



JOSEPH S. NYE, JR.

Understanding
International
Conflicts

AN INTRODUCTION TO THEORY AND HISTORY

Third Edition

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Joseph S. Nye, Jr.

Harvard University



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Preface

This text grows out of the course on international conflicts in the modern world that I taught as part of the Harvard core curriculum for more than a decade. It is also informed by five years of experience as a policy maker at the assistant secretary level in Washington. Its aim is to introduce students to the complexities of international politics by giving them a good grounding in the traditional realist approach before turning to liberal and other theories of interdependence and institutions that are becoming more prominent after the Cold War. I try to present difficult concepts in clear language with historical examples so that students will understand the basic vocabulary of international politics.

Twice in the first half of this century the great powers engaged in devastating world wars that cost nearly 50 million lives. The second half of the century was wracked by a cold war, regional wars, and the threat of nuclear weapons. Why did those conflicts happen? Could they happen again? Or will rising economic and ecological interdependence, the growth of transnational and international institutions, and the spread of democratic values bring about a new world order? How will globalization and the information revolution influence international politics in the twenty-first century? No good teacher can honestly answer such questions with certainty, but we can provide our students with conceptual tools that will help them shape their own answers as the future unfolds. That is the purpose of this book.

This is not a soup-to-nuts textbook with all the concepts or history a student will need. Instead, it is an example of how to think about the complex and confusing domain of international politics. It should be read not for a complete factual account, but for the way it approaches the interplay of theory and history. Neither theory nor history alone is sufficient. Those historians who believe that understanding comes from simply recounting the facts fail to make explicit the hidden principles by which they select some facts rather than others. Equally mistaken are the political scientists who become so isolated and entangled in a maze of abstract theory that they mistake their mental constructs for reality. It is only by going back and forth between history and theory that we can avoid such mistakes. This text is an example of such a dialogue between theory and history. When combined with the suggested reading, it can provide a central thread for an introductory course. Alternatively, it can be used in a supplementary role as an example of one approach to the subject. Issues of ethics are discussed throughout the text, but particularly in Chapters 1, 5, and 6.

The third edition of this text has been updated with new materials on constructivist theory (Chapter 1 and elsewhere); the impact of globalization and the information revolution on the international power structure in the post-Cold War era (Chapter 8); transnational threats to global security (Chapter 8); as well as detailed discussion of the changing nature of power and interdependence in the Information

Age (Chapter 7). Elsewhere, the text has been revised and corrected to reflect more recent developments on the international scene such as the rise of China as a world economic power, nuclear testing by India and Pakistan, and the growing role of NGOs and other nonstate actors in international affairs. In addition, each chapter's suggested readings have been updated with new editions and more current texts for reference.

Over the years I sometimes taught this course with junior colleagues Stephan Haggard, Yuen Khong, Michael Mandelbaum, and M. J. Peterson. I have learned from all of them, and, I am sure, unconsciously stolen a number of their ideas. The same is true of Stanley Hoffmann, who has taught me since graduate days. I am grateful to him and to David Dessler, Robert Keohane, Charles Maier, and Ernest May for commenting on the manuscript. Others who reviewed the manuscript and offered constructive comments include June Teufel Dreyer, University of Miami; Kathie Stromile Golden, University of Colorado—Colorado Springs; J. Douglas Nelson of Anderson University; George Shambaugh of Georgetown University; Edward S. Minalkanin of Southwest Texas State University; Michael Barnett of University of Wisconsin, Madison; Kelechi Kalu of University of North Colorado; Howard Lehman of University of Utah; and Richard A. Melanson, Brown University. I have also learned from my excellent students and teaching fellows. I want, in particular, to thank my most recent head course assistants: Vin Auger, Peter Feaver, Meryl Kessler, Sean Lynn-Jones, Pam Metz, John Owen, Gideon Rose, and Gordon Silverstein. Veronica McClure was a wonderful colleague in transcribing and correcting my prose. In many ways this is her book as well as mine. Richard Wood and Dan Philpott helped check facts and notes. In preparing the third edition, Zachary Karabell, Carl Nagin, and Neal Rosendorf provided invaluable assistance on everything from words to pictures. I am fortunate to have had their help. Over the years I have also learned from my students. To all, I am deeply grateful.

Joseph S. Nye, Jr.

Contents

	Preface	ix
CHAPTER 1	Is There an Enduring Logic of Conflict in World Politics?	1
	Two Theoretical Traditions: Realism and Liberalism	1
	<i>What Is International Politics?</i>	2
	<i>Two Views of Anarchic Politics</i>	4
	<i>Building Blocks</i>	7
	The Peloponnesian War	11
	<i>A Short Version of a Long Story</i>	12
	<i>Causes and Theories</i>	14
	<i>Inevitability and the Shadow of the Future</i>	16
	Ethical Questions and International Politics	19
	<i>Limits on Ethics in International Relations</i>	20
	<i>Three Views of the Role of Morality</i>	21
	Notes	27
	Selected Readings	27
	Further Readings	27
	Study Questions	28
	Chronology: Peloponnesian Wars	29
CHAPTER 2	Origins of the Great Twentieth-Century Conflicts	30
	International Systems and Levels of Causation	30
	<i>Levels of Analysis</i>	32
	<i>Systems: Structure and Process</i>	34
	<i>Revolutionary and Moderate Goals and Instruments</i>	35
	<i>The Structure and Process of the Nineteenth-Century System</i>	36
	<i>A Modern Sequel</i>	38
	<i>Domestic Politics and Foreign Policy</i>	39
	<i>Liberalism Revived</i>	41
	<i>Liberal Democracy and War</i>	44
	<i>Definition of National Interests</i>	46
	<i>Variations in Foreign Policies</i>	46
	Counterfactuals	47
	<i>Plausibility</i>	48
	<i>Proximity in Time</i>	49
	<i>Relation to Theory</i>	49
	<i>Facts</i>	50
	Notes	50

	<i>Selected Readings</i>	50
	<i>Further Readings</i>	51
	<i>Study Questions</i>	52
	<i>Chronologies: Europe</i>	52
CHAPTER 3	Balance of Power and World War I	54
	Balance of Power	54
	<i>Power</i>	55
	<i>Balances as Distributions of Power</i>	58
	<i>Balance of Power as Policy</i>	59
	<i>Balance of Power as Multipolar Systems</i>	61
	<i>Alliances</i>	63
	The Origins of World War I	64
	<i>Three Levels of Analysis</i>	65
	<i>Was War Inevitable?</i>	70
	<i>What Kind of War?</i>	74
	<i>The Funnel of Choices</i>	75
	<i>Lessons of History Again</i>	76
	Notes	77
	<i>Selected Readings</i>	77
	<i>Further Readings</i>	78
	<i>Study Questions</i>	79
	<i>Chronology: The Road to World War I</i>	79
CHAPTER 4	The Failure of Collective Security and World War II	81
	The Rise and Fall of Collective Security	81
	<i>The League of Nations</i>	82
	<i>The United States and the League of Nations</i>	84
	<i>The Early Days of the League</i>	85
	<i>The Manchurian Failure</i>	86
	<i>The Ethiopian Debacle</i>	88
	The Origins of World War II	90
	<i>Hitler's War?</i>	90
	<i>Hitler's Strategy</i>	91
	<i>The Role of the Individual</i>	94
	<i>Systemic and Domestic Causes</i>	95
	<i>Was War Inevitable?</i>	97
	<i>The Pacific War</i>	98
	<i>Appeasement and Two Types of War</i>	103
	Notes	104
	<i>Selected Readings</i>	105
	<i>Further Readings</i>	105
	<i>Study Questions</i>	106
	<i>Chronology: Between the World Wars</i>	106

CHAPTER 5	The Cold War	108
	Deterrence and Containment	109
	Three Approaches to the Cold War	110
	Roosevelt's Policies	112
	Stalin's Policies	113
	Phases of the Conflict	114
	Inevitability?	119
	Levels of Analysis	121
	U.S. and Soviet Goals in the Cold War	123
	Containment	124
	The Rest of the Cold War	125
	The End of the Cold War	127
	The Role of Nuclear Weapons	131
	<i>Physics and Politics</i>	132
	<i>Balance of Terror</i>	134
	<i>Problems of Nuclear Deterrence</i>	136
	<i>The Cuban Missile Crisis</i>	138
	<i>Moral Issues</i>	140
	Notes	142
	Selected Readings	142
	Further Readings	143
	Study Questions	144
	<i>Chronology: The Deep Cold War Years</i>	144
CHAPTER 6	Intervention, Institutions, and Regional Conflicts	147
	Sovereignty and Intervention	147
	<i>Defining Intervention</i>	148
	<i>Sovereignty</i>	149
	<i>Judging Intervention</i>	150
	<i>Exceptions to the Rule</i>	151
	<i>Problems of Self-Determination</i>	152
	<i>Motives, Means, and Consequences</i>	154
	International Law and Organization	155
	<i>Domestic Analogies</i>	156
	<i>Predictability and Legitimacy</i>	157
	<i>The Suez Canal Crisis</i>	158
	<i>U.N. Peacekeeping and Collective Security</i>	160
	Conflicts in the Middle East	163
	<i>The Questions of Nationalism</i>	164
	<i>The Arab-Israeli Conflicts</i>	166
	<i>The 1991 Gulf War and Its Aftermath</i>	171
	Notes	173
	Selected Readings	173
	Further Readings	173

	<i>Study Questions</i>	174
	<i>Chronology: The Arab-Israeli Conflict</i>	175
CHAPTER 7	Interdependence, Globalization, and the Information Age	177
	The Concept of Interdependence	179
	<i>Sources of Interdependence</i>	180
	<i>Benefits of Interdependence</i>	180
	<i>Costs of Interdependence</i>	182
	<i>Symmetry of Interdependence</i>	184
	<i>Leadership in the World Economy</i>	187
	<i>Realism and Complex Interdependence</i>	188
	The Transnational Politics of Oil	189
	<i>Oil as a Power Resource</i>	192
	Transnational Actors	193
	Power and Interdependence in the Information Age	197
	<i>The Information Revolution and Power Among States</i>	197
	<i>The Information Revolution and Complex Interdependence</i>	200
	<i>The Information Revolution and Democratization</i>	202
	Notes	204
	<i>Selected Readings</i>	204
	<i>Further Readings</i>	205
	<i>Study Questions</i>	206
CHAPTER 8	A New World Order?	207
	Alternative Designs for the Future	207
	Nationalism and Transnationalism	211
	<i>The End of History?</i>	211
	<i>Transnationalism</i>	212
	<i>Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction</i>	214
	<i>Transnational Threats and the Concept of Security</i>	216
	A New World Order?	217
	<i>Different Concepts of Order</i>	217
	<i>Future Configurations of Power</i>	218
	<i>The Prison of Old Concepts</i>	219
	<i>The Evolution of a Hybrid World Order</i>	221
	<i>Thinking About the Future</i>	222
	<i>Selected Readings</i>	223
	<i>Further Readings</i>	223
	<i>Study Questions</i>	224
	Credits	226
	Index	228



Marble relief commemorating Athenians who died in the Peloponnesian War

CHAPTER 1

Is There an Enduring Logic of Conflict in World Politics?

TWO THEORETICAL TRADITIONS: REALISM AND LIBERALISM

The world is shrinking. The *Mayflower* took three months to cross the Atlantic. In 1924, Charles Lindbergh's flight took 24 hours. Today's Concorde can do it in three hours; ballistic missiles, in 30 minutes. In the 1990s, a transatlantic flight costs one-third of what it did in 1950, and a call from New York to London costs only six percent

of what it did at midcentury. Global Internet communications are nearly instantaneous and transmission costs are negligible. An environmentalist in Asia or a human rights activist in Africa today has a power of communication once enjoyed only by large organizations like governments or transnational corporations. On a more somber note, nuclear weapons have added a new dimension to war that one writer calls “double death,” meaning that not only could individuals die, but under some circumstances the whole human species could be threatened.

Yet, some things about international politics have remained the same over the ages. Thucydides’s account of Sparta and Athens fighting the Peloponnesian War 2500 years ago reveals eerie resemblances to the Arab-Israeli conflict after 1947. The world at the end of the twentieth century is a strange cocktail of continuity and change. Some aspects of international politics have not changed since Thucydides. There is a certain logic of hostility, a dilemma about security that goes with interstate politics. Alliances, balances of power, and choices in policy between war and compromise have remained similar over the millennia.

On the other hand, Thucydides never had to worry about nuclear weapons or the ozone layer or global warming. The task for international politics students is to build on the past but not be trapped by it, to understand the continuities as well as the changes. We must learn the traditional theories and then adapt them to current circumstances.

International politics would be transformed if separate states were abolished, but world government is not around the corner. The peoples who live in the nearly 200 states on this globe want their independence, separate cultures, and different languages. In fact, rather than vanishing, nationalism and the demand for separate states have increased. Rather than fewer states, this new century will probably see more. World government would not automatically solve the problem of war. Most wars today are civil or ethnic wars. In fact, the bloodiest wars of the nineteenth century were not among the quarreling states of Europe but the Taiping rebellion in China and the American Civil War. We will continue to live in a world of separate states for quite some time to come, and it is important to understand what that means for our prospects.

WHAT IS INTERNATIONAL POLITICS?

The world has not always been divided into a system of separate states. Over the centuries there have been three basic forms of world politics. In a *world imperial system*, one government is dominant over most of the world with which it has contact. The greatest example in the Western world was the Roman Empire. Spain in the sixteenth century and France in the late seventeenth century tried to gain similar supremacy, but they failed. In the nineteenth century, the British Empire spanned the globe, but even the British had to share the world with other strong states. Ancient world empires—the Sumerian, the Persian, the Chinese—were actually regional empires. They thought they ruled the world, but they were protected from conflict with other empires by lack of communication. Their fights with barbarians on the peripheries of the empire were not the same as wars among roughly equal states.

A second basic form of international politics is a *feudal system*, in which human loyalties and political obligations are not fixed primarily by territorial boundaries. Feudalism was common in the West after the collapse of the Roman Empire. An individual had obligations to a local lord, but might also owe duties to some distant noble or bishop as well as to the pope in Rome. Political obligations were determined to a large extent by what happened to one's superiors. If a ruler married, an area and its people might find their obligations rearranged as part of a wedding dowry. Townspeople born French might suddenly find themselves made Flemish or even English. Cities and leagues of cities sometimes had a special semi-independent status. The crazy quilt of wars that accompanied the feudal situation were not what we think of as modern territorial wars. They could occur within as well as across territories and were related to these crosscutting, nonterritorial loyalties and conflicts.

A third form of world politics is an *anarchic system of states*, composed of states that are relatively cohesive but with no higher government above them. Examples include the city-states of ancient Greece or Machiavelli's fifteenth-century Italy. Another example of an anarchic state system is the dynastic territorial state whose coherence comes from control by a ruling family. Examples can be found in India or China in the fifth century B.C. Large territorial dynasties reemerged in Europe about 1500, and other forms of international politics such as city-states or loose leagues of territories began to vanish. In 1648, the Peace of Westphalia ended the Thirty Years' War, sometimes called the last of the great wars of religion and the first of the wars of modern states. In retrospect, that treaty enshrined the sovereign territorial state as the dominant form of international organization.

Thus today when we speak of international politics, we usually mean this territorial state system, and we define *international politics* as politics in the absence of a common sovereign, politics among entities with no ruler above them. International politics is often called anarchic. As monarchy means one ruler, *anarchy*—"an-archy"—means the absence of any ruler. International politics is a self-help system. Thomas Hobbes, the seventeenth-century English philosopher, called such anarchic systems a "state of nature." For some, the words *state of nature* may conjure up images of a herd of cows grazing peacefully in Vermont, but that is not what Hobbes meant. Think of a Texas town without a sheriff in the days of the Old West, or Lebanon after its government broke down in the 1970s, or Somalia in the 1990s. Hobbes's state of nature is not benign; it is a war of all against all because there is no higher ruler to enforce order. As Hobbes famously declared, life in such a world tends to be nasty, brutish, and short.

The result is that there are legal, political, and social differences between domestic and international politics. Domestic law is generally obeyed and if not, the police and courts enforce sanctions against lawbreakers. International law, on the other hand, rests on competing legal systems, and there is no common enforcement. There is no international police to enforce the law.

Force plays a different role in domestic and international politics. In a well-ordered domestic political system, the government has a monopoly on the legitimate use of force. In international politics, no one has a monopoly on the use of force. Since international politics is the realm of self-help, and some states are stronger than others, there is always a danger that they may resort to force. When force cannot be ruled out, the result is mistrust and suspicion.

Domestic and international politics also differ in their underlying sense of community. In a well-ordered domestic society, there is a widespread sense of community that gives rise to common loyalties, standards of justice, and views of what is legitimate authority. In international politics, divided peoples do not share the same loyalties. Any sense of global community is weak. People often disagree about what seems just and legitimate. The result is a great gap between two basic political values: order and justice. In such a world, most people place national before international justice. Law and ethics play a role in international politics, but in the absence of a sense of community, they are not as binding as they are in domestic politics.

Of the three basic systems—*world imperial*, *feudal*, and *anarchic system of states*—the last is most relevant to international politics in the contemporary world, though, as we shall see in the last chapters, some people speculate that the twenty-first century may see the gradual evolution of a new feudalism.

Two Views of Anarchic Politics

International politics is anarchic in the sense that there is no higher government, but even in political philosophy there were two different views of how harsh a state of nature need be. Hobbes, who wrote in a seventeenth-century England wracked by civil war, emphasized insecurity, force, and survival. He summarized it as a state of war. A half century later, John Locke, writing in a more stable England, argued that although a state of nature lacked a common sovereign, people could develop ties and make contracts, and therefore anarchy was less threatening. Those two views of a state of nature are the philosophical precursors of two current views of international politics, one more pessimistic and one more optimistic: the *realist* and *liberal* approaches to international politics.

Realism has been the dominant tradition in thinking about international politics. For the realist, the central problem of international politics is war and the use of force, and the central actors are states. Among modern Americans, realism is exemplified by the writings and policies of President Richard Nixon and his secretary of state, Henry Kissinger. The realist starts from the assumption of the anarchic system of states. Kissinger and Nixon, for example, sought to maximize the power of the United States and to minimize the ability of other states to jeopardize U.S. security. According to the realist, the beginning and the end of international politics is the individual state in interaction with other states.

The other tradition is called *liberalism*, not because of American domestic politics, but because it can be traced back in Western political philosophy to Baron de Montesquieu and Immanuel Kant in eighteenth-century France and Germany, respectively, and such nineteenth-century British philosophers as Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. A modern American example can be found in the writings and policies of the political scientist and president Woodrow Wilson.

Liberals see a global society that functions alongside the states and sets part of the context for states. Trade crosses borders, people have contacts with each other (such as students studying in foreign countries), and international institutions such as the United Nations create a context in which the realist view of pure anarchy is

insufficient. Liberals complain that realists portray states as hard billiard balls careening off one another in the attempt to balance power, but that is not enough because people do have contacts across borders and because there is an international society. Realists, claim liberals overstate the difference between domestic and international politics. Because the realist picture of anarchy as a Hobbesian "state of war" focuses only on extreme situations, in the liberals' view it misses the growth of economic interdependence and the evolution of a transnational global society.

Realists respond by quoting Hobbes: "Just as stormy weather does not mean perpetual rain, so a state of war does not mean constant war."¹ Just as Londoners carry umbrellas on sunny April days, the prospect of war in an anarchic system makes states keep armies even in times of peace. Realists point to previous liberal predictions that went awry. For example, in 1910 the president of Stanford University said future war was impossible because the nations could not afford it. Books proclaimed war to be obsolete; civilization had gone beyond war. Economic interdependence, ties between labor unions and intellectuals, and the flow of capital all made war impossible. Of course, these predictions failed catastrophically in 1914, and the realists were vindicated.

Neither history nor the argument stopped in 1914. The 1970s saw a resurgence of liberal claims that rising economic and social interdependence was changing the nature of international politics. In the 1980s, Richard Rosecrance, a California professor, wrote that states can increase their power in two ways, either aggressively by territorial conquest or peacefully through trade. He used the experience of Japan as an example: In the 1930s, Japan tried territorial conquest and suffered the disaster of World War II. But since then, Japan has been a trading state, becoming the second largest economy in the world and a significant power in East Asia. Japan succeeded without a major military force. Thus Rosecrance and modern liberals argue that there is a change occurring in the nature of international politics.

Some new liberals look even further to the future and believe that dramatic growth in ecological interdependence will so blur the differences between domestic and international politics that humanity will evolve toward a world without borders. For example, everyone will be affected without regard to boundaries if the depletion

1910: THE "UNSEEN VAMPIRE" OF WAR

If there were no other reason for making an end of war, the financial ruin it involves must sooner or later bring the civilized nations of the world to their senses. As President David Starr Jordan of Leland Stanford University said at Tufts College, "Future war is impossible because the nations cannot afford it." In Europe, he says, the war debt is \$26 billion, "all owed to the unseen vampire, and which the nations will never pay and which taxes poor people \$95 million a year." The burdens of militarism in time of peace are exhausting the strength of the leading nations, already overloaded with debts. The certain result of a great war would be overwhelming bankruptcy.

—The New York World²

of ozone in the upper atmosphere causes skin cancer. If CO₂ accumulation warms the climate and causes the polar ice caps to melt, rising seas will affect all coastal states. Some problems like AIDS and drugs cross borders with such ease that we may be on our way to a different world. Professor Richard Falk of Princeton argues that these transnational problems and values will produce new nonterritorial loyalties that will change the state system that has been dominant for the last 400 years. Transnational forces are undoing the Peace of Westphalia, and humanity is evolving toward a new form of international politics.

In 1990, realists replied, "Tell that to Saddam Hussein!" Iraq showed that force and war are ever-present dangers. The liberal comeback was that politics in the Middle East is the exception. Over time, they say, the world is moving beyond the anarchy of the sovereign state system. These divergent views on the nature of international politics and how it is changing will not soon be reconciled. The realists stress continuity; the liberals stress change. Both claim the high ground of realism with a small r. Liberals tend to see realists as cynics whose fascination with the past blinds them to change. Realists, in turn, call the liberals utopian dreamers and label their thought "globaloney."

Who's right? Both are; and both are wrong. A clear-cut answer might be nice, but it would also be less accurate and less interesting. The mix of continuity and change that characterizes the world entering the twenty-first century makes it impossible to arrive at one, easy, synthetic explanation.

Because it involves changeable human behaviors, international politics will never be like physics: It has no strong determinist theory. What is more, realism and liberalism are not the only approaches. For much of the past century *Marxism*, with its predictions of class conflict and warfare caused by problems among capitalist states, was a credible alternative for many people. Even before the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union, however, the failure of Marxist theory to account for peace among major capitalist states and warfare among some communist states left it lagging in the explanatory competition. In the 1960s and 1970s, *dependency theory* was popular. It predicted that the wealthy countries in the "center" of the global marketplace would control and hold back poorer countries on the "periphery." But dependency theory lost credibility when it could not explain why, in the 1980s and 1990s, peripheral countries in East Asia like South Korea, Singapore, and Malaysia grew more rapidly than "central" countries like the United States and Europe. This loss of credibility was underlined when Fernando Henrique Cardoso, an academic leader among dependency theorists in the 1970s, turned to liberal policies of increasing dependence on global markets after he was elected president of Brazil in the 1990s.

In the 1980s, analysts on both sides of the realist-liberal divide attempted to devise more deductive theories similar to those of microeconomics. "Neorealists" such as Kenneth Waltz and "neoliberals" such as Robert Keohane developed models of states as rational actors constrained by the international system. Neorealists and neoliberals increased the simplicity and elegance of theory, but they did so at the cost of discarding much of the rich complexity of classical realist and liberal theories. "By the end of the 1980s, the theoretical contest that might have been was reduced to relatively narrow disagreements within one state-centric rationalist model of international relations."³

More recently, a diverse group of theorists labeled *constructivists* have criticized realism and liberalism for what they believe is their inability to adequately explain long-term change in world politics. Neorealists and neoliberals took for granted how the goals that states sought changed over time. Constructivists draw upon different fields and disciplines to examine the processes by which leaders, peoples, and cultures alter their preferences, shape their identities, and learn new behavior. For example, both slavery in the nineteenth century and racial apartheid in South Africa were once accepted by most states, but later were widely opposed. Constructivists ask why the change? What role did ideas play? Will the practice of war go the same way someday? What about the concept of the sovereign nation-state? The world is full of political entities such as tribes, nations, and nongovernmental organizations. Only in recent centuries has the sovereign state been a dominant concept. Constructivists point out that concepts such as nation and sovereignty that give meaning to our lives as well as to our theories are socially constructed, not just “out there” as permanent reality. Feminist constructivists add that the language and imageries of war as a central instrument of world politics have been heavily influenced by gender.

Constructivism is an approach rather than a theory, but it provides both a useful critique and an important supplement to the main theories of realism and liberalism. Though sometimes loosely formulated and lacking in predictive power, constructivist approaches remind us of what the two main theories often miss. As we shall see in the next chapter, it is important to look beyond the instrumental rationality of pursuing current goals and to ask how changing identities and interests can sometimes lead to subtle shifts in states’ policies, and sometimes to profound changes in international affairs. Constructivists help us to understand how preferences are formed and knowledge is generated prior to the exercise of instrumental rationality. In that sense, they complement rather than oppose the two main theories. We will illustrate the questions of understanding long-term change in the next chapter and return to it in the final chapter. Suffice it to say for now that when I was trying to understand international politics and help formulate American foreign policies as an assistant secretary in Washington, I found myself borrowing elements from all three types of thinking: realism, liberalism, and constructivism.

Building Blocks

Actors, goals, and instruments are three concepts that are basic to theorizing about international politics, but each is changing. In the traditional realist view of international politics, the only significant “actors” are the states, and only the big states really matter. But this is changing. The number of states has grown enormously in the postwar period: In 1945 there were about 50 states in the world; by 1998 there were 185 members of the United Nations, with more to come. More important than the number of states is the rise of *nonstate actors*. For example, large multinational corporations straddle international borders and sometimes command more economic resources than many nation-states do. At least 12 transnational corporations have annual sales that are larger than the gross national product (GNP) of more than half of the states in the world. The sales of a company such as Shell, IBM, or

General Motors are larger than the gross domestic product (GDP) of countries such as Hungary, Ecuador, or the Democratic Republic of Congo. While these multinational corporations lack some types of power such as military force, they are very relevant to a country's economic goals. In terms of the economy, IBM is more important to Belgium than is Burundi, a former Belgian colony.

A picture of the Middle East without the warring states and the outside powers would be downright silly, but it would also be woefully inadequate if it did not include a variety of nonstate actors. Multinational oil companies such as Shell, British-Petroleum, and Mobil are one type of nonstate actors, but there are others. There are large intergovernmental institutions such as the United Nations, and smaller ones such as the Arab League, and the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). There are nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), including the Red Cross and Amnesty International. There are also a variety of transnational ethnic groups, such as the Kurds who live in Turkey, Syria, Iran, and Iraq, or the Armenians scattered throughout the Middle East and the Caucasus. Guerrilla movements, drug cartels, and mafia organizations transcend national borders and often divide their resources among several states. International religious movements, particularly political Islam in the Middle East and North Africa, add a further dimension to the range of possible nonstate actors.

The question is not whether the state or the nonstate groups are more important—usually the states are—but how new complex coalitions affect the politics of a region in a way that the traditional realist view fails to disclose. States are the major actors in current international politics, but they do not have the stage to themselves.

Second, what about *goals*? Traditionally the dominant goal of states in an anarchic system is military security. Countries today obviously care about their military security, but they often care as much or more about their economic wealth, about social issues such as drug traffic or the spread of AIDS, or ecological changes. Moreover, as threats change, the definition of security changes; military security is not the only goal that states pursue. Looking at the relationship between the United States and Canada, where the prospects of war are exceedingly slim, a Canadian diplomat once said his fear was not that the United States would march into Canada and capture Toronto again as it did in 1813, but that Toronto would be programmed out of relevance by a computer in Texas—a rather different dilemma than the traditional one of states in an anarchic system. Economic strength has not replaced military security (as Kuwait discovered when Iraq invaded in August 1990), but the agenda of international politics has become more complex as states pursue a wider range of goals.

Third, the *instruments* of international politics are changing. The traditional view is that military force is the instrument that really matters. Describing the world before 1914, the British historian A. J. P. Taylor defined a great power as one able to prevail in war. States obviously use military force today, but over the past half century there have been changes in its role. Many states, particularly large ones, find it more costly to use military force to achieve their goals than was true in earlier times. As Professor Stanley Hoffmann of Harvard University has put it, the link between military strength and positive achievement has been loosened.