Introduction to

# International Relations

## Theories and Approaches

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Robert Jackson

Georg Sørensen



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CHAPTER 1

# Why Study IR?






## Summary

This chapter answers the question 'why study IR?' It begins by introducing the historical and social basis of international relations, or IR. The aim of the chapter is to emphasize the practical reality of international relations in our everyday lives and to connect that practical reality with the academic study of international relations. The chapter makes that connection by focusing on the core historical subject matter of IR: modern sovereign states and the international relations of the **state system**. Why do states and the state system exist? Three main topics are discussed: the significance of international relations in everyday life and the main values that states exist to foster; the historical evolution of the state system and world economy in brief outline; and the changing contemporary world of states.

## International Relations in Everyday Life

**IR** is the shorthand name for the academic subject of international relations. It can be defined as the study of relationships and interactions between countries, including the activities and policies of national governments, international organizations (IGOs), non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and multinational corporations (MNCs). It can be both a theoretical subject and a practical or policy subject, and academic approaches to it can be either empirical or normative or both. It is often considered a branch of political science, but it is also a subject studied by historians (international or diplomatic history), and economists (international economics). It is also a field of legal studies (public international law) and an area of philosophy (international ethics). From that broader perspective, IR clearly is an interdisciplinary inquiry. Aspects of international relations, and in particular war and diplomacy, have been scrutinized and remarked upon at least since the time of the ancient Greek historian Thucydides, but IR only became a proper academic discipline in the early twentieth century.

The main reason why we should study IR is the fact that the entire population of the world is divided into separate political communities or independent countries, nation-states, which profoundly affect the way people think and live. Nation-states are involved with us, and we are involved with them. In highly successful nation-states most of the population identify, often quite strongly, with the country of which they are citizens. They are proud of their country's flag. They sing the national anthem. They do not sing the anthems of other countries. They see the world's population as divided and organized in terms of separate nation-states. 'I'm American, you're French, he's German, she's Japanese, the man over there is from Brazil, the woman is from South Africa, the other fellow is Russian . . .' And so it goes right around the world.

As a practical matter it is difficult and probably impossible for most people to escape from the various effects of nation-states on their daily lives, even if they wanted to. The state is involved in protecting them and providing for their security, both personal and national, in promoting their economic prosperity and social welfare, in taxing them, in educating them, in licensing and regulating them, in keeping them healthy, in building and maintaining public infrastructure (roads, bridges, harbours, airports, etc.), and much else besides. That involvement of people and states is often taken entirely for granted. But the relationship is profound. People's lives are shaped, very significantly, by that reality.

IR focuses on the various activities of nation-states in their external relations. To begin to do that some basic concepts are required. An independent nation or **state** may be defined as an unambiguous and bordered territory, with a permanent population, under the jurisdiction of supreme government that is constitutionally separate—i.e., independent—from all foreign governments: a **sovereign state**. Together, those states form an international state system that is global in extent. At the present time, there are almost 200 independent states. With very few isolated exceptions, everybody on earth not only lives in one of those countries but is also a citizen of one of them and very rarely of more than one, although that possibility is increasing as the world becomes ever more interdependent. So virtually every

man, woman, and child on earth is connected to a particular state, and via that state to the state system which affects their lives in important and even profound ways, including some of which they may not be fully aware.

States are independent of each other, at least legally: they have sovereignty. But that does not mean they are isolated or insulated from each other. On the contrary, they adjoin each other and affect each other and must therefore somehow find ways to coexist and to deal with each other. In other words, they form an international state system, which is a core subject of IR. Furthermore, states are almost always involved with international markets that affect the economic policies of governments and the wealth and welfare of citizens. That requires that states enter into relations with each other. Complete isolation is usually not an option. When states are isolated and cut off from the state system, either by their own government or by foreign powers, the people usually suffer as a result. That has been the situation at various times recently with regard to Burma (officially, the Union of Myanmar), Libya, North Korea, Iraq, Iran, and Syria. Like most other social systems, the state system can have both advantages and disadvantages for the states involved and their people. IR is the study of the nature and consequences of these international relations.

The state system is a distinctive way of organizing political life on earth and has deep historical roots. There have been state systems at different times and places in different parts of the world, in, for example, ancient India, ancient Greece, and Renaissance Italy (Watson 1992). However, the subject of IR conventionally dates back to the early modern era (sixteenth and seventeenth centuries) in Europe, when sovereign states based on adjacent territories were initially established. Ever since the eighteenth century, relations between such independent states have been labelled 'international relations'. Initially, the state system was European. With the emergence of the United States in the late eighteenth century it became Western. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, however, the state system expanded to encompass the entire territory of the earth—east and west, north and south. Today, IR is the study of the global state system from various scholarly perspectives, the most important of which will be discussed in this book.

The world of states is basically a territorial world. People must live somewhere on the planet, and those places must relate to each other in some way or other. The state system is a way of politically organizing populated territory, a distinctive kind of territorial political organization, based on numerous national governments that are legally independent of each other. The only large territory that is not a state and cannot be a state because it lacks a population is Antarctica. But it is administered by a consortium of states that have an interest in its environment and its potential for scientific research and economic development. To understand the significance of IR, it is necessary to grasp what living in states basically involves. What does it imply? How important is it? How should we think about it? This book is centrally concerned with these questions and especially with the last one. The chapters that follow deal with various answers to that fundamental question. This chapter examines the core historical subject matter of IR: the evolution of the state system and the changing contemporary world of states. History is important because states and the states system had to come into existence, had to be a practical reality, before they could be studied theoretically.

*Why study IR?* To begin to respond to that question, it may be helpful to examine our everyday life as citizens of particular states to see what we generally expect from a state. There are at least five basic social values that states are usually expected to uphold: security, freedom, order, justice, and welfare. These are social values that are so fundamental to human well-being that they must be protected or ensured in some way. That could be by social organizations other than the state, e.g., by families, clans, ethnic or religious organizations, villages, or cities. In the modern era, however, the state has usually been involved as the leading institution in that regard: it is expected to ensure these basic values. For example, people generally assume the state should underwrite the value of security, which involves the protection of individual citizens and the people as a whole from internal and external threats. That is a fundamental concern or interest of states. However, the very existence of independent states affects the value of security; we live in a world of many states, almost all of which are armed at least to some degree and some of which are major military powers. Thus, states can both defend and threaten people's security. That paradox of the state system is usually referred to as the '**security dilemma**'. In other words, just like any other human organization, states present problems as well as provide solutions.

Most states are likely to be cooperative, non-threatening, and peace-loving most of the time. But some states may be hostile and aggressive at times and there is no world government to constrain them. That poses a basic and age-old problem of state systems: **national security**. To respond to that problem, most states possess armed forces. Military power is usually considered a necessity so that states can coexist and deal with each other without being intimidated or subjugated. Unarmed states are extremely rare in the history of the state system. That is a basic fact of the state system of which we should never lose sight. Many states also enter into alliances or defence organizations with other states to increase their national security. NATO (the North Atlantic Treaty Organization) is by far the most important example of a military alliance in recent history.

To ensure that no great power succeeds in achieving a hegemonic position of overall domination, based on intimidation, coercion, or the outright use of force, history indicates it may be necessary to construct and maintain a balance of military power. This approach to the study of world politics is typical of realist theories of IR (Morgenthau 1960). It operates on the assumption that relations of states can best be characterized as a world in which armed states are competing rivals and periodically go to war with each other.

The second basic value that states are usually expected to uphold is freedom, both personal freedom and national freedom or independence. A fundamental reason for having states and putting up with the burdens that governments place on citizens, such as taxes or obligations of military service, is the condition of national freedom or independence that states exist to foster. We cannot be free unless our country is free too: that was made very clear to millions of Czech, Polish, Danish, Norwegian, Belgian, Dutch, and French citizens, as well as citizens of other countries which were invaded and occupied by Nazi Germany during the Second World War. Even if our country is free, we may still not be free personally, but at least then the problem of our freedom is in our own hands. War threatens and sometimes destroys freedom. Peace fosters freedom. Peace also makes progressive international change possible; that is, the creation of a better world. Peace and progressive change are

obviously among the most fundamental values of international relations. That approach to the study of world politics is typical of liberal theories of IR (Claude 1971). It operates on the assumption that international relations can be best characterized as a world in which states cooperate with each other to maintain peace and freedom and to pursue progressive change.

The third and fourth basic values that states are usually expected to uphold are order and justice. States have a common interest in establishing and maintaining international order so that they can coexist and interact on a basis of stability, certainty, and predictability. To that end, states are expected to uphold international law: to keep their treaty commitments and to observe the rules, conventions, and customs of the international legal order. They are also expected to follow accepted practices of diplomacy and to support international organizations. International law, diplomatic relations, and international organizations can only exist and operate successfully if these expectations are generally met by most states most of the time. States are also expected to uphold human rights. Today, there is an elaborate international legal framework of human rights—civil, political, social, and economic—which has been developed since the end of the Second World War. Order and justice are obviously among the most fundamental values of international relations. That approach to the study of world politics is typical of International Society theories of IR (Bull 1995). It operates on the assumption that international relations can best be characterized as a world in which states are socially responsible actors and have a common interest in preserving international order and promoting international justice.

The final basic value that states are usually expected to uphold is the population's socioeconomic wealth and welfare. People expect their government to adopt appropriate policies to encourage high employment, low inflation, steady investment, the uninterrupted flow of trade and commerce, and so forth. Because national economies are rarely isolated from each other, most people also expect that the state will respond to the international economic system in such a way as to enhance or at least defend and maintain the national standard of living.

Most states nowadays try to frame and implement economic policies that can maintain the stability of the international economy upon which they are all increasingly dependent. This usually involves economic policies that can deal adequately with international markets, with the economic policies of other states, with foreign investment, with foreign exchange rates, with solvent banks, with international trade, with international transportation and communications, and with other international economic relations and conditions that affect national wealth and welfare.

Economic interdependence, meaning a high degree of mutual economic dependence among countries, is a striking feature of the contemporary state system. Some people consider this to be a good thing because it may increase overall freedom and wealth by expanding the global marketplace, thereby increasing participation, specialization, efficiency, and productivity. Other people consider it to be a bad thing because it may promote overall inequality by allowing rich and powerful countries, or countries with financial or technological advantages, to dominate poor and weak countries which lack those advantages. Still others consider national protectionism as preferable to economic interdependence as the

best way to respond to financial and economic crises which periodically disrupt the world economy. But either way, wealth and welfare obviously are among the most fundamental values of international relations. That approach to the study of world politics is typical of IPE (International Political Economy) theories of IR (Gilpin 1987). It operates on the assumption that international relations can best be characterized as a fundamentally socio-economic world and not merely a political and military world.

Most people usually take these basic values (security, freedom, order and justice, and welfare) for granted. They only become aware of them when something goes wrong—for example, during a war or a depression, when things begin to get beyond the control of individual states. On those acute learning occasions, people wake up to the larger circumstances of their lives which in normal times are a silent or invisible background. They become conscious of what they take for granted, and of how important these values really are in their everyday lives. We become aware of national security when a foreign power becomes belligerent, or when international terrorists engage in hostile actions against our country or one of our allies. We become aware of national independence and our freedom as citizens when peace is no longer guaranteed. We become aware of international order and justice when some states, especially major powers, threaten or attack others with armed force, or when they abuse, exploit, denounce, or disregard international law, or trample on human rights. We become aware of national welfare and our own personal socioeconomic well-being when foreign countries or international investors use their economic clout to jeopardize our standard of living.

There were significant moments of heightened awareness of these major values during the twentieth century. The First World War made it dreadfully clear to most people just how devastatingly destructive of lives and living conditions modern mechanized warfare between major powers can be, and just how important it is to reduce the risk of war between great powers (see web link 1.09). Such recognition led to the first major developments of IR thought which tried to find effective legal institutions—e.g., the Covenant of the League of Nations—to prevent great-power war (see web link 1.10). Those efforts were not as successful as was hoped. But IR remains important because it seeks to understand as fully as possible the different ways that international relations can enhance but also undermine the quality of life of so many people that live in different countries around the world.

The Second World War not only underlined the reality of the dangers of great-power war, but also revealed how important it is to prevent any great power from getting out of control and how unwise it is to pursue a policy of appeasement—which was adopted by Britain and France with regard to Nazi Germany just prior to the war, with disastrous consequences for everybody, including the German people.

There were also moments of heightened awareness of the fundamental importance of these values after the Second World War. The military occupation of Eastern Europe by Stalinist Russia alarmed leaders of Western nations and led to the Cold War. The Cuban missile crisis of 1962 brought home to many people the dangers of nuclear war and the shocking fact that it could destroy human civilization. The anti-colonial movements of the 1950s and 1960s in Asia and Africa, and the secessionist movements in the former Soviet Union and former Yugoslavia at the end of the Cold War, made it clear how important self-determination and political independence continue to be. The Gulf War of 1990–1 and the

conflicts in the Balkans, particularly in Bosnia (1992–5) and Kosovo (1999), were a reminder of the importance of international order and respect for human rights. The attacks on New York and Washington (2001) awakened many people in the United States and elsewhere to the dangers of international terrorism (see web link 1.16). More recently, the popular uprisings ('Arab Spring') in North Africa and the Middle East (2010–13), the Syrian Civil War (2011– ongoing at the time of writing), the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians in Gaza, the war of secession in Ukraine and the threatening posture of Vladimir Putin's Russia in Eastern Europe (2014– ongoing), and the rise of the radical terrorist organization Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) (2014– ongoing) demonstrate, yet again, the vital importance of the same values.

The Great Depression (1929–33) brought home to many people around the world how their economic livelihood could be adversely affected, in some cases destroyed, by collapsing market conditions, not only at home but also in foreign countries (see web link 1.11). The global inflation of the 1970s and early 1980s, caused by a sudden dramatic increase in oil prices by the OPEC cartel of oil-exporting countries, was a reminder of how the interconnectedness of the global economy can be a threat to national and personal welfare anywhere in the world. For example, the oil shock of the 1970s made it abundantly clear to countless American, European, and Japanese motorists—among others—that the economic policies of the Middle East and other major oil-producing countries could suddenly raise the price of gas or petrol at the pump and lower their standard of living. The global financial crisis of 2008–9 recalled the lessons of the Great Depression and underlined the extent to which it was a global episode and not merely a Western crisis. Both crises were addressed and overcome by massive state intervention in the economic system, particularly the financial and banking sectors. The military intervention of Putin's Russia in Ukraine, together with the dependency of Germany on Russian gas supplies, revealed both the power and the vulnerability of major countries.

For a long time, there has been a basic assumption that life inside properly organized and well-managed states is better than life outside states or without states at all. History reminds us of that fact. For example, the Jewish people spent well over half a century trying to get a state of their own, Israel, in which they could be secure. They finally succeeded in 1948. As long as states and the state system manage to maintain the foregoing core values, that assumption holds. That has generally been the case for developed countries, especially the states of Western Europe, North America, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, and some others. That gives rise to more conventional IR theories which regard the state system as a valuable core institution of modern life. The traditional IR theories discussed in this book tend to adopt that positive view (Table 1.1).

But if states are not successful in that regard, the state system can be easily understood in the opposite light: not as upholding basic social conditions and values, but rather as undermining them. More than a few states fail to ensure any of them. That is the case with regard to many states in the non-Western world, especially sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East. The conditions inside some of these countries are so bad, so adverse to human well-being, that people are driven to flee to neighbouring countries to find safety. They are forced to become refugees. The plight of such people, whose numbers now run into the millions,

**TABLE 1.1 IR (theories and focus)**

| THEORIES | FOCUS |
|---|---|
| • **Realism** | • **Security**<br>power politics, conflict, and war |
| • **Liberalism** | • **Freedom**<br>cooperation, peace, and progress |
| • **International Society** | • **Order and justice**<br>shared interests, rules, and institutions |
| • **IPE theories** | • **Welfare**<br>wealth, poverty, and equality |

**TABLE 1.2 Views of the state**

| TRADITIONAL VIEW | ALTERNATIVE OR *REVISIONIST* VIEW |
|---|---|
| States are valuable and necessary institutions: they provide security, freedom, order, justice, and welfare | States and the state system are social choices that create more problems than they solve |
| People benefit from the state system | The majority of the world's people suffer more than they benefit from the state system |



puts into question the credibility and perhaps even the legitimacy of the state system. It promotes a contrary assumption that the international system fosters or at least tolerates human suffering, and that the system should be changed so that people everywhere can flourish, and not just those in the developed or advanced countries of the world. That gives rise to more critical IR theories which regard the state and the state system as a less beneficial and more problematic institution. The alternative IR theories discussed later in this book tend to adopt that critical stance (Table 1.2).

To sum up thus far: states and the system of states are territory-based social organizations which exist primarily to establish, maintain, and defend basic social conditions and values, particularly, security, freedom, order, justice, and welfare. These are the main reasons for having states. Many states, and certainly all developed countries, uphold these conditions and values at least to minimal standards and often at a much higher level. Indeed, those countries have been so successful in promoting those values over the past several centuries that standards of living have steadily increased and are now higher than ever. These countries set the international standard for the entire world. But many states and most underdeveloped countries often fail to meet even minimal standards, and as a consequence their presence in the contemporary state system raises serious questions, not only about those states, but also about the state system of which they are an important part. The state system may be criticized, at a minimum, for tolerating adverse and harmful socioeconomic conditions in some countries. At a maximum, it has been condemned for producing those conditions. That has provoked a debate in IR between traditional theorists who by and large view the existing state system in positive terms, and radical theorists who by and large view it in negative terms.

## Brief Historical Sketch of the State System

States and the state system are such basic features of modern political life that it is easy to assume that they are permanent features: that they have always been and always will be present. That assumption is false. It is important to emphasize that the state system is a historical institution. It is not ordained by God or determined by Nature. It has been fashioned by certain people at a certain time: it is a social organization. Like all social organizations, the state system has advantages and disadvantages which change over time. There is nothing about the state system that is necessary to human existence, even though there may be many things about it that are advantageous for better living conditions. The following sketch of international history underlines that fact.

People have not always lived in sovereign states. For most of human history, they have organized their political lives in different ways, the most common being that of clans or tribes on a smaller scale and that of political empire on a larger scale, such as the Roman Empire or the Ottoman (Turkish) Empire (Box 1.1). In the future, the world may not be organized into a state system either. People may eventually give up on sovereign statehood. People throughout history have abandoned many other ways of organizing their political lives, including city-states, feudalism, and colonialism, to mention a few. It is not unreasonable to suppose that a form of global political organization which is better or more advanced than states and the state system will eventually be adopted. Some IR scholars discussed in later chapters believe that such an international transformation, connected with growing interdependence among states (i.e., globalization), is already well under way. But the state system has been a central institution of world politics for a very long time, and still remains so. Even though world politics is always in flux, states and the state system have managed to adapt to significant historical change. But nobody can be sure that that will continue to be the case in the future. This issue of present and future international change is discussed later in the chapter.

There were no clearly recognizable sovereign states before the sixteenth century, when they first began to be instituted in Western Europe. But for the past three or four centuries, states and the system of states have structured the political lives of an ever-increasing number of people around the world. They have become universally popular. Today, the



**BOX 1.1 The Roman Empire**

Rome began as a city state in central Italy . . . Over several centuries the city expanded its authority and adapted its methods of government to bring first Italy, then the western Mediterranean and finally almost the whole of the Hellenistic world into an empire larger than any which had existed in that area before . . . This unique and astonishing achievement, and the cultural transformation which it brought about, laid the foundations of European civilization . . . Rome helped to shape European and contemporary practice and opinion about the state, about international law and especially about empire and the nature of imperial authority.

Watson (1992: 94)

system is global in extent. During that same period, many alternative ways of organizing political life have been driven to the margins or become obsolete. Others linger on or occasionally reappear. That has happened in the Middle East recently where violent attempts have been made to revive Islamic Caliphates. But even when that happens, the state and state system are the main points of reference in people's lives.

The era of the sovereign state coincides with the modern age of expanding power, prosperity, knowledge, science, technology, literacy, urbanization, citizenship, freedom, equality, rights, and so on. This could be a coincidence, but that is not very likely when we remember how important states and the state system have been in shaping the five fundamental human values discussed above. Of course, it is difficult to say whether states were the effect or the cause of modern life, and whether they will have any place in a postmodern age. Those questions must be set aside for later.

However, we do know that the state system and modernity are closely related historically. In fact, they are completely coexistent; the system of adjoining territorial states arose in Europe at the start of the modern era. And the state system has been a central if not defining feature of modernity ever since. Although the sovereign state emerged in Europe, it extended to North America in the late eighteenth century and to South America in the early nineteenth century. As modernity spread around the world the state system spread with it. The reverse was also the case: the state system spread modernity because it was itself modern. Only slowly did it expand to cover the entire globe. Sub-Saharan Africa, for example, remained isolated from the expanding Western state system until the late nineteenth century, and it only became a regional state system after the middle of the twentieth century. Whether the end of modernity will also bring the end of the state system is an important question that must be left for later in this book.

Of course, there is evidence of political systems that resembled sovereign states long before the modern age. They obviously had relations of some sort with each other. The historical origin of international relations in that more general sense lies deep in history and can only be a matter of speculation. But, speaking conceptually, it was a time when people began to settle down on the land and form themselves into separate territory-based political communities. The first examples of that occurred in the Middle East and date back more than 5,000 years (Table 1.3).

The relations between independent political groups make up the core problem of international relations. They are built on a fundamental distinction between our collective selves and other collective selves in a finite territorial world of many such separate collective selves in contact with each other. Here we arrive at a preliminary definition of a state system: it stands for relations between separate human groupings which occupy distinctive territories, are not under any higher authority or power, and enjoy and exercise a measure of independence from each other. International relations are primarily relations between such independent groups.

The first relatively clear historical manifestation of a state system is that of ancient Greece (500–100 BCE), then known as 'Hellas' (see web link 1.01). Ancient Greece was not a nation-state the way it is today. Rather, it was a system of many city-states (Wight 1977; Watson 1992). Athens was the largest and most famous, but there were also many other

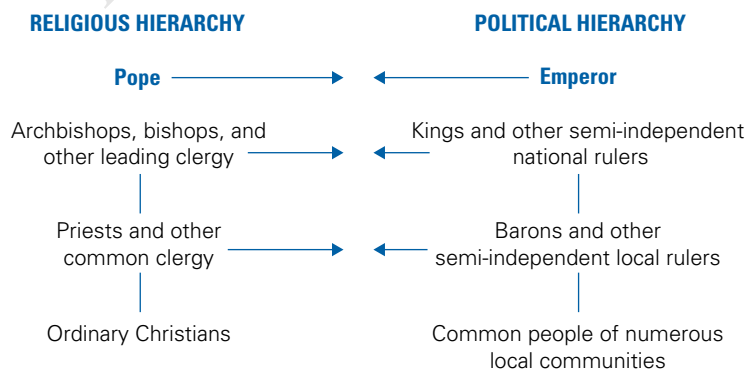
**TABLE 1.3 City-states and empires**

| | |
|---|---|
| 500 BCE–100 BCE | Greek city-states system (Hellas) |
| 200 BCE–AD 500 | Roman Empire |
| 306–1453 | Orthodox Christianity: Byzantine Empire, Constantinople |
| 500–1500 | Catholic Christendom: The Pope in Rome |
| 1299–1923 | Ottoman (Turkish) Empire, Istanbul (Constantinople) |
| Other historical empires | Persia, India (Mogul), China |

city-states, such as Sparta and Corinth. Together they formed the first state system in Western history. There were extensive and elaborate relations between the city-states of Hellas. But the ancient Greek city-states were not modern sovereign states with extensive territories. They were far smaller in population and territory than most modern states. Greek intercity relations involved distinctive traditions and practices, but they lacked the institution of diplomacy, and there was nothing comparable to international law and international organization. The state system of Hellas was based on a shared language and a common religion—Greek culture—more than anything else. The ancient Greek state system was eventually destroyed by more powerful neighbouring empires, and in due course the Greeks became subjects of the Roman Empire, which occupied most of Europe and a large part of the Middle East and North Africa. Empire was the prevalent pattern of political organization that gradually emerged in Christian Europe over several centuries after the fall of the Roman Empire (Figure 1.1). Rome's two main successors in Europe were also empires: in Western Europe, the medieval (Catholic) empire based at Rome (Christendom); in Eastern Europe and the near east, the Byzantine (Orthodox) empire centred on Constantinople or what is today Istanbul (Byzantium). Byzantium claimed to be the continuation of the Christianized Roman Empire. The European medieval Christian world (500–1500) was thus divided geographically most of the time into two, oftentimes rival, politico-religious empires. There were other political systems and empires further afield. North Africa and the Middle East



**FIGURE 1.1 The Christian commonwealth of medieval Europe**



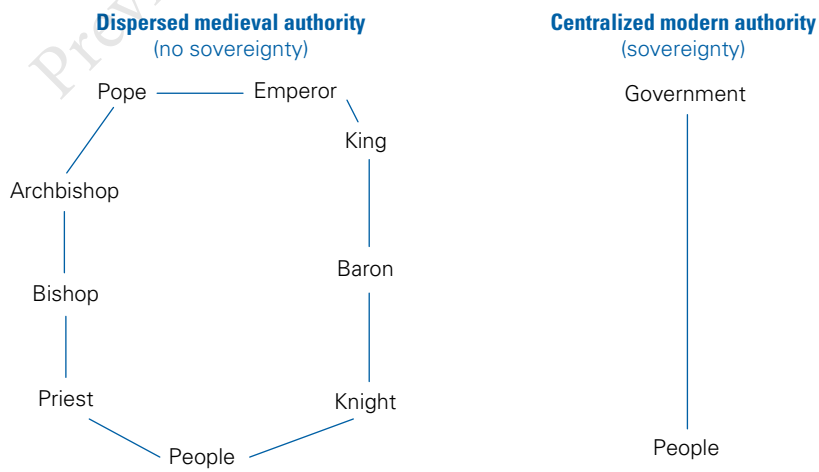
formed a world of Islamic civilization which originated in the Arabian peninsula in the early years of the seventh century (see web link 1.18). There were empires in what are today Iran and India. The oldest empire was the Chinese, which under different dynasties survived for about 4,000 years until the early twentieth century. Perhaps it still exists in the form of the Chinese Communist state, which resembles an empire in its hierarchical political and ideological structure and in the necessity to impose its will on some of its outlying territories from time to time. The Middle Ages were thus an era of empire and the relations and conflicts of different empires (see web links 1.03, 1.04, and 1.05). But contact between empires was intermittent at best; communications were slow and transportation was difficult. Consequently, most empires at that time were a world unto themselves.

Can we speak of 'international relations' in Western Europe during the medieval era? Only with difficulty. States existed, often in the form of kingdoms, but they were not independent or sovereign in the modern meaning of these words. There were no clearly defined territories with delineated borders. The medieval world was not a geographical patchwork of sharply differentiated colours representing different independent countries. Instead, it was a complicated and confusing intermingling of overlapping territories of varying shades and hues. Power and authority were organized on both a religious and political basis: in Latin Christendom, a Pope and an emperor were the heads of two parallel and connected hierarchies, one religious and the other political. Kings and other rulers were subjects of those higher authorities and their separate set of laws. Kings were not fully independent. And much of the time, local rulers were more or less free from the rule of kings: they were semi-autonomous but they were not fully independent either. The fact is that territorial political independence as we know it today was not present in medieval Europe (Figure 1.2).

The medieval era was also one of considerable disarray, disorder, conflict, and violence which stemmed from this lack of clearly delineated territorial political organization and



**FIGURE 1.2 Medieval and modern authority**



control. There was no clear distinction between civil war and international war. Medieval wars were more likely to be fought over issues of rights and wrongs: wars to defend the faith, wars to resolve conflicts over dynastic inheritance, wars to punish outlaws, wars to collect debts, and so on (Howard 1976: ch. 1). Wars were less likely to be fought over the exclusive control of territory or over state or national interests. In medieval Europe, there was no exclusively controlled territory, and no clear conception of the nation or the national interest.

The values connected with sovereign statehood were arranged differently in medieval times. The key to that difference is the fact that no one political organization, such as the sovereign state, catered for all these values. That high degree of political and legal integration of territorial societies had yet to occur.

Instead, those values were looked after by different organizations which operated at different levels of social life. Security was provided by local rulers and their knights who operated from fortified castles and towns. Freedom was not freedom for the individual or the nation. Rather, it was freedom for feudal rulers and their followers and clients, or it was freedom for fortified cities or towns. Order was the responsibility of the emperor, but his capacity to enforce order was very limited, and medieval Europe was punctuated by turbulence and discord at all levels of society. The provision of justice was the responsibility of both political and religious rulers, but it was separate and unequal justice. Those higher up the political and religious hierarchies had easier access to justice than those at the bottom. There were different laws and courts, different rights and duties, for different classes of people. There was no police force, and often justice was meted out by the people themselves in the form of revenge or reprisal.

What did the political change from medieval to modern basically involve? The short answer is: it eventually consolidated the provision of these values within the single framework of one unified and independent social organization: the sovereign state. In the early modern era, European rulers liberated themselves from the overarching religious–political authority of Christendom. They also freed themselves from their dependence on the military power of barons and other local feudal leaders. The kings subordinated the barons and defied the pope and the emperor. They became defenders of their own sovereignty against internal disorder and external threat. Their sovereignty later evolved into state sovereignty. Peasants began their long journey to escape from their dependence on local feudal rulers to become the direct subjects of the king: they eventually became 'the people' upon whom sovereignty came to rest: popular sovereignty.

In short, power and authority were concentrated at one point: the king and his government. The king now ruled a territory with borders which were defended against outside interference. The king became the supreme authority over all the people in the country, and no longer had to operate via intermediate authorities and rulers. That fundamental political transformation marks the advent of the modern era.

One of the major effects of the rise of the modern state was its monopoly of the means of warfare within its area of control (Box 1.2). The king first created order at home and became the sole centre of power within the country. Knights and barons who had formerly controlled their own armies now took orders from the king. Many kings then looked outward

with an ambition to expand their territories or out of fear that a neighbouring ruler would invade and conquer them. As a result, international rivalries developed which often resulted in wars and the enlargement of some countries at the expense of others. Spain, France, Austria, England, Denmark, Sweden, Holland, Prussia, Poland, Russia, and other states of the new European state system were frequently at war. War became a key institution for resolving conflicts between sovereign states and enforcing international law (Box 1.3).

In the traditional view of the episode, the political change from medieval to modern thus basically involved the construction of independent territorial states across Europe. The state captured its territory and turned it into state property, and it captured the population of that territory and turned them into subjects and later citizens. In the modern international system, territory is consolidated, unified, and centralized under a sovereign government. The population of the territory owe allegiance to that government and have a duty to obey its laws. All institutions are now subordinate to state authority and public law. The familiar territorial patchwork map is in place, in which each patch is under the exclusive jurisdiction of a particular state. All of the territory of Europe and eventually that of the entire planet became partitioned by independent governments. The historical end point of the medieval era and the starting point of the modern international system, speaking very generally, is usually identified with the Thirty Years War (1618–48, see Box 1.2) and the Peace of Westphalia which brought it to an end (see Box 1.3 and web link 1.06).

From the middle of the seventeenth century, states were seen as the only legitimate political systems of Europe, based on their own separate territories, their own independent



**BOX 1.2 The Thirty Years War (1618–48)**

Starting initially in Bohemia as an uprising of the Protestant aristocracy against Spanish authority, the war escalated rapidly, eventually incorporating all sorts of issues . . . Questions of religious toleration were at the root of the conflict . . . But by the 1630s, the war involved a jumble of conflicting states, with all sorts of cross-cutting dynastic, religious, and state interests involved . . . Europe was fighting its first continental war.

Holsti (1991: 26–8)

**BOX 1.3 The Peace of Westphalia (1648)**

The Westphalian settlement legitimized a commonwealth of sovereign states. It marked the triumph of the *stato* [the state], in control of its internal affairs and independent externally. This was the aspiration of princes [rulers] in general—and especially of the German princes, both Protestant and Catholic, in relation to the [Holy Roman or Habsburg] empire. The Westphalian treaties stated many of the rules and political principles of the new society of states . . . The settlement was held to provide a fundamental and comprehensive charter for all Europe.

Watson (1992: 186)

governments, and their own political subjects. The emergent state system had several prominent characteristics, which can be summarized. First, it consisted of adjoining states whose legitimacy and independence was mutually recognized. Second, that recognition of states did not extend outside of the European state system. Non-European political systems were not members of the state system. They were usually regarded as alien and politically inferior and most of them were eventually subordinated to European imperial rule. Third, the relations of European states were subject to international law and diplomatic practices. In other words, they were expected to observe the rules of the international game. Fourth, there was a balance of power between member states which was intended to prevent any one state from getting out of control and making a successful bid for **hegemony**, which would in effect re-establish an empire over the continent.

There were several major attempts by different powers to impose their political hegemony on the continent. The Habsburg Empire (Austria) made the attempt during the Thirty Years War (1618–48), and was blocked by a coalition led by France and Sweden. France made the attempt under King Louis XIV (1661–1714), and was eventually blocked by an English–Dutch–Austrian alliance. Napoleon (1795–1815) made the attempt and was blocked by Britain, Russia, Prussia, and Austria. A post-Napoleonic balance of power among the great powers (the Concert of Europe) held for most of the period between 1815 and 1914. Germany made the attempt under Hitler (1939–45), and was blocked by the United States, the Soviet Union, and Britain. For the past 350 years, the European state system has managed to resist the main political tendency of world history, which is the attempt by strong powers to bend weaker powers to their political will and thereby establish an empire. At the end of the Cold War it was debated whether the sole remaining superpower, the United States, had become a global hegemon in this meaning of the term. The rise of China and the reassertion of Russian military power cast serious doubt on that assertion. Instead, it suggested that the international system was again establishing a bipolar or multipolar world of great powers.

This traditional or classical view has been questioned. In Carvalho et al.'s (2011) revisionist interpretation, the story of Westphalia is a historical myth invented by IR scholars who wanted to create a foundational basis in history for their realist or international society theories. The revisionists argue that there is no solid basis in the historical evidence for the traditional claim that the modern, post-medieval system or society of states emerged out of the Peace of Westphalia and successive episodes, such as the Congress of Vienna (1815) or the Peace of Paris (1919). They argue that historical scholarship has 'demolished these myths', but they note that traditional or classical IR scholarship nevertheless persists in reiterating them. The revisionists argue that realist or international society scholars do not wish to lose their predominant position in the discipline and so they perpetuate the Westphalian myth in their textbooks used in teaching future IR scholars.

These conflicting interpretations are not merely different points of view or selections of evidence. Rather, they are different methodological assumptions and approaches. The traditionalists are historicists and empiricists, in the sense that they see existential evidence of the birth of modern statehood in the Westphalian episode. For them, it is the historical occasion when the sovereign state and the anarchic state system came into existence as the dominant

political feature of the European world: state sovereignty, state-controlled military power, diplomatic interaction and negotiation, peace settlement, treaties, etc. (see Part 2). The revisionists, on the other hand, are constructivists and critical theorists (see Part 3). They view Westphalia as a conception or construction of IR scholars that promotes their theoretical biases. For them, the historical reality, the actual Westphalia, was an ambiguous world of contradictory and confusing ideas and beliefs, and was far from a sharp and defining historical break with the past. Methodological issues such as these are examined in Part 3.

## Globalization and the State System

While Europeans created a state system in Europe, at the very same time they also constructed vast overseas empires and a world economy by which they controlled most non-European political communities in the rest of the world. The Western states that could not dominate each other succeeded in dominating much of the rest of the world both politically and economically (Box 1.4). That outward control of the non-European world by Europeans began at the start of the early modern era in the sixteenth century, at the same time that the European state system was coming into existence. It lasted until the middle of the twentieth century, when the remaining few non-Western peoples finally broke free of Western colonialism and acquired political independence. The fact that no Western state was able to completely dominate the European state system but many Western states were capable of imposing European sovereignty and control on almost everybody elsewhere has been crucially important in shaping the modern international system. The global ascendancy and supremacy of the West is vital for understanding IR even today. Whether that may now be changing with the rise of China, the resurgence of Russia, and—to a lesser extent—the emergence of India and Brazil is a question that can be asked and is being asked both inside and outside the West.

The first stage of the globalization of the state system was via the incorporation of non-Western states that could not be colonized by the West (Box 1.5). Not every non-Western country fell under the political control of a Western imperial state; but countries that



**BOX 1.4 President McKinley on American imperialism in the Philippines (1899)**

When I realized that the Philippines [a Spanish colony] had dropped into our laps [as a result of America's military defeat of Spain] . . . I did not know what to do . . . one night late it came to me this way . . . (1) that we could not give them back to Spain—that would be cowardly and dishonourable; (2) that we could not turn them over to France or Germany—our commercial rivals in the Orient—that would be bad business and discreditable; (3) that we could not leave them to themselves—they were unfit for self-government—and they would soon have anarchy and misrule over there worse than Spain's was; and (4) that there was nothing left for us to do but take them . . . [and] put the Philippines on the map of the United States.

Bridges et al. (1969: 184)

**BOX 1.5 President Ho Chi Minh's 1945 declaration of independence of the Republic of Vietnam**

All men are created equal. They are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness . . . All the peoples on the earth are equal from birth, all the peoples have a right to live, be happy and free . . . We members of the provisional Government, representing the whole population of Vietnam, have declared and renew here our declaration that we break off all relations with the French people and abolish all the special rights the French have unlawfully acquired in our Fatherland . . . We are convinced that the Allied nations which have acknowledged at Teheran and San Francisco the principles of self-determination and equality of status will not refuse to acknowledge the independence of Vietnam . . . For these reasons we . . . declare to the world that Vietnam has the right to be free and independent.

Bridges et al. (1969: 311–12)



escaped colonization were still obliged to accept the rules of the Western state system. The Ottoman Empire (Turkey) is one example: it was forced to accept those rules by the Treaty of Paris in 1854. Japan is another example: it acquiesced to them later in the nineteenth century. Japan rapidly acquired the organizational substance and constitutional shape of a modern state. By the early twentieth century, that country had become a great power—as demonstrated by its military defeat of an existing great power, Russia, on the battlefield: the Russo–Japanese war of 1904–5. China was obliged to accept the rules of the Western state system during the nineteenth and early twentieth century. China was not acknowledged and fully recognized as a great power until 1945.

The second stage of the globalization of the state system was brought about via anti-colonialism by the colonial subjects of Western empires. In that struggle, indigenous political leaders made claims for decolonization and independence based on European and American ideas of self-determination (see web link 1.16). That 'revolt against the West', as Hedley Bull put it, was the main vehicle by which the state system expanded dramatically after the Second World War (Bull and Watson 1984). In a short period of some twenty years, beginning with the independence of India and Pakistan in 1947, most colonies in Asia and Africa became independent states and members of the United Nations (UN) (Box 1.6).

European decolonization in the Third World (now developing countries) more than tripled the membership of the UN from about fifty states in 1945 to more than 160 states by 1970. About 70 per cent of the world's population were citizens or subjects of independent states in 1945 and were thus represented in the state system; by 1995, that figure had increased to virtually 100 per cent. The spread of European political and economic control beyond Europe thus eventually proved to be an expansion of the state system which became completely global in the second half of the twentieth century. The final stage of the globalization of the state system was the dissolution of the Soviet Union, together with the simultaneous break-up of Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia at the end of the Cold War. Expanded UN membership reached almost 200 states by the end of the twentieth century.

**BOX 1.6 Global expansion of the state system**

1600s Europe (European system)
1700s + North America (Western system)
1800s + South America, Ottoman Empire, Japan (globalizing system)
1900s + Asia, Africa, Caribbean, Pacific (global system)

Today, the state system is a global institution that affects the lives of virtually everybody on earth, whether they realize it or not. That means that IR is now more than ever a universal academic subject. That also means that world politics at the start of the twenty-first century must accommodate a range and variety of states that are far more diverse—in terms of their cultures, religions, languages, ideologies, forms of government, military capacity, technological sophistication, levels of economic development, etc.—than ever before. That is a fundamental change in the state system and a fundamental challenge for IR scholars to theorize.



## IR and the Changing Contemporary World of States

Many important questions in the study of IR are connected with the theory and practice of sovereign statehood, which, as indicated, is the central historical institution of world politics. But there are other important issues as well. That has led to ongoing debates about the proper scope of IR. At one extreme, the scholarly focus is exclusively on states and interstate relations; but at another extreme, IR includes almost everything that has to do with human relations across the world. It is important to study these different perspectives if we hope to have a balanced and rounded knowledge of IR.

Our reason for linking the various IR theories to states and the state system is to acknowledge the historical centrality of that subject. Even theorists who seek to get beyond the state usually take it as a starting point: the state system is the main point of reference for both traditional and new approaches. Later chapters will explore how IR scholarship has attempted to come to grips with the sovereign state. There are debates about how we should conceptualize the state, and different IR theories take somewhat different approaches. In later chapters, we shall present contemporary debates on the future of the state. Whether its central importance in world politics may now be changing is a very important question in contemporary IR scholarship. But the fact is that states and the state system remain at the centre of academic analysis and discussion in IR.

We must, of course, be alert to the fact that the sovereign state is a contested theoretical concept. When we ask the questions 'What is the state?' and 'What is the state system?' there will be different answers, depending on the theoretical approach adopted; the realist answer will be different from the liberal answer, and those answers will be different from the International Society answer and from the answer given by IPE theories. None of these

answers is strictly speaking either correct or incorrect because the truth is that the state is a multifaceted and somewhat confusing entity. It is not a thing in itself. It is a historical idea and institution that is open to a variety of interpretations and understandings. There are different concepts of the state. There is disagreement about the scope and purpose of the state. The state system consequently is not an easy subject to grasp theoretically, and it can be understood in various ways and with contrasting points of emphasis.

There are, however, ways of simplifying it. It is helpful to think of the state as having two dimensions, each divided into two broad categories. The first dimension is the state as a government versus the state as a country. Viewed from within, the state is the national government: it is the highest governing authority in a country, and possesses domestic sovereignty. That is the *internal* aspect of the state. The main questions in regard to the internal aspect concern *state–society* relations: how the government rules the domestic society, the means of its power and the sources of its legitimacy, how it deals with the demands and concerns of individuals and groups that compose that domestic society, how it manages the national economy, what its domestic policies are, and so forth.

Viewed internationally, however, the state is not merely a government; it is a populated territory with a national government and a domestic society. In other words, it is a country. From that angle, both the government and the domestic society make up the state. If a country is a sovereign state, it will be generally recognized as such. That is the *external* aspect of the state in which the main questions concern *interstate* relations: how the governments and societies of states relate to each other and deal with each other, what the basis of those interstate relations are, what the foreign policies of particular states are, what the international organizations of the states are, how people from different states interact with each other and engage in transactions with each other, and so forth.

That brings us to the second dimension of the state, which divides the external aspect of sovereign statehood into two broad categories. The first category is the state viewed as a *formal* or legal institution in its relations with other states. That is the state as an entity that is constitutionally independent of all foreign states, is recognized as sovereign or independent by most of those states, enjoys membership in international organizations, and possesses various rights and obligations under international law. We shall refer to that first category as **'juridical' statehood**. Constitutional independence and recognition are essential elements of juridical statehood. Constitutional independence indicates that no foreign state claims or has any legal authority over a state. The constitution of an independent country belongs exclusively to that country. Recognition acknowledges that fact of independence, and paves the way for membership of International Society, including membership of the UN. The absence of constitutional independence and recognition denies it. Not every country is independent and recognized as such; an example is Quebec, which is a province of Canada. To become independent it must be separate from Canada and be recognized as such by existing sovereign states, by far the most important of which for Quebec are first Canada and second the United States (Table 1.4) (see web links 1.31 and 1.32).

There are fewer independent countries than there might be. Quebec, Scotland (part of Great Britain), and Catalonia (part of Spain) could each be independent. A referendum in

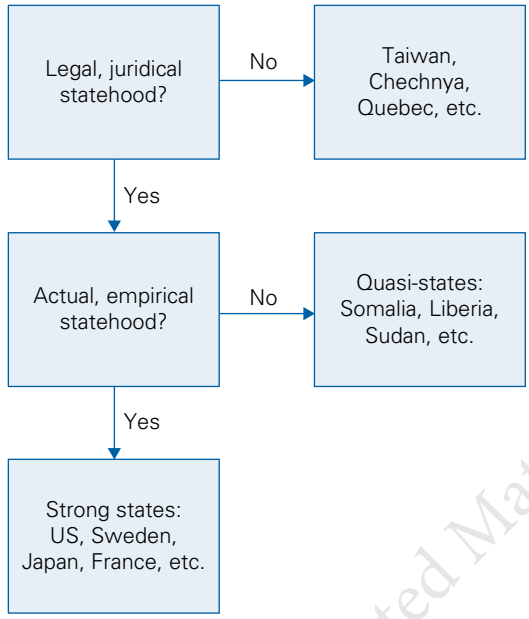
**TABLE 1.4 External dimension of statehood**

| | |
|---|---|
| **The state as a country:** | Territory, government, society |
| **Legal, juridical statehood:** | Recognition by other states |
| **Actual, empirical statehood:** | Political institutions, economic basis, national unity |

Quebec (1995) and another in Scotland (2014) each failed to secure enough votes for independence. Catalonia has thus far not succeeded in getting the Spanish government to hold an independence referendum for that part of the country. Most countries refuse to allow secession. In many it would be unthinkable. The international state system is generally unsympathetic to the idea of dividing the territory of countries. Existing countries would lose not only territory but also population, resources, power, status, and so on. Partition would also set a precedent that could destabilize the state system if a growing number of currently subordinated but potentially independent countries lined up to demand sovereign statehood or union with a foreign country. That latter demand is widely seen as particularly dangerous. That is strikingly evident in the widespread international concern, particularly of the European Union (EU) and the United States, in response to Russia's annexation of Crimea and intervention in the civil war in eastern Ukraine. The international state system reveals a major predilection, or bias, in favour of the preservation of existing borders between countries. That is widely understood as an essential element of international order. The second category is the state viewed as a substantial political–economic organization (Figure 1.3). That category has to do with the extent to which states have developed efficient political institutions, a solid economic basis, and a substantial degree of national unity; that is, of popular unity and support for the state. We shall refer to that second category as **'empirical' statehood**. Some states are very strong in the sense that they have a high level of empirical statehood. Most states in the West are like that. Many of those states are small, for example Sweden, Holland, and Luxembourg. A strong state in the sense of a high level of empirical statehood should be held separate from the notion of a strong power in the military sense. Some strong states are not militarily powerful; Denmark is an example. Some strong powers in the military sense, such as Russia, are not particularly strong states. On the other hand, the United States is both a strong state and a strong power (see Table 1.5).

This distinction between empirical statehood and juridical statehood is of fundamental importance because it helps to capture the very significant differences that exist between the almost 200 currently independent and formally equal states of the world. States differ enormously in the legitimacy of their political institutions, the effectiveness of their governmental organizations, their economic wealth and productivity, their political influence and status, and their national unity. Not all states possess effective national governments. Some states, including both large and small, are solid and capable organizations: they are strong states. Most states in the West are more or less like that. Some tiny island microstates in the Pacific Ocean are so small that they can hardly afford to have a government at all. Other states may be fairly large in terms of territory or

**FIGURE 1.3 State types in the global state system**






population or both—e.g., Sudan or the Congo (formerly Zaïre)—but they are so poor, so inefficient, and so corrupt that they are barely able to carry on as an effective government. A large number of states, especially in the non-Western world, have a low degree of empirical statehood. Their institutions are weak, the economic basis is frail and underdeveloped, and there is little or no national unity. We can refer to these states as **quasi-states**: they possess juridical statehood but they are severely deficient in empirical statehood (Jackson 1990).

Different conclusions can be drawn from the fact that empirical statehood varies so widely in the contemporary state system, from economically and technologically advanced and mostly Western states at one extreme, to economically and technologically backward and mostly non-Western states at the other. Realist IR scholars focus mainly on the states at the centre of the system: the major powers, and especially the great powers. They see underdeveloped countries as marginal players in a system of power politics that has always rested on 'the inequality of nations' (Tucker 1977). Such marginal or peripheral states do not affect the

**TABLE 1.5 Examples of strong/weak states—strong/weak powers**

| | STRONG POWER | WEAK POWER |
|---|---|---|
| Strong state | USA, China, France, | Denmark, New Zealand, Singapore |
| Weak state | Pakistan, North Korea, Nigeria | Somalia, Libya, Liberia, |

system in any very significant way. Other IR scholars, usually liberals and International Society theorists, see the adverse conditions of quasi-states as a fundamental question for the state system, which raises issues not only of international order but also of international freedom and justice.

Some IPE scholars, usually Marxists, make underdevelopment of peripheral countries and the unequal relations between the centre and the periphery of the global economy the crucial explanatory element of their theory of the modern international system (Wallerstein 1974). They investigate international linkages between the poverty of the developing world, or the South, and the enrichment of the United States, Europe, and other parts of the North. They see the international economy as one overall 'world system', with the developed capitalist states at the centre flourishing at the expense of the weak, underdeveloped states suffering on the periphery. According to these scholars, legal equality and political independence—what we have designated as juridical statehood—are scarcely more than a polite facade that merely obscures the extreme vulnerability of underdeveloped states and their domination and exploitation by the rich capitalist states of the West.

The underdeveloped countries certainly disclose in a striking way the profound empirical inequalities of contemporary world politics. But it is their possession of juridical statehood, reflecting their membership of the state system, which places that issue in sharp perspective, for it highlights the fact that the populations of some states—the developed countries—enjoy far better living conditions in virtually every respect than the populations of other states; that is, the underdeveloped countries. The fact that underdeveloped countries belong to the same global state system as developed countries raises different questions from those that would arise if they belonged to entirely separate systems; that is, the situation that existed before the global state system came into existence. We can see the issues of security, freedom and progress, order and justice, and wealth and poverty far more clearly when they involve members of the same international system. For *inside* a system the same general standards and expectations apply. So if some states cannot meet common standards or expectations because of their underdevelopment, it becomes an international problem and not only a domestic problem or somebody else's problem. This is a major change from the past when most non-Western political systems either were outside the state system and operated according to different standards, or were colonies of Western imperial powers that were responsible for them as a matter of domestic policy rather than foreign policy (Table 1.6).



These developments are a reminder that the world of states is a dynamic, changing world and not a static, unchanging one. The world is always in flux. In international relations, as in other spheres of human relations, nothing stands still for very long. International relations change along with everything else: politics, economics, science, technology, education, culture, and the rest. An obvious case in point is technological innovation, which has profoundly shaped international relations from the beginning and continues to shape it in significant ways that are never entirely predictable. Over the centuries new or improved military technology has had an impact on the balance of power, arms races, imperialism and colonialism, military alliances, the nature of war, and much else. Economic growth has

**TABLE 1.6 Insiders and outsiders in the state system**

| PREVIOUS STATE SYSTEM | PRESENT STATE SYSTEM |
|---|---|
| Small core of insiders, all strong states | Virtually all states are recognized insiders, possessing formal or juridical statehood |
| Many outsiders: colonies | Big differences between insiders: dependencies; some strong states, some weak quasi-states |

permitted greater wealth to be devoted to military budgets, and has thus provided a foundation for the development of larger, better-equipped, and more effective military forces. Scientific discoveries have made possible new technologies, such as transportation or information technologies, which have had the effect of knitting the world more closely together. Literacy, mass education, and expanded higher education have enabled governments to increase their capacity and expand their activities into more and more specialized spheres of society and economy.

It cuts both ways, of course, because highly educated people do not like being told what to think or what to do. Changing cultural values and ideas have affected not only the foreign policy of particular states but also the shape and direction of international relations. For example, the ideologies of anti-racism and anti-imperialism that were first articulated by outspoken intellectuals in Western countries eventually undermined Western overseas empires in Asia and Africa, and helped bring about the decolonization process by making the moral justification for colonialism increasingly difficult and eventually impossible.

Examples of the impact of social change on international relations are almost endless in their number and variety. The relationship is undoubtedly reversible: the state system also has an impact on society, economy, science, technology, education, culture, and the rest. For example, it has been compellingly argued that it was the development of a state system in Europe that was decisive in propelling that continent ahead of all other continents during the modern era. The competition of the independent European states within their state system—their military competition, their economic competition, their scientific and technological competition—catapulted those states ahead of non-European political systems which were not spurred by the same degree of competition. One scholar has made the point as follows: 'The states of Europe . . . were surrounded by actual or potential competitors. If the government of one were lax, it impaired its own prestige and military security . . . The state system was an insurance against economic and technological stagnation' (Jones 1981: 104–26). We should not conclude, therefore, that the state system merely reacts to change; it is also a cause of change.

The fact of social change raises a more fundamental question. At some point, should we expect states to change so much that they are no longer states in the sense discussed here (see web links 1.21, 1.25, 1.26, and 1.27)? For example, if the process of economic globalization continues and makes the world one single marketplace and one single

production site, will the state system then be obsolete? We have in mind the following activities which might bypass states: ever-increasing international trade and investment; expanding multinational business activity; enlarged NGO activities; increasing regional and global communications; the growth of the Internet; expanding and ever-extending transportation networks; exploding travel and tourism; massive human migration; cumulative environmental pollution; expanded regional integration; the global expansion of science and technology; continuous downsizing of government; multiplying privatization; and other activities that have the effect of increasing interdependence across borders.

Or will sovereign states and the state system find ways of adapting to those social changes, just as they have adapted time and again to other major changes during the past 350 years? Some of those changes were just as fundamental: the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century; the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century; the encounter of Western and non-Western civilizations over the course of several centuries; the growth of Western imperialism and colonialism; the Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; the rise and spread of nationalism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (see web link 1.30); the revolution of anti-colonialism and decolonization in the twentieth century; the spread of mass public education; the growth of the welfare state; the control of disease, the spread of public health, the increase in life expectancy; and much else. These are some of the most fundamental questions of contemporary IR scholarship, and we should keep them in mind when we speculate about the future of the state system.



## Conclusion

The state system was European in the first instance. During the era of Western imperialism, the rest of the world came to be dominated by Europeans and Americans, either politically or economically or both. Only with Asian and African decolonization, after the Second World War, did the state system become a global institution. The globalization of the state system vastly increased the variety of its member states and consequently its diversity. The most important difference is between strong states with a high level of empirical statehood and weak quasi-states, which have formal sovereignty but very little substantial statehood. In other words, decolonization contributed to a huge and deep internal division in the state system between the rich North and the poor South; i.e., between developed countries at the centre, which dominate the system politically and economically, and underdeveloped countries at the peripheries, which have limited political and economic influence.

Recently, this divergence between developed and underdeveloped countries has taken a more complex and worrying turn. Failed states have emerged, particularly in the Middle East and Africa, which have had the unintended effect of setting the foreign policy and

military policy agendas of advanced countries. The erosion and sometimes collapse of government power and authority in these areas has created vacuums of power and authority. That has set the stage for the emergence of armed terrorist organizations that are particularly hostile not only to their own governments, or Western governments, but also to the very notion of modern, enlightened, and humane government itself. That was first evident in the so-called war on terror waged by the United States and its allies in Iraq and Afghanistan. An unintended effect of those wars—and others in the Horn of Africa, North Africa, and West Africa—has been the emergence of more extreme forms of terrorism.

The most extreme by far has been the rise of ISIL, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (Syria). This is an acutely violent and barbaric form of terrorism, but also a more capable and determined form that has targeted the very foundations of modern statehood and civil society by employing the most shocking methods and tactics imaginable. Their murderous rampages against innocent populations, including children, their cruel public beheadings of civilian captives, their apparent callous indifference to the suffering they cause, all that and much more has shocked the conscience of people all over the world. More than that, it has also provoked some very dissimilar governments to collaborate and take concerted political, diplomatic, and military action against them. At the time of writing, we are witnessing what may truly become an anti-terrorist war by both Western and non-Western states against ISIL. This new form of barbarism reminds us of the basic values that states and the state system exist to defend. International relations is, of course, about power. But terrorism reveals that there is more to it than that. People expect states to uphold certain key values: security, freedom, order, justice, and welfare. States do not always defend them. Some states assault those values at certain times or in certain places. Hitler, the Japanese military dictatorship, and Stalin massively assaulted them during the Second World War. But the values remain. IR scholarship must therefore focus on them. It is, therefore, ironic that ISIL calls itself a 'state', while it is in fact not only a non-state actor of a particularly violent and malevolent kind, but also an actor that is waging its terrorist war against the modern state system itself. That is indicated not least by the alarmed reaction to it of a great many states, both Western and non-Western, and by their determination to do whatever may be necessary to defeat it. This recent episode reveals, as clearly as any episode could, the values that are associated with the modern state and the state system and which they are prepared to defend, if they have to, by means of armed force.

This leads to the larger issue of whether the state system is worth upholding and defending or whether it ought to be replaced by another system. IR theories are not in agreement on this issue; but the discipline of IR is based on the conviction that sovereign states and their development are of crucial importance for understanding how basic values of human life are being, or not being, provided to people around the world.

The following chapters will introduce the theoretical traditions of IR in further detail. Whereas this chapter has concerned the actual development of states and the state system, the next chapter will focus on how IR as an academic discipline has evolved over time.

## KEY POINTS

- The main reason why we should study IR is the fact that the entire population of the world is living in independent states. Together, those states form a global state system.
- The core values that states are expected to uphold are security, freedom, order, justice, and welfare. Many states promote such values; some do not.
- Traditional or classical IR scholars generally hold a positive view of states as necessary and desirable. Revisionist scholars view them more negatively as problematical, even harmful.
- The system of sovereign states emerged in Europe at the start of the modern era, in the sixteenth century. Medieval political authority was dispersed; modern political authority is centralized, residing in the government and the head of state.
- The state system was first European; now it is global. The global state system contains states of very different types: great powers and small states; strong, substantial states and weak quasi-states.
- There is a link between the expansion of the state system and the establishment of a world market and a global economy. Some developing countries have benefitted from integration into the global economy; others remain poor and underdeveloped.
- Economic globalization and other developments challenge the sovereign state. We cannot know for certain whether the state system is now becoming obsolete, or whether states will find ways of adapting to new challenges.
- States and the state system not only uphold certain values, they also embody them.

## QUESTIONS

- What is a state? Why do we have them? What is a state system?
- When did independent states and the modern system of states emerge? What is the difference between a medieval and a modern system of political authority?
- What are two different interpretations of Westphalia?
- Why did the modern state and state system emerge in Europe and not somewhere else?
- We expect states to sustain a number of core values: security, freedom, order, justice, and welfare. Do states meet our expectations?
- Should we strive to preserve the system of sovereign states? Why or why not?
- Explain the main differences between strong, substantial states and weak quasi-states; great powers and small powers. Why is there such diversity in the state system?
- Does it make sense to view modern terrorism as an attack on the state system itself?
- What are some practical ways that states sustain the core value of security?

## GUIDE TO FURTHER READING

Bull, H. and Watson, A. (eds) (1984). *The Expansion of International Society*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Darwin, J. (2007). *After Tamerlane: The Global History of Empire*. London: Allen Lane.

Fukuyama, F. (2014). *Political Order and Political Decay. From the Industrial Revolution to the Globalization of Democracy*. London: Profile Books.

Osiander, A. (1994). *The States System of Europe, 1640–1990*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Wallerstein, I. (1974). *The Modern World System*. New York: Academic Press.

Watson, A. (1992). *The Evolution of International Society*. London: Routledge.

## WEB LINKS

Web links mentioned in the chapter, together with additional material including a case-study on the relationship between history and theory, can be found on the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book.

www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/jackson_sorensen6e/