

# Political Science Background Notes

## 1. What Are The Basic Concepts of Political Science?

There are four concepts that people often use interchangeably, but have special meanings for political scientists interested in international relations. These concepts are: *nation*, *country*, *government*, and *state*.

A *nation* is a group of people who have common characteristics (both objective, like language, race, and religion, and subjective like feeling, wishing, and wanting to be a part of a group) and want to be independent. This definition separates a *nation* from an *ethnic group*, since the latter does not want to be independent.

By the term *country*, we often refer to the geographic dimensions of a *state*. In this regard, one could take a pure scientific perspective by specifying the geographic limits of a state as indicated by longitudes and latitudes. One may also focus on the geographic boundaries by specifying the neighboring states or they might want to focus on the geographic characteristics of a particular land, if it is mountainous, hilly, or simply flat. Obviously, different geographic characteristics are associated with different types of historical and political experiences.

A *government* is an administration, which attempts to bring order to a society by performing three major functions: making laws, enforcing laws, and judging based on laws.

A *state* is a legal and political entity that has five major characteristics: people, territory, government, sovereignty (independence), and diplomatic recognition. Thus, one may argue that state is a more comprehensive concept in comparison to the other three terms.

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## 2. How Do The States And Nations Relate To One Another?

There are three concepts used in international politics based on how states and nations relate to one another. These concepts are: *nation-state*, *multinational state*, and *multistate nation*.

A *nation-state* is a *state* which predominately contains one nation within its territory. For example, Japan is a very homogeneous state. In Japan, about 98% of the population is of Japanese descent, about 1.5% are Korean, and .5% are other nationalities.

A **multinational state** is a **state** that contains more than one **nation** within its geographic boundaries. In Canada, there are two major nationalities-- the English and the French speaking. The latter is concentrated in Quebec region.

A **multistate nation** is a **nation** that forms the majority of the inhabitants of more than one **state**. For example, the Anglo-Saxon nation constitutes the majority of the people living in the UK, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. The Arabs are also a multistate nation since they constitute the majority of citizens of Syria, Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and other Arab states.

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### 3. What Are The Major Schools of Thought In This Field?

There are two major schools of thought in politics: **realism** and **idealism**. The realists present a pessimistic world view similar to that of Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan*, where the nature of mankind is evil and unchangeable, the international community is anarchical, and only the strong will survive. The realists emphasize the importance of power and national interest, instead of human rights and humanitarian efforts. One of their most well-known scholars was Hans Morgenthau (who wrote ***Politics Among the Nations***), while policy-makers include Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger. The major assumptions of the realists are:

1. Different states have different interests, which are often at odds with each other.
2. Contradictory interests could lead to a conflict, the largest of which is a war.
3. A state's power level is a crucial factor in determining the outcome of the conflict.
4. Politics is all about maintaining power, increasing power, or projecting power.

On the contrary, the idealists represent a world view that can be traced back to the ideas of Jean Jacque Rousseau, in ***the Social Contract***. The idealists tend to be more optimistic about human nature. They think change is possible and cooperation among individuals is doable. Cyrus Vance and Jimmy Carter are recognized as idealists. Their main assumptions can be summarized as follows:

1. Preserving, acquiring, and applying power is not the essence of international politics.
2. Pursuing ethical policy is not against national interest.
3. The world must seek a new system of order.
4. Humans are capable of more cooperation and less conflict.

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### 4. What To Study?

Like other social scientists, all political scientists study behavior. What separates political scientists from others, however, is their emphasis on the concept of power and consequently political behavior. In the field of international politics, scholars focus on the political behavior that influences the international scene. The subject of the study can come from one of the three levels-of-analysis: individual, state, or system. Thus, a level-of-analysis is what we study. We will discuss each of these levels in more detail in the future.

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## 5. What Are Some of The Themes of Politics?

One of the major themes of international politics is conflict-cooperation studies. Simply said, we can study the relationship among states in terms of the nature of their association, which can be either cooperative or conflictual. Another theme is the North-South connection, which focuses on the global economic division between the South, the Poor, or the less developed countries (LDCs), and the North, the Rich, or the developed countries (DCs). During the Cold War era, it was also customary to focus on the East-West axis, which illustrated a political and ideological division of the world into two camps each led by a superpower.

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## 6. What Are The Major Types of Relations In The World?

There are three different types of relationships that can exist among states. They are ***dependent***, ***interdependent***, and ***independent*** relationships. A dependent relationship is a type of association in which the event in one state influences another state, which is often a less powerful state. The examples can mostly be found in the North-South relationships, or the relationship between most developing countries whose economy is dependent on the trade with their more powerfully developed counterparts.

An ***interdependent*** relationship is a type of association when the events in one state influence events in another and this process is mutual. The relationship among the industrial societies of the West is the best example. For instance, the American economy influences the Japanese economy and politics and vice versa.

An ***independent*** relationship between two states exists when the events in either one have no major impact on the other. This type of relationship traditionally existed between the economies of the Western and the Socialist countries, especially during the Cold War era. Although Americans traded their wheat for Russian fur and vodka for many years even in the height of the Cold War, the US trade embargo of the Soviet Union (after the invasion of Afghanistan) did not seriously impact the USSR, which began to import wheat from Canada and Argentina.

