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Core Concepts and Historical Contexts

Chapter Summary

International studies investigates global phenomena, and the primary unit of analysis in the world today is the **country**. As such, the field of international studies is interested in how different countries relate to, and deal with, each other. All countries contain six vital components: a **territory** and its **natural resources**; a human **population**; an **economy**; **culture**; a **state** (or **government**); and **non-state actors/associations**.

The contemporary **interstate system** has its origins in European history. Over many centuries, individual leaders oversaw the rise of unique nation-states with their own distinct language and culture, coupled with defined territory and systems of governance. This process culminated with the **Treaty of Westphalia** in 1648 CE, which ended the **Thirty Years' War** and formally ushered in the era of nation-states, centred around the ideas of **political sovereignty** and **territorial integrity** for every country. This Westphalian system then spread to the rest of the world via the creation of European **empires**, which involved the **colonization** of non-European areas by different European countries. Following the two world wars in the early- to mid-twentieth century (1914–1945 CE), these European empires collapsed, leading to a period of **decolonization**, wherein former colonies became independent countries of their own, disseminating the nation-state model to all corners of the globe.

This long period of European imperialism resulted in two further concepts vital to the world today: the distinctions between the **Global North** and **Global South**, and **Western civilization** and non-Western **civilization**. The two divisions generally parallel each other, with countries of the Global North also part of Western civilization, and countries of the Global South part of non-Western civilization. The North–South divide revolves around the question of development and wealth, with former imperial powers (countries of the Global North) having benefited tremendously from their colonies (countries of the Global South), thereby leading to higher standards of living today. This simple dichotomy masks the complex nature of development, as evidenced by a group of **middle-income countries**. On the other hand, the civilizational difference focuses on shared values and a pervasive culture (or way of life) that divides one civilizational grouping from another (with each civilization having its own strengths and weaknesses). This means that “non-Western civilization” actually encompasses a number of different civilizations. Considering the prominent role Western countries have played in world history, the West versus “the rest” division can serve as a useful (though controversial) tool in explaining contemporary issues and events (see the “Clash of Civilizations” thesis).

Case studies can be a useful way to apply abstract and conceptual knowledge to the real world. In this chapter, the United States is used to examine themes such as the nation-state model in global affairs, imperialism, the North–South divide, and the West versus “the rest” debate. Specifically, two interrelated questions help guide the discussion: Do we live in an Age of American Empire? And if the United States does have some kind of empire, is this good or bad for the world? The question of Canada’s place in the world is also considered.

Key Concepts

Authoritarian regimes: a government of a country that has not been democratically elected. (p. 26)

Capitalism: an economic system that: (a) allows for private property ownership of the means of production; (b) allows business people the freedom to set up their own businesses and keep profits they earn for themselves; (c) encourages trading between buyer and seller as the means of distributing goods and services; (d) uses money as the means of exchange to facilitate trading; (e) features a court system of public laws for the peaceful handling and non-violent resolution of economic disputes. (p. 25)

City-state: tiny, urban areas, ruled by local or municipal governments. Earlier form of political unit in Europe. Examples include the classic city-states of Ancient Greece, like Athens and Sparta. (p. 12)

Civil society: sum total of all non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and associations within a given country, with an emphasis on the voluntary, leisure, and not-for-profit (non-corporate) groups. Democratic countries tend to have flourishing civil societies while authoritarian countries try to control and diminish civil society. (p. 26)

Civilization: a pervasive culture (or way of life) shared by many countries and impacting a large region of the world over time. Countries of a civilization tend to have the same (or at least similar) systems of governance, laws, economics, patterns of living, and kinds of culture (shared values). *Western civilization* is one example of a civilizational grouping. (p. 24)

Cold War: global, multi-generational conflict that lasted from the end of World War II (1945) until 1991. The conflict was over opposing socio-economic systems, with the United States championing capitalism and democracy, and the Soviet Union pushing for communism and authoritarianism. The War was “cold” because the two sides never directly engaged each other in militarized live-fire hostilities. Eventually, the United States won the Cold War when the Soviet Union collapsed in the early 1990s. (pp. 27–28)

Colonization (or colonialism): the process of founding and maintaining colonies, as part of a system of empire. (p. 18)

Communism: state ownership of the means of economic production and state control over all economic activity. (p. 25)

Country: most basic unit in international studies (over 200 countries in the world today). Defined by six vital components: (a) territory (and its natural resources); (b) human population; (c) economy; (d) culture; (e) state or government; (f) non-state actors/associations. (p. 4)

Culture: how people live, think, and behave; a way of life. It is often split into “high culture” (culture of good quality or enduring merit, thought to represent the best and most meaningful aspects of culture; examples include great works of art like Picasso’s paintings or literary works like Shakespeare’s plays) and “low culture” (more common or widespread forms of belief and behaviour; examples include dietary practices like specific cuisines or popular music and sports). (pp. 7–8)

Decolonization: process whereby an imperial core ends its control over its colonies, leaving them to become independent countries. The term is generally used to refer to the process where European imperial powers gave up their colonies after World War II, from around 1945 until 1995. (p. 19)

Democracy: system of governance that features, at minimum, regular, free, fair, and public elections where all citizens of a certain age and political jurisdiction can vote. Democratic government is determined by the free consent of the people. (p. 25)

Economy: how a country produces and distributes goods (like cars) and services (like tourism); how the costs and benefits of such distribution are spread among the population. (p. 6)

Emigration: people leaving their country of origin to go live somewhere else. (p. 22)

Empire: a system of governance forged in military conquest, as opposed to the consent of the people. Empires are generally composed of both a “hub,” called the metropole (pole around which the rest of the empire revolves) and the “periphery,” called the colonies (conquered and subject lands). The domination and subjugation of the colonies by the metropole is the essence of empire. (p. 13)

Global North: refers to more developed countries of the world (tend to be wealthier, better educated, healthier, less populated, more technologically advanced, more urbanized, more influential globally, and more attractive to immigrants), loosely equivalent to countries that are part of Western civilization (these terms tend to be synonyms). (pp. 21–22)

Global South: refers to developing countries of the world. When compared to countries of the Global North, Global South countries tend to be more populated, less wealthy, less healthy, less educated, less technologically advanced, more rural, less powerful, and with higher rates of emigration than immigration. (pp. 21–22)

Globalization: recent and increasing strengthening of ties and interconnections between countries, in both an economic (international trade) and socio-cultural sense (migration, pop culture, Internet). (p. 7)

Gross Domestic Product (GDP): measure of national wealth; total value of goods produced and services provided in a country, in one year. (p. 6)

Hegemon: a dominant power in a given field, region, or area. A hegemon exerts “hegemony” (strong influence) over others. Brazil can be considered a hegemon in South America, or China in East Asia. The only truly global hegemon today is the United States. (p. 31)

Immigration: people arriving in a new country from another country, seeking to settle and create new lives for themselves in the new country. (p. 22)

Imperialism: process or policy of trying to form and maintain an empire. (pp. 17–18)

Insurgent forces: revolutionary armed groups committed to the violent overthrow of the government of their society. (p. 11)

Interest group: sub-category of non-state actors, that tend to be more highly organized and more politically involved; goal is to get their particular interest onto the agenda of government and society, for the sake of change and securing some kind of benefit. Examples include the National Rifle Association (NRA) in the United States and the Dairy Farmers of Ontario (DFO) in Canada. (p. 10)

International Public Spaces: areas of the Earth not “owned” by any country. Three such places are currently recognized: (a) Antarctica; (b) the “high seas” (middle of the great oceans); (c) “near space” (the very high atmosphere, just before outer space). (p. 3)

Interstate system: prevailing order of international affairs, where countries are the primary units that act and operate in relation to each other. (pp. 11–12)

Middle-income countries (MICs): group of newly or quickly developing countries, thought to occupy a middle range of relative development and wealth, between the Global North/Western societies and the Global South/developing societies. Examples range from India (low MIC) to China (high MIC). (p. 23)

Multinational Corporation (MNC): a large business operating in several countries. (p. 10)

Nation: a group of people that sees itself as being a people; as belonging together in some meaningful sense as a unit; having its own unique identity, separate and distinct from other comparable groups. (pp. 4–5)

Nationalism: recognition of and attachment to one’s nation. Historically, nationalism implies the drive of a nation to get and form its own separate country, governed by a state (or government) of its own choosing. (p. 5)

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs): sub-category of non-state actors that are charitable in nature, with social movement or humanitarian functions. Examples include groups that promote respect for human rights or strive to protect the environment. (p. 10)

Non-state actors: non-governmental groupings or institutions. A broad category that encompasses a variety of groups like non-governmental organizations (NGOs), social movements, and interest groups. (p. 10)

Political sovereignty: the right of a group of people to rule themselves. The most basic right of a country in the modern international system, to make its own laws and govern itself, provided that it respects the rights of all other countries to do the same. (p. 17)

Private militias: armed groups that are not part of any country's official military. They may be political or mercenary in nature. Mercenary groups of this kind are called private military companies (PMCs). (p. 11)

State: the government of a country; the group of people responsible for making and enforcing the rules that regulate the collective life of a people and that thereby make an orderly social life possible within a given territory. Every country has a government, and often, it is the single most powerful institution in that society. (p. 11)

Supranational: "above the national"; usually referring to some kind of international institution or practice that is above the national level of government, and that includes many countries, but is more regional than truly global in nature. The European Union (EU) is a good example of a supranational institution. (p. 6)

Territorial integrity: a community or country has a right to some livable territory and is considered the "owner" of all the natural resources within its lands. The community also has the right not to have other countries invade its territory and take its resources. (p. 17)

Terrorist group: armed group that deliberately uses violence against the civilian population, as opposed to military targets, in hopes that the resulting spread of fear and terror among the people will further the group's narrow political agenda. (p. 11)

Thirty Years' War: religious conflict between Catholics and Protestants that devastated Europe in the seventeenth century (1618–1648). Ended with the Treaty of Westphalia, which ushered in the era of nation-states. (p. 16)

Treaty of Versailles: peace treaty of 1918–1919, which ended World War I. (p. 19)

Treaty of Westphalia: peace treaty in 1648, which ended the Thirty Years' War. It marked the birth of the modern nation-state system (sometimes called the Westphalian system), centred around the ideas of territorial integrity and political sovereignty for every country. (p. 16)

Western civilization: (1) geographical reference, to Western Europe and the colonies it created, especially throughout the Americas and Australia/New Zealand; (2) reference to shared values and a set of beliefs about how to ideally run a society. (p. 24)

Study Questions

Scroll to the end for answers.

1. What are the six vital components of a country?
2. What is the difference between high culture and low culture?
3. What are the main differences between countries of the Global North and countries of the Global South?
4. What are the seven shared (ideal) values of Western civilization?

Weblinks

Guns, Germs, and Steel Documentary

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLhzqSO983AmHwWvGwccC46gs0SNObwnZX>

- Three-part documentary based on Jared Diamond's Pulitzer Prize-winning book (see citation in Further Readings section)
- Tackles the big question of why some parts of the world became so much more powerful and wealthy than other parts of the world

Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* Revisited

<https://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/04/opinion/04brooks.html>

- Op-ed piece in the *New York Times* that re-considers Huntington's famous thesis nearly 20 years later

Revisionist History Podcast

<http://revisionisthistory.com/about>

- Podcast by *New York Times* bestselling author (*The Tipping Point*, *Blink*, *Outliers*, are a few of his books) and well-known social commentator Malcolm Gladwell; each episode goes back in history and "reinterprets something from the past: an event, a person, an idea. Something overlooked. Something misunderstood"

Foreign Policy Article: "The Ideology of Development"

<http://foreignpolicy.com/2009/10/13/the-ideology-of-development/>

- Article in *Foreign Policy* magazine by well-known American development economist William Easterly about the ideological nature of the concept of "development" and all the problems this poses for the world

Further Readings

Diamond, Jared. 2005. *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton.

- This Pulitzer Prize-winning book by American geography and physiology professor Jared Diamond tackles the big question of how the modern world came to be. Why did wealth and power become distributed the way they are now, and not some other way? In other words, why did human beings on different continents developed at different rates? The author focuses on environmental and geographical factors (not biological differences) as the ultimate explanations for this chain of causation.

Ferguson, Niall. 2017. *The Square and the Tower: Networks and Power, from the Freemasons to Facebook*. New York, NY: Penguin Press.

- Niall Ferguson's latest book considers how power has been employed throughout history, and the conflict that arises time and time again between networks (horizontal systems) and hierarchies (vertical systems). This book is highly relevant today, as the twenty-first century has been called the "Age of Networks."

Fukuyama, Francis. 2012. *The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Fukuyama, Francis. 2014. *Political Order and Political Decay: From the Industrial Revolution to the Globalization of Democracy*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

- This two-volume set by well-known American political scientist Francis Fukuyama is similar in scope to Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel*. The books trace the evolution of basic political institutions, analyze why some states fail, and consider how democratic societies develop and survive; the author identifies three key components to a modern political order: state building, rule of law, and accountable government.

Zinn, Howard. 2016. *A People's History of the United States*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.

- A classic, revisionist history of the United States, first published in 1980 by influential American historian and social activist Howard Zinn. The book chronicles US history from the "bottom-up" and challenges the traditional narrative of "America."

Answers to Study Questions

1. The six vital components of a country are territory, human population, economy, culture, state (or government), and non-state actors/associations. (p. 4)
2. High culture reflects the most meaningful aspects of a culture, including great works of art like Picasso's paintings and important literary works like Shakespeare's plays. Low culture represents the more everyday and common forms of belief and behaviour, like popular music, books, and sports, as well as dietary practices and cuisines. (pp. 7–8)
3. Countries in the Global North tend to be wealthier, better educated, healthier, less populated, more technologically advanced, more urbanized, and more powerful than countries in the Global South. (pp. 21–22)
4. The seven shared values of Western civilization are individualism, democracy, free-market capitalism, history of Christianity as dominant religion (but separation of church and state today), commitment to science and technology to improve people's lives, urbanization, robust civil society activity. (pp. 25–26)