# THE MEDITERRANEAN INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM IN THE LATE MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN PERIODS

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## Introduction

This paper takes the view that the Mediterranean basin constituted an international system long before the emergence of the modern international system. It argues that the degree and intensity of the interactions among Mediterranean societies after the Crusades made them to be part of a common system which can rightly be called as Mediterranean international system. Referring to Martin Wight's conception of a "secondary states system among the Latin Christendom, Orthodox Christianity and the Islamic Caliphate"; the paper makes the point that the Mediterranean international system of the late medieval and early modern periods had been a trans-regional system and formed the cradle of the wider system of Afro-Eurasian international system.

## Conception of International System

An international systems is simply defined as a grouping of, or formula for, the multiple socio-political units in order to have smooth interactions with each other. International systems set frameworks for the peaceful or smooth coexistence of multiple units. As well known to the students of International Relations, an international system is composed of multiple units (e.g., nation-states) whose behaviours become a consideration for each other when they formulate their policies vis-à-vis each other. International systems may be 'anarchical' in the sense that the members of the system do not acknowledge a common supreme power above themselves and they interact within the framework of a loose association. International systems may be imperial or 'hierarchical' in the sense that some form of a centre is recognized or emerges to lay down the rules for the interaction of multiple units and the supremacy of the centre is acknowledged, at least nominally. Then, international system may be taken as a response to the question of the peaceful

co-existence of multiple units.[1] Yet, in time, it becomes a unit comprising multiple socio-political groupings of human beings like some human social groupings or identities such as civilizations.

There is a close similarity between international systems and civilizations. Historically, most civilizations have, for most of the time, contained, or given way to, an international system. Examples of international system defined by the students of international system show the link between civilizations and international systems. Wight, for instance, identifies three systems of states: the Hellenic-Hellenistic or Greaco-Roman, the Chinese between the collapse of the Chou Empire in 771 BC and the establishment of the Ts'in Empire in 221 AD, and the Western systems.[2] Bull gives five examples of 'international society' as follows: the classical Greek city-state system, the international system formed by the Hellenistic kingdoms in the period between the disintegration of Alexander's empire and the Roman conquest, the international system of China during the period of Warring States, the states-system of ancient India, and the modern states-system which arose in Europe and is now world-wide.[3] We see that Wight and Bull's examples of states systems are associated with civilizations. Each took place in, or started from, a civilization.

Of course, an international system does not necessarily remain being confined to the boundaries of one civilization. Partly because the delineation of the boundaries of a civilization is much more difficult than those of socio-political groupings which constitute an international system. Partly because an international system could take place between, not only within, civilizations due to civilizational encounters, exchanges and relations. In other words, an international system can be multi-civilizational. For example, Wight gives three examples of inter- or multi-civilisationally international systems, in his terms 'secondary states-systems': the Roman-Persian system, the Near Eastern system in the latter half of the second millennium BC, and the Mediterranean in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries AD.[4] Wight's 'secondary states system' in the Mediterranean of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries comprised three different civilisations, namely Latin Christendom, the Orthodox Christianity and Muslim Caliphate. This is I think a good point to formulate a Mediterranean international system in the late medieval and early modern periods.

## The Mediterranean International System

To begin with, we need to look at the emergence and development of the modern international system as the modern system has generally been taken to be the reference point in defining and examining other systems. It is a prevalent argument among the students of International Relations that the modern world-wide international system sprang from the medieval European system. The modern international system first

[1]   The literature on international system is vast. I have extensively analysed it elsewhere. See A. Nuri Yurdusev, 'The Concept of International System as a Unit of Analysis', *METU Studies in Development,* Ankara, Vol. 21/1, (1994), pp. 143-74.

[2]   M. Wight, *Systems of States,* ed. with an Introduction by H. Bull, Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1977, p. 22.

[3]   Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics*, London: McMillan, 1977, p. 15-16.

[4]   Wight, *Systems of States*, p. 24-5.

emerged in Western Europe from the sixteenth century onwards and, then, through European overseas expansion into non-European zones, it became a world-wide global system.[5] In this conventional account, there are some assumed points. First, it is held that the pre-modern international systems had been regional systems, confined to a particular region or civilization. Secondly, the modern international system emerged and developed in Europe and within European civilisation. Thirdly, the system became a global system as a result of European overseas expansion, in other words, it was a European undertaking. These assumptions reflect a Euro-centric outlook and they are quite questionable. A conception of the Mediterranean international system of the late medieval and early modern periods enables us to question those Euro-centric assumptions. In order to conceive the Mediterranean international system, first, we need to account for the systemic interdependence in the old world, what one may call the Afro-Eurasian international system.

Bull and Watson in the introduction to their edited work, identified four regional international systems other than the one in Europe when the latter began to expand: Arab-Islamic system stretching from Spain to Persia, the international system of the Indian subcontinent and its extensions eastward, the Mongol-Tartar dominion of the Eurasian steppes, and the Chinese system.[6] The first thing that should be noted about this list is that all the regional, not global, international systems take place in Eurasia and at least three civilizations correspond to them. At this point, we may naturally ask: Was it the case that these four systems sharing the then known world remained as closed systems without any interaction among them, or that they had interactions with each other as Wight hinted for the Mediterranean? Based upon the historical record, we are, I think, justified to assert that these so-called regional systems were in interaction so as to be part of a single system, that is, the Afro-Eurasian system.

The Afro-Eurasian international system was a trans-regional and inter-civilizational system in the sense that the civilizational identity as a form of collective social identification was salient and the inter-societal exchanges were largely channelled through civilizational lines. It was also a multi-regional and multi-civilizational system in the sense that it comprised multiple regions and civilizations. The system included the major Eurasian civilizations, namely Europe (Christians), the Middle East (Muslims), India and China.

Hodgson and McNeill have told us that there were interactions among different societal, or regional, or civilizational entities long before the modern period.[7] We know that there were exchanges between distinct civilizations by 500 BC when the Middle Eastern civilization according to McNeill, had preponderance in the then world. From 500 BC to 1500 AD, we do not see any single civilized centre enjoying a definite preponderance. After 1500 AD, the European centre assumed

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[5]  I have extensively examined the emergence and development of the modern international system in my book *International Relations and the Philosophy of History: A Civilisational Approach,* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, chs 6-7.

[6]  Hedley Bull and Adam Watson (eds), *The Expansion of International System*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1984, p. 2-3.

[7]  See M. G. S. Hodgson, *Rethinking World History: Essays on Europe, Islam and World History*, ed, with an Introduction and Conclusion by E. Burke, III, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993; and W. H. McNeill, *A World History* London: Oxford University Press, 1967.

predominance. However, that there were inter-civilizational exchanges may not mean that they amount to the degree of placing them in one system.

McNeill's description of the interactions and interdependencies among the civilizations of the Old World allows us to speak of a then world-wide system that he calls the 'Eurasian-African ecumenical system'. His remarks are worth to quote in length. There was, according to McNeill, a Eurasian-African ecumenical system:

> The reason was that mercantile practice had, in fact, slowly created a workable code of conduct that went a long way towards standardizing encounters across cultural boundaries. Even the arcanum of religion made room for outsiders and unbelievers, since the principal religions of the Eurasian world –Christianity, Confucianism, Buddhism and Islam- all agreed in exhorting the devout to treat strangers as they would wish to be treated themselves. Thus, despite the fact that no single set of rulers had ever exercised political sovereignty across the whole Eurasian-African ecumene, a bare-bones moral code did arise that went a long way towards reducing the risks of cross-civilizational contact to bearable proportions. Little by little across the centuries, local rulers of every stripe learned that they could benefit mightily by taxing instead of plundering strangers… As these attitudes became general, so that an enforceable (and remarkably uniform) merchant law arose in the ports and other great urban centres of Eurasia, and was supplemented by an informal body of customs for dealing strangers that extend into the rural hinterland, the structure of the ecumenical world system approximated very closely to that of the separate civilizations embraced within it.[8]

What is so striking in this quotation is that it informs us about the nature and extent of the relations among societies of the Old World which allow us to confidently argue for, what I have called, the Afro-Eurasian international system. We see that the interactions among those societies involve a workable code of conduct, standardization of encounters, moral code, an enforceable and uniform merchant law, and informal body of customs, all which are the elements we associate with international systems. It is thus such a system of interactions that those societies may be said to amount to an international system. There emerged a degree of interdependence that international systems are generally observed to have.

By 1000 AD local civilized societies of the Old World began to have interactions and exchanges and from 1500 AD the peoples of the Americas and Australasia were incorporated into this network of interactions. In the formation of the inter-continental and trans-regional exchanges and interactions, renewed contacts between the Latin Christendom, Orthodox Christianity and the Muslim Middle East after the Crusades had been decisive. We have been told by Southern that there was already an international trade between Latin Christendom, Constantinople and the Islamic

World by the eleventh century. He even goes further and makes the point that the restoration of the Mediterranean in European politics in the late twelfth century is one of the main determinants in later Medieval Europe.[9] Similarly, Abu-Lughod, through a ground-breaking examination of the degree and intensity of trade and exchanges among the cities in the Mediterranean basin and the wider world, showed us that there was a well-established world economy in the thirteenth century.[10] The international trade between those three civilizations, in fact, extended into India and China as well. All this suggests that it is possible to speak of an Afro-Eurasian international system, comprising Europe, Islamic World, India and China, before the modern international system and the Mediterranean basin constituted the core and cradle of this system.

[9]   R. W. Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages*, London: Hutchinson University Library, 1953, pp. 13, 32, 42-49.

[10]  See Janet L. Abo-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World-System A.D. 1250-1350*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.

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