

## 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 (you do not need to include any outlines as part of your responses). Third, be sure to draw on relevant literature to inform your answers. Last, 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. Please do not include a bibliography or list of references.

### IR Theory

1. IR scholars have long debated whether the key organizing principle for the international system is based on anarchy or hierarchy. More recently, some scholars have suggested moving toward a view of the international system based on networks. Discuss these three conceptions of the international system’s organizing principle: anarchy, hierarchy, and networked. What is meant by each conception? How do these approaches differ from one another? What are the unique contributions of each perspective? Which, if any, do you believe is the most compelling, empirically accurate, and/or useful perspective?
2. IR scholarship has traditionally focused on power, international institutions, international norms, and domestic politics. In recent years, however, there has been a flourishing of scholarship at the individual level of analysis focused on the attributes of leaders and elites. Discuss the IR literature at the individual level of analysis. What are its unique contributions? What are some of the potential pitfalls or drawbacks of the focus at this level? And how important do you think individuals are (relative to factors at other levels of analysis) when it comes to explaining various outcomes of importance in international relations?
3. After years of neglect, mainstream IR scholarship has increasingly focused in recent years on the roles of gender and race in international relations. In your response, you can choose to focus on *one or both* of these topics. Describe what you view as the central contributions of these literatures. What do scholars mean by gender and/or race? What questions have these literatures helped answer? What outcomes have they helped explain? Are there existing theories and approaches in IR scholarship that are more or less well suited to incorporating issues of gender and/or race into their explanations?

## International Security

1. Analysts of international security typically assume that state policies are intentional—in the sense that policies are decided by leaders authorized to make such choices—and that the consequences of state policies are also foreseeable and intended. Second and third image theorists, however, have long recognized that states sometimes implement policies or take actions that are *not* intentional according to the above definition, and that actions can have unintended consequences. Discuss at least one topic in international security that scholars have argued involves unintended actions and one (or more) that features unintended consequences (the topics can be the same for both actions and consequences but need not be). For the former, what are the causes of unintentional actions emphasized by scholars? How is it possible for states to do things their top leaders don't intend to do? For the latter, identify the unintended consequences of the policies and explain why they occurred. On net, were they positive or negative?

2. Traditionally, scholarship in security studies has focused on the overt, observable actions of states. Recently, however, scholars have begun to emphasize the secret side of IR. What do scholars in security studies mean by “secrecy” and “covertness”? What are the arguments in the security literature for why states sometimes act covertly as opposed to overtly? What are some of the advantages and disadvantages of acting covertly? Are there different levels of covertness/secrecy and, if so, do they matter? Is acting covertly more effective for achieving states' goals? Be sure to discuss at least three examples of work on secrecy/covertness.

3. In June 2025, Israel launched an air campaign aimed at eliminating Iran's nuclear program. The United States joined in to bomb the one target that Israel could not fully destroy—the Fordo enrichment site buried deep underground. Assessments of the extent of the damage to the Iranian program vary but there is no doubt that it has suffered a significant setback. Kinetic attacks, however, are only one possible tool to counter nuclear proliferation. What others exist? How have states sought to slow down or prevent the spread of nuclear weapons to additional countries around the globe? How successful have these respective policies been? Be sure to discuss particular cases in your response.

## **International Political Economy**

1. The Trump administration recently threatened a 145% tariff on imports from China. Why has the US embraced trade protectionism? Are ideas, interests, institutions, international structure, or something else most helpful in explaining this policy change? In addition to developing your argument, be sure to address potential critiques from at least two other perspectives.
2. Is neoliberal globalization dead? Drawing on your knowledge of—and the literature on—trade, money, and migration (choose at least two), explain whether the levels of globalization vary across these issue areas. If so, why?
3. What is austerity, and how did this idea become so prominent in Europe after the 2009 sovereign debt crisis? What explains the global prevalence of austerity during this period? What are the structural, institutional, material, and ideational explanations for this policy stickiness?