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Foreign relations

Conflict, security and armed forces

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International and national political economy, economics and development


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Asia and Pacific


North America


Latin America and Caribbean

International relations theory is the study of international relations (IR) from a theoretical perspective. It attempts to provide a conceptual framework upon which international relations can be analyzed. Ole Holsti describes international relations theories as acting like pairs of coloured sunglasses that allow the wearer to see only salient events relevant to the theory; e.g., an adherent of realism may completely disregard an event that a constructivist might pounce upon as crucial, and vice versa.
Theories of International Relations allow us to understand and try to make sense of the world around us through various lenses, each of which represents a different theoretical perspective. In order to consider the field as a whole for beginners it is necessary to simplify IR theory. This chapter does so by situating IR theory on a three-part spectrum of traditional theories, middle-ground theories and critical theories. Examples are used throughout to help bring meaning and perspective to these positions.