

Study of International Politics (Systems Approach)

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Systems Approach can be regarded as a useful approach to the study of International Politics. It can be used for an overall view of the relations among nations. It can be used for both macroscopic as well as microscopic studies of regional sub-systems which form parts of the international system. The concept of system can be used for achieving the objective of theory-building in international politics.

The emergence of Systems Approach to the study of International Politics can be described as one of the most significant developments of the 20th century. Immediately after its birth, Systems Approach captured the interest of a large number of modern political scientists. They began using it as a convenient tool for a large scale macro-cosmic analysis of the political phenomena in the world.

Ever since its introduction in the late 1950's, Systems Approach has been regularly used by a large number of Political scientists for analyzing relations among nations.

Writing in mid-20th century, Robert J. Lieber rightly observed;

“It would be no exaggeration to say that it is systems approaches have dominated the field of broad gauged international relations theory during the past decade.”

Meaning and Nature:

Systems Approach seeks to analyze international relations as a system of interactions which are interdependent and interrelated. It studies international relations as a system of behaviour of international actors. Each nation acts and reacts in the international environment and its behaviour is characterised by regularities.

It influences the international environment and is itself influenced by the international environment. McClelland has observed, “A nation’s behaviour is a two-way activity taking from and giving to international environment.” A nation’s behaviour influences and is influenced by the international environment. The process of exchange is fairly continuous, regular and patterned and as such can be studied as a system of behaviour.

1. What is a System?

For an understanding of the main features of the Systems Approach in international relations, let us be clear about the concept of system. A system consists of a known set of actors and entities or a known set of variables (political machinery, attitudes, interests and political activities) which set parameters to the study. A system exists when visible regularities characterize the relationship of

variables to each other. International Politics involves describable regularities in the interactions among nations and as such it can be explained and analyzed as International System. System is a set of interrelated and inter— dependent interactions among actors.

2. What is International System?

Morton Kaplan conceives of international system as “an analytical entity for explaining the behaviour of international actors and the regulative, integrative and disintegrative consequences of their policies.” Karl Deutsch holds, “International System consists of clusters of settlements, modes of transport, centres of cultures, areas of language, divisions of class and caste, barriers between markets, sharp regional differences in wealth and interdependence.” International system is the set of interrelated and interdependent interactions among international actors-national and supra-national actors.

Assumptions of Systems Approach:

(1) International Relations as International System:

International relations can be analyzed as a set of relations among international actors i.e. as an international system

(2) International System is not International Political System:

When the concept of ‘system’ is used in the context of International Politics it is, taken to mean International System and not International Political System. It cannot be described as International Political System because it does not allocate authoritative values. Basic international units or actors are sovereign states and as such no international actor or agency can authoritatively implement values/decisions over them. Hence, it cannot be described as International Political System.

(3) International Actors and National Actors:

What are known as international actors are basically the national actors acting in the international environment?

(4) National and Supra-National Actors:

The International actors can be classified into two main categories:

- (i) The national actors acting in the international environment, and
- (ii) The supra-national actors like the UN, regional organisations and other international agencies.

The latter can be sub-classified as bloc actors or regional actors like the EU, ASEAN, NAFTA and others, and universal actors like the United Nations, World Bank & other international agencies.

(5) A System of Interactions:

International System is constituted by a set of interactions among the actors or entities (nations, interests and international actors).

(6) Regular Interactions:

Nations are in continuous contact. There is a continuous process of interactions among international actors and entities.

(7) Interactions for preservation of National Interests:

The activities of nations are directed towards the preservation of their national interests in the international environment.

(8) Regular Participation:

Participation in international environment gives rise to regular mutual exchanges among international actors.

(9) Patterns of Behaviour:

There are certain identifiable and describable regularities in the patterns of interactions among nations.

(10) Theory-building as the objective:

The use of the concept of system for describing or explaining or analyzing international politics can greatly enrich our understanding of the phenomena, which can further help us in theory-building in international relations.

(11) Several Variables or Elements:

All systems' approaches use units (or actors), structures, processes, and context (environment) as major elements of the system. These elements are considered as major factors in terms of which all substantive phenomena are explained.

System theory has, in a variety of ways, guided the theorizing and research in international relations. This approach has been used by a large number of scholars like Morton Kaplan, Richard Rosecrances, John Burton, Charles McClelland, J. David Singer, Karl Deutsch, K. J. Holsti, George Modelski and many others.

Views of Morton Kaplan:

Morton Kaplan has been the chief exponent of the Systems Approach in international Relations. He advocates that international politics offers the best sphere for the application of the concept of

'system' as a tool for investigating all its phenomena. International System is most inclusive as it is constituted by those interactions among international actors which are neither fully cooperative nor totally conflictual. It has its sub-systems and a set of actors, both international and supra-national actors. It is constituted by interactions among the international actors.

Morton Kaplan's Six Models of International System:

On the basis of such a conceptual framework, Morton Kaplan discusses six models of international system:

- (1) The Balance of Power System
- (2) The Loose Bi-polar System
- (3) The Tight Bi-polar System
- (4) The Universal System
- (5) The Hierarchical System
- (6) The Unit Veto System.

1. The Balance of Power System:

This model of international system refers to the balance of power system that operated in the 19th century Europe.

Features of a Balance of Power System are:

- (1) It is constituted by 5 or 7 major powers/actors.
- (2) Each actor seeks to increase its capabilities through negotiations and not through resort to war.
- (3) Each actor is prepared to fight rather than pass on an opportunity to increase capabilities for protecting its national interest.
- (4) The actors maintain a balance in their power positions, and no actor is permitted to become unduly powerful.
- (5) An actor or a group of actors in such a system can resort to war for maintaining the balance of power in their relations.
- (6) No actor is to be eliminated from the system. The actor terminates the war before the opponent is eliminated.
- (7) An actor or a group of actors acts for opposing any other group or single actor that tends to assume unduly powerful position and dominance with respect to the rest of the system.

- (8) Attempts are made to check the actors who try to follow supranational organizing principles.
- (9) The defeated or constrained essential actors are permitted to re-enter the system as acceptable role partners.
- (10) Actors act to bring some previously inessential actor within the essential actor classification and treat all essential actors as acceptable role partners.

These ten features keep intact the 'balance' in relations. The failure to keep up these leads to disturbances and finally to an end of the balance. The end of the balance leads to an end of the system.

In the early years of the 20th century these rules were not followed by major international actors and the Balance of Power system suffered a breakdown. It led to the outbreak of First World War in 1914.

2. The Loose Bi-polar Model:

The breaking down of the Balance of Power System leads to a Bi-polar system.

It has two forms of manifestation:

1. The Loose Bi-polar and
2. The Tight Bipolar system.

The Loose Bi-polar System comes into existence when two powerful nations are successful in organizing the other nations into their two respective competing blocs or groups. However, the organisation of the blocs is loose and internal differences prevail among the members of each bloc. There are also present several other supra-national and regional actors.

In other words, the Loose Bi-polar System is constituted by two major bloc-actors, non-member bloc-actors (like the group of Non-aligned), and universal actor/actors, like the UN. In it, blocs try to increase their relative capabilities as well as to limit or weaken their rival bloc. Each bloc strives to use the universal actor for increasing its own power. The non-bloc actors tend to support the universal actor for reducing the danger of war between rival blocs. Blocs attempt to extend membership but along with it tends to tolerate the status of non-bloc actors.

3. The Tight Bi-polar System:

The Loose Bi-polar System easily gets transformed into a Tight Bi-polar System. It is a bi-polar system in which the two major powers lead their respective blocs of allied powers. Each bloc is dominated by a major power. The international organisations are very weak and there are no neutral blocs or nations. International relations take the form of interactions between the two blocs.

4. The Universal System:

The fourth model is the Universal System in which the nations get organised in a federal system. It is a hypothetical model in which the world gets transformed into a Federal World State based upon the principle of mutual toleration and universal rule of law. It works through a universal actor—an international organisation. The universal actor is powerful enough to check war and preserve peace or a balance in international relations.

5. The Hierarchical System:

Such a model can come into existence when a single powerful super power may bring, either through a conquest or a treaty, all other nations under its control. The states as territorial units are then transformed into functional units. The superpower becomes the universal actor and absorbs all other nations. In case this system comes into existence through conquest, it is a directive system, and when it comes through democratic means, it is a non-directive system.

6. The Unit Veto System:

The sixth model projected by Kaplan is the Unit Veto System. It involves the conception of a situation of multi-polarity in which each state is equally powerful. Each possesses such weapons (nuclear weapons) as can be used by it for destroying any other state. It becomes stable when each state can resist and retaliate threats from every other state. On the basis of these six models, Morton Kaplan believes that international relations can be analyzed as international system.

Critical Evaluation of Systems Approach:

The Systems Theory in general and Morton Kaplan's six Models of International System in particular have been severely criticized by several scholars.

Robert J. Lieber has summarised the major limitations of the Systems Approach as under:

1. Only Frameworks:

The first limitation is, as Easton and Kaplan have acknowledged, that the systems approaches are not yet theories but only conceptual frameworks. As such, these cannot lay down an intellectual policy of international relations.

2. Inadequate:

The second major limitation is its methodological inadequacy. There is lack of operationalization of concepts in a way that can make them accessible to empirical testing.

3. Gap between Theory and Research:

The third major limitation is the gap between theory and research. Systems oriented theorizing has not, until very recently, led to great deal of empirical work. In the opinion of J. David Singer, "the

unfortunate bifurcation between theory and research has sharply limited the usefulness and value of systems theory.”

4. A Limited Approach:

Systems Approach is a limited approach because it does not accept the study of political institutions and important domestic variables of international relations. It wrongly ignores the value of historical and ideological factors.

5. Limitation of Morton Kaplan Models of International System:

Besides these four major limitations of the Systems Approach in general, which naturally apply to Morton Kaplan's approach, there are a number of shortcomings in Kaplan's approach.

There are a number of limitations of Kaplan's six models of international systems:

(i) Morton Kaplan's Models are Limited:

Critics refuse to accept Morton Kaplan's view that his models involve a preliminary theory of international politics. All of his six models are limited. The balance of power system is impracticable in contemporary times. Kaplan was wrong in predicting that the balance of power system leads first to Loose Bipolar System and then to a Tight Bi-polar System. The course of evolution of international relations in the post-1945 period reflected that the opposite of it was true. Tight Bi-polarity emerged first in early 1950s and then it came to be replaced by Loose Bi-polarity or polycentrism in the 1960s. In 1990s the International System became a unipolar system.

(ii) Impracticability of Four Hypothetical Models of Kaplan:

The hypothetical models suggested by Kaplan appear to be totally impracticable. The type of hierarchical system as conceived by Kaplan has little chance to get established in international relations. There is no chance for the existing international organisation, the United Nations, to become a really powerful and effective universal actor.

There has never been, and there can never be a situation involving world domination by a single nation. The unit veto system can be hypothetically imagined but never considered to be possible and practical. Hence all the models have serious and big limitations. These models, as Hedley Bull has remarked, “constituted merely an intellectual exercise and no more.”

(iii) Kaplan ignores Geo-strategic Factors:

Kaplan's models ignore the role of economic, technological, personality, geo-political and political factors of international relations.

(iv) Kaplan ignores the study of National and Sub-national Factors:

Ernest Hass in his work “Beyond the Nation State” and Stanley Hoffman in his work “The Long

Road to Theory” have charged Kaplan of ignoring the national and sub-national causes of actions in international relations.

(v) Kaplan’s analysis is Too General:

Morton Kaplan has listed some major variables for identifying and analyzing the models. But he has failed to specify the priority positions among these variables. Mc Clelland has observed “The models are also formulated at too general a level to be of much use in ordering of the facts.”

(vi) Arbitrary Classification:

Morton Kaplan’s classification of international relations into six systems is arbitrary. One can increase and decrease the number of these models.

(vii) Kaplan’s Models do not enable us to make Predictions:

Analyzing the weakness of these models Robert J. Lieber has observed, “While claiming to predict behaviour within a particular kind of international system, they do not extend much beyond the level of definition, in that the distinction between proposition and definition is not clearly drawn.”

Evaluating the Systems Approach, Blauberg Sadousky and E.G. Yudin write, “the systems movement is at present rather an assemblage of non-trivial problems than a systematized summary of results achieved.” Systems Approach seeks to study problems of international politics. It, however, nowhere explains as to how the formulation of problems for the purpose of study has to be undertaken. All this, however does not means that Systems Approach and Kaplan’s models have nothing positive and useful in them.

Systems Approach can be regarded as a useful approach to the study of International Politics. It can be used for an overall view of the relations among nations. It can be used for both macroscopic as well as microscopic studies of regional sub-systems which form parts of the international system. The concept of system can be used for achieving the objective of theory-building in international politics. It can improve our ability to describe, explain, predict and even control the nature and course of international politics.

Morton Kaplan’s Systems Approach has performed a heuristic function. It has popularized the systems approach. In contemporary times, several scholars have been using several models of international system for analyzing international relations e.g. Three Bloc Geo-economic Model, the Revitalized Balance of Power Model, the Unipolar Model, the Uni-multipolar Model, the Clash of Civilizations Model, the Global Village Model, the Nonviolent Non-nuclear Model, Globalisation Model and several others. Thus systems approach can be used as one of the several approaches to the study of International Politics.