

THE DEVELOPMENT OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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Summary

International relations is a vague and widely used term with two main meanings. The first meaning of term pertains to interactions among states and between states and state-based actors across state boundaries. In this sense, the term can be compared with another widely used term: international politics. However, international relations is wider than international politics. Thus, the second term is included in the first. Indeed, international politics is usually seen as one of the most important sub-fields of international relations. This first meaning of the term ‘international’ relations was coined by Jeremy Bentham – it makes its first appearance in his 1789 book *Principles of Morals and Legislation*.

The second meaning of the term – International Relations (IR) – denotes a separate field of academic inquiry, distinct from other social sciences like Economics, Law, Sociology etc. This second meaning of the term (IR) effectively originated in 1919 with the establishment of the first chair in the field at the university of Wales, Aberystwyth. This second meaning of the term, then, has the first as its object of scholarly scrutiny. IR has, since its origins in the wake of the First World War, developed several theoretical perspectives in order to identify and explain the recurring patterns of international relations – most notably the causes of war and the preconditions for peace. Many contemporary universities offer courses and degrees in IR; these offerings often cohabit Departments of Political Science together with close academic relations such as Political Theory, Comparative Politics, Public Policy or International Political Economy.

These two meanings are abstract and conventional. In practice, they overlap; it is often hard to tell where one ends and the other begins. This chapter, “The Development of International Relations” is a case in point. It draws on academic perspectives to present a simple overview of international relations through modern history. If it draws heavily – some might say excessively – on Western events, this has a simple explanation: Conventions of the IR discipline singles out the territorial state as the dominant actor in international relations. Since the territorial state is largely a Western invention the attention of this chapter is biased towards Western events.

The chapter begins with a simple overview of the development of the modern state around the “Atlantic rim” of the Western world. It then sketches the evolution of political interaction among states and the interaction between states and state-based actors through world history. This narrative is not smooth and steadily evolving. The story slows down a bit at those periods which are marked by important events – like the Thirty Years’ War (1618-1648) and the French Revolution (1789) which are considered turning points in the history of international politics.

This chapter delineates the development of the modern interstate system, but it touches only lightly on its further maturation into an interstate society, as this is discussed by K. J. Holsti in the following chapter. Furthermore, this chapter emphasizes military and economic relations among individual states, as diplomatic relations, geopolitical concerns and global-world history are covered in subsequent chapters by G. R. Berridge, S. Dalby and M. G. Fry & A. J. Williams, respectively.

1. Pre-State Relations

Convention identifies territorial states as the major actors of international politics. And as the nature of states has evolved through the ages, so has the nature of international relations. Where “states” or “nations” do not exist, it is hard to identify macro-political affairs that deserve to be denoted as “international relations”.

Before the age of the modern state, it is difficult to find much evidence of “international relations”. Before the age of modern states, macro-political order was imposed by other social formations, such as cities or empires. In Europe, Asia Minor, the Middle East and the north coast of Africa, order and unity were long imposed by the Roman Empire. However, as soon as the Roman Empire began to divide and split in rivaling parts during the course of the fourth century AD, it is possible to distinguish the first foreshadowing of international relations in the macro-political affairs of the West – especially in the fragmented, impoverished western territories that bordered the Atlantic rim.

1.1. The Decline and Fall of Rome

During the fourth century, the politics of the Roman Empire was disintegrating in corruption and increasing disorder. Processes of political deliberation were increasingly overridden by brute force. The empire divided. Armies gained influence. Generals fought each other, sometimes recruiting bands of barbarians to fight for them. As the Empire was increasingly weakened from within, it faced a sudden wave of great migrations (380-450) from without. The eastern half of the Empire survived. The western half, however, collapsed. Western cities faltered. Western industry and commerce decayed. The vast, western territories of the Empire sank back into economic poverty, political fragmentation, and social disorder.

The Eastern half of the old Roman Empire retained the basic institutions of Rome. From its splendid capital in Byzants, the East Roman Empire managed to maintain political unity by virtue of Orthodox religion and authoritarian politics. Byzants secured the survival of the eastern Empire partly by repelling the barbarian onslaught by armed force, and partly by deflecting it by diplomacy. Throughout the Middle Ages, Byzants remained the major European city. But the Byzantine Empire closed itself defensively off from the rest of the world, and took no leadership in European events. Thus, it was not from Byzantine politics that the first, significant features of international relations emerged.

The Western half of the Roman Empire, by contrast, unraveled under the impact of the great migrations of the fourth and fifth centuries. Communications halted. Production and trade choked. Two centuries afterwards, Europe had no coherent existence. The area had unraveled into a great jumble of tribes, military raiders, villages, manors, monasteries and trading towns. And if this fragmented area retained any social unity at all during the “Dark Ages” of the seventh and eighth centuries, this was due to the remembrances of a common imperial past which glazed the territory with the collective memory of Roman law and a thin veneer of Christian institutions. Kingdoms rose under exceptionally strong rulers, but fell apart again under weaker ones. Yet, it was here, in

this unpromising and chaotic congeries of the Christian civilization of the Far West, that the most significant institutions of international relations emerged. But slowly.

1.2. The Role of the Church

Some institutions emerged during the fifth and sixth century to provide some measure of unity and order in the impoverished and fragmented west. The first of these was the Christian Church. It maintained, against all odds, the rudiments of a common Western identity through the Dark Ages. It kept the Christian religion alive. It conserved the remnants of the Roman civilization. It preserved the light of religion, learning and literacy – indeed, it spread the light to the northwestern peripheries.

A second force for unity was the German and Frankish kingdoms. They rose and fell during the early Middle Ages and, over time, they united the central and western regions of the Continent. One of these was built by a German king, Clovis (466-511). He conquered most of Western Europe and imposed upon it a political unity—which unraveled as his sons quarreled about their inheritance soon after his death. Another great kingdom was built by the Frankish king Carolus Magnus (or Charlemagne, 768-814). This kingdom also unraveled soon after the death of its king – when it was weakened by waves of destructive migrations.

In some places Magyar, Viking and Arab assaults destroyed the order which Charlemagne had created. In other places foreign onslaughts stimulated the growth of defensive institutions. In England, Alfred the Great (871-899) organized a successful defense against the Viking invasions and won the allegiance of the Anglo-Saxons. In Germany, local counts and dukes repulsed the infringements of foreign attacks in the late 800s; and in the early 900s they elected themselves a king, Henry I (919-936), whose son, Otto I, repressed domestic rebellions and defeated the Magyars once and for all. In France, political stability was similarly rebuilt, and in the late 900s, the great lords of France chose Hugh Capet (987-996) as their king, and became his vassals. Hugh seized the old Carolingian crown, gave it to his own family and thus founded the Capetian dynasty.

1.3. The Rise of Monarchs and Nobles

From the point of view of economic history, feudalism has often been portrayed as a distinct mode of production. From the point of view of international relations, it makes good sense also to see feudalism as a distinct mode of protection – as a way in which new, powerful rulers tried to impose order and stability on their realms by granting extant knights large land grants (“fiefs”), thus creating a supreme class of specialized warriors (“vassals”).

Legally, the members of this class were liegemen or vassals of kings and lords; but in practice, they were given privileges and fiscal bases large enough to ignore royal orders. Parts of Europe fell under the influence of armored knights who assumed the authority to govern all those who lived on their fiefdom. They administered justice, collected taxes, gathered agricultural produce, claimed labor service and demanded military service from the residents. And in the process they evolved from a military elite to a

social elite. They called themselves *nobiles* in the Roman fashion and appropriated various late imperial titles such as *comes* (count) and *dux* (duke).

At this time, before the advent of the modern state, Europe was not yet a state system, and international relations did not really exist. Monarchic states were intertwined with other social formations – with empires, cities, and city-states (republics, bishoprics and principalities) – in shifting arrangements among emperors, monarchs, nobles, clerics and towns. Around 1000 AD, however, important economic and social changes occurred, after which the larger-scale, territorial states emerged as a superior way of organizing men, money and military might.

2. The Age of the Territorial State

To understand International Relations, it is necessary to appreciate the nature of the modern territorial state. Also, it is important to note that this kind of state is a Western creation; that the modern state originated in Europe and subsequently spread to other parts of the globe. This fact gives the study of international relations a Western bias. It naturally directs a historical discussion of the early development of international relations towards European affairs.

The “modern state” refers to an internationally recognized unit, controlled by some kind of government that exercises control over a distinct territory and the group of people that live on it. A state, then, possesses four key characteristics: (1) a territory, (2) a people that inhabit the territory, (3) political institutions that maintain some measure of order and are (4) recognized by other states. The first three features are common enough; they are found in various social formations at different times and in many parts of the globe. The fourth feature, however, is more peculiarly Western. For it endows each state with legal standing as a juridically equal actor in a larger, international society of states.

This formal recognition of each state by all the others is a peculiar Western practice which evolved at a particular time in Western history, and it had particular implications for interstate relations. These implications conferred upon the state its distinct attributes as a Western and modern phenomenon. Also, they indicate the distinct properties that mark a system of interacting states.

One of these properties involves a distinction between two levels of human interaction: On one level is the interaction among individual men – this is the level of the commonwealth (which is a society among individuals) where social order is maintained by central institutions of political authority. On the other level is interaction among commonwealths – this is the level of international society, where no central authority exists. This distinction emerged at the end of the Middle Ages, and evolved, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, into a defining conception in International Relations. It contrasts with the medieval notion that the international society, too, was a commonwealth of sorts (a more embracing society among men).

Thus emerges also the second property of International Relations: the absence of a central authority. Renaissance scholars like Francesco Guicciardini and Giovanni

Botero noted this property. Alberico Gentili was quite explicit about this in his *Three Books on the Law of War* [1598]: there exists no jurisdiction above the state. Therefore, disputes will routinely arise between them. And they will be solved either through negotiation or through war. Renaissance authors increasingly referred to this situation of general lawlessness as a “state of nature”. Today, the situation is more commonly referred to as “anarchy”. The modern system of sovereign states is said to be “anarchic” in nature. In an anarchic system, the most effective mechanism for maintaining order is a “balance of power” – as Guicciardini, Botero, Gentili and other observers of Renaissance politics were among the first to note.

2.1. The Advent of States

As the feudal order was undermined by the advent of trade and of urban centers, a diverse plurality of social formations evolved: city-states evolved in northern Italy; city-leagues emerged in the German Empire and along the Baltic coast; monarchic states emerged along the Atlantic rim.

In the longer run, no social formation could compete with these Atlantic monarchies in terms of efficiency and might. They emerged as dominant macro-political actors of the Western world, and they soon carried their dominance far beyond the West. Stimulated by new economic dynamics, new means of production, new ways of trade and finance, and by new patterns of authority and power, the monarchic territorial states established themselves as the most effective social formations of the new age.

It is a much-overlooked fact that when the territorial states emerged along the north-Atlantic rim, they did not really appear one after the other; they appeared together. The first territorial states of Europe – Portugal, Spain, France and England foremost among them – evolved hand in hand and soon constituted a unique, interrelated interstate system.

These states all had roots far back in Western history. But their decisive consolidation was marked by the Italian Wars (ca 1492-1527/56). These wars, in which the royal houses of Habsburg and Valois fought for dominance over Italy, involved the final destruction of the city-states system and the emergence of Spain and France as territorial states. They also involved the emergence of several new, characteristically modern innovations, which gave the territorial states a leg up on competing social formations. The most significant of these were associated inventions like the compass, gunpowder and the printing press.

The compass made it possible to navigate across the world oceans out of the sight of land. The compass, together with other new technologies of navigation, provided decisive preconditions for the wave of Western expeditions and discoveries of the second half of the fifteenth century – climaxing in Columbus crossing the Atlantic from Spain to the Americas in 1492. Expeditions of conquest and settlement – such as the Hernán Cortés’ conquest of the Aztec empire in 1519, and Francisco Pizarro’s conquest of the Inca empire followed such discoveries in 1533. Such expeditions became all the more efficient when Western ships were equipped with guns and cannons.

Gunpowder revolutionized international relations. On the one hand, it marked the advent of Western expansion and colonialism; for when guns were mounted on ocean-going ships, Western adventurers were enabled to blast their way along the Asian and American coasts and conquer foreign land on behalf of European rulers. On the other hand, gunpowder hastened the fall of feudalism and fuelled qualitative changes in the relationships among Western states. Gunpowder weapons obviously made wars more deadly and dangerous; but they also distributed the dangers more evenly: Even the most ordinary footman could, if he were given a handgun, kill the most noble of knights. As a result, the relative costs of war were radically altered, and the role of the old aristocracy was greatly reduced – in warfare as in more general social terms. One implication of this downgrading of the mounted knight was the relative upgrading of foot soldiers – organized in massive armies and divided into the three specialized military branches of cavalry, infantry and artillery. Another implication was the upgrading of the prince – the centralization of military power in the hands of the monarch, and the concentration of political power in the hands of the European kings and their splendid courts.

The introduction of movable typeface reinforced all other changes. Once introduced around 1450, the new technology of print spread across Europe and the world like wildfire. It affected the development of states and of interstate relations.

On the one hand, the advent of print strengthened the rising power of the state. All over the Western world, print stimulated the advent of official state languages – print vernaculars, which imposed standardized vocabularies and grammars on official communication. This development marked the beginning of the linguistic unification of many countries. It also marked a new phase in the consolidation of states, for a common print vernacular provided an important base for the evolution of national identities and, in turn, of the potent political doctrine of nationalism.

On the other hand, print weakened the traditional authority of the Church. Print was used to collect and systematize all types of knowledge – in tables, charts, maps and practical handbooks of all kinds. As these texts spread in wider and wider circles, they challenged the Church – partly because many maps and navigational charts were so obviously at odds with the official Church vision of the earth and the heavens; and partly because they broke the Church monopoly of learning.

As local laymen printed their practical texts in local languages, they crowded out Latin as the divine and universal language of learning. As local churchmen printed and spread their sermons and breviaries, they made visible the deep differences of doctrine among Europe's many local congregations. This necessitated the intervention of the pope's theologians to mediate among the differences and create a unified, central and official Church doctrine. But such interventions were met with protests, conflict and open revolt. The climax of this was reached during the Reformation – which was triggered by Martin Luther nailing up his 95 theses on the church door in Wittenberg in 1517, and by his theses being printed and widely distributed across all of Europe.

During the course of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, then, international relations were affected by a complex blend of technological, economic, moral and symbolic forces. They gave the Western world some of its most characteristic features –

most notably a worldwide web of economic relations centered on a European system of strong territorial states led by powerful Christian monarchs. Each monarch presided over institutions that maintained order in civil society, the population perceiving the king as legitimate through a rich blend of religious, linguistic, and symbolic factors.

The rise in monarchic power was purchased at the expense of local authorities. Local princes and land-owning noblemen resisted the centralization of monarchic power with protests, rebellions and war. The century was littered with local rebellions and civil strife. Yet the monarchs consolidated their power. By 1600, the states of Europe had evolved a set of distinct characteristics. First, it was territorial in nature; the state represented a distinct area of the surface of the earth. Second, its territory supported a distinct population – a population that was increasingly unified by religion and language and a distinct set of cultural values and symbols, all of which contributed to their common identity. Third, the population obeyed a common, central authority – a monarch and his court-based, administrative apparatus. This authority had evolved around the two basic functions: of raising military forces and of paying for them. Thus, the two basic pillars of the early modern state were the military institutions, which administered the monarch's armed forces on the one hand, and the fiscal institutions, which collected taxes and tolls for the royal coffers on the other.

States had long possessed *internal sovereignty* – each state had a domestic center of legitimate authority – as Jean Bodin had tried to explain in his *Six Books of the Commonwealth* (1575). However, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Western states also developed a notion of *external sovereignty*; i.e., they evolved a principle of mutual recognition of the inviolable nature of each other's territory (and thereby of each other's internal sovereignty). This notion of external sovereignty highlighted the territorial nature of the state: the state was not merely territorial in nature – its territory was circumscribed by a boundary which was impenetrable in principle, defended by military might in practice and justified in law. The state was generally accepted as a self-contained and self-supported unit. An emerging codex of law justified its right to self-defense. And it was assumed to have an interest and a moral code all its own – a *ragion di stato* or a *raison d'etat*, as noted by political thinkers in Italy and France respectively.

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Biographical Sketch

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