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The international system

Summary

DEFINITION OF THE TERM: The international system is one of the main conceptual categories in international relations research. The systems concept appeared in the social sciences as a result of popularisation of interdisciplinary general systems theory and influenced the vision of political science at the time.

HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF THE TERM: In the 1950s and 1960s, researchers associated with the systems school proposed establishing an international relations discipline, the aim of which was to study the international system. In the 1970s and 1980s, new approaches were developed, including structural realism and world-systems theory.

DISCUSSION OF THE TERM: The end of the Cold War ended the dominance of the 'international system' as the main tool for describing relations between states.

SYSTEMATIC REFLECTION WITH CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS: Today the systems approach still has adherents and is a suitable tool for studying international relations in the age of globalisation. A systemic perception of the world as a set of elements linked by relationships can be useful in (1) describing, (2) analysing, (3) explaining, and (4) predicting complex international phenomena.

Keywords: system, behaviourism, politics, order, globalisation

Definition of the term

The term 'system' comes from the ancient Greek word σύστημα (*systēma*) and denotes a set of elements and their reciprocal relations. The concept was popularised in the interwar period by the Austrian biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy, who co-authored the general systems theory. He believed that the idea of a system would allow researchers to conduct modern objective science by integrating various scientific disciplines, thus providing themselves with a uniform language of description and methods for explaining the phenomena they study. In his opinion, treating these phenomena as a 'system' would make it possible to identify separate research areas and their key elements and, subsequently, develop models of biological, social, and other phenomena. Von Bertalanffy described this concept in 1968 in his book *General System Theory. Foundations, Development, Applications*. To this day, the terms created in systems theory are present in the technical, natural, and social sciences.

In the social sciences, Talcott Parsons (in sociology) and Kenneth Boulding (in economics) contributed the most to the use of the term 'system' in the post-war period. In political science, the system idea was promoted by David Easton and Robert Dahl, among others, and in the field of international relations this was done by Morton A. Kaplan, Joel David Singer, and Kenneth N. Waltz. It was believed that the goal of political science should be the study of the 'political system', and the aim of international relations research should be analogous to this, i.e., the study of the 'international system'. These terms were associated with the founding vision of the new sciences which studied the behaviour of political actors in a given system, and this led to linking the systems approach with behaviourism.

Historical analysis of the term

In the early 1950s, the process of institutionalising international relations as a discipline of political science was underway. International relations theory was one of the main concerns of that time and was essential for scientific explanations of the enormous social changes taking place in

the post-war world. These changes included international cooperation within the United Nations, rivalry between superpowers, decolonisation, and the increasing interdependence of trade, media, transport, and other processes which, in the 1980s, Thomas Levitt termed 'globalisation'.

The search for a general theory of international relations coincided with popularisation of the systems approach. Two seminal multi-author works in this area are *Contemporary Theory in International Relations*, published in 1960 and edited by Stanley Hoffman, and *The International System. Theoretical Essays*, published in 1961 and edited by Klaus Knorr and Sidney Verba. The editors of the latter volume pointed out that theories of international trade had existed since the time of Adam Smith, but the theory of the international 'system' had been developed much more recently. However, it was widely believed that, given the existence of more than a hundred states linked by complex interrelations, a neutral approach to explaining their political and economic relations was necessary and that a systems approach to studying them would be the most suitable. Less than a decade after the discussion on the need for international relations research had started, the systems approach became the leading way of looking at and analysing international politics and economics, and numerous works on 'systems' of relations, armaments, trade, finance, international organisations, and integration were published.

The first stage in the development of the concept of the international system can be conventionally marked as the period between 1957 and 1971. In 1957, Morton Kaplan outlined a project for international systems research; this period ends with the publications of Charles Mclelland (*Theory and the International System*, 1966) and Joel David Singer (a collection of conceptual proposals entitled *A General Systems Taxonomy for Political Science*, 1971).

Morton Kaplan's writings are the most representative example of the understanding of the international system concept in the 1950s and 1960s. In his opinion, international relations had emerged as an area of reflection that was separate from law due to the new research methods introduced in political science. However, this research area lacked a common disciplinary core, which prevented it from becoming a recognised scientific discipline. Kaplan analysed past methods of creating scientific theories and concluded that an example of a good

method was the work of Adam Smith in economics (his use of abstract categories such as the market) and the work of Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt in sociology (his use of comparative analysis of distributing resources in different societies). In constructing his own theory, Kaplan emphasised that scientific knowledge must be communicable, reproducible, and testable (Kaplan, 1966), and he recognised the specific nature of the social sciences, e.g., that human actions are often unconscious and inconsistent with openly declared motivations. Thus, it is only by studying behaviour that we can gain awareness of what we know. Kaplan used numerous analogies to other areas of life, e.g., he wrote that poison attacks the 'system' of the bloodstream, cancer destroys the biological 'system' of the body, and a politician who wants to make a difference must work within the 'system' of the politics of a state. Economists describe and predict the behaviour of a firm in the economic system, while international relations scholars study the behaviour of states in the international system. According to Kaplan, the international system should be the main category and a distinguishing feature of international relations research.

In line with the ideas of systems theory, Kaplan was convinced that all systems can be analysed by means of a universal scientific method, although each type of system is unique. With the help of a theory, characteristic modal behaviour can be predicted. In his 1957 work, Kaplan described six international systems, including the balance of power system, which is still discussed today, and the loose bipolar system (Kaplan, 1957). Kaplan chose to address the issue of superpower rivalry but pointed out that it should be the task of researchers to identify how international behaviour can be linked with such factors as military and economic capabilities, communication, information, technological change, and demography. A systems approach can be used to, among other things, compare countries and measure the growth of their position in the world and their military and economic expansion.

Kaplan's vision of the balance of power system is worth analysing. In his opinion, a 'balance of power system' is an international social system without a political subsystem of a superior power, thus it is in a state of anarchy. The main features of this system include self-help policies, restriction of the expansion of other states, and transactions that allow the system to survive. The last point can be expressed by the following

six rules: 1) Act to increase capabilities but negotiate rather than fight; 2) Fight rather than pass up an opportunity to increase capabilities; 3) Stop fighting rather than eliminate an essential national actor; 4) Act to oppose any coalition or single actor which tends to assume a dominant position; 5) Act to constrain actors who subscribe to supranational organizing principles; 6) Permit defeated or constrained essential national actors to re-enter the system as acceptable role partners. States that do not follow the rules (e.g., Napoleonic France) will be surrounded and defeated, and states that are not central to the system can sometimes be sacrificed for the preservation of the balance of power in the system (e.g. the partitions of Poland). Kaplan believed that during the interwar period the victorious superpowers had disregarded all the rules of the system, thus causing WW2.

Joel David Singer is another key proponent of the systems approach. He was the author of the concept of levels of analysis (Singer, 1961) and argued that we are unable to enter the 'mind' of decision-makers, thus we can only make inferences based on people's 'behaviour'. The best tool to explain the behaviour of many actors at the same moment is to analyse their behaviour from the level of the international system because this system is the environment in which states operate and which influences their actions by imposing certain rules. Strong states behave in a similar way to each other, yet they behave differently to weak states. Singer argued that the behavioural sciences had better chances of development than classical political science because they are linked with the natural sciences. After 1964, Singer became involved in the Correlates of War Project, which aimed to explain the causes of conflicts between states around the world. This project still exists today and contains databases of conflicts, wars, peace processes, and many other variables. It is the most enduring example of a research project initiated by the systems approach.

Singer agreed with Kenneth Waltz, who in 1959 explained the causes of war by splitting them into three levels: the level of individuals (human nature is the cause of wars), the level of the state (state politics can lead to wars), and the level of the international system (the cause of wars is anarchy in relations between states). However, Waltz was not considered a representative of the behavioural school as he based his considerations on traditional political thought.

A different understanding of the international system was proposed by George Modelski, who linked the politics of states with the development of the world economy (Modelski, 1961). He believed that the international system consists of historically existing elements and the relations between them. These elements have statuses (positions) and roles (processes). Each international system has boundaries and an environment and is characterised by the allocation of people and resources. In his study, Modelski argued that there were different agrarian and industrial systems in the economic history of the world. Agrarian systems are based on agriculture and a strong social hierarchy, while industrial systems are linked with the development of industry and capitalism. In later years, Modelski analysed the development and decline of empires and introduced into his studies the concept of system cycles, which he modelled on the work of Joseph Schumpeter. In this concept, system cycles are understood as patterns of the functioning of systems, and states cyclically gain or lose their position as superpowers in the system as a result of wars and other objective processes of expending their capacity to exercise power. The idea of cycles also has some analogies to general systems theory as cyclical processes are observed in physics, biology, and climate. Researchers who use the systems approach try to show that it is also possible to demonstrate cyclical changes on a macro scale in the social world; these changes might include the expansion and decline of states, cities, economies, technologies, market industries, etc.

The second stage in the development of the concept of the international system occurred in the 1970s and 1980s. This was a period of major economic changes in the world, such as the oil crises, the collapse of the Bretton Woods system, the rise of interdependence, and the post-colonial emergence of many poor countries. In this period, systems theories were expected to provide answers to questions about economic integration in Europe, global inequality, poverty, exploitation, the growth of transnational corporations, and disintegrating states; thus, the economisation of international relations research was advocated. At this time, influential works by, among others, Kenneth Waltz, Robert Gilpin, and Immanuel Wallerstein were published. In their summaries of post-war scientific research, they listed the role played by various theories of power (Morgenthau,

Aron), decision-making (Snyder), communication (Deutsch, Haas), and systems theory. The international system was commonly understood as a shape or arrangement of relations between states that was reconstructed by a researcher in the context of the tradition of the systems approach.

The earliest of the key concepts of this period was the idea of a 'world-system' that was developed by Immanuel Wallerstein, who ignored political science works on international systems and focused instead on history and economic sociology. He described the development of the system of a capitalist world-economy and linked this process to the international division of labour rather than the system of states. Wallerstein borrowed the term 'world-economy' from the historian Fernand Braudel, who used it to describe a certain spatially and temporally distinct area which was an independent economic entity. Wallerstein outlined the foundations of his model in a 1974 essay that became the introduction to a series of monographs entitled *The Modern World-System* (Wallerstein, 2004). In these books, Wallerstein described the problems of the centres, semi-peripheries, and peripheries of the world economy and reflected on the impact of capitalism on different regions of the world. Like Modelski, Wallerstein referred to the cyclical development of empires and analysed the conditions for the progression of different regions and states in the world power hierarchy. He argued that the globalised world came about as a result not of political expansion but of the emergence of a world economic system. Consequently, the roles and behaviour of the superpowers do not depend on themselves but on their adaptation to the rules of the global economy. According to Wallerstein, relations within the 'system of states' were only a secondary problem, i.e., a 'political subsystem' of the more general capitalist world economy.

Wallerstein's approach gained international recognition for its usefulness in studying global economic inequality. In 2001, Barry Buzan and Richard Little observed that the concept of the 'world-system' had become more popular than that of the 'international system'. Wallerstein's work was at the peak of its popularity in the 1980s and 1990s, i.e., at the same time as the explosion of interest in globalisation.

The second major approach to the analysis of international systems was structural realism. This approach was promoted primarily by

Kenneth Waltz (*Theory of International Politics*, 1979) (Waltz, 2010) and, to a lesser extent, by Robert Gilpin (*War and Change in World Politics*) (Gilpin, 1981). Waltz presented his theory of the international system in his seminal book *Theory of International Politics*, where he argued that only systems theories are capable of painting a complete picture of world politics. Other theories neglect the reciprocal positioning of states and their potential in the international system, the description of which should be the goal of international relations research. Waltz believed that statistics do not confirm the increasing interdependence of states and that the global economy is not capable of influencing the politics of the superpowers.

In his works, Waltz critically commented on other authors' theories. For example, he criticised Wallerstein for equating theory with reality. According to Waltz, a system is a theoretical tool which explains the mechanism of international politics in a similar way to how economics uses the idea of the market. He thus believed that the primary object of analysis should be the politics of the superpowers rather than the world economy. Waltz also criticised Kaplan for confusing the levels of analysis. In his opinion, Kaplan's perception of the problem of the boundaries of the system and what influences it is unclear. At the time, transnational processes were not yet accurately recognised, and global cultural, social, and ecological phenomena were ignored if they were not directly related to the politics of states.

The crux of Waltz's theory is his systems analysis. He focused on analysing the 'system-level forces' that influence the actions of states. The system modifies the political structures of the world, which changes the behaviour of actors and influences the outcomes of interactions. According to Waltz, European integration after the Second World War is a good example here. For the first time in a long time, the determinants of war and peace on the Old Continent were outside Europe. The shape of the international system in Europe was decided by the global rivalry between the US and the USSR. According to Waltz, this is a good example of systems analysis because the change of the system in the form of the rise of non-European powers led to changes in the behaviour of European states. Instead of the traditional zero-sum game, Europeans took common interests to a higher level. Unlike traditional scholars, Waltz believed that under conditions of international anarchy the goal of

states is security, while power is only a means to this end. States – like firms in the market – rarely have the opportunity to maximise their goals, so they use the optimal solutions available in the system. Europeans entrusted security to the care of the United States, while they themselves focused on post-war reconstruction and the development of their economies.

The second major work which analysed the international system in the spirit of realism was Robert Gilpin's book on change in international relations. He argued that the international system arises for the same reasons as any other social system: it is the net result of the realisation of the interests of the parties that make up its structures. He identified several types of change in international systems: 1) *systems change*, which occurs when the nature of the elements of the system changes; 2) *systemic change*, which entails a change in the governance of the system, i.e., the distribution of power and the hierarchy of prestige of the states that determine the conditions of the system; 3) *interaction change*, which concerns interstate processes, i.e., the processes that take place between the states that make up the system (Gilpin, 1981, pp. 40–44). Gilpin argued that an international system is stable when none of the states that belong to this system believe it would be beneficial and desirable for them to change this system. States attempt to change the system when the expected benefits of this change exceed the costs. These attempts can lead to expansion. The conclusion was similar to Waltz's: the world is ruled by superpowers which decide on the shape of the institutions of the world economy. It is states that govern globalisation by creating organisations, banks, funds, stock exchanges, trade mechanisms, and other interaction processes.

According to Gilpin, the existence of a global international system is a modern phenomenon as many independent international systems previously existed on different continents. The features of the current system are 1) *diverse entities*; 2) *regular interaction*, related to the development of the economy, transport, and communication; and 3) *form of control*, i.e., the existence of regulators of the behaviour of states. For example, the United States controls the politics of other states and organisations by supporting a network of organisations that reinforce the rules that are beneficial to Washington, such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and others.

Nevertheless, control in the international system is only relative: under anarchy, no state has total power over other states and there is no world government. Realists such as Gilpin believe that the globalisation system serves the interests of the US and, in the 1990s, attention was drawn to the fact that globalisation is often linked with such phenomena as Americanisation, McDonaldisation, etc.

Gilpin was also a proponent of the theory of hegemonic war. Historically, the most common way of introducing any systemic change was through a hegemonic war, whereby a dominant superpower emerges as its result. The three characteristic features of such a war are its scope (it involves almost all the states of the system), its limitlessness (the conflict spans the political, economic, and ideological dimensions), and the unlimited means employed to cater for the general scope of the warfare. Gilpin lists the following as examples of hegemonic wars: the Thirty Years' War, the wars of Louis XIV, the French Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars, and both World Wars of the 20th century. Contemporary scholars believe that a potential US-China war could be of a similar nature.

During the period in question, the concept of the international system became a fundamental concept in international relations research. It affected other influential concepts such as anarchy, hegemony, complex interdependence, international regimes, security, and war. One concept that competed with the 'system' concept was 'international society', which was promoted by scholars from the English School. According to Hedley Bull, an international system is a 'constellation of states' formed when two or more states interact and influence each other's decisions; an international society is a community of norms (e.g., 'Western states'); a society is always formed on the basis of an existing international system, but the system itself can exist without a society.

The third stage in the development of the concept of the international system was and still is the post-Cold War period. In the 1990s, the systems approach was heavily criticised and attempts to reform it were undertaken by Barry Buzan, Richard Little, and the constructivists. During this period, the number of works that used the international system concept declined and globalisation came to the fore. Eclectic ideas and advanced research in the areas of integration, development, international political economy, and international security studies also gained popularity.

In the post-Cold War period, the aforementioned school of Immanuel Wallerstein became a separate scientific perspective and was rarely referred to in international relations theory. Structural realism faced accusations that it ignored the internal characteristics of states and failed to predict the collapse of the Soviet Union. A key line of argumentation on this issue was presented by Kenneth Waltz in his two texts published in 1993 and 2000 (Waltz, 1993, 2000).

In the first text, Waltz observed that, historically, the multipolar system had been stable but prone to war and the last 300 years of modern history had witnessed the rise and fall of numerous powers. There had been 12 superpowers in the multipolar era, seven before the Second World War, and only two leading superpowers after the Second World War. Although the bipolar system that had emerged at that time was peaceful, it was hardly stable. Waltz emphasised that during the Cold War, the US and the USSR had behaved in a similar fashion and their expansion strategies, troop numbers, arms policies, and ideological interactions were similar. The aggressiveness of the superpowers had been greatly reduced by nuclear weapons, which effectively ended the wars between them. According to Waltz, despite the collapse of the USSR and changes in the relative power of states, the basic structure of international politics had not changed, hence international relations scholars should focus on analysing the politics of the superpowers as this is what influences the international system.

In his 2000 paper, Waltz acknowledged that some people believe that political realism is outdated and that the ideas of anarchy, self-help, and the balance of power are concepts from a bygone era. However, he reiterated the position that there was no change *of* the international system but, at most, changes *in* the system, such as changes in the means of transport, communication, and warfare. Waltz continued to believe that the theory of the international system remained legitimate because its basic principles, such as anarchy, self-help, security interests, the dominance of states, and the distribution of potential between them, are still present in international relations. All other forms of modifications of the system, such as interdependence in the areas of the economy, energy resources, or ideas, are changes in the system but are not a change of the system.

In the book, *The Logic of Anarchy: Neorealism to Structural Realism* by Barry Buzan, Charles Jones, and Richard Little (published in 1993),

the authors set out to modify Waltz's conception, which they considered too narrow. They acknowledged that Waltz's achievement was to create new standards for international relations research, which was something that others had failed to achieve. However, Buzan, Jones, and Little argued that an additional level of analysis of international relations was needed, namely the interactions of the main actors (which they termed interaction capacity). The existence of any structures and systems is a result of history. The international system is permeated with the logic of structuration, i.e., the production of structures resulting from the practices of the main elements of the system, i.e., states. Waltz's theory ignores knowledge about states and their internal politics and also ignores transnational ideas such as property rights, capitalism, and sovereignty. Conceived in this way, Waltz's theory is static: it allows the international system to be described but does not allow its elements and their changes to be discussed. As a result, it is difficult to study complex international processes that are related to the development of political capabilities and political deep structures, such as the transformation of state-level political systems, democratisation, globalisation, political integration, etc. The authors of this book were aware of the growing importance of globalisation processes and wanted to use the category of the international system to adapt previous research on state politics to the post-Cold War era. Systems theories were criticised on the grounds that they lacked a sound theory of the state and ignored the role of culture, norms, ideas, and intangible factors that have an overwhelming impact on the functioning and evolution of states. It was thus considered that the theory of the international system remained an important reference point but failed to explain crucial aspects of international relations.

Barry Buzan and Richard Little developed their argumentation in their work *International Systems in World History. Remaking the Study of International Relations* (Buzan and Little, 2000). Both pointed out that international relations scholars need extensive historical knowledge because history is essential for explaining what distinguishes the past from the present. In their book, they introduce the idea of the international system as a theoretical framework for the study of world history. Inspired by Wallerstein's findings, in their analyses they reached as far back as prehistoric times and presented man's colonisation of the planet and the building of political institutions on different continents. This presentation,

however, lacked the unifying thread that would bind all the elements of their propositions.

Discussion of the term

This section defines the areas in which the term 'international system' has been used. This concept has appeared in so many roles that it has acquired the status of a distinct academic category.

In his first cross-sectional book devoted to the idea of international systems, entitled *The Concept of 'System' in International Relations Theory*, published in 1965, Jay Goodman argued that the concept of an international system has several functions: 1) system-as-description (to describe events); 2) system-as-explanation (to explain the structures of states' behaviours); and 3) system-as-method (a method of dealing with international policy data). Goodman observed that authors associated with the systems approach often confuse the ways in which the concept of a system is used or fail to sustain the assumptions they make at the outset of their research work. Nevertheless, he found the systems method to be the most promising for international relations research as it enabled simulation, extrapolation, or experimentation with different event scenarios. These advantages remain valid to this day.

Systems theories have also been criticised for a number of reasons. Their most comprehensive criticism was formulated by Stanley Hoffman (1959), who drew attention to potential weaknesses of the concept of a system. First, there was a risk that researchers would 'fit' into their systems analyses only those elements that were convenient for them; second, the research methods used in the natural sciences are useless in the social sciences, which are not based on experiments. Third, Hoffman disagreed with the view that the laws that guide states' activities could be identified; he believed that researchers could only observe trends. Fourth, in his opinion, patterns in international relations can only be observed on a macro scale, which makes them trivial. Fifth, he believed that confining knowledge within a precisely defined system means detaching it from the social world as most assumptions, roles, and estimates are simply arbitrarily adopted in a system. In Hoffman's

view, systems theory resembles a religion whose god is 'System'. Finally, Hoffman argued that systems analyses ignore social processes and instead focus only on impersonal forces, mechanisms, and procedures, which is a manipulative approach. He also observed that in such an analytical approach the role of the expert is increased, which can lead to the politicisation of science.

Of the works dedicated to international systems published in the 21st century, the 2006 publication by N. Harrison and J.D. Singer is worth mentioning (Harrison & Singer, 2006, pp. 25–41). These authors believe that systems theories still have the capacity to explain social complexities. Summarising several decades of systemic reflection, Singer commented on Kaplan's, Waltz's, and Wallerstein's achievements. He observed that Kaplan had described a system of actions and interactions of states; Waltz had developed a model of the international system along the lines of an economic market in which, however, the characteristics of actors are of no interest (beyond simple measures of power); and Wallerstein had focused on the structural forces (capitalism) that dictate states' behaviours, regardless of their characteristics. Singer assumed that it is the characteristics of the various actors that generate patterns of action and participate in the construction of the structures of the international system.

Importantly, in social systems, institutions set the rules for the selection of actions and are created as the consequences of prior actions. In this sense, the development of each system follows its own path dependence. However, this development over time from point A to B is not entirely random. Furthermore, a living system cannot be separated from its history; to say that the Cold War evolved from earlier history is not to say that it was its inevitable outcome. Human choices introduce randomness into outcomes and make any system 'open'. Singer thus evaded the accusations of 'mechanicism' and 'determinism' which are frequently formulated against the systems approach. The systems perspective offers great opportunities for the study of contemporary international relations by analysing the complexity of social structures and their interactions. Nowadays, science has increased access to information, data creation, and knowledge. The systems approach to complex phenomena such as media, treaties, or international energy offers an opportunity to advance scientific research.

In a similar vein, M. Albert and L.E. Cederman, who authored the book *New Systems Theories of World Politics*, observe that in the 21st century there are numerous opportunities to apply the systems approach (Albert & Cederman, 2010, pp. 3–11). They acknowledge that the unexpected end of the Cold War and the emergence of new actors in international relations have led to a decline in the popularity of systems theories. For a while it was thought that international relations could be replaced by comparative political studies or regional studies and, for a short period, problems of the world economy became more important than politics and the hierarchy of states. The processes of globalisation and climate change intensified. Global media, global ideas, and global culture have emerged. All of this, however, indicates the potential usefulness of systems theories, as long as they take global change into account. Systemicity makes it possible to see historical and geographical factors and to combine micro- and macro-scale research areas. However, systems theories lack a sound social theory.

What can the term ‘the international system’ be used for?

System as a tool for building science – the international system was intended to become the central concept of a new discipline of international relations in which the research area covered the interactions of states on a global scale, with a particular focus on superpowers as key elements of the system. This vision was advocated by proponents of the behavioural approach, who model their proposals on scientific publications dedicated to general systems theory.

System as a tool for international relations research (level of analysis) – the international system was also defined as the broadest tool for describing, explaining, and predicting international relations. Unlike the political system of a state, the international system has no supreme authority (a world government does not exist) and thus combines features of anarchy and hierarchy. Researchers from the realist school believed that the system is governed by the superpowers, while proponents of world-system theory argued that the world is divided into economic centres, semi-peripheries, and peripheries.

System as a research meta-category ('toolbox') – in this view, the international system serves as an intellectual map of world politics issues. It 'systematises' research problems undertaken by researchers. It does not have to be linked with any specific theory (i.e., a set of claims regarding causes and effects)

System as a tool for developing or criticising international relations research – the neo-realist approach led to the development of a scientific theoretical model of the international system (Waltz) and a theory of system change (Gilpin), whereas the globalist approach emphasised the importance of historical case studies of different systems (Modelski, Wallerstein). In both approaches, conclusions led to normative postulates, e.g., treating international organisations as a tool through which superpowers exert their influence (realism), or criticising the shape of the world economy (globalism) and the global inequalities it causes.

System as a subject of critique – the concept of the international system had many competitors, such as the international society, the world-system, the international order, and the international regime. It was at times accused of being an imperial or a neo-colonial idea, among other things. After the end of the Cold War, the concept of the international system ceased to be widely used, and researchers focused on regional and issue-based approaches. In the 21st century, meta-theoretical issues have become the main topic of debate in international relations theory. This is an opportunity to return to the systems approach in international relations, the main goal of which was to rigorously reform the way in which science is done.

Systematic reflection with conclusions and recommendations

The concept of the international system appeared in the 1950s as a means to define the research area of international relations. General systems theory was the main inspiration for this approach, and the concept was intended to describe relations between states in the world.

Who studied international systems and when? The main attention of political scientists – who were interested in power – was

drawn by dominant states and the political constellations they created. These researchers developed such models of international systems as the balance of power system, the bipolar system, and the multipolar system. Researchers with a sociological and economic orientation focused on the determinants of the development of empires and the social relations within world politics and economics. This gave rise to the concepts of international cycles and the world-system/world-economy. Researchers with a historical orientation focused on analysing the development of the norms of international law and the institutions of international competition and international cooperation. The concept of international society was also developed within this perspective.

The first period of the development of the systems approach covered the 1950s and 1960s; the second period covered the 1970s and 1980s; the third is ongoing. The concept of the international system, however, has not gained much popularity outside international relations studies, unlike the concept of the 'world-system'.

Is it worth using the concept of the international system? The increase in complexity of international relations makes it possible to recommend the systems approach as timely and useful. This is fostered by the increasing popularity of quantitative methods and the search for a common language for researchers from different cultural backgrounds. The main advantages of the idea of an international system include its usefulness in systematising the research area and describing global macro-processes, both historical and contemporary. The disadvantages are linked with this idea's determinism and mechanism. The international system helps to describe and explain the existence of a hierarchy of states, the interdependence of states, inequalities, the relations between states, alliances, institutions of integration, the impact of states on globalisation, the creation of new channels of communication and trade, the geography of various international problems, and the political strategies of various actors in world politics and the world economy. The systemic language is comprehensible to all sciences, has sufficient precision and capacity to produce generalisations, and can be used in teaching the fundamentals of international relations.

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