



- U.S. marine and Iraqi girl whose mother was just killed, March 2003.

Understanding International Relations

The Study of IR

Our world is large and complex. International relations is a fascinating topic because it concerns peoples and cultures throughout the world. The scope and complexity of the interactions among these groups make international relations a challenging subject to master.

Strictly defined, the field of **international relations (IR)** concerns the relationships among the world's governments. But these relationships cannot be understood in isolation. They are closely connected with other actors (such as international organizations, multinational corporations, and individuals); with other social structures (including economics, culture, and domestic politics); and with geographical and historical influences. IR is a large subject that overlaps several other fields.

The purpose of this book is to introduce the field of IR, to organize what is known and theorized about IR, and to convey the key concepts used by political scientists to discuss relations among nations. This first chapter defines IR as a field of study, introduces the actors of interest, and reviews the geographical and historical contexts within which IR occurs.

- The Study of IR
- Actors and Influences
- History

IR and Daily Life



Ground Zero Third Anniversary

This icon indicates Case in Point videos (see p. xvii).

Sometimes international relations is portrayed as a distant and abstract ritual conducted by a small group of people such as presidents, generals, and diplomats. This is not accurate. Although leaders do play a major role in international affairs, many other people participate as well. College students and other citizens participate in international relations every time they vote in an election or work on a political campaign, every time they buy a product or service traded on world markets, and every time they watch the news. The choices we make in our daily lives ultimately affect the world we live in.

In turn, IR profoundly affects the daily lives of college students and other citizens. The prospects for getting jobs after graduation depend on the global economy and international economic competition. Those jobs also are more likely than ever to entail international travel, sales, or communication. And the rules of the world trading system affect the goods that students consume.

Although international economics pervades daily life, war dominates daily life only infrequently. Still, war casts a long shadow. In major wars, students and their friends and family go off to war and their lives change irreversibly. But even in peacetime, war is among the most pervasive international influences in daily life. Children play with war toys; young people go into military service; TV and films reproduce and multiply the images of war; and wars disrupt economic and social life.

As technology advances, the world is shrinking year by year. Better communication and transportation capabilities are constantly expanding the ordinary person's contact with people, products, and ideas from other countries.

IR as a Field of Study

As a field of study, IR has uncertain boundaries. As a part of political science, IR is about *international politics*—the decisions of governments concerning their actions toward other governments. To some extent, however, the field is interdisciplinary, relating international politics to economics, history, sociology, and other disciplines. Some universities offer separate degrees or departments for IR. Most, however, teach IR in political science classes. The focus is on the *politics* of economic relationships, or the *politics* of environmental management.

Political relations among nations cover a range of activities—diplomacy, war, trade relations, alliances, cultural exchanges, participation in international organizations, and so forth. Particular activities within one of these spheres make up distinct **issue areas** on which scholars and foreign policy makers focus attention. Examples of issue areas include global trade, the environment, or specific conflicts such as the Arab-Israeli conflict. Within each issue area, and across the range of issues of concern in any international relationship, policy makers of one nation can behave in a cooperative manner or a conflictual manner—extending either friendly or hostile behavior toward the other nation. IR scholars often look at international relations in terms of the mix of **conflict and cooperation** in relationships among nations.

One kind of politics that has an international character is not generally included in the field of IR: the domestic politics of foreign countries. That is a separate field of political science called *comparative politics*. Comparative politics overlaps with IR to the

considerable extent that domestic politics influences foreign policy in many countries. Furthermore, the scholars who know about IR and foreign policies in a certain country or region often are the same people who know the most about domestic politics within that country or region.

The scope of the field of IR may also be defined by the *subfields* it encompasses. Traditionally, the study of IR has focused on questions of war and peace—the subfield of **international security** studies. The movements of armies and of diplomats, the crafting of treaties and alliances, the development and deployment of military capabilities were subjects that dominated the study of IR in the past, especially in the 1950s and 1960s, and they continue to hold a central position in the field. In the 1990s, after the Cold War, the subfield of security studies broadened beyond its traditional focus on military forces and the superpower arms race. Regional conflicts and ethnic violence began to receive more attention. Meanwhile, interdisciplinary peace studies programs, which emerged in the 1980s at many universities, sought to broaden concepts of “security” further—as did feminist scholars. While the study of war, weapons, and military forces continues to be the core concern of international security studies, these trends have expanded the boundaries of the subfield.

In the 1970s and 1980s, as economics became increasingly central to international relations, the subfield of **international political economy (IPE)** grew and became the counterpoint to international security studies as a second main subfield of IR. Scholars of IPE study trade relations and financial relations among nations, and try to understand how nations have cooperated politically to create and maintain institutions that regulate the flow of international economic and financial transactions. These topics mainly concern relations among the world’s richer nations. But, since the 1990s, growing attention has been paid to global North-South relations between rich and poor nations (see pp. 14–15), including such topics as economic dependency, debt, foreign aid, and technology transfer. As the East-West confrontation of the Cold War has receded into history, North-South problems have become more salient. So are problems of international environmental management and of global telecommunications. The subfield of IPE is expanding accordingly.

The same principles and theories that help us understand international security (in the first half of this book) also help us to understand IPE (in the second half). Economics is important in security affairs, and vice versa. The organization of this book may seem to create a divide between the two subfields, but in reality they are interwoven.

Theories and Methods

IR scholars want to understand why international events occur in the way they do. Why did a certain war break out? Why do some states sign trade agreements while others do not? Why are some countries so much richer than others? These “why” questions can be answered in several ways. One kind of answer results from tracing the immediate, short-term sequences of events and decisions that led to a particular outcome. For instance, the outbreak of war might be traced to a critical decision made by a particular leader. This kind of answer is largely *descriptive*—it seeks to describe how particular forces and actors operate to bring about a particular outcome.

Another kind of answer results from seeking general explanations and longer-term, more indirect causes. For example, a war outbreak might be seen as an instance of a general pattern in which arms races lead to war. This kind of answer is *theoretical* because it places the particular event in the context of a more general pattern applicable across many cases.

Understanding IR requires both descriptive and theoretical knowledge. It would do little good only to describe events without being able to generalize or draw lessons from them. Nor would it do much good to formulate purely abstract theories without being able to apply them to the complex world in which we live.

Different IR scholars emphasize different mixes of descriptive and theoretical work. Like other disciplines, IR includes both basic and applied research. Generally, scholars closer to the policy process are most interested in descriptive and short-term explanations that are useful for managing a particular issue area or region. Other scholars tend to be interested in more abstract, general, and longer-term explanations. The *methods* used in developing and testing various theories can be arrayed roughly along an empirical versus theoretical axis. At one end, many scholars seek knowledge about IR by interviewing people in various places and piecing together their stories—a method well suited to descriptive explanation or to induction (building theories from facts). At the other end, some researchers create abstract mathematical models of relationships that are all theory with no real grounding in the empirical reality of international politics—a method suited to deduction (predicting facts from a theory). Between these approaches are others that mix theory and empirical evidence in various ways. Many IR scholars try to make quantitative measurements of things such as international conflict or trade, and use statistical methods to make inferences about the relationships among those variables. All of these methods of learning about IR can be useful in different ways, though they yield different kinds of knowledge.

IR scholars do not agree on a single set of theories to explain IR or even on a single set of concepts with which to discuss the field. Traditionally, the most widely accepted theories—though never unchallenged by critics—have explained international outcomes in terms of power politics or “realism.” But there are many theoretical disagreements—different answers to the “why” questions—both within realism and between realists and their critics. Throughout these discussions, no single theoretical framework has the support of all IR scholars.

One way to look at the variety of theories is to distinguish three broad theoretical perspectives, which may be called the *conservative*, *liberal*, and *revolutionary world views* (see Figure 1.1). In some sense, each is a lens through which the world looks different and different things seem important. At the same time, the three perspectives can complement each other, and most theories draw on all three, though in different proportions. Each world view encompasses a variety of distinct theoretical approaches.

A *conservative* world view generally values maintenance of the status quo and discounts the element of change in IR. These perspectives focus on the laws of power politics, which are considered timeless and universal. Conservative perspectives find their most fertile ground in the subfield of international security with its logic of military power. They see states as the most important actors (largely because states control the biggest armies). Relative position with regard to other states is more important than the

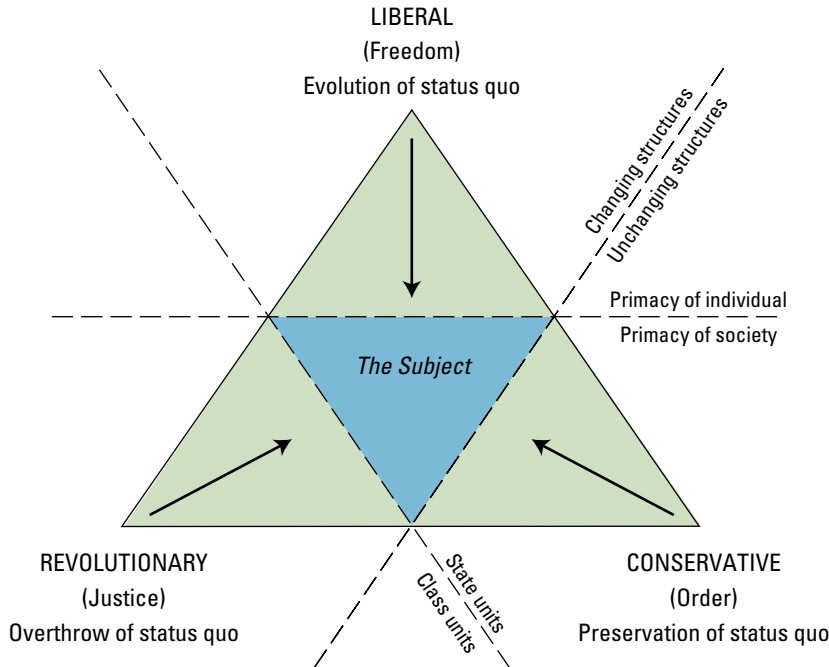


FIGURE 1.1 ■ Conservative, Liberal, and Revolutionary World Views

Source: Adapted from J. S. Goldstein, *Long Cycles: Prosperity and War in the Modern Age*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988.

absolute condition of a state, because with an ever-present possibility of war, winning and losing matter above all. Conservative approaches tend to value *order*. Their advocates are prudent and not eager for change, especially rapid change or change that upsets the hierarchy of power in the international system. These perspectives tend to see war as the natural order of things, a necessary evil for which one should always be prepared. They see international trade as a potential source of national power, a view expressed in IPE as *mercantilism* (the accumulation of national war chests through the control of trade).

A *liberal* world view values reform of the status quo through an evolutionary process of incremental change. Theories that build on the liberal tradition often focus on the mutual benefits to be gained in IR through interdependence and reciprocity. Gaining wealth in absolute terms is more important from this perspective than gaining power relative to other countries. Liberal approaches find their most fertile ground in the international political economy subfield because of the potentials for mutual gain in trade and exchange, with each nation exploiting its comparative advantage in particular products and services. Liberal approaches tend to value *freedom*, especially free trade and free exchange of ideas. They tend to see war not as a natural tendency but as a tragic mistake, to be prevented or at least minimized by international agreements and organizations.

The Web Link icon means that interactive World Wide Web exercises are available at this book's Web site (see p. xvii).



Liberalism

This icon indicates a Simulation is available on MyPoliSciLab (see p. xvii).



What's Your World View?

A *revolutionary* world view values transformation of the status quo through revolutionary and rapid change. These perspectives often focus on the unfair and exploitive aspects of international relationships, and on efforts to radically change those relationships. Revolutionary approaches have found resonance in areas of IR scholarship dealing with North-South relations and the developing world because of the evident injustice of grinding poverty suffered by a majority of the world's people. Revolutionary approaches tend to value *justice*. They often see war as a product of underlying exploitative economic relationships, and see changes in those economic relationships as the key to solving the problem of war.

Real-world politics mixes these three perspectives in various ways. In the United States, for example, most conservative politicians adopt classically liberal positions on free trade. Some European social democrats combine a liberal emphasis on freedom with a revolutionary concern for justice. Similarly, no theory or scholar in IR is purely conservative, liberal, or revolutionary.

The theoretical debates in the field of IR are fundamental, but unresolved. They leave IR scholarship in a turbulent condition, racing to try to make sense of a rapidly changing world in which old ideas work poorly. This book lays out the current state of knowledge without exaggerating the successes of the discipline.