

INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM

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Keywords: the Balance of power, the Chinese World Order, Globalization, International regimes, International society, International system, System, the Western State System, World system.

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Summary

In studies of international politics, the concept of international system is used mainly in two ways, analytical and historical. Morton A. Kaplan and Kenneth N. Waltz have striven to develop analytical theories of international system in scientific terms, but despite their greatest efforts, their attempts have not been very successful due to intrinsic difficulties with the methodology. The “balance of power” system, quite often cited, is considered to be a variant of the international system, but it cannot be formalized in a scientific way, either. In contrast, being as a historical concept, the behavior codes of the Western State System can be deciphered to unmask the Western dominance over it, although that term is not founded on a strict notion of system. The economic counterpart of this system corresponds to the world system, which is in many cases interchangeable with the capitalist world economic system. Meanwhile, the terms of international regimes and global governance seem to have taken the place of international system as an academic key word. This change reflects the transformation in process of international relations into international society, although international system still holds its position.

1. Systemic Approach

1.1 The Concept of System

In studies of international politics, the conception of “system” has been used mainly in two ways, international system, and world system(s). First, the term “international system” is a concept for analysis or description of international politics or relations, but therein lies a sense of prescription for diplomatic or military action too. Used as an analytical term, it is predicated upon a definite notion of system. But it is not necessarily so when it is used to describe situations of international relations at a given time. Second, the term “world system(s)” is a concept with which to analyze or describe mainly politico-economic global situations, while its implications for political action are derived but only indirectly. Third, “international system” came to be accepted as an academic term in the late 1950s, soon becoming fashionable, but more or less obsolete in the late 1990s. “World system(s)” began to be discussed in the 1970s, still maintaining popularity in the academia. Terms such as “international regimes” and “global governance” seem to have taken the place of “international system” as an academic key word in the 1990s, although the latter still holds validity. The new terms are more normative and descriptive than analytic, having explicit implications for promoting international cooperation.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines “system” to be (a) a set or assemblage of things connected, associated, or interdependent, so as to form a complex unity, or (b) a whole composed of parts in orderly arrangement according to some scheme or plan. This is a well-conceived definition, but when we apply this to these systemic approaches, we find it insufficient. As a basic definition, it is fairly useful and satisfying, but it is not fully sufficient, in that it does not take into consideration what powers, military, economic, political or cultural, circulate among the parts so as to connect or disconnect them. Besides, it greatly matters how deeply a structure exerts influences on its constitutive units. Here the problem is whether the influences reach just the surface only to change the behavior patterns of the units, or whether they penetrate deeply enough to transform even the inner structures. Within the framework of international system, they are assumed to impose restraints on the freedom of action of states, and in terms of world system(s), to change the nature of the units. The conception of system in the former is, so to speak, mechanical or of the modern Western origin, but that in the latter can be said to be organic, and of the classical Asian origin.

1.2 International System and Society

While the first part of OED definition is more extensive in usage, the second is limited to such cases as can be related to a preconceived scheme or plan. When we extrapolate this contrast to international relations, we reach the argument developed by Hedley Bull in elaborating on the distinction between international system and society. As to the former, he defines: a system of states (or international system) is formed when two or more states have sufficient contact between them, and have sufficient impact on one another’s decisions, to cause them to behave—at least in some measure—as parts of a whole. This corresponds very well to the first definition of system noted in the above. Turning to international society, he defines: a society of states (or international society)

exists when a group of states, conscious of certain common interests and common values, form a society, in the sense that they conceive themselves to be bound by a common set of rules in their relations with one another, and share in the working of common institutions. Thus he notes that an international society in this sense presupposes an international system, but an international system may exist that is not an international society. This usage is quite similar to the second definition of system cited from the OED in the above. His distinction between the two is more persuasive in the light of the change in international relations since the end of the Cold War (1989).

The term “international system” in Bull’s sense was very popular among the academics of all nations during the Cold War period. But it has increasingly lost popularity in the 1990s, the role of which is beginning to be taken over by such terms as international regimes or global governance, reflective of formative changes in international society. We see international schemes or plans more activated in the post-Cold War world than ever before. If we borrow Bull’s concepts, international relations have been rapidly changing from international system to international society. However, we should not forget that the notion “international system” still holds some validity, regardless of changes in real politics and academic fashions, because inter-state relations compose an integral part of the current international relations. So, to analyze or depict them, we need both the terms of international system and international society in Bull’s sense.

2. Analytical Term

2.1 International System, Morton Kaplan

Morton Kaplan has developed the most elaborate discussion on international system. In his argument, he does not define international systems in particular, but describes the state of an international system or of its subsystems, assigning values to the following variables: the essential rules of the system, the transformation rules, the actor classificatory variables, capabilities variables, and the information variables.

Utilizing the five variables, he specifies six international systems, (a) the “balance of power” system, (b) the loose bipolar system, (c) the tight bipolar system, (d) the universal system, (e) the hierarchical system in its directive and non-directive forms, and (f) the unit veto system. While the first two have historical counterparts (the modern Western world politics, and the Cold War), the rest are heuristic models, having no foundation in history. However, we may be able to understand that the third corresponds to the most extreme case of direct confrontation between the East and the West in the Cold War, without any non-aligned countries allowed. The fourth system is judged to be the would-be world confederation of the states, and the fifth the assumed world state, authoritarian or democratic, with concentration of all the authorities in the center. The sixth international system is a hypothetical case when all nations have gone nuclear.

Here we would look at two examples, the “balance of power” (deduced from the modern European history) and the loose bipolar system (from the Cold War). First, in the former system, the number of essential national actors must be at least five and preferably more. The system is characterized by six essential rules describing the behavior patterns of the actors. The first of the rules posits that the actors act to increase

capabilities but negotiate rather than fight. In the second, they are assumed to fight rather than pass up an opportunity to increase capabilities. The third is that they stop fighting rather than eliminate an essential national actor. The fourth, referring to a principle of coalition formation, is that they act to oppose any coalition or single actor which tends to assume a position of predominance with respect to the rest of the system. As the sixth rule notes, they permit defeated or constrained essential national actors to re-enter the system as acceptable role partners. Of these, the first, second and fourth ones correspond well to an ordinary understanding of the system, but the third and the sixth are more noteworthy in that they elucidate the necessity of preserving the system as such.

Second, the loose bipolar system has two major confronting bloc actors (NATO and the Communist bloc), two leading actors representative of the blocs (the US and the Soviet Union), non-bloc actors (non-aligned nations), and universal actors (the United Nations and its affiliates). Of the 12 essential rules, the first one postulates that all blocs, subscribing to directive hierarchical or mixed hierarchical integrating principles for the international system, are to eliminate the rival bloc. In the second, they are defined to negotiate rather than to fight, to fight minor wars rather than major wars, and to fight major wars rather than to fail to eliminate the rival bloc. Thus the third rule is that all bloc actors are to increase their capabilities in relation to those of the opposing bloc. In contrast, the ninth rule points out that non-bloc member national actors are to act to reduce danger of war between the bloc actors, and the 11th does that universal actors are to reduce the incompatibility between the blocs.

These propositions relating to the two systems seem to be well balanced and firmly based. However, if we meticulously scrutinize his logical construct composing the six systems, first, we shall find out that all transformation rules are reduced to essential rules because the former are derivative or negative forms of the latter. Second, his models are in essence composed of a few factors such as the character and number of actors (national/bloc/universal, directive/non-directive, and hierarchical/non-hierarchical), the essential rules, and capabilities variables. Third, the essential rules are factored into (a) the character of actors, (b) the increase in, coalitions of, and control of capabilities (mostly military), and (c) the choice of security means among negotiating, waging of conventional and nuclear war. Finally we shall conclude that the first three and last models of international system are a variant of theory of power politics, which is expressed in the language of scientific system, and the other two (hierarchical and universal) are not models of international politics in an ordinary sense.

In 1969, he added four international systems to his repertoire, the Very Loose Bipolar, the Détente, the Unstable Bloc, and the Incomplete Nuclear Diffusion Systems. Actually, the theoretical construct of the Détente System reflected the major change in international politics from the naked confrontation to the Détente between the East and the West in the 1960s. Later on, however, he did not further extend systemic thinking but expressed his militaristic posture more in the vernacular when he supported American nuclear deterrence strategy, deployment of Anti-Ballistic Missiles and involvement in the Vietnam War. Thus his work looks quite scientific. But following his argument, academic and practical, very closely, we recognize rather traditional reasoning supportive of power politics per se. Pace Kaplan's (notwithstanding his

greatest efforts to introduce a scientific approach to international politics) bizarre phrases in his theoretical formulation make us confused.

2.2 International System, Kenneth N. Waltz

Another remarkable systemic work is done by Kenneth N. Waltz. First, he sorts out causes of international conflicts at three levels, the human nature, the features of states, and the structure of international politics. He notes that international conflict is basically derived from the anarchic nature of international politics. Second, addressing to systemic treatment of international politics, he therein emphasizes a structural factor. In this regard he is rather critical of Kaplan's argument on system, saying that he has no concept of the system's structure acting as an organizational constraint on the actors.

Waltz on his part defines system as composed of a structure and of interacting units, and a structure by the arrangement of its parts. Related to the interrelationship between a structure and units (or parts), his argument starts in a modest way, as expressed in the statement that structure operates as a cause, but it is not the only cause in play. But his very systemic argument ends in a sort of structural determinism, when applied to international politics.

He contends that the units are sovereign states in international politics. And it is structure that defines the arrangement, or the ordering, of the parts of a system. Thus the structure of international politics is an ordering principle to position or arrange sovereign states in their interactions. Describing the nature of the structure, he notes that international systems are decentralized and anarchic, and stresses that states are to seek to ensure their survival.

That is because the close juxtaposition of states promotes their sameness through the disadvantages that arise from failure to conform to successful practices. This argument is a testimony to his inclination toward structural determinism. Of course he admits that states, being as functionally alike, have distinct capabilities. But he claims that the distribution of capabilities is not a unit attribute, but rather a system-wide concept. So he goes on to argue that the concentration of capabilities ensures the systemic stability, hence a bipolar system is more favorable than a multi-polar one.

This is the essence of his argument on international political system, which is generally called neo-realism (see *Realism*). According to Barry Buzan, Waltz is at fault in this area for constructing an unbalanced systems theory by developing a highly elaborate definition of structure, while leaving the unit level as indifferentiated mass. In policy recommendations, Waltz supported American nuclear deterrence strategy as a countervailing force against the Soviet Union.

This is a contrast to a classical realist, Hans J. Morgenthau, who was skeptical about the utility of nuclear deterrence. But Waltz was more concerned with striking a nuclear balance with the Soviet Union than unnecessary military campaigns in Vietnam. Notwithstanding his structural orientation in theory formation, he seems to allow each nation to pursue its own line of policy for itself. He is not such a staunch structural determinist as his argument suggests or as often claimed to be.

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Biographical Sketch

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