Hubert Zimmermann, Milena Elsinger and Alex Burkhardt

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

THEORIES IN ACTION

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Hubert Zimmermann, Milena Elsinger and Alex Burkhardt

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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Milena and Alex would like to dedicate this book to Elise and Sascha.

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Dr Alex Burkhardt teaches at the Bundessprachenamt in Koblenz, Germany. He received his PhD in Modern History from the University of St Andrews in 2017. He has published in *Central European History*, *German History*, and *The Bulletin of the German Historical Institute London*, and his monograph *Democrats into Nazis* was published in 2019. He taught IR at the Philipps University Marburg between 2019 and 2021.

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Among his publications are *Money and Security*, a book comparing EU and US policies in the integration of China to the WTO (*Drachenzähmung* [Taming the Dragon]), a volume on the justification of military intervention (*Militärische Missionen* [Military Missions]) and the European Union (*Key Controversies in European Integration,* 3rd edn), as well as numerous articles in scholarly journals.

Preface

International Relations (IR) is the most popular subject in political science programmes the world over. Students are often highly motivated by and interested in the study of global affairs. However, they sometimes seem less convinced of the relevance of theory to their studies. The aim of this volume is to engage students with an understanding of IR as an analytical, scholarly pursuit. It is geared towards the core challenge of helping students to grasp the links between theory, methods, and empirical material in order to understand real-world events. It aims to enthuse students to move beyond the status of an informed (if somewhat cynical) consumer of current affairs, and toward a critical, analytical, systematic understanding of global politics. Explicitly designed for single semester introductory courses in IR, the book provides students with both a primer to the field and everything they need for a one-off or first introductory module in International Relations. Such modules are typically taught during the first year of a BA degree.

With this essential companion for all undergraduate students, we intend to demonstrate the benefits of theory as useful maps and lenses for making sense of empirical case studies. Theory is not presented here in the traditionally rather abstract manner found in many existing textbooks, nor is it peremptorily summarized with reference to 'Great Debates'. Instead, theory is brought alive through application and concrete historical examples, and through a critical, questioning approach. The book presupposes no prior student knowledge or interest in the 'isms'. In fact, it draws on theories as tools to be used, adapted, combined, and applied when grappling with some of the most contested issues in global politics.

Such issues range from traditional security and economic questions, to the myriad challenges of the Anthropocene, global inequality, race and racism, financialization, global health, and many other topical themes. We present positivist and reflectivist approaches as well as traditional and recent debates in the discipline, showing the respective strengths and weaknesses of different theories without privileging any particular approach. We hope to empower students in forming their own opinions and, to this end, provide a helpful starting point for diving into the multifaceted depths of different approaches. With that said, this book is not intended as a comprehensive volume which exhaustively covers the entire field of IR and incorporates in detail all of the newer developments in the discipline. Such an endeavour usually results in overly expansive – and expensive! – books that in themselves often seem somewhat intimidating to newcomers in the field. In fact, we explicitly wanted this volume to be slim and affordable.

To sum up, this book aspires (1) to be state-of-the-art in terms of content and pedagogy, (2) to accurately reflect the role of theory in the study of IR in a way that is engaging, accessible, and relevant to today's students, and (3) to consistently weave together empirical

examples and conceptual issues. This last point is particularly important. Our aim is to show students *how to do International Relations theory* – that is, how to actually *apply* theory to concrete examples in a systematic way, in order to illuminate understanding of global politics. Students should be using the knowledge they gain from this book, and more broadly from their study of IR, to help them make sense of what they see on the news or read about in a newspaper and to develop skills to think more explicitly about how to justify intuitive judgements. Promoting the practical application of IR theory lies at the heart of our book. This is why we include a number of innovative, interactive learning exercises, in order to systematically train students in the application (and evaluation) of IR theory. These bring what might initially look like opposing theoretical paradigms into constructive dialogue, to create a more complete, nuanced, and multi-faceted picture.

To meet these many needs, numerous empirical examples will be drawn from a broad historical and geographic range of case studies, transcending the usual focus on the liberal international order. To be sure, the book takes in more traditional issues, such as the US–China rivalry and transatlantic relations. However, it will also reflect, for example, the influence of populist movements worldwide, and the current shift in the discipline away from Eurocentrism. All these topics will be analysed with the help of competing theoretical concepts, enabling students to understand the importance of different lenses on issues, and to critically evaluate them.

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ARCTIC OCEAN
Ellesmere I.
Queen Elizabeth Islands
GREENLAND (DENMARK)
Beaufort Sea
Victoria I.
Baffin I.
Baffin Bay
RUSSIAN FEDERATION
BROOKS RANGE
Yukon R.
ALASKA RANGE
Great Bear Lake
Great Slave Lake
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Weddell Sea
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Russian Federation and Central Asia
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South Asia
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ARCTIC OCEAN
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EGYPT
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ARABIAN PENINSULA
OMAN
Arabian Sea
Bay of Bengal
WESTERN SAHARA (MOR.)
CABO VERDE
MAURITANIA
SAHARA
MALI
NIGER
CHAD
SUDAN
Nile R.
Red Sea
ERITREA
YEMEN
DJIBOUTI
SENEGAL
GAMBIA
GUIN.-BIS.
GUINEA
SIERRA LEONE
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BURK. FASO
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GHANA
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CENT. AF. REP.
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DEM. REP. OF THE CONGO
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COMOROS
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ZAMBIA
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NAMIBIA
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BOTSWANA
ESWATINI
SOUTH AFRICA
LESOTHO
CAPE OF GOOD HOPE
Tropic of Capricorn
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ATLANTIC OCEAN
AUSTRALIA
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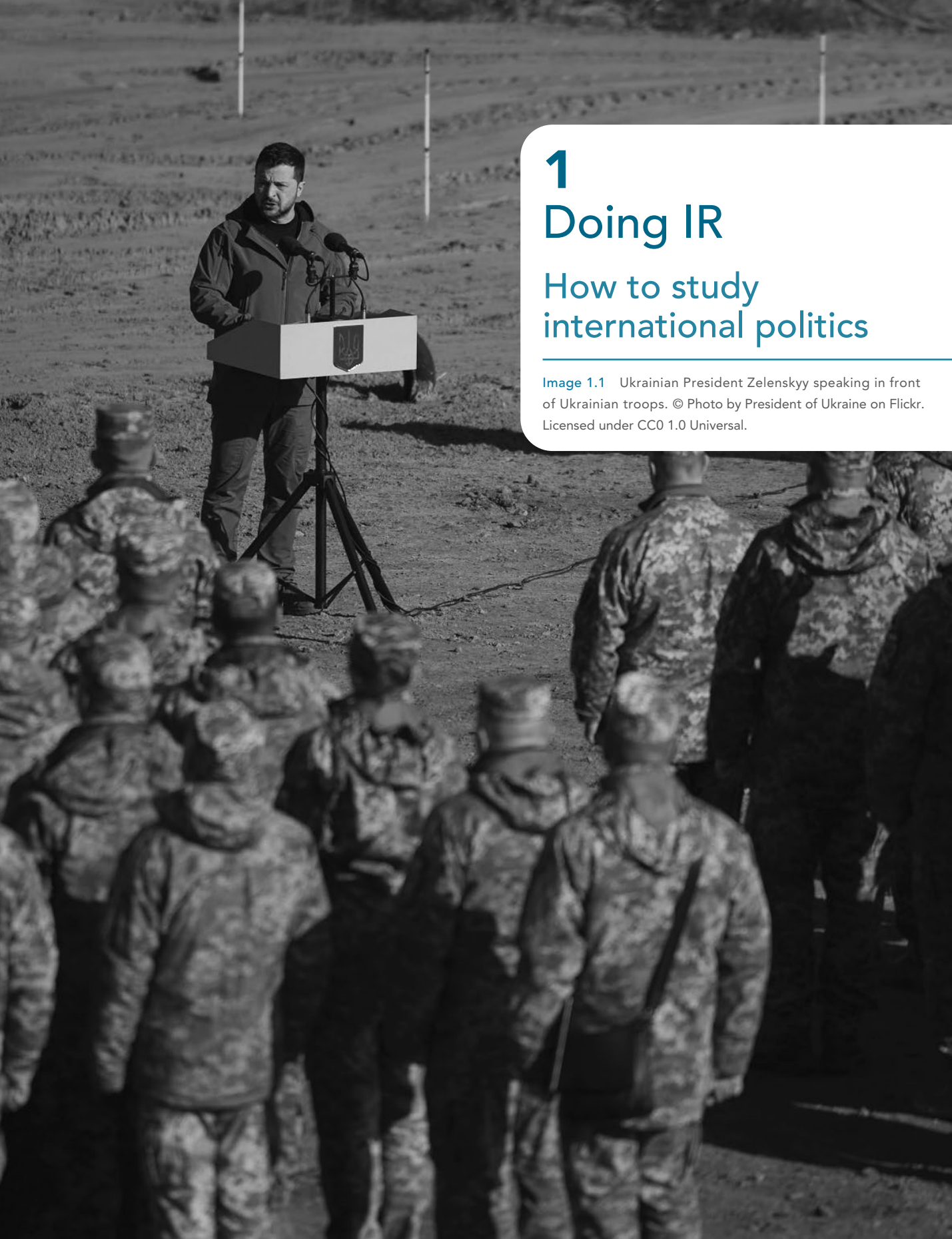

1
Doing IR

How to study international politics

Image 1.1 Ukrainian President Zelenskyy speaking in front of Ukrainian troops. © Photo by President of Ukraine on Flickr. Licensed under CC0 1.0 Universal.

Learning objectives

- Understanding the difference between everyday debates on global politics and a scientific analysis
- Grasping the rationale for using theory in the study of IR
- Learning about core competencies to analyse problems of international relations

On February 24, 2022, columns of armed infantry, tanks, and military aircraft of the Russian Federation crossed the borders of Ukraine, a neighbouring country, and initiated an invasion which unleashed a torrent of violence on Ukrainian territory. To the surprise of most observers, Ukrainian defences were able to withstand the onslaught, albeit at the cost of tens of thousands of military and civilian dead and the complete destruction of countless towns and villages across the country. The global repercussions were immediate. Most Western states condemned the attack and rushed to support Ukraine with weapons, intelligence, and economic aid, in addition to the imposition of unprecedented economic sanctions on Russia. The United Nations condemned the invasion. However, many states worldwide assumed a rather neutral stance to this blatant violation of Ukrainian sovereignty. Ominously, China, the emerging superpower of the 21st century, seemed to side with Russia or, at least, to display an ambiguous position. Subsequently, there was an appreciable rise in US–Chinese tensions over the question of Taiwan, an American ally and a country which China regards as part of its own national territory (echoing Russian President Vladimir Putin's claim to Ukrainian land). In the years since the Russian invasion began, global concerns about an imminent stand-off between nuclear-armed superpowers have grown precipitously.

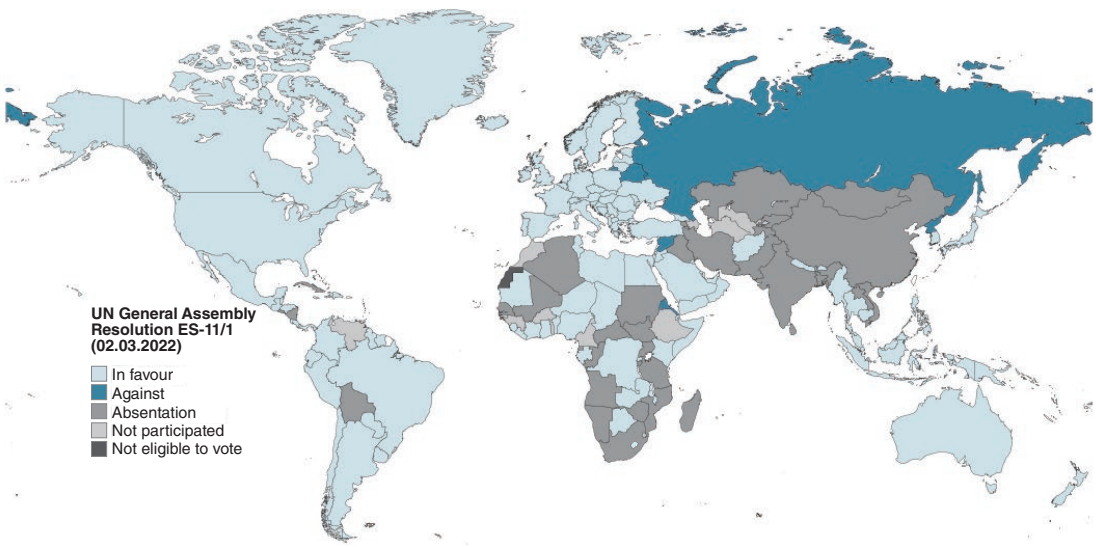

Figure 1.1 UN vote on Russian aggression in Ukraine in March 2022: Russia, Syria, North Korea and Eritrea voted against the resolution.

Source: Created using Mapchart.net under a CC BY-SA 4.0 DEED license

The war in Ukraine not only ramified in the form of intensifying geopolitical rivalry. Many African and Middle Eastern countries were heavily reliant on food deliveries from the war zone. Global food and energy prices started to rise steeply as hostilities continued, with an immediate and catastrophic impact on vulnerable populations in poorer countries. Firms, families, and individuals in many regions of the world suffered from the economic fallout of the war, which came on top of prolonged socio-economic turbulences around the globe caused by the unprecedented Covid-19 pandemic that began in late 2019. Less money for social programmes, education, environmental protection, and many other policies were among the consequences felt by millions of human beings around the world. Certainly, huge numbers of Ukrainian refugees were, at least initially, welcomed in neighbouring European states, while aid poured into the war-torn country. However, those fleeing battlefields of similarly horrific violence, for example in Syria, Yemen, or Afghanistan, saw doors closed even more firmly than before. Budgets for humanitarian aid were reduced as seemingly more pressing needs took precedence. Thus, global reactions to the conflict in Ukraine were shaped by further structural elements of the international system – global inequality, racism, and gender. There was widespread evidence of countless incidents of gender-based violence and other atrocities in Russian-occupied territories. In addition, global cooperation in areas such as climate change, outer-space exploration, and disarmament suffered as mutual projects were abruptly discontinued.

Overall, the war in Ukraine serves as a stark reminder of how international crises can entail significant ripple effects which reach deeply across and into societies, communities, and families, even if they are located far from the actual conflict zone. Global politics truly matters and can have serious, potentially even existential, consequences for individuals, societies, and nations worldwide.

The multi-dimensional character of the war in Ukraine makes it all the more important to get to know the underlying structures and mechanisms of international relations, and to develop a profound understanding of the processes shaping the international realm. All too often, our knowledge of global politics is shaped by clichés, alternative 'facts', and unacknowledged preconceptions. This is particularly true in the age of social media, which allows for the rapid and massive amplification of half-baked truths, outright fake news, and blatantly biased and selective information, which is often enough promoted or exploited by political actors. The discipline of International Relations (IR)[1] seeks to move beyond the random and selective accumulation of facts and opinions, and strives for a systematic understanding of global events. Such an understanding involves the constant questioning of one's own assumptions, the critical review of often contradictory or unclear facts and of conflicting interpretations in the literature, the acceptance of the frustrating but inevitable limits of the information that is available for most international processes, and the use of sound methods to acquire a solid knowledge and understanding of what is going on in global politics. At the outset of any serious study of IR, therefore, it is very important to keep in mind two fundamental differences between, on the one hand, a social-scientific method of dealing with international politics and, on the other, the everyday or journalistic observation of world politics that we, as individuals interested in this subject, routinely undertake.

First: doing IR is more than just accumulating information about current affairs, and sorting through it in the search for intuitively convincing explanations for today's real-world events. Of course, a cursory browse of online search engines readily yields an array of convincing answers to questions such as: Why do states wage wars against each other? Why is there persistent poverty and discrimination? Why are global environmental problems not tackled more effectively? Scattergun searching of this kind is most appealing because, on the one hand, it is less labour-intensive than the scientific approach that this book intends to instil while, on the other hand, it can be psychologically pleasant. After all, the texts that correspond to one's own preconceived ideas, theses, and attitudes are often selected – consciously, unconsciously, or by algorithms. This saves us the trouble of dealing with the many contradictions, constraints, conflicting opinions, and ambiguities of international politics. But it also means losing sight of what is actually the most exciting benefit of studying international politics in a systematic way.

The really fascinating part is when we begin to *understand* the reasons why there are phenomena like war, inequality, crises, tense summits, long-standing rivalries, intractable injustices, etc. And that is why IR is not about providing a comprehensive description of how the US invaded Iraq in 2003 and what happened when it did, or how the tragic cascade of events in the Israel–Palestine conflict unfolded, or what the Cold War-era Cuban Missile crisis was about, and how human civilization almost came to an end during those 13 days in 1962. To be sure, the enumeration of factual knowledge, especially of less accessible facts, and the serious research and presentation of such information are important tasks. But this is not sufficient. The crucial requirement is to *understand* systematically what is relevant among those facts, what the relationship(s) between these facts are, what the different explanations for core questions are, and how to discriminate between such often diverging views. Achieving this competence is a complex but rewarding process.

Second: IR is not primarily concerned with sounding a note of moral indignation against, for example, the fact that global inequalities and exploitation continue to exist, or how incompetent the West was in Afghanistan, or global inactivity on climate change, or the aggressiveness of Russia in Ukraine. It is striking how, in online political debates, but frequently also in media accounts, there is often a prevailing assumption that political actors are somehow unable to see the obvious problems and corresponding solutions to the situations which confront them. It is easy and satisfying to condemn the catastrophic invasion of Iraq in 2003 by George W. Bush's administration as a gigantic mistake, or to reject the colonial and postcolonial practices of European states in Africa. But the actual question is: Why do or did these manifestly unwise or morally reprehensible actions occur? How can we make sense of them? The goal is to first explain and then to judge, and not to judge without understanding. This does not mean that moral values are irrelevant, or that one should or indeed can approach the subject entirely without bias. Rather, it means that the scholar consciously reflects on their own point of view, which then becomes an explicit aspect of the analytical approach. The well-known German sociologist Tilman Allert expressed this very aptly in an interview:

> if I want to understand, then I have to control my indignation about this world, not morally, but methodologically. I don't have to become a different person. I don't have to change my motives for changing this world. … But to understand a case, I

> have to make it an object worth understanding and not complaining about.
> (Allert et al., 2014: 314)

The aim of studying International Relations is therefore *not* primarily to express more or less correct values (this is actually the task of real-world politics!), but to understand how and why these (material as well as immaterial) values arise, how they are distributed, how they are pursued and implemented in political processes, and what biases, silences, and injustices remain.

Anyone who grasps these two fundamental differences between the academic pursuit of IR and the day-to-day business of politics has already taken an important step towards a productive study of IR. They will quickly find that this in no way resembles the cliché of a social scientific 'talking shop'. Indeed, this book is intended as a guide to help you to cut through the 'noise' of online and offline political debate, and to clarify the core assumptions behind the plethora of viewpoints on global politics.

Infobox

Doing IR

Doing IR does not mean:

- The accumulation of a collection of information that is as comprehensive as possible on a specific topic of international politics.
- Uttering factually accurate statements or morally 'correct' value judgements about events or situations in the field of International Relations.

Doing IR means rather the systematic, methodically controlled, and rigorous pursuit of open and controversial questions under conditions of incomplete information in a subject area of highest relevance.

Global politics (and thus also its analysis) is often metaphorically described as a kind of game (of thrones – to cite a famous fantasy series which, as it happens, is riddled with concepts drawn from political science). Of course, global politics functions without the universally accepted rules, the fixed logic, and the clear purpose of a real game. However, there are some similarities. Studying IR is a skill that does not come naturally – it needs to be honed and trained. With a bit of effort, and maybe with the help of this book, you should be able to recognize the central questions and relevance of any given problem of IR more quickly. In addition, you should have an idea of the most important methods for dealing with the issue. You might also be able to recall potentially similar historical or actual situations, to do so in a focused way, and to have an idea of how to search for valid information in the right places. It is particularly challenging, even for seasoned researchers, to get to the point at which a well-chosen research question helps them to truly understand the core of any given IR problem, and to not remain stuck in the simple reframing of known facts or rehearsing of well-established interpretations. And this is the point at which it becomes essential to deal with theories of international relations, because they are fundamental in pursuing many of the steps outlined above.

Theories, methods, and core concepts: Why do I have to struggle with them?

Why do political scientists, including those in IR, attach such importance to theories and methods? To put it in simple terms: theories and methods are the core instruments for pursuing the study of IR systematically. They are not to be used just for the sake of sounding academic or to please the professors. Beginners in IR should see theories as helpful tools rather than as a chore to be memorized and deployed randomly. It takes time to systematically and methodically work on controversial questions of international politics, the stages and sequence of which often initially seem quite inscrutable. However, mastering research design, the use of theory and methods – these are the essence of every social science. Combining these elements is the only way to gain interesting and exciting insights into the many fundamental problems of international politics beyond national borders.

To illustrate this way of thinking, we will present here an ideal typical research design, the basic structure of which is useful for any kind of scientific treatment of political science questions. This is not a scheme that you should adhere to rigidly. There are many different ways to acquire knowledge. This is just one way to illustrate how theory, method, and empirical material might be connected and linked. Throughout this book, we will acquaint ourselves with different ways of forging such links, using a vast array of diverse empirical examples.

Usually, we start with an interest in a particular issue of international relations. For example: What is the reason for the failure of the West in Afghanistan despite two decades of strenuous and costly efforts to transform the country? Is there any chance at all for an effective global climate protection agreement? What is the influence of Instagram, Twitter (now X), TikTok, and other social media on international politics? How do we explain the emergence of certain widely accepted notions about international politics, such as the idea that there is a Global North and a Global South? Why should we care about the conflict in Syria?

For all of these topics, an abundance of more or less plausible answers exists, and one could easily compile a comprehensive list of facts and explanations for any given international problem. But what are the really relevant facts? Confusion about this is usually indicative of a more fundamental problem: the research question is not sufficiently well-defined. *In IR (and political science in general), you do not work on a topic, you work on a question!* One of the greatest science theorists of all time, Karl Popper, wrote:

> Knowledge does not start from perceptions or observations or the collection of data and facts, but it starts, rather, from problems. No knowledge without problems, but also no problems without knowledge […]. Because each problem arises from the discovery of […] an apparent contradiction between our supposed knowledge and the supposed facts. (Popper, 1978: 88)

So, for the student of IR, the core question cannot be: What has occurred in Syria since the first riots in 2011, resulting in the deadliest conflict of the 21st century up to date? Who has intervened in this conflict, and how? These are questions which demand merely descriptive answers. Rather, the more interesting social scientific questions might be: Why did this happen? What are the deeper causes of this conflict, and how do the different actors involved

understand these causes? Why did foreign powers intervene or not intervene? What does this conflict tell us about war, global inequalities, failures of cooperation, or long-standing international practices?

Key concepts

Different questions, different theories: Positivist and interpretive approaches

When reading these questions on the war in Syria, you might have noticed that they fall into different categories. Some are problem-based and aim to explain the causal relationships and regularities that characterize these conflicts. Others are concerned with the question of how this conflict can be and is interpreted, what this reveals about how the involved actors understand themselves and the conflict, and even how we, as observers, arrive at certain interpretations of the events. The difference between these two types of questions is often characterized as resulting from a basic distinction between positivist and interpretive research and theories (Lamont, 2022). Other authors divide the different approaches responding to the questions above into (i) problem-solving theories, which try to answer 'why' questions, (ii) critical theories, which promote certain normative stances, and (iii) constitutive theories, which investigate the core concepts through which we try to grasp social reality (Smith, 2021). Whichever of these three directions a particular theory belongs to, they all make assumptions about what it is that we study (ontology), how we go about studying it (epistemology), and by which means we acquire knowledge (methodology). While you do not need to possess a deep familiarity with the philosophy of science in order to study IR, it is important to understand the basic assumptions from which different theories depart.

Explanatory (or positivist, or empiricist) approaches resemble the natural sciences, in that they assume the existence of a reality separate from us as observers, and that we can observe this reality, deduce certain general laws and causes, and formulate falsifiable hypotheses. Interpretive (or post-positivist) approaches, such as more radical forms of constructivism, postcolonialism, or some variants of feminism, reject the assumption that observers and the social world are separate, and aim to understand the meanings embedded in our perception of 'reality'. This divide is not a clear-cut dichotomy, but rather a continuum along which different theories and methods are grouped (for a highly accessible overview of this, see Lamont, 2022). IR is a field with a broad variety of approaches and methods, and this can generate confusion among students. Scholars have debated and continue to debate the merits of different methodologies and ways of doing IR. These controversies can become dogmatic and stale (like the politics they aim to explain, some might say!). In this book, however, we argue that it makes little sense to distinguish between 'good' and 'bad' theories, or to declare one side superior. Theories are tools in a toolbox that we can take out and use depending on what kind of problem confronts us, but this should not be done randomly. Your choice of theory depends on what you want to find out and the scope of your results is limited not only by the amount of information you have but also by the theoretical approach you use. IR researchers need to be aware of this when evaluating particular arguments.

In newspaper articles or on television talk shows, you will readily find masses of apparently clear and unambiguous answers to the myriad questions on the tragic events in Syria. These might, for example, go like this: the Syria conflict is so insoluble because so many different external actors seek to enhance their influence in the region by supporting different sides or by intervening actively. This makes the conflict a proxy war in the struggle of big powers for regional supremacy. This would be quite a plausible thesis. But how do I know that it is the most persuasive or most empirically robust option? Good IR research starts from a basic refusal to take claims such as these for granted and, instead, a willingness to approach the subject with sound academic analysis and theory. Without solid research into the causes of the conflict, the above statement is just a hypothesis or an opinion taken from somewhere else.

Indeed, many observers would vehemently refute this interpretation of the Syrian conflict. For example, a Syrian refugee who has escaped from their shattered country might view the conflagration not primarily as an international proxy war, but as a struggle among different domestic groups: official troops and rebels opposed to the government, Sunni and Shiite factions, radical Islamic and moderate forces. Thus, we might call it a civil war, or a religious war. Answers depend on the evidence, but also on the perspective and the approaches which are taken. Assumptions such as the ones cited above (proxy war versus civil war) are ultimately theories about the causes of the conflict. They offer explanations which are used in most descriptions of the war in Syria but, unlike in academic studies, they are not made explicit in journalistic accounts. The concepts on which such accounts rely are rarely problematized. However, calling the Syrian war a 'proxy war' – an armed conflict fought on behalf of other, usually larger powers – already suggests a particular explanation, and implicitly rules out or minimizes others.

In the realm of scientific work (rather than political debate), such assumptions must be made clear, and concepts must be defined and critically interrogated. In this way, readers or listeners know from which point of view the problem is being assessed, and they can judge for themselves based on the strength of the evidence or the overall argument. Here we find the first central function of theories: they offer statements about cause and effect in international politics, i.e. *explanations*. Such a statement might be, for example: the inconceivable escalation and endless duration of the war in Syria results from a power struggle of international and regional superpowers for dominance in the region. As we shall see later in this book, this would be the prediction of neorealist IR theories. Explanations offered by theories can aim to describe the world 'as it is and how it works', or they can undertake a fundamental critique with the objective of sparking change. Whatever their objectives, it is important to remember that arguments such as the one made above are not true because they are based on a well-known and well-established theory, or because they seem intuitively convincing. The arguments remain *hypotheses*, plausible assumptions, which can be derived from the information so far available, or from statements in the literature about the causes of the conflict. The next step in a scholarly approach would be to substantiate or refute this hypothesis.

This is where the second central function of theories comes into play: *selection*. Where do I need to look for evidence to confirm (or disprove) my hypothesis? If the focus is on the politics of great powers, then it is obvious that the actions and statements of representatives of these great powers are at the centre of your interest. Theories thus help us to concentrate on the relevant actors, levels of analysis, and significant factors when investigating the question. They

reduce the risk of wasting time on insignificant secondary phenomena. This selective function is very helpful, but researchers always have to be aware of its existence. A lot of recent interpretive research has noted that many IR theories are profoundly embedded in understandings that are deeply shaped by the times and places in which they originated (that is, mainly in universities in 20th- and 21st-century North America and Europe). While positivist scholars hold that theories should and can transcend place and time, critical scholars point out that subjective factors, such as race or gender, always play a role in how we can understand the world.

Thus, theories help us to select the evidence, but this selection has to be rendered transparent. If there are indications that the conflict in Syria originated from socio-economic tensions within Syrian society, we might find a theory convincing that stresses domestic factors as key explanations for international politics. In order to substantiate these claims, we must select evidence that helps us to decide whether the explanation suggested by our theory is right or wrong, such as socio-economic data, or evidence of contestation at the local level, for example through interviews and polls, etc. No explanation of an international phenomenon (which is always a complex, multi-faceted affair) can do without selection.

Infobox

Agents, structures, and levels of analysis

Why did the United States under the administration of George W. Bush invade the Middle Eastern country of Iraq, topple Iraq's dictator Saddam Hussein after a six-week long, brutally effective military campaign, and then proceed to occupy the country for eight long years? How can we explain this war, which is now generally seen as a huge disaster resulting in massive regional turmoil and hundreds of thousands of victims? These questions have been the subject of intense debate since the war's outbreak in 2003. Some analysts focused on the person of the president. Bush's father, George Bush senior, had been in office in 1991, when an international coalition under US leadership defeated Saddam Hussein after the dictator occupied the neighbouring country of Kuwait. After the victory, Bush senior had been heavily criticized because he left Saddam in power. According to these analysts, Bush senior's son was now trying to complete his father's task. By contrast, many other authors blamed a group of activist officials in the administration, the so-called neo-conservatives, which included Vice President Dick Cheney and Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. According to this second set of commentators, these hawks managed to convince the president of their agenda, which had long focused on the removal of dictatorships they saw as imminent dangers to the United States. The neo-conservatives captured the decision-making process and used the window of opportunity provided by the shock of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 to implement their agenda, and to push claims that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction. Most Americans, still enraged by the terrorist attacks and eager to retaliate, believed these false claims and supported this mission. Many people abroad, whether politicians or experts, did not,

(Continued)

however. They saw the Iraq War as something else: either an American ploy to stabilize their regional hegemony, or as a geo-economic gambit to gain privileged access to the energy resources of the Middle East.

All these very different interpretations are based on different theories regarding the decisive determinants of the fateful Iraq decision. While the first focuses on the personal level – that is, the psychology of the core decision-maker – the second stresses bureaucracy, powerful influencers, and American public opinion, while the third highlights America's position in the international geopolitical and geo-economic system. These three sets of explanations operate at different analytical levels: **the individual level; the state (or societal) level; and the global (systemic) level.** The eminent scholar Kenneth Waltz (1959) has called these levels 'first, second, and third image', situating his version of neorealism firmly as a third image (systemic) theory. In our review of different theories, we will see that they can be quite clearly distinguished according to the level of analysis they privilege.

There is no general agreement on which level might explain certain problems best: it is here that theories make explicit assumptions, allowing the reader to judge whether they think the choice is convincing. The impossibility of decisively establishing the explanatory superiority of one level over another is partly due to what social scientists call the **agency–structure debate**. Are the choices and decisions made by actors determined by the structures in which they find themselves embedded (for example the international system, the structure of the state, the institutions to which they belong, the ideologies they adhere to, etc.)? Or do actors determine these structures? Some theories, such as neorealism or most postcolonial approaches, are firmly anchored at the systemic levels, while others, such as classical realism or domestic theories of IR, privilege the unit-level. Constructivist theories argue that agency and structure co-constitute each other. The agency–structure debate has a long history and no ultimate solution. However, if you study international problems, you should be aware of it, and you should clarify whether your explanation for the phenomenon under examination is focused on structures or agents.

What is the third function of theories? Once you have researched your issue, and if your theory has been confirmed by convincing evidence, then we may have a solid basis for *prediction* and *ethical judgement* (though not all theories aim for this). Imagine, for example, that you have established that the cause of the war in Syria is competition for regional influence among great powers. We might then have some basis for arguing that only by solving or managing the clash of interests between great or regional powers can such wars be prevented. Maybe these powers can meet in the framework of the United Nations and agree on some kind of cooperation to deal with the root causes of their conflicts in the area, or use their influence to bring the warring factions in Syria to the negotiating table. In addition to this prescriptive reasoning, you might also be in a position to make a normative judgement about the behaviour of these great powers and their governments, and to demand that they should be held accountable. Note, however, that if the analysis is not correct, and the causes of the conflict are, say, mostly religious clashes or the nature of Assad's dictatorial regime, then the

prescriptions will fall short, and any accusations might be hollow. Disproving a hypothesis or a certain interpretation, though, is often just as useful as finding new potential explanations.

Naturally, your research sheds light primarily on the case being studied. But theories always try to find a valid explanation for as many similar or near-identical problem situations as possible. Thus, much of the best work in IR deals not only with a particular case; it aims to incorporate a large number of them. The aim is to provide a basis for predictions or reasoned judgements about potential developments beyond a single example. Most IR research is not primarily concerned with explaining certain individual phenomena, but with generalizing as far as possible, while extrapolating enduring factors that influence a wide range of events.

Theories thus play a central role in several stages of the research process. They should be understood pragmatically as useful tools, especially during the particularly demanding stages of research question and, perhaps, hypotheses formulation. The following figure shows a simplified sequence of a research process in international politics. You do not have to follow this scheme rigorously, but for any kind of oral or written elaboration, it is central that you are clear about Steps 2 to 4 before you prematurely take the steps of accumulating random empirical facts (Step 5), formulating all sorts of basic definitions of terms, or composing the usually superfluous historical overview of your problem. This ultimately saves a lot of work and is a big step towards a convincing result.

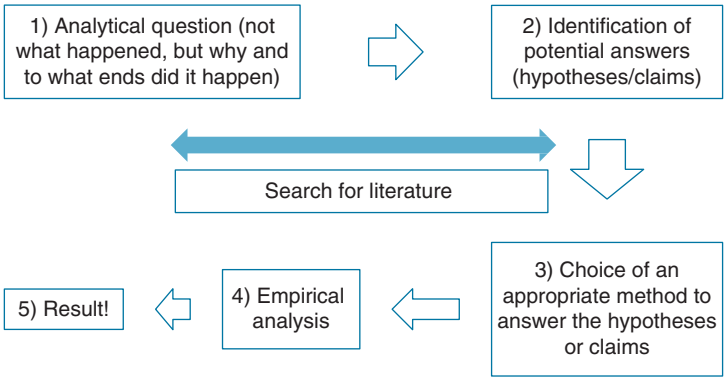

Figure 1.2 Analysing a problem in IR

How do I find a productive research question in International Relations?

It is not difficult to identify interesting topics in IR. There are countless exciting cases. Thus, when you start with the preparation for a seminar paper, an essay, or a presentation, you will usually already have certain events or phenomena in mind that are of particular interest to you, about which you feel passionate, or that are simply suggested by your teacher. However, it is often hard to translate the general interest in a fascinating phenomenon of international politics into a worthwhile and feasible research question, and many students struggle with this task.

It can help to think about what the answer to the question you have in mind might be – to brainstorm possible hypotheses. If the answer is relatively straightforward and can be found by a simple online search or by using ChatGPT, then the question itself probably does not have much potential. If, however, there are several possible answers, and it does seem hard to determine which of the answers are most convincing, then you're on the right track. There is nothing difficult about listing the major events in Syria since Assad's violent crackdown in 2011. That is not to deny that it is sometimes necessary to reconstruct unclear courses of events, and that such a reconstruction can amount to serious research. Historians, for example, try to supplement or correct the public record once previously closed archives open and classified materials or personal papers become available. Nonetheless, social science research needs a guiding question that is more analytical: a 'why' or 'how' question that helps to identify causes and motives behind the events, or that helps to change our perspective and reveal new ways of thinking.

Such 'why' or 'how' questions can be the result of indignation about something: 'Why does my country export so many weapons to crisis regions?', or: 'Why can Israelis and Palestinians not agree on a peaceful solution to their perpetual conflicts?' Another motivation is sheer curiosity, even perplexity: 'Why did Russia send its troops to Syria?', or, to take another example, 'Why did the World Health Organization fail to achieve a coordinated global response to the Covid-19 pandemic?' Finding the right question is essential, because it also directs you to the appropriate literature and methods. It is also essential to narrow your question down to make it manageable. 'Why do countries join regional organizations?', 'Why does the European Union adopt its current migration policies?', or 'What were the causes and consequences of Brexit?' – these questions might be too big and unwieldy for undergraduate research. It is better to focus on a particular country or pair of countries, limit the timeframe, or just prepare a review of the literature in a larger field, instead of merely scratching the surface of any topic because it is too broad.

Once you have formulated your question, you will probably be aware – or you will quickly discover – that there is already a body of literature on this topic. This literature is usually based on a particular theoretical lens, and it offers you a guide to additional material which can help you to sharpen your question and find out about answers to your problem that already exist.

As soon as you have obtained an initial overview of the state of research on the topic, you can begin to formulate hypotheses, or other objectives which your research is intended to fulfil. So, in the case of the Syrian War, you might be interested to find out why Russia intervened and started bombing Syrian cities to rubble. You might find numerous variations of relatively few explanations for this 'why?' question. A good idea is to first check the official one: what did Russian politicians say about their motives? They talk, for example, about terrorists, or about the domestic stability of Syria. You can accept this: but, as a social scientist, you should probe further and try to find additional motives. An alternative hypothesis would be, for example, that Russia is interested in retaining its influence in this geopolitically important area. Such alternative hypotheses usually are not (and should not) be formulated randomly. You may have come across them, for example when reading press articles on the subject, when evaluating the research literature in which the argument may already have

been put forward (perhaps also in the context of a similar phenomenon, such as other great power interventions in domestic conflicts), or when – and this is the most important scenario – you draw on a theory (in this case realism) that suggests other motives. You may also go beyond hypothesis testing and identify the Russian activities as an example of long-standing practices and habits of imperial conduct in the Near East and, by unmasking this, pursue a critical agenda. You could, for example, look at how Putin and other Russian leaders talk about their intervention in Syria and refer to certain ideas and ideologies to 'construct' their case.

The hypotheses and claims found in this way must then of course be tested and substantiated: are the assumptions correct? This brings you to the choice of method. This choice is primarily dependent on the question you posed. It is quite obvious that, when it comes to the kind of questions posed in the previous paragraph, statistical methods might not help much. Similarly, expert interviews may not be practicable, given the time involved and the obvious practical difficulties (or dangers) of doing research in Syria or interviewing Russian president Vladimir Putin. Instead, an analysis of the linguistic content of documents might be called for.

Generally, though, the whole range of political science methods can be applied in IR, both quantitative (regression analyses, statistics, network analyses) and qualitative (source analysis, process tracing, qualitative data analysis, discourse analysis, etc.) methods. Usually you will also complete modules on methodology and techniques of scientific work in your social science department. Take them seriously, ask your teachers to provide application-oriented instruction with examples, and also use other seminars to practice methodical work. A precise methodology is fundamental for good academic performance!

'Help! There is no literature on my topic!': A small guide to acquiring knowledge in IR

University teachers, particularly when they assign essays on current events, are frequently confronted with claims such as the one in the headline to this section. In fact, in most cases there is too much literature, and it is difficult to decide which part of this literature is particularly relevant and reliable. Basically, searching for good literature is your task, and the assessment of relevance should also be done by you. You will develop a feeling for this during your studies. To do that, you will, of course, have to read about your topic – as comprehensively as possible! It might sound like a tired, endlessly repeated admonition from bygone times, but 'Doing IR' mostly means reading – not random reading, but critical and targeted reading.

Training your reading skills is one of the most fundamental tasks of your studies. This is not helped by the fact that most of us now acquire information in small, easily digestible chunks served by social media and countless webpages. Alas, problems in international relations are way too complex to be understood by relying on simple explanations. In any given problem of international politics, we will find a number of often competing interpretations and a mass of prior research. Acquiring critical reading skills, sorting through contending arguments, and weighing them against each other is a fundamental step. You will notice

that, in almost each book or peer-reviewed article, a literature review will tell you how others have approached the topic in the past. There are some basic rules to observe that make independent literature research much easier.

Recognizing and dealing with primary sources

First of all, it is important to distinguish between primary sources and literature. Sources or primary documents are texts created by the actors or institutions themselves. If you want to know more about the EU's reaction to investments by China in what are considered sensitive sectors of European economies, you will find a lot of information on the EU's website: policy papers, resolutions, statistics, etc. If you want to obtain information about US Congressional politics regarding the war in Ukraine then, after acquiring a general overview from news sources, it might be wise to delve into the Congressional Record – which is freely available online – to read the arguments made by senators and congresspersons. If you want to know more about US policies towards African countries during the Cold War, the 'Foreign Relations of the United States' series will give you an invaluable first-hand look into the deliberations of American policy makers at the time.

Such official information is usually very reliable, but you should evaluate it critically. Context matters: at what precise moment was it written, what is the intended audience, which aspects of the international problem at hand are mentioned, and which are not addressed? Keeping such aspects in mind is core to critical reading. Statements from actors or official documents are sources that should be taken seriously, but their context and the intentions of their authors need to be evaluated. Just as dangerous as the uncritical acceptance of standpoints in sources and literature is the opposite stance – that is, to read one's own bias into the text or statistics, and to avoid grappling with the arguments in depth. This is something you should learn in your courses on qualitative and quantitative research methods. Primary sources must be clearly distinguished from the secondary literature (also in the bibliography attached to your papers or essays).

Quality media and think tanks

Up-to-date information on international politics is not difficult to obtain. Every high-quality newspaper and political magazine reports extensively on it, and you should first inform yourself about the topic there. The internet offers a lot of information, too, but here it is much more difficult to distinguish between 'junk' and solid information. Those who study politics seriously will develop a sense of what trustworthy information is, and they will not so easily accept popular denunciations of the 'mainstream' or 'fake news media'. Behind such assertions are usually people who cannot accept that their own private opinions are not shared by everybody. Of course, it should be self-evident that every piece of information – including in the quality press – should be viewed with a critical eye.

Alongside quality media, so-called think tanks provide helpful reports on current international and national political issues. Usually, they are written by experts in the area. The Institute for International Studies in London, Brookings, and RAND in the USA, the Institut

Français des Relations Internationales in Paris, the European Council of Foreign Relations, Bruegel and the Centre for European Policy Studies in Brussels, the Singapore Institute for International Affairs, the Fundação Getulio Vargas in Brazil, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik in Berlin, and many other think tanks offer countless up-to-date studies (usually in English) on any conceivable political issue in global politics. Their experts publish studies on all topics of international politics, albeit mostly without (explicit) theoretical claims. Most are available online, and easy to use. Some think tanks offer quite impartial analysis, others are more wedded to certain political points of view.

Academic literature

Reports from quality media and think tanks usually aim to analyse specific problems of international politics in more or less depth, based on the newest available information. They usually do not claim to provide relevant, generalizable explanations beyond the individual case in question. Precisely this, however, is what academic research tries to do. The easiest way to find cutting-edge research is in academic journals, which are usually more or less theoretically oriented, and which contain articles that explicitly outline the theoretical assumptions and methods from which they proceed. You should definitely have a look at the articles published in such journals, because their structure and approach are exemplary of what a scientific paper should look like. They will also help you to learn about the current state of the scientific debate, and about the principal questions in your chosen topic area. You can find the key works in your chosen topic by looking at course syllabi, textbooks, or review articles. So, by all means, stand on the shoulders of these academic giants – but always remember to critically interrogate them. With that said, reading academic articles is different from reading newspapers or novels. The following section provides an example.

How to read IR articles

In 2018, Ricardo De Soares Oliveira and Harry Verhoeven, professors at Oxford and Columbia University respectively, published an article in the well-known British journal *Survival* on the topic of military intervention in Africa. Their piece did not deal with the frequent military incursions of former colonial powers in African countries, which have been highly controversial and subject to voluminous research. In fact, the authors were interested in a more recent phenomenon, namely the fact that African countries seem to have become much more supportive of international intervention on the continent, and that they use this instrument with increasing frequency. For example, in 2021, the South African Development Community, a regional organization with South Africa as its largest member, and Rwanda, sent over 3000 troops to neighbouring Mozambique, officially to fight terrorism.

The frequency of such African interventions poses a genuine puzzle. For centuries, African states suffered terribly from the multiple and flagrant violations of national sovereignty undertaken by European colonial powers. How is it possible, de Soares Oliveira and Verhoeven asked, that some of these same states are now so supportive of intervention? Their answer to this puzzle was that African nations had redefined the purpose of these

interventions, from a concern with democracy-building or humanitarian protection, to an overriding objective of fostering regime stability in African states. Based on a wide range of literature, the authors argued that African states had re-interpreted intervention as stabilization, rather than as infringements on hard-won sovereignty.

Such articles should not be read mainly for the purpose of acquiring factual information, but rather to understand a particular question and the author's specific answer. This means that the first thing you should look for in such an article is the core research question. What is its relevance? What is the debate to which the authors intend to make a contribution? What have previous answers to the research question contended? After this, you have to identify the core argument. It is very useful to take notes that sketch the explanation and the main points made by the author. Authors will usually explain how their thesis distinguishes itself from other interpretations. Frequently, the argument is based on a theoretical claim or perspective. In the article summarized above, this is not made explicit. However, the authors claim that there is a society of African states which try to export stability through military intervention. This betrays a certain closeness to the thinking of the so-called English school (see Chapter 6). Critical reading also means that you look closely at the methods employed to reach the conclusions. Are they appropriate to the research question, and are they well-executed? In the article cited above, the argument is based mainly on secondary literature. Would it make sense to add more primary sources, for example statements by African leaders or interviews? Finally, is the argument convincing, or are alternative explanations for African interventions more persuasive?

Theories in action

The United Kingdom and the slave trade in the 19th century

For much of the 19th century, Great Britain was the world's hegemonic power, and the primary profiteer from international trade. During this time, Britain also embarked on a long campaign to abolish the transatlantic slave trade. Why? This is the core puzzle dealt with in the following article, which you can find freely available on the internet:

- Kaufmann, C. and Pape, R. (1999) 'Explaining costly international moral action: Britain's sixty-year campaign against the Atlantic slave trade', *International Organization*, 53 (4): 631–68.

The article is a much cited and relatively accessible piece from perhaps the most prestigious IR journal, *International Organization*. The article should provide you with an opportunity to clearly identify the argument, alternative explanations, the theory employed, and the methods that are used by the author.

Discussion

- Summarize these points, the core concepts used, and the way in which the arguments are set up.
- What are the potential lessons for humanitarian policies?
- Finally, think about potential problems of the arguments brought forward by the authors.