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Q2(c)

What is complex interdependence? Discuss the role of transnational actors in the international system

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2021 · PSIR GS 2 · 15 marks · Key concepts in International Relations

Key concepts in International Relations: National interest, Security and power; Balance of power and deterrence; Transnational actors and collective security; World capitalist economy and globalisation.

Core demand of the question

- Explain the concept of complex interdependence and discuss the role of transnational actors
- Write at 15-mark length

Revision summary

Keohane and Nye defined complex interdependence against a military-first hierarchy.

Multiple channels and issue density are the mechanism.

MNCs, IOs, and NGOs are the typical transnational actors.

They set agendas and raise the cost of autarky.

Force still ranks highest when territorial survival is the issue.

Introduction

Complex interdependence is Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye's map of a world in which societies are linked by many channels and military force is not always the last word. Transnational actors are the carriers of those channels.

Body

The concept

- **Power and Interdependence (1977)** set three traits: **multiple channels** between societies; absence of a fixed hierarchy of issues; and a minor role for military force on many agendas.
- Sensitivity and vulnerability describe how quickly and how costly a disruption travels.
- The model was a reply to Waltzian anarchy as the only structure. It did not claim that force had vanished.

Transnational actors

- Multinational firms move capital, technology, and standards across borders. They bargain with States and with each other.
- International organisations, from the IMF to functional UN agencies, create routines that States cannot ignore cheaply.
- NGOs, churches, scientific networks, and later digital platforms carry norms and information that no foreign ministry monopolises.
- Diasporas and terrorist networks show that transnational is not only liberal peace. It can be violent or communal.

Role in world politics

- **Agenda setting:** climate, human rights, and trade law often start outside cabinets.
- **Coalition making:** a State plus firms plus NGOs can outflank another State on an issue.
- **Limits:** on territorial conquest and nuclear deterrence, **Waltz's** military hierarchy still bites. Complex interdependence is issue-specific.

India-relevant illustration

- WTO, climate COP processes, and IT services firms are transnational channels. Border wars with China are not.

Flow diagram

Complex interdependence -> Multiple channels
Complex interdependence -> No fixed issue hierarchy
Transnational actors MNCs NGOs IOs -> Multiple channels
Multiple channels -> Outcomes besides force

Conclusion

Complex interdependence is **multiple channels**, mixed issue hierarchies, and a reduced role for force on many questions. Transnational actors - firms, IOs, NGOs, and networks - make those channels real. They constrain and enable States. They do not abolish anarchy where survival is at stake.

Facts & figures

Keohane and Nye

Power and Interdependence: three traits of complex interdependence and the politics of asymmetric sensitivity.

Multiple channels

Interstate, transgovernmental, and transnational links, not only ambassador-to-ambassador traffic.

MNCs

Firms as political actors that can relocate production and lobby several capitals at once.

Waltz

Counter-claim that structure remains anarchy and that economic ties do not erase security competition.