

The Evolution of International
Relations as a Field of Activity to
International Relations as an
Academic Discipline

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Introduction

International relations, on a traditional account, can be identified as actual relations between and among states. However, with the advancement of human civilization and the development of states, international relations gained a great significance in human lives and became an essential aspect for the survival of individuals and states. Although in the beginning of human history, international relations were limited only to a field of activity, it gradually developed into an academic discipline gaining worldwide recognition. International relations were subjected to many changes in its evolvement process. Various scholars and intellectuals have defined international relations differently and have come up with diverse theories and approaches for further understanding. This research will discuss the historical events which marked a great importance in International Relations and demonstrate the gradual progression of International Relations into an academic discipline.

International Relations as a Field of Activity

International relations, in simpler terms, could be defined as any kind of a relationship among and between the states in the world. As an activity, International relations are as old as the recorded history itself. When looking back to history, it becomes clear that humans are social beings and they cannot live in isolation. From the day states were formed, those states have built and maintained relationships with external states. Those relationships, at times, have been militant and at other times peaceful. Convention identifies states as the major actors of international relations and as the nature of states evolved through time so has the international relations. Before the emergence of the nation states which exists today, the pre-national forms of governments or constitutions which ruled the different parts of the world were personal states, theocracy, oligarchy, city states, territorial empires and trading empires. With time the nature of relationships which states form with each other has changed based on the form of government, nature of the rulers and their attitudes (Forms of Government, n.d.).

- Ancient Greece

As an activity, one of the earliest examples for international relations among states can be found in ancient Greece. Written evidence has been found that Greek city states have kept relationships between each other. These relationships have mostly been militant. The ancient Greece was much troubled and influenced by politics. Although the city states were constantly at war with each other, in many instances they formed alliances in the name of their security to fight and eliminate threats. And also, in Greece, at the time of Olympics all city states called for a truce and seized fighting until the games are over (Rhodes, 2007). These instances witness the existences of diplomacy in that period. However, the constant fighting of states makes it clear that the international relations at that time were not strong enough to hold peace for a long period because rulers at that time did not focus on avoiding conflicts in future.

Greek city states had many differences from each other. Sparta, for example, had a unique classification with Helots, Perioikoi and Spartiates sharing different citizen privileges, while in democratic cities like Athens, the citizens usually shared equal privileges. Some cities had restrictions in trading with other cities, while others were economically dependent mostly on trading. These differences are the reason why Greeks preferred to be independent. Moreover, for powerful cities, joining an alliance meant losing their dominance (Mavrommatis, 2004). In many cases, for example, disputes arose as to who should lead the alliance and take

decisions, and whether the others should obey someone who they might consider inferior. However, despite of many differences, Athens and Sparta joined alliances in the war against Persians between 499 and 449 B.C. The formation of the Hellenic League when the Persians started moving towards mainland Greece was an early example for the relations between Greek city states (Mavrommatis, 2004). This shows that states cannot survive in isolation and their interdependence. During the Persian Wars, as Herodotus has written, “almost all the city-states were forced to join one alliance, the Persian one or the other the Hellenic League for their own survival as they knew that they could not survive independently”(1920, n.d.). However, as soon as the Persian threat faded away from Greece, the league broke up showing the lack of agreement and poor nature of international relations between states.

- **Peloponnesian War**

Following the Greco-Persian war, Greek city-states or poleis began to align themselves in protective alliances. Many states sided with Athens and together they formed the Delian League in 478 BCE. There were over 300 members in the league which was led by Athens, the strongest naval power in Greece. Member states provided ships or money to Athens in return for Athenian protection against Persians and also Mediterranean pirates. The existence of alliances enabled Athens to gain power and threaten other city-states and turn it into an empire. Athens grew more powerful and tensions rose. This eventually led to nearly three decades of war known as the Peloponnesian War (431-404 B.C.E.) between Athens and Sparta. Both Sparta and Athens gathered allies and fought on and off because no single city-state was strong enough to conquer the other. Although Athens and Sparta fought together against Persia in Persian war, in Peloponnesian war, Persia offered Sparta money to build a fleet that could challenge Athens. In return Persia demanded Sparta to recognize Persian sovereignty in Asia Minor. This shows how the states used international relations to achieve their national interests and the complexity of international relations. At the end, Sparta emerged victorious, while the constant fighting left Athens bankrupt. Neither city-state regained the military strength they once had. Thucydides, a contemporary historian, believed that the war broke out because of Spartan fear of the rising power of Athens. During the Greco-Persian war and Peloponnesian war; when powerful alliances or empires were having a war with each other, Greek city states were forced to join alliances for the sake of their survival. It is clear that, since the beginning of human civilizations States have been interdependent and formed relationships with the external sources for their survival and growth. The international relations were formed for the protection of states and to gain and

keep power. However, there were both positive and negative consequences of forming alliances.

- **The Thirty Years War Followed by the Treaty of Westphalia**

Many scholars trace the history of International Relations back to Peace of Westphalia in 1648 which was a stepping stone in the development of the modern state system and the international relations. It was the treaty which ended the thirty years war one of the most destructive wars in the history of Europe. The war or series of connected wars began in 1618, when the Holy Roman Emperor Ferdinand II tried to impose Roman Catholicism on the Protestants in Bohemia. It set Protestants against Catholics. The war came to involve the major powers of Europe, with Sweden, France, Spain and Austria (Thirty Years War ends, n.d.). During the sixteenth century, the Reformation and the Counter Reformation had divided Germany into Protestant and Catholic camps, each prepared to seek foreign support to guarantee its survival and protection (Thirty Years War ends, n.d.). The Swedes, the Danes, the Poles, the Russians, the Dutch and the Swiss were all dragged in to this war. Commercial interests and rivalries played a huge part in the war as well as the religion and power. The war was largely fought in Germany and reduced the country to desolation. There was no order, no borders, and no protection for the nations and people. Apart from the religious conflict, balance of power among the European powers played a significant part for the thirty years war. The rulers of the opposing governments, and most importantly the people of Europe, finally grew sick of the horror and demanded the war to end. As a result, more than 179 diplomats representing 194 separate states gathered in Westphalia to discuss peace. As a result of the agreement followed by the treaty of Westphalia, a system of world order came into being and it is known as the Peace of Westphalia.

International Relations that time was not organized therefore it was not an easy task to get all nations which participated in war together to one place and agree on particular terms. At the absence of technology, it took more than ten days to communicate from Munster to Paris or Vienna and twenty days or more to Stockholm or Madrid. The treaty gave the Swiss independence of Austria and the Netherlands independence of Spain. The German principalities secured their autonomy. Sweden gained territory and a payment in cash, Brandenburg and Bavaria made gains too, and France acquired most of Alsace-Lorraine. The prospect of Roman Catholics reconquering Europe vanished forever. Protestantism was in the world to remain.

Apart from ending the Thirty Years War, many have argued that the Peace of Westphalia is one of the most important events with regard to state sovereignty. The Treaty of Westphalia weakened the Holy Roman Empire, facilitating the emergence of the modern European states. According to Philpot the importance of Peace of Westphalia to international relations are as follows,.

- Firstly, the diplomatic communications and foreign policy designs of contemporary great powers after Westphalia revealed a common understanding of a system of sovereign states.
- Secondly, Westphalia brought an end to intervention in matters of religion.

By signing the treaty of Westphalia each state agreed to let other states keep its own religion without outside interference and to leave the internal affairs of each nation-state to be dealt alone. They also accepted the nation-state as the highest form of government and these nation-states would not be governed by religious leaders. Each nation agreed to only attack other nations if it was immediately and strategically threatened. They would no longer attack each other just because one nation did not like what the other was doing.

Treaty of Westphalia is a fine example of the importance of international relations. It was the force which was able to stop the bloodiest war before the First World War and establish the world order and peace. If not for the formation of international relations between the states, world would have been destroyed many years ago. Peace of Westphalia can be called as a victory of international relations.

- **Rise of Nationalism**

According to Hough, “Nationalism is a political expression of group identity often coupled with a country or state”. Nationalism led people who share the same ancestry, culture and religion, has same origin and speak same language to claim a separate state for them. It is a patriotic feeling which a group of people have toward their kind. This feeling has been in the minds of people in many forms long before the creation of the nation-state. It was the nationalism that largely contributed to the emergence and the continuation of the nation-states. French Revolution is a fine example for the nationalism in Europe. It led to a change in politics and constitution of France. In 1789 the power was transferred from monarchy to the body of citizens. It was proclaimed that henceforth the French people would shape the destiny of their country. Both American and French revolutions formalized the idea of

national sovereignty. American Declaration of independence and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen leave no doubt that the people are the only legitimate foundation for sovereign statehood. (Burke, Devetak and George, 2007)

- **Nation-State System**

Westphalian treaty laid the foundation for the development of modern nation state system. A nation state is a sovereign political state whose borders encompasses the entirety of a nation and of which most of the citizens is united by a common language, customs, religion and origin (McCollum, n.d.). A new phase of international relations emerged with the development of the nation states. Nation states formed relations with each other with the intention of realizing their national interests. The process of achieving national interests often led to the break-out of war and then to the study of international relations, as a new world-order without wars could be built only through a proper study of international relations.

Up to the period of First World War international relations were popular only as an activity. Ordinary citizens did not have an understanding of relations among states neither they knew what could be achieved or lost by forming relations with external states. In 1914 with the commencement of First World War, the world order which was established from the peace of Westphalia collapsed. Then, in order to prevent that kind of disastrous wars in future, people started to show an interest in creating a new world order and in international relations.

International Relations as an Academic Discipline

“International Relations as a field of study can be defined as a branch of social sciences which studies the policies, developments and interactions, the effects of which cross national boundaries and affect the lives of people in different countries and in several parts of the world”. (Gale, 1968)

Some scholars argue that the International Relations is a distinct discipline while others counter argue that it is a sub field. If a distinct discipline is considered as separate field wholly distinct from any other field or study, then International Relations cannot be considered a distinct discipline because it is a well-known fact that International Relations is not a subject that can be learnt, taught or studied by itself. It is closely linked to many other fields such as Political Science, History, Sociology, Law, and Economics. Therefore International Relations can be called as an ‘inter-disciplinary’ subject. But on the other hand, if distinct discipline means a disciplined study of a particular field, with a recognizable focus

of interest and body of theory, then International Relations is, and always has been a distinct discipline, a discipline that has tended to evolve with the times (Hellmann,2011).

Academic discipline is a study or a subject that is formally taught in the universities or in other academic institutions. International Relations can be considered as a distinct academic discipline as it has evolved into a field of study which is formally taught in universities. There has never been a precise agreement amongst scholars regarding the definition of the discipline of International Relations.

- Thompson stated that International Relations was “The study of rivalry among nations and the conditions and institutions which ameliorate or exacerbate these relationships.” (Schmidt, 2012)
- Quincy Wright once said that “It is not only the nations which International Relations seek to regulate. Varied types of groups –nations, states, governments, people, regions, alliances, confederations, international organizations, even industrial organizations, cultural organizations, and religious organizations must be dealt with in the study of IR, if the treatment is to be realistic.”

Even though there is no one precise definition of the discipline of International Relations, it can be concluded that International Relations deal with policies and actions of states, their representatives as well as non-state actors too. These policies and actions extend beyond national boundaries and are largely political but are also concerned with social relations as well.

- **First World War**

First World War was probably the most important political event of the modern global system. After the First World War many theories were formed in the field of International Relations. The causes of the First World War included many factors, such as “militarism, alliances, imperialism, and ethnic nationalism”. However the main cause was the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand who was the crown prince of Austria by a Serbian secret organization, the Black Hand. It led to the outbreak of the First World War which set Germany, Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire (the Central Powers) against Great Britain, France, Russia, Italy and Japan (the Allied Powers). The United States joined allies after 1917. By the time the First World War ended with the defeat of the Central Powers in November 1918, massive number of deaths and unimaginable destruction were caused.

The First World War largely affected international politics, economy and social status of the countries. The destruction was enormous. It became a priority to research on the war and its causes to avoid such destructions in future. The trauma of the First World War made people demand a better understanding of foreign relations and drew people's attention to the growing importance of international relations as an academic discipline.

As a result, in 1919, a department of international politics was established in the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth followed by the establishment of the department of international relations in early 1920s in the London School of Economics. As an academic discipline international relations initially focused on the study of political and diplomatic relations and then later commercial relations among sovereign states. International Relations were started to be popular among European as well as American universities and then it started to be taught in Scandinavian countries. (Basu, 2012)

During the interwar period, studies in international relations were largely devoted to 'normative' and the 'Utopian' pursuit of preserving order and the rule of law in what was considered a largely anarchical and self-regulate international system of sovereign states. (Basu, 2012)

Although the concepts of 'territorial sovereignty' and 'independent nation state' were born from the treaty of Westphalia, it isn't until the period after the First World War in the 1920's that International Relations developed as a distinct discipline.

- **Idealism and the Formation of League of Nations**

Idealism is an approach that emerged in the 1920's after the end of the First World War. It was based on a Utopian concept of 'what should be, rather than what is' and it was optimistic and legalistic in nature. Idealism was based on the principle of 'man is good by nature.' Idealists believed that man is made aggressive by weak institutions and that progress in the international system can only be achieved through peace. It was based on this idealism that the League of Nations was formulated in 1920 hoping to bring lasting peace to the world through such an institution (Karunadasa,2004). But this concept of idealism was clearly unsuccessful as it did not achieve its primary purpose because before long the Second World War took place. Among some famous idealists are President of The United States Woodrow Wilson, Hugo Grotius, and Rousseau.

- **Second World War**

After the First World War, Second World War was the most widespread and deadliest war in history. The obvious inability of the League of Nations to deal with major international issues was one of the major causes of the Second World War. Started by Adolf Hitler's invasion of Poland in 1939, the war dragged on for six years until the Allied nations defeated both Nazi Germany and Japan in 1945.

After the Second World War, the International System came to be a totally different system from the classical 19th century international system. The classical international system was Euro-centric and it worked on the principles of balance of power, war as a means, secret diplomacy as an instrument, and narrow nationalism as its objective. Before the war, only European nations, particularly Britain, France, Germany and Italy, were the major actors in world politics. However, after the Second World War many changes took place in the international system; the United States abandoned isolationism, Germany and Italy became very weak as a result of their defeats in war, Britain and France also became weak due to the heavy war losses suffered by them and the creation of new independent states because of the liberation of Asian and African countries from colonization.

The concept of war made a huge impact on the world with the mass deaths and destruction. This highlighted the compelling need to improve the techniques of international relations for the survival of the human race. After the Second World War a new development stage of International Relations began. People lost faith in the political idealist approach and a new approach emerged in International Relations known as Realism. The basic assumption of realists was that 'man is evil by nature' and 'the state works only to secure power' (Altshuler,2009). Realism focuses on the actual situation at hand rather than the idealist utopian outlook. Hans.J.Morganthau once said "All politics is a struggle for power". Some of the pioneers of political realism who immensely contributed to the development of International Relations as an academic discipline were E.H.Carr, Hans.J.Morganthau, Kenneth.W.Thompson, and Henry Kissinger.

The Development International Relations as an Academic Discipline

The Development of International Relations as a field of study has a long history of growth and development. This is another important factor that proves, International Relations has indeed developed a distinct academic discipline. Between 1900-1939, the study of International Relations gradually progressed and as an academic discipline it received a wider recognition during the inter-war period (1919-1939). Its development was further aided by the many universities, research bodies, and organizations that showed a great interest in International Relations at the time. The League of Nations also had a considerable role to play in the development of International Relations as a distinct discipline, as it encouraged the study by its work as a forum for international discussions and by sponsoring many International Conferences.

The development of International Relations as an academic discipline can be divided into few phases such as the Prenatal, Organizational, Cold War and Scientific Phases. Kenneth Thompson has summed it up in the following stages,

1. The period of 1900-1918 - up to the end of the First World War International Relations were taught by diplomatic historians who were more interested in history than in politics, their main concern was the description of past events rather than the analysis of present ones.
2. The period of 1918-1930 - starting after the end of the First World War, it was focused only on the study of current affairs as a reaction to the excessive concentration on the past, done during the period of 1900-1918.
3. The period of 1930-1938 - Scholars during this time tended to take a more moralistic and legalistic approach towards studying International Relations. More emphasis was laid on the importance of international Law and International Organizations. Especially the League of Nations which was formed during this time, with the hope of narrowing nationalism by internationalism. The Idealist approach became popular during this time.
4. The period after 1945 – This was the period following the Second World War. During this era people had lost faith in the power and authority of international organizations and international law as a tool of maintaining peace, because of the failure of the League of Nations to prevent another world war. Therefore the emphasis of this period shifted towards a scientific analysis of the developments of international

politics. Scientific studies were conducted on what causes war, how to avoid war, what influences the behavior of states, etc. (Mnung, n.d.)

- **Cold War Phase**

After the four stages which Kenneth Thompson categorized, there comes the cold war phase. After the Second World War USA and Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) rose up as two super powers in the world. There was no complete war or peace during this time; therefore, it was described as the Cold war period. USA took the leadership of capitalist countries and USSR took the leadership of communist countries. Neither of the two parties declared an actual war against the other but promoted their form of governments. This can also be referred to as a “diplomatic war”. The cold war phase led the world to tension and all nations were overwhelmed by fear of war. As a result, The USA formed alliances like NATO to get together with other anti-communist countries under its own leadership and the USSR countered the move by organizing the communist countries into the Warsaw Pact. As another result of the cold war, a Third World was created. A large number of nations of Africa, Asia and Latin America refused to join military alliances of the two super powers. They chose to remain neutral and together they formed the Non-Alignments Movement. After the Second World War nations in the world started to follow different principles and policies, therefore it became a need to understand the foreign policies and the principles which they follow for the survival of all nations. This largely contributed to the development of International Relations as an academic discipline.

The fear of war and the struggle for power remains till today. United Nations were formed as an attempt to maintain the world order, hold peace and to prevent wars in future. International Relations ascended to the very top in the international system acting as the only solution for world issues. The wars which took place in the past created the importance of learning International Relations and promoting peace. Therefore, International Relations emerged as an important academic discipline.

In order to become a distinct discipline, any social science has to create own theories, approaches, and concepts to explain certain phenomena found within the field and outside as well. Similarly International Relations too were recognized as a distinct discipline once it created its own theories and approaches. According to Stanley Hoffman the theory of

International Relations is “a systematic study of observable phenomena trying to discover the principle variables to reveal the characteristic types of relations among national units.”

International Relations have many approaches and theories. The approaches can be classified as the Idealist approach, Realist approach, Behavioural approach, Post-Behavioural approach, Neo-Realism approach and others. In the 1950's and 1960's the Realist approach became the popular in International Relations, they believed that Politics is nothing but a struggle for power. Marxism became popular during this time as well. From the mid 1960's to the 1970's, the Behavioral Approach became popular. By the mid-1980's Realism had once again emerged in the form of Neo-Realism. In the mid 1960's and 1970's another approach could be identified as the Behavioural approach. This was the post-realist paradigm which concentrated on scientific analysis of the developments and phenomena of International Relations. Behaviourism in IR was a larger movement spreading across the social sciences known as the scientific approach for analyzing International Relations. However, towards the end of the 20th century the field of International Relations moved towards approaches such as Post-Behaviourism and Neo-Realism.

Apart from the various theories and approaches in the discipline of International Relations, it also talks about many concepts such as the state, nation-state, power, national interest, national security, war, peace, balance of power etc. all of these theories, approaches and concepts have helped towards shaping the field of International Relations into a distinct discipline today. There have also been many books that have been written regarding the discipline of International Relations which further contributed towards International Relations becoming a distinct academic discipline.

Conclusion

International relations, as an activity has a long history. It was the means which used to interact with other states. It has gone through many changes and advancements and has been developed as an academic discipline today. In a world where the struggle for power created conflicts and wars, an international system to maintain the order of the world and to hold peace was much needed. In order to create such an international system, it was required to investigate and understand International Relations in depth. Further, it was important to give attention to all international problems because people's security, welfare, and above all their survival depended on it. As a result of people's growing interest of the International Relations, it emerged as an academic discipline. However, it was only after the Second World War that the International Relations began to develop largely. Since the Second World War much of International Relations has centered on the search for a new international system to replace the old order that was shattered in two world wars. The emergence of many new states and with the technological changes which were the results of the Second World War, the nature of the International Relations changed.

International Relations is a comparatively new discipline as its origin and the development started in the beginning of 20th century. During this short time International Relations has passed through different phases and stages and have evolved into a distinct discipline. International Relations have many characteristics common to social sciences which are required it to be considered a distinct discipline such as a distinct field of study, specific subject matter, and analytical methods. International Relations have also developed its own theories, approaches, concepts which further prove that it has indeed grown to become a distinct discipline.

Today, International Relations have become a very popular and an important field as people in the 21st century is connected to the international world like in no other time. The majority of things happen in the international world affect people's lives directly or indirectly no matter which part of the world they are. International terrorism, globalization, communication and technological development affect the human race and these things cannot be controlled by one nation. Therefore, the importance of International Relations has rapidly increased because it is only through International Relations that the world peace can be maintained. In conclusion, with the growing importance of International Relations, it has undoubtedly developed into an academic discipline from being a mere field.

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