



The Expansion of International Society

Edited by
Hedley Bull & Adam Watson

THE EXPANSION OF INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY

Edited by

HEDLEY BULL

and

ADAM WATSON

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PREFACE

The present work originated in a series of discussions of a group known as the British Committee on the Theory of International Politics, which for some years has interested itself in the history and working of the modern international system. We decided to turn our attention to the broad issue of the transition from the European international system that grew up in early modern times and was still predominantly European in our own lifetimes to the worldwide international system of today.

Most of the chapters in the present volume were written by members of the Committee and discussed and modified at meetings of it. We also invited a number of other scholars to contribute chapters on lines which we suggested, and we gratefully acknowledge their willingness to take the time and trouble involved and to agree to the revisions for which we asked.

This book was planned from the beginning as a coherent whole. We have aimed not at a collection of separate essays but at a systematic analysis of the subject under four main headings: the nature and expansion of European international society; the entry of non-European states into it; the reaction against the European international order; and the nature of the new global society of states. Of course, a survey of such a broad and complex transformation cannot treat every aspect in detail. We have aimed at setting out the broad outlines, and at supplementing this general picture with some illustrative detail. The book can only be a statement of the position as we see it. We have tried to look at the scene from many sides, and to obtain contributions and advice from scholars with many different backgrounds. But there are certainly many aspects of the subject which we have not been able to cover. The responsibility for the over-all shape of the book as it stands, and more particularly for the introduction and the conclusion, is ours alone.

The essay by Elie Kedourie first appeared in *Commentary*, December 1980, and we are grateful to the editor for permission to reprint it. We wish to acknowledge the help we have received from a grant by the Ford Foundation to Hedley Bull to pursue work in this field.

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PREFATORY NOTE
FOR THE PAPERBACK EDITION

The contributors to this volume and I deeply regret to announce that Professor Hedley Bull died on 18 May 1985.

Adam Watson

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INTRODUCTION

THE EDITORS

The purpose of this book is to explore the expansion of the international society of European states across the rest of the globe, and its transformation from a society fashioned in Europe and dominated by Europeans into the global international society of today, with its nearly two hundred states, the great majority of which are not European.

By an international society we mean a group of states (or, more generally, a group of independent political communities) which not merely form a system, in the sense that the behaviour of each is a necessary factor in the calculations of the others, but also have established by dialogue and consent common rules and institutions for the conduct of their relations, and recognize their common interest in maintaining these arrangements. Such was the international system that emerged in Europe in early modern times, which Voltaire called 'a commonwealth divided into several states' and Burke 'the diplomatic republic of Europe', which was exclusively European until the time of the American Revolution and remained predominantly so until the Second World War. Such an international society also, it seems to us, is the worldwide system of today, with its vast and complex array of international institutions and its long catalogue of laws and conventions, which most of its members habitually obey. We are concerned to see how, by the flood-tide of European dominance over the world and its subsequent ebb, the one became transformed into the other.

When European expansion began in the late fifteenth century the world was not organized into any single international system or society, but comprised several regional international systems (or what we choose to call international systems, with some danger of anachronism), each with its own distinctive rules and institutions, reflecting a dominant regional culture. The global international society of today is in large part the consequence of Europe's impact on the rest of the world over the last five centuries. Europeans, of course, have never had any monopoly of knowledge or experience of international relations. The rules and institutions of contemporary international society have been shaped by North and South Americans of European stock or assimilation and also by Asians, Africans, and Oceanians, as well as by the European powers in their period of dominance. Indeed, in the last few decades there has been a massive revision of international rules and

conventions carried out by African, Asian, and Latin American states. But it was the expansion of Europe that first brought about the economic and technological unification of the globe, just as it was the European-dominated international society of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that first expressed its political unification. Moreover, with the decline of European dominance and the achievement or recovery of political independence by the societies of America, Asia, Africa, and Oceania, it was the rules and institutions of European international society which they accepted as the basis of their international relations, even while seeking in some respects to modify them. The present international political structure of the world – founded upon the division of mankind and of the earth into separate states, their acceptance of one another's sovereignty, of principles of law regulating their coexistence and co-operation, and of diplomatic conventions facilitating their intercourse – is, at least in its most basic features, the legacy of Europe's now vanished ascendancy. Because it was in fact Europe and not America, Asia, or Africa that first dominated and, in so doing, unified the world, it is not our perspective but the historical record itself that can be called Eurocentric.

In the centuries immediately preceding Europe's expansion the most important regional international systems, alongside medieval Latin Christendom from which the modern European states-system developed, were the Arab-Islamic system, which stretched from Spain to Persia; the international system of the Indian subcontinent and its extensions eastward, founded upon a traditional Hindu culture but with predominant power in the hands of Muslim rulers; the Mongol-Tartar dominion of the Eurasian steppes, which had also become Muslim; and the Chinese system, long under Mongol domination.

All these regional international systems were built upon elaborate civilizations, including complex religions, governments, law, commerce, written records, and financial accounts. Outside them lay areas of less developed culture, usually pre-literate and sometimes without awareness of the techniques of smelting metal, but organized as a rule into recognizable political entities which had contacts and relations with their neighbours without achieving a general system. The largest and most significant of these areas was sub-Saharan Africa, which the Arab-Islamic world was beginning to penetrate, but they also included most of the Americas and Australasia, which before their discovery by the Europeans were quite unknown to the Old World. In the Americas two empires similar to those of the Old World had developed in Mexico and Peru, each administered by a small ruling group that dominated subject peoples; outside these restricted realms there lay an enormous

area of pre-literate peoples. Here as in Australasia there were no highly organized empires, and political communities were often stateless. Peoples dealt with their neighbours according to established codes of conduct, which were often elaborate, but their geographical awareness did not extend very far; and there was nothing that could plausibly be called an international system, such as had existed for millenia in the Middle East, India, and China.

These regional international systems were, of course, very different from one another: the Arab-Islamic and Indian systems, for example, were in practice composed of a number of independent political entities, whereas the Mongol-Tartar and Chinese systems were more effectively centralized. But they had one feature in common: they were all, at least in the theory that underlay them, hegemonial or imperial. At the centre of each was a suzerain Supreme Ruler – the Khalifa or Commander of the Faithful, the Emperor in Delhi, the Mongol Great Khan, the Chinese Son of Heaven – who exercised direct authority over the Heartland; and around this empire extended a periphery of locally autonomous realms that acknowledged the suzerain's overlordship and paid him tribute. Many peripheral states were able to maintain a complete independence in spite of the nominal claims of the Supreme Ruler. Beyond each fluctuating periphery there lay kingdoms and principalities which were recognized, even by the Supreme Ruler, as independent, although not as his equal – for example, the reduced state of Byzantium before its final collapse in 1453, the kingdoms of the Deccan and Java, some Russian principalities, and Japan.

Within each of the suzerain-state systems, different as they were, relations among political authorities were regulated by specific treaties as well as by traditional codes of conduct, governing such matters as the movement of envoys who came and went, the payment of tribute, commercial exchanges, and the waging of war. States of the periphery maintained relations with each other as well as with the Supreme Ruler. But they did not combine to overthrow the central authority. They might disobey it or rebel against it, and sometimes a powerful king might aspire to take it over; but they all assumed that some hegemonial focus would continue to exist, to lay down the rules and determine the nature of relations among the members of the system. There was no attempt, within these major, extra-European international systems, to question the underlying hegemonial concept.

Contacts among these regional international systems (and with the different world of medieval Latin Christendom) were much more limited than contacts within them. There was trade, especially by sea across the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. There was some

diplomatic communication and military conflict, in some cases severe, as between Latin Christendom and the Arab-Islamic system. The Arab-Islamic system, to a limited extent, provided brokers and middlemen between the other systems; Islamic geographers, for example, had a much more accurate concept of the Old World than either the medieval Europeans or the Chinese, Marco Polo notwithstanding. But not even the three Islamic systems (Arab-Islamic, Mongol-Tartar, and Indian) may be said to have formed among themselves a single international system or international society, in the sense in which we use these terms; much less did any such system embrace the world as a whole.

In this era preceding the emergence of a universal international society, what assumptions were made about the relations between states or rulers that belonged to different regional international systems, as opposed to the much more intimate and continuous relations among states or rulers within the same system? This question has an important bearing on our study. We do not know enough to be able to provide a comprehensive answer to it, but certain things can be said. It is clear that states or rulers have commonly enough entered into agreements with states or rulers – and indeed with merchants and other individuals and groups – outside their own regional international system and the civilization with which it is associated. Societies which recognize that *pacta sunt servanda* among their own members, do not find it difficult to recognize the advantages of fulfilling obligations and contracts in dealings with individuals and groups in different societies. The fact that all societies appear to recognize that there is an obligation to fulfil contracts, along with prudential advantage in fulfilling them (just as, it is often argued, they all recognize rules that limit violence among their members and enjoin respect for rights of property) provides a basis for the extension of the principle of the sanctity of contracts beyond the bounds of particular societies.

It has been said that the advantages of implementing contracts become apparent first in economic transactions between buyers and sellers, and that the spread of agreements between members of different societies and civilizations first occurs in the area of commercial exchanges. It is pertinent to our inquiry that the relations between the Chinese and the Indian worlds, and even among the Islamicized systems, were largely economic in nature, just as the activities of the Europeans in the Indian Ocean and beyond were almost entirely concerned with trade until the nineteenth century. We have also to note, however, that states or rulers belonging to different regional international systems and civilizations have not found it impossible to

enter into agreements about war, peace, and alliances: one has only to think of the role played by such agreements in the history or relations between Latin Christian and Arab-Islamic powers.

It is also clear that such agreements reached, as it were, across the boundaries of international systems and civilizations are often written in a form intelligible to both sides. A celebrated example is the series of agreements between the Pharaoh of Egypt and the Great King of the Hittites in the fourteenth century BC, preserved in the Tell el Amarna tablets; these agreements were written down in cuneiform Aramaic, a mercantile Semitic language used by neither imperial government domestically, and there is extensive diplomatic correspondence about their implementation. So too Muslim and Hindu rulers in India, whose beliefs about the ordering of society perhaps showed more differences than those between any other great civilizations of Asia, found no great difficulty in negotiating written agreements, often with texts in more than one language, or in arguing about their implementation. From the historic moment when Vasco da Gama dropped his anchor in Calicut harbour, Asian rulers applied these principles also to Europeans, who were of course equally familiar with them.

When the Europeans embarked upon their historic expansion they did so with a set of assumptions about relations with non-European and non-Christian peoples inherited from medieval Latin Christendom and ultimately from the Ancient World. They had a conception of what they called the law of nations, meaning the law common to all nations, that could be used to regulate relations among nations and applied beyond the bounds of Christendom or Europe just as it was within them, at least in cases where there was acceptance on both sides of the principles and practices connected with it. They also had a conception of the law of nature, the law binding upon all human beings and made apparent to them by the faculty of reason, that provided a normative basis for regulating relations among nations and with private traders throughout the world as a whole and not merely within the European or Christian community. Indeed, in the three centuries from 1500 to 1800, as European involvement in Asian politics persisted and grew, and with it the armed rivalry of the European powers in Asia, a loose Eurasian system or quasi-system grew up in which European states sought to deal with Asian states on the basis of moral and legal equality, until in the nineteenth century this gave place to notions of European superiority.

However, it was never the case, before Europe unified the globe, that relations between states or rulers that were members of different regional international systems could be conducted on the same moral

and legal basis as relations within the same system, for this basis was provided in part by principles that were culturally particular and exclusive: the unity of Christendom, the community of the faithful in Islam, the conception of the Chinese Empire as the Middle Kingdom. In the European tradition ideas of a universal law of nations or law of nature were contested by doctrines of a fundamental division of humanity between Greeks and barbarians, Christians and infidels, Europeans and non-Europeans. Most importantly, there was no single, agreed body of rules and institutions operating across the boundaries of any two regional international systems, let alone throughout the world as a whole, such as we imply when we speak of an international society.

Among the regional international systems into which the world was divided that which evolved in Europe was distinctive in that it came to repudiate any hegemonial principle and regard itself as a society of states that were sovereign or independent. This non-hegemonial society was not without historical precedent: the city states of classical Greece, the Hellenistic Kingdoms between the death of Alexander and the Roman conquest, perhaps the 'period of warring states' in ancient China, may all be thought to provide examples. Nor should it be overlooked that the European states, as they evolved this non-hegemonial system in their relations with one another, at the same time established a number of empires which, while they were rival and competing, taken together amounted to a European hegemony over the rest of the world, which in the nineteenth century became an immense periphery looking to a European centre. Moreover, the non-hegemonial system among the Europeans themselves was evolved only slowly, and with great difficulty, after 1500. Medieval Latin Christendom, which gave birth to the modern European states-system, while it did not have a Supreme Ruler, had not itself recognized the independence of its various parts, and the model of the Roman suzerain-state system remained an inspiration to the Catholic Church and to a series of lay imitators such as Charles V, Louis XIV, Napoleon, and Hitler, who were restrained only by coalitions seeking to maintain a balance of power. Only in the eighteenth century was the idea firmly implanted among European states that an attempt by any one of them to establish hegemony over the others was a violation of the rules of their international society.

This European international society, it should be noted, did not first evolve its own rules and institutions and then export them to the rest of the world. The evolution of the European system of interstate relations and the expansion of Europe across the globe were simultaneous processes, which influenced and affected each other. Both began at the

end of the fifteenth century, and both were concluded by the end of the Second World War, by which time European dominance was clearly at an end and the global international system, while still evolving, was being shaped less by Europeans than by others. When the Spanish conquistadors first encountered the Aztecs and Incas, European states were far from having repudiated the hegemonial principle even in their relations with one another; they had not begun to embrace the idea that relations between independent political communities should be conducted on a secular rather than a religious basis; the doctrines of the internal and external sovereignty of states had not yet been clearly formulated; and although the principle that there should be a balance of power was known among the renaissance Italian states, the great European powers north of the Alps were only beginning to grope towards it. The idea that states, even within the European system, were equal in rights did not emerge until the middle of the eighteenth century, and only then to receive a setback in the nineteenth when the great powers in forming the European Concert put forward claims to special responsibilities for maintaining order, and corresponding rights that small powers did not have. Resident embassies, that distinctively European contribution to diplomatic practice, spread among the European states after, not before, the beginning of European expansion, and diplomatic precedent up to the time of the Congress of Vienna in 1815 was determined by status in the ancient hierarchy of kingdoms and republics, not by the principle of equal rights. The development of international organizations, although it may be said to have begun towards the end of the period of European ascendancy with the founding of technical international organizations late in the nineteenth century, and of the League of Nations after the First World War, has been more remarkable since the end of European dominance than it ever was before.

Part I of our book, *European International Society and the Outside World*, describes the floodtide of expansion that established the domination of one of the several regional international systems that existed in the fifteenth century over the others, and over the less developed parts of the world as well – a domination that united the whole world into a single economic, strategic, and political system for the first time.

Part II, *The Entry of Non-European States into International Society*, examines the process whereby non-European states came to take their place alongside European states not merely as participants in a single international system, but as members of the same international society