

POLI 212

Introduction to International Politics

Session 2 – **UNDERSTANDING INTERNATIONAL POLITICS-
ACTORS AND INTERNATIONAL LAW**

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Session overview

- This introductory session is very important because it provides the foundation for the study of the other sessions. This session builds on the first session.
- In this session, you will become familiar with the meaning and principles of international law and actors in the global system.

Session outline

The Key topics to be covered in the session are:

- Topic one- Actors in international relations
- Topic two- International Law

Reading List

- Chapter 1 of Asare and chapter 1 of Kegley and Blanton. Read the aspects on the discussions for session two
- Goldstein, Joshua & Jon Pevehouse (2006) International Relations, Pearson Longman: USA.
- Shimko, Keith (2005) International Relations: Perspectives and Controversies, Houghton Mifflin Company: Boston, USA.
- Kegley, Charles Jr. (2009). World Politics: Trend and Transformation (12th Edition), Wadsworth Cengage Learning: USA.

Topic One

ACTORS IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Actors in International Relations

- Actors are individuals and organizations/institutions whose actions and inactions influence the international system in profound ways. These individuals and organizations are known as Actors.
- These actors play major roles in the political, economic, social, and cultural life of the world. It must be pointed out that some of the major roles played by the actors are extremely negative. This is because terrorists and other fundamentalist groups are also actors in international relations.
- Actors are the leaders of countries, individuals, representatives and leaders of intergovernmental organizations (such as the United Nations, World Bank and the International Monetary Fund-IMF), multinational corporations, terrorist organizations, and international nonprofit organizations.



Types of Actors

- Actors in the global system are either state actors or non-state actors. State actors are the individuals and institutions that act on behalf of states/countries. The United States and Ghana's presidents, as well as the ministers/secretaries of finance and foreign affairs of both countries, are state actors. State actors do not act on their own behalf.
- Non-state actors are individuals and organizations who act on behalf of themselves, multinational corporations, nonprofit organizations, terrorist and other militant groups, and intergovernmental organizations.
- Some popular non-state actors are Oprah Winfrey, Warren Buffet, Bill and Melinda Gates, Carlos Slim Helu, Jim Yong Kim (president of the World Bank), the World Bank, Barclays Bank, World Vision International, Oxfam International, Care International, Action Aid, Amnesty International, Medicines Sans Frontiers (Doctors Without Borders), Standard Chartered Bank, Unilever, Coca Cola, and Christine Lagarde (the Managing Director of the IMF).

Sample questions

- Distinguish between state actors and non-state actors.
- Why would you classify terrorists as non-state actors?
- How relevant are state actors in international relations?

Topic Two

INTERNATIONAL LAW



Meaning of International Law

- Because international politics involves the interactions between and among countries and intergovernmental and nongovernmental organizations on several levels, international law becomes important in shaping the policies of countries towards other countries in the international system.
- International law entails a body of legal system that regulates the behavior of individuals and entities with global or international personality. The meaning of international law indicates that it applies to people and institutions that perform activities that have international implications. This is one main reason why countries take international law seriously in their relations with other countries.
- It is essential to point out that international law provides rules, regulations, standards, and principles that guide the activities of states and other actors in the international system. For instance, because of international law countries abide by certain agreements such as protecting the rights of vulnerable people in their countries and respecting certain international agreements on how to deal with people who are prisoners of war (POWs).

Sources of International Law

- Experts on national laws of countries will tell you that there are several sources of their national laws. In a democracy the prominent among these sources are the Constitution and administrative regulations.
- Goldstein and Pevehouse (2006: 274-275) and Shimko (2005:223) have argued that there are four main sources of international law. These are treaties, custom, general principles of law, and legal scholarship. **Treaties** are signed by states in the international system. These are signed by states with the expectation that they are going to abide by them.
- Goldstein and Pevehouse (2006) have emphasized that treaties are the most important source of international law, and countries make the effort not to deliberately violate them.

Sources of International Law (Contd.)

- **Custom** entails how the behavior of states towards each other over a long period of time bubbles up to become laws. Once these behaviors persist over time, they become an accepted practice among countries.
- **General principles of law** are where the basic principles of laws in several countries, such as theft and assault, are accepted as having the same meaning in the international system.
- Finally, **legal scholarship** involves the written arguments of judges and lawyers throughout the world. These are usually lawyers and judges who have distinguished themselves in the legal profession and at the bench, respectively. A copy of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which requires countries to protect certain basic rights of human beings, is available online for download for free.



Types of International Law

- There are two main types of international law. These are public international law and private international law.
- **Public international law** pertains to government-to-government relations as well as countries relations with other types of transnational actors, such as nongovernmental organizations and intergovernmental organizations (Kegley 2009).
- **Private international law**, on the other hand, according to Kegley (2009:495), pertains “to routine transnational intercourse between or among states as well as non-state actors.” It regulates “the kinds of transnational activities undertaken every day in such areas as commerce, communications, and travel.”
- Kegley has further noted that most of the international activities fall under private international law.

Principles of International Law

- The principles distinguish international law from other types of law. The principles we will discuss are sovereign equality, neutrality, nonintervention norm, de jure sovereignty, and extraterritoriality.
- **Sovereign Equality** means all countries in the international system are equal. Whether countries are rich or poor, large or small, they all have the same protection under international law.
- **Nonintervention norm** implies that international law prohibits states from interfering in the domestic affairs of other countries. However, when genocide, ethnic cleansing and mass killings are taking place, other countries are allowed by international law to interfere in the affairs of other countries to protect the lives of others.



Principles of International Law (Contd.)

- **De jure sovereignty** means a country's sovereignty is based on law, not on fact. The direct opposite is de facto sovereignty, which implies a country's existence is based on facts but there is no legal justification supporting the country's existence. Countries stay away from having diplomatic missions in countries with de facto sovereignty. The 193 member states of the United Nations have de jure sovereignty. Taiwan and Palestine have de facto sovereignty
- **Extraterritoriality** in international law allows countries to maintain jurisdictions over their diplomatic missions in other countries. Thus, the Ghana Embassy in Washington, DC belongs to the government and the people of Ghana, not the United States. In the same vein the United States Embassy in Accra belongs to the American people and their government.
- **Neutrality** means that states that decide to remain neutral or nonaligned in conflicts or war between opposing parties have rights and thus they are protected by international law. This primarily suggests that countries do not have to kowtow under any circumstance to support or oppose other countries in times of war.

Problems of International Law

- The main problem with international law has to do with enforcement. Unlike national or domestic laws where there are clearly defined institutions to enforce laws and punish those who disobey the laws of the land, there is nothing like that in the international system. For this reason, the international legal system relies on individual countries to punish violators. This indicates that the great powers in the international system will get away with most, if not all, violations. Who will punish the United States of America for violations of international law?
- Another problem is that international law lacks worldwide applicability. Countries have different ideological, religious, and social orientations. The problem comes because international law has been largely shaped by western culture, and this is somewhat antithesis of certain cultures, such as Islamic and African. Consequently, some countries do have problems applying international agreements, such as equal rights for men and women, in their jurisdictions.
- Several scholars have also noted that international law compromises the sovereignty of countries in the sense that, at times, it prevents countries from pursuing certain policies they consider important.

Sample questions

- Explain any three principles of international law.
- Describe two sources of international law.
- Discuss three importance of international law.

Conclusion of Session Two

I guess you have understood the role actors, both state and non-state, play in the international system.

Additionally, the session has outlined the importance of international law in the global system.

I am certain you are familiar with the principles, the sources and the problems of international law.

References

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