

# **INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS**

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# The Modern State System

## THE TREATY OF WESTPHALIA AND INTERNATIONAL LAW

The international state system and the modern state, as we know it today, is rather young. The treaty of Westphalia of 1648 is said to be the beginning of the system of sovereign states. But what sort of a system existed prior to Westphalia and why historians and

scholars of International Relations (IR) consider it fundamental is important to understand. The modern state, with defined political borders and sovereignty, was an alien concept till the sixteenth century. Pre- and post-Westphalia, several things have remained unchanged. Wars were fought and peace treaties were signed. But the treaty of Westphalia drew up a list of core principles, which redefined the conception of the state. Huge empires sprawled across the globe and dynasties frequently changed. Political boundaries were almost fluid, being drawn and violated repeatedly. Territories were often cut up and divided amongst allies or appropriated.

The treaty of Westphalia revised this completely. Territories were fixed and marked as inviolable. Sovereignty of the state or supremacy of the state became an accepted norm. These developments facilitated the growth of international relations, for now states could conduct relations and maintain ties as clearly identified actors; no longer did the states constantly changed their role. The treaty of Westphalia was strengthened with *two* major *turns* in history: the birth of the American nation and the French Revolution. Both lent the treaty certain credibility and deepened the norm of sovereignty and territorial inviolability. The Westphalia world order was based on *three principles*. The first is *rex est imperator in regno suo* or that 'the king is the master in his land'. This means that the king is the highest authority. Also that all sovereign states are equal. The second is that the king determines which religion is to be followed in the state. The third and the last principle is that of balance of power. This norm evolved to keep in check the hegemonic ambitions of a state.

When the Americans snapped ties with Great Britain after the much publicised and historic Boston Tea Party and declared that they were an independent nation, the idea that a nation is possible without a royal ruling dynasty was perpetuated. The French Revolution carried on the short history of breaking links with the past and rejecting the *ancient regime*. The cry of "Liberty, Equality and Fraternity" spelt the death knell of not only Marie Antoinette, the young French empress, but also the traditional social structure of France. The idea that society was divided into classes was overturned and replaced with that of fraternity. The idea of a Republic was revolutionary in 1789 and was poised to spread across Europe. Ironically, the "child of the revolution" Napoleon, doused the flames of the revolution by establishing an autocratic French Revolution. From 1795 to 1815 till he was finally exiled to the Island of Elba, European monarchies struggled to quell Napoleon's hegemonic ambitions.

The growth of international law is closely related to the simultaneous conceptualisation of state sovereignty. International law could be defined as *a code of*

*conduct, which states adhere to, both in times of war and peace.* The body of international law as we know it today, has been evolving for the last four or five hundred years in Europe. The term *international law*, first used by Jeremy Bentham in 1780, was used to express the "law of states" and its primary purpose was to regulate the relations between states. This law and its consequent obligations have been accepted by states. It not only outlines the rights and duties of states, but also provides means to amicably resolve disputes between states. Several scholars are of the opinion that international law is weak and can be easily manipulated by powerful states. They argue that international law is subject to frequent violation and the majority of states utilise it to serve their interests. Interestingly, the origins of international law lie in the instinct for self-preservation and selfish purposes. International law owes its existence to the labour of Hugo Grotius, who in the seventeenth century compiled the primary principles of this law. Much of this effort stemmed from the Dutch aspirations of an empire. International law was an effective remedy to combat pirates from attacking Dutch ships and maintaining the freedom of the seas. It was much later, that the international law acquired shades of moral and ethical righteousness.

### **THE MODERN STATE AND SOVEREIGNTY: SCHOLARS AND CLASSIFICATIONS**

The modern state is sovereign and geographically clearly defined. Traditionally, however, the king has been regarded as the sovereign and the divine embodiment of the state. His words have been accepted as the law. Since the fifteenth century, however, scholars have questioned this concept of sovereignty. Jean Bodin argued that sovereignty could be defined as a force, which lies above the citizens and the state. Sovereignty, according to Bodin, is unlimited and unconstrained in its functioning. Similarly, the law jurist Oppenheim argues that a sovereign state cannot possibly accept directions from a higher power, indicating that within the state, the sovereign is supreme. There is no individual or institution higher than the state. Hobbes envisaged such a sovereign state in *The Leviathan* and Machiavelli has done the same in the political classic, *The Prince*. Several other scholars such as Rousseau and Woodrow Wilson have posited different variations of the theory of sovereignty but all these arguments converge on the consensus that there is no higher authority than the sovereign, divine or democratically elected. This concept has been recognised