

Emergence of the International State System: A Historical Perspective

Abhishek Choudhary
abhishek.chy23@gmail.com

Doctoral Candidate

Centre for International Politics, Organization and Disarmament,
School of International Studies,
Jawaharlal Nehru University.

Abstract: The paper seeks to examine historical evolution of state systems to understand the present phase of international relations. It begins by identifying four types of international systems: Independent; Hegemonic; Imperial; and Feudal. The paper then discusses the Persian Empire, Classical Greece, India and the Roman Empire in order to fit in the above-mentioned categories. The next part engages with the specificity of the Westphalian system and the issue of sovereignty. It assesses the change from a divinity ordained idea of rule to that of popular sovereignty. It ends with the notion that Westphalia was not just a moment. It was rather an idea that continues to remain as a process in the so-called post-Westphalian system of states.

Introduction

The role of history is important at multiple levels. Major concepts of the discipline have been the result of historical circumstances (Mingst 2011). The importance of history is also evident from the fact that scholars tend to look at theoretical concepts from the past to make sense of present developments. In this regard, the chapter presents an analysis of the emergence of the international state system.

International system could be defined as an aggregation of similar or diverse entities linked by regular interactions. The main actors in the international realm are the states even when other actors are gaining importance with the advent of the forces of globalisation. 'States', as a legal concept, are characterised by – (a) A territory with defined boundaries; (b) A population; (c) A government; and (d) Recognition as a

sovereign state by other sovereign states (Viotti and Kauppi 2001: 32). This definition of states reflects the concept of state sovereignty that is enshrined in Article 1 of the 1933 Montevideo Convention. The article defines state as possessing the following qualifications: (a) a permanent population; (b) a defined territory; (c) government; and (d) capacity to enter into relations with the other states (Mansbach and Taylor 2008). State sovereignty, thus, is one major aspect.

Types of International Systems

Viotti and Kauppi (2001: 35) identify four ideal types of international systems – Independent; Hegemonic; Imperial; and Feudal – and explain the benefits of applying this conceptual category to understand the history of international relations. These are ideal types – this means that these were not actually present in the exact manner that the categories suggest. However, the international systems fall under these categories in a broader sense. Also, in real world, there is a possibility of overlaps between categories as the next section will demonstrate.

First, the *independent state systems* are political entities that claim to be sovereign with the right to make both foreign policy and domestic decisions. Maintenance of balance of power and respect for sovereignty are central to this system. Second, in *hegemonic state system*, one or more states dominate the system and exert direct influence on external affairs of other states. Such a system could be unipolar (single dominant state), bipolar or dual hegemony (two dominant states), multipolar or collective hegemony (three or more dominant states). Third, the *imperial system* or the suzerain system consists of separate societal units associated by regular interaction, but one among them asserts political supremacy and tends to manage the affairs of a subject state or colony. Fourth, the *Feudal system* is distinguished by its characteristic of power being claimed by a diverse group of governmental units including kings, barons, trading houses, and popes in a very decentralized system (Mansbach and Taylor 2008).

The so-called “Pre-Westphalian World” could be understood by looking at the then

existing system of states. An analysis of the major historical international systems allows us to understand the diversity of systems, actors and processes (Mansbach and Taylor 2008).

Major Historical International Systems in Pre-Westphalian Phase

Different types of international systems – falling under and around the ideal types of independent, hegemonic, imperial and feudal systems – existed in history. Viotti and Kauppi (2001) lists some major historical international systems to explain this broad categorisation. These were: 1. The Persian Empire – close to the ideal type of an imperial system; 2. Classical Greece – falling under the ideal types of independent state system and hegemonic system; 3. India – representing independent state system and imperial system; 4. The Roman Empire; and 5. Medieval Europe representing a feudal system (Viotti and Kauppi 2001).

The Persian Empire

Persia (centered in the present-day Iran) is an example of imperial organization in the ancient world. Persians were experts in assimilating the local customs of areas that they sought to include in their empire. This allowed for an easy expansion and an efficient control of their empire. They, for instance, adopted the Egyptian advances in administration and science. They used the local language of conquered territory as the common language for better communication. The Persian Empire had a decentralised control. While the inner core was directly administered, control was more decentralised in areas that were far from the capital. The territories in such areas were quasi-autonomous implying that they had some degree of control. The major way to maintain control was through persuasion. The political rulers, with aid from advisory councils, exercised a separate jurisdiction than the local commanders. Local administrative customs were respected and adopted to administer areas that had regional and cultural differences across the far-flung empire. The Persian rulers' approach to empire was based on providing internal autonomy to constituent territorial units. This, in turn, lowered the military and administrative costs considerably.

Classical Greece

Classical Greece (6th – 1st Century BC) consisted of various political entities called as city-states that had small population and limited external control. The type of government in Greek city-states included monarchies that tended towards despotism. Other types of rule included enlightened aristocracies, exploitative oligarchies and democracy as well. Different city-states worked towards maintaining their independence. The powerful city-states tended to dominate the weaker city-states and extracted tribute in return for military protection. Diplomatic practices mainly rested upon delegations that were sent to other city-states to present demands, resolve disputes or enter into trade agreements. The interstate relations for European and American diplomats in the 18th and 19th centuries was modelled on this classical Greek period (Viotti and Kauppi 2001).

The rise of Sparta and Athens as two most powerful city-states during the 5th Century B.C.E. marked the beginning of a period of dual hegemony in place of independent state system. The Spartans and Athenians joined hands in preventing Persian invasions more than once. The Persian invasion of northern Greece in was prevented in 490 B.C.E. Few years later, the Spartans joined forces with a combined Greek force to repel the second Persian invasion. Forces of Persian King Xerxes were eventually defeated with support from Athenian navy. Athens presented the idea of creating the Delian League in order to prevent another Persians invasion. The Delian League was an alliance of the city-states that were most vulnerable to Persian pressure. With this arrangement in place, Athens continued to expand the naval and other military forces in the name of protecting other city-sates from possible Persian invasion. In the process, Athens became a major military power. The Delian League, however, began to face problems as the member states were forced to pay tribute to Athens. Also, Athens started to dominate and dictated their foreign as well as important domestic policies.

The Greeks and the Persians entered a peace treaty in 449 B.C.E. The Athenians and Spartans began to recognise the respective spheres of influence. This created a ‘balance of power’ between the two city-states and their respective allies. The peace that followed

allowed the two hegemonic rivals to consolidate control in their respective spheres. The Greek international system displayed a ‘dual hegemony’ of Athens and Sparta. Independent state system returned with the defeat of Athens in 404 B.C.E. Sparta, however, began to assert its hegemony by interfering in the internal affairs of other Greek city-states and eventually lost support of its former allies. Persians joined the anti-hegemonic coalition and pushed for a negotiated peace with Sparta and other belligerents to ensure stability at their borders. The resultant international system was based on balance of power among independent states. The peace was short lived and the Spartans, Athenians, and Thebans maintained their respective hegemonic ambitions. A common Greek identity did not prevent war among them. The Persian Empire and the Greek system finally came under imperial rule of Macedonia with the rise of Philip of Macedon and his son, Alexander the Great (356–323 B.C.E.).

For ancient Greek thinkers, the concept of hegemony (*hêgemonía*) meant guidance and leadership, as well as an authority to exercise power, to govern and to command among states. Hegemonic powers are those states that can lead an alliance of affiliated nations and dominate the global political and economic order because of its preponderant capabilities (material or material and ideational, hard or hard and soft power). A hegemonic power can establish and maintain the rules that regulate interactions within the international system of states on the basis of its own preferences (Masciulli and Molchanov 2012).

India

Ancient India was geographically isolated before 6th Century BC and its identity was synonymous with Hinduism. Hindu ideas represent a broad set of values embedded in the Indian culture. However, despite having a common civilization, the Indian subcontinent was divided into a number of independent political units. Some were more powerful than others, and warfare and expansionism were common. Hinduism provided a common cultural identity and interdependence. It helped in development of common rules and customs that guided the relations among various states. Most states were governed by kings belonging to the *kshatriya* caste – the second rank within the varna system – who

believed their primary role in life was to govern and to fight.

When the Persian Empire started its eastward expansion, the Indian rulers and the educated castes came to learn about the concept of 'empire'. The Persians influence continued for about two centuries, till 327 B.C.E. This was followed by Alexander's invasion that brought new Greek ideas. The spread of Buddhism also had a major impact on Hindu life. This turmoil was at the backdrop of the rise of Chandragupta Maurya. Kautilya was instrumental in his rise and after the death of Alexander, the duo seized the opportunity to establish the Mauryan Empire that controlled most of India. Initial years saw expansion in trade owing to domestic and foreign security. However, Chandragupta Maurya started being heavy-handed and made enemies as a result. Empire building continued for the next two generations and his grandson, Asoka (272–231 B.C.E.) is revered as a prominent ruler. Asoka adopted brutal methods to expand the empire in initial years but once he became a Buddhist, he was known for his concern over the welfare of his subjects. Upon his death, however, the bonds of the empire began to loosen. The desire for independence was reasserted by elements throughout the empire which led to a crisis of authority. This caused the eventual collapse of the empire and India went back to a system of independent warring states.

The Roman Empire

Roman Empire is an ultimate historical expression of the imperial international system. It started out as a city-state and expanded its control in all directions in due course of time. Beginning with the reign of Augustus (63-14 B.C.E.), the Roman Empire was internally stable for a couple of centuries. Rome did play a major role in shaping 'thought and practice about the state, international law, and international society'.

With the development of aristocratic rule in Rome, senate came into existence and wielded executive authority. Roman rule expanded despite regular internal strife. The senate continued to gain more and more power with increase in wealth combined with able rulers. The senate very smartly realised that their long-term interests would suffer if they abused the newly subjected communities. Thus, they allowed those populations to

benefit from the Roman law and order. Roman citizenship was also extended to certain individuals. The distant communities professed substantial self-rule as the degree of direct rule lessened with increased distance from the capital.

From 250 to 200 B.C.E., Rome and Carthage were two major powers seeking supremacy but Rome absorbed the Carthaginian Empire with victory in the Punic wars (264 to 146 B.C.E.). Rome further gained control towards the East in absence of any anti-hegemonic coalition between the Greeks and the Macedonians. The Roman imperial lands were divided into provinces that were ruled and taxed by Roman governors. The kingdoms were given local autonomy and indigenous customs were respected as long as they pledged loyalty. The executive authority and bureaucracy of the central government were weak and it was difficult to control territories effectively. In such scenario, military leaders tried to step in to fill the void only to create more unrest. Caesar Augustus provided respite to the empire from internal strife and retained ultimate power. He also gained legitimacy by restoring some privileges and responsibilities of the Senate.

Problems for Roman Empire began to resurface by the 3rd Century C.E. when the Roman territory was invaded by the armies of Persian Sassanid Empire. Several Roman generals came to power with fragile attempts to restore order. Imperial authority got concentrated in the hands of the emperor and the power of the Senate was lost. By C.E. 476, Roman Empire came to a formal end in the West after Germanic invasion.

After the decline of the Roman Empire by the 5th century C.E., the period known as the Middle Ages began. This period ended with the Renaissance and the Reformation of the 15th and 16th centuries. The importance of this period lies in its being the immediate predecessor to the modern state system.

The Christian Church was the highest authority and its teachings became the religion of the Roman Empire around 3rd Century C.E. This happened after the emperor of Rome, Constantine, converted to Christianity (some believe that he co-opted Christian leaders) to have a unified imperial religion (Viotti and Kauppi 2001). Christianity offered a

religious-cultural frame that was consistent with earlier Stoic philosophical roots. Christian leaders realised the need to develop their own sources of worldly power to support their evangelical mission after the collapse of the Roman empire. Thus the Church began to gain wealthy and legitimacy. Christianity was the framework within which private as well as public life in medieval era was conducted. Church in Western Europe proclaimed the universal legitimacy in the religious realm. However, political power remained deeply fragmented and several actors sought to claim legitimacy.

The Holy Roman Empire, centered in Germany, was founded by Charlemagne in the early 9th century. The successors Charlemagne did seek to counterweight the growing power of the Church through imperial power. However, the Holy Roman Empire effectively collapsed owing to internal weaknesses coupled with the Hungarian invasions. Though the constituent kingdoms existed, they lacked efficient bureaucracies and military forces. The Kings, therefore, had little power over the local barons. As a result, the system changed to feudalism where the local barons gained prominence during 19th Century. Public authority was placed in private hands of the feudal lords who held their authority at the expense of kings. Political authority throughout Europe was fragmentation because the local government was more powerful than the claims of kings. Political authority was claimed by a diverse collection of institutions and individuals, including local barons, bishops, kings, and popes (Viotti and Kauppi 2001). Any one of these entities could be granted or denied diplomatic status or right of embassy depending on their status. Diplomacy did exist during the medieval period. However, in place of national interest, interest of particular rulers and dynasties existed. There was a high degree of dynastic interdependence that mainly was a result of diplomatic marriages and political courtship.

Westphalia

The Thirty Years' War: Beginnings and the Course of War

History has shown that some states in the independent state system tend to move towards hegemonic or imperial system and other states attempt to prevent this. This has been the cause of major military conquests as well. Scholars have also simplified the history of

international relations by arguing that the contemporary system emerged post 1648. The Thirty Years' War was a conflict over religion, religious authority, and the power of the Holy Roman Empire.

The Thirty Years' War originated with the revolt in Prague on 23 May 1618. The revolt was mainly a protestant uprising against Emperor Matthias who brought in the decision to proceed with 'counterreformation' in the Austrian Habsburg. The mobilisation was based on the Protestant religion nobles. After Matthias' death in 1619, the Habsburg lands were left under the control of the Archduke Ferdinand (1619–1637) who also was aggressive against reformation. The Bohemian rebels knew about this policy of Ferdinand against Protestantism. They sought respite by crowning Calvinist Elector Frederick V of the Palatine as the king of Bohemia on 4 November 1619 (Nexon 2009).

The 1555 Peace of Augsburg was dying due to disputes over principalities and the growth of Calvinism. The German Protestant princes formed the Evangelical Union in 1608. This was followed by the elector of Bavaria forming the Catholic League in 1609. Tensions between the two groups led to the division of the Duchy between the Calvinist and Catholic claimants. The anti-Habsburg rebellion of Calvinists was suppressed through external intervention and the the Evangelical League was convinced to back out. The army of the Protestants was crushed by the Catholic forces at the Battle of White Mountain on 8 November 1620.

The 'Twelve Years' Truce' between the Spanish Habsburgs and the Dutch Republic ended when Catholic forces made efforts to dethrone Elector Frederick. The Dutch were in a disadvantageous position due to internal divisions, weak foreign alliances, political and religious conflicts. By 1619 the Orthodox Calvinist party controlled the republic and provided financial and military support to extremist Protestants in Germany. Eventually, Catholic forces defeated the Elector Frederick in 1623 and gave electorship to Maximilian of Bavaria. As a reaction, a new Protestant alliance among the Lutheran prince Christian IV of Denmark, prince of the Netherlands, England, and Frederick V. Thus, the Spanish-Dutch war got linked to the German conflict. Later, Christian IV's

forces were defeated by the imperial troops led by Albrecht von Wallenstein in 1627. In 1629, there was a limited war between France and Spain. It was related to the claims on the Duchy of Mantua after the death of Duke Vincent II. The Spanish Army was involved in a prolonged siege of Casale and La Rochelle fell to royal forces in October 1628 ending to the Ninth French War of Religion. France was free to act under the direction of Cardinal Richelieu and in February 1629, French forced Spain to lift the siege of Casale. The conflict continued and caused a diversion of resources and attention from the war with the Dutch (Nexon 2009).

Ferdinand dictated severe terms against the German Protestants in the 'Edict of Restitution' of May 1629 that prohibited Calvinism. This inflamed the Protestants and Richelieu convinced king Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden to intervene in Germany for the Protestant cause. The Swedes began with major successes. However, by November 1632, its position began to weaken and it was defeated eventually by the combined army of Austria and Spain in September 1634. Habsburg power was winning in Germany as most of the Protestant German princes agreed to the 1635 Peace of Prague. Richelieu decided to intervene to keep the Swedes in the war. With no pressure on the Habsburgs in Germany, Spain had a free hand. Also, with French commitment to the war, the Thirty Years' War became a Pan-European war. Swedish and French forces remained engaged in Germany causing massive casualties and displacement of civilians (Nexon 2009).

The Treaty of Westphalia

The Peace of Westphalia (1648) ended the Thirty Years' War and established the right of princes to exercise authority over people in territories within their jurisdictions. Within their jurisdiction, princes were to be autonomous in the conduct of foreign relations. It ended the rule of religious authority and led to the emergence of secular authorities in Europe. The Peace of Westphalia was comprised of two major treaties, one signed between the Holy Roman Empire and France at Osnabrück, and the other signed between the Holy Roman Empire and Sweden at Münster.

In the two treaties of Westphalia, the Austrian Habsburgs made peace with their enemies.

Spain formally recognized the Dutch and made peace with them. However, the war continued with France. Spain did achieve some degree of domestic stability but Philip IV decided to continue the war and in 1656 England rallied against Spain. In 1659, however, Philip IV was forced to agree for a peace treaty with France (Nexon 2009).

It is important to note that even though the Peace of Westphalia is seen to manifest the ideals of sovereignty, the first legal effort to establish a peaceful coexistence between the Catholics and the Protestants was made almost a century prior to it (Mansbach and Taylor 2008). In 1555, the Peace of Augsburg granted new powers to the princes under the principle of that the religion of the subjects would be decided by the one who governs the territory. The Augsburg Peace was a major step toward the independence of principalities from the papacy and the Holy Roman Empire. It, however, did not succeed in ending religious controversy. Philosophers like Jean Bodin and Thomas Hobbes contemplated the idea of sovereignty in this atmosphere (Mansbach and Taylor 2008).

Sovereignty

Using broad categorisations, the term sovereignty has been used in four different ways: *domestic sovereignty*, which refers to the “organization of public authority within a state and the level of effective control exercised by those holding authority”; *interdependence sovereignty*, which refers to the “ability of public authorities to control trans-border movements”; *international legal sovereignty*, which refers to the “mutual recognition of states or other entities”; and *Westphalian sovereignty*, which refers to the “exclusion of external actors from domestic authority configurations” (Krasner 1999).

Sovereignty according to Jean Bodin and Thomas Hobbes

Jean Bodin (1530-1596) was a French lawyer who lived during an era of religious war between the Protestants and the Catholics. Sovereignty was understood by Bodin as the power to make the laws. Sovereignty was the ‘absolute and perpetual power vested in the commonwealth’ (Bodin 1976). In his *Six Books of the Republic* (1576), he advocated greater authority for the king in order to have a united France. He argued that a sovereign state should enjoy supreme power over citizens and subjects. The leaders, however, were

limited by the laws of God, the laws of nature, the constitutional laws. The contracts, covenant and promises entered with the people also provide limitations on the authority.

Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) was an English philosopher who presented the idea of the *Leviathan* – a strong central authority. Hobbes was pessimistic about human nature and considered the life of man as solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short (Hobbes 1991). He presented an authoritarian solution to the problem of civil war. The royalist supporters of the Stuart King Charles I were pitted against the parliamentary supporters of Oliver Cromwell. Hobbes argued that only an absolutist government could maintain peace and security in a world in which everyone was constantly at war with everyone else. The leviathan, however, was also limited in power by the fact that he could not cause injury to those who came together and created him for their protection.

‘Westphalia’ as an idea and a process

‘Westphalia’, as an idea represents the state-centric character of world order where membership is accorded exclusively to territorially sovereign states (Falk 2002: 312). The term, when used in this sense, moves beyond the historical point of 1648 and conveys a broader feature of the world order – states are the sole members in an international system.

On the other hand, ‘Westphalia’, as a process, represents to the changing character of the state and statecraft as it has evolved during more than 350 years since the treaties were negotiated. It represents the time that saw some major developments like colonialism, decolonization, the establishment of international institutions, the advent of globalisation and corresponding rise of global market and emergence of global civil society (Falk 2002: 312).

Conclusion

Several scholars of international relations have considered the treaties of Westphalia as the major incident that shaped the modern international relations. Some scholars, however, have contested the importance accorded to the Peace of Westphalia. The general idea is that even though the contribution of the Peace is undeniable, it would be

oversimplification to suggest that the year 1648 marked a watershed. The Peace of Westphalia, to be clear, did not extend sovereignty throughout Europe. All it did was the reaffirmation of the confederative character of the empire (Teschke 2003).

Another aspect is that the Westphalian treaty was not even Pan-European. It included only three parties – the Holy Roman Empire, France and Sweden. To assert that it can be applied to entire international system would be an overstatement. The context and the setting under which the treaty was entered had a particular historical logic to it and the same could not be said of the present context.

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