



# Historical Context of International Relations

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# Today's class

- Central Question
- Key Terms
- Origins of Sovereignty
- A Short Historical Primer
- Types of International System



## Central question

Why are states the most important actors  
in international relations?



# Key terms

- Politics
- Anarchy
- State
- Sovereignty



# What do we mean by politics?

- **Politics:** the process through which societies decide how their resources are allocated.
- “Who gets what, how, and when”
- Consider:
  - Health care
  - Education
  - Fiscal stimulus packages
  - Defense
- All political decisions - policies - produce winners but also losers.
- How are these questions resolved in domestic politics?
- Through governmental institutions: legislative bodies, autocratic decision-making, courts, etc.

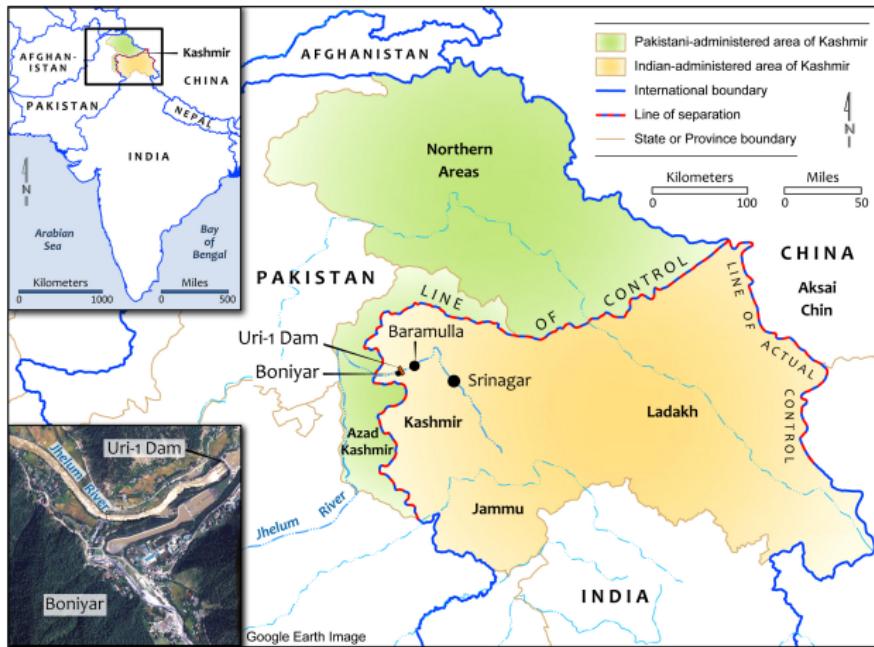


# The problem of anarchy

- Now, zoom out to politics at the international level.
- Who controls territory and the rights to natural resources in that territory? Who has authority over the people in a given territory?
- There is no central authority in international relations - so states must decide such outcomes for themselves.
- This is what IR means by **anarchy**: the lack of any central authority above states that can make *and* enforce rules those states must follow.
- Example: Kashmir



# Kashmir





# The problem of anarchy

- Example: Kashmir
  - Territory claimed by both India and Pakistan
  - Ceding the claim gives the other side a strategic advantage
  - Stakes are high due to historical claims
  - No authority above India and Pakistan to enforce a solution  
(or to prevent violent conflict over it)
- Deciding who gets what, how, and when becomes *very* difficult without central authority



# The main unit in international politics

- **States** (“countries”) are the primary actors in IR.
- They are:
  - central authorities
  - with the ability to make laws, rules, and decisions
  - and enforce them via a monopoly on the use of violence
  - within a specified territory
  - recognized as sovereign by other states
- Because of their internal authority, they are an efficient way of deciding political problems within their borders.



# Sovereignty

- Integral to the concept of the state is the principle of **sovereignty**.
- **Sovereignty:** the expectation that states have legal and political supremacy and authority within their territorial borders.
  - Enforced by their monopoly on the use of force.
- The expectation is not always accurate (ex: failed states).
- But states (generally) presume each other to have sovereignty over affairs within their territory, with norms of non-intervention in the affairs of other states.

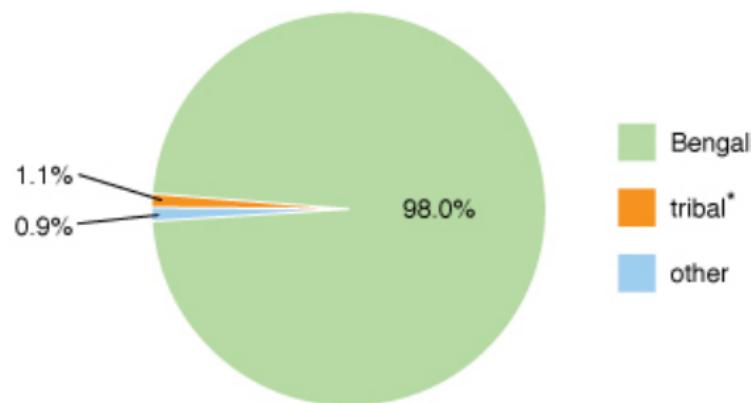


## Brief Sidebar: State or Nation?

- What is the difference between a state and a nation?
- **States** are tied to physical geography.
- **Nations** are groups of people with common lineage, culture, or customs.
- Nations may be confined to a single state, or be split across states.
- States may contain many nations or be relatively homogeneous.



## Ethnic composition (2011)



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\*Includes Chakma, Saontal, and Marma tribal groups.



# The Kurds

## The Kurds

Between 25 to 35 million people, living mainly in 4 countries

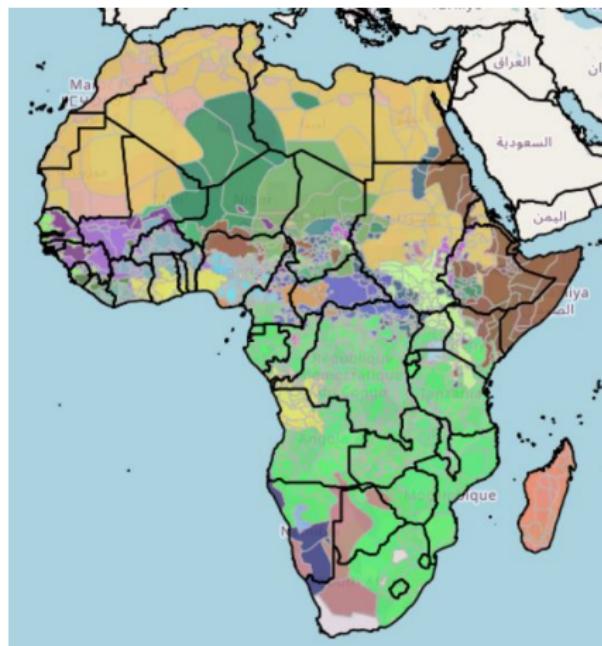


Sources: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, F. Balanche & M. Horan

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# Africa





# Where did these concepts come from?

- We can trace the modern concept of the state and sovereignty to the outcome of the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648).
- Thirty Years' War (over-)simplified:
  - Holy Roman Emperor tries to establish Catholicism in Protestant regions within the empire.
  - This was an effort to establish central control over increasingly independent local principalities.
  - This effort's primary objective: gain/retain tax revenues and loyalty from the people.
  - Local rulers violently disagreed.
- War ends in **1648** with the **Peace of Westphalia**.



# Peace of Westphalia

- Gives the princes control over the territory they confiscate from the Catholic Church and the Hapsburgs.
- Allowed princes and their proto-states independent decision-making.
- Establishes their authority over territories under their control, including defining specific borders for that control.
- This means that control shifts from church and emperor to local units - these proto-states are now considered sovereign.
- Citizens now give loyalty (and taxes) to their local states.
- Establishes importance of states and their sovereignty.



# Peace of Westphalia Implications

- Centuries later, this means that we often take for granted discussing why one state (ex: the US) behaves a certain way with another state (ex: China).
- We also tend to assume that all states possess the right to sovereignty and non-intervention.
- Think about how weird this is for a second.
- There are (imaginary!) lines out in the world, where if you happen to live on one side of the line, your entire political life is controlled by one government, but if you live on the other side of the line, your political life may be totally different.



# PoW Implications: Who is “the state”?

- Who approved the Treaty of Westphalia?
  - Not “the people,” but European rulers (mostly monarchs).
- What did those rulers want?
- Prior to Westphalia, rulers often had competing claims over which populations were their subjects (no clear borders).
- This means they have to compete for citizens’ support, which can become very costly to do.
  - This involves giving citizens more rights, more economic benefits, etc. (None of which rulers want to do!)
- Economics shows that, when many firms compete for the same consumers, this is good for consumers but bad for firms.



# PoW Implications: Who is “the state”?

- What kind of arrangement shifts benefits away from consumers and to a firm?
- Answer: Monopoly.
- We can apply this to the post-PoW world. The clarification and settling of borders meant that rulers could focus on keeping their citizens in check, without needing to spend a bunch of extra resources competing against other monarchs for their citizens' support.
- **This gives rise to the norms of sovereignty and non-interference.**



# PoW Implications: Who is "the state"?

- Given that governments are sovereign, and not supposed to interfere with citizens in other states, **this lets us discuss the action of a state's government as representing the interests of the state itself.**
- HOWEVER: This is a useful fiction. States are always composed of many (sometimes competing) groups.
  - Talking about a state's interests is a useful simplification of reality (most of the time).
  - We'll return to this later...



# Why are states so important?

- What does the origin of sovereignty mean for the state's relationship to war?
- How did this principle of state sovereignty spread to the rest of the world?
- How does the tension between sovereignty and nations complicate politics?



# Why are states so important?

- What does the origin of sovereignty mean for the state's relationship to war?
  - War makes the state, and the state makes war (Tilly 1979).
  - States use their monopoly on the legitimate use of force to impose peace within their territories, enabling them to efficiently tax. This tax revenue lets them maintain the military capacity to wage war on other states.
- How did this principle of state sovereignty spread to the rest of the world?
  - Primarily through European imperialism.
- How does the tension between sovereignty and nations complicate politics?
  - Makes state control extremely valuable and worth fighting for, especially if two hostile nations are confined to one state.



# Historical Eras

- 1 The Mercantilist Era, 1492–1815
- 2 The Pax Britannica, 1815–1914
- 3 The Thirty Years' Crisis, 1914–1945
- 4 The Cold War, 1945–1990
- 5 Post–Cold War, 1991–Present
- 6 What Will Shape Our World in the Future?



# The Mercantilist Era: 1492-1815



North Wind Picture Archives/Alamy



# The Mercantilist Era: 1492-1815

- The “world” as a meaningful unit emerged after 1492.
- The Age of “Discovery:” explorers such as Columbus (Spain) and Henry the Navigator (Portugal) traveled the world, and Spain and Portugal were the first to expand outward and to establish colonies abroad.
- Prior slide image shows Spanish invaders in 1520 in Tenochtitlán, the site of modern-day Mexico City.
  - Military technology, transportation (ships), and disease (e.g., blankets with smallpox) made conquest possible despite the relatively small numbers of Europeans.
- England, France, and the Netherlands promptly followed.



# The Mercantilist Era: 1492-1815

- Competition led the great powers to secure trade routes and establish colonial empires in the New World, Africa, and Asia. By 1700, Western European powers controlled much of the world.
- In this system, wealth and military power were mutually reinforcing.
- This led to **Mercantilism**: the use of military power to enrich imperial governments. This system intentionally favored the mother country over both its own colonies and competing empires.



# The Mercantilist Era: 1492-1815

- Key mechanisms of mercantilism:
  - State monopolies
  - Controls on colonial trade
- What does this mean in practice?
- Goods made in colonies could only be exported to the imperial center, at prices substantially lower than those of world markets, while colonies could only purchase goods from that same center.



# The Mercantilist Era: 1492-1815

- This leads to a battle for supremacy between rival imperial powers, who seek to colonize the rest of the planet to expand their own wealth via mercantilism.
  - 1 Spain vs. Portugal for control of the “New” World
  - 2 Spain’s possessions in the Netherlands rebelled in the 1560s and formed the New Dutch Republic.
  - 3 British and Spain battled in the late 1500s; Britain defeated the Spanish Armada in 1588.
  - 4 Thirty Years’ War (1618-1648): French and Dutch vs. Spain (with other contributors). **Treaty of Westphalia.**
- Does the Treaty of Westphalia bring peace to this era?



# The Mercantilist Era: 1492-1815

- Of course not.
- The following 150 years see a struggle for hegemony between England and France (and their respective allies).
- Notable conflicts
  - Seven Years' War (1756-1763): Cements British dominance in the New World (mostly).
  - Napoleonic Wars (1804-1815): Establishes Britain as dominant force in Europe.
- Britain emerges as the **hegemon**: the undisputed superpower in the international system.



# The Pax Britannica: 1815-1914

- Also called the “Hundred Years’ Peace”
- International cooperation generally encouraged by:
  - Greater links among economies and governments.
  - Less belligerent relations and converging interests.
  - British hegemony and predominance (naval power) helping to maintain a rough power balance.



# The Pax Britannica: 1815-1914

- Exchange of goods and economic integration increase during this era, increasing GDP. Why?
- Britain's Industrial Revolution:
  - Efficient, large-scale production by 1820s
  - Rise of industrial and merchant class
  - Mercantilism seen as harmful and inefficient
- New desire for free trade leads to trade liberalization in the 1880s.
- Transportation and communication grow too.
- Overall result: more free trade and migration, backed by the British gold standard (globalization v1).



# The Pax Britannica: 1815-1914

FIGURE 1.1 *Gross Domestic Product per Capita, 1500–2010\**

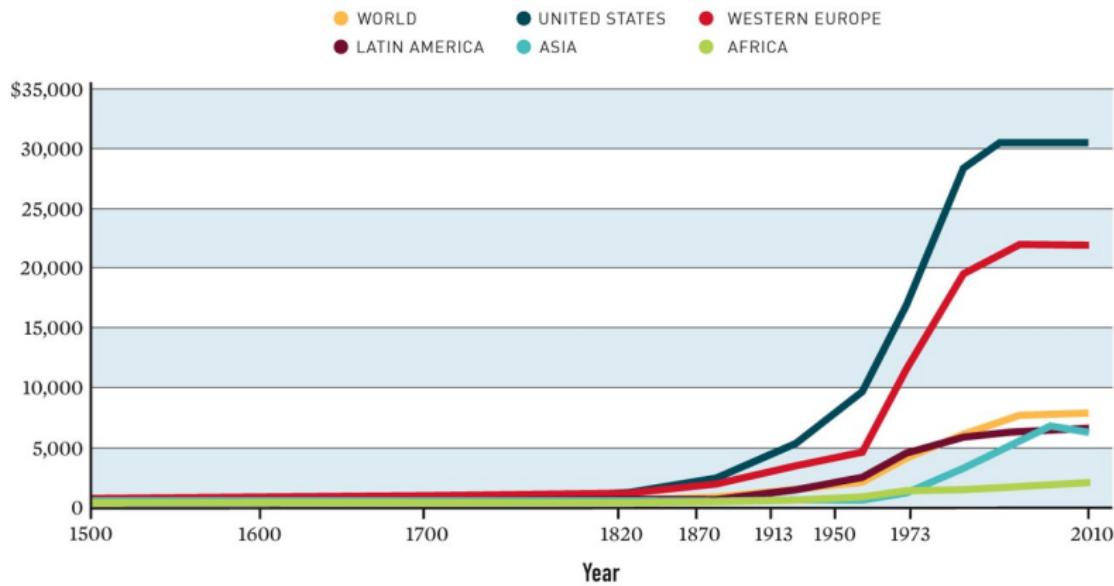


Figure sources: Angus Maddison, *The World Economy: Historical Statistics* (Paris: OECD, 2004); 2010 data from [www.ggdc.net/maddison/maddison-project/data/mpd\\_2013-01.xlsx](http://www.ggdc.net/maddison/maddison-project/data/mpd_2013-01.xlsx) (accessed 10/10/14).



# The Pax Britannica: 1815-1914

## MAP 1.1 *The Colonial Empires, 1914*

After 1870, European countries, Japan, and the United States dramatically expanded their colonial possessions. By 1914, almost all of Asia and Africa had been taken over by the colonial powers. In the poorer regions of the world, only Latin America, China, and a handful of countries in Africa and Asia remained independent.



Arctic Ocean





# The Thirty Years' Crisis: 1914-1945

- States generally wanted security through alliances, expansion, and economic self-sufficiency.
- Rising powers (particularly Germany and Japan) chafed at “established” political boundaries, believing that they were being artificially restrained.
- Over time, relations became more conflictual. Europe divides into two camps: Central versus Allied powers.



# The Thirty Years' Crisis: 1914-1945

MAP 1.2 *Europe, 1914*





# The Thirty Years' Crisis: World War I

- World War I: Costly and bloody war of attrition.  
Ultimately decided by late US entry (1917) and inability of German submarines to cut off British supplies.
- Assorted consequences: Central powers defeated, Russian Revolution and Soviet Union formation, new states replaced Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires.



# The Thirty Years' Crisis: 1914-1945

MAP 1.3 *Europe after World War I, 1920*





# Treaty of Versailles

- The Treaty of Versailles, June 1918.
- Punishes Germany as WWI's aggressor, leading to loss of territory and status.
- Forces Germany to pay war reparations to Allied countries to cover their costs of going to war.
  - Many of these costs were actually to pay loans to the US, which had made loans available during the war to allow these states to afford huge military expenditures.
- German economy could not afford both reparations and rebuilding.
- This leads to the government printing more and more money...



# The Thirty Years' Crisis: Hyperinflation



Hulton-Deutsch Collection/Corbis





# The Thirty Years' Crisis Continued

- 1929: Great Depression. This has global economic impacts.
  - U.S. industrial production drops by half.
  - One-third of the labor force is unemployed in Germany.
  - Free trade ends; the volume of world trade drops 67% between 1929 and 1933.
- States turn inward with more protectionism and decreased trade; fascism and imperialism on the rise.



# The Thirty Years' Crisis: WWII

- WWII: Germany invades Poland and the war begins.
- Axis Powers: Germany, Italy, Japan.
- Allied Powers: US, Britain, USSR
- US and USSR left standing as only viable superpowers; widespread devastation in Europe.



# The Cold War: 1945-1991

- Superpowers form alliances and gather allies while trying to maximize global influence and regrow their economies.



# The Cold War: 1945-1991

MAP 1.4 *The Cold War and Its Alliances, 1980*

- NATO
- OTHER ALLIES OF THE UNITED STATES
- WARSAW PACT
- SOCIALIST COUNTRIES ALIGNED WITH THE SOVIET UNION
- OTHER ALLIES OF THE SOVIET UNION
  
- NONALIGNED COUNTRIES
- COMMUNIST GUERRILAS
- ANTICOMMUNIST GUERRILAS





# The Cold War: 1945-1991

- Rise of the “third world” (more recently called “Less Developed Countries”).
- Most of the dominant countries were preoccupied with war or rebuilding from 1915-1960.
- This meant that many colonial areas were neglected, leading to pressure for independence.
- This generates a huge wave of “de-colonization;” almost all colonial powers have given up their colonies by late 1960s.
- Now, the world was composed of sovereign states rather than empires.



# The Cold War: 1945-1991

- Eventually, rising costs to Soviet economy of competition with US leads to attempts at political and economic reform (Gorbachev's glasnost and perestroika).
- These prove insufficient...



# Post-Cold War: 1991-Present



Sueddeutsche Zeitung Photo/Alamy Stock Photo



# Post-Cold War: 1991-Present

- USSR collapses due to a number of factors:
  - The Soviet economy lags behind the West.
  - Gorbachev seeks better relations with the West.
  - Glasnost and perestroika decrease state control.
  - Soviets leave Afghanistan in 1989 after 10 years of fighting.
- Soviet Union becomes 15 separate states; Eastern European states hold elections.



## Post-Cold War: 1991-Present

- Increase in international cooperation: cooperation in the 1991 Gulf War.
- Increased United Nations peacekeeping and global role.
- Increased global economic integration, interdependence, and institutions (although multiple financial crises also occurred).



# Post-Cold War: 1991-Present

FIGURE 1.2 *Regional Trade Agreements (RTAs), 1948–2017*

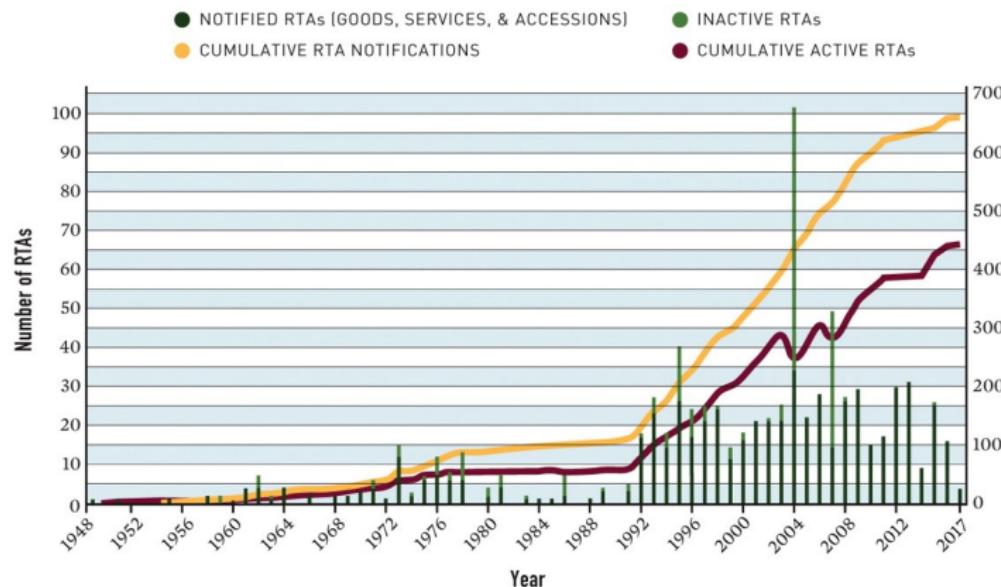


Figure source: World Trade Organization, [www.wto.org/english/tratop\\_e/region\\_e/regfac\\_e.htm](http://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/region_e/regfac_e.htm) (accessed 11/27/17).



# Post-Cold War: 1991-Present

- This era has not been without crises.
  - 1990 Iraq invasion of Kuwait
  - 1992 UN mission in Somalia
  - 1993 Rwandan genocide
  - 9/11 and the War on Terror
  - 2011: Arab Spring and its aftermath
    - ISIS in Syria, Iraq, Libya, Afghanistan
    - Civil war in Yemen
    - Massive refugee flows to Europe and reactionary formation of anti-immigrant parties



# Future Challenges

- Diplomatic
  - Yemen civil war
  - Chinese territorial claims
  - North Korean nuclear power
  - Russian annexation of Crimea and invasion of Ukraine
- Economic
  - Inequality
  - Decreased support for globalization
  - Rise in populism
  - Covid impacts (social, financial, etc.)
  - America's role in and commitment to its alliances



# How do states interact?

- In this history, we can see a variety of international orders.
- **International order:** the governing arrangements among a group of states; the rules, principles, and institutions that guide their actions towards each other
- We can generally classify at least three types of international order.



# Varieties of international order

- **Multipolar:** A variety of (groups of) states of roughly equal strength vie for power.
- **Bipolar:** Two states of equal strength balance each other's power, often collecting weaker states into alliances.
- **Hegemonic:** One state with disproportionate strength makes and enforces its own rules.



Broad international orders since 1492

- **The Mercantilist Era:** Mixture of multipolar (Spain vs. others) and bipolar (England vs. France).
- **Pax Britannica:** Mostly hegemonic (Britain).
- **30 Years' Crisis:** Multipolar.
- **Cold War:** Bipolar (US vs. USSR).
- **Age of Globalization to present:** Briefly hegemonic (US 1991 onwards to mid-2000s) then shift towards multipolarity (US, Russia, China, EU).
- **2022 and beyond:** Increasing multipolarity?