Main Topic: Introduce students to the history behind modern international relations (IR) and the structure of the current international system.

1 Key Terms

- international politics
- hegemony
- de jure sovereignty
- de facto sovereignty
- failed state
- Treaty of Westphalia
- UN system
- major powers

2 Key Themes/Ideas

Q. What is international politics?

**Answer:** According to Professor Fearon, international politics is the politics, interactions, and relations between political communities that are *de facto* and/or *de jure* independent.

Q. Do differences between *de jure* and *de facto* independence matter?

**Answer:** In theory, no. In practice, yes. Many *de jure* countries today lack *de facto* independence, but states act as though *de jure* independence is super important.

Q. How does the “Melian Dialogues” conceive of the international system?

**Answer:** The Melian Dialogues argues the international system is full of unequal powers where “the strong do what they may and the weak suffer what they must.”

Q. What is the the puzzle of *de jure* independence in today’s international system?

**Answer:** The puzzle of today’s international system is that despite large power disparities between states, the international system treats states as formally equal, independent entities.

Q. What three historical events are important to understanding the emergence of the modern international system?

**Answer:** Three historical events important to understanding the modern international system are the Peloponnesian War, the Thirty Years War and Peace of Westphalia, and World War II.

Q. How did the state system arise?

**Answer:** The modern state system comes from the Treaty of Westphalia (1648) which institutionalized sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-interference in domestic affairs.

Q. How many states exist in the modern international system?

**Answer:** In 2016, there are 193 member states in the UN and 195—197 countries overall.¹

Q. What is the UN system?

**Answer:** The UN system is the name for the modern international system whereby member sovereign states agree to “sovereign equality” and international cooperation.

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¹This figure comes from states with some limited recognition by other UN member states and includes, for example, Taiwan.

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3 Key Readings

- Frieden, Lake, and Schultz (FLS), Chapter 1: What Shaped Our World?, “World Politics”
- Thucydides, “The Melian Dialogues”
- Jackson and Rosberg, “Why Africa’s Weak States Persist”

4 Review Questions

Check your understanding of this week’s material and key ideas with the following questions.

- Thucydides argues the ‘strong do what they may and the weak suffer what they most’ yet the current international systems does not see this type of behavior. What has changed?
- What would the Melian Dialogues say about Putin’s behavior in the Crimea? Why did the UN system not deter Putin from his aggressive action?
- FLS’ emphasis on mercantilism, colonialism, and the Concert of Europe provides a Euro-centric framework for understanding international relations. What are the advantages and disadvantages to interpreting international politics from this view? Does it matter?
- How would Jackson and Rosberg rationalize the emergence of Eritrea and South Sudan given their theory about juridical statehood?
- According to FLS, the economic prosperity of the nineteenth-century global economy was based on a system of relatively open trade and cooperation among major powers to minimize security disputes. Why were world leaders unable to re-create such a system after World War I, despite its advantages? What implications does the collapse of this system have for contemporary world politics?
- European countries founded and maintained large colonial empires after 1500, and used principles of mercantilism to govern trade and exchange within these empires. Why is it difficult to imagine powerful states, such as the United States, creating formal empires today? How would norms such as sovereignty and self-determination make it difficult to manage and empire in the contemporary world?
- Given that de facto sovereignty provides a more realistic interpretation of who has power, why would states default to an interpretation of de jure sovereignty across the international system?