *(Source: "F.W. de Klerk, left, the last president of apartheid-era South Africa, and Nelson Mandela, his successor, wait to speak in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania" by Carol M. Highsmith is in the Public Domain.)*

The government granted voting rights to the Black majority and guaranteed property rights and protections for all citizens, including the white minority, which helped reduce fear and encouraged participation in a shared political system. It also formed a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, providing a forum to acknowledge past abuses and offering conditional amnesty to perpetrators who came forward, while giving victims a voice.

In the decades after apartheid, South Africa has succeeded in avoiding a return to large-scale political violence. Many observers expected the transition to majority rule to spark civil war, yet the country instead established regular elections within a constitutional framework. Political conflict has largely been addressed through courts, elections, and public debate rather than armed struggle.

Yet peace did not eliminate inequality or tension. Economic disparities persist, and South Africa remains one of the most unequal societies globally, with high unemployment and uneven access to quality education and healthcare. The ANC is widely seen as corrupt and unable to deliver the growth promised in earlier eras. Some members of the white minority argue that discrimination now exists and that the current government cannot be trusted to protect property rights, leading many to sell assets or emigrate.

Likewise, the Economic Freedom Fighters, led by Julius Malema, challenge the ANC by advocating land expropriation without compensation and the nationalization of key industries, policies many perceive as anti-white. These ongoing challenges show that achieving lasting peace requires more than the end of violence. It requires leadership, recognition of past wrongs, and a long-term commitment to preserving peace.

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8.5: IR in the Real World

In 2011, Syria became part of the Arab Spring, a wave of popular uprisings challenging authoritarian regimes across the Middle East and North Africa. Successful movements included the overthrow of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia, Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, and Muammar Gaddafi in Libya. In Syria, protests initially called for political reform, economic opportunity, and an end to corruption. The Assad family had dominated Syrian politics with Hafez al-Assad ruling from 1971 to 2000, followed by his son Bashar al-Assad. The regime maintained control through a combination of propaganda, censorship, and security personnel, which rewarded loyalty and suppressed dissent.

Demonstrations in 2011 were largely peaceful but escalated rapidly after the Assad government responded with mass arrests, live fire against demonstrators, and detention and torture by security services. Violent repression, combined with political, ethnic, and regional divisions, transformed unrest into one of the most destructive civil wars of the 21st century. Instability spilled into neighboring Iraq, while millions of refugees fled to Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan. Later waves reached Europe.

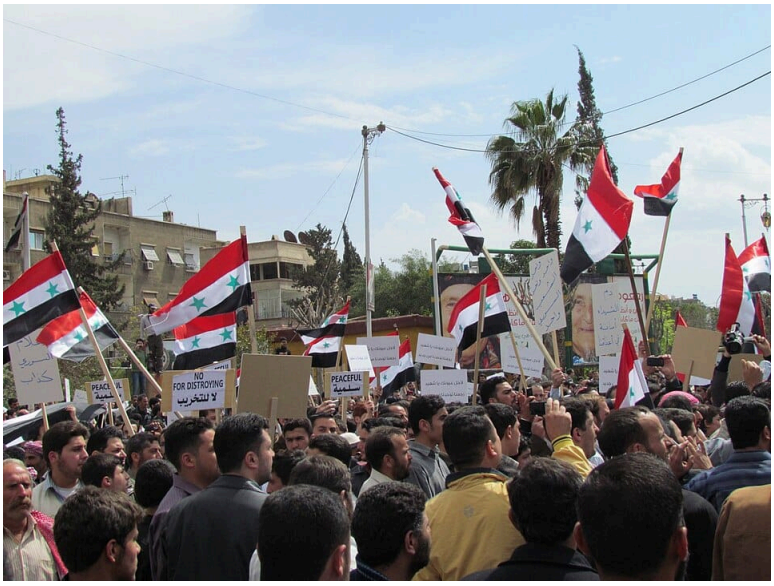


Image 8.5.1: A peaceful demonstration early in the Syrian revolution, in a suburb of Damascus, April of the 2011 "Arab Spring." *(Source: "Syrian Demonstration 30" by shamsnn is licensed under CC BY 2.0.)*

Violence in Syria was carried out by both state and non-state actors using a wide range of tactics. The Syrian Arab Army relied on conventional military power, including infantry, artillery, airstrikes, and at several points chemical weapons. The use of chemical weapons crossed what many international leaders described as a red line, generating global condemnation but limited direct intervention. The regime also depended on militias and intelligence services operating outside formal legal structures to assert state control. Russia and Iran provided military assistance, including airpower, weapons, advisers, and financial support, allowing the government to survive for over a decade despite significant internal opposition.

Opposing the regime was a collection of non-state armed groups including the Free Syrian Army, local militias, and a range of Islamist factions. Many opposition fighters were former soldiers or civilians mobilized through local political, religious, and ethnic networks. External support came primarily from Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and to a lesser extent the U.S. Lacking the resources of the state, these groups relied on guerrilla tactics such as ambushes, improvised explosive devices, and hit-and-run attacks. Kurdish forces in northern Syria pursued a separate strategy, emphasizing local governance and protection from both the regime and extremist groups. They relied on light arms, drones, and urban defense tactics to secure autonomy in areas they viewed as ancestral homelands.



Image 8.5.2: Military support to the Syrian opposition forces came in part from Turkey. *(Source: "Turkish reinforcements during Afrin Campaign, Jan 21, 2018" by Mark Lowen is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0.)*

The rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) further reshaped the conflict. Exploiting the chaos of the war, ISIS seized large territories and declared a caliphate based on an extreme interpretation of Sunni Islam. The group sought to erase national borders, dismantle existing political regimes, and impose a new religious-political order through social control and violence.

ISIS used terrorism both within its controlled territories and internationally. Civilians, particularly ethnic and religious minorities such as Yazidis, Christians, and Shia populations, were targeted to instill fear, enforce compliance, and eliminate resistance. Rival groups were attacked through assassinations, bombings, and mass executions. Beyond Syria and Iraq, ISIS carried out attacks in the U.S., Europe, and the Middle East in order to reinforce its global ideological agenda.

The group pursued revolutionary goals, attempting to replace existing regimes with its own political-religious system by controlling governance, legal systems, and social-religious norms in captured areas. Sophisticated online propaganda amplified its revolutionary message, attracting foreign fighters and spreading its ideology.

The U.S. and its allies conducted airstrikes and coordinated ground operations from 2014 through 2019 as part of a U.S.-led international coalition, working with Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces and Iraqi security forces. By targeting ISIS leadership, revenue sources, and territorial control, and through ground campaigns in cities such as Mosul and Raqqa, the coalition reduced ISIS from a widespread governing authority to a decentralized terrorist network.



Image 8.5.3: U.S. Marines acting in 2017 as part of the Combined Joint Task Force - Operation Inherent Resolve, the global Coalition to defeat ISIS in Iraq and Syria. *(Source: "U.S. Marines with the 11th Marine Expeditionary Unit fire their M777 Howitzer during a fire mission in northern Syria as part of Combined Joint Task Force - Operation Inherent Resolve, Mar. 24, 2017" by Lance Corporal Zachery Laning, U.S. Marine Corps is in the Public Domain.)*

At the decision-maker level, the choices of Syria's leadership and opposition reflect both rational and psychological motivations common in civil wars. From a rational perspective, Assad viewed repression as necessary to preserve power and maintain patronage networks that tied political survival to loyal elites and security forces. Past crackdowns, such as the destruction of the Muslim Brotherhood uprising in Hama in 1982, reinforced the belief that overwhelming force could restore order. Psychologically, fear and mistrust played a central role. Assad closely observed the removal of leaders in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya and concluded that compromise risked regime collapse. The uprising was interpreted not as a demand for reform but as a threat encouraged by foreign governments and Islamist movements.

Opposition leaders were similarly guided by rational and psychological considerations. Many believed that the wave of the Arab Spring, which had toppled other authoritarian regimes, signaled a opportunity to challenge Assad's rule. They assessed the regime's economic and political weaknesses and recognized their own numerical advantages. The prospect of external support from Turkey and to a lesser extent the U.S. reinforced their strategic calculations. Psychologically, opposition figures were motivated by the belief that the Arab Spring represented a broader regional movement for change and the urgency created by the regime's violent repression.

At the state level, Syria displayed many characteristics associated with authoritarian governance. It lacked legitimate institutions for managing political conflict. Elections were tightly controlled, civil liberties were limited, and dissent was routinely met with imprisonment or violence. Minority groups such as Alawites, Druze, and Christians held disproportionate influence in the military and government, creating deep fears that a loss of power would lead to retaliation or ethnic cleansing. The Sunni Arab majority, largely excluded from political authority and shaped by memories of past repression, formed the core of the opposition. Kurdish populations in the north pursued autonomy and recognition, further weakening state cohesion.

International explanations come from a Marxist or post-colonial perspective. Syria's internal divisions can be traced to borders drawn during the French mandate, which reinforced ethnic differences and weakened national identity. From a realist viewpoint, Syria became a battleground for regional and great-power competition. Russia and Iran supported the regime to preserve influence, military access, and regional power, while Turkey and Gulf states backed opposition forces to counter Iranian expansion. A social constructivist lens highlights how weak enforcement of international norms, particularly regarding chemical weapons, demonstrated the limits of international law and norms when confronted by strategic interests.

Conflicts over ideas were central to the war. For the Alawite minority, the conflict was framed as a struggle for survival. Many Sunni opposition groups viewed the war as resistance to an unjust ruler, often grounding their claims in religious terms. Islamist movements sought governance based on Islamic law, emphasizing religious authority. Assad's regime promoted a

form of nationalism that emphasized religious pluralism under centralized state control, while democratic activists demanded representative government, civil liberties, and accountability.

Territory and resources also shaped the conflict. Cities such as Aleppo, Homs, and Damascus were fought over for their population, symbolic importance, and economic value. Control of oil fields, agriculture, and border crossings provided revenue, food, and leverage, enabling armed groups to sustain long-term fighting.

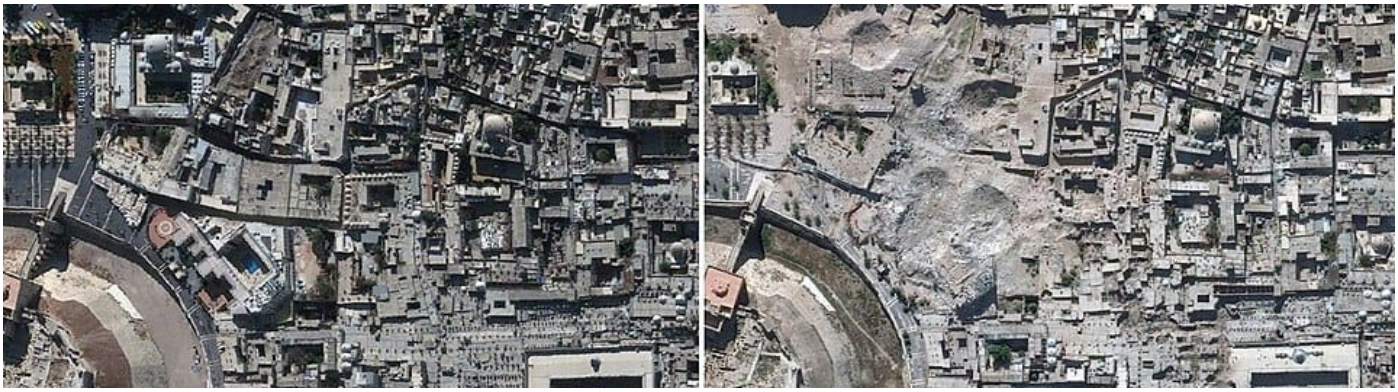


Image 8.5.4: Satellite photographs taken before (2010) and after (late 2014) the destruction of the Old City of Aleppo near the Citadel. *(Source: "Unitar alleppo 2010 2014 banner" by US Department of State, Humanitarian Information Unit is in the Public Domain.)*

Each side claimed moral legitimacy. The Assad regime portrayed itself as a defender of stability and secularism, arguing that it was preventing state collapse and protecting minorities from extremist violence. Rebel groups framed their actions as justified resistance to repression and state brutality. Despite these claims, all sides committed atrocities, including attacks on civilians, hospitals, and humanitarian organizations, reinforcing cycles of grievance and revenge.

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8.6: Conclusion

The post-conflict period in Syria, like South Africa, exemplifies how difficult it is to achieve peace after a prolonged conflict. In late 2024, Assad was overthrown by a coalition of opposition factions led primarily by Sunni Arab groups, with the assistance of Kurdish forces and minority Alawite and Druze militias that had defected from the regime. A transitional government led by Ahmed al-Sharaa took power with backing from the U.S., Turkey, and several regional actors seeking stability and international legitimacy. The new leadership has emphasized inclusion, drawing representatives from Alawite, Druze, Christian, Sunni, and Kurdish communities, and has sought international recognition and reconstruction assistance.



Image 8.6.1: The Syrian government under President Ahmed al-Sharaa issued a set of commemorative postage stamps to mark the first anniversary of the fall of Assad, or "Liberation Day." *(Source: "2025 Postage 4" by Oaladib is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0.)*

Despite these efforts, militias have refused to disarm, fearing persecution or the loss of political and economic influence. Former opposition commanders continue to control weapons stockpiles, while former regime loyalists remain deeply distrustful of the new political order. Violence has not disappeared. In areas such as Sweida and Latakia, Druze and Alawite communities have experienced property destruction and retaliatory attacks linked to their perceived associations with the former regime. Kurdish regions remain under pressure from Turkey, and Christian communities face intimidation from extremist cells. Externally, Turkey continues to arm northern factions, while Israeli airstrikes against alleged Iranian-linked targets persist.

South Africa's example demonstrated how leadership, amnesty, and protected rights helped stabilize a post-conflict society. Syria will need to find its own approach to integrating former enemies into governance in order to achieve lasting peace.

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8.7: Student Resources

Summary

This chapter examined intrastate conflict, the most prevalent form of warfare in the contemporary international system. Unlike wars between states, intrastate conflicts occur within state borders and involve governments fighting domestic challengers. These conflicts are often highly violent and difficult to resolve, producing mass displacement and regional instability.

State and non-state actors fight intrastate conflicts. Governments rely on repression, security forces, militaries, paramilitaries, and, at times, coups to maintain power, while opposition groups utilize strategies ranging from nonviolent protest to insurgency, guerrilla warfare, terrorism, and revolution to resist or overthrow the regime.

Explanations for intrastate war include the incentives of decision-makers, state weakness, colonial legacies, ethnic identity, ideology, nationalism, and competition over territory and natural resources. After a civil war, achieving durable peace is difficult.

Key Terms

- **Autogolpe (self-coup)** refers to actions taken by an elected leader to avoid losing power, such as dissolving legislatures, suspending constitutions, or using security forces to remain in office.
- **Civil war** is an armed conflict occurring within a state between a government and organized domestic challengers.
- **Clientelism** is a form of political control in which leaders maintain the status quo by distributing benefits, positions, or resources to loyal individuals or groups in exchange for continued support.
- **Coup d'état** occurs when political elites or members of the armed forces remove a government through force, the threat of force, or other unconstitutional means, most commonly where civilian control of the military is weak.
- **Ethnic cleansing** is the deliberate removal of a population from a territory through violence or forced displacement, often aimed at undermining support for rival factions or altering control over territory.
- **Ethnic outbidding** is a process in which leaders within an ethnic group adopt increasingly extreme positions or use violence to present themselves as the only authentic representatives of that group, especially when moderates are discredited for cooperating with the state.
- **Guerrilla warfare** refers to tactics commonly used by insurgent groups, including ambushes, sabotage, and hit-and-run attacks, designed to offset the military advantages of the state.
- **Insurgency** is a prolonged effort by a non-state group to challenge state authority by combining armed violence with the political mobilization of a population, often seeking to weaken state control over territory rather than immediately overthrow the government.
- **Militia** is a locally organized armed group that operates in areas where state authority is weak, controlling towns or provinces, and may enforce local rules or provide security.
- **Political regime** is the combination of norms, laws, and institutions that structure political authority and determine how power is exercised within a state.
- **Resource curse** describes the tendency of resource-rich but weak states to experience instability and conflict, as access to valuable resources makes political power highly contested and enables both governments and rebel groups to finance violence.
- **Revolution** is a fundamental transformation of political authority involving the overthrow of an existing regime and lasting change to political institutions, rather than simply replacing leaders.
- **Secessionist conflict** is a form of intrastate conflict in which a group seeks to break away from an existing state in order to form a new, independent state, often driven by ethnic, religious, or regional grievances tied to territory.
- **Terrorism** involves acts committed by non-state actors against non-combatants for a political motive, often used strategically to provoke reactions, gain attention, or force concessions.
- **Warlord** is a leader who uses armed force to maintain personal power, control resources, and secure loyalty from local populations, often providing protection and services in exchange for support, with authority based on coercion and local influence rather than state authority.
- **Weapons of the weak** are everyday forms of resistance used by oppressed populations, including work slowdowns, sabotage, or refusal to comply with state directives.

Critical Thinking Questions

1. Why might leaders choose to preserve the status quo even when their society faces widespread unrest?
2. What is ethnic outbidding, and how does it complicate the possibility of compromise or peace during civil conflicts?
3. How do ideas such as religion, ethnicity, or ideology shape both the motivations and strategies of actors in civil wars?
4. How do natural resources influence the likelihood and duration of civil wars, and why might they make democratic governance more difficult?
5. Reflecting on the example of South Africa, what challenges emerge when trying to preserve peace after a period of intense internal conflict?

Suggestions for Further Study

Web Resources

- Council on Foreign Affairs: Backgrounders on War and Security
- Correlates of War Project
- Stockholm International Peace Research Institute

Journal Articles

- Blattman, C. and E. Miguel. (2010). "Civil War." *Journal of Economic Literature*, 48(1): 3–57.
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9: INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

9.1: Introduction

9.2: International Governmental Organizations

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9.1: Introduction

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to:

- Explain why states create international organizations.
- Distinguish between different types of international organizations, including international governmental organizations, supranational organizations, and international nongovernmental organizations.
- nalyze the operations of the United Nations and the European Union.

Note

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Despite the absence of a central authority in the international system, states still manage to work together by following rules governing their interactions. The cooperation between states is so routine that we hardly notice it in our everyday lives. For example, imagine stepping off a plane in a foreign state. As you disembark, you switch on your phone to check any messages that came through while you were in transit. You follow the sign that directs you to the airport's exit, clear immigration, and pick up your luggage at the designated carousel. You then head straight for the "nothing to declare" green lane to exit the airport. By completing these routine actions, you have interacted with the work of at least four different international organizations.

The aircraft that you traveled in was one of the many planes under the International Air Transport Association, and it was regulated by standards set by the International Civil Aviation Organization. The fact that you were able to use your phone to check messages was courtesy of the work of the International Telecommunication Union. And, your customs clearance was facilitated by the Kyoto Convention set by the World Customs Organization to simplify the customs process. Today, it is increasingly difficult to imagine an international system in which the only voices that matter are those of states; rather, international organizations form an integral part of our everyday lives.

An **international organization (IO)** is a group whose members include governments, institutions, or individuals from different states. IOs are created to promote cooperation among member states by fostering information exchange, monitoring compliance, and creating stable, shared expectations. IOs include international governmental organizations, such as the United Nations and the African Union; supranational organizations, such as the European Union; and international nongovernmental organizations, such as Doctors Without Borders and Greenpeace. In the following sections, we will discuss each type of international organization in turn.

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9.2: International Governmental Organizations

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- *Rom, M.C., Hidaka, M., & R.B. Walker. (2022). "International Law and International Organizations." In Introduction to Political Science (Chapter 15). OpenStax [CC BY 4.0].*

An **international governmental organization (IGO)**, also referred to as an intergovernmental organization, is an organization with membership that includes at least three state parties, holds regular meetings, and has a permanent headquarters and budget.

Since World War II, the number of IGOs increased from approximately 70 to approximately 350 in the 1980s, after which the number remained mostly the same (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, 2020, p. 352). IGOs help the international community focus on issues and coordinate actions even when individual states' interests may push them to act in ways that are incompatible with common goals.

We can categorize IGOs according to their scope and purpose. In terms of scope, some IGOs are global and some are regional. Global IGOs are open to any state in the world, such as the United Nations and the World Trade Organization. Regional IGOs are open to states from a specific region, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. In terms of purpose, some IGOs are general, and some have specific functions. For example, the African Union is general in purpose as it handles a wide range of issues, including social, economic, and security issues on the African continent. The Southern Common Market is a specific functional organization as it focuses on economic cooperation among its members in South America. Despite differences in scope and purpose, as long as an organization is composed exclusively of states, it is an IGO.



Image 9.2.1: Leaders of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations pose with the symbolic "ASEAN-way handshake" at the ASEAN Summit in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, on May 26, 2025. *(Source: "46th ASEAN Summit family photo" by Presidential Communications Office is in the Public Domain.)*

While IGOs bring global governance to our international system, they are not a global *government*. A global government does not currently exist, as the international system continues to operate under the condition of anarchy (for a review of anarchy, see Chapter 3). The major reason why states create IGOs is to reduce transaction costs and provide a stable venue for cooperation.

An IGO's power rests with governments (the member states), rather than with the international organization. States are free to leave an IGO or even, in some cases, to ignore its recommendations. There are usually consequences for either action, but the fact remains that even in extreme cases—such as when an organization like the United Nations imposes sanctions, or authorizes war, on a state—IGOs do not rule over states. It is a set of states that must agree to finance and partake in any given operation, so the power rests with the states themselves. There are numerous and regular examples of states rejecting a certain course of action within an IGO because it did not advance their national interest. As one example, the United Nations' failure to establish a coordinated response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, despite thousands killed and millions displaced since 2022, illustrates how states can stymie a potential IGO response if it runs counter to their national interests (most obviously, in this example, Russia's national interest).

United Nations

The United Nations (UN) is the most well-known IGO, which was created by 51 states at the end of World War II in 1945 in an attempt to avoid future destructive wars. According to the Charter of the United Nations, its purpose is to maintain international peace and security, develop friendly relations among states based on respect for equal rights and the self-determination of people, and promote respect for human rights and freedoms for all irrespective of race, sex, religion, and language. The Charter also sets the principle of sovereign equality of all its members. That is, all members, irrespective of their population size, economic wealth, and military power, have an equal voice and an equal vote. In cases of dispute, the UN Charter obligates its members to resolve their disputes peacefully; to respect other states' territorial integrity; and to refrain from threats and use of force, except in cases of self-defense and when authorized by the Security Council (see the discussion of the Security Council below). Because the UN was founded in part on the principle of the sovereignty of member states, it is not and cannot become a "world government" with ultimate authority over its members. UN decisions are not binding on member states without the consent of those states.



Image 9.2.2: Plans for United Nations operations including voting procedures in the Security Council were discussed at the 1945 Yalta Conference with British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt, and Soviet leader Joseph Stalin. *(Source: "Yalta Conference (Churchill, Roosevelt, Stalin) (B&W)" by US government photographer is in the Public Domain.)*

Only states can be members of the UN, and membership confers international recognition of a state's sovereignty. As of 2026, there are 193 UN member states. While the UN has near-universal membership, some states are not members. Taiwan, for example, has repeatedly requested membership but had its request blocked by China. This is because China regards Taiwan as a part of its sovereign territory and does not recognize it as an independent state. Taiwan, of course, wants UN membership because it would mean that the international community fully accepts its sovereignty. The Taiwan example has gone unresolved for decades due to the major role that China plays within the UN as one of its most powerful members. As two other examples, the Holy See and Palestine are non-voting "observer" members of the UN (World Population Review, 2025).

The UN addresses every conceivable issue in international relations, from peace and security to migration and refugees, law, food, development, energy, and human rights, among others. Dozens of IGOs are housed within the UN framework, such as the World

Health Organization; World Food Programme; United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization; the World Bank; and the International Monetary Fund.

There are six main organs within the UN: the UN General Assembly, the UN Security Council, the Secretariat, the Economic and Social Council, the International Court of Justice, and the Trusteeship Council.

Once a state is a member of the UN, it is automatically a member of the **UN General Assembly**. This is the main policymaking body and the most democratic organ within the UN. Each state gets one vote; it does not matter how big or small, nor how rich or poor, a state is. The General Assembly addresses a broad range of issues, including peace and security, social and economic development, and environmental and human rights issues. The General Assembly is a deliberative body, which means that its resolutions are not binding but recommendatory in nature. The passage of important resolutions, such as peace and security, budgetary issues, and the admission of new members, requires two-thirds approval of the members present, while more routine issues, such as procedural decisions and the approval of reports, require only a simple majority (more "yes" votes than "no" votes). It is also the place where, every September, world leaders give addresses to the international community from behind a dark green podium with the UN crest clearly visible. UN member states pay dues based on their wealth relative to other member states. As of 2025, the U.S. pays 22 percent of the operating expenses of the UN and China pays the second highest amount toward the peacekeeping budget, at 20 percent (United Nations, 2025).

Though each state has an equal vote in the General Assembly, by far the most powerful organ within the UN is the UN Security Council, which has 15 members. Five of the 15 members are permanent members (often referred to as "the P5"): China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom (UK), and the United States (U.S.). The General Assembly votes for the other ten non-permanent members based on a regional distribution, and these members hold two-year terms.



Image 9.2.3: The United Nations Security Council Chamber at U.N. Headquarters in New York. *(Source: "UN Security Council Nov 16 2023" by Wikiweeki is licensed under CC BY 4.0.)*

The Security Council has primary responsibility for maintaining peace and security. It is the only organ that can impose sanctions on states or deploy military forces on behalf of the international community to keep the peace in a certain area, region, or state. For example, the Security Council authorized military intervention in response to Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait and levied sanctions in 2006 against Iran for refusing to stop its uranium enrichment process in its quest for nuclear weapons. The Security Council also provides a space for multilateral discussions about transnational threats to international security, such as terrorism, poverty, migration, refugees, and the trafficking of goods and people.

To take action on these issues, the Security Council considers whether to adopt **resolutions**, formal expressions of the opinion or will of UN organs. A resolution must receive nine out of 15 votes to pass. Yet the five permanent members have **veto power**, the ability to unilaterally block any resolution. The veto power is only available to the five permanent members. That is, even if all ten non-permanent members and four out of five permanent members vote in favor of a resolution, the one remaining member of the P5 can use its veto to prevent that resolution from passing.

The Soviet Union/Russia and the U.S. have been the most frequent users of the veto, defeating many resolutions. Out of 327 vetoes cast in the Security Council between 1946 and 2026, 161 were cast by the USSR/Russia and 95 by the U.S. The admission of new UN member states is the issue that most often triggers the use of the veto (United Nations Security Council, n.d.). When China wants to signal its disagreement with a resolution that does not affect it directly, it often abstains from voting, an option available to all members of the Security Council.

In addition to the General Assembly and the Security Council, the UN Secretariat is an organ that acts as the executive branch, running the UN and its programs on a daily basis. A Secretary-General, elected by the General Assembly upon the recommendation of the Security Council, heads the Secretariat. The Secretary-General engages in leadership, diplomacy, and public outreach to promote the UN; to draw international attention to urgent issues; and to raise money for UN activities. The Secretariat, including the Secretary-General, cannot take action on its own. It can only appeal to member states to "do something"—a clear reminder that the UN is an IGO and not a world government.

The UN contains three other principal organs. First, the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) is a primary driver of global governance policy dealing with economic and social issues, such as raising the standard of living for people around the world through economic expansion and improved access to resources common throughout wealthier states, such as electricity, sanitation, education, and health care. In recent years, ECOSOC has focused on how to incorporate care for the environment in the drive for economic prosperity, a concept known as sustainable development (for more discussion of sustainable development, see Chapter 13).

Second, the **International Court of Justice (ICJ)**, also called the World Court, is the UN's principal judicial body that settles legal disputes between states. Any UN member state can bring a case to the ICJ, and the most common types of cases involve boundary and resource disputes. Since its founding, the ICJ has issued approximately 160 rulings, including both resolutions to interstate disputes and advisory opinions. For example, in 2001, the ICJ resolved a long-standing territorial dispute between Qatar and Bahrain over small islands in the Persian Gulf. Both states accepted and complied with the court's decision, demonstrating that international organizations can be effective in peaceful resolution of a long-standing conflict (International Court of Justice, 2001). In total, however, only approximately one-third of UN member states have agreed to treat ICJ rulings as binding (for additional discussion of the ICJ, see Chapter 10).

Third, the UN technically has the **Trusteeship Council** (per the UN Charter), but this organ is inactive. At the time of the UN's founding, much of the world was under European colonial control. The Trusteeship Council allowed the UN to administer the former colonial territories of the defeated powers in World War II: Germany, Italy, and Japan. All trust territories subsequently attained independence, and the Trusteeship Council suspended operations after the final trust territory, Palau, gained independence in 1994.

IGO Effectiveness and Constraints

What constrains the effectiveness of the UN and other IGOs? In IGOs, sovereign states represent their own interests, bringing their own cultures and ideas to discussions of global governance, and IGOs are limited in their ability to intervene in the domestic affairs of member states. Although the purpose of IGOs is to help states work cooperatively, and though they strive to help states coordinate activities in pursuit of collective goods, in most circumstances, states place their own desires and interests above those of the broader international community. For example, ideally, all states would work together to promote collective security by punishing aggressor states; in practice, states often cannot agree on what constitutes aggression or are unwilling to hold their allies accountable. Similarly, global poverty might be more easily eliminated if all states worked together and pooled resources, but most states are anxious to keep the gains of prosperity to themselves and dedicate only a small percentage of their wealth to help others. The limitations inherent in intergovernmental cooperation have led to the development of supranational institutions with deeper integration and stronger centralized authority.

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9.3: Supranational Organizations

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While the UN is a global IGO open to all states, as mentioned in the previous section, regional IGOs also exist, such as the African Union, with 55 member states representing all states on the African continent; the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, with 11 member states; and the Organization of American States (OAS), with 34 member states from the Western Hemisphere. Other regional IGOs include the Arab League, the Economic Community of West African States, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, among many others.

Over time, regional IGOs may broaden their scope, increasing the level of cooperation between member states. **Functionalism** is the idea that cooperation on small, specific policy areas such as coordinating postal services or air traffic control can create mutual trust and evolve into cooperation on larger, more complex issues. In rare cases, such an increase in scope may lead to the creation of a **supranational organization**, an international organization in which member states give up some of their decision-making power to a higher authority that can make binding rules for them.

European Union

The **European Union (EU)** is a supranational organization. The EU began as a small-scale economic organization, but through a gradual process, its mission expanded to promote peace and solidarity among European states.

In 1951, to support economic recovery from the devastation of World War II, six states— Belgium, France, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and West Germany—decided to integrate their coal and steel industries, areas central to economic recovery. The states created a regional IGO called the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) to institutionalize their cooperation. The goal of the ECSC was to eliminate trade barriers and to consolidate the production of coal and steel. Its executive branch, the High Authority, had the power to bypass state governments to deal directly with companies and labor unions in all six member states. It could also issue binding decisions over member states on coal and steel issues.

As the theory of functionalism prescribes, the ECSC's success led to the expansion of cooperation into the creation of a common market, the European Economic Community (EEC), in 1957. The EEC allowed for free movement of people, capital, and services among member states. Over time, additional states joined the EEC (which, along with the ECSC, became part of the "European Communities" in 1967). These enlargements occurred with the addition of the UK, Ireland, and Denmark in 1973; Greece in 1981; and Spain and Portugal in 1986. In 1992, the Maastricht Treaty (also called the Treaty on European Union) created an Economic and Monetary Union, setting the stage for the introduction of a common currency (the Euro) regulated by the European Central Bank in 1999. The Maastricht Treaty also officially created the EU, fostering political integration with the creation of EU citizenship and an EU passport in 1993, and leading to subsequent enlargements, with 27 EU member states in 2026.

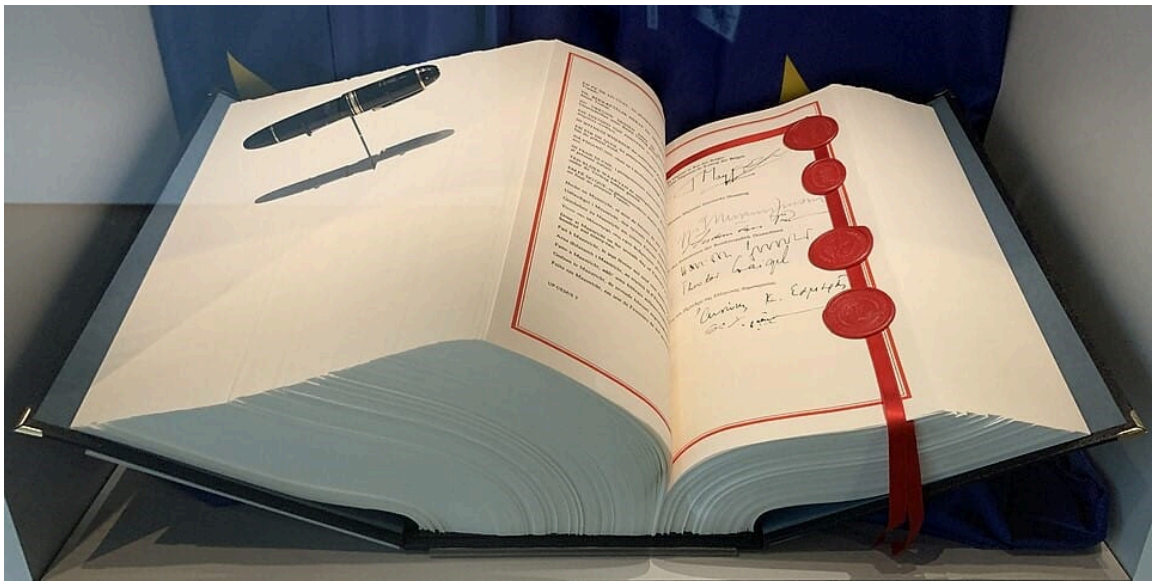


Image 9.3.1: The Treaty of Maastricht, officially creating the EU, opened here to show signatures and seals representing Belgium, Denmark, Germany and Greece. *(Source: "GER — BY — Regensburg - Donaumarkt 1 (Museum der Bayerischen Geschichte; Vertrag von Maastricht) (cropped)" by User:Mateus2019 is licensed under CC BY 2.0.)*

While the ECSC's High Authority illustrates the early stages of a supranational organization, to have supranational powers means that an organization must be able to govern its members with a degree of independence from its member states. For this reason, the EU is unique as a supranational organization. Unlike the UN and other IGOs, the EU exercises a degree of sovereignty over its members via lawmaking powers that its members agreed to relocate to the supranational level.

Five main bureaucratic and political organs oversee and help guide EU activities and policies: the European Council, the European Parliament, the European Commission, the Council of the EU, and the Court of Justice of the EU.

Leaders of European states sit on the European Council, which meets several times per year and helps to determine the broad priorities of the EU. Working with the European Council to set priorities is the European Parliament, a 720-member body (as of 2026) that European citizens directly elect for five-year terms. Members of the European Parliament represent EU citizens, playing both a policymaking and budget-oversight role.

The European Commission acts as the EU's executive body, promoting EU interests as a whole. It includes a 27-member College of Commissioners, with a president elected by the European Parliament for a five-year term. The Commission implements EU legislation, represents the EU internationally, and allocates funding for EU projects. Member states nominate commissioners, who are then approved by the European Parliament and serve as the bureaucratic heads of various policy agencies within the EU.

The Council of the EU works similar to the UN in the sense that each member state represents its own interests to the whole. The Council of the EU is a policymaking body that, along with the European Parliament, discusses and passes laws for the EU. Its members are empowered to commit their home states to any decisions the Council makes.

Finally, the Court of Justice of the EU settles disputes arising under EU laws. The Court of Justice can interpret, find states in violation of, and sanction those who disobey EU laws.

Challenges

Any supranational organization, even while moving some decision-making power to a higher authority, inherently includes sovereign states. This presents coordination challenges. In the EU, when 27 states, each with its own goals and ambitions, attempt to coordinate a unified response to common issues, tensions and conflicts are inevitable. For example, during the 2015-2016 refugee crisis, EU member states disagreed sharply over how to distribute asylum seekers across states. The European Commission proposed mandatory quotas to relocate refugees from heavily affected states, such as Greece and Italy, but several states resisted accepting migrants, citing domestic political concerns and national sovereignty. Addressing the needs and desires of every EU member state and trying to reach agreement on a common policy is difficult, especially when the organization's

mission incorporates so many different policy areas. The economies, politics, and cultures of the EU states differ, and these variations complicate efforts to create a "European identity" beyond the identity of the member states (Institute for the World Economy, n.d.).

The EU's unification of so many traditional state functions under a supranational umbrella, including economic and foreign policies, has led to some backlash. Economic pressures on national governments can lessen the perceived benefit of being a part of the EU. Domestic constituents of wealthier states, who believe they are losing their sovereign identity and subsidizing poorer and weaker states, may become convinced that EU membership is no longer in their state's best interest. There is a rising tide of discontent with the growing power of the EU and a desire in some political circles to weaken, or even dissolve, the organization so that more of the power returns to states. The "Brexit" debate, when the British public voted in a 2016 referendum to leave the EU, raised many of these issues, directly challenging the idea of supranationalism. Although only the UK has entirely withdrawn from EU membership, political parties in many member states include anti–EU ("Euroskeptic") sentiments in their platforms.



Image 9.3.2: The far right French political party Action Française references Brexit in its call for France to withdraw from the European Union, 2018. *(Source: "Affiche pour le Frexit" by Guy Courtois is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0.)*

Despite these challenges, states continue to desire admission to the EU. States that apply for admission must meet certain entrance criteria through the EU accession process, including utilizing a functioning market economy, having stable democratic institutions, and adopting national legislation that aligns with EU law. This process can take years, but as of 2026, there are nine official candidate states for EU membership (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Turkey, and Ukraine).

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9.4: International Nongovernmental Organizations

Note

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- *Abidin, S.Z. (2016). "International organizations." In S. McGlinchey (Ed.), International Relations (pp. 71-77) [CC BY-NC 4.0]. E-International Relations.*
- *Rom, M.C., Hidaka, M., & R.B. Walker. (2022). "International Law and International Organizations." In Introduction to Political Science (Chapter 15). OpenStax [CC BY 4.0].*

International nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) are nongovernmental organizations that either work at the international level or have international members. INGOs are a mixed bag, best described as those organizations that are not intergovernmental, business entities, or terrorist organizations (Davies, 2014). INGOs engage in transnational relations, meaning cross-border interactions, that may happen with minimal or no government involvement. In some cases, INGOs collaborate with governments or push governments to sign international treaties but often the goals of INGOs and particular governments do not align, and their relationships become conflictual. For example, the well-known INGO Greenpeace has repeatedly clashed with the government in Brazil over the issue of deforestation in the Amazon. Greenpeace has staged protests, published reports, and filed legal challenges against government policies that allow logging and agricultural expansion, arguing that these policies threaten biodiversity and contribute to climate change, while the Brazilian government has defended logging as necessary for economic development.



Image 9.4.1: Greenpeace protest calling for an end to deforestation in Brazil, 2007. *(Source: "Greenpeace protest in Brasilia" by Agência Brasil is licensed under CC BY 3.0.)*

There is no exact figure for the number of INGOs that are currently active. The UN lists over 4,000 INGOs with consultative status. According to the Union of International Associations (n.d.), the number of INGOs is over 8,500, but depending on how they are counted, that number may be in the tens of thousands. In terms of global governance, INGOs are a part of the global **civil society**, that is, the arena in which groups come together to engage in collective action in the service of shared interests, values, and goals outside government or profit-based motivations.

In most cases, INGOs address a transnational concern—like the environment, humanitarian issues, health care, economic development, or conflict cessation—that is important to all and necessitates cooperation across borders. Within these broad areas, the majority of INGOs focus on specific issues, such as saving endangered species, conducting anti-malaria programs in tropical zones, or providing small loans to local farmers. Much of the work of INGOs happens in the poorest and most conflict-

torn areas of the world. In developing states, INGOs often help fulfill needs that the government cannot, like providing access to adequate health care, nutrition, education, sanitation, or potable water. They also play an active role in the aftermath of natural disasters like hurricanes or floods and provide relief in emergency situations such as refugee or famine crises.

INGOs are often the result of a moral crusade of one or a small group of concerned citizens. For example, Henry Dunant founded the Red Cross in the mid-1800s to aid soldiers injured in war. Some INGOs have thousands of members, while others have only a few hundred, and their budgets and scope of impact similarly vary. The Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee, for instance, has close to 100,000 people on staff, making it the largest INGO in the world. Not all INGOs need large staffs to be impactful. For example, only three people started Global Witness, yet its work successfully publicized corruption in extraction industries, such as the timber industry in Cambodia and the diamond industry in Angola.

Some INGOs organize spectacular and headline-grabbing protests. Images of Greenpeace protestors chaining themselves to ships, or of anti-globalization protestors blocking streets, are usually well covered in the media. These are organizations whose mission is to raise awareness among the general public on issues of concern. No less effective, however, are those that carry out their missions away from the limelight. Mercy Corps, for example, helps disaster survivors in states around the globe, Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders) is often the first highly skilled responder to arrive in a crisis, and Oxfam is at the forefront of various poverty eradication programs around the world. Former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan termed groups like these the “unsung heroes” of the international community.



Image 9.4.2: Doctors Without Borders clinic outpost at a Darfur refugee camp in Chad, 2005. *(Source: “MSF front door in Chad” by Mark Knobil from Pittsburgh, usa is licensed under CC BY 2.0.)*

In this capacity, INGOs often help IGOs and state-based development agencies. They engage in information sharing and advocacy efforts, assist in emergencies, and play a key role in helping to monitor compliance with international treaties. For example, Malala Fund promotes girls’ secondary education in rural areas of low-income states, such as Nigeria and Pakistan, through advocacy and grant-making. Malala Fund advocates by pushing governments to invest in girls’ education and by funding local activists working on the issue. Another example, Doctors Without Borders, provides emergency medical care in conflict and disaster zones, working directly with IGOs and states to coordinate humanitarian relief and uphold international humanitarian law. Together, the two examples illustrate the complementary ways INGOs reinforce global governance through both advocacy and operational engagement.

Due to the nature of their work on the front lines in states around the world, INGOs often have more current information about what is happening in another state than a government or an IGO. For example, the INGO Amnesty International (2018) relied on the work of local researchers and its regional staff in Bangladesh to collect testimonies from Rohingya refugees fleeing Myanmar, documenting evidence of ethnic cleansing. This work became part of the investigation by the International Criminal Court, an IGO created in 2002 to prosecute individuals for international crimes of genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes (for additional discussion of the ICC, see Chapter 10). The cooperation between the INGO Amnesty International and the IGO International Criminal Court resulted in the issuance of an arrest warrant for Myanmar’s Senior General Min Aung Hlaing. INGOs can therefore serve as informal monitors of state behavior. By providing evidence and testimonies, INGOs can draw international

attention to situations such as human rights abuses or worsening humanitarian or environmental conditions. Such pressure may cause governments to change their policies or provide critical aid to under-resourced regions (Stroup, 2019).

Despite these important functions of INGOs, some criticize them for being too narrowly focused on specific issues rather than working on larger systemic problems. Some contend that INGOs should better coordinate with other actors rather than working in isolation and that reliance on Western donors leads INGOs to focus on projects that are more easily "sold" instead of those that are arguably more critical. INGOs may not be interested in or able to solve the root cause of a particular problem, and hence the solutions they provide may be temporary. Observers also scrutinize INGOs, like many nonprofit organizations, for how much of their budgets go toward fundraising, advertising, and overhead, rather than directly helping their stated cause.

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9.5: IR in the Real World

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) offers an example of a state with weak domestic institutions and limited governing capacity. The DRC has faced a long history of political and economic challenges. Belgian colonial rule, which lasted until 1960, focused on extracting the state's rich natural resources, such as rubber, copper, and cobalt, while neglecting the development of local political institutions and infrastructure. After independence, successive governments were characterized by corruption and weak state capacity, and armed conflicts over control of mineral wealth became frequent. These historical and political forces produced a state that struggles to provide basic services and maintain security across most of its territory.



Image 9.5.1: Illustrating weak state capacity, Indonesian UN troops build a road between Faradje and Dungu, September 23, 2010. *(Source: "Congo 10" by david_axe is licensed under CC BY-NC 2.0.)*

To fill the governance vacuum, a wide range of IGOs and INGOs have stepped in to provide humanitarian assistance, health care, and peacekeeping, effectively substituting for the state in many regions.

This has been especially true in the period since the First Congo War (1996-1997) and the Second Congo War (1998-2003). Although a peace agreement was signed in 2002, the violence persisted, particularly in the Ituri and Kivu provinces. In 2022, the conflict was estimated to have claimed the lives of approximately six million people and displaced more than five million people, resulting in poverty and hunger (Parens, 2022). As of 2025, approximately 120 militia groups, of which M23 is the most prominent, continue to fight over mineral resources and territory, committing mass killings, perpetrating sexual violence, and forcing the recruitment of child soldiers. The violence and instability in the DRC have repeatedly drawn in neighboring states, such as Burundi, Rwanda, and Uganda. Although the conflict often stays out of the headlines, many IOs are active in the DRC, providing peacekeeping, humanitarian relief, justice, and reconstruction efforts.

As one example, since 1999, the UN has maintained peacekeeping operations in the DRC (for additional discussion of peacekeeping, see Chapter 11). In 2010, the UN peacekeeping mission was restructured as the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the DRC (MONUSCO), becoming the UN's largest, most expensive, and most complex peacekeeping operation. MONUSCO was authorized to "use all necessary means" to protect civilians, support the Congolese government, stabilize conflict-affected areas, and assist in the disarmament and reintegration of armed groups. By 2023, MONUSCO operated with an annual budget of approximately $1 billion and included roughly 16,000 military and 13,000 civilian personnel (United Nations Peacekeeping, n.d.).



Image 9.5.2: In the Ituri province of the DRC, thousands of displaced civilians seek refuge near the UN MONUSCO base. *(Source: "Protection des civils: en Ituri, des milliers de déplacés trouvent refuge aux abords de la base de la MONUSCO" by MONUSCO/Didier Vignon Dossou-Gbakon is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0.)*

However, the presence of IOs, particularly peacekeepers, can create tensions over sovereignty. Under UN rules, peacekeepers may be deployed only with the host state's consent. In 2023, amid growing anti-UN sentiment and criticism that MONUSCO had failed to protect civilians, the DRC's President Félix Tshisekedi requested the mission's withdrawal (United Nations, 2023). The following year, the UN Security Council voted to end MONUSCO (Better World Campaign, 2025). The Southern African Development Community (SADC) then created its own peacekeeping mission to take over MONUSCO's role: the SADC Mission in the DRC (or SAMIDRC). SAMIDRC included troops from Malawi, South Africa, and Tanzania. Preliminary reports suggested that the local population viewed SAMIDRC more favorably, believing that the regional peacekeepers would have a better understanding of the context and stronger incentives to stabilize the area (Trithart, 2024). However, one year after its deployment, SADC announced the withdrawal of SAMIDRC, citing casualties among its troops, public opposition, and financial challenges.

Beyond peacekeeping, UN agencies provide essential humanitarian assistance in the DRC. The UN International Children's Emergency Fund and UN High Commissioner for Refugees support 7.8 million internally displaced persons, children, and women. They provide emergency kits, emergency shelter, legal services, vaccination, transportation, water trucking, treatment for malnutrition, and temporary school facilities (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2025). The World Food Programme delivers rations to 28 million people living with food insecurity. Due to ongoing clashes between armed groups, IOs play a critical role in sustaining civilian survival and resilience (World Food Programme, n.d.).



Image 9.5.3: Stacks of flour at a World Food Programme warehouse in Goma, North Kivu province, 2016. *(Source: "USAID helps feed 1.6M vulnerable people in the DRC" by USAID Democratic Republic of Congo is licensed under CC BY-NC 2.0.)*

In addition to the ongoing hostilities, the DRC faces severe food insecurity and frequent disease outbreaks, including cholera, polio, measles, yellow fever, Ebola, and the bubonic plague (Forum des ONGI de RDC, 2021). A number of INGOs, such as Doctors Without Borders and the Red Cross, provide emergency medical care, while Oxfam, the International Rescue Committee, and Save the Children support displaced populations, offering food security, water, sanitation, and child protection throughout the state.

Yet, just as in the case with peacekeepers, the presence of INGOs can create tensions. In 2019, for example, Doctors Without Borders shut down its Ebola treatment clinics in some parts of the DRC after violent attacks on its clinics (Médecins Sans Frontières, 2019). The attacks were fueled by tensions with local communities and distrust towards Doctors Without Borders' response to the Ebola outbreak, again illustrating how IOs can clash with local communities and pose challenges to state sovereignty.



Image 9.5.4: Families entering the Ebola Treatment Center managed by the NGO ALIMA (The Alliance for International Medical Action) in partnership with local doctors, Beni, DRC, 2019. *(Source: "DRC: A Trip to the Front Lines of the Fight Against Ebola" by World Bank Photo Collection is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.)*

The ongoing crisis in the DRC illustrates the complex interplay between weak state capacity and work of IOs. While multiple IOs stepped in to respond to the various crises, persistent violence, weak domestic institutions, and tensions over sovereignty constrained their work. The experience of the DRC underscores an important lesson: IOs can support and complement domestic efforts, but their work often involves navigating difficult political and social dynamics.

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9.6: Conclusion

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This chapter demonstrates the important role played by IOs in global politics. The proliferation of IOs, particularly in the 20th century when the concept of global governance came of age, means that nearly every aspect of life is regulated in some way at the global level.

While realists view IOs with skepticism, reminding us that IOs have little independent power because powerful states shape them to serve their interests, liberals and constructivists view IOs with more optimism. Liberals see IOs as capable of reducing conflict by improving communication, building trust, creating processes for peaceful conflict resolution, reducing transaction costs to facilitate economic cooperation, and promoting interdependence. Constructivists view IOs as transformative, having the ability to change state behavior by spreading new norms and shaping new identities.

This chapter shows that each theoretical perspective has some merit. IOs, in their vast array of forms, complement and sometimes positively challenge the role of the state. Despite their growing importance, the authority of IOs is still constrained by the interests of member states. This tension defines much of international politics today, where IOs push to promote global norms and solve transnational problems, while states continue to protect their sovereignty. Understanding this dynamic is key to understanding the present day structure of the international system. Going back to the airport example used in the opening of this chapter, we may not always be aware of how IOs affect even the most mundane things in our lives, but our lives would be materially different without them.

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9.7: Student Resources

Summary

Even without a central authority, states cooperate daily by creating and following rules and institutions. International organizations (IOs) are one mechanism for cooperation, though they vary in scope and purpose. Some operate regionally, while others have a global reach. Some organizations focus on specific issues, such as Doctors Without Borders, while others address a broad range of issues, such as the United Nations (UN). We can categorize most IOs in three groups: international governmental organizations (IGOs), supranational organizations, and international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs). IGOs, like the UN, are composed of states, organized by treaties, and limited by the sovereignty of their members, with power resting with the states rather than the organization itself. Supranational organizations, such as the European Union, possess independent governing power and some degree of sovereignty over member states. INGOs are nongovernmental entities that operate transnationally, engaging in collective action to address issues like human rights and humanitarian aid, and serving as an important component of global civil society.

Key Terms

- **Civil society** is the arena in which groups come together to engage in collective action in the service of shared interests, values, and goals outside government or profit-based motivations.
- **Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)** is a UN organ that acts as a primary driver of global governance policy dealing with economic and social issues.
- **European Union (EU)** is a supranational organization comprising 27 member states.
- **Functionalism** is the idea that cooperation on small, specific policy areas such as coordinating postal services or air traffic control can create mutual trust and evolve into cooperation on larger, more complex issues.
- **International Court of Justice (ICJ)**, sometimes referred to as the World Court and headquartered in The Hague, is the official court of the United Nations that hears disputes between states.
- **International governmental organization (IGO)**, also referred to as an intergovernmental organization, is an organization with membership that includes only states.
- **International organization (IO)** is a group whose members include governments, institutions, or individuals from different states.
- **International nongovernmental organization (INGO)** is a nongovernmental organization that either works at the international level or has international members.
- **Resolutions**, within the UN Security Council, are formal expressions of the opinion or will of UN organs that must receive nine out of 15 votes to pass (and must not be vetoed by any permanent member).
- **Supranational organization** is an international organization in which member states give up some of their decision-making power to a higher authority that can make binding rules for them.
- **United Nations (UN)** is an IGO with almost universal state membership, established in 1945 after the end of World War II.
- **UN General Assembly** is the main policymaking organ of the UN, in which all member-states enjoy an equal vote. is the main policymaking organ of the UN, in which all member-states enjoy an equal vote.
- **UN Security Council** is the most powerful organ within the UN, consisting of 15 members, with five permanent members (“the P5”) who hold veto power and ten rotating members.
- **UN Secretariat** is an organ that acts as the executive branch, running the UN and its programs on a daily basis, and headed by the Secretary-General.
- **UN Secretary-General**, elected by the General Assembly upon the recommendation of the Security Council, heads the Secretariat.
- **Veto power**, in the UN Security Council, is the ability for any permanent member (China, France, Russia, United Kingdom, United States) to unilaterally block any resolution.

Critical Thinking Questions

1. Do you think that international organizations have independent power, or are they simply tools of powerful states?
2. To what extent should the United States play a leading role in international organizations, and what might be the positive and negative implications of allowing rising powers to play a larger role?

3. Should international organizations have the authority to intervene in domestic affairs of states for humanitarian reasons, even if it violates state sovereignty?

Suggestions for Further Study

Web Resources

- UN System
- World Association for Non-Governmental Organizations
- The Malala Fund
- International Court of Justice's List of All Cases

Books

- Sisk, T. D. (2024). *Sports in International Politics: Between Power and Peacebuilding*. Rowman and Littlefield.
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10: INTERNATIONAL LAW AND NORMS

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10.1: Introduction

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to:

- Distinguish between international law and domestic law.
- Describe the sources of international law.
- Analyze examples of international law.
- Evaluate international courts, including the International Court of Justice (ICJ).
- Define norms and describe the norm life cycle using empirical examples.

In 1926, a French ship, the SS Lotus, collided with a Turkish vessel, the Boz Kourt, sinking the vessel and causing eight crewman deaths. When the French ship arrived in Constantinople (modern day Istanbul), a French officer (in addition to the Turkish captain) was arrested, prosecuted, and sentenced in Turkish courts for his role in the collision. Following a disagreement regarding jurisdiction—that is, the question of which state can prosecute which nationals in a collision that occurs at sea—the French and Turkish governments agreed to take the issue to the Permanent Court of International Justice (PCIJ), the "World Court" that had been created within the League of Nations. As Pazartis (2013, p. 323) summarizes, "France contended that the Turkish courts, in order to have jurisdiction, should be able to point to some specific entitlement to jurisdiction recognized by international law in favor of Turkey. Turkey, on the other hand, claimed that it had jurisdiction unless it was forbidden by international law."



Image 10.1.1: The composition of the Permanent Court of International Justice (PCIJ) as photographed in the 1920s when the Lotus Case was decided. *(Source: "Hof van Internationale Justitie" is in the public domain.)*

The PCIJ ultimately ruled in favor of Turkey, but the most infamous portion of the ruling dealt with broader questions of international law. The ruling states:

> International law governs relations between independent States. The rules of law binding upon States therefore emanate from their own free will as expressed in conventions or by usages generally accepted as expressing principles of law and established in order to regulate the relations between these co-existing independent communities or with a view to the achievement of common aims. Restrictions upon the independence of States cannot therefore be presumed. (Permanent Court of International Justice, 1927, p. 18)

The final sentence has been referred to as the "Lotus principle" and has been interpreted (though highly-debated) as "an essentially internal view of sovereignty, holding that a sovereign is presumptively free of any constraint" (Guilfoyle, 2017, p. 99).

This interpretation is not quite right, as the ruling continues:

> Now the first and foremost restriction imposed by international law upon a State is that—failing the existence of a permissive rule to the contrary—it may not exercise its power in any form on the territory of another State. (Permanent Court of International Justice, 1927, p. 18)

While the exact interpretation of the Lotus ruling varies, the pieces referenced above remind us of concepts introduced and used throughout this textbook. These concepts play a key role in understanding international law and norms, the focus of this chapter, so they are worth brief review.

States are the principal actors in international law. As sovereign entities, states hold the ultimate authority over what occurs inside their borders. Though states exist in a world characterized by anarchy, with no world government above them, shared principles still hold, such as the principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of other states.

As Guilfoyle (2017, p. 107) relates, "the general view of the Lotus case is that it represents the last gasp of an 'old' vision of international law based on the mere coexistence of sovereigns relatively unencumbered by legal relations in their dealings with each other, a view barely [relevant] in the 1920s and completely unsustainable now." This chapter will investigate whether and why such a view is unsustainable by defining international law, examining various sources of international law, delineating the process of international norm-creation, and discussing the conditions under which states comply with international laws and norms.

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10.2: What is International Law?

Note

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The "old vision of international law" of independent, sovereign states acting with few constraints makes us wonder: Is international law actually law? How can international laws be effective if their validity depends on the will of states (the very actors they should govern)?

After World War II, this doubt in the validity and effectiveness of international law led two scholars, Edward Hallett Carr and Hans Morgenthau, to suggest that international law was particularly inept for understanding state behavior. They were disappointed by what they identified as an idealistic belief in international law which, after all, had not prevented—for the second time—a world war. In response, they proposed a more "realistic" assessment of international relations based on power and interest (for a review of realism, see Chapter 3).

Yet much has changed since then. There are countless bilateral and multilateral contracts between states (called treaties or conventions in international law). There are thousands of intergovernmental entities that engage in the regulation and administration of nearly all aspects of international life. And there are international legal norms that pervade global affairs. As only a partial list, international law permeates areas such as border control, diplomatic and consular relations, the determination of flight and navigation routes, internet regulation, privacy, the use of postal and telecommunication services, industrial standards, cross-border environmental hazards, the protection of human rights, and the fight against transnational terrorism.

International law, then, is "a set of rules and principles governing the relations and conduct of sovereign states with each other, as well as with international organizations and individuals" (Wex).[1]

This set of rules and principles that together forms international law, however, is not a monolith. Scholars characterize international law along a continuum ranging from "hard" to "soft" depending on the law's level of obligation, precision, and degree of delegation. **Hard law** refers to legally binding obligations that are precise and that delegate authority for interpreting, implementing, and resolving disputes about the law. Due to high levels of obligation, hard law can restrict an international actor's behavior. Though restrictive in some ways, hard law can also provide benefits to international actors who want to cooperate, such as reducing transaction costs and enhancing credible commitments. **Soft law** refers to legal arrangements that do not have binding obligations; are not precise; and do not delegate authority for interpreting, implementing, and resolving disputes about the law. Though sometimes criticized as mere window-dressing or as a stepping stone toward hard law, soft law has some advantages. Soft law may be easier for international actors to agree to than hard law, as it may infringe less on state sovereignty, and soft law allows actors to learn and adjust over time, facilitating ongoing compromise (Abbott & Snidal, 2000, pp. 421-423).



Image 10.2.1: The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), whose global members are pictured here meeting in 2023, publish and promote the "soft" but widely influential "Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises on Responsible Business Conduct." *(Source: "Responsible Business Conduct (RBC) Ministerial meeting Family photo" by OECD is licensed under CC BY-NC 3.0.)*

In addition to the distinction between hard and soft law, within international law, we draw a distinction between the "laws of peace" and the "laws of war." The **laws of peace** regulate peaceful relations and include such subject matters as international treaty law, the law of diplomatic and consular relations, international organization law, the law of the sea, international environmental law, and international economic law. The **laws of war**, also known as international humanitarian law, regulate conduct during times of armed conflict, including (but not limited to) the methods and means of war; the protection of certain categories of persons (e.g., the sick and wounded, prisoners of war, civilians); the prohibition of the use of certain types of weapons (e.g., chemical or biological weapons); and the protection of cultural property. We will examine specific examples of the laws of peace and the laws of war in the following section.

[1]This definition and chapter focuses on *public* international law, which addresses relations involving states, intergovernmental organizations, and non-state actors (e.g., individuals, non-governmental organizations, and private corporations). It is worth noting that there is also *private* international law, which addresses conflicts of laws that may arise in cases where the domestic laws of different states could apply (e.g., in cases of cross-border e-commerce or marriages).

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10.3: Sources of International Law

Note

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Traditionally, states were the subjects of international law, enjoying privileges such as sovereign status and membership in international organizations, and having obligations toward other states, such as through the principle of non-interference.

It is a contentious issue in international law, however, whether a territorial entity gains the legal status of a sovereign state depending only on a number of factual criteria, such as the existence of a population, a territory, an effective government, and the capacity to enter into international relations ("internal sovereignty"), or whether the legal status also requires a formal recognition by other states ("external sovereignty").

In practice, it is not always easy to determine whether all conditions are met. In addition, for political reasons states have sometimes recognized other states that did not fulfill one or more criteria of statehood, or they have not recognized states despite them fulfilling all criteria. For example, Kosovo declared its independence from Serbia in 2008, but Serbia—in addition to states such as China, Russia, and Spain, which all worry about internal movements for regional independence—has not formally recognized Kosovo as an independent sovereign state. As shown in the map below, nearly 60 percent of UN member-states (110) recognized Kosovo as of April 2025, though some states that initially recognized Kosovo's independence later withdrew their recognition (Kosovo and Serbia disagree on how many states have withdrawn recognition, leaving the exact number subject to ongoing debate).

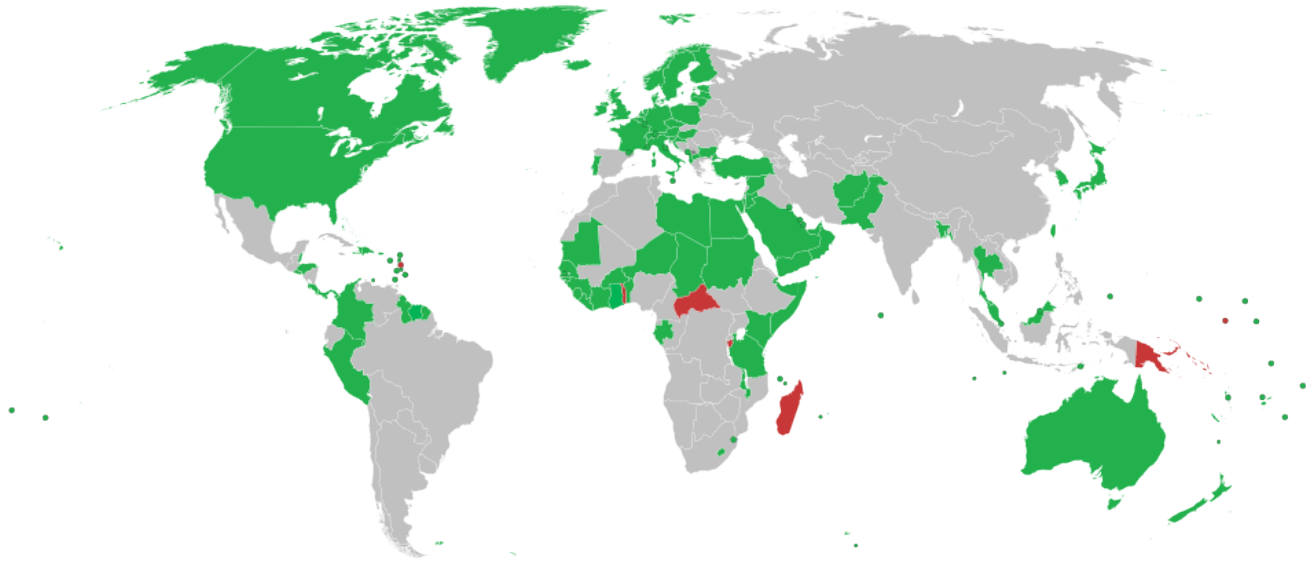


Image 10.3.1: Map of states that have recognized Kosovo's independence as of 16 April 2025. *(Source: "Countries Recognizing Kosovo" by Alethiareg is marked with Public Domain Mark 1.0.)*

Image Legend:

- Dark grey: Kosovo
- Green: States that have recognized Kosovo as independent
- Light grey: States that have not recognized Kosovo as independent
- Red: States that have recognized Kosovo and were later reported to have withdrawn recognition

Palestine is another example. While Palestine is a non-member observer state in the United Nations (UN), Algeria was the first member state to recognize it as sovereign in November 1988. By the end of that year, 78 member states had recognized Palestine, a number that grew over the ensuing decades to 157 at the end of 2025. At the UN General Assembly in September 2025, Andorra, Australia, Belgium, Canada, France, Luxembourg, Malta, Portugal, San Marino, and the United Kingdom became the newest states to recognize Palestinian sovereignty. Yet this recognition is contentious; states including Germany, Japan, and the United States continue to not recognize Palestine as sovereign.

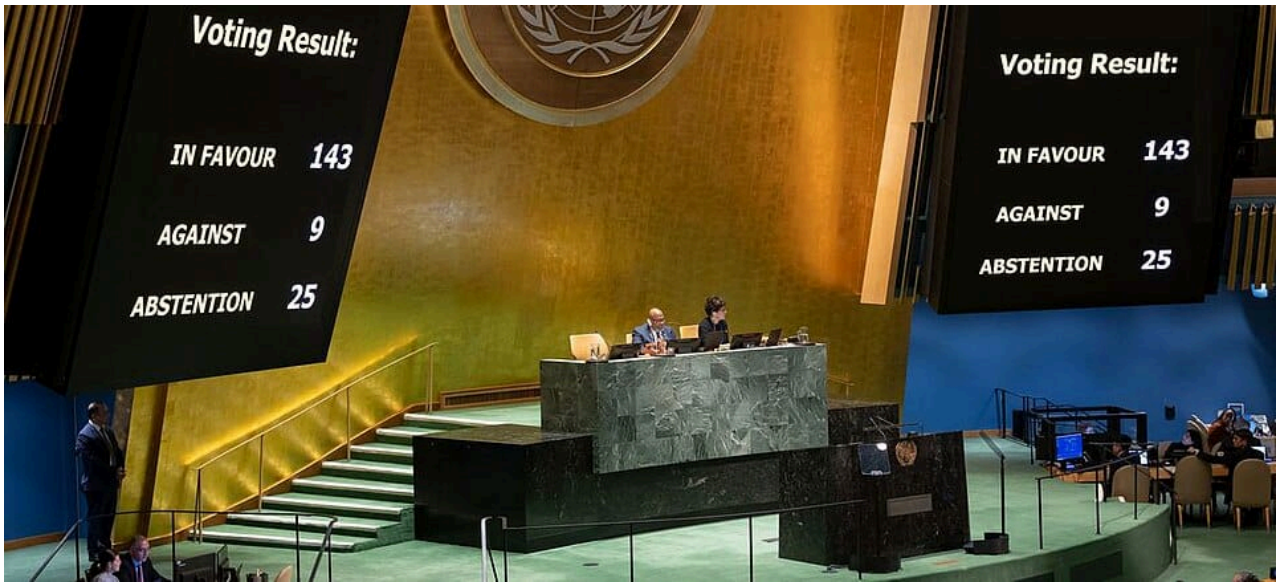


Image 10.3.2: In May 2024, the UN General Assembly voted overwhelmingly to adopt a resolution upgrading Palestine's rights at the United Nations as an observer State (including seating, speaking, and proposing agenda items), and urging the Security Council to consider its full membership. *(Source: "10th Emergency Special Session (ESS)" by Falasteen Now is marked with CC0 1.0.)*

Noting this contentious framework of statehood, Article 38 of the Statute of the International Court of Justice recognizes four primary sources of international law: treaties; customary international law; general principles of law that are shared by most states' domestic legal systems, such as behaving in "good faith"; and judicial decisions and scholarly writings, such as those coming from international courts to help interpret existing international law. Below, we will more closely examine treaties and customary international law, illustrating them with examples from the laws of peace and the laws of war.

Treaties

The most concrete sources of international law are **treaties**, also referred to as international conventions, which are binding agreements between states that govern the rights and obligations of those participating (Wex). The "binding" portion of the definition means that, once a treaty enters into force, all states that have ratified the treaty are legally bound by its provisions. Treaties can be bilateral (between two parties) or multilateral (between more than two parties). The use of treaties was codified through the 1969 Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties (also referred to as "the treaty on treaties"), which describes the rules for the conclusion and entry into force of treaties; the observance, application, and interpretation of treaties; the amendment and modification of treaties; and the rules for invalidating, terminating, or suspending treaties.

As an example adapted from Bloor (2022), the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) is an international environmental treaty—an illustration of the laws of peace—dating back to the 1992 Rio de Janeiro Summit. The UNFCCC's aim is to stabilize greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere and enable sustainable development, and it is the parent treaty of the 1997 Kyoto Protocol and the 2015 Paris Agreement.

The first stage of the Kyoto Protocol established legally binding obligations (a feature of hard law) for developed states to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by an average of five percent in comparison to 1990 levels over a five-year period (2008-2012). The second stage was negotiated via the Doha Amendment, which included a second commitment period (2013-2020). However, implementation of the second stage was limited and attention shifted to the Paris Agreement, which was agreed to at the end of 2015.

Like the Kyoto Protocol, the Paris Agreement is a legally binding international treaty. It works on a five-year cycle of increasingly ambitious climate action with states submitting national climate action plans to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions (UN Climate Change, The Paris Agreement).

As a multilateral treaty related to the laws of peace, the UNFCCC enjoys a broad sense of legitimacy (though enforcement is difficult), and membership is near unanimous (198 parties). Similarly, there are numerous multilateral treaties related to the laws of war that maintain widespread legitimacy (though not always widespread compliance), such as treaties related to specific types of weapons. The Biological Weapons Convention (1972) has 185 states parties and four signatory states, for instance, and effectively prohibits the development, production, acquisition, transfer, stockpiling, and use of biological and toxin weapons (United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs). As another example, the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Treaty (1997), often referred to as the Ottawa Convention and aiming to eliminate anti-personnel landmines, has 164 states parties (United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs, Anti-Personnel Landmines Convention).



Image 10.3.3: American activist Jody Williams received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1997 for her work towards the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Treaty; she is seen here in 2019 calling for a preemptive ban on lethal autonomous weapons systems (LAWS). *(Source: "Photo Credits Ganesh Vernekar TedX (47888848161) CCBYSA" by Ganesh Vernekar is licensed under CC BY 4.0.)*

Customary International Law

Another important, though less concrete and therefore more contentious, source of international law is customs. **Customary international law** refers to law that arises from patterns of behavior in states (Wex). To return to a portion of the ruling quoted in the introduction from the Lotus case: "The rules of law binding upon States therefore emanate from their own free will as expressed...by usages generally accepted as expressing principles of law" (Permanent Court of International Justice, 1927, p. 18). The "generally accepted" usage refers to customs. These international obligations arise from established international practices rather than from formal written treaties (Council on Foreign Relations).

Unlike treaties, which are often prepared during long negotiations at diplomatic state conferences where a final treaty text is adopted and then opened for signature and ratification by states, customary international law develops slowly over time. It may subsequently be codified through a formal agreement, but the process to get to that point differs from the development of treaties.

The law of diplomatic immunity, which generally exempts diplomats from the laws of a foreign state, is an instance of customary international law. In ancient times, we find examples of the inviolability of envoys and the origins of diplomatic immunity; between approximately the 16th and 18th centuries, we see the establishment of embassies and the principle of treating ambassadors as quasi extra territorium (as if outside the territory), meaning not subject to the laws of the host state; in the 19th century, we see an explosion of international envoys and some reactionary restrictions on diplomatic privileges; and, finally, in the 20th century, we see diplomatic immunity codified in international law through the 1961 Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations (Frey & Frey, 2016). Prior to codification, the principle of diplomatic immunity developed slowly over time.



Image 10.3.4: Special passports and vehicle plates are among the methods allowing diplomats abroad to identify their diplomatic status, affording immunity from certain laws of their host state. *(Source: "Diplomatic License" by Randy Levine is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.)*

If a customary law exists, its binding nature depends on the implied consent of states (as illustrated by their own practices). While there can be universally binding customs, states can also act as "persistent objectors," meaning they can make their opposition to an emerging practice widely known before the practice solidifies as custom for others. A persistent objector can then be ruled exempt from the binding custom. As one example, in the case United Kingdom v. Norway at the International Court of Justice, "the court ruled that because the government of Norway had consistently opposed [a] territorial fishing zone regime, Norway was a persistent objector and therefore not bound by such customs" (Fon & Parisi, 2009, 284-285).

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10.4: International Norms

Note

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- *Marchetti, R. (2016). "Global Civil Society." In S. McGlinchey (Ed.), International Relations (pp. 78-85) [CC BY-NC 4.0]. E-International Relations.*
- *Traisbach, K. (2016). "International Law." In S. McGlinchey (Ed.), International Relations (pp. 57-70) [CC BY-NC 4.0]. E-International Relations.*

Norms are standards of behavior for actors with a given identity (for a review of constructivism, see Chapter 5). These shared expectations about proper behavior can take many forms. At an individual level, and depending on cultural customs, a norm may be for an individual to hold a door open for others, or a norm may be to shake hands, hug, kiss, or bow when greeting someone. At the state level, norms within democratic systems may include the exercise of free and fair elections and the peaceful transfer of power. At the international level, a norm may exist regarding the "nuclear taboo," the widely-held inhibition against the use of nuclear weapons (Tannenwald, 1999, p. 435).

There are countless actors that engage in the making, interpretation, use, and enforcement of international norms. While states are the principal makers and targets of international norms, intergovernmental organizations, courts, non-governmental organizations, and even individuals can also create, interpret, and disseminate international norms.

These non-state actors sometimes do this without, or even against, the will of states. For example, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) led an armed intervention, Operation Allied Force, against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) between March and June, 1999. The justification for this bombing campaign was to stop human rights abuses in Kosovo, a region within the FRY that had been embroiled in a separatist armed conflict led by the Kosovo Liberation Army since February 1998. Yet this intervention against a sovereign state (the FRY) occurred without the authorization of the UN Security Council. And, in response, a draft resolution sponsored by Belarus, India, and Russia stated (in part) that "...such unilateral use of force constitutes a flagrant violation of the United Nations Charter" (United Nations Security Council, 1999). Though the resolution failed, it illustrates how the intervention occurred against the will of some states.

This example—combined with other humanitarian disasters in the 1990s, such as those in Rwanda and Bosnia—led then UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan to ask: "If humanitarian intervention is, indeed, an unacceptable assault on sovereignty, how should we respond...to gross and systematic violation[s] of human rights...?" (United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect).



Image 10.4.1: Kofi Annan pictured in 2005, during the years when he championed the development of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) principle. *(Source: "File:Msc 2005-Saturdayevening-005 Moerk.jpg" by Kai Mörk is licensed under CC BY 3.0.)*

The Responsibility to Protect (R2P) emerged as an answer to Annan's question. R2P is a principle arguing that if a state fails to protect its people, that responsibility shifts to the broader international community (for more on R2P, see Chapter 11). Since the creation of R2P, the UN Security Council and the UN General Assembly have repeatedly referred to it, and it has been used as an argumentative tool by many non-governmental organizations. R2P has now become an international norm.

Norm Life Cycle

The R2P example suggests a reactionary nature to norm-creation, but more generally, what is the process by which norms emerge?

As briefly discussed in Chapter 5, the emergence of a norm starts long before a norm is codified in international law. Political scientists and legal scholars describe a transnational social process called a **norm life cycle**. As Finnemore and Sikkink (1998, p. 895) describe, this cycle has three stages: norm emergence, norm cascade, and norm internalization.

In the first stage of norm emergence, norm entrepreneurs aim to persuade states to embrace new norms. These norm entrepreneurs may be private individuals, lobbying groups, or non-governmental organizations, and they actively work within their organizational platforms to promote what they see as desirable behavior by calling attention to issues, providing cognitive frames, employing expertise, appealing to empathy, and shaming (among other tactics). If norm entrepreneurs are successful, the norm will reach a tipping point—the point at which a critical mass of states (a large enough number) or a mass of critical states (those without which the achievement of the norm goal would be exceedingly difficult) adopt the norm (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998, p. 901).

In the second stage of a norm cascade, the norm spreads through international society, even in places without domestic pressure to conform. This is an active process of transnational socialization led primarily by states, international organizations, and networks of norm entrepreneurs. Those state and non-state actors that endorsed the norm during the norm emergence stage engage in a process of attempting to socialize other states to also become norm followers. When a cascade occurs, it is likely due to "a combination of pressure for conformity, desire to enhance international legitimation, and the desire of state leaders to enhance their self-esteem" (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998, p. 895).

In the third stage of norm internalization, norms "achieve a 'taken-for-granted' quality that makes conformance with the norm almost automatic" (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998, p. 904). If this process succeeds, norms become truly transnational, exerting force domestically through constitutional guarantees and the work of civil society groups and exerting force internationally through regional and international courts or human rights bodies. Thus, these norms acquire a transnational character through interactions between state and non-state actors, across issues areas, across public and private spaces, and across domestic and international audiences (Koh, 1997, p. 2612).

Transnational Advocacy Networks

As explained in the previous section, the second stage of the norm life cycle includes "networks of norm entrepreneurs" who work toward a norm cascade. But who makes up these networks? And what exactly do they do?

The success of the norm life cycle requires the mobilization of actors and resources across states. Playing a crucial role in this process, a **transnational advocacy network (TAN)** is a group of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), civil society organizations (e.g., social movements, labor unions, community groups), and individuals, located in several states, that focus on a specific global issue and coordinate in pursuit of a normative goal. In some instances, TANs are "motivated by broader notions of right and wrong rather than their own material interest" (Busby, 2007, p. 248). In the 1990s, for example, a transnational campaign called Jubilee 2000 worked to induce creditor governments and the International Monetary Fund to take steps toward debt relief for highly indebted poor states. This effort was primarily framed in religious terms, induced some states to act contrary to their narrow material interests, and ultimately "moved [international] donors to more than double the amount of debt relief on offer" (Busby, 2007, p. 249). As this example illustrates, a key feature of transnational activism is its attempt to influence the normative battle on the right and legitimate interpretation of global issues.

In that sense, TANs are not only problem solvers (providing solutions that governments are less suited to delivering), but also problem generators (placing new problematic issues on the international agenda). For transnational mobilization, TANs create

frames through which the global public will perceive the issue at stake as problematic and urgent, yet also soluble. As Keck & Sikkink (1999, p. 89) describe, "what is novel in these networks is the ability of non-traditional international actors to mobilize information strategically to help create new issues and categories, and to persuade, pressurize, and gain leverage over much more powerful organizations and governments."

We can see an example of this in the campaign to generate an international norm banning anti-personnel landmines, which involved NGOs from over 60 countries in the 1990s, and culminated in the signing of the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Treaty in 1997. This transnational network, called the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, mobilized information strategically, highlighting the staggering number of mines worldwide, publicizing graphic images of amputees, and circulating horrific statistics such as "one in every 236 Cambodians is an amputee, compared with one in every 22,000 Americans" (Price, 1998: p. 620). By disseminating information about the scope of the problem, the TAN helped to label the issue a crisis and to put it on the international agenda.



Image 10.4.2: The "Broken Chair" sculpture was installed outside the UN offices in Geneva in 1997 as a symbol for armed violence victims. Intended to remain just until passage of the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Treaty that year, the monument remains in place today keeping attention focused on the continued need for states to remain in the treaty. *(Source: "Broken Chair: Palace of Nations, United Nations Office, Geneva, Switzerland 2015" by Ank.Kumar is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.)*

Although TAN success necessarily depends on international circumstances, national conditions also play an important role. In national contexts, civil society organizations are rooted in a web of social relations and common identities. They have access to important resources, such as people and money, but operate in highly formalized political systems that shape and constrain their mobilization and impact. For instance, while democratic states tend to leave space for activism, authoritarian states offer less room to maneuver. In these settings, TANs may perform a facilitating role, providing space for actors who are usually voiceless and excluded. And, if all links between state and domestic actors are severed, TANs may facilitate a **boomerang pattern**, one in which domestic NGOs directly seek international allies to try to bring pressure on their states from outside (Keck & Sikkink, 1999, p. 93).

As an example of the boomerang pattern, we can look to the 2010-11 "Save Sakineh" campaign, which aimed to put pressure on Iran for its use of stoning as capital punishment. This campaign stemmed from an Iranian court's decision to sentence Sakineh Mohammadi Ashtiani to death by stoning after finding her guilty of adultery in 2006. The following year, Sakineh's son connected with an Iranian defense attorney and an Iranian human rights activist living abroad who, together, used their connections in the transnational human rights network to garner global attention to Sakineh's case. Armed with a "media-savvy outreach strategy complete with a compelling narrative of horrific abuse, photos of the victim, and an emotional plea from Sakineh's children," Sakineh's name was ultimately printed in over 300 newspapers, protests on her behalf took place in over 100 cities, a petition for her release collected thousands of signatures, and officials in at least 40 countries publicly condemned the sentence (Terman, 2019, pp. 13-17). Though the "Save Sakineh" campaign fizzled in 2011, it illustrates how TANs attempt to use a boomerang pattern to exert pressure on states to reform domestically.[2]



Image 10.4.3: Members of the European Parliament in 2010 wear t-shirts as part of the global protests against the sentence on Iranian Sakineh Mohammadi-Ashtiani. *(Source: "MEPs condemn stoning sentence on Iranian Sakineh Mohammadi-Ashtiani" by European Parliament is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.)*

[2]Sakineh was eventually released in 2014.

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10.5: Compliance

Whether an international treaty, customary international law, or an internalized norm, states and non-state actors still exist in an anarchical international system—a system that cannot force them to comply with international law.

And we see examples of non-compliance frequently. As only three recent examples, the United States' with drawal from the Paris Climate Agreement in 2020 showed non-compliance with soft law, going against the norm of cooperation on global climate issues; the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 violated state sovereignty, illustrating non-compliance with hard law; and, in 2024, Ecuadorian forces entered the Mexican Embassy in Quito to arrest a former vice president sentenced for corruption offenses, an act running contrary to the customary international law that diplomatic premises are inviolable sovereign territory.



Image 10.5.1: Dramatic footage from a news video shows Ecuadorian National police scaling the walls of the Mexican embassy in Quito. *(Source: "Policía encima del portón de la embajada" by cambio21 tv's YouTube channel and cambio21 tv's website: is licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0.)*

What factors affect the probability of a state choosing to comply with international law and norms?

Self-Interest

Perhaps most obviously, states will comply with international law and norms when those laws and norms are in the state's self-interest. If the law or norm does not intrude on state sovereignty or if the law or norm will provide benefits to a state (e.g., increasing resources, promoting cooperation with other states), it is in the state's interest to comply. A state may choose to participate in an international organization like the World Trade Organization, for example, because it believes that doing so will provide broader access to global markets and reduce the risk of retaliatory trade wars with other states.

States may also be more likely to comply with international law and norms when they see other states doing so. States may feel the need to keep up with their peers, avoid reputational costs by not adhering to a common norm, or face pressure to comply in order to join international organizations. In the early 1980s, for example, the Council of Europe—an international organization that aims to uphold human rights, democracy, and the rule of law in Europe—began gradually persuading governments to help Europe become the first region in the world to permanently outlaw the death penalty. Its 46 member states now represent a death penalty free zone.

States may also view compliance with an international law or norm in their self-interest when they believe that there is broad agreement that the law or norm is "good" or "the right thing to do." The 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, for instance, is the most widely ratified human rights treaty (though notably not ratified by the United States).

Outside Enforcement Mechanisms

Beyond self-interests, the existence of enforcement mechanisms may affect the probability of a state choosing to comply with international law and norms. States may face monitoring by non-governmental organizations or international institutions, which have the ability to "name and shame" them when they do not comply (see Chapter 11 for additional discussion of monitoring).

States may also face **sanctions**, coercive measures taken by one or more states, or an international organization, to protest another state's actions and to try to force a change in that state's behavior. Such sanctions may be economic, political, diplomatic, or cultural. As one example of economic sanctions, the UN and several individual states have imposed sanctions on the Democratic People's Republic of North Korea (DPRK) in response to its nuclear weapons program. The hope is that these sanctions, such as restrictions on trade and finance, will encourage DPRK compliance with the nuclear non-proliferation norm. As an example of cultural sanctions, we can consider the sporting boycotts taken against South Africa during apartheid, the governmental system that sanctioned racial segregation and discrimination against nonwhites for most of the second half of the 20th century. The exclusion of South Africa from the Olympic Games from 1964 to 1988 was an example (among numerous others) of cultural sanctions aiming to illustrate broad disapproval with the apartheid system.

States may also be taken to court if they violate international law. The **International Court of Justice (ICJ)**, sometimes referred to as the World Court and headquartered in The Hague, the Netherlands is the official court of the UN. ICJ judges, elected by the UN Security Council and the UN General Assembly, are responsible for resolving legal disputes between UN member states on issues related to property rights, force, and diplomatic relations, among other issues. While the ICJ has shown some successes, such as helping to resolve a border dispute between Cameroon and Nigeria over a peninsula called Bakassi, it has limited scope (i.e., states can choose to bring issues for adjudication) and it cannot always enforce its rulings. In 2003, for instance, the ICJ ruled that Israel violated international law by constructing a wall alongside the occupied West Bank, yet the Israeli government ignored the court's ruling and completed the wall (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.).



Image 10.5.2: A portion of the Israeli West Bank barrier wall in 2009. *(Source: "File:Israel - Jerusalem - Mount Zion - 03 (4261536735).jpg" by Kyle Taylor from London, 84 Countries is licensed under CC BY 2.0.)*

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10.6: IR in the Real World

While many international laws and norms relate to conflict, the advancement of technology—whether in terms of weapons, defense systems, surveillance, deepfakes as propaganda tools, or a multitude of other areas—makes keeping up difficult. Rapid advancements in cyber-warfare and artificial intelligence (AI), in particular, are areas in which international norms may necessarily emerge prior to international law.

As Finnemore (2017) explains, a distinctive feature of these advancements "is the diversity of actors and stakeholders involved. This is not simply an issue to be solved by governments. In contrast to the case of nuclear weapons, the production and use of cyber technology is neither owned or monopolized by governments." How can international laws or norms address these advances in technology?

Cyber-warfare introduces numerous concerns in international relations, such as how to counter attacks or punish often-anonymous aggressors. Cyber-attacks may wreak havoc on physical infrastructure within a state, such as by sabotaging electricity grids, infiltrating banking systems, or damaging nuclear facilities. In 2013, the UN Group of Governmental Experts on Developments (GGE) affirmed that international law—including the UN Charter and principles such as sovereignty and non-interference in domestic affairs—applies to cyberspace. Subsequent GGE reports outlined voluntary, non-binding norms, principles, and rules; the 2021 report, for example, includes Norm 13(f) that "states should not conduct or knowingly support [information and communications technology] activity…that intentionally damages critical infrastructure or otherwise impairs the use and operation of critical infrastructure to provide services to the public" (UN General Assembly, 2021). While these norms are not legally binding, they aim to shape state cybersecurity policies and behavior.



Image 10.6.1: In an example of continuing international cooperation on cyber norms, Jamila Ade, head of Nigeria's Cyber Crime Unit at the Federal Ministry of Justice, presents to more than 70 cybersecurity professionals attending the Program on Cyber Security Studies in Garmisch Partenkirchen, Germany, May 6, 2025. *(Source: "Cyber Experts Explore Voluntary Norms in Cyberspace at PCSS Panel (9045288)" by U.S. Department of Defense is in the Public Domain.)*

In addition to cyber-warfare, AI is an area rife with ethical concerns. As one example, some authoritarian states weaponize AI to target and repress opponents, from using "facial-recognition technologies that cross-check real-time images against massive databases to algorithms that crawl social media for signs of opposition activity" (Feldstein, 2019, p. 41). While this example illustrates only a small subset of AI-related concerns, there have been some international attempts to create norms surrounding AI usage. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), for example, created the OECD AI Principles (last updated in 2024), the first intergovernmental standard on AI that claims to respect human rights and democratic values. As the OECD (n.d.) describes, "by adhering to these principles, policymakers can guide the development and deployment of AI to maximize its benefits and minimize its risks." While not international law, the development of these principles illustrates an attempt at forming international norms surrounding AI usage.

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10.7: Conclusion

Note

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Although questions about the relevance and effectiveness of international law persist—especially when powerful states use their power to bend, obstruct, or break international law—today hardly anyone declares international law as irrelevant. Accordingly, the discussion has shifted from "Is international law actually law?" to "When, why, and how do international norms matter?"

This shift has led to an understanding of international law as a social process that results in normative regulations that function as standards of conduct to guide and evaluate the behavior of international actors. And this regulatory capacity extends beyond states. The individual has acquired a prominent role in international law as a central subject, with individuals enjoying rights that are embedded—albeit imperfectly—in international law. This law is not static, but in a constant process of development.

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10.8: Student Resources

Summary

International law is “a set of rules and principles governing the relations and conduct of sovereign states with each other, as well as with international organizations and individuals” (Wex). Hard law refers to legally binding obligations that are precise and that delegate authority for interpreting, implementing, and resolving disputes about the law; soft law refers to legal arrangements that do not have binding obligations; are not precise; and do not delegate authority for interpreting, implementing, and resolving disputes about the law.

Article 38 of the Statute of the International Court of Justice recognizes four primary sources of international law: treaties (binding agreements, also referred to as international conventions), customary international law (law that arises from patterns in behavior in states), general principles of law that are shared by most states’ domestic legal systems (e.g., behaving in “good faith”), and judicial decisions/scholarly writings.

Norms are standards of behavior for actors with a given identity. In international relations, the emergence of a norm starts long before a norm is codified in international law, following a transnational social process called a norm life cycle. This cycle has three stages: norm emergence, norm cascade, and norm internalization. The success of the norm life cycle requires the mobilization of actors and resources across states. Playing a crucial role in this process, a transnational advocacy network (TAN) is a group of nongovernmental organizations, civil society organizations (e.g., social movements, labor unions, community groups), and individuals, located in several states, that focus on a specific global issue and coordinate in pursuit of a normative goal.

Key Terms

- **Boomerang pattern** is a strategy facilitated by transnational activist networks in which domestic non-governmental organizations directly seek international allies to try to bring pressure on their states from outside. This typically occurs when governments, often within authoritarian regimes, are unwilling to directly engage with domestic activists.
- **Customary international law** refers to law that arises from patterns of behavior in states (Wex).
- **Hard law** refers to legally binding obligations that are precise and that delegate authority for interpreting, implementing, and resolving disputes about the law.
- **International Court of Justice (ICJ)**, sometimes referred to as the World Court and headquartered in The Hague, is the official court of the United Nations that hears disputes between states.
- **International law** is “a set of rules and principles governing the relations and conduct of sovereign states with each other, as well as with international organizations and individuals” (Wex).
- **Laws of peace** regulate peaceful relations and include such subject matters as international treaty law, the law of diplomatic and consular relations, international organization law, the law of the sea, international environmental law, and international economic law.
- **Laws of war**, also known as international humanitarian law, regulate conduct during times of armed conflict, including (but not limited to) the methods and means of war; the protection of certain categories of persons; the prohibition of the use of certain types of weapons; and the protection of cultural property.
- **Norms** are standards of behavior for actors with a given identity.
- **Norm life cycle** is a framework used to understand how norms can evolve from ideas to widely-accepted standards of behavior. The framework consists of three stages: norm emergence, norm cascade, and norm internationalization.
- **Sanctions** are coercive measures taken by one or more states, or an international organization, to protest another state’s actions and to try to force a change in that state’s behavior.
- **Soft law** refers to legal arrangements that do not have binding obligations; are not precise; and do not delegate authority for interpreting, implementing, and resolving disputes about the law.
- **Transnational advocacy network (TAN)** is a group of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), civil society organizations, and individuals, located in several states, that focus on a specific global issue and coordinate in pursuit of a normative goal.
- **Treaties** are binding agreements between states that govern the rights and obligations of those participating.

Critical Thinking Questions

1. Why might a state prefer to rely on soft law instead of hard law? Are there circumstances under which soft law might be just as effective as hard law in shaping state behavior?
2. How do we know a norm when we see one? What criteria can we use to identify when norm internalization occurs?
3. Under conditions of international anarchy, why do states ever comply with international law?

Suggestions for Further Study

Documents

United Nations Charter

Websites

International Court of Justice

Journal Articles

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11: HUMAN RIGHTS

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11.3: Protecting Human Rights Legally

11.4: Protecting Human Rights on the Ground

11.5: Accountability and Justice

11.6: Ongoing Challenges

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11.1: Introduction

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to:

- Define human rights.
- Identify where and how international law and institutions address human rights.
- Explain the roles that intergovernmental organizations and nongovernmental organizations perform in monitoring, reporting, and adjudicating human rights abuses.
- Distinguish between types of abuses of human rights, such as crimes against humanity, genocide, and ethnic cleansing.
- Describe the Responsibility to Protect (R2P).
- Analyze how the protection of human rights conflicts with the norms of sovereignty and non-intervention.

Note

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- *Bellamy, A.J. (2016). "Protecting People." In S. McGlinchey (Ed.), International Relations (pp. 123-134) [CC BY-NC 4.0]. E-International Relations.*
- *Michel, K. (2018). "Week 11: Human Rights." In Introduction to International Relations. Canvas Commons [CC BY-NC 4.0].*
- *Morton, J. and S. Maesel. "Empowering International Human Security Regimes." In A. Lautensach and S. Lautensach (Eds.), Human Security in World Affairs - Problems and Opportunities 2e [CC BY-NC 4.0]. LibreTexts.*

Established in 1945, the Charter of the United Nations (UN) set out to "save succeeding generations from the scourge of war" and "uphold faith in fundamental human rights." Signed three years later, in 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) called for states to work together to ensure that all enjoy "freedom from fear" and "freedom from want."

And yet, more than 75 years after the UDHR's signing, continued violations of human rights frequently occur. Finding ways to protect people from harm is therefore a major contemporary debate. Too often the international community does too little, too late to protect people from atrocities, civil wars, and other human-made ills. In the 20th century, wars between states killed tens of millions of people, while governments killed an even higher number of their own citizens. Facts like these pose a major challenge for the way we think about international relations.

The contemporary international system organizes itself as a society of states that enjoy exclusive jurisdiction over particular pieces of territory. That is, these states have sovereignty, the principle under which each state is fundamentally equal in legal terms and free to act independently without the consent of any higher authority. These sovereign states enjoy the right of non-intervention, enshrined in Article 2(4) of the UN Charter, which prohibits "the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state."

This system assumes that states exist primarily to protect the security of their citizens; the security of the state is therefore worth protecting through the principle of non-intervention because states provide security to individuals. But, as countless examples show, not every state protects the well-being of its population.



Image 11.1.1: Destruction in Bab Dreeb area in Homs, Syria in 2012. *(Source: "Destruction in Homs (4)" by Bo yaser is licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0.)*

From recent examples like Syria, to numerous examples from the past century, threats to individual security tend to come more from a person's own state than from other states. Instances like these raise questions about whether there are circumstances in which the international community should privilege the security of individuals over the security of states.

What are human rights?

While the foundation of the international system and modern international law is the sovereign state, human rights became a subject of international regulatory efforts after World War II. This shift transformed the individual from the mere object of international law to one of its *subjects*.

As the UN defines, "**human rights** are rights inherent to all human beings, regardless of race, sex, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, or any other status. Human rights include the right to life and liberty, freedom from slavery and torture, freedom of opinion and expression, the right to work and education, and many more. Everyone is entitled to these rights, without discrimination."

The UDHR expands this definition, recognizing equal and inalienable rights as the foundations for freedom, justice, and peace. The UDHR's 30 articles—including (as select examples) the right to equal protection of the law (Article 7); the right to seek asylum (Article 14); the right to a nationality (Article 15); the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion (Article 18); and the right to rest and leisure (Article 24)—provided a strong basis for the drafting of numerous human rights treaties.



Image 11.1.2: Eleanor Roosevelt, first chair of the UN Commission on Human Rights, was instrumental in drafting the UDHR. It was signed in 1948. *(Source: "Eleanor Roosevelt UDHR" by FDR Presidential Library & Museum is licensed under CC BY 2.0.)*

Some of these key human rights documents include the Convention on the Prevention and the Punishment of Genocide (1948); the Convention to End Racial Discrimination (1965); the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966); the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (1966); the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979); the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (1984); the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989); and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2007).[1]

Table 11.1 lists select provisions illustrating the different focuses of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). Often referred to as "the International Covenants," when taken together with the UDHR, these three documents form the **International Bill of Human Rights**.

Table 11.1. Select Rights Covered by the ICCPR and ICESCR (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights)

ICCPR	ICESCR
Right to life	Right to work
Freedom from torture and slavery	Right to just and favorable conditions at work
Right to liberty and security of person	Right to form trade unions
Right to be treated with humanity in detention	Right to strike
Freedom of movement, religion and belief, expression, and association	Right to social security
Right to fair trial	Freedom of children from social and economic exploitation
Right to peaceful assembly	Right to an adequate standard of living
Right to equality before the law	Freedom from hunger
Minority rights	Right to health

The protection of human rights requires more than the drafting of treaties to meaningfully impact international relations. In a perfect world, states would internalize protections for human rights and police themselves to ensure their respect. In a world of sovereign, independent states, however, the international community must collectively ensure that states act in accordance with prevailing human rights documents.

How successful is the international community in this endeavor? The following sections will examine theoretical perspectives, legal principles, implementation methods, accountability mechanisms, and ongoing challenges in the protection of human rights.

[1]The years in parentheses reflect the years in which the documents were signed.

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11.2: Protecting Human Rights in Theory

Note

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The theoretical debate about protecting human rights hinges on a question: Should a state's right to non-intervention be conditional on its fulfillment of certain responsibilities to its citizens, including protection from mass violence?

We can plot various responses to this question along two axes, as in the image below. The first axis relates to our conception of whether moral progress is possible in international relations, and runs from a more pessimistic to a more optimistic view (as shown on the x-axis). The second axis relates to which actors we believe we should privilege in international relations: states or individuals (as shown on the y-axis).

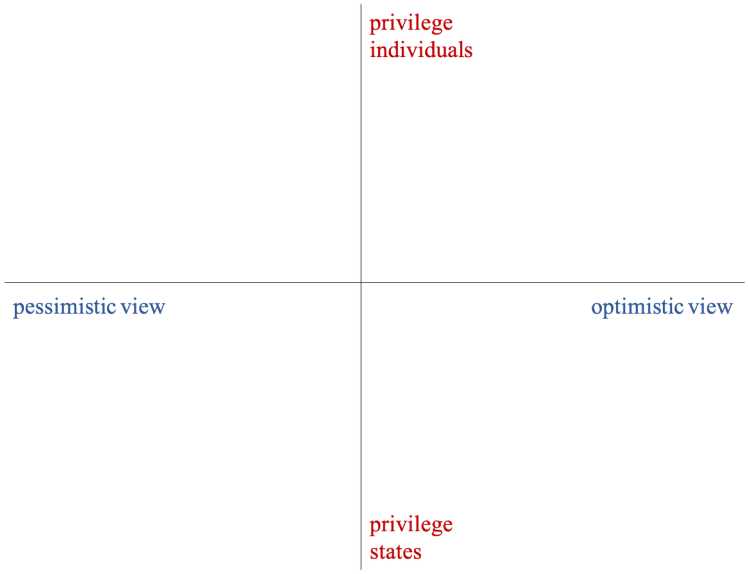


Image 11.2.1: Graph depicting possible positions in the debate surrounding the protection of human rights. *(Source: created by the author)*

In Image 11.2.1, the x-axis refers to the way we understand the potential for and limits of world politics. Some theoretical approaches share an optimistic vision that dialogue between communities makes moral consensus and shared purposes possible (Linklater, 1998). Others have a fatalistic or "tragic" conception of world politics based on the view that the world is composed of culturally distinct units with different values that pursue their own goals with limited possibilities for cooperation (Lebow, 2003). This approach is skeptical of progress, doubts that morality plays a role in world affairs, and predicts that efforts to spread moral values will prove costly and counterproductive.

The y-axis in Image 11.2.1 relates to what sort of actor a given theoretical approach privileges: states or individuals. It is common for theories of international relations to privilege the state on the grounds that it is the principal actor in world affairs, the main source of order, and the bearer of international rights and responsibilities (e.g., as in realism). An alternative perspective privileges the individual as the only irreducible actor. Individuals cannot be means to an end; they must be seen as ends in themselves. From the combination of these two axes, we derive four theoretical approaches.

Protection Occurs within a Rule-Governed International System

The first theoretical approach, falling in the lower right quadrant of Image 11.2.1 (optimistic and state-centered), accepts that progress in international affairs is possible, but argues that the basis for progress should be voluntary cooperation between states within a rule-governed international system. Perspectives housed in this quadrant hold that the common good is best served by privileging the rules of coexistence found in the UN Charter. This focuses especially on the legal ban on the use of force, and ensuring that the two exceptions to that ban (Articles 42 and 51) are not abused. According to this view, giving states a free hand to protect human rights in other states would create disorder by allowing wars that impose one state's values on others. Disorder would weaken the international system, undermine human development, and make cooperation between states more difficult. This view coincides with the commonly held legal view that there is a general prohibition on interference except when authorized by the UN Security Council (UNSC).

Protection Occurs based on Strong States' Interests

The second theoretical approach, falling in the lower left quadrant of Image 11.2.1 (pessimistic and state-centered), is a perspective that espouses a communitarian view about the diversity of communities and the relativity of values, but rejects even basic claims about the capacity of states to agree to meaningful rules of coexistence, let alone substantive rules. This account suggests that norms and rules are irrelevant as causes of behavior when set against material factors such as economic gain, territory, and the national interest. To paraphrase a prominent realist, Edward Hallett Carr, international interference for "protection" would in fact be nothing other than the interests and preferences of the powerful masquerading as universal morality (for a review of realism, see Chapter 3). This account counsels against humanitarian activism because it doubts the capacity of states to be altruistic and thus sees all state actions as exercises in the self-interested use of power.

Protection Occurs to Defend Common Values

The third theoretical approach, falling in the upper right quadrant of Image 11.2.1 (optimistic and individual-centered), is the perspective most positively disposed to advancing the protection of human rights. It is usually associated with liberalism and a broader cosmopolitan view that all humans belong to a single world community (for a review of liberalism, see Chapter 4). It holds that states have positive duties to protect foreigners from tyranny as well as a right to do so since human rights are universal rights that ought to be defended everywhere. According to theorists in this tradition, states have agreed to certain minimum standards of behavior. As such, action across borders to support the protection of human rights is not about imposing the will of a few powerful states, but about protecting and enforcing basic values and/or the collective will of the international community.

Protection Occurs in a Selective, Partial, and Sometimes Harmful Manner

The fourth theoretical approach, falling in the upper left quadrant of Image 11.2.1 (pessimistic and individual-centered), is a perspective that tends to privilege traditional forms of humanitarian assistance, such as sending aid. This perspective exhibits deep skepticism about military intervention on the grounds that it tends to make situations worse and reinforces the militaristic ideals that are among the chief underlying causes of humanitarian crises in the first place. This approach emphasizes that interventions are selective, partial, and never solely humanitarian.

Image 11.2.2 summarizes the four theoretical positions.

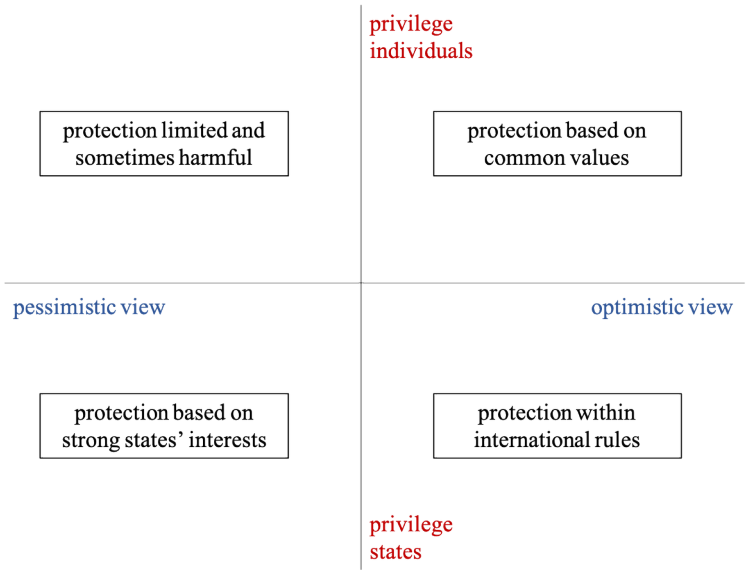


Image 11.2.2: Graph summarizing the four theoretical approaches to the protection of human rights. *(Source: created by the author)*

In the following two sections, we ask: Which of these theoretical approaches most closely reflects the international community's protection of human rights in practice?

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11.3: Protecting Human Rights Legally

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In practice, a number of interconnected efforts from the international community weave together to advance the protection of human rights. The successes, and sometimes failures, of these efforts illustrate how no one theoretical approach from the previous section perfectly encapsulates all work in this area. In this section and the following, we identify select rules, practices, norms, and institutions that aim to protect human rights.

International Humanitarian Law

After World War II, international humanitarian law developed, resulting in a series of international treaties. As a reminder from Chapter 10, a treaty is a binding agreement between states that governs the rights and obligations of those participating.

In 1948, the newly established UN General Assembly approved the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (commonly referred to as the Genocide Convention), which prohibited the crime of genocide and assigned all states a legal duty to prevent it and punish the perpetrators. **Genocide**, according to Britannica, is "the deliberate and systematic destruction of a group because of [its] ethnicity, nationality, religion, or race." Article II of the Genocide Convention specifies that a group's destruction may come from numerous actions, such as killing members of the group; causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; and forcibly transferring children of the group to another group. As a result of the Genocide Convention, the International Court of Justice (ICJ), the judicial arm of the UN, judged that all states have a legal responsibility to do what they can, within existing law, to prevent genocide.

Four Geneva Conventions (1949), two additional protocols (1977), and a range of protocols covering the use of Certain Conventional Weapons further codified the laws of war. Of particular importance for human rights was Common Article 3 of the 1949 Geneva Conventions, which committed parties to respecting the human rights of all non-combatants, and the Convention on the Protection of Civilian Persons, which offered legal protection to non-combatants in occupied territories. The Geneva Protocols (1977) extended the legal protection afforded to non-combatants to situations of non-international armed conflict. They also insisted that armed attacks be strictly limited to military objectives and forbade attacks on non-combatants or their property. These principles provided the legal and moral foundation for subsequent campaigns for conventions banning weapons, such as landmines and cluster munitions, that were considered inherently indiscriminate.

The continued development of international humanitarian law supports the optimistic, state-centered theoretical approach of protection occurring within a rule-governed international system. The expansion of international humanitarian law created a normative standard of civilian protection that not only prohibits attacks on non-combatants and restricts the use of certain weapons, but also calls for the prevention of particular crimes, such as genocide, and the punishment of perpetrators.

Responsibility to Protect (R2P)

In late 2005, world leaders adopted the **Responsibility to Protect (R2P)** in paragraphs 138–139 of the UN World Summit Outcome Document. The UNSC and the UN General Assembly subsequently reaffirmed this commitment, and they also committed to ongoing consideration of its implementation.

R2P, an international norm, rests on three pillars. The first is the responsibility of each state to use appropriate and necessary means to protect its own populations from four crimes: genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity.

Ethnic cleansing, while not recognized as an independent crime under international law, is "...a purposeful policy designed by one ethnic or religious group to remove by violent and terror-inspiring means the civilian population of another ethnic or religious group from certain geographic areas" (United Nations Security Council, 1994). **Crimes against humanity** are acts committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population (Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 2023). These crimes may include acts like murder, extermination, enslavement, imprisonment, rape, and torture (among others).



Image 11.3.1: A mobile court hearing held in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and supported by MONUSCO as authorized by UNSC Resolution 2211, working for accountability in cases of murder and rape during conflict. *(Source: "PHOTO DU JOUR DU VENDREDI 17 SEPTEMBRE 2021" by MONUSCO Photos is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0.)*

The second pillar refers to the commitment of the international community to encourage and help states exercise this responsibility. The third pillar refers to the international responsibility to respond through the UN in a timely and decisive manner when national authorities are manifestly failing to protect their populations from the four crimes. Though this principle was initially controversial—supporting the potential use of force and other transgressions of sovereignty—international consensus on the principle widened and deepened over time.



Image 11.3.2: A platoon of Mongolian soldiers participate in multinational UN peacekeeping exercises designed to train UN partner states in preparation for real-world peacekeeping operations. *(Source: "Exercise Shanti Prayas- Camp Defense Training [Image 12 of 12]" by PO2 Justin Mohr, identified by DVIDS, is marked with CC0 1.0 and must comply with the restrictions shown*

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R2P is now part of the working language that frames international engagement with political crises. As of December 2023, R2P was invoked by the UNSC in more than 80 resolutions, by the Human Rights Council in more than 50 resolutions, and by the UN General Assembly in 13 resolutions (Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 2023). These resolutions reminded governments of their protection responsibilities (e.g., Resolution 2014 on Yemen), demanded active steps to protect civilians (e.g., Resolution 2139 on Syria), tasked peacekeepers with assisting governments to protect their own populations (e.g., Resolution 2085 on Mali), and demanded that perpetrators of mass violence be held legally accountable (e.g., Resolution 2211 on the Democratic Republic of the Congo). The UNSC also connected its work on R2P with several of its other efforts focused on conflict prevention, such as measures aimed to control small arms and light weapons, counter-terrorism, and policing.

International consensus on the principle of R2P lends support to the optimistic, individual-centered theoretical approach that protection occurs to defend common values. As will become clear in the following section, the implementation of these legal principles is not always smooth and requires coordination among numerous actors.

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11.4: Protecting Human Rights on the Ground

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The protection of human rights on the ground goes beyond legal principles—introducing significant questions about their viability in reality—and includes the work of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and intergovernmental organizations (IGOs). This section highlights select examples of this work to evaluate the status of human rights protections in practice.

Monitoring and Reporting

The explicit monitoring and reporting of human rights abuses by NGOs (e.g., Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International) and IGOs (e.g., the UN Human Rights Council) has made important contributions to the protection of human rights. Two aspects in particular stand out.

First, emerging principles and practices of peer-to-peer review, where states evaluate and comment on each other's performance create expectations about the type of steps that states ought to take in order to protect their populations from various forms of abuse. As one example, the Human Rights Council (made up of 47 states nominated by the UN General Assembly) uses Universal Periodic Review (UPR), which calls for each UN Member State to undergo a peer review of its human rights records every 4.5 years (United Nations Human Rights Council, n.d.-c). Established in 2006, UPR utilizes information provided by the state under review, information from reports of independent human rights experts and groups, and information from national human rights institutions and NGOs to craft an "outcome report" with recommendations for improvement (United Nations Human Rights Council, n.d.-a). While the most intransigent states remain largely unmoved, peer review activities can influence states and push them toward greater compliance with their human rights obligations due to the pressure of being watched.

Second, international society has made increasing use of permanent and ad hoc arrangements for human rights monitoring and reporting in its decision-making, such as through Human Rights Council-mandated investigative bodies like fact-finding missions and commissions of inquiry (United Nations Human Rights Council, International Commissions). This reporting helps support decision-making on mass violence by furnishing key institutions with reliable information. It also encourages states to respect human rights by raising international awareness of domestic human rights practices.

While monitoring and reporting mechanisms such as the UPR and investigative bodies show the international community's commitment to defending common values, the system remains state-centered and rule-governed. Even powerful states, however, can face admonishment within this system, as shown through the suspension of Russia from the Human Rights Council in 2022 due to its human rights abuses in Ukraine (UN Affairs, 2022). This provides some (albeit weak) evidence against the notion that protection occurs only based on strong states' interests.

Addressing Vulnerable Groups

Though much of this chapter describes state-centered initiatives, the international community has periodically recognized groups of individuals who experience particular vulnerabilities and established mechanisms aimed at addressing or reducing those vulnerabilities. Of these, the best developed is the international refugee regime, which is governed by the 1951 Refugee Convention and subsequent 1967 Protocol, and overseen by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

This system grants individuals facing persecution the right to claim asylum and receive resettlement in other states. It mandates the UNHCR to ensure that refugees have access to protection and durable solutions to their displacement. During the 1990s, it became apparent that this system was unable to cope with a new displacement crisis—namely, that of internal displacement.

Internal displacement occurs when people are forced from their homes by mass violence and other ills, but remain within their home state. As a largely domestic issue, there was little international appetite for a convention to govern the internally-displaced. Instead, the UNHCR extended its mandate to cover the protection of all displaced persons and United Nations officials developed a list of 30 "guiding principles" for their treatment. As examples, Principle 14 states (in part) that "every internally displaced person has the right to liberty of movement and freedom to choose his or her residence," Principle 16 states that "all internally displaced persons have the right to know the fate and whereabouts of missing relatives," and Principle 18 states (in part) that "all internally displaced persons have the right to an adequate standard of living" (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, n.d.).



Image 11.4.1: Refugees in Mishamo Camp, Tanzania in front of UNHCR housing, as photographed by members of the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUSCO). *(Source: "Refugees in Mishamo Camp, Tanzania" by MONUSCO Photos, is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0.)*

Another facet of mass violence that gained political prominence only in the 1990s was sexual and gender-based violence. The use of rape as a weapon of war in various cases pushed the UNSC to establish the protection of women and girls as one of the principal elements of its "Women, Peace, and Security" agenda adopted in the year 2000 via Resolution 1325. Since then, the UN created the post of Special Representative of the Secretary-General to give permanent focus to the issue and instituted a series of annual reports that identify the locations of these crimes.

Running parallel to these developments is a range of initiatives focused on protecting children in armed conflict. The United Nations appointed a Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, which reports on the unique protection challenges facing children and related issues, such as the recruitment of child soldiers.

All of these initiatives to protect vulnerable groups illustrate an optimistic and individual-centered focus on defending common human rights values.

Peacekeeping and Other Practices of Protection

One of the most controversial ways in which the international community can protect human rights is through "peacekeeping." **Peacekeeping** is a tool used to provide security and support to states in the early transition from conflict to peace. It relies on three principles: consent of the parties, impartiality, and non-use of force except in self-defense and defense of the mandate (United Nations Peacekeeping, n.d.-d).

In 1999, the UNSC unanimously adopted Resolution 1265 expressing its "willingness" to consider "appropriate measures" in response "to situations of armed conflict where civilians are being targeted or where humanitarian assistance to civilians is being deliberately obstructed." It additionally expressed its willingness to explore how peacekeeping mandates might be reframed to afford better protection to endangered civilians. In 2006, the UNSC adopted Resolution 1674, which built on this progress by demanding that parties to armed conflict grant unfettered humanitarian access to civilians.

Before the turn of the 21st century, the protection of civilians was typically not a core part of peacekeeping. Starting in 1999 with the UN Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL), the UNSC began invoking Chapter VII of the UN Charter with increasing regularity to authorize peacekeepers to use all means necessary to protect civilians, including the use of force for the maintenance of international peace and security. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the UNSC went even further by authorizing a "Force Intervention Brigade" to fight against non-state armed groups that were employing mass violence against civilians.

As the UNSC expanded its use of peacekeeping for the protection of civilians, it also developed and strengthened other practices of protection. For example, in Resolution 1973, passed in 2011, the UNSC authorized the use of force for human protection purposes in Libya. This was the first time in the history of the UNSC that such an action passed without the consent of the host state. Through this resolution, and the one that preceded it (Resolution 1970), the UNSC utilized the full range of the collective security powers granted to it by the UN Charter. In particular, Resolution 1973 authorized a "no-fly zone," applying a ban on all flights in Libyan airspace, except those flights "whose sole purpose [was] humanitarian, such as delivering or facilitating the delivery of assistance, including medical supplies, food, humanitarian workers and related assistance, or evacuating foreign nationals" (United Nations Security Council, 2011).

Three years later, in 2014, Resolution 2165 authorized the delivery of humanitarian assistance into Syria without the consent of the Syrian government—the first time that the Council had done this. Hence, two very important issues of precedent were established through Libya and Syria, both built on a new understanding of the need to protect civilians.



Image 11.4.2: In 2014, following almost six months of siege, thousands of refugees lined up on the destroyed main street of Yarmouk, Syria for a humanitarian food distribution. *(Source: "In January 2014, UNRWA was able to complete its first humanitarian distribution in Yarmouk, Syria, after almost six months of siege," by UNRWA Archive Photographer Unknown, is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0.)*

Though peacekeeping missions and other practices of protection appear on the surface as a way to defend common values, critics often point to particular missions as providing evidence that protection occurs based on strong states' interests. As one example, despite the existence of the short-lived UN Supervision Mission in Syria (UNSMIS, which lasted less than three months), additional action to protect civilians was fraught. Russia, one of the five permanent members of the UNSC, vetoed 17 resolutions related to Syria since 2011 (DeLaurentis, 2023).

In addition, critics point out that peacekeeping missions and other practices of protection can sometimes occur in a selective, partial, or harmful manner. In terms of harm, allegations of human rights abuses by peacekeepers—including sexual misconduct, rape, and forced prostitution—have been well-documented in places such as the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Haiti (Wheeler, 2020). Despite the many allegations, prosecutions rarely occur, as punishment for any crimes committed must come from the troops' home states and not the UN.

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11.5: Accountability and Justice

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While the previous section mentioned the difficulties surrounding the prosecution of peacekeepers who commit human rights abuses, this section examines methods of criminal prosecutions by which the international community can (though not always successfully) hold the perpetrators of human rights abuses accountable. These attempts include the establishment of tribunals, the issuing of indictments by the International Criminal Court, and the creation of transitional justice mechanisms.

Tribunals

International legal tribunals serve two distinct, yet interrelated, purposes. First, they aim to bring to justice those individuals who violate the core principles of international law. Second, they aim to deter future bad behavior. They take two basic forms, depending on their intended longevity and focus. An **ad hoc tribunal** is temporary; it serves a particular purpose and exists for a limited amount of time. A permanent tribunal (or a permanent court) serves, in a long-standing capacity, the general needs of the international community.

As an example of an ad hoc tribunal, in 1993 and in response to the conflict in the former Yugoslavia, the UNSC established the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). Seated in The Hague, Netherlands, the ICTY possessed the legal power to issue indictments and prosecute war criminals from that series of wars. The most famous indictment was issued against former Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic, who was accused of a wide range of violations of international law, including aggression, crimes against humanity, and genocide. A long and complicated trial began in the ICTY in 2002, and it concluded in 2006 when Milosevic died before the tribunal issued its ruling. The ICTY formally ceased operations in 2017 after completing all cases pending before it. The ICTY indicted a total of 161 individuals, completed 111 trials, and convicted 90 war criminals.



Image 11.5.1: A photograph of the exhumation of a mass grave from 1993 used in evidence for the prosecution of war crimes by the ICTY. *(Source: "File:Bodies in Vitez, Bosnia and Herzegovina.jpg" by UN International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia is licensed under CC BY 2.0.)*

In 1994, the UNSC established another ad hoc tribunal. In response to the catastrophic loss of life in the African state of Rwanda, it created the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR). With its chief prosecutor in The Hague, the ICTR's court was located in Tanzania. The ICTR discontinued operations in 2015 after bringing 50 cases to conclusion.

The two ad hoc tribunals (ICTY, ICTR) established by the UNSC at the dawn of the post-Cold War era contributed greatly to the development of international humanitarian law. Important advances included the designation of rape as a form of genocide and/or torture, the ability of prosecutors to charge individuals with crimes against humanity prior to the onset of armed conflict, and the development of a more precise code of laws of armed conflict.

Yet there are problems associated with the use of ad hoc tribunals. First, the creation of ad hoc tribunals occurs as their need arises. Powerful states' political or economic interests will influence the decision to create (or not create) a tribunal for a particular conflict. This suggests a lack of impartiality and, given that these tribunals exist mostly for conflicts in developing states, it illustrates selective (and perhaps discriminatory) implementation. Second, and related, ad hoc tribunals exist for a particular event or location. There are thus inherent limitations in the tribunal's jurisdiction—generally, alleged crimes that occur only within a specific geographic and temporal scope. While ad hoc tribunals may address some localized violations of human rights, the only way to evenly apply international laws to the international community is through the establishment of a permanent criminal court.

International Criminal Court

Meeting in Italy in 1998, diplomats drafted the Rome Statute to create the world's first permanent criminal court. The **International Criminal Court (ICC)** officially came into existence in 2002. As of July 2025, the ICC counts 125 states as State Parties to the Rome Statute. Yet it is important to note that three members of the UNSC Permanent Five—China, Russia, and the United States—have not joined.

Unlike the International Court of Justice (ICJ), which has jurisdiction over states, the ICC's jurisdiction is limited to individuals. Its chief prosecutor has the authority to undertake investigations and to issue indictments against individuals whose actions constitute grave violations of international law. As of July 2025, the ICC has indicted more than 70 individuals. Included among those indicted are heads of state from Ivory Coast, Kenya, Liberia, Libya, Russia, and Sudan. In February 2023, the ICC ordered Russian President Vladimir Putin's arrest (along with Maria Lvova-Belova, Commissioner for Children's Rights in the Office of the President of the Russian Federation) due to his alleged responsibility for the war crime of "the unlawful deportation and transfer of Ukrainian children from occupied areas of Ukraine to the Russian Federation" (International Criminal Court, 2023).



Image 11.5.2: The ICC issued arrest warrants for both Russian President Vladimir Putin and Commissioner for Children's Rights Maria Lvova-Belova for their alleged war crimes against Ukrainian children. *(Source: "Встреча с Уполномоченным по правам ребёнка Марией Львовой-Беловой 03" by Президент России is licensed under CC BY 4.0.)*

While most legal experts view Putin's warrant as symbolic, the indictment has limited Putin's ability to travel abroad because any ICC member would be compelled to arrest him if he entered their territory (Klobucista and Ferragamo, 2024).

The Putin example points to a larger problem for the ICC: The ICC is not able to execute arrest warrants and instead relies on state cooperation to detain individuals. For example, the ICC issued arrest warrants for former Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir in 2009 and 2010 on charges of crimes against humanity, war crimes, and genocide. Yet Sudan is not a party to the Rome Statute, and al-Bashir's arrest did not occur until 2019 (and then only after a military coup d'état ousted him from power). In general, if a state does not want to hand over an individual accused of crimes, there is no mechanism to force them to do so; thus far, the ICC has only detained 22 individuals.

Transitional Justice

Ad hoc tribunals and the ICC represent one aspect of transitional justice, which is the ways in which states emerging from periods of conflict and repression address large-scale or systematic human rights violations so numerous and so serious that the normal justice system is unable to provide an adequate response (International Center for Transitional Justice, n.d.). There are, however, other approaches to transitional justice, such as domestic criminal prosecutions; "truth-seeking" (or fact-finding) processes (e.g., the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa); reparations, such as compensation, access to land, or symbolic actions like apologies; and institutional reforms, such as within the police, military, and judiciary. While these approaches to transitional justice in part aim to hold the perpetrators of human rights abuses accountable, they also focus on providing justice to victims and preventing the recurrence of human rights abuses.

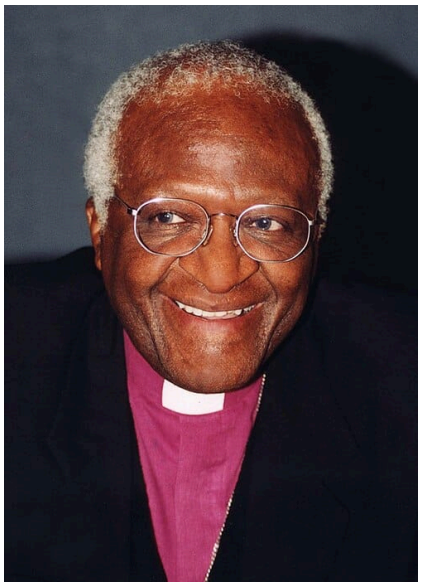


Image 11.5.3: Archbishop Desmond Tutu chaired the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. *(Source: "Desmond Tutu (4732745680 1) (cropped and adjusted)" by John Mathew Smith & www.celebrity-photos.com from Laurel Maryland, USA is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0.)*

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11.6: Ongoing Challenges

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While the world is more likely to respond to human rights abuses today than it once was, even when the normative and political context allows for it, the effective protection of populations from human rights abuses confronts practical challenges.

The Norm of Non-intervention

The first challenge is that there are significant limits to what outsiders can do to protect people in foreign states. Many internal conflicts are not readily susceptible to outside mediation, as they are so complex and fraught with danger that they can defy easy resolution. Concerted international action can sometimes protect populations or prevent mass atrocities, but the primary determinants of violence or peace typically rest within the state itself and the dispositions of its leaders. The UN tends to confront *only the* world's most difficult cases, compounding this challenge. Situations usually reach the UNSC only when others have tried, and failed, to resolve them. As a rule of thumb, where conflicts have an easy remedy, solutions tend to be found at the local, national, or regional level. The international community tends to assume the lead only in those crises for which others have found no solution. In such circumstances, a modest success rate might partly reflect the sheer difficulty of the cases presented to the UN.

(Lack of) Political Will

The second challenge is that the pursuit of human protection is politically sensitive. The protection of human rights is *both* enabled *and* constrained by politics. It can generate acute controversies and disputes by, for instance, requiring that some states be identified as being "at risk" of a crisis, and demanding actions that some governments might object to. Often, even long-term preventive measures entail a significant degree of intrusion in the domestic affairs of states, which is not always welcome. States tend to zealously guard their sovereignty and are sensitive to perceived incursions on their rights, criticisms of their conduct, or judgments of their domestic conditions. As such, states rarely invite assistance or look kindly on external efforts to prevent atrocities within their jurisdiction.

It is important to remember that UN activities are overseen by political (as opposed to judicial) bodies composed of sovereignty-wielding member states. One facet of the problem is that states sometimes judge that their own interests are best served by *not* preventing human rights abuses. This can be seen over a wide range of cases, but perhaps none have been as striking as the Syrian example, where from 2011 the UNSC failed to act decisively as hundreds of thousands were killed and millions displaced. The UN struggles to assert its primacy in such situations where the interests of powerful states, especially permanent members of the UNSC, have competing aims.

Another facet of the problem of "political will" is that states are self-interested actors that prioritize the well-being of their own citizens. As such, they are generally reluctant to commit extensive resources to prevent human rights abuses in other states. The issue here is not whether governments support atrocity prevention as a goal, but the depth of their support relative to other goals, such as domestic objectives like social welfare. Political and diplomatic capital are also finite resources. Sometimes, states may judge that trade-offs have to be made to achieve the greatest good, or the least harm, overall. For example, at the outset of the crisis in Darfur in 2003, several states decided not to press the government of Sudan too hard, fearing that this might jeopardize negotiations to end the government's war with rebels in the south. These rebels eventually seceded and founded their own state, South Sudan, in 2011.

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11.7: IR in the Real World

While the former section's title was "ongoing challenges," these issues are particularly easy to identify in a decades-old example: Rwanda in the early 1990s.

Rwanda is a tiny nation in Africa, approximately the size of Vermont, that achieved independence from Belgium in 1962. Under colonial rule, an ethnic group called the Tutsis received privileged status, though they made up a minority of the population. After independence, the majority group, the Hutus, dominated. A Tutsi rebel group called the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) took up arms, leading to violence between the RPF and the government. In 1990, the Rwandan Civil War began and, in August 1993, peace talks led to the signing of the Arusha Accords, a power-sharing peace agreement.

There were two UN missions in Rwanda. The UN Observer Mission Uganda-Rwanda (UNOMUR) lasted from June 1993 to September 1994. The UN Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR) lasted from October 1993 to March 1996. These dates are important because a genocide occurred when both of these missions existed, from April 7 to mid-July 1994. In those 100 days, approximately 800,000 people were killed. The Hutu government nearly exterminated the Tutsi minority (estimates are that approximately 70 percent of the Tutsi population was killed), along with many politically-moderate Hutus. How did this happen?



Image 11.7.1: Rwandan children who had lost their parents rest at Ndosha camp in Goma, July, 1994. *(Source: "United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR)" by United Nations Photo is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.)*

UNOMUR's mission was to monitor the border between Uganda and Rwanda and verify that no military assistance was provided across it. The main goal was to gather information about the illicit flow of firearms through the Ugandan border due to fears that this would disrupt the peace process. UNOMUR had 81 observers attempting to cover 193 miles of border; the force was simply too small to be effective (United Nations Peacekeeping, n.d.-b).

When UNAMIR was created, UNOMUR came under the command of the new mission. UNAMIR's goal was to assist in the implementation of the Arusha Accords, including by establishing a "weapons secure area" to ensure the security of Kigali, the Rwandan capital, and by monitoring observance of the ceasefire agreement. Though the authorized strength was 2,548 personnel, it took five months to reach this level with Belgium (the former colonizer), Bangladesh, Ghana, and Tunisia contributing troops. After violence against Belgian troops occurred, some states unilaterally withdrew their contingents, and the UNSC subsequently voted to reduce the troop number to 270 (United Nations Peacekeeping, n.d.-a).



Image 11.7.2: Belgian Soldier Memorial in Kigali, Rwanda, where ten Belgian soldiers with UNAMIR were killed in 1994. *(Source: "Belgian Soldier Memorial" by Dylan Walters is licensed under CC BY 2.0.)*

As the genocide took place, the UNSC expanded UNAMIR's mandate to contribute to the security and protection of displaced persons, refugees, and civilians, but the mission was defensive rather than offensive, essentially giving the troops a bystander role. The UN agreed to send reinforcements (5500 troops and equipment), called UNAMIR II, but it took nearly six months for the member states to provide the troops. Even with the additional troops, there was no mandate to use force. In short, the UNAMIR missions showed that member states did not supply forces fast enough, were not willing to endure losses, and had little military power to protect civilians from genocide (United Nations Peacekeeping, n.d.-a).

As noted in a previous section, the UNSC established an ad hoc tribunal in response to the genocide called the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), which contributed to developments in international humanitarian law, such as the designation of rape as a form of genocide and/or torture. In addition to the ICTR, Rwanda used its national court system to prosecute those accused of planning the genocide or of committing serious atrocities. By mid-2006, the national courts had tried approximately 10,000 genocide suspects. Yet thousands still awaited trial. To expedite the process, and to foster transitional justice and attempts at reconciliation, the Rwandan government re-established a traditional community court system called "gacaca" (pronounced "ga-cha-cha"). In place from 2005 to 2012, the gacaca system had more than 12,000 community-based courts with locally-elected judges. These judges heard the trials of genocide suspects (except those accused of planning the genocide), providing a chance for suspects to publicly offer information to victims' families, confess their crimes, express remorse, and seek reconciliation by asking for forgiveness in front of their community (such actions resulted in lower sentences for the accused). Ultimately, the gacaca courts tried more than 1.2 million cases (United Nations, 2014).



Image 11.7.3: At a gacaca court in the Rwamagana district in 2006, one man accuses another. *(Source: "Gacaca courts- ©Elisa Finocchiaro" by elisa finocchiaro is licensed under CC BY-NC 2.0.)*

The Rwandan example illustrates *both* major challenges for the international community in protecting human rights *and* innovative techniques for transitional justice aimed at fostering reconciliation in a post-conflict environment.

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11.8: Conclusion

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Whichever theoretical position one holds on the virtue and practicality of international action to protect humans from imminent peril, it is indisputable that the past few decades have seen a proliferation of mechanisms, institutions, and practices aimed at improving the protection of human rights. The international community codified norms of acceptable behavior, established responsibilities for third-party states and international institutions, and developed a range of practices aimed at protecting vulnerable populations.

As a result, human rights abuses today are typically met with complex—if sometimes ineffective—responses from a range of actors. Adequate and consistent protection of human rights remains unfinished business. Not only are there a number of political issues, but also practical and ethical concerns connected to implementation that the international community must address.

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11.9: Student Resources

Summary

Human rights are rights inherent to all human beings, regardless of race, sex, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, or any other status. Yet the international community faces challenges in protecting human rights due to the norms of sovereignty and non-intervention, and sometimes due to (lack of) political will.

Depending on whether an observer privileges individuals or states, and whether they take a pessimistic or optimistic view on the possibility for moral progress, theoretical approaches argue that protection of human rights occurs within a rule-governed international system (optimistic, state-centered); based on strong states' interests (pessimistic, state-centered); to defend common values (optimistic, individual-centered); or in a selective, partial, and sometimes harmful manner (pessimistic, individual-centered).

In recent decades, developments include advancements in international humanitarian law, the creation of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), increased monitoring and reporting by non-governmental organizations, special protections for vulnerable populations, and increased mandates for peacekeeping missions illustrate the international community's attempts to protect human rights in principle (through legal means) and on the ground. Yet violations of human rights continue to occur. While the international community created accountability mechanisms—such as tribunals, the International Criminal Court, and other transitional justice measures—the international community must do more to ensure consistent protection of human rights worldwide.

Key Terms

- **Ad hoc tribunal** is a temporary court established to address specific allegations of human rights abuses within a particular conflict.
- **Crimes against humanity** are acts committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population.
- **Ethnic cleansing** is a purposeful policy designed by one ethnic or religious group to remove by violent and terror-inspiring means the civilian population of another ethnic or religious group from certain geographic areas.
- **Genocide** is "the deliberate and systematic destruction of a group because of their ethnicity, nationality, religion, or race" (Britannica).
- **Human rights** are rights inherent to all human beings, regardless of race, sex, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, or any other status.
- **International Bill of Human Rights** is the combination of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR).
- **International Criminal Court (ICC)** is a permanent criminal court that undertakes investigations and issues indictments against individuals whose actions constitute grave violations of international law.
- **Non-intervention** is a principle enshrined in Article 2(4) of the UN Charter, which prohibits "the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state."
- **Peacekeeping** is a tool used to provide security and support to states in the early transition from conflict to peace.
- **Responsibility to Protect (R2P)** is an international norm that asserts that if a state fails to protect its population from mass atrocities (genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity), the international community has a responsibility to intervene.
- **Sovereignty** is the principle under which each state is fundamentally equal in legal terms and free to act independently without the consent of any higher authority.
- **Transitional justice** is the ways in which states emerging from periods of conflict and repression address large-scale or systematic human rights violations so numerous and so serious that the normal justice system is unable to provide an adequate response.

Critical Thinking Questions

1. Which of the three pillars of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) principle do you find most controversial? Why? How does R2P relate to state sovereignty?
2. Considering each of the four theoretical approaches, what is the strongest evidence in favor of this approach and what is the strongest evidence against it? Use empirical examples to back up your claims.
3. Is peacekeeping a worthwhile practice? What are the biggest problems with peacekeeping missions (e.g., in terms of international norms or practical implementation issues), and how can they be remedied?

Suggestions for Further Study

Documents

- Universal Declaration of Human Rights
- United Nations Charter, Chapter VII

Websites

- International Criminal Court
- United Nations Peacekeeping
- Brief review of human rights: "What is a Human Right?"

Journal Articles

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  - Note: This documentary is not available to stream online in full, but is available through many college libraries.
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12: INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL ECONOMY

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12.1: Introduction

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to:

- Compare and contrast how mercantilism, liberalism, and Marxism shape trade policies.
- Analyze the role of the government and its tools in regulating international trade and finance.
- Explain the role of international financial institutions in managing financial stability and economic development globally.
- Explain the impact of international trade agreements on the global economy.
- Evaluate the role of multinational organizations on national economies, state sovereignty, and international trade.

As the previous chapters demonstrated, power is a central concept in international relations. Power is measured not only by a state's military capacity but also by its economic wealth, which in turn depends on how effectively the state participates in the global economy. This chapter focuses on International Political Economy (IPE); that is, it describes how the cross-border movement of goods, services, and money shapes the interactions between states. States, multinational corporations, and international organizations all play a central role in IPE.

The debate between theoretical approaches—namely, between realist and liberal thinkers—dominates the field of IPE. In IPE, realism promotes the mercantilist economic theory by focusing on competition and relative power, while liberalism promotes cooperation and economic interdependence between states by focusing on mutual benefits brought by trade deals. Meanwhile, Marxism provides an alternative approach to IPE by offering theories that criticize the free market as a cause of global inequality and conflict.

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12.2: International Trade

Note

The author adapted portions of the following section from two existing sources (noted by parenthetical citation in all relevant paragraphs):

- *LibreTexts. (n.d.). "Dependency Theories." In Introduction to Sociology [CC BY-SA 1.0].*
- *Walzenbach, G. (2017). "Global Political Economy." In S. McGlinchey (Ed.), International Relations [CC BY-NC 4.0].*

International trade is the exchange of goods and services between states. This allows a state to obtain goods that it cannot produce efficiently domestically, ideally leading to greater prosperity and wealth. The decision behind a state's level of participation in international trade comes with many questions: Does buying goods from states that are more efficient producers or does producing more goods domestically lead to more wealth? What goods should be exported and imported? What role should the government play in regulating trade? Which states should trade with one another? Realism and liberalism offer different answers to these questions, but both begin by analyzing the state's balance of trade.

The **balance of trade** measures the difference between a state's imports and exports. **Imports** are goods and services bought from a foreign state. **Exports** are goods and services sold to foreign states. If a state exports more than it imports, then its balance of trade is positive, also referred to as trade surplus. A **trade surplus** usually indicates that the state is competitive because it produces more than it consumes. Conversely, a state has a negative balance of trade, or **trade deficit**, if it imports more than it exports. A trade deficit implies that the state is less competitive in the global market because it consumes more than it produces. Positive and negative trade balances have advantages and disadvantages, depending on how the state manages them within its broader economic strategy. Below, we review mercantilism and liberalism as two competing economic strategies.

Mercantilism

Mercantilism, one of the earliest economic strategies, flourished throughout history and contributed to the success of Italy under the Medici, the United Kingdom (U.K.) in the 1700s, Nazi Germany before World War II, Japan after World War II, and contemporary China. The global recession of 2008, President Trump's "America First" policy, and the COVID pandemic brought back the mercantilist ideas under the labels of neo-mercantilism and economic nationalism.

Mercantilism views the balance of trade as a key economic indicator of a state's prosperity and power. According to mercantilism, a state should strive to have a positive balance of trade because, by selling more of its goods to the outside world (i.e., by prioritizing exports), the state earns more gold/silver/foreign currency. The state can then invest these earnings in the military and state power. Such a view is based on mercantilism's assumption that trade is a zero-sum game, where one state's gain is another state's loss. To achieve a positive balance of trade, the government encourages domestic production through subsidies, tax breaks, and interest-free loans for strategic industries deemed vital to national security and export competitiveness. It also discourages the consumption of foreign goods by imposing protectionist measures, such as tariffs, quotas, and other non-tariff barriers.

A **tariff** is a tax on imports. Tariffs increase the price of foreign goods and encourage residents to buy from domestic producers. As an extreme example, Japan collects a 1706 percent tariff on konjac, a root vegetable, and a 778 percent tariff on rice (Canon Institute for Global Studies, 2013). A **quota** limits the quantity of specific goods imported into a state. For example, the United States (U.S.) has quotas on brooms, olives, and tuna (U.S. Customs and Border Protection, n.d.). Governments can also impose other **non-tariff barriers**, such as regulations and inspections requiring imported goods to meet specific technical, environmental, safety, and legal standards, effectively restricting the flow of foreign goods into a state. For example, the U.S. requires importers of children's toys to undergo lab tests for lead concentration and other dangerous chemicals.



Image 12.2.1: President Joe Biden sanctions Russia by signing an Executive Order on "Blocking Property of Certain Persons and Prohibiting Certain Transactions with Respect to Continued Russian Efforts to Undermine the Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity of Ukraine," Friday, February 18, 2022, in the Oval Office. (Official White House Photo by Erin Scott) *(Source: "P20220221ES-0298-1" by The White House is in the Public Domain.)*

In addition to tariffs, quotas, and non-tariff barriers, governments sometimes use trade restrictions for political rather than economic reasons. **Sanctions** are politically motivated trade restrictions. For example, the U.S. sanctioned Russian oil mining and banking industries after the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The effectiveness of sanctions is questionable, but the limited record suggests that they become more effective when the broader international community cooperates with the sanctions. For example, South Africa's apartheid government stepped down only after the U.S. and the U.K., along with 23 other governments, joined the United Nations' call for economic sanctions and a weapons embargo on South Africa.

When evaluating trade deals, mercantilism prioritizes relative gains. As a reminder from our chapter on realism (Chapter 3), relative gains refer to the amount that one state gains in comparison to other states. For mercantilists, a state cares not only about how much it gains from a trade deal, but also how much it gains in comparison with its trading partners. This happens because mercantilists see the world as zero-sum, where one state's gain is another state's loss. Because mercantilism focuses on relative gains, its proponents might reject a trade deal where a trading partner benefits the most, even if both partners gain something from the deal. Mercantilists also prioritize short-term gains, which refer to immediate economic benefits, rather than long-term sustainable gains.

To understand mercantilist strategy, consider the two deals below. Which deal is better from the mercantilist point of view?

> **Deal #1:** Today, you earn $4, while your partner earns $2.
> **Deal #2:** Tomorrow, you will earn $10, while your partner will earn $20.

A mercantilist would reject Deal #2 despite $10 being more than $4. To a mercantilist, Deal #2 is bad for two reasons. First, under Deal #2, the trade partner benefits more than you, which is unacceptable since mercantilism focuses on relative gains. Second, to receive $10 from Deal #2, you have to wait until tomorrow, while $4 is available today. Since mercantilists (like realists) do not have much trust, any promises about the future are dubious; the partner or the money might disappear tomorrow. As a result, a mercantilist would pick Deal #1 because it evaluates trade deals in terms of relative short-term gains.

Mercantilism encourages people to produce more and consume less. Instead of spending money on the consumption of luxury and non-essential goods, mercantilists encourage people to save and invest in production. Japan, for example, has followed mercantilist policies since the late 1800s. These resulted in low domestic spending, low consumption, and high saving rates. Mercantilist policies were so successful, in fact, that Japan's Central Bank had to introduce negative interest rates—a policy in which commercial banks, and sometimes depositors, actually pay to keep their money in the bank—to encourage spending in 2019.

Mercantilism views trade as a political tool to enhance national power and self-reliance. Today, mercantilist ideas thrive in the

form of **economic nationalism**. The Build America, Buy America Act of 2021, the calls to ban TikTok in the U.S., the social media campaign in India to boycott Chinese products, and heavy state subsidies for exporting industries in China are all measures adopted in fear of a negative balance of trade (a trade deficit). Policymakers promoting economic nationalism believe such policies protect jobs and domestic producers and promote national security and self-reliance. Among the unintended consequences of economic nationalism are higher prices for domestic consumers, support for ineffective domestic producers, and stifled competition and innovation.

Even economists who support free trade acknowledge that there are certain circumstances that justify temporary protectionist measures. The first circumstance is the need to protect an infant industry. The argument claims that protection is warranted for young industries, especially in less developed states. Fledgling industries have little chance of competing with established industries that have been in business longer and, over time, have been able to improve their efficiency in production. For example, in the 1980s, South Korea protected its automakers KIA and Hyundai; again in the 1980s, the U.S. Congress issued tax breaks to Intel and Microsoft to shield them from Japanese competitors; and, in the early 2000s, Chile and Australia protected their wine producers to help them compete with France and Italy. Such protections allow an infant industry time to mature and, once the industry becomes competitive, the state removes the protectionist measures. The other two legitimate circumstances for governments to practice protectionism are the needs to protect the state's national security and to counteract dumping. **Dumping** is a technique of predatory pricing, or selling goods in a foreign market at a loss-making price to undercut competitors and force them out of business. The international trade rules condemn but do not prohibit dumping, and they allow states to retaliate against dumping by imposing import quotas and tariffs on the dumped goods.

Liberalism

In the late 1700s and early 1800s, industrialization introduced a new economic model: capitalism and economic liberalism, which replaced mercantilism as the leading trade theory. Liberalism takes a more optimistic view of international trade by arguing that trade can be mutually beneficial for all states involved.

Liberalism evaluates trade deals based on their potential for long-term absolute gains. As a reminder from our chapter on liberalism (Chapter 4), absolute gains refer to the total amount of benefits that all parties gain without focusing on the relative distribution of those benefits. In a trade deal, a state will focus on the total increase in its wealth without comparison to its trading partner.

Liberalism differs from mercantilism by defining power not only as the accumulation of wealth but also as improvements in the state's standard of living. Liberalism emphasizes that wealth is meaningful only if it enhances the people's quality of life. Therefore, a truly powerful state, according to liberalism, is one that not only amasses capital in its bank account but also provides people with good living conditions. As such, liberalism promotes greater consumption and spending as a path to greater overall prosperity.

According to liberalism, a state can become even more prosperous if it picks its trading partners based on the concepts of "absolute advantage" and "comparative advantage." We will consider each in turn.

Adam Smith, often referred to as the "father of capitalism," argued that to achieve more prosperity, states should specialize in producing goods in which they have an absolute advantage. An **absolute advantage** exists when a state can produce a product more efficiently (i.e., with fewer resources and less time) than another state. By focusing on producing goods in which they have an absolute advantage, states will produce more goods at a lower price through specialization, making them more competitive in the global market. As the states are able to sell more of their goods, they will earn more foreign currency, strengthen their currency, and boost their domestic job market. International trade based on absolute advantage not only makes an individual state better off, but also makes the entire world more prosperous because it promotes the efficient allocation of resources on a global scale. For Smith, the specialization in working patterns and the division of labor also created new opportunities for employees to achieve personal growth and professional careers. In the classic example, ten people working to produce pins could produce more in total if they worked together, dividing up tasks and performing each one better than if they all worked separately (Walzenbach, 2017).

As an example, if given the same amount of resources and time, State A can produce ten gallons of milk, while State B can produce only five gallons of milk, then State A has an absolute advantage in milk and should specialize in its production. At the same time, if State A can produce only five boxes of strawberries while State B can produce 10 boxes of strawberries with the same amount of resources and time, then State B has an absolute advantage in strawberries and should specialize in its production. When trading, State A should sell milk to State B, and State B should sell strawberries to State A. As a result of such trade, both states will end up with more milk and strawberries than if they did not engage in trade with one another.

Yet what if State A has an absolute advantage in the production of both milk and strawberries? Does this mean that State A should produce milk and strawberries and forgo trade with State B? David Ricardo, another classical economist, answers this question by arguing that, even in such a situation, trade can be mutually beneficial if both states focus on comparative advantage.

Comparative advantage is when a state specializes in the production of goods in which it has the lowest opportunity cost. **Opportunity cost** is a potential benefit that a state gives up if it decides to produce a certain good. The more the state gives up to produce something, the higher the opportunity cost. By focusing on producing goods with the lowest opportunity cost, Ricardo argued that states can achieve greater prosperity. Such productivity evaluation allows trade to remain profitable even for states with an absolute advantage in everything. By instead concentrating on the things that a state does the "most best" and trading any excess of those things with another state for the things that state does the "most best," both states can be better off. International trade based on comparative advantage allows states to dedicate their labor and resources to their most productive industries, resulting in much greater production and consumption of goods (Walzenbach, 2017).



Image 12.2.2: The British economist David Ricardo, 1821. *(Source: "Portrait of David Ricardo by Thomas Phillips" is in the Public Domain.)*

Liberalism views trade as an engine of growth globally. Some states might benefit more than others, but all of them will gain something in the end. Liberalism accepts unequal distribution of gains because what is more important is that every state gets some benefit as a result of trade. As a result, inequality is one of the main drawbacks of liberalism as an economic strategy. Another drawback of liberalism is the loss of jobs in inefficient industries (e.g., due to factories shutting down). One solution to the latter drawback is to have government programs re-train those who lose their jobs and help them find employment in an industry with comparative advantage.

To sum up, proponents of liberalism argue that specialization and the free movement of goods and services can produce more good than harm because they value efficiency more than economic equality.

Marxism

As discussed in our chapter on constructivism and critical theories (Chapter 5), proponents of Marxism argue that economic inequality—specifically the class struggle between the bourgeoisie (capitalist class) and the proletariat (working class)—is the root of political conflict. Marxism provides the foundation for an economic theory that views the inequalities that arise in capitalist societies as a source of political instability on the international level between "developed" and "developing" states: dependency theory.

Dependency theory describes the world as a system of hierarchical division of labor where states are classified as "core" and "periphery." The core states, such as Japan, the U.K., and the U.S., are wealthy, industrialized, militarily strong, and politically stable. The periphery states, such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Guatemala, and Pakistan, are poor, militarily weak, politically unstable, and rich in raw materials. Dependency theory proposes that colonialism and neocolonialism are the main

causes of global poverty. States have developed unevenly because wealthy states have exploited poor states in the past and continue to do so today through foreign debt and foreign trade (LibreTexts, n.d.).

Historically, wealthy states became rich by taking the raw materials from their colonies and organizing cheap labor through slavery. For example, King Leopold II, King of Belgium from 1865-1909, forced hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children to work as slaves in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The invention of the bicycle tire in the 1890s, and later the automobile tire, meant that rubber was in high demand; wild rubber vines were widespread in the Congo, earning Leopold millions. The Democratic Republic of Congo still suffers from the plunder of natural resources, torture, and killing endured during Leopold's reign (LibreTexts, n.d.).

Today, poor states are held back by large debts that prevent them from developing. For example, between 1970 and 2002, the continent of Africa received $540 billion in loans from wealthy nations through the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. African states have paid back $550 billion of their debt but still owe $295 billion. States cannot focus on economic or human development when they are constantly paying off debt. Dependency theorists believe large economic aid is not necessarily the key to reducing poverty and developing, but rather debt relief may be a more effective step (LibreTexts, n.d.).

In addition, dependency theory argues that foreign trade and multinational corporations (MNCs) often limit poor states' abilities to improve their living conditions. Governments invite MNCs, hoping for economic growth, but workers end up producing goods that they themselves will not consume. For example, in Cape Verde, land that could grow food for locals is instead used to grow cash crops for foreign trade. Moreover, fresh food, such as tuna, is canned and exported rather than consumed by the local population (LibreTexts, n.d.).



Image 12.2.3: Tuna fishing and canning for export is a mainstay of the Cape Verde economy. *(Source: "Fishermen in Tarrafal, Cape Verde" by AIO SIDS IWRM Project is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.)*

As a reminder from Chapter 5, Wallerstein's World Systems Theory expands on dependency theory by describing the international system as a three-tiered system of states: the core, the periphery, and the semi-periphery. The semi-periphery states usually have characteristics of both core and periphery states: They are less developed than the core, but more developed than the periphery. Examples of the semi-periphery are Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, collectively known as **BRICS**, a multilateral bloc of states with emerging markets that cooperate on economic issues to counterbalance the dominance of the wealthy industrialized states. According to Wallerstein, the world system is not rigid, and periphery states are not condemned to remain underdeveloped, as shown by semi-periphery states that managed to escape periphery status (e.g., South Korea and China).

To break away from dependency and to become self-sufficient, dependency theorists prescribe the adoption of protectionist tariffs to support domestic producers; the nationalization of foreign-owned businesses; and the approval of reforms like higher taxes on the wealthy, higher public spending on education and job retraining, and more social control over businesses.

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12.3: International Finance

International finance examines how economic policies and financial markets affect international relations. For instance, the decision to trade with the outside world is influenced, in part, by the value of a state's national currency. The **national currency** is the system of money in general use in a particular state, and its value is based on supply and demand. The amount of money printed by the government determines supply. A combination of political and economic factors determines demand, but currencies from stable and healthy economies generally tend to have higher demand. When a currency rises in value, it is known as strong, when it falls, it is weak. A strong currency makes imported goods cheaper for domestic consumers, but can make the state's exports more expensive and less competitive abroad. Conversely, a weak currency makes the state's exports cheaper for foreign buyers, helping domestic industries to sell more abroad. For example, in 2019, the U.S. government accused the Chinese government of deliberately devaluing its national currency to make Chinese goods cheaper and more attractive to foreign markets. **Devaluation** is a deliberate step by the government to lower the value of its currency by adjusting its currency's exchange rate, printing more money, reducing interest rates, or increasing lending to domestic businesses.



Image 12.3.1: U.S. President Donald Trump accusing China of deliberate currency devaluation via a social media post in 2019. The text reads "China dropped the price of their currency to an almost a historic low. It's called "currency manipulation." Are you listening Federal Reserve? This is a major violation which will greatly weaken China over time!" *(Source: "Twitter status on Chinese currency manipulation" by @realDonaldTrump is in the Public Domain.)*

National currency is an attribute of state sovereignty. By controlling the national currency, a government can manage its economy through fiscal and monetary policies. **Fiscal policy** is used to shape a state's budget through government spending and tax revenues. A state's Ministry of Finance, or the Treasury Department in the U.S., usually oversees taxation and government expenditures. **Monetary policy** is a tool used to influence the economy through interest rates and the supply of the national currency. Central banks usually manage the state's currency and control inflation. In the U.S., the Federal Reserve is the central bank. To maintain trust in the national currency and to avoid becoming a political tool in the hands of politicians, central banks have to be politically independent from the ruling politicians. Central banks do not deal with individuals and businesses, but instead deal with private commercial banks. One of the major responsibilities of the central bank is to set up a **discount rate**, the interest rate set by central banks to lend money to commercial banks. The discount rate represents the "price of money" because it determines private banks' cost of borrowing money from the government. If the central bank sets a low discount rate, then private banks can borrow money cheaply, making it cheaper for consumers and businesses to borrow money. A discount rate that is too low can result in an overheating of the economy and high inflation. Conversely, a high discount rate can increase the cost of borrowing money for private banks and consumers, leading to an economic recession.



Image 12.3.2: The Federal Reserve building in Washington, D.C. is the headquarters of the United States' central bank. *(Source: "Front entrance of the Marriner S. Eccles building built in 1937: ec_8" by Federal Reserve is in the Public Domain.)*

To have value outside of an individual state (or a group of states that shares the same currency, such as those in the Eurozone), the national currency has to be exchanged for the currencies of other states. Over time, three major systems of international currency exchange developed: the fixed exchange rate, the floating exchange rate, and the managed float exchange rate.

Fixed Exchange Rate

Traditionally, the world used gold and silver as currency because they were viewed as durable, easy to standardize, and hard to counterfeit. This tradition evolved into the **gold standard**, which became the prevailing currency exchange system by the early 20th century. Under the gold standard, national currencies were evaluated in relation to gold. The gold standard is an example of the fixed exchange rate system (or "pegged exchange").

In 1971, the gold standard was abandoned, but the **fixed exchange rate system** is still around. Today, states that use the fixed exchange rate system tie, or peg, their currency to the value of another currency, usually the U.S. dollar or the Euro. The advantage of this system is that it offers stability, while the disadvantage is that the state loses the ability to use monetary tools, such as setting interest rates, in times of an economic crisis.

Floating Exchange Rate

States that want to be in control of their monetary policies and be able to leverage their currency's interest rates adopt the **floating exchange rate system**. Under this system, market forces, such as the currency's supply and demand, inflation, and interest rate, determine the currency's value. The currency's value therefore floats freely without direct intervention from the state's central bank. Major world currencies, such as the U.S. dollar, the Euro, and the Japanese Yen, operate under the floating exchange rate system. The benefit of this system is that the government retains its sovereign power to manage its national currency through interest rates, while the disadvantage is that it creates a more volatile exchange rate and uncertainty in foreign trade.

Managed Float Exchange Rate

The **managed float exchange rate system** represents a middle ground between the previous two systems. The currency floats freely, but the central bank occasionally intervenes when the currency's value inflates or drops too drastically. Central banks can intervene strategically by buying or selling the currency or by adjusting the currency's interest rate to keep it within certain benchmarks. Many states with emerging markets, such as China, India, Mexico, and Russia, use the managed float system. The advantage of this system is that it gives the government some degree of flexibility and stability, but the disadvantage is that the system's success depends on the competency of those who manage the currency and requires the central bank to keep high

reserves of foreign exchanges.



Image 12.3.3: Zimbabwean banknotes with values ranging from 10 dollars to 100 billion dollars were printed within a one-year period in the late 2000s. *(Source: "Zimbabwe Hyperinflation 2008 notes" by en:User:Discott is dedicated to the Public Domain.)*

Under the managed float, excessive money printing, insufficient reserves of foreign exchanges to effectively control the currency's value, and other poor economic decisions can result in **hyperinflation**. Hyperinflation is when the prices of goods and services increase by more than 50 percent per month. In the late 2000s, Zimbabwe experienced one of the worst cases of hyperinflation in the world's history, where prices doubled every 24 hours. To stop hyperinflation, in 2009, Zimbabwe's government abandoned its national currency, the "Zimbabwean dollar," and replaced it with a multi-currency system consisting of the U.S. dollar, South African rand, and other currencies. In 2019, the Zimbabwean government re-introduced its Zimbabwean dollar, but other foreign currencies can still circulate.

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12.4: International Actors

Note

The author adapted portions of the following section from two existing sources (noted by parenthetical citation in all relevant paragraphs):

- *Bloor, K. (2022). "Economic Global Governance." In Understanding Global Politics [CC BY-NC 4.0].*
- *Walzenbach, G. (2017). "Global Political Economy." In S. McGlinchey (Ed.), International Relations [CC BY-NC 4.0].*

A stable international financial system requires cooperation between states. During World War II, in 1944, representatives from the Allied states gathered for a conference to discuss the post-war economic order in Bretton Woods, New Hampshire. To manage the world economy and promote cooperation, the conference created the **Bretton Woods system**, which includes the International Bank of Reconstruction and Development (the lending arm of the World Bank) and the International Monetary Fund. These institutions form the two pillars of the international financial system. The World Trade Organization also traces its origins to the Bretton Woods Conference.

International Financial Institutions

The **International Monetary Fund (IMF)** is responsible for the stability of the world's monetary system, while the objective of the **World Bank** is to offer financial assistance to states that need it. The IMF and the World Bank promote a set of market-based economic policies, such as privatization and deregulation, known as the **Washington Consensus** (Bloor, 2022).

A loan from the IMF is conditional upon implementing certain policies to meet a series of requirements, such as reducing government spending in healthcare or adopting banking reforms. If these conditions are not met, the IMF can withhold its funding. To secure IMF funding, a state has to undergo a **structural adjustment program (SAP)** by adopting policies of austerity, trade liberalization, and depreciation of the exchange rate. Governments must also balance their budgets by privatizing state-owned assets, removing state subsidies, tackling corruption, and reducing wasteful spending (Bloor, 2022).

The World Bank provides loans and grants to less developed states to combat poverty by funding projects such as developing human capital, improving irrigation systems, or building roads. The World Bank also distributes grants to social enterprises that provide services to lower-income groups and communicates with other international organizations regarding protecting the environment and providing health services. The IMF and World Bank provide loans at a market rate of interest and, in both cases, the main condition of gaining a loan is to adjust the domestic economy to ensure the state can repay the debt (Bloor, 2022).

The two organizations have a mixed record of success. First, the IMF and the World Bank have helped to transform the economic situation facing states plagued by bad governance (such as military juntas in Latin American states). Brazil is a particularly good illustration of this argument. For a state that once suffered from hyperinflation, the gross domestic product (GDP) of the Brazilian economy overtook the U.K. in 2011. Second, market-based reforms championed by the IMF and the World Bank have lowered the cost of consumer goods and services. Allowing prices to be set by supply and demand is often preferable to wasteful policies from unaccountable elites. Financial assistance provided by the IMF and the World Bank may even have helped lift millions out of poverty (World Bank, 2018). For instance, economic growth in Central and Latin America has been considerable, while debt levels have been significantly lowered.

Yet structural reforms do not always lead to intended consequences. For instance, many former state-owned assets in Russia have links to oligarchs and organized crime (Bloor, 2022). As another example, structural adjustment policies in Argentina contributed to an economic crisis. By the late 1990s, Argentina faced a severe recession with high unemployment and high public debt. In 2001, to respond to the economic slowdown, the government of Argentina requested an IMF loan that came with conditions, such as the privatization of state-owned enterprises, deregulation, cuts to public sector wages, pensions, and restrictions on people's ability to withdraw cash from banks. The IMF reforms arguably deepened the crisis, leading to mass protests and riots.



Image 12.4.1: Argentinians protest the IMF and austerity policies in Buenos Aires, 2018. *(Source: "Buenos aires 24-10-18 / G20" by Santiago Sito is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.)*

Critical theorists additionally point out that SAPs have failed to break the economic dependence of periphery states on the core. The IMF and the World Bank ensure that states rich in natural resources remain locked in a system of economic dependence. For instance, the removal of protectionist trade policies within the periphery has benefited multinational companies (such as Walmart) and the vested interests of the wealthy (Bloor, 2022).

It is striking to consider, for instance, that several economies within sub-Saharan Africa have failed to develop in spite of implementing conditions imposed by the Washington Consensus. Most notably, the level of economic growth recorded within African states during the 1980s and 1990s fell *below* the figures recorded in previous decades.

The former Chief Economist of the World Bank, Joseph Stiglitz (2015), has been particularly critical of these institutions' "one size fits all" treatment of individual economies (Bloor, 2022). The standard, near-uniform policies implemented by these institutions undermine national sovereignty within the recipient states. Those who receive loans and grants are unable to implement economic policies most suitable for their own national development.

International Trade Institution

The **World Trade Organization (WTO)**, the 1995 successor organization to the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, is an intergovernmental organization with 166 member-states accounting for 98 percent of world trade. The WTO is responsible for the regulation of international trade in goods, services, and intellectual property. The WTO seeks to ensure that trade flows as smoothly, predictably, and freely as possible. The main objective of the WTO is to resolve disputes and thereby prevent trade wars between nations. It also provides a framework for negotiating trade agreements and ensuring that signatories adhere to them (Bloor, 2022). As a neutral arbiter, the WTO prevents the implementation of "beggar-thy-neighbor" protectionist policies. A **beggar-thy-neighbor policy** is an economic strategy where a state improves its own welfare by harming others, often leading to retaliation and leaving all states worse off.

Under the rules of the WTO, a state must treat all of its trading partners equally. This means that a trade advantage given to one state must be extended to all other trading partners. This is called the **Most Favored Nation (MFN)** principle. For example, if a state lowers a tariff for one WTO member, it must give the same benefit to all members. Exceptions exist for free trade agreements, customs unions, and circumstances relating to national security and environmental protection. The WTO, therefore, provides a more welcoming domain for the conduct of global trade. In doing so, the organization helps reduce transaction costs, resulting in a significant increase in international trade since the 1990s. World trade as a percentage of GDP rose from around 40 percent in 1990 to 57 percent in 2024 (World Bank, 2025) due to the WTO's efforts to reduce protectionist policies (Bloor, 2022).

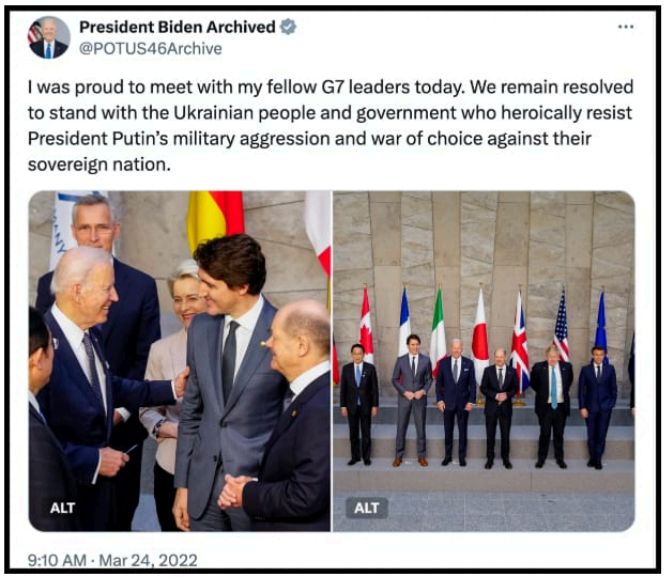


Image 12.4.2: In an example of invoking national security exceptions to the MFN principle, U.S. President Joe Biden coordinated with the European Union and other G7 countries to collectively revoke MFN status from Russia and Belarus in response to the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. The text reads: "I was proud to meet with my fellow G7 leaders today. We remain resolved to stand with the Ukrainian people and government who heroically resist President Putin's military aggression and war of choice against their sovereign nation." *(Source: Screenshot of a post on X by @POTUS46Archive beginning, "I was proud to meet with my fellow G7 leaders today" with images in the public domain.)*

However, the WTO faces harsh criticism for exacerbating global inequality by promoting multinational companies' interests at the expense of low- and middle-income states. As examples, agreements reached in the fields of agriculture and health restrict access to food and medicine; the inflexible MFN principle contributes to lost export revenue among the least developed states; rich economies maintain import duties and quotas, while less developed states cannot protect their own infant industries; negotiations favor the developed states because the developing and emerging economies lack the ability to participate on an effective basis; and WTO-imposed policies dismantle government welfare programs within less developed states, contributing to economic damage and food insecurity (Bloor, 2022).

Regional Trade Agreements

Because the WTO faces difficulties in finding consensus between developed and developing states, states often turn to regional and bilateral trade agreements. A **regional trade agreement (RTA)** is a trade agreement between two or more states designed to facilitate trade by reducing tariff and non-tariff barriers. Examples include the US-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA), the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR), the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) Agreement; the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN); the Pacific Alliance between Chile, Colombia, Mexico and Peru; and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA).

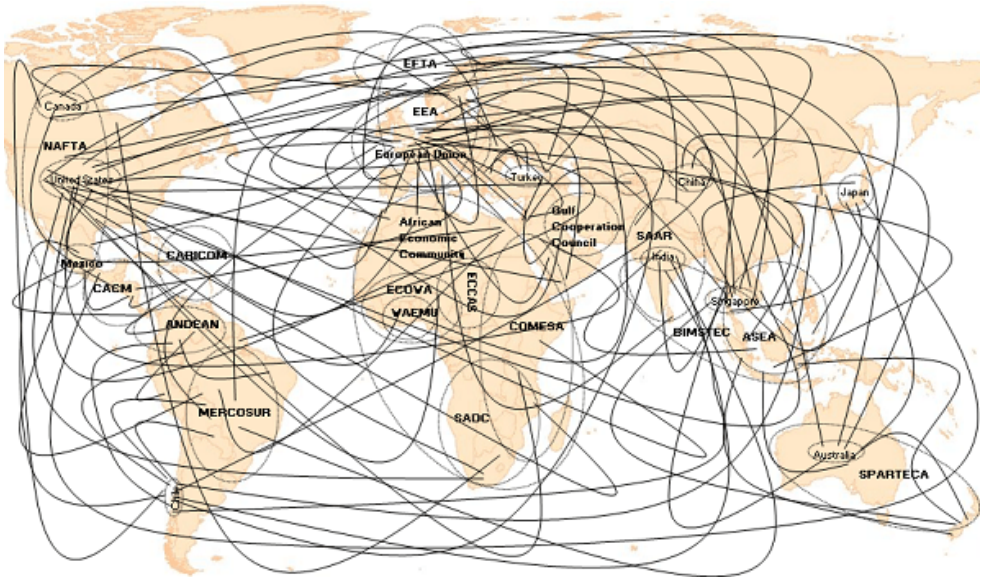


Image 12.4.3: An illustration of the “spaghetti bowl” nature of international investment agreements, including regional trade agreements. (Source: “File:IIA Spaghetti Bowl.png” by Cyclotour09 is licensed under CC BY 3.0.)

As of January 2025, 373 RTAs were in force, compared to 100 RTAs in 2000 (World Trade Organization, n.d.). The World Trade Organization (n.d.) refers to this growing number as the “spaghetti bowl of RTAs” to describe the complex and overlapping nature of these agreements.

RTAs vary in scope and depth. In a free trade agreement (FTAs), member states reduce or eliminate tariffs on trade among the members but each member maintains its own external tariffs on trade with non-members (e.g., USMCA). In a customs union, member states additionally harmonize external tariffs on trade with non-members (e.g., MERCOSUR). In a common market, member states allow for the free movement of goods, services, capital, and labor (e.g., European Economic Area). In an economic or monetary union, member states may additionally adopt a common currency (e.g., member states of the European Union that participate in the Eurozone).

FTAs represent the first step in economic cooperation as they focus on reducing trade barriers between states, while economic and monetary unions represent the deepest level of integration between states. When states integrate into an economic or monetary union, they pool some aspects of their sovereignty for economic benefit.

The impact of RTAs on global economic cooperation remains uncertain; they may serve as either a stepping-stone or a barrier. While the number of RTAs has grown, global trade negotiations have stalled, and protectionism is rising in some industries. Even though the WTO reduced tariffs significantly, harmonizing national regulations and guaranteeing mutual market access remains challenging. To achieve higher growth rates, enhance consumer choice, and create more jobs, hidden trade barriers need to be tackled more effectively on the global level. Critics worry that trade agreements could harm labor standards, worker rights, income distribution, and environmental sustainability (Walzenbach, 2017).

Multinational Corporations

While the study of international relations often focuses on the behavior of states, who could have predicted that multinational corporations such as Apple or Alphabet would earn annual revenues greater than the GDP of some states? The movement of global capital and goods points to the porous nature of state boundaries (Bloor, 2022).

Today, **multinational corporations (MNCs)**, private businesses that operate and hold assets in at least two states, dominate, accounting for almost two-thirds of global trade (Conconi, 2024). MNCs influence state sovereignty by leveraging their massive economic power and mobility to pressure governments into altering domestic laws, such as tax, labor, and environmental regulations, to remain competitive in a global market. MNCs participate in international markets in multiple ways. First, MNCs may move their manufacturing operations to a different state to avoid tariffs and to reduce transportation costs, as Toyota did in the 1960s when it moved some of its manufacturing to California. Second, MNCs might be incentivized to move their operations to a foreign market through tax incentives. From the 1990s through 2020, MNCs like Apple and Facebook used the “Double Irish with

Dutch Sandwich" tax strategy to avoid a 35 percent U.S. corporate tax, rerouting their profits through Ireland's 12.5 percent rate (Boller, Luo, & Sun, 2024). Third, MNCs might invest directly in a foreign state because of the state's lower labor costs. Chinese MNCs moved their manufacturing to Vietnam, for example, while U.S. MNCs moved to India and Mexico to cut production costs.



Image 12.4.4: Google's campus in Dublin, Ireland's "Silicon Docks." *(Source: "GOOGLE DUBLIN [EU HQ]-117258" by infomatique is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0.)*

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12.5: IR in the Real World

In 2013, China launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Originally, the BRI was designed as a regional project to connect China's commercial centers with underdeveloped regions and neighboring states. Under this project, Chinese state-owned banks and companies financed and built power plants, pipelines, railways, highways, sea ports, and other critical infrastructure. In a few years, the BRI turned into a global investment project stretching to South America, Africa, Oceania, and Europe. The BRI also diversified its investment portfolio to include high-tech areas, such as telecommunications, fiber-optic cables, smart cities, cloud computing, e-commerce, and surveillance technology. Today, 147 states are part of the BRI or have expressed an interest in being part of the project (McBride, Berman, & Chatzky, 2023). Under this project alone, China has already spent more than $1 trillion, making it the world's largest debt collector, and the project is expected to reach over $8 trillion (Feingold, 2023).

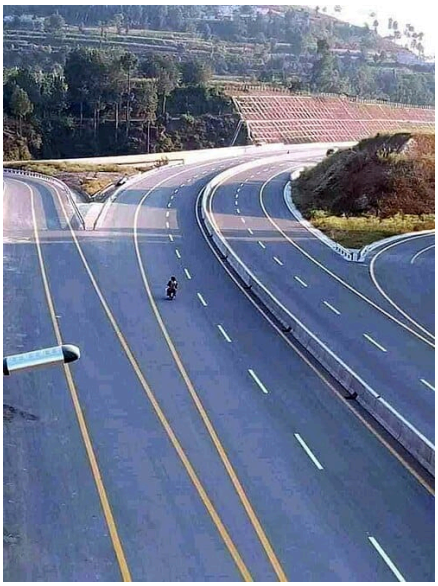


Image 12.5.1: The Hazara Motorway at Mansehra is part of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a major developed land corridor in China's Belt and Road Initiative. *(Source: "Under Construction at Mansehra" by Muhammad Umair Gondal is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0.)*

China's expansion through the BRI raises many concerns. First, while promoting international trade and cooperation, the BRI gives China a disproportionate amount of leverage over the recipient states. Second, since BRI funding comes from Chinese state-owned banks, states taking on large debts to finance infrastructure projects find themselves economically dependent. The BRI already faces opposition in some states (such as Ghana, Laos, Sri Lanka, and Zambia), where governments struggle with unsustainable debt incurred under the BRI, resulting in dependency and loss of sovereignty. Third, by offering alternative funding sources, the BRI undermines the power of Western financial institutions, such as the IMF and the World Bank. However, supporters of the BRI see it as a path to economic growth for states that otherwise would have struggled to attract foreign direct investment.

To counterbalance China's BRI, several states have launched their own competing projects, but none of them come close to the BRI's scope and ambition. U.S. President Trump's BUILD Act (2018) and President Biden's Build Back Better World Initiative (2021), as examples, were introduced to compete with China's BRI. In 2021, both Japan and the EU also introduced their own investment projects, but all of them fell far behind the BRI's investment portfolio (McBride, et al, 2023).

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12.6: Conclusion

The study of international political economy focuses on the relationship between economic power and political power. Since the end of World War II, cooperation and interdependence have been viewed as prerequisites for peace and prosperity. To promote economic ties, states built a network of international institutions and trade agreements. Such economic interdependence resulted in more trade, more global prosperity, less global poverty, and less destructive wars. The arrival of the global recession in 2008, the COVID pandemic in 2020, and the war in Ukraine in 2022 made states weary of economic interdependence. Politicians around the globe turned to populist rhetoric, talking about “decoupling” and “economic independence.” Under internal pressure from domestic groups, governments introduced protectionist measures, such as tariffs.

A stable global financial system requires cooperation between states to ensure stability. Who can provide such stability? Some argue that a hegemon, such as the U.S. in the post-World War II era, is best positioned to lead. Others contend that to avoid unilateral dominance, multilateral institutions (e.g., International Monetary Fund, World Bank) are better positioned to coordinate collective action among individual states. Yet cooperation need not always take place on a global scale. Regional cooperation can also be effective--the European Union and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations are such examples.

Recent global challenges—such as rising inequality, climate change, and an increasingly multipolar international system—have led some to question whether traditional economic mechanisms are sufficient. This raises the possibility that we may need a new world order based on a fresh set of values, such as prioritizing sustainability, equity, and multilateral cooperation to address the complex realities of today’s interconnected financial system. In this evolving context, the future of global financial stability may depend on rethinking the roles of states, institutions, and global or regional agreements.

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12.7: Student Resources

Summary

International trade is usually viewed through the lens of three theories. Mercantilism views trade as a zero-sum game, where one state's gain is another state's loss. To protect domestic industries and maintain positive trade balances, mercantilism advocates for policies that maximize a state's exports and minimize imports, usually through protectionist measures. Liberalism takes a more optimistic view of international trade, arguing that trade can be mutually beneficial for all states involved and promoting comparative advantage—the idea that states should specialize in the goods and services they produce most efficiently. This theory favors free trade and open markets. The Marxist approach views international trade as a mechanism for exploitation; the global capitalist system keeps developing states dependent on and subordinated to wealthier states, perpetuating inequality and underdevelopment.

International finance includes currency exchange systems. The first is the fixed exchange rate system where currencies were tied to the U.S. dollar, which in turn was pegged to gold. The second is the floating exchange rate system, which allows exchange rates to fluctuate freely depending on the market forces, leading to potential volatility and even currency crises, but allowing states to have more flexibility in their monetary policies. The third is the managed float exchange rate system which represents a middle ground between fixed and floating rates. In this system, states maintain their currencies within a certain range but allow for occasional adjustment by the government.

Numerous international actors affect the international political economy. These include the three major international institutions (the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization), state participation in regional trade agreements, and multinational corporations.

Key Terms

- **Absolute advantage** exists when a state can produce a product more efficiently (i.e., with fewer resources and/or less time) than another state.
- **Balance of trade** measures the difference between a state's imports and exports.
- **Beggar-thy-neighbor policy** is an economic strategy where a state improves its own welfare by harming others, often leading to retaliation and leaving all states worse off.
- **Bretton Woods system** is an international monetary framework agreed to in 1944 at the Bretton Woods Conference by representatives of the Allied states, including the development of the International Bank of Reconstruction and Development (the lending arm of the World Bank) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).
- **BRICS** (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) is a multilateral bloc of states with emerging markets that cooperate on economic issues to counterbalance the dominance of the wealthy industrialized states.
- **Comparative advantage** is when a state specializes in the production of goods in which it has the lowest opportunity cost.
- **Dependency theory** describes the world as a system of hierarchical division of labor where states are classified as "core" and "periphery" and asserts that exploitation of the periphery by the core is the main cause of global poverty.
- **Devaluation** is a deliberate step by a government to bring down the value of its currency by manipulating the currency's exchange rate, printing more money, reducing interest rates, or increasing lending to domestic businesses.
- **Discount rate** is the interest rate set by central banks to lend money to commercial banks.
- **Dumping** is a technique of predatory pricing, or selling goods in a foreign market at a loss-making price to undercut competitors and force them out of business.
- **Economic nationalism** is a modern form of mercantilism, in which policies protect jobs and domestic producers, promoting national security and self-reliance.
- **Exports** are goods and services sold to foreign states.
- **Fiscal policy** is used to shape a state's budget through government spending and tax revenues.
- **Fixed exchange rate**, or pegged exchange, is a system in which states tie their currency to the value of another currency, usually the U.S. dollar or the Euro.
- **Floating exchange rate** is a system in which a currency's value floats freely, without direct intervention from the state's central bank, and its value is determined by market forces, such as the currency's supply and demand, inflation, and interest rate.
- **Gold standard** was the prevailing currency exchange system by the early 20th century, in which national currencies were

evaluated in relation to gold.
- **Hyperinflation** is when the prices of goods and services increase by more than 50 percent per month.
- **Imports** are goods and services bought from a foreign state.
- **International Monetary Fund (IMF)** is an international financial institution stemming from the Bretton Woods Conference (1944) that is responsible for the stability of the world's monetary system.
- **Keynesian economic theory** argues that the government can play a positive role in the economy, especially during economic downturns, by focusing on demand through its monetary and fiscal policies.
- **Managed float exchange rate system** is a system in which the currency floats freely, but the central bank occasionally intervenes when the currency's value inflates or drops too drastically.
- **Mercantilism** is an economic strategy that views the balance of trade as a key economic indicator of a state's prosperity and power, and strives for a positive balance of trade (trade surplus).
- **Monetary policy** is a tool used to influence the economy through interest rates and the supply of the national currency.
- **Most Favored Nation (MFN)** is the WTO's principle requiring a state to treat its trading partner no less favorably than it treats any other trading partner.
- **Multinational corporations (MNCs)** are private businesses that operate and hold assets in at least two states.
- **National currency** is the system of money in general use in a particular state.
- **Non-tariff barriers** are protectionist measures, such as regulations and inspections requiring imported goods to meet specific technical, environmental, safety, and legal standards, effectively restricting the flow of foreign goods into a state.
- **Opportunity cost**, in international trade, is a potential benefit that a state gives up if it decides to produce a certain good.
- **Quotas** are protectionist measures that limit the quantity of specific goods imported into a state.
- **Regional trade agreement (RTA)** is a trade agreement between two or more states designed to facilitate trade by reducing tariff and non-tariff barriers.
- **Short-term gains** refer to immediate economic benefits, rather than long-term sustainable gains.
- **Structural adjustment program (SAP)** is a condition for securing IMF or World Bank funding, in which a state must adopt economic reform policies, such as austerity measures, trade liberalization, or depreciation of the exchange rate.
- **Tariffs** are protectionist measures in the form of taxes on imports, which increase the price of foreign goods and encourage residents to buy from domestic producers.
- **Trade deficit** occurs if a state imports more than it exports, giving it a negative balance of trade.
- **Trade surplus** occurs if a state exports more than it imports, giving it a positive balance of trade.
- **Washington Consensus** is a set of market-based economic policies, such as privatization and deregulation, promoted by the IMF and the World Bank.
- **World Bank** is an international financial institution that offers financial assistance to developing states.
- **World Trade Organization (WTO)** is an intergovernmental organization responsible for the regulation of international trade in goods, services, and intellectual property.

Critical Thinking Questions

1. Mercantilism, liberalism, and Marxism have different views on international trade. Which theoretical approach makes the most sense to you? Why?
2. How has the Ukraine-Russia War reshaped global economic interdependence, and does it challenge the idea that trade reduces the risk of conflict? Consider the roles of energy markets, supply chains, food aid, and sanctions in your analysis.
3. In what ways do international financial institutions, such as the IMF and the World Bank, affect the sovereignty of nations? Can their policies promote global stability or do they contribute to the growing inequality?
4. Does the Belt and Road Initiative represent a new form of mercantilism, where China prioritizes its own economic dominance? Or is it a tool of economic globalization that benefits all participating states? How can we measure its long-term impact on global trade and economic power?

Suggestions for Further Study

Websites

- World Bank
- International Monetary Fund
- World Trade Organization
- Council for Foreign Relations: Economics Section

Articles

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13: INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

13.1: Introduction
13.2: Development Measures
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13.1: Introduction

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to:

- Critique the disparities between the Global North and the Global South.
- Appraise a state's level of economic development by applying various measurements of development.
- Identify basic human needs and describe the Global South's progress to meet those needs.
- Identify key environmental challenges and international responses/policies to remedy the problems.
- Design and defend a development strategy for a specific developing country.

The field of international development emerged as the post-war reconstruction effort following World War II. It has since evolved into global initiatives, such as the Millennium Development Goals and Sustainable Development Goals (discussed later in this chapter). Between 1990 and 2020, extreme poverty rates fell from 36 to eight percent. Maternal, infant, and child mortality rates fell by one-half, and life expectancy rose from 65 to 72 years. The international and medical communities defeated smallpox, eliminated polio in all but two states, cut deaths from malaria by one-half, and saved 17 million lives from HIV/AIDS (Ingram, 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and the rise of authoritarianism worldwide disrupted the upward trend toward economic and social development. How soon will the international community recommit to its development goals?

This chapter reviews development measures, goals, and policies aiming to reduce poverty, increase economic growth, improve health and education, and promote sustainable development. The chapter explores the persistent economic disparities between wealthy and low-income states, assessing the role and effectiveness of foreign aid, foreign direct investments, and international institutions in promoting development. Before this, however, the chapter briefly reviews the theoretical approaches and key vocabulary.

Theoretical Approaches

International development is one aspect of the field of international political economy (IPE). As discussed in Chapter 12, the dominant approach to studying IPE is liberalism, emphasizing free markets, trade, and cooperation. Liberalism argues that open markets, free trade, and economic integration bring prosperity, and neo-liberal policies push for privatization, deregulation, and free trade (for a review of liberalism, see Chapter 4).

Marxism and feminism criticize liberalism by pointing out that its policies often worsen inequalities within and between states. Marxists argue that economic structures favor the wealthy, reinforcing economic inequalities between states. Feminists argue that capitalism embeds gender inequalities and, therefore, market-based policies reinforce economic inequalities within states. In short, both critiques offer an observation that as powerful states become wealthier, poor states become poorer.

From the 1800s to the 1980s, global inequality (inequality between states) grew due to colonialism and industrialization in the West. In the 1980s, global inequality started to decrease due to the economic rise of China and India, which lifted millions out of poverty. Yet while global inequality started to decrease in the 1980s, inequality *within* states increased, particularly in states with advanced economies. Why is such economic inequality a concern?

As constructivists point out, inequality is bad not only for low-income states, but also for wealthy states, as it can lead to the spread of diseases, refugee crises, and instability. Creating a stable future for the world therefore requires going beyond the tenets of liberalism by addressing economic disparity, achieving gender equality, and finding collective identity and shared norms.

Key Vocabulary

When discussing international development, scholars use various terms. In the past, states with lower income levels—particularly those within Asia, Africa, and Latin America—were labeled as "Third World" or "underdeveloped." In contrast, states with wealthier economies—mainly in North America, Western Europe, and later in East Asia—were referred to as "First World" or "developed." The term "Third World" was coined during the Cold War to refer to states that were not aligned with either the Western bloc, led

by the United States (the “First World”), or the Eastern bloc, led by the Soviet Union (the “Second World”). Meanwhile, the term “underdeveloped” reflected a Eurocentric view of industrial and technological backwardness, implying inferiority and failure. Over time, observers rejected these labels as derogatory and pejorative.

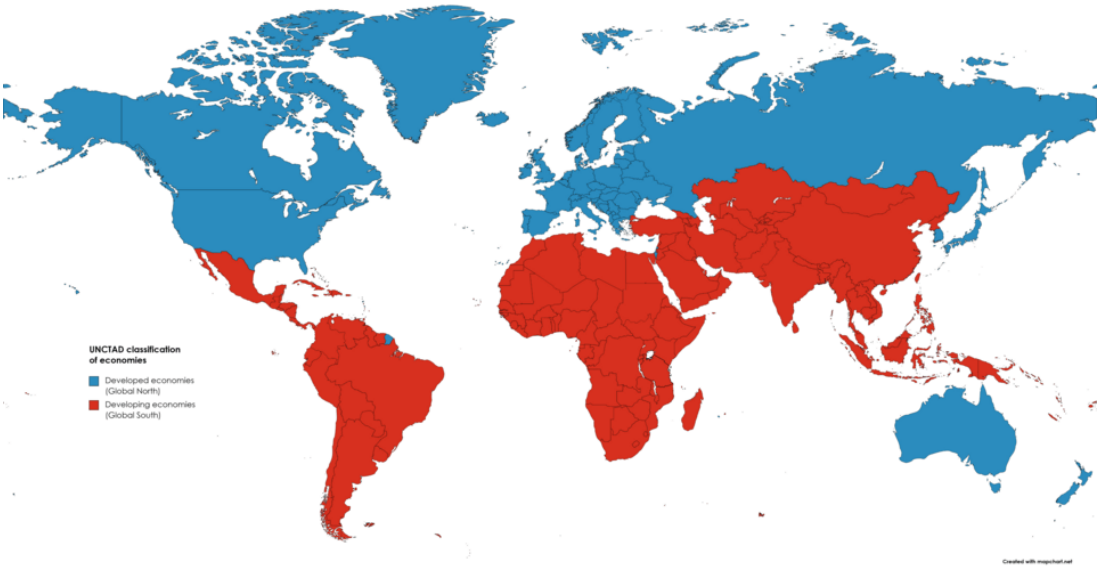


Image 13.1.1: This map illustrates the Global North and Global South based on the UN's classification of developed and developing economies, rather than strictly geographic distinctions. *(Source: "World map. UNCTAD classification of economies" by Specialgst - created with mapchart.net based on UN Trade and Development Classifications (UNCTADstat) / UNCTAD Handbook of Statistics 2023 is licensed CC BY-SA 4.0.)*

By the 1990s, scholars adopted the **Global North** and **Global South** as more neutral terminology to refer to the global division in wealth. As illustrated in the world map above, the Global North refers to states with higher living standards, longer life expectancies, higher employment numbers, and more advanced infrastructure. Approximately 25 percent of the world’s population lives in the Global North, while controlling about 80 percent of the world’s wealth. The **Global South** refers to states with lower income levels, less industrialization, less infrastructure, struggling economies, less advanced healthcare, and poorer education. Approximately 75 percent of the world’s population lives in the Global South, while controlling about 20 percent of the world’s wealth. The terms Global South and Global North are not strictly geographical. For example, Australia and New Zealand, though located in the Southern Hemisphere, are part of the Global North; China, despite its rapid economic growth and global influence, is still part of the Global South because of its persistent rural poverty and developmental disparities. The **North-South Gap**, then, refers to the persistent disparity in wealth, development, and power between the world’s economically advanced states (Global North) and the less economically developed states (Global South).

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13.2: Development Measures

States measure their development by a variety of economic and social indicators. The **gross domestic product per capita (GDP per capita)** is the most common indicator to measure a state's economic activity. GDP refers to the total value of goods and services produced within a state in a given year. To calculate GDP per capita, the state's GDP is divided by its population size. GDP and GDP per capita tell us two different stories. The GDP by itself shows us the size of the state's economy, while adjusting GDP for population size shows us the living standards and development. For example, as of 2024, India and Japan have equally sized economies in terms of GDP: India's GDP is $3.9 trillion, and Japan's GDP is $4 trillion. But they differ significantly in their GDP per capita due to the differences in the population size: India's GDP per capita is $2,700, while Japan's GDP per capita is $32,500 (World Bank 2025b).

One problem with using GDP per capita as a measure of economic development is that it does not account for differences in the cost of living across different places. For example, a person can stretch $2 per day much further in a poor state than in a wealthy state. To address this problem, economists developed the **Purchasing Power Parity (PPP)**, a method that considers the differences in the real cost of living across states by comparing the price of specific goods in different states. To account for differences in purchasing power, it is common for researchers to use GDP per capita, adjusted for PPP, as an indicator of development. If using GDP per capita, adjusted for PPP, the gap between India and Japan's economic development changes: India's GDP per capita at PPP is $11,000, while Japan's GDP per capita at PPP is $51,000.

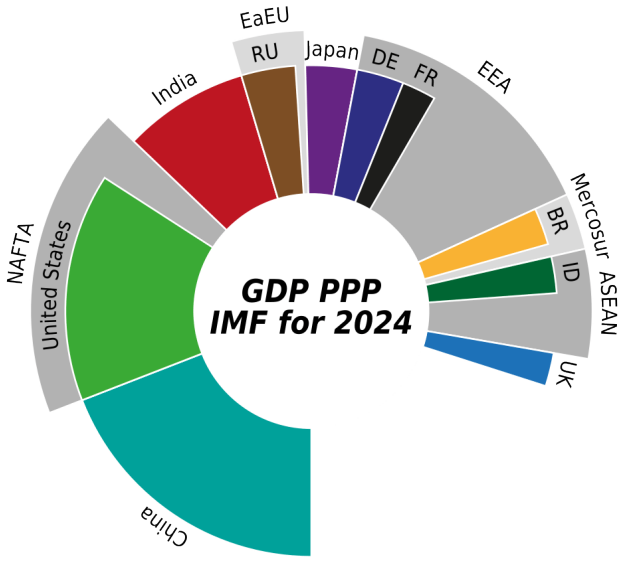


Image 13.2.1: GDP (PPP), gross domestic product based on purchasing power parity, for 10 countries and trading blocs, based on International Monetary Fund estimates for 2024. *(Source: "GDP PPP 2024 Selection" by Aeroid is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0.)*

In the 1960s, economists became concerned that the existing measures of development only focused on the economic aspects, rather than the broader idea of quality of life. GDP per capita, measured at PPP, for instance, does not tell an observer *how* a state allocates its income. How much of its budget does a state allocate to public health and education? Does a state prioritize debt repayment and military spending over health and education?

As a result of these concerns, Pakistani economist Mahbub ul Haq, while working at the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), created the **Human Development Index (HDI)**, a development indicator that integrates economic and social factors. The HDI is a composite score based on three factors within a state: life expectancy, average years of schooling per adult, and gross national income (GNI) per capita (the total income earned by a state's residents, including income earned abroad). A high HDI score means that a state has a high income, healthy, and well-educated population. Researchers also use the HDI score to separate the Global North from the Global South; states of the Global North score above 0.8, while states of the Global South score at or below 0.8.

The HDI ranking provides a more comprehensive picture of the concept of development than an economic indicator alone, and it opens up discussion surrounding national policy choices. How, or why, do states with a similar GDP per capita end up with different human development outcomes? Table 13.1 provides a few select comparisons.

Table 13.1: Comparing Development Indicators

State	GDP per capita *(2024, World Bank 2025b)*	HDI *(2023, UNDP n.d.)*
Kuwait	$32,213	.85
Spain	$35,291	.92
Turkey	$15,473	.85
United States	$85,800	.93

As Table 13.1 shows, the United States' GDP per capita is more than twice as high as Spain's GDP per capita, yet the two states' HDI scores are relatively similar. Similarly, Kuwait's GDP per capita is twice as high as Turkey's GDP per capita, yet their HDI scores are identical. These contrasts can stimulate debate about government policy priorities.

Though the HDI provides a more detailed picture of a state's level of development, it still does not account for inequality in a society. To measure income inequality, Italian statistician Corrado Gini developed the **Gini coefficient**. The Gini coefficient indicates how equally a state's wealth is distributed within a society. Ranging from zero to one, a score of zero indicates perfect equality in a society (i.e., all individuals have the same amount of wealth), while a score of one indicates ultimate inequality (one individual controls all wealth in a state). Only seven percent of the global population lives in countries with low inequality (World Bank 2024b).

The **Gender Development Index (GDI)**, another indicator developed by UNDP economists, specifically examines gender inequalities on the three major components of the HDI (economic, health, and education indicators). A high GDI score means strong levels of gender equality. Females in countries with a low GDI score tend to struggle the most. Yemen has the lowest GDI at 0.40, as the standard of living for men is ten times higher than for women (measured as gross national income, GNI, per capita, adjusted for PPP). Men also have twice as many years of schooling as women. In contrast, Qatar has the highest GDI at 1.04. While Qatari men's standard of living is twice as high as that for women, Qatari women have more years of schooling.



Image 13.2.2: Students participate in a seminar-style class at Northwestern University in Qatar. *(Source: "Class at Northwestern University in Qatar" by Speakmind is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0.)*.

There are many other development indicators, such as social mobility scores, environmental sustainability indicators, and even a Gross National Happiness indicator. Each indicator may be appropriate depending on an observer's goal of development, and each has its advantages and disadvantages. How states measure economic development is important because it determines what

strategies states adopt to develop. If a state uses economic indicators to measure its development, its policies will prioritize economic growth; if a state uses social indicators to measure its development, its policies will emphasize health, education, and gender equality. Using multiple indicators can produce the most comprehensive picture of a state's development.

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13.3: Development Goals

Having explored how researchers measure economic development, we can now explore policies aimed to translate these measurements into concrete development policy objectives. Since the end of World War II, large-scale interstate conflicts became less common, while poverty-related causes, such as malnutrition, diseases, lack of sanitation, and hunger, remained the leading causes of death in the Global South. According to ReliefWeb (2022), humanitarian organizations estimate that one person dies from hunger every four seconds. At the same time, global military spending reached a total of $2,443 billion (Tian, et al., 2024). Poverty affects and kills more people than wars, yet it receives less attention than wartime violence, likely due to its chronic and visually less dramatic nature. How has the international community tried to address this far-reaching problem?

Millennium Development Goals

In 2000, the United Nations (UN, 2015) adopted the **Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)**, which identified the following eight goals to achieve by the target date of 2015:

1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger.
2. Achieve universal primary education.
3. Promote gender equality and empower women.
4. Reduce child mortality.
5. Improve maternal health.
6. Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases.
7. Ensure environmental sustainability.
8. Develop a global partnership for development.

The international community achieved substantial progress in reducing child mortality, improving maternal health, and combatting HIV/AIDS and malaria in the Global South, saving at least 21 million lives, mostly in Sub-Saharan Africa, China, and India. In addition, as many as an estimated 111 million more people completed primary school due to MDG efforts. However, the international community struggled to meet the targets related to the first goal: eradicating extreme poverty and hunger (a topic we will return to in the following section).



Image 13.3.1: Widespread frustrations with limited progress on the Millennium Development Goals led to the “Global Call to Action against Poverty” movement and worldwide protests, including this one held in London in 2010. *(Source: "keepyourpromisescbondtallis2010" by bondngo is licensed under CC BY-NC 2.0.)*



Image 13.3.2: This infographic produced in 2014 by the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation expressed both the successes and frustrations of the Millennium Development Goals as the 2015 goal deadline neared. The text notes that while "extreme poverty rates have been cut in half since 1990," "worldwide 1 in 8 people remain hungry." *(Source: "MDG-infographic-1" by noradno is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.)*

Sustainable Development Goals

Following the conclusion of the MDGs in 2015, the UN launched the **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)** as the new global development framework, with a target date of 2030. Unlike the eight MDGs, which focused in large part on poverty reduction and applied mainly to developing countries, the SDGs consist of 17 goals that apply to all states, regardless of income level. The 17 goals have a stronger focus on climate action, biodiversity, peace, inequality, and responsible consumption and production. The main idea behind sustainable development is for countries to grow and develop to meet their present-day needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. The SDGs recognize that climate change poses a risk to poverty and inequality reduction, as poorer countries and people are more likely to be negatively affected by climate change (World Bank, 2024b).



Image 13.3.3: United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon and others promote the 17 Sustainable Development Goals at a 2016 UN Chief Executive Board meeting in Vienna. *(Source: "Sustainable Development Goals (9495)" by IAEA Imagebank is*

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In terms of implementation, the SDG agenda is also more inclusive as it involves local governments, NGOs, and businesses. Ten years after the adoption of the SDG framework, UN agencies reported that only 17 percent of SDG targets are on track to be achieved by 2030 (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2024), creating even more urgency for action at all levels of society.

Economic development is often referred to as a double-edged sword because in the process of improving the standard of living, economic development degrades the environment, which is needed to sustain development in the long-term. As global incomes rise, especially in emerging economies, dietary patterns shift toward greater consumption of animal-based foods, such as meat and dairy products. This dietary transition has significant environmental implications. Livestock production is a major contributor to **greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions**, such as carbon dioxide and methane, that trap heat in the atmosphere and accelerate global warming. In addition, increased demand for food contributes to **deforestation**, the large-scale conversion of forests into commercial use for agriculture, urban development, and mining, and **defaunation**, the extinction or dramatic reduction in animal species and populations in the ecosystem (we will return to this in section 13.6). Deforestation disrupts ecosystems, reduces biodiversity, contributes to climate change by releasing carbon dioxide stored in trees, and often leads to soil erosion and habitat loss for plants and animals. Thus, the right question is not just how states can achieve economic growth, but how states can achieve economic growth without destroying the environment in the process.

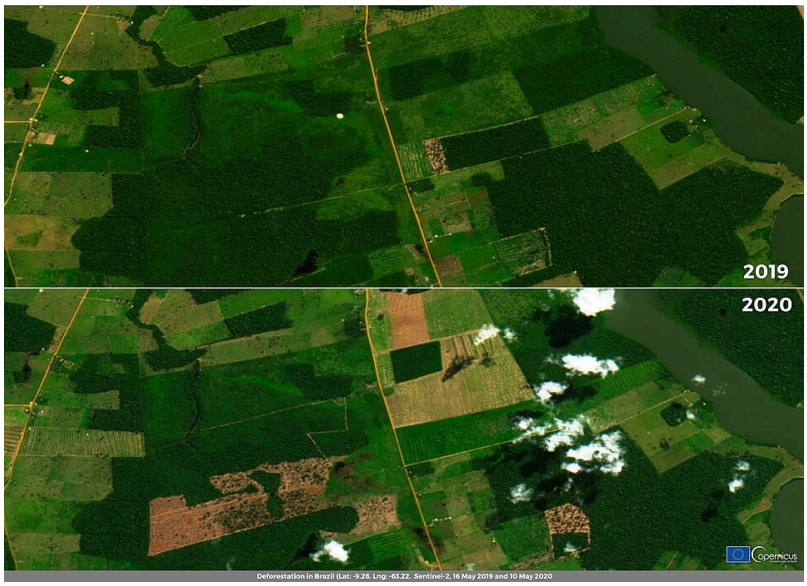


Image 13.3.4: Two satellite images acquired one year apart in the area southeast of Porto Velho provide evidence of the recent rapid escalation of deforestation in Brazil. *(Source: "Deforestation in Brazil" by European Union Contains modified Copernicus Sentinel data 2020.)*

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13.4: Poverty and Hunger

In both the MDGs and the SDGs, eradicating poverty and hunger are the top goals, and this section examines the extent of these two interrelated problems.

Measuring Poverty and Hunger

According to the World Bank (2025), the international poverty line is $3.00 per person per day. This number reflects the cost of meeting basic needs (e.g., being able to afford clothing, food, and shelter) in the poorest states. If a person falls below the international poverty line, they live in **extreme poverty**, also referred to as "abject poverty" and "absolute poverty." In 2024, 8.5 percent of the world's population (about 700 million people) lived in extreme poverty (at this time, the international poverty line was $2.15 per person per day), with 75 percent located in Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, or in conflict-affected countries, such as Afghanistan and South Sudan. Based on 2024 data, 44 percent of the global population (about 3.5 billion people) lived on less than $6.85 per day, the poverty line for upper-middle-income countries (World Bank, 2024b). In 2025, the poverty line for these upper-middle-income states increased to $8.30.

Until the early 1990s, the states of the Asian continent had the highest number and rate of poor people. For example, in the 1980s, 80 percent of China's population lived below poverty, but by 2021, this number dropped to 17 percent. Other states in the region, such as India, Cambodia, East Timor, Indonesia, and Vietnam have also been successful in reducing poverty. In contrast, the poverty level in the states of Sub-Saharan Africa remained mostly unchanged since the 1990s. Since 2011, Sub-Saharan Africa has been the region with the highest and growing share of the world's extreme poor, highlighting stark regional differences in progress toward poverty reduction. Examining government policies that resulted in these successes and failures can help to identify strategies for the effective eradication of poverty.

While extreme poverty reflects an individual's inability to meet basic survival needs, **relative poverty** captures inequality within a state, referring to the condition in which individuals lack the "resources to participate adequately in [their] society as it progresses" (World Bank, 2023). To measure relative poverty, a researcher ranks the entire population by income, then considers anyone who falls below a certain percentile (e.g., the share of the population below 50 percent of the median income in a given state) as living in relative poverty. This measure aims to describe an individual's living condition relative to others living in the same state.

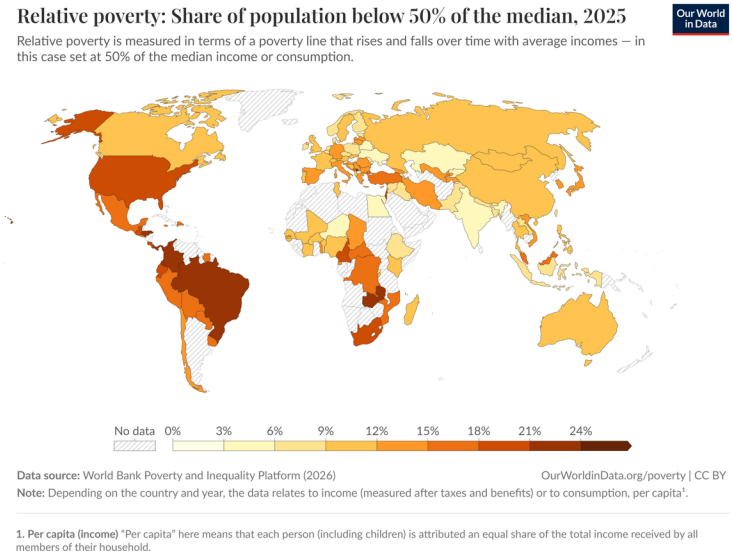


Image 13.4.1: Map showing the percentage of each state's population living below 50 percent of the median income within that state. *(Source: "Relative poverty: Share of population below 50% of the median, 2024" by World Bank, Poverty and Inequality Platform (PIP) is licensed under CC BY 4.0.)*

Hunger is the most immediate and devastating effect of poverty. **Food insecurity**, one cause of hunger, refers to a lack of reliable access to sufficient and nutritious food. When food scarcity becomes widespread and reaches catastrophic levels within a concentrated geographical area, the government or international organizations may declare a **famine**. Official declarations of famines require three conditions within a state: (1) 20 percent of the state's households face extreme food shortages, (2) more than 30 percent of the population suffers from acute malnutrition, and (3) at least two out of 10,000 people die each day due to hunger. According to the World Food Program, famine was officially declared in Somalia (2011), South Sudan (2017), Sudan (2024), and Gaza (2025).



Image 13.4.2: A girl walking to get food in Gaza in August 2024. *(Source: "A girl walks inside Gaza during the Gaza-Israel war to get food" by Jaber Jehad Badwan is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0.)*

(Select) Causes of Poverty and Hunger

Why does poverty and hunger persist in the Global South? There are many reasons, and this section focuses on only a few select answers to this question.

First, colonialism placed the Global South at disadvantage when it comes to poverty and hunger. Traditionally, precolonial societies engaged in subsistence farming, the type of agriculture in which farmers grow food for their own consumption rather than for export to foreign markets. Crops produced for farmers' own use are called **subsistence crops**, such as wheat, rice, fruits, and vegetables, and help to ensure local food security. Under colonialism, farmers were forced to replace subsistence crops with cash crops. **Cash crops** are crops grown for export, such as tobacco, cotton, cocoa, rubber, and coffee. When farmers were forced to focus on cash crops, they had less land and labor to produce food for local consumption, increasing vulnerability to hunger if market prices fell or if crops failed. This pattern of commercial agriculture continues today under the policies of free trade. Many states of the Global South point out that the World Trade Organization (WTO) exacerbates this dynamic by pushing small, low-income states to open their markets to Western goods while ignoring agricultural subsidies in the Western industrialized states. These dynamics reduce local food availability and income stability, leaving rural communities more prone to poverty and famine when shocks such as droughts or price fluctuations on the world market occur.

Second, conflict is one of the leading causes of poverty and hunger. Wars disrupt food production and supply chains, uproot communities from their homes, and destroy infrastructure. As an example, Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 did not just impact Europe, but had a rippling effect on the global food supply chain. Russia and Ukraine are both major exporters of wheat, corn, and fertilizers. The Ukraine-Russia conflict brought shipments out of Ukraine to a standstill, pushing millions of people into hunger in the Global South. Moreover, today's epicenters of hunger are in states torn by violent conflicts, such as Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Haiti, South Sudan, Sudan, and Yemen.



Image 13.4.3: A wheat field near the Illinivka village in the Donetsk region of Ukraine after Russian shelling on July 17, 2023. *(Source: "Burnt wheat field in Illinivka, 2023-07-17 (1)" by National Police of Ukraine is licensed under CC BY 4.0.)*

Third, a state's political regime—and the resulting policies from its government—may influence levels of poverty and hunger. As one example, Nobel Prize-winning Indian economist Amartya Sen (1981), in a study of the Bengal famine of 1943, concluded that "famines are caused by the disruption in communication." More specifically, he argued that shortfalls in food supply do not cause widespread deaths in a democracy because vote-seeking politicians will undertake relief efforts in order to ensure their reelection. Under an authoritarian regime, however, even modest food shortfalls can create deadly famines because there is no accountability mechanism built in through elections. India, for instance, was plagued by famines as a British colony, but once it became an independent democracy, there were no more famines despite occasional crop failures and droughts. In fact, development economists argue that hunger and famine are political, not economic, issues as there is enough food produced in the world today to feed everyone; it is up to politicians to ensure that food is distributed equally and at affordable prices (Boyce, 2011).

Fourth, population growth heightens the issues of poverty and hunger. In the last 250 years, the population increased tenfold. The highest rate of increase was in the 1950s due to the invention of antibiotics and better medical care. The rate of increase slowed down starting from the late 1960s, partially due to broader access to oral contraceptives, China's Great Leap Forward policy that killed 30 million in just three years, and the introduction of China's one-child policy in the 1980s. Since then, the growth rate has fallen to less than one percent and, by 2100, the forecasted growth rate is only 0.1 percent. Though the population growth rate is slowing down, the total number of people in the world keeps growing, with estimates that by 2050 governments around the world will have to figure out how to feed, house, educate, and employ 10 billion people. To feed 10 billion people, food production will have to increase by 70 percent (Ranganathan et al., 2018). This is a vast challenge for poverty- and hunger-reduction efforts, particularly because forecasts show the population growth will be concentrated in the world's poorest region of Sub-Saharan Africa, with an estimated increase of from 1.5 billion in 2024 to 2.4 billion in 2050 (Population Reference Bureau, 2024).

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13.5: Development Strategies and Policies

Note

The author adapted portions of the following section from four existing sources (noted by parenthetical citation in all relevant paragraphs):

- *Bozonelos, D., J. Wendt, C. Lee, J. Scarffe, M. Omae, J. Franco, B. Martin, S. Veldhuis. (n.d.). "8.2: Political Economic Systems." In Introduction to Comparative Government and Politics [CC BY-NC 4.0]. LibreTexts.*
- *Finlayson, C. (n.d.). "9.5: Patterns of Economic Development in East and Southeast Asia." In World Regional Geography [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0]. LibreTexts.*
- *Peinhardt, C. (n.d.). "1.5: Trade—Development, Growth, and Inequality." In Open International Political Economy [CC BY-NC 4.0]. LibreTexts.*
- *Boundless. (n.d.). "16.2F: Microfinancing." In Sociology [CC BY-SA 4.0]. LibreTexts.*

While acknowledging the vast challenges that exist in attempting to eradicate poverty and hunger, we will now examine different strategies that states have taken—shaped by ideology, global trends, and domestic interests—in their attempts to achieve economic growth and lasting development.

Trade and Development

In the aftermath of colonialism and World War II, many newly independent and industrializing states faced the challenge of achieving rapid economic development. Two competing strategies for how countries could develop domestic industries and engage with the global market emerged during the 20th century: Important Substitution Industrialization (ISI) and Export-Oriented Industrialization (EOI).

Import-substitution industrialization (ISI) refers to a state's attempt to achieve self-reliance and reduce its dependence on foreign companies through increased domestic production. In the late 1940s, governments of many developing states wanted to move away from being suppliers of raw materials and to become self-sufficient in industrial production. At the same time, the spread of democracy and manufacturing reduced the political influence of the old exporting land-based elites, and it simultaneously increased the power of the urban business and working class who advocated for the development of the domestic industrial base. For these reasons, most countries in Latin America, Africa, and Asia adopted ISI policies.



Image 13.5.1: The Embraer aircraft, commemorated here as part of the "Brazilian Aeronautics Industry" postage stamp series,

symbolized the initial success of that industry under the state's ISI program during the 1970s and 1980s. *(Source: "Stamp of Brazil - 1983 - Colnect 261611 - Embraer EMB 120 Brasília" by Post of Brazil is in the Public Domain.)*

ISI uses protectionist instruments such as tariffs, quotas, and subsidies to protect domestic producers from foreign competition. Tariffs are taxes imposed on imported foreign products with the purpose of making those products more expensive and, thus, making the domestically produced products more competitive. Quotas are limits on the number of foreign goods coming into a state. The idea is to ensure that domestic companies have a guaranteed share of the market for certain products (Bozonelos, et al., n.d.). Subsidies are sums of money given by a government to assist a domestic industry to ensure its prices remain competitive.

ISI policies show a mixed record of success in promoting development. Initially, by the 1970s, ISI delivered impressive results. States that adopted ISI, such as Brazil, China, India, Mexico, and the Soviet Union, were nearly self-reliant in manufactured goods. But, by the 1980s, ISI shortcomings emerged, such as the inability for these states to compete on the global market and the difficulty to earn foreign currency to purchase essential imports. ISI policies often required large commitments of capital goods as well as advanced technology that had not been available domestically. These products needed to be imported, leading to more foreign borrowing or massive government spending. Even for the infant industries that ISI often focuses on, development policies are not always successful long term. For example, despite government protections under ISI policies, the automobiles in India, the electronics in Brazil, and the steel in Mexico remained inefficient and uncompetitive, struggling to achieve the scale and innovation needed to thrive once protections were lifted. For industries where ISI policies were initially successful, later, the infant industries did not want to lose government assistance. Generally, this meant that government finances deteriorated, external debts grew, and ISI generated inflationary pressure. The debt crises in the 1980s meant that protectionist strategies became unsustainable.

Mexico's 1982 default on its external debt triggered a wider Latin American crisis, with Brazil and Argentina also struggling to service their debts, while in Sub-Saharan Africa states like Nigeria and Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo) faced growing external debt amid collapsing commodity prices. The Philippines experienced a similar crisis in 1983 and, across regions, governments turned to the IMF and the World Bank, which imposed stringent structural adjustment programs. Therefore, developing states shifted toward new economic development strategies in the 1980s and 1990s based on more liberalized trade and export orientation (Peinhardt, n.d.).

Export-oriented industrialization (EOI) focuses on increasing a state's capacity to manufacture products for international markets. By exporting goods for which a state has a comparative advantage (for a review of comparative advantage, see Chapter 12), developing states can speed up their industrialization. By reducing tariff barriers, establishing a fixed exchange rate, and increasing government support for exporting sectors, markets become open to foreign competition and gain access to foreign markets (Karunaratne, 1980). EOI is designed to increase the state's exports, which improves the state's foreign currency. A higher export growth can generate higher productivity, thus creating even more exports in a positive upward-spiraling cycle. The so-called "East Asian Tigers"—Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan—used EOI policies to accelerate their economic growth since the 1960s, enjoying a high growth rate of seven percent per year for three decades. This prolonged period of rapid economic growth is referred to as "the Asian Miracle" (Peinhardt, n.d.).



Image 13.5.2: Singapore's successful export-oriented industrialization practices established it as a major financial center during the "Asian Miracle" period. *(Source: "Skylines of the Central Business District, Singapore at dusk" by Basile Morin is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0.)*

The main difference between export-oriented industrialization and import-substitution industrialization is the extent to which industrial production targets exports rather than domestic markets. ISI aims to reduce imports and become more inward-oriented, while EOI aims to stimulate exports and become more outward-oriented. States that used infant industry protection initially, but then turned those industries into global competitors, were more successful in the long haul (Peinhardt, n.d.).

Targeted Solutions

Research documents the effectiveness of **direct cash transfers** as a tool to alleviate current and future poverty. Direct cash transfers refer to payments of cash to economically vulnerable individuals or families. Unlike the in-kind aid, such as food or goods, direct cash transfers empower individuals or families to make their own decisions on how to use the money to meet their needs. Latin American governments of various political ideologies have embraced direct cash transfers, payments that are tied to specific conditions. For example, Progresa/Prospera program in Mexico, one of the first such programs, and Bolsa Familia in Brazil gave low-income families cash if children attended school and received health checkups. The direct cash transfer programs are expanding on the African continent, for example the LEAP program in Ghana, but these programs are usually unconditional because of weaker administrative capacity and financed by UNICEF and the World Bank.



Image 13.5.3: Quilombola women of Biritinga received benefits from Brazil's “Bolsa Família” direct cash program. *(Source: “Quilombo Biritinga (16263456495)” by Ministério do Desenvolvimento Social is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0.)*

Development economists point out that poverty is not gender-neutral, with women and girls bearing the brunt of its consequences. In many parts of the world, women are more likely than men to experience hunger. This disparity is partly due to social norms and household food distribution practices in which women and girls may eat last and least, particularly during times of scarcity. Educational inequality also reflects broader gender-based disparities. In families with limited resources, boys are often prioritized for schooling over girls. As a result, girls may be withdrawn from school to perform domestic labor, contributing to higher female illiteracy rates in many low-income countries. Projects carried out by the World Bank, UNDP, Asian Development Bank, and Grameen Bank show that strategies such as investing in the health and education of women improve economic performance on the national level. Literate women are more likely to access healthcare services, read medical instructions, and adopt practices promoting children’s well-being. Evidence shows maternal education strongly correlates with lower child mortality, better nutritional outcomes, and household economic stability (McKinsey Global Institute, 2015).

Gender-based solutions also help to address the link between poverty and population growth. When women and girls have access to education, healthcare, and reproductive rights, fertility rates tend to decline, leading to slower population growth and reduced pressure on resources. At the same time, empowered women are more likely to invest in their family’s health and education, creating a cycle that lifts families out of poverty. Thus, policies that prioritize women’s empowerment through

schooling, family planning, and economic opportunities, simultaneously help to control rapid population growth and foster sustainable development.

The Global North's calls for population control are controversial in the Global South as they are associated with past colonial policies that interfered with the local cultural and religious norms. Population control programs are also mistrusted because they are perceived as punitive and coercive. Finally, calls for population control are resented as they distract from structural problems, such as lagging infrastructure and growing foreign debt.

North-South Cooperation

Beyond domestic policies, we can consider how cooperation among states helps or hinders development. Cash flow from the Global North to the Global South takes place mostly in two shapes: foreign aid and foreign direct investments. **Foreign aid** is any type of assistance (e.g., capital, humanitarian aid, military assistance) that one state voluntarily transfers to another. Foreign aid either does not require repayment or comes at concessional, below-market rates. These projects may be implemented through international institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), or they may stem from individual state donors, such as from the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ) or the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA).

Foreign aid can vary from large infrastructure projects, such as the construction of highways, dams, and electric power stations, to projects to improve healthcare, education, and life in rural communities. Funding for the projects typically comes in several "tranches," which are conditional on the implementation of political and economic reforms required by the donors. One of the most comprehensive IMF loans was the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP), a program covered in Chapter 12, which required deep reforms in a state's fiscal and monetary policies, such as currency devaluation, reforms in the banking industry, privatization of major government-owned industries, removal of expensive welfare policies, and trade liberalization.

Criticism of foreign aid raises questions about its long-term effectiveness, as its critics argue that foreign aid fosters dependency, undermines domestic production, fuels corruption, and often does not match the local needs. Many states receiving foreign aid point out that technical assistance (such as highly paid consultants and technical experts) that can constitute as much as 25 percent of foreign aid (Easterly & Pfutze, 2008) benefits the donor country more than the recipient country, as the payments for the salaries of the consultants are taken out of the foreign aid and end up back in bank accounts within wealthy states.

Foreign direct investment (FDI) is when a foreign actor (e.g., a foreign government, investor, or company) has an ownership stake in a domestic company or project. FDI flows have exceeded the flows of foreign aid. For example, in 2023, foreign aid to the Global South amounted to $223 billion (ONE, n.d.), while FDI in the Global South amounted to $916 billion (UNCTAD, 2023, p. 3). The advantages of FDI include the creation of local jobs, transfer of knowledge and expertise, and improvement in local infrastructure, especially transportation and communication. These expectations are not always met as foreign companies often send their profits back to their home states; create only low-skilled jobs; and lobby for favorable tax breaks, weak labor laws, and lax environmental regulations.

Both foreign aid and FDI are part of the **North-South Cooperation (NSC)** framework under which the Global North shares its resources, knowledge, expertise, and technology with the Global South. The critics of the NSC point out that the NSC reinforces dependency, ignores local priorities, and imposes economic models that are not suitable for the local needs of the Global South. Moreover, according to UNCTAD (2025), by borrowing from foreign banks, developing states' external debts reached a record $11.4 trillion in 2023. Due to these high debts, governments sometimes suspend funding of schools, hospitals, infrastructure, and climate action to avoid defaulting on their debt payments. Servicing debt can therefore come at the expense of social and economic development.

To relieve the debt burden on the poorest states, the World Bank launched debt relief measures. **Debt relief** is the partial or total forgiveness of debt, or the slowing or stopping of debt growth, offered to low-income states that cannot meet their debt obligations. In 1996, the IMF and the World Bank created the **Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative**, under which states can have their debt canceled or substantially rescheduled in exchange for channeling the savings into poverty-reduction projects.

South-South Cooperation

Due in part to the critiques of NSC described above, the idea of **South-South Cooperation (SSC)** emerged. With roots at the Bandung Conference in Indonesia in 1955, SSC emerged as an alternative to the Bretton Woods system. Designed as a

collaborative framework among states of the Global South, SSC prioritizes the horizontal organization of co-equal counterparts, rather than a donor-recipient hierarchy.

The guiding principles of SSC differ from NSC. Unlike traditional aid models, where donors from the Global North provide financial assistance under strict conditions requiring political reforms for good governance, the SSC model is based on the principles of mutual benefit and non-interference in domestic affairs. Mutual benefit assumes that both the aid donor and the aid recipient will benefit from the provided aid (in the NSC model, the donor should not benefit commercially from the aid). Non-interference in domestic affairs dictates that SSC aid providers, unlike NSC aid providers, avoid setting conditions on their aid.

In recent decades, states of the Global South have increasingly turned to SSC as an alternative to NSC. China's Belt and Road Initiative, for example, embodies the principles of the SSC model. China invests in overlooked infrastructure projects in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and (more recently) Central Europe. China's FDI amounted to $125 billion in 2017, according to the 2018 World Investment Report. Another example of SSC is the creation of regional financial institutions, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the New Development Bank (NDB) (Finlayson, n.d.).

Supporters of SSC argue that it creates greater autonomy and more equitable partnerships for the states of the Global South. However, critics point out that South-South partnerships can still produce hierarchical relationships, which may lead to new forms of dependency.

Microfinancing and Remittances

The previous sections identified high-level development strategies, often between states, but there are also many types of small-scale development strategies, such as microfinancing and remittances.

Microfinance provides financial services to micro-entrepreneurs and small businesses, many of whom lack access to banking services because of the high transaction costs associated with serving these types of clients. The modern use of the expression "microfinancing" has roots in the 1970s. At this time, organizations such as the Grameen Bank of Bangladesh, led by Muhammad Yunus, were starting to shape the modern microfinance industry. Microfinance is a broad category of services, one of which is microcredit. Microcredit is the provision of credit services to poor clients who usually do not have access to the formal banking services. Although microcredit is only one of the aspects of microfinance, the two terms are often used interchangeably (Boundless, n.d.). The most common criticisms are that microfinancing can result in overindebtedness and overborrowing, pushing already vulnerable people deeper into poverty; that microfinancing shows short-term benefits, such as improved access to food and education, but limited long-term outcomes in areas like escaping poverty and asset accumulation; that microfinancing's positive effects tend to be concentrated among the moderately poor rather than the extremely poor; and that while microfinancing improves women's decision-making power within the households, it rarely drives deeper changes to gender inequality. To sum up, microfinancing delivers moderate, but not transformative, effects on poverty (Swain & Garikipati, 2019).



Image 13.5.4: An Afghan woman uses a sewing machine purchased with a microfinance loan in 2008. *(Source: "Afghanistan*

microfinance women Sewing (10665104743)" by Imal Hashemi, Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund/AusAID is licensed under CC BY 2.0.)

Another form of small-scale support is **remittances**, which are earnings of labor migrants employed overseas that are sent to support their families at home. Remittances represent a major source of income in many low- and middle-income states. According to the World Bank (2019), in 2019 remittances sent home by migrant workers from low and middle income states exceeded the total amount of all foreign direct investments into those states. In some states, such as Nepal and Kyrgyzstan, the annual remittance inflow made up to 29 percent of the annual GDP (World Bank, 2019). While remittances benefit individual families by allowing them to send children to school and improve their health, remittances are a short-term solution to a state's lagging development. In addition, remittances can contribute to a rise in real estate prices, making life even more expensive for others, and in turn promoting additional labor migration.

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13.6: IR in the Real World

International development often emphasizes the need for economic growth and increased incomes, but these gains frequently come at the expense of the environment. For example, two biodiversity hotspots, the Amazon rainforest and Congo Basin, are experiencing rapid deforestation and defaunation. Deforestation in the Congo Basin in the Democratic Republic of Congo threatens many species, such as gorillas, forest elephants, and various primates. The Amazon rainforest in Brazil has seen the highest rate of deforestation, destroying habitats for such animals as jaguars and giant otters. In these two tropical regions, deforestation and defaunation are mostly caused by commercial farming of monocultures, cattle ranching, logging, and mining. While these industries create jobs and generate revenue, they also reduce biodiversity, degrade soil and water systems, and threaten long-term ecosystem stability. Short-term economic growth therefore undermines the very resources and ecosystem —such as pollination, water regulation, and climate moderation—that human societies depend on.



Image 13.6.1: A hill in Veracruz, Mexico, with a stark contrast between two land uses. The right half of the hill remains densely forested, while the left half has been cleared of trees to create a cattle ranch. *(Source: author photograph by Jamilya Ukudeeva is licensed under CC BY-NC 4.0)*

The loss of animal populations is alarming not only for environmental but also economic reasons. Birds, amphibians, mammals, and pollinators like bees and butterflies are declining rapidly, jeopardizing agriculture, honey production, and food security. This illustrates the cascading consequences of prioritizing immediate economic gains over environmental sustainability: higher food prices, reduced agricultural productivity, and increased vulnerability to ecological shocks.

From the perspective of international relations, biodiversity is a public good benefiting all states regardless of their contribution to its preservation. This creates a classic free-rider problem: States that focus solely on rapid economic growth without investing in conservation contribute to biodiversity loss, ultimately harming everyone. To address this challenge, states must find ways to overcome short-term self-interest of achieving rapid economic growth and adopt environmentally sustainable strategies of economic growth. Mechanisms such as international treaties, multilateral agreements, and incentives for conservation can encourage cooperation among states, helping states to balance economic growth with the protection of the environment.

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13.7: Conclusion

International development is a complex issue where historical legacies, political regimes, domestic actors, and global economic trends have to be taken into account. Achieving economic development requires cooperation on multiple fronts. First, focusing on economic growth is important but not sufficient. Human development through investments into people's health and education is just as important as investments into the state's roads and transmission lines.

Second, achieving economic development is not only a concern for low-income states. Finding a strategy for sustainable economic growth is a goal that states from the Global South and the Global North must share collectively. Actors on all levels—international, domestic, individual, and transnational—must be part of the solution. Studying past experiences with various development strategies can give us insights for future progress to uplift the well-being of all states.

Third, economic development is not just an economic issue, it is also a political issue. To solve the problem of poverty and hunger and to achieve economic growth requires cooperation between scientists and politicians. Scientists have come up with methods to produce enough food to feed everyone in the world. Some of the most dangerous diseases (malaria, tuberculosis, and HIV/AIDS) that take away lives of people in the Global South can be treated inexpensively. Now it is up to politicians and governments to distribute food and medicine equally at affordable prices (Boyce, 2011).

Until the disruptions caused by COVID-19 and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, these international efforts to advance global development achieved significant and measurable results. Now the task is to get back on track with the SDGs.

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13.8: Student Resources

Summary

After World War II, international development emerged as a subfield within international political economy, focusing on how states could achieve economic growth to improve living standards. While security studies are dominated by realism and international political economy is largely guided by liberalism, development studies are often informed by constructivist approaches, emphasizing the role of norms and social factors in shaping policy outcomes. Within this field, liberalism highlights free markets and trade as drivers of prosperity, while Marxist and feminist critiques show how such policies can exacerbate inequalities both between and within states. Today, scholars use the terms Global North and Global South to describe these disparities.

Common indicators used to measure economic development highlight different areas, and each has its advantages and disadvantages. The economic indicators, such as GDP per capita, emphasize policies that prioritize economic growth, while social indicators, such as HDI highlight health, education, and gender equality.

Since the end of World War II, poverty-related issues such as malnutrition, disease, lack of sanitation, and hunger have remained the leading causes of death in the Global South, claiming more lives than wars. In response, in 2000, the UN launched the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which achieved significant progress. Building on the MDGs, in 2015, the UN introduced the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Progress toward achieving the SDGs remains slow, with only 17 percent of targets on track for 2030. Economic development raises living standards but also creates environmental challenges.

Extreme poverty continues to affect hundreds of millions of people. Today, hunger and famines are largely human-made, driven more by conflict and political choices than by crop failures or natural disasters, suggesting that poverty and hunger require not only economic but also political solutions.

Import-substitution industrialization, export-oriented policies, North-South cooperation, South-South cooperation, foreign aid, and foreign direct investments highlight the diverse approaches countries have taken to achieve development. Targeted strategies, such as direct cash transfers, have proven effective in reducing poverty by empowering recipients to decide how best to meet their needs.

Key Terms

- **Cash crops** are crops grown for export, such as tobacco, cotton, cocoa, rubber, and coffee.
- **Debt relief** is the partial or total forgiveness of debt, or the slowing or stopping of debt growth, offered to low-income states that cannot meet their debt obligations.
- **Defaunation** - extinction or dramatic reduction in animal species and populations in the ecosystem.
- **Deforestation** - large-scale conversion of forests into commercial use for agriculture, urban development, and mining.
- **Direct cash transfer** - payments of cash to individuals or families.
- **Export-oriented industrialization (EOI)** focuses on increasing a state's capacity to manufacture products for international markets.
- **Extreme poverty** refers to the condition in which a person is unable to meet basic survival needs (e.g., clothing, food, shelter). As of 2025, if a person falls below the international poverty line of $3.00 per person per day, they suffer from extreme poverty.
- **Famine** is an extreme scarcity of food within a geographical area.
- **Food insecurity** occurs when there is a lack of reliable access to sufficient and nutritious food.
- **Foreign aid** is any type of assistance (e.g., capital, humanitarian aid, military assistance) that one state voluntarily transfers to another.
- **Foreign direct investment (FDI)** is when a foreign actor (e.g., a foreign government, investor, or company) has an ownership stake in a domestic company or project.
- **Gini coefficient** is an indicator of income inequality in a society that measures how equally a state's wealth is distributed.
- **Global North** refers to states with (comparatively) higher living standards, longer life expectancies, higher employment numbers, and more advanced infrastructure.
- **Global South** refers to states with (comparatively) lower income levels, less industrialization, less infrastructure, struggling economies, less advanced healthcare, and poorer education.

- **Greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions** - gases released into atmosphere, such as carbon dioxide and methane, that trap heat in the atmosphere and drive climate change.
- **Gross domestic product (GDP) per capita** is an economic indicator of a state's economic activity, calculated by dividing the state's total value of goods and services produced within a state in a given year (GDP) by its population size.
- **Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative** is a program through which states can have their debt canceled or substantially rescheduled in exchange for channeling the savings into poverty-reduction projects.
- **Human Development Index (HDI)** is a development indicator that integrates economic and social factors, considering life expectancy, average years of schooling per adult, and gross national income (GNI) per capita.
- **Import-Substitution Industrialization (ISI)** refers to a state's attempt to achieve self-reliance and reduce its dependence on foreign companies through increased domestic production.
- **Microfinance** provides financial services to micro-entrepreneurs and small businesses, many of whom lack access to banking services.
- **Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)** are a set of eight goals to improve development adopted by the UN in 2000 to achieve by the target date of 2015.
- **North-South cooperation** refers to economic activity showing collaboration between the Global North and the Global South to promote development.
- **North-South gap** refers to the persistent disparity in wealth, development, and power between the world's economically advanced countries (Global North) and the less economically developed countries (Global South).
- **Purchasing Parity Power (PPP)** is a method that considers the differences in the real cost of living across states (namely, by comparing the price of specific goods in different states to compare the relative value of currencies) when measuring economic development (e.g., when measuring GDP per capita).
- **Relative poverty** is the condition in which individuals lack the resources to participate adequately in the economic activities of their society. Unlike extreme poverty, relative poverty captures inequality within a society.
- **Remittances** are the earnings of labor migrants employed overseas that are sent to support their families at home.
- **South-South cooperation** is a collaborative framework among states of the Global South that prioritizes horizontal organization of co-equal counterparts, rather than a donor-recipient hierarchy.
- **Subsistence crops** are crops produced for farmers' own uses, such as wheat, rice, fruits, and vegetables.
- **Sustainable Development Goals** are a set of 17 goals to improve development adopted by the UN to achieve by the target date of 2030, which came after the conclusion of the Millennium Development Goals in 2015.

Critical Thinking Questions

1. Which measurement of economic development do you find most accurate and helpful? Why?
2. Given the criticism of foreign aid, such as fostering dependency and undermining local production, under what conditions can foreign aid truly contribute to sustainable development, and how might it be improved?
3. Which economic development strategy—ISI, export-oriented growth, North-South cooperation, South-South cooperation, microfinancing, or direct cash transfers—do you think is the most effective, and why?

Suggestions for Further Study

Websites

- Council for Foreign Relations. CFR Education. International Development
- United Nations Sustainable Development Goals
- UNDP. Human Development Index
- IMF. Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative

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14: CONTEMPORARY GLOBAL CHALLENGES

14.1: Introduction
14.2: Global Health and Pandemics
14.3: Mass Migration Crisis
14.4: Rise of Non-State Actors
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14.1: Introduction

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to:

- Analyze the securitization of global health and its impact on foreign policy.
- Explain the tension between national sovereignty and demographic necessity in the context of migration.
- Evaluate the role of non-state quasi-sovereigns in the modern international system.

For nearly four centuries, the state has been the undisputed dominant actor on the world stage. From the Peace of Westphalia (1648) to the end of the Cold War (1989), we understood the world through the lens of relatively fixed borders, the central importance of national interests, and the centrality of sovereign governments to the functioning of a rules-based international system (for a review of these terms, see Chapter 1 and Chapter 2). However, that monopoly is arguably eroding as borderless challenges continue to arise.

For example, we are now in a world in which non-governmental actors, such as the World Health Organization (WHO), direct and coordinate state reactions to global pandemics. We are now in a world in which technology companies, like Starlink (owned by the world's richest man, Elon Musk), partner in successful governmental war-making activities, such as in Ukraine. And, we are now in a world in which Silicon Valley technology firms, like Nvidia or Qualcomm, can arguably "sanction" nuclear powers (e.g., China, United States) more effectively than mid-sized nations by controlling access to critical artificial intelligence chips, advanced software, and semiconductor manufacturing technology. These items are vital to the development and maintenance of modern military capabilities.

The world system seems to be, therefore, in a transition from the rules-based system centered on states to a world system in which states increasingly share power with non-governmental actors and deal with challenges and threats from borderless actors. This chapter will highlight three central examples of this global shift: global health and pandemics, the global migration crisis, and the rise of non-state actors.

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14.2: Global Health and Pandemics

Until relatively recently, reactions to disease outbreaks were often regionally fragmented, slow moving, and demonstrated region- or state-specific responses. Public information campaigns, for example, were all too often *not* coordinated with international governmental organizations like the WHO (for more information on international governmental organizations, see Chapter 9).

In 2005, the WHO rewrote its rules to provide more tools to help member states better and more effectively coordinate national efforts at managing global pandemics. The rules centered on changing the strictly local or national approach to pandemic management to one that took a more global and collective approach that coordinated with the WHO. The point was to globalize responses to global pandemics and to make them binding on all WHO member states. Specifically, the Director-General of the WHO gained the authority to declare specific pandemics as "international emergencies" (Council on Foreign Relations, 2025).



Image 14.2.1: United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres with WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, during a strategic briefing in the month following the WHO's declaration of COVID-19 as a public health emergency of international concern. *(Source: "Official Visit of the Secretary-General" by UN Geneva is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.)*

On January 30, 2020, the WHO declared COVID-19 as a public health emergency of international concern. Due to the severity and rapid spread of the virus, many of the world's affected states engaged in multilateral cooperation and agreements, such as taking part in the WHO Pandemic Agreement. The aims of such multilateral cooperation were to ensure widespread global access to vaccines; to share outbreak data and contact tracing; and to provide equitable production and access to personal protective equipment (PPE), medicines, and therapeutics.

Yet despite this cooperation and the real danger of the rapid spread of viruses across the globe, states still reserve the unilateral right to impose travel restrictions on foreign nationals, to impose selective or general lockdowns, and to conduct contact tracing to limit and reduce the spread of such viruses. How do states navigate between unilateral and multilateral approaches? We will examine two states as examples: Switzerland, which centered health policy domestically and then expanded its influence through existing intergovernmental organizations, and Turkey, which worked outside the existing system to collaborate with a multilateral bloc on vaccine production.

Switzerland's "Health First" Foreign Policy

In 2006, Switzerland integrated health issues as a top-tier priority in its diplomatic department, then renewed this commitment in 2012 (Anderson, 2022). In essence, it made health a defining feature of Swiss diplomacy, making it a central component of the state's foreign policy (Desson, et al., 2020). This move illustrates the **securitization of health**, which is the process of framing health threats as existential threats to national security, requiring extraordinary measures and high-level diplomatic priority.

The traditional focus of foreign policy is “high politics,” or national security policy centering on life and death issues like national security, military defense, and diplomacy (for a discussion of these topics, see Chapter 6). Switzerland was one of the first states to formalize health as a component of high politics, rather than relegating it to isolated social and welfare issues (commonly referred to as “low politics”).

The Swiss move to formalize “health first” influenced others, like Germany, to move in the same direction (Editorial Board, 2015). Since this switch in approach, Switzerland actively worked to set global health strategies, emphasizing pandemics, the health workforce, and collaboration with the Global South (Anderson, 2022). This represented a large change in Swiss policymaking, where pandemic preparedness was no longer only a medical issue but a core pillar of Swiss national security and foreign policy.

The Swiss approach to combatting COVID-19 centered on policymakers mandating (with penalties) a national approach: closing borders; restricting events; and closing schools, restaurants, and bars. The Swiss implemented these policies uniformly and clearly across all of its cantons (administrative districts). Its “health first” focus on preparedness—such as making sure its hospitals had sufficient PPE, testing kits, and staffing (Desson, et al., 2020).



Image 14.2.2: Official COVID-19 protection measures centrally posted in the Swiss Federal Palace, seat of the Swiss Parliament and the executive branch, on March 16, 2020. *(Source: “Corona-Schutzmassnahmen Schweiz 02” by Hadi is marked with CC0 1.0.)*

Data show that the Swiss “health first” approach for dealing with COVID-19 worked well relative to its European counterparts in Belgium, France, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom in terms of rates of infection and mortality rates. Along Switzerland’s borders with France and Italy, infection rates were relatively high (per capita), but the 22.60 per 100,000 overall rate was among the lowest in Europe with only Germany and Austria being lower (Desson, et al., 2020).

Turkey’s Vaccine Cooperation with BRICS

As a reminder from Chapter 12, BRICS (representing Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) is a multilateral bloc of states with emerging markets that cooperate on economic issues to counterbalance the dominance of the wealthy industrialized states. In 2024-2025, BRICS expanded to include five additional states, becoming BRICS+.

The expansion of BRICS led to a focus on **medical diplomacy**, the use of health assistance, vaccine distribution, and medical expertise as a tool of foreign policy to build influence or strengthen alliances. By creating independent vaccine manufacturing centers, separate from existing health organizations like the WHO, BRICS+ members aim to achieve self-sufficiency, promote South-South collaboration, and address the high burden of infectious diseases in emerging economies (Zakaria, 2009).

Though Turkey is not a BRICS+ member, it has been deeply embedded in BRICS-adjacent vaccine infrastructure for years. This was particularly evident when Turkey signed an agreement with Sinovac for the procurement of 100 million doses of the vaccine CoronaVac. Turkey was among five states granted a production license for CoronaVac, alongside Brazil, Egypt, Indonesia, and

Malaysia. Despite not being a BRICS+ member, this licensing process placed Turkey in the same tier as BRICS members Brazil and Indonesia in terms of manufacturing access.

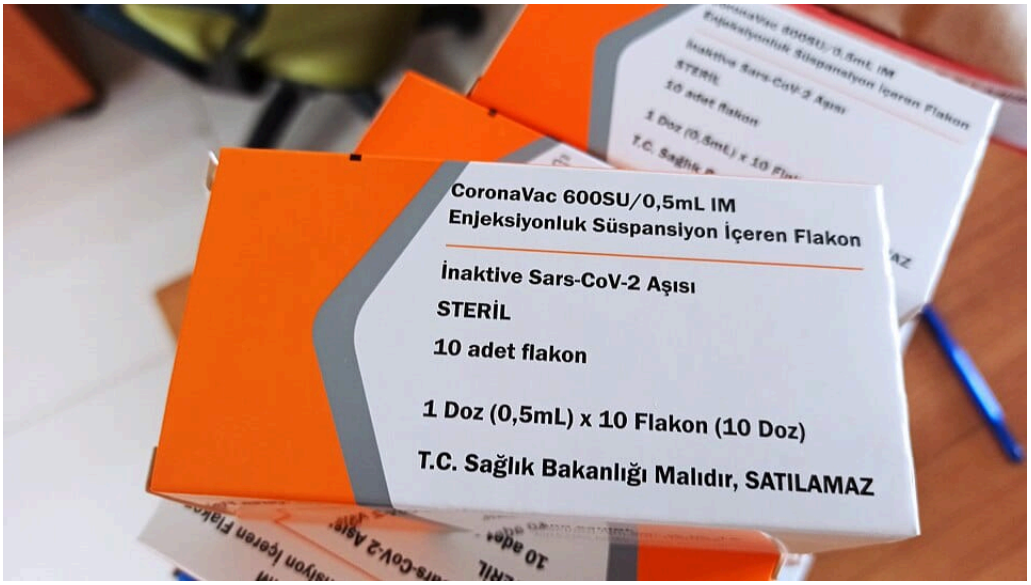


Image 14.2.3: The Chinese company Sinovac's "Coronavac" Covid-19 vaccine packaged for distribution in Turkey. *(Source: "Coronavac Vaccine Turkish Version" by UcuncuUlus is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0.)*

Turkey started using CoronaVac in January 2021, administering this vaccine first to healthcare workers and then to the wider public alongside the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine (Daily Sabah, 2021). Its vaccine relationship with Sinovac fits squarely into a broader strategy of diversifying economic partnerships beyond traditional Western markets and positioning itself as a hinge middle power within the Global South. The creation of a network of pharmaceutical interdependence allows Turkey to informally align with BRICS+ through medical diplomacy (Çubukçuoğlu, 2025).

Navigating the Borderless Challenge

In response to a global pandemic—a clear borderless challenge in the modern world—we see the centrality of a non-governmental coordinating organization, the WHO. The Swiss "health first" example largely worked within the existing WHO structure. Yet the Turkish example illustrates how the WHO structure is not the only response option. Turkey instead worked outside the existing system to collaborate with a multilateral bloc on vaccine production.

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14.3: Mass Migration Crisis

As defined in Chapter 1, a state's authority is partially defined by its ability to control its borders. However, in the 21st century, shifting demographics and global instability have turned migration into a borderless challenge that traditional state tools struggle to manage. There is a collision between political demands for state sovereignty and demographic necessity; while the former necessitates closed and controlled borders, the latter requires the free movement of labor to sustain aging economies.

Externalization of Borders

In the not-so-distant past, states managed migratory issues directly at the source—that is, at a border, meaning a physical frontier defining the edge of the state's territory. Now, states are increasingly moving their legal and administrative borders into the territories of other states, raising questions surrounding state sovereignty. The practice of "externalizing" border controls—where states manage migration within the territories of other states—has become increasingly common over the last decade, particularly among industrialized states like Australia, those within the European Union (EU), and the United States (Human Rights Watch, 2025). The **externalization of borders** occurs when a state shifts its border control functions to another state or to a transnational partner to prevent migrants from reaching its territory.

One example is the 2025 Italy-Albania deal, in which the Italian government established asylum processing centers on Albanian soil. There are two connected elements of this externalization. First, Italy exercises legal jurisdiction and "border control" inside another sovereign state, Albania. Second, such externalization allows the Italian state to respond to domestic political pressure for controlled borders by preventing migrants from ever stepping foot on Italian (and thus EU) soil, effectively bypassing certain regional legal protections.



Image 14.3.1: The Albanian Port of Shëngjin, with the Italian migrant detention and processing center on the left. *(Source: "Shëngjin Port 2025" by Albinfo is licensed under CC BY 4.0.)*

This example, an unprecedented model of the externalization of borders, does not show an outsourcing of responsibility to Albania. Rather, it illustrates what legal scholars describe as an "Italian enclave in Albanian territory" where Italian law applies in full and Albanian authorities are only responsible for external security (De Leo & Celoria, 2024). The arrangement implements an accelerated border procedure, prevents physical access to EU territory, and involves external processing while Italy retains responsibility for relocating those granted protection and returning those who do not qualify (De Leo, 2024).

Demographic Paradox

Many states within the EU are moving toward a “fortress Europe” model, in which they pursue policies characterized by increased militarization and stricter exclusion. These policies sometimes stem from a nationalist concern that mass migration is a threat to cultural homogeneity and traditional sovereignty. Yet at the same time, some—but not all—of these states face a demographic paradox. Due to declining birth rates, some states’ economic survival depends, in part, on the very populations that the fortress Europe model aims to exclude.

Spain offers an example of the tension stemming from this paradox. Spain’s fertility rate plummeted from 3 in 1964 to 1.2 in 2025. This number is one of the lowest in the world, far short of the 2.1 replacement level. The **replacement level fertility** is the total fertility rate—the average number of children born per woman—at which a population exactly replaces itself from one generation to the next, without migration (Searchinger, et al., 2013). While birth rates declined, the foreign-born population increased. Over approximately a 30 year period, the foreign-born population surged from 1.4 percent of the total population (542,000) in 1996 to nearly 20 percent of the population (9.8 million) in October 2025 (Chislett, 2026a).

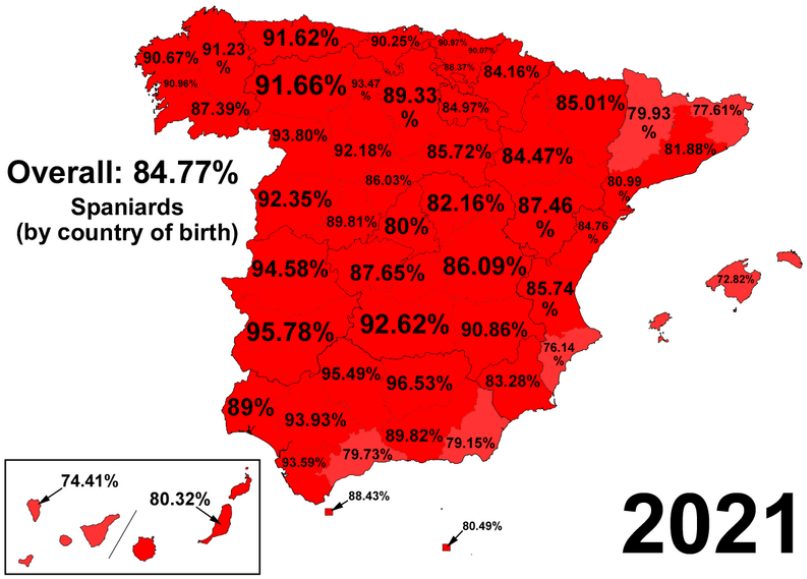


Image 14.3.2: With declining birthrates, Spain has seen an increase in its foreign-born population, illustrated here as just over 15 percent countrywide in 2021. *(Source: “Proportion of Spanish people in Spain in 2021 (by country of birth)” by Tweedle is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0.)*

To maintain current levels of economic growth and support its pension system, Spain’s Central Bank estimates the state will need approximately 25 million migrants over the next 30 years (Ali, 2024). Without migration, Spain faces a potential collapse of its welfare state. While modern pension systems are designed for roughly four workers per retiree, Spain is trending toward a dependency ratio of barely one worker per retiree by 2050. In 2024, migrants accounted for 13.5 percent of the Spanish workforce and 40 percent of newly-created jobs (Gauriat, 2025), yet Spain will need to add millions more working-age migrants to its population to maintain current social security and healthcare standards.

Unlike many of its EU neighbors that continue to tighten borders, Spain chose to move in a different direction to address this paradox. A government reform effective May 2025 plans to regularize 300,000 undocumented residents per year for three years. **Regularization**, a process to grant mass legal status to undocumented residents, is Spain’s seventh in the past 40 years, and more than 1.7 million people have benefited from this process thus far (Chislett, 2026b).



Image 14.3.3: Migrant street vendors in downtown Madrid, a Spanish city with a large immigrant population. *(Source: "File:Top manta madrid 0001.jpg" by Jose Carlos Costizo Perez is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0.)*

Spain's approach creates friction with regional migration policy trends toward stricter exclusion, particularly among states that face different demographic realities. When Spain regularizes hundreds of thousands of people, those newly documented residents gain freedom of movement across the entire EU. Other member states effectively have no say over who Spain legalizes inside its territory, yet they must absorb the downstream mobility consequences. In essence, Spain's sovereign right to manage its own immigration becomes another state's border problem.

The Italy-Albania model we examined earlier in this section coupled with Spain's mass regularization model demonstrates two sides of the same crisis: One is trying to externalize the mass migration problem while the other is trying to absorb and formalize it. In each case, the chosen approach toward migration raises questions about regional cooperation—in this case, within the EU—among states.

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14.4: Rise of Non-State Actors

This section elucidates how non-state actors, from Silicon Valley technology actors to transnational philanthropic giants, help to set the global issue and security agenda. These actors very often possess more resources and power than the states they operate within, which highlights a growing tension between nationalism and globalism.

CEO as Diplomat

In perhaps the most striking example of technological entities influencing security, in 2022 after Russia disabled Ukraine's traditional communication infrastructure, the defense of a sovereign state became dependent on a private commercial entity: SpaceX's Starlink. Decisions made in a corporate boardroom in California directly affected the tactical success of drone strikes in the Black Sea. This example demonstrates that, in the 21st century, **digital sovereignty**—the power of an actor to control the digital infrastructure, data, and information flow within a specific territory or network—is often held by the private sector, forcing traditional states to negotiate with billionaires as if they were fellow heads of state.

SpaceX's involvement started innocently enough: Ukraine's Minister of Digital Transformation Mykhailo Fedorov tagged SpaceX founder Elon Musk on X and asked him directly to provide Starlink terminals to facilitate encrypted real-time communication, calling him out for trying to "colonize Mars" instead of helping civilians on Earth. According to SpaceX President Gwynne Shotwell, "they tweeted at Elon and so we turned it on... that was our permission. That was the letter from the minister. It was a tweet" (Schroeder, 2025). This quotation captures something structurally new about current geopolitics: A state's critical wartime infrastructure was activated via a social media post directed at a private citizen. As Musk described in March 2025, Starlink became "the backbone of the Ukrainian army," saying "their entire front line would collapse if I turned it off" (Tanno, 2026).



Image 14.4.1: Kyiv Mayor Vitali Klitschko and his brother during the Battle of Kyiv on March 15, 2022, posing with some of the Starlink terminals Elon Musk provided to Ukraine. *(Source: "Wladimir and Vitali Klitschko with a Starlink user terminal" by not stated is licensed under CC BY 4.0.)*

Starlink's most consequential moment occurred in September 2022. Musk publicly acknowledged that he had refused Ukraine's request to activate Starlink around Sevastopol, a city in southern Ukraine, which would have enabled command and control of a counteroffensive against the Russian fleet. He stated: "If I had agreed to their request, then SpaceX would be explicitly complicit in a major act of war and conflict escalation." A Ukrainian official's response was blunt: By blocking the request, Musk effectively allowed Russia's Black Sea fleet to continue firing missiles at Ukrainian cities (Bryant, 2023).

This is the crux of what we can term a "quasi-sovereign" problem. **Quasi-sovereignty** is a situation in which a non-state actor possesses powers traditionally reserved for states, such as the ability to enforce laws on digital territory or provide national

defense. In this example, Musk made a unilateral geopolitical judgment that no elected government, no North Atlantic Treaty Organization committee, and no treaty framework authorized him to make. He simply made the decision, and it held.

The Starlink case is not an anomaly so much as an early, unusually visible instance of a structural shift. Commercial satellites, terminals, and data subscriptions are now part of the military supply chain. Just like ammunition and air defense systems, their delivery can be restricted, redirected, or weaponized under political pressure. Commercial space is becoming part of how states and private companies exercise and withhold power (Muggah, 2026). This illustrates a new type of sovereignty problem: Super-empowered individuals (i.e., those who are especially wealthy, influential, or powerful) have enormous amounts of power over states.

Transnational Philanthropy

Beyond powerful individuals, transnational philanthropy organizations also exert an immense amount of power. These organizations often have larger budgets for issues like global health than many sovereign states. They illustrate a **transnational governance model**, in which non-state actors set the global agenda, sometimes bypassing international organizations or individual state ministries.

The Gates Foundation is one such example. In 2005, Bill Gates was the first non-state actor to address the World Health Assembly, the WHO's governing body. In 2024, the Gates Foundation was the third largest contributor of development assistance for health globally, surpassed only by the United States and Germany, granting it standing in international affairs sometimes akin to that of a sovereign state (de Bengy Puyvallée, 2025). In May 2025, Gates announced he would give away virtually all of his remaining wealth, roughly $77 billion, through the foundation over the next 20 years, making it a de facto world funding leader at a time when many states slashed their global health and aid budgets (Skibba, 2025).



Image 14.4.2: Bill Gates joins Margaret Chan, Director-General of the World Health Organization, at a World Health Assembly press conference focused on polio eradication, 2011. *(Source: "Press Conference - Margaret Chan & Bill Gates" by Jean-Marc Ferré for UN Geneva is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.)*

The foundation's measurable impact on infectious disease is significant. Through its partnership with the Global Fund in 2024 alone, it helped 25.6 million people gain access to HIV treatment, supported 7.4 million people in receiving tuberculosis care, and helped distribute more than 162 million mosquito bed nets (Mwase, 2025).

Despite these positive impacts, some accuse the Gates Foundation of exerting too much power over **global health governance**, the collection of rules, norms, and institutions that coordinate international responses to health crises. This is particularly true at the WHO. Between 2000 and 2024, the Gates Foundation made 640 grants worth $5.5 billion to the WHO. More than 80 percent of those grants was targeted at infectious diseases, with almost 60 percent spent on polio alone. Less than one percent went toward non-communicable diseases, despite those being responsible for 74 percent of global deaths (Kennedy & Thakrar, 2025). Because the Gates Foundation has such deep pockets, it tends to set the global health agenda for much of what the WHO does,

which some global health advocates resent as undemocratic (Skibba, 2025).

This tension showed up concretely in Kenya. The Gates Foundation was controversially granted diplomatic immunity in Kenya through the state's Privileges and Immunities Act, which appears to have included immunity from legal action while performing duties within the state (for a review of diplomatic immunity, see Chapter 10). In November 2024, Kenya's High Court temporarily suspended those privileges (Skibba, 2025). That legal dispute is essentially a microcosm of the whole paradox: A private foundation is doing genuine good, while operating with protections and leverage that resemble those of a foreign state. The tension is not really between "doing good" and "doing harm"; the malaria nets and vaccine programs are obviously saving lives. The real tension is over who gets to decide what the world's poor most need and by what process those decisions are made.

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14.5: Conclusion

To understand the future of international relations, we must look at how contemporary global challenges, such as health, migration, and the rise of non-state actors, intersect to redefine the role of the state. While we are not witnessing the *end* of the sovereign state, we are observing the international system's devolvement into a more fragmented, power-based system.

The examples of BRICS+ vaccine hubs and unilateral border externalization suggests a move away from a liberal international order that relied on global institutions, such as the WHO. Rather, it suggests the importance of new regional blocs. Looking forward, security may not be guaranteed by international law, but rather by the strength of the bloc to which a state belongs.

Yet, in some ways, contemporary global challenges also require us to look backward. Much like the overlapping authorities of the Middle Ages—where a person might owe allegiance to a local lord, a distant king, and a transnational church—a patchwork of authorities now govern modern citizens. While a citizen is subject to their state's laws, big technology companies now control their information, and transnational foundations control their health security.

The examples presented in this chapter, all demonstrating IR in the real world, offer some evidence of a return to classical realism. States have adapted by securitizing everything, from vaccines to software to human movement, in a desperate bid to maintain control. While the state is clearly not exiting the stage, it is sharing the spotlight with other actors. The state's ability to project power depends on its agility while navigating a web of pandemics, shifting populations, and digital giants.

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14.6: Student Resources

Summary

This chapter explored the process by which sovereign states must share power with borderless, non-governmental forces. In the area of global health, domestic policy has been securitized into an international priority. Through the lens of mass migration, tension exists between economic necessity and the externalization of borders. And, through the rise of non-state actors, fragmentation of authority occurs. While the state remains the central actor on the world stage, it no longer holds a monopoly on power, navigating instead a complex web of contemporary global challenges.

Key Terms

- **Digital sovereignty** is the power of an actor to control the digital infrastructure, data, and information flow within a specific territory or network.
- **Externalization of borders** is a policy in which a state shifts its border control functions to another state or to a transnational partner to prevent migrants from reaching its territory.
- **Global health governance** is the collection of rules, norms, and institutions that coordinate international responses to health crises.
- **Medical diplomacy** is the use of health assistance, vaccine distribution, and medical expertise as a tool of foreign policy to build influence or strengthen alliances.
- **Quasi-sovereignty** is a situation in which a non-state actor possesses powers traditionally reserved for states, such as the ability to enforce laws on digital territory or provide national defense.
- **Regularization** is a process to grant mass legal status to undocumented residents.
- **Replacement level fertility** is the total fertility rate–the average number of children born per woman–at which a population exactly replaces itself from one generation to the next, without migration.
- **Securitization of health** is the process of framing health threats (like pandemics) as existential threats to national security, requiring extraordinary measures and high-level diplomatic priority.
- **Transnational governance model** is one in which non-state actors set the global agenda, sometimes bypassing international organizations or individual state ministries.

Critical Thinking Questions

1. To what extent should an organization like the WHO have the authority to override a state's domestic policy during a pandemic? Does the securitization of health strengthen or weaken the traditional concept of the state?
2. If a state can manage its borders and legal processes inside the territory of another state, does the physical border still matter? How does the externalization of borders redefine where a state begins and ends?
3. When a private company has the power to provide essential military infrastructure, have they become quasi-sovereigns? What happens to international accountability when the most powerful actors are not governments, but corporations?

Suggestions for Further Study

Websites

- World Health Organization
- International Organization for Migration
- Gates Foundation

Journal Articles

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INDEX

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GLOSSARY

Chapter 1

- **Bipolar** distribution of power occurs when there are two centers of power (states or blocs of states) with roughly equal influence in the international system.
- **Charismatic legitimacy** occurs when citizens follow the rules of a state based on the charisma and personality of the current leader.
- **Country** is a term often used colloquially to refer to what political scientists call a "state," but it is less precise as it can encompass aspects of both the nation and the state.
- **Distribution of power** is the allocation of authority and influence among states in the international system (that is, whether power is evenly distributed or concentrated among one or a few states).
- **Empirical**, in terms of research in international relations, means based on measurable experiences, usually through observation or experimentation, and aiming to explain how the world *actually* works.
- **External sovereignty** is the ability of a state to manage its affairs independently from outside interference.
- **Government** is the group of people in charge of running a state.
- **Hegemon** is the dominant superpower within a unipolar distribution of power (note that there can also be regional hegemons).
- **Internal sovereignty** is the ability of a state to deflect internal resistance.
- **International relations** is a subfield of political science that focuses on interactions that cross borders.
- **Legitimacy** is the state's ability to establish itself as a valid power over its citizens.
- **Multipolar** distribution of power occurs when three or more states hold roughly similar amounts of power in the international system.
- **Nation** is broadly defined as a population of people joined by common culture, history, language, and/or ancestry within a designated region or territory.
- **Normative**, in terms of research in international relations, means built on principles and assumptions about how social interactions should occur, and aiming to explain how the world *should* work.
- **Political regime** is the set of rules that structures access to political power within a state, which is typically institutionalized through a state's constitution.
- **Rational-legal legitimacy** occurs when states derive their authority through firmly established laws, rules, regulations, and procedures.
- **State** is a central authority that has the ability to make and enforce laws, rules, and decisions within a specified territory.
- **Traditional legitimacy** occurs when states have the authority to lead based on historical precedent.
- **Unipolar** distribution of power occurs when one state acts as the dominant superpower in the international system.

Chapter 2

- **Berlin Conference** was a series of negotiations among non-African rulers (extending from November 15, 1884 to February 26, 1885) that legalized the partition of Africa and, in doing so, accelerated the pace of colonization.
- **Collective security** is an arrangement where countries agree to defend each other against any aggressor.
- **Colonialism** is the settlement of people from a colonizing nation within territories inhabited by indigenous populations, typically carried out in conjunction with imperial expansion and the assertion of political and economic control.
- **Concert of Europe** describes the geopolitical order in Europe during the nearly 100-year period of relative peace after Napoleon's defeat in 1815 until the beginning of World War I in 1914, characterized by agreement to maintain the existing balance of power among the so-called "great powers."
- **Congress of Vienna** is a landmark diplomatic gathering (1814-15) among representatives of Austria, France, Great Britain, Prussia, and Russia that aimed to reshape Europe, restore order, and prevent future upheaval in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars.
- **Globalization** is the acceleration and intensification of global interconnectivity, interdependence, and integration processes.
- **Hyperinflation** is when there is a rapid increase in the price of goods and services, usually measured as exceeding 50% in a given month.
- **Imperialism** is the expansion of authority over territories and their residents, usually distant, typically achieved through military conquest.
- **Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD)** is where each side in a conflict has enough nuclear weapons to completely destroy

the other.
- **Nation** is a population of people joined by common culture, history, language, and/or ancestry within a designated region or territory.
- **Nationalism**, according to Britannica, is "an ideology that elevates one nation or nationality above all others and that places primary emphasis on promotion of its culture and interests as opposed to those of other nations, nationalities, or supranational groups."
- **Peace of Westphalia**, consisting of two main treaties, formally ended the Thirty Years' War in 1648, enshrining the concept of sovereignty in the international system.
- **Proxy war** is an armed conflict where major powers support opposing sides through funding, weapons, or training, rather than fighting directly themselves.
- **Realpolitik** is an approach in foreign policy based on practical and pragmatic objectives, rather than moral or ethical objectives.
- **Scramble for Africa** was an era in which European powers divided the African continent through conquest and conflict.
- **Second-strike capability** is a situation in which each side in a conflict has nuclear weapons that could survive a first strike, thereby disincentivizing a surprise attack.
- **Sovereignty** is the principle that each state is fundamentally equal in legal terms and free to act independently without the consent of any higher authority.
- **Total war** is a form of war in which an entire society becomes involved in the conflict. Civilians, industries, and national resources are directed toward the war effort.

Chapter 3

- **Alliance** is "a formal agreement between two or more states for mutual support in case of war" (Britannica).
- **Anarchy** is the absence of a central (world) government that regulates the interactions between states.
- **Balance of power** is when states act to prevent any one state or coalition from becoming too dominant.
- **Balancing** is when a state joins other states to oppose a stronger power that it views as a threat.
- **Bandwagoning**, or joining forces, is when a state aligns itself with a stronger power (to gain some benefit, such as protection or resources).
- **Deterrence** is any strategy used to prevent an adversary from taking an undesirable action.
- **Hegemon** is a state that dominates in the international system.
- **Hegemonic Stability Theory** is a theory arguing that the overwhelming dominance of a hegemon allows that state to set and enforce the "rules of the game" in the international system, thereby promoting stability and cooperation.
- **National interest** refers to the goals and objectives of a sovereign state.
- **Rational actor** is a realist assumption that the state, a unitary actor (see definition below), makes decisions based on its self-interest, aiming to maximize benefits and minimize costs.
- **Realism** is a theory that explains state behavior and the configuration of the international system based on the distribution of power and the current non-hierarchical world order.
- **Relative gains** refer to the amount that one state gains in comparison to other states.
- **Security dilemma** occurs when one state's efforts to increase its security—such as expanding its military or forming alliances—causes other states to perceive this buildup as a threat. This perception then leads to an arms race or a cycle of escalating tensions, even when no state intends to initiate conflict.
- **Self-help system** is one in which states must rely on their own capabilities—military, economic, or otherwise—if they wish to ensure their survival.
- **Sovereignty** is a principle under which each state is fundamentally equal in legal terms and free to act independently without the consent of any higher authority.
- **Theory** is a well-substantiated framework that explains observable phenomena based on hypotheses, evidence, and thorough testing.
- **Unitary actor** is a realist assumption that the state is a single entity that speaks with one voice.
- **Zero-sum** means a situation in which a gain for one side entails a corresponding loss for the other side.

Chapter 4

- **Absolute gains** refer to the total amount of benefits that all parties gain (without focusing on the relative distribution of those benefits).
- **Complex interdependence** is a theory that emphases the importance of the interconnectedness and mutual dependence between actors (both state and non-state), such as the multiple ways through which cultural, economic, and political relationships may connect states.

- **Democratic Peace Theory** asserts that democratic states do not go to war with one another.
- **Liberalism** is a theory that explains state behavior and the configuration of the international system by emphasizing the mutual benefits of cooperation and international institutions.
- **Positive-sum** means a situation in which all sides can gain.
- **Reciprocity** is the principle that states respond to the actions of other states in kind.

Chapter 5

- **Agency** is the ability for a person to act.
- **Bourgeoisie** is a group of people who are the owners of capital, such as land, factories, and other means of production.
- **Critical theories** are a set of theories of international relations that challenge traditional views on world politics.
- **Constructivism** is a theory of international relations that argues that international politics is socially constructed.
- **Feminism** is a social and political philosophy that, in the context of international relations, centers gender as a consideration in politics.
- **Gender** is socially constructed behaviors and expectations that are assigned to men and women.
- **Ideational structure** is the distribution of ideas and knowledge in the international system, according to constructivism.
- **Identity** is a representation of an actor's understanding of who they are, which in turn signals their interests.
- **Intersectionality** is the overlapping and interaction of multiple identities with one another that often provide advantages or disadvantages for individuals or groups holding those identities.
- **Historical materialism** is a Marxist theory of history that explains how economic activity shapes political and social conditions.
- **Marxism** is a political, economic, and social philosophy that, in the context of international relations, holds that economic factors shape relations between states.
- **Material Structure** is the distribution of physical capabilities in the international system, according to constructivism.
- **Proletariat** is a group of people who provide their labor in exchange for wages.
- **Relations of production** is the Marxist view that two groups are connected in the production of goods and services, often in an opposing fashion.
- **Social norms** are standards of appropriate behavior for actors with a given identity.
- **Structure** is the context in which a person acts, including the material and ideational structures of the international system.
- **World Systems Theory** is a multidisciplinary framework that analyzes the world as a system made up of three interdependent groups: the core, the semi-periphery, and the periphery.

Chapter 6

- **Bilateralism** is when two states decide to work together to address a foreign policy problem or address a collective goods issue.
- **Bureaucratic politics model** is a foreign policy process primarily driven by conflict resolution, rather than problem-solving, among multiple actors within a government.
- **Cultural diplomacy** is a strategic approach that leverages the exchange of ideas, values, traditions, and other cultural elements to foster relationships, enhance socio-cultural collaboration, and promote national interests.
- **Diaspora** refers to a population that resides in states outside of their ancestral or historical homeland, but maintains cultural, linguistic, or social ties to their origins.
- **Diplomacy** is the practice by which states seek to influence the actions and policies of other states through negotiation, bargaining, and strategic communication.
- **Diplomats** are individuals designated by a national government to represent its interests; engage in official negotiations; and manage political, economic, and social relations with foreign states.
- **Domestic policy** refers to the set of decisions and actions undertaken by a government that directly impact the lives of people within its borders.
- **Economic power** refers to a state's ability to leverage financial incentives or impose economic restrictions to influence and secure conformity with its objectives.
- **Foreign policy** is "the sum of official external relations conducted by an independent actor (usually a state) in international relations."
- **Hard power** involves a state's use of its available power resources to compel other states into aligning with its interests through coercive means.
- **International organization (IO)** is a formal international institution, created by and composed of states, in which representatives relay their government's interests in independent governing bodies.
- **Internationalism**, at its extreme, is when a state fully engages within global systems and is interdependent with other states

in these systems.
- **Isolationism**, at its extreme, is when a state fully disengages with global systems and retreats into self-sufficiency., at its extreme, is when a state fully disengages with global systems and retreats into self-sufficiency.
- **Less than vital interests** are not a state's core interests or conditions, and these interests are (at least to some extent) negotiable.
- **Military power** encompasses the use or threat of armed force as a means for a state to pursue and achieve its strategic objectives.
- **Multilateralism** is the predisposition for a state to act in unison with other states and/or organizations, forgoing individual action.
- **Multinational corporations (MNCs)** are for-profit organizations with financial activities outside of their home state's borders.
- **National interest** is the core principles and aims of a state's foreign policy.
- **Non-governmental organizations** are organizations that operate independently of a government, with private and voluntary membership.
- **Power potential** is each state's capability to promote or secure its national interests, determined by the resources it can utilize to exert influence.
- **Public diplomacy** is the strategic use of media and cultural programming to influence foreign publics and their elites.
- **Rational actor model** is a foreign policy process that operates on an action-reaction dynamic, where foreign policy is a deliberate response to the behaviors and decisions of other actors.
- **Religious diplomacy** is a strategic approach that leverages the moral authority and legitimacy of religious leaders, institutions, or values to foster dialogue and resolve conflicts.
- **Small group decision-making model** is a foreign policy process that focuses on the dynamics of a small, often informal, circle of individuals, rather than a large bureaucracy.
- **Smart power** is a combination of hard power and soft power approaches.
- **Soft power** is the ability of a state to influence other actors by encouraging them to adopt its preferred actions, values, or policies through persuasion and the perceived legitimacy of its conduct.
- **Track One diplomacy** refers to formal diplomatic efforts by diplomats who represent the official positions of their government.
- **Track Two diplomacy** refers to informal diplomatic efforts by individuals outside of the government, such as academics, leaders of civil society groups, corporate executives, and/or media professionals.
- **Unilateralism** is the predisposition for a state to act alone when it comes to solving a problem or protecting its interests.
- **Vital interests** are a state's core interests or conditions, considered vital to national sovereignty and security, that are non-negotiable.

Chapter 7

- **Air Force** is the branch of the military that conducts operations in the air, including bombing and surveillance.
- **Army** is the branch of a nation's military responsible for land operations, including infantry, armor, and artillery.
- **Biological weapons** are weapons that use living organisms or toxins to spread disease among humans, animals, or crops.
- **Chemical weapons** are toxic substances designed to harm or kill through poisoning or chemical reactions. Their use is banned under international law.
- **Cyber warfare** is the use of digital attacks to damage or disrupt another state's information systems, infrastructure, or networks.
- **Guerrilla warfare** is a type of unconventional warfare in which small forces use the local terrain to conduct ambushes, hit-and-run attacks, and sabotage against an opponent.
- **Interstate war** is armed conflict between states. These wars involve militaries and are often fought over territory, power, or political control.
- **Intrastate war** is armed conflict within a state, often between the government and organized groups such as rebels or separatists.
- **Jus ad bellum**, in Just War Theory, is the criteria for a "just war," such as requiring a just cause like self-defense or protecting the innocent, authorization by a legitimate political authority, and that war should only be used as a last resort.
- **Jus in bello**, in Just War Theory, is the rules for conduct in war, such as limiting violence, protecting civilians, and using proportional force rather than indiscriminate destruction.
- **Navy** is the branch of the military that operates at sea, protecting shipping lanes and projecting power through ships and submarines.
- **Nuclear weapons** are explosive devices powered by atomic reactions. Their immense destructive power and long-term radiation effects make them central to global security debates.

- **Proxy war** is an armed conflict where major powers support opposing sides through funding, weapons, or training, rather than fighting directly themselves.
- **Total war** is a form of war in which an entire society becomes involved in the conflict. Civilians, industries, and national resources are directed toward the war effort.

Chapter 8

- **Autogolpe (self-coup)** refers to actions taken by an elected leader to avoid losing power, such as dissolving legislatures, suspending constitutions, or using security forces to remain in office.
- **Civil war** is an armed conflict occurring within a state between a government and organized domestic challengers.
- **Clientelism** is a form of political control in which leaders maintain the status quo by distributing benefits, positions, or resources to loyal individuals or groups in exchange for continued support.
- **Coup d'état** occurs when political elites or members of the armed forces remove a government through force, the threat of force, or other unconstitutional means, most commonly where civilian control of the military is weak.
- **Ethnic cleansing** is the deliberate removal of a population from a territory through violence or forced displacement, often aimed at undermining support for rival factions or altering control over territory.
- **Ethnic outbidding** is a process in which leaders within an ethnic group adopt increasingly extreme positions or use violence to present themselves as the only authentic representatives of that group, especially when moderates are discredited for cooperating with the state.
- **Guerrilla warfare** refers to tactics commonly used by insurgent groups, including ambushes, sabotage, and hit-and-run attacks, designed to offset the military advantages of the state.
- **Insurgency** is a prolonged effort by a non-state group to challenge state authority by combining armed violence with the political mobilization of a population, often seeking to weaken state control over territory rather than immediately overthrow the government.
- **Militia** is a locally organized armed group that operates in areas where state authority is weak, controlling towns or provinces, and may enforce local rules or provide security.
- **Political regime** is the combination of norms, laws, and institutions that structure political authority and determine how power is exercised within a state.
- **Resource curse** describes the tendency of resource-rich but weak states to experience instability and conflict, as access to valuable resources makes political power highly contested and enables both governments and rebel groups to finance violence.
- **Revolution** is a fundamental transformation of political authority involving the overthrow of an existing regime and lasting change to political institutions, rather than simply replacing leaders.
- **Secessionist conflict** is a form of intrastate conflict in which a group seeks to break away from an existing state in order to form a new, independent state, often driven by ethnic, religious, or regional grievances tied to territory.
- **Terrorism** involves acts committed by non-state actors against non-combatants for a political motive, often used strategically to provoke reactions, gain attention, or force concessions.
- **Warlord** is a leader who uses armed force to maintain personal power, control resources, and secure loyalty from local populations, often providing protection and services in exchange for support, with authority based on coercion and local influence rather than state authority.
- **Weapons of the weak** are everyday forms of resistance used by oppressed populations, including work slowdowns, sabotage, or refusal to comply with state directives.

Chapter 9

- **Civil society** is the arena in which groups come together to engage in collective action in the service of shared interests, values, and goals outside government or profit-based motivations.
- **Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)** is a UN organ that acts as a primary driver of global governance policy dealing with economic and social issues.
- **European Union (EU)** is a supranational organization comprising 27 member states.
- **Functionalism** is the idea that cooperation on small, specific policy areas such as coordinating postal services or air traffic control can create mutual trust and evolve into cooperation on larger, more complex issues.
- **International Court of Justice (ICJ)**, sometimes referred to as the World Court and headquartered in The Hague, is the official court of the United Nations that hears disputes between states.
- **International governmental organization (IGO)**, also referred to as an intergovernmental organization, is an organization with membership that includes only states.
- **International organization (IO)** is a group whose members include governments, institutions, or individuals from different

states.
- **International nongovernmental organization (INGO)** is a nongovernmental organization that either works at the international level or has international members.
- **Resolutions**, within the UN Security Council, are formal expressions of the opinion or will of UN organs that must receive nine out of 15 votes to pass (and must not be vetoed by any permanent member).
- **Supranational organization** is an international organization in which member states give up some of their decision-making power to a higher authority that can make binding rules for them.
- **United Nations (UN)** is an IGO with almost universal state membership, established in 1945 after the end of World War II.
- **UN General Assembly** is the main policymaking organ of the UN, in which all member-states enjoy an equal vote. is the main policymaking organ of the UN, in which all member-states enjoy an equal vote.
- **UN Security Council** is the most powerful organ within the UN, consisting of 15 members, with five permanent members ("the P5") who hold veto power and ten rotating members.
- **UN Secretariat** is an organ that acts as the executive branch, running the UN and its programs on a daily basis, and headed by the Secretary-General.
- **UN Secretary-General**, elected by the General Assembly upon the recommendation of the Security Council, heads the Secretariat.
- **Veto power**, in the UN Security Council, is the ability for any permanent member (China, France, Russia, United Kingdom, United States) to unilaterally block any resolution.

Chapter 10

- **Boomerang pattern** is a strategy facilitated by transnational activist networks in which domestic non-governmental organizations directly seek international allies to try to bring pressure on their states from outside. This typically occurs when governments, often within authoritarian regimes, are unwilling to directly engage with domestic activists.
- **Customary international law** refers to law that arises from patterns of behavior in states (Wex).
- **Hard law** refers to legally binding obligations that are precise and that delegate authority for interpreting, implementing, and resolving disputes about the law.
- **International Court of Justice (ICJ)**, sometimes referred to as the World Court and headquartered in The Hague, is the official court of the United Nations that hears disputes between states.
- **International law** is "a set of rules and principles governing the relations and conduct of sovereign states with each other, as well as with international organizations and individuals" (Wex).
- **Laws of peace** regulate peaceful relations and include such subject matters as international treaty law, the law of diplomatic and consular relations, international organization law, the law of the sea, international environmental law, and international economic law.
- **Laws of war**, also known as international humanitarian law, regulate conduct during times of armed conflict, including (but not limited to) the methods and means of war; the protection of certain categories of persons; the prohibition of the use of certain types of weapons; and the protection of cultural property.
- **Norms** are standards of behavior for actors with a given identity.
- **Norm life cycle** is a framework used to understand how norms can evolve from ideas to widely-accepted standards of behavior. The framework consists of three stages: norm emergence, norm cascade, and norm internationalization.
- **Sanctions** are coercive measures taken by one or more states, or an international organization, to protest another state's actions and to try to force a change in that state's behavior.
- **Soft law** refers to legal arrangements that do not have binding obligations; are not precise; and do not delegate authority for interpreting, implementing, and resolving disputes about the law.
- **Transnational advocacy network (TAN)** is a group of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), civil society organizations, and individuals, located in several states, that focus on a specific global issue and coordinate in pursuit of a normative goal.
- **Treaties** are binding agreements between states that govern the rights and obligations of those participating.

Chapter 11

- **Ad hoc tribunal** is a temporary court established to address specific allegations of human rights abuses within a particular conflict.
- **Crimes against humanity** are acts committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population.
- **Ethnic cleansing** is a purposeful policy designed by one ethnic or religious group to remove by violent and terror-inspiring means the civilian population of another ethnic or religious group from certain geographic areas.
- **Genocide** is "the deliberate and systematic destruction of a group because of their ethnicity, nationality, religion, or race"

(Britannica).
- **Human rights** are rights inherent to all human beings, regardless of race, sex, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, or any other status.
- **International Bill of Human Rights** is the combination of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR).
- **International Criminal Court (ICC)** is a permanent criminal court that undertakes investigations and issues indictments against individuals whose actions constitute grave violations of international law.
- **Non-intervention** is a principle enshrined in Article 2(4) of the UN Charter, which prohibits "the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state."
- **Peacekeeping** is a tool used to provide security and support to states in the early transition from conflict to peace.
- **Responsibility to Protect (R2P)** is an international norm that asserts that if a state fails to protect its population from mass atrocities (genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity), the international community has a responsibility to intervene.
- **Sovereignty** is the principle under which each state is fundamentally equal in legal terms and free to act independently without the consent of any higher authority.
- **Transitional justice** is the ways in which states emerging from periods of conflict and repression address large-scale or systematic human rights violations so numerous and so serious that the normal justice system is unable to provide an adequate response.

Chapter 12

- **Absolute advantage** exists when a state can produce a product more efficiently (i.e., with fewer resources and/or less time) than another state.
- **Balance of trade** measures the difference between a state's imports and exports.
- **Beggar-thy-neighbor policy** is an economic strategy where a state improves its own welfare by harming others, often leading to retaliation and leaving all states worse off.
- **Bretton Woods system** is an international monetary framework agreed to in 1944 at the Bretton Woods Conference by representatives of the Allied states, including the development of the International Bank of Reconstruction and Development (the lending arm of the World Bank) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).
- **BRICS** (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) is a multilateral bloc of states with emerging markets that cooperate on economic issues to counterbalance the dominance of the wealthy industrialized states.
- **Comparative advantage** is when a state specializes in the production of goods in which it has the lowest opportunity cost.
- **Dependency theory** describes the world as a system of hierarchical division of labor where states are classified as "core" and "periphery" and asserts that exploitation of the periphery by the core is the main cause of global poverty.
- **Devaluation** is a deliberate step by a government to bring down the value of its currency by manipulating the currency's exchange rate, printing more money, reducing interest rates, or increasing lending to domestic businesses.
- **Discount rate** is the interest rate set by central banks to lend money to commercial banks.
- **Dumping** is a technique of predatory pricing, or selling goods in a foreign market at a loss-making price to undercut competitors and force them out of business.
- **Economic nationalism** is a modern form of mercantilism, in which policies protect jobs and domestic producers, promoting national security and self-reliance.
- **Exports** are goods and services sold to foreign states.
- **Fiscal policy** is used to shape a state's budget through government spending and tax revenues.
- **Fixed exchange rate**, or pegged exchange, is a system in which states tie their currency to the value of another currency, usually the U.S. dollar or the Euro.
- **Floating exchange rate** is a system in which a currency's value floats freely, without direct intervention from the state's central bank, and its value is determined by market forces, such as the currency's supply and demand, inflation, and interest rate.
- **Gold standard** was the prevailing currency exchange system by the early 20th century, in which national currencies were evaluated in relation to gold.
- **Hyperinflation** is when the prices of goods and services increase by more than 50 percent per month.
- **Imports** are goods and services bought from a foreign state.
- **International Monetary Fund (IMF)** is an international financial institution stemming from the Bretton Woods Conference (1944) that is responsible for the stability of the world's monetary system.
- **Keynesian economic theory** argues that the government can play a positive role in the economy, especially during economic downturns, by focusing on demand through its monetary and fiscal policies.

- **Managed float exchange rate system** is a system in which the currency floats freely, but the central bank occasionally intervenes when the currency's value inflates or drops too drastically.
- **Mercantilism** is an economic strategy that views the balance of trade as a key economic indicator of a state's prosperity and power, and strives for a positive balance of trade (trade surplus).
- **Monetary policy** is a tool used to influence the economy through interest rates and the supply of the national currency.
- **Most Favored Nation (MFN)** is the WTO's principle requiring a state to treat its trading partner no less favorably than it treats any other trading partner.
- **Multinational corporations (MNCs)** are private businesses that operate and hold assets in at least two states.
- **National currency** is the system of money in general use in a particular state.
- **Non-tariff barriers** are protectionist measures, such as regulations and inspections requiring imported goods to meet specific technical, environmental, safety, and legal standards, effectively restricting the flow of foreign goods into a state.
- **Opportunity cost**, in international trade, is a potential benefit that a state gives up if it decides to produce a certain good.
- **Quotas** are protectionist measures that limit the quantity of specific goods imported into a state.
- **Regional trade agreement (RTA)** is a trade agreement between two or more states designed to facilitate trade by reducing tariff and non-tariff barriers.
- **Short-term gains** refer to immediate economic benefits, rather than long-term sustainable gains.
- **Structural adjustment program (SAP)** is a condition for securing IMF or World Bank funding, in which a state must adopt economic reform policies, such as austerity measures, trade liberalization, or depreciation of the exchange rate.
- **Tariffs** are protectionist measures in the form of taxes on imports, which increase the price of foreign goods and encourage residents to buy from domestic producers.
- **Trade deficit** occurs if a state imports more than it exports, giving it a negative balance of trade.
- **Trade surplus** occurs if a state exports more than it imports, giving it a positive balance of trade.
- **Washington Consensus** is a set of market-based economic policies, such as privatization and deregulation, promoted by the IMF and the World Bank.
- **World Bank** is an international financial institution that offers financial assistance to developing states.
- **World Trade Organization (WTO)** is an intergovernmental organization responsible for the regulation of international trade in goods, services, and intellectual property.

Chapter 13

- **Cash crops** are crops grown for export, such as tobacco, cotton, cocoa, rubber, and coffee.
- **Debt relief** is the partial or total forgiveness of debt, or the slowing or stopping of debt growth, offered to low-income states that cannot meet their debt obligations.
- **Defaunation** - extinction or dramatic reduction in animal species and populations in the ecosystem.
- **Deforestation** - large-scale conversion of forests into commercial use for agriculture, urban development, and mining.
- **Direct cash transfer** - payments of cash to individuals or families.
- **Export-oriented industrialization (EOI)** focuses on increasing a state's capacity to manufacture products for international markets.
- **Extreme poverty** refers to the condition in which a person is unable to meet basic survival needs (e.g., clothing, food, shelter). As of 2025, if a person falls below the international poverty line of $3.00 per person per day, they suffer from extreme poverty.
- **Famine** is an extreme scarcity of food within a geographical area.
- **Food insecurity** occurs when there is a lack of reliable access to sufficient and nutritious food.
- **Foreign aid** is any type of assistance (e.g., capital, humanitarian aid, military assistance) that one state voluntarily transfers to another.
- **Foreign direct investment (FDI)** is when a foreign actor (e.g., a foreign government, investor, or company) has an ownership stake in a domestic company or project.
- **Gini coefficient** is an indicator of income inequality in a society that measures how equally a state's wealth is distributed.
- **Global North** refers to states with (comparatively) higher living standards, longer life expectancies, higher employment numbers, and more advanced infrastructure.
- **Global South** refers to states with (comparatively) lower income levels, less industrialization, less infrastructure, struggling economies, less advanced healthcare, and poorer education.
- **Greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions** - gases released into atmosphere, such as carbon dioxide and methane, that trap heat in the atmosphere and drive climate change.
- **Gross domestic product (GDP) per capita** is an economic indicator of a state's economic activity, calculated by dividing the state's total value of goods and services produced within a state in a given year (GDP) by its population size.
- **Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative** is a program through which states can have their debt canceled or substantially rescheduled in exchange for channeling the savings into poverty-reduction projects.

- **Human Development Index (HDI)** is a development indicator that integrates economic and social factors, considering life expectancy, average years of schooling per adult, and gross national income (GNI) per capita.
- **Import-Substitution Industrialization (ISI)** refers to a state's attempt to achieve self-reliance and reduce its dependence on foreign companies through increased domestic production.
- **Microfinance** provides financial services to micro-entrepreneurs and small businesses, many of whom lack access to banking services.
- **Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)** are a set of eight goals to improve development adopted by the UN in 2000 to achieve by the target date of 2015.
- **North-South cooperation** refers to economic activity showing collaboration between the Global North and the Global South to promote development.
- **North-South gap** refers to the persistent disparity in wealth, development, and power between the world's economically advanced countries (Global North) and the less economically developed countries (Global South).
- **Purchasing Parity Power (PPP)** is a method that considers the differences in the real cost of living across states (namely, by comparing the price of specific goods in different states to compare the relative value of currencies) when measuring economic development (e.g., when measuring GDP per capita).
- **Relative poverty** is the condition in which individuals lack the resources to participate adequately in the economic activities of their society. Unlike extreme poverty, relative poverty captures inequality within a society.
- **Remittances** are the earnings of labor migrants employed overseas that are sent to support their families at home.
- **South-South cooperation** is a collaborative framework among states of the Global South that prioritizes horizontal organization of co-equal counterparts, rather than a donor-recipient hierarchy.
- **Subsistence crops** are crops produced for farmers' own uses, such as wheat, rice, fruits, and vegetables.
- **Sustainable Development Goals** are a set of 17 goals to improve development adopted by the UN to achieve by the target date of 2030, which came after the conclusion of the Millennium Development Goals in 2015.

Chapter 14

- **Digital sovereignty** is the power of an actor to control the digital infrastructure, data, and information flow within a specific territory or network.
- **Externalization of borders** is a policy in which a state shifts its border control functions to another state or to a transnational partner to prevent migrants from reaching its territory.
- **Global health governance** is the collection of rules, norms, and institutions that coordinate international responses to health crises.
- **Medical diplomacy** is the use of health assistance, vaccine distribution, and medical expertise as a tool of foreign policy to build influence or strengthen alliances.
- **Quasi-sovereignty** is a situation in which a non-state actor possesses powers traditionally reserved for states, such as the ability to enforce laws on digital territory or provide national defense.
- **Regularization** is a process to grant mass legal status to undocumented residents.
- **Replacement level fertility** is the total fertility rate–the average number of children born per woman–at which a population exactly replaces itself from one generation to the next, without migration.
- **Securitization of health** is the process of framing health threats (like pandemics) as existential threats to national security, requiring extraordinary measures and high-level diplomatic priority.
- **Transnational governance model** is one in which non-state actors set the global agenda, sometimes bypassing international organizations or individual state ministries.

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