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Defining International Relations

International Relations is best defined as “the study of the interactions among the various actors that participate in international politics, including states, international organizations, nongovernmental organizations, subnational entities such as bureaucracies and local governments, and individuals” (Mingst and Toft, 5). As a study of interactions, International Relations adjusts itself over time in order to encompass the evolving ways the international community deal with one another, yet it is grounded on the ideals of stability and harmonious relationships. Some aspects of International Relations, such as wars, are still a fact of life in human society both in the domestic and international stages. The underlying causes have changed though: the soaring of population growth, the scarcity of basic needs, the shrinking of personal space and the depletion of natural resources. The most compelling perspective of the nature of International Relations is the emphasis on systemic stability, international homeostasis and continuity of the system yet adaptable to the ever-changing conditions of human transnational relationships. Karl Deutsch and J. David Singer lay out three main essential characteristics that indicate systemic stability: (1) no one major power dominates the rest, (2) no major war between the powers occurs, and (3) the members of the state-system endure for a very long time (Gaddis, 103). Although today, the United States is only super-power on the global stage, there is no war right now between the United States and the other major powers. This contributes significantly to the stability of the present anarchic system. During the era of bipolarity in the Cold War, the Soviet Union and the United States kept each other in check. As

for the other members of the present system, the countries officially acknowledged by the international community today endured for some time now and this indicates stability in the system.

Deutsch and Singer add that systems that are stable are also capable of self-regulation. Self-regulation is the capability of a system to react on stimuli that are considered out of the ordinary and still retain stability. In order to be a self-regulating system of states there must be (1) an agreement on fundamental objectives, (2) the structure accurately reflects the system's capabilities and the component states' powers, and (3) an agreed-upon conflict resolution, which include holding conferences and releasing tensions somewhere else (Gaddis, 103). In the case of the European countries of the late eighteenth to the late nineteenth centuries, they released all the pent-up tensions in their African colonies when imperialism served as a safety valve for international politics. Today, conflict resolutions come in forms of state visits and United Nations conferences. The structure also depicts the system's capabilities by recognizing countries that have the most influence and putting them on the forefront of the world issues today, like the *Group of Eight* (G8). G8 is comprised of the eight leading industrialized countries today: United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Germany, France, Japan, Italy and Russia. The United Nations today cultivate the agreement on the fundamental objectives of peace and harmony.

International Relations demonstrate that international relationships cycles or go on phases. New threats come and go, but the main framework of International Relations stays the same. The Greek City-State system exhibits an anarchic system of twenty-or-so independent city-states, with Athens and Sparta, serving as the bipolar power structure. They lasted for a while until the Romans consolidated power by 50 BC. The empire was built through force, and

the Romans were pre-occupied by maintaining both external and internal powers. Maintaining territories outside and keeping a stable government inside is a typical consolidation of power by large and powerful nations like the United States today. The United States balances an internal aspect and external aspect in its politics. Stability from within the defined borders of the nation and the maintenance of all of its territories and activities outside the country are balanced by the United States in order to keep the massive nation intact. The Romans, however, by the mid-400 AD, collapsed under the pressure of internal unrest and threats from the barbarians beyond the pale. This brings the defragmentation era of the middle ages. Europe is now fragmented into local fiefdoms. These fiefdoms prospered after a long time and by 1000 AD, city-states were on the rise again particularly in the Italian peninsula. This prosperity also produced the rise of centralized monarchies, powerful ruling dynasties who claim the sole right to govern their territory. Due to the human nature of wanting more, this centralization of power leads to the expansion of territory, which in turn leads to war. 1618 ushered the beginnings of the *Thirty Years' War*, a religious war between the Catholics and the Protestants (Mingst and Toft, 20). The war originated as a clash between the two variations of Christianity and ended with the stripping of papal power and the weakening of the Holy Roman Empire. Bankruptcy, dire economic losses and massive casualties also took toll on Europeans at the time (Mingst and Toft, 21). The war ended in 1648 with the *Treaty of Westphalia*. The Treaty of Westphalia states that territories are now acquired through conquest and secular means, not religious. After the Treaty, the states of England, France, Russia, Austria and Prussia rose to world-power prominence and the power of the church was minimized drastically (Mingst and Toft, 22). This is a pivotal point in International Relations history because it sets the stage for a secularist view of world politics. The Westphalian system endures today to deal with new threats such terrorism and radicalism

and the present secularist treatment of global turbulences help alleviate the matter. The *Age of Nationalism* grew alongside the Westphalian system. Nationalistic sentiments and ideals rang throughout the western world from the late eighteenth century and, throughout the rest of world after World War I, when colonies were being granted independence by the colonial powers. Except for the interruptions of Napoleonic dreams of empire, the 1870 Franco-Prussian War (which brought forth unified Germany at the end), 1914 World War I, 1939 World War II, and to a lesser extent, the Cold War, the Westphalian system is, for the most part, effective at keeping peace. The fact that all these problems rose and no drastic change to the system took place is evident that the present system is stable and continuous enough for now. The Westphalian system continues to adapt new approaches and techniques to deal with new threats in the international community, but it retains its fundamental framework of stability and secularism. Changes in the system are inevitable as humanity adapts to a transforming environment, economy and society, but these changes are slow and gradual. It will take many years for the system to change holistically or it will take an extremely strong aberrant stimulus to completely shake the stability of the Westphalian system, like the collapse of the United States or the states with major consolidated powers. When this happens, the stage of defragmentation will take place, and if any aspect of prosperity is possible, city-states will rise from the defragmented territories, thus repeating the cycle again.

International Relations is stable yet adaptable and flexible. It does not change drastically but it adjusts itself slowly to be a fitting frame to deal with issues arising today. Continuity is a fundamental aspect of International Relations because everything that the field is dedicated about is mostly how to have peace and continuity of the present anarchic system. The specific reasons

why wars or peace happen may change with the times but the fundamental and underlying factors remain the same.

Works Cited

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