

The World Between States

The World Between States

Power, Order, Institutions, and the
Foundations of International Relations

Gaurav Tiwari

International Relations Library · Volume 1

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This book explains public institutions, concepts, and cases for education. It does not provide legal, diplomatic, security, investment, or policy advice. Moving cases are dated; official claims are identified as claims rather than treated as verified fact.

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For readers who want to understand the system behind the headline.

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Before You Read the Headline

An international event rarely begins where the headline begins. A border closes after a domestic election, an alliance statement, a market shock, a military movement, a court ruling, or a decade of changing dependence. The visible decision belongs to a chain of actors who do not share one objective, one clock, or one definition of success.

This book gives you a working model for that chain. It starts with authority and sovereignty, then asks who acts, what power can accomplish, why security measures can create insecurity, how institutions and law work without a world government, and why connection can produce both gain and vulnerability. Theory enters when it answers a problem. It is not a parade of labels.

Four distinctions will recur:

1. **Event and mechanism:** what happened is not yet why it happened.
2. **Resource and effect:** possessing capability is not the same as converting it.
3. **Fact and inference:** an official statement is evidence of what was said, not automatic proof of the world it describes.
4. **actor and system:** leaders choose, but choices are enabled and constrained by institutions, relationships, geography, ideas, and prior commitments.

The final test is not whether you can repeat a definition of realism, sovereignty, or interdependence. It is whether you can reconstruct an unfamiliar event, compare plausible explanations, and state what the evidence still cannot settle.

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Part I

A World Without a Final Authority

Why World Politics Is a Different Kind of Politics

Domestic politics usually takes place inside a recognized legal order. Its authority may be contested, uneven, or unjust, but a government can ordinarily make rules, collect revenue, adjudicate disputes, and authorize force within a territory. International politics has rules and institutions too. What it lacks is a final authority above states with the same general capacity to legislate, judge, and enforce everywhere.

International Relations calls this condition *anarchy*. The word is easily misunderstood. It does not mean permanent chaos, the absence of law, or a claim that every state is always at war. It describes a structure in which political units coexist without a common sovereign. Order must therefore be produced through some combination of self-help, bargaining, hierarchy, law, institutions, habit, legitimacy, dependence, and restraint.

Authority Has Layers

The difference between domestic and international politics is not a clean border between authority and no authority. Authority crosses levels.

A national court may issue a binding judgment. A treaty body may interpret an obligation but lack direct enforcement. A regional organization may impose conditions that members accepted in advance. A dominant state may exercise practical authority over a weaker partner without possessing formal sovereignty. A private platform may govern access to communications used by governments and citizens alike.

Ask 4 questions whenever somebody says that an actor has authority:

1. **Over whom?** Membership, territory, firms, individuals, or a particu-

lar issue?

2. **For what?** Rule-making, interpretation, coordination, enforcement, or recognition?
3. **From where?** Consent, law, coercion, expertise, custom, material dependence, or social legitimacy?
4. **With what remedy?** What happens when the rule is ignored, and who must act?

The answers prevent 2 opposite errors. One is to treat an international rule as meaningless because no world police automatically enforces it. The other is to treat formal agreement as self-executing even when authority, capacity, and political support are missing.

The UN Charter Shows the Dual Structure

The United Nations Charter expresses both legal order and decentralized power. Article 2 begins with the sovereign equality of members, requires good-faith performance of Charter obligations and peaceful settlement of disputes, and prohibits the threat or use of force against a state's territorial integrity or political independence. The same Charter gives the Security Council primary responsibility for international peace and security while allocating permanent members a veto over substantive decisions.

Legal equality and institutional inequality therefore coexist. Every member has a vote in the General Assembly. Not every member controls the same material resources, agenda access, or capacity to prevent collective action. This is not a contradiction to be solved by choosing whether law or power is "real." It is the political structure to be explained.

Anarchy Creates Problems, Not One Inevitable Behavior

Without a final protector, states must consider that promises can fail and capabilities can change. This encourages self-help. Yet self-help does not specify one policy. A state may arm, ally, remain non-aligned, build reserves, join institutions, trade widely, specialize, seek legal shelter, reassure rivals, or combine several approaches.

The condition creates recurring problems:

- no actor can guarantee that today's partner remains tomorrow's partner;
- agreements must survive incentives to defect and disagreements about interpretation;
- defensive preparations may look offensive to another state;
- large differences in power affect whose risks receive attention;
- collective problems invite each participant to wait for others to pay;
- enforcement depends on actors who have their own interests and constraints.

These problems do not predetermine failure. They explain why cooperation needs mechanisms such as monitoring, reciprocity, repeated interaction, credible commitments, domestic implementation, and shared meaning.

Hierarchy Exists Inside Anarchy

Anarchy describes the absence of a common sovereign among states. It does not mean relationships are flat. Empires, alliances, security guarantees, protectorates, occupations, financial conditions, colonial legacies, markets, and technical standards create hierarchy.

Hierarchy may be formal, as when one institution has delegated authority. It may be relational, as when one state depends on another for security or market access. It may be structural, as when choices are shaped before a negotiation begins because infrastructure, finance, or knowledge has already been organized around a few centers.

This matters for small and middle powers. Formal sovereignty can coexist with few affordable choices. A smaller state can still gain room through access, expertise, geography, legitimacy, or a coalition needed by a larger state.

Order Is a Pattern With a Political Price

An international order is a sufficiently stable pattern of rules, institutions, expectations, and power relationships. Stability alone does not make it legitimate. An imperial order can be stable for the center and violent for the governed. A rule can increase predictability while distributing bene-

fits unequally. An institution can coordinate action while silencing actors who did not design it.

Judge order through several lenses:

- What behavior becomes more predictable?
- Which actor supplies enforcement, finance, information, or restraint?
- Who receives voice, protection, or exception?
- What conflict is suppressed, displaced, or normalized?
- What makes the arrangement legitimate to those expected to follow it?
- How does it adapt when power and membership change?

Order is not the opposite of conflict. It is the arrangement within which some conflicts are managed, some prohibited, and others made difficult to see.

A Reaction Chain

Suppose State A deploys a new surveillance system near a contested border. Its government says the system is defensive. State B sees improved targeting capacity, mobilizes forces, and signs an access agreement with State C. State A interprets the agreement as encirclement and expands the deployment.

The event contains a chain:

A's deployment → B's interpretation → B's military and diplomatic response → A's interpretation → a more dangerous position for both.

Intent matters, but intent does not travel unaltered. Capability, geography, history, doctrine, domestic politics, and trust shape how an action is read. An international explanation must reconstruct both desks.

Anarchy is not an outcome. It is a condition under which actors must produce protection, commitment, and order without a final common authority.

Put It to Work

- ☐ Choose one current international institution and specify its authority, constituency, source of legitimacy, and remedy.

- ☐ Find one relationship where formal sovereign equality coexists with practical hierarchy.
- ☐ Build a 5-step reaction chain for a recent policy announcement.
- ☐ Separate what the initiating actor intended from what another actor could reasonably infer.

Decision: What kind of claim is this?

When a commentator says “the international system made them do it,” demand the missing mechanism. Structure changes incentives and options; it does not move without actors, interpretations, and decisions.

Notes

The Charter provisions summarized here are in Articles 1, 2, 24, and 27 of the *Charter of the United Nations*. Alexander Wendt’s constructivist challenge is developed in “Anarchy Is What States Make of It,” *International Organization* 46, no. 2 (1992): 391–425.

The State, the Nation, and Sovereignty

A state is not simply a country-shaped color on a map. It is a political and legal organization claiming authority over a territory and population, operating institutions, and relating to other states. A nation is a community imagined through some combination of history, language, culture, descent, political project, memory, and belonging. The 2 may overlap. They do not have to.

Confusing them turns disputes over citizenship, borders, recognition, and self-determination into apparent exceptions. They are central problems of the modern international system.

Statehood Has Several Tests

Law, diplomacy, and political practice do not reduce statehood to one universally decisive checklist. Common elements include a population, territory, government, and capacity to enter relations. Yet each contains difficult boundaries.

Territorial disputes do not automatically erase a state. Governments can lose effective control and retain recognition. An entity may govern effectively without widespread diplomatic recognition. External occupation, dependence, or delegated authority can complicate the claim without producing a single mechanical answer.

Separate at least 4 questions:

1. Does the entity maintain effective public authority?
2. Is it legally recognized, by whom, and for which relationship?
3. Can it perform international obligations and relations?

4. Do the people governed accept, contest, or divide over its authority?

A claim can be strong on one dimension and weak on another.

Recognition Is an Act With Effects

Recognition does not merely label an independent fact. It can enable diplomatic relations, access to courts and institutions, control of assets, treaty participation, and political legitimacy. It also has limits. Recognition by one state does not compel recognition by all, and withholding recognition may not remove effective governance.

Ask who is recognizing what. A state may recognize another state but not a particular government's legitimacy. It may maintain practical contact without formal recognition. An international organization may admit, suspend, credential, or decline to seat representatives under its own rules.

The map is therefore partly an outcome of political and legal practice. It is not a neutral starting image.

Sovereignty Contains More Than Independence

Sovereignty is used for several related ideas:

- **domestic authority:** the claim to rule within a territory;
- **external independence:** the absence of another state's lawful superior authority;
- **international legal status:** membership in a system of rights and obligations;
- **control:** the practical capacity to regulate borders, institutions, and decisions;
- **non-intervention:** protection against coercive interference in reserved matters.

These dimensions travel unevenly. A state may possess full legal status and limited control. It may voluntarily accept treaty obligations that restrict future choices without ceasing to be sovereign. It may be independent in law but heavily dependent in security or finance.

Consent is important but not magical. A formally voluntary agreement can be negotiated under severe asymmetry. The analytical task is to record the consent, the alternatives, the mechanism of influence, and the distribution of cost.

Borders Are Institutions

A border is not only a line. It organizes jurisdiction, movement, taxation, protection, identity, infrastructure, and access to rights. Some borders are settled and open. Others are fortified, disputed, administered differently from their legal claim, or crossed daily through social and economic relationships.

Colonial boundary-making left many states with borders designed for imperial administration rather than local political settlement. The consequence is not that every later conflict was inevitable or “ancient.” It is that state-building began from inherited territorial, institutional, and economic arrangements that distributed groups and resources in particular ways.

When a border dispute appears, ask:

- Which line is legally claimed, and which area is effectively controlled?
- What population, route, water, resource, or strategic position is affected?
- Which agreement, judgment, map, or administrative practice supports each claim?
- Does the dispute concern title, delimitation, demarcation, access, or treatment of people?
- Which domestic audience makes compromise costly?

Nation, Citizenship, and Belonging

States define membership through citizenship law and practice. Nations define belonging through narratives and boundaries that may not match citizenship. A multinational state can hold several national communities. A nation can extend across states. Diasporas can affect domestic coalitions, remittances, diplomacy, and conflict without acting as one unit.

Nationalism can support emancipation from imperial rule, democratic solidarity, exclusion, expansion, or several projects in different moments. Treating nationalism as either inherently liberating or inherently aggressive removes the political work: who defines the nation, which history is selected, who belongs, and what state project follows?

Self-Determination Meets Territorial Integrity

The UN Charter places self-determination among its purposes and protects states against force directed at territorial integrity or political independence. These principles do not turn every claim by a distinct community into an automatic right to a new state. Nor do they make existing borders morally complete.

Decolonization gave self-determination a powerful application against alien rule. Claims within recognized states raise additional questions: representation, autonomy, discrimination, remedial arguments, consent, feasibility, violence, and the rights of populations inside the proposed boundary. International practice remains contested.

Do not solve this tension with a slogan. Identify the claimant, the people represented, the territory, the governing relationship, the proposed remedy, and the consequences for others.

Contested Statehood Is Not Empty Space

Where status is disputed, people still need courts, schools, documents, health systems, movement, trade, and security. External actors often create practical arrangements without settling final status: liaison offices, special travel documents, technical agreements, or participation under a designated name.

These arrangements can reduce immediate harm. They can also stabilize an unresolved hierarchy. The analyst should distinguish practical governance from recognition, and temporary procedure from a final legal conclusion.

Case File: South Sudan and the Layers of Statehood

South Sudan formally became independent on 9 July 2011 after an internationally monitored referendum held under the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement. On 14 July, the UN General Assembly admitted it as the organization's 193rd member following a Security Council recommendation.

The sequence demonstrates that independence, recognition, and institutional membership are related but distinct acts. A referendum supplied evidence of a political choice under an agreed process. Independence changed legal and political status. Bilateral recognitions established particular relationships. UN membership followed the Charter's admission procedure.

Membership did not settle borders, resources, migration, administrative capacity, or the relationship with Sudan. The UN's own admission coverage identified these as outstanding issues. Legal statehood therefore opened a new set of institution-building and bargaining problems. It did not certify effective control or erase interdependence.

Use the 4-dimension test:

- **effectiveness:** which institutions could govern, tax, provide security, and deliver services across territory?
- **recognition:** which states and organizations accepted the new status, and through what acts?
- **international capacity:** which obligations, memberships, assets, and negotiations became available?
- **domestic legitimacy:** how did communities relate to the new state and its distribution of authority?

The case warns against using membership as a proxy for every dimension of sovereignty. It also warns against treating limited capacity as proof that statehood is unreal. Different questions require different evidence.

Legal equality, practical inequality

Sovereign equality means that states possess equal legal status in a defined sense. It does not mean equal territory, wealth, population, military power, administrative capacity, or voice in every institution.

Put It to Work

- ☐ Choose one disputed status and separate effectiveness, recognition, international access, and domestic legitimacy.
- ☐ For one sovereignty claim, identify whether it concerns authority, independence, status, control, or non-intervention.
- ☐ Read one border claim without relying on the map image alone.
- ☐ Identify who is included and excluded by one nationalist claim.

Decision: What is being recognized?

Never write “the world recognizes” when the evidence is a set of particular state or institutional decisions. Name the recognizing actor, object, date, and practical effect.

Who Else Acts

States remain central because they make law, tax, recognize, represent, regulate territory, authorize public force, and join many international institutions. State-centrism becomes an error only when it turns every other actor into scenery or treats every state as internally unitary.

The useful question is not whether an actor “matters.” It is how the actor changes another actor’s options, information, incentives, capacity, legitimacy, or audience.

Build an Actor Map

For each actor, record 6 elements:

1. **objective:** the change or condition sought;
2. **capability:** resources and relationships that can produce effects;
3. **dependency:** what the actor needs from others;
4. **constraint:** law, authority, capacity, geography, coalition, or time;
5. **audience:** who must accept, reward, fund, or not obstruct the action;
6. **arena:** where the actor can make the relevant decision.

An actor map is relational. A firm with valuable technology may influence a regulation while depending on states for licenses, infrastructure, and legal protection. An international organization may set an agenda while depending on member contributions and access. A social movement may shift legitimacy without commanding enforcement.

International Organizations Are Delegated and Political

International organizations can collect information, coordinate rules, lend, monitor, convene, adjudicate, authorize, and provide services. Their secretariats and experts may develop initiative beyond the immediate preference of one member. They still operate through a legal mandate, budget, membership structure, and political environment.

Do not personify an organization without locating the act. “The UN decided” may mean the Security Council adopted a resolution, the General Assembly voted, the Secretariat issued a report, a specialized agency changed guidance, or an official spoke. These acts have different authority.

Ask whether members delegated the power, whether the organization possesses independent capacity, and who controls implementation. An institution can matter by changing information or legitimacy even when it cannot compel compliance.

Firms Govern Dependencies

Companies organize production, platforms, standards, data, logistics, finance, communications, and infrastructure across borders. Some possess revenue or technical capacity larger than many public agencies. Their influence does not make them states.

A firm can deny service under contract, lobby government, set private participation rules, move capital, control a supply bottleneck, or provide infrastructure that public authority depends on. At the same time it is incorporated under law, exposed to jurisdiction, dependent on workers and suppliers, and vulnerable to market exit or political restriction.

Map the mechanism. “Corporate power” is too broad when the actual route is procurement, technical lock-in, campaign finance, employment concentration, standard setting, arbitration, or control of information.

Armed Groups Exercise Force Without Full Statehood

Insurgent groups, militias, criminal organizations, private military companies, and other armed actors can hold territory, tax, provide services, terrorize, bargain, and cross borders. Their capabilities, legitimacy, legal status, and relationship to states vary sharply.

Avoid 2 shortcuts. The first assumes that control of violence creates legitimate public authority. The second assumes that a non-state label means no governance or political objective. Record what the group does, how it is financed, whom it claims to represent, who supports or constrains it, and how civilians experience its rule.

Educational analysis should not reproduce operational detail that enables harm. The purpose is to understand authority, conflict, and bargaining from public evidence.

Cities and Regions Cross National Channels

Cities cooperate on climate, transport, health, investment, and migration. Provinces and states within federations maintain international offices or commercial relations. Their legal authority comes from domestic constitutional arrangements, but their networks can alter policy diffusion and implementation.

A mayor cannot ordinarily conclude a national defense treaty. A city can still change emissions, procurement, sanctuary policy, infrastructure standards, or the practical success of an international commitment. Sub-national action explains why a state signature does not guarantee uniform implementation.

Movements Change What Is Legitimate

Transnational advocacy networks connect local groups, experts, donors, media, courts, and international bodies. They may document abuse, change language, raise reputational cost, or move an issue into a forum where a government is vulnerable.

Their influence is uneven. Attention favors some victims, languages, and media markets. Funding can distort accountability. A campaign may win a declaration without implementation or achieve a procedural opening while failing to shift material conditions.

Legitimacy is nevertheless a form of political capacity. If an action becomes difficult to defend publicly, coalitions and institutions may change even before coercion occurs.

Experts and Knowledge Networks Frame the Decision

Epidemiologists, economists, engineers, lawyers, intelligence analysts, humanitarian workers, and standards specialists translate complex conditions into decision categories. Their models do not simply report reality. They choose measures, thresholds, assumptions, and uncertainty language.

Expertise can make coordination possible. It can also conceal distributional choices inside technical procedure. Ask who commissioned the knowledge, which evidence was admissible, what uncertainty was retained, and who could challenge the frame.

One Crisis, Many Arenas

Consider a submarine cable disruption. States investigate jurisdiction and security. Cable owners restore service. Insurers and financiers calculate loss. Platform firms reroute data. Military organizations assess intent. International bodies share technical information. News organizations frame attribution. Users and firms experience uneven outages.

No single actor owns the event. Yet actors are not equally capable. The actor map reveals who can diagnose, repair, attribute, regulate, compensate, punish, or escalate. “All stakeholders” would hide those differences.

Actor plurality does not imply actor equality. Specify the decision, arena, capability, dependency, and constraint before comparing influence.

Put It to Work

- ☐ Replace one sentence that says an organization “acted” with the organ and legal form.
- ☐ Map a firm’s influence through a specific dependency rather than its size.
- ☐ Add the relevant subnational, expert, movement, or infrastructure actor to one state-only explanation.
- ☐ Record which actor can implement, which can legitimate, and which can obstruct.

Decision: Does this actor belong on the map?

Include an actor when it changes a consequential option, relationship, interpretation, or implementation. Do not add names merely to make the diagram look comprehensive.

Levels of Explanation

An explanation answers a particular question about an outcome. “Why did the crisis begin?” is different from “Why did it escalate on Tuesday?” or “Why did these 2 states respond differently to the same shock?” Before choosing a theory, stabilize the thing to be explained.

Levels of analysis organize possible causes. They do not tell you in advance which cause wins.

The Individual Level

Leaders perceive risk, interpret signals, remember analogies, choose advisers, and authorize action. Their beliefs and errors can matter most when authority is concentrated, information is ambiguous, or a decision window is short.

Individual explanation requires evidence. A speech may be strategic rather than sincere. A memoir may defend the author’s legacy. A psychological label based on public behavior can be speculation dressed as diagnosis.

Look for decision records, repeated beliefs, adviser testimony tested against other evidence, and moments where a different leader plausibly had an available alternative. Do not explain a country through a personality when institutions or constraints made the same action likely.

The Domestic Level

States contain executives, legislatures, courts, militaries, bureaucracies, parties, firms, regions, movements, media, and publics. Policy can reflect bargaining among them, not one national preference.

Domestic mechanisms include:

- electoral incentives and coalition maintenance;
- bureaucratic missions, procedures, and information control;
- civil–military relations;
- concentrated industries and distributed costs;
- nationalism, identity, and opposition competition;
- constitutional authority and judicial constraint;
- state capacity to carry out the chosen policy.

“Domestic politics” is not a residual category. Name the actor, resource, institutional route, and decision affected.

The Dyadic Level

Some outcomes arise from the relationship between 2 actors: rivalry, alliance, territorial dispute, trade dependence, repeated crisis behavior, or historical mistrust. Neither actor’s attributes alone explain the interaction.

A deployment may be unremarkable in one relationship and alarming in another. The difference can lie in proximity, unresolved claims, communication channels, force posture, or a history of broken agreements. Dyadic explanation is where reaction chains become especially useful.

The Regional Level

Regions develop patterns of threat, hierarchy, institution, identity, and intervention that cannot be derived from global structure alone. Geography makes some actors permanent neighbors. Regional powers, external patrons, colonial borders, economic corridors, and local institutions shape who can act and which security problems travel.

Do not treat a region as a sealed container or a cultural personality. Define the relationship that makes it a region for this question. Energy networks may create one regional boundary, migration another, and military planning a third.

The Systemic Level

Systemic explanation concerns the arrangement of capabilities, authority, and interaction across the wider system. The distribution of power, absence of final government, polarity, global production, and institutional order can alter incentives faced by many states at once.

Systemic pressures do not produce identical responses. States occupy different positions, interpret threats differently, and convert resources through domestic institutions. A useful systemic claim identifies the pressure and then explains the variation.

Levels Can Form a Causal Chain

Suppose a commodity shock increases import costs. That is a transnational or systemic change. In State A, an election makes the government politically vulnerable. Domestic firms lobby for subsidies. The leader interprets a neighbor's export control through a history of rivalry. A retaliatory restriction follows, changing regional prices and inviting another external power to offer finance.

The explanation crosses levels:

global shock → domestic distribution → leader interpretation
→ dyadic response → regional realignment.

This is not permission to list every possible cause. Each arrow needs a mechanism and evidence.

Avoid the Level-Switch Trick

A weak argument begins with one question and answers another. It asks why a war occurred but shows only why one leader disliked another state. It asks why cooperation endured but lists only the treaty's formal design. It asks why a norm spread but points only to a powerful sponsor.

Run a level check:

1. Write the outcome with date, unit, and comparison.
2. State the proposed cause at its actual level.
3. Name the mechanism connecting cause to outcome.

4. Identify what should be visible if the mechanism operated.
5. Test a rival explanation from another level.
6. State whether the levels compete, complement, or sequence.

Counterfactuals Clarify Causal Weight

Ask what would likely differ if the proposed cause changed while other important conditions remained. If a different leader faced the same alliance, domestic coalition, and military position, would the decision plausibly change? If the election were absent, would the economic shock still produce restriction? If geography differed, would the same capability alarm the neighbor?

Counterfactuals are not fictional freedom. They discipline the claim by exposing which part of the explanation carries the outcome. Keep the alternative close to what was historically and institutionally possible.

Same Event, Different Lens

A small state joins a security partnership.

A realist lens may emphasize threat, balancing, and uncertainty. A liberal lens may examine domestic preferences, institutional information, and credible cooperation. A constructivist lens may ask how identity and appropriate partnership were produced. A critical lens may trace hierarchy, colonial categories, and whose security the partnership defines.

These lenses need not be mutually exclusive. They ask different questions and privilege different mechanisms. Comparison should identify what each reveals, what evidence it requires, and what it leaves weakly explained.

More levels are not automatically better

A compact explanation with one demonstrated mechanism can outperform a comprehensive list. Add a level only when it changes the causal account or explains meaningful variation.

Put It to Work

- ☐ Rewrite one broad “why” question as a dated, bounded outcome.

- ☐ Generate individual, domestic, dyadic, regional, and systemic hypotheses.
- ☐ Choose the 2 with the strongest observable mechanisms.
- ☐ State whether they compete, sequence, or operate through each other.

Decision: Where does the explanation live?

Locate the cause where the decisive variation occurs. Then trace any necessary links across levels without turning background conditions into direct causes.

Part II

Power, Security, and Order

What Power Can and Cannot Mean

Power is often treated as an inventory: population, territory, military spending, gross domestic product, energy, technology, or nuclear weapons. Inventories matter. They do not tell you which actor can produce which effect in a particular relationship.

A large resource can be unusable, misdirected, or offset. A smaller actor can control access, delay, legitimacy, local knowledge, or a decision rule that a larger actor needs. Power is best analyzed as capacity converted through a mechanism under constraints.

Start With the Effect

Ask what change is at issue:

- make another actor do something it would not otherwise do;
- prevent an issue from reaching a decision agenda;
- shape the rules and institutions inside which choices occur;
- create identities, categories, and knowledge that make some actions thinkable;
- preserve autonomy by denying another actor control;
- attract cooperation because an actor or project appears legitimate or valuable.

These effects are not interchangeable. Military capability may deter attack while doing little to establish a technical standard. Market access may change a firm's choice while failing to change a government that values political survival more than income. Moral authority may build a coalition without delivering implementation.

Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall distinguish compulsory, institutional, structural, and productive power. Their framework is useful because it expands the question beyond direct command: who controls whom, which rules bias outcomes, how positions shape capacities, and how social categories produce subjects and possibilities.

Resources Need a Conversion Chain

Use this sequence:

resource → usable instrument → target dependence or vulnerability → behavioral or structural effect → political consequence.

A state possesses a large market. To convert it into bargaining power, it needs legal authority to restrict access, administrative capacity to implement the measure, domestic willingness to bear reciprocal loss, and a target that cannot cheaply switch markets. The target may respond by conceding, retaliating, subsidizing, rerouting, delaying, or building a coalition.

The final consequence may differ from the immediate effect. A restriction can produce short-term compliance and long-term diversification away from the coercer.

Relational Power Depends on Alternatives

Dependence becomes politically important when exit is costly and alternatives are scarce. If 2 actors need each other equally, neither automatically controls the relationship. If interruption hurts one faster, more visibly, or in a politically sensitive sector, asymmetry creates leverage.

Measure dependence through more than trade volume:

- concentration of suppliers or buyers;
- time needed to switch;
- infrastructure compatibility;
- legal and financial exposure;

- domestic groups that bear the cost;
- stockpiles and spare capacity;
- ability to conceal, transfer, or socialize loss.

A small supplier of a specialized component can hold temporary leverage over a larger economy. That leverage shrinks if the buyer can redesign, stockpile, or coordinate alternatives.

Agenda Power Shapes Which Choices Exist

Direct bargaining begins after an issue enters the room. Agenda power controls entry, timing, framing, and procedure. A chair may schedule a vote after a coalition forms. A lender may define which policy counts as credible. A standards body may choose the technical baseline against which every proposal must be defended.

Evidence of agenda power often appears in absence: proposals never considered, harms measured in no accepted category, or actors unable to access the venue. Absence is difficult to prove. Look for procedural rules, rejected agenda requests, drafting control, consultation records, and changes after membership or voting rules shift.

Structural Power Organizes Positions

Structural power concerns the relationships that constitute actors' capacities. A debtor and creditor do not enter negotiation with preferences alone. Their positions are shaped by payment schedules, currency access, law, ratings, domestic institutions, and alternative finance. A colonial economy built around export extraction can retain that structure after formal independence.

The mechanism is not simply that a powerful actor issues commands. The structure makes some strategies affordable and others punishing. Because no single decision creates the whole constraint, structural power can look like neutral necessity.

Productive Power Shapes Categories

Political language divides states into developed and developing, responsible and rogue, stable and fragile, donor and recipient, modern and traditional. Categories help organize knowledge and policy. They can also distribute authority and stigma.

Ask who defines the category, which measures make it visible, what behavior it authorizes, and whether those classified can revise it. A category is powerful when it shapes how actors understand themselves and are treated by others.

Legitimacy Changes the Cost of Rule

Legitimate authority reduces the amount of coercion needed because rules are accepted as appropriate, lawful, procedurally fair, or necessary. Legitimacy is not popularity and does not make an institution just. It is an empirical relationship between a claim to authority and the reasons audiences accept or reject it.

An action may be materially possible and politically costly because partners, domestic institutions, or publics refuse its justification. Conversely, broad legitimacy can help a smaller actor gather support disproportionate to its material resources.

Power Conversion Fails

Conversion can fail because:

- the objective is vague or internally contradictory;
- the instrument cannot reach the relevant actor;
- the target values resistance more than the coercer expected;
- domestic institutions cannot sustain the cost;
- allies condition or dilute implementation;
- the action creates counter-coalitions;
- tactical success destroys legitimacy needed for settlement;
- the resource is impressive in general but irrelevant to the task.

Power should therefore be stated with a verb and object: power to deny access, shape a rule, mobilize finance, survive interruption, define a cate-

gory, or legitimate a settlement.

Resources are inputs. Power is demonstrated in a relationship through a conversion mechanism, and the consequence must be judged at the relevant time horizon.

Put It to Work

- ☐ Choose one resource ranking and state which effect it can actually support.
- ☐ Trace a complete conversion chain, including target countermeasures.
- ☐ Identify an agenda rule that changes whose proposal can be considered.
- ☐ Add the structural or productive power that a direct-command explanation misses.

Decision: Who is powerful for this task?

Compare actors against the required effect, alternatives, time, authority, implementation capacity, and likely reaction. Do not substitute an aggregate ranking for the relationship.

Notes

Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall, “Power in International Politics,” *International Organization* 59, no. 1 (2005): 39–75, develops the 4-part taxonomy used in this chapter.

The Security Dilemma

State A wants to become safer. It improves readiness, surveillance, defenses, or alliances. State B cannot observe intention directly. It sees a capability that could reduce warning time or increase the cost of waiting. B responds. A treats that response as proof that its original fear was correct.

The security dilemma is the possibility that measures taken for security reduce another actor's security and produce a spiral that neither initially wanted. It is not a synonym for any rivalry or arms competition.

The Dilemma Requires Compatible Insecurity

The concept is strongest when both sides could prefer mutual restraint but cannot safely reach or sustain it. If one actor clearly seeks conquest and the other resists, the problem is not only misperception. If capabilities are transparent and purely protective, reassurance is easier. If both can distinguish offense from defense, the spiral may weaken.

Robert Jervis identifies offense–defense balance and the distinguishability of offensive and defensive postures as important conditions. Geography, technology, doctrine, mobilization, and alliances influence both. Analysts often overstate what hardware alone reveals. The same system can play different roles under different basing, training, and command arrangements.

Intent Is Private and Capability Travels

Governments know more about their own immediate intention than outsiders do. They may also be uncertain about future governments. A capability built today can remain after policy changes. The observer therefore asks not only “What does A want now?” but “What could A do later, how quickly, and what would we lose by waiting?”

Statements of peaceful intent help only when connected to costly, observable, and durable behavior. A claim that cannot be distinguished from what an aggressive actor would say carries little information.

Geography Changes the Meaning of Preparation

Distance, terrain, access, warning time, and concentration affect whether a posture looks offensive. A force stationed far from a border may reassure more than the same force deployed forward. A defensive obstacle may look different from long-range strike capacity. Maritime and air systems complicate the distinction because mobility and dual use expand possible roles.

Geography is not destiny. Infrastructure, alliances, surveillance, and technology alter it. The correct question is how geography changes the time and cost of attack, defense, reinforcement, and verification.

Domestic Audiences Reward the Spiral

Leaders can face political punishment for appearing weak while receiving less punishment for unnecessary caution. Militaries plan against damaging possibilities, not only declared intent. Industries and regions may benefit from security spending. Historical memory gives particular signals emotional force.

These domestic processes do not make security concerns fake. They explain why a mutually costly response can remain politically rational for each government. A leader who privately sees a dilemma may lack authority to slow it.

Reassurance Must Address the Other Desk

Reassurance is not repeating that an action is defensive. It changes what the other side can observe or fear. Possible mechanisms include:

- advance notification and communication channels;
- reciprocal inspection or monitoring;
- limits on location, number, readiness, or exercise pattern;
- separating defensive capability from rapid offensive concentration;
- phased steps that preserve reversibility;
- third-party verification;
- explicit assurance connected to behavior, not only words.

Every reassurance has costs. Transparency can expose vulnerability. A limit may lock in inequality. Verification can be intrusive or incomplete. Domestic actors may portray restraint as concession.

The Spiral and Deterrence Problem

Reducing a security dilemma does not require assuming all threats are misunderstandings. A state may need deterrent capacity while also limiting avoidable alarm. The problem is to make denial and assurance work together.

Pure reassurance can invite exploitation if the threat is real. Pure threat can convince a defensive rival that aggression is coming. Policy must be conditional on evidence, posture, and reaction rather than a moral preference for hardness or softness.

A Settled Illustration

During the Cold War, the United States and Soviet Union combined intense nuclear competition with communication, arms-control agreements, notification, and verification. These mechanisms did not remove rivalry or eliminate danger. They sought to reduce particular uncertainties and control parts of a relationship in which rapid escalation could be catastrophic.

The lesson is not that one agreement solved the dilemma. It is that adversaries can cooperate on the management of risk while continuing to compete. Cooperation may be narrow, reciprocal, and designed around shared vulnerability rather than trust.

Diagnose Before Applying the Label

Use 5 tests:

1. Could both actors prefer a less militarized or less dangerous position?
2. Is the initiating measure plausibly compatible with defense?
3. Can the observer distinguish intent or posture at acceptable cost?
4. Does each response reduce the other's warning, options, or confidence?
5. Is there a feasible reassurance or verification step that preserves essential security?

If the answer to the first 2 is no, coercion or aggression may be the stronger frame. If the last is no, the dilemma may be real but difficult to mitigate under current technology or politics.

WATCH OUT

Do not use the security dilemma to erase responsibility. Misperception, domestic politics, and structural uncertainty can coexist with deliberate coercion, treaty violation, or aggression.

Put It to Work

- ☐ Identify the first action, interpretation, response, and unintended effect in one spiral.
- ☐ Separate stated intent from observable posture.
- ☐ Assess offense–defense balance and distinguishability for the specific theater.
- ☐ Propose one assurance and state the vulnerability it creates.

Decision: Dilemma or threat?

Treat the security dilemma as a hypothesis. Compare it with deliberate revision, domestic diversion, bureaucratic momentum, and alliance politics before choosing the explanation.

Notes

Robert Jervis, "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (1978): 167–214, provides the offense–defense and distinguishability framework.

War, Bargaining, and Miscalculation

War destroys lives and resources that could, in principle, be part of a negotiated settlement. That creates a puzzle. If both sides expect cost, why can they not find a bargain each prefers to fighting?

The bargaining model does not claim that war is sensible or that leaders calculate perfectly. It turns the puzzle into mechanisms: private information and incentives to misrepresent, commitment problems, indivisibility or framing of the issue, domestic political divergence, and errors in perception and implementation.

The Bargaining Range

Imagine a disputed benefit with possible divisions. Each side has an expected outcome from war minus the cost it expects to pay. If a division exists that gives both more than that expected war result, a bargaining range exists.

This simple model clarifies 3 things. War costs can create space for agreement. Expectations, not objective capability alone, shape the limits. And a range does not guarantee a deal; the actors must locate, credibly commit to, and politically accept it.

The model is an analytical device, not a moral market in which lives and rights can always be traded. Some political goods are understood as indivisible, and the people paying the cost may not control the decision.

Private Information and Misrepresentation

Leaders know imperfectly the capability, resolve, allies, and domestic constraints of other actors. Each may have reason to exaggerate strength or determination to win a better bargain. Credibly revealing military plans or vulnerabilities can reduce the advantage those plans provide.

James Fearon identifies private information combined with incentives to misrepresent as one rationalist explanation for war. The mechanism explains why cheap statements may fail. It does not mean every claim is a bluff or that better information always prevents conflict.

Costly signals, mobilization, alliance commitments, inspections, or limited actions may reveal information. They can also escalate, be misread, or create sunk political costs.

Commitment Problems

An actor may prefer a bargain today and fear that the other side will violate it after power or position changes. A rising state may be unable to promise restraint once stronger. A withdrawing force may be unable to guarantee the safety of collaborators after departure. A disarmament step may be difficult to reverse if the other party defects.

Commitments become more credible through monitoring, phased exchange, guarantees, third-party presence, domestic ratification, automatic consequences, or arrangements that reduce the gain from defection. None is universally sufficient. Guarantors can leave, institutions can fail, and future governments inherit promises they did not design.

Indivisibility Is Often Political

Territory, sacred sites, sovereignty, and regime survival may be presented as impossible to divide. Sometimes the physical or legal object truly resists division. Often the obstacle is how the issue is framed, who can authorize compromise, and whether side payments or shared arrangements are legitimate.

Calling an issue indivisible can itself be a bargaining position. Analysts should ask what institutional designs were considered, who rejected them, and whether domestic audiences made any division politically fatal.

Leaders and Citizens Can Face Different Costs

Leaders may gain political survival, resources, or ideological goals while soldiers and civilians bear the main cost. Regime institutions shape information and accountability. Opposition parties can punish compromise or expose failure. Military organizations can provide biased estimates. Nationalist mobilization can narrow the set of publicly defensible bargains.

This mechanism does not require assuming leaders want war. It shows why “the state” may not have one welfare calculation.

Miscalculation Has Sources

Miscalculation is not an explanation until the mistake and its source are named.

Possible sources include:

- intelligence collection or assessment failure;
- motivated reasoning and confirmation bias;
- analogies that preserve a surface resemblance but miss the mechanism;
- organizational plans that hide political uncertainty;
- secrecy that prevents internal challenge;
- signaling interpreted through a different doctrine;
- coalition partners misrepresenting their commitment;
- escalation that outruns political control.

Evidence should show what decision-makers believed before the outcome, not merely that the outcome later proved costly.

War Can Change the Bargain

Fighting reveals capability and resolve, destroys assets, changes territory, mobilizes identity, and alters domestic coalitions. A settlement available

before war may disappear after violence, while a previously incredible commitment may become enforceable through changed control.

This is why termination is not simply returning to the prewar table. The parties, issues, information, and political costs have changed. A battlefield outcome remains different from a political settlement capable of lasting.

Build a Prewar Bargaining File

For a historical case, record:

1. the disputed issue and relevant actors;
2. each side's publicly stated and inferred objectives;
3. expected costs, capabilities, and likely allies at the decision date;
4. proposals that were actually available;
5. private information and possible incentives to misrepresent;
6. any commitment problem or domestic veto;
7. the belief that later evidence proved wrong;
8. the outcome that war produced and whether it resolved the dispute.

Do not treat a later settlement as proof that the same terms were politically or informationally available before the war. Test the path.

War is not explained by saying the parties had incompatible interests. Explain why bargaining, commitment, information, or political authority could not contain the incompatibility.

Put It to Work

- ☐ Draw the plausible bargaining range using the expectations held before war.
- ☐ Identify the information each side possessed privately and what it had reason to hide.
- ☐ Test for a shift in future power that undermined commitment.
- ☐ Locate who made the decision and who bore the principal cost.

Decision: What blocked the bargain?

Choose the mechanism with the strongest contemporaneous evidence. Do not list information, commitment, indivisibility, and miscalculation as interchangeable causes.

Notes

James D. Fearon, “Rationalist Explanations for War,” *International Organization* 49, no. 3 (1995): 379–414, develops the bargaining puzzle and the information and commitment mechanisms summarized here.

Deterrence, Compellence, and Credibility

Deterrence seeks to prevent an action. Compellence seeks to make an actor begin, stop, or undo an action. Both combine threat, communication, capability, and an expectation about how the target values alternatives. They are not the same problem.

Deterrence can succeed invisibly because the prohibited action never occurs. Compellence must produce visible change and often confronts the target's sunk costs, reputation, and control of the pace.

Write the Threat as a Conditional

A threat contains:

If the target takes or fails to take action X, the issuer will impose consequence Y; if the target complies, Y will be withheld, stopped, or removed under condition Z.

Vague threats can preserve flexibility but create interpretation risk. Precise threats can clarify the boundary while inviting the target to operate just below it. A credible policy also needs assurance. If compliance still produces punishment or regime-threatening loss, the target has less reason to concede.

Capability Must Fit the Consequence

General military or economic strength does not establish capability for the promised action. The issuer needs access, readiness, legal and political authority, intelligence, partners, logistics, and a way to control escalation. The target evaluates whether the issuer can act at the required time and sustain the cost.

Capability can also be too blunt. A devastating response may be technically available and politically incredible for a minor violation. Graduated options can strengthen credibility, but they can also normalize escalation or create ambiguity about the real threshold.

Resolve Is Relational

Resolve is willingness to bear cost for an objective. It depends on stakes, alternatives, domestic support, time, and expected effectiveness. No state possesses a single reserve of resolve that transfers mechanically from one crisis to another.

This is why “reputation” should not be treated as a bank balance. Observers distinguish issues, locations, allies, leaders, and domestic conditions. A past retreat may signal limited stakes rather than universal weakness. A past commitment may not make an implausible present threat credible.

Signals Need an Audience and Alternative Explanation

Mobilization, deployments, public speeches, private messages, exercises, sanctions, and alliances can signal capability or resolve. Ask what else could produce the same signal. A deployment may reassure an ally, prepare defense, compel a rival, or satisfy domestic critics.

A costly signal is harder to imitate because it imposes risk or political commitment. It is not automatically clear. Different audiences may read the same cost differently, and leaders may misjudge which audience controls the decision.

Denial and Punishment Work Differently

Deterrence by denial reduces confidence that the prohibited action will succeed. Deterrence by punishment promises unacceptable cost after or during the attempt. Denial can be more credible when defensive capability is already in place. Punishment may reach assets the target values but creates questions of proportionality, escalation, and civilian harm.

The 2 can reinforce each other. They can also conflict. A punishment threat that appears offensive may intensify a security dilemma. A denial posture may reassure if its limits are observable.

Extended Deterrence Adds an Ally

When one state promises to protect another, credibility involves 3 relationships: protector, protected ally, and adversary. The ally fears abandonment. The protector fears entrapment. The adversary may test whether the alliance applies to a particular action or territory.

Forward presence, integrated planning, consultation, and clear commitments can increase credibility. They also reduce flexibility and may make local escalation harder to contain. Allies are actors with their own domestic politics, not pieces protected by a single strategist.

Compellence Needs an Exit

To compel, the issuer must state what compliance looks like and what follows. If demands expand after partial compliance, the target learns that concession does not end pressure. If sanctions or deployments cannot be reversed, the promised benefit of compliance is weak.

An exit does not require trust. It can use sequencing, verification, escrow, reciprocal steps, or third-party monitoring. The issuer also needs a plan for refusal. Repeated threats without execution can change beliefs, but automatic execution of every threat can trap policy inside a bad commitment.

Judge Success Against a Counterfactual

If the prohibited act does not occur, deterrence may have worked. The target may also have lacked intent or capability. If an act stops, compellence may have contributed. The target may have changed course for unrelated domestic or battlefield reasons.

Use multiple evidence types: target deliberation, timing, private communication, changes after the signal, and comparison with similar situations. Avoid claiming success from outcome alone.

Credibility has components

A credible threat joins a specific demand, suitable capability, believable willingness, clear communication, target valuation, and assurance about compliance. Weakness in one component can collapse the mechanism.

Put It to Work

- ☐ Rewrite one policy warning as an explicit conditional with compliance and exit terms.
- ☐ Test whether the promised consequence fits the scale and location of the violation.
- ☐ Identify the signal's audiences and 2 alternative interpretations.
- ☐ Separate denial, punishment, reassurance, and compellence in one portfolio.

Decision: Would the target believe and prefer compliance?

Credibility is not what the issuer says about itself. Reconstruct capability, resolve, value, assurance, and alternatives from the target's desk.

Balance, Hierarchy, and International Order

An order connects power with rules and expectations. A balance of power can restrain domination. A hierarchy can provide security or coordination. Institutions can stabilize bargains. Ideas can make some arrangements legitimate. None works alone or benefits every actor equally.

The central question is not whether an order is “rules-based.” It is which rules, made by whom, applied through which institutions, backed by which power, accepted by which audiences, and revised through what process.

Balancing Is a Behavior and an Outcome

States balance when they build capability or align to prevent another actor from becoming too threatening. A balanced distribution can also be an outcome no actor designed. Analysts should not infer balancing merely because a coalition opposes a powerful state.

States respond to threat, not aggregate power alone. Proximity, offensive capability, perceived intention, unresolved disputes, and available allies affect the choice. Some states bandwagon, hedge, remain neutral, seek shelter, or specialize instead.

Internal balancing develops domestic capability. External balancing forms alliances or partnerships. Both cost time and autonomy. A state may prefer institutions, economic ties, or limited alignment because full balancing is unaffordable or escalatory.

Polarity Simplifies and Conceals

Unipolar, bipolar, and multipolar describe concentrations of capability among leading states. They can clarify broad strategic structure. They conceal variation across domains and regions. A state may dominate one military theater while depending on others in finance, technology, or energy. A region may contain a local hierarchy inside a more diffuse global system.

Polarity does not forecast stability by itself. It changes alliance choices, uncertainty, and the number of major relationships to manage. Domestic politics, nuclear weapons, geography, institutions, and perception mediate the result.

Hegemony Combines Capability and Order-Building

A hegemonic state possesses exceptional capacity to shape rules, provide public goods, enforce or violate arrangements, and create institutions around its preferences. Other states may accept leadership because it supplies security, liquidity, access, or predictability. They may also resist dependence, exclusion, or unequal privilege.

Hegemony therefore contains a bargain. The leading state supplies benefits and restraint while receiving influence and advantage. If provision weakens, privilege expands, or power shifts, the bargain loses legitimacy.

Spheres of Influence Are Claims, Not Natural Zones

A powerful state may claim special security interests or authority in neighboring territory. Geography makes nearby developments consequential. It does not automatically create a legal or moral right to control another state's choices.

Analyze a sphere through the mechanism: military access, alliance exclusion, economic control, political intervention, or recognition of privileged consultation. Then include the agency of states located inside the

claimed sphere. Treating them only as buffers reproduces the hierarchy being studied.

Rules Restrain and Reproduce Power

Rules can raise the cost of unilateral action, protect weaker members, provide information, and make expectations durable. They can also lock in the voting weight, categories, or economic advantages of founders.

A powerful actor may accept restraint because stable rules reduce transaction costs, reassure partners, and preserve an order it benefits from. A weaker actor may accept an unequal rule because the available alternative is worse. Consent and power operate together.

Legitimacy Makes Order More Durable

An order gains legitimacy when relevant audiences accept its rules and authority as appropriate, not merely unavoidable. Sources include fair procedure, effectiveness, law, shared identity, representation, and restraint by powerful members.

Legitimacy can fracture unevenly. Governments may support an institution that domestic publics distrust. Small states may value legal protection while criticizing governance. A rule can be legitimate in one issue and rejected in another.

Track behavior: compliance without direct coercion, willingness to defend the arrangement, participation in revision, and reasons actors give when they accept or contest it.

Order Changes Through Contestation

Rising powers may seek more voice within institutions, create alternatives, reinterpret rules, or reject parts of an order while preserving others. Established powers may defend rules selectively or update them to preserve leadership. Smaller states can use coalitions and forums to influence revision.

Change is not only replacement. Orders layer. New institutions coexist with old ones. Regional arrangements overlap global rules. Informal

groups handle problems formal bodies cannot, while raising questions of representation.

Run an Order Audit

For a defined issue, record:

1. the behavior the order organizes;
2. the formal rules and informal expectations;
3. the actor supplying enforcement, finance, information, and restraint;
4. the distribution of voice, benefit, exception, and risk;
5. the source of legitimacy and evidence of contestation;
6. the revision process;
7. the likely effect if the arrangement disappears.

This avoids treating “international order” as a single global object. There are orders of security, trade, finance, development, human rights, communications, and regions. They overlap without forming a seamless constitution.

Order is power made sufficiently patterned to guide expectations. Its quality depends on the rules, distribution, legitimacy, and revision process, not stability alone.

Put It to Work

- ☐ Identify whether one state is balancing power, threat, or a particular policy.
- ☐ Separate global polarity from the distribution in the relevant region and domain.
- ☐ State the bargain sustaining one hierarchical arrangement.
- ☐ Audit who can revise a rule and who must live under it.

Decision: What holds this order together?

Name the mix of capability, benefit, law, habit, legitimacy, dependence, and restraint. Do not credit institutions for effects supplied entirely by an underlying bargain, or power for order that requires accepted rules.

Part III

Institutions, Exchange, and Unequal Connection

Why States Build Institutions

International institutions are durable rules, practices, and organizations that structure expectations. They do not replace politics. They change where politics occurs, which information is available, how bargains are repeated, and what noncompliance costs.

States create institutions because decentralized cooperation is difficult, not because interests have disappeared.

Coordination and Cooperation Are Different Problems

In a coordination problem, actors benefit from choosing the same standard but may disagree about which standard. Once selected, defection may be unattractive. In a cooperation problem, each actor has an incentive to receive the common benefit while shifting cost to others.

The institutional design should fit the problem. Coordination may need a forum, shared technical information, and a selection rule. Cooperation may need monitoring, reciprocity, review, finance, and consequences for free-riding.

Calling every failure “lack of political will” hides whether actors disagree over distribution, fear cheating, lack capacity, or cannot make a credible future commitment.

Institutions Supply Information

Institutions define reporting categories, collect data, inspect, publish, compare, and convene. Information reduces uncertainty about behavior and makes reputation more specific. It also creates power over measurement.

Ask what is reported, by whom, under what verification, and with what missingness. A monitoring system can improve transparency while rewarding actors able to produce compliant data. Self-reporting may be the only feasible route, but it should not be confused with independent proof.

Institutions Extend the Bargain

Repeated meetings and linked issues allow actors to exchange concessions across time. A state may accept a loss in one negotiation because it expects gain elsewhere or values continued membership. Procedures reduce the need to reinvent rules for every dispute.

This does not guarantee fairness. Powerful members can dominate agenda and enforcement. Yet predictable procedure can protect smaller members by making departure from a rule visible and costly.

Institutions Create Voice and Coalitions

One-state-one-vote forums give formal voice that is absent in resource-weighted bargaining. Weighted institutions reflect contribution or power. Consensus can protect every member or give each the capacity to block. Small groups can act quickly while excluding affected actors.

No voting rule solves representation. Audit who participates, who proposes, who implements, and who bears the consequence. Informal drafting often matters as much as the final vote.

Delegation Solves and Creates Problems

Members delegate to secretariats, courts, experts, central banks, inspectors, or agencies to gain continuity, credibility, and specialization. Agents develop knowledge and preferences of their own. Members then face a

control problem: enough independence to perform the task, enough accountability to remain legitimate.

Budget, appointment, review, jurisdiction, transparency, and exit provisions shape that balance. An institution with no autonomy may reproduce momentary bargaining. One with weak accountability may become politically unsustainable.

Compliance Is Not One Thing

An actor may comply because it agrees, expects reciprocity, fears retaliation, values reputation, is monitored, receives assistance, or has incorporated the rule into domestic law. Apparent noncompliance may reflect ambiguity or missing capacity rather than deliberate defection.

Distinguish:

- commitment to the rule;
- implementation through law and administration;
- behavior in practice;
- outcome the rule was designed to improve.

A treaty can achieve high formal implementation and weak substantive outcome because the rule was poorly designed or the problem changed.

Institutional Failure Can Be Functional

Failure may preserve a forum when members prefer no decision to institutional collapse. A weak agreement can create data and review that support later action. Conversely, visible activity can conceal an institution that no longer changes behavior.

Judge performance against a feasible counterfactual. Would the actors coordinate less, know less, bargain differently, or impose higher costs without it? Do not compare every institution with an imaginary world government.

Venue Choice Is Strategy

Actors choose among courts, councils, assemblies, technical bodies, regional organizations, coalitions, and bilateral negotiations. A venue

changes membership, rules, remedy, timing, publicity, and available expertise.

Powerful states may prefer flexible small groups. Weaker states may prefer universal forums and law. The same actor can switch preference by issue. Forum shopping is not evidence that institutions are irrelevant; it shows that institutional rules affect outcomes.

Case File: The Montreal Protocol as Adaptive Cooperation

The Montreal Protocol addresses substances that deplete the ozone layer. Its value as an institutional case lies not in a claim that cooperation was easy, but in how design connected scientific assessment, differentiated schedules, trade measures, financial support, reporting, and adjustment over time.

The problem combined shared atmospheric harm with different production, consumption, capacity, and development positions. States needed evidence about substances and substitutes, confidence that others would act, and support for implementation. The regime created repeated meetings and procedures for changing controls as science and technology developed. The Multilateral Fund supported eligible developing countries' compliance.

Several mechanisms reinforced each other:

- reporting and assessment reduced uncertainty;
- differentiated timetables made participation more feasible;
- finance addressed capacity and distribution;
- trade provisions reduced free-riding and leakage;
- adjustment and amendment allowed learning without renegotiating the whole relationship;
- repeated review made implementation visible.

The case should not be copied mechanically to climate change. The industries, number and availability of substitutes, distribution, infrastructure, and domestic dependence differ. What travels is a design question: which information, capacity, enforcement, distribution, and revision mechanisms fit the actual collective-action problem?

Institutional effect

An institution matters when changing its rule, information, membership, or procedure would plausibly change behavior or the bargaining path. The logo alone explains nothing.

Put It to Work

- ☐ Classify one issue as coordination, cooperation, distribution, commitment, or capacity.
- ☐ Match the institution's design to that actual problem.
- ☐ Separate commitment, implementation, behavior, and outcome.
- ☐ Compare the chosen venue with one available alternative.

Decision: What work does the institution perform?

Name the information, transaction, enforcement, legitimacy, coalition, or delegation mechanism. If none changes the actors' options, the institution may be a setting rather than a cause.

International Law Without a World Government

International law creates obligations, rights, procedures, and legal reasons among states, organizations, and in some fields individuals. It operates without a single legislature, executive, and court of universal jurisdiction. That makes it different from most domestic law, not imaginary.

Law matters through consent, custom, reciprocity, domestic incorporation, courts, institutions, reputation, legitimacy, and material enforcement. Its limits also matter.

Where Rules Come From

Treaties bind parties under their terms. Customary international law develops from general state practice accepted as law. General principles, judicial decisions, and scholarship play supporting roles in legal reasoning. Decisions of international organizations may be binding, recommendatory, or institutionally authoritative depending on the governing instrument.

Do not call every declaration a treaty or every repeated behavior custom. Identify the source, parties, entry into force, reservations, relevant provision, and interpretive context.

The Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties states the principle *pacta sunt servanda*: every treaty in force is binding on its parties and must be performed in good faith. The same legal order contains rules about interpretation, invalidity, suspension, and termination.

Consent Is Central but Uneven

States consent to treaties, jurisdiction, and institutional rules in particular ways. Custom can bind more broadly. Consent protects sovereignty and enables cooperation. Negotiating power, technical capacity, and available alternatives differ, so a formally consensual rule can distribute burdens unequally.

International legal analysis should neither erase consent nor treat it as proof of fairness. Record the legal act and the political conditions separately.

Interpretation Is an Argument With Rules

Treaty language does not apply itself. Interpretation considers ordinary meaning, context, object and purpose, subsequent agreements and practice, and relevant rules under the applicable framework. Genuine ambiguity remains.

Official statements may be legal positions advanced by parties. They are not neutral summaries. A court judgment has authority within its jurisdiction and legal effect; separate opinions, commentary, and political response have different status.

Compliance Often Occurs Before Enforcement

Most international legal relations do not wait for a court or sanction. Domestic officials apply customs, aviation, postal, trade, maritime, diplomatic, and technical rules daily. Compliance can reflect convenience, reciprocity, internal law, professional practice, or belief in obligation.

Enforcement remains decentralized. States use countermeasures under legal conditions, domestic courts apply rules, institutions suspend benefits, and political bodies authorize measures. Power affects who can invoke, resist, or survive these processes.

Courts Need Jurisdiction

International courts and tribunals do not possess unlimited authority over every dispute. Jurisdiction may come from a treaty clause, special agreement, declaration, membership rule, or another accepted basis. A court can issue a judgment and depend on parties or institutions for implementation.

The International Court of Justice's 1986 merits judgment in *Nicaragua v. United States* found violations of customary obligations concerning non-intervention, use of force, sovereignty, and peaceful maritime commerce. The United States had declined further participation. The case shows both legal articulation and enforcement difficulty. One does not cancel the other.

Selective Enforcement Is a Legal and Political Problem

Powerful actors can avoid some consequences that weaker actors cannot. Allies may receive different treatment. Institutions with vetoes or limited jurisdiction produce uneven remedy. Selective enforcement damages legitimacy and can distort development of law.

It does not follow that every underlying rule vanishes when enforcement is unequal. Domestic laws are not treated as nonexistent whenever enforcement is selective. The proper analysis separates rule, violation, forum, remedy, implementation, and political consequence.

Law Can Be an Instrument and a Constraint

States use legal arguments to legitimate coalitions, challenge measures, delay action, demand procedure, and shape precedent. They also accept rules that constrain later governments because commitment can produce valuable trust and predictability.

Calling this "lawfare" can illuminate strategic legal use or become a way to dismiss law when an opponent invokes it. Ask whether the legal

claim is valid, which forum owns it, and how the strategy affects the rule's legitimacy.

Read a Legal Claim in 7 Steps

1. Identify the actor making the claim and the remedy sought.
2. Locate the legal source and exact relevant provision.
3. Establish parties, jurisdiction, date, and reservations.
4. Separate facts agreed, alleged, and judicially found.
5. Reconstruct competing interpretations.
6. Identify the authorized forum and available remedy.
7. Separate legal conclusion from enforcement and political effect.

This method does not turn a reader into counsel. It prevents press statements from becoming the law by repetition.

WATCH OUT

International legal questions can determine rights, sanctions, force, asylum, trade, and individual safety. Use qualified legal advice and authoritative current texts for real decisions.

Put It to Work

- ☐ Classify one claimed rule as treaty, custom, institutional decision, judgment, or policy.
- ☐ Confirm jurisdiction before summarizing a court's role.
- ☐ Separate a legal finding from implementation and political effect.
- ☐ Compare the official positions of 2 parties without treating either as the judgment.

Decision: What can this rule do here?

State the obligation, legal subjects, forum, remedy, domestic route, and political constraint. Avoid both "law decides everything" and "power makes law irrelevant."

Notes

See the *Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties*, especially Articles 26 and 31, and the International Court of Justice case page and merits judgment for *Military and Paramilitary Activities in and against Nicaragua* (1986).

Trade, Finance, and Interdependence

Exchange can increase total welfare, spread technology, support specialization, and make conflict costly. It can also transmit shocks, concentrate production, expose payment channels, and give one actor leverage over another. Interdependence is neither automatic peace nor automatic vulnerability.

Its politics lies in asymmetry, distribution, substitutability, and time.

Mutual Gain Does Not Mean Equal Gain

Two economies can both gain from trade while sectors, workers, regions, and firms experience different effects. Domestic policy shapes adjustment, bargaining, and legitimacy. An aggregate national gain does not answer who pays, who receives compensation, or who gains political influence.

International bargaining also concerns relative gain. A state may reject an efficient arrangement if it expects the partner's gain to translate into future military or technological advantage.

Sensitivity and Vulnerability Differ

Sensitivity is the immediate cost imposed by change in a relationship before policy adjusts. Vulnerability concerns the cost after feasible alternatives are considered. A supply shock may produce high sensitivity but low long-term vulnerability if substitutes are available quickly. Low current trade volume can conceal high vulnerability if the product is irreplaceable.

Map:

- share and concentration;
- criticality of the input or market;
- inventory and spare capacity;
- switching time and compatibility;
- financial and legal exposure;
- political concentration of the cost;
- alternatives controlled by partners or rivals.

Networks Create Chokepoints

Global finance, logistics, communications, and supply chains are networks. Actors occupying central nodes can monitor flows or deny access. Their leverage depends on jurisdiction, technical control, allied cooperation, and the target's alternatives.

Using a chokepoint changes the network. Targets reroute, localize, build reserves, develop new standards, or accept inefficiency for autonomy. What is powerful in one crisis can erode through repeated use.

Currencies Organize More Than Exchange Rates

Widely used currencies support invoicing, reserves, lending, and payment. Their issuers and financial centers can gain lower transaction costs, policy space, information, and coercive reach. Users benefit from liquidity and stability while accepting exposure to another jurisdiction and monetary system.

Currency power is not total control. Capital can move through alternatives, enforcement needs institutions and partners, and aggressive use can create incentives for diversification.

Supply-Chain Resilience Has Costs

Redundancy, diversification, stockpiles, domestic capacity, allied production, and modular design can reduce disruption. They cost money, require information, and may replace one concentration with another. Domestic

production can still depend on imported machinery, software, finance, energy, or minerals.

The WTO's 2021 World Trade Report treats interconnected trade as both a transmitter of shocks and a source of resilience when it supports diversification and cooperation. This dual effect is the correct starting point.

Trade Rules Make Expectations Tradable

Multilateral and regional trade rules reduce uncertainty, set tariff and standards procedures, and create dispute processes. They do not eliminate power or domestic distribution. Members argue over security exceptions, subsidies, development, intellectual property, and who can use industrial policy.

The WTO's 2023 report argues that fragmentation can reduce security, inclusion, and climate cooperation, while acknowledging the policy pressure created by dependence. Treat this as an institutional argument supported by analysis, not a neutral fact beyond debate.

Economic Coercion Requires a Mechanism

A tariff, sanction, export control, asset freeze, procurement rule, or investment restriction can impose cost. Cost is not yet behavioral change.

Trace:

measure → affected transaction → economic loss → domestic
or organizational transmission → decision-maker incentive
→ response.

The target may shift cost to civilians, repress opposition, subsidize firms, blame the coercer, or value its objective more. Coalitions leak. Humanitarian effects and legal authority require separate review.

Interdependence Can Restrain and Entrap

Dense exchange raises the cost of disruption and creates constituencies for stability. It can also make actors fear being cut off during crisis, encouraging preemptive diversification or control. Expectations about future access matter as much as current flow.

A relationship restrains conflict when both expect continued benefit, interruption is costly, and institutions make access sufficiently credible. It becomes a source of insecurity when dependence is asymmetric, alternatives are slow, and future denial appears likely.

Interdependence is a structure of mutual effects. Its politics depends on which flow matters, who can interrupt it, who adjusts faster, and how cost reaches decision-makers.

Put It to Work

- ☐ Separate mutual gain from domestic and relative distribution.
- ☐ Measure sensitivity now and vulnerability after feasible adjustment.
- ☐ Identify the chokepoint, jurisdiction, partners, and target alternatives.
- ☐ Trace an economic measure all the way to the political decision it seeks to change.

Decision: Connection or exposure?

Treat the same relationship as potentially productive and vulnerable. Compare diversification, efficiency, resilience, autonomy, and the cost of lost cooperation.

Notes

World Trade Organization, *World Trade Report 2021: Economic Resilience and Trade*; World Trade Organization, *World Trade Report 2023: Reglobalization for a Secure, Inclusive and Sustainable Future*.

Empire, Colonial Legacies, and Development

The modern international system declares sovereign equality. It was built through empires that classified people, extracted labor and resources, moved borders, organized trade, and claimed civilizational authority. Formal decolonization transformed legal status. It did not erase the institutions, infrastructure, knowledge, ownership, and unequal connections produced under colonial rule.

History becomes explanatory when a specific inherited mechanism shapes a present option.

Empire Organizes Unequal Rule

Empire places distinct peoples and territories in a hierarchy of authority. Rule can be direct or indirect, territorial or networked, formal or informal. It relies on military force, law, administration, local intermediaries, racial and cultural categories, extraction, and claims of legitimacy.

Do not reduce empire to foreign presence or every inequality to empire. Identify who ruled, through which institution, over whom, for what purpose, and how the relationship constrained self-government.

Extraction Builds a Particular Economy

Colonial infrastructure often connected mines, plantations, and ports to external markets rather than integrating domestic regions. Land and la-

bor rules favored extraction. Education and administration developed unevenly around the needs of rule.

After independence, a government could inherit export concentration, limited fiscal capacity, regional inequality, and transport routes poorly suited to national development. The legacy is not cultural destiny. Later governments, firms, movements, and international conditions alter it. The inherited structure changes the starting cost of alternatives.

Borders and Political Institutions Travel Forward

Administrative boundaries became international borders under decolonization. This preserved territorial stability in many cases while dividing communities and combining others inside new states. Colonial strategies of indirect rule, ethnic classification, and uneven representation could shape later political competition.

Avoid the phrase “artificial borders” as a complete explanation. Every border is politically made. Specify the inherited administrative decision, the groups or resources affected, and the postcolonial institutions that reproduced or changed its effect.

Knowledge Can Create Hierarchy

Maps, censuses, ethnography, development measures, legal categories, and archives made populations governable. Colonial knowledge often treated European experience as universal and other societies as delayed versions of it. These categories entered policy and scholarship.

Decolonizing knowledge is not rejecting evidence because of origin. It asks who framed the question, whose archive survives, which categories were imposed, which voices are absent, and whether a claimed universal mechanism was tested beyond its original setting.

Development Is a Political Relationship

Development can mean expanded capability, health, education, income, transformation, freedom, or structural change. Projects distribute land,

finance, risk, authority, and time. A technical intervention carries a theory of who knows, who decides, and what outcome counts.

Aid and lending can provide essential resources and knowledge. Conditionality can support reform or narrow domestic policy space. Recipient governments exercise agency, negotiate, redirect, and sometimes use external finance to strengthen their own coalitions.

Judge the relationship, not a moral label. Record ownership, alternatives, accountability, implementation, distribution, and capacity left after the project ends.

Debt Connects Past and Future Choices

Debt finances investment and stabilizes shocks. It also creates future payment claims and exposure to interest rates, currency, and creditors. A debt crisis can shift policy toward actors with liquidity and away from domestic priorities.

Not every debt problem is colonial, and not every creditor relationship is imperial. Historical structures can affect who borrows in which currency, at what price, for which inherited need, and with what access to restructuring. A serious claim demonstrates that chain.

Postcolonial States Are Agents, Not Only Legacies

Independence movements, constitutional choices, industrial strategies, regional cooperation, social movements, and domestic conflict shaped new orders. States across Asia, Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, and the Pacific reshaped international law, decolonization, development, non-alignment, and demands for economic sovereignty.

Treating the Global South as one actor repeats the flattening this chapter rejects. Positions vary by region, regime, income, security, history, coalition, and issue.

Run a Legacy Test

For a current inequality, ask:

1. What historical institution or relationship is proposed as the source?
2. Through which asset, law, border, category, network, or organization did it persist?
3. What later decisions reinforced, redirected, or weakened it?
4. What comparison shows the legacy matters rather than merely pre-dates the outcome?
5. Which actors gained agency within or against the inherited structure?

This prevents both historical amnesia and historical determinism.

WATCH OUT

Do not use colonial legacy as a universal explanation for present failure. It must identify a persisting mechanism and leave room for post-colonial politics, global change, and variation.

Put It to Work

- ☐ Trace one present infrastructure or export pattern to a specific institutional history.
- ☐ Identify the later decisions that preserved or changed the inherited effect.
- ☐ Inspect one policy category for the people and experience it makes invisible.
- ☐ Replace “the Global South” with the actors and coalition relevant to the issue.

Decision: Does history explain this outcome?

Use history when the institutional chain survives into the causal mechanism. Do not confuse a distant origin, a moral context, and a demonstrated present cause.

Ideas, Identity, and Norms

Actors do not enter world politics with complete interests supplied by material position. They learn what kind of actor they are, what they value, which threats are plausible, and which actions are appropriate through social and political practice.

Ideas do not float above power. They shape how power is understood, organized, and justified.

Interests Need Interpretation

A coastline, army, market, or technology does not announce its political meaning. Leaders and institutions interpret it through doctrine, history, identity, and expectation. The same capability can be accepted from an ally and feared from a rival.

Material constraints remain real. Constructivist analysis asks how their meaning and the actor's response are socially produced. It does not claim that words eliminate weapons or geography.

Identity Locates Self and Other

States and other actors hold multiple identities: sovereign, democratic, revolutionary, regional, religious, developing, non-aligned, middle power, great power, or member of a security community. Identities create expectations about appropriate interest and partners.

Identity is not a national personality. It is contested inside states, performed through policy, and recognized or rejected by others. Evidence

includes official doctrine, institutions, education, repeated practice, public contestation, and changes in how actions are justified.

Norms Define Appropriate Conduct

Norms are shared expectations about proper behavior for actors with a given identity. They can prohibit, require, or enable action. A norm differs from repeated behavior: actors may violate a norm and still acknowledge it by denying, excusing, or justifying the violation.

Norm effects include:

- changing the language in which policy must be defended;
- mobilizing domestic and international audiences;
- defining membership and status;
- entering law and organizational procedure;
- shaping which tools are considered legitimate;
- creating reputational and identity costs.

Norms Spread Through Work

Advocates frame problems, gather evidence, build coalitions, persuade, shame, litigate, teach, and institutionalize. Powerful states can sponsor norms, but marginalized actors and movements also change agendas. Diffusion is not copying. Local actors translate a norm into existing institutions and meanings.

A norm can spread superficially. Governments adopt language while preserving behavior. Measure legal change, budgets, organizational routines, enforcement, and response to hard cases.

Appropriateness and Consequence Interact

Actors often ask both “What should an actor like us do?” and “What will happen if we do it?” A government may comply with a norm because it accepts the rule, fears cost, values membership, or several reasons at once.

Do not force every case into material interest or sincere belief. Trace the decision and test what changes when cost, audience, or identity changes.

Norm Collision Is Political

Human rights, sovereignty, non-intervention, self-determination, security, development, and humanitarian protection can point in different directions. Actors rank and interpret them. The conflict may be genuine rather than proof that one norm is fake.

Norm entrepreneurs frame the collision to favor their priority. Institutions define exceptions and procedures. Unequal power affects whose interpretation becomes authoritative.

Silence and Stigma Matter

Some actions become so stigmatized that actors avoid explicit defense. This can reduce use, shift it into secrecy, or change the label without changing the mechanism. Absence of public justification is therefore ambiguous.

Look for euphemism, denial, classification, procedural avoidance, and response when evidence becomes public. Normative constraint can operate even without full compliance.

Same Event, 4 Explanations

Suppose states create a regional disaster-response arrangement.

- A realist account may emphasize influence, access, and competition for regional leadership.
- A liberal account may emphasize information, repeated coordination, and domestic demand for effective response.
- A constructivist account may trace a regional identity and expectation of mutual care.
- A critical account may ask whose knowledge defines disaster, whose vulnerability receives funding, and whether the arrangement reproduces hierarchy.

The explanations can complement each other. Comparison requires observable implications. If identity matters, policy should change with membership and meaning even when immediate material cost does not.

If institutional information matters, change should follow monitoring and repeated interaction.

Case File: The Anti-Personnel Mine Ban and Norm Change

The 1997 Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on Their Destruction emerged after efforts within the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons did not produce a complete ban. States, humanitarian organizations, the International Committee of the Red Cross, survivors, campaigners, and specialists reframed anti-personnel mines around persistent civilian harm and an unacceptable weapon category.

The process illustrates norm work. Advocates documented effects, built a transnational coalition, created simple public language, worked with supportive states, and moved negotiation into a process capable of a stronger rule. The resulting treaty joined prohibition with stockpile destruction, clearance, reporting, and assistance.

Material and institutional factors still mattered. States assessed military utility, alliance relations, verification, and the cost of clearance. Important states remained outside the Convention. Yet abstention did not prevent the norm from changing production, transfer, procurement, public justification, and expectations for many actors.

Test the mechanism through behavior rather than applause:

- Did states join and implement national rules?
- Were stockpiles destroyed and contaminated areas cleared?
- Did producers and financiers change behavior?
- How did non-parties justify policy under the new stigma?
- Which conflicts and new deployments exposed the norm's boundary?

The case shows that norms can constrain without universal membership and fail without becoming meaningless. Legal obligation, social stigma, practical assistance, and strategic resistance must be recorded separately.

Ideas matter when they change how actors define themselves, their interests, legitimate action, or the evidence a decision can use. Demonstrate

the pathway rather than citing discourse alone.

Put It to Work

- ☐ Identify the identity claim embedded in one foreign-policy justification.
- ☐ Distinguish a norm from frequent behavior and formal law.
- ☐ Trace one norm from advocacy to procedure and hard-case behavior.
- ☐ Compare material, institutional, ideational, and critical explanations of one event.

Decision: Did the idea change the action?

Show that a different meaning, identity, or norm would plausibly alter the option or justification even under similar material conditions. Otherwise the idea may be description rather than cause.

Notes

Alexander Wendt, “Anarchy Is What States Make of It,” *International Organization* 46, no. 2 (1992): 391–425, shows how identities and interests develop through interaction rather than following mechanically from anarchy.

Part IV

Problems That Cross Borders

Climate, Energy, and the Commons

Climate change joins a global physical mechanism with unequal historical contribution, exposure, capacity, and development need. Every state benefits from a safer climate, while the cost and politics of mitigation occur through national economies and local communities. This is a collective-action problem with distribution at its center.

The atmosphere is shared. Responsibility, vulnerability, and capacity are not.

The Commons Problem

Greenhouse-gas emissions mix globally. One actor bears only part of the climate harm created by its emissions, while receiving much of the immediate benefit from energy and production. Each has an incentive to wait for others or minimize its share.

Repeated negotiation, measurement, finance, technology, domestic law, and reputational pressure can change that incentive. No single mechanism removes it.

Distribution Controls Cooperation

States disagree over historical responsibility, present emissions, per-capita use, development space, vulnerability, capacity, and who should finance transition and loss. Aggregate efficiency cannot decide these moral and political claims.

The UN climate framework uses differentiated responsibility and respective capabilities. The Paris Agreement joins a common temperature objective with nationally determined contributions, reporting, review, and successive ambition rather than one centrally allocated emissions quota. This design enabled broad participation and left an ambition and implementation gap.

Energy Security Has Several Clocks

Energy policy must manage current reliability, price, import exposure, infrastructure life, emissions, industrial capacity, and future transition. A rapid change can reduce one risk and increase another if grids, storage, finance, skills, or public consent lag.

Fossil-fuel dependence creates relationships among producers, transit states, consumers, firms, and financial institutions. Transition creates new dependencies in minerals, processing, manufacturing, software, and standards. “Energy independence” often means changing the portfolio, not leaving interdependence.

Finance Converts Agreement Into Capacity

A state can accept a target and lack affordable capital, administrative capacity, or access to technology. Climate finance therefore concerns effectiveness and distribution. Loans increase debt; grants are scarce; private finance seeks returns and risk protection; public development banks carry mandates and political conditions.

Ask which project the finance enables, who bears currency and performance risk, what capacity remains, and whether the investment serves adaptation, mitigation, development, or a donor’s industrial strategy.

Adaptation Is Security Without a Single Enemy

Adaptation reduces harm from heat, flood, drought, sea-level rise, disease, and ecosystem change. It requires public infrastructure, land decisions,

insurance, health systems, early warning, and social protection. The benefits are often local and politically less visible than large mitigation announcements.

Calling climate change a security threat can mobilize attention. It can also shift authority toward military institutions, treat displaced people as threats, or hide justice behind emergency language. Specify whose security, from which harm, through which institution.

Loss, Damage, and Irreversibility

Some harms cannot be prevented through adaptation or restored through payment. Small island states and highly exposed communities have made this boundary central to climate diplomacy. Questions of attribution, finance, responsibility, and non-economic loss are politically contested.

Irreversibility changes bargaining. Delay can lock infrastructure and emissions into future decades. It can also close adaptation options. A cost postponed is not necessarily a cost saved.

Institutions Need Domestic Transmission

International targets pass through planning agencies, utilities, firms, regions, households, courts, and budgets. A government can announce ambition and lack the coalition or capacity to implement it. Domestic policy can exceed the international pledge.

The IPCC's Sixth Assessment Synthesis Report assesses scientific knowledge and response options. It does not negotiate the distribution of international obligation. Scientific assessment, legal commitment, and political choice are related but distinct kinds of authority.

Build a Climate Cooperation Map

For one policy, record:

1. the physical harm and time horizon;
2. major contributors and exposed populations;
3. mitigation, adaptation, and loss boundaries;
4. domestic actors who implement and bear cost;

5. finance, technology, and capacity dependencies;
6. monitoring and review;
7. distributional objection and proposed remedy.

This turns “global cooperation” into a chain that can be judged.

Climate cooperation fails when it treats a shared atmosphere as proof of shared capacity and responsibility. Common action needs differentiated implementation and credible support.

Put It to Work

- ☐ Separate the climate target, national commitment, domestic policy, and measured outcome.
- ☐ Map the new dependencies created by one transition strategy.
- ☐ Identify who carries finance, currency, land, and reliability risk.
- ☐ State whether the policy addresses mitigation, adaptation, loss, or several distinct jobs.

Decision: What makes this cooperation fair enough to work?

Name the distribution of obligation, support, voice, risk, and review. A technically efficient plan can remain politically impossible when these are hidden.

Notes

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, *Climate Change 2023: Synthesis Report*; United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, *Paris Agreement* (2015).

Health, Migration, and Human Security

Traditional security asks how the state survives external threat. Human security asks how people survive violence, disease, displacement, hunger, disaster, and deprivation, including harm produced or neglected by states. The shift changes the referent of security. It does not remove difficult choices over authority and resources.

Cross-border health and migration show why protecting territory and protecting people can reinforce or conflict with each other.

Disease Crosses Jurisdiction

Pathogens move through travel, trade, animals, environment, and ordinary social life. Detection and response remain organized through national and local systems. A state may fear the health harm, the economic cost of reporting, and international restrictions that follow.

The International Health Regulations create legally binding obligations for 196 states parties, including notification and core capacities, and seek response proportionate to public-health risk while avoiding unnecessary interference with traffic and trade. The framework links sovereign responsibility, information sharing, WHO coordination, capacity, and rights.

Rules cannot substitute for laboratories, trusted reporting, local care, finance, or political cooperation. Capacity gaps become global vulnerabilities.

Health Security Can Narrow Health

Security framing can mobilize rapid funding and executive attention. It can prioritize threats to wealthy populations, borders, or state continuity over chronic harms and unequal access. It can encourage secrecy or coercion when public trust is necessary.

Ask whose health counts, which harm receives emergency status, who controls data, and whether the response strengthens ordinary systems after the emergency.

Borders Select Rather Than Seal

Borders regulate movement differently for citizens, workers, refugees, tourists, goods, capital, and disease. They are filters supported by documents, databases, carriers, employers, police, and agreements.

Closing a border can slow a risk under some conditions and create humanitarian or economic harm. Its effectiveness depends on timing, route, exemptions, domestic transmission, and neighboring coordination. A visible restriction is not automatically a complete health policy.

Migration Has Multiple Drivers

People move for work, education, family, safety, climate pressure, persecution, conflict, or a combination. Categories matter because rights and institutions differ, but lived causes do not always fit one box.

A refugee claim concerns protection under a legal framework. Labor migration concerns admission, employment, and rights under other rules. Internal displacement does not cross an international border. Smuggling and trafficking are distinct phenomena. Loose language can erase legal status and policy responsibility.

Displacement Is Unequally Hosted

UNHCR reported 123.2 million forcibly displaced people at the end of 2024, including refugees, asylum-seekers, internally displaced people, and others within its statistical framework. The number is dated and provi-

sional. It should not be reduced to one image of movement toward rich states; much displacement remains internal or in neighboring countries.

Responsibility sharing concerns finance, protection, resettlement, asylum systems, host communities, return conditions, and the causes of flight. Geographic proximity often places large burdens on states with limited fiscal capacity.

Human Security Reveals Distribution

A policy can improve aggregate national security and expose a particular population. A camp can provide immediate shelter and restrict movement. A surveillance system can support outbreak response and threaten privacy. An externalized border can reduce arrivals in one jurisdiction while shifting danger elsewhere.

Human security asks for disaggregated effects and voice. It does not settle every tradeoff. It prevents the state's success measure from becoming the only measure.

Protection Requires Authority and Trust

International organizations, states, cities, communities, health professionals, employers, and humanitarian actors each control part of the response. Information sharing depends on trust and data protection. Public-health compliance depends on feasibility and legitimacy. Refugee protection depends on access to procedure, documentation, and non-refoulement obligations.

When responsibility is fragmented, every actor can claim the missing step belongs elsewhere. Map the handoff.

Read a Moving Number Carefully

For displacement, disease, or mortality data:

1. identify the publisher and mandate;
2. define the population and categories;
3. record the reference date and whether the estimate is provisional;
4. distinguish stock from flow;

5. inspect missing countries, underreporting, and model assumptions;
6. avoid comparing unlike definitions across sources;
7. state what policy inference the number supports and what it does not.

WATCH OUT

Health and migration decisions affect legal status, bodily safety, privacy, and access to care. Use current authoritative guidance and qualified professional or legal support for real cases.

Put It to Work

- ☐ Name the protected referent: state, population, individual, system, or several.
- ☐ Separate the legal categories inside one broad use of “migrant.”
- ☐ Trace a cross-border health obligation through domestic capacity.
- ☐ Audit one security policy for harms shifted to another population or jurisdiction.

Decision: Whose security improved?

State the protected actor, harm reduced, new exposure, institution responsible, and evidence of effect. Do not accept a national aggregate as the complete result.

Notes

World Health Organization, *International Health Regulations (2005)*, current amended text; UNHCR, *Global Trends 2024*, published June 2025. The UNHCR figure is locked to the end of 2024 and should be updated in later editions.

Technology and Infrastructure as World Politics

Technology enters world politics through systems: standards, components, data, talent, energy, finance, networks, maintenance, law, and users. A device list misses the political mechanism.

Infrastructure matters because it makes later choices easier, harder, faster, or dependent on an actor who controls access.

Standards Allocate Compatibility

A technical standard allows systems to interoperate. The selected design can advantage firms, embed values, create licensing revenue, and make alternatives costly. Standards bodies look technical because they require expertise. Membership, voting, patents, testing, and agenda control make them political too.

Power may lie in drafting, installed base, reference implementation, certification, or the ability to make adoption attractive. A state can influence through domestic market size, research, firms, alliances, and participation rather than command.

Infrastructure Locks In Relationships

Ports, grids, cables, satellites, cloud systems, railways, payment networks, and platforms require large initial investment and long maintenance.

Once built, compatibility and switching cost can outlast the political agreement that created them.

Evaluate an infrastructure relationship through:

- ownership and jurisdiction;
- financing and collateral;
- construction and operational control;
- data and access rights;
- maintenance and spare parts;
- standards and interoperability;
- resilience, redundancy, and exit cost.

The nationality of one contractor rarely answers the whole dependency.

Supply Chains Distribute Capability

Advanced technologies combine research, design, equipment, materials, manufacturing, software, testing, packaging, logistics, and skilled labor across jurisdictions. A state can lead in one segment and depend deeply in another.

Aggregate production shares conceal segment-specific chokepoints. Industrial policy seeks to move or duplicate capability, but building a factory does not automatically build suppliers, talent, quality, intellectual property, or demand.

Platforms Exercise Private Governance

Platforms set rules for speech, access, ranking, identity, payment, and application distribution. They operate under multiple states' laws while governing transnational spaces at machine speed.

Governments can regulate, block, request data, or depend on platforms for communication. Platforms can resist, comply, segment services, or exit. Users experience the interaction through private terms and public law.

Do not ask only whether a platform is powerful. Ask which moderation, access, data, pricing, or distribution decision it controls and which jurisdiction can alter it.

Data Power Depends on Processing and Purpose

Possessing data does not produce knowledge automatically. Collection, labels, representativeness, compute, models, expertise, and institutional use determine effect. Data can improve services, surveillance, targeting, research, or commercial advantage.

Cross-border data policy concerns privacy, security, trade, law enforcement, localization, innovation, and rights. One category cannot settle all purposes. A localization rule may reduce one jurisdictional risk and increase cost or concentration elsewhere.

Cyber Risk Blurs Public and Private Systems

Critical services often use private infrastructure. Attribution can be uncertain. Actions can be espionage, crime, coercion, sabotage, or preparation, with different legal and strategic meanings. Cumulative low-level activity can matter without crossing a dramatic threshold.

For safety, foundational analysis should remain at the level of authority, dependency, resilience, attribution, and escalation. Operational intrusion or evasion detail is unnecessary for understanding the politics.

Access Controls Can Reorganize the System

Export controls, investment screening, procurement restrictions, and research rules seek to limit transfer of sensitive capability. Effect depends on multilateral coordination, definition, enforcement, substitutes, and the target's ability to innovate or reroute.

Controls create spillovers: firms lose markets, partners demand exemptions, research networks fragment, and targets accelerate domestic alternatives. A narrow security gain can produce a broader ecosystem change.

Technology Is Not Autonomous

Statements that a technology “changes geopolitics” skip institutions and adoption. The same technical capability produces different outcomes under different ownership, doctrine, market, law, and social practice.

Use a mechanism chain:

technical capability → accessible system → changed cost or information → actor adoption → response → institutional effect.

If the chain cannot be stated, the analysis is likely forecasting from novelty.

Infrastructure is stored politics. It embeds earlier choices about ownership, standards, access, risk, and dependency into the cost of future action.

Put It to Work

- ☐ Choose one technology and map the full system around it.
- ☐ Identify the precise segment where a chokepoint exists and how it can erode.
- ☐ Audit one infrastructure deal for ownership, finance, operation, data, maintenance, and exit.
- ☐ Trace a control measure through target adaptation and coalition response.

Decision: Where is the political leverage?

Locate it in standards, access, installed base, jurisdiction, finance, talent, components, maintenance, data, or legitimacy. Avoid treating the artifact itself as the actor.

Regional Orders and the Global System

World politics is global without being uniform. Threats travel through geography and history. Institutions develop around local problems. External powers enter regions through alliances, bases, markets, colonial ties, finance, and diplomacy. A region is therefore neither a sealed container nor a miniature copy of the global system.

Regional analysis asks which relationships are dense enough that one actor's security or prosperity cannot be understood separately from nearby actors.

Define the Region for the Question

Continents and official memberships are convenient boundaries. The relevant region may follow a sea, river, energy grid, migration route, linguistic network, production chain, or conflict system. South Asia, the Indian Ocean, and Indo-Pacific frames include India in different actor sets and political projects.

State the boundary and mechanism. Do not let a familiar label choose the cases silently.

Regional Security Has Local Histories

Unresolved borders, state formation, colonial rule, wars, alliances, regime security, and military doctrines shape how actors interpret capability. A global power entering a region is read through these local relationships.

The same alliance design can reassure in one region and intensify polarization in another. Institutional transfer fails when it copies form without the underlying bargain, threat, or identity.

Regional Powers Face a Legitimacy Problem

A materially leading state may provide markets, infrastructure, security, mediation, or public goods. Neighbors can benefit and fear domination. Leadership requires enough capability to supply order and enough restraint or representation to make that order acceptable.

Smaller states use external partners, regional institutions, law, economic diversification, and issue coalitions to preserve autonomy. Calling their choice a “proxy” can erase their own objectives.

External Powers Are Inside and Outside

An external power may have bases, territories, treaty allies, diasporas, investment, or historic responsibilities that make it part of regional calculations. It still faces distance, local knowledge gaps, domestic attention cycles, and dependence on access.

Local actors can invite external involvement to balance a regional power, gain resources, or internationalize a dispute. The external power can then become a constraint that regional actors manipulate as well as endure.

Institutions Reflect the Regional Bargain

Some regional organizations delegate authority and adjudication. Others preserve consensus and non-interference. The design reflects state formation, power distribution, identity, and the issues members are willing to manage together.

Low delegation does not equal irrelevance. Regular meetings, norms of consultation, and quiet coordination can reduce uncertainty. High legalization does not guarantee solidarity when the political bargain fractures.

Regions Overlap

A state can belong to several strategic and economic regions. This creates options and contradictions. A trade arrangement may point one way, a security partnership another, and an identity project a third.

Overlapping memberships allow forum choice and coalition building. They also create rule conflict, duplication, and pressure to choose. “Alignment” should be measured issue by issue.

India as a Middle-Power Illustration

India’s international position cannot be reduced to one label. It operates as a dominant actor in some South Asian relationships, an Indian Ocean power, a major economy and nuclear-armed state, a participant in BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, a member of the Quad, and a state that emphasizes strategic autonomy.

These memberships do not add up to neutrality or alliance in the abstract. They create a portfolio across issues. Analysis should ask what each arrangement provides, which dependence it manages, what commitment it avoids, and how domestic capacity constrains aspiration.

India is one case of middle-power strategy, not its universal form. Geography, alliance status, regime, economy, and historical identity make other middle powers different.

Compare Regions Without Cultural Ranking

Comparison should use shared dimensions:

- distribution of power and local hierarchy;
- principal security relationships;
- external-power access;
- institutional delegation and norms;
- economic and infrastructure connection;
- state capacity and domestic regime concerns;
- identity and historical settlement.

Do not call one region “mature” because its institutions resemble Europe. Ask what problem the institution solves and at what cost.

Case File: ASEAN and the Design of Regional Order

The ASEAN Charter affirms sovereignty, peaceful settlement, consultation, cooperation, and the principle of non-interference. Article 20 makes consensus the basic decision rule. The Summit may determine a process for a specific decision when consensus is absent.

This design is often criticized for weak enforcement and praised for preserving dialogue. Both claims need mechanisms. Consensus protects member control and can make participation acceptable among states with different regimes and threat perceptions. It also lets one member delay a collective position. Non-interference can reduce fears of organizational intrusion and constrain response to domestic crises with regional effects.

ASEAN’s effect cannot be judged only by whether it resembles a more delegated regional organization. Ask whether regular consultation changes information, escalation, agenda, and expectations; whether members implement agreed economic and technical measures; and where consensus prevents action the stated purpose requires.

External powers also interact through ASEAN-centered forums because member states value a regional convening role. “Centrality” is not material dominance. It is a claim and practice of agenda location whose effectiveness depends on members’ cohesion and partners’ willingness to use the forum.

The case demonstrates a general rule: institutional design contains a tradeoff between action, control, representation, and legitimacy. A decision rule can be the mechanism that sustains the organization and the mechanism that blocks it.

Regional agency
A small state can use location, access, coalition, law, specialization, and forum choice. Its options are constrained, but it is not merely terrain between larger powers.

Put It to Work

- ☐ Redraw one region around the mechanism rather than the continent.
- ☐ Identify the bargain that sustains or blocks regional leadership.
- ☐ Map an external power's dependence on local access and partners.
- ☐ Compare 2 regions using the same dimensions without treating one as the template.

Decision: Which system matters most here?

Locate the decisive interaction at global, regional, dyadic, or domestic level, then show how the other levels transmit rather than assuming the global distribution explains every outcome.

Part V

How to Read an International Event

Build the Explanation

An international event arrives as fragments: a press release, a video, a market move, an official accusation, a map, a speech, an anonymous briefing, and a stream of commentary. The first task is not choosing a theory. It is building an evidence structure strong enough for theory to explain.

Use 8 stages. Each produces an artifact that can be checked.

Stage 1: Define the Outcome

Write one sentence with actor, action or change, date, place, and comparison. “Why is the region unstable?” is too broad. “Why did 3 neighboring states create a joint maritime patrol in 2024 after rejecting a similar proposal in 2021?” creates variation to explain.

Separate the outcome from its consequence. The patrol may be the decision. Reduced incidents, new rivalry, or no operational change are later outcomes.

Stage 2: Establish the Chronology

Build a table with date, event, actor, source, and confidence. Use the earliest authoritative record available, then compare later accounts. Note when a document reports an event and when the event occurred.

Chronology prevents reverse causation and compressed stories. A policy announced after a crisis may have been designed earlier. A speech described as a response may precede the action it is said to answer.

Classify every entry:

- verified event;
- actor claim;

- report with named evidence;
- reasonable inference;
- unresolved or disputed.

Stage 3: Build the Actor Map

Include only actors who change the decision, information, implementation, legitimacy, or reaction. For each, record objective, capability, dependency, constraint, audience, and arena.

Do not assign an objective from behavior alone. Record the source and confidence. An actor can hold several objectives that conflict across agencies or time.

Stage 4: Trace the Reaction Chain

International outcomes are interactive. For each consequential move, write:

action → observed signal → interpretation → response → feedback.

The interpretation step is where many explanations disappear. Evidence can come from internal records, official reasoning, doctrine, timing, or consistent behavior. If interpretation is inferred, label it.

Stage 5: Run the Level Check

Generate hypotheses at individual, domestic, dyadic, regional, and systemic levels. A useful hypothesis contains a mechanism and expected evidence.

Example:

Domestic coalition

Export firms bearing disruption pressed the government to accept a patrol mechanism. Evidence: lobbying, parliamentary debate, industry concentration, and timing.

Regional balance

Smaller states coordinated to reduce dependence on the regional power. Evidence: threat statements, access agreements, defense planning, and alternative explanations.

Institutional learning

Earlier exercises produced information and procedures that made cooperation feasible. Evidence: working-group records, standard procedures, and changed costs.

Stage 6: Identify the Mechanisms

Mechanisms are the moving parts between cause and outcome: coercion, bargaining, reassurance, monitoring, socialization, delegation, domestic veto, diffusion, dependence, agenda control, or identity change.

Name the actor and action at each link. “Globalization caused” and “geopolitics forced” are background labels until the transaction or constraint is visible.

Stage 7: Test Rival Explanations

Choose the strongest rival, not a caricature. State what evidence would make it more plausible. Look for cases where the proposed cause exists without the outcome or the outcome occurs without the cause.

Ask whether explanations:

- compete for the same causal work;
- sequence across time;
- operate at different levels;
- describe scope conditions;
- explain different parts of the outcome.

The goal is not a forced winner when evidence supports a layered account.

Stage 8: Write the Confidence Boundary

End with 3 paragraphs:

1. **What the evidence supports:** the mechanism and strongest observations.
2. **What remains inferred:** the private belief, missing document, or uncertain effect.
3. **What would change the assessment:** future evidence, comparison, or case development.

Confidence language should reflect evidence, not tone. Use high confidence only where multiple independent and appropriate sources support the claim and plausible alternatives are weak.

Source Roles Differ

An official statement is authoritative evidence of the position stated. It may contain disputed facts. A satellite image may show physical change and not intent. A dataset may identify a trend under a definition and not its cause. A scholarly article may supply a mechanism tested on other cases and require adaptation. A news report may connect sources quickly but depend on anonymous claims.

Use each source for the job it can perform. Triangulation is not counting sources that repeat the same origin.

The One-Page Explanation File

Compress the work into:

- bounded outcome;
- 6-event chronology;
- actor map;
- primary reaction chain;
- 2 mechanisms;
- strongest rival;
- fact, inference, and unknown;
- conclusion with confidence and date.

If the file cannot fit, the question may still be too broad.

An explanation earns confidence by exposing its chronology, mechanism, rival, source roles, and unknowns. Completeness of tone is not completeness of evidence.

Put It to Work

- ☐ Define a single dated outcome and separate its consequence.
- ☐ Build chronology before causal prose.
- ☐ Map actors and reaction rather than countries alone.
- ☐ Test the strongest rival and state what remains unresolved.

Decision: Is the explanation ready?

It is ready when another reader can inspect the evidence chain, see why the mechanism fits, understand the rival, and locate the uncertainty without trusting your confidence by tone.

Reconstruct the Crisis

This chapter applies the method to a settled public-source case: the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. The purpose is not to produce a complete history. It is to show how different mechanisms explain different decisions and why a headline summary cannot carry the causal load.

The case is dangerous to simplify because later knowledge makes the outcome feel inevitable. Decision-makers experienced incomplete information, organizational friction, domestic pressure, alliance concerns, and a risk of escalation neither side fully controlled.

Define the Outcome

The broad event includes Soviet deployment of nuclear-capable missiles in Cuba, United States detection and response, a naval quarantine, intense communication, and Soviet withdrawal under an agreement that included a public US non-invasion pledge and a private understanding regarding US Jupiter missiles in Turkey.

Our bounded question is:

Why did the crisis end through a negotiated withdrawal rather than an immediate US attack, continued Soviet deployment, or uncontrolled escalation?

The outcome is the bargaining path. The longer-term consequences for deterrence, Cuba, Turkey, and later arms control are separate.

The Compact Chronology

Deployment

The Soviet Union secretly deployed missiles and supporting forces to Cuba in 1962, following the failed Bay of Pigs invasion and within a wider strategic relationship.

Detection

US reconnaissance identified missile construction in October. Senior officials considered air strike, invasion, diplomacy, and blockade options.

Quarantine

President John F. Kennedy announced a naval quarantine rather than an immediate attack, preserving pressure and time while mobilizing public and allied support.

Escalation risk

Soviet ships approached, forces operated under uncertain control, and a US reconnaissance aircraft was shot down over Cuba. Multiple routes could have accelerated.

Messages

Communications from Nikita Khrushchev proposed withdrawal connected to a US non-invasion pledge; a later message raised US missiles in Turkey.

Settlement

The public arrangement removed Soviet missiles under verification and pledged against US invasion. The Turkey component was handled privately and later implemented.

Each line contains a larger documentary dispute. The reconstruction stays at the level needed for the mechanisms.

The Actor Map

The United States executive

Objectives included removing the missiles, protecting national and alliance credibility, avoiding unacceptable escalation, and preserving political control over the response. Capabilities included military superiority around Cuba, naval control, nuclear forces, intelligence, alliances, and

public communication. Constraints included uncertainty about Soviet and Cuban response, alliance politics, domestic pressure, and escalation.

The Soviet leadership

Objectives included protecting Cuba, changing the strategic position, demonstrating resolve, and avoiding a war that threatened the Soviet Union. Capabilities included the deployed forces, nuclear deterrent, diplomacy, and the ability to withdraw. Constraints included US local advantage, incomplete deployment, secrecy, communication, and risk of losing control.

Cuba

Cuban leaders sought protection against invasion and revolutionary sovereignty. Cuba was not only the location of a superpower bargain. Its security and preferences were partly subordinated to decisions made in Washington and Moscow, exposing hierarchy inside the alliance relationship.

Military organizations and allies

US and Soviet military commands, crews, intelligence organizations, NATO allies, and Turkey affected options and credibility. Operational acts could change the political crisis before leaders completed bargaining.

Mechanism 1: Costly Bargaining Under Shared Risk

The quarantine imposed pressure without immediately destroying Soviet assets or requiring the same rapid response as an attack. It signaled resolve, mobilized coalition support, and created time. It also carried escalation risk.

The settlement gave each leadership something it could present as serving a core objective: withdrawal for the United States; non-invasion assurance and a private missile understanding for the Soviet Union; survival without invasion for Cuba, though without equal control over the bargain.

The bargaining range existed because nuclear war and invasion were costly, but finding it required communication, sequencing, and political management.

Mechanism 2: Assurance Made Compliance Possible

A demand for unilateral withdrawal with no assurance about Cuba would leave a major Soviet objective unaddressed. The non-invasion pledge changed the future condition. The private handling of Turkey helped manage alliance and domestic politics while creating later controversy about what drove the settlement.

Assurance did not rest on trust alone. Verification and observable withdrawal mattered. The agreement combined public and private components aimed at different audiences.

Mechanism 3: Organizational Risk Favored Time

Military operations created danger beyond the intended message. The loss of an aircraft, rules for naval encounter, dispersed forces, and incomplete command knowledge meant that a supposedly controlled move could trigger response.

This strengthens an organizational and individual explanation for the choice of quarantine and the urgency of settlement. It also limits a clean rational-actor story: the states did not act as single minds with perfect command.

Rival Explanations

A pure power explanation emphasizes US local military advantage and the Soviet inability to sustain the deployment. It explains the asymmetry and pressure. It does not alone explain the chosen instrument, reciprocal terms, or moments of restraint.

A domestic political explanation emphasizes US elections, Kennedy's earlier confrontation over Cuba, and each leader's need to defend credibil-

ity. It explains audience constraints and secrecy. It does not alone explain the shared nuclear danger and operational pathway.

A norm and legitimacy explanation emphasizes the legal and public framing of quarantine, consultation, and the distinction between blockade and immediate attack. It explains coalition and justification effects, but material pressure remains central.

The best account layers mechanisms without pretending they are equal at every moment.

What We Know, Infer, and Cannot Settle Here

Public records support the broad sequence, option debate, settlement terms, and serious risk of escalation. They support an explanation combining pressure, assurance, communication, and restraint under uncertainty.

This compact reconstruction infers the relative causal weight assigned to motives across leaders and institutions. Historical scholarship continues to debate the importance of missile balance, Cuba, Berlin, Turkey, domestic politics, and particular communications.

The case does not prove that calibrated coercion always works. Nuclear deterrence, local geography, personalities, secret bargaining, and luck define scope conditions. Copying the quarantine from the mechanism is an analogy error.

Your Second Reconstruction

Choose a public event outside the superpower Cold War. Suitable practice cases include a regional institution responding to a health emergency, a small-state coalition changing a negotiation, a trade dispute resolved through an institution, or a cross-border infrastructure agreement. Avoid a moving case if reliable evidence is too thin.

Complete the companion dossier without reading a model answer:

1. define one outcome;
2. build a dated chronology;
3. map at least 4 actors without treating them as equal;

4. trace the central reaction chain;
5. develop 2 mechanisms at different levels;
6. test the strongest rival;
7. write fact, inference, unknown, and confidence.

No portable recipe

The Cuban Missile Crisis teaches mechanisms of bargaining, assurance, communication, hierarchy, organizational risk, and restraint. It does not supply a reusable crisis tactic detached from nuclear danger and historical context.

Put It to Work

- ☐ Rewrite the crisis as one bounded outcome rather than a 13-day label.
- ☐ Identify where the United States, Soviet Union, and Cuba occupied unequal positions.
- ☐ Separate material pressure from assurance and organizational risk.
- ☐ State which evidence would change your weighting of the rival explanations.

Decision: What survives the case?

Carry forward the analytical mechanisms and scope conditions. Leave behind the temptation to turn one successful settlement into a universal doctrine.

Notes

Primary public materials include the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library's Cuban Missile Crisis records, US Department of State *Foreign Relations of the United States* volumes, and declassified communications. Readers should compare later recollection with contemporaneous records and scholarship.

Part VI

The Event Analysis Pack

Core Concepts Without the Jargon

Anarchy

A system without a final common sovereign above states. It does not mean constant chaos or absence of rules.

Sovereignty

A cluster of claims about domestic authority, external independence, international legal status, practical control, and non-intervention.

Power

Capacity to produce a specified effect through relationships, rules, structures, or meaning. Resources require conversion.

Security dilemma

A condition in which defensive measures can reduce another actor's security and generate a mutually costly spiral.

Deterrence

Preventing an action by convincing an actor that it will fail or cost too much.

Compellence

Making an actor begin, stop, or reverse action through conditional pressure and assurance.

Institution

A durable rule, practice, or organization that structures expectations and interaction.

Interdependence

A relationship in which actors impose consequential effects on each other;

its politics depends on asymmetry and alternatives.

Norm

A shared expectation about appropriate conduct for an actor with a given identity.

Order

A sufficiently stable pattern of rules, expectations, institutions, and power relationships.

Mechanism

The actors and steps connecting a proposed cause to an outcome.

Level of analysis

The location of a cause or process: individual, domestic, dyadic, regional, systemic, or transnational.

For every concept, add a verb, actor, and case. A definition becomes useful only when it helps you distinguish one mechanism from another.

Theory Comparison Matrix

Realist lenses

Ask how anarchy, power, threat, uncertainty, and survival shape behavior. Strong for security competition and position. Blind spot when domestic institutions, ideas, or non-state authority carry the variation.

Liberal lenses

Ask how domestic preferences, institutions, information, exchange, and repeated cooperation shape outcomes. Strong for variation in cooperation and state preferences. Blind spot when hierarchy and coercion are treated as correctable transaction costs.

Constructivist lenses

Ask how identity, norms, categories, and interaction construct interests and appropriate action. Strong for change in meaning and legitimacy. Blind spot when discourse is shown without the pathway into behavior.

Critical and postcolonial lenses

Ask how hierarchy, empire, class, race, gender, knowledge, and exclusion produce the system and its categories. Strong for hidden distribution and historical structure. Blind spot when critique does not distinguish causal mechanisms or variation.

For the event under study, write the question, mechanism, required evidence, strongest contribution, and blind spot for each lens. Do not award points for mentioning every theory.

Case Reconstruction Worksheet

Outcome

Actor, action or change, date, place, and comparison:

Chronology

For each entry record event date, publication date, actor, source, confidence, and status as verified event, actor claim, report, inference, or unresolved.

Actor Map

For each consequential actor: objective, capability, dependency, constraint, audience, arena.

Reaction Chain

Action → observed signal → interpretation → response → unintended effect.

Explanation

Primary mechanism, observable evidence, strongest rival, fact, inference, unresolved question, confidence, and manuscript date.

Reading Official Statements and Data Carefully

Official Statement Card

1. Who spoke, under which institutional authority?
2. What act is this: law, decision, policy, allegation, explanation, or advocacy?
3. Which audience and decision does it seek to affect?
4. Which facts are supported independently?
5. Which terms are undefined or contested?
6. What omission would change the interpretation?
7. What later behavior supports or contradicts it?

An official source is primary evidence of the official act. It is not automatically independent verification of every factual claim inside it.

Data Card

Record publisher, mandate, definition, unit, population, geography, reference date, release date, stock or flow, missingness, revision status, uncertainty, and comparison compatibility.

Never copy a moving number without its date and category.

Map Card

Record producer, projection, boundary status, data date, control versus claim, scale, omitted routes or populations, and the political work the map performs. A clean line can hide a disputed or administered boundary.

An Annotated Path Into the Discipline

Begin with the question you need to answer rather than a universal reading list.

Foundations and theory

Use a current university-level International Relations textbook for disciplinary breadth, then read primary theoretical works in context. Compare realism, liberal institutionalism, constructivism, feminist IR, Marxist and critical political economy, postcolonial IR, and English School approaches without treating one text as a whole tradition.

Power and security

Read Robert Jervis on the security dilemma, Thomas Schelling on coercion and bargaining, James Fearon on rationalist explanations for war, and Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall on forms of power. Pair theory with historical work that tests decision records and scope conditions.

Institutions and law

Read the constitutive instrument before commentary: the UN Charter, treaty text, court judgment, or institutional rules. Then use scholarship to explain compliance, delegation, legalization, and power. International law primers should be current and written by qualified specialists.

Political economy and inequality

Study trade and finance through both efficiency and distribution. Add work on interdependence, structural power, development, empire, race, gender, labor, and environmental politics. Official reports supply data and institutional positions, not the only interpretation.

Methods and evidence

Learn case selection, process tracing, comparison, causal inference, archival research, and interpretive methods. The right method follows the question and evidence. No source count substitutes for a causal design.

Maintain a reading ledger: question, mechanism, evidence, strength, limit, and next source. Reading becomes disciplinary when texts enter relation instead of forming a pile of summaries.

Continue From Explanation to Statecraft

Once you can explain an event, the next question is operational: which instrument could change which behavior, through what mechanism, at what cost, and with what likely reaction? That work continues in *The Statecraft Handbook*.

For now, choose one international event outside your usual region. Build its chronology, actor map, reaction chain, level check, and rival explanations. Keep fact, inference, and unresolved interpretation separate. A disciplined incomplete explanation is better than a complete-sounding story with no evidentiary boundary.

About the Author

Gaurav Tiwari is an educator, writer, developer, and founder. His books turn large subjects into practical analytical systems without replacing uncertainty with slogans.

More books and companion resources are available at gauravtiwari.org.

