COURSE GUIDE

IRS 102
EVOLUTION OF THE CONTEMPORARY INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM

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Introduction

Welcome to*: Evolution of the Contemporary International System*. This is a two-credit-unit course available to undergraduate B.Sc. students—International *Relations programme.* The course provides an opportunity for you to acquire a detailed knowledge and understanding of what the international system is, its structures and characteristics, its evolution from one stage to another and what shape it is likely to assume in the future. The international system has not been static but has evolved from one stage to another. Thus, even though this course is not a history course, understanding the evolution of the contemporary international system requires recourse to historical evidence. This means that in this course, we shall rely heavily on the history of world politics.

The course likewise dives into the term "system" and how it is appropriately applied to the arena of global politics. It also examines the origins of the international system, from the classical to the contemporary. The focus is on basic approaches to understanding how the international system works, as exemplified by the realist and idealist kaleidoscopic lenses. As well, watersheds in the history of the international system are explored. These include the Westphalian peace treaties that gave rise to the "modern" state system, the transitional international system, and the international system during the world wars, the Cold War, and the post-Cold War era.

This course guide provides you with the necessary information about the course content and the materials you will need to understand the subject matter. It is designed to help you get the most from the course by enabling you to think productively about the principles underlying the issues you study and the projects you undertake throughout your studies and thereafter. It also provides guidance on how to approach your tutor-marked assignments (TMAs). You will, of course, receive on-the-spot guidance from your tutorial classes, which you are advised to approach with all seriousness. Overall, this course guide will fill an important vacuum in the field of international studies, especially as it is interested in knowing and explaining why nations behave the way they do, as well as interpreting the relationship among nation-states in terms of alliances and confrontational relationships that colour inter-state relations in the arena of international politics.

What you will learn in this course

The overall objective of **IRS 102, Evolution of the Contemporary International System, is to expose students to interactions within** the international system. The course provides an opportunity for you to acquire detailed knowledge and understanding of what international is, its structure and characteristics, its evolution from one stage to another, and

the shape it is likely to assume in the future. The course likewise dives into the term “system” and how it is appropriately applied to the arena of global politics. It also examines the origins of the international system, from the classical to the contemporary. The focus is on basic approaches to understanding how the international system works, as exemplified by the realist and idealist kaleidoscopic lenses. As well, watersheds in the history of the international system are explored. These include the Westphalian peace treaties that gave rise to the "modern" state system, the transitional international system, and the international system during the world wars, the Cold War, and the post-Cold War era.

Course Aims
The aims of this course are to:

- explicate the term “system” as applied to the international system;
- present an overview of approaches in understanding the working of the international system;
- trace the origins and/or history of the evolution of the contemporary international system;
- identify the major features and characteristics of the international system; and
- discuss major issues in the contemporary international system.

Course Objectives
By the end of the course, you will be able to:

- define a system and explain what the international system is;
- differentiate between the international system and systems in other fields of study;
- distinguish between the international system and international society;
- identify major actors in the international system (states and non-state actors);
- define concepts such as state, anarchy, national interest, power, polarity, and hegemony;
- define realism and idealism as frameworks for understanding the international system;
- enumerate the basic assumptions of realist and idealist schools of thought;
- explain classical realism, neorealism, classical neorealism, liberal idealism, neoliberal idealism, and neoconservatism;
- identify notable scholars in international relations and their contributions;
- define the concept of the Great Debates in international studies and explain the context of the first Great Debate.

- define the classical international system and explain the pre-Westphalian world, the Thirty Years' War, and the Peace of Westphalia;
- discuss the birth of nation-states and the distribution of power and wealth in the classical system;
- explain the emergence of the transitional international system, its actors, and features such as polarisation and interdependence;
- examine scholarly disagreements on the international system from Thucydides to the post-Cold War era;
- define the postwar international system, superpowers, and bipolarity;
- explain factors leading to the collapse of the postwar system and the rise of the contemporary international system;
- discuss the distribution of power, wealth, and interdependence in the post-Cold War system;
- explain how globalisation, collective security, and terrorism impact the international system;
- critically assess globalisation, especially its effects on developing nations;
- define collective security, trace its evolution, and discuss challenges in its application;
- define terrorism, enumerate its characteristics, and explain reasons for its prevalence;
- identify alternative world order models and regionalism as possible frameworks for reordering the future international system; and
- describe major political formations in Northern Nigeria (e.g., Sokoto Caliphate, Kanem-Borno Empire) on the eve of British colonisation.

Working through this Course

It is advisable that you carefully study each unit, beginning with this course guide, especially since this course provides an opportunity to understand the major approaches to interpreting the workings of the international system in terms of their theoretical assumptions. It is also advisable to make a habit of noting down any questions you might have for tutorials. In addition, you should endeavour to note some of the relevant knowledge that would help you as a future Nigerian policy maker in the area of international politics.

Course Materials

i. Course Guide
ii. Study Units
iii. Textbooks and other Reference Sources
iv. Assignment File
v. Presentation

Study Units
There are nineteen study units in this course, captured in four modules, as follows:

Module 1: Understanding the International System

Unit 1: The Definition of the International System
Unit 2 The Realist Approach in Understanding the International System
Unit 3 The Idealist Approach in Understanding the International System
Unit 4 The Idealist versus the Realist Approaches in Understanding the International System

Module 2 Evolution of the Contemporary International System

Unit 1 The Classical International System (1648-1789)
Unit 2 The Transitional International System (1789-1945)
Unit 3 The Post World War II International System (1945-1989)
Unit 4 The Contemporary International System (1989-Date)

Module 3 Characteristics of the International System

Unit 1 The Actors in the International System
Unit 2 Anarchy in the International System
Unit 3 Interest and the Use of Power in the International System
Unit 4 Polarity in the International System

Module 4 Issues in the Contemporary International System

Unit 1 The Impact of Globalisation
Unit 2 Collective Security
Unit 3 Terrorism in the International System
Unit 4 The Future of the International System

Each unit contains several self-tests. In general, these self-tests question you on the materials you have just covered or require you to apply them in some way and, thereby, assist you in gauging your progress as well as reinforcing your understanding of the material. Together with tutor-marked assignments, these exercises will assist you in achieving the stated learning objectives of the individual units and of the Course.

Textbooks and Reference
At the end of each unit, there is a list of relevant reference materials which you may wish to consult as the need arises. The list, however, is not exhaustive or sacrosanct. You are encouraged to cultivate the habit of consulting as many relevant materials as possible within the time available.

Assignment File
There are two aspects to the assessment of this course. In this file, you will find all the details of the work you must submit to your tutor for marking. The marks you obtain for these assignments will count towards the final mark you obtain for this course. Further information on the assignment will be found in the Assignment File itself, and later in this Course Guide in the section on assessment.

There are many assignments in this course, with at least one per unit. These assignments are meant to assist you in understanding the course.

Assessment
There are two aspects to the assessment of this course. First, there are the tutor-marked assignments; second, there is a written examination.

In tackling these assignments, you are expected to apply the information, knowledge and experience acquired during the course. The assignments must be submitted to your tutor for formal assessment in accordance with the deadlines stated in the Assignment File. The work you submit to your tutor for assessment will account for 30 per cent of your total course mark. At the end of the course, you will need to sit for a final examination of three hours' duration. This examination will account for the other 70 per cent of your total course mark.

Tutor-Marked Assignments (TMAs)
There are 25 tutor-marked assignments in this course. You only need to submit some of the assignments. The best four (i.e. the highest four of what you submit) will be counted. Each assignment counts for 20 marks, but on average, when the five assignments are put together, the score will count 30% towards your total course mark.

The Assignments for the units in this course are contained in the Assignment File. You will be able to complete your assignments from the information and materials contained in the reference books, reading and study units. However, it is always desirable at this level of your education to research more widely and demonstrate that you have a very broad and in-depth knowledge of the subject matter.

When each assignment is completed, send it together with a TMA (tutor-marked assignment) form to your tutor. Ensure that each assignment reaches your tutor on or before the deadline given in the Assignment File. If, for any reason, you cannot complete your work on time, contact your tutor before the assignment is due to discuss the possibility of an extension. Extensions will not be granted after the due date unless exceptional circumstances warrant such.

Final Examination and Grading
The final examination for **IRS 102 Evolution of Contemporary International Relations** will last three hours and be worth 70% of the total course grade. The examination will consist of questions which reflect the practice exercises and tutor-marked assignments you have previously encountered. All areas of the course will be assessed.

Use the time between completing the last unit and sitting for the examination to revise the entire course. You may find it useful to review your tutor-marked assignments and comment on them before the examination.
The final examination covers information from all aspects of the course.

Course Marking Scheme
Table 1: *Course marking Scheme*

ASSESSMENT	**MARKS**
Assignments	Four submissions were submitted, the best three accounts for 30% of the course marks.
Final Examination	70% of overall course marks
Total	**100% of course marks**

How to get the most from this Course
In distance learning, study units replace university lectures. This is one of the great advantages of distance learning; you can read and work through specially designed study materials at your own pace, and at a time and place that suits you best. Think of it as reading the lecture instead of listening to the lecturer. In the same way, a lecturer might give you some reading to do; the study units tell you when to read and which texts or reference books to use. You are provided exercises to do at appropriate points, just as a lecturer might give you an in-class exercise.

Each of the study units follows a common format. The first item is an introduction to the unit's subject matter and its integration with the other units and the course as a whole. Next to this is a set of learning objectives. These objectives indicate what you should be able to do by the time you complete the unit. These learning objectives are meant to guide your study. The moment a unit is finished, you must go back and check whether you have achieved the objectives. If you make this a habit, you will significantly improve your chances of passing the course.

The main body of the unit guides you through the required reading from other sources. This will usually come from either the reference books or the Reading section.

The following is a practical strategy for working through the course. If you run into any trouble, telephone your tutor. Remember that your tutor's job is to help you. When you need assistance, do not hesitate to call your tutor.

1) Read this Course Guide thoroughly; it is your first assignment.
2) Organise a Study Schedule. Design a 'Course Overview' to guide you through the Course. Note the time you are expected to spend on each unit and how the assignments relate to the units. Important information, such as details about your tutorials and the first day of the semester, is available on the NOUN Website. You need to gather all the information into one place, such as your diary or a wall calendar. Whatever method you choose, you should decide on and write in your own dates and work schedule for each unit.
3) Once you have created your own study schedule, do everything to stay faithful to it. The main reason students fail is that they fall behind on their coursework. If you get into difficulties with your schedule, please let your tutor know before it is too late to get help.
4) Turn to Unit 1 and read the introduction and the objectives for the unit.
5) Assemble the study materials. You will need your set books and the unit you are studying at all times.
6) Work through the unit. As you work through the unit, you will know what sources to consult for further information.
7) Up-to-date course information will be continuously posted there.
8) Well before the relevant due dates (about 4 weeks before due dates), access the Assignment File on the NOUN Website and download your next required assignment. Keep in mind that you will learn a lot by doing the assignment carefully. They have been designed to help you meet the objectives of the course and, therefore, will help you pass the examination. Submit all assignments not later than the due date.
9) Review the objectives for each study unit to confirm that you have achieved them. If you feel unsure about any of the objectives, review the study materials or consult your tutor.
10) When you are confident that you have achieved a unit's objectives, you can start on the next unit. Proceed unit by unit through the course, and try to pace your studies so you stay on schedule.
11) When you have submitted an assignment to your tutor for marking, do not wait for its return before starting on the next unit. Keep to your schedule. When the Assignment is returned, pay particular attention to your tutor's comments, both on the tutor-marked assignment form and also the written comments on the ordinary assignments.
12) After completing the last unit, review the course and prepare yourself for the final examination. Check that you have achieved the unit objectives (listed at the beginning of each unit) and the

course objectives (listed in the Course Guide).

Tutors and Tutorials

There are 15 hours of tutorials available to support this course. You will be notified of the dates, times and location of these tutorials, together with the name and phone number of your tutor.
Your tutor will mark and comment on your assignments, keep a close watch on your progress and on any difficulties you might encounter and assist you during the course. You must mail your tutor- marked assignments to your tutor well before the due date (at least two working days are required). They will be marked by your tutor and returned to you as soon as possible.

Do not hesitate to contact your tutor by telephone, e-mail, or discussion board. The following might be circumstances in which you will find help necessary. Contact your tutor if:

i. you do not understand any part of the study units or the assigned readings;
ii. you have difficulties with the exercises; and
iii. you have a question or problem with an assignment, with your tutor's comments on an assignment or with the grading of an assignment.

Summary
You should try your best to attend the tutorials. This is the only chance to have face-to-face contact with your tutor and have questions answered instantly. You can raise any problem encountered during your study. To gain the maximum benefit from course tutorials, prepare a list of questions before attending them. You will learn quite a lot from participating in the discussions.

MAIN COURSE

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MODULE 1 UNDERSTANDING THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM

Unit 1 The Definition of the International System
Unit 2 The Realist Approach in Understanding the International System
Unit 3 The Idealist Approach in Understanding the International System
Unit 4 The Idealist versus the Realist Approaches in Understanding the International System

UNIT 1 DEFINITION OF THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM

Unit Structure

1.1 Introduction
1.2 Learning Outcomes
1.3 Understanding the Term "System"
1.4 International System as a System
1.5 Definition of International System
1.6 Distinction between International System and International Society
1.7 Summary
1.8 References/Further Readings/Web Resources
1.9 Possible Answers to Self-Assessment Exercises

1.1 Introduction

Welcome to the very first unit of Module 1. In the study of International Relations, you will frequently encounter the term international system. Understanding this concept is essential because it provides a framework for explaining how states and other international actors interact, cooperate, and sometimes compete within the global environment. Before exploring different theories of international relations, it is important to understand what is meant by a system and why this concept has become central to the study of world politics. In this unit, you will examine the origin and meaning of the term system, explore how it is applied to international relations, consider scholarly perspectives on the international system, and distinguish between the concepts of the international system and international society. By the end of the unit, you should have a solid foundation for understanding subsequent discussions on the international system and the major approaches used to explain it.

1.2 Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- explain the meaning of the term *system*;
- explain the concept of the international system;
- describe the characteristics of the international system as a system; and
- distinguish between the international system and international society

1.3 Understanding the Term "System"

Having been introduced to the concept of the international system, it is important to begin by understanding the meaning of the term system, which forms the foundation of the discussions in this unit.

Etymological evidence for the term 'system' traces its origin to the Latin, then Greek, word "systēma", which means a "whole compounded of several parts or members". The term also has a long history in political philosophy, dating back to Aristotle. It was used to connote "union." In earlier times, it was derived from the Greek verb *sunìstemi*, which means "uniting" or "putting together."

How has the meaning of the term system evolved?

It was in the 19th century that the French physicist Nicolas Léonard Sadi Carnot first developed the concept of a "system" in the natural sciences in his study of thermodynamics. In 1824, Carnot studied the system he called the working substance, which involved a body of water vapour in steam engines, to demonstrate the system's ability to work when heat is applied. In 1945, Ludwig von Bertalanffy introduced the concept to the biological sciences, while Norbert Wiener and Ross Ashby pioneered the use of mathematics to study systems (Fagen 1961:896).

The following figure shows how the concept of a system has evolved and been applied across different fields of study.

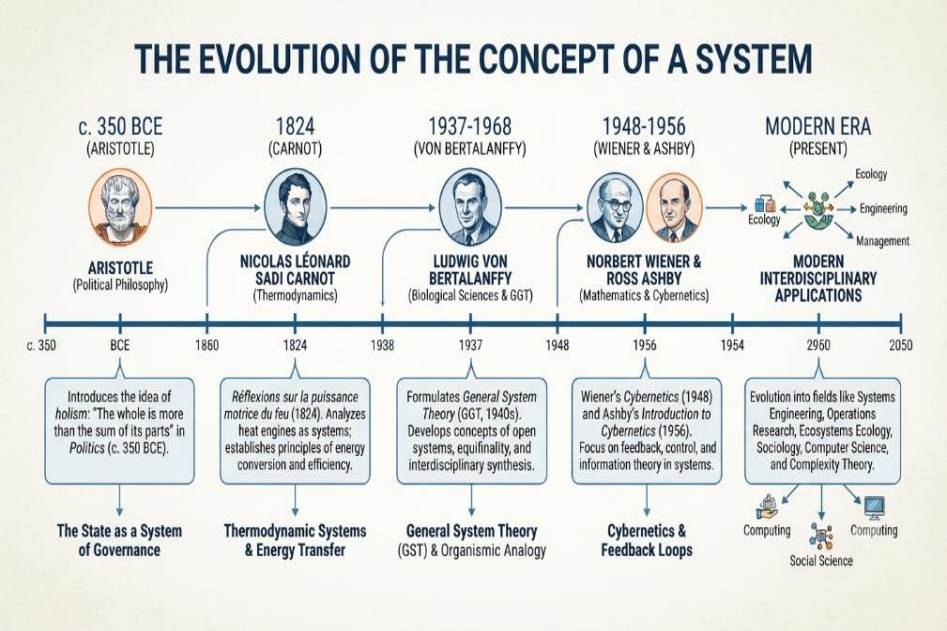

Figure 1.1: Evolution and Application of the Concept of a System
Source: Google Gemini, Adapted by Abdulazeez A. Lawal, NOUN, 2026.

Study the figure carefully. How does it show the development of the concept of a system across different disciplines?

In the present dispensation, the concept of system refers to the interaction among the components of an entity. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines a system as (a) a set of or an assemblage of things connected, associated, or interdependent, to form a complex unit, or (b) a whole composed of parts in orderly arrangement, according to some scheme or plan. This definition presupposes that the connected units or parts should experience some form of interaction. It is also assumed that the interaction can bring about interconnectivity among the units or parts. A system, therefore, implies not only the inter-dependence of parts but also the acceptance of influence from the environment and vice versa.

What common features are shared by all systems regardless of their type?

Definitions of a "system" may vary, but they all point to common salient facts. First, a system has different parts that interact, interrelate, and are interdependent. Second, interdependence here means that when the properties of a component in a system change, all other components and the system as a whole are affected. Third, a system is also viewed as having a boundary. This means some entities are considered to be inside the system, while others are outside. Those outside the system are regarded as the system's environment.

Systems are classified in different ways. There are natural and human-made (designed) systems. Natural systems may not have an apparent objective, but their outputs can be interpreted as purposes. Human-made systems are designed to achieve purposes by delivering outputs. Their parts must be related; that is, they must be designed to work as a coherent entity.

Furthermore, systems can be classified as physical or abstract, and subsystems can be classified as well. Physical systems are tangible entities that may be static or dynamic in operation. Abstract systems, on the other hand, are intangible entities. On the other hand, a subsystem is a set of elements that is a system in its own right but a component of a larger system.

The key characteristics of a system discussed above are summarised in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1: Key Characteristics of a System

Characteristic	**Description**
Structure	A system contains parts or components that are directly or indirectly related to one another.
Behaviour	A system contains processes that transform inputs into outputs, such as material, energy, or data.
Interconnectivity	The components and processes are connected through structural and behavioural relationships.
Equilibrium (Homeostasis)	Systems strive towards a state of balance or stability.

Self-Assessment Exercise 1

Complete the following questions to assess your understanding of the concept of a system.

1. The Greek word *systēma* originally refers to:
   - A. A political institution
   - B. A whole composed of several parts or members
   - C. A military alliance
   - D. A legal framework
2. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a system consists of:
   - A. Independent units with no interaction
   - B. Connected or interdependent parts forming a complex unit
   - C. Only physical objects
   - D. Separate organisations working independently
3. Which of the following is a characteristic of a system?
   - A. Isolation of components
   - B. Lack of interaction among parts
   - C. Interdependence among components
   - D. Absence of boundaries

1.4 International System as a System

Having examined the meaning and characteristics of a system, the next step is to understand why scholars of International Relations apply the concept of a system to interactions among states and other international actors.

One major controversy that has trailed the understanding of the international system concerns the inadequacy of applying the term "system" to the intermingling of states and non-state actors in the international arena. This inadequacy has stemmed from the strict scientific notion of "system." This is because, scientifically, mechanical or biological systems are natural and can be studied using intrinsic scientific methodologies. But, the international system is considered to be artificial, thus, an abstraction which cannot be subjected to the scientific intrinsic methodologies.

How can the international arena be regarded as a system despite these differences?

The general concept of the international system is grounded in the works of system theorists in international relations. Scholars in the field have developed a basic framework for understanding how the international arena can be regarded as a system. They regard nation-states as actors, always interacting with one another, making the whole world an organised complexity. Spiro holds that the idea of the international system is abstract, descriptive and theoretical. Nevertheless, it contributes a perspective in which the international system serves as an expression that stimulates thought about a generalised image (Spiro, 1999: 177).

David Easton and Gabriel Almond have used the systems approach to study political systems, while Kenneth Waltz and Morton Kaplan have used it to study the international system. One remarkable work on the international system is Kenneth Waltz's. Addressing the systemic nature of international political interaction, Waltz emphasises the structural factor. He explains that a system is made of a structure and units. The units are interactive and interdependent. He further contends that in international politics, sovereign states are the units, while the structure of international politics is an ordering principle that positions sovereign states in a pecking order of ranking and alliances (Waltz, 1979).

The following figure illustrates how sovereign states interact within the international system and how their interactions collectively form a structured international environment.

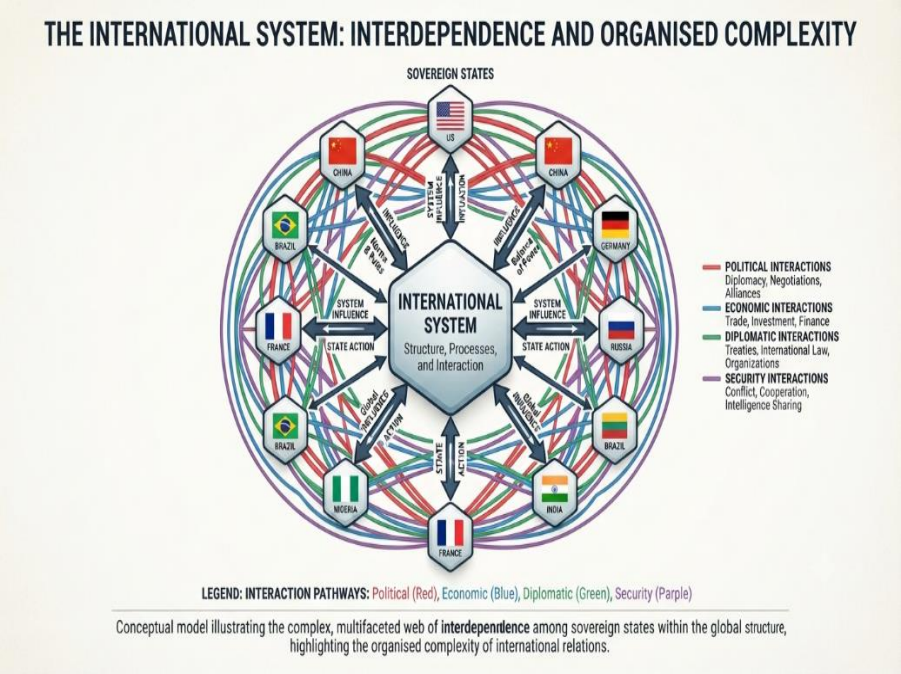

Figure 1.2: The International System as a Network of Interacting States

Source: Google Gemini, Adapted by Abdulazeez A. Lawal, NOUN, 2026.

Study the figure carefully. How does it demonstrate that the international system is based on interactions among sovereign states?

Kaplan, even though he has not developed a precise definition of the international system, is said to have the most elaborate discussions on its nature, bringing the idea of system to bear on discussions of international politics among international actors. He regards the interactions in the international arena as a system of action, which he elaborates as follows: "A system of action is a set of variables so related, in contradistinction to its environment, that describable behavioural regularities characterise the internal relationships of the variables to each other and the external relationships of the set of individual variables to combinations of external variables" (Kaplan, 1957:242). Thus, according to Kaplan, international actions take place between international actors. It is the interaction between actors that ultimately gives birth to the international system.

Some of the remarkable elements of Kaplan's work lie in his ability to describe the nature of an international system by identifying variables within it and assigning values to them. He identifies the variables of the system to include:

a) the essential rules of the system
b) the transformation rules

c) the actors' classificatory variables
d) capacity variables and the information variables.

Based on these variables, he identifies six types of international systems, which include the following:
i) the balance of power system
ii) the loose bipolar system; the tight bipolar system
iii) the universal system
iv) the hierarchical system in its directive and non-directive forms, and
v) the unit veto system.

The six international systems identified by Kaplan are summarised in Table 1.2.

Table 1.2: Kaplan's Types of International Systems

International System	**Brief Description**
Balance of Power System	States maintain equilibrium by preventing any one state from becoming dominant.
Loose Bipolar System	Two major powers lead opposing blocs with relatively flexible alliances.
Tight Bipolar System	Two dominant powers exercise strong control over their respective alliances.
Universal System	Authority is exercised through a universal organisation or governing body.
Hierarchical System	A dominant authority directs relationships among states.
Unit Veto System	States possess the capability to inflict unacceptable damage on one another, discouraging aggression.

Although Morton Kaplan is the chief exponent of systems theory, many others have contributed to the systems approach. They include Karl Deutsch, Charles McClelland, J. David Singer, Kenneth Boulding, David Easton and Anatole Rapport. The interpretations given by these scholars concern the variables of the international system, which help in properly understanding the interaction process. They see a system as an assemblage of units, objects, or parts united by some form of regular interaction. In the 1950s, the behavioural revolution in the social sciences and growing acceptance of political realism in international relations led scholars to conceptualise international politics as a system, using the language of systems theory. McCleland, in particular, calls systems theory a way of thinking with the proportion of a worldview (McCleland, 1966). Thus, the international system can be taken as a system because nations live with one another. They live in an international environment and participate in that environment. The behaviour of nations in the

system is a two-way activity of taking from and giving to the international environment. It is this process of exchange that makes it a system.

Self-Assessment Exercise 2

Attempt the following questions to assess your understanding of the international system as a system.

1. Kenneth Waltz argues that the units of the international system are:
   A. International organisations only
   B. Sovereign states
   C. Multinational corporations
   D. Regional organisations only
2. According to Morton Kaplan, the international system emerges primarily from:
   A. The isolation of states
   B. The interaction among international actors
   C. Economic competition alone
   D. Geographical proximity
3. Which of the following is one of Kaplan's identified types of international systems?
   A. Democratic system
   B. Federal system
   C. Balance of power system
   D. Parliamentary system

1.5 Definition of International System

Having examined why international relations can be viewed as a system, the next step is to explore how scholars have defined the international system and the key elements that distinguish it.

How do scholars define the international system?

In defining the international system, Stanley Hoffman regards it as a pattern of relations among the basic units of world politics, characterised by the scope of the objectives pursued by those units and the tasks performed among them, as well as by the means used to achieve those goals and perform these tasks (Hoffman, 1965). On their part, Frederic S. Pearson and Martin Rochester define international system as “the general pattern of political, economic, social, geographical, and technological relationships that shape world affairs. Or more simply, as the general setting in which international relations occur at any time” (Pearson and Rochester, 1984). In an attempt to find an operational definition of the international system, Dougherty and Pfaltzgraff maintain that “An international political system is a set of polities linked by a set of

interactions (patterns of behaviour in the world politics complex)" (Dougherty and Pfaltzgraff, 1997: 175-185). This definition presupposes that political interaction among polities cannot merely constitute an international system unless the polities are identified as sovereign.

From the foregoing discussions, we can say, in lucid terms, that the international system is a lexicon used by scholars of international relations to describe the network and complexities of interactions among states and non-state actors in the international arena. Amidst their interactions, they exert political, military, economic, and cultural impacts on one another. The exertion of influence on one another is carried out within the laid-down rules and norms of behaviour that guide the entire interaction process. The interaction can take different forms, such as direct government-to-government economic collaboration or diplomatic contacts. It can be direct, non-governmental, in areas such as tourism, or indirect, governmental, regarding the adoption of industrialisation. It may also be collaborative or conflicting.

The following figure illustrates the key actors and interactions that make up the international system.



Figure 1.3: Interactions within the International System
Source: Google Gemini, Adapted by Abdulazeez A. Lawal, NOUN, 2026.

Study the figure carefully. How does it illustrate the different forms of interaction among international actors?

In addition, international actors are in two categories. The first category comprises national actors, while the second comprises supranational actors. Nigeria, the USA, India, China, etc., are examples of national actors, while ECOWAS and NATO are examples of supranational actors. And, as Kaplan maintains, when international action occurs between

international actors, it is the interaction between these two types of actors that ultimately gives birth to the international system.

The categories of international actors discussed above are summarised in Table 1.3.

Table 1.3: Categories of International Actors

Category	Examples
National actors	Nigeria, United States of America, India, China
Supranational actors	ECOWAS, NATO

Furthermore, the international system comprises various smaller international systems at a lower scale, functioning as sub-systems or dependent systems. Each subsystem or dependent system affects the functioning of the larger system, and vice versa. Thus, each system, in addition to being a system in itself, can be a sub-system of a larger or dominant system. Interaction may even differ in intensity. We may find that the interaction among the actors of the Western European sub-system is more intense than that among the actors of Africa.

Self-Assessment Exercise 3

Now test your understanding of the definitions and components of the international system by answering the following questions.

1. According to Pearson and Rochester, the international system refers to:
   - A. A military alliance among sovereign states
   - B. The general pattern of relationships that shape world affairs
   - C. A collection of independent domestic political systems
   - D. A legal framework governing international trade
2. According to the unit, international actors are broadly classified into:
   - A. Developed and developing states
   - B. Public and private organisations
   - C. National and supranational actors
   - D. Democratic and authoritarian governments
3. Which of the following is an example of a supranational actor?
   - A. Nigeria
   - B. India
   - C. China
   - D. ECOWAS

1.6 Distinction between International System and International Society

Having examined the meaning and definition of the international system, it is important to distinguish it from the closely related concept of international society, which is frequently used in the study of international relations.

What distinguishes an international system from an international society?

In recent times, scholars of international relations have advanced the debate about the concept of the international system by introducing the notion of international society to be set alongside it, thereby enabling the necessary contrast. In this regard, Hedley Bull has developed an argument to elaborate on the distinction between the international system and the international society. For him, an international system is formed when two or more states have sufficient contact between them and have sufficient impact on one another's decisions to cause them to behave as parts of a whole (Bull, 1977). This definition corresponds to the ones we elucidated earlier in our discussion.

On the other hand, he maintains that the international society is created when a number or group of states with common interests and values get together on the basis that they conceive themselves as being tied together by a common set of rules in their relationship with one another, and share in the working of common institutions. From this point of view, it can be extrapolated that in Bull's sense, an international society presupposes an international system, but an internal system may exist without an international society.

The following figure illustrates the relationship between the concepts of international system and international society.

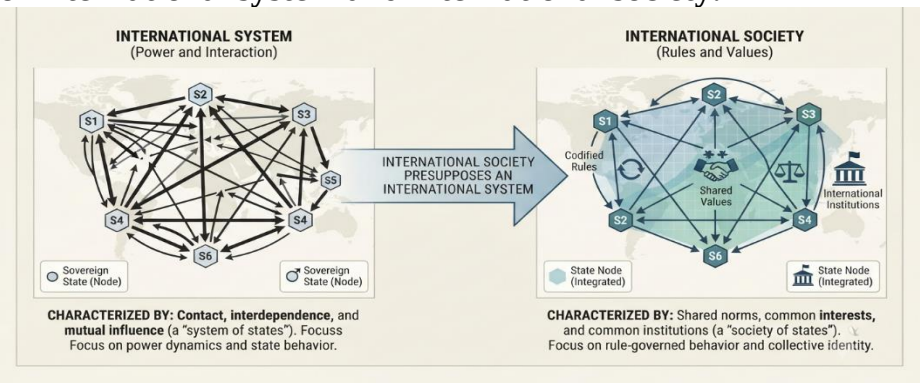

Figure 1.4: Relationship between International System and International Society
Source: Google Gemini, Adapted by Abdulazeez A. Lawal, NOUN, 2026.

Study the figure carefully. How does it show that an international society builds upon the existence of an international system?

The distinction between the two concepts can be further understood by comparing them as presented in Table 1.4.

Table 1.4: Distinction between International System and International Society

International System	International Society
Formed through interaction and mutual influence among states.	Formed when states share common interests, values, rules, and institutions.
Focuses on patterns of interaction among international actors.	Focuses on cooperation based on agreed rules and shared institutions.
It may exist without an international society.	Presupposes the existence of an international system.

In the terminology, the term “international system” was commonly used among scholars during the Cold War. But in the post-Cold War era, amid rapid changes in the world order, the term's use declined as it was replaced by other vogue terms such as “international society.” Nevertheless, that does not mean that the term “international system” has lost its meaning. The term remains valid despite changes in real politics and academic fashions. What is actually happening is that the two terms are, or can be, used interchangeably in discussions of international politics.

Complete the following to assess your understanding of this unit.

Case Study

A regional organisation brings together several sovereign states that regularly interact through trade, diplomacy, and security cooperation. Over time, the member states develop common rules, shared values, and institutions that guide their relationships and resolve disputes peacefully. A student argues that this arrangement represents both an international system and an international society.

Self-Assessment Exercise 4

Based on your understanding of this unit, answer the following questions:

1. Explain why the interactions among the member states can be regarded as an international system.
2. Discuss the features that make the arrangement an international society rather than merely an international system.
3. Using Hedley Bull's argument, explain the relationship between an international system and an international society in this scenario.
4. Assess whether the student's argument is justified, giving reasons for your answer.

1.7 Summary

This unit examined the meaning of the term "system" and explained how the concept has evolved across different fields of study before its application to international relations. It discussed the characteristics of a system and examined why interactions among states and non-state actors can be regarded as an international system. The unit also explored scholarly definitions of the international system, highlighting the contributions of leading theorists such as Kenneth Waltz, Morton Kaplan, Stanley Hoffman, Pearson and Rochester, and Dougherty and Pfaltzgraff. Finally, it distinguished between the concepts of the international system and international society, showing that while the two are closely related, an international society presupposes the existence of an international system. As you proceed to the next unit, reflect on how the interactions among international actors shape the structure and behaviour of the international system.

1.8 References/Further Readings/Web Sources

Bull, H. (1977). *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics*. London: Macmillan.

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1.9 Possible Answers to Self-Assessment Exercise

Self-Assessment Exercise 1
1. B
2. B
3. C

Self-Assessment Exercise 2
1. B
2. B
3. C

Self-Assessment Exercise 3
1. B
2. C
3. D

Self-Assessment Exercise 4

1. The interactions among the member states constitute an international system because the states have regular contact and exert influence on one another's decisions and actions. Their political, economic, and security interactions place them within a broader international framework.
2. The arrangement qualifies as an international society because the member states share common interests, values, rules, and institutions that guide their relationships and promote cooperation beyond mere interaction.
3. According to Hedley Bull, an international society is built upon the existence of an international system. States must first interact as parts of a system before they can develop common rules, shared values, and institutions that transform their relationships into an international society.
4. The student's argument is justified because the arrangement exhibits the characteristics of both concepts. The regular interactions among the states demonstrate the existence of an international system, while their shared rules, values, and institutions indicate that they have also formed an international society.

Unit 2 Understanding the International System the Realist Approach

Unit Structure

2.1 Introduction
2.2 Learning Outcomes
2.3 The Realist Approach
  2.3.1 Neorealism or Structural Realism
  2.3.2 Classical Realism
  2.3.3 Neoclassical Realism
  2.3.4 Liberal Realism or the English School
2.4 Summary
2.5 References/Further Readings/Web Resources
2.6 Possible Answers to Self-Assessment Exercises

2.1 Introduction

Welcome to this unit. In the previous unit, you examined the concept of the international system and the interactions that occur among states and other international actors. Building on that foundation, this unit introduces one of the most influential theoretical perspectives for explaining how the international system operates—the realist approach. As you study this unit, you will explore the core assumptions of realism and how they explain the behaviour of states within an international system characterised by the absence of a central authority. You will also examine the different strands of realism, including neorealism, classical realism, neoclassical realism, and liberal realism or the English School, and understand how each offers a distinct perspective on international politics.

2.2 Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- explain the realist approach to understanding the international system;
- describe the key assumptions of realism;
- distinguish between classical realism, neorealism, neoclassical realism, and liberal realism; and
- analyse how the different realist perspectives explain the behaviour of states in the international system

2.3 The Realist's Approach

Having introduced the concept of realism, let us now examine its main assumptions and how it explains states' behaviour in the international system.

Realism as a formal discipline in international relations did not emerge until World War II, but its primary assumptions have been expressed by earlier thinkers and writers such as Thucydides, Niccolò Machiavelli, Cardinal Richelieu, and others. Thucydides, an ancient Greek historian, in his work History of the Peloponnesian War, has espoused views that have formed the basis of Realists' assumptions and is also cited as an intellectual of realpolitik. Niccolò Machiavelli, a Florentine political philosopher, wrote *Il Principe* (*The Prince*) in which he held that the sole aim of a prince (politician) was to seek power, regardless of religious or ethical considerations. Cardinal Richelieu, a French statesman, acted in tandem with a realist spirit as he suppressed domestic factionalism and guided France to a position of dominance in foreign affairs. Thomas Hobbes, an English philosopher, wrote Leviathan, in which he stated that the "state of nature" was prone to a "war of all against all".

How does realism explain the behaviour of states in the international system?

Realism, frequently referred to as the power theory in some quarters, is identified with scholars such as Hans Morgenthau, Henry Kissinger and Kenneth Waltz. According to realists, the international system is defined by anarchy. This is because there is no central authority to settle disputes among contending actors, as there is in domestic political systems. Thus, in such an anarchical situation, state power is the key. There is the belief that only through power can states defend themselves and hope to survive. Realism holds that power can be exercised in a variety of ways: militarily, economically and diplomatically. It also emphasises the possession of coercive capacity as the ultimate determinant of international politics.

The following figure presents the central assumptions of the realist approach to the international system.

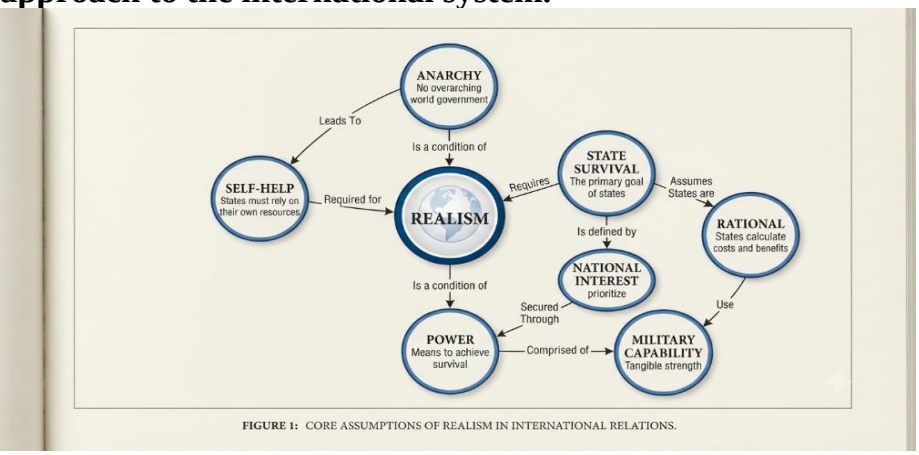

Figure 2.1: Core Assumptions of the Realist Approach
Source: Google Gemini, Adapted by Abdulazeez A. Lawal, NOUN, 2026.

Study the figure carefully. How do these assumptions explain why states compete for power in the international system?

The worldview of the Realists rests on the assumption that, first, survival is the principal goal of every state actor. Given the anarchy of the international system, states are required to constantly ensure that they have sufficient power to defend themselves and advance their interests, which is required for survival. Second, Realists take states to be rational actors. This means that, given the goal of survival, states will act as best they can to maximise their likelihood of continuing to exist. Third, Realists believe that all states possess military capacity, and that no state knows precisely what its neighbours intend. This presupposes that the word is dangerous and uncertain. Fourth, in such a world, only countries with greater powers can prevail. Thus, the international system is a system of power exercise. Over time, realism has been refined by scholars, resulting in various paradigms, including classical realism, liberal realism, the English school, rationalism, neorealism (or structural realism), and neoclassical realism.

Self-Assessment Exercise 1

Test your understanding of the realist approach by answering the following questions.

1. According to the realist perspective, the international system is characterised by:
   A. Democracy
   B. Anarchy
   C. Federalism
   D. Global government
2. According to realism, the primary goal of every state is:
   A. Economic integration
   B. Survival
   C. Cultural exchange
   D. Environmental protection
3. Realists believe that states rely primarily on _____ to defend themselves and advance their interests.
   A. International law
   B. Power
   C. Public opinion
   D. Global organisations

2.3.1 Neorealism or Structural Realism

Having examined the general assumptions of realism, let us now consider one of its major developments: neorealism, or structural realism.

Why does neorealism place greater emphasis on the structure of the international system than on human nature?

According to Robert Powell, neorealism, or structural realism, is a theory of international relations that was first outlined by Kenneth Waltz in his 1979 book *Theory of International Politics* (Robert 1994: 313-344). Neorealism can be considered as one of the most influential contemporary approaches to international relations. Neorealism is also considered to have been derived from the classical realist tradition of E.H. Carr, Hans Morgenthau, and Reinhold Niebuhr. The major exception is that neorealism rejects classical realism's reliance on concepts such as "human nature" to explain international politics.

Neorealist thinkers, instead, propose that structural constraints — that is, not strategy, egoism, or motivation — will determine behaviour in international relations. Thus, rather than focusing on human nature, it predominantly examines the anarchic structure of the international system. They see states as primary actors because there is no political monopoly on force existing above any sovereign. But while states remain the principal actors, greater attention is paid to the forces above and below them. The international system is seen as a structure acting on the state, with individuals acting as an agency of the state.

The following figure illustrates the main features of neorealism or structural realism.

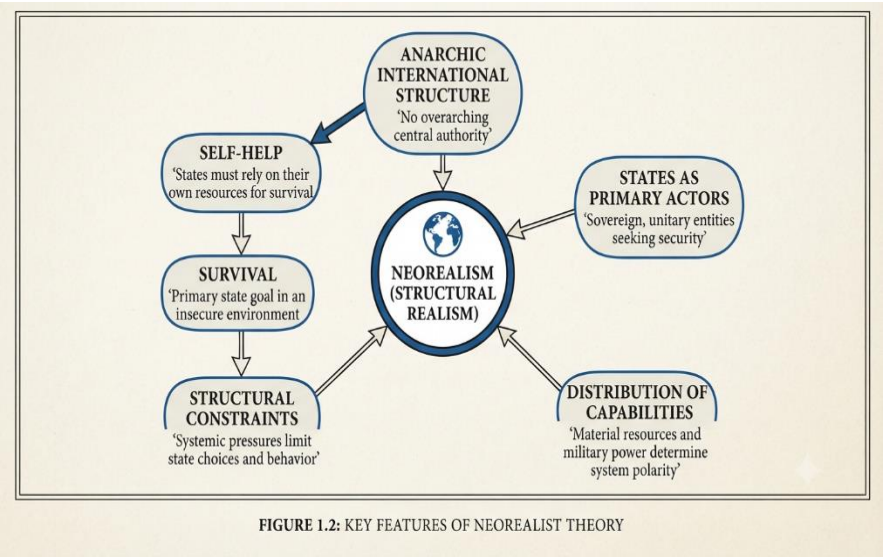

Figure 2.2: Key Features of Neorealism (Structural Realism)
Source: Google Gemini, Adapted by Abdulazeez A. Lawal, NOUN, 2026.

Study the figure carefully. How does it show that the international structure influences the behaviour of states?

The principal assumption of the neorealist is that the nature of the international structure is defined by its ordering principle. That is to say, the anarchy and the distribution of capabilities are measured by the

number of great powers within the international system. The anarchic ordering principle of the international structure is decentralised, meaning there is no formal central authority. Every sovereign state is formally equal in this system. These states act according to the logic of self-help, meaning they seek their own interests and will not subordinate them to the interests of other states. States are assumed, at a minimum, to want to ensure their own survival, as this is a prerequisite to pursuing other goals. This survival drive is the primary factor influencing their behaviour and, in turn, ensures that states develop offensive military capabilities for foreign interventionism and to increase their relative power. In summary, the nature of the environment pushes states to accumulate power to ensure their survival within the system.

Self-Assessment Exercise 2

Assess your understanding of neorealism by answering the following questions.

1. Neorealism primarily explains international politics by focusing on:
   A. Human nature
   B. The anarchic structure of the international system
   C. Religious beliefs of leaders
   D. Domestic political parties

2. According to neorealism, states operate according to the logic of:
   A. Collective ownership
   B. Self-help
   C. Global governance
   D. Economic equality

3. In neorealism, the primary factor influencing state behaviour is:
   A. International public opinion
   B. The international structure and the need for survival
   C. Cultural traditions
   D. Individual political ambitions

2.3.2 Classical Realism

Having examined neorealism, we will now consider classical realism, which explains international politics primarily through human nature and the desire for power.

What does classical realism identify as the fundamental cause of conflict in international politics?

Classical realism's most important roots arguably date back to the fall of the medieval Roman Catholic realm. Medieval Europe entertained the idea of universalism as its competitors, the Byzantine Empire and the Islamic caliphates, but according to Bozeman, it never enjoyed the same ability to pursue it in practice (Bozeman, 1994). With this, Haslam maintains that, therefore, universalism gradually gave way to particularism, as scholars and observers promoted the shift by developing new doctrines of state interest (raison d'état) and balances of power to explain behaviour in the international system (Haslam, 2002). In the early 20th century, scholars of the interwar generation took up these concepts and insights, giving rise to the tradition of classical realism as a body of thought.

Prominent scholars of the interwar generation include Reinhold Niebuhr, Edward H. Carr, Georg Schwarzenberger, and Nicolas Spykman, who would go on to inspire figures such as Hans Morgenthau, Raymond Aron, Stanley Hoffmann, Arnold Wolfers, George Kennan, Henry Kissinger, and others. Classical realists share an understanding of social reality as collective, which is to say that the group is the essence of social reality and of politics as a contentious struggle among these groups over values (Gilpin, 1986).

Political conflict is rooted in human affairs, and more specifically in human nature, according to classical realists. Reinhold Niebuhr believed that humans had a potential for ‘evil’, and that with humankind's increasing grasp of science and control over society, the scope for human evil expanded. Reinhold Niebuhr claimed that “man’s claim to goodness is absurdity if not blasphemy. Social groups such as nations and states may contain many ethical people but the glue of these groups — ‘patriotism’— contains a ‘paradox’: it ‘transmutes individual unselfishness into national egoism’ (Niebuhr, 1932: 91). Hans Morgenthau sought to provide ‘a theory of international politics’ focused on the ‘objective laws’ of politics and rooted in ‘human nature’ (Morgenthau, 1993: 3–4). Morgenthau may have been less preoccupied with the ‘evil’ nature of man than Niebuhr, but he maintained that the desire for power was universal (Waltz, 1959: 34).

Niebuhr and Morgenthau thus created inextricable links between individuals and collectivities, partly because individuals live in groups (i.e., the essence of social reality), partly because groups’ occasional warring is rooted in human nature. By implication, classical realism does not distinguish between the ‘first’ (the individual) and ‘second’ (the state) image in the assessment of why tragedy happens. Kenneth Waltz

nevertheless built his criticism of prevailing international theories, including classical realism, on the notion of distinct images, and he associated classical realism with the first image (human nature) (Waltz, 1959). Classical realists find that revisionist states, which are those wreaking havoc in international politics, somehow emerge from human nature.

The following figure illustrates the central assumptions of classical realism.

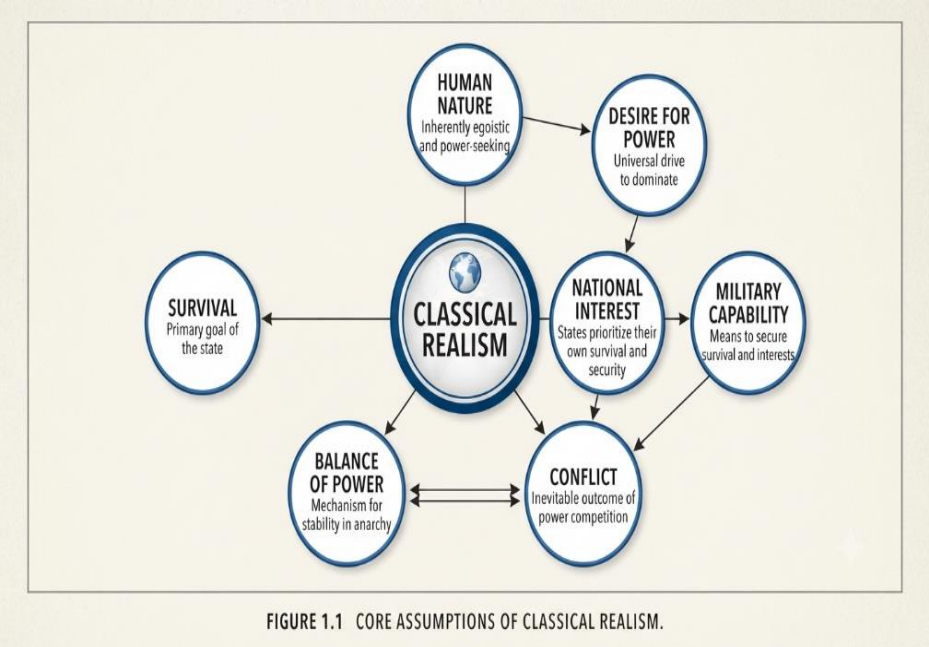

Figure 2.3: Core Assumptions of Classical Realism
Source: Google Gemini, Adapted by Abdulazeez A. Lawal, NOUN, 2026.

Study the figure carefully. How does it illustrate the relationship between human nature and the pursuit of power in classical realism?
The basic assumptions of classical realism are that, first, the drive for power and the will to dominate are fundamental aspects of human nature that inform state behaviour in the international system. Second, people are by nature narrowly selfish and ethically flawed, and cannot free themselves from the vicious fact that they are born to watch out for themselves. Third, of all the people's evil ways, none are more prevalent, inexorable, or dangerous than their instinctive lust for power and their desire to dominate others. Fourth, eradicating the instinct for power is a utopian aspiration. Fifth, international politics is, as Thomas Hobbes put it, a power struggle, "a war of all against all." Lastly, the primary obligation of every state, the goal to which all other national objectives should be subordinated, is to promote its national interest and to acquire power for this purpose.

Other basic assumptions of classical realism include the fact that the nature of the international system dictates that states acquire sufficient military capabilities to deter potential enemies; and that states should never entrust the task of self-protection to international security organisations or to international law, and should resist efforts to regulate international conduct. In addition, if all states seek to maximise power, stability will result from maintaining a balance of power, lubricated by fluid alliance systems.

Self-Assessment Exercise 3

Check your understanding of classical realism by answering the following questions.

1. Classical realism explains international conflict mainly by emphasising:
   A. Human nature
   B. International organisations
   C. Technological advancement
   D. Economic cooperation
2. According to classical realism, the primary obligation of every state is to:
   A. Promote global equality
   B. Protect its national interest and acquire power
   C. Follow international law at all times
   D. Eliminate military capability
3. Classical realists believe that stability in the international system is most likely to result from:
   A. A global government
   B. The abolition of military power
   C. A balance of power among states
   D. Universal economic integration

2.3.3 Neoclassical Realism

Building on the ideas of classical realism and neorealism, let us now examine neoclassical realism, which considers both the international system and domestic factors in explaining state behaviour.

Why do neoclassical realists argue that states facing similar international conditions may behave differently?

Neoclassical realism can be seen as the third generation of realists, following the classical authors of the first wave, such as Thucydides, Machiavelli, and Thomas Hobbes, as well as the neorealist Kenneth Waltz. The adherents of neoclassical realism argue that the ambition and scope of a state's behaviour in international politics is driven, first and

foremost, by its place in the international system and specifically by its material power capabilities. It is based on this reasoning that they call themselves realists. They further argue that they are neoclassical because they also take into account that the effects of a state's power capacities are usually constrained by systemic variables. They buttress their position by establishing that relative material power is the basic parameter of a state's action in the international system, relying on Thucydides' formula, which states that "the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must" (Strasser, 1996: 89).

Yet the neoclassical realists go further, pointing out that there is no immediate evidence to support the claim that material power, strictly speaking, determines states' behaviour. The argument is that political leaders or the elite make a state's behavioural choices, so it is their perception of relative power that matters, not the quantity of physical resources at their disposal. Finally, the neoclassical realists take into cognisance systemic pressures that would influence political leaders' choice of alternatives. This means that the influence of systemic factors may become more apparent in directing the choices of political leaders in the behaviour of their state in the international system.

The following figure illustrates the factors that influence state behaviour according to neoclassical realism.

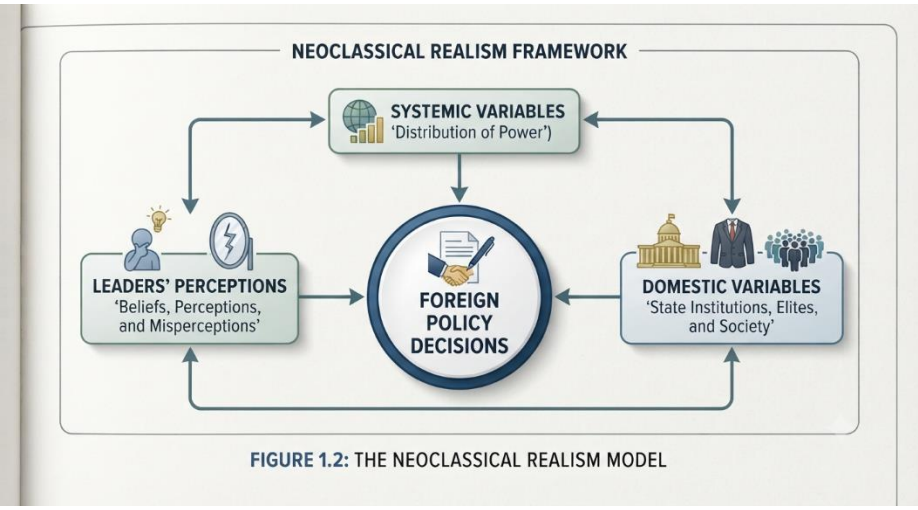

Figure 2.4: Factors Influencing State Behaviour in Neoclassical Realism

Source: Google Gemini, Adapted by Abdulazeez A. Lawal, NOUN, 2026.

Study the figure carefully. How does it explain why two states with similar power capabilities may adopt different foreign policies?

In other words, neoclassical realism holds that a state's actions in the international system can be explained by systemic variables, such as the distribution of power capabilities among states, as well as cognitive

variables, such as the perception and misperception of systemic pressures, other states' intentions, or threats. Neoclassicism also relies on domestic variables such as state institutions, elites, and societal actors, which affect the power and freedom of action of foreign policy decision-makers.

The implication here is that, first, appropriate balancing occurs when a state correctly perceives another state's intentions and balances accordingly with such states. Second, inappropriate balancing or overbalancing will occur when a state incorrectly perceives another state as threatening and allocates more resources than necessary to maintain the balance. This causes an imbalance. Third, “underbalancing” can occur when a state fails to balance out, either due to inefficiency or to incorrectly perceiving a state as less of a threat than it actually is. This causes an imbalance. Fourth, non-balancing occurs when a state avoids balancing. A state may choose to do this for several reasons, including an inability to balance. In sum, decision-makers’ beliefs can strongly affect the state’s foreign policy. Thus, correct or incorrect perceptions and beliefs about a state will produce the corresponding course of action, whether positive or negative.

Neoclassical realists reject the traditional realist assumption that the sole aim is security. They maintain that, instead, states attempt to use their power to direct the international system towards their goals and preferences. They use tools at their disposal to gain control over their environment. Therefore, more powerful states will pursue more far-reaching foreign policies.

In addition, while holding to the neorealist concept of survival, neoclassical realism further posits a link between a state's economic strength and its military or political influence. This can result in the rise and fall of great powers in the international system, during periods of economic buoyancy or economic recession.

Self-Assessment Exercise 4

Evaluate your understanding of neoclassical realism by answering the following questions.

1. Neoclassical realism argues that state behaviour is influenced by:
   A. Only military power
   B. Systemic, cognitive, and domestic variables
   C. International law alone
   D. Cultural traditions only
2. According to neoclassical realism, foreign policy decisions are primarily shaped by:
   A. The perceptions of political leaders
   B. Geographical size alone
   C. Climate conditions
   D. International organisations
3. Which of the following is consistent with neoclassical realism?
   A. States always behave identically under similar conditions.
   B. Material power alone determines foreign policy.
   C. Domestic institutions and leaders' perceptions can influence state behaviour.
   D. Military capability does not influence international politics.

2.3.4 Liberal Realism or the English School

Having examined the major realist perspectives, let us now consider liberal realism, also known as the English School, which places greater emphasis on shared norms and common interests among states.

How does the English School explain cooperation among states despite the absence of a central authority?

This framework holds that the international system, while anarchic in structure, constitutes a "society of states" in which common norms and interests allow for greater order and stability than might be expected under a strict realist view. Prominent English school writers include Hedley Bull, author of the classic *The Anarchical Society*. The liberal realists stand on the conviction that ideas, rather than simply material capabilities, shape the conduct of actors in the international system. The basic argument, according to Hedley (1977), is that states share a common interest, usually the "fear of unrestricted violence," which leads to the development of a set of "rules."

However, since these rules are not legally binding and there are no ordering institutions, it is most probably more appropriate to speak of norms. States that respect these basic rules form an international society. Chris Brown defines such a relationship as a "norm-governed relationship whose members accept that they have at least limited responsibilities towards one another and the society as a whole" (Brown, 2009: 48-52). Given this situation, liberal realism maintains that states would pursue their interests, but not at all costs, as traditional realists hold. This would entail moving with other members of the system rather than being against them.

The following figure illustrates the key ideas of liberal realism or the English School.

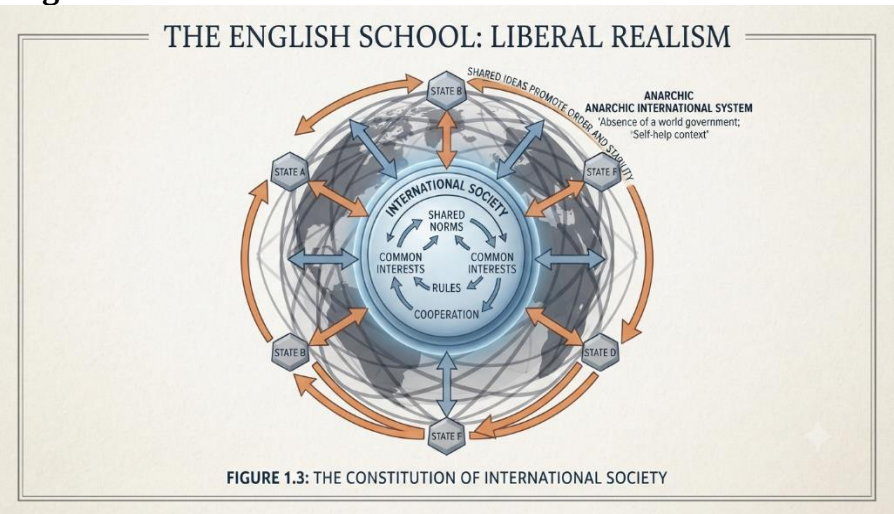

Figure 2.5: Liberal Realism (English School) and International Society
Source: Google Gemini, Adapted by Abdulazeez A. Lawal, NOUN, 2026.

Study the figure carefully. How does it show that shared norms can promote cooperation among states in an anarchic international system?
The key features of the major realist perspectives discussed in this unit are summarised in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1: Comparison of the Major Realist Perspectives

Perspective	Primary Focus	Main Explanation of State Behaviour
Classical Realism	Human nature	States pursue power because this desire is rooted in human nature.
Neorealism (Structural Realism)	International structure	The anarchic structure of the international system compels states to seek survival through self-help.
Neoclassical Realism	Structure, domestic factors, and leaders' perceptions	Both systemic pressures and domestic variables shape state behaviour.
Liberal Realism (English School)	Shared norms and international society	States cooperate through common interests, rules, and norms despite anarchy.

Apply what you have learnt in this unit to the following case study.

Case Study

Two neighbouring countries have experienced increasing political tension over access to shared natural resources. Although both countries possess strong military capabilities, they also belong to the same regional organisation, participate in regular diplomatic meetings, and have agreed to follow established regional rules for resolving disputes. While one group of analysts argues that the countries will ultimately rely on power to protect their national interests, another group believes that shared norms and institutions will encourage peaceful cooperation.

Self-Assessment Exercise 5

Based on the realist perspectives discussed in this unit, answer the following questions:

1. Explain how classical realism would interpret the behaviour of the two countries.
2. Discuss how neorealism would explain the actions of the countries within the anarchic international system.
3. Explain how neoclassical realism would account for differences in the foreign policy decisions of the two countries.
4. Assess how liberal realism (the English School) would explain the role of shared norms and institutions in managing the dispute.

2.4 Summary

This unit examined the realist approach as one of the major theoretical perspectives for understanding the international system. It explained the fundamental assumptions of realism, particularly its view that the international system is anarchic and that states pursue power and security to ensure their survival. The unit also discussed the major variants of realism, including neorealism, classical realism, neoclassical realism, and liberal realism (the English School), highlighting how each explains state behaviour from a slightly different perspective while maintaining the central importance of power and national interest. As you continue your study of international relations, reflect on how these different realist perspectives help explain the behaviour of states in contemporary international politics.

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2.6 Possible Answers to Self-Assessment Exercise

Self-Assessment Exercise 1
1. B
2. B
3. B

Self-Assessment Exercise 2
1. B
2. B
3. B

Self-Assessment Exercise 3
1. A
2. B
3. C

Self-Assessment Exercise 4
1. B
2. A
3. C

Self-Assessment Exercise 5
1. Classical realism would interpret the behaviour of the two countries as being driven primarily by human nature and the desire for power. Each state would seek to protect its national interest and strengthen its position, believing that conflict and competition are natural features of international politics.
2. Neorealism would explain the situation by pointing to the anarchic nature of the international system. Since there is no central authority to guarantee security, both countries would rely on self-help, build their capabilities, and make decisions aimed at ensuring their survival.
3. Neoclassical realism would argue that, although both countries operate within the same international system, their foreign policy decisions may differ because of domestic institutions, political leaders' perceptions, and internal political factors. These variables influence how each country responds to the same external pressures.
4. Liberal realism, or the English School, would explain that shared norms, common interests, and regional institutions can encourage

cooperation even in an anarchic international system. Membership of the same regional organisation and adherence to agreed rules provide mechanisms for peaceful dispute resolution, reducing the likelihood of conflict while allowing states to pursue their national interests.

Unit 3 The Idealist Understanding of International System

Unit Structure

3.1 Introduction
3.2 Learning Outcomes
3.3 The Idealist's Approach
3.3.1 Liberal Idealism
3.3.2 Neoliberal Idealism
3.3.3 Neo-conservatism
3.4 Summary
3.5 References/Further Readings/Web Sources
3.6 Possible Answers to Self-Assessment Exercises

3.1 Introduction

Welcome back to another interesting topic. International relations can be understood from different theoretical perspectives, each offering a unique explanation of how states interact within the international system. In the previous unit, you examined the realist approach, which emphasises power and survival in an anarchic international environment. In this unit, you will explore the idealist approach, which focuses on cooperation, international institutions, and the possibility of achieving lasting peace among states. As you study this unit, pay attention to how idealist thinkers explain international relations and how their ideas differ from those of the realist tradition.

3.2 Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- define idealism as an approach to understanding the international system;
- explain the major assumptions of the idealist school of thought; and
- distinguish between liberal idealism, neoliberal idealism, and neo-conservatism as perspectives of idealism.

3.3 The Idealist's Approach

Having considered the introduction to this unit, let us now examine the idealist approach and the key ideas that shape its understanding of the international system.

Idealism, or the idealist school of thought, can trace its modern heritage to the tenets of Woodrow Wilson, often referred to as Wilsonian liberalism.

Why do idealists believe that cooperation among states is possible despite international disagreements?

The idealist thought frequently views human nature as a positive force. It is precisely the power politics of nation-states that is the problem. So, the requirement is to find a way to reduce or eliminate that particular form of interaction altogether. The major assumption of the idealists is that there is a natural harmony of interests among nation- states, based on the inherent desire of most people to live in peace with one another. So, it is only when the corrupting influence of power politics, ideology, nationalism, evil leaders, and so on comes into play that we see international politics and the entire international arena degenerate into conflict and war. Thus, what is required is to prevent the rise and control of such corruptive influence.

To accomplish this, first and foremost, there is a need to encourage the growth of democracy as a form of government that gives the people maximum expression. After all, if most people are inherently peace-loving, then governments that express the people's desires will be less warlike. Second, international institutions can be used to create forums in which nation-states can discuss their disagreements in ways that reinforce cooperation rather than the competitive dimensions of their relationships with one another.

For this reason, the idealists find great promise not only in institutions like the United Nations but also in the further development of international treaties, covenants, and other common practices as a basis for a system of international law. Such international institutions can be used to change the way states calculate their interests, hence they can encourage cooperation over conflict among states. This means, to a certain extent, the idealists believe in the creation of a world government.
That is an equivalence between domestic government and the regulation and management of actors' behaviour in the international system.

More often than not, the assumptions of the idealists have been portrayed as “utopian”, yet trends in development in the contemporary international system to resolve the world crisis seem to conform to the notion of institutionalism advanced by the idealists. It is believed that the more states understand that their interests are effectively pursued within international institutions, and that all states can benefit from such interaction, the more they are induced to behave cooperatively rather than competitively. Most of the post-World War II international trade and

economic regimes (Bretton Woods, GATT and others) are based precisely on the idealists' philosophy.

Idealism proper was a relatively short-lived school of thought, and suffered a crisis of confidence following the failure of the League of Nations and the outbreak of World War II. However, subsequent theories of international relations would draw on elements of Wilsonian idealism in constructing their views of the international system. These include liberal idealism, neoliberal idealism, and neoconservatism.
To reinforce the ideas discussed above, study the image below.

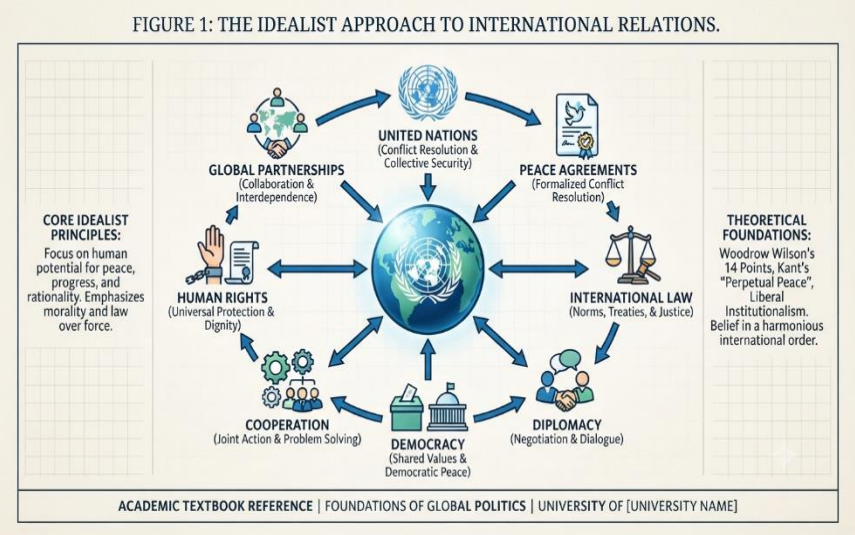

Figure 3.1: Idealist Perspective of the International System
Source: Google Gemini, Adapted by Abdulazeez A. Lawal, NOUN, 2026.
Study the figure and identify the institutions or principles that idealists believe can promote cooperation among states.

Test your understanding of the ideas presented in this section by answering the following questions.

Self-Assessment Exercise 1

1. The idealist school of thought believes that international cooperation is mainly promoted through:
   A. Military alliances
   B. International institutions and cooperation
   C. Arms competition
   D. Territorial expansion
2. According to idealism, conflict in the international system mainly results from:
   A. The natural desire of people for war
   B. The corrupting influence of power politics and related factors
   C. Economic abundance
   D. Scientific development
3. Idealists believe that international organisations can:
   A. Eliminate the need for diplomacy
   B. Encourage cooperation and peaceful resolution of disputes
   C. Replace all national governments
   D. Prevent states from pursuing their interests

3.3.1 Liberal Idealism

The idealist perspective has developed into several strands over time. One of the most influential of these is liberal idealism, which provides a more detailed explanation of how cooperation and peace can be achieved within the international system.

Liberal idealism is one of the main schools of thought for understanding the international system.

What assumptions make liberal idealists optimistic about international cooperation?

Its roots lie in the broader liberal thought originating in the era of the Enlightenment. Liberal idealism views history as the progressive advancement of human society. Heywood writes that liberal idealism is best viewed as "humanity moving from dark to light, by virtue of reason. Reason emancipates humankind from the grip of the past ..." (Heywood, 2011: 31). Thus, liberal idealism believes that cooperation between states for the common goal of the advancement of humanity is the rational choice which would always be made.

The central issues that liberal idealism seeks to address are how to achieve lasting peace and cooperation in international relations, as well as the

methods that could contribute to their achievement. It might have existed, but it became popular only after the First World War. It manifested as a tempered version of Wilson's idealism in the wake of World War I. Cognisant of the failures of idealism to prevent renewed isolationism following World War I, and its inability to manage the balance of power in Europe to prevent the outbreak of a new war, liberal idealism took root. During this period, it participated in the first great debate between idealism and realism, shaped postwar politics, and led to the creation of rudimentary international governance in the form of the League of Nations, which sought to manage and prevent future conflicts between states (Carr, 1984). It would not be incorrect if we assert that even the modern-day United Nations drew upon the successes and shortcomings of the League of Nations in its creation. Even international regimes such as the Bretton Woods system and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) were designed both to maintain a balance of power and to regularise cooperation between nations.

The basic assumptions of the liberal idealists can be summarised as follows:

a) Human nature is essentially good or altruistic: People are capable of mutual aid and collaboration through reason and ethically inspired education.
b) The fundamental human concern for others' welfare makes progress possible.
c) Bad human behaviour, such as violence, is the product not of flawed people but of evil institutions that encourage people to act selfishly and to harm others.
d) War and international anarchy are not inevitable, and war's frequency can be reduced by strengthening the institutional arrangements that encourage its disappearance.
e) War is a global problem requiring collective or multilateral, rather than national efforts to control it.
f) Reforms must be inspired by a compassionate, ethical concern for the welfare and security of all people, and this humanitarian motive requires the inclusion of morality in statecraft.
g) International society must reorganise itself to eliminate the institutions that make war likely, and states must reform their political systems so that self-determination and democratic governance within states can help pacify relations among states.

The foregoing demonstrates that the major dividing line between realists and liberal idealists is that, while the former see conflict as the norm in international affairs, the latter are more hopeful about the prospects for peace and international cooperation. Again, while realists seek to explain international politics by examining state-to-state relations within an anarchical system of mutual distrust and suspicion, the liberal idealists

consider other international actors that present themselves as institutions within the states as actors.

To illustrate the key ideas of liberal idealism, study the image below.

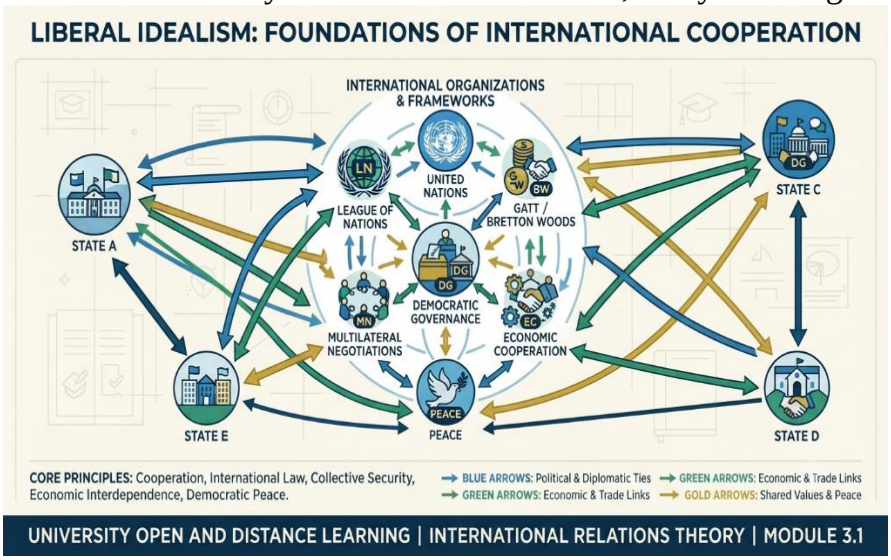

Figure 3.2: Liberal Idealism and International Cooperation
Source: Google Gemini, Adapted by Abdulazeez A. Lawal, NOUN, 2026.
Study the figure and consider how international institutions can contribute to peaceful cooperation among states.

Complete the following self-assessment exercise based on what you have just studied.

Self-Assessment Exercise 2

1. Liberal idealism views history as:
   - A. A continuous struggle for military dominance
   - B. The progressive advancement of human society
   - C. A cycle of unavoidable conflicts
   - D. The decline of international cooperation
2. According to liberal idealists, war can be reduced by:
   - A. Expanding military alliances
   - B. Strengthening institutional arrangements that encourage cooperation
   - C. Increasing competition among states
   - D. Eliminating international organisations
3. One major difference between liberal idealism and realism is that liberal idealism:
   - A. Rejects the existence of states
   - B. Recognises the important role of institutions alongside states
   - C. Focuses only on military power
   - D. Rejects international cooperation altogether

3.3.2 Neoliberal Idealism

Having examined liberal idealism, we now consider neoliberal idealism, which extends some of these ideas by placing greater emphasis on institutions, cooperation, and interdependence in the international system.

Neoliberal idealism, also known as “complex integration” or “neoliberal institutionalism,” is an outgrowth of the idealists’ worldview for explaining the international system and is attributed to Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye as its precursors. Neoliberalism is considered a comprehensive challenge to realism and to the use of neoliberalism as the basis for explaining the international system (Graham and Newnham 1998: 29). Ordinarily, both theories consider the international system anarchic and recognise the state and its interests as the central subject of analysis. But while neoliberalism does not deny the postulates of neorealism, it has some arguments against neorealism. It accuses neorealism of exaggerating the importance and effects of anarchy, as well as underestimating "the varieties of cooperative behaviour possible within a decentralised system" (Graham Evans and Jeffrey Newnham: 29).

The neoliberal idealists focus on institution-building, regime creation and the search for ‘absolute’ rather than ‘relative’ gains as mitigating strategies in a quasi-anarchic system. They also favour a mixed-actor model of the international system that includes international organisations, transnational organisations, non-governmental organisations, multinational corporations, and many other non-state actors. Keohane and Nye (1977) refer to these phenomena as complex interdependence and argue that neorealism has failed to capture these complexities of international behaviour and, in particular, distorts the reality by ignoring the institutions, processes, rules and norms that provide a measure of governance in a formally anarchic environment (Keohane and Nye, 1989: 23).

In sum, neoliberals contend that interaction in the international system has greatly expanded in the twentieth century, particularly in the non- military dimension. Therefore, theories that concentrate solely on military and diplomatic issues are bound to be one-sided and incapable of addressing the realities of the international system.

Before proceeding, study the Figure below, which highlights how neoliberal idealism promotes cooperation through institutions and multiple international actors.

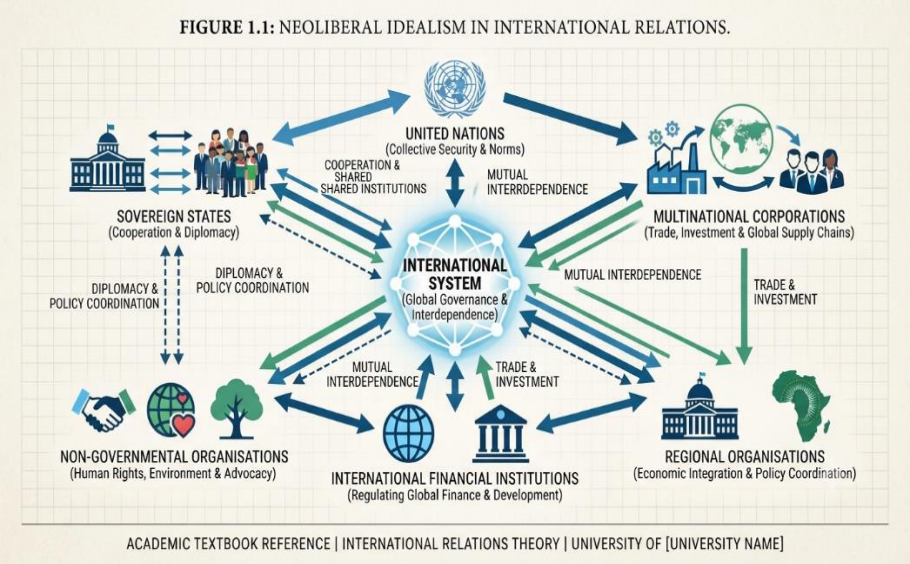

Figure 3.3: Neoliberal Idealism and Complex Interdependence
Source: Google Gemini, Adapted by Abdulazeez A. Lawal, NOUN, 2026.

Study the figure. How does it illustrate the idea that international cooperation extends beyond interactions among states alone?
Before moving to the next section, answer the following questions to assess your understanding.

Self-Assessment Exercise 3

1. Neoliberal idealism is also commonly known as:
   A. Structural realism
   B. Complex integration or neoliberal institutionalism
   C. Classical realism
   D. Democratic peace theory
2. According to neoliberal idealists, international cooperation is promoted mainly through:
   A. Military competition
   B. Institution-building and regime creation
   C. Territorial expansion
   D. Balance of power alone
3. Keohane and Nye argue that international relations involve:
   A. Only interactions among sovereign states
   B. Complex interdependence involving both state and non-state actors
   C. Complete absence of international institutions
   D. Elimination of economic cooperation

3.3.3 Neo-conservatism

How does neo-conservatism differ from other idealist approaches in promoting universal values?

It is widely believed that neoconservatism is the product of a specific group of policy strategists tagged as "special interest" or "faction". This special interest group includes individuals who hold or have held government positions. Neoconservatives are also found in the academy (Halper and Clarke, 2004: 32). The neoconservative faction consists of intellectuals and elitists who tend to be of Jewish or Catholic background, many of whom seem to have lapsed into secular humanism. The group has also been identified as "unipolarism" and "democratic globalism" (Dorrien, 2004: 1-5).

Neo-conservatism drew from liberalism its intense focus on the promotion of "universal values", in this case democracy, human rights, free trade, women's rights and minority protections. However, it differs in that it is less wedded to the importance of preserving international institutions and treaties while pursuing assertive or aggressive stances which it deems morally worthy. Neo-conservatism supports the use of force or the threat of force, unilaterally if necessary, to advance its goals.

Why do neo-conservatives believe military intervention may sometimes be necessary?

The major doctrinal position of neoconservatives is that they depict the world of international politics as a struggle between good and evil. Second, it is specifically about the relationship between Moscow and Washington in the late twentieth century, and between the United States, as the centre of democratic societies, and rogue nations in the early twenty-first century. Third, neoconservatives assert that statesmen should make a clear distinction between friends and enemies, since it was a mistake, especially for the United States, not to count the Soviet Union as an enemy; and finally, for a great power, the "national interest" is not a geographical term, but also an ideological one. Fourth, barring extraordinary events, the United States should always feel obliged to defend, if possible, a democratic nation under attack from nondemocratic forces, external or internal.

That is why Irving Kristol argues that it was in the national interest of the United States to come to the defence of France and Britain in World War II. It is for the same reason that it feels it necessary to defend Israel today, when its survival is threatened. No complicated geopolitical calculations of national interest are necessary. It also supports the supposition that if democracy and the rule of law are established in troubled countries

worldwide, they will cease to pose threats. The promotion of democracy is not left to economic development and political engagement; if necessary, it is provided through military force (Irving Kristol, 2003).
We could as well add that other common themes of neo-conservatism include: a belief that the human condition is defined as a choice between good and evil, and that the former (themselves) should have the political character to confront the latter; a willingness to use military power; and a primary focus on the Middle East and global Islam as the principal theatre for American overseas interests.

What impact do these beliefs have on a state's foreign policy?

These doctrinal ideas imply that neoconservatives analyse international issues in absolute moral categories and focus on the "unipolar" power of the United States, seeing the “use of force as the first, not the last option” of foreign policy. They are hostile toward nonmilitary multilateral institutions and instinctively antagonistic toward international treaties and agreements (Stefan Halper and Jonathan Clarke, 2004: 32). Halper and Clarke conclude that based on the above beliefs and approaches, neoconservatives tend to find themselves in confrontational postures with the Muslim world, with some US' allies, with the need for cooperation in the United Nations, and with those within their country who disagree with them and their objectives. Thus, for them, when it comes to dealing with tyrannical regimes, the United States should seek not coexistence but their transformation.

It is easy to identify this projection of neoconservative global intent as a blueprint for what would later be known as the *Bush Doctrine*. The principal aim of American foreign policy has been to bring about a change of regime in hostile nations - in Baghdad and Belgrade, in Pyongyang and Beijing and wherever tyrannical governments acquire the military power to threaten their neighbours, the United States and its allies.

Before proceeding, study **Figure 3.3**, which illustrates the key ideas associated with the neo-conservative approach to understanding the international system.

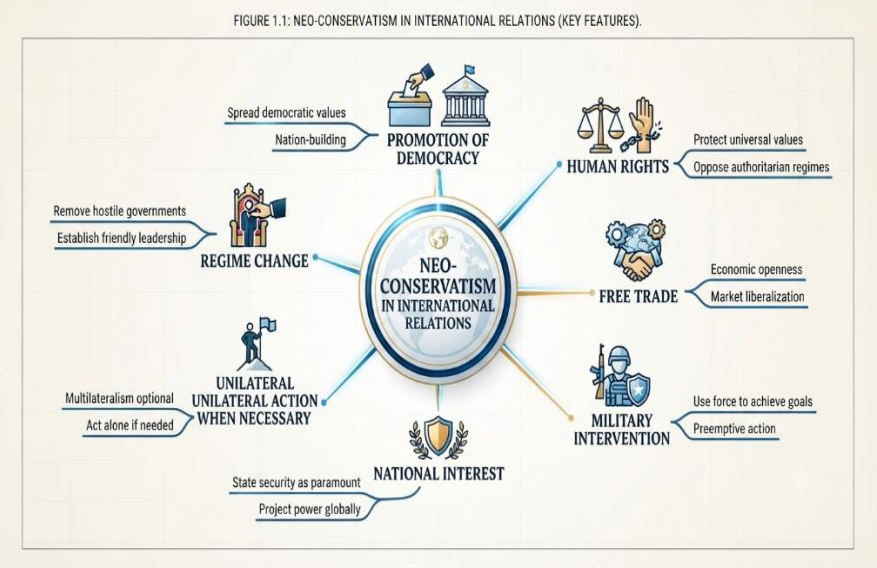

Figure 3.3: Key Features of Neo-conservatism
Source: Google Gemini, Adapted by Abdulazeez A. Lawal, NOUN, 2026.

Study the figure. Which features of neo-conservatism distinguish it most clearly from the other idealist approaches discussed in this unit?
Having completed this unit, apply what you have learned to the following scenario.

Scenario
Several countries are facing rising tensions over access to freshwater resources. Instead of preparing for military confrontation, they establish a regional organisation to negotiate agreements, create common environmental regulations, promote economic cooperation, and resolve disputes peacefully. However, one powerful country insists that military intervention should remain an option if democratic governments within the region are threatened.

Self-Assessment Exercise 4

Based on the concepts discussed in this unit, answer the following questions:

1. Which aspects of the scenario reflect the principles of the idealist approach to understanding the international system?
2. Explain how liberal idealism and neoliberal idealism would interpret the role of the regional organisation in promoting cooperation among the participating states.
3. Which actions in the scenario reflect neo-conservative thinking? Support your answer with evidence from the unit.
4. To what extent do you think idealist approaches can effectively explain the behaviour of states in contemporary international relations? Give reasons for your answer.

3.4 Summary

This unit examined the idealist approach as one of the major perspectives for understanding the international system. It explained the central assumptions of idealism, particularly its emphasis on peace, cooperation, international institutions, and the role of shared values in shaping relations among states. The unit also discussed the major strands of idealist thought, namely liberal idealism, neoliberal idealism, and neo-conservatism, highlighting how each offers a distinct perspective on the operation of the international system while retaining the broader idealist belief in the importance of ideas, institutions, and cooperation. As you continue your study of international relations, consider how the assumptions of the idealist approach compare with those of realism in explaining contemporary international events.

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3.6 Possible Answers to Self-Assessment Exercise

Self-Assessment Exercise 1

1. **B**
2. **B**
3. **B**

Self-Assessment Exercise 2

1. **B**
2. **B**
3. **B**

Self-Assessment Exercise 3

1. **B**
2. **B**
3. **B**

Self-Assessment Exercise 4

1. Which aspects of the scenario reflect the principles of the I dealist approach to understanding the international system?

Answer: The establishment of a regional organisation, peaceful negotiation of disputes, creation of common regulations, and promotion of economic cooperation all reflect the idealist belief that international institutions and cooperation can promote peace and reduce conflict among states.

2. Explain how liberal idealism and neoliberal idealism would interpret the role of the regional organisation in promoting cooperation among the participating states.

Answer: Liberal idealism would view the regional organisation as an institution that encourages peaceful dialogue, cooperation, and the collective pursuit of common interests. Neoliberal idealism would further emphasise that such institutions promote complex interdependence, create rules and regimes, and enable both state and non-state actors to cooperate for mutual or absolute gains despite the anarchic nature of the international system.

3. Which actions in the scenario reflect neo-conservative thinking? Support your answer with evidence from the unit.

Answer: The country's insistence that military intervention should remain an option to defend democratic governments reflects neo-conservative thinking. This aligns with the neo-conservative belief that the use or threat of force may be justified to promote democracy, protect universal values, and advance national or ideological interests.

4. To what extent do you think idealist approaches can effectively explain the behaviour of states in contemporary international relations? Give reasons for your answer.

Answer: Idealist approaches remain relevant because they explain the importance of international organisations, diplomacy, cooperation, and international law in addressing global challenges. However, they may not

fully explain situations where states prioritise power, security, or military interests. Therefore, while idealism provides valuable insights into international cooperation, it is often complemented by other approaches, such as realism, to explain the full range of state behaviour in contemporary international relations.

Unit 4 The Great Debate the Idealists Versus the Realists

Unit Structure

4.1 Introduction
4.2 Learning Outcomes
4.3 Background to the Debate
4.4 The Context of the Great Debate
4.5 The Events of World War I and Idealism
4.6 The End of World War II, the Cold War and the Rebirth of the Realists' Postulations
4.7 The Events in the Post-Cold War Era
4.8 Summary
4.9 References/Further Readings/Web Sources
4.10 Possible Answers to Self-Assessment Exercises

4.1 Introduction

Welcome to this unit.

In the previous units, you examined the realist and idealist approaches to understanding the international system as separate schools of thought. In this unit, you will explore how these two approaches came into direct intellectual confrontation through what is widely known as the Great Debate in International Relations. You will also examine how major historical events, including the two World Wars, the Cold War, and the post-Cold War era, influenced the development and acceptance of these competing perspectives. As you progress through the unit, consider how changing international events continue to shape the way scholars explain the behaviour of states and other actors within the international system.

4.2 Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit, you shouldbe able to:

- explain the historical background to the Great Debate in International Relations;
- describe the context of the First Great Debate between the idealists and the realists;
- examine how the events of World War I influenced the development of idealist thinking;
- explain how World War II and the Cold War contributed to the resurgence of realist thought; and
- assess how developments in the post-Cold War era have influenced contemporary thinking about the international system.

4.3 Background to the Debate

This section traces the historical foundations of the debate between realism and idealism. It explains how early political thinkers influenced the competing perspectives that later became central to the study of International Relations.

Why do scholars regard Thucydides as a foundation for both realist and idealist thinking in International Relations?

The realist and idealist trends of thought existed before they were developed as coherent terms in world political discourse in international relations. From the Peloponnesian War through European poleis to, ultimately, nation-states, realist trends can be observed before the term existed. Similarly, the evolution of idealist thinking, from the Enlightenment onwards, expressed itself in calls for a better, more cooperative world before finding practical application – if little success – after the Great War. Writers like Thucydides, in his work, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, have shown interest in developing an understanding of human nature to explain behaviour in world crises. Some analysts of his work have long hailed him as the father of the realist political model of international relations, due to the numerous messages implicit in The *History of the Peloponnesian War* that seem to favour the idea that morality and justice do not have a place in political decisions; rather, political decisions are governed more by the basic needs of security and wealth inherent in human nature. Thus, Thucydides became the first to describe international relations through a realist lens as anarchic and immoral, viewing interstate politics as lacking in regulation and justice. His realism has had a timeless impact on the way contemporary analysts perceive the international system. All later realists, from Thomas Hobbes to Machiavelli and Henry Kissinger, owe an intellectual debt to Thucydides.

In the 20th century, realism drew its descriptions and assumptions about the international system from the Allied experience with Wilhelmina and Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan, and the Soviet Union. In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, Hans J. Morgenthau was credited with having systematised classical realism. His *Politics Among Nations* became the standard textbook and continued to be reprinted after his death.

Although Thucydides clearly believes that realism is the true motivator of political decisions, he is not a die-hard realist. In the same work, he has also shown a strong interest in the role of ethics and morals in politics. He acknowledges that considerations of justice cannot be ignored if a political entity wishes to maintain its power in the long run. Writing on *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Korab-Karpowicz (2012) argues that

the most compelling argument on behalf of Thucydides' complex political views is that, as reflected in the overarching theme of the *History*, an empire that is unchecked by morals and moderation becomes drunk with desire for more power and will inevitably fail.

The best indicator of Thucydides' views on morality is found, first, in his description of the social disintegration during the Corcyran civil war. Thucydides condemns the "atrocities" of the civil war and directly attributes it to man's noble nature being defeated by greed and the power struggle. Second, in history, one can identify in the speech of the Melians elements of the idealistic or liberal worldview: the belief that nations have the right to exercise political independence, that they have mutual obligations to one another and will fulfil them, and that a war of aggression is unjust. In the "Melian dialogue", the Melians employ idealistic arguments; the choice is between war and subjection. They are courageous and love their country. They do not wish to lose their freedom, and even though they are militarily weaker than the Athenians, they are prepared to defend themselves. They base their arguments on an appeal to justice, which they associate with fairness, and regard the Athenians as unjust.

The "Melian Dialogue," one of the most frequently commented-upon parts of Thucydides' History, presents the classic debate between the idealist and realist views, with each side representing an extreme of the spectrum. It is here that the Athenians and Melians use all the arguments that realists and idealists have used ever since, leaving us with the question: Can international politics be based on a moral order derived from principles of justice, or will it forever remain the arena of conflicting national interests and power?
The figure below illustrates how Thucydides' ideas provided the intellectual foundation for both realist and idealist interpretations of international politics.

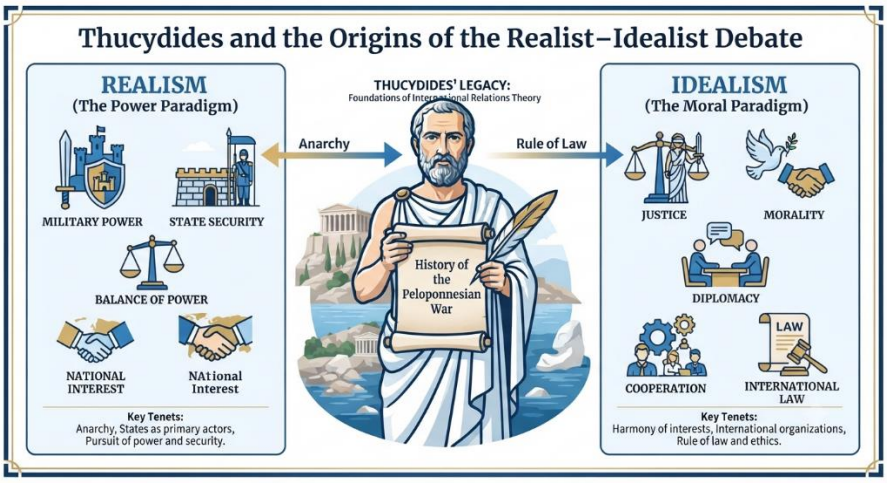

Figure 4.1: Thucydides and the Origins of the Realist–Idealist Debate

Source: Google Gemini AI-generated image. Prompt developed by Abdulazeez Ayodeji Lawal, National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), 2026.

Having examined the historical background to the debate, answer the following questions to evaluate your understanding.
Self-Assessment Exercise 1

1. Thucydides is widely regarded as:
   A. The founder of liberal institutionalism
   B. The father of the realist political model of international relations
   C. The creator of the League of Nations
   D. The founder of neoliberal institutionalism
2. According to the discussion, Thucydides also recognised the importance of:
   A. Eliminating all military power
   B. Justice and morality in sustaining political power
   C. World government above nation-states
   D. Economic sanctions as the primary foreign policy tool
3. The "Melian Dialogue" is significant because it:
   A. Introduced the United Nations Charter
   B. Presents the classic debate between realist and idealist perspectives
   C. Describes the Cold War rivalry
   D. Explains the principles of neoliberal institutionalism

4.4 The Context of the Great Debate

Having examined the historical origins of the debate, this section explains how the disagreements between realism and idealism came to be recognised as the First Great Debate in International Relations, and how subsequent debates contributed to the discipline's growth.

Why has the First Great Debate remained relevant in the study of International Relations for over eighty years?
In international relations, the “Great Debates” refer to a series of disagreements between international relations scholars. In this unit, our focus is on the "First Great Debate”, also known as the "Realist-Idealist Great Debate”. Suffice it to say that other Great Debates took place in the field, such as the "Second Great Debate," which was a dispute between "scientific IR" scholars who sought to refine scientific methods of inquiry in international relations theory and those who insisted on a more historicist/interpretative approach to international relations theory. The debate is termed "realists versus behaviourists" or "traditionalism versus scientism". The inter-paradigm debate is considered to be a great debate

and is therefore referred to as the "Third Great Debate". The inter-paradigm debate was a debate between liberalism, realism and radical international relations theories. The debate has also been described as being between realism, institutionalism and structuralism. The "Fourth Great Debate" was a debate between positivist theories and post-positivist theories of international relations. Confusingly, it is often described in the literature as "The Third Great Debate" by those who reject the label "Great Debate" for the inter-paradigm debate. This debate concerns the underlying epistemology of international relations scholarship and is also described as a debate between "rationalists" and "reflectivists". Robert Keohane started the debate at the International Studies Association in 1988. He can be considered an epistemological one, about how we can know 'things', rather than an ontological one, that is, a debate about what we can claim to know.

The chronicle of the disciplinary history of Internal Relations, framed as a series of great debates, begins with the first great debate between “idealists” (or “utopians”) and “realists” in the 1930s and 1940s. This debate highlights the idealist-realist dichotomy. It provides evidence of the actual academic controversy that took place after World War II between rival idealist and realist scholars. The general framework of the First Great Debate narrative has become an integral element of the discipline, such that, over eighty years after the alleged First Great Debate, it continues to occupy a central place in the field’s historical consciousness.

The figure below presents a simplified timeline of the major debates that have shaped the evolution of International Relations as an academic discipline.



Figure 4.2: Evolution of the Great Debates in International Relations
Source: Google Gemini AI-generated image. Prompt developed by Abdulazeez Ayodeji Lawal, National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), 2026.

Now that you have examined the context and evolution of the Great Debates, assess your understanding by answering the following questions.
Self-Assessment Exercise 2

1. The First Great Debate in International Relations is commonly known as the debate between:
   A. Liberalism and Marxism
   B. Realism and Idealism
   C. Constructivism and Feminism
   D. Behaviouralism and Structuralism

2. The Fourth Great Debate primarily focused on:
   A. Colonial administration
   B. Military alliances
   C. Positivist and post-positivist approaches to knowledge
   D. International trade agreements

3. According to the unit, the First Great Debate remains important because it:
   A. Ended the study of realism
   B. Continues to occupy a central place in the history of International Relations
   C. Eliminated theoretical disagreements among scholars
   D. Replaced all earlier approaches to international politics

4.5 The Events of World War I and Idealism

The outbreak and aftermath of the First World War significantly influenced the development of idealist thinking in International Relations. This section examines how the devastating consequences of the war encouraged scholars and political leaders to advocate international cooperation and collective security as alternatives to power politics.

How did the experiences of World War I strengthen the appeal of idealism in International Relations?
While politics in the international system continued to be conducted within the realist framework articulated by Thucydides, Hobbes, and Machiavelli, World War I broke out. World War I, also known as the First World War, was a global war centred in Europe that began on 28 July 1914 and lasted until 11 November 1918. From its onset until the approach of World War II in 1939, it was simply called the World War or the Great War, and thereafter the First World War or World War I. In America, it was initially called the European War. More than 9 million combatants were killed: a scale of death impacted by industrial advancements, geographic stalemate and reliance on human wave attacks.

The war drew in all the world's great economic powers, which were assembled in two opposing alliances: the Allies (based on the Triple Entente of the United Kingdom, France, and the Russian Empire) and the Central Powers of Germany and Austria-Hungary. Although Italy had also been a member of the Triple Alliance alongside Germany and Austria-Hungary, it did not join the Central Powers, as Austria-Hungary had taken the offensive against the alliance's terms. These alliances were both reorganised and expanded as more nations entered the war: Italy, Japan and the United States joined the Allies, and the Ottoman Empire and Bulgaria the Central Powers. Ultimately, more than 70 million military personnel, including 60 million Europeans, were mobilised in this Great War in the history of the world. By the end of the war, four major imperial powers, the German, Russian, Austro-Hungarian, and Ottoman empires, ceased to exist. The successor states of the former two lost substantial territory, while the latter two were dismantled. The map of Europe was redrawn, with several independent nations restored or created. It was the fifth-deadliest conflict in world history, paving the way for major political changes, including revolutions in many of the nations involved, as well as scholarly understanding of politics in the international arena.

After the war, the League of Nations was formed to prevent any repetition of such an appalling conflict. It was formed against the backdrop of the strong belief that it is possible to base a political system primarily on morality, and that the baser, more selfish impulses of humans can be muted to build national and international norms of behaviour that foster peace, prosperity, cooperation, and justice. The League of Nations is said to be based on moral principles and Woodrow Wilson's convictions. Link finds that Wilson from his earliest days had imbibed the beliefs of his denomination - in the omnipotence of God, the morality of the Universe, a system of rewards and punishments and the notion that nations, as well as man, transgressed the laws of God at their peril, in the righteous duty of mankind to make the world a safe place (Link, 1956: 524-541).

The League of Nations was an intergovernmental organisation founded at the Paris Peace Conference that ended the First World War. It was the first international organisation whose principal mission was to maintain world peace. Its primary goals, as stated in its Covenant, included preventing wars through collective security and disarmament, and settling international disputes through negotiation and arbitration. The thinking behind the League represented a fundamental shift from the realists' understanding of the preceding hundred years.

The situational realities of the League proved that it lacked its own armed force and depended on the Great Powers to enforce its resolutions, keep to its economic sanctions, or provide an army when needed. However, the

Great Powers were often reluctant to do so. Sanctions could hurt League members, so they were reluctant to comply. Its two most important members, Britain and France, were reluctant to use sanctions and even more reluctant to resort to military action on behalf of the League. When, during the Second Italo- Abyssinian War, the League accused Italian soldiers of targeting Red Cross medical tents, Benito Mussolini responded that "the league is very well when sparrows shout, but no good at all when eagles fall out" (Farhang, 2008: 2).

The league lasted for 27 years, but after several notable successes and some early failures in the 1920s, the league ultimately proved incapable of preventing aggression by the Axis powers in the 1930s. Germany withdrew from the league, as did Japan, Italy, Spain and others. The outbreak and escalation of World War II showed that the League had failed in its primary purpose: preventing future world wars. Because it could not compel powerful countries to obey its rulings, it became evident that, without the use of force, collective security that relied primarily on the league's pacifist approach could not confront the aggression of actors in the international arena.

The figure below illustrates how the devastation of the First World War influenced the emergence of idealist thinking and the establishment of international institutions, such as the League of Nations, to promote peace, cooperation, and collective security.

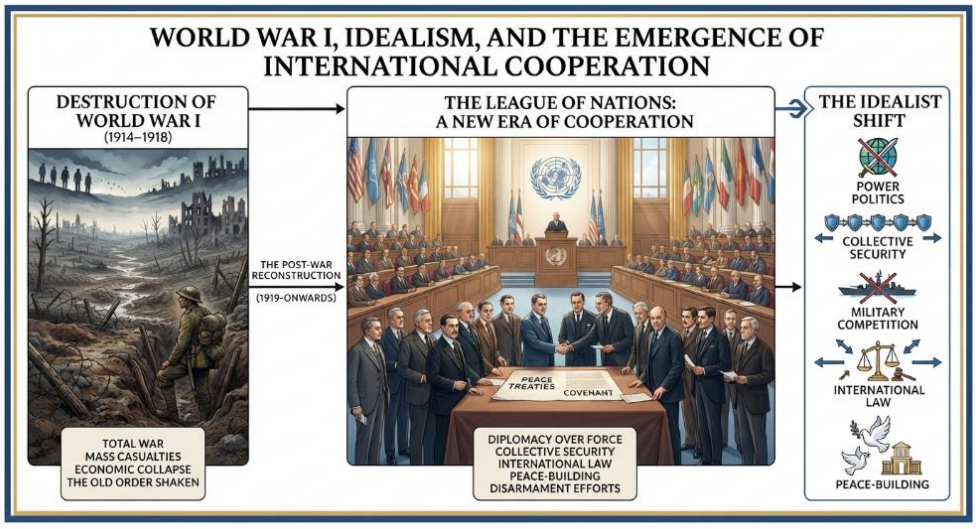

Figure 4.3: World War I, Idealism, and the Emergence of International Cooperation
Source: Google Gemini AI-generated image. Prompt developed by Abdulazeez Ayodeji Lawal, National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), 2026.

Having examined the impact of World War I on the development of idealist thinking and the establishment of international institutions, answer the following questions to assess your understanding.

Self-Assessment Exercise 3

1. The First World War contributed to the rise of idealist thinking because it:
   A. Proved that military competition was the best way to maintain peace
   B. Encouraged the search for cooperation, morality, and international institutions
   C. Eliminated the need for international organisations
   D. Strengthened the belief that states should rely only on military p ower
2. The League of Nations was established primarily to:
   A. Promote territorial expansion among powerful states
   B. Maintain world peace through collective security and cooperation
   C. Replace all national governments
   D. Encourage competition among states
3. The creation of the League of Nations reflected the idealist belief that:
   A. International politics is controlled only by military strength
   B. States cannot cooperate because the international system is anarchic
   C. International institutions and moral principles can help reduce conflict
   D. Power struggles are the only explanation for international relations

4.6 The End of World War II, the Cold War and the Rebirth of the Realists' Postulations

The League of Nations' failure to prevent another major conflict demonstrated the limitations of relying solely on international cooperation and moral principles. The events that followed World War II and the emergence of the Cold War created conditions that renewed attention towards realist explanations of international politics.

Why did the events after World War II contribute to the revival of realist thinking in International Relations?

It is a fact that each shift in worldview paradigm is a product of a new historical experience. The rebirth of the realist paradigm in understanding, organising and explaining politics in the international system after World War II was obviously influenced not only by argument but also by insight into events unfolding at the time. The failure of the idealist paradigm to anticipate and prevent World War II gave way to the rebirth of realism as a new paradigm after 1945.

While it is agreed that realists are just as interested as idealists in conflict management, realists are less optimistic about the effectiveness of international law and organisation and about the extent of international cooperation that is possible. Realists focus more on military strategy, the elements of national power, and the nature of national interests than on international law and organisation. From World War II, they learned that the way to prevent future wars was a "balance of power" capable of deterring would-be aggressors, or a "concert of powers" willing to police the world. This paradigm would prevail throughout the Cold War.

To understand the preponderance of realist ideals in the Cold War era, one has to examine the events of that period. First, the era saw the world divided into two ideological blocs: the capitalist and the communist, with two prominent enemy nations: the United States of America (USA), leading the capitalist bloc, and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, leading the socialist bloc. Second, the two enemy nations, also known as the two superpowers, engaged in an intense power struggle that ranged from forming alliances to waging war. They played havoc with conflict in different parts of the world. They used all types of weapons, propaganda, diplomacy, arms and other tactics to malign each other. Thus, within this period, whatever happened (peace, proxy wars) between the USA and the USSR could be very eloquently explained through the kaleidoscopic lenses of realist thinking.

While it endured, the Cold War seemed to confirm and validate many of the principles and predictions that realists emphasised before and in the wake of World War II, and to invalidate the principles that idealists advocated after World War I. Realism found a hospitable home in which to flourish during the conflict-ridden fifty-year system between 1939 and 1989, when lust for power, appetite for imperial expansion, struggle for hegemony, a superpower arms race, and an obsession with national interest were in strong evidence.

The figure below illustrates how the aftermath of World War II and the Cold War environment contributed to the renewed dominance of realist thinking in explaining international politics.



Figure 4.4: World War II, Cold War Rivalry, and the Revival of Realism
Source: Google Gemini AI-generated image. Prompt developed by Abdulazeez Ayodeji Lawal, National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), 2026.

Having examined the revival of realism after World War II and during the Cold War, answer the following questions to assess your understanding.

Self-Assessment Exercise 4

1. The failure of the idealist approach after World War II contributed to:
   A. The decline of all international theories
   B. The rebirth and renewed influence of realism
   C. The elimination of military competition
   D. The rejection of state power in international politics
2. During the Cold War, realist explanations focused mainly on:
   A. Morality and global citizenship
   B. Military power, national interest, and balance of power
   C. The complete disappearance of conflict
   D. The replacement of states by international organisations
3. The rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War reflected realist ideas because:
   A. States competed for power and security in an uncertain international environment
   B. States abandoned military strategies completely
   C. International institutions controlled all state decisions
   D. States no longer pursue national interests

4.7 The Events in the Post-Cold War Era

The end of the Cold War introduced another major transformation in the international system. While the Cold War period appeared to reinforce realist assumptions about power competition and security, developments after 1989 highlighted increasing attention towards democracy, international cooperation, economic interdependence, international law, and the role of international organisations.

How did the post-Cold War era challenge the dominance of realist explanations of international politics?
The end of the Cold War in 1989 marked the end of another world war, fortunately this time without bullets and bloodshed, and ushered in another seismic shift in how one can describe the international system. Nevertheless, one thing is certain: the strict application of power politics has become unpopular; hence, what the world is witnessing is a novel fashion in world politics that realism had ignored. Instead, the world is witnessing new fashions that are not just increasingly applicable, appropriate, and consistent with the tenets of Woodrow Wilson's idealism. These ideals read as if they were taken from Wilson's "Fourteen Points" speech, delivered to the US Senate on January 22, 1917.

In that speech, Wilson dwelt on the march towards democracy, believing that making the world safe for democracy would make it fit and safe to live in. The manner in which countries around the world have embraced democracy has strengthened the confidence that democracy promotes peace. This exposes the fallacy of realism and supports the validity of Wilson's idealism. Second, the economic underpinnings of world politics have received so much impetus. Specifically, more attention has been accorded to economic issues such as trade liberalisation as an instrument for international peace. Third, support for, adherence to, and advocacy of strengthening international law have grown visibly. Today, many nations voluntarily adhere to judgments of the International Court of Justice even when compliance runs counter to their immediate self-interests; for example, Nigeria's compliance with the ICJ judgment regarding the ceding of Bakassi to Cameroon. Fourth, the role of international organisations as actors in international politics, especially in the preservation of world peace, has been increasing. The United Nations and other international governmental organisations, as well as non-governmental organisations, have become more effective in preserving world peace. Fifth, arms control is no longer a mere slogan, but has gained more recognition as a viable path to the collective security agenda in the international system.

Furthermore, responses to human repression have reinvigorated interest in human rights. In the post-Cold War era, the entire world views with

disgust the persecution of minority groups everywhere in the world. The United Nations has become a viable institutional approach for offering guarantees of issues ranging from ethnic and religious conflicts to violations of minority rights in particular and human rights in general in a system where such violations pose a threat to the entire international community. All the issues mentioned amount to a rediscovery of the approaches that Wilson's idealism had proposed after World War I. Today, such approaches are relied upon to confront various forms of strife and structural violence that have plagued the post-Cold War world.

The figure below illustrates the major changes that characterised the post-Cold War international system and the growing influence of ideas associated with idealism, including democracy, international cooperation, human rights, and international institutions.

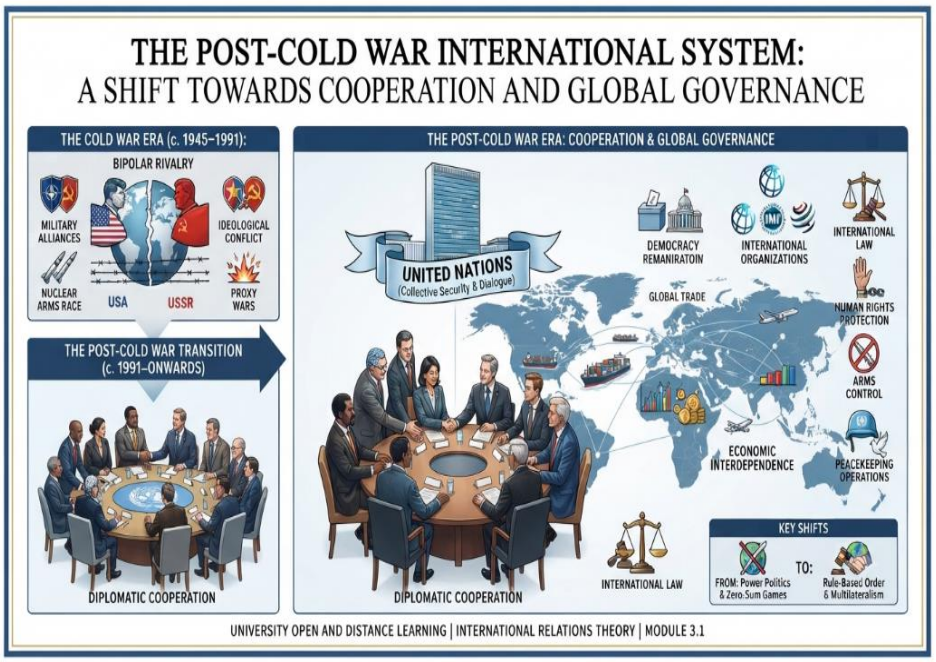

Figure 4.5: The Post-Cold War International System: A Shift Towards Cooperation and Global Governance

Source: Google Gemini AI-generated image. Prompt developed by Abdulazeez Ayodeji Lawal, National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), 2026.

Having completed this unit, apply what you have learned to the following scenario.

Case Study: International Cooperation After the Cold War

Following the end of the Cold War in 1989, many countries began adopting democratic systems of governance and strengthening their participation in international organisations. Global institutions such as the United Nations became increasingly involved in peacekeeping operations, conflict resolution, and the protection of human rights. At the same time, international trade expanded as countries pursued economic cooperation through regional and global agreements.

However, some states continued to rely on military strength and strategic interests to protect their national security. For example, powerful states still maintained military alliances, developed defence capabilities, and sometimes used force when they believed their national interests were threatened.

Self-Assessment Exercise 5

Based on this scenario and your understanding of the post-Cold War era, answer the following questions:

1. Identify two developments in the scenario that reflect the principles of idealism in international relations.
2. Explain how the growing role of international organisations after the Cold War challenges traditional realist assumptions about international politics.
3. Despite the growth of international cooperation, why do realist ideas about power and national interest remain relevant in the post-Cold War era?
4. In your opinion, does the post-Cold War international system provide stronger support for idealism or realism? Give reasons f or your answer.

4.8 Summary

This unit examined the Great Debate between the idealist and realist approaches to understanding the international system. It explained how these two perspectives offer different interpretations of state behaviour, with realism emphasising power, security, and national interests, while idealism emphasises cooperation, international institutions, and shared values. The unit also explored how major historical events, including the World Wars, the Cold War, and the post-Cold War era, influenced the development and relevance of these competing perspectives. As you continue your study of international relations, consider how the ideas of realism and idealism help explain the challenges and opportunities that shape contemporary global politics.

4.9 References/Further Readings/Web Sources

Jahanpour, F. (2008). "The Elusiveness of Trust: The Experience of the Security Council and Iran." In: *Transnational Foundation of Peace and Future Research.*

Link, A. S. (1956). "A Portrait of Wilson." *Virginia Quarterly Review.*

4.10 Possible Answers to Self-Assessment Exercises

Self-Assessment Exercise 1

1. B
2. B
3. B

Self-Assessment Exercise 2

1. B
2. C
3. B

Self-Assessment Exercise 3

1. B
2. B
3. C

Self-Assessment Exercise 4

1. B
2. B
3. A

Self-Assessment Exercise 5

1. The scenario reflects idealist principles through developments such as the increased role of international organisations, promotion of democracy, strengthening of international law, and emphasis on cooperation among states.
2. The growing role of international organisations challenges traditional realist assumptions by showing that states can work collectively through institutions, rules, and agreements rather than relying only on power competition and self-help.
3. Realist ideas remain relevant because states continue to pursue national interests, protect their security, compete for influence, and rely on power in addressing international challenges.
4. Responses may vary. Learners should provide arguments supported by examples from the unit, explaining whether contemporary international relations demonstrate stronger support for idealism, realism, or a combination of both.

MODULE 2 EVOLUTION OF THE MODERN INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM

Unit 1 The Classical International System (1648-1789)
Unit 2 The Transitional International System (1789-1945)
Unit 3 The Post World War II International System (1945-1989)
Unit 4 The Contemporary International System (1989-Date)

Unit 1 The Classical International System (1648-1789)

Unit Structure

1.1 Introduction
1.2 Learning Outcomes
1.3 The Ancient World
1.4 The Formation of the International Political System, 1500–1900
1.5 Degree of Polarisation among Nations
1.6 Degree of Interdependence
1.7 Summary
1.8 References/Further Readings/Web Sources
1.9 Possible Answers to Self-Assessment Exercises

1.1 Introduction

Welcome to Module 2. Have you ever wondered how the world moved from being organised around empires, kingdoms, and scattered political communities to the system of states that shapes global affairs today? Understanding this transformation requires us to look back at the historical events and political developments that influenced the organisation of international relations. In the previous unit, we examined the foundations and major perspectives that help us understand international relations. This unit takes the discussion further by exploring how the modern international system gradually developed through important historical experiences, particularly those that shaped the emergence of sovereign states. This unit focuses on the classical international system and the events that contributed to its formation, including developments before the Peace of Westphalia, the Thirty Years' War, and shifting state relations. As you progress through this unit, you will gain a clearer understanding of how historical changes influenced the structures, practices, and interactions that continue to shape international politics today.

1.2 Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- explain the development of political organisations in the ancient world;
- describe the formation of the modern international political system between 1500 and 1900;
- discuss the nature of power distribution and polarisation among nations in the classical international system;
- explain the level of interdependence among states during the classical international system.

1.3 The Ancient world

The modern international system did not emerge overnight. To appreciate how states eventually developed into the primary actors in international relations, it is useful to begin by examining one of history's most influential civilisations: Ancient Rome.

Rome: An Empire Born of Myth
The origins of every culture, every religion, and every civilisation burble up from a wellspring of deep human intuition about life itself. The Roman Empire is no exception to this universal law and, in fact, stands as its exemplar. Rome's thousand-year stride across history is analogous to human life: the miracle of birth, the full flowering of maturity, and the decrepitude of old age. The rise and fall of the Roman Empire is the most human of stories, hence the fascination it continues to exert over the minds of people the world over. A parable, a cautionary fable, and above all, a grand tale: the story of Rome's ascendancy and collapse is truly epic.

Why do you think many civilisations explain their origins through myths and legends rather than historical records?
The discussion that follows provides insight into how Rome's legendary origins shaped its cultural identity and political development.

The River, the Twins, and the She-Wolf
The legends surrounding Rome's founding are many and varied, but most involve the demigod twins, Romulus and Remus. The boys were sons of Mars, the god of war, and descendants of the Trojan hero, Aeneas, whose exploits were chronicled by Virgil in The Aeneid. The boys' mother was the daughter of Numitor, king of what is now central Italy. Numitor's brother, fearing the twins would cheat him out of the throne, sought to kill them in infancy. A kind-hearted servant of their mother, upon hearing of the planned murders, wrapped the boys in blankets, placed them in a basket, and set them in the gentle current of the Tiber River, which, guided

by the river god Tibernus, carried them to a safe riverbank some distance away near the Palatine Hill. In what is easily the most fantastical element of the tale, a she-wolf happened upon the infants and nursed them to health, after which a woodpecker fed them. A shepherd and his wife, Faustulus and Acca, discovered the boys and took them as their own children. In time, the brothers grew into young adulthood and became shepherds like their adoptive father. And, as brothers often do, Romulus and Remus quarrelled. Unlike most brothers, however, one of their quarrels would prove fateful for Western Civilisation.

A City on Seven Hills

The brothers wanted to start a new city, and so looked about for a suitable spot among the area's seven small hills. Romulus chose the Palatine Hill; Remus argued for the Aventine Hill instead. To settle their dispute, they agreed to engage in augury—determining the future by observing the flight patterns of birds. The brothers established sacred spaces on their respective hills and awaited the birds' appearance. Romulus claimed to see twelve birds to Remus' six and thus declared himself the winner. Remus insisted that since he had seen his six birds first, he was the winner. Things remained at a standstill until Romulus began digging trenches around the Palatine Hill and started constructing a wall. Remus mocked the wall, which was relatively short, and even leapt over it in ridicule. Romulus quickly became enraged and killed his brother. It is from this moment that we date the founding of Rome: April 21, 753 BCE. Romulus, having killed his brother in cold blood, named the city after himself: Roma. Whatever the absolute truth of Rome's founding, the mythical elements of the Romulus and Remus story evince a deeper truth about the nature of the city that would bear a murderer's name: Rome would be a city—and eventually an Empire—seeded with the blood of innocents.

The Figure below summarises the traditional account of Rome's legendary founding and early development.

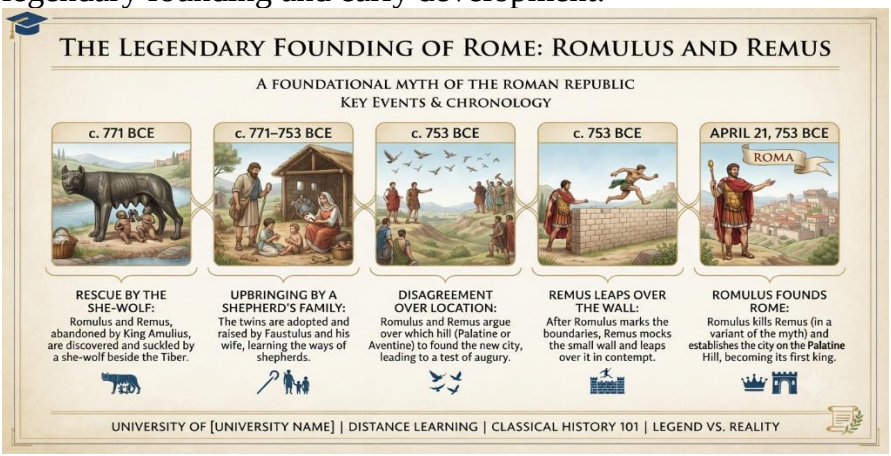

Figure 1.1: The Legendary Founding of Rome

Source: Google Gemini, Adapted by Abdulazeez Ayodeji Lawal, National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), 2026.

From Myth to Republic

How can geography contribute to the growth and strength of a civilisation?

Rome was originally a small village on the banks of the Tiber River. It grew quickly, aided by the convenience of its location. Having an easily navigable waterway allowed merchants to traffic their wares successfully, and this economic activity generated rapid growth and power. The region's proximity to Greece—and to Greece's colonies in southern Italy—gave it a culture on which to build something familiar yet new. The Greek pantheon of gods, for example, was adopted by the early Romans, who renamed the deities. The Greek god Zeus became the Roman god Jupiter; the Greek Ares became Mars (who was credited, you'll recall, with having sired Romulus and Remus), and Apollo became Mercury. The Romans also adapted Greek architecture and literature, imbuing it with a certain Romanitas. Its adaptive skills enabled the new Kingdom of Rome to grow rapidly from a trading town to a prosperous city between the eighth and sixth centuries BCE. During that time, Rome was ruled by seven kings, from Romulus to Tarquin. When this last king, known as Tarquin the Proud, was deposed in 509 BCE, his rival for power, Lucius Junius Brutus, forcefully reformed the government, abolished the monarchy, and established the Roman Republic.

Ruling: A Matter of Class

Unlike in a democracy, where all citizens are expected to take an active role in governing and hold supreme power, in a republic, citizens elect representatives to rule on their behalf. (America, you'll recall from grade school, is a constitutional republic: the citizens elect representatives to rule on their behalf, guided by an approved constitution.) Strikingly progressive for its era, the Roman Republic's elements have been incorporated into many modern systems of government worldwide. In the Roman Republic, two consuls, elected each year and advised by the Roman Senate, were at the head of the government. The people elected magistrates to serve in the Senate. Though the monarchy had been overthrown and the people had regained ruling power through the creation of the Republic, a hierarchical class structure remained ingrained in both politics and society. Many of the Senators were patricians, meaning they were descended from the original ruling classes of Rome established during Romulus's reign. Patricians were highly-regarded members of society with all the trappings of wealth and privilege. In contrast to the rich and powerful patricians stood the rest of the Roman people, known as plebeians. Eventually, after a few hundred years, the plebeians would gain additional rights, such as the right to marry patricians, and even the opportunity to rise to leadership ranks within the military. In time,

plebeians who were successful in military service or business could become what was known as self-made nobles.

The Power and the Glory

Rome's size and power grew exponentially during the Republican era, thanks in part to the Punic Wars. The Punic Wars were a series of wars that began in 264 BCE with the First Punic War, which ended in 241 BCE. Sicily was positioned between Rome, in present-day Italy, and Carthage, in present-day Tunisia in North Africa, and it called upon the two powers to resolve internal disputes as they arose. Part of Sicily was under Carthage's control. Rome had already conquered most of Italy, and the Romans were interested in expanding their territory to include Sicily. Most of Rome's conquests had been through its powerful army in land battles. It did not have the size and strength of Carthage's navy, and Rome's bid to secure Sicily eventually failed. The Second Punic War began in 218 BCE, and by then, Rome had extended its influence and tightened its hold on Sicily, Corsica, and Sardinia.

The Reach of the Republic

The Roman Republic was an era of exploration and expansion of power. As the Romans warred with foreign powers, conquered territories became Roman outposts, also known as coloniae, or colonies. When a Roman citizen retired from a legion or other military unit, they were often granted land in the conquered territory where they had served. The colonisation of conquered territories led to their Romanisation. The Latin language, Roman traditions, and technological advances, such as good roads and viaducts for transporting water, became part of the way of life in Roman colonies. Granting Roman citizenship to conquered peoples instilled a sense of Roman pride and reduced the risk of rebellion after new lands were conquered. Though the period following the Punic Wars saw a decline in prosperity among Romans, particularly among plebeians, Roman territories expanded throughout the Republic. By the first century BCE, Rome's conquests included Sicily, Sardinia, Corsica, most of Spain, Macedonia, North Africa, and Gaul. Roman coins were used throughout the lands of the Republic. A common currency, a system of good roads, and a naval presence to ward off pirates combined to make trade between Roman territories and allies easy.

Trade with outposts and allies was frequently undertaken based on the available regional specialities. Spices and silk were imported from the Middle and Far East; olives and olive oil from Iberia; and other imports included fish, grains, meat, beer, and livestock. Beyond foodstuffs, precious metals, textiles, pottery, glass, marble, wool, and other materials were also traded between the far-reaching corners of the Roman lands.

The Figure below highlights how Rome expanded from a small settlement into a vast empire.

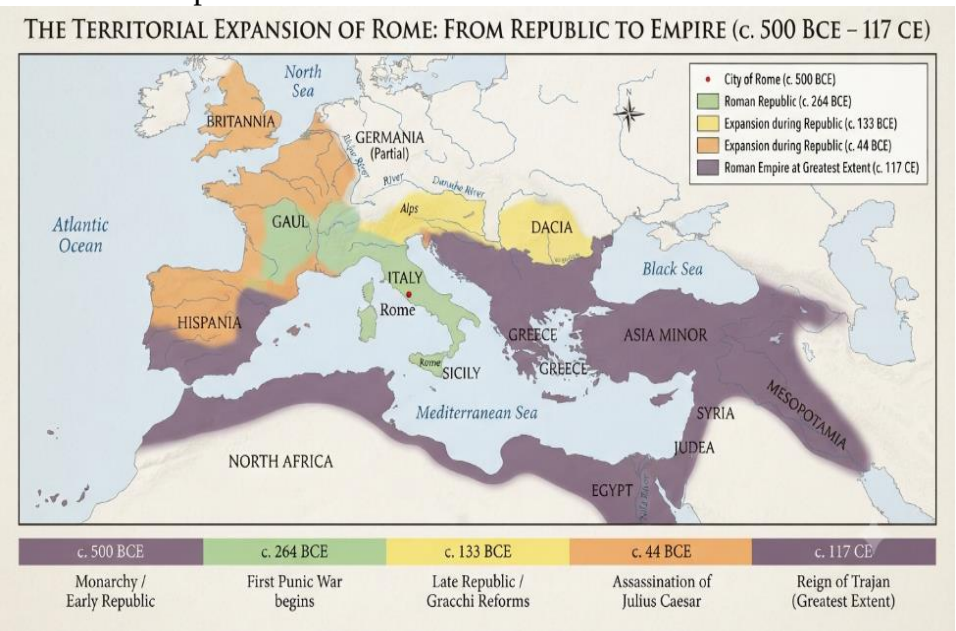

Figure 1.2: Expansion of the Roman Republic and Empire
Source: Google Gemini, Adapted by Abdulazeez Ayodeji Lawal, National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), 2026.

The Empire Reaches Its Zenith

Like Julius Caesar before him, Augustus implemented social reform programs that were popular with the Roman people. The military victories during Augustus's reign allowed Rome to continue expanding, trading and collecting taxes from outposts and territories in exchange for granting those territories' citizens some of the benefits of Roman citizenship. As new lands were annexed or conquered, their cultures, technological advances, art, literature, and architecture were incorporated into the Roman culture, becoming part of Rome itself. Augustus ruled for an astonishing 56 years, earning the status of a god, which the Senate bestowed upon him upon his death in 14 CE. The deification of emperors would become a long-running tradition in Rome.

The Age of Emperors

After Augustus's death, a succession of emperors ruled over Rome and its territories. Just as with other world leaders, some of the emperors in Rome's history earned notoriety or infamy, while others have faded into obscurity. Although an examination of every Roman emperor would be a task too exhaustive and would most likely be rather boring, it will be instructive to examine some of the more notable Caesars.

- **Caligula**

One of the more memorable emperors—and for entirely negative reasons—was Caligula, who ruled from 37 to 41 CE. Unstable and bloodthirsty, he took power at the age of 25 and immediately

distinguished himself with wild theatrics and bizarre behaviour. He belittled, bullied, and taunted Senators and others with demonstrations of his own power—for example, forcing Roman Senators to run in front of his chariot for sport.

- **Nero**

Emperor Nero was the son of an imposing mother, who may well have taken advantage of his young age, only 17, when he ascended the throne in 54 CE. Politically, Nero shared power with the Senate and left decisions to the philosopher Seneca, the prefect Burrus, and his mother, Agrippina, so that he could pursue his own interests in the arts. He eventually fell in love with a friend's wife, Poppaea, and married her. After a tumultuous three-year marriage, he killed Poppaea, kicking her in the stomach in a fit of rage. Nero loved to play the lyre and sing. During a fire in 64 CE, the shops around the Circus Maximus became engulfed in flames. Three of Rome's districts were destroyed, and seven more were damaged. A popular saying recalls that Nero fiddled while Rome burned.

A conspiracy to assassinate Nero emerged, with his advisor Seneca being named as one of the conspirators. This provoked Seneca to commit suicide. Nero consoled himself by touring Greece and participating in the Olympic Games. After Nero returned home and failed to address a revolt in Gaul or problems in other territories, Galba declared himself legate of the Senate and Roman People in Spain. The Praetorian Guard allied with Galba, declaring Nero an enemy of the Roman people. Upon hearing of his impending arrest and execution, Nero committed suicide.

- **Domitian: The Roman Emperor**

Domitian was a thoroughly dreadful human being, remembered today chiefly for two reasons: his brutal suppression of Christians and his despotic terrorising of prominent Senate members. Titus Flavius Domitianus was born in 51 CE, the second son of the future emperor Vespasian. In his final years, only his confiscations averted bankruptcy and total financial ruin. He had his cousin, Flavius Clemens, executed in 95 CE, and this proved to be the breaking point: those around him now realised that no one was safe and that action needed to be taken—and taken swiftly. On September 18, 96 CE, a group of conspirators, which included his wife, Domitia Longina, murdered Domitian.

- **Hadrian**

The emperor Hadrian, who ruled from 117 to 138 CE, was the third of the so-called Five Good Emperors. The remaining four were Nerva, Trajan, Antoninus Pius, and Marcus Aurelius. These five, in contrast with the rest of the early emperors, were esteemed for the fairness and justness that marked their reigns. Born Publius Aelius Hadrianus, most probably in Hispania (modern-day Seville, Spain), Hadrian is best known today for a

structure that still stands as a demarcation between countries and bears his name: Hadrian's Wall, a stone structure dividing England and Scotland.

The Eastern and Western Provinces

During the Roman Empire, people who were neither Roman nor Greek were known as barbarians. In later periods, the term came to mean a foreigner and was often used simply to describe someone as uncultured, uncouth, or uncivilised. By the year 285 CE, Rome's vast territories were too far-reaching to be governed from the central city of Rome. The emperor Diocletian split the Roman Empire into two halves: Eastern and Western Rome. Byzantium, known later as Constantinople, was the seat of the Eastern Empire, while Rome was the head of the Western Empire. The Eastern Empire included territories from Greece and around the Mediterranean Sea to what is now modern Egypt. The Western Empire included Italy and extended around the Mediterranean Sea to modern Tunisia in northern Africa. Despite the logistical division between the two halves of the Empire, Rome remained a single state as far as its citizens were concerned. Throughout the Age of Emperors, there was the Roman practice of creating alliances with neighbouring peoples and former enemies, granting them Roman citizenship, and further ingratiating them by allowing them to join the Roman army.

Constantine

As emperor, Constantine used the name Flavius Valerius Constantinus. The date of his birth is not known for certain, with estimates ranging from 274 CE to 288 CE. What is known is that he was born in what is today Serbia, the son of a Roman officer, Constantius, who later became Roman Emperor himself. Constantine's mother, revered as a saint by both the Catholic and Orthodox Churches, would later claim to have discovered the actual cross on which Jesus of Nazareth was crucified. After his father died in 306 CE, Constantine was acclaimed as emperor by the army. However, his leadership was not universally acknowledged, and he was forced to fight many battles against rival claimants. Constantine converted to Christianity—the first emperor to do so. Although not insignificant, the Christian population throughout the Empire was relatively small and had been mercilessly persecuted by Rome for most of the previous 300 years. Constantine's conversio and the subsequent tolerance he extended to the Christian Church were unprecedented and not wholly supported.

It should be stressed, too, that Constantine—again, contrary to what many believe—did not declare Christianity the official religion of the Empire. That declaration would be made several decades later by a different emperor, Theodosius. For his part, Constantine merely instituted a policy of religious freedom.

Constantine Looks Eastward

Constantine decided to make Byzantium the future capital of the Empire, and with his usual energy, he took every measure to enlarge, strengthen, and beautify it. And in a move very much in keeping with imperial self-regard, he renamed the city after himself, calling it Constantinople. Not long before Constantine's death, the Persian king made hostile movements into the outer realms of the Empire. Constantine prepared to join his troops in battle. But before he could march against the Persian king, he was suddenly stricken with an illness and rendered bedridden. Asking for and receiving baptism, he died in May of 337 CE.

The First Sack of Rome

Just as the Roman Empire was not built in a single day, or even a single year, its collapse was likewise long in coming. Although people could sense something was amiss and that the Empire was straining under the demands of too many territories and too many peoples, the sacking of Rome by Visigoth barbarians nevertheless came as a devastating shock. On August 24, 410, the Visigoth General Alaric led his forces into Rome, looting and pillaging the city for three straight days. Though a sack nonetheless, it was considered restrained by the standards of the day: there were no mass killings, and most structures survived intact. At the time of the sack, Rome was no longer the capital of the Empire. The capital of the Empire had already been moved to Ravenna some eight years prior. Nevertheless, Rome still had great symbolic and emotional significance in people's lives. The sack would reverberate like a shockwave through the Empire. It will come as a surprise to many that Alaric, the leader of the Visigoth barbarians, had once served in the Roman army. In fact, Alaric makes for a rather fascinating character.

- **Alaric**

In 394, Alaric had led a 20,000-strong force in aid of Theodosius, the Eastern Roman Emperor, in his defeat of the Frankish Roman General Arbogast at the battle of Frigidus. Alaric lost half his men and had expected some show of gratitude for their sacrifice. Unfortunately, Theodosius barely acknowledged it. In response, the Visigoths decided to fight for their own interests rather than Rome's. They raised Alaric on a shield and proclaimed him their king. He would reign as the first king of the Visigoths from 395 to 410. Although considered a barbarian, Alaric was in fact a Christian, albeit a heretical one.

Warnings from the East

The sack of Rome had been preceded by the sack of several Greek cities in 396 and 397. The armies of the Eastern Empire had been busy fighting the Huns, which allowed the Goths to raid unprotected regions such as Attica and Sparta, though Alaric spared Athens. The sack of Rome in 410

was largely due to the failed alliance of Alaric and Stilicho, a high-ranking general in the Roman Army. Stilicho was half-Vandal and married to the niece of the Emperor Theodosius. Though comrades in the battle of Frigidus, Stilicho had later defeated Alaric's forces in Macedonia and Pollentia. Stilicho, however, planned to enlist Alaric to fight for him against the Eastern Empire in 408. These plans never came to fruition, and Stilicho, along with thousands of Goths, was killed by the Romans, though without Emperor Honorius's say so. Alaric, strengthened by 10,000 Goths that had defected from Rome, sacked several Italian cities and set his sights on Rome. Although portrayed as a barbarian, Alaric attempted numerous times to negotiate with Rome and avoid the sack. Emperor Honorius did not take Alaric's threats seriously enough, and negotiations crumbled amid evidence of his bad faith and desire for war. Honorius ordered a failed surprise attack on Alaric's forces at a meeting where the two were scheduled to negotiate. Angered by the attack, Alaric finally entered Rome. He would not enjoy his success very long. Rome may have suffered a devastating blow, but she did land a final counterpunch against the Visigoth king: not long after the sack, Alaric died, most likely of fever.

- **Devastation**

The sack was the first time in 800 years that Rome had fallen to a foreign foe. The previous sack had occurred in 390 BCE and was perpetrated by the Gauls after their victory over the Romans at Allia. The physical devastation of Alaric's sack of Rome was nothing compared to the emotional and psychological devastation suffered by a populace for whom the unimaginable had just happened. There may have been a growing sense of unease over the barbarians' repeated incursions into the Empire, but the sack of Rome itself —"the eternal city" — was a psychological wound from which the Romans—and their Empire—would never recover.

The End of the Empire

In 476, it finally happened. Rome fell. And for good. In the decades that followed Alaric's sack of Rome, wave after wave of Germanic barbarian tribes swept through the Roman Empire, ravaging it and carving out areas in which to settle. By 476, Rome itself was a shadow of its former self and was easily overtaken by barbarians for the final time. After nearly 500 years as the world's greatest superpower, the Roman Empire collapsed in the late fourth century and passed into memory and myth.

Historians and experts have blamed the collapse on hundreds of factors, from military failures and crippling taxation to natural disasters and, more recently, climate change. Others, meanwhile, argue that the Roman Empire didn't really fall in 476, since its eastern half continued for another thousand years as the Byzantine Empire, based in Constantinople.

While just how—and when—the Empire fell remains a subject of continuing debate, certain theories have emerged as the most popular explanations for Rome's decline and disintegration.

- **Invasions by Barbarian Tribes**

The most obvious theory for Rome's collapse pins the fall on a string of military losses sustained against outside aggressors. Rome had tangled with Germanic tribes for centuries, but by the 300s, barbarian groups like the Goths had encroached beyond the Empire's borders. Finally, in 476, the Germanic leader Odoacer staged a revolt and deposed Emperor Romulus Augustulus. From then on, no Roman emperor would ever again rule from a post in Italy, leading most historians to cite 476 as the year the Western Empire suffered its deathblow.

- **Economic Troubles and Overreliance on Slave Labour**

Even as Rome was under attack from outside forces, it was crumbling from within. A kind of inner rot had developed. Constant wars and overspending had significantly lightened Imperial coffers, and oppressive taxation had widened the already substantial gap between rich and poor. In hopes of avoiding the tax collector, many members of the wealthy classes had fled to the countryside and established independent communities.

- **The Focus of the Empire Shifts Eastward**

The fate of Rome was partially sealed in the late third century when Diocletian divided the Empire into two—the Western Empire centred in Milan and the Eastern Empire centred in Byzantium, later known as Constantinople. The division made the Empire easier to govern in the short term, but over time, the two halves drifted apart. East and West failed to work together effectively to combat external threats. Worse, they often squabbled over resources and military aid. As the gulf widened, the largely Greek-speaking Eastern Empire grew in wealth while the Latin-speaking West descended into economic crisis. Perhaps most importantly, the strength of the Eastern Empire served to divert barbarian invasions westward.

- **Government Corruption and Political Instability**

If Rome's sheer size made it difficult to govern, ineffective leadership only exacerbated the problem. Being the Roman emperor had always been a particularly dangerous job, but during the tumultuous second and third centuries, it was more often than not a death sentence. Constant civil war thrust the Empire into chaos, and over the course of one 75-year stretch, more than 20 men took the throne—usually after the murder of their predecessor. As the situation worsened, civic pride plummeted, and many Roman citizens lost trust in the city's leadership.

- **The Arrival of the Barbarian Tribes**

The barbarian attacks on Rome were partly driven by a mass migration prompted by the Huns' invasion of Europe in the late fourth century. When these nomadic warriors rampaged through northern Europe, they drove many of the Germanic tribes to the borders of the Roman Empire. The Romans allowed—begrudgingly— members of the Visigoth tribe to cross south of the Danube and into the safety of Roman territory, but they treated them with disdain and extreme cruelty. When the oppression finally became too much to bear, the Goths rose in revolt and killed the Eastern Emperor Valens in 378.

- **Christianity as Culprit**

The decline of Rome dovetailed with the spread of Christianity, and while it might sound odd to say today, many Romans at the time of Alaric's sack blamed Christianity for the Empire's fall. The Edict of Milan legalised Christianity in 313, and it later became the state religion in 380. According to complaints made at the time, the spread of the Christian faith eroded the traditional Roman values system by supplanting the Roman pantheon of gods with the monotheistic god of Christianity. Once the traditional Roman religion had been marginalised, the importance of the state eclipsed that of the emperor, leading to bloated budgets and severe deficits. This view, which reached its peak with Edward Gibbon in the 18th century, is now widely ridiculed as having little to recommend it. Military, economic, and administrative factors were far more important in hastening Rome's fall.

- **Weakening of the Roman Legions**

Rome's military was, for most of its history, the envy of the ancient world. During its decline, however, the makeup of the once-mighty legions began to morph. Unable to recruit enough soldiers from the Roman citizenry, emperors such as Diocletian and Constantine began hiring foreign mercenaries to bolster their armies. Germanic Goths and other barbarians eventually swelled the legion's ranks to such an extent that Romans began using the Latin word barbarus in place of soldier. The Germanic soldiers of fortune were fierce warriors, but they evinced no loyalty to the Empire, and their power-hungry officers often turned against their Roman employers. In fact, many of the barbarians who sacked Rome and brought down the Western Empire had earned their military stripes while serving in the Roman legions.

From Romulus to Romulus

It is fascinating to note that Rome's last and final emperor was named Romulus. That the great city should be founded, at least mythically, by a man named Romulus, and then, over a thousand years later, see its empire stripped from a man named Romulus—history is nothing if not interesting.

Self-Assessment Exercise 1

Having examined the origins, growth, and decline of Ancient Rome, test your understanding of the concepts discussed in this section.

1. According to the traditional account, Rome was founded in:
   A. 509 BCE
   B. 753 BCE
   C. 264 BCE
   D. 476 CE
2. Which event marked the beginning of the Roman Republic?
   A. The Punic Wars
   B. The reign of Augustus
   C. The overthrow of Tarquin the Proud
   D. The division of the Empire
3. Which of the following was identified as one of the commonly accepted explanations for the decline of the Western Roman Empire?
   A. The discovery of the New World
   B. Barbarian invasions
   C. The Industrial Revolution
   D. The formation of the League of Nations

1.4 The Formation of the International Political System, 1500-1900

The development of the modern international system did not end with the rise and fall of ancient empires. This section explains how Europe gradually evolved into a system of sovereign states whose influence eventually extended across much of the world.

European states set the world in motion toward the system of states in which we all still live. To understand this process, we need to examine how a system of states emerged in Europe between 1500 and 1815. We also need to see how these European states came to control the Americas, sub-Saharan Africa, and the Indian sub-continent, and how they made similar inroads in China and the Ottoman Empire, but not Japan. Finally, we need to understand why European states were able to gain control over such a large portion of the world's territory and population.

The Pre-Westphalian World: A State System Begins to Emerge in Western Europe

Why do you think independent European states repeatedly formed alliances instead of allowing a single empire to dominate the continent?

The discussion that follows explains how rivalry, alliances, and repeated attempts at empire-building contributed to the emergence of the European state system.

From the 1400s to the 1600s, a state system, or a group of competing states, came into being in Europe (Dehio 1962; Tilly 1975; Tilly 1990; Kaiser 2000). It emerged from two sources. The first was European feudalism. Second, in German-speaking areas of Central Europe, a loose and largely symbolic association, termed the Holy Roman Empire, was controlled by the Habsburg dynasty by the early 1500s. The formation of the European state system was the unintended consequence of a succession of failed efforts over three hundred years by powerful European leaders to use war to establish control over the European continent. These leaders repeatedly sought to create an imperial order in Europe. Those leaders with imperial ambitions catalysed the historical process by which independent, interacting, and often competing states were created in Europe. The resulting states and the state system they formed became entrenched, forming the nucleus of today's global system of states. The imperial efforts were made by the Habsburg Emperor Charles V between 1519 and 1556; his son Philip II during the late 1500s; the Austrian and Spanish Habsburgs during the Thirty Years War of 1618-48; France's King Louis XIV between 1667 and 1715; France again between 1789 and 1815, most spectacularly after General Napoleon Bonaparte seized power in 1799 in a military coup and made himself emperor in 1804; and Germany under Adolph Hitler between 1933 and 1945. Leaders of other European states formed alliances to counter these efforts, and these alliances ultimately defeated each bid for empire. An example of a network of alliances formed to prevent the creation of an empire in Europe is the one that emerged from the 1520s to the 1550s. At its core was France: to prevent the Habsburgs from attaining military and political hegemony in Europe, France allied, on the one hand, with a host of small German principalities and, on the other hand, with the Ottoman Turks. This network of alliances raises interesting questions about the importance of identity — in this instance, religious identity - in foreign policy.

For the moment, consider this: for almost seven centuries — from the Muslim conquest of Spain in the eighth century, through the Christian crusades in the Levant in the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries, through the subsequent rise of the Ottomans - Muslim states and rulers posed a fundamental challenge to Europe and its states and monarchs. Yet, notwithstanding that common challenge from the Muslim world, Catholic France, determined not to be politically dominated by Habsburg

co-religionists, during the first half of the 1500s crafted a formal military alliance with the Muslim Ottoman Turks and worked with that country against their mutual enemy, the Habsburgs. In the same vein, fearful that Emperor Charles V would bring Europe under Habsburg control, Catholic France supported Protestant German princes in their initial rebellion against the Habsburgs in the first half of the 1500s. Later, during the Thirty Years' War of 1618-48, Catholic France again intervened on behalf of the Protestants against the Austrian and Spanish Habsburgs, at first providing subsidies to the Dutch Republic and Sweden, and later going directly to war against the Habsburgs. Thus, French monarchs demonstrated repeatedly over a period of 150 years that they were willing and able to put aside differences with two communities with which they had the most fundamental of differences in identity - Muslim Ottomans and Protestant Germans - to prevent the establishment of a Habsburg empire in Europe.

The Figure below summarises the major attempts to establish political dominance in Europe and the alliances that resisted them.

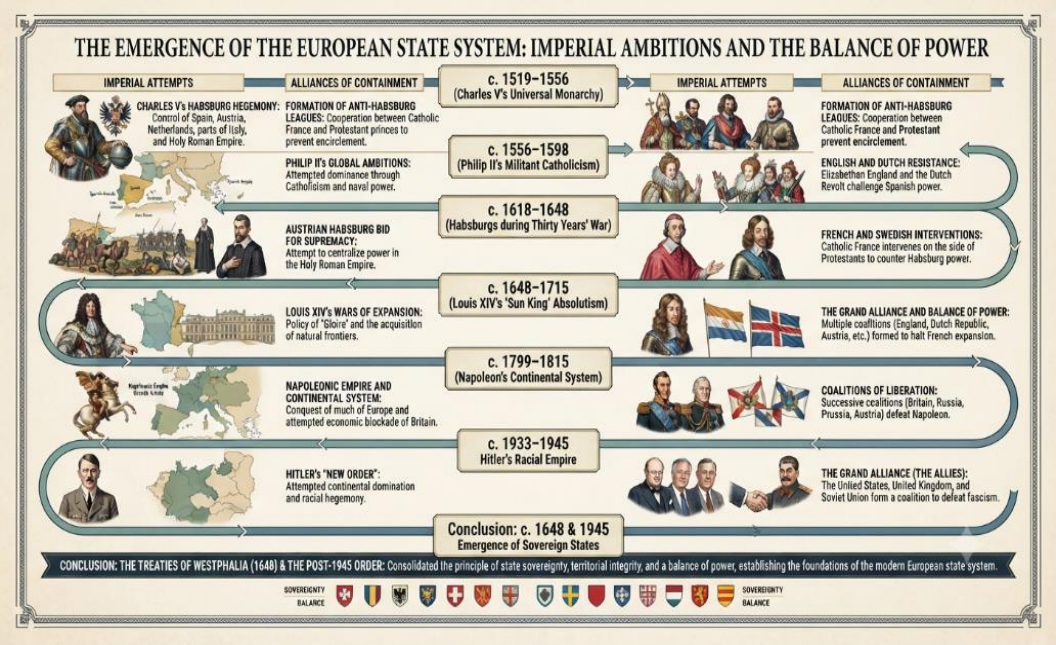

Figure 1.3: Emergence of the European State System (1500–1945)
Source: Google Gemini, Adapted by Abdulazeez Ayodeji Lawal, National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), 2026.

The Thirty Years War

How can a conflict that begins within one region transform the political organisation of an entire continent?
Reading through the plethora of literature on the Thirty Years' War, you would observe that it is not easy to define its precise nature and its causes. However, there is no doubt that the Thirty Years' War is one of the great

conflicts of early modern European history. It consisted of a series of declared and undeclared wars that raged throughout central Europe during 1618- 1648, involving most of the countries of Europe. This was one of the longest and most destructive conflicts in European history, and one of the longest continuous wars in modern history.

During the Thirty Years' War, there was, on the one hand, the House of Habsburg, which included Holy Roman Emperors Ferdinand II and Ferdinand III, together with their Spanish cousin Philip IV. On the other hand, there was the House of Austria, which included Denmark, the Netherlands, and, above all, France and Sweden. It was between the Houses that the conflict would rage. In addition to its international dimensions, the Thirty Years' War was also a German civil war. The principalities that made up Germany took up arms for or against the Habsburgs, or, most commonly, both, at different times during the war's 30 years. Again, the Thirty Years' War was, at least in part, a religious war among Catholics, Lutherans and Calvinists.

In terms of actors in the system, the pre-Westphalia years had been markedly different: the actors were the pope, monarchs, princes, and potentates, loosely connected in vague and often contradictory hierarchical orders. The sense in which the French king Louis XIV declared that 'l'étatc'est moi' (I am the state) was very much true of other monarchs who participated in an international system that was very much personalised.

By the end of the war, major consequences were recorded, including the devastation of entire regions, denuded by the foraging armies. Famine and disease significantly decreased the population of the German states, Bohemia, the Low Countries, and Italy; most of the combatant powers were bankrupt. The War was ended with the treaties of Osnabrück and Münster, as was to be contained in the wider Peace of Westphalia.

The Figure below highlights the key outcomes of the Peace of Westphalia and their contribution to the modern international system.

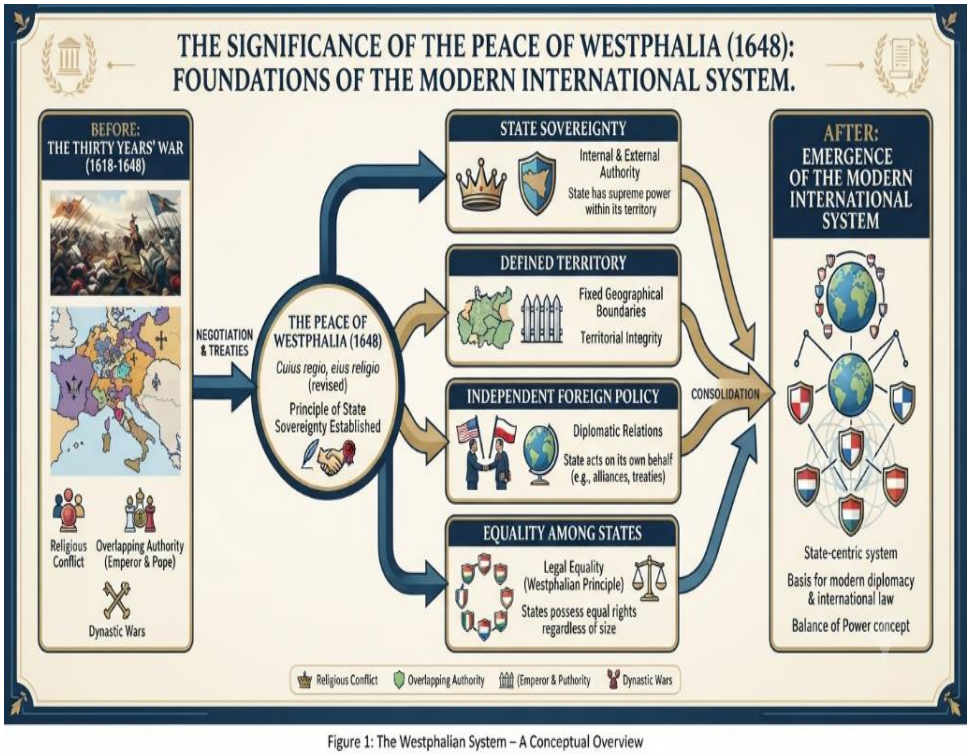

Figure 1.4: The Peace of Westphalia and the Emergence of Sovereign States

Source: Google Gemini, Adapted by Abdulazeez Ayodeji Lawal, National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), 2026.

The Peace of Westphalia and the Birth of Nation-States

The Thirty Years' War was brought to a conclusion in 1648 by a series of agreements known as the Peace of Westphalia. Each signatory to the treaties, including the Germanic states that previously had at least a nominal duty to defer to the Habsburg Holy Roman Emperor, was now a free agent, including on such important matters as the establishment of Catholicism or Protestantism within their jurisdictions as the state-sponsored religion, and the crafting of alliances and other agreements with other states. We live in a system of sovereign states over which no higher political authority exists, often described as the Westphalian state system.

Sovereignty implies that each state has political authority within its territory and each can establish its own foreign policy toward other states. The inclusion of these two provisions in the Peace of Westphalia recognised and formalised the existence of what was, in fact, already an interstate system in Europe. That system of states, which we will see below, gradually expanded to include the entire globe. The Peace of Westphalia may have been a turning point in the establishment of the idea of sovereign states.

No exact definition of the borders of the territorial landmass of Westphalia can be given, as the name "Westphalia" has been applied to several different entities throughout history. There is, however, a consensus that Westphalia is a region in Germany encompassing the cities of Arnsberg, Bielefeld, Osnabrück, Dortmund, Minden, and Münster. Westphalia is known for the 1648 Peace of Westphalia, which ended the Thirty Years' War, as the two treaties were signed in Münster and Osnabrück.

The Peace of Westphalia is not a literal moment of political transformation, but rather symbolises a change. It was a series of peace treaties signed between May and October 1648 in Osnabrück and Münster. These treaties ended the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648) across the Holy Roman Empire and the Eighty Years' War (1568–1648) between Spain and the Dutch Republic, with Spain formally recognising the Dutch Republic's independence. It also involved Ferdinand III, of the House of Habsburg, the Kingdom of France, the Swedish Empire, the Dutch Republic, and the sovereigns of the free imperial cities. Two major events resulted from the treaties. First, the Peace of Münster between the Dutch Republic and the Kingdom of Spain, signed on 30 January 1648, was officially ratified in Münster on 15 May 1648. Second, the signing of two complementary treaties on 24 October 1648, namely: The Treaty of Münster (Instrumentum Pacis Monasteriensis, IPM), concerning the Holy Roman Emperor and France and their respective allies; and the Treaty of Osnabrück (Instrumentum Pacis Osnabrugensis, IPO), concerning the Holy Roman Emperor, the Empire and Sweden and their respective allies (Repgen, 1998).

It suffices to note that the treaties resulting from the major diplomatic congresses ushered in a new system of political order in central Europe, later known as Westphalian sovereignty. Westphalian sovereignty was based on the concept of a sovereign state, governed by a sovereign, and established a precedent in international affairs against interference in another nation's domestic business. The treaty not only signalled the end of the perennial and destructive wars that had ravaged Europe, but it also represented the triumph of sovereignty over empire, of national rule over the personal writ of the Habsburgs. This means that the Peace of Westphalia symbolised the final, most decisive nail in the coffin of the medieval claim that all European states were subject to the spiritual leadership of the pope and the political leadership of the Holy Roman Emperor. The treaties' regulations also served as a precursor to later major international treaties and, in turn, to the development of international law in general.

It is important to bear in mind that, based on long historical evidence, the nation-state is a relatively young institution in human affairs. Pearson and Rochester (1998) maintain that nation-states are less than 400 years old compared with at least 5,000 years of recorded human history. Before then, human beings had been organised in other kinds of political units such as tribes, city-states and empires.

Bearing this in mind, the Peace of Westphalia was a significant milestone in the emergence of the modern international system because it introduced key, revolutionary, system-changing features in the conduct of international affairs. In the first instance, it was only after 1648 that the modern state appeared on the scene, around which international contacts were to be built. Westphalia's contribution to the emergence of the modern system is perhaps best captured by the birth of the nation-state. The nation-states were assigned characteristics that include a single central government exercising sovereignty, a fixed population, and a defined territory. The nation-states are said to be sovereign because they have governments with supreme decision-making authority within their territorial boundaries. It would also not acknowledge any higher authority outside those boundaries. The sovereignty of nation-states also presupposes that, internally, the state could claim a monopoly on the use of legitimate legal force to compel obedience. Externally, a state could also claim a monopoly right to act on behalf of its people. Thus, when one examines the international system of the classical era, one would find a relatively small number of
actors involved in international politics such as England, France and other European nation-states.

Distribution of Power and Wealth among Nation-states

In the classical international system, though there existed independent entities outside Europe, such as China, Japan, and the United States of America, the international politics of that era were essentially European politics. Power, in terms of military and other related factors, was roughly evenly distributed among the dominant European states, including England, France, Austria, Sweden, Spain, Turkey, Prussia and Russia.
The European states were not only similar in military power but also in terms of wealth and economic strength. In an era when the economies of the dominant powers were largely feudal and agrarian, and the Industrial Revolution was not yet fully underway, all states had similar sources of wealth, making it difficult to discern differences between them. We need to add that Power and wealth do go hand in hand. Thus, insofar as power is exercised mainly through military prowess, that prowess would depend heavily on economic resources for support. As such, rulers, partly because the resources available at their disposal made them equal in wealth

possession, could hardly embark on grand hegemonic ambitions or an expansionist agenda against one another.

On the other hand, it was also possible that a given state might be dissatisfied with its power or wealth and threaten other states' sovereignty, upsetting the equilibrium by engaging in empire-building. In the absence of any centralised political authority in the international system, order among states was to be maintained primarily through the "balance of power." Thus, "balance of power" was the main instrument for stability in the international system. At the core of the "balance of power" strategy is the idea that states' security is enhanced when military capabilities are distributed among states so that no single state is strong enough to dominate the others. If one state gains inordinate power, the strategy predicts it will exploit its strength to attack weaker states. This naturally provided an incentive for the states to unite in a defensive coalition. The opposite of "balance of power" is "bandwagoning," which refers to aligning with the source of danger (Walt, 1987: 17).
With the "balance of power" strategy in the system, it was hoped that any aggressively minded state would be deterred by the prospect of confronting a coalition of states with equal or superior power. If deterrence failed and an attack occurred, the coalition of states would be expected to fight and defeat the aggressor. For this reason, all the European monarchs did not just understand the "Rules of the Game" surrounding international politics in that era. They were conscious of not interfering in another country's internal affairs in any way that might destabilise monarchical institutions. They would also not allow any single nation-state to achieve dominant power in the system.

The International Distribution of Power as a Condition for Peace
The distribution of power among states may influence the prospects for peace. Scholars have investigated two possibilities regarding peace and the distribution of power: one is that peace is more likely in periods when there is a more or less equal distribution of capabilities among several states, while the other, in a completely different line of analysis, is that peace is most likely when there is a single overwhelmingly powerful state in the international system.

Balance of Power
In a balance of power, a rough equality of power exists among the major states in the international system at a given moment in time. If several great powers are roughly equal in their material capabilities, the balance of power has taken the form of a multipolar system. In those circumstances, peace and stability may be attained because coalitions of states form alliances or partnerships to ensure that no single state — or coalition of states — gains dominant power. When two states overshadow all others — as the United States and the Soviet Union did during the Cold

War — the balance of power is established in a bipolar system. Each of the two superpowers gathers allies and seeks to muster sufficient collective capabilities to counterbalance the other side. In both bipolar and multipolar settings, peace is maintained when there is a rough equilibrium of power. After the European wars of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the balance of power was the dominant condition for re-establishing peace. During the Cold War, the balance of power was again a crucial mechanism for preserving stability. The United States and the Soviet Union were each convinced by the other's power that war was not worth the risks. Nuclear weapons and the threat of retaliation against a 'first strike' figured prominently in this calculation. Each side went to considerable efforts to establish its own power position to ensure that the other side would indeed make sober calculations of restraint.

Self-Assessment Exercise 2

Now that you have examined the emergence of the modern international political system, test your understanding of the ideas discussed in this section.

1. The Thirty Years' War lasted from:
   A. 1492–1520
   B. 1618–1648
   C. 1701–1731
   D. 1815–1845
2. Which agreement formally recognised the principle of state sovereignty?
   A. Treaty of Versailles
   B. Congress of Vienna
   C. Peace of Westphalia
   D. Treaty of Utrecht
3. Which of the following is a characteristic of a sovereign nation-state as discussed in this section?
   A. Shared monarchy among neighbouring states
   B. Supreme political authority within a defined territory
   C. Religious authority over all European kingdoms
   D. Dependence on imperial governance

1.5 Degree of Polarisation among Nations

Having examined the emergence of sovereign states and the foundations of the modern international system, we can now explore how power was distributed among states during the classical international system.

How does the way power is distributed among states influence peace and stability in the international system?

The discussion below explains how the distribution of power shaped relationships among states during the classical international system.

Polarisation in the international system refers to the various ways in which power is distributed within it. It describes the nature of the international system at any given period of time. Polarity also refers to the number of blocs of states that exert power in the international system. The type of international system at any given point in world history depends entirely on the distribution of power and influence among states, whether regional or international.

To a great extent, polarisation in the classical international system was less complicated. The system was flexible in that the European powers and other actors did not fall into rigid armed camps at opposite poles, poised against each other. Rather, the actors were amenable to frequently making and breaking alliances as the situation warranted. For this reason, the classical international system, though not perfect, worked fairly effectively (Pearson and Rochester, 1998) in maintaining systemic stability. Thus, the actors' mutual security concerns made it seem as if they were working consciously to maintain stability in the system.

Pearson and Rochester also attributed the smooth operation of the balance-of-power mechanism and the flexibility of the classical international system to two major factors. One is that decision-making was concentrated in the hands of a few rulers in that era. As such, decisions about making and breaking alliances would not suffer bottlenecks; hence, there was no need for chains of consultation for approval before decisions were implemented. Second, the classical international system did not witness ideological camps among actors, as it did during the Cold War era. Ideological cleavages could make some alliances impossible because of incompatibility among alliance partners. Such
Incompatibilities could thus inhibit shifts in alliances or re-alliances, undermining balance-of-power calculations.

The Figure below summarises the characteristics of polarisation during the classical international system.

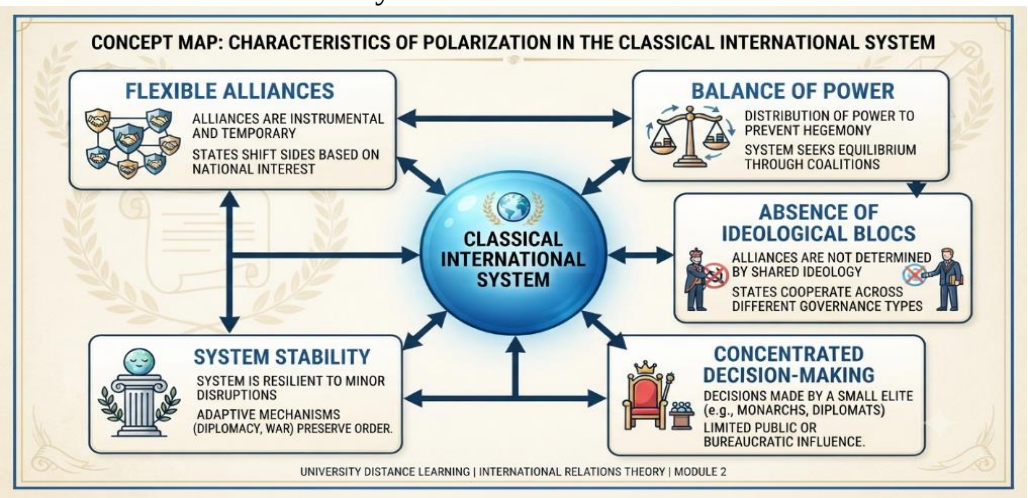

Figure 1.5: Characteristics of Polarisation in the Classical International System

Source: Google Gemini, Adapted by Abdulazeez Ayodeji Lawal, National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), 2026.

Self-Assessment Exercise 3

Having examined the distribution of power during the classical international system, assess your understanding of the concepts discussed in this section.

1. In the classical international system, polarisation primarily refers to the:
   A. Distribution of power among states
   B. Growth of international organisations
   C. Spread of industrialisation
   D. Expansion of colonial trade
2. Which characteristic best describes alliances during the classical international system?
   A. They were permanent and unchangeable.
   B. They were flexible and changed according to political circumstances.
   C. They were based entirely on ideological differences.
   D. They were prohibited by international law.
3. According to Pearson and Rochester, one reason the balance of power operated effectively during the classical international system was that:
   A. Every decision required approval through democratic institutions.
   B. International organisations enforced peace.
   C. Decision-making was concentrated in the hands of relatively few rulers.
   D. Nuclear deterrence prevented conflict.

1.6 Degree of Interdependence

As the distribution of power influenced relationships among states, another important feature of the classical international system was the level of interaction and mutual dependence among nations. This section examines the extent to which states relied on one another during this period.

How might limited communication and trade have influenced the relationships between states during the classical international system?

The discussion below explains why states in the classical international system remained relatively independent despite occasional political and economic interactions.

"Interdependence" is a word that describes a relationship in which each member of the relationship is mutually relying on the other. This concept differs from a dependence relationship, in which some members are dependent, and others are not. In an interdependent relationship, participants may be emotionally, economically, ecologically and/or morally reliant on and responsible to each other. In terms of state relations, interdependence can arise between two or more states. Interdependence can provide common ground for two states to meet their aspirations.

The concept of interdependence became popularised in the field of international relations through the work of Richard N. Cooper. Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye have gone a step further, analysing how international politics is transformed by interdependence. They maintain that, in interdependence, states and their fortunes are inextricably tied. They also recognised that various and complex transnational connections and interdependencies between states and societies are increasing, while the use of military force and power balancing are decreasing, even though both remain important.

Given that the classical international system was cosmopolitan and elitist-oriented (Pearson and Rochester, 1998), the degree of interdependence among entities was not high. Whereas the elites of Europe travelled, mingled, and discussed freely across national boundaries, the masses knew little about the world outside their towns and villages, and even less beyond their national boundaries. The classical system was such that nation-states were fairly self-sufficient and self-contained economic units, depending minimally on international commerce. The flow of cultural and other diffusion processes was not yet developed. Again, primitive communication technology kept one corner of the globe

insulated from developments in the other, resulting in little or no interaction.

The balance of power that kept the world in mutual concern was also structured so that the era's primitive weapons kept the allies apart and prevented coordinated military planning and training. They did not share a common bond that would have made them realise that a fatal decision by one side could mean annihilation for both. In short, the classical international system was characterised by a low degree of interdependence among states. However, many of these conditions began to change towards the end of the eighteenth century, ushering in a new era and a new international system that allowed greater interdependence among nation-states.

The Figure below summarises the main characteristics of interdependence during the classical international system.

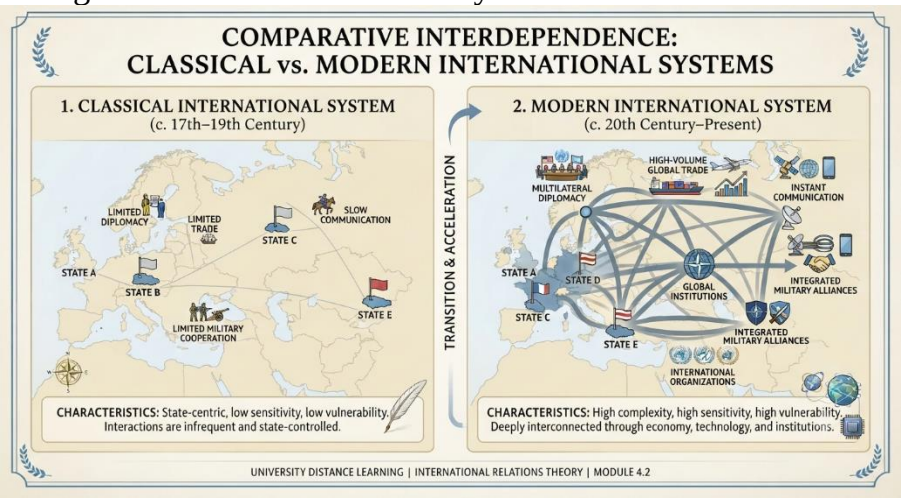

Figure 1.6: Degree of Interdependence in the Classical International System

Source: Google Gemini, Adapted by Abdulazeez Ayodeji Lawal, National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), 2026.

Having completed this unit, apply what you have learned to the following scenario.

Scenario
Imagine you are an adviser to the ruler of a medium-sized European state shortly after the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. Your ruler is concerned about preserving the country's independence in a political environment where powerful states frequently compete for influence, alliances change according to national interests, and international cooperation remains limited.

Self-Assessment Exercise 4

Using your knowledge of the classical international system, answer the following questions.

1. Explain how the principle of state sovereignty established after the Peace of Westphalia could help your country protect its independence.
2. How could the balance of power be used to reduce the risk of domination by a stronger neighbouring state?
3. Why were alliances during the classical international system generally flexible rather than permanent?
4. Based on the characteristics of interdependence during this period, explain why states were able to remain relatively self-sufficient compared with modern states.

1.7 Summary

In this unit, you examined the evolution of the classical international system and its significance in the development of modern international relations. You explored the political organisation of the ancient world, particularly the Roman Empire, before examining the emergence of the European state system, the Thirty Years' War, and the Peace of Westphalia, which established the principle of state sovereignty. The unit also highlighted how the balance of power contributed to stability among European states, the flexible nature of alliances during the classical international system, and the relatively low level of interdependence among states. Together, these developments laid the foundation for the modern international system and provided an important basis for understanding the evolution of international relations.

1.8 References/Further Readings/Web Sources

Grieco, J, Ikenberry, G. J., & Mastanduno, M (2015). *Introduction to International Relations.* London. Palgrave.

Konrad, R. (1998). “Negotiating the Peace of Westphalia: A Survey with an Examination of the Major Problems.” In: *1648: War and Peace in Europe*, 3 Vols.

Pearson, F., & Rochester, M.J. (1997). *International Relations: the Global Conditions in the Twenty-First Century.* New York: The McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc.

1.9 Possible Answers to Self-Assessment Exercises

Answers to Self-Assessment Exercise 1

1. **B**
2. **C**
3. **B**

Answers to Self-Assessment Exercise 2

1. **B**
2. **C**
3. **B**

Answers to Self-Assessment Exercise 3

1. **A**
2. **B**
3. **C**

Possible Answers to Self-Assessment Exercise 4

1. **State sovereignty** would protect the country's independence by recognising its authority to govern its own territory, conduct its own foreign policy, and manage its internal affairs without external interference.
2. The **balance of power** could be maintained by forming alliances with other states so that no single power became strong enough to dominate the region.
3. Alliances were generally **flexible** because rulers adjusted their partnerships according to changing political and security interests rather than permanent ideological or religious commitments.
4. States remained relatively **self-sufficient** because international trade, communication, transportation, and military cooperation were limited. Most countries depended primarily on their own resources and had relatively little interaction with other states compared with the modern international system.

Unit 2 The Transitional International System (1789-1945)

Unit Structure

2.1 Introduction
2.2 Learning Outcomes
2.3 The Emergence of the Transitional International System
2.4 The Actors in the Transitional International System
2.4.1 Non-State Actors
2.5 Distribution of Power and Wealth among Nation-States
2.6 Degree of Polarisation among Nation-States
2.7 Degree of Interdependence among Nation-States
2.8 Summary
2.9 References/Further Readings/Web Sources
2.10 Possible Answers to Self-Assessment Exercises

2.1 Introduction

Welcome back. In the previous unit, you examined the classical international system and how principles such as state sovereignty and the balance of power shaped relations among European states. This unit builds on that foundation by exploring the transitional international system, a period that connected the classical era with the modern international order. As you study this unit, you will examine the historical developments that transformed international relations between 1789 and 1945. You will explore how the French Revolution, nationalism, industrialisation, ideological rivalry, and the emergence of new state and non-state actors reshaped the international system. Understanding these developments will help you appreciate how many features of today's international relations evolved during this important transitional period.

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2.2 Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- describe the emergence of the transitional international system;
- explain the actors in the transitional international system;
- analyse the distribution of power and wealth among nation-states in the transitional international system;
- examine the degree of polarisation among nation-states in the transitional international system; and
- evaluate the degree of interdependence among nation-states in the transitional international system.

2.3 The Emergence of the Transitional International System

This section explains the major events and ideas that shaped the transitional international system between 1789 and 1945.

Why is the French Revolution often regarded as one of the most significant events in the evolution of the international system?
The discussion below explains how the French Revolution transformed international relations and laid the foundation for the transitional international system.

Historically, the French Revolution was a major turning point in the evolution of the international system. The emergence of the transitional international system can be linked to the events of the revolution. The fact is that, even though the French Revolution had been preceded by the American Revolution and Oliver Cromwell's constitutional movement in 17th-century England, it had, in many respects, the most profound systemic redefinition of the international system. One, it was important because it occurred at the very heart of continental Europe and a nation-state that was a major power in the international system. Second, it was also based on universal values, as its theoretical foundations were far from a localised resistance to authoritarianism but rather an affirmation of the very essence of humanity, expressed in values such as freedom, equality, human rights, and democracy.

The Peace of Westphalia may have been a turning point in the establishment of the idea of sovereign states, but it did not end the quest by particular European states to establish an empire in that part of the world. In 1672, 1681, and 1700, King Louis XIV of France launched or became involved in major European wars as part of his strategy to establish French hegemony over the Continent. In each case, Holland played a key role in organising a counter-coalition against France, and, among other allies, the Dutch were successful in recruiting and working with two of their former enemies, the Austrians and, perhaps most remarkably, their former masters (and, because of that, deeply hated) Spanish. Shortly after the French Revolution of 1789, French revolutionary governments, and then France under Napoleon Bonaparte, waged a sequence of wars — the former known as the French Revolutionary Wars of 1792- 1802, the latter the Napoleonic Wars of 1803-15 — as a result of which France came very close to establishing hegemony over much of Europe. However, Napoleon was defeated in 1814 and 1815 by an alliance of a democratising England and autocratic Prussia, Russia, and Austria—38 Foundations of International Relations. In the wake of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars, Britain, France (at first under a restored monarchy), Prussia (later Germany), Austria (later Austria-Hungary), and Russia established an informal

‘Concert of Europe? These ‘great powers’ and other relevant lesser states would meet in congress to address political problems that might threaten Europe's peace. They sought to create an international order, that is, a period of sustained peace and cooperation among the great powers. The Concert played a positive role in contributing to European stability even as late as 1878 and the Congress of Berlin, to be discussed below, but, as we will also see, the Concert ultimately failed to find a sure path toward a permanent European peace.

How did the ideas of nationalism strengthen the position of the nation-state in international relations?

The remaining discussion explains how nationalism and other developments transformed the international system beyond Europe.

The transitional international system also emerged as a period that laid the foundations for much of what exists in the contemporary system. It was built not just on old issues like stateism, sovereignty, international law, and self-determination, but also on new issues like increased global communication, ideological conflicts, and population explosion. It was also confronted with the horrors of the atomic bomb. In addition, even though it was still lop-sided, with most of the states located in Europe, the transitional international system shifted it from being essentially crowded by European states to a worldwide system. The emergence of a transitional international system also marked the era of “nationalism.”

The emergence of Napoleon in France introduced the phenomenon of nationalism, which strengthened the sociological and materialist bases of the state and cemented its dominance as a factor in the international political system. The new nationalism was based on a firmer relationship between government and the people over which it presided. This, in essence, created a stronger emotional bond between the two and gave rise to greater mass involvement in the political life of their respective countries. The emergence of such militant nationalism in Napoleon’s France had the unintended consequence of inducing counter-nationalistic tendencies in many other European states. Its utility in mobilising resources to advance interests and defend territory became a major cause of its spread across Europe during the Napoleonic period. The aforementioned situational realities led to the emergence of new features in the international system, transforming it and giving it a new look that one would conveniently call the transitional international system.

The Figure below highlights the major historical developments that contributed to the emergence of the transitional international system.

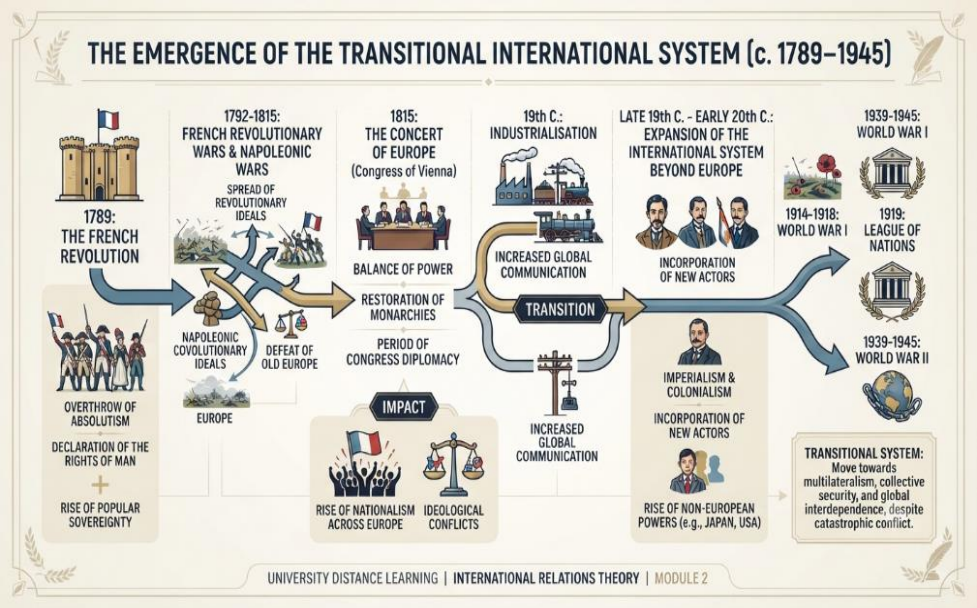

Figure 2.1: Emergence of the Transitional International System (1789–1945)
Source: Google Gemini, Adapted by Abdulazeez Ayodeji Lawal, National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), 2026.

Self-Assessment Exercise 1

Now that you have examined the emergence of the transitional international system, test your understanding of the concepts discussed in this section.

1. Which historical event is identified as the major turning point in the emergence of the transitional international system?
A. The American Revolution
B. The French Revolution
C. The Industrial Revolution
D. The Russian Revolution

2. Which informal arrangement was established after the Napoleonic Wars to preserve peace among the major European powers?
A. League of Nations
B. European Union
C. Concert of Europe
D. United Nations

3. According to this section, which development strengthened the relationship between governments and their citizens during the transitional international system?
A. Colonialism
B. Nationalism
C. Mercantilism
D. Feudalism

2.4 The Actors in the Transitional International System

Think About It

How did the rise of nationalism contribute to the emergence of new actors in the international system?

The discussion below explains how nationalism, independence movements, and imperial expansion increased the number and diversity of actors in international relations.

As mentioned earlier, the transitional international system created new issues in its emergence. One of these issues in the system was the proliferation of states. The tendency of "nationalism" invariably led to the appearance of more states, like the states in Latin America that gained independence from Spain in the early 19th century and the unification of culturally similar groups of erstwhile loose affiliation, like the Confederation of German-speaking and Italian-speaking peoples that formed the modern states of Germany and Italy. In addition, even though nationalism led to the liberation of some peoples, like the Romanians, from Turkish rule in 1878, it also triggered off imperialism that resulted in the colonisation of Africa and other places.

The colonisation and the relationship that inevitably emerged between African states and their European colonisers set the context for Africa's later cooption into the international system. This means that the new states of Latin America, the Romanians, as well as the co-opted nation-states of Africa, would add to the number of actors in the transitional international system. Apart from the increase in the number of nation-state actors in Europe, the scope of the international system expanded in this era. This means that the actors in the system were no longer limited to Europe, but were spread throughout the globe.

Suffice it to add to that, Russia, as a semi-European state and a semi-powerful member of the international system throughout the nineteenth century, even though beaten by Japan earlier in 1905, was able to take on special significance as a world actor after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 that created the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR).

Another development was the incorporation of additional factors into the international system's politics. It has been noted earlier that the new nationalism created a firmer relationship between government and the people over which it presided, as well as gave room for greater involvement of the masses in the international political life of their various countries. The implication is that leaders had to become more.
sensitive to public opinion in the formulation of foreign policy in a way that their predecessors in the classical period could not. This aided the

gradual consideration of public opinion as a major factor in the conduct of a nation-state's foreign policy.

The Figure below summarises the major state actors that emerged or gained prominence during the transitional international system.

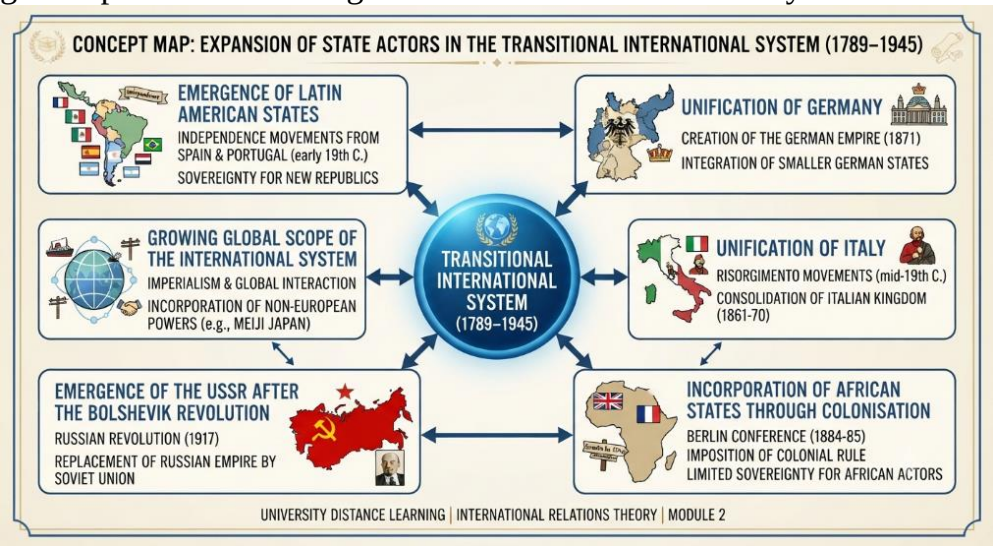

Figure 2.2: Expansion of State Actors in the Transitional International System
Source: Google Gemini, Adapted by Abdulazeez Ayodeji Lawal, National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), 2026.

2.4.1 Non-State Actors

Think About It
Why might governments alone be insufficient to manage every aspect of international relations?
The discussion below explains how non-state actors gradually assumed important roles alongside nation-states in the conduct of international affairs.

Again, the horrors of the two world wars within the era laid another foundation for another international order that emerged after 1945. Non-state actors, such as international and multinational organisations, became increasingly involved in issues like economic exchange and questions of war and peace. This was to mark the beginning of the active involvement of individuals, as citizens of nation-states and corporate bodies, in the conduct of international politics. In particular, intergovernmental organisations (IGOs) appeared on the scene, ranging from the modest creation of the Central Commission for the Navigation of the Rhine in 1815 to the Universal Postal Union and the International Telegraph Union, the League of Nations, and ultimately the United Nations. Quite a few such organisations were developed at the regional and global levels.

A special category of non-state actors, multinational corporations (MNCs), also became significant actors in world affairs. These categories of actors emerged from the inability of state actors to address issues of interstate commerce dominated by commercial enterprises expanding beyond national borders. Therefore, IGOs and MNCs became instruments for regulating and maintaining uniform rules and order in economic activities within the international system. Thus, just as wars existed alongside interdependence, so was nationalism accompanied by the emergence of "trans-nationalism" as non-state actors grew and organised themselves across national boundaries.

The Figure below shows how non-state actors complemented nation-states during the transitional international system.

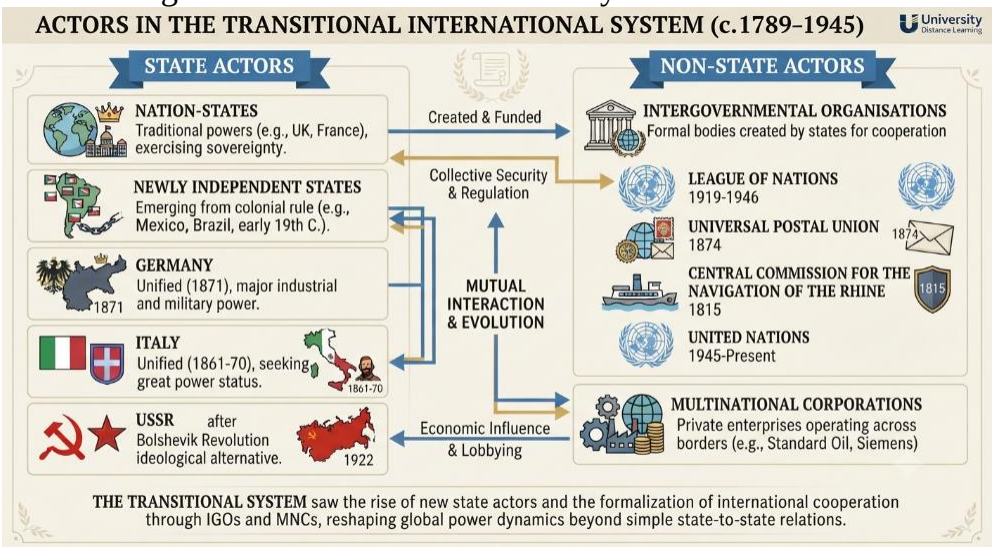

Figure 2.3: State and Non-State Actors in the Transitional International System

Source: Google Gemini, Adapted by Abdulazeez Ayodeji Lawal, National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), 2026.

Self-Assessment Exercise 2

Now that you have examined the actors in the transitional international system, test your understanding of the concepts discussed in this section.

1. Which development contributed directly to the emergence of more nation-states during the transitional international system?
   A. Mercantilism
   B. Nationalism
   C. Feudalism
   D. Isolationism
2. Which event led to the creation of the USSR?
   A. French Revolution
   B. Industrial Revolution
   C. Bolshevik Revolution
   D. Congress of Vienna
3. Which of the following is an example of a non-state actor discussed in this section?
   A. Germany
   B. Italy
   C. League of Nations
   D. Russia

2.5 Distribution of Power and Wealth among Nation-States

How can advances in industry transform the economic and political influence of a nation?

The discussion below explains how industrialisation reshaped the global distribution of wealth and power during the transitional international system.

The era of the transitional international system was the period during which the Industrial Revolution was fully underway, creating wealth in some parts of the world and poverty in others. Even though the industrial revolution was essentially based in Europe, two highly industrialised non-European states, the United States (after it defeated Spain in 1898) and Japan (after it defeated Russia in 1905), also emerged, signalling the first real challenge to European domination of the international political system.

In the real sense, industrialisation created wide disparities in living standards and, of course, power configurations among nation-states. With this development, the transitional international system saw a growing disparity in wealth between societies in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres. Although one would argue that the "rich-poor gap" had historically existed within societies, the "rich-poor gap" that began to

form among societies during the transitional era was unprecedented. The Industrial Revolution, while it bypassed the Southern half of the globe, provided rapid income growth and improved living standards for all categories of citizens (both the formerly rich and the poor) in the Northern Hemisphere, while those in the South were practically untouched.

Why did industrialisation strengthen some states politically and militarily while leaving others comparatively weak?
The following discussion shows how economic development translated into greater military and political influence.

Furthermore, industrialisation not only skewed the distribution of wealth in favour of certain states but also skewed the distribution of power in their favour. This is evident in the way the new economic technology was readily convertible into military advantage. Not just that, the transitional era consequently witnessed the emergence of two highly industrialised non-European states as major world powers. After defeating Spain in 1898 and Japan in 1905, the United States became a superpower to contend with in the international system.

Perhaps the most salient feature of the distribution of power in the transitional system was the gradual transfer of the system's domination from European states. At one point, the European powers controlled 80 per cent of the world's territory. This represented the peak of the European-centred international system, as the European civilisation overshadowed the earth. However, the decline of European domination began unfolding between 1900 and 1945 – the years of confusion in world affairs. By the end of the confusion, not only was continental Europe eclipsed by the USA and the USSR, but other non-European power centres, such as China, were already looming on the horizon. On a general note, aside from the Southern Hemisphere states, one can say that power and wealth were distributed fairly evenly among the states in the transitional international system.

The Figure below summarises how industrialisation reshaped the global distribution of wealth and power during the transitional international system.

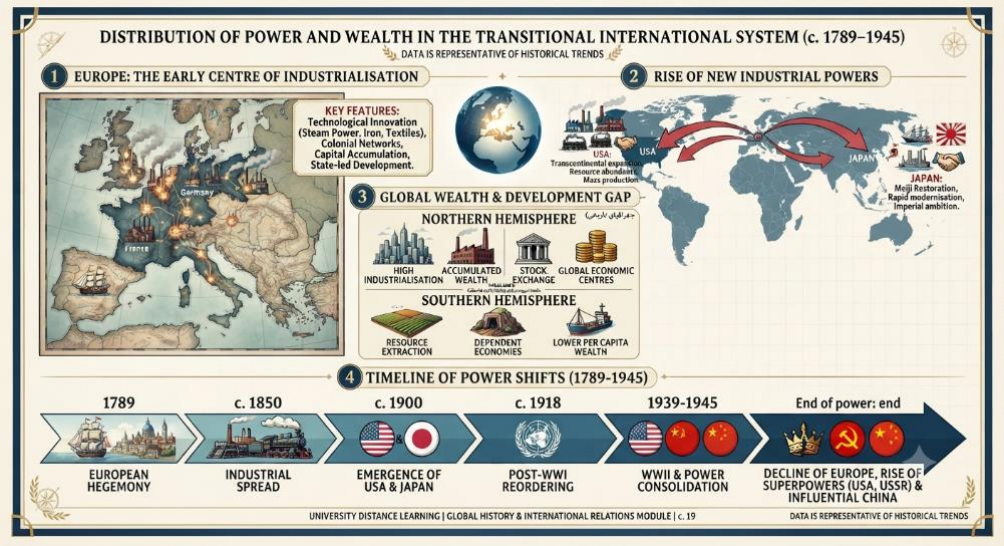

Figure 2.4: Distribution of Power and Wealth in the Transitional International System

Source: Google Gemini, Adapted by Abdulazeez Ayodeji Lawal, National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), 2026.

Self-Assessment Exercise 3

Now that you have examined the distribution of power and wealth during the transitional international system, test your understanding of the concepts discussed in this section.

1. Which development contributed most directly to the changing distribution of wealth during the transitional international system?
   A. Feudalism
   B. Industrialisation
   C. Mercantilism
   D. Nationalism
2. Which two non-European states emerged as major powers during this period?
   A. China and India
   B. Brazil and Mexico
   C. United States and Japan
   D. Australia and Canada
3. According to this section, the gradual decline of European dominance became most evident during:
   A. 1500–1600
   B. 1600–1700
   C. 1700–1800
   D. 1900–1945

2.6 Degree of Polarisation among Nation-States

How can competing political ideologies influence cooperation and conflict among states?

The discussion below explains how ideological rivalry and nationalism contributed to the growing polarisation of the transitional international system.

In the history of the evolution of the international system, the transitional period has witnessed extreme polarisation among nation-states. Apart from the emergence of non-European powers into the mainstream of world politics, which by implication augmented the number of actors, the transitional international system, for the first time, witnessed ideological conflict, which was expressed in the rivalry between socialist and capitalist political cum economic ideologies, as well as the rivalry between the forces of Napoleon's nationalism against the forces of the conservative monarchs across Europe. The ideological rivalry was to combine with the forces of nationalism to create an international system that produced hardened polarisation among nation-states.

As we noted earlier in the section on the emergence of the transitional international system, the system was marked by nationalism, which emanated from the French Revolution. While Napoleon's army sought to export the ideals of the revolution across Europe, the armies of the conservative monarchs sought to block the whirlwind of nationalism. This ended in polarising the international system between the forces of Napoleon's nationalism and the conservative monarchs.

Why were alliances during this period able to change despite big ideological differences among states?

The following discussion shows that political interests often outweighed ideological differences when states formed alliances.

In another dimension, Woodrow Wilson, as the president of the USA and Lenin, as the Leader of the USSR, got entangled in a bitter exchange of diatribes in favour of or against capitalism and communism. While the United States president pursued capitalism as the best political-economic policy, Lenin in the USSR saw capitalism as evil, in the process of devouring humanity. Vice versa, while Lenin was imbued with the communist philosophy, the USA saw communism as tyrannical and a crime against humanity, as well as an affront to human freedom. To exacerbate the situation of world polarisation, while Benito Mussolini in Italy was propagating the spirit of National Socialism, Adolf Hitler was assiduously battling to conquer the world to establish the supremacy of fascism.

Though archrivalry ensued among states, the international system was fairly flexible (Pearson and Rochester, 1998: 57), as national rivalries or ideological differences did not prevent states from keeping their options open when forming alliances. So the international system was described as multipolar. The ideological conflicts never degenerated into open wars on the international plane. The battle lines in the few wars waged were not clearly drawn along ideological lines. For example, Britain, France and the USA, which were free democracies, joined forces with conservative Russia against another conservative regime of Germany and Austria in World War II.

The Figure below summarises the major ideological and political rivalries that shaped polarisation during the transitional international system.

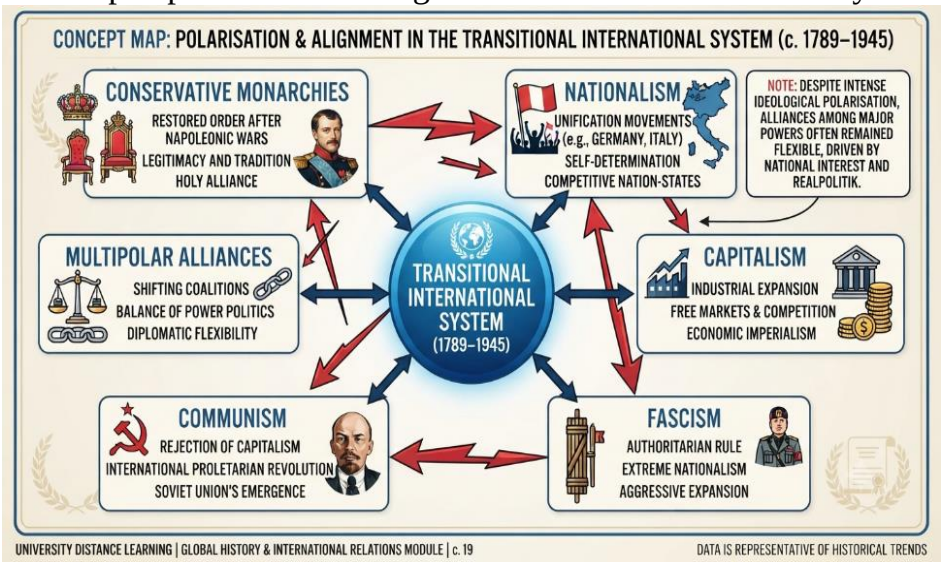

Figure 2.5: Polarisation in the Transitional International System
Source: Google Gemini, Adapted by Abdulazeez Ayodeji Lawal, National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), 2026.

Self-Assessment Exercise 4

Now that you have examined the degree of polarisation among nation-states, test your understanding of the concepts discussed in this section.

1. Which factor contributed significantly to the increased polarisation of the transitional international system?
   A. The decline of industrialisation
   B. Ideological rivalry
   C. Reduced international trade
   D. Geographic isolation
2. Which two competing ideologies became prominent during this period?
   A. Mercantilism and Feudalism
   B. Capitalism and Communism
   C. Colonialism and Imperialism
   D. Liberalism and Mercantilism
3. Despite ideological rivalry, the transitional international system remained:
   A. Bipolar
   B. Unipolar
   C. Multipolar
   D. Apolar

2.7 Degree of Interdependence among Nation-States

Can countries become economically dependent on one another while still engaging in political or military conflict?
The discussion below explains how technological progress and economic cooperation increased interdependence among nation-states during the transitional international system.

The dilemma of improved technology during the transitional international system was two-plunged. On the one hand, it plunged the system into two devastating world wars that were to sound the death knell of the transitional era. On the other hand, it also fostered greater interdependence among states. The era of a transitional international system witnessed the flourishing of interdependence among nation-states, especially in the economic sphere.

It is observed that economic interdependence among European states had already begun to flourish before World War I. Some people even called that era "the beautiful epoch of interdependence" (Pearson and Dorchester, 1998:59). Therefore, it would be rational to think that war among them could not be contemplated, lest it would totally disrupt their economies. Thus, when it happened, it led only to the paradoxical conclusion that war and economic interdependence could coexist within

the same system. In any case, this paradox had only proven that political impulse can be stronger than economic imperatives. In fact, during the interwar period between 1919 and 1939, the economic interdependence among the industrialised states made the impact of the "Great Depression" felt worldwide and exacerbated the tensions that led to World War II.

The Figure below summarises the relationship between economic interdependence, technological advancement, and conflict during the transitional international system.

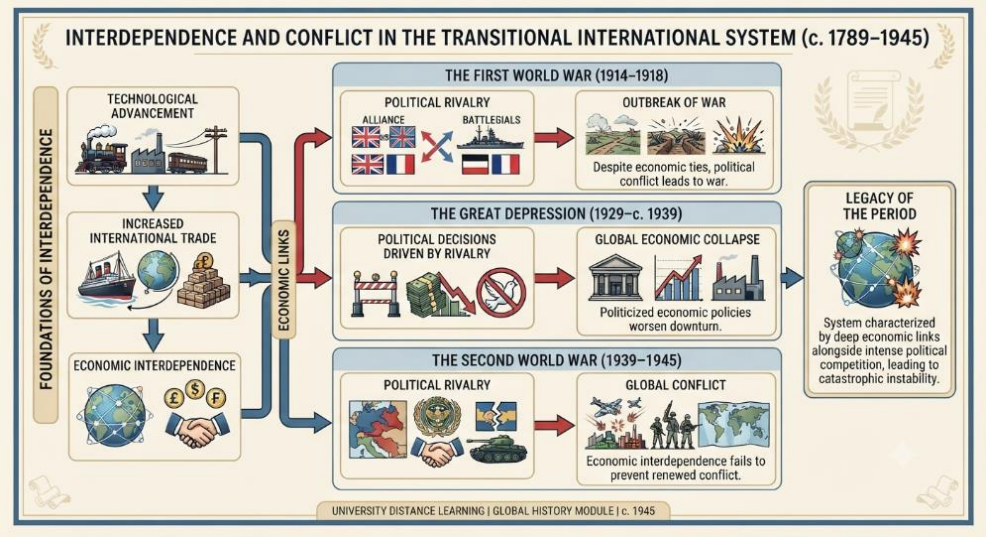

Figure 2.6: Interdependence in the Transitional International System
Source: Google Gemini, Adapted by Abdulazeez Ayodeji Lawal,

National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), 2026.
Having completed this unit, apply what you have learned to the following scenario.

Scenario
Imagine you are an adviser to the leader of a newly independent country in the early 1940s. Your government wants to understand how developments between 1789 and 1945 transformed international relations and what lessons can be drawn for future foreign policy.

Self-Assessment Exercise 5

Answer the following questions.

1. Explain **two historical developments** that contributed to the emergence of the transitional international system.
2. Discuss **two ways** in which nationalism changed the actors in the international system during this period.
3. Analyse how **industrialisation** influenced the distribution of wealth and power among nation-states.
4. Evaluate why increasing **economic interdependence** did not prevent the outbreak of the two World Wars.

2.8 Summary

In this unit, you examined the emergence of the transitional international system and the major developments that shaped international relations between 1789 and 1945. You explored the influence of the French Revolution, nationalism, the expansion of state and non-state actors, and the growing global scope of the international system. The unit also explained how industrialisation reshaped the distribution of wealth and power, how ideological rivalry contributed to greater polarisation among nation-states, and how advances in technology and economic integration increased interdependence despite the occurrence of two World Wars. Together, these developments laid the foundation for many of the characteristics of the contemporary international system.

2.9 References/Further Readings/Web Sources

Akinboye, O. S. & Ottoh, O. F. (2005). *A Systematic Approach to International Relations.* Lagos: Concept Publications.

Blake, J., Pearson, F., & Rochester, M.J. (1997). *International Relations: The Global Conditions in the Twenty-First Century—New* York: The McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc.

2.10 Possible Answers to Self-Assessment Exercises

Answers to Self-Assessment Exercise 1
1. B
2. C
3. B

Answers to Self-Assessment Exercise 2
1. B
2. C
3. C

Answers to Self-Assessment Exercise 3
1. B
2. C
3. D

Answers to Self-Assessment Exercise 4
1. B
2. B
3. C

Possible Answers to Self-Assessment Exercise 5

1. The emergence of the transitional international system was influenced by developments such as the **French Revolution**, the **Napoleonic Wars**, the **Concert of Europe**, and the rise of **nationalism**.
2. Nationalism contributed to the emergence of new nation-states through independence movements and political unification, while also encouraging greater public participation in national and international political affairs.
3. Industrialisation increased wealth and military strength in industrialised countries, widened the gap between the Northern and Southern Hemispheres, and facilitated the rise of new powers such as the United States and Japan.
4. Although economic interdependence strengthened commercial ties among states, political ambitions, nationalism, ideological rivalry, and security concerns outweighed economic interests, leading to the First and Second World Wars.

Unit 3 The Post-World War II International System (1945-1989)

Unit Structure

3.1 Introduction
3.2 Learning Outcomes
3.3 The Distinctive Features of the Postwar International System
  3.3.1 Superpowers
  3.3.2 Bipolarity
  3.3.3 The Nonaligned States in the Postwar System
3.4 The Collapse of the Postwar System
  3.4.1 Fissures in Bipolarity and Alliances
  3.4.2 The Collapse of the Postwar System
3.5 Summary
3.6 References/Further Readings/Web Sources
3.7 Possible Answers to Self-Assessment Exercises

3.1 Introduction

Welcome back. In the previous unit, you examined the transitional international system and how developments such as nationalism, industrialisation, and the two World Wars reshaped international relations. This unit builds on that discussion by examining the international system that emerged after the Second World War, a period marked by profound political, military, and ideological changes that redefined global affairs. As you study this unit, you will explore the distinctive features of the post-World War II international system, including the emergence of superpowers, bipolarity, and the role of nonaligned states. You will also examine the factors that weakened this postwar order and eventually led to its collapse. Understanding these developments will help you appreciate how the international system evolved into many of the political structures and relationships that continue to shape world affairs today.

3.2 Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- explain the distinctive features of the post-World War II international system; and
- analyse the factors that led to the collapse of the post-World War II international system.

3.3 The Distinctive Features of the Postwar International System What major changes do you think occurred in the international system after the Second World War?

The discussion below explains how the emergence of superpowers, bipolarity, and nonaligned states shaped the postwar international system.

The end of World War II marked a decisive shift in the global system. After the war, only two great world powers remained: the United States and the Soviet Union. Although other important states existed, almost all were understood in the context of their relations with the two superpowers. This global system was called bipolar because it was centred on two superpowers. It is the notions of superpowers and that of bipolarity that we shall discuss here.

3.3.1 Superpowers

What qualities distinguish a superpower from other powerful states?

The invention of the atomic bomb and several other weapons of mass killing, whose effects were seen in 1945, during World War II, had tremendous consequences on international politics. This led to two developments, unprecedented in the history of world politics, that fundamentally transformed the postwar international system. The first impact to be noted at the end of World War II was the emergence of two states as the dominant powers in the international system. The USA and the USSR came to be tagged as “superpowers” to differentiate them from other powerful nations.

A superpower is a state with a dominant position in the international system that can influence events, advance its own interests, and project power worldwide to protect those interests. A superpower is traditionally considered a step above a great power. Alice Lyman Miller defines a superpower as "a country that has the capacity to project dominating power and influence anywhere in the world, and sometimes, in more than one region of the globe at a time, and so may plausibly attain the status of global hegemony." This term was first applied to the Great British Empire, the United States of America and the Soviet Union. Following World War II, the British Empire's superpower status was transferred to the United States. The United States and the Soviet Union (USSR) came to be generally regarded as the two superpowers and confronted each other in the Cold War.

However, France and Britain were not categorised as “superpowers.” Rather, they were tagged as “second-tier powers.” This was because France and Britain suffered economic setbacks during World War II.

Germany and Japan, which suffered military defeat, and China, which had not yet developed an industrial base, were regarded as the Bottom tier of states.

What was fascinating and distinctive about the USA and the USSR, compared with other nation-states, was their intimidating nuclear arsenals during and after World War II. Nevertheless, it is asserted that the USSR was unable to attain nuclear parity with the USA until the 1970s. Actually, it has been established that the USA was said to have enjoyed a monopoly on atomic technology until 1949, when the USSR acquired its first atomic weapon to square up with the USA. By then, the USA was to have already claimed military superiority in the international system (Pearson and Dorchester, 1997: 607). Thus, of the two superpowers, the USA was to be regarded in the international system as "first among equals." By 1950, it was said to have assumed economic hegemony, with the largest military spending, financial reserves, and industrial production.

The Figure below compares the characteristics that distinguished the two superpowers from other states in the postwar international system.

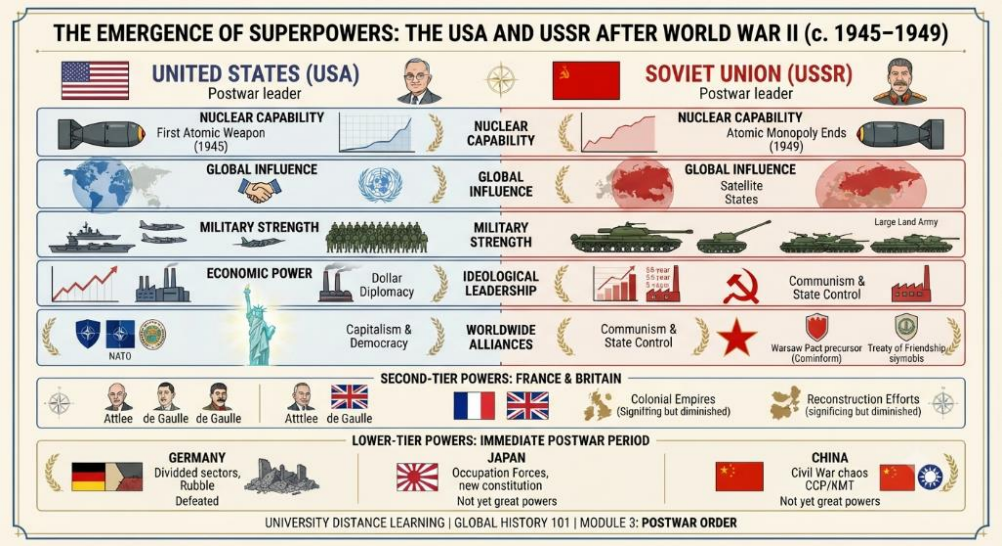

Figure 3.1: Characteristics of the Postwar Superpowers
Source: Google Gemini, Adapted by Abdulazeez Ayodeji Lawal, National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), 2026.

3.3.2 Bipolarity

How does the concentration of power in only two dominant states influence international relations?
The following discussion explains how bipolarity shaped the organisation of the postwar international system.
Polarity in international relations is any of the various ways in which power is distributed within the international system. This term describes the nature of the international system at any given period of time. One

generally distinguishes four types of systems: Unipolarity, Bipolarity, Tripolarity, and Multipolarity, for four or more centres of power. The type of system is entirely dependent on the distribution of power and influence among states, whether within a region or internationally. Bipolarity, on the other hand, is the distribution of power in which two states have the majority of economic, military, and cultural influence internationally or regionally. Often, spheres of influence would develop.

The Aftermath of World War II was the beginning of a new era. It was defined by the decline of the old great powers and the rise of new world powers. This development led to a novel alignment configuration in the international system, making the world extremely polarised. The world witnessed the East-West conflict and the Cold War, which was organised between the competing ideologies cum superpowers. One bloc, referred to as the West, included the USA and other economically developed capitalist democracies of Western Europe, as well as Japan, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. The other bloc, referred to as the East, consisted of the USSR, the developed communist states of Eastern Europe, and Communist China. There was a great struggle between the two blocs to dominate the world. This system was labelled as “bipolar.”

The intricacies of the bipolar system between the United States and the USSR meant that the entire Cold War was not just about them; it was also about the independence and safety of those not involved. In effect, European countries were often used as gambling chips, and third-world countries were often targets for consumption by either democracy or communism. The USA and the USSR organised the world's opposing blocs. The members of each bloc became closely linked militarily and economically. The members of each bloc of the alliance were militarily and economically dependent on either the USA or the USSR. These members complied rigidly with the policies outlined by the leader of such a bloc. The other states in the system also tended to move towards either pole.

3.3.3 The Nonaligned States in the Postwar System

Why did some newly independent countries choose not to align themselves with either the Western or Eastern bloc?

The discussion below explains the emergence and significance of nonaligned states during the Cold War.

In the postwar international system characterised by bipolarity, almost all nation-states were closely aligned with one bloc or the other. For example, many states in Asia and Africa were already colonial territories of the Western bloc, while the USA commandeered Latin American nation-states. USSR, on her part, formed alliances with several countries outside

Europe. In the midst of all these alliances, countries like Yugoslavia, India and Egypt remained neutral. As events took their course, even though the distribution of power never changed, the alignment patterns among states gave rise to another form of polarisation known as “tripolarity.” The “tri-polarity” resulted from the proliferation of newly independent states on the African continent and in Asia. Many of the newly independent states were to be found mostly in the Southern Hemisphere. Even though these states did not ally themselves, their position in the existing polarity was seen as creating a third “pole”; hence, they chose to be “nonaligned” in the face of the East-West confrontation.

The posture of the non-aligned states in the system was, no doubt, to become a force to be reckoned with in the international system as they met in Indonesia and called for an end to colonialism. The end of colonialism also created other waves in the scheme of things in the international system; the large mass of the population that was under colonial rule before 1945 achieved self-government. The number of nation-states in the system doubled, and the system also introduced diverse cultures. This was a factor that could cause a dramatic change in world affairs.

With the emergence of new states in the international system, the USA and the USSR sought to recruit them into their respective camps. Their efforts did not yield much because, as Pearson and Dorchester (1997) point out, the two superpowers tended to jeopardise one another's efforts in the recruitment exercise. In addition, the new states’ nationalist traits resisted the superpowers' attempts to cajole or coerce them into their various camps. The general hatred the new states harboured toward colonial rule was a major driving force behind their reluctance to accept the influence of the superpowers. The growth of the nonaligned states was a major factor that, together with others, would endanger the power and alliance structures of the international system, leading to its final collapse.

Self-Assessment Exercise 1

Now that you have examined the distinctive features of the postwar international system, test your understanding of the concepts discussed in this section.

1. Which two countries emerged as the recognised superpowers after the Second World War?
   A. Britain and France
   B. Germany and Japan
   C. United States and Soviet Union
   D. China and India
2. The international system after the Second World War was described as bipolar because:
   A. Most countries became independent.
   B. Two states dominated global power and influence.
   C. Europe was divided into several kingdoms.
   D. International organisations controlled world politics.
3. Why did many newly independent states adopt a nonaligned position during the Cold War?
   A. They wanted to join both military alliances.
   B. They wished to remain neutral in the East-West rivalry.
   C. They opposed economic development.
   D. They rejected independence.

3.4 The Collapse of the Postwar System

Although the postwar international system was dominated by two superpowers for several decades, changes within and outside the rival blocs gradually weakened its foundations. This section examines the developments that undermined the bipolar structure and ultimately led to the collapse of the postwar international system.

3.4.1 Fissures in Bipolarity and Alliances

Why do you think alliances between powerful states sometimes weaken, even when they share common interests?

It has been observed that the very existence of nuclear weapons, which brought the notion of "superpowers" and "bipolarity" in the international system at the onset of the postwar era, again interacted with other issues, as time went on, to bring a diffusion of power and the disintegration of alliances in the system and its ultimate collapse. The disintegration started as a minor disagreement and crystallised into a major one. On the western side, for instance, the USA took sides with the USSR over the Suez Crisis of 1956 against its very allies – Britain and France. The USA admonished France and Britain for their military action against Egypt and called for

their withdrawal from Egyptian territory. This led to strained relations and suspicion about the USA's commitment to the alliance.

At the same time, the Eastern Bloc was also to witness its crisis following the Hungarian Revolution. The Hungarian Revolution threatened to remove Hungary from the USSR's sphere of influence, but the revolt was forestalled, and Hungary was forced to remain within it. This singular act, according to Ghita Ionesco (1965), created doubt among members of the Eastern Bloc alliance regarding the true nature of the Soviet fraternity towards them.

Why would the possession of nuclear weapons encourage both rivalry and cooperation among superpowers?

Finally, by 1956, the USSR called for the mutual "peaceful coexistence" between the Superpowers because it became mindful of the devastation that could result from the escalation of the confrontation between the two blocs. The USSR was able to anticipate the deadly result that any nuclear confrontation between the United States and the USSR could cause to the entire humanity on the face of the globe. By the 1960s, observers had prophesied the end of the Cold War because it became clear that rapprochement between the blocs was achievable as nations grew less concerned about military aggression in world politics. The result was the gradual loosening of ties within the blocs. France under De Gaulle was the first to loosen ties with its allies as De Gaulle proclaimed that France was not to have permanent enemies but permanent interests. As if that was not enough, Turkey and Greece, two members of the Western alliance, went to war against Cyprus. In the communist bloc, Nicolae Ceaușescu of Romania, Mao Zedong of China, and other Communist Party leaders in Eastern Europe began calling for "polycentrism" in place of a single party line. By the early 1970s, it became clear that there was more intra-bloc fighting than inter-bloc fighting.

The cracks in the alliances were also manifesting in the "superpower" status itself. By 1970, more states were able to acquire nuclear weapons. So the "superpowers club" expanded, neutralising the monopoly of the USA and USSR in this realm. In addition, as more states acquired nuclear weapons, the more they realised that the nuclear arsenal that had conferred superpower status on the USA and USSR was, after all, proving unusable. As a result, the world began to question the relevance of the nuclear arsenal to the day-to-day exercise of power in the international system. Moreover, the USA, which was unchallengeably leading the stockpiling of nuclear weapons, was humiliated by two small Asian countries- North Korea during the Pueblo incident in 1968 and Vietnam, during the Indochina War that ended in 1972.

In addition, at one point, it was not military might but rather the economic strength of the USSR and the USA that gave them superiority in the world system. Even then, other countries' economies were improving. For example, Germany and Japan had revived their economies and were quickly learning to leverage their economic situations to their advantage. Furthermore, oil became a major instrument in international bargaining. The oil embargo during the Yom Kippur War in 1973- 1974 can better illustrate this. The industrialised nations became increasingly dependent on oil. Incidentally, it is the less developed countries that possess over 80 per cent of the world's oil supplies. Any cut in the supply of oil to the industrialised nations in the West could spell doom, since the powers of the oil-producing states have grown stronger.

The Figure below summarises the major developments that weakened bipolarity and the alliance system during the postwar international system.

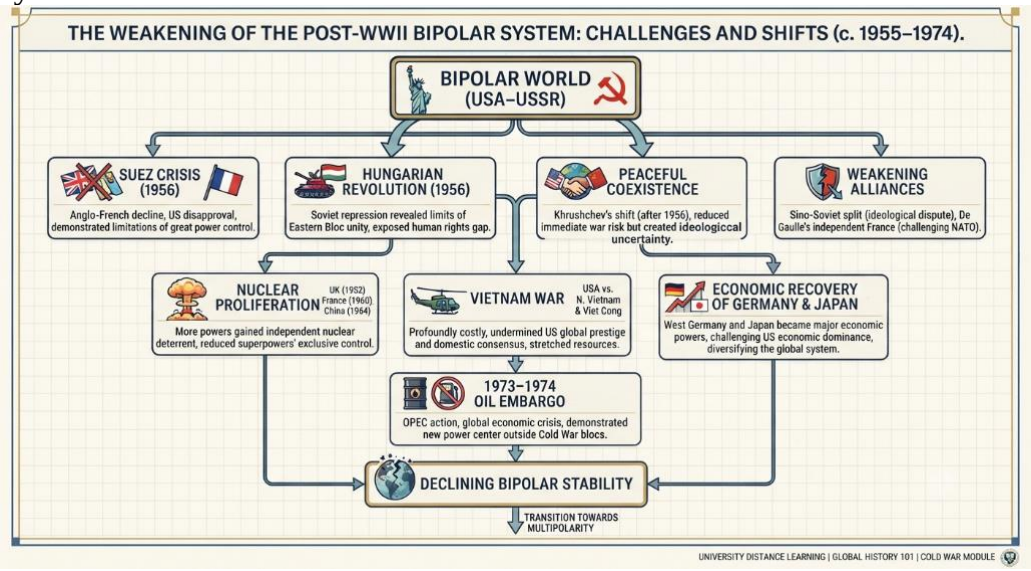

Figure 3.2: Factors that Weakened the Postwar Bipolar System
Source: Google Gemini, Adapted by Abdulazeez Ayodeji Lawal, National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), 2026.

3.4.2 The Collapse of the Postwar System

Which developments do you think finally brought the postwar international system to an end?

The collapse of the postwar international system became imminent in the late 1970s, when the superpowers' status in the USA and the USSR was tarnished and subjected to scrutiny by two events in 1979. First, the Soviet Union experienced a disgrace in Afghanistan. Ten thousand Soviet troops were defeated in Afghanistan in their bid to support a Marxist regime against Muslim rebels who wanted to oust the Marxist regime. The Soviet troops were defeated there. To worsen matters, in the process, the Soviet

regime itself was toppled back at home. Meanwhile, the USA had its frustration when fifty-two of its Embassy personnel in Tehran were held hostage by the militant Islamic regime of Iran. The USA suffered unprecedented humiliation. The two events led to a confirmation of the inadequacies of military might in calculations in the international system.

In another dimension, one would say that, to some extent, the history of the international system was dominated by discussions of bipolarity and superpowers. Nevertheless, the oil embargo episode and other events showed that other sets of issues could not only compete for attention in the international system but also form fluid, complex alignments around them. For example, the North-South confrontation, pitting the rich against the poor, came to be seen as more important in the postwar system than the East-West axis of conflict. In the events, the "Group of 77" less developed states came to make strident demands for a "New International Economic Order," using their large numbers in the United Nations General Assembly to push through a "Charter on Economic Rights and Duties of States" and other measures designed to give them more economic and political clout. This was to continue to fester, remaining a major source of tension in the international system.

Besides, other issues such as ecology, trade, and women's rights started competing for attention in the international system. Such issues have nothing to do with East-West or North-South dimensions. They are global issues that involve all states. Even the battle line between East and West became less clear, as the two got entangled in collaborations over issues, as seen in the provision of cheap loans and technology to Moscow for the construction of natural gas pipelines linking Siberia and Western Europe. Again, intra-West squabbles over trade agreements came to overshadow East-West conflicts.

By 1989, ideological differences and rival alliances within the blocs had attenuated as states in the Eastern Bloc left the bloc.
applied for entry into the European Community, which at first was regarded as a Western affair. Moreover, the Soviet government withdrew from the Warsaw Pact and expressed its desire to join a "common European bloc." These were obvious indications of a loss of will to continue with the strident East-West rivalry. And sooner rather than later, the events described in this section came together to bring closure to the postwar international **system.**

Now that you have examined the factors that led to the collapse of the postwar international system, assess your understanding by answering the following questions.

Scenario
Imagine you are an international relations analyst in 1989, preparing a report on why the post-World War II international system is coming to an end.

Self-Assessment Exercise 2

Answer the following questions.

1. Explain **two developments** that weakened the alliance system during the postwar international era.
2. Analyse how the growth of **economic power** and **nuclear proliferation** reduced the dominance of the two superpowers.
3. Discuss **two international developments** that demonstrated the declining influence of the United States and the Soviet Union during the late 1970s.
4. Evaluate why **1989** is widely regarded as the turning point that marked the collapse of the postwar international system.

3.5 Summary

In this unit, you examined the major features of the post-World War II international system and how it differed from earlier international orders. You learned about the emergence of the United States and the Soviet Union as superpowers, the development of a bipolar world, and the role of nonaligned states during the Cold War. The unit also explored the factors that gradually weakened the postwar system, including divisions within alliances, nuclear proliferation, shifting economic power, and the rise of new global issues. These developments reduced the dominance of the two superpowers and eventually brought the bipolar international system to an end in 1989.

3.6 References/Further Readings/Web Sources

Akinboye, O. & Ottoh, O. F. (2005). *A Systematic Approach to International Relations.* Lagos: Concept Publications.

Pearson, F. & Rochester, M.J. (1997). *International Relations: the Global Conditions in the Twenty-First Century.* New York: The McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc.

3.7 Possible Answers to Self-Assessment Exercises

Answers to Self-Assessment Exercise 1

1. C
2. B
3. B

Possible Answers to Self-Assessment Exercise 2

1. Alliance structures weakened because of disagreements such as the **Suez Crisis**, the **Hungarian Revolution**, the policy of **peaceful coexistence**, and increasing divisions within both the Western and Eastern blocs.
2. Nuclear proliferation reduced the exclusive military advantage of the United States and the Soviet Union, while the economic recovery of countries such as **Germany** and **Japan** reduced the superpowers' economic dominance.
3. The Soviet Union's military difficulties in **Afghanistan** and the **Iran Hostage Crisis** involving the United States demonstrated the limitations of military power and weakened the international standing of both superpowers.
4. By 1989, ideological rivalry had declined, Eastern European states were leaving the Soviet bloc, the Soviet Union had abandoned the Warsaw Pact, and cooperation increasingly replaced Cold War confrontation. These developments marked the collapse of the post-World War II international system.

Unit 4 The Contemporary International System (1989-DATE)

Unit Structure

4.1 Introduction
4.2 Learning Outcomes
4.3 The Contemporary International Order
4.4 Factors Precipitating the Emergence of the Contemporary International System
4.5 Distribution of Power
4.6 Distribution of Wealth
4.7 Polarity in the Contemporary International System
4.6 Interdependence in the Contemporary International System
4.7 Summary
4.8 References/Further Readings/Web Sources
4.9 Possible Answers to Self-Assessment Exercises

4.1 Introduction

In the previous unit, you examined the post-World War II international system, including the emergence of the superpowers, bipolarity, and the factors that eventually led to the collapse of the Cold War order. That discussion provides the foundation for understanding the international system that emerged after 1989 and continues to shape global politics today.

In this unit, you will explore the contemporary international system by examining the events that led to its emergence, the changing distribution of power and wealth, patterns of polarity, and the growing interdependence among states. As you progress through the unit, you will gain a broader understanding of how the post-Cold War era has transformed international relations, as well as the challenges and opportunities it presents in an increasingly interconnected world.

4.2 Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- describe the contemporary international order;
- explain the factors that led to the emergence of the contemporary international system;
- examine the distribution of power and wealth in the contemporary international system;
- analyse patterns of polarity in the contemporary international system; and
- evaluate the significance of interdependence in the contemporary international system.

4.3 The Contemporary International Order

This section examines the defining characteristics of the contemporary international order and how global politics has evolved since the end of the Cold War.

After the Cold War ended, did the international system become dominated by a single power, or did it evolve into a complex global order?

We live today in a global system of states. Both conflict and cooperation characterise that system, and the problems of peace, war, and order remain with us. In what kind of international order do we find ourselves at present? Some observers have suggested that the demise of the Soviet Union created, at least for a brief moment in history, unipolarity, that is, a distribution of world capabilities such that there is only one extraordinary power and all other countries are of markedly lesser capabilities and corresponding political influence. The United States, in this view, was, after 1991, the world's sole superpower and the only state with truly global influence.

In the two decades after 1991, according to this view, the United States sought to preserve its position at the top of the international hierarchy and to fortify elements of the international order that reflect its interests and values. The United States sought to maintain its position in Europe by preserving NATO and enlarging its membership to include former members of the disbanded Warsaw Pact, as well as three of the new states formed after the breakup of the Soviet Union: Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. American officials maintained a security presence in Asia primarily by continuing and strengthening its bilateral alliance with Japan. The Clinton administration, the two Bush administrations, and the first Obama administration tried, with mixed success, to convince Russia and China to join an American-centred international order. They also sought to spread American values and preferred institutions globally, including privatisation, free trade, and financial liberalisation on the economic side, and democracy and individual rights on the political side. Most dramatically, through the invasion of Iraq and overthrow of Saddam Hussein, the George W. Bush administration pursued an ambitious and unsuccessful effort to impose democracy in the heart of the Middle East. The Barack Obama administration has undertaken a less forward-pressing stance on the matter of spreading democracy in Iraq and Afghanistan, and instead has sought to wind down US wars in those two countries. The United States under President Obama has also taken a cautious stance on the Arab Spring, the near-simultaneous eruption of revolutions across North Africa and the Middle East that began in 2011 and was still

underway in late 2014. America's momentary supremacy in relative power resources never translated into US global political omnipotence. The United States was unable to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons to Pakistan and North Korea. It now seems unable to stop Iran from having nuclear research and production programs that may allow that country to have the capacity to build nuclear weapons. The United States became bogged down in wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and essentially has had to recognise that it will not enjoy a victory in either conflict. The United States, notwithstanding its economic might, precipitated a major global financial crisis in 2008 and played almost no role in resolving the European financial crisis that began the following year. In summary, after the end of the Cold War, the United States was both predominant in material capabilities and tightly constrained in its ability to get its way in international affairs. The states of Europe, in the meantime, were engaged through the European Union (EU) in an ambitious and unprecedented attempt to integrate peacefully into a political union that, to a great degree, pools their individual sovereignty. Twenty-eight states now belong to the European Union. Eighteen of them have gone so far as to give up their national currencies in favour of a common European currency, the euro. Japan after the Cold War experienced sluggish economic growth, but retained great strengths in industry and technology, and as a result of renewed diplomatic tensions with China at the outset of the 2010s, it seemed poised to take on a more active role in its defence, although in conjunction with its major ally, the United States. Several countries — Brazil, India, and, above all and without question, China — were on a trajectory in the early post-Cold War era to become economic and, possibly, military great powers.

Following a brief period of good relations with the West, Russia became less democratic but slightly more prosperous, exerting influence over its weaker (former Soviet) neighbours and relying on global demand for its natural resources. Russia showed as well with its takeover of the Crimea region from Ukraine in March 2014 that, even in the face of political entreaties from the United States not to seize Crimea, it was prepared to use military force to defend what it considers to be core national security interests in its immediate neighbourhood. In light of these developments, it is becoming clear that unipolarity, as a term of analysis, is unhelpful for understanding the contemporary international order or international relations in the decades to come. Politics among nations is taking on a strongly regional character. Western Europe continues to enjoy the absence of great-power conflict, remarkable given its long history of war. East Asia is more troubled: China and Japan are regional rivals; China and Taiwan have unresolved tensions; China has territorial disputes with Vietnam, the Philippines, and Japan; and the continuing division of the Korean Peninsula poses the risk of a major war. The Middle East and the Gulf region are weighed down by multiple political and military conflicts:

Israel versus several neighbours; the United States against Iran; civil war within Syria; and incipient high- intensity civil conflicts in several countries, most notably Iraq and Libya. Africa and Latin America, battlegrounds of superpower competition during the Cold War, have been left to struggle with their own challenges: periodic famine, ethnic conflict, and genocide in Africa, and the struggle to control the narcotics trade and promote democracy and economic growth in Latin America. Europe, which seemed at the outset of the 2000s to be on a track toward becoming a wide-ranging zone of peace, seemed poised in 2014 to became a zone of potential conflict as the United States and its NATO partners became concerned that, after seizing Crimea, Russia might have territorial ambitions directed toward other parts of the former Soviet Union, such as Moldova, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine as a whole, and even possibly countries that now are NATO members, namely, Poland and the Baltic countries of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.

Another distinctive feature of the contemporary era is globalisation, an ongoing process of international economic and technological integration, underpinned by revolutionary advances in transportation and communication. We will pay close attention to globalisation in the section on International Political Economy. Here, we emphasise that well-educated individuals tend to benefit most from globalisation, leveraging their access to information and knowledge to improve their material and social status. Those less well educated are less able to reap the benefits, and those who value traditional ways of life or means of production — such as farmers in Europe, nationalists seeking to limit immigration into the United States, and religious conservatives in the Middle East — find globalisation disruptive, threatening, or culturally offensive.
Some states or groups may seek ways to lash out or insulate themselves against globalisation.

The Figure below highlights some of the defining features that characterise the contemporary international order.

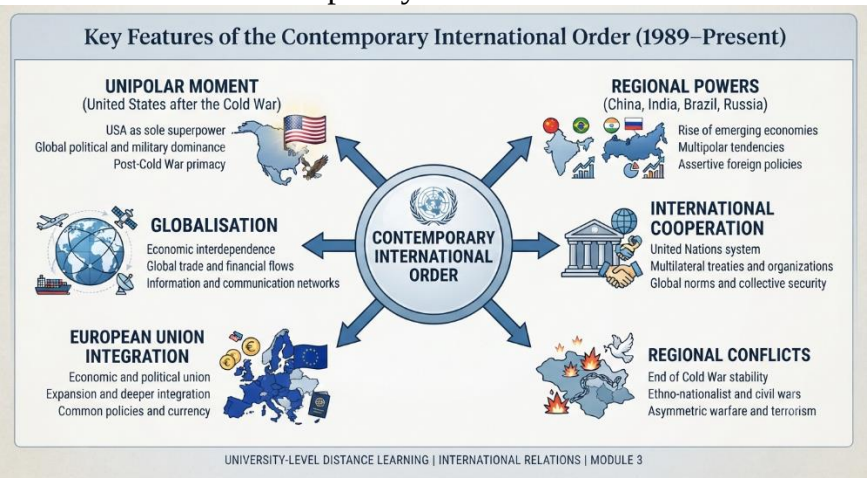

Figure 4.1: Key Features of the Contemporary International Order

Source: Google Gemini, Adapted by Abdulazeez Ayodeji Lawal, National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), 2026.

Having examined the characteristics of the contemporary international order, assess your understanding of the key ideas discussed in this section.

Self-Assessment Exercise 1

1. Following the end of the Cold War, some scholars argued that the international system briefly became:
   A. Bipolar
   B. Multipolar
   C. Unipolar
   D. Tripolar
2. Which organisation expanded to include several former members of the Warsaw Pact?
   A. United Nations
   B. African Union
   C. NATO
   D. ASEAN
3. According to this section, which process has significantly increased international economic and technological integration?
   A. Decolonisation
   B. Globalisation
   C. Mercantilism
   D. Protectionism

4.4 Factors Precipitating the Emergence of the Contemporary International System

As you study this section, consider the major historical events that transformed the structure of the international system after the Cold War.

Which major events contributed to the emergence of the contemporary international system?

The emergence of the post-Cold War international system has been shaped by many factors and events that we cannot address exhaustively here. Nevertheless, we shall treat a few of them, not in the order of their importance, but rather, in the order in which they readily come to our mind. These factors and issues include the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the disintegration of the USSR in 1989, the reunification of the two Germanies, the disintegration of Czechoslovakia into two states, and the disintegration of Yugoslavia into five new states.

To start with, the disintegration of the USSR, which was considered one of the poles of the Cold War era, brought enormous changes to the system in which we had been living since 1945. The collapse was not a

spontaneous process, but rather a conscious effort by the Communist Party and government apparatchiks to dismantle the country. The collapse was also ascribed to the struggle between the Communists and the Democrats. The process of disintegration took place against the backdrop of complete public apathy.

One fundamental point is that disintegration can determine the character and tone of the international system in various ways. One impact of the collapse is the serious restructuring of the Eurasian axis and an increase in the number of states in the system, resulting from the emergence of 15 new states from the former Soviet Union. The declarations of sovereignty and independence by 15 new states in the former Republic were significant, as all the former republics, including Russia, required foreign recognition of their 1991 borders and the legitimacy of their leaders. All of these states immediately announced their intention to form a partnership with the United States, which was leading the West pole.

Closely linked to the above is the fact that the world has experienced an expansion of the West's geopolitical sphere. The former Eastern European states that were not considered part of the West have not only begun to be regarded as such but have also practically institutionalised their membership in Western alliances. They have become members of the European Union and NATO.

Again, if we look at the main geopolitical consequences of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the first thing we should note is that the world that had been divided into blocs became almost one. The borders that were previously impassable became passable. The world became a single informational, economic and political system. Bipolar confrontation became a thing of the past. Consequently, a unipolar period emerged in global politics. The United States became the sole superpower in the world, which, in principle, could resolve any problems as it saw fit. This period witnessed a sharp rise in America’s global presence, not only in regions where the Soviet Union had ceased to exist, such as Eastern Europe and the former republics of the Soviet Union, but also in other regions worldwide.

In another dimension, the collapse of the Berlin Wall has also attracted considerable attention for its significance during the Cold War. The Berlin Wall, which separated the two Germanies, was considered a symbol of the Cold War era. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the unification of East and West Germany in 1989 marked another watershed in East-West relations. The fall of the Wall was a declaration of détente between the NATO Alliance and the Warsaw Pact. It altered the ordering principles of the international system in the Cold War era. Besides, several other alterations of the same magnitude, such as the disintegration of

Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, occurred. All the issues enumerated here combined to create a new world arrangement, which we rightly refer to as another phase in the sociopolitical and economic order we are now living with.

The contemporary international system emerged through a series of significant political transformations across Europe and the former Soviet Union. The Figure below presents the key events that collectively shaped the post-Cold War international order.

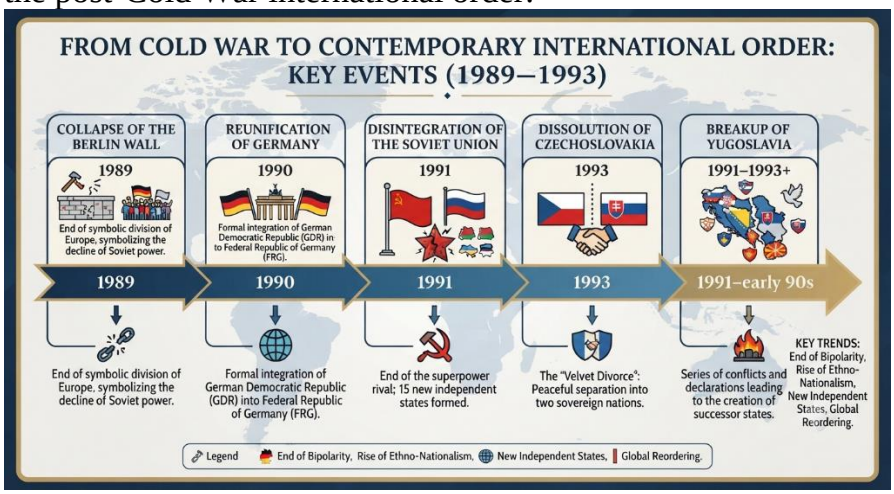

Figure 4.2: From Cold War to Contemporary International Order
Source: Google Gemini. No licence specified. Adapted by Abdulazeez Ayodeji Lawal, National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), 2026.

Self-Assessment Exercise 2

Attempt the following questions to assess your understanding of the factors that led to the emergence of the contemporary international system.

1. Which event symbolised the end of the Cold War and became a major turning point in the emergence of the contemporary international system?
   A. Cuban Missile Crisis
   B. Fall of the Berlin Wall
   C. Korean War
   D. Vietnam War
2. The disintegration of the Soviet Union resulted in:
   A. The formation of 15 new independent states.
   B. The creation of NATO.
   C. The reunification of Korea.
   D. The dissolution of the European Union.
3. According to the discussion, which development contributed to the expansion of Western political and security influence after the Cold War?
   A. Withdrawal of all states from international organisations
   B. Former Eastern European states joining the European Union and NATO
   C. Dissolution of the United Nations
   D. End of international trade

4.5 Distribution of Power

As you read this section, consider how the decline of the bipolar system changed the way influence and power are exercised in international relations.

How did the distribution of power change in the contemporary international system after the Cold War?

One of the major features of the post-Cold War international system that represented a clear break from the patterns that had characterised the postwar system is the distribution of power. The Yugoslav crisis presented a situation in which it became difficult to talk of power.
ranking among nations. This is because, in the midst of the crisis, neither the USA nor the USSR could marshal its power to resolve it. If the USSR was said to be a house in shambles, the USA was also facing the decline of its hegemony due to the cost of military spending on peace operations worldwide. So, it would be right to say that both superpowers were in an economic quagmire.

Nevertheless, it is also appropriate to note that the USA's position in the hierarchy of States in the post-Cold War era appears to be superior to that it enjoyed during the Cold War. This is premised on the fact that her major rival in that era, the USSR, got disorganised. As such, the latter could not pose any challenge to the USA's status as a clear hegemon. Some analysts, based on this, have seen the international system as unipolar, with the USA capable, to a certain extent, of dealing with threats to it through its own unilateral action. For example, the United States has visibly enhanced its influence in the Middle East since the end of the Cold War. The invasion of Kuwait by Iraq in August 1990 and the following Gulf Crisis, in a way, created an opportunity for the United States to exercise its hegemonic power in the Middle East. In the following years, in the absence of a counter-power, the influence of the United States increased further. With the military operation in Afghanistan and the invasion of Iraq after the September 11, 2001 attacks, the United States is seen as perpetuating its dominance in the region.

In addition, power has become diffuse, as a group of less-developed countries, such as Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, even though they do not possess nuclear arsenals, have been able to exploit their oil production capacity to assert their position in the international system. These are countries that, in the past, were regarded as “tiny” and “statelets.” What is striking about power in the contemporary system is that countries now possess nonmilitary resources that, in the past, did not translate directly into power. Today, such nonmilitary resources can provide considerable leverage in world politics. The contemporary era

seemed to mark an acceleration of a process in which traditional military resources are eclipsed by non-military resources such as oil and food, while the value of military resources is increasingly devalued.

Moreover, several other states were able to join the "nuclear club," which had hitherto consisted of the USA and the USSR, along with only a few of their allies. On the one hand, there were a few of the USA's allies, like China, France, and Britain. On the other hand, there were the USSR and a few of its allies, such as Ukraine and Kazakhstan. Other non-aligned states like India, Iran, Iraq and Pakistan also joined the group of nations in possession of nuclear weapons. Besides, one can still talk of "middle powers" like
Brazil, Argentina, Indonesia and several others – playing a preponderant role in the international system.

Power in the contemporary international system is no longer based solely on military strength. Economic influence, strategic resources, and technological capabilities have become increasingly important in determining a state's position in world affairs. The Figure below presents these changing dimensions of power.

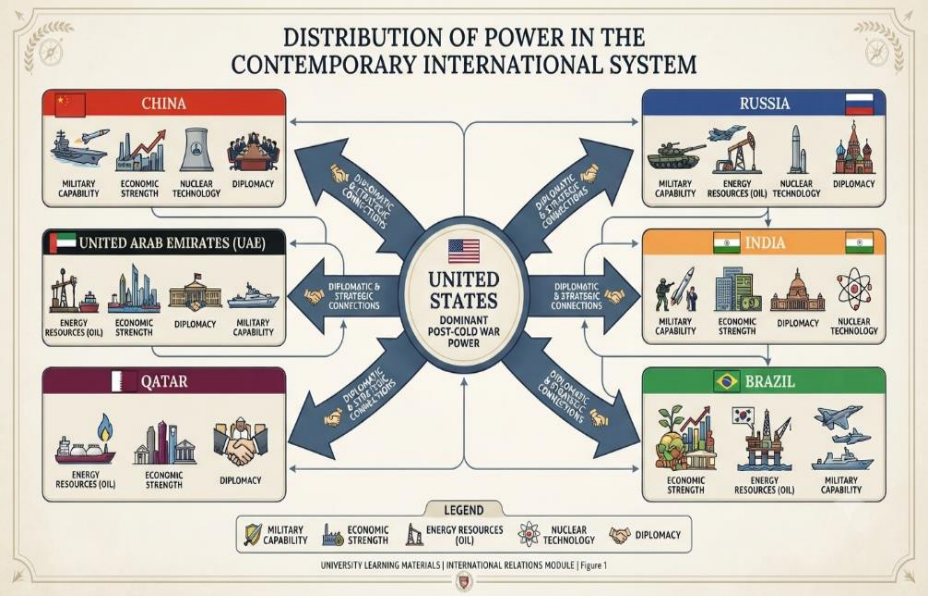

Figure 4.3: Distribution of Power in the Contemporary International System
Source: Google Gemini. No licence specified. Adapted by Abdulazeez Ayodeji Lawal, National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), 2026.

Self-Assessment Exercise 3

Attempt the following questions to assess your understanding of the distribution of power in the contemporary international system.

1. According to the discussion, which country emerged as the dominant global power after the collapse of the Soviet Union?
   A. China
   B. Russia
   C. United States
   D. Germany
2. Which of the following is identified as an important non-military source of power in the contemporary international system?
   A. Colonial possessions
   B. Oil resources
   C. Population size alone
   D. Geographic isolation
3. The contemporary international system suggests that national power is increasingly influenced by:
   A. Military capability only
   B. Economic and other non-military resources alongside military strength
   C. The number of colonies a country controls
   D. Religious influence alone

4.6 Distribution of Wealth

As you study this section, consider the factors that distinguish wealthy nations from poorer ones in the contemporary international system.

How is wealth distributed among states in the contemporary international system?

The contemporary international system is not only stratified in terms of power distribution but also in terms of wealth. The wide 'rich-poor' gap between developed and developing nations during the post-World War II era has been exacerbated in the post-Cold War era. Technologically advanced nations are using technology to advance their economies, while technologically backward nations are becoming more marginalised in the global system.

The world of this era is highly stratified into several classifications: backward states include many states on the African continent that lack the technology to advance their development. There also exist less-developed states, including the newly rich OPEC nations like Saudi Arabia, which are still, in many ways, economically underdeveloped and politically fragile. We can also mention the newly industrialised nations, which are referred to as "upper middle-income" and, in some cases, as "high-

income." In this group, we have nations such as Brazil, Mexico and South Korea. The developed countries themselves range from the highly developed and wealthiest market economies such as the USA, Japan and most members of the European Union, to the less wealthy economies of Eastern Europe, currently seeking to make a difficult transition from the Communist system to the market-oriented, capitalist economy.

The real economic differences among nations, in this regard, are more evident in areas such as the standard of living, infant mortality rate, life expectancy, and the even distribution of wealth within societies. Industrialised nations tend to have a high standard of living, a low infant mortality rate, and a longer life expectancy than developing nations. Regardless of these indices, it is quite clear that the contemporary international system is divided into "haves" and "have-nots" or the rich and the poor.

Countries differ considerably in their levels of economic development and standards of living. The Figure below presents the broad categories of states based on their levels of economic development and wealth as discussed in this section.

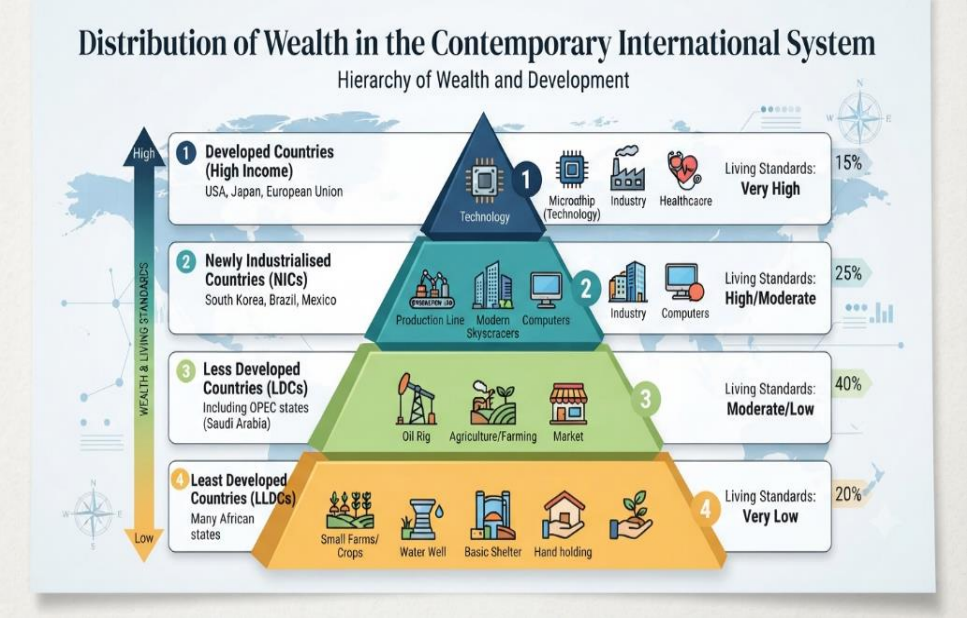

Figure 4.4: Distribution of Wealth in the Contemporary International System

Source: Google Gemini. No licence specified. Adapted by Abdulazeez Ayodeji Lawal, National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), 2026.

Self-Assessment Exercise 4

Attempt the following questions to assess your understanding of the distribution of wealth in the contemporary international system.

1. According to the discussion, the contemporary international system is stratified not only by power but also by:

A. Religion
B. Wealth
C. Language
D. Population

2. Which of the following is identified as an indicator of economic development?

A. Number of political parties
B. Infant mortality rate
C. Number of military alliances
D. Territorial size

3. According to the discussion, technologically advanced countries generally:

A. Experience lower economic productivity.
B. Use technology to strengthen their economies.
C. Depend entirely on developing countries for innovation.
D. Have lower standards of living than developing countries.

4.7 Polarity in the Contemporary International System

As you read this section, think about how the end of the Cold War changed the pattern of global alignments and whether new forms of rivalry have emerged.

How has polarity changed in the contemporary international system since the end of the Cold War?

In the section on the Cold War era, we have seen how complex and polarised the world became. However, as the Cold War waned, the East-West axis of polarisation began to experience some détente and rapprochement among the principal actors in the conflict. With détente at the end of the Cold War, all the sentiments, revulsions and rivalries had, in the words of Pearson and Dorchester (1997), been squeezed into a Pandora's Box. The end of the Cold War has released the tension inherent in it, which has since exploded elsewhere. Again, the collapse of the Berlin Wall, to some, signified the end of the historical rivalry in the international system, leaving capitalism to triumph completely over communism. This means that a resurrection of the East-West confrontation is unlikely to occur in the international system. This disintegration left one superpower standing in the world at the moment:

the USA. The international system of the 21st century can be seen as a single pole, but a hegemonic outcome does not yet follow from this.

However, it is still possible to believe that the world could be polarised similarly, as the so-called Pandora's Box could actually explode within the same international system. This is particularly true in the situation where there still exist some orthodox Marxist regimes in countries like Cuba and elsewhere. China also officially remains a communist state. Even the capitalist reforms in the former Soviet Republic are yet to prove successful. In addition, in some Eastern European states, the former communist party has regained power through popular elections. The case of Yugoslavia's disintegration is a figure. The crisis of Yugoslavia, which has been between the Muslim and the Serb-Croat communities, is a conflict that demonstrated that the polarisation tendencies of the Cold War era can be replaced by a far more complex alignment pattern, with many sources of the conflict and cross-cutting cleavages in the post-Cold War international system. In another dimension, even though the East-West conflict might have disappeared, the world in the post-Cold War era is witnessing a new clash of civilisations based on competing cultural values. The central focus of the clash in the world as we see it, in the real sense, is between the West and several Islamic states along the Middle Eastern axis. The Islamic group, through the 2001 terrorist attacks against the World Trade Centre, can be seen as an opposing pole. That means the present polarisation is between Islam as opposed to Christianity and the Eastern civilisation as opposed to Western civilisation. Many of the Islamic militants are strongly committed to the direct use of violence in pursuing their mission.

The end of the Cold War altered the pattern of global power relations. While some scholars describe the contemporary system as unipolar, others argue that new centres of rivalry and competing interests continue to shape international politics. The Figure below highlights these changing patterns of polarity.

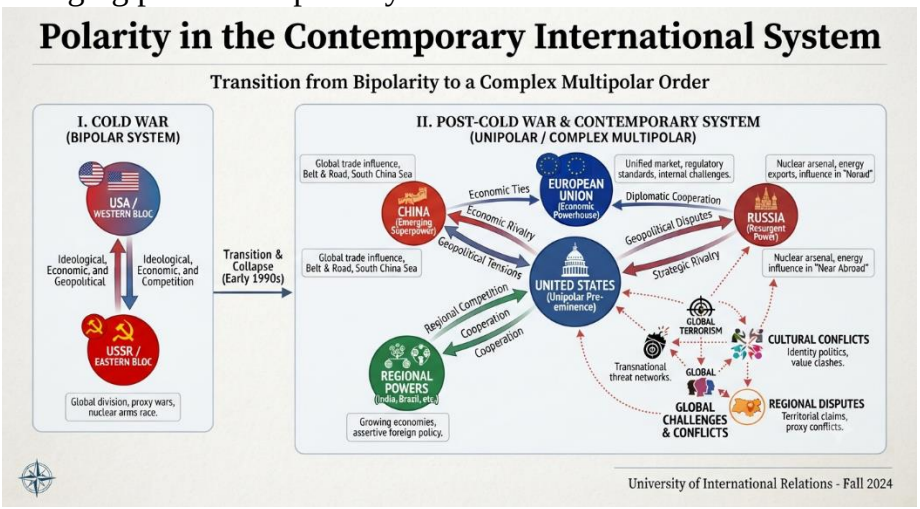

Figure 4.5: Polarity in the Contemporary International System

Source: Google Gemini. No licence specified. Adapted by Abdulazeez Ayodeji Lawal, National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), 2026.

Self-Assessment Exercise 5

Attempt the following questions to assess your understanding of polarity in the contemporary international system.

1. Following the end of the Cold War, many scholars initially described the international system as:
   A. Bipolar
   B. Multipolar
   C. Unipolar
   D. Tripolar
2. According to the discussion, which event symbolised the end of Cold War rivalry?
   A. The Korean War
   B. The Fall of the Berlin Wall
   C. The Cuban Missile Crisis
   D. The Suez Crisis
3. According to the discussion, contemporary global tensions increasingly reflect:
   A. Competition among colonial empires
   B. A clash of civilisations and competing cultural values
   C. Rivalry between monarchies and republics
   D. Competition over territorial expansion alone

4.8 Interdependence in the Contemporary International System

As you study this section, consider the factors that have made countries increasingly dependent on one another in today's globalised world.

What factors have increased interdependence among states in the contemporary international system?

We must start our discussion here with the concept of "globalisation." In lucid terms, "globalisation" refers to the emergence of an international network that has increased interdependence among nations worldwide through rapid cross-border movement of goods, services, and technology. Globalisation, a phenomenon of the post-Cold War era, has been a major driver of interdependence among states in the international system over the past few decades. Almost all aspects of modern society have been influenced by it in some way. Baylis, John and Smith, Steve (2001) see globalisation as intensifying cross-border interactions and interdependence between countries, bringing about major changes in the international system. Borders are increasingly becoming irrelevant as even the most isolated states are no longer so isolated.

Various Intergovernmental Organisations (IGOs) have played important roles in the process of globalisation, which has, in turn, increased interdependence among countries. Before the age of globalisation, states viewed the international system solely through the lens of their national interests. They were more concerned with their own safety than with global security and sought to address problems at the domestic rather than the international level. Nowadays, since the issues and difficulties that states face are becoming more global than national, states are no longer able to protect their citizens and address problems on their own unless they take collective action, counting on one another. To this end, non-state actors, especially IGOs, are at the forefront. By joining these, states give up some of their sovereignty to a body governed by the collective will and decisions of its member-states.

It is not only the IGOs with individual states as members that have increased interdependence among states. Intergovernmental Organisations (IGOs) from different countries have had a similar impact on states over the course of interdependence. Examples of such trans-border connections include the Assembly of European Regions and the European Union's Committee of the Regions. This organisation has since been influencing the respective countries of their member regions. In this way, states have also become more interdependent, not specifically through their own actions, but through their constituent regions.

Forming part of such regional organisations. Even more directly, states have become more interdependent through the opening of national borders and the implementation of free trade. Private-sector institutions are another development that has been enhancing the interconnectedness of states in the modern international system. Bodies such as the International Federation of Stock Exchanges have, through their decisions and actions on issues such as interest rates and food prices, significantly influenced many countries worldwide and the global economy as a whole.

Another important factor that has been of cardinal importance in augmenting the interdependence of states is the fusion of national capital markets and the emergence of an integrated global economy. Since states no longer have sole control over their economies, they rely on the collective governance of bodies such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank to regulate the international financial market.

Overall, interdependence has significantly changed the international system, making states far more dependent on one another and interconnected. The world is not a place of many different, separate countries anymore; these states form almost one entity at many different levels. Isolated problems no longer arise; thus, solutions must be found through collective action rather than individual responses. And by doing

so, this has simultaneously brought states closer together and made them more dependent on each other.

Advances in technology, international organisations, trade, and global finance have created stronger links among countries than ever before. The Figure below shows the major drivers of interdependence in the contemporary international system.



Figure 4.6: Interdependence in the Contemporary International System
Source: Google Gemini. No licence specified. Adapted by Abdulazeez Ayodeji Lawal, National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), 2026.

Self-Assessment Exercise 6

Attempt the following questions to assess your understanding of interdependence in the contemporary international system.

1. According to the discussion, globalisation refers to:
   A. The isolation of national economies
   B. The emergence of an international network that increases cross- border movement of goods, services, technology, and information
   C. The replacement of nation-states by international organisations
   D. The end of international trade
2. Which of the following organisations is identified as helping regulate the international financial system?
   A. African Union (AU)
   B. North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO)
   C. International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank
   D. Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC)
3. According to the discussion, states increasingly rely on collective action because:
   A. National governments no longer exist.
   B. Most contemporary challenges are global rather than purely national.
   C. International organisations have replaced sovereign states.
   D. National borders have completely disappeared.

4.9 Summary

In this unit, you have studied the contemporary international system that emerged after the end of the Cold War. You examined the major events that led to its emergence, including the collapse of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Berlin Wall. You also learned how power and wealth are distributed in the contemporary world, how the nature of polarity has changed since the Cold War, and how globalisation has increased interdependence among states through greater economic, political, and technological cooperation.

4.10 References/Further Readings/Web Sources

Baylis, J. & Smith, S. (Eds). (2001). *The Globalisation of World Politics – An Introduction to International Relations* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.

Brown, C. & Ainley, (2005). *Understanding International Relations* (3rd ed.). Palgrave: Macmillan.

Grieco, J, Ikenberry, G. J., & Mastanduno, M (2015). *Introduction to International Relations.* London. Palgrave.

4.11 Possible Answers to Self-Assessment Exercises

Self-Assessment Exercise 1

1. **B**
2. **C**
3. **B**

Self-Assessment Exercise 2

1. **B**
2. **A**
3. **B**

Self-Assessment Exercise 3

1. **C**
2. **B**
3. **B**

Self-Assessment Exercise 4

1. **B**
2. **B**
3. **B**

Self-Assessment Exercise 5

1. **C**
2. **B**
3. **B**

Self-Assessment Exercise 6

1. **B**
2. **C**
3. **B**

MODULE 3 FEATURES OF THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM

Unit 1 The Actors in the International System
Unit 2 Anarchy in the International System
Unit 3 Interest and the Use of Power in the International System
Unit 4 Polarity in the International System

Unit 1 The Actors in the International System

Unit Structure

1.1 Introduction
1.2 Learning Outcomes
1.3 State Actors
  1.3.1 Understanding State Actors
  1.3.2 How States Work in the International System
1.4 Non-State Actors
  1.4.1 Inter-Governmental Organisations (IGOs)
  1.4.2 Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs)
  1.4.3 The Multinational Corporations (MNCS) and Transnational Corporations (TNCS)
  1.4.4 The Cross-National Organisations
1.5 States in the Westphalian system: challenges to state sovereignty by non-state actors
  1.5.1 Challenges to Sovereign States
  1.5.2 International Responses to Non-State Actors
1.6 Summary
1.7 References/Further Readings/Web Sources
1.8 Possible Answers to Self-Assessment Exercises

1.1 Introduction

Welcome to Module 3. In previous units, you explored the nature and key features of the international system. Building on that foundation, this unit shifts attention to the participants who shape activities within the international system. As you study this unit, you will discover that although states continue to occupy a central position, they are no longer the only actors influencing international affairs. Various organisations and groups now play significant roles in shaping events and interactions across national boundaries.

As you progress through the unit, you will examine both state and non-state actors and consider how their roles, relationships, and interactions contribute to the functioning of the international system. By the end of the unit, you should have a clearer understanding of how these different

actors influence international relations and why they remain important to the study of the international system.

1.2 Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- identify the different state and non-state actors in the international system;
- describe the roles of state and non-state actors in the international system; and
- analyse how non-state actors challenge state sovereignty within the Westphalian system.

1.3 State Actors

Having considered what you will learn in this unit, let us begin by examining the traditional actors in the international system. Understanding their characteristics and roles provides the foundation for appreciating how international relations operate.
Before reading further, consider this:

When people refer to a "state", a "nation", or a "country", do they always mean the same thing?
As you read this section, pay attention to how these terms differ and why understanding these distinctions is important in the study of international relations.

1.3.1 Understanding State Actors

In our daily conversations, we use the terms “nation,” “state,” and “country” interchangeably to refer to entities distinguished by thick boundary lines on the world map. We might have been interchanging these terms because we believe they are synonyms. But technically speaking, these terms are not synonyms. Technically speaking, a “state” refers to a legal-political entity. The term “nation” refers to a cultural or social entity, and “country” refers to a geographical entity. In defining a “state” and a “nation,” the distinction is not merely technical; it is of real importance to students of international relations. When we say that a “state” refers to a legal-political entity, we mean an entity that has a sovereign government exercising supreme authority over a relatively fixed population within well-defined territorial boundaries and acknowledging no higher authority outside those boundaries (Pearson and Rochester, 1997). This sovereignty is expressed in their ability to exercise preeminent control over their people and policies within their territorial boundaries. Sovereignty encourages a state to exercise control

over its people without interference from external forces, such as other states.

There are several territorial units considered as states. Such entities have international legal status, which enables them to enter into treaties, join intergovernmental organisations such as the United Nations, exchange ambassadors, and engage in other official activities.
international transactions. In international law, a state is regarded as a legal person, with the capacity to sue and be sued.

Actually, it is "states" that are the main reference points we see on a world map. Suffice it to say that some states, such as the United States of America, Japan, Britain, and Nigeria, are well known; others, like Palau and Nauru, are not. No matter how tiny or inconspicuous a state may be, its sovereignty confers on it formal equality with other states.

A "nation," on its part, is conceptually and legally different from a state. When one talks of a "nation," one is referring to a cultural or social entity composed of a group of people with a shared historical experience rooted in a common language, ethnicity, or other cultural characteristics, as well as a shared identity. The term "nation" is the human aspect of a country. A nation may constitute part of a state. For example, Tivs, Hausas, Yorubas, or Igbos constitute distinct nations within the state called Nigeria. The term "nation" can also be coterminous with a state, such as the United States. The society of the United States of America, actually, is made up of many nationality groups like the Irish-Americans, the Polish-Americans and several others. However, over time, these groups have become assimilated into one American society and have come to identify themselves as "Americans." A "nation" may also spill over several states, as we see the Palestinians in the state of Israel, the state of Lebanon, the state of Jordan and several other states. The Palestinians in Israel do not see themselves as Israelis; the Palestinians in Jordan do not see themselves as Jordanians, nor do those in Lebanon consider themselves Lebanese. Similarly, the Kurds in Iran and Iraq do not identify themselves as Iranians or Iraqis. The situation in the cases cited here is that these states are plagued by culturally diverse populations who, from time to time, have agitated to break away and form their own independent statehood. In contrast, there are also cases of oneness between the "state" and "nation," such as in France and Switzerland. France has various groups and political cleavages, accompanied by many violent, vociferous quarrels among its people over the state's political institutions. Yet, they generally regard themselves as one - Frenchmen. They do not think of seceding to form another state.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it was the state that created national unity. That is to say, it was the state that held central political authority and forged a sense of national identity among a group of people who happened to find themselves living within the same geographical boundaries, but who never thought of themselves as one people, such as "French" or "English." This was in contrast to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when nations created states. That is, a group of people sharing common linguistic and other cultural bonds eventually united into a single state. The loose confederation of the German-speaking territories forming Germany in 1870 provides a good example. Another good example is the various Italian-speaking territories that came together to form Italy.

The pattern after World War II was similar to that of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in which many societies in Africa and Asia that gained independence from colonial powers by 1945 became states. These states have boundaries that do not correspond to any natural cultural groupings but rather to artificial mapmaking. These states had to face the task of getting divers and often historically hostile tribal units to identify with the new state in which they were situated.

In the face of the foregoing, one may have to ask what a "nation-state" as a term connotes. Pearson and Dorchester (1997) explain that the term "nation-state" does not add any other meaning to the term "state". Rather, the term "nation-state" is used by scholars as a synonym of "state." Its usage connotes the fact that over the years, there has been the persistent impulse to achieve congruence between state and national boundaries to make "state" and "nation" mean one thing in the minds of people.

Now that you understand what distinguishes a state from a nation and a country, what gives a state the authority to represent its people and interact with other states in the international system?
As you study the next subsection, identify the features and institutions that enable states to function as recognised actors in international relations.

1.3.2 How States Work in the International System

One of the most common images of the international system is that it is a system in which each state has the attributes of a person. As such, in the classical international system, what states do and the relations among them used to be the focus of attention in discussions of the international system. A state is usually controlled by a government in which people assume authoritative positions and act legally on its behalf. The people of a state define who has authoritative status to act on behalf of the state. The authority of a state is in the hands of the leader – president or monarch -

who can, according to his domestic status and power, and by international law, speak and write, promise and threaten, and make or break commitments on behalf of his state.

Apart from that, each state has a complex of authorities who serve as the leader's aides. They act on its behalf. They include diplomats and statesmen, trade and customs officials, soldiers, legislative leaders, cabinet members, and prime ministers. In the name of a state, the complex authorities formulate policies and present them to other countries as though they were the general will of the state. In this effect, all states are organisations led by the elite, who influence their goals and foreign policies to achieve them, and by an establishment that articulates these policies.

States enter into a system of international rules, procedures, and norms governing the behaviour between officials representing different states. They do structure and frame people's behaviour. They provide meaningful, causal understanding of diverse human behaviours and simplify our apprehension of them. Similarly, states enter into treaties and make war. Thus, a violent clash between several thousand men on Damansky (or Chenpao) Island on the River Ussuri in March 15, 1969, becomes understandable as a border clash between Soviet and Chinese frontier guards, as a manifestation of the Sino-Soviet conflict.

As you have seen, a state is more than a place shown on a map. It possesses specific characteristics that enable it to function as a recognised actor in the international system. The illustration below summarises the key components of a sovereign state discussed in this section.

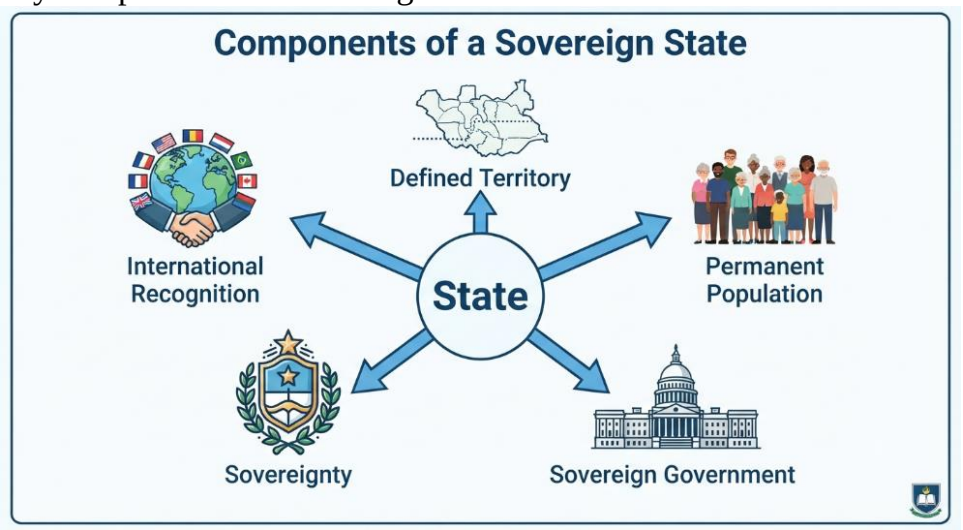

Figure 1.1: Components of a Sovereign State
Source: Google Gemini, Adapted by Abdulazeez A. Lawal, NOUN, 2026.
Test your understanding of what you have learnt in this section by attempting the questions below.

Self-Assessment Exercise 1

Choose the most appropriate answer for each question.

1. Which of the following best describes a **state**?
   - A. A cultural group with a shared language and identity
   - B. A geographical area defined by physical features
   - C. A legal-political entity with a sovereign government, a defined territory, and a permanent population
   - D. A community formed through shared historical experiences
2. According to the unit, which statement best distinguishes a **nation** from a **state**?
   - A. A nation is defined by political sovereignty, while a state is defined by geography.
   - B. A nation is primarily a cultural or social entity, whereas a state is a legal-political entity.
   - C. A nation and a state always refer to the same concept.
   - D. A nation is recognised only when it becomes a member of the United Nations.
3. In the international system, governments act on behalf of their states by:
   - A. Exercising authority through recognised leaders and officials who represent the state in international affairs.
   - B. Allowing citizens to negotiate treaties directly with other countries.
   - C. Delegating all international responsibilities to non-governmental organisations.
   - D. Relinquishing sovereignty to neighbouring states.

1.4 Non-State Actors

You have now examined the role of states as the traditional actors in the international system. However, states no longer operate in isolation. Let us now explore the other actors that have become increasingly influential in shaping international affairs.

Besides states, what other organisations or groups do you think influence decisions and events in the international system?
As you read this section, identify the different categories of non-state actors and consider the unique roles they play in global affairs.

Traditionally, international politics focuses on the relationships among states in the system. However, since the end of World War II, other forces have become influential in the international arena; these are called non-state actors. Non-state actors have become important players, with key roles in the ordering of events in the international system. Some states

create non-state actors, while others emerge autonomously. They include intergovernmental organisations, non-governmental organisations, multinational corporations, and even individuals. The proliferation of non-state actors has greatly contributed to the complexities of the international system. Non-state actors have been linking people across international borders in various ways, such as occupation, religion, personal ties, and other factors. In this manner, state interactions in the international arena are no longer solely bilateral, with states dealing with one another on a one-on-one basis. Instead, many issues are dealt with on a multilateral basis. Moreover, states are no longer the primary channels for international interactions. Individuals and groups often bypass the state's apparatus to work with each other. There are different types of non-state actors; four are discussed here.

The discussion has shown that international relations involve a wide range of actors beyond sovereign states. These non-state actors differ in their composition, objectives, and areas of influence, yet each contributes to the functioning of the international system. The figure below summarises the major types of non-state actors discussed in this section.

1.4.1 Inter-Governmental Organisations (IGOs)

Intergovernmental organisations (IGOs) are international actors whose members are only states, and decision-making authority lies with the member states. They are supranational, in that states give up their sovereignty when they consent to abide by any agreement they enter into by joining the organisation. Moreover, intergovernmental organisations transcend state borders and can have a major impact on the government and transnational actors within states. As a result, over time, intergovernmental organisations can develop independent power bases and identities separate from those of the founding states. IGOs include bodies such as the United Nations, regional organisations such as the European Union and ECOWAS. Other functional organisations include the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). These are IGOs primarily concerned with trade and the economy.

IGOs are not a replacement for government, as they do not govern. They seek to navigate and help administer complex interrelations and global economic, political, and social challenges by facilitating cooperation with other actors, particularly governments. To this end, their work extends beyond the traditional boundaries of governmental sovereignty. IGOs not only bring opportunities for their member states but also exert influence and impose limits on members' policies and on the way those policies are made.

Even though member states abide by the commitments of an intergovernmental organisation voluntarily, the organisation has a habit of international cooperation. States become socialised through regular involvement in multilateral relationships and policy coordination. Additionally, states may come to feel that they want to maintain a reputation of law-abiding behaviour in the international realm. Finally, domestic groups that support the principles and norms of the intergovernmental organisation with which they work may reinforce the custom of cooperation.

IGOs, as instruments for creating and sustaining international interdependence and cooperation, have made the world more interconnected. To this end, governments, nation-states, and societies are discovering that many problems and issues need to be addressed and redressed at the global and regional levels rather than at the national level. Thus, states have increasingly sought to work through IGOs to achieve cooperation on a variety of issues.

1.4.2 Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs)

Non-governmental organisations have a history dating back to at least 1839. According to Richard (2007), they were important in the anti-slavery movement and the movement for women's suffrage, and reached a peak during the World Disarmament Conference. However, the phrase "non-governmental organisation" only came into popular use with the establishment of the United Nations Organisation in 1945,
(Vakil, 1997). NGOs are difficult to define and classify. Apart from that, the term "non-governmental organisations" is not used consistently.

According to the UN, any private organisation independent of government control can be termed a non-governmental organisation, provided it is not for-profit, not criminal, and not simply an opposition political party. In a strict sense, the term refers to organisations that are not a part of a government and are not conventional for-profit businesses. In cases where NGOs are funded in whole or in part by governments, the non-governmental organisation maintains its non-governmental status by excluding government representatives from membership. In the United States, non-governmental organisations are typically nonprofit organisations. The term is usually applied only to organisations that pursue wider social aims with political aspects but are not openly political organisations, such as political parties.

One characteristic these diverse organisations share is that their non-profit status means short-term financial objectives do not hinder them. Accordingly, they can devote themselves to issues that span longer time horizons, such as climate change, malaria prevention, or a global ban on

landmines. Apart from non- governmental organisations, there are many alternative or overlapping terms in use, including: third sector organisation (TSO), non-profit organisation (NPO), voluntary organisation (VO), civil society organisation (CSO), grassroots organisation (GO), social movement organisation (SMO), private voluntary organisation (PVO), self-help organisation (SHO) and non-state actors (NSAs).

1.4.3 The Multinational Corporations(MNCS) and Transnational Corporations (TNCS)

Another group of non-state actors in the international system is called multinational corporations (MNCs). A corporation, according to Christopher (2013), is regarded as multinational when it is registered in more than one country or has operations in more than one country. Usually, it is a large corporation which both produces and sells goods or services in various countries. It can also be referred to as an international corporation. Traditionally, MNCs are companies with a particular national home base and subsidiaries around the world. A transnational corporation (TNC) differs from a traditional multinational corporation in that it does not identify with a single national home.

TNCs spread their operations across many countries, sustaining high levels of local responsiveness. An example of a TNC is Nestlé, which employs senior executives in many countries and tries to make decisions from a global perspective rather than from a single centralised headquarters. MNCs and TNCs are global actors, driven by self-interest, that conduct commercial activities for profit in more than one country. It is estimated that MNCs and TNCs control two-thirds of world trade. MNCs and TNCs, in the present dispensation of technological advancement, have leveraged technology, especially in communication, to become truly global in nature. With a corporate headquarters, they have sometimes been able to spread their tentacles worldwide. The production of their goods and services does not need to be done at the organisation's headquarters. Much of the impact of MNC and TNC activities is felt in international commerce. With enormous wealth, they have an immense impact on the global economy. They have become instruments of modernisation, fast spreading new goods and services across the globe. In addition, they are involved in establishing hospitals, schools, and other essential infrastructure in developing countries.

1.4.4 The Cross-National Organisations

There is a non-state group, which is involved in international relations or whose organisation is cross-national. Here, I have in mind multinational corporations (having foreign subsidiaries), companies with foreign

investments, religious organisations like the Catholic Church, associations like the International Political Science Association, political groups like the Palestine Liberation Organisation, and terrorists like the Che Guevara Internationalist Brigade. Like states, groups are integrated into authoritative structures and legal status. They may have a legal identity under domestic law (as does a corporation or church), or be extralegal under domestic law (as is the Palestine Liberation Organisation), or illegal (as are terrorist organisations). In any case, each group has internal laws or norms that establish its hierarchy and command structure and specify who can legally (by group law) represent and commit the group in international relations. The same analysis of the state as an actor applies to this group: the actions of group authorities follow a pattern set by the group hierarchy and policies.

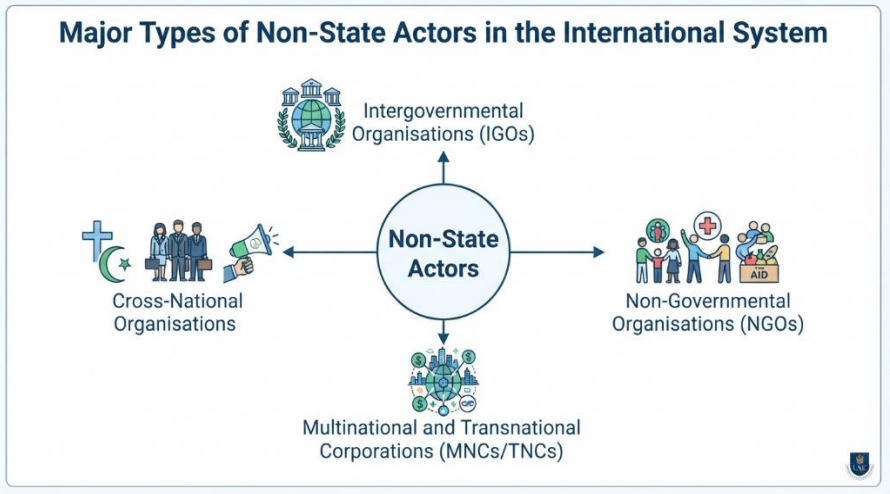

Figure 1.2: Major Types of Non-State Actors in the International System
Source: Google Gemini, Adapted by Abdulazeez A. Lawal, NOUN, 2026.

Self-Assessment Exercise 2

Choose the most appropriate answer for each question.

1. Which of the following is classified as an intergovernmental organisation (IGO)?
   A. Amnesty International
   B. The United Nations
   C. Nestlé
   D. The International Political Science Association
2. What is a key characteristic of a non-governmental organisation (NGO)?
   A. Sovereign states establish it to enforce international law.
   B. It operates independently of government control and is generally not-for-profit.
   C. It exists solely to maximise profits for shareholders.
   D. It exercises sovereign authority over a defined territory.

3. According to this section, multinational and transnational corporations contribute to the international system primarily by:
   A. Conducting diplomatic negotiations on behalf of states.
   B. Regulating the activities of intergovernmental organisations.
   C. Carrying out commercial activities and facilitating international trade across multiple countries.
   D. Exercising military authority beyond national borders.

1.5 States in the Westphalian system: challenges to state sovereignty by non-state actors

You have explored the different types of non-state actors and their roles in the international system. The next step is to examine how some of these actors affect one of the core principles of the international system: state sovereignty.

If a state has supreme authority within its territory, what happens when non-state actors begin to influence or challenge that authority? As you study this section, identify the different ways non-state actors challenge state sovereignty and consider how the international community responds to these challenges.

Our starting point is the observation that international relations do not involve states alone. There are a multitude of other agents or actors in world affairs, non-state actors who are not beholden to national governments but pursue their agendas privately and transnationally across international borders. Most non-state actors are peaceful in their interests and actions. Human rights groups, such as Amnesty International, and environmental groups, such as the World Wide Fund for Nature, are well-known examples. But some non-state actors behave more like criminal gangs — groups such as pirates, warlords, and terrorists.

These non-state actors typically prey on their victims in parts of the world where states are weak or use these weak states as bases of operation to attack more advanced countries. Indeed, in some parts of the world, states are so weak that they are often referred to as failed states. Failed states are states that lack the basic institutions and capacities of government — taxing, policing, upholding the rule of law, protecting property, providing public roads and services, and maintaining control over territory. To appreciate the significance of these non-state actors, we need to recall the historical rise and spread of the nation-state system. The rise of the nation-state is one of the great dramas of the modern world. In earlier units, we explored the history and implications of the growth and expansion of territorial states.

Two features are most important in characterising the Westphalian state system, and they operate at different levels of analysis. First, domestically, states are territorial sovereign entities. As the German sociologist Max Weber famously observed, states in a Westphalian system have 'a monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory' (Weber 1970). This is the classic understanding of the modern sovereign nation-state. The state, embodied in the national government, has the exclusive right and ability to exercise violence (physical force) within its own territorial boundaries. Groups in society have no right to act as private armies or police. The state controls violence and force within the society. Second, at the international level, national governments recognise and respect the supreme authority of states as sovereign political entities. Outside actors have no legitimate rights to act inside the territory of a sovereign state. Together, these features capture the essence of the Westphalian system. As the political theorist Chris Brown observes, '[t]he actors in the Westphalian System are sovereign states - territorial polities whose rulers acknowledge no equal at home, no superior abroad' (Brown 2002).

It is important to distinguish between the ideal norms of the Westphalian system and the actual capacities of states to live up to them. Throughout the modern era, many states claimed sovereign status but were unable to fully enforce a monopoly on the use of violence within their societies. Warlords — private authority figures who control their own local armies or militias - and criminal gangs have plagued nation-states across the centuries in both the West and the rest of the world. Certain national governments and their law-enforcement capabilities have often proved incapable of preventing sub-state groups from wielding violence. Organised criminal gangs are notorious in the United States and other countries. Among the most infamous of these groups is the American Mafia, an Italian-American criminal society that emerged in the late nineteenth century in New York City and spread to other major cities on the East Coast and elsewhere. In Italy, the Mafia has challenged the central state for more than a century. In Mexico, drug gangs have grown into multinational businesses, with private armies that smuggle contraband across the United States border, intimidating and killing politicians and law-enforcement officials. In Japan, the Yakuza are an infamous organised crime syndicate that operates across many sectors of the economy. In China, warlords and violent gangs operated along territorial borders and in waters off the coast for centuries. Governments have running battles with these gangs as they terrorise towns and cities, and use the threat of violence to extract payments from frightened businesses. States may claim the legitimate monopoly of violence, but they often struggle to make good on this claim.

Recall as well that sovereign states, in a legal sense, are equal as members of the Westphalian system. In practice, however, they differ vastly in their capabilities. In this sense, the norms of equality within the Westphalian system coexist with a system of power inequality and political hierarchy. Some powerful states have more ability to get their way than weak states. Similarly, the norm of sovereign non-intervention exists as an ideal but is often violated. States can claim supreme authority within their national borders, but outside actors, such as strong states or non-state transnational actors, may be able to intervene within states. States may be unable to enforce border controls and find their sovereign territorial boundaries transgressed by foreign actors. At the extreme, such transgressions would be the military intervention of a foreign power. A weak state may be unable to resist or defend against a more powerful invading state. But a state's sovereign control can fail in many less spectacular ways. Criminal groups, such as drug lords and gangs, can operate across borders without the national government being able to enforce laws or territorial boundaries. Challenges to the sovereign authority of states by criminal groups are not new. Pirates, organised crime, and drug cartels have operated for centuries in various parts of the world. States have always been under challenge by non-state groups. There are challenges to the state today, but there have been challenges in the past as well. As a result, states must constantly find new ways to build and reinforce state control. Below, we examine non-state challenges in greater detail and then consider international responses to them.

1.5.1 Challenges to Sovereign States

The traditional Westphalian idea of the international system — and the modern sovereign state itself - has been challenged in recent decades by a cluster of interrelated developments: non-state actors empowered by technological change, failed states, and the changing norms and expectations of the international community. First, advancements in technology have made it easier for private groups, such as criminal gangs and terrorist groups, to operate and inflict harm across national borders and at longer distances. The internet makes it easier to communicate and transfer funds across the world. These groups can build extended transnational organisational networks. Technologies of violence — nuclear, chemical, and biological - also provide capabilities that allow non-state actors to wield destructive force that, previously, only states could possess.

Second, the capacity of states to retain sovereign control over their national territories varies considerably. In the developing world, many nation-states are sovereign more in name than in reality. Afghanistan, Sudan, and Somalia are just some examples of states so weak that the central government has no effective control over major regions within the

formal territorial borders. These unruled territories provide attractive havens for non-state criminal and terrorist groups to operate, offering training sites and launching pads for transnational operations.

Third, countries around the world have become increasingly concerned with the activities of non- state actors, particularly the violent ambitions of terrorist groups with increasing global reach. The Westphalian system is under threat, and established sovereign states are searching for ways to respond. One response is to target criminal and terrorist groups with intelligence, special operations, covert actions, and counterinsurgency warfare.

We can look at three 'faces' of this non-state world: pirates, warlords, and terrorists with global reach.

- **Piracy**

Pirates have been among the most colourful and persistent challengers to state authority, threatening freedom on the world's oceans over the centuries. Pirates are non-state gangs who commit robbery or criminal violence on the high seas. The 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Seas defines piracy as acts of 'violence, detention, or depredation committed for private ends against the crew or passengers on board ships on international waterways. States care about piracy because the criminal activity itself can be costly, in human and economic terms, and these non-state groups pose a direct challenge to states and their monopoly on the use of force in and between states. Pirates operate outside the law, and also outside the Westphalian system of states. The upsurge in piracy in the contemporary world, most prominently off the coast of East Africa, provides disturbing evidence that at least some states have lost control of the seas.

- **Terrorism**

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, were a frightening introduction to the threats of violence in the twenty-first century. In one sense, the attacks were quite simple in their design. A group of twenty hijackers boarded four commercial airlines, took over the controls, and smashed them into buildings. The only weapons they brought were box-cutting knives. What made the attacks shocking is that the hijacked aeroplanes became weapons used to inflict great violence on New York City and the Pentagon.

Before 9/11, the security of the American homeland had really only been attacked in the modern era when Japanese bombers destroyed Pearl Harbour at the beginning of World War II. But September 11, 2001, seemed to shatter the view of America as relatively invulnerable. Violence could come from any direction and hit any place on earth. No

one is secure. Small groups of armed gangs, made up of people who hate and are prepared to die, can lash out at established soci-Anarchists: Late nineteenth-century Russian terrorists who used assassination by bomb as a means to incite popular revolt against the state. Terrorists employ violence against civilians to achieve a political purpose. Used as a tool of war and political struggle, terrorism may be employed by a group seeking to intimidate, coerce, or manipulate the sentiments of other people by inflicting violence on innocent civilians. This violence may simply be an expression of hatred and anger, but it can also be a calculated step aimed at altering an enemy's behaviour. The immediate victims may be innocent civilians, but the ultimate target is the foreign policy of a state. In this sense, terrorism, like piracy, is very old.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, terrorism primarily took the form of violence committed by nationalist movements resisting occupation and seeking independence from imperial or colonial domination. In late nineteenth-century Russia, opponents, or anarchists, of the Tsarist state used bombs to kill state officials with the hope of inciting popular revolt. Anarchist figures were responsible for the assassination of Russian Czar Alexander II in 1881 and American President William McKinley in 1901. Also in the late nineteenth century, Armenian nationalist groups seeking independence from the Ottoman Empire used violence against public officials. During the same period, Irish nationalists carried out attacks in England, foreshadowing the later activities of the Irish Republican Army, a group that, for decades, carried out assassinations and political violence in their protests against British presence in Northern Ireland. In the early twentieth century, Zionist groups fought the British in their efforts to establish a Jewish state in Palestine. At the same time, the Muslim Brotherhood, which recently won control of the Egyptian government and then lost it in a military coup, was formed in Egypt as a nationalist group resisting British control. A terrorist act by a Serbian nationalist was the proximate cause of World War I.

In the past, groups that were willing to use violence to express their hatred were limited in the damage they could inflict. In the future, this limitation may well drop away. It is now possible to imagine a small group of determined individuals camped out in a weak or war-torn Middle Eastern country or elsewhere planning a massively destructive event. It would not take many people, but it would require money, knowledge, and logistical capabilities. The group might find common cause with a few scientists or engineers who work for a government military agency with chemical, biological, or nuclear materials. Secretly, the government experts could find a way to transfer the materials to the non-state group. This could be possible because the state itself is weak or failing, has splintered into

competing factions, or has lost the capacity to enforce safety and security for its WMD stockpiles.

- **Organised crime groups or warlords**

Organised crime groups or warlords from another state could act as an intermediary between government experts and terrorists. Once in the hands of a terrorist group, it is only a matter of logistics and determination to get the weapon to its target. The target might be a harbour city in Europe or the United States, perhaps New York City. Like the hijackers of September 11, these terrorists may be willing to die for their cause. An exploded nuclear device would kill hundreds of thousands of people, perhaps even a million or more, depending on its explosive capacities. A chemical or biological weapon would kill people more slowly, contaminating and poisoning people on a large scale across a metropolitan area. This is what terrorism could look like with global reach. It is a future spectacle in which the forces of technology and anger threaten the world in new and ominous ways. In the wake of September 11, 2001, the United States government sounded the alarm about this new threat.

1.5.2 International Responses to Non-State Actors

In the years since September 11, 2001, the international community has debated how to respond to the danger of terrorism with global reach. Generally, there have been three types of responses: attacking terrorist targets, building capacity to deter terrorism, and long-term efforts to strengthen weak and failing states. As time has passed since the dramatic events of 2001, the focus has tended to be on the long-term necessity of strengthening weak states and promoting stable, sovereign states capable of enforcing the rule of law. The first type of response, attacking terrorist targets, involves direct military action. The United States invaded Afghanistan in late 2001 to overthrow the Taliban regime, which had been harbouring Al Qaeda, terrorists. In the meantime, the Bush administration articulated a doctrine of pre-emptive action that justified future efforts to go after terrorists before they could strike.

In 2003, the United States invaded Iraq and overthrew the regime of Saddam Hussein. In the run-up to this war, the Bush administration argued that the Iraqi government was actively acquiring WMD, including materials to build a nuclear bomb. From their perspective, the invasion was justified both as combating a direct and gathering threat and as part of the larger ‘war on terror’ where despotic and hostile regimes, such as Saddam's Iraq, could threaten the world by passing WMD to terrorist groups. It was the nexus of despotism, technology, and terrorism that the Bush administration focused on to justify war. More than a decade after the September 11, 2001 attacks, the United States has only recently left Iraq and is ending its war in Afghanistan, and the justification continues

to be the threat posed by terrorist groups that operate within and out of these states. A second type of response to the new terrorist threats has been a series of international conventions and agreements that are aimed at giving states the authority to track down groups seeking to transport WMD around the world. In the decades before 2001, the United Nations had already developed conventions and protocols that served as universal legal instruments for the prevention and suppression of terrorism. In 2005, the General Assembly adopted a series of conventions aimed at reducing the power and capabilities of these terrorist organisations and individuals, including the International Convention on the Suppression of Acts of Nuclear Terrorism and the Convention on the Physical Protection of Nuclear Material (Ward 2003). Altogether, the United Nations has adopted 16 international conventions and protocols aimed at establishing a legal framework for international cooperation to counter terrorism. In addition, the UN Security Council has passed resolutions, both before and after the 2001 attacks, calling upon member states to ratify these anti-terrorism agreements and urging states to implement domestic measures to fulfil their obligations.

In addition, outside of the UN framework, states have cooperated to expand monitoring and tighten up safety at nuclear sites. The United States and Russia, for example, have been cooperating for some years on securing Cold War-era nuclear facilities and weapons in the former Soviet Union. The United States has also worked with other states to develop a counter-terrorism regime worldwide. Major countries with intelligence agencies have also increased their cooperation in tracking terrorist suspects and organisations by sharing intelligence. As one expert on the financial networks behind terrorist groups reports: “Beneath the loud shout of unilateralism present from the creation of the Bush administration's invasion of Iraq, a veritable orchestra of institutions has continued to play sotto voce to build capacities against global terrorism” (Winer 2003).

Individual countries have also taken steps to increase security at harbours and border crossings. Even the borders between friendly countries, such as the United States and Canada, have been tightened, subjecting travellers to more demanding inspections and documentation checks. In all these ways, countries are seeking to gain more information on what terrorist groups are doing and prepare against their operations and attacks. In recent years, a third type of response has focused on the longer-term problem of promoting political stability and the rule of law in weak and failing states. In the view of the George W. Bush administration, terrorist groups were threats, in part, because states in troubled parts of the world were weak and failing, providing safe havens for these groups. Other autocratic states, such as Iraq under Saddam Hussein, were directly threatening the world if they acquired WMD or passed weapons or

materials on to terrorist groups. These new security worries grew the agenda for regime transformation. Threats by terrorists and hostile autocratic states could only be confronted by altering the character of these states.

The discussion has shown that although sovereign states remain the principal actors in the international system, they face a variety of challenges from non-state actors operating across national boundaries. The illustration below summarises some of the major challenges to state sovereignty highlighted in this section.

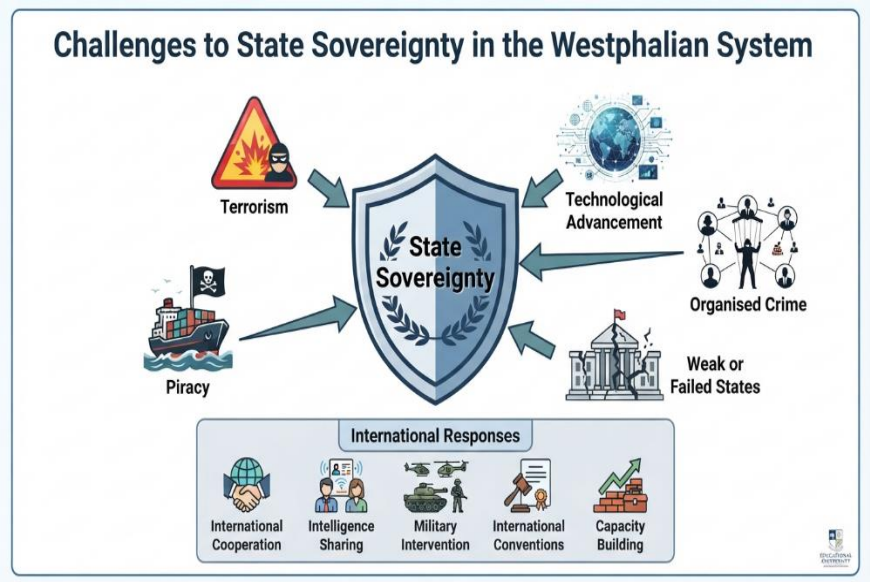

Figure 1.3: Challenges to State Sovereignty in the Westphalian System

Source: Google Gemini, Adapted by Abdulazeez A. Lawal, NOUN, 2026.

Self-Assessment Exercise 3

Choose the most appropriate answer for each question.

1. According to the unit, which of the following is a major challenge to state sovereignty within the Westphalian system?
   A. Increased diplomatic recognition
   B. The activities of non-state actors across national borders
   C. Expansion of territorial boundaries
   D. Greater cultural diversity within states
2. Which of the following is identified as one of the international responses to threats posed by non-state actors?
   A. Eliminating all international organisations
   B. Promoting international cooperation and strengthening weak states
   C. Suspending diplomatic relations with all neighbouring countries
   D. Replacing sovereign states with regional governments

3.	Why are weak or failed states considered a concern in the international system?
A.	They encourage the creation of additional sovereign states.
B.	They provide environments in which criminal and terrorist groups can operate more easily.
C.	They possess greater military power than developed states.
D.	They prevent international cooperation among sovereign states.

1.6 Summary

In this unit, you examined the actors in the international system, beginning with state actors and their roles as sovereign entities in international relations. You also explored the different categories of non-state actors, including intergovernmental organisations, non-governmental organisations, multinational and transnational corporations, and cross-national organisations. You considered their growing influence in global affairs. The unit further discussed how non-state actors challenge state sovereignty within the Westphalian system and highlighted the various responses adopted by the international community to address these challenges. As you reflect on this unit, consider how the interactions between state and non-state actors continue to shape the nature and dynamics of the contemporary international system.

1.7 References/Further Readings/Web Sources

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1.8 Possible Answers to Self-Assessment Exercises

Self-Assessment Exercise 1

1. C
2. B
3. A

Self-Assessment Exercise 2

1. B
2. B
3. C

Self-Assessment Exercise 3

1. B
2. B
3. B

Unit 2 Anarchy in the International System

Unit Structure

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2.1 Introduction

Welcome. In the previous unit, you explored the different actors that shape the international system and the roles they play in international relations. Building on that knowledge, this unit focuses on one of the fundamental features of the international system: anarchy. As you work through the unit, you will explore how the absence of a central global authority influences the behaviour of states and examine the different perspectives that explain this characteristic of the international system. By the end of the unit, you should have a clearer understanding of why anarchy remains a key concept in the study of international relations.

2.2 Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- define the concept of anarchy in the international system;
- describe the major schools of thought that explain the concept of anarchy; and
- analyse how anarchy influences the behaviour of states in the international system.

2.3 What is Anarchy?

Having established what you are expected to learn in this unit, let us begin by exploring the central concept on which the discussion is based. Understanding this concept will help you appreciate why it occupies a prominent place in the study of international relations.

When you hear the word *anarchy*, what first comes to mind? Does it always imply disorder, or can it have a different meaning in the context of international relations?
As you read this section, pay attention to how the concept of anarchy is explained and how it relates to the behaviour of states in the international system.

Literally, the word “anarchy”, according to *The Internet Encyclopedia of International Relations,* means "without a leader." The word combines the Greek prefix "an-" meaning without, with the Indo-European root *arkh,* meaning "begin" or "take the lead". It is adapted from the ancient Greek (ἀναρχία-anarchia) meaning "absence of a leader”. In common usage, “anarchy” has come to signify both the absence of a ruler and the disorder bound up with it. *The Cambridge English Dictionary* defines anarchy as “a situation in which there is no organisation and control, especially in society because there is no effective government." In an anarchical system, the basic motive of a state's behaviour is survival. To survive, states need to accumulate power in terms of actual power (military strength).

The term anarchy can have different meanings. However, we will only focus on one definition. Anarchy in the context of the international system implies that there are no higher authorities, and because many consider nation-states the primary actors in international relations, an anarchic world would be one in which no authority is higher than that of the state (Bull, 1995). The state exists as a sovereign over its people and territory, and it enjoys the ultimate power of complete self-determination. By taking into account Waltz’s structure of the international system, three elements define it: its “ordering principle,” “the character of the units” that compose it, and “the distribution of capabilities” between these units. For the neorealist, two of these elements never change. Neorealism considers the international system to be permanently anarchic because of the absence of a superior authority, and believes that all the units, or states, are “functionally alike” (Elman in Williams, 2008: 18).

To some extent, states retain the same rights, the principal one being the right to do as they wish, because no institution has the capacity or power to control their actions. Therefore, no order is established in this system, as all actors can do whatever they want, since nothing prevents them. Nonetheless, even though states have the same rights, it does not mean they have the same capabilities. The distribution of power in the international system is far from a “perfect equilibrium” (Walzer, 2006: 77). States have different powers, and the significance of these powers shifts from one to another. Capabilities are not constant in the system, only the gains and “losses of power” are (ibid). States exist in a hostile global environment because nothing can prevent a powerful state from

resorting to aggression, and a state's future is never certain, as its power can wane.

In a nutshell, in the field of international studies, anarchy is the concept that the world system is leaderless, with no universal sovereign or worldwide government. The anarchical condition, thus, exists because sovereign states, as the most important players in world politics, are autonomous and independent. Thus, in international politics, each state will presumably behave in accordance with its interests. States' behaviour in pursuing their own interests and their relations with other states respectively shape international politics.

Anarchy is widely accepted as the starting point for studies on the international system. While some political scientists use the term "anarchy" to signify a world in chaos, in disorder, or in conflict, others view it simply as a reflection of the order of the international system — independent states with no central authority above them. The concept of anarchy is the foundation of the realist school of thought in international relations. This makes it imperative for us to re-examine this school of thought in our effort to explicate the anarchical nature of the international system.

The discussion has explained the meaning of anarchy in the context of international relations and highlighted its key features. The figure below provides a simple overview of the concept and its relationship with state behaviour in the international system.



Figure 2.1: The Concept of Anarchy in the International System
Source: Google Gemini, Adapted by Abdulazeez A. Lawal, NOUN, 2026.

Self-Assessment Exercise 1

Choose the most appropriate answer for each question.

1. In the context of international relations, anarchy primarily refers to:
   A. A world characterised by constant violence and conflict.
   B. The absence of a central authority above sovereign states.
   C. The collapse of all national governments.
   D. The replacement of states by international organisations.
2. According to the unit, why do states place great emphasis on survival in an anarchic international system?
   A. Because international organisations guarantee their security.
   B. Because there is no higher global authority to protect them.
   C. Because all states possess equal military capabilities.
   D. Because states are required to surrender their sovereignty.
3. Which statement best reflects the concept of anarchy discussed in this section?
   A. States are subject to a single global government.
   B. States are autonomous and pursue their interests within a leaderless international system.
   C. States cannot cooperate under any circumstances.
   D. International law completely determines the behaviour of all states.

2.4 Supportive Schools of Thought about Anarchy

You have now explored what anarchy means in the context of the international system. The next step is to examine how different schools of thought interpret this concept and explain its influence on state behaviour.

Do all scholars agree that anarchy inevitably leads to conflict, or do they offer different explanations of how states behave under an anarchic international system?
As you read this section, compare the assumptions of the different schools of thought and identify how each explains the relationship between anarchy, power, security, and cooperation.

The realist school of thought asserts that states are the primary actors in international politics. Realists respond to the anarchic world system by adopting a "self-help" doctrine that presents states as entities that believe they can rely on no one but themselves for security (Elman, 2008: 15-27). The basic motive of a state’s behaviour is survival, which is seen in terms of competition, holding that the increased security of one state will necessarily lead to a decrease in security of others. Thus, states are constantly forced to take into account that others might have more power than they do or plan to gain more, and therefore must do the same. It is believed to be the basis of anarchy in the system.

According to the classic realist thinker Niccolò Machiavelli, the desire for more power in the international system is rooted in the flawed nature of humanity, which extends into the political world and leads states to continually struggle to increase their capabilities. Another traditional realist thinker, Hans Morgenthau, claimed: "international politics is a power struggle", elaborating that "the power struggle is universal in time and space" (Morgenthau, 1978: 4-15). The kernel of the realist belief is the conviction that power must be defined in military terms. It asserts that stronger military power will lead states to their ultimate goal of being hegemony. This means international anarchy arises from competition and conflict among states and undermines their willingness to cooperate, even when they share common interests. Thus, realists see no reason to believe that states can ever trust each other and must rely on themselves (the self-help doctrine) in the anarchic world system. In a nutshell, realists view ruthlessness as a consequence of the prevalent power struggle in the international system. Under this condition, daily life in the international system is always characterised by competition among states, with the possibility of war looming in the background. While classical realists such as Machiavelli and Morgenthau attributed power politics as the cause of anarchy, neorealists emphasise anarchy as the cause of the competition in the international system. This idea was first advanced by Kenneth Waltz in his neorealist text Man, the State and War and expanded on in his *Theory of International Politics*. For Waltz, the absence of a higher authority than states in the international system is the basis of anarchy. This means that states can rely only on themselves for their survival, requiring vigilance and constant preparation for conflict. In *Man, the State, and War,* Waltz describes anarchy as a condition of possibility or a "permissive" cause of war. He argues that anarchy breeds war because there is nothing to prevent it (Waltz, 1954).

Similarly, American political scientist John Herz argues that international anarchy ensures the centrality of the struggle for power even in the absence of aggression or similar factors. He emphasises that a state's interests and actions are determined by the anarchical structure of the international system itself (Donnelly, 2000: 12). This shows that the anarchical international system dictates that states put security as their main interest because other states tend to look for opportunities to take advantage of each other by any means, including military force.

The discussion has shown that different schools of thought provide varying explanations of the implications of anarchy for international relations. While they all recognise the absence of a central global authority, they differ in how they explain state behaviour and the prospects for cooperation. The figure below summarises the key perspectives discussed in this section.

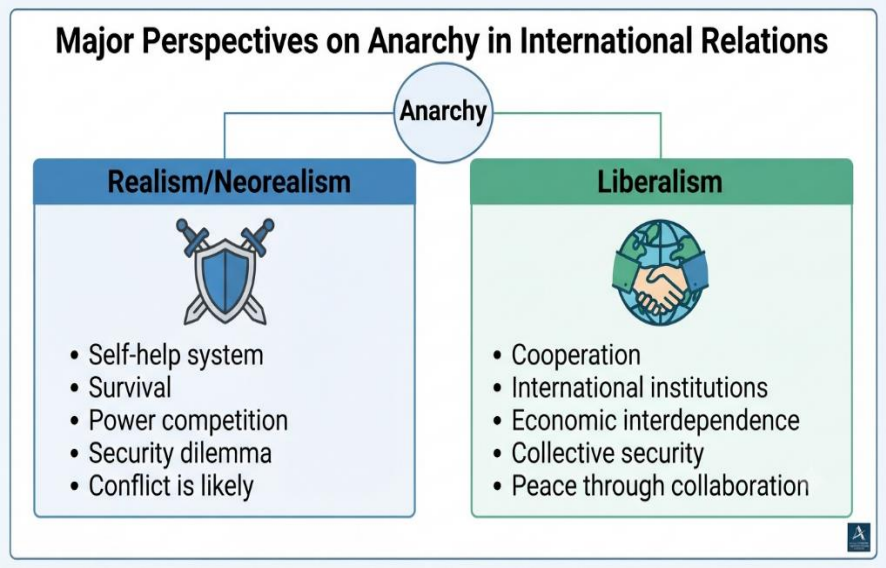

Figure 2.2: Major Perspectives on Anarchy in International Relations

Source: Google Gemini, Adapted by Abdulazeez A. Lawal, NOUN, 2026.

Self-Assessment Exercise 2

Choose the most appropriate answer for each question.

1. According to the realist school of thought, why do states rely on the principle of self-help?

A. International organisations provide complete protection for all states.

B. States cannot depend on a higher authority for their security.

C. Economic interdependence removes the need for national defence.

D. International law guarantees equal protection for all states.

2. Which school of thought argues that international institutions can reduce the effects of anarchy and encourage cooperation among states?

A. Classical Realism

B. Neorealism

C. Liberalism

D. Mercantilism

3. According to the discussion in this section, the major difference between realist and liberal perspectives is that:

A. Realists reject the existence of states.

B. Liberals deny that the international system is anarchic.

C. Realists emphasise power and self-help, whereas liberals believe cooperation and institutions can moderate the effects of anarchy.

D. Both schools believe military power is the only basis of international relations.

2.5 Anarchy in the International System

Having examined the major schools of thought on anarchy, let us now consider how these ideas apply to the international system in practice. This section explores how different perspectives explain the possibility of cooperation, peace, and conflict among states in an anarchic world.

If there is no central authority above sovereign states, is lasting cooperation between states possible, or will competition always prevail?

As you study this section, compare how the different schools of thought explain the relationship between anarchy, cooperation, and international peace.

Realism, in all its ramifications, has established that the international system is anarchic and that the self-interested state is the starting point for discussing its characteristics. This position has presented a gloomy picture of the system, with no hope of entrenching order. However, unlike realism, the liberalist school of thought argues that the anarchy in the international system can be regulated. It maintains that institutions can mitigate the constraining effects of anarchy on interstate cooperation. This is where the two schools of thought diverge.

While liberalists acknowledge that the international system is anarchic, they contend that this anarchy can be regulated with various tools. Most importantly: liberal democratisation, liberal economic interdependence and liberal institutionalism (Dunne, 1997:150). The basic liberal goal is a completely interdependent world. Liberalist thinking asserts that the existence and spread of free trade reduces the likelihood of conflict, as "economically interdependent states are reluctant to become involved in militarised disputes out of fear that conflict disrupts trade and foreign investment and thus induces costs on the opponents." Furthermore, they contend that it is not in any country's interest to go to war with a state with which its private economic agents maintain an extensive exchange of goods and capital (Russett, 2000).

Thus, for liberals, there is hope for world peace even under anarchy if states seek common ground, forming alliances and institutions to police the world's powers. Realists tend to believe that power is gained through war or the threat of military action, and assert that, under this power-grabbing system, there is no such thing as lasting alliances or peace. Liberal thought, however, attributes more power to common institutions than to states and takes into account the individual attributes of states, allowing for the idea of lasting alliances based on common beliefs and ideas. Rather than focusing solely on the military survival of states, liberals believe that shared ideas can lead states into interdependence, thereby removing allies from the list of threats to sovereignty. Liberalism

emphasises that the real power of states comes from shared ideas, such as religion, language, economy, and political systems, which lead states to form alliances and become interdependent.

Neoliberalism, the process of implementing liberalism's political ideology, also seeks to counter the neorealist claim that institutions are unable to "mitigate anarchy's constraining effects on inter-state cooperation". Rather, it argues that even in an anarchic system of states, cooperation can emerge through the building of norms, regimes, and institutions. Neoliberal thought contends that the "importance and effect" of the anarchic nature of the international system has been exaggerated. It asserts that nation-states are, or at least should be, concerned first and foremost with absolute gains rather than relative gains to other nation-states.

For example, realists and neorealists assume that security is a competitive and relative concept, whereby the "gain of security for any one state means the loss of security for another". However, neoliberals argue that states should recognise that security can be cooperative or collective, whereby states can increase their security without decreasing others' security, or that the security of other states can, in fact, be valuable to them. Therefore, while both neoliberal and neorealist theories consider the state and its interests as the central subject of analysis, the neoliberal argument is focused on what it perceives as the neorealists' underestimation of the varieties of cooperative behaviour possible within a decentralised international system.

The question that comes to mind is, why does war still occur if the international system promotes cooperation between states to ultimately create peace? There are many answers, but we will only focus on a few. First, it could be a problem related to the economy and its management at the national level. Liberals, especially advocates of commercial liberalism, will argue that by liberalising trade, conflicts are less likely to happen, as it offers a "degree of economic freedom" that cannot be neglected, because if governments are too involved in the "economic sphere," then conflicts will emerge in the political sphere (Navari, 2008). Second, it could be that international institutions are quite liberal and promote peace. Hence, in line with the democratic peace theory, non-liberal states are more likely to "distrust non-liberal states." Wars occur because, for instance, a liberal state will try to free another state from a non- democratic regime (ibid, 36-38). Third, it can be argued that globalisation is an integral part of our world system today, but this increased interconnectedness brings many problems that make it highly vulnerable to war and coercion (Ibid., 36). Therefore, we can see that even a system that seeks to enhance cooperation and peace is not without flaws that can lead to war.

The discussion has shown that although the international system is widely regarded as anarchic, scholars differ on whether anarchy inevitably leads to conflict or whether cooperation can emerge through institutions and shared interests. The figure below compares these contrasting perspectives.

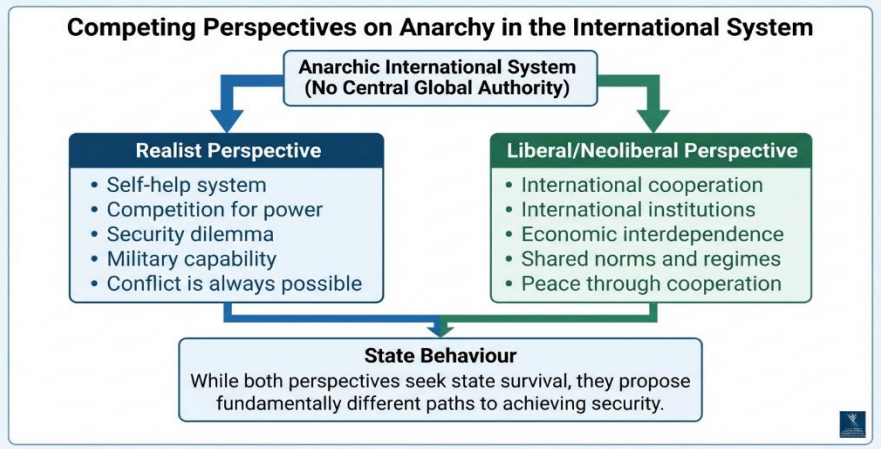

Figure 2.3: Competing Perspectives on Anarchy in the International System

Source: Google Gemini, Adapted by Abdulazeez A. Lawal, NOUN, 2026.

Self-Assessment Exercise 3

Choose the most appropriate answer for each question.

1. According to the liberal perspective, how can the effects of anarchy be reduced?
   - A. By increasing military competition among states.
   - B. Through international institutions, cooperation, and economic interdependence.
   - C. By eliminating state sovereignty.
   - D. Through permanent military alliances against all other states.
2. Neoliberalism argues that cooperation among states is possible because:
   - A. States no longer pursue national interests.
   - B. International institutions, norms, and regimes can encourage cooperation even in an anarchic system.
   - C. Military power is the only source of security.
   - D. All states possess equal capabilities.
3. Which statement best summarises the key difference between realist and liberal views of anarchy?
   - A. Realists deny the existence of anarchy, while liberals accept it.
   - B. Realists view anarchy as encouraging self-help and competition, whereas liberals believe cooperation and institutions can moderate its effects.

C. Both perspectives argue that war is impossible under anarchy.
D. Both perspectives believe international organisations replace sovereign states.

2.6 Summary

In this unit, you examined the concept of anarchy as a fundamental feature of the international system and explored its implications for the behaviour of sovereign states. You also considered the major schools of thought that explain anarchy, particularly the realist, neorealist, liberal, and neoliberal perspectives, and how they differ in their views on power, security, cooperation, and conflict. The unit further discussed how these perspectives explain the way the international system operates and the possibility of achieving cooperation despite the absence of a central global authority. As you reflect on this unit, consider how the different interpretations of anarchy continue to shape state behaviour and influence contemporary international relations.

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Waltz, K. (1954). *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

2.8 Possible Answers to Self-Assessment Exercises

Self-Assessment Exercise 1

1. B
2. B
3. B

Self-Assessment Exercise 2

1. B
2. C
3. C

Self-Assessment Exercise 3

1. B
2. B
3. B

Unit 3 Interest and the Use of Power in the International System

Unit Structure

3.1 Introduction
3.2 Learning Outcomes
3.3 What is National Interest?
3.4 Schools of Thought about National Interest
3.5 The Attributes of Power in the International System
3.6 Summary
3.7 References/Further Readings/Web Sources
3.8 Possible Answers to Self-Assessment Exercises

3.1 Introduction

Welcome back. In the previous unit, you explored the concept of anarchy and examined how it influences the behaviour of states in the international system. Building on that discussion, this unit focuses on another important concept in international relations: national interest and the use of power. As you progress through the unit, you will explore how national interests shape states' actions, examine different perspectives on national interest, and consider the role of power in achieving national objectives within the international system. By the end of the unit, you should have a clearer understanding of how national interest and power influence interactions among states.

3.2 Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- define the concept of national interest;
- describe the major schools of thought on national interest; and
- analyse the attributes of power and their influence in the international system.

3.3 What is National Interest?

Having established the focus of this unit, let us begin by exploring the concept of national interest. Understanding what motivates states in their interactions with other states provides an important foundation for appreciating their actions and decisions in the international system.

Why do states sometimes make decisions that appear to benefit their own interests, even when those decisions may not be popular with other countries?

As you read this section, identify what constitutes a state's national interest and consider how it influences the behaviour of states in the international system.

National interest has been defined in various ways by several scholars in the field of International Relations. According to Marchall (1994), "interest," on the other hand, equates interest with self-preservation, which is the underlying motivation of all human actions in relationship with other human beings. When linked to states' actions, national interest is a state's action in relation to other states, seeking to gain advantages or benefits for itself.

The national interest, often referred to in French as raison d'État (reason of the state), is a country's goals and ambitions, whether economic, military, or cultural. The practice of pursuing national interests was first seen under the direction of France's Chief Minister, Cardinal Richelieu, during the "Thirty Years' War," when it intervened on the Protestant side, despite its own Catholicism, to check the growing power of the Holy Roman Emperor. At Richelieu's prompting, Jean de Silhon defended the concept of raison d'état as a means between what conscience permits and what affairs require (Thuau, 1966). The notion of national interest soon came to dominate European politics, which became fiercely competitive in the centuries that followed. The first thinker of the realist school to advocate for the primacy of the national interest is usually considered to be Niccolò Machiavelli. Today, the concept of national interest has become an important one in international relations, where its pursuit is the foundation of the realist school.

In its barest meaning, "national interest" is made of goals and ambitions states seek to pursue, achieve and protect in the course of their interaction in the international system. The interest could be expressed in economic, military, or cultural terms. One other thing we need to mention is that all states have core or vital interests. The most readily seen and agreed upon are the basic survival interests of a state, which are composed of the protection of its territory, its people and its sovereignty. The behaviour of actors in the international system is rooted in the pursuit, protection and promotion of their interests. So if one can accurately identify an actor's interest in the system, one would be better able to understand that actor's behaviour vis-à-vis other actors in the system. Historical evidence has shown that states and their people have willingly risked much, including death and destruction, to protect and promote their interests. It is generally agreed that a nation's foreign policy geared towards pursuing the national interest is the foundation of the realist school of international relations. States now openly embark on wars purely out of national interest, using it as a justification for aggression against a fellow state in the international

system. To engage in war, rulers need to justify their aggressive action in this context.

The discussion has shown that national interest lies at the heart of a state's interactions within the international system. Although national interests may vary from one country to another, they generally revolve around a set of common objectives. The figure below summarises the key components of national interest discussed in this section.

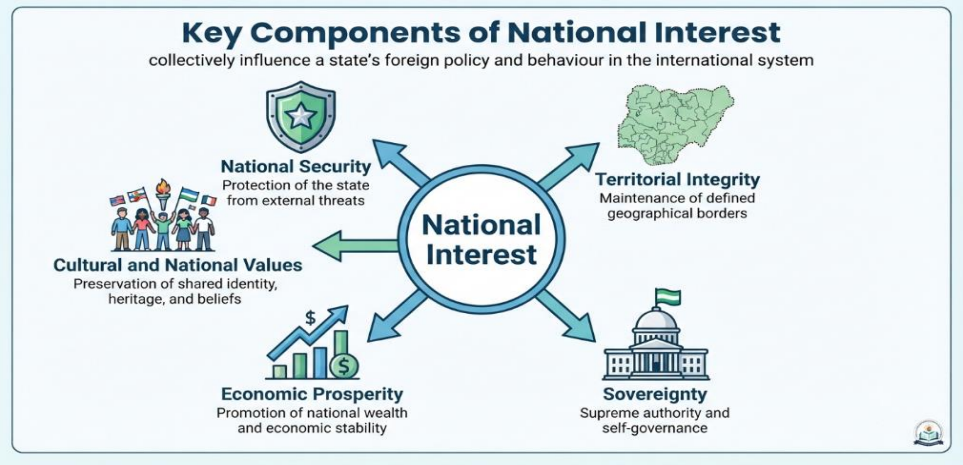

Figure 3.1: Key Components of National Interest
Source: Google Gemini, Adapted by Abdulazeez A. Lawal, NOUN, 2026.

Self-Assessment Exercise 1

Choose the most appropriate answer for each question.

1. In the context of international relations, **national interest** primarily refers to:
   A. The personal interests of political leaders.
   B. The goals and ambitions that a state seeks to pursue, achieve, and protect.
   C. The interests of international organisations.
   D. The cultural practices shared by neighbouring states.
2. According to the discussion, which of the following is generally regarded as a **core or vital national interest**?
   A. Expanding tourism
   B. Protecting a state's territory, people, and sovereignty
   C. Increasing cultural exchanges
   D. Promoting sporting activities
3. Why is an understanding of a state's national interest important in international relations?
   A. It helps explain the behaviour and foreign policy decisions of states.
   B. It determines the membership of international organisations.
   C. It guarantees peaceful relations among all states.
   D. It eliminates competition between states.

3.4 Schools of Thought about National Interest

You have now explored the meaning of national interest and its importance in shaping the behaviour of states. Let us now examine how different scholars and schools of thought explain what constitutes a state's national interest and who determines it.

Do you think a country's national interest is determined by its leaders, its citizens, or both?
As you read this section, compare the different perspectives on national interest and identify the factors that influence how states define and pursue their national interests.

Despite its wide range of uses in international relations, scholars hold different perceptions of the concept of national interest, depending on their understanding of the subject. The contention lies in determining what constitutes a state's national interest and who determines it. Is it the leadership or the citizens of a state that determines it? Hans Morgenthau (1998) states that the national interest of a nation lies in the aim of a nation-state to promote its image, prestige and respect at home and abroad. Chandra, cited in Ake (1982), has identified the national interest as including national security, political independence, territorial integrity, the promotion of the nation's economic well-being, and world peace. The kernel of the above perception is the ardent desire of nations to secure and maintain political independence and to protect their territory from incursions by other nations. Viewed from this perspective, the national interest encompasses the strategies states employ in international interactions to ensure their self-preservation. This clearly emphasises the threat to a nation within the international system. It also highlights the need to defend its interests within the anarchic international system, where dangers abound, and the nation's interests are always at risk.

It suffices to add that the onus of formatting and controlling the national interest of a state lies with the leadership of the state, while the citizens are directly affected either positively or negatively by the derivation of national interest. Other writers concede that national interest is subjectively interpreted by the government of the day. In this version, national interest is similar to the politician's rhetorical usage of the term, or say, the national interest is merely what the politician says the national interest is.

Furthermore, national interest, whether aspirational or operational, is divided into core/vital and peripheral/non-vital interests. Core or vital interests constitute the things which a country is willing to defend, such as territory, ideology (religious, political, economic), and its citizens. Peripheral or non-vital interests are those that a state is willing to

compromise. For example, in the German annexation of the Sudetenland in 1938 (to make part of Czechoslovakia) under the Munich Agreement, Czechoslovakia was willing to relinquish territory considered ethnically German to preserve its own integrity and sovereignty. In addition, sometimes, two or more states can have the same national.
interest. For example, two states might both want to foster peace and economic trade. And states with diametrically opposing national interests might try to resolve their differences through negotiation or even war.

The discussion has shown that although national interest is a central concept in international relations, scholars differ in their interpretations of what it entails and how it is determined. The figure below summarises the major perspectives and the different categories of national interest discussed in this section.

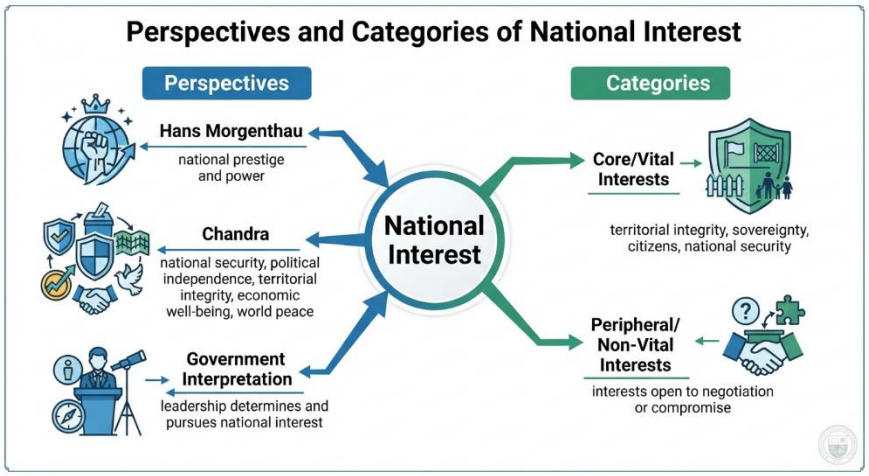

Figure 3.2: Perspectives and Categories of National Interest
Source: Google Gemini, Adapted by Abdulazeez A. Lawal, NOUN, 2026.

Self-Assessment Exercise 2

Choose the most appropriate answer for each question.

1. According to Hans Morgenthau, a nation's national interest is primarily concerned with:
   A. Expanding tourism and cultural exchanges.
   B. Promoting its image, prestige, and respect at home and abroad.
   C. Eliminating international organisations.
   D. Establishing a single world government.
2. Which of the following is an example of a **core or vital national interest**?
   A. Hosting international sporting events.
   B. Protecting territorial integrity and national sovereignty.
   C. Promoting international tourism.
   D. Expanding cultural festivals.
3. According to the discussion, who has the primary responsibility for formulating and controlling a state's national interest?
   A. International organisations.
   B. The leadership or government of the state.
   C. The media.
   D. Foreign governments.

3.5 The Attributes of Power in the International System

You have examined the concept of national interest and the different perspectives on its understanding. The next step is to explore the role of power, which enables states to pursue, protect, and promote their national interests in the international system.

If states pursue their national interests, what enables some states to influence the actions and decisions of others more effectively than others?

As you read this section, identify the different attributes of power and consider how they shape interactions among states within the international system.

Most interactions in the international system are political and have political ramifications; hence, all definitions of politics revolve around power. Thus, it is not surprising that power has become prominent in discussions about interactions among states in the international system from Thucydides to the present day. The long history of discussions about the role of power in politics, however, has not produced agreement on its definition and nature. Hans Morgenthau (1967) suggests that the concept of political power poses one of the most difficult and controversial problems in international studies. Kenneth N. Waltz (1986) notes that

while power is the key concept in international studies, its proper definition remains a matter of controversy.

There is, however, a consensus among scholars of international studies on the necessity to address the role of power in the politics among nations in the international system. The consensus starts with distinguishing the various attributes of power, such as power as control, power as influence, power as coercion, power as force, and so on. It is possible to identify a common element underlying the various attributes of power. Robert, H. Darl (1957) suggests that one basic notion that runs through all the attributes of power is the ability to cause an effect: that is to say, the ability of "A" to cause "B" to do what ordinarily "B" would not do. In the same vein, Arnold Wolfers (1962) contends that power is the ability to move others or make them do what one desires, as well as to restrain them from doing what one does not want them to do through threats or the infliction of deprivation. Hans Morgenthau sums it up as the ability to control others' minds and actions.

In the anarchical international system, states can only maintain their interest through the acquisition and use of power. In essence, a state can make its wishes prevail by force, despite antagonism from other nations. The assumption is that survival is the principal interest of every state, given that the most menacing threat it faces is foreign invasion and occupation by a stronger state. In such situations, states are well aware that only through power can they defend themselves and hope to survive. The anarchy of the international system requires that states constantly ensure that they have sufficient power to defend themselves and advance the material interests necessary for their survival. In other words, states are rational actors who would maximise the chances of their continued existence by constantly calculating the power available at their disposal; no state knows the quantity of power at the disposal of a fellow state, as well as what the fellow state intends to do with such power. This is the basic assertion of the realist school of thought, which views the international arena as a dangerous and uncertain place to exist in.

Thus, discussions about the character of the international system have an overriding emphasis on anarchy and the use of power. The conduct of politics in the international system is effective only when backed by the use of power or the threat of it, without regard to questions of right or justice. It presupposes a situation in which, irrespective of the right or wrong of a case, a nation may obtain what it wants and other nations may just have to accept what they must. This explicitly defines the actions of the United States of America in the Gulf crisis from 1990 to 1991. The United States got what it wanted, and Iraq had to accept what it must.

The power of nation-states can be measured from different perspectives. John Stroessinger (1962), in his work The Might of Nations: World Politics in Our Time, suggests that the power of nations can be measured or evaluated either through a subtle psychological-effects approach or in relational terms. Based on this relation, power exists between one nation and another when the two are knitted together unequally. For example, in the relationship between Nigeria and the Niger Republic, it is obvious that, given Nigeria's large population, the size of its army, and its stronger economy, when put side by side with the Niger Republic, an unequal power dynamic marks the relationship between the two.

From the psychological point of view, a nation's power status may depend, to a considerable extent, on what other nations in the international system feel about its power or what such a nation projects about its power in the international system. In this case, Nigeria can be seen as a regional power in West Africa. It cannot be ignored in the affairs of the African continent, since it has always put itself at the forefront. From a psychological perspective, it can be argued that every nation is presumed to be powerful. The real difference in the powers of nations lies in the degree of power exercised by one nation in relation to another.

To sum up, it is imperative to point out that the issue of power, expressed in terms of military power in the international system, has been overemphasised by scholars in international relations. Consequently, the role of nonmilitary forms of power, such as economic statecraft, has been grossly underestimated. It is instructive to note that there are many powers at the disposal of actors in the international system that have nothing to do with force, yet they bring considerable rewards in the pursuit of nations' goals in the so-called anarchic international system.
The discussion has shown that power is a central concept in international relations and can take different forms. While military capability is often emphasised, other forms of power also influence how states pursue their national interests. The figure below summarises the major attributes of power discussed in this section.

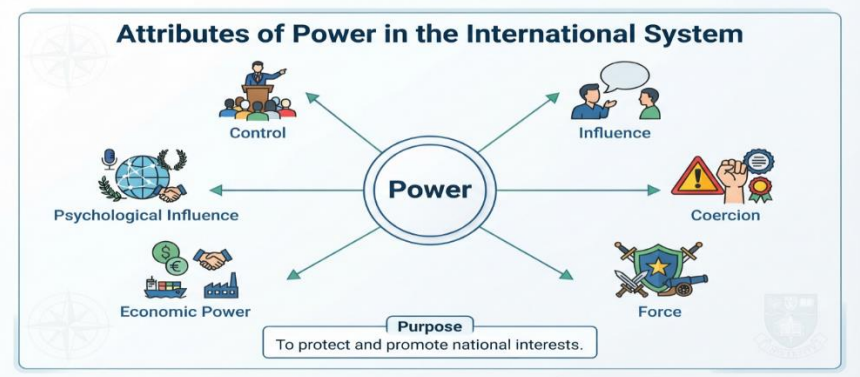

Figure 3.3: Attributes of Power in the International System
Source: Google Gemini, Adapted by Abdulazeez A. Lawal, NOUN, 2026.

Self-Assessment Exercise 3

Choose the most appropriate answer for each question.

1. According to the discussion, why is power considered important in the international system?
   A. It eliminates competition among states.
   B. It enables states to protect and promote their national interests.
   C. It guarantees equal influence for all states.
   D. It replaces diplomacy in international relations.
2. Which of the following is identified as an attribute of power in the unit?
   A. Influence
   B. Isolation
   C. Neutrality
   D. Dependency
3. According to the unit, which form of power has often been underestimated despite contributing significantly to the achievement of national goals?
   A. Military power
   B. Economic statecraft
   C. Territorial expansion
   D. Population growth

3.6 Summary

In this unit, you examined the concept of national interest and its significance in shaping states' behaviour within the international system. You explored different perspectives on the national interest, including scholars' views on what constitutes a state's national interest and who is responsible for determining it. The unit also discussed the concept and attributes of power, highlighting its role in enabling states to protect and promote their national interests in an anarchic international system. In addition, you considered that while military power remains important, non-military forms of power, such as economic statecraft, also contribute significantly to achieving national goals. As you reflect on this unit, consider how national interest and the different forms of power continue to influence the decisions and relationships of states in contemporary international relations.

3.7 References/Further Readings/Web Sources

Thuau, E. (1966). *Raison d'État et pensée politique à l'époque de Richelieu*. Paris: Armand Colin.

Waltz, K. N. (2000). ‘‘Globalisation and American Power.’’ *National Interest.* Spring, Issue 59.

3.8 Possible Answers to Self-Assessment Exercises

Self-Assessment Exercise 1

1. B
2. B
3. A

Self-Assessment Exercise 2

1. B
2. B
3. B

Self-Assessment Exercise 3

1. B
2. A
3. B

Unit 4 Polarity in the International System

Unit Structure

4.1 Introduction
4.2 Learning Outcomes
4.3 The Multipolar System
4.4 The Bi-Polar System
4.5 The Uni-Polar System
4.6 Summary
4.7 References/Further Readings/Web Sources
4.8 Possible Answers to Self-Assessment Exercises

4.1 Introduction

In the previous unit, you examined how national interest and power influence the behaviour of states in the international system. Building on that discussion, this unit explores how power is distributed among states and how this distribution shapes the structure of the international system. As you progress through the unit, you will examine the three major patterns of polarity: multipolarity, bipolarity, and unipolarity, and consider their implications for international relations. By the end of the unit, you should have a clearer understanding of how different distributions of power influence global politics.

4.2 Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- identify the different forms of polarity in the international system;
- describe the characteristics of multipolar, bipolar, and unipolar systems; and
- analyse how different patterns of polarity influence the international system.

4.3 The Multipolar System

Having introduced the concept of polarity, let us now examine one of its major forms. Understanding the multipolar system will help you appreciate how power can be distributed among several influential states within the international system.

How might international relations differ when power is shared among several influential states rather than concentrated in one or two?

As you read this section, identify the characteristics of a multipolar system and consider how the distribution of power influences cooperation, alliances, and international decision-making.

Multipolarity in international politics refers to a distribution of power in which more than two nation-states have roughly equal military, cultural, and economic influence within the world system. This system tends to have many shifting alliances until one of two things happens. Either a balance of power is struck, and neither side wants to attack the other, or one side attacks the other because it either fears the potential of the new alliance or believes it can defeat the other. One of the major implications of a multipolar international system is that international decisions will often be made for strategic reasons to maintain the balance of power rather than for ideological or historical reasons. The 'Concert of Europe,' a period from the end of the Napoleonic Wars to the Crimean War, was an example of peaceful multipolarity. The international system during World War I, World War II, and the Thirty Years' War is also an example of multipolarity.

In addition, multipolarity can be used to describe the relationship among the three Great Powers of the Cold War: the People's Republic of China, the Soviet Union, and the United States. The Cold War also witnessed the Sino-Soviet split and ended with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. The Cold War era also had the Non-Aligned Movement as another power. For this reason, one can argue that depicting the Cold War as a purely bipolar system rather than a multipolar one oversimplifies the much more complex reality. The international system in the nineteenth century can be described as multipolar, with power being shared among several influential actors.

Today, to buttress the claim that the world has been basically multipolar, even during the Cold War era, two main assumptions are held. One camp holds that the USA and USSR in the Cold War were, in fact, superpowers, but argues that, due to complex economic interdependencies on the international scale and the creation of a global village, the concept of a single state or group of states gaining enough power to claim superpower status is unrealistic. The rival view is that throughout the Cold War, neither the USA nor the USSR was a superpower, but was actually dependent on the smaller states in their spheres of influence. While the US has a great deal of economic clout and has influenced the culture of many nations, its dependence on foreign investors and reliance on foreign trade have created a mutual economic dependency between developed and developing nations.

According to those who believe the world is multipolar, this interdependency means that the US cannot be called a superpower as it is not self-sufficient and relies on the global community to sustain its people's quality of life. These interdependencies also apply to diplomacy. Considering the complex state of world affairs and the military might of some developing nations, it has become increasingly difficult to pursue foreign policy without support from other nations. The diplomatic and economic factors that bind the global village together have created a state in which no nation or union can dominate the others.

The discussion has shown that a multipolar system is characterised by several influential states with relatively comparable levels of power. The illustration below summarises the main features and examples of a multipolar international system.

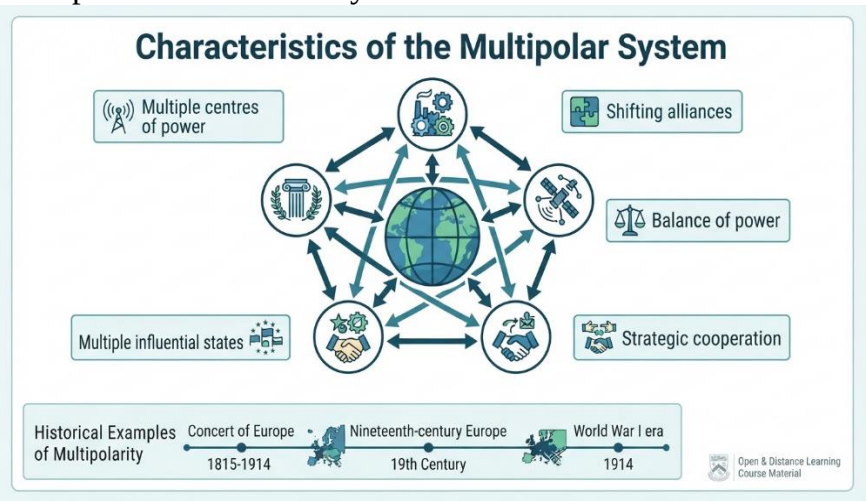

Figure 4.1: Characteristics of the Multipolar System
Source: Google Gemini, Adapted by Abdulazeez A. Lawal, NOUN, 2026.

Self-Assessment Exercise 1

Choose the most appropriate answer for each question.

1. A multipolar system is characterised by:
   A. One dominant state.
   B. Two dominant states.
   C. More than two states possessing relatively comparable influence.
   D. The absence of sovereign states.
2. One major characteristic of a multipolar system is:
   A. Permanent military rule.
   B. Shifting alliances among states.
   C. Elimination of diplomacy.
   D. A single global government.
3. Which historical period is presented in this section as an example of multipolarity?
   A. The Concert of Europe.
   B. The League of Nations.
   C. The United Nations era.
   D. The Gulf War.

4.4 The Bi-Polar System

You have explored how power is distributed in a multipolar system. Let us now examine another pattern of power distribution in which influence is concentrated in two dominant states or blocs.

What advantages or challenges might arise when two major powers dominate the international system?
As you read this section, identify the characteristics of a bipolar system and consider how alliances and rivalries shape international relations.
Bipolarity in international politics refers to a distribution of power in which two states hold the majority of economic, military, and cultural influence at the international or regional level. The two major powers dominating the system either remain alone or lead opposing coalitions, maintaining spheres of influence. For example, in the Cold War, most Western and democratic states would fall under the influence of the USA, while most Communist states would fall under the influence of the USSR. After this, the two powers will normally manoeuvre to secure support for the unclaimed areas. The dichotomy between the United States and the Soviet Union during the peak of the Cold War, and between Great Britain and France during the colonial era, exemplifies a bipolar system.

The bipolar system can be said to extend to much larger systems, such as alliances or organisations, which would not be considered nation- states, but would still have power concentrated in two primary groups. In both World Wars, much of the world, and especially Europe, the United States and Japan had been divided into two respective spheres - one case being the Axis and Allies of World War II (1939-1945) - and the division of power between the Central Powers and Allied Powers during World War I (1914-1918).

In the bipolar system, alliances tend to be long-term and based on relatively permanent, not shifting, interests; states do not move from one alliance to another just to outbalance the other alliance's power. The relations within alliances are hierarchical, but there is often tension as well. Bipolar system collapses because of one of the following reasons: either other states arise from the dependence on one of the states, or superpowers and a multipolar system is created, or one of the two poles collapses, which often leads to the creation of a unipolar system.

The discussion has highlighted that a bipolar system is centred on two dominant powers that influence international politics through alliances and spheres of influence. The figure below summarises the key characteristics of this polarity pattern.

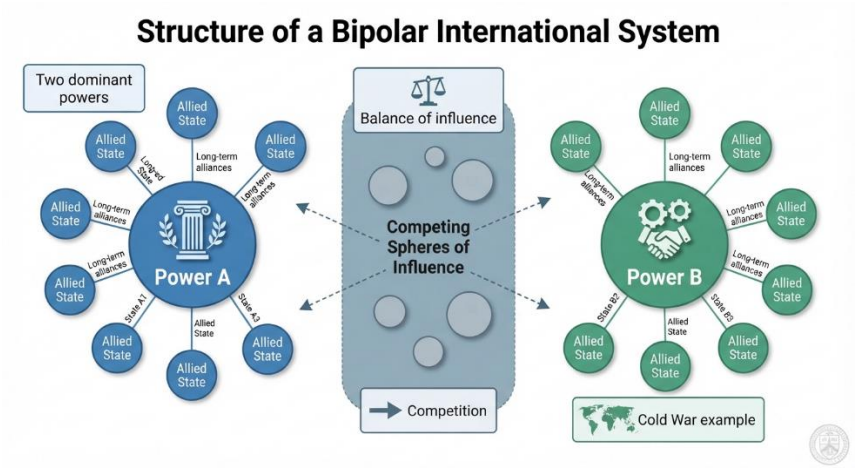

Figure 4.2: Structure of a Bipolar International System
Source: Google Gemini, Adapted by Abdulazeez A. Lawal, NOUN, 2026.

Self-Assessment Exercise 2

Choose the most appropriate answer for each question.

1. A bipolar system is characterised by:
   A. One dominant power.
   B. Two dominant powers.
   C. Several equally powerful states.
   D. No dominant powers.
2. During the Cold War, the two principal powers were:
   A. China and Japan.
   B. France and Britain.
   C. The United States and the Soviet Union.
   D. Germany and Italy.
3. According to the unit, alliances in a bipolar system are generally:
   A. Temporary and frequently changing.
   B. Long-term and relatively stable.
   C. Non-existent.
   D. Controlled by international organisations.

4.5 The Uni-Polar System

Having examined multipolar and bipolar systems, let us now consider the final pattern of polarity. This section explores how the international system operates when one state possesses significantly greater influence than all others.

Can a single dominant power maintain stability in the international system, or will other states eventually challenge its position?

As you read this section, identify the characteristics of a unipolar system and consider both its strengths and its limitations.

Unipolarity in international politics refers to a distribution of power in which a single state holds most of the cultural, economic, and military influence. This is also called a hegemony or hyperpower. In the unipolar system, the world is dominated by a single actor, and the relationships are hierarchical. Although one state is a hegemon, it does not mean that it has absolute control over everything. The power of the hegemon remains relative, and its economic, political, or social power does not translate into the ability to control all parts of the world, as seen in Vietnam or in the recent Iraq war.

Certain characteristics are endemic in a unipolar system. Nuno P. Monteiro, an Assistant Professor of Political Science at Yale University, argues that, first, unipolarity is an interstate system and not an empire. Monteiro (2011), who cites Robert Jervis of Columbia University to support his claim, argues that "unipolarity implies the existence of many juridically equal non-states, something that an empire denies" (Jervis, 2009: 188-231). Monteiro illustrates this point further through Daniel Nexon and Thomas Wright, who state that "in empires, inter-societal divide-and-rule practices replace interstate balance-of- power dynamics (Nexon and Wright 2007: 253–271).

Second, Unipolarity is anarchical. Anarchy results from the incomplete preponderance of power of the unipole. Citing Kenneth Waltz, Monteiro (2011) argues that a great power cannot "exert a positive control everywhere in the world" (Waltz, 1964: 881–909). Therefore, relatively weaker countries have the freedom to pursue policy preferences independent of the unipole. The power-projection limitation of the unipole is a distinguishing characteristic of unipolar and hegemonic systems. And thirdly, unipolar systems possess only one great power and face no competition. If a competitor emerges, the international system is no longer unipolar. Kenneth Waltz maintains that the United States is the only "pole" to possess global interests.

William Wohlforth (2012) believes unipolarity is peaceful because it "favours the absence of war among great powers and comparatively low levels of competition for prestige or security for two reasons: first, the leading state's power advantage removes the problem of hegemonic rivalry from world politics, and reduces the salience and stakes of balance of power politics among the major states." This idea is based on hegemonic stability theory and balance of power theory. Hegemonic stability theory stipulates that "powerful states foster international orders that are stable until differential growth in power produces a dissatisfied state with the capability to challenge the dominant state for leadership. The clearer and larger the concentration of power in the leading state, the more peaceful the international order associated with it will be." Balance of power theory stipulates that, as long as the international system remains

unipolar, it creates peace. “Therefore, one pole is best, and security competition among the great powers should be minimal.” Unipolarity generates few incentives for security and prestige competition among great powers (Wohlforth, 2012:5-23).

The problem with a unipolar system is that there are always states that do not accept the hegemon and will challenge it. For instance, since the end of the Cold War, some theorists have used the term hegemon to describe the United States. However, other realist theorists such as John Mearsheimer argue that the United States is not a global hegemon, since it cannot impose dominance over the whole world and because in the modern world, states depend on foreign investors, resources from other countries, foreign trade, and this creates an economic interdependency between states. Also, other states such as Japan and China, as well as the European Union, are increasingly regarded as emerging superpowers. In addition, many states do not accept American hegemony, and this causes conflicts and hostility between them and the USA. For example, Russia, as a former superpower, does not like the idea of the USA being the only superpower. Also, France and now the EU have been challenging the USA's power for many decades. Many other states do not even like the fact that the USA intervenes in many global issues.

Nevertheless, the post-Cold War international system remains unipolar, with the USA as the hegemon for various reasons. First, the United States’ defence spending is “close to half of all global military expenditures. Second, it has a blue-water navy superior to all others combined. Third, it has a chance at a splendid nuclear first strike over its erstwhile foe, Russia. Fourth, it has a defence research and development budget that is 80 per cent of the total defence expenditures of its most obvious future competitor, China. Lastly, it has unmatched global power-projection capabilities” (Monteiro, 2011: 9–40).

The United States is the only country in the early 21st century that possesses the ability to project military power on a global scale, providing full command of the global commons. With no viable challenger on the horizon in the short term, the current distribution of power overwhelmingly favours the United States, making the world.
order it set out to construct in 1945, more robust. So, even if it is argued that the USA is not a world hegemon, it has been acting as one. The question that remains for scholars of international studies is how long this “unipolar moment” will last.

The discussion has shown that the predominance of a single state with extensive global influence characterises a unipolar system. The illustration below summarises the major features of a unipolar international system and the concept of hegemony.

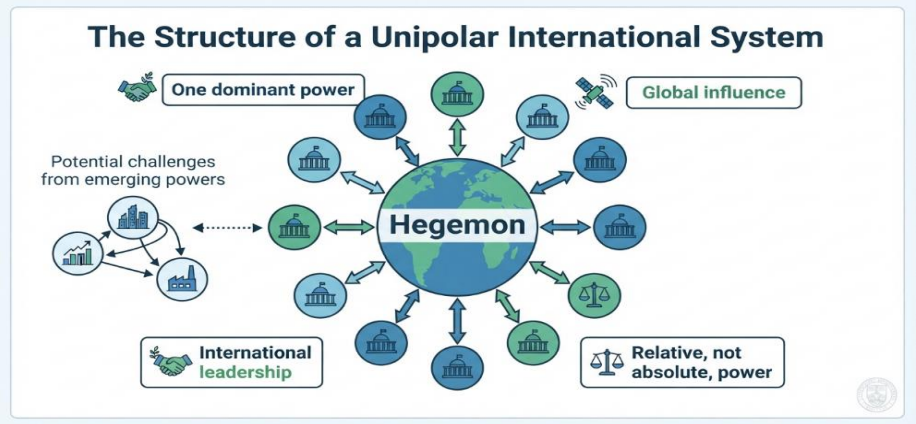

Figure 4.3: The Structure of a Unipolar International System
Source: Google Gemini, Adapted by Abdulazeez A. Lawal, NOUN, 2026.

Self-Assessment Exercise 3

Choose the most appropriate answer for each question.

1. In a unipolar system, power is primarily concentrated in:
   A. Two competing states.
   B. Several equally powerful states.
   C. One dominant state.
   D. Regional organisations.
2. According to the unit, a dominant state in a unipolar system is also referred to as a:
   A. Confederation.
   B. Hegemon.
   C. Protectorate.
   D. Coalition.
3. Which country does the unit identify as the post-Cold War hegemon?
   A. China.
   B. Russia.
   C. The United States of America.
   D. Germany.

4.6 Summary

In this unit, you examined the concept of polarity and its significance in explaining how power is distributed within the international system. You explored the characteristics of the three major forms of polarity: multipolarity, bipolarity, and unipolarity, and considered historical examples that illustrate each pattern of power distribution. The unit also highlighted how the structure of the international system influences alliances, competition, cooperation, and the exercise of power among states. As you reflect on this unit, consider how changes in the global distribution of power continue to shape international relations and the evolving nature of the international system.

4.7 References/Further Readings/Web Sources

Jervis, R. (2009). "Unipolarity: A Structural Perspective". *World Politics,* Volume 61, Issue 01, pp. 188-213.

Nexon, D. & Thomas, W. (2007). "What's at Stake in the American Empire Debate". *American Political Science Review,* Vol. 101, No 2, pp. 252-271.

Wohlforth, W. (2012). "The Stability of a Unipolar World". *International Security,* Vol. 24, No. 1, pp. 5-41

4.8 Possible Answers to Self-Assessment Exercises

Self-Assessment Exercise 1

1. C
2. B
3. A

Self-Assessment Exercise 2

1. B
2. C
3. B

Self-Assessment Exercise 3

1. C
2. B
3. C

MODULE 4 ISSUES IN THE CONTEMPORARY INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM

Unit 1 Impact of Globalisation
Unit 2 Collective Security
Unit 3 The Threat of Terrorism
Unit 4 The Future of the International System

Unit 1 Impact of globalisation

Unit Structure

1.1 Introduction
1.2 Learning Outcomes
1.3 The Forerunner of Globalisation: The Industrial Revolution in Britain
  1.3.1 Why did this revolution in the techniques and organisation of manufacture occur first in Britain?
  1.3.2 Capitalism and imperialism
  1.3.3 Problems of Social Progress in the Developed and Underdeveloped World
  1.3.4 The Export of Capital
  1.3.5 Lenin's Basic Arguments
  1.3.6 Backward Capitalism in the Third World
  1.3.7 Origins and Aims of ·Dependency Theory
1.4 The Rise of the Global Phenomenon
  1.4.1 What is Globalisation?
  1.4.2 The Major Aspects of Globalisation
  1.4.3 Impact of Globalisation on the International System
  1.4.4 A Critique of Globalisation
1.5 Regional Integration
1.6 Summary
1.7 References/Further Readings/Web Sources
1.8 Possible Answers to Self-Assessment Exercises

1.1 Introduction

Welcome back. In the previous module, you explored key concepts explaining how the international system is organised and how states interact within it. This module shifts attention to some of the major contemporary issues that continue to shape international relations. The first of these is globalisation, a phenomenon that has transformed the way states, economies, societies, and people interact across national boundaries. As you study this unit, consider how increasing

interconnectedness has created new opportunities and challenges for states in today's international system.

1.2 Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- describe the historical developments that laid the foundation for globalisation;
- explain the concept, major aspects, and impacts of globalisation on the international system; and
- analyse the role of regional integration in promoting cooperation and addressing the opportunities and challenges associated with globalisation.

1.3 The Forerunner of Globalisation: The Industrial Revolution in Britain

To understand how globalisation emerged, it is useful to begin with the historical developments that transformed production, trade, and international economic relations. This section examines the Industrial Revolution in Britain and explains why it is widely regarded as the foundation of modern globalisation.

Why do you think the Industrial Revolution in Britain is considered the starting point for the global interconnectedness we experience today?

As you study this section, pay attention to how industrialisation influenced production, trade, capital movement, and relationships among nations.

In the eighteenth century, a series of inventions transformed the manufacture of cotton in England and gave rise to a new mode of production —the factory system. During these years, other branches of industry effected comparable advances, and all these, together and mutually reinforcing one another, made possible further gains on an ever-widening front. The abundance and variety of these innovations almost defy compilation, but they may be subsumed under three principles: the substitution of machines—rapid, regular, precise, tireless—for human skill and effort; the substitution of inanimate for animate sources of power, in particular, the introduction of engines for converting heat into work, thereby opening to man a new and almost unlimited supply of energy; the use of new and far more abundant raw materials, in particular, the substitution of mineral for vegetable or animal sub- stances. These improvements constitute the Industrial Revolution. They yielded an

unprecedented increase in man's productivity and, with it, a substantial rise in income per head.

Moreover, this rapid growth was self-sustaining. Where previously, an amelioration of the conditions of existence, hence of survival, and an increase in economic opportunity had always been followed by a rise in population that eventually consumed the gains achieved, now for the first time in history, both the economy and knowledge were growing fast enough to generate a continuing flow of investment and technological innovation. This flow lifted the ceiling of Malthus's positive checks beyond visible limits.

The Industrial Revolution thereby opened a new age of promise. It also transformed the balance of political power within nations, between nations, and between civilisations; revolutionised the social order; and changed man's way of thinking as much as his way of doing. In 1760, Britain imported some 2 million pounds of raw cotton to feed an industry dispersed for the most part through the countryside of Lancashire and existing in conjunction with the linen manufacture, which supplied it with the tough warp yarn it had not yet learned to produce. All of its work was done by hand, usually (excluding dyeing and finishing) in the homes of the workers, occasionally in the small shops of the master weavers. A generation later, in 1787, the consumption of raw cotton was up to 22 million pounds; the cotton manufacture was second only to wool in numbers employed and value of product; most of the fibre consumed was being cleaned, carded, and spun on machines, some driven by water in large mills, some by hand in smaller shops or even in cottages.

A half-century later, consumption had increased to 366 million pounds; the cotton manufacture was the most important in the kingdom in value of product, capital invested, and numbers employed; almost all of its employees, except for the still large number of hand-loom weavers, worked in mills under factory discipline. The price of yarn had fallen to perhaps one twentieth of what it had been, and the cheapest Hindu labour could not compete in either quality or quantity with Lancashire's mules and throstles. British cotton goods sold everywhere in the world: exports, a third larger than home consumption, were worth four times those of woollens and worsteds. The cotton mill was the symbol of Britain's industrial greatness; the cotton hand, of her greatest social problem—the rise of an industrial proletariat.

1.3.1 Why did this revolution in the techniques and organisation of manufacture occur first in Britain?

A few theoretical considerations may help us to organise the argument. Technological change is never automatic. It means the displacement of established methods, damage to vested interests, and often serious human dislocations. Under the circumstances, there usually must be a combination of considerations to call forth such a departure and make it possible: (1) a need or opportunity for improvement due to inadequacy, present or potential, of prevailing techniques; and (2) a degree of superiority such that the new methods pay sufficiently to warrant the costs of the change. Implicit in the latter is the assumption that, however much the users of older, less efficient methods may attempt to survive by compressing the costs of the human factors of production, entrepreneurial or labour, the new techniques are enough of an improvement to enable progressive producers to outprice and displace them. The technological changes that we denote as the 'Industrial Revolution' implied a far more drastic break with the past than anything since the invention of the wheel. On the entrepreneurial side, they necessitated a sharp redistribution of investment and a concomitant revision of the concept of risk. Where before, almost all the costs of manufacture had been variable—raw materials and labour primarily—more and more would now have to be sunk in fixed plant. The flexibility of the older system had been very advantageous to the entrepreneur: in times of depression, he was able to halt production at little cost, resuming work only when and insofar as conditions made it advisable. Now he was to be a prisoner of his investment, a situation that many of the traditional merchant-manufacturers found very hard, even impossible, to accept.

1.3.2 Capitalism and imperialism

Marx, Engels, and Lenin, who considered capitalism historically far more advanced than any earlier civilisation, logically welcomed its extension to non-capitalist regions, whether by means of direct colonialism (India) or 'neo-colonialism' (Russia). Soon, however, a strange paradox emerged in Marxist thought. Imperialism, conceived by Marx and Engels as the historical process of capitalist expansion into the non-capitalist worlds and regarded as progressive precisely because they analysed capitalism as the most advanced social system hitherto achieved, came to be regarded as the characteristic of capitalism that nullified its previously progressive features. The tail wags the dog. It is now not the character of capitalism that determines the progressiveness (or otherwise) of imperialism, but the character of imperialism that determines the reactionary character of capitalism.

The shift was polemically accomplished for the world communist movement by Lenin in his Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism (1917). Lenin's essay reversed Marxist doctrine on the progressive character of imperialist expansion and, by an irresistible ideological process, erased from Marxism any trace of the view that capitalism could henceforth represent an instrument of social or economic advance, even in pre-capitalist societies. The historic mission of capitalism was declared ended.

1.3.3 Problems of Social Progress in the Developed and Underdeveloped World

In his work on imperialism, Lenin paid little attention to its effects on underdeveloped countries, as he was almost entirely concerned with its sources and repercussions in the advanced capitalist world. Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism was written in 1916 at the height of the First World War, when the working classes of Europe were slaughtering one another by the million in the name of patriotism; the Second International had split, major sectors of it abandoning the internationalist principles on which it had been founded and supporting the nationalist carnage. The major aim of Lenin's· argument was twofold: to explain the origins of the war and to account for the abandonment of internationalism by the majority of the working classes, who were following the opportunists in their support of the war. As we shall see, although his results were logically and analytically lamentable, Lenin did score Marxism's glittering propaganda success of the twentieth century, for the pamphlet was able to neatly explain both the causes of the war and the reasons for the opportunist, nationalist proletarian support for it by the same phenomenon: imperialism. But Lenin went even further. He tried to identify the sources of imperialism in an underlying transformation of the capitalist economies, leading to a new stage of capitalism, in his view, the final one. Indeed, Lenin frequently spoke of imperialism not simply as an aspect of capitalism but as· equivalent to monopoly capitalism. Current popular usage has tended to equate modern imperialism with the prevailing relationships of domination and exploitation between advanced capitalist and underdeveloped economies. This tendency was, in part, encouraged by Lenin's own emphasis on exporting capital to underdeveloped countries. This has led to a somewhat schizophrenic approach to the question on the left, such that one Marxist authority on imperialism, Tom Kemp, can produce a book on industrialisation in nineteenth-century Europe without mentioning imperialism, while another, Ernest Mandel, can write a book on the 'contradictions of imperialism without discussing the underdeveloped world.

1.3.4 The Export of Capital

The export of capital was central to Lenin's theory, both as a proof of the over-ripeness of capitalism and as a specific link between this phenomenon and the scramble for territories in the late nineteenth century. But it cannot be shown either that capital export was characteristic of a specific (later) stage of capitalism or that it was decisively connected with the scramble for territories. In principle, there is no reason to presume that the export of capital is the result of 'pressure' arising from the disappearance or reduction of profitable investment outlets in the metropolitan countries. It may just as well result from the development of preferable (or what were thought to be preferable) investment opportunities abroad. Indeed, foreign investment may be the direct result of booming domestic investment, and vice versa. Booming domestic investment not only creates profits that can be invested both at home and abroad, but also, more importantly, stimulates (and incorporates into new equipment) technological advances that, in turn, open new opportunities for investment abroad. An outstanding instance of this process may be seen in the development of railways.

1.3.5 Lenin's Basic Arguments

The crux of Lenin's argument was that the advent of monopoly capitalism marked the end of those progressive aspects of capitalism that Marx and Engels had proclaimed in the Communist Manifesto; Capitalism had become 'overripe'. His thesis was that competition under industrial capitalism inevitably led to the concentration of capital and thus to monopoly: trade combines, cartels, etc., whose control of the domestic markets of the advanced capitalist world was so firm that it was a vigorous competitive incentive to innovate. had vanished, the living standards of the masses could no longer rise, and above all, the expanded profits of the monopolists would eventually find all profitable spheres of domestic investment exhausted. This latter circumstance, in turn, led to rivalry for profitable outlets abroad, generating a struggle for the division and redivision of the world among the leading imperialist states. Stagnation at home meant imperialism abroad. The international wave of imperialist expansion in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was thus to be explained by the stage of monopoly capitalism that had been reached in the major industrial countries, which forced them into territorial rivalry for investment outlets, especially in the colonial or semi-colonial countries, where labour, land, and raw materials were cheap and capital scarce.

1.3.6 Backward Capitalism in the Third World

In Imperialism, Lenin scarcely touched on the effects of imperialism in the exploited colonies and semi-colonies. He alluded to the fact that these countries had been drawn into international capitalist intercourse. With the construction of railways, he noted, 'the elementary conditions for industrial development have been created'. This, he held, had created conditions permitting the export of capital to these countries. More positively, he also wrote: 'The export ·of capital greatly affects and accelerates the development of capitalism in those countries to which it is exported. While, therefore, the export of capital may tend to a certain extent to arrest development in the countries exporting capital, it can only do so by expanding and deepening the further development of capitalism throughout the world.'91 Further on, he noted that 'in the colonies, capitalism is only beginning to develop' (p. 116), and that it 'is growing with the greatest rapidity in the colonies and in overseas countries' (p 118). And: 'Thanks to her colonies, Great Britain has increased the length of "her" railways 'by 100,000 kilometres, four times as much as Germany' (p.119). This revealing remark referred to the growth of railways in the British Empire between 1890 and 1913, which Lenin contrasted with Germany's domestic expansion. His point was to show that in 'sharing out this "booty", an exceptionally large part goes to countries which, as far as the development of productive forces is concerned, do not always stand at the top of the list' (p. 118).

1.3.7 Origins and Aims of ·Dependency Theory

Dependency theory arose in Latin America in the 1960s in response to the alleged failure of both continental development and of theories attempting to explain it. More specifically, it was a reaction to what was considered the failure of import-substitution industrialisation during the immediately preceding period. But the inadequacy of existing theory and the propriety of formulating a new approach were grounded above all in the desire to elaborate adequate policies for national development. Its major contentions may be summarised as follows:

1. Dependency is 'the conditioning structure of poverty' (Dos Santos).
2. Poverty is the result of (or is equated with) underdevelopment.
3. 'Development and underdevelopment are partial, interdependent structures of one global system.' The development of the core countries is the consequence of the underdevelopment of the periphery; the underdevelopment of the periphery is the consequence of the development of the core (Dos Santos).
4. In other words, the global system is such that the development of part of the system occurs at the expense of other parts.

5. Underdevelopment is not simply non-development, but is a unique type of socio-economic structure brought about by the integration of the society concerned into the sphere of the advanced capitalist countries (Frank).
6. Thus: 'Dependence is a conditioning situation in which the development and expansion of others conditions the economies of one group of countries. A relationship of interdependence between two or more economies or between such economies and the world trading system becomes a dependent relationship when some countries can expand through self-impulsion while others, being in a dependent position, can only expand as a reflection of the expansion of the dominant countries, which may have positive or negative effects on their immediate development.'

The discussion has shown that the Industrial Revolution introduced technological innovations and economic changes that transformed production and expanded international trade. These developments laid the foundation for the modern process of globalisation. The illustration below summarises the progression from industrialisation to global interconnectedness.

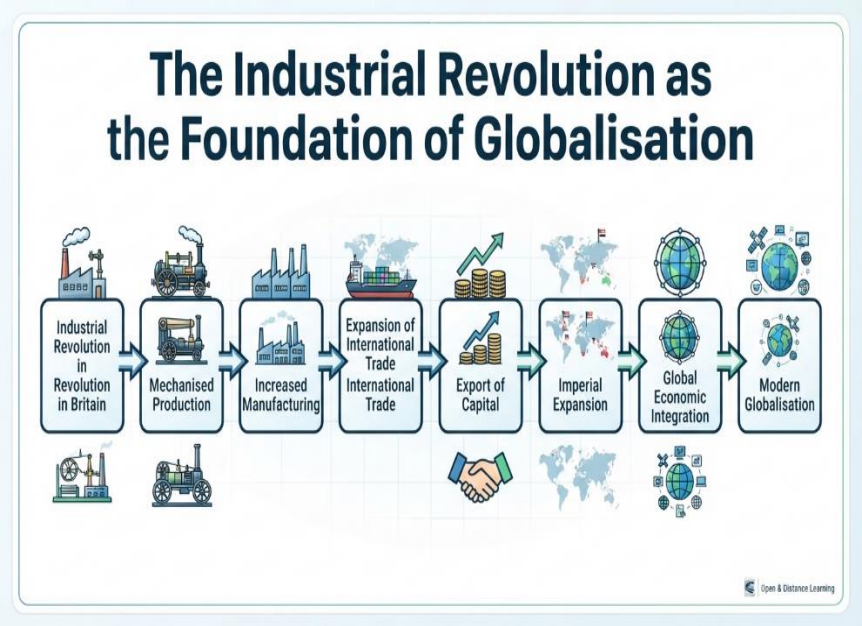

Figure 1.1: The Industrial Revolution as the Foundation of Globalisation
Source: Google Gemini, Adapted by Abdulazeez A. Lawal, NOUN, 2026.

Self-Assessment Exercise 1

Choose the most appropriate answer for each question.

1. According to the unit, which historical development is regarded as the forerunner of globalisation?
   A. The French Revolution
   B. The Industrial Revolution in Britain
   C. The First World War
   D. The Cold War
2. Which of the following was identified as one of the major characteristics of the Industrial Revolution?
   A. Replacement of machines with manual labour
   B. Increased dependence on animal power
   C. Substitution of machines for human skill and effort
   D. Decline in technological innovation
3. According to the discussion, dependency theory primarily emerged in response to:
   A. The success of colonial rule
   B. The failure of development strategies in Latin America
   C. The establishment of the United Nations
   D. The collapse of the Soviet Union

1.4 The Rise of the Global Phenomenon

Having examined the historical developments that paved the way for globalisation, you will now explore how globalisation emerged as a defining feature of the contemporary international system. This section explains the concept of globalisation, its major dimensions, its impact on international relations, and the different perspectives surrounding it.

How has increasing global interconnectedness changed the way states, organisations, and individuals interact in today's world?
As you study this section, identify the major features of globalisation and consider both its opportunities and the challenges it presents to the international system.

For about 200 years (1650-1850), the governments of the great European powers sought to protect their economies from what they viewed as the disruptive effects of international trade. By the latter part of the nineteenth century, these same governments were cooperating economically, trading more intensively with each other, investing in each other’s economies, and connecting European economies to those in other parts of the world. The result was an increase in global prosperity, yet one in which some countries and groups within them benefited far more than others. But this first great age of globalisation, or the process and attainment of heightened cross-border contacts through the movement of trade, money, and people, was brought to an end by the onset of World War I, between

1914 and 1918. After World War I, the leading states tried to resuscitate the global economy, and made some progress toward that end during the mid-to-late 1920s. But the era of global economic recovery was aborted by what came to be known as the Great Depression of 1929-33, during which there was a sharp, sustained contraction of economic activity, and a corresponding increase in unemployment. With major countries like the United States, Britain, France, and Germany closing their national markets to international competitors in a failed attempt to ward off the Great Depression, international economic relations became a source of conflict that eventually contributed to the outbreak of World War II.

Today, the world economy is in the midst of a second great era of globalisation, as goods, capital, technology, and ideas move relatively freely across international borders. The modern era of globalisation has contributed to unprecedented levels of economic wealth but has also raised serious problems of inequality in developing nations and older industrial countries like the United States and Britain. The rapid movement of money across borders has contributed to financial crises such as the one that began in 2008. Some observers believe that globalisation has an unstoppable momentum, making a return to a world of economic conflict and depression highly unlikely. Others see a prosperous yet troubled world economy whose political foundations are sufficiently fragile to warrant concern about a global economic collapse.

1.4.1 What is Globalisation?

According to the *Online Etymology Dictionary, the term "globalisation" is derived from the word "globalise,"* which refers to the emergence of an international network of social and economic systems. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary Online,* one of the earliest known uses of the term as a noun appeared in a 1930 publication titled *Towards New Education*, where the concept denoted a holistic view of human experience in education. By the 1960s, this concept became a vogue term among economists and other social scientists. It then reached the mainstream press in the second half of the 1980s. Since its inception, the concept of globalisation has inspired competing definitions and interpretations, due to its complexity. Research projects, articles, and discussions have been written on the subject, focusing on varied implications and repercussions in ordering the world. In 2000, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) identified four basic aspects of globalisation: trade and transactions; capital and investment movements; migration and movement of people; and the dissemination of knowledge.

Roland Robertson, a professor of Sociology at the University of Aberdeen and an early writer in the field, defined globalisation in 1992 as the compression of the world and the intensification of the consciousness of

the world as a whole (Robertson, 1992). Sociologists Martin Albrow and Elizabeth King define globalisation as "... all those processes by which the peoples of the world are incorporated into a single world society" (Albrow, and King 1990: 8). In *The Consequences of Modernity*, Anthony Giddens uses the following definition: "Globalisation can thus be defined as the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa" (Giddens, 1991: 64). Economist Takis Fotopoulos defined "economic globalisation" as the opening and deregulation of commodity, capital and labour markets that led toward present neoliberal globalisation. He used "political globalisation" to refer to the emergence of a transnational elite and a phasing out of the nation-state. "Cultural globalisation", he contended, refers to the worldwide homogenisation of culture. Other usages included "ideological globalisation", "technological globalisation", and "social globalisation" (Fotopoulos, 2001: 7).

For our working definition in this unit, globalisation refers to the process of international integration that arises from the exchange of worldviews, products, ideas, and other cultural aspects. It can also be taken to refer to the spatiotemporal processes of change that underpin a transformation in the organisation of human affairs by linking and expanding human activity across regions and continents. Advances in transportation and telecommunications infrastructure, including the rise of the telegraph and its posterity, the Internet, are major factors in globalisation, generating further interdependence of economic and cultural activities.

1.4.2 The Major Aspects of Globalisation

There are distinct aspects of globalisation that you need to know to have a deeper understanding of this course. The four of these include economic globalisation, global health, the global natural environment, and the global workforce.

- **Economic Globalisation**

Economic globalisation is defined as the increasing economic interdependence of national economies worldwide, driven by rapid cross-border flows of goods, services, technology and capital. The growth of international trade is a fundamental component of economic globalisation. With improvements in transportation and communication, international businesses have grown rapidly. International business arrangements have led to the formation of multinational corporations (MNCs), companies that have a worldwide approach to markets and production and operate in more than one country. In addition, the establishment of free trade areas has become an essential feature of modern governments' approach to handling preferential trade

arrangements with foreign and multinational entities. These include free ports endowed with favourable customs regulations. Free-trade agreements have established the elimination of tariffs and import quotas among states. With such agreements, people are also free to move between the countries, as an open-border policy usually accompanies them. The European Union, for example, a confederation of 27 member states, provides both a free trade area and an open border policy.

- **Global Health**

Global health is the health of populations in a global context, transcending the perspectives and concerns of individual nations. Health problems that transcend national borders or have a global political and economic impact are emphasised. Global health has been defined as 'the area of study, research and practice that places a priority on improving health and achieving equity in health for all people worldwide' (Koplan, 2009: 373). Thus, global health is about the worldwide improvement of health, the reduction of disparities, and the protection against global threats that disregard national borders. The application of these principles to the domain of mental health is called Global Mental Health (Patel V, 2010: 303). The major international health agency is the World Health Organisation (WHO). Other important agencies that impact global health activities include the United Nations International Children's Education Fund (UNICEF), the World Food Programme (WFP), the United Nations University International Institute for Global Health, and the World Bank. A major initiative for improved global health is the United Nations Millennium Declaration and the globally endorsed Millennium Development Goals.

According to Daulaire (1999), international travel has helped to spread some of the deadliest infectious diseases. Modern modes of transportation allow more people and products to travel around the world at a faster pace, but they also open the airways to the transcontinental movement of infectious disease vectors. One example of this occurring is HIV/AIDS. Another is the Chagas disease. Due to immigration, approximately 500,000 people in the United States are believed to be infected with Chagas disease. In 2006, the tuberculosis (TB) rate among foreign-born persons in the United States was 9.5 times that of US - born persons. Starting in Asia, the Black Death killed at least one-third of Europe's population in the 14th century. Even worse devastation was inflicted on the American supercontinent by European arrivals. About ninety per cent of the populations of the civilisations of the "New World", such as the Aztec, Maya, and Inca, were killed by smallpox brought by European colonisers.

- **Global Natural Environment**

The natural environment, according to Johnson et al. (1997), encompasses all living and non-living things occurring naturally on Earth or some region thereof. It is an environment that encompasses the interaction of all living species. The natural environment is contrasted with the built environment, which comprises areas and components strongly influenced by humans. It is difficult to find truly natural environments; naturalness often varies along a continuum, from 100% natural at one extreme to 0% at the other. More precisely, we can consider the different aspects or components of an environment and see that their degrees of naturalness are not uniform; instead, there exists a coupled human–environment system. Human challenges to the natural environment, such as climate change, cross-boundary water and air pollution, overfishing of the ocean, and the spread of invasive species, require at least transnational and often global solutions. Since factories in developing countries have increased global output and faced less stringent environmental regulation, pollution has risen substantially, with impacts on water resources worldwide. The northern hemisphere has been the leading producer of carbon monoxide and sulfur oxides. Global traffic, production, and consumption are increasing air pollutant levels worldwide.

The distances between continents and countries are shrinking due to globalisation, prompting both developed and developing countries to find new ways to solve problems on a global rather than a regional scale. Agencies like the United Nations have now become the global regulators of pollution. The United Nations has taken action to monitor and reduce atmospheric pollutants through the Kyoto Protocol, the UN Clean Air Initiative, and studies on air pollution and public policy.

- **Global Workforce**

Global workforce refers to the international labour pool, including workers employed by multinational companies and connected through a global network of production, as well as immigrant and transient migrant workers, telecommuting workers, and those in contingent and other precarious employment. The global workforce, or international labour pool, reflects a new international division of labour that has been emerging since the late 1970s in the wake of other forces of globalisation. Torres (2013) maintains that, as of 2012, the global labour pool consisted of approximately 3 billion workers, with around 200 million unemployed. The global economic factors driving the rise of MNCs – namely, the cross-border movement of goods, services, technology and capital – are changing the way we think about labour and the structure of today's workforce. With roots in the social processes surrounding the shift to standardisation and industrialisation, post-industrial society in the Western world has been accompanied by industrialisation in other parts of the world, particularly in Asia. As industrialisation takes hold

worldwide and more cultures move away from traditional practices regarding work and labour, how employers think about and utilise labour is changing.

The global workforce is competitive and has been described as "a war for talent" (Marin, Dalia and Thierry Verdier 2012: 209–223). This competitiveness is due in part to communication technologies that help companies attain multinational status. Communication technologies also allow companies to find workers without limiting their search to a local area, a process known as global labour arbitrage. An example of this war for talent is the appointment of foreign executives to headquarters positions in local organisations.

Furthermore, many countries have some form of guest worker programme with policies similar to those in the US, permitting US employers to sponsor non-US citizens as labourers for approximately 3 years, after which they are deported if they have not yet obtained a green card. As of 2009, over 1,000,000 guest workers resided in the USA. The largest programme, the H-1B Visa, has 650,000 workers, and the second-largest, the L-1 Visa, has 350,000. Many other United States visas exist for guest workers, including the H-2A Visa, which allows farmers to bring in an unlimited number of agricultural guest workers.

1.4.3 Impact of Globalisation on the International System

Globalisation has significantly changed the international system, making states far more interdependent and interconnected. The world is not a place of many different, separate countries anymore; these states form almost one entity at many different levels. Problems no longer arise in isolation; thus, their solutions must be found through collective action rather than individual responses. Intergovernmental Organisations, private-sector bodies and global financial institutions – the products of globalisation – have taken a leading role in addressing these global problems and in creating a global market and economy. And by doing so, they have simultaneously brought states closer together and made them more dependent on each other.

A very important role in the process of globalisation has been played by the various Intergovernmental Organisations (IGOs), which have gained increasing significance as globalisation has progressed. Before the age of globalisation, states were looking to promote their national interests. They were more concerned with their own safety than with global security, and they were looking for ways to address problems at the domestic rather than the international level. Nowadays, since the issues and difficulties that states face are becoming more global than national, states can no longer protect their citizens and address problems on their own unless

they take collective action with other states through IGOs. By joining these, states give up some of their sovereignty to a body governed by the collective will and decisions of its member-states. This joined sovereignty had not existed before, and it sometimes implies that states must comply with the majority decision and are thus affected by it, even though it might not have been the initial desire of the individual state. Sometimes they have to sacrifice their national interests to pursue international rather than national aims. This demonstrates how NATO member states are dependent on one another and affected by events in other member states.

1.4.4 A Critique of Globalisation

Reactions to the processes contributing to globalisation have varied widely. Philosophical differences regarding the costs and benefits of globalisation have given rise to a broad range of ideologies and social movements. Proponents of economic growth, expansion and development, in general, view globalisation as desirable and necessary to the well-being of human society. In general, corporate businesses, particularly in finance, view globalisation as a positive force. Many economists cite statistics that seem to support such a positive impact. In the words of Jeffrey Sachs, economic liberals and neoliberals generally argue that higher degrees of political and economic freedom in the form of free trade in the developed world are ends in themselves, producing higher levels of overall material wealth. Between them, globalisation is seen as the beneficial spread of liberty and capitalism (Sachs, 2005).

Jagdish Bhagwati, a former adviser to the UN on globalisation, holds that although there are obvious problems with overly rapid development, globalisation is a very positive force that lifts countries out of poverty by triggering a virtuous economic cycle associated with faster growth (Bhagwati, 2005). Economist Paul Krugman is another staunch supporter of globalisation and free trade, with a record of disagreeing with many critics of globalisation. He argues that many who pick holes with globalisation lack a basic understanding of comparative advantage and its importance in today's world.

However, antagonists view globalisation as detrimental to social well-being at the global or local level. This includes those who question either the social or the natural sustainability of long-term, continuous economic expansion; the social-structural inequality caused by these processes; and the colonial, imperialist, or hegemonic ethnocentrism, cultural assimilation, and cultural appropriation that underlie such processes (Sen, 1970). Other critiques of globalisation generally stem from discussions of the impact of such processes on the planet and the human costs they entail. They challenge directly traditional metrics, such as GDP, and a "multitude of interconnected fatal consequences such as social disintegration,

breakdown of democracy, more rapid and extensive deterioration of the environment, the spread of new diseases, increasing poverty and alienation" (Fritjof, 2002), which they claim are the unintended consequences of globalisation.

Criticisms of globalisation have arisen from church groups, national liberation factions, unionists, intellectuals, artists, protectionists, and anarchists, amongst others. Some critics argue that globalisation harms cultural diversity. As a dominant country's culture is introduced into a receiving country through globalisation, it can threaten the diversity of local culture. Some argue that globalisation may ultimately lead to Westernisation or Americanisation of culture, in which the dominant cultural concepts of economically and politically powerful Western countries spread, harming local cultures.

Other opponents of globalisation see the phenomenon as promoting corporatist interests (Lee, 2007). They also claim that the increasing autonomy and strength of corporate entities shape countries' political policies. They advocate global institutions and policies that they believe better address the moral claims of the poor and working classes, as well as environmental concerns. They also argue that unrestricted free trade benefits only those with more financial leverage (i.e. the rich) at the expense of the poor. The anti-globalisation groups are aware of the unequal power and respect among nations in international trade between developed and underdeveloped countries. They maintain that while free trade encourages globalisation among countries, some countries that advocate it turn to protectionism to shield their economies.
The discussion has shown that globalisation extends beyond international trade to include economic, political, social, technological, environmental, and cultural interactions across national borders. The illustration below highlights the major dimensions of globalisation and their interconnections.

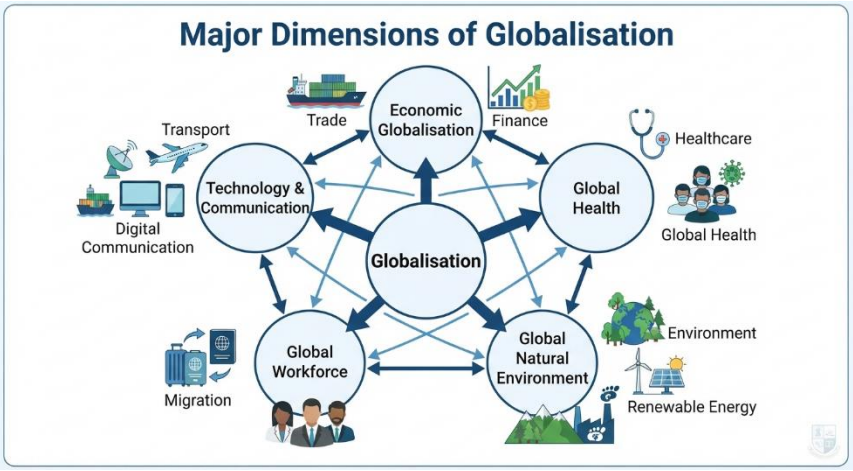

Figure 1.2: Major Dimensions of Globalisation
Source: Google Gemini, Adapted by Abdulazeez A. Lawal, NOUN, 2026.

Self-Assessment Exercise 2

Choose the most appropriate answer for each question.

1. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which of the following is one of the major aspects of globalisation?
   A. Space exploration
   B. Capital and investment movements
   C. Military alliances only
   D. Religious expansion
2. Which organisation is identified in the unit as the leading international agency responsible for global health?
   A. UNESCO
   B. World Trade Organisation (WTO)
   C. World Health Organisation (WHO)
   D. International Labour Organisation (ILO)
3. According to the unit, one major effect of globalisation on the international system is that:
   A. States have become completely independent of one another.
   B. International organisations have become less important.
   C. States have become more interconnected and interdependent.
   D. International trade has disappeared.

1.5 Regional Integration

Globalisation has encouraged countries to work more closely together in addressing shared economic and political interests. One important way this has occurred is through regional integration, where neighbouring states cooperate to promote trade, investment, and development. As you read this section, consider how regional organisations contribute to strengthening international cooperation.

Why might countries choose to cooperate through regional organisations instead of acting independently in today's globalised world?
As you study this section, identify the objectives of regional integration and the ways it supports economic cooperation within the international system.

The 1990s witnessed the rise of economic integration within the three major regions of international economic activity. The United States, Canada and Mexico forged the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) to oversee and regulate the continued integration of their neighbouring economies. The United States also sought to spread regional integration southward, initiating free trade agreements (FTAs) with Chile in 2003, Peru in 2006, and six Central American nations (the Dominican Republic, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, and Nicaragua)

in 2004. In 2012, the United States concluded free trade agreements with Colombia and Panama. European integration proceeded even more rapidly and deeply. The core states of the European Union not only consolidated a single integrated market for goods and services, but also surrendered national currencies in favour of the euro.

Economic integration in East Asia was strengthened with the creation of APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) in 1989 and the development of ASEAN plus Three (the ten members of the Association of South-East Asian Nations plus Japan, China and South Korea) during the late 1990s. In line with the geo-economic model's expectations, regional economic agreements rose sharply after the end of the Cold War. At the same time, global trade negotiations almost came to a standstill. The Uruguay Round of multilateral negotiations, which created the WTO in 1995, took nearly ten years to complete. The Doha Development Round began in 2001 and took 13 years to produce, culminating in an initial and rather modest agreement to reduce global trade barriers at Bali, Indonesia, in December 2013. Competition for natural resources among leading states has been intensifying as well. One could plausibly view the post-Cold War wars in Iraq in 1990-91 and 2002-3 as efforts by the United States to assure that the Gulf oil reserves remain in friendly hands (Clark 2005). As its economy has grown rapidly, China has stepped up efforts to consolidate political relations with important suppliers of energy and other raw materials in Central Asia and Africa. Chinese foreign direct investment in Asian and African countries has increased significantly since 2003. Relations between business and government in both Europe and Japan have typically been marked by close cooperation in pursuit of national development goals.

The discussion has shown that regional integration has become an important feature of the contemporary international system, with countries forming regional organisations to promote trade, economic growth, and cooperation. The illustration below presents some of the major regional integration arrangements discussed in this unit.

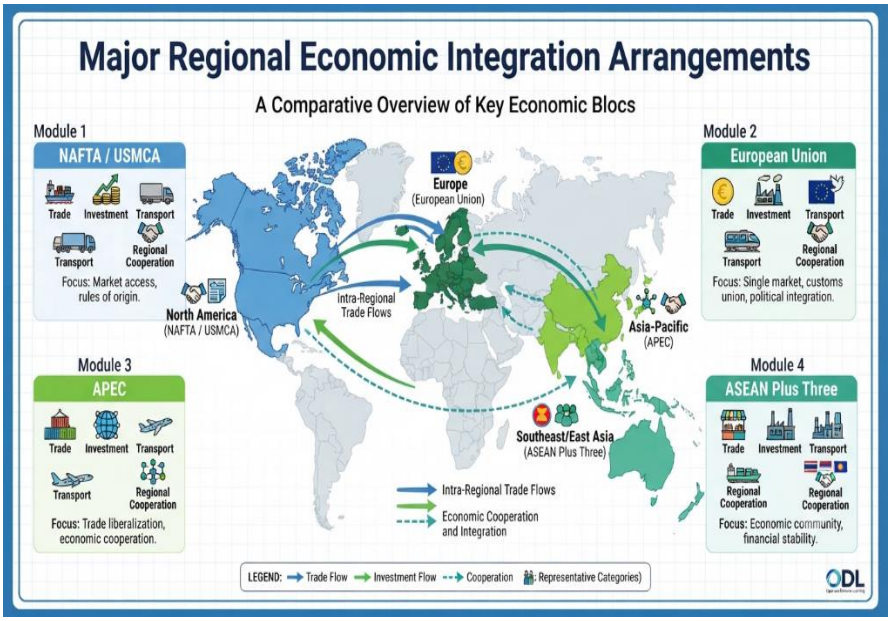

Figure 1.3: Major Regional Economic Integration Arrangements
Source: Google Gemini, Adapted by Abdulazeez A. Lawal, NOUN, 2026.

Self-Assessment Exercise 3

Choose the most appropriate answer for each question.

1. Regional integration primarily seeks to promote:
   A. Political isolation among states.
   B. Economic cooperation and regional development.
   C. The abolition of international trade.
   D. Military competition among neighbouring countries.
2. Which regional organisation introduced a common currency among many of its member states?
   A. ASEAN
   B. APEC
   C. European Union
   D. NAFTA
3. According to the unit, which organisation was created in 1995 following the Uruguay Round of multilateral trade negotiations?
   A. International Monetary Fund (IMF)
   B. World Health Organisation (WHO)
   C. World Trade Organisation (WTO)
   D. United Nations (UN)

1.6 Summary

In this unit, you have learnt that globalisation is the process through which countries become increasingly interconnected through the movement of goods, services, capital, technology, people, and ideas. The unit traced its historical roots to the Industrial Revolution and examined its major dimensions, including economic globalisation, global health, the natural environment, and the global workforce. It also explained how

globalisation has increased cooperation among states through international organisations and regional integration, while creating greater interdependence in addressing shared global challenges. Finally, the unit considered both the benefits and criticisms of globalisation, highlighting its contributions to economic growth and international cooperation alongside concerns about inequality, cultural domination, environmental degradation, and the uneven distribution of its gains, particularly for developing countries.

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1.8 Possible Answers to Self-Assessment Exercises

Self-Assessment Exercise 1

1. B
2. C
3. B

Self-Assessment Exercise 2

1. B
2. C
3. C

Self-Assessment Exercise 3

1. B
2. C
3. C

Unit 2 Collective Security System in the Modern International System

Unit Structure

2.1 Introduction
2.2 Learning Outcomes
2.3 What is Collective Security?
  2.3.1 The Major Principles and Assumptions of the Collective Security System
  2.3.2 The Evolution of Collective Security in the International System
  2.3.3 The Relevance of the Collective Security System
2.4 The Challenges of the Collective Security System
2.5 Summary
2.6 References/Further Readings/Web Sources
2.7 Possible Answers to Self-Assessment Exercises

2.1 Introduction

Welcome back. Before exploring how collective security operates in the international system, it is important for you first to understand what the concept means and why it has become a significant approach to maintaining global peace. As you have learned in the previous section, the growing interconnectedness among states means that conflicts in one part of the world can affect the security and stability of others. This raises an important question: can individual states protect global peace on their own, or is cooperation among nations necessary? The idea of collective security is based on the belief that threats to peace should not be treated as the concern of only the affected state. Instead, all members of the international community should work together to prevent aggression and respond to actions that threaten the international order.

As you read this section, consider the following question: If one country uses force against another country, should other nations intervene, and under what conditions should such intervention take place? The discussions that follow will help you understand the meaning of collective security, the ideas behind it, and how scholars have explained its role in international relations.

2.2 Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- define collective security;
- explain the major principles, evolution, and relevance of the collective security system; and
- examine the challenges facing the collective security system in the modern international system.

2.3 What is Collective Security?

To understand how collective security operates in the modern international system, you first need to examine what the concept means and how scholars have explained it. The following discussion presents different perspectives on collective security and highlights the main ideas associated with the concept.

Before reading further, consider this question:
Why do you think defining collective security has remained difficult among scholars and international organisations?
Miller (1999) states that several factors have made it difficult to define the concept of collective security. This is because the concept has continued to evolve, making its definition fluid and varied. He adds that the definition has become more complicated because several organs operate in the system. Miller maintains that some of the organs are established to protect their member states from attacks by non-members. These, according to him, are collective defence organs. He cites NATO as an example.

In seeking to establish a conceptual clarification about collective security, Onyemaechi Eke maintains that collective security is an idealist thinking which hinges on the prevention of hostilities by the formation of an overwhelming military force by member states to deter aggression or, by implication, to launch a reprisal attack capable of defeating the recalcitrant member (Eke, 2007). According to him, collective security connotes the institutionalisation of a global police force to address breaches of order and abuses of power, which can lead to insecurity in the international system. It is an arrangement in which states cooperate to provide security for all by acting collectively against any state within the group that might challenge the existing order by using force.

The idea of collective security is based on cooperation among states to respond to threats to peace. The illustration below shows how collective action is used to address aggression in the international system.



Figure 2.1: Concept of Collective Security
Source: Google Gemini, Adapted by Abdulazeez Ayodeji Lawal, National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), 2026.

Van Dyke (1957) sees collective security as a system in which several states are bound to engage in collective efforts on behalf of one another's security. Chaturvedi (2006) defines collective security as an arrangement among nations to protect their vital interests, safety, or integrity against a probable threat or menace over a particular period by combining their powers. Lastly, Schwarzenberger (1951) defines collective security as a machinery for joint action to prevent or counter any attack against the international order. The term implies collective measures to address threats to peace.

From the definitions provided by the scholars above, what common idea about collective security can you identify?
From the definitions given by the scholars mentioned, collective security in the international system can be seen as a plan for maintaining peace through an organisation of sovereign states whose members pledge to defend one another against attack. The concept is best seen as security for individual nations through collective means. That is to say that membership in an international organisation made up of all or most of the states of the world that have pledged to defend each other from attack.

Collective security, in another way, is the acceptance of the fact that war is a reality as well as recognising the relevance of power in international politics; its arrangement ensures that there should be a measure to use overwhelming force to frustrate any attempt by any state to change the status quo of the international system by use of force. The status quo here implies the world order of independent sovereign states. This contrasts with self-help strategies of engaging in war for purely immediate national interest. The collective security organisation not only provides cheaper security but may also be the only practicable means of security for smaller nations against more powerful, threatening neighbours.

The term "collective security" has also been cited as the guiding principle for the establishment of the League of Nations and the United Nations, which sees aggression as a crime against humanity. By employing a system of collective security, aggression or war would no longer be the concern of any individual nation but of all nations. The United Nations hopes to dissuade any member state from acting in a manner likely to threaten peace, thereby avoiding any conflict.

2.3.1 The Major Principles and Assumptions of the Collective Security System

The system of collective security is considered successful if the following assumptions are realised. First, according to Palmer and Perkings (2007), for a collective security system to be successful, it must be strong enough to cope with aggression from any power or combination of powers, and it must be invoked if and as aggression occurs. Thus, collective security involves the willingness to apply sanctions as and when necessary and even to go to war. Collective security will never work unless all the nations that take part in it are prepared simultaneously to threaten with sanctions and to fight, if necessary, an
aggressor. It must, therefore, be open to those states which are willing to accept this obligation in good faith.

Rourke and Boyer (1998) assert that collective security system is based on four basic principles: first, all countries foreswear the use of force except in self-defense; second, all agree that peace is indivisible, an attack on one is an attack on all; third, all pledge to unite to halt an aggression and restore peace; fourth, all agree to supply whatever material or personnel resources that are necessary to form a collective security force associated with the United Nations or some Intergovernmental Organisations to defeat aggressors and restore peace. Thus, the basic idea behind the collective security system is that an attack on one is an attack on all. Any state contemplating aggression would face the sure prospect of struggle, not simply with the prospective victim, but with all other members of the system, who would make the necessary sacrifice to save the state under attack.

2.3.2 The Evolution of Collective Security in the International System

The concept of collective security, as one of the most promising approaches to peace and a valuable instrument for power management on an international scale, has a long history of development, albeit in different forms. As such, it is not a new creation in the international system. Cardinal Richelieu, as the king's chief advisor and prime minister

of France during the reign of Louis XIII, proposed a scheme of collective security in 1629. Later, his principles were partially reflected in the 1648 Peace of Westphalia. In the eighteenth century, many other proposals were made for collective security arrangements, especially in Europe.

In another dimension, the concept of a peaceful community of nations was outlined by Immanuel Kant in 1795 in his work *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch*. Kant, specifically, outlined the idea of a league of nations to control conflict and promote peace among states. He argues for the establishment of a peaceful world community, not in the sense that there be a global government, but in the hope that each state would declare itself as a free state that respects its citizens and welcomes foreign visitors as fellow rational beings. His key argument is that a union of free states would promote a peaceful society worldwide; therefore, in his view, there can be a perpetual peace shaped by the international community rather than by a world government. Bahá'u'lláh (1817–1892), The founder of the Bahá'í Faith prescribed collective security as a means of establishing world peace in his writings during the 19th century.

The treaties of Westphalia, signed in 1648 to end the wars among the European states, were intended to avert the recurrence of the wars evident before their signing. Wars are seldom simple affairs, but the Thirty Years' War of the European states was even more complex than most, prompting endless scholarly debates about its causes and the motives of the major protagonists. In 1618, over half a century of festering religious, dynastic, and strategic tensions erupted into civil war in the Holy Roman Empire, subsequently engulfing the entire European continent in thirty years of exhausting and utterly devastating warfare. The signing of the treaties was an attempt to prevent future wars by proposing recognition of states' territorial integrity and sovereignty, and equal recognition of religions.

The League of Nations, established after the First World War (WWI), and the United Nations, established after the Second World War (WWII), were intended to prevent future wars. At the twilight of World War I, many thought and hoped that the world's states would establish the League of Nations as a collective security system to maintain international peace and security. They had the same thought and hope after World War II, when the United Nations was established. Thus, the treaties signed after the two major world wars sought to establish permanent organs mandated to safeguard peace and security in the international system. The principles upon which these organs were formed were those of collective security.

2.3.3 The Relevance of the Collective Security System

In the international system, the United Nations has become the primary custodian of international security, peace, and stability. Based on the principle of collective security in the world system, the United Nations has created the Security Council as a special organ to conduct the policing of the entire world. The Security Council is duly authorised under the UN Charter to address issues of peace and security. For several years now, there has been a collective understanding that the international community has the responsibility to protect where a state is unable or unwilling to protect its citizens from violations such as genocide, ethnic cleansing, and several other crimes against humanity. It is the responsibility to protect that gives credence to the Security Council's intervention. As the principal collective security organ, the Security Council bears the responsibility, especially when the intervention involves military action.

Similarly, regional and sub-regional arrangements, such as NATO, the African Union force, and ECOMOG, complement the international efforts of the Security Council. These regional efforts have adopted the principle of collective security, which allows intervention in the internal affairs of their member states.

Since the end of World War II, there has been a decline in the number of inter-state conflicts, and the exercise of the powers vested in the Security Council of the United Nations and other regional arrangements has contributed to this decline (Kupchan and Kupchan, 1995). In this vein, the collective security paradigm has transformed the international system from an anarchic system to a platform for dialogue and negotiation on issues. The use of sanctions by collective security organs in pursuing their mandate against so-called rogue states has characterised their operations.

The Security Council was able to effectively sanction Iraq's aggressive behaviour in the invasion of Kuwait and thereafter. Particularly, under the Bush regime, the US government presented its attack against Iraq as a war that was justified by the Resolutions passed by the Security Council on Iraq. President Bush claimed that the contents of Resolutions 678, 687 and 1441 (Mandel, 2004: 33) were sufficient grounds to declare war on Iraq.

Again, following the September 11 terrorist attack on the United States, the Security Council made it clear that it is highly against terrorism and is ready to use measures that would contain the threat posed by terrorism to global peace and security. The UN Security Council passed two unanimous Resolutions: Resolution 1368 and Resolution 1373. The two Resolutions condemned the terrorist attacks as well as recognised the

right of states to self-defence and collective defence. Based on this, the Bush administration in the US declared war on terrorism, calling for a crusade against all that was deemed as terrorists, including Al-Qaeda, a group identified as being responsible for the attack under the leadership of Osama Bin Laden and the Taliban regime of Afghanistan, which was alleged, according to intelligence sources, to have given sanctuary to the group. The US government justified their assault on Afghanistan as an act of self-defence, which was taken in accordance with the spirit of the Security Council to maintain international security.

Libya was first sanctioned for its subversive activities, including its alleged masterminding of the Lockerbie bombing of 1988, in which 270 people perished in an Aircraft. Again, on the 26th February 2011, a week after Gaddafi violently suppressed peaceful demonstrations in the opposition stronghold of Benghazi and vowed to crush the rebellion that was taking root in the East of Libya, the United Nations Security Council Council passed Resolution 1970, which condemned the regime's action and called for an immediate end to civilian attacks. Furthermore, on 17th March 2011, the Security Council adopted a second resolution – Resolution 1973 - in response to the Libyan crisis. This Resolution authorised the imposition of a no-fly zone over Libya and the use of "all necessary measures" to protect Libyan civilians from Gaddafi's regime. Resolution 1973 was later, to justify NATO's bombardment of Libya and the provision of military assistance to the rebels, which culminated in the ousting and execution of Colonel Gaddafi.

Apart from the peace efforts expressed in military operations, collective global security has been pursued through the International Criminal Court's instrumental justice. There have been several attempts to ensure justice through the establishment of international criminal tribunals as an independent entity for ensuring the retribution of war criminals. In the case of the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, and Liberia, ad hoc tribunals were established with the support of the Security Council, with responsibility for prosecuting crimes and ensuring that perpetrators are brought to justice. The Security Council also referred the Darfur crisis in Sudan to the attention of the ICC prosecutor. All these are indicative of the international desire for a collective security system to safeguard world peace and security through international justice.

Test your understanding of the concept of collective security by answering the questions below.

Self-Assessment Exercise 1

1. According to Miller (1999), why has defining collective security remained difficult?
   A. Because states no longer participate in international organisations
   B. Because the concept has evolved and has different interpretations
   C. Because collective security only applies to military alliances
   D. Because scholars have rejected the concept
2. Collective security is best understood as:
   A. A system where states act alone to protect their interests
   B. A system where states cooperate to maintain peace and respond to threats
   C. A system where powerful states control weaker states
   D. A system that prevents international organisations from operating
3. According to the discussion, collective security differs from self-help because:
   A. Collective security depends on cooperation among states
   B. Collective security prevents states from defending themselves
   C. Self-help requires all states to form one organisation
   D. Self-help eliminates the use of power in international politics

2.4 The Challenges of the Collective Security System

Although the collective security system has contributed to efforts to maintain international peace and security, it has also faced several challenges that undermine its effectiveness. In this section, you will examine some of the major issues that have limited collective security arrangements' ability to achieve their objectives.
As you read through the challenges discussed below, consider this question:

If collective security depends on cooperation among states, what happens when powerful states act based on their own interests rather than collective decisions?

- **The Threat of Unilateral Actions by Powerful Nations**

The collective security system has faced several challenges in fulfilling its mandate in the international system. One of the major challenges of the collective security system is the increasing tendency of powerful states to resort to unilateral actions. This is especially true of the United States of America. First, the USA's military action against Afghanistan was not, in any way, authorised by the Security Council. It was essentially a unilateral decision by the USA. At the point the superpower was

contemplating the attack, many nations cautioned her of the likely repercussions of such an attack, with religious connotations that may be taken as an attack on Islam. This caution was, however, ignored, and the USA went ahead to prosecute the war in Afghanistan.

Second, the military action in Iraq is also a unilateral action on the part of the USA. At the beginning of 2003, the United States sought the support of the Security Council for an invasion of Iraq, but the Council was not convinced that there were sufficient and reasonable grounds to authorise the USA and its allies to take military action against Iraq. Despite the position of the United Nations, the USA and its allies went ahead and attacked Iraq. In the real sense, the attack on Iraq can be said to be, in itself, an act of aggression.

From the discussion above, why do unilateral actions by powerful states pose a challenge to the collective security system?

In Libya, the International Criminal Court's (ICC) intervention in the 2011 events has also been viewed with suspicion, as the Court had not previously intervened similarly in ongoing situations in Tunisia, Egypt and Syria. In addition, the bombardment of Libya by NATO was also questionable, since no such military actions were authorised by any of the Resolutions of the UN Security Council. As such, it will be right to say that the actions of NATO were aimed at bringing down the regime of Gaddafi in Libya. In other words, such actions were illegal and at variance with the spirit of the UN Charter.

- **Double Standards**

Generally, international organisations such as the United Nations are accused of double standards in discharging their functions in the international community. The double standard here involves favouring strong nations and disfavouring the weak in different situations. The best example of the double standards inherent in the collective security system is epitomised by the International Criminal Court (ICC). For example, the ICC has opened cases of abuse of human rights and violence against civilian populations perpetrated by insurgent groups in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda, Sudan and the Central African Republic. Close observation has shown that the ICC's performance in handling cases in the countries mentioned is negligible. This is because the ICC has not been able to compel any of the perpetrators of the crimes to appear before it. In addition, the indictment of rebels or perpetrators of these crimes has made the situation escalate as the rebels have intensified their attacks on civilians (Allen, 2006: 24). This raises doubt in the performance of the ICC in the examples cited.

What does the accusation of double standards suggest about the way international organisations apply collective security principles?

In the same vein, the same violence cited above is committed in other nations such as Palestine, Georgia, Colombia and Syria, but the ICC has turned a blind eye to these nations. One may then ask why the ICC would be involved elsewhere, yet shy away in another region where the same crimes are committed. The only reliable explanation is the one that underlies the idea of a double standard by powerful nations. The fact is that in many instances, the ICC is only interested in prosecuting cases against countries that are unfriendly to the superpowers, while ignoring cases against the superpowers and their allies.

- **Lack of a Real Sense of Oneness as an International Community**

In rhetoric, the world is portrayed as a single international community. But this axiom is more of lip service, as there is no real sense of oneness in the international system. There are many instances in which global events challenge this cliché. We can agree that there exist diverse interests in the international system. Sometimes there is a point of convergence among these diverse interests, but at other times they are opposed and compete with one another. There are also obvious differences in the military and economic capabilities among nations in the international system. As such, differences in interests open the way to rivalry and dominance among nations. Furthermore, given that nations have no room for morality or fairness in pursuing their interests, it becomes difficult to address, practice, or even enforce the spirit of oneness among nations with diverse interests. It is on this basis that the unity of purpose among nations about collective security becomes a subject of debate, patterned by the "real collectivity" of nations.

The effectiveness of collective security depends on cooperation, shared interests, and commitment among states. However, differences in national interests and unequal power relations can create difficulties. The illustration below highlights some of the major challenges affecting collective security.



Figure 2.2: Challenges Facing Collective Security
Source: Google Gemini, Adapted by Abdulazeez Ayodeji Lawal, National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), 2026.

Answer the following questions to assess your understanding of the challenges facing collective security.

Self-Assessment Exercise 2

1. Which of the following is identified as a major challenge to collective security?
A. Increased cooperation among states
B. Unilateral actions by powerful nations
C. Formation of international organisations
D. Peaceful negotiations among states
2. The accusation of double standards against international organisations refers to:
A. Applying the same rules to all states equally
B. Supporting only peaceful negotiations
C. Favouring some states while treating others differently
D. Preventing states from joining international organisations
3. Why does the lack of a real sense of oneness among states challenge collective security?
A. States always have identical interests
B. States often pursue different interests and priorities
C. International organisations have no role in security matters
D. States no longer experience conflicts

2.5 Summary

In this unit, you have examined the concept of collective security, its principles, evolution, relevance, and challenges in the modern international system. You learned that collective security is an arrangement in which states cooperate to maintain peace and respond collectively to threats to the international order. The unit highlighted that

the concept has evolved and has influenced the establishment of international organisations such as the League of Nations and the United Nations. You also explored how collective security mechanisms, including the United Nations Security Council and regional organisations, contribute to global peace efforts. However, the effectiveness of collective security continues to be challenged by unilateral actions by powerful states, accusations of double standards, and divergent national interests.

2.6 References/Further Readings/Web Sources

Claude, I. L. Jr. (1975). "An Autopsy of Collective Security." *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 90.

Kupchan, C. & Kupchan, C. (1995). "The Promise of Collective Security." *International Security*, Vol. 20, pp. 52-53.

2.7 Possible Answers to Self-Assessment Exercises

Self-Assessment Exercise 1

1. B
2. B
3. A

Self-Assessment Exercise 2

1. B
2. C
3. B

Unit 3 The Threat of Terrorism

Unit Structure

3.1 Introduction
3.2 Learning Outcomes
3.3 Etymology
  3.3.1 What is Terrorism?
  3.3.2 Perspectives on Terrorism
  3.3.3 Characteristics of Terrorism
3.4 Reasons for Terrorist Acts
3.5 Perpetrators of Terrorism
3.6 The War against Terrorism in the International System
3.7 Summary
3.8 References/Further Readings/Web Sources
3.9 Possible Answers to Self-Assessment Exercises

3.1 Introduction

Welcome to this unit on the threat of terrorism in the international system. In the previous unit, you examined collective security and the efforts of states and international organisations to maintain peace and stability. Despite these efforts, the international community continues to encounter security challenges that influence relations among states and affect global peace.

In this unit, you will explore the complex issue of terrorism by examining the different perspectives surrounding the concept, the factors associated with terrorist activities, the actors involved, and international responses to the threat. As you progress through the unit, reflect on the question: Why does terrorism continue to pose a major challenge to international peace and security despite ongoing efforts to address it? This reflection will guide your understanding of the discussions that follow.

3.2 Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- identify the origin and historical development of the term terrorism;
- explain the major reasons associated with terrorist acts in the international system;
- analyse the various perpetrators involved in terrorist activities; and
- evaluate the international efforts and strategies adopted in the war against terrorism.

3.3 Etymology

To understand the development of the term terrorism, it is useful to begin by exploring its origin and how its meaning has changed over time. The history of a term often provides insight into how societies have interpreted and responded to certain events. In this section, you will examine the origin of the word "terrorism" and how its usage has evolved across different historical contexts.
As you read through this section, consider the following question:

How can the meaning of a term change as societies and political situations change?
To trace the etymology of the term “terrorism,” we shall rely on the *Online Etymology Dictionary* of 1979. According to this dictionary, the word terrorism derives from the French word terrorisme, which, in turn, according to Kim Campbell (2001), is derived from the Latin verb terreō, meaning "I frighten". The term was used in 105 BC to describe the panic and state of emergency in Rome in response to the approach of the Cimbri warriors. Subsequently, the Jacobins employed the term during the Reign of Terror of the French Revolution. They employed the term to describe, specifically, the state of terrorism, as practised by the French government during the period 1793-1794. After the Jacobins lost power, the word "terrorist" became a term of abuse.

From the historical development of the term discussed above, what does the changing use of the word “terrorism” suggest about its interpretation?
Initially, "terrorism" originally referred to acts committed by a government. Currently, it is, however, used to refer to the killing of innocent people for political purposes in such a way as to create a media spectacle (Mackey, 2009). Arnold (2011) maintains that this meaning can be traced back to Sergey Nechayev, who founded the Russian terrorist group called "People's Retribution" in 1869. Sergey described himself as a "terrorist." Today, out of all the human acts that have menaced humankind globally, terrorism can be counted as the major threat to global peace, stability and security.

The meaning associated with terrorism has changed across different periods of history. The illustration below presents a simplified timeline of important stages in the term's development.

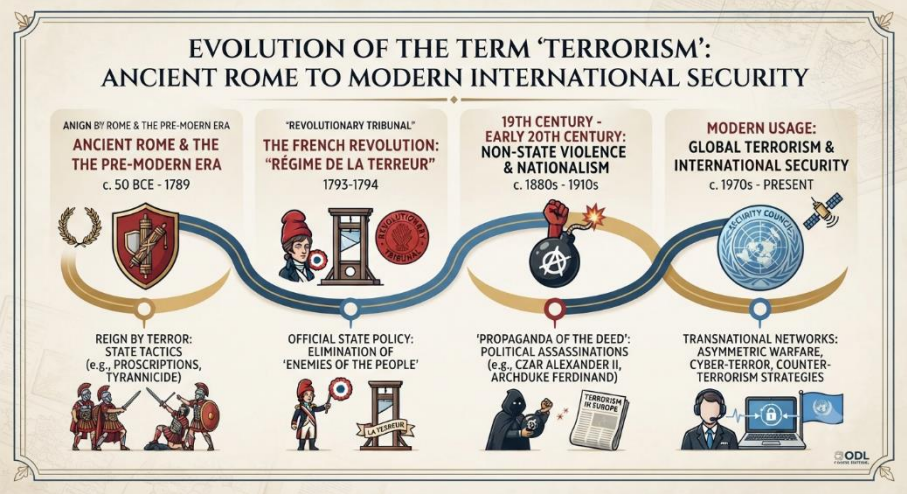

Figure 3.1: Historical Development of the Term Terrorism
Source: Google Gemini, Adapted by Abdulazeez Ayodeji Lawal, National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), 2026.

3.3.1 What is Terrorism?

As we indicated in the introduction to this unit, the definition of terrorism has generated considerable controversy. This is because various governments and organisations offer different definitions. In addition, the international community itself has never been able to coin a universally agreed, legally applied definition of the concept. These difficulties arise because the term "terrorism" is viewed through a kaleidoscope of lenses. Angus Martyn (2002), in his address to the Australian Parliament, titled "The Right of Self-Defence under International Law- the Response to the Terrorist Attacks of 11 September", stated that the international community has never succeeded in developing an accepted comprehensive definition of terrorism. Even during the United Nations attempts in the 1970s and 1980s to define the term failed because of differences of opinion between various members about the use of violence in the context of conflicts over national liberation and self-determination.

These divergences have made it impossible for the United Nations to conclude a Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism that incorporates a single, all-encompassing, legally binding criminal-law definition of terrorism. The international community has adopted a series of sectoral conventions that define and criminalise various types of activities regarded as terrorist acts. Rather, the United Nations General Assembly, since 1994 has repeatedly condemned terrorist acts using the following political description of terrorism in its Resolution 49/60: "Criminal acts intended or calculated to provoke a state of terror in the general public, a group of persons or particular persons for political purposes are in any circumstance unjustifiable, whatever the considerations of a political, philosophical, ideological, racial, ethnic,

religious or any other nature that may be invoked to justify them" (NUGA, 1994).

In November 2004, a United Nations Secretary General report described terrorism as any act "intended to cause death or serious bodily harm to civilians or non-combatants to intimidate a population or compelling a government or an international organisation to do or abstain from doing any act".

In addition, Bruce Hoffman (2006) has noted that even individual agencies within the same governmental apparatus cannot agree on a single definition of terrorism. Experts and other long- established scholars in the field are equally incapable of reaching a consensus. In the first edition of his magisterial survey, 'Political Terrorism: A Research Guide,' Alex Schmid devoted more than a hundred pages to examining more than a hundred different definitions of terrorism in an effort to discover a broadly acceptable, reasonably comprehensive explication of the word. Four years later, in a second edition, Schmid was no closer to the goal of his quest, conceding in the first sentence of the revised volume that the search for an adequate definition is still on.

In any case, Bruce Hoffman believes it is possible to identify some key characteristics of terrorism. He proposes that by distinguishing terrorists from other types of criminals, and terrorism from other forms of crime, we come to appreciate that terrorism is ineluctably political in aims and motives; violent or, equally important, threatens violence; and is designed to have far-reaching psychological repercussions beyond the immediate victim or target; conducted by an organisation with an identifiable chain of command or conspiratorial cell structure whose members wear no uniform or identifying insignia; and perpetrated by a sub-national group or non-state entity (Hoffman, 2006: 41).

A definition proposed by Carsten Bockstette (2008) in the *George C. Marshall Centre Occasional Paper Series*, "Jihadist Terrorist Use of Strategic Communication Management Techniques," highlights the psychological and tactical aspects of terrorism. Here, terrorism is defined as political violence in an asymmetrical conflict that is designed to induce terror and psychic fear (sometimes indiscriminate) through the violent victimisation and destruction of noncombatant targets (sometimes iconic symbols). Such acts are meant to send a message from an illicit, clandestine organisation. The definition of expatriates further states that the purpose of terrorism is to exploit the media to achieve maximum publicity as an amplifying force multiplier to influence the targeted audience(s) and reach short- and midterm political goals and/or desired long-term end states.

Walter Laqueur, of the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, noted that "the only general characteristic of terrorism generally agreed upon is that terrorism involves violence and the threat of violence". There are arguments that this criterion alone does not yield a useful definition, since it includes many violent acts that are not usually considered terrorism. Such acts include war, riot, organised crime, or even a simple assault. Yet, on one hand, property destruction that does not endanger life is not usually considered a violent crime, but on the other hand, Ronald Bailey (2009) states that some have described property destruction by the "Earth Liberation Front" and Daniel Schorn (2006) has described property destruction by the "Animal Liberation Front" as violence and acts of terrorism.

Khan, Ali (1987), in his work "A Theory of International Terrorism," published on the Social Science Research Network, maintains that among the various definitions of terrorism, several do not recognise the possibility of legitimate use of violence by civilians against an invader in an occupied country. He states that other definitions would label as terrorist groups only the resistance movements that oppose an invader with violent acts that indiscriminately kill or harm civilians and non-combatants, thus making a distinction between lawful and unlawful use of violence. According to Ali Khan, such a distinction lies ultimately in a political judgment.

3.3.2 Perspectives on Terrorism

The terms "terrorism" and "terrorist" carry strong connotations. In the negative, these terms are often used as political labels to condemn violence or the threat of violence by certain actors as immoral, indiscriminate, and unjustified or to condemn an entire segment of a population. Those labelled "terrorists" by their opponents rarely identify themselves as such and typically use other terms or terms specific to their situation, such as separatist, freedom fighter, liberator, revolutionary, vigilante, militant, paramilitary, guerrilla, rebel, patriot, or similar-meaning terms in other languages and cultures. Jihadi, mujaheddin, and fedayeen are similar Arabic words which have entered the English lexicon. It is common for both parties in a conflict to describe each other as terrorists.

On the question of whether particular terrorist acts, such as killing civilians, can be justified as the lesser evil in a particular circumstance, philosophers have expressed different views: while, according to David Rodin, utilitarian philosophers can (in theory) conceive of cases in which the evil of terrorism is outweighed by the good which could not be achieved in a less morally costly way, in practice the "harmful effects of undermining the convention of non-combatant immunity is thought to

outweigh the goods that particular acts of terrorism may achieve" (Rodin, (2006). Among the non-utilitarian philosophers, Peter Steinfels (March 1, 2003) identifies Michael Walzer, who argued that terrorism can be morally justified in only one specific case, when a nation or community faces the extreme threat of destruction. The only way it can preserve itself is by intentionally targeting non-combatants. It is morally entitled to do so.

Again, Bruce Hoffman, in his book *Inside Terrorism,* explains why the term *terrorism* has become distorted: On one point, at least, everyone agrees: *terrorism* is a pejorative term. It is a word with intrinsically negative connotations that is generally applied to one's enemies and opponents, or to those with whom one disagrees and would otherwise prefer to ignore. 'What is called terrorism,' Brian Jenkins has written, 'thus seems to depend on one's point of view. The use of the term implies a moral judgment. If one party can successfully attach the label *terrorist* to its opponent, then it has indirectly persuaded others to adopt its moral viewpoint.' Hence, the decision to call someone or label some organisation *terrorist* becomes almost unavoidably subjective, depending largely on whether one sympathises with or opposes the person/group/cause concerned. If one identifies with the victim of the violence, for example, then the act is terrorism. If, however, one identifies with the perpetrator, the violent act
is regarded in a more sympathetic, if not positive (or, at the worst, an ambivalent) light; and it is not terrorism (Hoffman, 1998: 32).

The negative connotations of the word can be summed up in the aphorism, "One man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter". This is exemplified when a group that uses irregular military methods becomes an ally of a state against a mutual enemy, but later falls out with the state and begins using those methods against its former ally. Dr Chris Clark (2007) states that during World War II, the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army was allied with the British, but during the Malayan Emergency, members of its successor (the Malayan Races Liberation Army) were branded "terrorists" by the British. Ronald Reagan and others in the American administration frequently called the Afghan Mujahideen "freedom fighters" during their war against the Soviet Union, yet twenty years later, when a new generation of Afghan men were fighting against what they perceived to be a regime installed by foreign powers, their attacks were labelled "terrorism" by George W. Bush.

In the same vein, a leading terrorism researcher, Professor Martin Rudner, director of the Canadian Centre of Intelligence and Security Studies at Ottawa's Carleton University, defines "terrorist acts" as attacks against civilians for political or other ideological goals, and said that some groups, when involved in a "liberation" struggle, have been called "terrorists" by Western governments or media. Later, these same

individuals, as leaders of the liberated nations, are referred to as "statesmen" by similar organisations. Two examples of this phenomenon are the Nobel Peace Prize laureates Menachem Begin and Nelson Mandela. WikiLeaks whistleblower Julian Assange has been called a "terrorist" by Sarah Palin and Joe Biden.

Sometimes, states which are close allies, for reasons of history, culture and politics, can disagree over whether or not members of a certain organisation are terrorists. For instance, for many years, some branches of the United States government refused to label members of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) as terrorists while the IRA was using methods against one of the United States' closest allies (the United Kingdom), which the UK branded as terrorism. For these and other reasons, media outlets wishing to preserve a reputation for impartiality try to be careful in their use of the term.

3.3.3 Characteristics of Terrorism

There are basic characteristics that mark operations of terrorism. Hoffman (2003) states that, first, terrorist attacks are usually carried out in such a way as to maximise the severity and length of the psychological impact. Each act of terrorism is a "performance" designed to impact large audiences. Second, terrorists also attack national symbols to show power and to attempt to shake the foundation of the country or society they are opposed to. This may negatively affect a government, while increasing the prestige of the given terrorist organisation and/or ideology behind a terrorist act (Juergensmeyer, 2000:125–135). Third, terrorist acts frequently have a political purpose. Their attacks are like letter-writing or protest, which activists use when they believe no other means will bring about the kind of change they desire. The change is desired so badly that failure to achieve change is seen as a worse outcome than the deaths of civilians. Juergensmeyer (2000) explains that this is often where the inter-relationship between terrorism and religion occurs. When a political struggle is integrated into the framework of a religious or "cosmic" struggle, such as the control over an ancestral homeland or holy site, such as Israel and Jerusalem, failing in the political goal becomes equated with spiritual failure, which, for the highly committed, is worse than their own death or the deaths of innocent civilians.

It is also important to note that in the thinking of Juergensmeyer, very often, the victims of terrorism are targeted not because they are threats, but because they are specific symbols, tools, animals or corrupt beings that tie into a specific view of the world that the terrorists possess. Their suffering accomplishes the terrorists' goals of instilling fear, getting their message out to an audience or otherwise satisfying the demands of their often radical religious and political agendas.

Test your understanding of the origin and development of the term terrorism by answering the questions below.

Self-Assessment Exercise 1

1. The term terrorism is derived from which French word?
   A. Terrorisme
   B. Terrorist
   C. Terreō
   D. Terror
2. According to the discussion, the term terrorism was initially associated with:
   A. Economic development
   B. Government actions during the Reign of Terror
   C. International organisations
   D. Religious movements
3. The modern use of the term terrorism is mainly associated with:
   A. Peaceful political negotiations
   B. The expansion of international trade
   C. Violence carried out for political purposes
   D. The establishment of sovereign states

In the next section, you will examine the reasons associated with terrorist acts and the factors that contribute to the occurrence of terrorism in the international system.

3.4 Reasons for Terrorist Acts

Having examined the origin and development of the term terrorism, the next step is to consider the factors associated with terrorist activities. Understanding these factors helps you appreciate the different circumstances that may influence individuals or groups to engage in terrorist acts.

As you study this section, reflect on the following question:
What factors might influence individuals or groups to choose violence as a means of achieving their objectives?
There are many reasons why people or groups engage in terrorism.

- **Political Motives**

Liberation struggles, agitation for self-rule and autonomy, resistance against the imposition of a particular form of government, secession of a territory to form a new sovereign state or become part of a different state, as well as opposition to a domestic government or occupying army, have been cited as some of the major reasons for which terrorist acts can be carried out. National liberation is historically among the most potent reasons that extremist groups turn to violence to achieve their aims.

There are many of these groups. They include the ETA, the IRA, and the PKK.

From the examples provided, what political objectives have motivated some groups to engage in terrorist activities?
ETA stands for Euskadi Ta Askatasuna or EuskalHerria in Basque country. It spans the border between France and Spain. It has an autonomous culture and language, whose roots are believed to extend to the Palaeolithic period. This area was relatively self-governing until around the turn of the 19th century. ETA is an offspring of the Basque nationalist movement more broadly and, like the non-violent nationalist political parties, believes that the Basque are a distinct nation and should have a sovereign state identity or, at least, an autonomous status. The ETA (Basque) ETA wants an independent French state in the Basque region.

There is also the IRA– the Irish Republican Army. The emergence of the Irish Republican Army has its roots in Ireland's 20th-century quest for national independence from Great Britain. In 1801, the Anglican (English Protestant) United Kingdom of Great Britain merged with Roman Catholic Ireland. For the next hundred years, Catholic Irish Nationalists opposed Protestant Irish Unionists. The IRA began its terrorist attacks on the British army and police following a summer of violent rioting between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland. For the next generations, the IRA would carry out bombings, assassinations and other terrorist attacks against British and Irish Unionist targets.

The PKK **(**Partiya Karkeran Kurdistan) has assumed several names since its founding, but resumed using the name PKK in April, 2005. The Kurds, who are not Turkish, found themselves, their language and their culture marginalised or forcefully suppressed following Turkey's establishment in 1924. As the largest minority in Turkey, their earliest objective, in the 1970s, was the creation of an independent home for the Kurds. At first, they envisioned achieving this through a Marxist revolution in Turkey.

In the early 20th century, terrorists justified violence in the name of anarchism, socialism and communism. Socialism was becoming a dominant way for many people to explain the political and economic injustice they saw developing in capitalist societies and to define a solution. Millions of people expressed their commitment to a socialist future without violence, but a small number of people in the world thought violence was necessary.

- **Economic Reasons**

Gary Becker, a professor at the University of Chicago Business School, has argued that there is a connection between wealth and terrorism, based on the observation that "nations or regions that are experiencing rapid

growth appear to have lower incidences of terrorism." Becker posits that political activism, including violent activity, is less appealing to individuals when their economic opportunities expand. So, even if it were the case that poverty does not directly cause terrorism, it could still be true that economic growth reduces terrorism. Furthermore, economic deprivation of a population where a territory is dominant, and its resources are controlled by a particular ethnic group, creates conditions for misdistribution as well as spurs terrorism.

According to the discussion above, how can economic conditions contribute to the occurrence of terrorism?

- **Religious Fanatism**

Religious terrorism is terrorism performed by groups or individuals, the motivation of which is typically rooted in faith-based tenets. Peter Rose (2003), in an article titled "Disciples of religious terrorism share one faith", in *Christian Science Monitor,* argued that terrorist acts throughout the centuries have been performed on religious grounds with the hope to either spread or enforce a system of belief, viewpoint or opinion. Religious terrorism does not in itself necessarily define a specific religious standpoint or view. Still, it instead usually defines an individual or a group's view or interpretation of that belief system's teachings. Jamaat al-Fuqra is an Islamic terror organisation whose goal, according to the Centre for Peace and Security, is to “purify Islam through violence.” Put simply, this group of radical Islamic men believes that God commands them to propagate their religion. Furthermore, violence is the only acceptable way to deal with differing beliefs.

Al Shabaab is another radical Islamic group with strongholds in Pakistan and the United Kingdom. Various small-scale bombings have been traced back to this group. Hamas is another Islamic group operating in Palestine, and they are responsible for hundreds of rocket and mortar attacks on Israel. The Al-Qaeda operatives are based in Pakistan and Saudi Arabia.

In Nigeria, a prominent Islamic fundamentalist, Mohammed Marwa, also known as Maitatsine, reached the height of his notoriety during the 1970s and 1980s. Mohammed refused to believe Muhammad was the Prophet and instigated riots in the country, which resulted in the deaths of thousands of people. Some analysts view Boko Haram as an extension of the Maitatsine riots. Boko Haram itself is another religious terrorist group. The term "Boko Haram" comes from the Hausa word *boko,* figuratively meaning "western education" (literally "alphabet",
from English "book") and the Arabic word *haram,* figuratively meaning "sin" (literally, "forbidden"). The name, loosely translated from Hausa, means "western education is forbidden". The group earned this name by its strong opposition to anything Western, which it sees as corrupting Muslims. In a 2009 BBC interview, Mohammed Yusuf, then the group's

leader, stated that the fact of a spherical Earth is contrary to Islamic teaching and should be rejected, along with Darwinian evolution and the fact that rain originates from water evaporated by the sun. Before his death, Yusuf reiterated the group's objective of changing the current education system and rejecting democracy. The growing frequency and geographical range of attacks attributed to Boko Haram have led some political and religious leaders in the north to the conclusion that the group has now expanded beyond its original religious composition to include not only Islamic militants, but criminal elements and disgruntled politicians as well. For instance, the Borno State Governor, Kashim Shettima, said of Boko Haram that it has become a franchise that anyone can buy into. The group has also forcibly converted non-Muslims to Islam.

Terrorist acts may occur for various motivations and circumstances. The illustration below highlights the major categories of reasons discussed in this section.

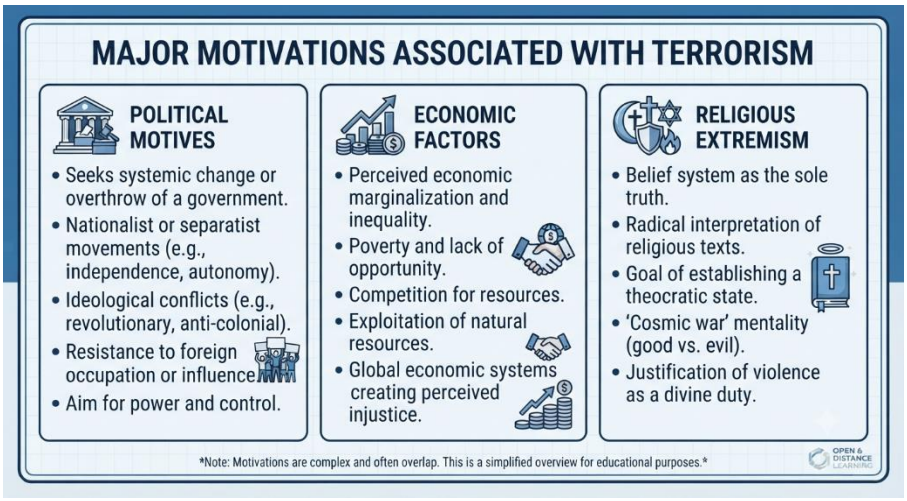

Figure 3.2: Reasons for Terrorist Acts
Source Attribution:

Google Gemini, Adapted by Abdulazeez Ayodeji Lawal, National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), 2026.

Answer the following questions to assess your understanding of the reasons associated with terrorist acts.

Self-Assessment Exercise 2

1. Which of the following is identified as a political motive for terrorist acts?
   A. Promotion of international trade
   B. Liberation struggles and demands for self-rule
   C. Expansion of educational opportunities
   D. Development of communication systems
2. According to Gary Becker, expanding economic opportunities may:
   A. Increase terrorist activities
   B. Reduce the appeal of violent political activities
   C. Eliminate all forms of conflict
   D. Encourage political violence
3. Religious terrorism is generally associated with:
   A. Faith-based motivations used to justify violent actions
   B. Economic competition among states
   C. Peaceful religious discussions
   D. International cooperation

In the next section, you will examine the various individuals, groups, and states identified as perpetrators of terrorism within the international system.

3.5 Perpetrators of Terrorism

Having examined the reasons associated with terrorist acts, it is important to understand the actors who engage in such activities. Terrorism can involve different categories of perpetrators, and the nature of an attack may depend on the intention, organisation, and capacity of those involved. As you study this section, consider the following question:

Who can be responsible for terrorist activities, and how might their roles differ?

Terrorist attacks are manifest in various forms and are perpetrated by various groups. To an extent, the form of the attack determines the type of perpetrator. The perpetrator's intent and capacity also drive the attacks. In fact, in terrorism, the intention of the terrorist is very fundamental to determining the type and perpetrator of the act. Thus, individuals, groups and even governments have been found engaging in terrorist activities. Let us briefly explain the various perpetrators of terrorism.

- **Individuals**

In most cases, acts of terrorism are carried out individually. It takes an individual to make the difficult decision of committing a suicide bombing or any other act of violence, making terrorism visible. Most local and international terrorist acts begin with one person who subsequently

becomes the leader once he forms a group. Even then, their activities are usually carried out by individuals. Al-Qaeda, for example, started with Bin Laden and developed into a group. Two individuals committed the Lockerbie bombing of December 1988. Ahmed khalfanGhailani, a Tanzanian, was alleged to have carried out the bombing of the US embassy in East Africa in 1998. Muhammad Abdul Mutallab was alone when he attempted the bombing of a US Airplane in 2009. However, certainly, the individual does not operate in isolation. He is usually connected to a highly organised hierarchical group of individuals.

Why do you think an individual involved in terrorism may still require connections with organised groups?

- **Groups**

This is what we also call organised terrorism. It refers to the increasing capacity of global terrorists to recruit more members, expand their geographic reach, and broaden their influence and impact. Al-Qaeda, for example, has its major goal to bring together other militant groups under its control. From Afghanistan, the group has acquired allies in the Arabian Peninsula. With this network, it becomes difficult to wipe the group off the face of the earth completely. The most common image of terrorism is that it is carried out by small and secretive cells, highly motivated to serve a particular cause and many of the most deadly operations in recent times, such as the September 11 attacks, the London underground bombing, and the 2002 Bali bombing were planned and carried out by a close clique, composed of close friends, family members and other strong social networks. These groups benefited from the free flow of information and efficient telecommunications, enabling them to succeed where others had failed.

Boko Haram in Nigeria is a group which exerts influence in the northeastern Nigerian states of Borno, Adamawa, Kaduna, Bauchi, Yobe and Kano. *Al Jazeera* reported on 24 December 2011 that this group is divided into three factions, with a splinter group known as Ansaru. The group's main leader is Abubakar Shekau. Its weapons expert, second-in-command and arms manufacturer was Momodu Bama. According to one US military commander, Boko Haram is likely linked to Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), but there is no documented evidence of material international support running between them.

Terrorism can involve different actors operating at different levels. The illustration below presents the main categories of perpetrators discussed in this section.

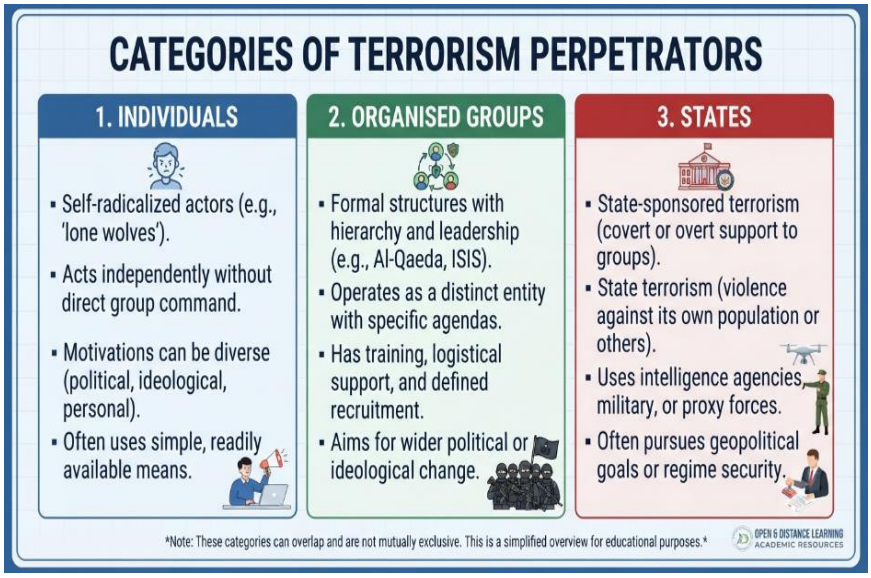

Figure 3.3: Categories of Terrorism Perpetrators

Source: Google Gemini, Adapted by Abdulazeez Ayodeji Lawal, National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), 2026.

- **The State**

State terrorism has been used to refer to terrorist acts by governmental agents or forces. This involves the use of state resources in a state's foreign policy, such as directly using its military to commit acts of terrorism. A professor of Political Science, Michael Stohl, in an article titled "The Superpowers and International Terror", cites the examples that include Germany's bombing of London and the US atomic destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki during World War II. He argues that "the use of terror tactics is common in international relations and the state has been and remains a more likely employer of terrorism within the international system than insurgents" (Stohl, 1984). A state can sponsor terrorism by funding or harbouring a terrorist organisation. Opinions as to which acts of violence by states consist of state- sponsored terrorism vary widely. When states provide funding for groups considered by some to be terrorists, they rarely acknowledge them as such.

How does the involvement of states make the issue of terrorism more complex within the international system?

Answer the following questions to assess your understanding of the perpetrators of terrorism.

Self-Assessment Exercise 3

1. Which of the following is identified as a category of terrorism perpetrators?
   A. Individuals, groups, and states
   B. International markets and businesses
   C. Educational institutions and communities
   D. Non-governmental organisations only
2. Organised terrorism refers to:
   A. Terrorist activities carried out without any planning
   B. Terrorist activities involving groups with wider networks and influence
   C. Peaceful political movements
   D. Actions carried out only by governments
3. State terrorism refers to:
   A. Terrorist activities carried out by governmental agents or forces
   B. Actions taken only by individuals
   C. Activities of international organisations
   D. Peaceful state policies

In the next section, you will examine the international efforts and strategies adopted to respond to terrorism and address the threat it poses to global peace and security.

3.6 The War against Terrorism in the International System

Having examined the different actors involved in terrorism, the next step is to consider how the international community has responded to the threat posed by terrorist activities. The fight against terrorism has involved military, legal, political, and security measures adopted by states and international organisations.

As you study this section, reflect on the following question:
How can the international community respond to terrorism while maintaining international peace and security?

In 1984, the Reagan Administration used the term "war against terrorism" as part of an effort to pass legislation that was designed to freeze assets of terrorist groups and marshal the forces of government against them. Silver, Alexandra, in an article titled "How America Became a Surveillance State," quotes author Shane Harris as asserting that the use of this term by the Reagan administration was a reaction to the 1983 Beirut barracks bombing. On 16 September 2001, at Camp David, President George W. Bush used the phrase *war on terrorism* in an unscripted and controversial comment when, in reaction to the 11 September 2001 bombing of the World Trade Centre, he said, "This crusade – this war on terrorism – is going to take a while, ..." (Kenneth, 2001).

Because the actions involved in the "war on terrorism" are diffuse, and the criteria for inclusion are unclear, political theorist Richard Jackson has argued that "the 'war on terrorism' therefore, is simultaneously a set of actual practices - wars, covert operations, agencies, and institutions - and an accompanying series of assumptions, beliefs, justifications, and narratives - it is an entire language or discourse" (Jackson, 2005: 8). Critics of the term have argued that the term is been used to justify unilateral preventive war, human rights abuses and other violations of international law (Borhan and Muhammad, 2008: 379–397).

Why has the term "war against terrorism" generated debate within the international community?

Following the bombings of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, the then US President Bill Clinton launched Operation Infinite Reach, a bombing campaign in Sudan and Afghanistan against targets the US asserted were associated with the World Islamic Front for Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders (WIFJAJC). The Authorisation for Use of Military Force against Terrorists or "AUMF" was made a law on September 14, 2001, to authorise the use of United States Armed Forces against those responsible for the attacks on September 11, 2001. It authorised the President to use all necessary and appropriate force against those nations, organisations, or persons he determines planned, authorised, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001, or harboured such organisations or persons, to prevent any future acts of international terrorism against the United States by such nations, organisations or persons.

The international response to terrorism has involved different approaches, including military operations, security measures, and cooperation among states. The illustration below highlights some of the major responses adopted in addressing terrorist threats.

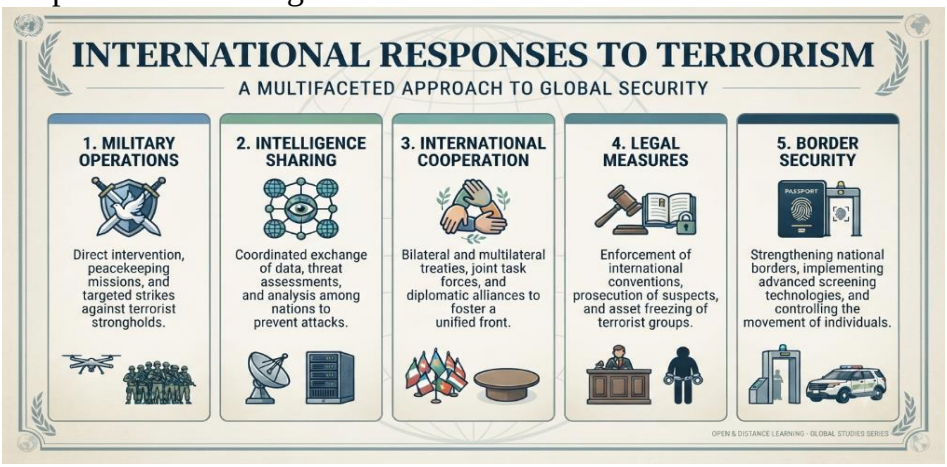

Figure 3.4: International Responses to Terrorism

Source: Google Gemini, Adapted by Abdulazeez Ayodeji Lawal, National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), 2026.

Operation Active Endeavour, a naval operation of NATO, started in October 2001 in response to the September 11 attacks. It operates in the Mediterranean and is designed to prevent the movement of militants or weapons of mass destruction and to enhance the security of shipping in general. The operation has also helped Greece prevent illegal immigration. In the same dimension, Operation Enduring Freedom is the official name used by the Bush administration for the War in Afghanistan, together with three smaller military actions, under the umbrella of the Global War on Terror. These global operations are intended to seek out and destroy any al-Qaeda fighters or affiliates.

In October 2001, US forces (with UK and coalition allies) invaded Afghanistan to oust the Taliban regime. On 7 October 2001, the official invasion began with British and US forces conducting airstrike campaigns over enemy targets. Kabul, the capital city of Afghanistan, fell by mid-November. The remaining al-Qaeda and Taliban remnants fell back to the rugged mountains of eastern Afghanistan, mainly Tora Bora. In December, Coalition Forces (the US and its allies) fought within that region. It is believed that Osama bin Laden escaped to Pakistan during the battle. In March 2002, the US and other NATO and non-NATO forces launched Operation Anaconda to destroy any remaining al-Qaeda and Taliban forces in the Shah-i-Kot Valley and Arma Mountains of Afghanistan. The Taliban suffered heavy casualties and evacuated the region.

The Taliban regrouped in western Pakistan and began to unleash an insurgent-style offensive against Coalition Forces in late 2002. Throughout southern and eastern Afghanistan, firefights broke out between the surging Taliban and Coalition Forces. Coalition Forces responded with a series of military offensives and an increase in the number of troops in Afghanistan. In February 2010, Coalition Forces launched Operation Moshtarak in southern Afghanistan along with other military offensives in the hopes that they would destroy the Taliban insurgency once and for all. Presently, peace talks are also underway between Taliban affiliated fighters and Coalition Forces. The United States and other NATO and non-NATO forces are planning to withdraw from Afghanistan by the end of 2014.

Apart from military operations, what other approaches can be used to address terrorism?

The United States has also conducted a series of military strikes on al-Qaeda militants in Yemen since the War on Terror began. Yemen has a weak central government and a powerful tribal system that leaves large lawless areas open for militant training and operations. Al-Qaida has a strong presence in the country. MacLeod Hugh is quoted in *The Guardian*, London 28 December 2009, as asserting that the US, in an

effort to support Yemeni counter-terrorism efforts, has increased their military aid package to Yemen from less than $11 million in 2006 to more than $70 million in 2009, as well as providing up to $121 million for development over the next three years (Hugh, 2009).

In addition to military efforts abroad, in the aftermath of 9/11, the Bush Administration increased domestic efforts to prevent future attacks. Various government bureaucracies which handled security and military functions were reorganised. A new cabinet-level agency, the United States Department of Homeland Security, was created in November 2002 to lead and coordinate the largest reorganisation of the US federal government since the consolidation of the armed forces into the Department of Defence.

The Justice Department launched the National Security Entry-Exit Registration System for certain male non-citizens in the US, requiring them to register in person at the Immigration and Naturalisation Service offices.

The USA PATRIOT Act of October 2001 dramatically reduces restrictions on law enforcement agencies' ability to search telephone, e-mail communications, medical, financial, and other records; eases restrictions on foreign intelligence gathering within the United States; expands the Secretary of the Treasury's authority to regulate financial transactions, particularly those involving foreign individuals and entities; and broadens the discretion of law enforcement and immigration authorities in detaining and deporting immigrants suspected of terrorism-related acts. The act also expanded the definition of terrorism to include domestic terrorism, thus enlarging the number of activities to which the USA PATRIOT Act's expanded law enforcement powers could be applied. A new Terrorist Finance Tracking Programme monitored the movements of terrorists' financial resources. This was discontinued after it was revealed by The New York Times. Telecommunication usage by known and suspected terrorists was studied through the NSA electronic surveillance programme. The Patriot Act is still in effect.

Answer the following questions to assess your understanding of the international response to terrorism.

Self-Assessment Exercise 4

1. The term "war against terrorism" became widely associated with international efforts following:
   A. The establishment of the United Nations
   B. The September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks
   C. The First World War
   D. The creation of NATO
2. Which of the following was created by the United States after the September 11 attacks to coordinate national security efforts?
   A. Department of Homeland Security
   B. International Criminal Court
   C. League of Nations
   D. World Trade Organisation
3. Critics of the war against terrorism have argued that it has sometimes been used to justify:
   A. Increased cultural exchange
   B. International cooperation only
   C. Unilateral military actions and human rights violations
   D. Economic development programmes

3.7 Summary

In this unit, you have examined the concept of terrorism, its historical origin, different perspectives surrounding its meaning, and the challenges involved in providing a universally accepted definition. You have also explored the characteristics of terrorism, the various reasons that may influence terrorist activities, and the different categories of perpetrators involved, including individuals, groups, and states. Finally, you have considered the international response to terrorism and the measures adopted by states and international organisations to address the threat it poses to global peace and security. Understanding these issues provides a broader perspective on how terrorism continues to shape international relations and security concerns in the modern world.

3.8 References/Further Readings/Web Sources

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3.9 Possible Answers to Self-Assessment Exercises

Self-Assessment Exercise 1

1. B
2. A
3. A

Self-Assessment Exercise 2

1. B
2. B
3. A

Self-Assessment Exercise 3

1. A
2. B
3. A

Self-Assessment Exercise 4

1. B
2. A
3. C

Unit 4 The Future of the International System

Unit Structure

4.1 Introduction
4.2 Learning Outcomes
4.3 The Continuation of the Contemporary Nation-State System
4.4 Regionalism
4.5 World Government
4.6 The Polis Government
4.7 Summary
4.8 References/Further Readings/Web Sources
4.9 Possible Answers to Self-Assessment Exercises

4.1 Introduction

Welcome to the final unit of this module. In the previous units, you explored the nature of the international system, the role of states and other actors, and the challenges affecting global relations. As the world continues to change, questions about the future direction of the international system become increasingly important.

In this unit, you will examine different possible models that may shape the future organisation of global affairs. As you progress through the unit, you will explore whether the current nation-state system will continue or whether alternative arrangements, such as regionalism, world government, or the polis model, may influence how societies are organised in the future. You are encouraged to reflect on which of these models appears most likely to shape the international system.

4.2 Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- identify the features of the contemporary nation-state system;
- explain the concept of regionalism;
- describe the idea of world government; and
- analyse the polis government model.

4.3 The Continuation of the Contemporary Nation-State System

Having considered possible future directions of the international system, let us begin by examining whether the existing nation-state system may continue to shape global affairs.

As you study this section, reflect on the following question:
Can the ion-state system remain the dominant structure of international relations despite global changes?

In this coursework, we have devoted our energy to describing the contemporary international system. We have shown that the dominant feature of the contemporary system is the preponderance of nation-states engaged in competition. We also acknowledged that IGOs and several other non-state actors live side by side with nation-states in the conduct of world affairs. This calls our attention to the chain of relationships in which some issues, such as the economy, concern all actors, while military-security issues are the exclusive concern of nation-states.

It might seem that events occurring in our century are rapidly changing the system daily, so it is impossible to think that the future international system would resemble the present. However, one possibility is that the world may still look much as it does today. It is possible that the present order may well last into the next century, at least in its basic characteristics. That means one would expect nation-states to remain the major actors in world politics, even as technological development continually undermines their sovereignty. The relationship among the nation-states would also be coloured by either increased or reduced interdependence, exacerbating tensions among them.

In addition, it is most likely that the world would continue to be overwhelmed by the socio-economic, ideological, and political dominance of the US-centred world, in which the promises of an entirely peaceful world order through the USA's unipolarity dreams are becoming increasingly delusive. The problem with the unipolar system is that there are always states that do not accept the hegemon and will challenge it. Thus, even if the USA is acclaimed as a hegemon, it will not be universally accepted and cannot impose its dominance on the entire world. Again, the international system in the future may continue to live with instability, wars and political violence as well as acts of terrorism. To this end, even non-state actors will inevitably be drawn into the crescendo of these crises.

Why do you think nation-states may continue to remain important actors in the international system?
This future system would correspond to the realist approach to understanding the international system, with the conceptualisation of the international arena as a chain of forces that can only be checked, rather than by the well-known mechanism of the balance of power, or by the hegemony of the USA and its allies. The implication here is that the future world order will witness the diffusion of power, with the major feature being a loose polar system characterised by the emergence of new power

centres from the erstwhile developing nations of Asia and Africa. In fact, critical scholars like Chantal Mouffe (2007) and Danilo Zolo (2007) have already argued, separately, in the international political thought of Carl Schmitt, for a multi-polar world order in the context of their criticism of the American uni-polar and imperial project.

A single power may not dominate the future international system, but could involve the emergence of multiple centres of influence. The illustration below presents the possible shift from a single dominant power structure towards a more distributed global power system.

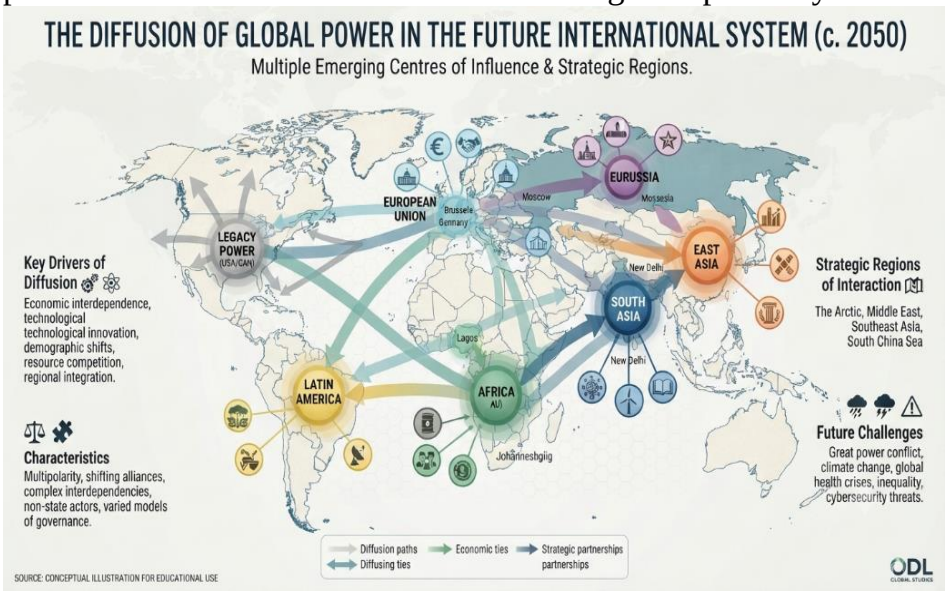

Figure 4.1: Future Distribution of Global Power
Source: Google Gemini, Adapted by Abdulazeez Ayodeji Lawal, National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), 2026.

Self-Assessment Exercise 1

1. The dominant feature of the contemporary international system is the presence of:
   A. Global cities only
   B. Nation-states as major actors
   C. International businesses only
   D. Regional governments only
2. According to the discussion, one possibility for the future international system is that:
   A. Nation-states will completely disappear
   B. The present order may continue with some changes
   C. International organisations will replace all states
   D. Conflicts will no longer occur
3. The realist approach emphasises the importance of:
   A. Power relationships among states
   B. Elimination of all borders
   C. Cultural similarities among nations
   D. Complete global unity

In the next section, you will explore regionalism as another possible model that may shape the future structure of the international system.

4.4 Regionalism

Having examined the possibility that the current nation-state system may continue, let us now consider another possible model of international organisation: regionalism. This section focuses on how countries may form larger regional units to address shared political, economic, and security interests.

As you study this section, reflect on the following question:
Can regional cooperation become a stronger alternative to the traditional nation-state system?
Another possible future world order may take the form of regional units as an alternative to the nation-state system. Countries like Switzerland and Belgium developed regional confederate forms of government centuries ago to bring diverse groups together and peacefully build stable, effective societies that continue to respect internal linguistic and ethnic diversity. The Netherlands established the world's first federation by creating the United Provinces in 1581, with the signing of the Oath of Abjuration. The United States established the world's second federation by replacing the Articles of Confederation with the Federal Constitution of 1787, which dozens of countries have since emulated.

In this order, instead of having numerous nation-states, the world may be divided into five or six regional states, or what may, in other words, be regarded as continental states. This means the world would have entities like the “United States of Europe,” “the United States of Africa,” and so on. This prediction greeted the creation of the European Community in the 1950s. At the EU's creation, many people predicted that it might not only lead to the emergence of the United States of Europe but also serve as a model for similar integration movements in other parts of the world. The European Union has attempted to unite a large group of widely diverse, formerly hostile nations spread across a vast geographical area. The African Union, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the South American Community of Nations are following the EU's lead. These multinational associations are at different stages of development, but they are all growing, both in coverage and in the extent of economic and political integration.

What examples of regional organisations show attempts by countries to work together beyond individual national interests?
There is a strong belief that the regions of the world will learn from their failures, improve on them, and make better efforts to achieve regional integration. This has been evident in the European region's ability to

prevent the EU's collapse. The EU has achieved a significant expansion today. Presently, regionalism has become a significant phenomenon in the international system, with regional organisations growing far more rapidly than global organisations. It is thus not inconceivable that, in the future, because of mutual security concerns and economic interdependence, national units might merge into larger regional socio-economic and political communities.

The argument for regional government is that it would be a better world than the current one, with a more centralised political system in which agreements would have to be reached among only a few actors rather than many. So, it would probably be a more manageable world in many respects. In addition, such a world order would be particularly effective at addressing problems that are regional rather than global in scope.

Others, however, have argued that the regional unit would just remain a replica of the nation-state system, with the same propensity for conflict and far more complex military capabilities to pursue their national interests. That means that in the future, the system of regional government conflicts, which today are confined to a localised area on the world map, would be magnified to cover a larger area of the globe. In addition, because many national leaders today struggle to sustain national unity and patriotism among their people, loyalty to a regional government would be even more difficult to maintain.

Countries often form regional organisations to strengthen cooperation and address common challenges. The illustration below shows how regional integration brings different states together through shared political, economic, and security interests.

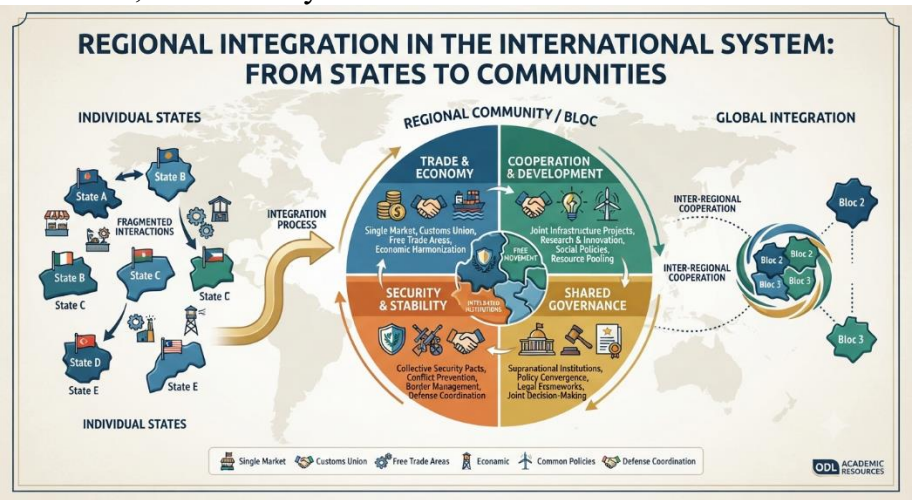

Figure 4.2: Regional Integration in the International System
Source: Google Gemini, Adapted by Abdulazeez Ayodeji Lawal, National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), 2026.

Self-Assessment Exercise 2

1. Regionalism refers to:
   A. The complete removal of all states
   B. The formation of cooperation among countries within a region
   C. The isolation of countries from one another
   D. The replacement of all governments with local authorities
2. Which organisation is an example of regional integration?
   A. European Union
   B. United Nations Security Council
   C. International Criminal Court
   D. World Trade Organisation
3. One argument in favour of regional government is that it may:
   A. Make cooperation among countries easier
   B. Eliminate all conflicts permanently
   C. Prevent countries from interacting
   D. Remove all national identities

In the next section, you will examine the idea of world government as another possible model for the future organisation of the international system.

4.5 World Government

Having explored regionalism as a possible future model of international organisation, we now turn to another possibility: world government. This section examines the idea of creating a central authority to oversee global affairs and the different forms such an arrangement might take.
As you study this section, reflect on the following question:

Do you think a single global authority can effectively manage the affairs of all nations?

The world government is yet another possible model of the international system in the future. The world government would be a political system in which a single set of institutions would preside over all human beings and political units worldwide. Several variations of this model have been contemplated. According to Pearson and Dorchester (1998), the most ambitious proposal is, first, the call for nation-states to surrender total sovereignty to a supreme global authority that would rule directly over all citizens of the world. A second model of the world government is the one designed along the lines of a federated system. In this model, nation-states would share power and authority with a central government. Under this arrangement, the world government would delegate specific powers in certain areas. This would resemble the model used by the founding fathers of the USA in creating their nation in 1787.

A third possible model would be that of a confederation of nations. Here, the central government would have limited powers, while the constituent nation-states would retain the major powers. Still, Pearson and Dorchester (1998) have outlined another model of world government that would include the creation of several separate global authorities in different functional areas, along the lines of the International Seabed Authority proposed by UNCLOS III.

What are the possible ways in which authority could be distributed between a world government and individual states?

Over the years, various model constitutions have been drafted to outline what the world government would look like, especially regarding the separation of powers among the executive, legislative, and judicial organs. Beres and Targ (1974) have identified Clark and Sohn's plan as the most discussed in their book *World Peace through World Law*. In this plan, the remarkable point lies in the formation of a permanent world police with a monopoly on the legitimate use of force.

With a highly empowered world police, one can imagine that the world government would maximise world peace. Under such an arrangement, criminals who stir up trouble or commit crimes in one part of the world and then take refuge in another have nowhere to hide. International criminals in the world would have escaped being brought to justice because the world system does not have the police with enough jurisdiction to chase them to their hideout, especially when the harbouring country refuses to surrender such international criminals.

A world government would require a system for organising authority and responsibilities at the global level. The illustration below presents a possible structure showing how a central global authority could relate to existing political units.

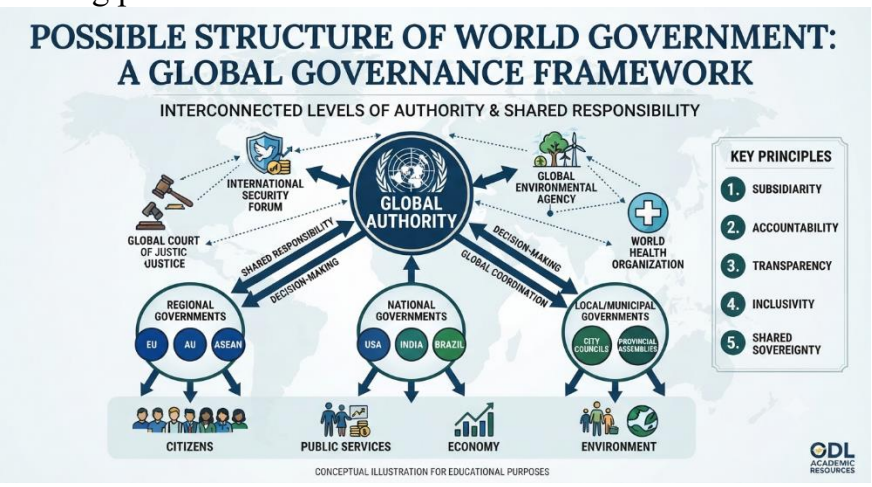

Figure 4.3: Structure of a Possible World Government

Source: Google Gemini, Adapted by Abdulazeez Ayodeji Lawal, National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), 2026.

Self-Assessment Exercise 3

1. A world government refers to:
   A. A system where one central authority oversees global affairs
   B. A system where only regional governments exist
   C. A system without any political institutions
   D. A system where states completely avoid cooperation
2. In a federated world government model:
   A. Nation-states would share authority with a central government
   B. Nation-states would lose all forms of identity
   C. Regional organisations would replace all governments
   D. No central authority would exist
3. One possible advantage of a world government is that it could:
   A. Provide stronger mechanisms for addressing global issues
   B. Eliminate all cultural differences
   C. Prevent all disagreements among people
   D. Remove the need for political institutions

In the next section, you will examine the polis government model, which presents a more decentralised approach to organising political communities in the future.

4.6 The *Polis* Government

As you continue exploring possible models of the future international system, you will now examine an alternative approach that focuses on smaller and more decentralised political units. Read through this section carefully and consider how this model differs from the larger political structures discussed earlier.

The term *polis* refers to the ancient Greek city-states, which were composed of smaller human communities. They were not like other ancient primordial city-states such as Tyre or Sidon, which were ruled by a king or a small oligarchy, but rather were political entities ruled by their bodies of citizens. In the Sparta system, for example, the *polis* was established as a network of villages. Regionalism and World government models, which we have treated in the preceding sections, are based on a centralised global system. However, it is also possible to have a system model based on increased decentralisation, such as the Greek city-states, which were referred to as the *polis*. This would create a system which revolves around smaller or fragmented units than the current nation-states. The world is made up of people speaking different languages. With the polis model, each of these ethnic groups would form its own state.

As unlikely as this model may seem, it gained some ground in the 1990s amid ethnic unrest in places like Rwanda, Angola, Liberia, and Sierra Leone, as well as the breakups of Yugoslavia and the USSR. Pearson and Dorchester (1998) state that such smaller units might be based not on common ethnicity but on special needs of the local population. James N. Rosenau (1995) in his article "Governance in the Twenty-first Century" and Saskia Sassen (1991) in his work, *The Global City*, have observed that activities of certain cities and "natural" economic zones can be best described as subtle and nascent forms of a transnational system that are outside nation-states' sponsorship, but instead from other types of actors. Examples of such developments include those resulting from the 1988 cooperation pact: Lyon in France, Milan in Italy, Stuttgart in Germany, and Barcelona in Spain. This development, which attracted huge investment and enjoyed prosperity, described as a resurrection of city-states' actions, is capable of transforming Europe's political and economic landscape, diminishing the influence of national governments and redrawing the continent's map for the twenty-first century. In a similar vein, Seyom Brown has discussed economic activities in which major sectors operate beyond national borders, with a high degree of coordination to advance the region in which the sector is situated. He cites the case of economic activities linking parts of countries clustered around San Diego and Tijuana, as well as the "growth triangle" linking Singapore and the nearby Indonesian islands (Seyom Brown, 1993: 154-155).

But as we have noted earlier, although an international system order composed of sub-national local entities or transnational micro-regions as the dominant political units may seem conceivable, it appears it will not function as a world government. As such, a world organised in communes seems utopian. And as a utopian model, one may ask whether it could be an improvement over the existing system or over any of the alternative models mentioned here.

The idea of the polis government is based on smaller political communities rather than large centralised systems. The illustration below highlights the structure and key features of this model.

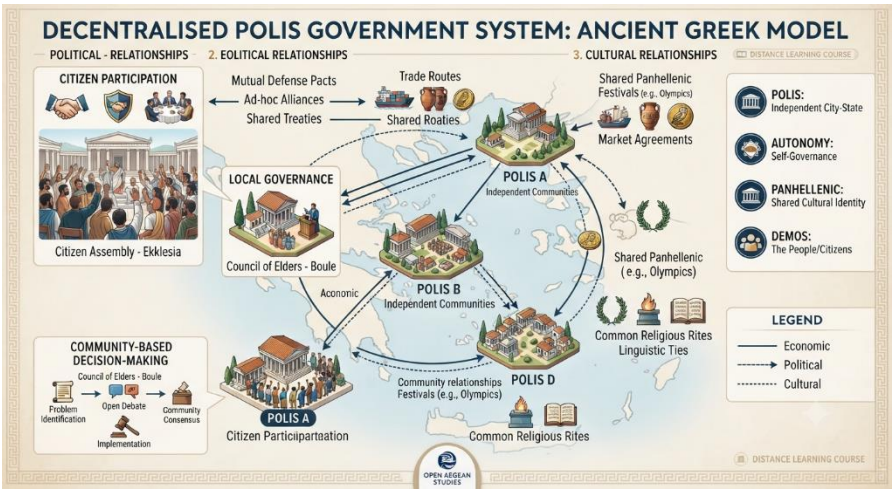

Figure 4.4: The Polis Government Model

Source: Google Gemini, Adapted by Abdulazeez Ayodeji Lawal, National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), 2026.

Self-Assessment Exercise 4

1. The polis government model is mainly based on:
   A. A highly centralised global authority
   B. Smaller and decentralised political units
   C. A single world government
   D. Military control of international affairs
2. The polis system is historically associated with:
   A. Ancient Greek city-states
   B. Modern nation-states
   C. International organisations
   D. Colonial governments
3. One major feature of the polis model is:
   A. Complete elimination of local communities
   B. Increased decentralisation of political authority
   C. Expansion of one dominant state
   D. Removal of citizen participation

4.7 Summary

In this unit, you have explored different possible models that may shape the future direction of the international system. You examined the possibility that the contemporary nation-state system may continue to remain the dominant structure of global politics, despite the growing influence of technology, globalisation, and other non-state actors. You also considered regionalism as an alternative arrangement where states may come together to form larger regional political and economic communities. Furthermore, you examined the idea of a world government as a model of central authority managing global affairs, as well as the polis model, which emphasises smaller, more decentralised political units.

These models present different possibilities for how political organisation and international relations may develop in the future. As you conclude this unit, reflect on the strengths and limitations of each model and consider which arrangement may best address the challenges of the future international system.

4.8 References/Further Readings/Web Sources

Otto, C. & Rosenau (Eds). (1989). *Global Changes and Theoretical Challenges: Approaches to World Politics for the 1990s*. Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books.

Pearson, F. & Rochester, M.J. (1997). *International Relations: the Global Conditions in the Twenty-First Century*. New York: The McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc.

Rosenau, N. J. "Governance in the Twenty-First Century." *Global Governance,* Vol. 1.

4.9 Possible Answers to Self-Assessment Exercises

Self-Assessment Exercise 1

1. B
2. B
3. A

Self-Assessment Exercise 2

1. B
2. A
3. A

Self-Assessment Exercise 3

1. A
2. A
3. A

Self-Assessment Exercise 4

1. B
2. A
3. B