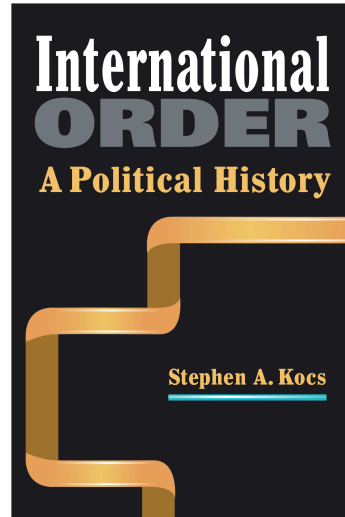


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A Political History

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1

Introduction

THE QUESTION OF ORDER IS PERHAPS THE MOST IMPORTANT problem in international relations. International order matters because it is a precondition for attaining many of the goals of human existence. Human societies find it difficult to thrive amid conditions of chaos and insecurity. In modern times, the collapse of international order has coincided with the onset of total war, as exemplified by World Wars I and II. Those wars resulted in millions of deaths, caused physical destruction on a massive scale, and disrupted lives all across the globe. If an all-out war among major powers were to take place in today's nuclear-armed world, the survival of the human race would be endangered. For that reason, political leaders are normally anxious to ensure that international order does not collapse.

Where does international order come from? How is it created and maintained? The existence of order at the international level cannot be taken for granted. The international realm consists of multiple independent political actors able to decide for themselves how they will behave toward others. International politics therefore takes place in a condition of anarchy, meaning that no one government exercises effective authority over the whole realm. Under anarchy, political order exists only to the extent that the actors deliberately construct it.

In the modern world, sovereign states are the main international actors. There are nearly 200 sovereign states in existence today, ranging from very large and powerful ones, such as the United States and

China, to comparatively small and powerless ones, such as Fiji and Luxembourg. Each sovereign state has its own government, laws, and armed forces. As a sovereign actor, a state may pursue whatever foreign policy it deems desirable and may choose to do so without regard to the impact on other states. It may decide to cooperate with other states, but it may also decide to launch a war or take other actions damaging to them.

Given such circumstances, it might seem logical to expect that international affairs would be chaotic, with states engaged in an endless and violent struggle to seize resources for themselves and enslave or destroy those who stand in their way. Yet if we survey the world as it actually is, that is not what we find. In the real world, the vast majority of states coexist peacefully with their neighbors. Every year, trillions of dollars in goods and services are traded across international borders. Millions of tourists, students, and businesspeople travel to and from foreign countries without incident. Banks and business firms invest billions of dollars in foreign economies, confident that their investments are safe. Although conflicts of interest between states sometimes give rise to skirmishes and tests of will, it is unusual for such conflicts to escalate to full-scale war. To be sure, there is a great deal of organized violence in the world, but most of it takes place within states, not between them, and arises from domestic power struggles rather than international ones. In short, order seems more prevalent in the international realm than does chaos.

Historically, breakdowns of international order have been followed quickly by attempts to reestablish it on a more solid foundation. States create international order by accepting constraints on their behavior. Such constraints may derive from custom or from explicit rules like those listed in the United Nations charter, or from informal agreements between states. For example, during the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union reached an informal agreement not to challenge each other's vital interests in Europe. The United States refrained from challenging Soviet domination of eastern Europe; in return, the Soviet Union refrained from challenging US leadership over western Europe. The agreement enabled the two superpowers to avoid all-out war, even though their overall relationship remained highly adversarial.

A set of rules or arrangements that creates order among international political actors may be called an international political system, or "international system" for short. International systems are estab-

lished by the most powerful international actors, and any system they create reflects their preferences. That is to be expected. The powerful actors wield the economic and military capabilities necessary to sustain a system. The less powerful actors do not.

An international system defines the rights and obligations of the actors that make it up and specifies the constraints they are expected to observe in their behavior toward each other. Once established, an international system normally remains in place for as long as the powerful actors retain the ability and will to uphold it. If a time comes when they are no longer able or willing to do so, the system will fall apart, and a period of disorder is likely to ensue before a new system is put into place. Given that the identities and preferences of the most powerful actors change over time, international systems change over time as well. Each system is specific to its own historical era.

This book approaches the question of international order from a comparative historical perspective. It traces the rise and fall of successive international systems through history, focusing initially on the international systems of late medieval and early modern Europe, then turning its attention to the more globalized international systems established beginning in the nineteenth century. By comparing the international systems of different periods, the analysis highlights the distinctive features of each system and illuminates long-term trends.

A central argument of this book is that the essential character of international order has evolved over time. In late medieval Europe, international order arose mainly from the religious beliefs and social customs that defined western Christendom. In adhering to those beliefs and customs, European rulers accepted some implicit constraints on their international actions. By the eighteenth century, religion and custom were fading as sources of restraint. International order came to depend on informal, pragmatic arrangements among the major European powers. Those arrangements enabled the major powers to advance their own interests, but did so in ways that often sacrificed the interests of less powerful states and peoples. Another major shift occurred after World War I, when the victorious powers agreed that international order should be based on explicit, universal rules designed to protect the security and independence of all states. Since that time, universal rules have provided much of the basis for international order. But because not all states have been willing to adhere to those rules, order has continued to depend partly on informal arrangements based on power.

The book proceeds as follows. Chapter 2 introduces key concepts and provides an overview of the main arguments. Chapter 3 explores international politics in Renaissance Europe, showing how hereditary monarchs employed dynastic wars and marriages to perpetuate an international order based on inherited rulership. Chapter 4 shows how the great powers in eighteenth-century Europe tried to preserve their independence through balance-of-power stratagems. Chapter 5 traces the rise and fall of the Concert of Europe, which the great powers created as a basis for international order following the Napoleonic Wars. Chapter 6 describes the revival of the Concert of Europe in the 1870s and shows how the revived Concert preserved international order until the outbreak of World War I in 1914. Chapter 7 covers the period between the two world wars and examines why the international system established after World War I broke down so quickly. Chapter 8 addresses the Cold War era, focusing on the role of the United States in constructing and managing global international order. Chapter 9 examines the nature of international order in the post-Cold War world. Finally, Chapter 10 discusses questions facing the international system as we look toward the future.

The story of international order is ongoing. Every international system reflects the political conditions that existed at the time of its creation. As those conditions change, the rules and arrangements that define the system may become more difficult to sustain. New rules and arrangements, reflecting new circumstances, may need to be created. For example, political observers point to China's emergence as a global economic power as a development that may well lead to significant changes in the current international system. Other contemporary developments, such as climate change, declining birth rates across most of the developed world, and the growth of populist political movements in the United States and Europe, may also lead to changes. What form will those changes take? How will they come about? The history of international order provides important clues.