



**Encyclopedic Dictionary
of Public Administration**

The reference for understanding government action

INTERNATIONAL POLICY AND POLITICS

*Stéphane Paquin, Associate Professor, Canada
Research Chair in Comparative and International
Political Economy
École nationale d'administration publique
stephane.paquin@enap.ca*

As a concept, international has a range of different meanings but is generally understood as dealing with two realities – first, the power relations between government actors beyond the borders of at least one state, and, secondly, the academic discipline dedicated to international questions and issues.

Although “international politics” is often used as a synonym of “international relations,” the two terms do not quite refer to the same reality. “International relations” covers all the relations occurring between public actors (nation-states, international organizations, etc.) and crossing the borders of at least one state. “International politics,” on the other hand, brings into play not only relations between nation-states but also the political or power relationships between actors on the international scene.

It is also important to differentiate “international politics” from “world politics,” as the latter term encompasses the analysis of international private and public actors (also called transnational actors), which can include multinational corporations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as Greenpeace or Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières, or terrorist movements such as Al-Qaeda (Smith, Owen and Baylis, 2011, pp. 2-3).

Finally, “international politics” should be distinguished from “foreign policy,” which, Marcel Merle describes as “the portion of government activity that is oriented toward the ‘outside,’” (Merle, 1984, p. 7 – our translation). In short, foreign policy can be viewed as a form of international public policy.

The first research chair dedicated to international politics was created at the University of Wales in the immediate aftermath of World War I. International politics as a field of research spread quickly, particularly in the United States, which today is home to the greatest number of specialists and institutions dedicated to the study of these questions. American domination was so considerable that toward the end of the 1970s, Stanley Hoffman wrote that international relations was an American social science (Hoffman, 1977). Nearly 20 years later, Ole Wæver developed a sociological analysis of the discipline in which he arrived at a similar conclusion (Wæver, 1998).

As a field of research, international politics can be subdivided into several areas of specialization, with the most important of them focusing on questions of security, international political economy and foreign policy (Maliniak et al., 2011, pp. 437-438).

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Security specialists examine such subjects as the causes of war and peace, trends in warfare, the causes of civil wars, the reconstruction of failed or collapsed states, the effects of globalization on war, and cyberwarfare. Among recent debates, democratic peace theory, which holds that longstanding democracies never go to war with each other, has been particularly prominent (Battistella, 2009).

International political economy stands out from the other subfields of international politics owing to its emphasis on the economic dimension of international problems. Its central focus is on the political determinants of international economic issues, the reciprocal interactions between governments and markets, as well as their effects on international politics of such developments as financial liberalization or economic integration processes. Specialists in this discipline study, among other things, globalization and its effects on policymaking and government autonomy, bilateral and multilateral trade negotiations, international financial regulation issues, and global economic inequalities (Paquin, 2012).

Foreign policy specialists scrutinize the factors influencing the diplomatic relations of a single country or a group of countries, such as opinion surveys, decision-making processes, the psychology of decision-makers, the role of bureaucracies in the decision-making process, ideologies, or obstacles to implementing decisions (Pigman, 2010).

The study of international politics is framed by a number of major conceptual frameworks, with realism, liberalism and constructivism constituting the three main theories at the present time.

According to Tim Dunne and Brian Schmidt, realism is the dominant theory of international relations (Dunne and Schmidt, 2011, p. 90). It is a long tradition of thought that includes such figures as Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes and Rousseau. The realist paradigm focuses particularly on issues of security, war and peace. While there are several currents within realism, the authors operating under this paradigm maintain in essence that the nation-states are the key actors in international politics. From their perspective, the international system is anarchic, as there no central authority to govern or regulate it. States, in line with their reputation for self-interestedness, cannot rely on others to see after their security requirements. In the realm of international politics, the national interest of a state can be gauged in terms of the state's capacity to ensure its survival through power politics. However, this line of approach breeds insecurity in the other states, which are likely to arm themselves in response; the resulting situation is referred to as the "security dilemma." For realists, the main determinant consists in the distribution of capabilities among actors in the international system. The authoritative representatives of this paradigm are Kenneth Waltz, Henry Kissinger and Raymond Aron.

The liberal perspective descends from a long line of thinkers that include Grotius, Locke and Kant. According to the authors working within this framework, the main actors of international politics are private individuals and groups that interact with one another and whose objective is to promote their interests. Liberals are pluralists. They believe that the state remains an important and indeed critical actor of international politics but that other actors, such as multinationals, international organizations and NGOs, have a vital role to play, too. The nature of the international system owes more to state preferences than to the distribution of state capabilities or the demands of the ruling classes. States create international organizations in order to facilitate cooperation, reduce the risks of conflicts, and exert governance over globalization. Liberals tend to have an optimistic outlook, asserting that man learns from his errors. Among liberals, the key theorists are Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye (Dunne, 2011).

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The constructivist perspective concerns itself with the social construction of ideas and norms in international politics. These ideas, rules and norms both shape and frame the behaviour of actors, structuring international politics in the process. According to constructivists, the construction of the meaning of international politics has an impact on the decision-making process of states. Following Alexander Wendt, a pistol in the hands of a friend or an enemy does not have the same meaning, as hostility is a social, not a material, relationship (Wendt, 1995). For constructivists, a number of key concepts, such as anarchy, represent more of a social construction than a material reality. The noted authors representing this paradigm are Nicolas Onuf and Alexander Wendt.

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