

Comprehensive Examination: International Relations

The George Washington University

Department of Political Science

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Instructions

Please answer one question from each section. You have eight hours to complete the exam.

Keep the following in mind when composing your essays. First, read the questions carefully and answer all parts of the questions you select. Second, articulate a coherent argument in answering each question. Merely demonstrating that you have read the literature is insufficient for answering questions satisfactorily. To this end, it is strongly recommended that you outline your essays before beginning to write. Third, citation format is up to you, although author-date citations (e.g., “Waltz 1979”) are recommended for speed and brevity. Rough or approximate citations to prominent works (e.g., “Rodrik’s 2011 book on globalization”) are acceptable. There is no need to provide a bibliography or list of references.

Section I: IR Theory

1. Many IR scholars use the notion of “polarity” to describe the structure of international politics. The Cold War, for example, was described as a bipolar system. The immediate post-Cold War period was described by some as a unipolar system. The Concert of Europe was a multipolar system. Is the notion of polarity still useful for describing today’s 2022 international system? If so, what kind of polarity are we experiencing? What facts tell us this and what behaviors should we expect from this configuration of power given what we know about polarity? If polarity is not a useful concept for describing today’s international system, why not? What facts support your answer and what might be a better characterization?
2. What roles do mass publics play in world politics and what theoretical tools do we have to investigate their influence? Pick two different theoretical approaches to the influence of mass publics on international politics and assess the strengths and weaknesses of each. What are the theoretical mechanisms that generate influence for mass publics in the arguments you compare? How robust are the claims the different approaches make and what are the conditions under which each can be usefully applied? Might either approach be further developed in fruitful ways? If so, how? Be sure to define “mass public” as part of your answer.
3. The IR field is often subdivided into “security studies” and “international political economy.” What is gained, intellectually, from this division? Intellectually, what might be lost? Pick two important research programs in IR that are identified with one or the other of these subfields and use them to illustrate your argument about what is gained or lost by dividing the field this way.
4. The rise of big multinational corporations in the 1970s led some IR scholars in those years to worry that large firms and private commercial interests would threaten state sovereignty and core aspects of state autonomy, particularly in the Global South. [Ray Vernon’s *Sovereignty at Bay* was a landmark work in this vein.] With the rise of Big Tech, how should contemporary scholars be thinking about these issues? Do private firms compromise state sovereignty and autonomy in important ways in today’s world? If not, why not? If so, what implications does that have for state-centric IR theories and our understanding of world politics? Be sure to define sovereignty and autonomy in your answer.

Section II: International Security

1. Russia has massed large conventional forces along the borders of Ukraine in what some analysts believe portends an invasion of that country. The United States and its NATO allies, although not formally committed to defend Ukraine, clearly wish to deter Russia from attacking. In an essay, lay out a framework for understanding the range of possible strategies the West could use to dissuade the Russians from

striking. Provide examples of how NATO could implement each strategy you discuss. Where does the current NATO strategy fall on this spectrum? Is that strategy likely to be effective? Why or why not? Is there a more effective strategy NATO could employ? What is it and why would it work better?

2. For decades the dominant understanding of nuclear deterrence held that once states obtained an assured destruction capability, they no longer needed to react to increases in other states' nuclear arsenals. Nuclear weapons were "revolutionary" in this line of thought because once the action-reaction cycle of arms racing was severed between nuclear-armed rivals, the security dilemma would be attenuated and relations between them would stabilize. This view has been challenged in various ways over time and has come under sustained attack over the past fifteen or twenty years from a new generation of theorists. What are some of the prominent empirical and theoretical critiques of the theory of the nuclear revolution? How persuasive are they? Should they fundamentally alter the field's understanding of the efficacy of nuclear weapons for deterrence?
3. The bargaining model of war has become the dominant approach to the causes of war in IR. Although the initial work in this paradigm (e.g., Fearon) treated war itself as a costly lottery, others have pointed out that bargaining does not stop once the shooting starts. How have scholars applied the bargaining approach to the conduct and termination of interstate war (and, optionally, civil war)? What are the central insights of this work? What is the process through which wars end in a bargaining framework? Is it sufficient on its own to explain the conduct and termination of war? If so, why? If not, why not?
4. What is the role of technology in the causes and conduct of war? Does variation in military technology at the systemic or dyadic level, for example, create incentives or disincentives for states to launch wars? What theoretical arguments exist about this and how persuasive are they? Similarly, once a war has begun, is the side with the superior military technology likely to prevail? If so, why? If not, explain which factors moderate or trump the effect of technology.

Section III: International Political Economy

1. "Corporations are exploiting the pandemic to gouge consumers with higher prices on everyday essentials, from milk to gasoline." – Senator Elizabeth Warren

Taking a cue from Senator Warren, some economic advisors in the Biden White House have suggested that monopoly power rather than government spending is responsible for stubborn U.S. inflation. How might traditional mainstream economics and the political science subfield of political economy differ in their approaches to understanding the roots of inflation? What structural, institutional, material, and ideational factors help explain why governments choose different macroeconomic approaches to governing the economy?

2. How does the rise of state-led finance during the last decade affect the relationship between global investors, international institutions, and national governments? Is state-led capital different from private capital, and what are the potential repercussions for global governance and development? Under what conditions might state-led capital deepen or diminish longstanding concerns about a race-to-the bottom in global governance? Provide empirical examples in your answer. Be sure to define "state-led finance" (or state-led capital) as part of your answer.
3. In February 2021, President Biden issued an executive order to secure and strengthen America's supply chains to reduce foreign monopolization of key industrial components. By summer 2021, the U.S. was forging key supply chain partnerships with important allies, such as South Korea in the semiconductor sector. What do these shifting supply chain patterns tell us about the prospects for reviving trade negotiations in multilateral forums? Employing your knowledge of political economy theory, specifically the influence of domestic interest groups, national governments, international institutions, and economic ideas in determining trade policy outcomes, do you think there is a role for the World Trade Organization in the 21st century?

4. Is trade and investment with low-income economies responsible for the recent growth of populist movements in the West? Why or why not? What are some political economy explanations for the populist backlash against globalization over the last half-decade? To what extent does growing economic nationalism reflect structural economic patterns versus other institutional, normative, and cultural explanations?