

# 1

# Why Study IR?

<b>International Relations in Everyday Life</b>	2
<b>Brief Historical Sketch of the State System</b>	9
<b>The Global State System and the World Economy</b>	17
<b>IR and the Changing Contemporary World of States</b>	21
<b>Conclusion</b>	28
KEY POINTS	30
QUESTIONS	30
GUIDE TO FURTHER READING	31
WEB LINKS	31

## **SUMMARY**

This chapter introduces 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. 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.



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## International Relations in Everyday Life

IR is the shorthand name for the academic subject of international relations. The main reason why we should study IR is the fact that the entire population of the world is divided into separate territorial political communities, or independent states, which profoundly affect the way people live. Together those states form an international system that is global in extent. At the present time there are almost 200 independent states. Everybody on earth with very few exceptions not only lives in one of those countries but is also a citizen of one of them and very rarely of more than one. 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 ways that they may not be fully aware of.

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. They are usually embedded in international markets which affect the policies of their governments and the wealth and welfare of their citizens. That requires that they enter into relations with each other. Complete isolation is usually not an option. When states are isolated and are 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 recently with regard to Burma, Libya, North Korea, Iraq, and Iran. The state system is a system of social relations, that is, a system of relations between groups of human beings. Like most other social systems, international relations can have certain advantages and disadvantages for the participants. IR is the study of the nature and consequences of these relations.

The state system is a distinctive way of organizing political life on earth which has deep historical roots. There have been state systems or quasi-state systems at different times and places in different parts of the world: for example, in ancient India, in ancient Greece, and in 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 the relations between such independent states have been labeled 'international relations'. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the state system was expanded to encompass the entire territory of the earth. The world of states is basically a territorial world: it is a way of politically organizing the world's populated territory, a distinctive kind of territorial political organization which is based on numerous different governments that are legally independent of each other. The only large territory that is not a state is Antarctica, and it is administered by a consortium of states. Today IR is the study of the global state system from

**Box 1.1 Key concepts****State sovereignty**

a state's characteristic of being politically independent of all other states

**State system**

relations between politically organized 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

**Five basic values of a state system**

security, freedom, order, justice, and welfare

**Major traditional IR approaches**

realism, liberalism, International Society, and IPE

**The security dilemma**

states are both a source of security and a threat to security for human beings

**Medieval authority**

an arrangement of dispersed political authority

**Modern state authority**

an arrangement of centralized political authority

**Hegemony**

power and control exercised by a leading state over the other states

**Balance of power**

a doctrine and an arrangement whereby the power of one state (or group of states) is checked by the countervailing power of other states

various scholarly perspectives, the most important of which shall be discussed in this book.

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 which 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.

To begin to respond to these questions it may be helpful to examine our everyday life as citizens of particular states to see what we generally expect from it. 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 family,



clan, ethnic or religious organizations. In the modern era, however, the state has usually been involved as the leading institution in that regard: it is expected to insure these basic values. For example, people generally assume that the state should and will underwrite the value of security, which involves the protection of citizens from internal and external threat. 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. Thus states can both defend and threaten peoples' security, and 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 friendly, non-threatening, and peace-loving. But a few states may be hostile and aggressive and there is no world government to constrain them. That poses a basic and age-old problem of state systems: national security. To deal with 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 that we should never lose sight of. Many states also enter into alliances with other states to increase their national security. 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, it is also necessary to construct and maintain a balance of military power. Security is obviously one of the most fundamental values of international relations. That 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 be best 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 tax burdens or obligations of military service, is the condition of national freedom or independence which 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, and Dutch citizens as well as citizens of other countries that 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 obviously are 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 be best 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 environment in such a way as to enhance or at least defend and maintain the national standard of living.

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. That 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 international trade, with international transportation and communications, and with other international economic relations 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 that to be a good thing because it may increase overall freedom and wealth by expanding the global marketplace and 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 that lack those advantages. 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 be best characterized as fundamentally a socioeconomic world and not merely a political and military world.

#### Box 1.2 IR values and theories

##### FOCUS

- **Security**  
power politics, conflict, and war
- **Freedom**  
cooperation, peace, and progress
- **Order and justice**  
shared interests, rules, and institutions
- **Welfare**  
wealth, poverty, equality

##### THEORIES

- **Realism**
- **Liberalism**
- **International Society**
- **IPE theories**

Most people usually take these basic values (security; freedom; order and justice; 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 learning occasions people wake up to the larger circumstances of their lives which in normal times are a silent or invisible background. At those moments they are likely to become sharply aware 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 rattles its saber or engages 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, 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 great power war. That 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. The Great Depression brought home to many people around the world how their economic livelihood could be adversely affected, in some cases destroyed, by market conditions not only at home but also in other countries. 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 in regard to Nazi Germany just prior to the war with disastrous consequences for everybody, including the German people.

There also were moments of heightened awareness of the fundamental importance of these values after the Second World War. The Cuban missile crisis of 1962 brought home to many people the dangers of nuclear war. The anti-colonial movements in Asia and Africa of the 1950s and 1960s 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 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 economic policies of 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 Gulf War (1990–1) and the conflicts in the Balkans, particularly 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.

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. For example, the Jews spent more than half a century trying to get a state of their own in which they could be secure: Israel. 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, 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. They recognize the significance of these basic values even if they disagree about which ones are most



important—e.g. realists emphasize the importance of security and order, liberals emphasize freedom and justice, and IPE scholars emphasize economic equality and welfare.

But if states are not successful in that regard the state system can easily be understood in the opposite light: not as upholding basic social conditions and values, but rather as undermining them. That is the case with regard to many states in the Third World, especially sub-Saharan Africa. It is also the case with regard to some states which emerged as a result of the breakup of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia at the end of the Cold War. Many of these states more or less fail to provide or protect even to a minimal standard at least some of the five basic values discussed above. More than a few states fail to ensure any of them. The plight of countless men, women, and children in those countries puts into question the credibility and perhaps even the legitimacy of the state system. It promotes a corresponding 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 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 problematical institution. The alternative IR theories discussed later in this book tend to adopt that critical view.

### Box 1.3 Views of the state

#### TRADITIONAL VIEW

- States are valuable institutions: they provide security, freedom, order, justice, welfare
- People benefit from the state system

#### ALTERNATIVE VIEW

- States and the state system create more problems than they solve
- The majority of the world's people suffer more than they benefit from the state system

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, including 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 higher level. Indeed, they have been so successful in doing that for the past several centuries that the standards 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 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. That has provoked a debate in IR between traditional theorists who by and large accept the existing state system and radical theorists who by and large reject it.

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## **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 will always 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 to high standards of living.

People have not always lived in sovereign states. For most of human history people have organized their political lives in different ways, the most common being that of political empire such as the Roman empire. In the future the world may not be organized into a state system either. People may eventually give up on sovereign statehood and abandon the institution. 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 that 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 in flux, in the past states and the state system have always 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 system is global in extent. The era of the sovereign state coincides with the modern age of expanding power,



prosperity, knowledge, science, technology, literacy, urbanization, citizenship, freedom, equality, rights, etc. 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 a 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. 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 an independent 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 date back more than 5,000 years.

Each political group faced the inescapable problem of coexisting with neighboring groups whom they could not ignore or avoid because they were right there next door. Each political grouping also had to deal with groups that were further away but were still capable of affecting them. Their geographical closeness must have come to be regarded as a zone of political proximity, if not a frontier or border of some kind. Where group contact occurred, sometimes it must have involved rivalry, disputes, threats, intimidation, intervention, invasion, conquest, and other hostile and warlike interactions. But sometimes and perhaps most of the time, it must also have involved mutual respect, cooperation, commerce, conciliation, dialogue, and similar friendly and peaceful relations. A very significant form of dialogue between autonomous political communities—diplomacy—has ancient roots. There are recorded formal agreements among ancient political communities which date as far back as 1390 BC, and records of quasi-diplomatic activity as early as 653 BC (Barber 1979: 8–9).

Here in prototype is the classical problem of IR: war and peace, conflict and cooperation. Here, too, are the different aspects of international relations emphasized by realism and liberalism.



These 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 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 politically organized 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 relations between such independent groups.

The first relatively clear historical manifestation of a state system is that of ancient Greece (500 BC–100 BC), then known as Hellas. It comprised a large number of mostly small city-states (Wight 1977; Watson 1992). Ancient Greece was not a nation-state the way it is today. Rather, it was a system of city-states. Athens was the largest and most famous, but there were also many other 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 also 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 more than anything else.

The ancient Greek state system was eventually destroyed by more powerful neighboring empires, and in due course the Greeks became subjects of the Roman Empire (200 BC–500 AD). The Romans developed a huge empire in the course of conquering, occupying, and ruling most of Europe and a large part of the Middle East and North Africa. The Romans had to deal with the numerous political communities that occupied these areas, but they did that by subordinating them rather than recognizing them. Instead of international relations or quasi-international relations, under the Roman empire the only option for political communities was either submission to Rome or revolt. Eventually those communities on the periphery of the empire began to revolt; the Roman army could not contain the revolts and began to retreat, and on several occasions the city of Rome itself was invaded and shattered by the 'barbarian' tribes. In that way the Roman empire was finally brought to an end after many centuries of political success and survival.

Empire was the prevalent pattern of political organization that gradually emerged in Christian Europe over several centuries after the fall of the Roman empire. Rome's two main successors in Europe also were empires: in Western Europe the medieval (Catholic) empire based at Rome (Christendom); in Eastern Europe and the near east the Byzantine (Orthodox) empire centered on Constantinople or what is today Istanbul (Byzantium). Byzantium claimed to be the continuation of the Christianized Roman empire. The European medieval



### Box 1.4 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)

Christian world (500–1500) was thus divided geographically most of the time into two politico-religious empires. There were other political systems and empires further afield. North Africa and the Middle East were a world of Islamic civilization which originated in the Arabian peninsula in the early years of the seventh century. There were empires in what is today Iran and India. The oldest empire was the Chinese which survived, under different dynasties, 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. The Middle Ages were thus an era of empire and the relations and conflicts of different empires. But contact between empires was intermittent at best: communications were slow and transportation was difficult. Most empires at that time consequently were a world unto themselves.

Can we speak of ‘international relations’ in Western Europe during the medieval era? Only with difficulty because, as already indicated, medieval

### Box 1.5 City-states and empires

500 BC–100 BC	Greek city-states
200 BC–500 AD	Roman Empire
500–1500	Catholic Christendom: The Pope in Rome
Medieval Christian World	Orthodox Christendom: Byzantine Empire, Constantinople
Other historical empires	Islam Iran, India, China



Christendom was more like an empire than a state system. States existed, but they were not independent or sovereign in the modern meaning of these words. There were no clearly defined territories with borders. The medieval world was not a geographical patchwork of sharply differentiated colors which represented different independent countries. Instead, it was a complicated and confusing intermingling of lines and colors of varying shades and hues. Power and authority were organized on both a religious and a political basis: the Pope and the 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 laws. They 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.

#### Box 1.6 The Christian commonwealth of medieval Europe

##### RELIGIOUS HIERARCHY

Pope →  
 ↓  
 Archbishops, bishops,  
 and other leading clergy →  
 ↓  
 Priests and other  
 common clergy →  
 ↓  
 Ordinary Christians

##### POLITICAL HIERARCHY

← Emperor  
 ↓  
 ← Kings and other  
 semi-independent  
 national rulers  
 ↓  
 ← Barons and other  
 semi-independent local rulers  
 ↓  
 Common people of numerous  
 local communities

The medieval era was also one of considerable disarray, disorder, conflict, and violence which stemmed from this lack of clear lines of territorial political organization and control. Sometimes wars were fought between religious civilizations—for example, the Christian Crusades against the Islamic world (1096–1291). Sometimes wars were fought between kings—for example, the Hundred Years War between England and France (1337–1453). But often war was feudal and local and was fought between rival groups of knights whose leaders had a quarrel. The authority and power to engage in war was not monopolized by the state: kings did not control war as they were later able to do. Instead, war-making rights and capacities belonged to members of a distinctive caste—the armed knights and their leaders and followers—who fought sometimes for the Pope, sometimes for the Emperor, sometimes for their king, sometimes for their master, and sometimes and indeed quite regularly for themselves. 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, etc. (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. Instead, they 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. 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 a highly unequal justice. Those higher up in the political and religious hierarchies had easier access to justice than those at the bottom. There were different courts for different classes of people. There was no police, and often justice was meted out by people themselves in the form of revenge or reprisal. The Pope was responsible not only for ruling the Church through his hierarchy of bishops and other clergy but also for overseeing political disputes between kings and other semi-independent national rulers. Members of the clergy were often senior advisers to kings and other secular rulers. Kings were sometimes 'Defenders of the Faith'—such as Henry VIII of England. Knights often thought of themselves as Christian soldiers. Welfare was connected to security and was based on feudal ties between local rulers and common people in which those rulers provided protection in exchange for a share of the labor, crops and other resources and products of a local peasant economy. Peasants were not free to live wherever they wished. Instead, they were tied to feudal landlords who could be members of the nobility or the clergy or both.

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 Emperor and the Pope. They became defenders of state sovereignty against internal disorder and external threat. 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'.

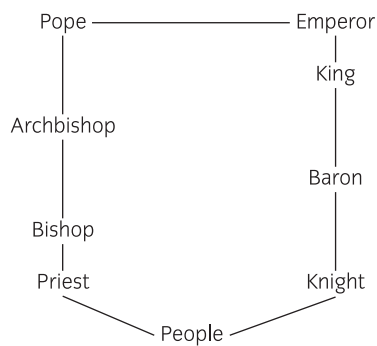


In short, power and authority were concentrated at one point: the King and his government. The King now ruled a territory with borders which were defended against outside interference. The King became the supreme authority over all the people in the country, and no longer had to operate via intermediate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

### Box 1.7. Medieval and modern authority

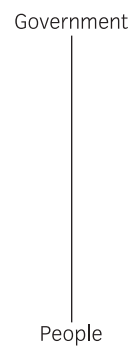
#### DISPERSED MEDIEVAL AUTHORITY

(no sovereignty)



#### CENTRALIZED MODERN AUTHORITY

(sovereignty)



One of the major effects of the rise of the modern state was its monopoly of the means of warfare. 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. As a result international rivalries developed which often resulted in wars and the enlargement of some countries at the expense of others. At various times Spain, France, Austria, England, Denmark, Sweden, Holland, Poland, Russia, Prussia and other states of the new European state system were at war. Some wars were spawned by the Protestant Reformation which profoundly divided the European Christian population in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. But other wars, and increasingly most wars, were provoked by the mere existence of independent states whose rulers resorted to war as a means of defending their interests, pursuing their ambitions and, if possible, expanding their territorial holdings. War became a key international institution for resolving conflicts between sovereign states.

The political change from medieval to modern thus basically involved the construction of the independent territorial state. 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 many countries, indeed most, the Christian churches fell under state control. There was no room within modern states for semi-independent territory or people or institutions. In the modern international system territory is consolidated, unified, and centralized under a sovereign government. The population of the territory owe their allegiance to that government and they have a duty to obey its laws. That includes bishops as well as barons, merchants as well as aristocrats. All institutions are now subordinate to state authority and public law. The familiar territorial patchwork map of the world is in place in which each patch is under the exclusive jurisdiction of a particular state. All of the territory of Europe and eventually the entire planet is partitioned in that way 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) and the Peace of Westphalia which brought it to an end.

#### **Box 1.8 The Thirty Years War (1618–1648)**

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 stakes, with all sorts of cross-cutting dynastic, religious, and state interests involved . . . Europe was fighting its first continental war.

Holsti (1991: 26–8)

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 governments, and their own political subjects. That 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 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.

**Box 1.9 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 of all Europe.

Watson (1992: 186)

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 (1618–1648), and was blocked by a coalition led by France and Sweden. France made the attempt under King Louis XIV (1661–1714) and was blocked by an English–Dutch 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. Whether the sole remaining superpower after the Cold War, the United States, was becoming a global hegemon was an issue at the time of writing.

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**The Global State System and the World Economy**

Yet, while Europeans resisted empire 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. 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 down to the middle of the twentieth century, when the last non-Western peoples finally broke free of Western colonialism



and acquired political independence. The fact that Western states were never able to dominate each other but were capable of dominating almost everybody else has been crucially important in shaping the modern international system. The global ascendancy and supremacy of the West is crucial for understanding IR even today.

The history of modern Europe is a history of political and economic conflict and war between its sovereign states. States made war, and war made and unmade states (Tilly 1992). European state rivalries were conducted not only in Europe but wherever European ambitions and power could be projected—and that was, eventually, throughout the world. European states entered into competition with each other to penetrate and control militarily useful and economically desirable areas in other parts of the world. European states felt they had every right to do that. The idea that non-Western peoples had rights of independence and self-determination only came much later. Huge non-European territories and populations consequently fell under the control of European states, by military conquest, commercial domination, or political annexation.

Western imperial expansion made possible for the first time the formation and operation of a global economy (Parry 1966) and a global polity (Bull and Watson 1984). The expansion of trade between the Western world and the non-Western world began at about the same time that the modern state was emerging in Europe—around the year 1500. That expansion was based on the long-distance and heavily armed sailing-ship which Europeans used both for transporting goods and for projecting military and political power. By such means European states expanded their power far beyond Europe. The American continents were gradually brought into the world trading system via the mining of silver and other precious metals, the trade in furs, and the production of agricultural commodities—much of it produced on large plantations by slave labor. About the same time the East Indies and then continental parts of South Asia and South-East Asia came under European colonization and control. While the Spanish, the Portuguese, the Dutch, the English, and the French expanded their empires overseas, the Russians expanded theirs overland. By the late eighteenth century the Russian empire based on the fur trade extended across Siberia, into Alaska, and down the west coast of North America as far as northern California. The Western powers also forced the opening of trade with China and Japan—although neither country was colonized politically. Large territories of the non-European world were settled by Europeans and later became independent member states of the state system under the control of their settler populations: the United States, the states of Latin America, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and—for a long time—South Africa. The Middle East and tropical Africa were the last continents that Europeans colonized.

During the era of economic and political imperialism by European states a few fundamental points should be kept in mind which shed light on the state system at that time. First, European states made expedient alliances with non-

**Box 1.10 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 dishonorable; (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)

European political systems—such as the alliances arranged by the British and by the French with different Indian ‘tribes’ (i.e. nations) of North America. Second, almost wherever they could, European states conquered and colonized those non-Western political systems and made them a subordinate part of their empires. Third, those far-flung empires became a basic source of the wealth and power of the European states for several centuries. Thus the development of Europe was achieved in significant part on the basis of the control of extensive territories outside Europe and by the exploitation of their natural and human resources. Fourth, some of those overseas colonies fell under the control of European settler populations, and many of those new ‘settler states’ were eventually allowed to become members of the state system. The successful American revolution against the British empire first opened that door in the late eighteenth century. That launched the transition from a European state system to a Western state system. Lastly, throughout the era of Western imperialism, from the sixteenth century until the early twentieth century, there was no interest or desire to incorporate non-Western political systems into the state system on a basis of equal sovereignty. That only happened on a large scale after the Second World War.

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. Not every non-Western country fell under the political control of a Western imperial state; but countries that 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, and 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 political claims for decolonization and independence based on European and American ideas of self-determination. 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.

**Box 1.11 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 . . .

R. Bridges *et al.* (1969: 311–12)

European decolonization in the Third World more than tripled the membership of the UN from about 50 states in 1945 to over 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 was 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 breakup of Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia at the end of the Cold War. That expanded UN membership to almost 200 states at the end of the twentieth century.

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 which 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.

#### Box 1.12 Global expansion of the state system

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

## 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 both for traditional and for new approaches. Later chapters will explore how each tradition of 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 center 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 are strictly speaking either correct or incorrect because the truth is: the state is a multifaceted and somewhat confusing entity. There is disagreement about the scope and purpose of the state. The state system consequently is not an easy subject to understand, and it can be understood in different ways and with different points of emphasis.

But there are ways of simplifying. It is helpful to think of the state as having two different 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: it possesses internal sovereignty. That is the *internal* aspect of the state. 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 which 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 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 politically independent. 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 relation with other states. That is the state as an entity which is recognized as sovereign or independent, enjoys membership in international organizations, and possesses various international rights and responsibilities. We shall refer to that first category as *juridical statehood*. Recognition is an essential element of juridical statehood. Recognition qualifies states for membership of International Society, including membership of the United Nations. The absence of recognition denies it. Not every country is recognized as independent: an example is Quebec, which is a province of Canada. To become independent it must 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.



**Box 1.13 External dimension of statehood**

**The state as a country**

- Territory, government, society

**Legal, juridical statehood**

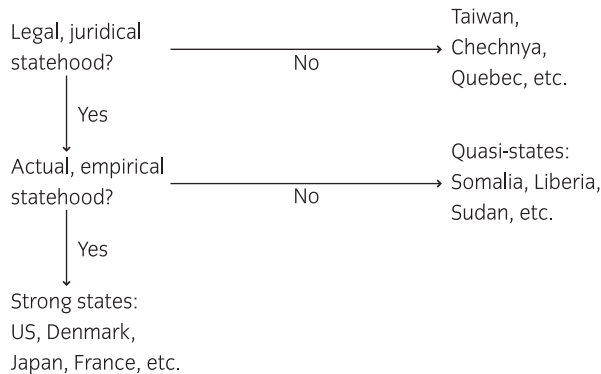
- Recognition by other states

**Actual, empirical statehood**

- Political institutions, economic basis, national unity

The countries that are recognized as sovereign states are always fewer than the countries that are not recognized but conceivably could be recognized. That is because independence is generally regarded as politically valuable. But the countries that are recognized as sovereign states usually have no desire to see new countries recognized because it would involve partition: existing states would lose territory, population, resources, power, status, etc. If partition became an accepted practice it would undermine international stability. Partition would set a dangerous precedent that could destabilize the state system if a growing number of currently subordinated but potentially independent countries lined up to demand recognition as sovereign states. So, there may always be somebody knocking on the door of state sovereignty, but there is a great reluctance to open the door and let them in. That would be disruptive of the present state system—especially now that there are no more colonies and the entire inhabited territory of the world is enclosed within one global state system. So juridical statehood is carefully rationed by existing sovereign states.

**Box 1.14 State types in the global state system**





The second category is the state viewed as a *substantial* political-economic organization. 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 powers in the military sense, such as Russia, are not strong states. Canada is the unusual case of a highly developed country with an effective democratic government but with a major weakness in its statehood: the threat of Quebec to secede. On the other hand, the United States is both a strong state and a strong power: indeed, it is the strongest power on earth.

**Box 1.15 Strong/weak states—strong/weak powers**

	<b>STRONG POWER</b>	<b>WEAK POWER</b>
<b>STRONG STATE</b>	USA, France, UK, Japan	Denmark, Switzerland, New Zealand, Singapore
<b>WEAK STATE</b>	Russia, Iraq, Pakistan	Somalia, Liberia, Chad, etc.

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 population or both—e.g. Nigeria 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 Third World, have a low degree of empirical statehood. Their institutions are weak, their economic basis is frail and underdeveloped, 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). If we summarize the various distinctions made here, we get the picture of the global state system shown in Box 1.16.

One of the most important conditions that throws light on the existence of so many quasi-states in the Third World is that of economic underdevelopment. Their poverty and consequent shortages of investment, infrastructure (roads, schools, hospitals, etc.), modern technology, trained and educated people, and

#### **Box 1.16 The global state system**

- 5 Great Powers: US, Russia, China, Britain, France
- Approx. 30 highly substantial states: Europe, N. America, Japan
- Approx. 75 moderately substantial states: Asia and Latin America
- Approx. 90 insubstantial quasi-states: Africa, Asia, Caribbean, Pacific
- Numerous unrecognized territorial political systems submerged in existing states

other socioeconomic assets or resources are among the most important factors that help us to understand why these states are so weak. The government and its institutions in these countries demonstrate little in the way of a solid foundation. The weakness of these states is a mirror of their poverty and technological backwardness, and as long as those conditions persist their incapacity as states is likely to persist as well. That profoundly affects the nature of the state system and also, therefore, the character of our IR theories.

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 center of the system: the major powers and especially the great powers. They see Third World states 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 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 problem 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 center 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 Third World, or the South, and the enrichment



of America, Europe, and other parts of the North. They see the international economy as one overall ‘world system’, with the developed capitalist states at the center advancing at the expense of the weak, underdeveloped states at the periphery. According to these scholars, legal equality and political independence—what we have designated as ‘juridical statehood’—is scarcely more than a polite façade that merely obscures the extreme vulnerability of poor Third World 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 which reflects their membership of the state system that 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—the underdeveloped countries. The fact that underdeveloped countries belong to the same global state system as developed countries raises different questions than if they belonged to entirely separate systems, which was the case before the global state system was created. We can see the issues of security, freedom and progress, order and justice, and wealth and poverty far more clearly when it involves 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, that becomes an international problem and not only a domestic problem or somebody else’s problem. That 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 they were colonies of Western imperial powers who were responsible for them as a matter of domestic policy rather than foreign policy.

#### Box 1.17 **Insiders and outsiders in the state system**

##### **PREVIOUS STATE SYSTEM**

- Small core of insiders, all strong states
- Many outsiders: colonies, dependencies, etc.

##### **PRESENT STATE SYSTEM**

- Virtually all states are recognized insiders, possessing formal or juridical statehood
- Big differences between insiders: some strong states, some weak quasi-states

These developments are a reminder that the world of states is a dynamic, changing world and not a static, unchanging one. 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, tech-



nology, 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 a profound impact on the balance of power, arms races, imperialism and colonialism, military alliances, the nature of war, and much else. Economic growth has permitted greater wealth to be devoted to military budgets, and has 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 and making national borders more permeable. Literacy, mass education, and expanded higher education have enabled governments to increase the capacity of their state 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 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 of colonialism increasingly difficult and eventually impossible.

The examples of the impact of social change on international relations are almost endless in their number and variety. However, this should suffice to make the point that social change affects states and the state system. The relationship is undoubtedly reversible: the state system also has an impact on politics, economics, 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? For example, if the process of economic globalization continues and makes the world one single market-place 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 (non-governmental organization) 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 growth of trading communities, the global expansion of science and technology, continuous down-sizing of government, increased privatization, and other activities which 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, the revolution of anti-colonialism and decolonization in the twentieth century, the spread of mass public education, the growth of the welfare state, 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.

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## Conclusion

The state system is a historical institution, fashioned by people. The population of the world has not always lived in sovereign states. For most of recorded human history people have lived under different kinds of political organization. In medieval times, political authority was chaotic and dispersed. Most people were dependent on a large number of different authorities—some of them political, some religious—with diverse responsibilities and power, from the local ruler and landlord to the King in a distant capital city, from parish priest to the Pope in far away Rome. In the modern state, authority is centralized in one legally supreme government, and people live under the standard laws of that government. The development of the modern state went a long way towards organizing political authority and power along rational and national lines.

The state system was a European state system in the first instance. During the era of Western imperialism the rest of the world was dominated by Europeans, both politically and economically. 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 center, which dominate the system politically and economically, and underdeveloped countries at the peripheries, which have limited political and economic influence.

People often expect states to uphold certain key values: security, freedom, order, justice, and welfare. IR theory concerns the ways in which states do or do not ensure those values. Historically the system of states consists of many heavily armed states, including a small number of great powers which often have been military rivals and sometimes have gone to war with each other. That reality of the state as a war machine underlines the value of security. That is the starting-point for the realist tradition in IR. Until states cease to be armed rivals, realist theory will have a firm historical basis. Following the end of the Cold War there are some signs that that may be changing: the great powers have cut back very significantly their military budgets and reduced the size of their armed forces. They have modernized their armies and navies and air forces, but they have not even considered abandoning their armed forces. That suggests that realism will be a relevant IR theory for some time to come.

But it is also a fact that most of the time states cooperate with each other more or less routinely, and without much political drama, for mutual advantage. They carry on diplomatic relations, they trade, they support international markets, they exchange scientific and technological knowledge, they open their doors to investors, businessmen, tourists, and travelers from other countries. They collaborate in order to deal with various common problems, from the environment to the traffic in illegal drugs. They commit themselves to bilateral and multilateral treaties for that purpose. In short, states interact in accordance with norms of reciprocity. The liberal tradition in IR is based on the idea that the modern state in that quiet and routine way makes a strategic contribution to international freedom and progress.

How do states uphold order and justice in the state system? Mainly through the rules and norms of international law, and through international organizations and diplomatic activity. There has been a huge expansion of those elements of international society since 1945. The International Society tradition in IR emphasizes the importance of such international relations. Finally the system of states is also a socioeconomic system; wealth and welfare is a core concern of most states. That fact is the starting-point for the IPE theories in IR. IPE theorists also discuss the consequences of Western expansion and the eventual incorporation of the Third World into the state system. Is that process bringing modernization and progress to the Third World, or is it bringing inequality, underdevelopment, and



misery? This question also 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. We begin this task by introducing IR as an academic discipline. Whereas this chapter has concerned the actual development of states and the state system, the next chapter will focus on how our thinking about states and their relations has developed over time.

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### 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. IR theory is about the effects that states and the state system have for these core values.
- 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 European first; now it is global. The global state system contains states of very different type: 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 Third World countries have benefited 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.

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### 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?
- We expect states to sustain a number of core values: security, freedom, order, justice, and welfare. Do states meet our expectations?
- What are the effects on Third World countries of integration into the global economy?
- Should we strive to preserve the system of sovereign states? Why or why not?
- Explain the main differences between strong, substantial states, weak quasi-states, great powers, and small powers. Why is there such diversity in the state system?



For additional material and resources see the companion web site at:

[www.oup.co.uk/best.textbooks/politics/jacksonsorensen2e/](http://www.oup.co.uk/best.textbooks/politics/jacksonsorensen2e/)

## GUIDE TO FURTHER READING

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

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

**Tilly, C.** (1992). *Coercion, Capital and European States*. Oxford: Blackwell.

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

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

## WEB LINKS

<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/westphal.htm>

Full text of the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia, which established modern European international society. Hosted by the Avalon Project at Yale Law School.

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/war/>

Discussion of the concept of war as well as links to related web resources. Hosted by Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy.

<http://carlisle-www.army.mil/usawc/Parameters/96spring/creveld.htm>

Martin van Creveld discusses 'The Fate of the State'. Hosted by the US Army War College.

<http://www.jeanmonnetprogram.org/papers/00/00f0801.html>

Jan Zielonka discusses whether a neo-medieval empire is likely to develop in Europe. Hosted by the Jean Monnet Center at the New York University School of Law.

