International Relations Comprehensive Exam, September 2013

Major comprehensive exam candidates should answer one question from *each* of the three sections (security, international political economy and general), as well as one further question from a section of their choosing. Minor comprehensive exam candidates should just answer one question from each of the three sections.

*Section I - Security*

1. In August 2012, President Barack Obama warned the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria that the large-scale movement or use of chemical weapons in its civil war would constitute a “red line” that would “change my calculus….change my equation.” This statement was widely interpreted as a deterrent threat. A year later, after several suspected small-scale uses of chemical weapons, more than one thousand people died in a major chemical attack in the Damascus suburbs attributed to the regime. The president is currently exploring the option of launching a limited military strike on Syria. Obama has put forward many reasons for using force, but it is clear that by publicly declaring the existence of a red line – a red line that the Assad regime subsequently crossed – the president has engaged the reputation of the United States and put the credibility of U.S. threats on the line. But what is it that makes threats credible in international politics? Is it true, as Schelling wrote in *Arms and Influence*, that a state’s reputation for upholding its commitments “is one of the few things worth fighting over?” In a short essay, draw on the literature to explore the causes of credibility, making an argument for which factor(s) you find most convincing. Finally, offer an interpretation of the apparent failure of the U.S. threat against the Assad regime.
2. Ever since Thucydides attributed the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War to the “growth of the power of Athens, and the alarm which this inspired in Sparta,” scholars have debated whether power transitions among the leading states in the international system make war inevitable. Robert Gilpin, for example, elaborated a theory in which hegemonic war is a central feature of change in the international system. Other scholars have sought to qualify these claims about the inevitability of war during power transitions, and a variety of factors have been suggested that could moderate the risk of war. After reviewing prominent theories, apply them to the implications of the “rise of China” for international security. Is China’s rise likely to be peaceful, or does it increase the likelihood of war? If so, how? Are there any factors that could increase or decrease that risk? In a short answer, draw upon the scholarly literature to compare the China case with other historical cases of rising great powers. Is the rise of China likely to have a similar outcome to these cases or a different outcome? Why?
3. The international community invests enormous time and resources working to prevent the spread of weapons of mass destruction—especially nuclear weapons—to more states. In your view, is this effort warranted? Why or why not? Does the proliferation of nuclear weapons increase or decrease the likelihood of (conventional or nuclear) war? Are there other reasons proliferation might be undesirable, other than the effect of these weapons on the risk of war? Be sure to explore theories at all levels of analysis in your answer, and make reference to specific cases. Is the acquisition of nuclear weapons by Iran, for example, likely to make for a more dangerous Middle East or a more dangerous world?

*Section II – International Political Economy*

1. “A state-centered approach is no longer useful in understanding outcomes in international political economy.” Critically evaluate this claim, with reference to this and other important approaches to International Political Economy (IPE). In doing so make sure you describe the state-centered approach and assess its strengths and weaknesses, along with alternatives approaches.
2. Evidence suggests fears about the rise of protectionism following the economic crisis of 2007-2008, were unwarranted. Do you agree? If so, how can we explain this? In your answer, be sure to address how useful different approaches to the study of International Political Economy (IPE) are in explaining this outcome. What areas warrant greater research as we seek to understand patterns of economic policymaking in the wake of the crisis, and why?
3. The performance of the major International Organizations (IOs) designed to promote and regulate global trade and investment appears to be faltering. Why? In your answer make sure you address the major explanations for international cooperation in International Political Economy (IPE), and how they can help us to understand changing patterns of international cooperation. Given your response, what is your expectation regarding the future of international cooperation in trade and investment?

*Section III – General*

1. The different major traditions of international relations scholarship - realism, constructivism and liberalism - have different understandings of power. How do these different understandings affect their broader understanding of the world? What do these different understandings emphasize and leave out? Can they in any sense be reconciled? In your answer, draw on the relevant literature to compare different accounts of power to each other, setting out your conclusions as to their respective strengths and weaknesses.
2. Are international organizations autonomous from states? International relations scholars disagree about the ways in which state action does and does not affect the independence, function and politics of international organizations. In a short essay, draw upon the relevant literature both to summarize these disagreements and to reach your own conclusions about whether and/or how international organizations can act independently of the states that have created them.
3. Both rational choice and constructivist explanations rely on assumptions about people’s beliefs. What are the differences between rational choice and constructivist accounts of beliefs? How do these differences shape explanatory strategies? How do the two approaches tackle the problem that beliefs are located inside actors’ heads and hence unobservable? In a short essay, draw upon the relevant literatures in both rationalism and constructivism to compare the two approaches’ understanding of the consequence of beliefs for world politics.