Lecture No (2)

What? – International Systems

Units and Systems

What? - International Systems Units and Systems What is it that we study in IR? What are Vattel's questions about? Of all the things in the cosmos, from the physics of black holes and quantum mechanics, to art, language, and music, and the biological diversity of species, students of IR study international systems. When I say international systems, I mean more than modern nation-states. I mean systems of political entities broadly speaking, those that are made up of groups of people, with some durability, like clans, city-states, empires, or the nation-states of modern times. International Relations is about the study of the relations of these collective political "units". When two or more political units relate and interact on a regular basis, they form a system, a system being the context of regular relations amongst multiple units. This is what I mean by an "international system". I use the term because it has some precedence, and it also finds a balance, as a term, between being too abstract and too

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specific.[2] The term "international" was created by Jeremy Bentham, in modern times, but for the majority of human history, humankind has been organized into bands and clans. This form of political organization is not "national" but it is about multiple political units that interact on a regular basis, through trade, diplomacy, war, etc. This is part of what IR is about too. Many modern indigenous peoples, a significant portion of humankind, in every continent, are still organized in this form and conduct regular relations, forming systems, amongst one another, as well .as with the new nation-states

In ancient history, with agriculture and other inventions, humankind built up different kinds of units with larger E-International Relations After the organization of bands and clans, empires are the second most common form of political organization in human history, dominating international systems from remote history up to contemporary times. Modern nationstates can be empires too, like the empire of France that expanded through imperialism dominating other units. In addition to these units, there are also a variety of non-state units that are not "peoples", but which have a life in the system. These are the small fish that still play a role in the system. The Oracle at Delphi, for example, in ancient Greece, had influential relations with all the Greek city-states. In Medieval times, the Knights Templar, for example, were not a people, but formed something of a political unit nonetheless, having relations with kingdoms and empires. In modern times, these small fish have taken on various bureaucratic forms. One form is the Non-Governmental Organization (NGO), like Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch. Another form of non-state unit is the International Organization (IO), like the secretariat and organs of the United Nations, the European Union, and older Organization of American States. These units are not states or peoples, but they are political units, with political agendas and political relations. Multinational corporations (MNCs) are included in the category of non-state units as well. Different kinds of units have different internal forms, different kinds of internal politics, but, as students of IR, we are interested in the forms in which the units relate to one another, the pattern of their regular relations. This pattern or form of relations is often

referred to as the structure of the system. Martin Wight gave us two

[categories of systemic forms: sovereign and suzerain.[3

We can also use the language of anarchy and hierarchy that Kenneth Waltz used to describe these categories. Sovereign systems are relations of multiple units that recognize none of the others as superior. In this abstract sense, they have no ruler, no arkhon, they are, categorically speaking, anarchical. The citystate system of ancient Greece is the usual example of this kind of systemic structure. Each city-state defended its independence. Suzerain systems by contrast have some units, often one imperial unit, that rules the system as a recognized superior to the rest. Suzerain systems have a hierarchical structure. The tributary system of China is often given as an example of a suzerain system, where imperial China was thought to stand at the centre of the cosmos, with a divine mandate, issuing out in circles of civilization. In historical experience, systems have almost always been a mixed type, where some units wish to be suzerains, whilst others resist, and relations have a complex form. In sum, there are several kinds of political units: clans, city-states, empires,

nation-states, and variety of non-state units. These units, through regular relations of trade, warfare, and diplomacy, form international systems that have, categorically speaking, two kinds of forms: anarchic and hierarchic. In practice, political units are almost always a complex mix of the two.

This, in general, is much of what international relations are.

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