

**Hedley Bull, The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics,
(New York: Columbia UP, 1977).**

Thesis: An international society of states helps to maintain order in the international system. States share a set of fundamental interests and establish rules and institutions to serve those interests.

Order in the international system is a pattern of activity that sustains the set of primary goals of the international society. All states pursue internal order based on three fundamental goals: protection of life, contract enforcement, and protection of property rights. An international society of states exists when sovereign states conceive of themselves as sharing a set of fundamental interests and bound by a common set of rules and institutions. In the international setting these fundamental goals are prevention of war; adherence to treaties; and mutual recognition of sovereignty.

Rules and institutions are the means of establishing order in international society. Bull suggests that rules and institutions function formally to maintain order but also socialize state behavior in a manner consistent with the fundamental goals of the society. The rules of international society can be codified as international law or exist as unofficial norms and practices. Rules define the structure of the society as well as rules for interaction between states (example: rules governing interstate trade). Institutions aid in the credible enforcement of rules. Institutions can be formal bureaucratic organizations or, “a set of habits and practices shaped towards the realisation of common goals.”(71).

Bull places the international society in a substantive context, arguing international society is only one element of a larger international system. In this larger system there are elements of pure distributive conflict between states as well as transnational activity among sub-state actors. Bull cites a number of historical examples to illustrate that the conception of common interests, rules, and institutions of the international society have never been inconsequential (example: observance of Geneva Convention by warring states).

Theoretical Framework

Bull terms this approach “Grotian” and he emphasizes it contains elements of both realism and Kantian liberalism. The defining feature of the Grotian approach is the central role of rules and institutions. Rules and institutions help overcome anarchy (as per liberalism), but they privilege states, rather than individual, as the primary actors in the international system (as per realism). While institutions are predicated on a sense of morality and legality, they also are designed to be “prudent and expedient” vis-à-vis state interests.

Questions to Ponder

How consequential are these norms and institutions? There is no explanation as why norms are violated and when the international society, as opposed to other features of the international system, govern state behavior. Additionally, there is no guide as to how states reconcile competing moral and material interests.