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Revised and Expanded

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CHAPTER 1

THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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For strategic leaders of the 21st century primarily concerned with the issues of foreign policy and national security, the international system with which they will be dealing is likely to reflect only partially the traditional international system. While the nation-state, first codified by the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, remains the dominant political body in international politics, its ability to influence events and people is being challenged by an assortment of nonstate actors, failed or failing states, and ungoverned regions. This is occurring in combination with the transnational threats posed by terror, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), crime, drugs, pandemics, and environmental degradation, as well as by elements of the system that also have potentially positive impacts such as globalization and the information revolution.

The international system refers to the structure of relationships that exist at the international level. These include the roles and interaction of both state and nonstate actors, along with international organizations (IO), multinational corporations (MNC), and nongovernment organizations (NGO).¹ States make foreign and national security policy against this external environment. Opportunities for both conflict and cooperation arise within this framework. The international community has tried for years to maintain order and prevent conflict using international institutions like the United Nations (UN) and international legal regimes like the Geneva Conventions.²

The international system frames the forces and trends in the global environment; it also frames the workspace of national security policy and strategy makers. As they work through the formulation process, with an understanding for the interests and objectives of any actors in a given situation, those involved in the business of policy and strategy making must be able to account for the associated state and nonstate actors present in the international system. In addition, it has become particularly important that they be able to assess the competing values associated with the global actors, both state and nonstate, especially in relation to the Global War on Terror. Also, given the criticality of being able to call upon other nation states and international or multinational organizations for support, the strategist or policymaker must know which alliances and coalitions are stakeholders in the issue in question. Another related element of the international system is the economic condition, as influenced by both the positive and negative components of globalization that helps determine the amount of power actors can wield in the system. It is also important to be able to identify the international legal tenets and regimes that bear on the situation. Finally, the 21st century policy and strategy maker must be able to understand the threats to order in the international system represented by both conventional and transnational entities. If the policymaker or strategist can accurately assess all these factors, he might be able to determine friends and enemies, threats and opportunities, and capabilities and constraints inherent in the contemporary world.

Threats, challenges, and opportunities can come in many shapes and sizes. A traditional threat might take the shape of a nation-state in possession of WMD and a hostile attitude. This is also true for a nonstate actor, potentially going down to the individual level, if he is willing to fly an airplane into a building. Less direct but also significant in the 21st century world are the threats that can be made to the successful execution of a nation-state's policies, if other nation-states are unwilling to provide support in a given situation. This lack of support can manifest itself in an opposing vote in an international organization like the United Nations (UN), a multinational organization like the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), or an international regime such as the International Atomic Energy Agency

(IAEA). It can equally be demonstrated by the refusal of a state to grant transit or over flight rights to the forces of another state.

The international system also affords the strategy or policymaker numerous opportunities for advantage. If a nation-state can come to the assistance of another nation-state or region in time of need like a natural disaster or failing economy, the opportunity exists to demonstrate concern and ultimately gain some level of influence with the entity in need. The same may be true when cooperating with other states as they transition toward democratic forms of government or market economies, or when accepting an international regime like an arms control treaty. In all cases, these are opportunities to gain acceptance and influence through and with other actors in the international system.

Who Are the Actors?

Nations and states are not the same. Nations represent groupings of a people that claim certain common bonds, such as descent, language, history, or culture. Collectively, such an aggregation would constitute a national entity.³ States, also known as nation-states, have a legal character and possess certain rights and duties under the tenets of international law. The 1933 Montevideo Convention on Rights and Duties of States, considered the classic legal definition for states, indicates that states possess the following characteristics: permanent population, defined territory, and a government capable of maintaining effective control over its territory and conducting international relations with other states.⁴ In addition, the government must possess a monopoly on the legitimate use of force in the state, and other states in the international system must recognize the sovereignty of that government.⁵

The concept of sovereignty came into existence with the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia ending the Thirty Years War in Europe, when, for the first time, the authority of state governments became officially recognized as greater than the authority of organized religion in formal state affairs. In contemporary international law, sovereign states are treated as equals, every recognized state can participate in the international system on the same plane. This sovereign equality possesses the following elements:

1. States are legally equal.
2. Every state enjoys the rights inherent in full sovereignty.
3. Every state is obligated to respect the fact of the legal entity of other states.
4. The territorial integrity and political independence of a state are inviolable.
5. Each state has the right to freely choose and develop its own political, social, economic, and cultural systems.
6. Each state is obligated to carry out its international obligations fully and conscientiously and to live in peace with other states.⁶

Since the 17th century, the nation-state has been the dominant entity in the international system, in part because of the power the concept of sovereignty gave the recognized states—both in terms of absolute domestic control and independence on the international level.

But nation-states have never been alone in the international system. A variety of nonstate actors always have challenged their influence. The term nonstate actor typically refers to any participant in the international system that is not a government. It is an entity or group that may have an impact on the internationally related decisions or policies of one or more states. Examples of nonstate actors would be IOs, NGOs, MNCs, the international media, armed elements attempting to free their territory from external rule, or terrorist groups. An individual may also be a nonstate actor.⁷

An IO is a formal institutional structure that transcends national boundaries. States create them by multilateral agreement or treaty. IOs normally function as an association of states that wields state-like power through governmental-like organs. The founding treaty defines the limits of the IO's legal

competence. This is the primary difference between a state and an IO. The IO only possesses the powers granted to it in its originating document by the states that created it, and cannot legally act beyond those powers. A state possesses the rights and duties recognized by international law, subject to the provisions of that law, and can involve itself in almost any activity of its choosing. IOs are completely dependent on member states for support and resources, both political and practical (like money and personnel). The result is that every IO is dependent on a sufficient number of member states believing that it is in their national interest to support the IO and its activities. Without member state support, the IO will not be able to function. Examples of IOs include the UN, NATO, and the European Union (EU).⁸

Different from IOs that are state based, NGOs are voluntary organizations of private individuals, both paid and unpaid, who are committed to a wide range of issues not on the behalf of any specific state government. Owing to increased interconnectedness partly associated with improvements in communications technology and transportation, specialized NGO organizations, agencies, and groups have risen around the globe, and have an unprecedented level of influence in the modern international system. NGOs typically fall in one of two categories: those that have a universal noncommercial (nonprofit), and nonpartisan focus; and those that are primarily motivated by self-interest. The former are likely to involve humanitarian aid organizations, human rights groups, environmentalists, or new social movements. Representative organizations of this first type are Amnesty International, Greenpeace, the Red Cross, and Save the Children.⁹

The second NGO grouping, those that are directed by self-interest, is usually best represented by MNCs. Sometimes called transnational corporations, MNCs are global actors that execute commercial activities for profit in more than one country. Estimates are that the largest 500 MNCs control more than two-thirds of world trade. While not a new concept, given that predecessors like the Hudson Bay Company and the British East India Company were operational over 300 years ago, contemporary MNCs such as General Motors or IBM have been able to take advantage of advances in technology and communication to become truly global in nature, with only a corporate headquarters in a single given country. Production no longer has to be located at the headquarters. With their enormous wealth, the impact of MNCs on the global economy is immense. Much of this influence comes in the arena of international commerce. In addition to being credited as a modernizing force in the international system through the establishment of hospitals, schools, and other valuable infrastructure in the Third World, MNCs are also charged with exploiting underdeveloped states in their conduct of free trade.¹⁰

To combat violations of the world order, the international community has created a number of regimes to ensure that widely accepted principles, procedures, norms, and rules are in place to govern particular issues in the international system. The intent is to create opportunity for states to use these regimes as fora to cooperate to achieve beneficial outcomes. Membership in these special purpose organizations generally is open to all relevant state actors. The success or failure of regimes is based on the level of coordination and cooperation of policies among the member states.¹¹

International regimes can take the form of legal conventions, international agreements, treaties, or international institutions. Special issue areas that they occupy include economics, the environment, human rights, policing, and arms control. Contemporary regimes like the World Trade Organization (WTO), General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), Kyoto Protocol on the Environment, Geneva Conventions, International Criminal Court (ICC), UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, and the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaties (START) I and II are all intended to specify general standards of behavior and identify the rights and obligations of signatory states.¹²

The checks and balances created for the international system by the primary state actors and regimes have still been unable to assure global stability and good governance. This has been particularly manifest in the increase in the number of failed states and ungoverned spaces as well as the appearance of rogue states in the later part of the 20th century.

The problem of failed states has emerged since the end of the Cold War. It indicates that a breakdown of law, order, and basic services, such as education and health for the population, has occurred. This situation arises when a state is no longer able to maintain itself as a workable political and economic entity. A failed state is ungovernable and has lost its legitimacy from the perspective of the international community. In some cases, power lies in the hands of criminals, warlords, armed gangs, or religious fanatics. Other failed states have been enmeshed in civil war for many years. In essence, the government of the state has ceased to function (if it exists) inside the territorial borders of the original sovereign state. The end of the Cold War catalyzed the state failure process because the rival powers no longer provided economic and military assistance to former client regimes in the underdeveloped world. The governments of the failed states in countries like Haiti, Somalia, Liberia, Cambodia, and Rwanda were unable to survive without that assistance.¹³

While not necessarily a component of a failed state, ungoverned spaces feature rugged, remote, maritime, or littoral areas not governed effectively by a sovereign state. The state that theoretically should control the territory either lacks the willingness or ability to exercise authority over part or all of a country. Ungoverned spaces are areas where nonstate actors that threaten domestic or international order can exploit the lack of legal norms and processes. Examples include northern parts of sub-Saharan Africa and the Northwest Territories in Pakistan.¹⁴

An additional failure to maintain complete order in the international system is associated with the development of the rogue state. A rogue state is a state that frequently violates international standards of acceptable behavior. This is a sovereign entity that is openly aggressive, highly repressive, and intolerant with little or no regard for the norms of the international system. As such, it is a threat to international peace. The rogue state may attempt to exert influence over other states by several means. It might threaten to or actually develop, test, and field WMD or ballistic missile systems. It might traffic in drugs, break international treaties, or sponsor terrorism. It is likely to be aggressive toward other states. Current example rogue states are North Korea and Iran.¹⁵

Transnational threats are threats to the international system that cross state borders. Such threats emerged or increased dramatically in the latter part of the last century. While the term transnational relates to any activity that cross state boundaries, transnational threats is a technical term that usually refers to activities with minimal or no governmental control. Three types of movement can be associated with transnational behavior: movement of physical objects, to include human beings; movement of information and ideas; and movement of money and credit.¹⁶

The combination of the cross border movement with illicit or dangerous activities has resulted in the identification of an emerging set of threats to human security, the ability of states to govern themselves, and ultimately the stability of the international system at large. These transnational threats fall into two broad categories:

1. Direct threats from human beings (terrorism, organized crime, drug trafficking, illegal alien smuggling, and smuggling of WMD), and
2. Threats from impersonal forces (disease and international pandemics, population growth and migration, resource shortages, global environmental degradation and climate change).¹⁷

Transnational threats have been expanding since the end of the Cold War for a number of reasons. These include the premise that many emerging democracies are the vestiges of former authoritarian states where there has been a long tradition of coercion, violence, and corruption. Such states relied more on roles and relations than on rules and regulations. Thus, many governments have been constrained by political norms that place factional loyalties above commitment to public policies. Also, as was the case with failing states and ungoverned spaces, diminished assistance from the developed world helped reduce the ability of governments to police their borders.¹⁸

Clearly, transnational threats, along with other traditional state-to-state threats, have created a number of significant challenges for the maintenance of stability in the international system. These threats and the problems associated with failed and rogue states, ungoverned spaces, and potential competition and conflict among the state and nonstate actors also present some opportunities. Some states and nonstate actors can advance their individual causes in support of their national, organizational, or group interests by exploiting instability in the system. This interaction among the actors represents the international system at work.

How Does the International System Function?

As players on the international stage, both state and nonstate actors either work alone or attempt to work with other elements of the system. Such relationships might be with other states or nonstate actors on a bilateral basis; formal groupings of states, IOs, NGOs, or other nonstate actors; or informal, even unacknowledged cooperation with other system members. States can opt to form or join existing alliances or coalitions. An alliance is a formal security agreement between two or more states. Typically, states enter into alliances to protect themselves against a common threat. By consolidating resources and acting in unison, members of an alliance believe they can improve their overall position in the international system and their security relative to states that are not members of their alliance. Additional benefits to alliance membership might include the ability to offset the cost of defense. Unless an alliance partner is an actual liability, membership in an alliance allows states to supplement their military capability with those of their alliance partners. The alliance is thus, at least theoretically, less expensive than a unilateral approach to security. Also, economically related alliances can provide expanded economic benefits through increased trade, assistance, and loans between allies.¹⁹ Alliance examples include NATO and the Warsaw Pact.

Coalitions are normally less formal than alliances. Normally, they represent a broad grouping of often very diverse states temporarily united for a specific purpose, typically military action.²⁰ States often agree to participate in a coalition strictly as a matter of convenience. Coalitions are likely to be temporary, while alliances frequently can endure for lengthy periods. Examples would be the American-led coalitions during the first Persian Gulf War (Operations DESERT SHIELD/STORM) and the second conflict (Operation IRAQI FREEDOM).

Two ways states might use alliances or coalitions are to balance or to bandwagon. Both refer to decisions, conscious or subconscious, about relations with other system members. A state is balancing when it joins a weaker alliance or coalition to counter the influence or power of a stronger state or group of states. "Balancing happens when weaker states decide that the dominance and influence of a stronger state is unacceptable and that the cost of allowing the stronger state to continue their policies unchecked is greater than the cost of action against the stronger state."²¹ Balancing can be either external or internal in origin. In the external case, weaker states form a coalition against a stronger state, shifting the balance of power in their favor. A weaker state can also balance internally by deciding to undertake a military build up to increase its power with respect to the stronger state. Balancing in the international system also can be either a hard or soft action. It would be hard when it is intended to increase or threaten the use of military power of one state relative to another. A soft usage would be when a weaker state or states want to balance a stronger opponent but believe use of military power is infeasible. In that situation, states employ nonmilitary elements of power to help neutralize the stronger states.²²

Bandwagoning is different from balancing because it will always refer to the act of a weaker state or states joining a stronger state, alliance, or coalition. Bandwagoning occurs when weaker states determine that the cost of opposing a stronger state exceeds the benefits to be gained from supporting it. The stronger power may offer incentives like territorial gain or trade agreements to entice the weaker actor to join with it.²³

Actors on the global stage, both state and nonstate, decide to participate in alliances and coalitions and to conduct policies in support of balancing and bandwagoning based on their assessment of their relative power in the international system. This reflects one of the pervasive concepts about the system – that it represents or responds to a balance of power. It is important to distinguish between balance of power as a policy (a deliberate attempt to prevent predominance on the part of another actor in the international system) and balance of power as a description of how the international system works (where the interaction between actors tends to limit or restrict any attempt at hegemony and results in a general status of stability). The most widely accepted usage of the balance of power term is related to the later concept: the process that prevents or opposes the emergence of a single dominant actor. Theoretically, the international system works to prevent any actor from dictating to any other actor – that is, the balance of power concept actually works to maintain the system of independent and sovereign states.²⁴ In effect, balance of power describes the distribution of power in the international system in both equal and unequal portions. Given an assumption that unbalanced power is dangerous for the maintenance of stability, actors attempt to conduct policy that produces equilibrium of power in the system. This helps form the rationale for actors to bandwagon or balance as they form alliances or coalitions against potentially dominant competitors.²⁵

Belief that equilibrium protects the sovereignty of the states, perceived inequality of power, and the threat of violence combine to give both dominant and subordinate actors a shared (if unequal) interest in maintaining order in the international system. Balance of power becomes a type of compromise among actors that find stability preferable to anarchy, although it results in a system that favors the strong and wealthy over the weak and poor. More powerful actors, like the great power states, play leading roles in a balance of power international system because they have superior military force and the ability to wield key technology.²⁶

Ultimately, the balance of power concept fulfills three functions in the international system:

1. It prevents the system from being transformed by conquest into a universal empire.
2. Localized balances of power serve to protect actors from absorption by a dominant regional actor.
3. Most important, the balance of power has helped create the conditions in which other elements or characteristics of the international system can develop (i.e., diplomacy, stability, anarchy, war).²⁷

Above all, this third function ensures the importance of the balance of power concept to the international system for the foreseeable future.

For those actors in the international system less comfortable with operating in alliances and coalitions, collective security provides an alternative. In formal terms, collective security is a framework or institution designed to prevent or neutralize aggression by a state against any member state. All state members are jointly responsible for the physical security of every other member. Membership in such an institution permits states to renounce the unilateral use of force because the institution guarantees to come to the assistance of the aggrieved state and sanction the aggressor. The overall intent of collective security is the maintenance of peace among members of the framework or institution (i.e., the UN, League of Nations), not between the system and external elements, as in the case of an alliance.²⁸

The search for security is the most significant concern in some manner, shape, or form for the vast majority of actors in the international system. Security implies the absence of threats to one's interests. In absolute terms, complete security would mean freedom from all threats. Historically, the term security equated to the military dimension of security. Thus, security meant security from war or violent conflict. But the 20th century witnessed an expansion of the concept to include other security issues such as those relating to the economy or environment. Economic security is the need to ensure that a hostile actor cannot control the supply of goods and services, or the prices for those goods and

services.²⁹ Examples are access to water, oil, or natural gas. Environmental security implies protection from environmental dangers caused by natural or human processes due to ignorance, accident, mismanagement, or design and originating within or across national borders.³⁰ Example issues are air and water quality, global warming, famine, or health pandemics.

How an actor in the international system chooses to interpret the concept of security helps determine participation in alliances or coalitions, involvement in collective security frameworks or institutions, and balancing or bandwagoning behaviors. In all cases, these actors consider their ability to wield all the elements of power they have available, whether or not to use force, and – most significantly – what interests their ultimate policies will support.

Power in the international system is the ability of an actor or actors to influence the behavior of other actors – usually to influence them to take action in accordance with the interests of the power-wielding state. Power does not have to be used to be effective. It is enough that the other actors acknowledge it, either implicitly or explicitly, since the potential exercise of acknowledged power can be as intimidating as its actual use. Historically, some international actors have sought power for power's sake; however, states normally use power to achieve or defend goals that could include prestige, territory, or security.³¹

There are two general components of power: hard and soft. Hard power refers to the influence that comes from direct military and economic means. This is in contrast to soft power, which refers to power that originates with the more indirect means of diplomacy, culture, and history. Hard power describes an actor's ability to induce another actor to perform or stop performing an action. This can be done using military power through threats or force. It can also be achieved using economic power – relying on assistance, bribes, or economic sanctions. Soft power is a term used to describe the ability of an actor to indirectly influence the behavior of other actors through cultural or ideological means.³²

In contrast with the primary tools of hard power – the ability to threaten with sticks or pay with carrots – soft power attracts others or co-opts them so that they want what you want. If a state can attract another state to want what it wants, it can conserve its carrots and sticks. The sources of soft power are culture (when it is attractive to others), values (when there is no hypocrisy in their application), and foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate in the eyes of others). Soft power uses an attraction to shared values and the perceived justness and duty of contributing to the achievement of those values.³³ It is much more difficult to systematically or consciously develop, manage, control, or apply than hard power.

Whether it is hard or soft, an actor's power is measured in terms of the elements of power that it actually possesses. Such measurement is always done in relation to another actor or actors and in the context of the specific situation in which the power might be wielded. Are the available elements of power appropriate given the potential foe or the nature of the conflict?³⁴ American security professionals traditionally have categorized the elements of power in terms of the acronym DIME for the diplomatic, informational, military, and economic elements. This concept has been expanded in the National Strategy for Combating Terrorism to MIDLIFE: military, information, diplomacy, law enforcement, intelligence, finance, and economic.³⁵

Regardless of which specific elements of power are available for potential use, the most important consideration for an actor's ability to transform potential power into operational power is political will. Effectiveness of the actor's government and depth of domestic support (or leadership effectiveness and stakeholder support for nonstate actors) are crucial for developing and sustaining political will.³⁶ Without either of those components, the likelihood for the successful use of power is reduced significantly.

One of the most visible uses of power is in the application of force. There are a number of reasons given for its employment. In 1966, the classic analyst of the use of force and influence, Thomas

Schelling, described the use, or threat of use, of force as a kind of “vicious diplomacy.” He described four different ways in which force might be used: deterrence, compellence, coercion, and brute force. Deterrence seeks to prevent another actor from doing something that it might otherwise have done. This is implemented over an indefinite period of time by convincing the deteree that he cannot achieve the aim he seeks successfully, sometimes by demonstrating sufficient force to prevent achievement and sometimes by promising a punishing response should the target engage in the action. An actor chooses to use compellence when it desires to make an enemy do something by a specific time deadline. It might have the positive effect of persuading an adversary to cease unacceptable behavior, or it might cause him to retreat from seized positions or surrender assets illicitly taken. Compellence usually is used after deterrence has failed, although that condition is not a prerequisite. It can carry the promise of inflicting an escalating level of damage to a foe until it meets demands. It might also provide some type of reward for meeting the demands. For both deterrence and compellence to be successful, both the threatened penalty and promised reward (if applicable) must be credible.³⁷

Coercion is the intent to inflict pain if an opponent does not do what you want. It is normally most successful when held in reserve as a credible threat. Signaling the credibility and intensity of the threat are keys to success. Different from compellence, coercion only offers a threat for noncompliance without a reward for compliance. Brute force is directly taking what the actor wants. It is not dependent on signaling intent to the opponent and succeeds when used based simply on the success of the application of force. Brute force is ultimately not about asking, but taking whatever the actor wants through the direct use of force.³⁸

Virtually any action taken by an actor in the international system, whether it be peaceful or forceful, likely will be done for the purpose of supporting the interests of the executing actor. The national interest is intended to identify what is most important to the actor. Until the 17th century, the national interest usually was viewed as secondary to that of religion or morality. To engage in war, rulers typically needed to justify their action in these contexts. This changed with the coming of the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648. For a state, the national interest is likely to be multifaceted and can be oriented on political, economic, military, or cultural objectives. The most significant interest is state survival and security. The term “vital” frequently is applied to this interest, with the “implication being that the stake is so fundamental to the well-being of the state that it cannot be compromised” and may require the use of military force to sustain it. Other types of interests considered to be important are the pursuit of wealth and economic growth, the promotion of ideological principles, and the establishment of a favorable world order. In addition, many states believe the preservation of the national culture in the state to be of great significance.³⁹ Ultimately, it is the state’s assessment of the importance of its national interests that will determine much or all of what it will do or not do within the international system.

Why Does the International System Behave the Way It Does?

Given a belief that the international system is composed of a structure and associated interacting units, political scientists in the late 1950s developed the concept known as levels of analysis to help analyze all the dynamics of interaction in the system. They believed examining problems in international relations from different perspectives on the actors would help determine why different units and structures in the international system behave as they do. They developed the term “levels” for the perspective units and structures. Levels represent locations where both outcomes and sources of explanation can be identified. The five most frequently used levels of analysis are:

1. International systems – largest grouping of interacting or interdependent units with no system above them; encompasses the entire planet.
2. International subsystems – groups or units within the international system that can be distinguished from the entire system by the nature or intensity of their interactions with or interdependence

on each other. (Examples: Association of Southeast Asian Nations [ASEAN], Organization of African Unity [OAU], and the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries [OPEC].)

3. Units – actors consisting of various subgroups, organizations, communities, and many individuals, all with standing at higher levels. (Examples: states, nations, and MNC.)
4. Subunits – organized groups of individuals within units that are able or try to affect the behavior of the unit as a whole. (Examples: bureaucracies and lobbies.)
5. Individuals.⁴⁰

Making use of the levels of analysis, international relations theory attempts to provide a conceptual model with which to analyze the international system. Each theory relies on different sets of assumptions and often a different level of analysis. The respective theories act as lenses, allowing the wearer to only view the key events relevant to a particular theory. An adherent of one theory may disregard completely an event that another could view as crucial, and vice versa.⁴¹

International relations (IR) theories can be divided into theories that focus primarily on a state-level analysis and those that orient on an overall systemic approach. Many, often conflicting, ways of thinking exist in international relations theory. The two most prevalent schools of thought are Realism and Liberalism; though increasingly, Idealism, also known as Constructivism, is becoming a competing concept.⁴²

Realism has been a major, if not the dominant, theory of international relations since the end of World War II. From the realist perspective, struggle, conflict, and competition are inevitable in the international system. Mankind is not benevolent and kind, but self-centered and competitive. Realism assumes that the international system is anarchic because there is no authority above states capable of regulating their interactions; states must arrive at relations with other states on their own rather than by obeying the dictates of some higher entity. States, and not international institutions, NGOs, or MNCs, are the primary actors in the international system. For states to thrive and survive, they must orient on security as their most fundamental national interest. Without security, no other goals are possible. States must struggle for power in that system; this produces the constant competition and conflict.⁴³ Military force is the ultimate arbiter in the struggle for power. Each state is a rational actor that always acts in accordance with its own self-interest. The primary goal is always ensuring its own security. Strong leaders are key to success in this environment and will be required to exhibit realistic vice morally idealistic based positions.

Realism asserts that states are inherently aggressive, and territorial expansion is only constrained by opposing state(s). This aggressive orientation, however, leads to a security dilemma because increasing one's own security produces greater instability as opponents build up their forces to balance. Thus, with realism, security is a zero-sum game where states make only relative gains.⁴⁴

A variation of realism is called neorealism. Rather than the realist view of the influence of human nature, neorealists believe that the structure of the international system controls and impacts all actors. In effect, it is the system itself that is in charge. States, with their orientation on survival, have a primary, if not sole, focus on war and peace. For a neorealist, state interests shape behavior. In neorealism, the success of regimes is totally dependent on the support of strong powers.⁴⁵

The international system constrains states. The system comprises both the states and the structure within which they exist and interact. From a neorealist point of view, cooperation is more likely than a pure realist claims because states are more interested in relative than absolute gains. States are often willing to bargain to give something up.⁴⁶

Several principal notions, especially since Immanuel Kant drafted "Perpetual Peace" in 1795, have characterized liberalism as another fundamental theoretical basis for international relations:

Peace can best be secured through the spread of democratic institutions on a worldwide basis. Governments, not people cause wars . . . Free Markets and human nature's perfectibility would encourage interdependence and demonstrate conclusively that war does not pay . . . Disputes would be settled by established judicial procedures . . . Security would be a collective, communal responsibility rather than an individual one.⁴⁷

Liberalism, which in this context differs from liberalism as used in the liberal-conservative political paradigm, maintains that interaction between states goes beyond the political to the economic components of the international system – to include commercial firms, organizations, and individuals. Thus, instead of the realist anarchic international system, liberals see plenty of opportunities for cooperation and broader notions of power like cultural capital. Liberals also assume that states can make absolute gains through cooperation and interdependence – thus peace and stability are possible in the system.⁴⁸

One primary hope of liberals for stability is the democratic peace concept. The main propositions of this concept are: peace through the expansion of democratic institutions; populations of states focus naturally on their economic and social welfare as opposed to imperialistic militarism; the subordination of states to an international legal system; and commitment to collective security enhances stability. Perhaps the most important element of the democratic peace concept is the belief that liberal democratic states are likely to remain at peace with one another. The international judicial system, combined with the perceived economic and social success of liberal states, normally dictates avoidance of external conflict, especially with another liberal democratic state.⁴⁹

As with classic realism, liberalism has a related alternative called neoliberalism. This postulates that the system is not in charge of everything; states make their own decisions. States are not only interested in survival, but also in cooperation. International institutions can promote cooperation; there are options beyond war and peace. Rules, principles, ideas, social norms, and conventions must be considered. With neoliberalism, there is a much greater degree of cooperation in the international system than neorealism is willing to acknowledge. To a great degree, this is as a result of the success of international regimes.⁵⁰

Regimes as a framework of rules, expectations, and prescriptions between actors can change state behavior, particularly in the arena of cooperation.⁵¹ Regimes often develop their own interests and become actors in the system.⁵² Regimes come about for many reasons. They can benefit all actors in the system and do not require a hegemonic state for support. The more times states cooperate in a regime, the more opportunity exists to change the behavior of a particular state. In effect, regimes can change state behavior. There is a shared interest that ultimately can benefit both parties. Institutional incentives can motivate states to cooperate peacefully even in situations when force might be considered. A regime's intervention in state behavior can lead to cooperation. The result is that the existence of regimes makes cooperation more likely – which, in turn, could help drive change.⁵³

Idealism, also known as constructivism, rejects standard realist and liberal views of the international system, arguing that states derive interests from ideas and norms. Idealists believe that the effects of anarchy in the system are not all defining, but “anarchy is what states make of it.”⁵⁴ For an idealist, the state's identity shapes its interests. To understand change, an idealist must assess a state's identity. States are social beings, and much of their identity is a social construct. If a state identifies itself as a hegemonic global policeman, it will shape its interests accordingly. States that self-identify as peace-loving economic powers emphasize different interests. Who a state is – primarily in the form of culture – will shape that state's identity. States understand other states through their actions. Key for an idealist, one state's reaction will affect the way another state behaves.⁵⁵

Summary.

In the end, there is no single answer for why any actor in the 21st century international system behaves the way that it does. There is also no single description for all the actors in the system, as well as no predictable method that any of them will use to interact. In effect, even considering the complexities of the 20th century, the 21st century international system is highly likely to be more complex than ever. Clearly the nationstate will continue to be the primary actor, but it will have increasing competition from the nonstate actors that have emerged in the later part of the last century. Advances in communication and transportation, along with the information revolution's contribution to globalization have provided both emerging states and nonstate actors a degree of international influence never previously imagined. From the perspective of a 21st century strategic leader, these emerging state and nonstate actors and emerging transnational threats will create numerous challenges and opportunities. These challenges and opportunities will force leaders to address issues like determining the exact threat, assessing the intensity of national interests at stake, deciding whether to employ hard or soft power, and opting to work with alliances or coalitions or to go it alone. Ultimately, understanding these issues, and many others dependent on the situation, will be critical for the success of any actor in the 21st century international system.

ENDNOTES - CHAPTER 1

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