

ROLE OF SYSTEMIC APPROACH IN STUDY OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

By

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Abstract

This article discusses systemic approach on study of international relations. Since nation states becoming a platform for modern international relations, several perspective on the interactions among states raised. Realist perspective emphasizes that balance of power is a corner stone of international system. However liberal perspectives states that interaction among states could not be seen as in a static term but in a continuity process including role of non-state actors. In addition, Marxist or radical perspective emphasizes that international system is structured by capitalist power. In addition, with choosing right level of analysis, implementation of the systemic approach would enrich understanding of international affairs.

Keywords:

Systemic approach, international relations, realism, liberalism, radical perspective, level analysis

Introduction

Since the nation-states system was formed when the Westphalia 1648 agreement was reached, the relationship between political units was already within the framework of the system. Relationship among states in modern term referred as international relations. The term “relationship” itself has shown there is a perspective of system approach within the interaction itself.

Stephen D Krasner (2000) mentions that the Westphalia Treaty which ended the war for thirty years marked the beginning of a modern international system in which the environment consists of each sovereign state with its own power within geographical boundaries. Thus modern international relations have been influenced by the system approach after the Westphalia put the state independently with attribution inherent in it. The Treaty of Westphalia was reinforced by the Montevideo Convention of 1933 in which the political unit was called a nation state because it had characters like territorial, people, sovereignty and recognition of other countries. In line with the development of relations between nations and the increasingly complex relationships, the state is not the only element in international relations but extends to other entities such as multinationals corporations, non-governmental organizations, international organizations and others.

The nation state system that is currently going on becomes something interesting because the term system is attached to it. This article will discuss the role of systemic approach in the study of international relations. The first part of the article will elaborate about understanding the systemic approach. The second part will explain the role of systemic approach in the study of international relations.

Systemic Approach

To understand systemic approach, it is better to know about what is called system. The term system comes from the Latin (*systema*) and the Greek (*systema*)

which means an entity consisting of components or elements connected together to facilitate the flow of information, matter or energy to achieve a goal. This term is often used to describe a set of entities that interact with one another so that one can create a particular model based on the existing system.¹

The system is the unity of the interconnected parts that reside within an area as well as possessing movable items, common examples from Social Sciences such as countries, political parties, world institutions etc. State for example, is a collection of some other elements such as provinces that are interconnected to form a country where the state's role as the mobilizer of the people in that country.

The notion of the system in this case can be described as "unity consisting of parts which are functionally related to each other in their subordinate bonds which indicate a motion in order to achieve a certain goal".² Rusadi Kantaprawira (1990) describes that the notion of the system as proposed by Bertalanffy, Russell L Ackoff, Kenneth Boulding, C. West Churchman, Anatol Rapoport and A. Angyal has elements such as integrated, regularity, unity, organizational, components which attached to each other, the connectedness of each other and the dependence of one component to each other. In addition, there is the unity connected, the system also has boundaries, the outer limit line that is directly adjacent to other systems.³

Furthermore, according to Ludwig von Bertalanffy (1940), a system as an element that is in a state of interconnectedness. The Webster dictionary describes the system as a complex unity formed by different parts that each are bound to the same plan or contribute to achieving the same goal.

¹Boscodoho. Teori Sistem Umum. <https://boscodoho.wordpress.com/2013/04/22/teori-sistem-umum-perkembangan-filosofi-dan-teori-sistem-dari-perspektif-keilmuan/>

²Rusadi Kantaprawira. 1990. *Pendekatan Sistem dalam Ilmu-Ilmu Sosial: Aplikasi dalam Meninjau Kehidupan Politik Indonesia*. Bandung: Sinar Baru. Hal. 5.

³Kantaprawira, Op.Cit., Hal 15.

Based on this understanding, the system is a collection of objects that interact and work together to achieve certain goals in a complex environment. The object in this term are elements of the system such as input, process, output, feedback, restrictions, where each of these parts have several values that together describe the state of the system at a certain moment.

Rusadi Kantaprawira explains the system approach is a way of viewing, analytical tools, analytical device, outlook about something. ⁴ Furthermore Rusadi explains this approach is a description of something so that something is complete, whole-shaped pattern and complete including factors that will affect it. The system approach implies explicit and clear views of the components of an organization as a whole.

According to Rusadi, the system approach has a number of functions, namely as (1) methodological instruments and logical instruments, (2) research instruments so that research can be in depth and can connect the gaps in the formation of theory as well as responsiveness to a weaknesses caused by different levels of view, 3) the coordination instrument between the different sciences and then forming the norms of the prevailing system, (4) the interdisciplinary instrument that first seeks to establish the commonly used "language" and the understanding of common problems as interdisciplinary communication means (5) and an integrative instrument so that the various disciplines of science do not collide with each other logically.⁵

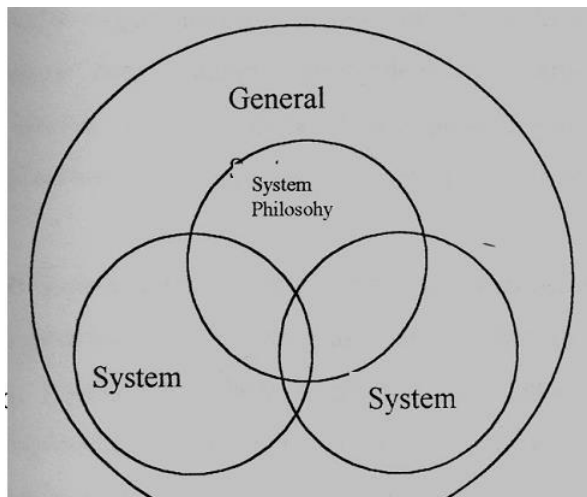
In general, the system approach, as explained by Rusadi, is the total point and the new orientation in seeing things. Consequently, the traditional, singular and partial approaches may be improved whilst technically such an approach remains important. The system approach in its various elements can be described as follows.⁶

⁴ Ibid. Hal. 4.

⁵ Kantaprawira. Op. Cit., Hal. 4-5.

⁶ Muslim Tampubolon dan Pasaman Silaban. *Penerapan Dan Pendekatan Teori Sistem: StudiKasus Universitas HKBP Nomensen*.

Figure 1 System and its Elements



Source: Tampubolon (2012)

Political scientists borrow the system concept from general system theory derived from the physics and biology. A system as described earlier is a set of interacting variables that are one unity by affecting each other. A system can also change with the passage of time. At some point a system develops but on other occasions it may split. Among these stages a system maintains itself as normal as possible but usually on course of change.⁷

Each system has a clear boundary but a system and its environment affect each other through the boundaries that exist. Each system has input and output and a number of outputs into feedback into the system and return into a new input. A system can also be in state of stable or not. A stable system usually requires considerable force to disrupt it, while an unstable system of equilibrium changes more frequently. Each system seeks to maintain a kind of equilibrium that can be stable and unstable.

⁷James E. Dougherty.1976."The Study of Global System". James N. Rosenau, Kenneth W. Thomson and Gavin Boyd. *World Politics: The Introduction*. New York: The Free Press. Hal. 598.

Systemic Approach in International Relations

The term system has been widely used in social science literature and particularly in the field of political science and international relations.⁸ James and Robert (2001) mentions that the theorization of international patterns especially since the mid-20th century focus on the concept of the international system. The assumption of human behavior as individuals and groups acts according to a pattern of behavior that can be described as a system.

The term system has also been used in several ways when explaining on International Relations.⁹ This includes systems analysis that describes techniques such as the study of cost-effectiveness in rational decision making related to resource allocation. In the literature of political science system analysis often alternately using the term system theory.

As a concept, system has been used in various theories of International Relations.¹⁰ Yet even though the system approach used in the exposure of the concepts and theories of International Relations is not always explicitly stated. The term system seems to have been inherent when explaining International Relations or International Politics.

Theorizing with systemic approach brings together two fundamental approaches in the theory of International Relations. First, the focus on the actors and their interactions whether they are individual, groups such as nations or bureaucratic units. This approach is called reductionist because at the level of individual participants or units such as a nation state rather than an international system. The second approach emphasizes the structure that provides the framework in the

⁸ James E. Dougherty and Robert L Pfaltzgraff Jr. 2001. *Contending Theories of International Relations: A Comprehensive Survey*. New York: Longman. Hal 104.

⁹ Ibid. 107.

¹⁰ Dougherty, Op. Cit., Hal 104.

interaction that occurs. The structure is said to have an influence shaping in the interaction of the actors.

Actors in this international system can be categorized as James E. Dougherty cites Andrew M. Scott as (1) nation states and their agencies, (2) international organization, (3) supranational actors, (4) alliances and bloc actors, (5) transnational nongovernmental organization and movements, (6) subnational groups and (7) individuals who satisfy the definition of actor but who cannot realistically be regarded as spokesmen for any other actor.¹¹

From the variety of actors in the international system it is clear that interactions involve not only nation states but also individuals as well as small groups. This international system becomes a reflection in the life of the nation so that it is acknowledged how the system has been running in the interaction between units either directly or indirectly. The presence of actors in the international system also emphasizes that in this system there are structures and processes.

As described earlier, the system is the relationship of one unit with other units that are interconnected and affect each other. A system is an assemblage of units, objects or parts united by some form of regular interaction.¹² With the concept of such a system then the explanation of the theory of International Relations to be diverse but still can be approached systemically.

One attempt to introduce the system approach in International Relations was conducted by Morton Kaplan in 1957 in his book *System and Process in International Politics*.¹³ His view presents six models of the international system. This Kaplan model shows how the structure affects the unit interactions within the

¹¹ James E. Dougherty.1976."The Study of Global System". James N. Rosenau, Kenneth W. Thomson and Gavin Boyd. *World Politics: The Introduction*. New York: The Free Press.

¹² Karen A. Mingst. 2003. *Essential of International Relations*. New York: Norton & Company. Hal.83.

¹³ Roozbeh Safdari Ghandehari.2016. *Systems Thinking and Culture in International Relations*. Thesis. Ottawa: The University of Ottawa. See also Mortons A. Kaplan. "Variants on Six Models of the

The model which describes by Kaplan became one of the most famous models in the view of the Realists. Karen A. Mingst (2003) mentions the Realist, Liberal, and Revolutionary approaches that quite dominant approach in International Relations have a complete system approach. In other words the concept of the system seems to be "embedded" or attached to the three dominant theoretical schools of International Relations.¹⁴

Realist School View

To some extent all realists view the international system as "anarchist". The realists call it no authority in the international system and there is no sovereignty. This anarchic structure impedes the actions of decision makers and affects the distribution ability among the various international actors. Among the realists is also different but only at the level of state autonomy within the international system. Traditionalist realists believe that the state acts and is formed by the system while the neorealist believes that international actors are hampered by the structure of the system.

Realist followers distinguish the international system based on its polarization and stratification. The polarized system refers only to a number of state blocks displaying its power within the international system. Realists are attracted to polarity because of its focus to power.¹⁵ Karen A. Mingst (2003) illustrates that the realists divide it into three unipolar, bipolar and multipolar polarities. However Kaplan (1967) has proposed six models of the international system.

These six models have a major rule in the balance of power system. The six rules, as quoted by Roozbeh Safdari Ghandehari from McGowan & Rood (1975) are (1) Act to improve the ability but to negotiate rather than fight, (2) Fight rather than

International System" dalam James N. Rosenau. 1969. *International Politics and Foreign Policy: A Reader in Research and Theory*. New York: The Free Press. Hal 291.

¹⁴ Ibid. Hal. 83.

¹⁵ Karen A. Mingst. 2003. *Essential of International Relations*. New York: Norton & Company. Hal.87.

miss opportunities for improvement. (3) Stop fighting rather than destroy major national actors, (4) Act against all coalitions or single actors who tend to dominate in the system. (5) Act to stem actors who want supranational organizational principles. (6) Allowing losing or retarded important actors to reentry into the system as acceptable or acting partners to bring unnecessary actors belonging to an important actor classification. All actors are treated as acceptable partners.¹⁶

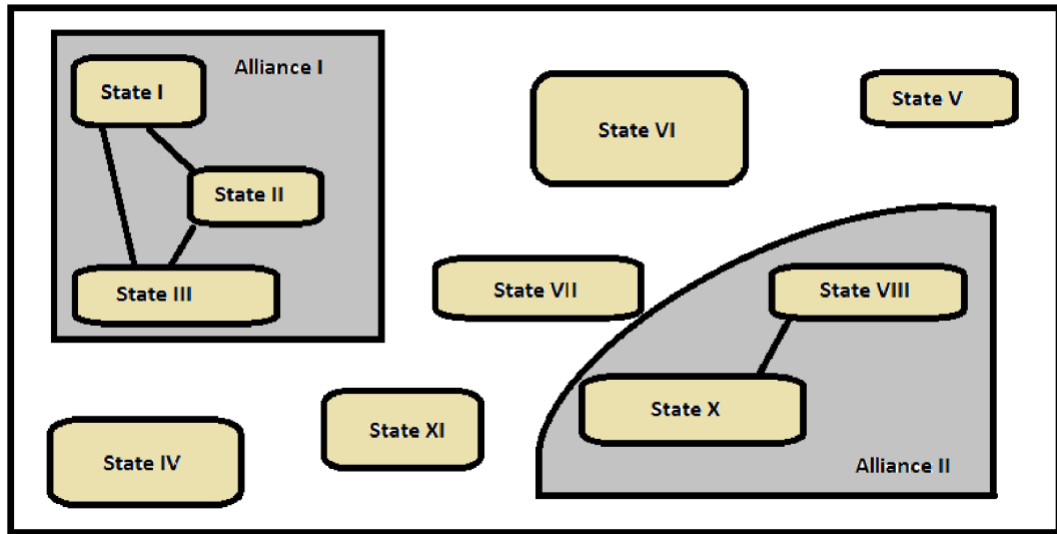
In the first model it appears as a "balance of power" system that has the character of a group of "national actors".¹⁷ In the balance of power system, states are not authoritatively governed by political sub-systems such as the United Nations. According to McGowan (1975), Kaplan argues that the six core rules of the balance of power system operate to produce liquid alliances that govern the system and prevent other countries or coalitions of other countries from reaching hegemony. Based on these six essential rules it is clear that the state is assumed rational and they form an alliance solely because of the interests and threats of the state not because of ideological and cultural attachments.

Figure 2 Balance of Power System

¹⁶ Roozbeh Safdari Ghandehari.2016. *Systems Thinking and Culture in International Relations*. Thesis. Ottawa: The University of Ottawa.

¹⁷ Mingst, Op. Cit., Hal. 88.

Balance of Power System



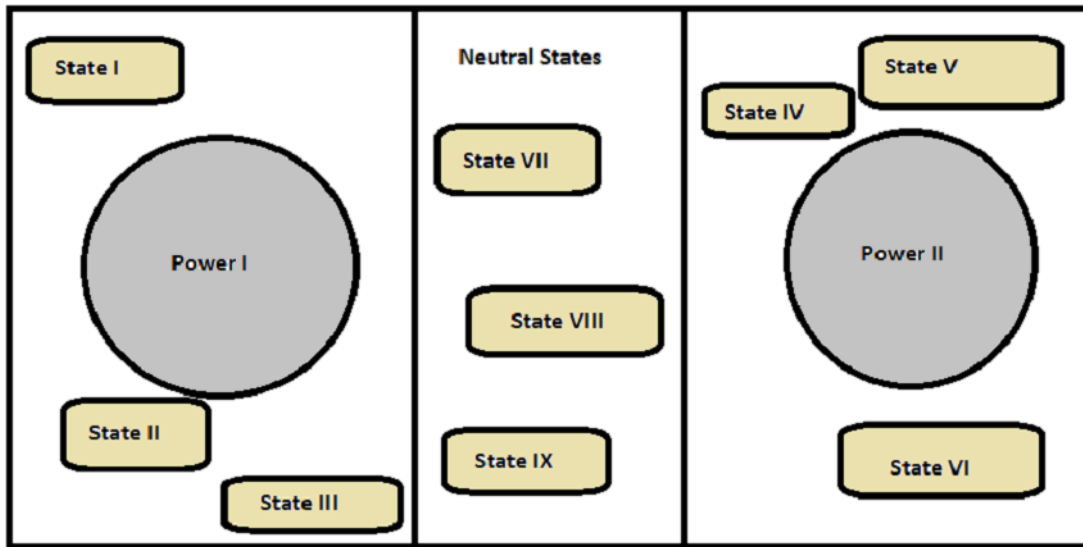
Source: Ghandehari (2016) and Kaplan (1969)

Kaplan also described the second model he called Loose Bipolar System. In this model there is a system with two major forces and other actors tend to cluster around two forces or be neutral.¹⁸

Figure 3 Loose Bipolar System

¹⁸ Ghandehari, Op.Cit. Hal. 9.

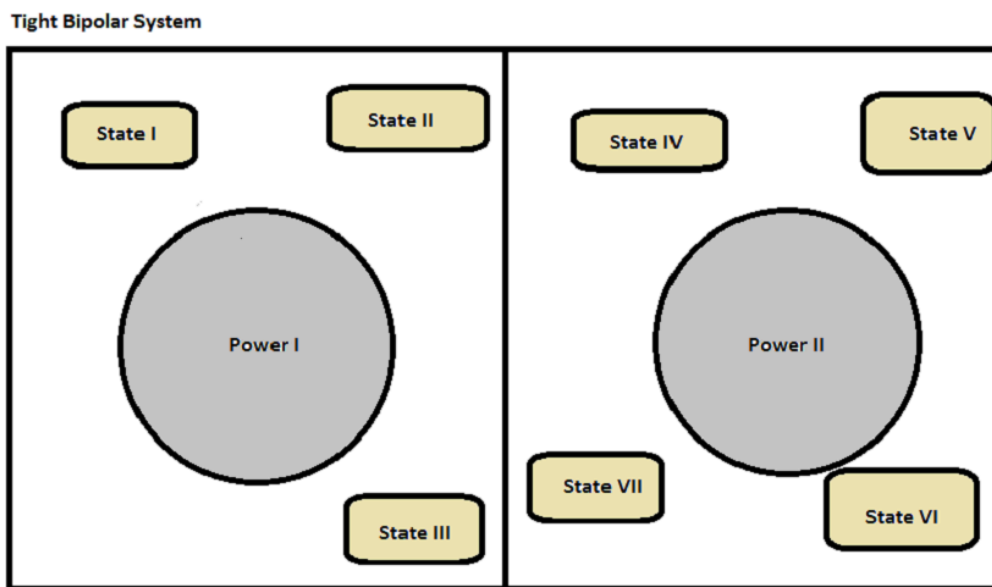
Loose Bipolar System



Source: Ghandehari (2016) and Kaplan (1969)

Kaplan then described the third model he called a tight bipolar system in which the system is simplified into two blocks. This model is an extreme version of the loose bipolar system.

Figure 4 Tight Bipolar System

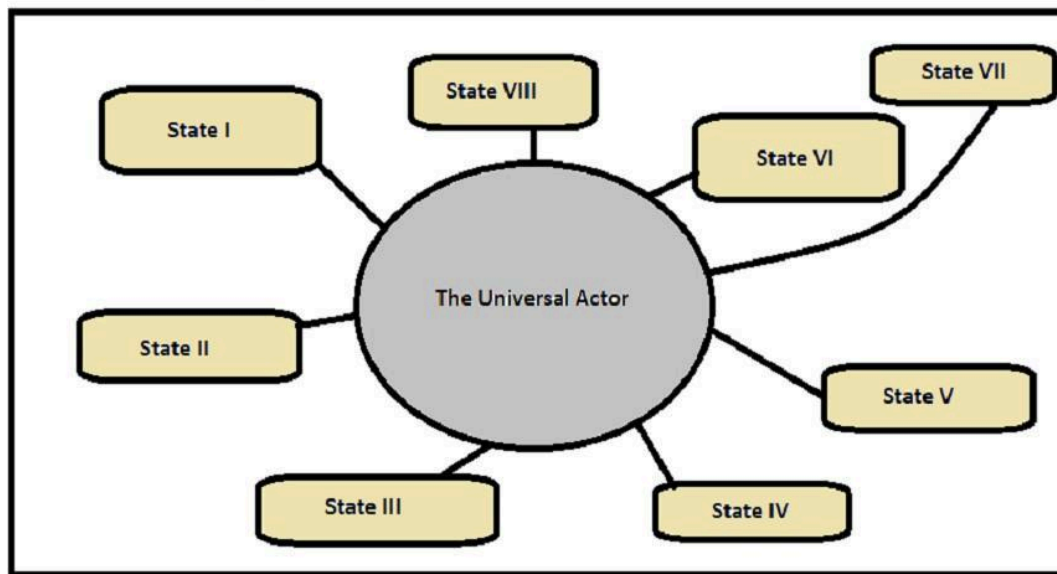


Source: Ghandehari (2016) and Kaplan (1969)

Kaplan's next model is a universal international system. In this model, the "universal actor" has sufficient power to prevent wars between national actors but the actors of national actors will try to increase their power in order to gain a better position within the framework of universal actors.

Figure 5 Universal International System

Universal International System

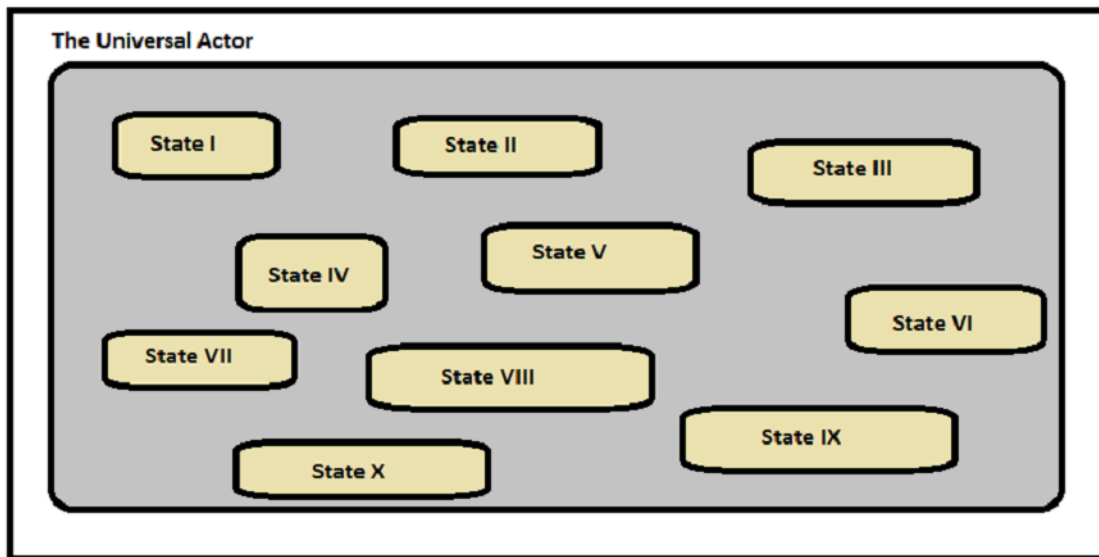


Source: Ghandehari (2016) and Kaplan (1969)

The fifth model is called "the hierarchical international system" in which the Universal Actor almost absorbs other actors and only one country is left in the world.

Figure 5 Hierarchical International System

Hierarchical International System

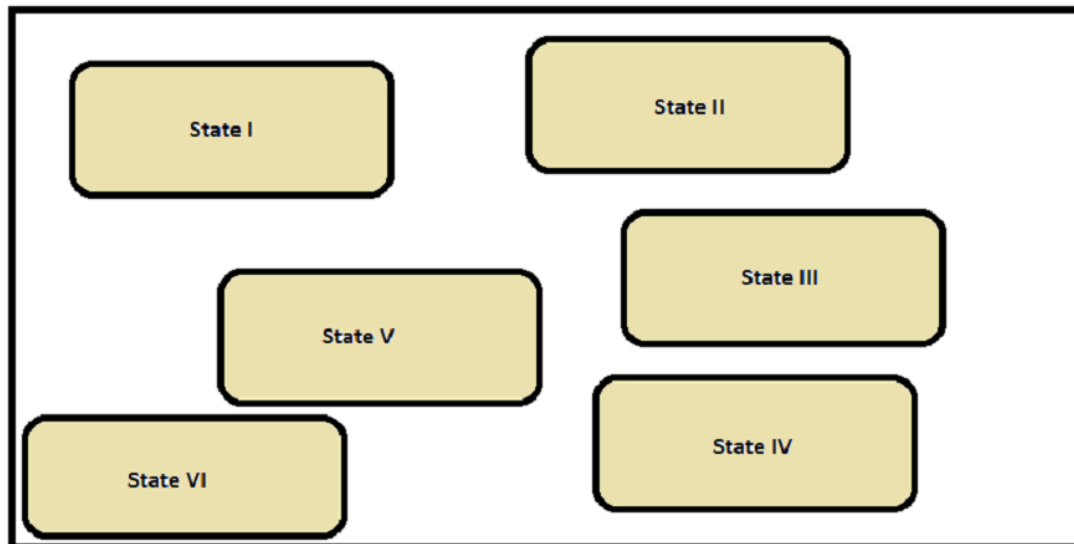


Source: Ghandehari (2016) and Kaplan (1969)

The sixth model is called "the veto unit of the international system" in which each state can secure itself without forming an alliance. In this system there are situations where it can be mutually destructive and each country raises its interests.

Figure 6 Unit Veto International System

Unit Veto International System

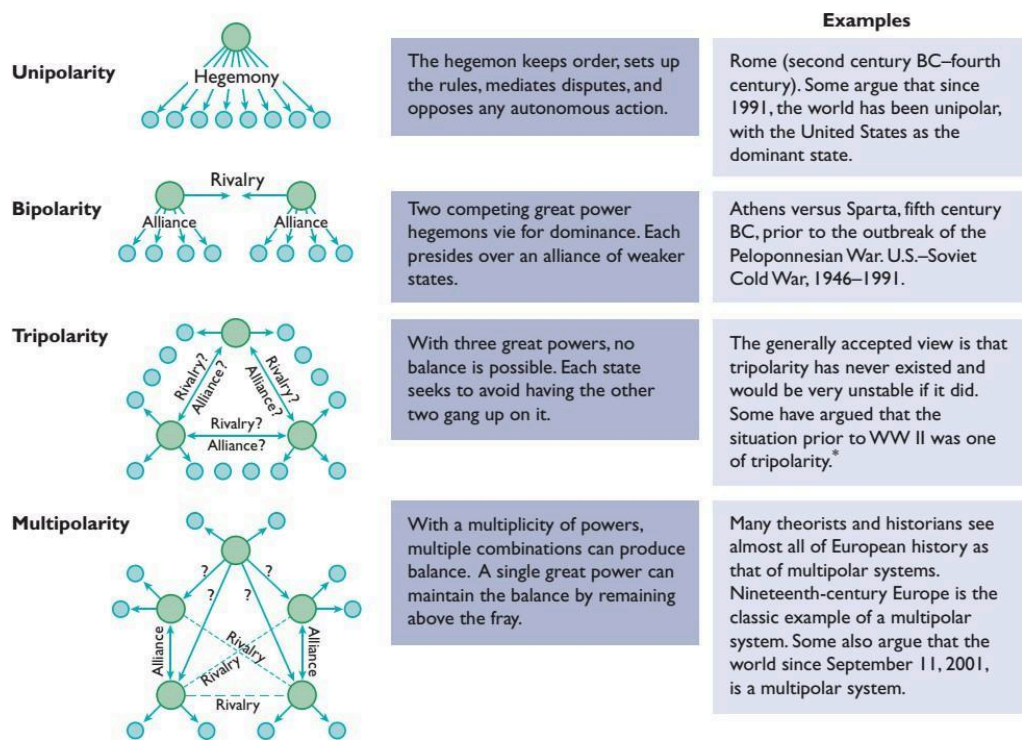


Source: : Ghandehari (2016) and Kaplan (1969)

The international system as believed by the realists is described by Paul D'Anieri (2012) ¹⁹ with a more simple version. The interpretation below shows that the world is currently in a multipolar system where no dominant actor simply to force his will. The United States could be dominant but there are other balances in both Russia, Japan and China.

Figure 7 Multipolar International System

¹⁹ Paul D'Anieri. 2012. *International Politics: Power and Purpose in Global Affairs*. Boston: Wadsworth. Hal 70.



Source: D'Anieri (2012)

In addition to polarization, the realist and neo realist schools also recognize what is called stratification in the international system. What stratification means is the different access to resources by different groups of countries. The international system is stratified according to which countries have access to important resources such as oil, military or economic power.

Based on that stratification, developed countries that have greater access to the resources of the United States and Japan belong to developed countries. Then the country has been partially developed like Argentina and Brazil so access to resources is not so high. While in large numbers of countries in this world based on GDP classified as developing countries such as Kenya and Senegal.

Liberal School Perspective

For the Liberal School, the international system is not the main point. Therefore, there are three concepts of the international system in the Liberal perspective. First, the concept that views the international system is not as a structure but a process. In this process various interactions arise between the various parties and where a number of actors learn from the interaction. Actors in this process are not only countries but also international agencies such as the UN, non-governmental organizations such as Human Rights Watch and multinational companies. Each actor interacts with each other.

The second concept from a Liberal perspective is the system coming from an English perspective of an international society. According to two thinkers of the English school tradition, Hedley Bull and A. Watson, the international system consists of a group of independent political communities, more than that. In this international society, various actors communicate, they care about common rules and institutions and acknowledge mutual interests. Actors in an international society share the same identity, a feeling like "we-ness".

A third concept of this perspective is neoliberal institutionalism that is closer to realist thinking. Neoliberal institutionalism views that the international system as something that has long been in progress where every country acts for its own sake. But unlike other realists, they see the interaction products among these actors as potentially positive.

Regarding changes in the international system, liberals view change from multiple sources. First, changes in the international system arose as a result of technological advances. For example, changes in communication and transportation lead to increased levels of interdependence among countries in the international system. Second, change may arise because of considerable changes in a number of areas. If the realists emphasize change to security, the liberals relate to other issues

such as the 20th century economic issues while in the 21st century concerning global issues such as human rights and the environment. A third change occurs if new actors such as Multinational Corporation, global civil society or non-governmental organizations replace state actors.

Radical School Perspective

The Radicals describe and explain the structure itself, while the realists define the international system in terms of structure and political power of inter-state interaction. The Radical School is concerned primarily with stratification in the international system. For Marxists the weakness of stratification in the international system is due to capitalism. Capitalism structures relationships between those who are lucky and unlucky, benefiting the rich and oppressing the weak. Marxists see capitalism as its own instrument of dominance, including the international institutions whose power is governed by the capitalist state in order to launch its institutions as multinational corporations whose headquarters are in the capitalist nation and its activities in other weak states.

The Radical School argue that economic disparity can be explained by placing it into the structure of the international system. All actions and interactions are restricted by the structure. Realists also admit it but are considered positive because it will limit aggressive action. But for the Marxist the restriction is very negative because it prevents economic change and development.

About the changes in the system, radical school consider changes in the transition of existing countries to the core of the system. For example, the Dutch were replaced by Britain and Britain replaced by the United States in the international system. Changes can occur in semi-periphery areas and on the periphery due to changes in interaction between actors in it. Capitalism goes through a cycle of growth and expansion as it did in the era of colonialism and imperialism followed by a period of contraction and decline.

The question is whether this system of capitalism can change itself? The radical schools's scholars has no same view. Walrstein for example pessimistic by saying there is a change but runs very slowly. Some are optimistic that there will be a change from capitalist to Marxist.

Level of Analysis

The systemic approach also uses level of analysis to answer the "why" question. Level of analysis helps to orient the question and provide what level of analysis advice is exactly used. A number of International Relations scholars propose a number of levels of analysis that outline three that are individual level, domestic level and international system level.²⁰ At the individual level the analysis focuses on the perceptions, choices and actions of the individual human being. But in the approach of this individual system is in a political system where the structure of the system will affect the decisions taken individually.

Similarly at the level of domestic or state or societal put attention to the behavior of the state that affect its actions in a system. The behavior is the input of various elements such as government institutions, political organizations, interest groups and others. Input of the various elements in this state which lead to action which then the response from the action becomes a feed back.

While the third level is the interstate relationship where the focus is on the international system which is the result of that interaction. So the focus is on the model of interaction between state actors rather than individual or state level. The study of this level is directed to the power of a country's position in the international system. This third level is considered the most important in the study of International Relations. Anak Agung Banyu Perwira and Yanyan Mochamad Yani (2014) cite

²⁰ Joshua S. Goldstein and Jon C. Pevenhouse. 2014. *International Relations*. Boston: Pearson. Hal. 17.

David J Singer, the international system is the most comprehensive range of analysis that includes the totality of interactions within the system and its environment.²¹

In addition to these three levels there is a fourth level called global level of analysis that wants to explain the results of global trends and forces that affect inter-country interactions. This global level is increasingly gaining attention in International Relations studies that examine transnational integration through science, engineering and business communities around the world. Joshua S. Goldstein and Jon C. Pevenhouse (2014) illustrate the use of level analysis in the following illustrations:

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Figure 8 Level Analysis

Many influences affect the course of international relations. Levels of analysis provide a framework for categorizing these influences and thus for suggesting various explanations of international events. Examples include:

Global Level		
North-South gap	Religious fundamentalism	Information revolution
World regions	Terrorism	Global telecommunications
European imperialism	World environment	Worldwide scientific and business communities
Norms	Technological change	
Interstate Level		
Power	Wars	Diplomacy
Balance of power	Treaties	Summit meetings
Alliance formation and dissolution	Trade agreements	Bargaining
	IGOs	Reciprocity
Domestic Level		
Nationalism	Dictatorship	Gender
Ethnic conflict	Domestic coalitions	Economic sectors and industries
Type of government	Political parties and elections	Military-industrial complex
Democracy	Public opinion	Foreign policy bureaucracies
Individual Level		
Great leaders	Psychology of perception and decision	Citizens' participation (voting, rebelling, going to war, etc.)
Crazy leaders	Learning	
Decision making in crises	Assassinations, accidents of history	

²¹ Anak Agung Banyu Perwira dan Yanyan Mochamad Yani. 2014. *Pengantar Ilmu Hubungan Internasional*. Bandung: Remaja Rosda Karya. Hal. 17.

²² Joshua S. Goldstein and Jon C. Pevenhouse. 2014. *International Relations*. Boston: Pearson. Hal. 18.

Source: Joshua (2014)

From the description it appears that level of analysis helps to be more focused in understanding the phenomenon of International Relations. The complex interactions of various international actors are more systematic when understood from the proper level of analysis.

Conclusion

The systemic approach is useful to provide a thorough explanation of social and natural phenomena. This approach has been used for the study of International Relations, especially after the birth of the Westphalia system that regulates international relations between countries. This approach provides a more holistic framework of analysis because it describes elements in systems that share the same interactions and goals. This interaction process is described by the Realist and Neorealist schools as polarization in the international system.

This approach enriches and empowers the study of International Relations to grow. Not only that the analysis of the approach of the system more sharply because the description of interaction between the state and other actors are placed in the process and the existing structure.

Level of Analysis helps to better understand why processes and changes occur at the individual, state, system and global levels so as to help answer the "why" questions in the International Relations study and can apply appropriately the level of analysis to understand a phenomenon. ***

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