



CHAPTER 14

Sovereignty, the State, and International Order

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

In this chapter we begin by introducing some basic terms and concepts. We also explore the emergence of the discipline. We then consider the central institution of traditional IR—the state—with special reference to

the diversity of state models throughout history. We also look at empire as a form of international order. Next, we consider the rise of the modern state and state system in Europe, along with the theory of sovereignty and

▲ US President Barack Obama and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzō Abe shake hands after laying wreaths at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park on 27 May 2016 (Jim Watson/AFP/Getty Images).

its implications for the conduct of relations between states; here we will see why the concept of anarchy has a special place in IR theory. Finally, we consider how the spread of the European state system through imperial-

ism and colonialism produced the present international state system, concluding with an examination of weak states, quasi-states, and state failure in various parts of the world.

Discipline, Definitions, and Subject Matter

You may have noticed that IR is often referred to by other names, including *international politics*, *world politics*, and *global politics*. Each term has its own nuances and denotes a somewhat different approach to the subject. When IR emerged as a formal field of academic study after World War I, its practitioners were concerned primarily with the causes of war and the conditions for peace in the international system. Early practitioners believed that relations between states and the maintenance of international order should be the subjects of specialized study in their own right, without reference to political institutions within states or to disciplines such as law and history. In the United States, especially in the aftermath of World War II and the dangerous climate of the Cold War, there were renewed calls to promote the specialized study of politics in the international sphere. A quotation from Frederick Dunn, a pioneer of IR in the United States and the long-time director of Princeton University's Center of International Studies, gives us a fairly conventional understanding of IR's standing and importance as a distinct field of study; it also highlights the fact that a world of sovereign states constitutes a special kind of community in which there is no centre of authority to enforce order; see Box 14.1.

Since that time, however, many IR scholars have come to a broader, more multifaceted understanding of their field. In their view, the international and domestic spheres are in constant interaction—politically, socially, and economically. Furthermore, sovereign states are no longer the only important actors on the world stage: a multiplicity of nonstate actors—from multi- or transnational corporations and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to international organized crime groups and terrorist organizations like Al-Qaeda and ISIL—must also be taken into account.

KEY QUOTE BOX 14.1

The Case for a Specialized Discipline of International Relations

The questions which arise out of the relations among nations are certainly important and difficult. They likewise possess their own coherence and uniqueness since they arise out of the relations in a special kind of community, namely, one made up of autonomous units without a central authority having a monopoly of power. Pulling together the scattered fragments of knowledge about them obviously serves to focus attention on them and encourage the development of more intelligent ways of handling them. Recent events have reinforced the growing conviction that the questions of international relations are too complex and dangerous to be dealt with any longer as sidelines of existing disciplines. (Dunn, 1948, pp. 142–3)

We must also be careful not to imply that states don't matter anymore: Clearly, states are still major players. In a world of nuclear weapons and weapons of mass destruction (WMD), only states can really ensure the survival of their citizens. State governments control national militaries, economies, and bureaucracies, and they are responsible for the security of the people living within their country's borders. No other actors possess the same level of legitimacy or the same capacity for action.

The term *global* is almost always used to refer to the entire world, regardless of state boundaries. Indeed, thinking in global terms tends to have the effect of erasing these boundaries. The idea of a global environment helps us to understand that in the context of issues such as global warming and climate change, borders are largely irrelevant. The idea of the global citizen, which is linked to the concept of cosmopolitanism, also emphasizes that we all belong to "one world," not just to one country. Human beings share common problems, common interests, and a common fate, all of which go beyond particular political communities. Cosmopolitanism also represents a different *ethical* vision of international order, implying a moral concern for the world and its people as a whole; see Box 14.2. Similarly, the concept of globalization emphasizes a global interconnectedness that transcends state boundaries and controls.

We should also give the terms *state* and *nation* some scrutiny. Although they are often used synonymously (or joined together to produce *nation-state*), they actually refer to two quite distinct entities. For our purposes—and those of politics more generally—we might define the **state** as a distinctive political community with its own set of rules and practices, more or less separate from other such communities. For the specific purposes of IR, *the state* refers to the modern sovereign state, which possesses a "legal personality" and is recognized as possessing certain rights and duties. (Of course, this kind of state is distinct from the states that make up a federation, as in the United States, Australia, or India.)

As we saw in Chapter 7, the sovereign state was legally defined by the 1933 Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States. Of the 16 articles adopted, the most important are the first 11. Article 1 summarizes the criteria for a modern sovereign state: *a permanent population; a defined territory and a government capable of maintaining effective control over its territory and of conducting international relations with other states.*

A particularly important provision highlighting the sovereign aspect of international statehood is Article 8, which asserts the right of states not to suffer **intervention** by any other state. Article 10 identifies the conservation of peace as the primary interest of all



See also Chapter 4, p. 82, for a discussion of the cosmopolitan approach.



Also see the Introduction, p. 7, and Chapter 1, p. 37, for discussions of globalization.



See Chapter 7, p. 147, for a discussion of the Montevideo Convention.

KEY QUOTE BOX 14.2

Peter Singer's One World

We have lived with the idea of sovereign states for so long that they have come to be part of the background not only of diplomacy and public policy but also of ethics. Implicit in the term "globalization" rather than the older "internationalization" is the idea that we are moving beyond the era of growing ties between nations and are beginning to contemplate something beyond the existing conception of the nation-state. But this change needs to be reflected in all our levels of thought, and especially our thinking about ethics. (Singer, 2002, p. 9)

KEY CONCEPT BOX 14.3

Article 11, Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States, 1933

The contracting states definitely establish as the rule of their conduct the precise obligation not to recognize territorial acquisitions or special advantages which have been obtained by force whether this consists in the employment of arms, in threatening diplomatic representations, or in any other effective coercive measure. The territory of a state is inviolable and may not be the object of military occupation nor of other measures of force imposed by another state directly or indirectly or for any motive whatever even temporarily. (Retrieved from www.molossia.org/montevideo.html)

states. And Article 11 reinforces both these messages in no uncertain terms (see Box 14.3). In summary, IR understands the state to be a *formally constituted, sovereign political structure encompassing people, territory and institutions*. As such, the state interacts with similarly constituted structures in an international system that is ideally characterized by peaceful, noncoercive relations, establishing a similarly peaceful international order conducive to the prosperity of all. Sadly, the reality often falls far short of this ideal.

See Chapter 5, p. 99, for an exploration of nationalism.



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PHOTO 14.1 | A dancer from Toronto’s annual Caribbean parade—founded by immigrants from Trinidad and Tobago—wears a peacock-inspired costume.

We now turn to the idea of the **nation**, a term that refers specifically to “a people” as opposed to a formal territorial entity. There is no widely agreed on definition of what constitutes “a people”; in general, though, the term denotes a kind of collective identity that is grounded in a shared history and culture and that may or may not lay claim to some kind of political recognition as well as a specific territory. We have already discussed (in Chapter 13) the difficulty, if not impossibility, of identifying a single political culture in any nation. We have also seen (in Chapter 5) that nationalism, as an ideology, calls for political organization to be based on “national identity.” Thus nationalism supports the claim of each nation to a state of its own—a claim that, since the early twentieth century, has generally been based on the apparently democratic principle of national self-determination. Nationalism, at least in its more extreme xenophobic versions, may also seek the exclusion of “alien” elements from an existing state to safeguard the “authenticity” of its national character.

However they are defined, *nations* are often assumed to populate sovereign states and are often thought of in singular terms: that is, one state may be assumed to contain one nation. Thus the state

of France is occupied by the “French nation,” Japan by the “Japanese nation,” and so on. These examples reflect the commonly accepted conflation of state and people that produces the familiar term *nation-state*, which, again, reflects the principle of national self-determination. In practice, though, the matching of state and nation has rarely, if ever, been so neat and unproblematic. There is virtually no state in the world that contains a single, homogeneous nation. Many states are made up of two or more “nations,” and even these are not always distinct. The contemporary British state is composed of recognized substate national entities—Welsh, Scots, English, and Northern Irish—but these entities themselves are multilayered, especially since immigration over the centuries has brought dozens of different “nationalities” to the British Isles. Contemporary Britain is far more “multicultural” and indeed “multinational” than it has been at any other time in history. The same can be said for France, which contains a plethora of ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups. Japan, by contrast, has maintained a high level of ethnic homogeneity by keeping its immigration rates low; as a consequence, its population is rapidly aging.

Close inspection of other national entities will reveal similar stories. What started out as British settler colonies (a legacy of modern empire and mass migration) are now among the most “multinational” nations in the world today. We need look no further than Canada, which has one of the highest levels of immigration in the Western world and a rapidly evolving multicultural identity. The 2011 census identifies some 200 ethnic groups in Canada, 13 of which have over 1 million people calling Canada home. One of every five people was foreign born (Statistics Canada, 2011). This does not include the roughly 600 First Nations as well. Even relatively small states can be amazingly diverse. Papua New Guinea, for example, has a population of just under 6 million but more than 850 different languages, and each language group could theoretically consider itself to be a “nation.” Such diversity is often associated with “weak states” (a topic we will explore further below).



See Chapter 13, p. 264, for a discussion of homogeneous national political culture.



State Department Photo/Public Domain

PHOTO 14.2 | The United Nations Security Council has a mandate to maintain international peace and security.

Nonetheless, states are still widely assumed to contain singular nations, and although most states are recognized to contain many more, their identities are still to some extent equated with a dominant majority. Thus in Canada, the United States, and Australia, a dominant white English-speaking majority constitutes the mainstream population. Multiculturalism may be important at a symbolic level—the way the state is presented—but the institutions and values of these countries are based on European-centred ways of perceiving and acting in the world. Rita Dhamoon (2009, p. x), favouring an intersectional approach to Canadian multiculturalism, has observed that “the histories of oppression experienced by people of colour and indigenous peoples are virtually absent in celebrations of multiculturalism: there is little talk of colonialism, racism, white privilege, sexism, patriarchy, heteronormativity, or capitalism.” She concludes, “It is all about accommodation and diversity, not anti-racism, decolonization, white supremacy, or power.”

This explanation of the basic distinctions between *state* and *nation* does demonstrate how simple terms can fail to capture complex realities. It also suggests that the name of the paramount organization in international affairs, the United Nations, is not completely accurate. After all, its members are states, not nations. This brings us to the last of our complex key terms: *international*. The entities that interact formally in the “international” sphere are not nations in the sense of “peoples”—they are sovereign states. Thus a more appropriate term might be *interstate* or *interstatal* relations. Of course, if we used either of those terms we would run the risk of confusion with states in a federal system.

KEY POINTS

- Although the distinctions between IR and other fields of political science are often difficult to maintain, IR is generally treated as a specialized area of study, if not a separate discipline.
- IR terminology is complex and consists of overlapping terms. However, *international relations*, *world politics*, and *global politics* all have different nuances.

States and International Systems in World History

The fact that empires have risen and fallen throughout history suggests that the sovereign state system as we understand it may sooner or later be replaced by another system made up of quite different units. Indeed, proponents of “globalism” believe that a transformation is under way now in which boundaries and controls will become increasingly meaningless in the future. Others believe that we are entering a new era of **empire**, although there is no consensus on where its centre of power might lie. Still others argue that as Indigenous peoples gain their rights to self-determination, varieties of overlapping and differentiated sovereignty may occur within and between Western settler states (Simpson, 2014).

Are states the only legitimate form of political community? As settler states work on repairing their relationships with the Indigenous peoples they colonized things may change. The Haudenosaunee (Six Nations or the Iroquois Confederacy) have travelled on their own passports since the 1920s, although such passports are often not recognized by established settler states. Under the 1794 Treaty of Canandaigua, signed by US President George Washington, the Six Nations are a recognized sovereign nation. Sid Hill

a Tadodaho, or traditional leader, of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy articulated the case for continuing to insist on separate travel documents that honour history and the treaties: “Maintaining our sovereignty demands that we use our own passport. . . . [T]his has always been and remains our land. We do not have the option of simply accepting American or Canadian passports. We are citizens of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, as we have been for millennia before the Europeans’ arrival” (Hill, 2015).

Political communities, of which the modern state is but one form, date more or less from the time when human groups first developed settled agricultural or animal husbandry practices. These activities required three basic things: an ongoing association with a particular part of the earth’s surface, a way of organizing people and resources, and some form of protection for them. As we have seen, a fundamental part of the definition of the modern state is a relationship between a permanent population and a defined territory. This characteristic covers numerous historic cases, although there have been “stateless communities” throughout history—typically groups with a nomadic lifestyle and no fixed attachment to or control over a particular territory. The formation of states has also given rise to “state systems” or “international orders”: ways of organizing relations between and among political communities either in the same geographical area or further afield.

Since IR is, by and large, a Eurocentric discipline that developed in “the West,” it is not surprising that it has looked for historical antecedents of statehood and international orders in the eastern Mediterranean region where the ancient Greek and Roman civilizations flourished. These civilizations were not isolated, however: They had close connections with the civilizations of northern Africa and the Near East, and both Greece and Rome drew on the rich sources of knowledge and cultural practices of those regions. In turn, the communities of northern Africa and the Near East were connected to other communities. Through cross-cultural exchange, knowledge of all kinds, including political knowledge, was transmitted from much farther afield as well. The extensive trading routes of the world’s Indigenous peoples by land and by sea, whether in what is now North America or in the Pacific or elsewhere, have until recently largely been outside the study of IR.

The “state” of the ancient Greeks was the *polis* or “city-state.” The largest and best known was the Athenian *polis*—often seen as the archetypal model of classical Western democracy. The political philosophy of certain thinkers who gathered in Athens has been the foundation of much subsequent Western political theory concerning the nature and purposes of the state. Aristotle, for example, saw the state not as an artificial construct separating the human from nature, but as the *natural* habitat for humans. When he described “man” as a *zōon politikon* (political animal) he did not mean that humans were naturally scheming, devious creatures. What he actually said was that since the *polis* “belongs to the class of objects which exist by nature,” it follows that the human is “by *nature* a political animal”—a creature designed by nature to live in a *polis* (Aristotle, 1981). In IR, Athens stands out as a historic example of a state driven by the imperatives of political realism, especially when it fought for supremacy against the Spartans. The historian and general Thucydides, eyewitness to some of the events of that war and author of *The Peloponnesian War*, stands at the forefront of a long tradition of realist thought for his interpretation of the war and his observations on human nature (these ideas will be discussed in the next chapter).

Although Athens for a time headed its own empire, the best-known empire of the ancient world was Rome. Roman thought played a major role in the historical growth of “the West,” especially with respect to republicanism and the development of the legal systems of significant parts of Europe. It was also partly because of the Roman Empire



See Chapter 3, p. 59, for a discussion of the history of democracy.

that Christianity became firmly established in Europe, a development that had significant consequences for subsequent political ideas and practices.

In considering empire as a form of international system, it is important to note that empires, like states, have existed at various times throughout most of the world and have taken different forms. In general, though, they have been relatively large-scale political entities made up of a number of smaller political communities (generally states) under the control of a central power. In most cases they have been held together by force. Although empire can constitute a kind of international order, this order is quite different from the current international state system, which is underpinned by a theory of sovereign equality among its constituent members. Empires are characterized explicitly by relations of domination and subordination, although (as contemporary critics would point out) this can occur in the present system as well. The brief outline of historical empires in Table 14.1 reminds us that not everything of historical significance happened in Europe.

The fact that the earliest recorded empires were situated around the river systems of the Tigris, Euphrates, and Nile suggests a certain correlation between the conditions required for successful agriculture and the establishment of settled political communities connected by extensive networks of relations. The same broad region saw the rise of the Sumerian, Egyptian, Babylonian, Assyrian, and Persian empires between roughly 4,000 and 400 BCE. The domination exercised by the controlling powers of these empires varied in form, from direct control of smaller subject communities to more indirect methods that allowed local groups some autonomy, provided they paid the expected tributes (Lawson, 2003, pp. 24–5; Stern, 2000, p. 57). Africa also produced a number of empires, both ancient and modern. Among the latter was the Malian Empire, which thrived between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries and made Timbuktu a significant centre of learning as well as trade and commerce. The Ottoman Empire, with its capital in Istanbul, emerged at around the same time and lasted until the early 1920s.

Farther east, the ancient kingdoms of the Indus Valley formed a broad civilizational entity. Although Hindu religious traditions and Sanskrit writing provided some basic cultural cohesion over much of the region, political communities within it varied widely, ranging from oligarchies to republics. The region's best-known empire was established in the north in 300 BCE. Although it lasted less than a century, its reputation was assured largely because one of its leading figures, Kautilya, produced a highly sophisticated text on **statecraft** known as the *Arthashastra*, which set out the ways and means of acquiring territory, keeping it, and reaping prosperity from it. It is comparable to Niccolò Machiavelli's writings on statecraft, although some see it as presenting a far harsher picture of the struggle for domination (Boesche, 2002, pp. 253–76; Lawson, 2003, pp. 24–5).

One of the most extensive and durable empires of all was the Chinese, which lasted from the time of the Shang dynasty in the eighteenth century BCE until the early twentieth century, although there was a substantial interlude during which it disintegrated into a number of warring states. It was during a period of chaos and violence that the ancient philosophy of Confucius, which is largely concerned with political and social arrangements conducive to good order under strong leadership and authority, is thought to have developed (see Lawson, 2006, p. 155). European theorists of sovereignty, which is ultimately concerned with the same problems, were to develop their ideas under similar conditions.

In the early modern period, the Ottoman Turks ruled over some 14 million subjects from the Crimea to Hungary, while the Moghuls pushed farther toward the south and east. By the end of the sixteenth century, Islamic forces—cultural, political, and military—

TABLE 14.1 | A Brief Guide to Historical Empires**Premodern Empires**

African empires: Ethiopian Empire (ca. 50–1974), Mali Empire (ca. 1210–1490), Songhai Empire (1468–1590), Fulani Empire (ca. 1800–1903)

Mesoamerican empires: Maya Empire (ca. 300–900), Teotihuacan Empire (ca. 500–750), Aztec Empire (1325–ca. 1500)

Byzantine Empire (330–1453)

Andean empires: Huari Empire (600–800), Inca Empire (1438–1525)

Chinese premodern empires: T'ang Dynasty (618–906), Sung Dynasty (906–1278)

Islamic empires: Umayyid/Abbasid (661–1258), Almohad (1140–1250), Almoravid (1050–1140)

Carolingian Empire (ca. 700–810)

Bulgarian Empire (802–27, 1197–1241)

Southeast Asian empires: Khmer Empire (877–1431), Burmese Empire (1057–1287)

Novgorod Empire (882–1054)

Medieval German Empire (962–1250)

Danish Empire (1014–35)

Indian empires: Chola Empire (11th century), Empire of Mahmud of Ghazni (998–1039), Mughal Empire (1526–1805)

Mongol Empire (1206–1405)

Mamluk Empire (1250–1517)

Holy Roman Empire (1254–1835)

Modern Empires

Portuguese Empire (ca. 1450–1975)

Spanish Empire (1492–1898)

Russian Empire/USSR (1552–1991)

Swedish Empire (1560–1660)

Dutch Empire (1660–1962)

British Empire (1607–ca. 1980)

French Empire (ca. 1611–ca. 1980)

Modern Chinese Empire: Ch'ing Dynasty (1644–1911)

Austrian/Austro-Hungarian Empire (ca. 1700–1918) [See also Habsburg Empire]

US Empire (1776–present)

Brazilian Empire (1822–1889)

German Empire (1871–1918, 1939–45)

Japanese Empire (1871–1945)

Italian Empire (1889–1942)

Habsburg Empire (1452–1806)

Ottoman Empire (1453–1923)

Source: Paul, J.A. (2005). Empires in world history. Global Policy Forum. Retrieved from <http://globalpolicy.org/empire/history/2005/empireslist.htm>

controlled not only the Middle East but significant parts of Africa, Central Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia (especially present-day Malaysia, Indonesia, and parts of the Philippines), as well as sizable parts of Eastern Europe. The list in Table 14.1 shows just how common the empire has been as a form of international system, and the list is by no means exhaustive.

Virtually all empires have left important legacies of one kind or another, but the ones that have had the most profound impact on the structure of the present international system are the modern European empires, the largest and most powerful of which was the British Empire. France, Spain, Portugal, Holland, Denmark, Belgium, Italy, Russia, and Germany were all colonial powers at one time or another, but none of them equaled Britain in influence.

The transmission of culture is greatly facilitated by **imperialism**, so it's not surprising that British—or more specifically English and Scottish—culture established itself around much of the world (see Box 14.4); even today, English prevails as the most important international language. At its height in the late nineteenth century, the British Empire ruled over hundreds of millions of people and encompassed nearly one-quarter of the world's land area. To a certain extent, the mantle of power passed to the United States after World War II.

But cultural spread travels both ways. Contemporary European states have absorbed many cultural influences from the places they once colonized, and many people from those places immigrated to the former “mother countries.” Thus the UK is home to large Indian, Sri Lankan, Bangladeshi, and Pakistani communities; France, to many North Africans; and Holland, to many people from Indonesia and other former Asian colonies. The influence of former colonies may be most obvious in the case of food—Indonesian *rijstafel* and Surinamese curry in Amsterdam, couscous in Paris, chicken vindaloo or beef madras in London—but it makes itself felt in areas of life, including language.



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PHOTO 14.3 | Countless Indigenous peoples in the Americas were killed or forced into slavery in the process of colonization. Spanish conquistadors such as Hernando de Soto, shown here in Florida, c. 1540, were particularly cruel.

KEY QUOTE BOX 14.4

A “Band of Brothers”: New Zealand’s Prime Minister Declares Support for Britain (1939)

Prime Minister Michael Savage’s declaration of support for Britain at the beginning of World War II reflected the feelings of many people in the “dominions”: when the “mother country” came under threat, they rushed to its defence. The ties that held the Empire together were emotional and moral as well as financial and military.

I am satisfied that nowhere will the issue be more clearly understood than in New Zealand—where, for almost a century, behind the sure shield of Britain, we have enjoyed and cherished freedom and self-government. Both with gratitude for the past and confidence in the future, we range ourselves without fear beside Britain. Where she goes, we go. Where she stands, we stand. We are only a small and young nation, but we are one and all a band of brothers and we march forward with union of hearts and wills to a common destiny. (Savage, 1939)



Arthur Edwards/The Sun/PA Wire. URN:8770108 (Press Association via AP Images)

PHOTO 14.4 | Prince Charles meets with soldiers at the mayor of London’s “Big Curry Lunch” (2010).

The history of empire, which encompasses exploration, trade, proselytization, and migration as well as other more explicitly political aspects, is also part of the history of globalization. The beginnings of contemporary global **interdependence** can largely be traced to the global reach of the modern European empires and the networks and movements of people, technological innovations, and financial and economic systems they gave rise to.

Globalization has recently been linked to a new form of empire which, some argue, is replacing traditional state sovereignty with a new kind of sovereignty that involves neither a territorial centre of power nor fixed boundaries. This new imperial order is based on the power of transnational corporations and forms of production that owe no allegiance to territorial entities and in fact seek to supplant their sovereignty (see Hardt & Negri, 2000, pp. xi–xiv). Some may see this scenario as exaggerated, but at the very least it offers a basis for critical reflection on key aspects of the phenomenon of globalization and the growing power of deterritorialized corporations.

Is the old concept of empire obsolete today? A contemporary definition formulated by John Perkins together with various groups of students may be useful here:

[An empire is a] nation-state that dominates other nation-states and exhibits one or more of the following characteristics: (1) exploits resources from the lands it dominates, (2) consumes large quantities of resources—amounts which are disproportionate to the size of its population relative to those of other nations, (3) maintains a large military that enforces its policies when more subtle measures fail, (4) spreads its language, literature, art, and various aspects of its culture through its sphere of influence, (5) taxes not just its own citizens, but also people in other countries, and (6) imposes its own currency on the lands under its control. (Perkins, 2007, pp. 4–5)

According to Perkins, virtually all the students he consulted believed that the United States fits this definition. He goes on to argue that the United States has used the above strategies to maintain a “secret empire” around the world. Certainly resource use and the spread of economic and other forms of influence are crucial to an understanding of empire in today’s world. Yet many Americans, including political leaders, are uncomfortable with the idea that their country exercises imperial control. For example, President George W. Bush claimed in 2000 that “America has never been an empire. . . . We may be the only great power in history that had the chance, and refused”—a theme he repeated when declaring a victory in Iraq in May 2003 over the forces of Saddam Hussein; while other nations had “fought in foreign lands and remained to occupy and exploit,” Americans “wanted nothing more than to return home” (Ferguson, 2003b). Conservative historian Niall Ferguson has concluded that the United States has taken on the global role formerly played by Britain, without facing the reality that an empire comes with it. In short, it is “an empire in denial” (Ferguson, 2003a, p. 370). More recently Fein (2014) observed in the right-of-centre newspaper the *Washington Times* that “If the United States is not an empire, the word has lost all meaning.” By this he meant that the United States was implicated in most major international problems, and while this might bring some prestige to the country, it was economically costly to be an empire, and could lead to “self-ruination.”

Whether or not the United States itself is an imperial power, it clearly exists in a world of powerful states that exert at least regional hegemony. Russia and Japan, the larger member states of the European Union (France, Britain, Germany), and the rising states of China and India all display at least some of the characteristics that Perkins attributes to an empire. This means that if the United States is an empire, it must jockey for power with empires or “semi-empires” in the international system. The interaction of imperial states today, as in previous centuries, helps create the texture of world politics.

KEY POINTS


- States as political communities have existed for thousands of years and have varied widely in size and institutional features.
- Although the sovereign state remains the dominant form and the foundation of the international system, many commentators today believe that the forces of globalization are undermining it.
- Empires have existed in different parts of the world from ancient times through the modern period.
- Some argue that the United States now plays an imperial role in everything but name, while others argue that the power of transnational corporations trumps that of any state. Still others emphasize competition among a number of hegemonic powers, including the United States, China, India, Japan, the European Union, and Russia.

The Rise of Modernity and the State System in Europe

Modernity is a complex phenomenon associated with the rise of European science and technology, which began around 1500 and led to industrialization and increased military power as well as enormous political and social changes, including a gradual decline in the authority of religion. But these changes did not occur in isolation from other influences. Stern (2000, p. 72) notes that many important ideas and inventions were transmitted to Europe from China and Arabia, and significant aspects of the Greek and Roman learning central to the Renaissance had been preserved by Islamic scholars. The invasion and occupation of the Americas and the Pacific also served to acquaint Europeans with a vast array of unfamiliar social and political models, all of which prompted new comparisons and questions (Lawson, 2006, p. 60). (As we noted in Chapter 3, Indigenous traditions, notably those of the Six Nations or Iroquois Confederacy, contributed far more to the shaping of American democracy than many Western theorists care to admit.)

Few people in the year 1500 would have suspected that a cluster of rather insignificant states in Western Europe would eventually control most of the world's surface (Kennedy, 1989, p. 3). Chinese civilization at the time seemed vastly superior to any other. Technological innovations such as moveable type, gunpowder, and paper money, together with advances in ironwork, contributed to an expansion of trade and industry that was further stimulated by an extensive program of canal building. With an army of more than a million troops and an efficient hierarchical administration run by an educated Confucian bureaucracy, China was “the envy of foreign visitors” (Kennedy, 1989, p. 5). Islamic civilization was also thriving, and there were many important centres of power outside Europe. In terms of political organization, Europe in 1500 was a chaotic patchwork of overlapping jurisdictions and fragmented authorities. The only institution providing any sort of unity was the Catholic Church; centred in Rome, it was the seat of religious authority throughout the continent. From 1519, however, the Protestant Reformation challenged the supremacy of the established Church, triggering massive theological and political fallout.

The devastating struggle between Catholic and Protestant forces continued for more than a century. The treaty that ended it, the Peace of Westphalia (1648), is conventionally credited with consolidating several key characteristics of the modern state (see the Case Study in Box 14.5). These included not only the principle of religious coexistence, but also the state's claim to sole authority in matters such as the declaration of war and the negotiation of peace, diplomatic representation, and the authority to make treaties with foreign powers (Boucher, 1998, p. 224). For these reasons, Westphalia has long been regarded as the founding moment of the modern *sovereign* state, although some contemporary scholars (for example, Clarke, 2005) dispute that assessment.



See Chapter 7, p. 140, for a discussion of the rise and spread of the Western state.

KEY POINTS

- Modernity is associated with social, political, intellectual, and technological developments in Europe that brought significant changes to the political landscape, although there were influences from other parts of the world as well.
- The Peace of Westphalia is conventionally regarded as the founding moment of the doctrine of state sovereignty and therefore of the modern state.

The Emergence of Sovereignty

The principle of sovereignty is seen as effectively *enclosing* each state within the “hard shell” of its territorial borders. It was meant to guarantee the state against any external

CASE STUDY 14.5

The Peace of Westphalia

The Thirty Years War ended in 1648 with the Peace of Westphalia. The treaty was the product of five years of complex diplomatic negotiations, which ended when the Treaties of Osnabrück and Münster were signed to form a comprehensive agreement containing 128 clauses covering matters of law, religion, and ethics as well as numerous practical issues.

Some of the principles enshrined in the Peace, such as the authority of rulers to determine the religious affiliations of their subjects, were similar to provisions included in an earlier agreement, the Peace of Augsburg of 1555. However, Westphalia was infused with emergent ideas about a kind of international law that could transcend religious differences and therefore be applied to Catholic and Protestant states alike. The foremost thinker along these lines was the Dutch jurist Hugo Grotius (1583–1645), whose influential work *Laws of War and Peace* confronted the problem of conflicting moralities and the need for toleration and set out minimum standards for conduct. Importantly for the development of the state system and international order, it granted coequal juridical status to states.

Westphalia has been described as the first, and perhaps the greatest, of the modern European peace treaties: a benchmark for both critics and supporters of the sovereign state system, as well as for those who predict its eventual demise in the face of the state-transcending forces of globalization.

intervention in its domestic affairs, including internal governmental arrangements. The theory possessed an attractive simplicity. Rulers could not only follow the religious and moral principles of their choice (and demand that their subjects conform), but could govern according to whichever form of rule they preferred. The protective shell of sovereignty guaranteed the freedom of all states—or rather the ruling elements within each state—to arrange their domestic affairs as they liked, regardless of either what external actors might think or the state’s relative standing in terms of size, power, and capacity.

The principle of state sovereignty appears straightforward, but putting it into practice has been difficult. Indeed, for much of the 300 years following Westphalia, Europe continued to be prone to warfare among its constituent states, and it is really only since World War II that Europeans seem finally to have struck on a formula for peaceful relations. That this was achieved via a regional supranational framework in the form of the European Union is somewhat ironic. Although the principle of state sovereignty was initially formulated to prevent warfare, it seems that a lasting peace was possible only when the European states overcame their obsession with safeguarding their sovereignty. The degree to which the EU—and other regional experiments elsewhere in the world—will undermine the principle of state sovereignty remains to be seen.

Another factor to be considered here is the moral conundrum raised when states mistreat people—whether their own citizens or others—within their borders. A strict interpretation of the theory of state sovereignty prohibits any intervention by actors outside the state, even in cases of civil war, genocide, or other human rights abuses. Today, though, there is a widely assumed right of **humanitarian intervention** that trumps the sovereign right of states—or their rulers—to do as they please within their own borders. This assumed right is a complement to the recent idea that sovereignty entails the *responsibility to protect* the state’s inhabitants.

The theory of state sovereignty is often seen to have two dimensions: external and internal. As Evans and Newnham (1998, p. 504) put it, the doctrine makes a double claim: “autonomy in foreign policy and exclusive competence in internal affairs.” This claim depends on there being an ultimate authority within the state that is entitled to make decisions and settle disputes. This authority is “the sovereign” and may be either a person (such as a monarch) or a collective (such as a parliament representing the sovereignty of the people). As the highest power in the state’s political system, the sovereign cannot be subject to any other agent, domestic or foreign (Miller, 1991, pp. 492–3). In other words, the traditional doctrine of sovereignty holds that the finality of sovereign power applies not only within the domestic arena but in the external realm as well.

Yet in an international system in which all states are sovereign, there can be no higher authority to function as a ruler (see Evans & Newnham, 1998, p. 504). Externally, therefore, the doctrine of state sovereignty has the paradoxical effect of creating **anarchy**—literally, “absence of a ruler.” And in that case there is nothing to stop a large, powerful state from taking over lesser states by sheer force. This is what many see as the prime danger posed by the anarchic nature of the international sphere. The disorder produced by unchecked power is likened to be a dangerous state of nature in which there is no law and order.

The theory of sovereignty was first worked out in relation to the sphere of domestic rather than international politics, and various well-known figures contributed to its development through the centuries. Among the earliest was Jean Bodin (ca. 1530–1596), who, like many others concerned with political order, lived in disordered times, experiencing civil and religious conflict for much of his life. He contributed to the development of



See Chapter 1, p. 32, for the discussion of the “state of nature” in the liberal social contract tradition.

sovereignty not just as a doctrine but as an “ideology of order” (see King, 1999). However, the best-known theorist of sovereignty is Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), the author of *Leviathan*, who is generally regarded as standing in the same tradition of political realism as Thucydides and Machiavelli. He, too, lived during a period of civil war and (as we saw in Chapter 1) believed that only an all-powerful sovereign could establish order. (We will consider his ideas and their contribution to IR theory in the next chapter.)

Another important development that must be considered along with the rise of the modern European state system is nationalism. The assumption implicit in the principle of self-determination is that each “nation” is entitled to have a state of its own. This can be problematic, given that there are thousands of groups around the world that could make some credible claim to constituting a nation. Practical difficulties aside, the idea that nations and states go together seems very persuasive; but like the sovereign state itself, it is a relatively recent idea. Indeed, its origins lie in the period of state-building dynamics that followed the Peace of Westphalia.

At the time of Westphalia, the link between nation and state was practically nonexistent. Sovereignty resided in the person who occupied the top position in the state’s political hierarchy, in most cases the king, though occasionally the queen. Monarchs did not regard the masses over whom they ruled as constituting “nations.” Indeed, the people within these states did not begin to acquire a common political identity until the late eighteenth century, when the emerging idea of democracy required a distinct body of people—citizens—to constitute a *sovereign people*, and the most likely candidate for this position was “the nation.” Although the record of democratic development in Europe remained patchy until quite recently (women in Switzerland did not gain the right to vote until 1971), the idea of “the nation” caught on rapidly. The later development of the modern state and state system brought together the three prime characteristics of the modern state: *sovereignty*, *territoriality*, and *nationality*. These characteristics also support an international order based on the state system.

The French Revolution, as we noted earlier, marked a turning point in the rise of the modern European state system. It converted the mass of people, who until then had been merely “subjects” of the monarch, into citizens of the French state. Nevertheless, the entity that emerged as the “French nation” was far from unified, since the territory covered by France was occupied by a variety of groups with their own distinct languages and customs. Whatever legal and administrative unity existed had to be imposed from above. The same was true in most other parts of Europe.

Another significant development came in the wake of the Napoleonic wars. This was the **Concert of Europe**: an agreement among various European powers to meet regularly to resolve diplomatic crises between states. Beginning with the Congress of Vienna in 1815, this arrangement lasted until the mid-1850s, and although the meetings were eventually discontinued, the art of diplomacy became an important instrument of the European state system. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the modern European state system was still more a matter of theory than practice, and the concept of the “nation-state” did not exist. But the idea of the nation was a powerful driving force, and it became more prominent as the century progressed, leading to the emergence of new “national” states in Greece (1830), Belgium (1831), Italy (1861), Germany (1871), and Romania, Serbia, and Montenegro (1878). By the beginning of the twentieth century, the sovereign state system was reasonably well entrenched in Europe, as well as in Western settler societies such as Canada, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand, but it scarcely existed in other parts of the world.

KEY POINTS

- Theories of sovereignty developed in response to events, including both civil and interstate wars in Europe.
- In political philosophy the “state of nature” was associated with anarchy, violence, and the drive for power. Centralized sovereign government was seen as necessary to safeguard the people and give them some protection from those conditions.
- Nationalism in the sense of political/cultural identity is closely associated with the rise of the modern sovereign state and state system.

The Globalization of the Sovereign State System

As we have seen, numerous empires have existed since ancient times and in many different parts of the world. Imperialism and colonialism only increased with the rise of the sovereign state, and European empires (sometimes unwittingly) exported the sovereign state system to the rest of the world, where it has met with varying success. Early Spanish, Portuguese, and Dutch explorers, traders, and colonizers were followed by the British, French, Belgians, and Germans. Shipping routes and trading posts encircled the world, facilitating further colonization. With the end of World War II, however, the future of colonialism was soon called into question. The devastating cost of the war was one factor; many European countries were near bankruptcy and simply too weak to maintain their hold on their overseas possessions. Another was the principle of self-determination. Originally developed with Europeans in mind, this principle was now invoked by colonized people, calling the legitimacy of colonialism into question. This normative change drove a decolonization movement that saw almost all former European colonies (except the settler states) achieve independence by the end of the twentieth century.

Among the legacies of European colonization were more or less clear borders dividing one colonial state from another. The imposition of such boundaries on territories traditionally used by a variety of Indigenous peoples in a fluid system of occupation frequently resulted in arbitrary divisions of tribes or ethnic groups between two or more different colonies. This problem was especially common in Africa, but also occurred in settler societies such as Canada, the United States, and Australia. In these countries, the boundaries of provinces and states had little if anything to do with traditional Indigenous territories. The lack of regard for pre-existing groupings and boundaries is especially clear in the case of borders represented on maps as straight lines. The arbitrary divisions created in this way have made the task of **nation-building**—the effort to develop a coherent sense of national identity among disparate groups of people—very difficult.

The relatively clear boundaries, established administrative centres, and more or less permanent settled populations of many colonial states mimicked the structure of European states. When decolonization came on the agenda, in many cases the colonial borders were retained and sovereignty was simply transferred from the colonizing power to members of an Indigenous elite who had been educated in the colonizing country, with structures of governance—parliaments, bureaucracies, and so on—that reflected European practices. A partial exception was colonial India, which was partitioned at the last minute to form the Republic of India (officially secular, but primarily Hindu) and the Islamic Republic of



See Chapter 7, p. 143, for a discussion of the European concepts of borders and sovereignty on colonial territory.

Pakistan. No doubt the lack of time to adjust to the division was largely responsible for the violence that ensued: At least a million people are estimated to have lost their lives during the partition period.

The fact that virtually all former colonies became part of an international system of states based largely on the European model effectively ensured the globalization of that system. Even states that had not been colonized, from Japan and Turkey to Thailand and Tonga, adopted the European state format.

For a number of former colonies, though, independent sovereign statehood has proved extremely difficult. Few postcolonial states have collapsed completely, but a number have been unable to exercise effective statehood. These states have been variously characterized as weak, quasi, and failing or failed states.


States that lack the capacity to organize and regulate their societies and therefore cannot deliver an adequate range of political, social, and economic goods to their citizens are usually described as *weak states*. *Quasi-state* is a label that has been used in various ways, and sometimes overlaps with *weak state*; however, Robert Jackson (1990) uses it to refer specifically to developing states that are dependent on the support of the international community and therefore possess what he calls “negative sovereignty.” The idea of *state failure* comes into play when a state that is already weak reaches a point where factors such as corruption, incompetence, unfair distribution of resources, human rights abuses, favouritism on the basis of ethnicity, and the direct involvement of the military in politics feed into social unrest, persistent violence, economic breakdown, and political turmoil (Rotberg, 2003, pp. 1–2). Among the states that have been described as weak, quasi, or failing are Congo, Sudan, Sierra Leone, Afghanistan, Colombia, Tajikistan, Haiti, Lebanon, Fiji, the Solomon Islands, and Papua New Guinea. Somalia is more or less a failed or collapsed state, since it has no functioning centralized institutions.

Even though many of the problems leading to state weakness or failure may be internal, there are almost always external factors—colonial legacies, continuing interference by former colonial powers, the activities of transnational organizations, inequitable trading regimes—that have played a contributing role. The forces of economic globalization have been especially problematic for fragile developing states with underdeveloped capacity; the fact that such states lack negotiating power in the international arena ensures that they remain vulnerable to failure at one level or another.


All these problems bring into question both the assumed benefits of the globalization of the European state system and its long-term prospects as an effective system of international order. Although it is true that many other postcolonial states, especially in Asia, have been relatively successful, it is also true that Europe has had its share of failed states. The former Yugoslavia is now divided into nine separate entities (including Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia–Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia, Kosovo, and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia). At the same time, the deepening and widening of the EU is a project in **regionalization** that raises questions about the future of the traditional sovereign state in its original heartland.

KEY POINTS

- Largely because of the global reach of the European empires and their political legacies, the European state system became the basis for the current international state system and international order.



See Chapter 7, pp. 145–6, for a discussion of Japan and Turkey’s adoption of the European state format.



See Chapter 7, p. 149, for discussion of strong and weak states.

- Formal sovereign statehood has not always delivered significant benefits, especially in the developing world, where weak or failing states are unable to meet the needs of their citizens.
- Jackson's concept of the "quasi-state" highlights the fact that some developing world states depend so much on the international community for their continuing existence that their sovereignty is essentially "negative."

Conclusion

In this chapter we have provided a broad overview of some key aspects of the study of international relations, from its foundations as a discipline and its basic terminology to the main concepts on which it has traditionally been based: sovereignty, the state, and international order. We have also sketched how states and international systems, including empires, have developed from the earliest times to the present era of globalization. Setting the rise of the contemporary international order against this world historical background has helped us illustrate the variety of state forms and international systems in history. It has also allowed us to demonstrate that while some systems have achieved impressive longevity, no system has ever achieved permanence. It would therefore be a mistake to assume that the present state system will necessarily remain as it is over the longer term, especially given the challenges of globalization and the various pressures it exerts on all aspects of sovereign statehood.

Key Questions

1. What does *international relations* signify and how does it differ from terms such as *world politics* or *global politics*?
2. Why has IR traditionally focused on the international system and not the domestic politics of states?
3. Under what circumstances did the idea of sovereign statehood arise in Europe?
4. Are there still empires in the world today? Is the United States an empire?
5. What are the distinguishing features of the modern state?
6. What is the relationship between states and nations?
7. What does it mean to say that Indigenous nations are sovereign?
8. How did the European state system become spread throughout the world?
9. What is "negative" sovereignty?
10. What are the alternatives to the current international order?

Further Reading

Greenfeld, L. (1992). *Nationalism: Five roads to modernity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. A classic work of political history that explores the roots of five distinct nationalisms (British, French, Russian, German, and American) and arguing (contrary to the standard view) that nationalism preceded industrialization and urbanization.

Hobson, J.M. (2012). *The Eurocentric conception of world politics: Western international theory, 1760–2010.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. A deconstruction of Eurocentric IR theories in world politics, with a strong focus on the work of Edward Said.

Lake, M., & Reynolds, H. (2008). *Drawing the global colour line: White men's countries and the international challenge of racial equality.* In *Critical Perspectives on Empire Series.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. An examination of the development of empire and colonialism, and how race and racism were intimately tied to the expansion of European power and the creation of settler states.

Weber, C. (2013). *International relations theory: A critical introduction.* New York: Routledge. An excellent critical introduction to IR by one of the world's most prescient critical IR theorists.

Web Links

<https://internationalrelationsonline.com>

A useful digital gateway to IR theory and case study research. It also provides links to jobs for students of IR.

www.history-world.org

An extensive site offering essays, documents, and maps as well as music and videos relating to the history of the ancient world, Africa, Europe, Asia, India, the Middle East, Australia, and the Americas.

www.globalpolicy.org/nations-a-states/failed-states.html

A failed states portal with articles and links hosted by Global Policy Forum.

<http://library.fundforpeace.org/fsi13-troubled10>

Failed States Index 2013 hosted by the Fund for Peace.

www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/Empire/index.html

Links to information on a range of historical empires, with a particular focus on the British.