

Comprehensive Examination: International Relations

The George Washington University

Department of Political Science

January 2021

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, you may find it useful to 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. What role does rationality play in different theories of international relations? Do all theories mean the same thing by “rationality”? Compare and contrast different treatments of rationality in IR theory. Which approach do you find most sensible and useful, and why?
2. What is an “international order”? How would we know one if we saw one in evidence? What variation in “international orders” have we seen historically, across both time and geography, and how well do our IR theories explain this variation?
3. Is “balance of power” a useful concept for understanding world politics in the 21st century? If so, what does balance of power mean in the contemporary world and how should we use the concept? If not, why not? What has changed about the world such that actors believed it to be useful in the past but it no longer is so. Be sure to define balance of power as part of your answer.
4. How, and how well, do different IR theories explain the actions of individuals? For example, how well do they explain the appearance of and effects of individual leaders? Do these theories think it matters who wins the US presidential election? If not, why not? If so, how so? Similarly, how well do IR theories explain the effects of influential citizens—successful entrepreneurs (e.g. Bill Gates, Steve Jobs), successful militants (bin Laden), or successful social activists? If IR theory has trouble explaining individuals, what analytic remedies are available to IR scholars?

Section II: International Security

1. Modern militaries are complex organizations, and scholars have used organization theories of various kinds to understand their behavior. Discuss two organizational approaches to the study of militaries in security studies and review some of the prominent findings of these approaches. In your view, is one school of organizational theorizing about militaries more persuasive than the other? If so, why? If not, why not? Is there anything about militaries as organizations that makes either of the theories you analyze particularly applicable?
2. Since at least Kant’s *Perpetual Peace*, scholars of international relations have argued that differences in the domestic makeup of democracies and non-democracies cause them to behave differently in their external affairs. How tenable does this distinction remain today? Explain two or three challenges to the democracy-autocracy distinction in security studies—arguments that cut across the divide or that stress variation within these categories rather than across them. In light of these arguments, would you say that the distinction between democracies and non-democracies continues to be highly salient for explaining their behavior? Why or why not?

3. Assess the validity of the following statement: *The rise of China and the resurgence of Russia heralds the return of great power politics to international relations and will represent the greatest security challenge for the United States for the foreseeable future.* Do you agree or disagree? If you agree, what form is conflict among the great powers likely to take? Will it be traditional militarized conflict or something else? How dangerous will it be? If you disagree, what other security challenges are likely to take precedence, what will they look like, and how dangerous will they be?
4. Despite being associated with concepts like anarchy, conflict, and competition for power, structural realism as articulated by scholars like Waltz, Jervis, Glaser, and Mearsheimer is not a theory of war. Are there theories of the causes of war that are consistent with structural realist premises? If so, what are they? Which, if any, is most persuasive and why? If they are not persuasive, why not?

Section III: International Political Economy

1. “Both monetary policy, which is the Federal Reserve’s job, and fiscal policy, the job of the federal government, have complementary roles to play in supporting the economy. As many as thirty million households didn’t have enough food in the last week. Only the Fed has acted forcefully.”
 - Janet Yellen, former Federal Reserve Chair and U.S. Treasury Secretary nominee, August 24, 2020.

What mainstream ideological approach to governing the economy does Yellen’s quote embody? What is the alternative macroeconomic governance approach? According to these two perspectives, what is the government’s role in helping offset the economic shock from the outbreak of COVID-19? More generally, what structural, institutional, material, and ideational factors help explain why governments choose different macroeconomic approaches to governing the economy?

2. Despite the protectionist rhetoric of key political leaders and media outlets, trade barriers in the United States remain historically low. What domestic factors (i.e. ideas, institutions, and actors) explain this outcome? In other words, who favors free trade and why is this preference reflected in trade policy, even after the renegotiation of recent trade deals, such as the United States-Mexico-Canada Trade Agreement (USMCA)?
3. There is a long-running debate regarding foreign aid effectiveness and whether it should be eliminated. Given your understanding of the causes and consequences of foreign aid, is it an effective tool? If so, under what circumstances is such aid most effective? If not, why is aid ineffective? Provide empirical examples in your answer.
4. Do international institutions play an important role in the governance of cross-border capital flows? To what extent does the 2008 financial crisis shed light on the successes and failures of international institutions in helping manage the global economy. Is there a need for greater institutional authority in global financial governance? Why or why not?