



# ENTREVISTA

# **Interview with Professor Kalevi Holsti: Brief Reflections on the Discipline of International Relations and World Problems**

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## ***DS & AL: Why Study International Relations today?***

**KH:** The Roman god Janus had two faces: one indicated peace, the opposite, war. War has been throughout history almost a constant between tribes, clans, city-states, empires, and nation-states. World War I terminated the common acceptance of war as a normal activity; its horrors gave rise to the field of International Relations as an academic pursuit. The assumption was that systematic research on the causes of war could help build a more peaceful world.

Understanding the structures, processes, and dynamics of the relations between states—and increasingly relations within states—requires more than a familiarity with the daily headlines. Thanks to academic research, today we possess broad knowledge about the sources of international conflict. That has value in itself. The question remains, however: how does academic knowledge of a social problem get incorporated into the minds and preferences of policy-makers, terrorists, militia leaders, and the vast hordes of people who transform social processes into organized violence? That is the crucial question.

But if interstate war as a phenomenon has declined since World War II, is it still necessary to study it? A symptom of the decline in the war/peace/order problematic has been the proliferation of studies outside of this domain. Post-modernism, feminism, queer studies, post-colonialism, and other new areas have pushed aside the Janus-inspired academic agenda of international politics. Russia's aggression against Ukraine and other problems associated with increased international tensions reminds us that, even if decreased in incidence, interstate war remains a critical possibility in the international system.

## ***DS & AL: How Has the Pandemic Affected International Relations?***

**KH:** It demonstrated that the locus of authority in the world remains with states. The World Health Organization played several roles in the pandemic, but the critical decisions were made by states. The allocation of critical vaccines was not based on need, but on which governments had access to them. The United States withdrew from the WHO and controlled the production and distribution of two vaccines. It negotiated with other states to distribute excuses over its own needs. The British, Chinese, Indian, and Russian producers behaved the same way: national requirements were met first, and surpluses were

negotiated with others. In brief, all the critical decisions were made at the national level. The WHO, representing a universal perspective, was left out of the key decisions. This problem clearly illustrated the error of the thesis that the power of states is declining and that global problems are being handled by global processes.

A second consequence of the pandemic was the significant differences in the various national responses. From the perspective of Chinese-American relations, the Chinese Communist Party scored propaganda points by contrasting its death rate —about six thousand— with the American rate of nearly one million. This difference was used to buttress the Chinese position that the United States is in decline and that, thanks to the draconian Chinese response to the pandemic, the Chinese have a superior model for others to follow.

### ***DS & AL: Are We Facing De-globalization?***

*KH:* International trade and investment continue at a robust rate. However, in certain economic sectors, national retrenchment is taking place. Many governments have concluded that reliance on foreign producers and shipping agents endanger national control over critical resources and products. China, the United States, the European Union (EU) and others provide numerous examples.

1. China announced that it would emphasize self-sufficiency in many aspects of technology within 25 years. These include chips and artificial intelligence.
2. The United States has taken a number of steps to promote the national production of computer chips, battery technology, and semi-conductors, thus reducing or eliminating foreign exposure.
3. EU members have increased national control over Chinese investments, in many cases denying Chinese purchases of sensitive industries;
4. Many countries have excluded Huawei, a Chinese-owned company, from developing 5G Internet technology in their territories.

Many other examples could be cited. They all indicate a re-nationalization of productive processes in key industries with national security implications.

### ***DS & AL: Which Models of International Politics are Most Useful?***

*KH:* The world has become increasingly complex. No single model of it is adequate as a short-hand method of description and explanation. The Realist model helps account for a wide range of behaviors. States define their interests and use a variety of means —including violence— to achieve and protect them. But as the liberal model of international politics

emphasizes, there are vast areas of international cooperation, where sensitivity to global needs modifies national priorities.

From a structural perspective, no single model is adequate. A polar characterization might fit —witness the reaction to Russia’s attack on Ukraine or the “cold war” between the United States and China. But there are also elements of multipolarity, where the interests of states do not lead to the leadership of a single hegemon. Latin American trade with China has significantly reduced its dependency on the United States, and European interests have shown similar patterns of diversification. And within regions there are various patterns of rivalry that develop quite independently of the relations between the great powers.

Finally, traditional models of International Politics ignore the trends and problems of domestic politics. Most wars since 1945 have domestic origins: secession movements, ethnic conflicts, state weakness, revolutions (often with outside support), and massive violations of human rights have made up a significant portion of the international agenda. To understand international conflicts, it is no longer adequate to assume that they are comprised solely of clashing state interests. A good example of International conflict being driven by domestic politics is Syria. A purely domestic (and peaceful) protest against the Assad regime escalated to the use of armed force by Russia, Turkey, Israel, Iran, and the United States. Today, domestic violent conflicts are active in Somalia, the Sahel states of Africa, Congo, Nigeria, Yemen, Mozambique, and in many other places.

The long-run trend in the decline of interstate war is notable. Once a common feature of all civilizations and geographical areas, the world since 1945 has featured a very low probability that two or more states would resolve their conflicting interests by armed conflict. The probability that in any given year war between states will occur has declined to less than one percent.

This pattern contrasts with the prevalence of domestic violence since 1945. Wars within states have made up the vast majority of armed conflicts, but our models of International Politics have little to say about them.

But the benign International situation of the post Cold War era has begun to crumble. The Russian attack on the Ukraine, tensions over Taiwan, the lapse of arms control agreements, the arms build-up of China and India are indicators of increased dangers and greater probabilities of armed conflicts between states. Cyber wars, as between Israel and Iran, have also appeared. The certainties of the Cold War era have been replaced by uncertainties and higher risks. ❀