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## International Relations

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International Relations (IR) is commonly understood as the study of behaviors and interactions of nation-states (such as the United States or China), regional organizations (such as the European Union or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations), international organizations (such as the United Nations or World Bank), and multinational corporations (such as Google or McDonalds). The question whether these examples may further be characterized as governmental, intergovernmental, or nongovernmental in nature depends on the hybridity of the tasks and roles they undertake and the mission-vision of these organizations.

It is apparent that other social science disciplines have had a marked influence on IR in terms of its theoretical and methodological development. IR is described as an interdisciplinary field mostly influenced by philosophy, political science, history, economics, and sociology. Thus, the individual, the community (cultural, religious, or secular), civil society, world society (cosmopolitan and universal), and the international system and their interactions are also part of the study of IR. In addition, it is concerned with the formulation and implementation of foreign policy. Its motivations, objectives, national interests, and the involvement of its agents such as political elites in decision-making are all part of the foreign policy of a given nation-state. IR may also utilize positivistic or normative tools for its research design and methodology.

Some treat it as still a branch of political science, but although IR is a relatively young discipline, scholars from the United Kingdom and the United States have established their own institutes and departments independent of the other social sciences. Almost all the books, journal articles, and textbooks in IR used all over the world were authored by American or British scholars, or by UK or US graduates. The extant literature in the West is therefore much more extensive than that in the rest of the world. IR is therefore considered by some scholars as a US- or Europe-centric discipline which ignores or downplays the experience of other parts of the world, such as the Muslim world, and its principal actors, such as China, India, and Brazil.

Another significant aspect of IR is the difference between theoreticians and practitioners in the approach to international issues. Who has more weight, credibility, and influence in a given case (e.g., Iranian nuclear talks, or issues of climate change or crimes against humanity)? Theoreticians may guide and provide explanatory precedents to practitioners, while practitioners will always be in the forefront of the hands-on implementation of solutions suggested by theoreticians. In short, both play a vital role in shaping and/or carrying out the study of IR.

Below is an overview of the historical development of IR as a discipline and guidance to practitioners or policymakers, including the major debates that have taken place and the future prospects for the discipline of international relations.

## HISTORY AND THE ROLE OF THE NATION-STATE

There is one element that has had a significant role in the historiography of international relations as a political reality and an academic discipline. This is the element of the nation–state, the idea of a state as a sovereign entity, and its interactions with other nation–states. This has played a significant role in the formulation of theories of international relations, particularly on the political spectrum, and has always been a contentious issue in terms of its definition and its relation to other aspects of international politics.

The nation–state is a kind of polity or a political unit of analysis. It comprises the elements of authority (the form of government), nationality (those people called citizens), territoriality (the juridical set of legal boundaries), and sovereignty (attained through the recognition bestowed by another nation–state or simply by an international organization such as the United Nations). Moreover, it is a modern entity (mostly secular in nature) that evolved from ancient civilizations, such as the Sumerian, Greek, and Italian city–states, and Rome's *res publica*, to the Western nation–state system, which was conceived by American and European scholars and political elites, and is commonly seen by political and social scientists as a product of the Peace of Westphalia in 1648.

However, before the nation–state emerged, there were dynasties and empires characterized by invasions, wars, the expansion of territories, and the amassing of wealth. From the great cultures and ancient civilizations in West Asia or the Middle East, China, and India to European colonizers (e.g., Spain, Portugal, Germany, and Great Britain), all have contributed to the intellectual progress of human civilization. In addition, the emergence of the nation–state was also the start of voyages of discovery and the development of modern bodies of knowledge.

The ideas of freedom, equality, emancipation, liberty, and brotherhood, and of the sovereign power of the people over monarchies or oligarchies, arose in the eighteenth–century revolutions in Europe, particularly in France, as one of the results of the Enlightenment. Literature and ideas were exported to the whole world through the medium of universities and academic institutions, paving the way for independence, nationalism, and the creation of several nation–states, especially during the decolonization process of empires like those of the British and the Ottomans. This led to the strengthening of institutions within a nation–state system, particularly following the founding of the United States of America, which spearheaded the establishment of international and regional organizations such as the League of Nations and the European Economic Community (later known as the European Union).

However, when these organizations failed to tame the rising military and political/diplomatic power of certain nation–states such as Germany, Japan, and Italy, World War II erupted. The power of certain states even grew stronger during the Cold War period, and nation–states such as the United States and the USSR were labeled “superpowers” or “hegemons,” exhibiting a controlling influence in the implementation of their foreign policies in international bodies. But, just like the ancient empires that had a beginning and an ending, the USSR too disintegrated. The United States has also shown symptoms of weakness, especially since the financial crisis that began in 2007. However, if these superpowers were experiencing symptoms of vulnerability in their institutions of governance, such as health, finance, and the military, then other contending nation–states were ready to counter their influence. These included the emerging world powers of BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), the EU (Germany, the UK, and France), and states in the economically ascendant regions of Asia, including Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore.

It is clear how such international events impacted the development of scholarship in IR as an academic discipline. Most scholars refer to the founding of the Woodrow Wilson Chair in 1919, a year after the ending of World War I, at the first Department of International Politics at the University of Aberystwyth in Wales as the birthplace of IR; others contend it was the establishment of the American Political Science Association in 1904 that marked the birth of IR. On the other hand, Brian Schmidt has argued that “IR scholars have, for a variety of reasons, been more inclined to identify the progenitors of the field with the writings of thinkers such as Thucydides, Grotius, and Kant than with academic scholars affiliated with the institutionalized and professional field of IR” (2011). With the ending of World War I, IR scholars started to debate on how to understand world event(s), analyze conflicts, and study the behaviors of nation–states.

## DEBATES AND THEORETICAL TRADITIONS

The first great debate happened during the interwar period (1919–39), when a group of idealists was concerned with finding ways to avoid further wars. But another group, known as the realists, argued instead that it is better to analyze and explain the causes of conflicts than to find solutions. However, some revisionist historians currently question whether such a debate ever happened, arguing that there is no evidence to support it.

A second debate is concerned with formulating and describing the most appropriate approach to the study of IR. This debate is exemplified by the intellectual exchanges between Hedley Bull, defending a “traditional” or “classical” approach, and Morton Kaplan, advocating a “scientific” approach. The classical approach was basically a normative one defending the idea that the social world is incongruent with the empirical methods of the natural sciences. The scientific approach was more positivist.

The third and fourth great debates took place among neorealists, neoliberalists, post-positivists or reflectivists, and poststructuralists. Some describe the third debate as an “inter-paradigm” while the fourth is a debate between positivist and post-positivist theoreticians. Alternative explanations to the dominant realism were put forward, including Immanuel Wallerstein's world systems theory, Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye's theory of complex interdependence, Alexander Wendt's social constructivism, and Stephen Krasner's regime theory; other theories were put forward by Marxists, feminists, and members of the Frankfurt school of critical theory. Around the same time, in the 1970s, international political economy (IPE) was emerging as a new subfield of IR. However, a new age of realism arrived with the publication of Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* in 1979, which focused on the structure in the international system as it affects the behaviors and constrains the capabilities of nation-states. The purpose of these debates was to simplify the chronological development of theories in IR.

In order to understand the three mainstream theoretical traditions and their interpretation of the concept of the nation-state, we will now briefly outline the traditions of liberalism, realism, and social constructivism.

The liberal tradition did not conceive the nation-state as a unitary actor or main actor in the international system. It emphasized the significance of interdependence between states under the presumption that the “power of reason” would result in harmonious cooperation between states, with positive outcomes, as the key feature of international relations. Thus, concepts like interdependence and world society suggest that, in the contemporary world, the boundaries between states are becoming increasingly permeable. Thinkers and figures such as Erasmus, Hugo Grotius, John Locke, Adam Smith, Immanuel Kant, Jeremy Bentham, Abraham Lincoln, Norman Angell, Woodrow Wilson, David Mitrany, and Ernst Hass have contributed to the academic and practical richness of liberalism. Oliver Daddow has commented that “the unifying theme across all these writers is that progress is possible via ‘modernization’ – of economies, of technology, of human morality, and of communication within and between states” (2009, 70).

Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Point Plan, which initiated the establishment of the League of Nations at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, is a prime example of the theory of liberalism in practice. The application of the theory is also illustrated by the founding of the United Nations after World War II, followed by various regional or continent-wide organizations. Liberalism thus points to the importance of international organizations, nongovernmental organizations, and multinational corporations as key players in the regulation of an anarchic international system. This does not mean that it entirely ruled out nation-states, but it considered them as merely one of a number of actors or units of analysis.

Realists had a very different take on the interpretation of the nation-state. Although both they and the liberals began by seeing it as a central “sovereign” actor in an anarchic international system, they ended with divergent understandings of the term (Daddow 2009, 81). Nation-states are thought by realists to be motivated by a drive for power and the pursuit of national interest; thus, this aggressive intent, combined with the lack of worldwide authority or power, means that conflict is an ever-present reality of international relations. Realists also noted that international organizations or institutions can be efficient if backed up or supported by nation-states that form alliances based on the expectation that they will thus advance their own interests. In addition, realists compared nation-states to individuals in a society which is unified and purposive as a rational actor. Prominent authors such as E. H. Carr, Hans Morgenthau, and Kenneth Waltz have done a great deal to develop realism.

The Middle East region was used as an example by realists as they could see their logical assumptions' practicability. Wars between states have immensely contributed to further the research agenda of realists in conceptualizing the international relations of the Middle East. The driving factors that spearheaded the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq, for example, were intricately embedded in Iraq's need for oil-based revenues to help it recover after its eight-year war with Iran. The Arab-Israeli wars in 1948, 1967, and 1982, and the current aggression by Israel against its neighbors, were interpreted by realists as pursuing the primacy of power and interests of Israel in a politically disrupted and anarchic region.

In the 1980s social constructivists contested the positivist approach and assumptions of how to “do” IR theory (Daddow 2009, 114). One of the pioneers of the social constructivist version of IR theory is Alexander Wendt. He wanted “to give identities and interests more of a say in the explanation for state behavior and the outcomes that result from the interaction between states in the international arena” (Daddow 2009, 116). Moreover, these interests and identities are not given to nation-states but are constructed by them on the basis of past experience, the experience of present actions, and expectations about the future. For example, national interests are calculated by political authorities based on their assessment of capabilities of other states (2009, 116). In addition, anarchy, for social constructivists, is viewed as a social construct (2009, 117) where collective identities and interests are not predetermined but considered to denote ideational structures that may influence state behaviors.

Trans-state or irredentist ideas were the ingredients for social constructivism: Arabism vs. Islamism, conservative vs. radical Arabism, and even Zionist religious vs. Zionist Israeli were the poles debated within this theory. In Syria, the rise of the Ba'athists and the advocacy of Arabism over nationalism or Islamism have led to the definition of the nation-state as an Arab republic without reference to its Islamic character. Iran, which witnessed a genuine revolution in the ascendancy of the

Islamic regime, has been the subject of internal and external debates. And Egypt, which had led the pan-Arab movement in the 1950s and 1960s, was the first to abandon it in the 1970s, much to the dismay of many Egyptians and Arabs.

## CHALLENGES TO THE MAINSTREAM IR PARADIGMS

From the late 1950s to the 1990s, some dominant reflexivist theories challenged the core arguments of mainstream IR, citing the rapid changes that were occurring in the international system and world society. One of these challengers was dependency theory that talked about the parallel and non-symbiotic relationship between rich and poor nations. Researchers argue that as the wealth of poor nations decreases, the wealth of rich nations increases. It also argues that the lack of economic development in many developing countries is caused by the treatment they received during colonization and that the course of their development was determined by the way they were integrated into the world economy.

Another challenger is the world systems theory of Immanuel Wallerstein, which provided a comprehensive understanding of various manifestations and characterizations of the modernization process by means of a comparative analysis of different parts of the world. According to this analysis, there are categories describing each region's relative position within the world economy vis-à-vis its stages of growth. These are the core (the capitalist world economy), the periphery (dependent and relatively poor countries), and the semi-periphery (representing either core regions in decline or peripheries attempting to improve their relative position in the world economic system).

One great challenge to the "balance of power" argument during the Cold War era was the creation of the Non-Aligned Movement in 1961, which was founded during the collapse of the colonial system and the independence struggles of the peoples of Africa, Asia, Latin America, and other regions. Another challenger is the "postmodern international theory" which can be dissociated from its corresponding literary, philosophical, and visual manifestations. Derderian and Ashley contend that international relations as a discipline is particularly conducive to postmodern approaches. They further argue that one single theory cannot explain the complexity of human relations in the international system, and this applies particularly to the discipline of IR. Other reflexivist challengers include feminism, queer theory, and race theory, which mainly discuss gendering issues in the theorization of IR, and green theory, which highlights the importance of environmental issues such as climate change and global warming in the international community.

## THE PROSPECTS FOR A NON-WESTERN STUDY OF IR

It is difficult to discern what the future holds for the discipline of international relations. There is no consensus among scholars about what constitutes the scope and subject matter of IR, which has gradually evolved in parallel with the temporal and spatial changes occurring in the international system. In addition, there is a serious shortage of shared ontological, epistemological, and methodological premises among scholars on certain matters such as the notion of the nation-state. What we may hope for and expect is a new orientation of IR's relations to other social sciences and to religion, for example through studying the relations between IR and Islam or developing an ambitious Islamic theory of international relations.

Some scholars have questioned why there is no non-Western theory of IR, or challenge the creativity and innovative thinking of scholars from non-Western countries. Song Xinning's "Building International Relations Theory with Chinese Characteristics" (2001) or 'Abdul Ḥamīd A. Abū Sulaymān's *Towards an Islamic Theory of International Relations: New Directions for Methodology and Thought* (1993) are prime examples of attempts to build Chinese or Islamic interpretations of IR. There are two possible reasons why these non-Western interpretations of IR were not mainstreamed. One is that the distribution of these publications is limited; the second is that little attention is given to non-Western writers by the prominent scholars, practitioners, and students of the West. This is discussed further in Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan's *Non-Western International Relations Theory: Perspectives on and Beyond Asia* (2009).

All we can do is try to be aware of our own perspectives and worldviews and hope for a balanced approach to international relations scholarship between the West and the rest of the world. That is, no more labeling the West as the "core" while the rest is seen as the "periphery." Equal importance should be given to the experiences of all state and nonstate actors in the international system and society with the aim of bringing in a truly globalized discipline of IR that gives equal importance to traditions from different parts of the world.

SEE ALSO: [Nongovernmental Organizations \(NGOs\)](#); [United Nations](#)

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