

ACTORS IN WORLD POLITICS

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Summary

It has been assumed that international relations consist of the relations between states. But such a definition of world politics has been increasingly challenged since the late 1960s and the early 1970s, as many other actors have become more and more involved in the international political process. As a result, transnational relations permeate world politics in almost every issue-area in which state and non-state actors interact regularly across national boundaries. The globalizing and liberalizing forces in the last three decades of the twentieth century have fundamentally transformed the structure of the world economy, thereby undermining the ability of states to govern. These great global transformations have influenced and modified the traditional paradigm and theories of international relations, particularly the realist school of thought because of its basic premises that actors are states, and states operate in a system of anarchy. The realist school of thought has been criticized for its state-centric view of international relations as well as its narrow focus on the problem of war and peace. These challengers to realism (the new International Political Economy, regime theory, dependency and capitalist world-system theories, and the World Order Model Projects formulations) vary greatly in emphasis and objectives but they have incorporated non-state actors and the new problematics in their theoretical frameworks. Consequently, the earlier arguments in the controversy in terms of a “state-centric” vs. a “society-centric” view of world politics are largely replaced by the view that pays more attention to how the inter-

state system interacts with the world of transnational actors, thereby identifying the conditions under which transnational actors matter in a specific issue-area. States will remain central in carrying out the activities of governance but non-state actors will also constitute an integral part of the various sites of competence, authority and legitimacy in the contemporary world.

1. Introduction

It has been widely assumed that international relations consist of the relations between states. But such a definition of world politics as simply the actions and interactions of states has been increasingly challenged since the late 1960s and the early 1970s as many other actors have become more and more involved in the international political process (see *Regionalism, International Regime, International System*).

Almost nobody denies today that transnational relations exist in the contemporary world. Transnational relations, according to Thomas Risse-Kappen, are regular interactions across national boundaries involving at least one non-state actor or when such an actor does not operate in the interest of a national government or an intergovernmental organization. It is no exaggeration to say, as he claims, that transnational relations in this sense permeate world politics in almost all issue-areas.

In Section 2, an attempt will be made first to define actors in world politics and then to describe various actors including states and non-state actors in the present-day setting, focusing in particular on non-state actors, which are attracting increased attention, not only from national governments but also from students of international relations. In Section 3, it will be explained how such non-state actors have led to the rise of transnational relations and the relative declining power and authority of states in the global system. This is followed in Section 4, by a discussion of four perspectives or world images as these perspectives or images are closely related to the way the role of actors is posited in world politics.

In this section the four major perspectives, Hobbesian, Marxian, Grotian and Kantian, are taken up as they reflect their own images of international society as well as the basic concepts and assumptions which underline international relations theories of major significance today. An attempt will be made here to tie the role of actors with those four perspectives. In Section 5, the contending theoretical approaches will be discussed in the context of transnational relations, which are increasingly characterized today by the more intensified interactions not only between states but also between states and other transnational actors. Taken up here are such schools of thought as realism, the new International Political Economy, the formulations of the participants in the World Order Models Project (WOMP), and the arguments of regime theorists.

The examinations of these competing paradigms and theoretical approaches will reveal that each has its own strengths and weaknesses. It will be also shown how these theories treat the role of actors in theoretical explanations of the dynamics and transformations of international and transnational relations. Finally, this article will conclude with a brief discussion of the role of state and non-state actors in relations to the future prospect for global governance and world order.

2. Defining and Identifying Actors in World Politics

Actors in world politics, states and non-state actors, according to Professor Ryo Osiba of Hitotsubashi University, can be defined as the entities which have the following three features: (a) They should have the autonomous capacity to determine their own purposes and interests; (b) They should also have the capability to mobilize human and material resources to achieve these purposes and interests; (c) Their actions should be significant enough to influence the state-to-state relations or the behavior of other non-state actors in the global system.

States remain the main actors in world affairs and today there are less than 200 states (national governments) in the global system. On the other hand, non-state actors are increasingly the focus of analysis among scholars as territoriality, the defining feature of the Westphalian state, has been steadily diminishing in relation to non-territorial, non-state actors. Exactly, the most influential of these non-state actors are international business firms often called transnational corporations (TNCs). According to the World Investment Report 1997 (UNCTAD, 1997 and 1998) there were 44 508 and 53 000 parent TNCs, having 276 659 and 450 000 foreign affiliates, respectively. Significantly enough, many of these TNCs control more resources than many states. In 1989, the 26 largest TNCs had an annual sales revenue greater than the GNP of the United Arab Emirates which ranked 50th among the states. In 1994 the 50 largest TNCs had an annual sales revenue greater than the GNP of 131 members of the United Nations. The size of the turnover of TNCs comparable to the GNP of middle-sized states means that depending upon the issue-area, they are significant players in the international political economy.

Equally significant as players in the global system are International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) which have also grown in number and membership. By the late 1980s, the *UN Yearbook of International Organizations* listed over 4500. The growth of INGOs was explosive, marking 832 in 1952, and 5472 in 1996. The World Wildlife Fund, for example, increased its membership from about 100 000 in 1983, to over a million by 1991, and its annual revenues from \$9 million to \$100 million. Greenpeace membership increased over the same period from fewer than 1.5 million to 6.75 million, and its revenues increased from \$24 million to \$100 million. Ibrahima Fall, head of the UN Center for Human Rights lamented that, though it is the arm of the UN for human rights, they have less money and fewer resources than Amnesty International. NGOs today provide ODA larger than the entire UN system (see *Human Rights*). They are supporting the role of the state in carrying out ODA and, given such a complimentary role played by them, ODA needs to be more local and specific to the needs of local residents. All in all, however, such INGOs today enjoy the authority and legitimacy of popular support and compete with other state and non-state actors for influence in transnational interactions.

Other than TNCs and INGOs such non-state actors as transnational criminals engaged in illicit trading in arms and drugs and guerrillas and national liberation movements are attracting increased attention not only from national governments that are threatened by their activities, but also from students of international relations. Mexico's President Ernesto Zedillo in 1995 described drug trafficking as his country's most serious national

security threat. Two years later when US President Bill Clinton visited Mexico, both Clinton and Zedillo signed a 97-page Bi-National Drug Threat Assessment and pledged to form a new alliance to combat this menace. According to a 1998 report on global terrorism prepared by the U.S. Department of State, during 1997 there were 304 acts of “international terrorism,” eight more than occurred during 1996. A total of 221 persons died and 693 were wounded, as compared with 314 dead and 2912 wounded in 1996. As the same report admits, terrorists are part of a larger phenomenon of “politically inspired violence,” and the line between the two is often difficult to draw. Some groups manage to move from the status of “terrorists” to “national liberation movements” or legitimate transnational guerrilla groups. According to Peter Willetts, their legitimacy is increased by gaining widespread popular support and/or when the target government is unusually oppressive, and/or when the violence is aimed at “military targets” without civilian victims. For example, the African National Congress (ANC) received widespread support for their fight against the South African apartheid regime. In the mid-1970s, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the West African People’s Organization (SWAPO) achieved membership of the Non-Aligned Movement and the Group of 77, along with observer status in the UN General Assembly and at all UN conferences.

Usually added to these actors are international organizations called International Governmental Organizations (IGOs). Following Richard Cupitt, Rodney Whitlock and Lynn Williams Whitlock, IGOs can be defined as organizations created by three or more governments that are based on a formal agreement and have some permanent secretariat or headquarters. IGOs encompass not only universal organizations like the United Nations, but also a wide range of organizations from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU). They also play a significant role and influence what goes on between states. Moreover, transgovernmental coalitions, namely, networks of government officials, which include at least one actor pursuing his/her own agenda independent of national decisions, also make state-to-state relations more complicated than before. For example, in formulating a joint European policy toward the non-proliferation regime, an epistemic community, (a group of professionals who form a knowledge-based community with an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within their domain of expertise), cooperated with a transnational coalition of foreign ministry officials against the European nuclear industry and economic ministries in various countries. The former coalition prevailed over the latter in convincing states to join the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) as with the case of France.

With the return of regionalism to the international agenda in the mid-1980s, coupled with the ending of the Cold War in 1989/1990, the role of sub-state actors has increased in importance. Students of international relations have begun to show a growing interest in the role of prefectural and municipal governments in promoting micro-regionalism, such as the Japan Sea Zone involving the Japan Sea coastal region of Japan, the Russian Far East, and South Korea, or the Pan-Yellow Sea Zone, involving the Yellow Sea coastal region of Japan, China, and South Korea. Scholars are exploring what role these sub-national actors play in putting pressure on the central government for resources to promote micro-regionalism. Or, to what extent sub-national political leaders have sought to utilize their sister-city and other links in order to put pressure on

the Chinese and South Koreans in competition with other local governments in Japan in the opening of new sea and air transportation routes in the Yellow Sea and Japan Sea micro-regions. These scholars are also asking such questions as: whether local authorities' technical cooperation in assisting China to develop anti-pollution technology represents their awareness of environmental security, or whether the 1997 Asian economic crisis has stimulated sub-national concern with economic security, or to what extent such local initiatives are part of the process contributing to stability and order in East Asia (see *Regionalism, Decentralization and Local Politics*).

It is not easy to categorize such diverse actors in a single category, but we will follow the common usage throughout this writing. In other words, actors other than states are called non-state or transnational actors. They interact with national governments or states and frequently pursue their own agenda, independently from and sometimes contrary to, the declared policies of their national governments. Therefore, for a better understanding of global politics, non-state or transnational actors need to be taken into account as they influence what goes on between states, and vice versa. The role of states must also be taken into account, as they are the most influential actors in international relations.

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Biographical Sketch

Hideki Kan is a professor of international relations at the Graduate School of Social and Cultural Studies, Kyushu University, Japan. His interest ranges from US relations with Asia in the twentieth century to international relations theory. He is the author of *The Cold War and the U.S. Policy toward Asia* (in Japanese), Minervashobo Publishers, 1993, a co-editor of *Regionalism and Security in the Asia-Pacific* (in Japanese), Minervashobo Publishers, 1999, and a coauthor of *A History of the Twentieth Century America* (in Japanese), Tokyo University Press, forthcoming.