FROM STATES SYSTEMS TO A SOCIETY OF STATES: THE EVOLUTION OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

K. J. Holsti

University Killam Professor, Political Science, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, CANADA

Keywords: states systems, society of states, Peace of Westphalia, Concert of Europe, League of Nations, United Nations, right of conquest, international institutions

Contents

Summary

In the long history of human political organization, systems of states have developed less frequently than loose, sedentary empires. The historical examples of states systems, such as those of the Greeks, show the development of rudimentary international institutions such as diplomacy and trade, but war, conquest, and slavery were the most notable correlates of political independence. Most systems of states eventually collapsed through constant warfare, to be taken over by neighboring empires and kingdoms.

European states began to form in the fifteenth century. Through war, religious heresy, and propaganda, they eventually replaced the mediaeval *respublica Christiana*, the theoretically organic community under the sovereignty of God, as mediated by the papacy. After the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648), the new European states sought to create a stable international anarchy by developing international law and a territorial balance of power. These contrivances did not significantly reduce the incidence of war,

as the old idea of a unified Europe under the hegemony of a single state continued to animate the likes of Louis XIV, Napoleon, the Germans during World War I, and Adolf Hitler. Each was the source of pan-European wars, followed by major peace treaties that established mechanisms for management of the states system. In 1815, it was the Concert of Europe. In 1919, the Paris Peace Conference established the League of Nations. The United Nations was the main legacy of World War II. Its efforts to manage the system were largely unsuccessful because of the Cold War and the problem of domestic wars in many post-colonial and Balkan states.

Nevertheless, rules regulating relations between states have strengthened substantially and as a result we have seen a dramatic decline in the incidence of interstate war since 1945, an increasing sanctity of territorial integrity, and in general more international peace and security. The main problem in the contemporary system is no longer war between states, but civil strife, collapse, and humanitarian emergencies within certain kinds of states.

We can call the contemporary system of states an international society, or society of states, because over the past several centuries most of the forms of interaction between states have become regulated by laws, norms, and institutions. Among the more significant rules are the non-use of force, respect for the sovereignty of member states, non-interference in their internal affairs, respect for territorial integrity, de-legitimization of the right of conquest, trade laws, and respect for human rights. The society of states is analogous to a club: members who wish to join must demonstrate respect for its rules. Those who break the rules are subject to censure, sanctions, and other forms of ostracism.

1. Early States Systems

Since man began to organize into sedentary political units more than ten millennia ago, domination and subordination have been the predominant structural characteristics of relations between diverse polities. The hierarchical form of relationships has usually been in the form of sedentary empires, varying arrangements of suzerainty or dominion over lesser, subordinate, and dependent political structures. Empires could be "loose," with very substantial autonomy for its constituent units. The center was generally content with symbolic forms of superiority such as annual payments or other symbolic expressions of fealty. Otherwise, the lower units enjoyed substantial autonomy. This was the essential structure of the ancient Chinese empire prior to 771 BC, and more recently of the Ottoman Empire. Effective forms of central control through military occupation, developed bureaucracies, and surveillance and taxation of subordinate units characterized other empires. A prime example was the Roman Empire.

There were relationships between early empires, but we could not claim that they constituted international systems because the intensity of relations was low, and usually concerned only one sector such as trade in luxuries. We have records of trade between Rome and Han China in the second century BC, but there was no formalized diplomatic-military relationship. Similarly, by the fifth century BC, the Chinese had commercial relations with small kingdoms in what is now Indonesia, but they were irregular and seldom spilled over into the military-diplomatic realm.

States systems are composed of polities, whether tribes, city states, principalities, kingdoms, or some combination of them, that maintain relationships at a relatively high degree of intensity over time, and in several sectors, including commerce, culture, diplomacy, and war. The main historical examples include the Sumerian city states of the fourth and third millennium BC, the independent states within the northeast Chinese cultural and geographic regions between 771 BC and 221 BC, and the system of relationships between independent polities in south Mexico during the first millennium. The most well known system arose among the Greek city states in the seventh to the fourth century BC, where independent polities of relatively small size and population conducted sustained relationships with each other. These involved commerce, culture, diplomacy, and war. More recently, the city states of Italy during the Renaissance maintained a formal diplomatic and balance of power system. The major states of the Italian system included Venice, Florence, Genoa, the Papal States, and Milan. This system developed institutions that were to become general throughout Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These included professional diplomacy, ideas about the balance of power, and alliances.

1.1. The Characteristics of Relationships in States Systems

By today's standards, relationships within these states systems were intermittent, irregular, and, except for the Italian city states, non-institutionalized. Trade was one form of interaction and in some cases states became dependent upon each other for foodstuffs and other necessities. In the Greek system, there was also regular cultural and religious interaction in the form of the Olympic Games, and the great religious congresses in Delphi, Milos, and elsewhere. But diplomatic contacts were for the most part sporadic, conducted by amateurs sent as delegations to negotiate over issues such as alliances, royal marriages, truces, and peace treaties. Once completed, the negotiators returned home.

We observe in these early states systems some forms of rule-making between the independent units. These covered matters such as immunities for diplomatic delegations, some rules on the conduct of war and treatment of wounded soldiers, and the various ceremonies associated with making and maintaining alliances. Such rules helped the states to coexist, and in some respects they can be seen as early forerunners of contemporary international law. However, these rules only regulated some interactions between the units. They did not include notions of sovereignty, territoriality (exclusive jurisdiction over a defined territory), citizenship, or state responsibility.

The result was that these states existed in an environment of continuous uncertainty and insecurity. Wars, invasions, conquests, treachery, and spying were standard practices, whereas institutions for international cooperation were notable for their absence. The fate of most states was ultimately to suffer conquest by a more powerful neighbor, loss of independence, and formal amalgamation into large political units. For example, after centuries of constant warfare and conquests, the number of independent Chinese states diminished from several hundred in the "Spring and Autumn" period (771- 483 BC) to less than ten toward the end of the "warring states" period (403-221 BC). This dramatic decline in the number of independent polities is explained primarily by the results of war and conquest.

After years of warring, the Greek city states exhausted themselves and became easy prey for the Macedonian kingdom. Ultimately, they became parts of the Roman Empire. The pattern repeats itself in the case of the Italian city states. Their life as independent polities lasted for about 400 years. By the eighteenth century they remained either as small, unimportant actors on the European stage (Venice), or they were annexed, conquered, and amalgamated into the Hapsburg or Spanish empires.

We can see a sort of pendulum movement in the history of independent states systems. States begin as parts of empires, slowly increasing their autonomy, and ultimately achieving independence. They then go through a period of intense war among themselves, leading to exhaustion and political ineptitude. Their fate is to be taken over by new and foreign empires (Greece, Italy) or to succumb to one central power among them which then sets up a new empire (China, India).

2. Mediaeval Cosmology and Politics

Europe in the middle ages was formally a hierarchy under the rule of God, whose power and authority were delegated in the first instance to the popes, and through them to the Holy Roman Emperor. This was an era of hierarchy between a varied mix of polities, with clear but often crosscutting lines of authority, subordination, and fealty. The dukes of Burgundy, for example, were simultaneously lords of their own domains and also vassals of the king of France and the Holy Roman Emperor. Europe was composed of an array of political types. In addition to the Empire, there were the kingdoms, principalities, free cities that had their own laws, currency, and political structures, church territories, manorial baronies, and leagues of cities. This heterogeneous collection of political organizations, with only weak conceptions of territoriality, and no concept of sovereignty or exclusive legal jurisdiction, was nevertheless unified loosely under the cosmology of a God-directed hierarchy, suffused with a common Christian religion (*respublica Christiana*). How did this complex structure develop into a states system?

3. Origins of the European States System

Over the centuries the kings and many lesser rulers successfully extended their rule over the disparate rural and frontier areas of Europe. They slowly gained the authority to tax and, usually through bribery, war, and extortion, they effectively disarmed their vassals, undermined the ancient rights and independence of free cities, and created effective bureaucracies throughout their realms. Already in the early fourteenth century some of these secular rulers began to challenge the authority of the Holy Roman Empire under the doctrine of *in regno suo* (the king is emperor in his own realm). These early claims of independent authority, the early forerunners of the sovereignty doctrine, led ultimately to claims against papal authority, leading to a cascade of both theological and political independence. The most famous manifestation of the growing might of the central kingdoms was Henry VIII's divorce of Catherine of Aragon against papal judgment, and the Act of Supremacy (1534) which formally abolished papal authority in England and elevated the king to be Supreme Head of the Church of England. Luther's Protestant heresy further undermined papal authority throughout northern Europe. By the beginning of the seventeenth century, the myth of the *respublica Christiana*, of a

united Christian Europe under divine, papal and imperial authority, was on the verge of extinction. The mediaeval cosmology of organic political unity was shattered by the growing might of the central monarchies. The monarchs armed themselves, in their quarrels with imperial and papal authority, with numerous legal arguments and they mobilized the writings of publicists such as Jean Bodin who, in his *Les Six Livres de la Republique* (1576), articulated a coherent theory of sovereignty. The short answer to the question of authority in Europe, according to Bodin, was that within the territorial realm, the king or queen was supreme. Neither pope nor Holy Roman Emperor had any right to rule or to interfere within the realm.

4. The Peace of Westphalia (1648)

The great Thirty Years' War (1618-1648) destroyed a good portion of central Europe and led to a population decline in the area of almost 40 percent. This was the first great pan-European war, and, as most great wars, it was also a major impetus for historic change. The peace negotiations that led to the two treaties, known as the Peace of Westphalia, had major consequences on the subsequent character of relations between states. The negotiators did not seek to innovate. Rather, they sought to restore the "ancient liberties" of the members of the Holy Roman Empire. But they also sought to find a formula for peace between the warring Protestants and Catholics.

While the treaties comprising the peace dealt with a number of specific issues resulting from the war, they also helped entrench several major principles that came to serve as the legal foundation for sovereignty and the relations between sovereigns. First, the treaties declared that papal authority no longer extended into the realms of the sovereigns on secular issues. Second, they held that the members of the Holy Roman Empire were free to make alliances with other states (so long as they were not directed against the Emperor). This was a grant of freedom of states to conduct their own foreign relations. Third, the Emperor was prohibited from "molesting" (interfering in the internal affairs of) the Empire's members. Later this came to be generalized into a fundamental norm of international law forbidding states to interfere in each other's internal affairs. Fourth, the treaties guaranteed some rights for religious minorities and, following these principles, implied that sovereigns could no longer become involved in religious issues in other states. The whole issue of religion that had torn Europe apart into civil wars, massacres, and the terrible Thirty Years' War, was now resolved.

4.1. The Legacies of Westphalia

Westphalia abolished the remnants of political hierarchy in Europe and established the fundamental rules that would regulate relationships in a system of legally equal, sovereign states. Though the process took several centuries, with Westphalia as only a major event along the way, Europe changed from a polity organized on the principle of hierarchy under the authority of God, to a formal anarchy; that is, to a set of independent political actors with equal legal standing, none under the authority of any other.

Other legacies of Westphalia included the foundation of international law, which is based on the idea that sovereigns can be obligated only through their consent. We take

this principle for granted today, but it had been debated and fought over by the centralizing monarchies and the papacy for more than 300 years. Equally important was the institutionalization of territory as the foundation for the state. Prior to the seventeenth century, there were only "realms," territorial units that were poorly defined, often contested, and seldom administered effectively. Thanks to improvements in cartography and the growth of central bureaucracies, sovereigns by the seventeenth century began to identify their territories and to construct official borders separating their realms from others. The first frontier that appeared on a map of Europe was drawn in the Treaty of Llivia, 1670, that implemented a peace treaty ending Louis XIV's war against Spain. It was not officially surveyed and demarcated until the nineteenth century, but shortly after Llivia, all states began to draw official lines around their realms. This state "bordering" reflected the concept of sovereignty and its normative claim that states have exclusive legal authority within a defined territory. That claim was partly hollow before the authorities could clearly establish exactly where the territory was located.

Along with lineal frontiers came border posts and, starting during the French Revolution, passports. Europe prior to the seventeenth century had been truly a "borderless world". By the early nineteenth century, borders were becoming increasingly institutionalized and effective as a means of controlling ingress and egress. The final legacy of note was the growing sense of a common European interest. At Westphalia the delegates displayed substantial distrust of each other and had difficulties conceptualizing how an anarchical system might operate without constant war of all against all. At the peace settlement of Utrecht (1713-1715) ending the War of the Spanish Succession (1701-1712), in contrast, the negotiators constantly referred to the "repose" (stability) of Europe, and to the need to compromise state interests for the overall interests of a European equilibrium and balance of power. There was now the recognition that the European states constituted a type of club, and that the overriding interests of all the members was to see that the club survived. This was the means of their individual security. The great fear of the era, now that religious issues had diminished, was the development of a European hegemony that could effectively challenge the independence of the new states. In part, the Thirty Years' War had been fought over this issue, as many participants were convinced that the Holy Roman Emperor's ultimate war aim was to conquer all of Europe and to restore the domination of the Catholic faith within it. The term used in that era was the threat of "universal monarchy". The peace of Westphalia effectively ended this threat by fundamentally weakening the position of the Emperor. But at the end of the seventeenth century, a new threat arose, this time in the guise of Louis XIV. Whether or not he had aspirations to create a pan-European hegemony for France remains an issue of debate, but what mattered was that many of the less powerful states of Europe feared it. For this reason, they sought to prevent any such future possibility by creating a balance of power on the continent. The interest or "repose" of Europe was understood to depend on such a balance, and states were expected to forego diplomatic or territorial gains for the greater good of all.

The early modern European states system after Westphalia had the following essential characteristics:
It was politically heterogeneous, composed of many different types of polities, ranging

from empires through states to free cities and numerous fiefs, some of them armed, to pirates and private religious groups such as the Order of Malta.

The centralizing states were essentially weak. They were ridden with debt and insufficient government revenues, local insurrections, tax revolts, papal claims to authority, and challenges to state authority by dukes, free cities, private estates, and other types of polities.

The centralizing states had poorly-defined territorial limits and weak administrative/military capacity to administer boundaries.

Rules governing interactions such as trade and diplomacy were poorly-defined, overlapping, and often challenged.

The result was that states were chronically insecure, facing perpetual threats and challenges from both domestic and external sources.

The main issues that led to armed conflict were territory, competing dynastic succession claims, commerce and navigation, and colonial competition.

5. The Legacy of the Napoleonic Wars: the Concert of Europe and the Management of the States System

In 1814 the states that had contributed most to Napoleon's military defeat decided among themselves that they would create a new post-war order. The numerous smaller powers and the many small polities that had lost their independence during Napoleon's domination of Europe all went to Vienna, but while their voices were heard, the great powers--a new concept in international relations--arrogated for themselves the responsibility for rearranging the political map of Europe.

In addition to the many territorial rectifications they made, they reincorporated France into the system, and decided that they would meet periodically to ensure that the terms of the peace treaty were observed. Any matter that might upset the "repose" of Europe was now a proper subject of discussion among the great powers.

During the subsequent century until the Great War, the leaders of the great powers--and upon invitation, some smaller powers--met in Congresses (heads of state or government) six times, and at conferences (foreign ministers) eighteen times. This was Europe's first system of international management. The congresses and conferences debated and decided issues on a broad agenda.

These included collectively recognizing new states (e.g., Greece, Belgium), resolving incipient or ongoing crises, approving peace treaties, defining rules and norms for carving up Africa, agreements to end the international slave trade, creating neutral zones and arms control agreements, selecting monarchs for states (e.g., Greece and Denmark), and negotiating peace. This was a system of governance that waxed and waned during the century between 1815 and 1914, but it often worked to sustain the "repose" of Europe. Most fundamentally, it further developed the rules and norms that were to sustain coexistence between sovereign states and to prevent any single state from achieving a position of hegemony. The Concert was a collective diplomatic directorate for the European states system.

-
-
-

Bibliography

Bull H. (1977). *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics*, 335 pp. London, Macmillan. [An insightful analysis of the major institutions of international relations, including international law, war, the balance of power, and diplomacy. The text offers a theoretical explanation for the rise of these institutions, and assesses likely developments in the society of states in the future.]

Buzan, B and Little R. (2000). *International Systems in World History: Remaking the Study of International Relations,* 452pp. Oxford, Oxford University Press. [This is a major comparative study of historical international systems, from the early origins of relations between tribes, city states, and empires, to the contemporary global political economy. This world historical perspective challenges the Eurocentric and state centric orthodox approaches to the study of international relations,]

Hall, J (1996). *International Orders,* 210pp. Cambridge, Polity Press. [This volume analyses the various strategies and choices the great powers have used to build order in the international system. The method is primarily historical and comparative,]

Held, D, McGregor, A, Goldblatt, D, and Perraton, J (1999). *Global Transformations: Politics, Economics and Culture*. 515pp. Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press. [This is the best of many recent volumes that study the impact of globalization on states and the states system,]

Holsti, K. (1991). *Peace and War: Armed Conflicts and International Order, 1648-1989*. 379pp. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. [This is a study of the changing sources of, and attitudes toward, war since Westphalia. The book also examines the major peace conferences since 1648 and shows how their major decisions affected the subsequent pattern of war,]

Howard, M (1976). *War in European History*. 165pp. Oxford, Oxford University Press. [This extended essay explores the changing nature of war, going back to the mediaeval era. It emphasizes, in addition to strategy, the various rules that have developed to constrain the use of force.]

Jackson, R. H. (1990). *Quasi-States: Sovereignty, International Relations and the Third World,* 225pp. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. [Jackson's innovative study explores the "sovereignty game" in international politics, and how that game has been played in connection with the new post-colonial states. They have gained advantages through the international community's formal recognition of sovereignty even though many of the states can not meet the classical criteria for diplomatic recognition.]

Morgenthau, H. J. (1973). *Politics Among Nations,* 615pp. New York, Knopf. [A classic text on the essential characteristics and sources of war and peace in the international system. The book emphasizes the role of power and international institutions in determining the patterns of relationships between states.]

Rosecrance, R. (1986). *The Rise of the Trading State: Commerce and Conquest in the Modern World*. 268pp. New York, Basic Books [This is an investigation into the changing sources of national power and the role of international trade in causing and ameliorating international armed conflict. The author argues that many of the traditional sources of power such as territory and population are losing relevance as trade advantages and technological leadership better define the great powers of our era.]

Rosenau, J. N. (1990. *Turbulence in World Politics: A Theory of Change and Continuity,* 480pp. Princeton, Princeton University Press. [This is an important theoretical essay on the sources and character of change in modern international politics. The author argues that we are seeing a major shift in the structures, actors, and processes of global politics, leading ultimately to the "two worlds of world politics". The first is state-centered, the second revolves around the activities of non-state actors.]

Schmidt, B. (1998). *The Political Discourse of Anarchy: A Disciplinary History of International Relations*. 309pp. Albany, State University of New York Press. [Schmidt describes and analyzes the development of the study of international relations as a distinct academic discipline, primarily in the United States.]

Singer, M and Wildavsky A. (1993). *The Real World Order: Zones of Peace/Zones of Turmoil*, 212pp. [This pessimistic characterization of the post-Cold War international order emphases the differences between politics in the developed and developing worlds. The authors implicitly reflect old imperialist habits of thought in portraying the problems of the Third World.]

Tilly, C. (1990). *Coercion, Capital and European States AD 900-1990*. 269pp. Oxford, Basil Blackwell. [Tilly's historical and sociological analysis of the origins of European states emphasizes the role of war. It is summarized in his famous adage, "states make war and war makes states".]

Wallerstein, I. (1974, 1980, 1989). *The Modern World System*. 3 vols. New York, Academic Press. [Wallerstein presents a major historical analysis of the development of the world economic system. His materialist conception of history emphasizes the dynamics of commercial relations between centers, semi-peripheries, and peripheries.]

Watson, A. (1990). *The Evolution of International Society: A Comparative Historical Analysis*. 337pp. London, Routledge. [An examination of pre-modern states systems and empires, but with an emphasis on the social and legal elements of the European and global society of states.]

Biography Sketch

K. J. Holsti: Professor Holsti is UBC Killam Professor Emeritus (at the University of British Columbia, Canada) and one of Canada's leading scholars of international relations, having been President of both the Canadian Political Science Association and the International Studies Association. Holsti teaches international relations and theories of international relations at graduate and undergraduate levels. His research interests over the last several years have focused upon the changing nature of international conflict and the dilemmas of its management and control. His two most recent books are *Peace and War: Armed Conflicts and International Order, 1648-1989* and *War, the State, and the State of War*, both of which are published by Cambridge University Press.