Key Concepts of International Relations

International system

The international system can be defined as the single mechanism or field of forces that states constitute together by their interaction with one another.

The action of states creates a network of dimensions which in turn form systems. Therefore, systems are not created voluntarily but come from individual efforts of the states. The international system refers to a group of units whose interactions are significant enough to justify seeing them in some sense as a coherent set.

A group of states forms an international system when the behaviour of each state is a necessary factor in the calculations of the others. The international system can also be defined as the set of political entities that maintain regular relations between them and can be involved in a general war.

For a system to exist, two conditions have to be met: A) there must be enough interconnections between the system units so that changes in one part of the system cause changes in other regions. B) The overall behaviour of the system as a whole has to differ from the expectations of its individual units. Due to the above mentioned, the international system imposes restrictions on the states that make it up, affects their behaviour and shapes their destiny.

The nature of such a system is determined by three factors: 1) the ordering principles, 2) the character of the units, and 3) the distribution of capabilities. The current international system: 1) is anarchic, 2) has states as its fundamental units because their interactions determine the context inside of which all the other units have to operate, and 3) is shaped by the power distribution between the states that make it up.

Nation-state

The nation-state model implies that its population constitutes a nation, united by many forms of shared culture such as common descent, a common language, and a common way of life. The idea of a nation-state was and is associated with the rise of the modern system of states, often called the "Westphalian system" in reference to the Treaty of Westphalia (1648). The balance of power that characterized that system depended on its effectiveness upon clearly defined, centrally controlled, independent entities that recognized each other's sovereignty and territory.

The first nation-state is considered to be France, whose kings managed to gradually take away feudal lords' power and consolidate their authority. They also persecuted various groups within the state that differed in terms of their nationality and religion. Similarly, most of the Western European nation-states were established. In the 19th-century, the will for a district sovereign was to droved various collectivities to either sick independence or unite with kin groups to create a nation-state.

Contrary to what happened in the 17th-century in Western Europe-where states created nations-these already existing nations established their own states. International law provides that nation-states are all equal and have complete sovereignty over their territory, while none has the legal right to interfere in another state's domestic affairs.

The nation-state in historical terms is a relatively recent arrival; its success has been due to a peculiar set of historical circumstances, and there is no guarantee that these conditions will continue into the future. In fact, in the biggest part of human history, the international system was composed of other social structures such as city-states, empires, and feudal states. Today, some nations lack their own independent state (the Kurds, for example) and states comprised of more than one nation.

International anarchy

International anarchy is a key concept in international relations theory. In international relations, anarchy signifies the absence of a global regulator. In other words, anarchy means that there is no recognized central/ higher/ superior authority above states. Therefore, the anarchic state of the international system translates to the lack of a worldwide government or a government of governments.

As a result, there is no hierarchically superior authority 1) able or entitled to regulate the relations developed among various existent collective entities in the international system; 2) empowered with the legitimate use of force; 3) that can provide justice and binding laws and be able to enforce them; 4) that can guarantee limits on the behaviour of states.

The other side, and at the same time the result of international anarchy, is state sovereignty. That is because the non-existence of a supreme authority automatically decentralizes authority to the individual states. In other words, precisely due to the anarchic state of the system, states are free to be in charge of themselves-sovereign. Hence, instead of regulatory authority on top of states, we have a horizontal relation between nominally equal entities (sovereign states) that do not have equal power, that is, capabilities.

However, to say that the international system is anarchic does not necessarily mean that it lacks order, even though no official institution can enforce it, or that international relations are in a state of chaos. In fact, the international system is prevented from being in complete disorder due to the relations of power that unfold between states.

Sovereignty

In international relations, sovereignty is an essential attribute of an entity in order to be recognized as a sovereign state in the international community, since to achieve statehood, it is necessary to possess territory, people and to be able to exercise authority over them. However, those criteria are not enough to achieve statehood since the recognition of fellow sovereign states is required.

State sovereignty, also known as Westphalian sovereignty, was established in the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648. It is enshrined under International Law and is the fundamental organizing principle of the international system. It means that, under International Law, states are equal and independent as other states are not allowed to intervene.

Nonetheless, sovereignty can have limitations placed upon it. This happens when a state under its own will joins an international organization or signs a treaty whereby it transfers part of its sovereignty to the organization or governing structure of the treaty and agrees to limitations on the exercise of its sovereignty to enable the organization to carry out its functions and to achieve its aims.

International order

Social order is a pattern of human activity inside a given society that sustains elementary social life goals. These include 1) limitation of violence resulting in death or bodily harm, 2) the assurance that promises will be kept and agreements will be carried out 3) the stabilization of possession by rules of property. Likewise, order can exist in international society as well.

An international society exists when a group of states, conscious of certain common interests and shared values, form a society in the sense that they conceive themselves bound by a common set of rules in their relations with one another and share in the working of common institutions.

Therefore, according to Hedley Bull, international order is a pattern of activity that sustains international society's elementary or primary goals. These are:

1) the preservation of the system and society of states itself

2) the maintenance of the independence or external sovereignty of individual states.

3) peace

4) the three above mentioned social life goals.

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