

International Relations Unit 1 Focus Questions

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Please note: Initially, this document is a draft based on what was taught last semester. Since new readings become available and new course-related events happen each term, I typically make some modest edits to the guide as the unit unfolds; any added or heavily edited items have been noted with **bold** formatting.

1. Based on class discussion, what is the point of studying “international relations”? What evidence is there to suggest that all of us are strongly impacted daily by international politics, even if we are not aware of it? How are the lives of Americans impacted by international relations? Why is the leadership of the United States so important to global politics, and what does this mean for the unique role the American people play in shaping contemporary IR?
2. Based on class materials, why do Americans not know very much about international politics? Why don’t they know more? What kind of evidence is there to suggest that college students need to know more about global politics? Does it make sense to divide the academic study of “international” and “domestic” factors when trying to explain the way states interact with one another? (Not really because domestic and international conditions affect one another, and yet political scientists have split up the academic study of international politics into IR and Comparative Politics). As a hint for studying some of the ideas in this question block: the connection between a country’s domestic politics and its actions in international affairs is a topic covered very early in class, but it also is a central theme in the discussion of “levels of analysis” reading you cover later on in the unit)
3. As the scanned chapter by Greenstein and Pevehouse (P&G) notes, one of the main challenges in international relations is that lots of problems and opportunities can only be addressed when countries work together on “collective goods problems.” What distinguishes collective goods from goods that states can individually achieve and exclude non-contributors from using? Can you explain why optimal international trade, reducing the spread and development of more nuclear weapons, and addressing global warming are all examples of collective goods issues?
4. What solutions are there to dealing with collective problems (or taking advantage of collective opportunities) and getting other states to do their part (i.e., be familiar with “dominance,” “reciprocity,” and “identity,” which are discussed at length in P&G)?
5. International relations as a discipline is deeply concerned with how “power” is used by states and international forces. What exactly is power, and what are its main sources and types? (See your textbook, especially the assigned sections in the chapter on Statecraft).
6. Based on the sections of Chapter 5 you were assigned to read, what are some of the main sources of power that countries can possess? What resources and natural advantages helped the United States become the most powerful country? Given what you know about America’s power resources, what kinds of power (drawing on the types of power identified in the questions below) is the United States most likely to rely on when it wants other countries to behave in ways they might not choose on their own?

7. What is the main difference between “hard” and “soft” power, and what are some examples of each? More recently, social scientists have discussed “sharp” power (referred to in your reading as subversion) and “sticky” power as examples of power that lies in the middle of the hard/soft extremes. How are soft and sticky power different from hard and soft power, and what are some examples of sharp power? Why is sharp power increasingly exercised by authoritarian regimes, and why is this one area of power where they have an advantage over democracies? What kind of sharp power (i.e., subversion) does the US use to influence the behavior of other countries?
8. How do these different types of power relate to by Greenstein and Pevehouse’s framework of dominance, reciprocity, and identity?
9. You were asked to watch outtakes from the video that discusses Martin Luther King’s views on the American war with Vietnam. What does King see as the main cause for this specific war and post-WW2 conflict involving the US more generally? What specific objections does he have to US involvement in the developing world and especially the use of force to get what we want? Why does he think that the US—once a strong proponent of revolution by the oppressed—frequently sides with oppressive leaders and states? Finally, why does he think that everyday citizens in the US should get involved in decisions by the government that are unjust, and what kind of a “revolution” does he want to see?
10. King’s speeches in the video are critical of both US foreign policy (at least in the 1960s). In what ways do King’s views match up with how realists, liberals, constructivists and “radical” IR scholars believe states use their power? (Hint: You will be best able to answer this question at the end of the unit after you’ve read Mingst’s Chp. 3, so come back and review King’s speech then)
11. You were asked to read a summary of a January 2026 interview that President Donald Trump gave to The New York Times. How do his views about what gives the United States its power, and how that power should be used, compare with the views of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.? According to each leader, who should benefit most from the use of American power? In answering this final question, reflect on your own views about the kinds of power the United States should rely on most to influence the world and whether that power should mainly serve some Americans (such as a president’s supporters), all Americans, Americans and their allies, or people more broadly around the world.
12. Thinking about the John Green video you were asked to review, what was the “modern revolution,” and why was it led by the West instead of, say, China? Why did the integration of the world into a single system occur when it did as opposed to happening centuries earlier or later? What major economic and social changes preceded and accompanied the development of the modern, state-centric international system? Why does Green think that social, economic, and political evolution will likely continue at a very quick pace (i.e., there will be exponential vs. linear development) for at least a while longer?
13. What are the defining qualities of the present-day international state system that sets it apart from other ways we might organize global politics? When, how, and why did “sovereign” “states” come to play such a central role in global politics? When and why did “states” effectively displace other forms of social organization to become the most important actors in international politics? Why are secular, rather than religious figures, the most important figures in modern national and international politics (think about

what “sovereignty” means and entails)? Why is there no central government or leader in charge of global politics, the way there is within individual countries? When and why did “national” identity and “self-determination” become so important to IR? Why has the international system become and stayed largely “westernized” for five centuries?

14. What major elements of the present-day intl. system only arrived in the 20th century? Specifically, why do so many nations now think that they are entitled to their own, separate state? Why did highly complex international regimes—like the UN and global arms agreements—emerge only in recent decades? Why are we seeing so many small, weak states now, when for centuries, the intl. system mostly saw the consolidation of territories into ever-larger states? Why does the intl. system increasingly worry about small states being attacked by larger ones and about state leaders who abuse human rights within their own state?
15. In very general terms (i.e., as described in the latter parts of the scanned Shimko text chapter) did the international system go from being a multipolar, bipolar, and finally unipolar system in the 20th century? How likely is it that international politics throughout the 21st century will be structured by a unipolar system of sovereign states in which the US remains the dominant global power? (You don’t need to think too hard about this last question as it is a topic we will tackle later in the course).
16. How can the different “levels of analysis” help us to predict and comprehend international behavior? Why is it useful to look carefully at individual leaders, state characteristics, and the international system as a whole when trying to predict and explain relations among countries? (See the chapter in your Mingst textbook, for examples). Think about how these levels can help us think about today’s US-China relations. You don’t need to be able to explain the interaction between the US and China in any detail, but rather you want to consider how different levels of analysis work together to help us to explain why countries act the way they do in international affairs.
17. What factors and traits—i.e., attributes and mixes of characteristics that vary from person to person—are most important in predicting how a country’s leader will act in a given situation? And, why are behaviors of some states much more reflective of the personalities and decision-making styles of their top leaders? As an example, consider how much the foreign policy decisions of the US, China, and Russia will directly reflect the attitudes of their most powerful leader. Be able to explain and give examples of how personality traits, decision-making styles, and reasons for seeking to lead shape how political leaders guide their country’s international behavior. In general terms, describe how inclinations toward “paranoia,” “narcissism,” and “obsessive-compulsive” information gathering can impact leaders’ decision-making?
18. What are some of the common decision-making errors (i.e. “misperceptions and selective perceptions” that all leaders and citizens make to some degree (some of this is discussed in Mingst chapter on individual factors, but also in class and part of a textbook chapter from Pevehouse and Greenstein) that leaders (and pretty much all of us) make? Why is it so hard for even the best leader to be completely “rational” when making decisions? What process would leaders need to use if they wanted to make fully rational decisions about important choices for their country? Do you use that process when making important decision about your life?
19. What are some the most common individual-level factors—e.g., susceptibility to “groupthink,” “wishful thinking,” and sunken costs—that can cause leaders to act irrationally? What biases in “perception” appear to be universal when it comes to how people and leaders view other societies?

Be familiar with these issues: “information screens” (i.e., looking for and seeing only certain types of evidence as relevant), “affective bias,” and faulty “historical analogies.”

20. On what aspects of international relations does “state-level” analysis focus? What are the three major types of regimes we talked about in class (e.g., types of government; see class notes and the Mingst chapter on “Levels of Analysis), and how differently do these types of governments behave from one another when it comes to their relations with other countries? How do the structure of a state’s economy, government, and bureaucracy impact how much the flaws of its leaders drive its interactions with other states?
21. How and why do different types of democratic political systems induce varying kinds of international behavior (think about how their leaders are selected and by whom, whether they are protected by term limits, and how much power they have to act by themselves)? How do most parliamentary democracies differ from America’s democracy in terms of how much unchecked decision power is given to their most powerful leader?
22. What is a “theory,” and what are the three major perspectives that scholars most frequently use to explain international relations? (For a definition of theory, your textbook or Mingst are good sources, but Kaplan’s article in the Atlantic on John Mearsheimer has an excellent one). How good are the major theories at explaining what countries actually do? What are the limitations using these macro (e.g., really big-picture) theories to predict what a country or international system will do? Why is it ok if one theory doesn’t explain everything and why do social scientists oftentimes use give theories to predict why people and organizations do what they do (in class, I may give examples from economics and the prediction of consumer behavior).
23. This class looks at three of the major theories that international relations scholars use to predict international behavior (realism and liberalism being the most influential, but also constructivism). Be able to describe the main assumptions of each. What type of power is emphasized by each, and what factors does each believe to best predict political behavior over the long run? When and why do states cooperate with one another?
24. What are the main assumptions of “realism”? Why do realists think states act rationally and as unitary actors? Why will conflict and aggressive states always be with us? Why do all states seek to extend their power? Why do realists assume that all states will act immorally if doing so serves their interests best (are there examples of this in US past behavior or our present-day ally choices)?
25. Realist scholars studying the “international system” level of international behavior), frequently describe countries’ behaviors as “rational” responses to “anarchy” self-help,” and “sovereignty” in the international system. The system’s distribution of power changes over time because of “security dilemma,” “balances of power,” and the number of “hegemons” present (i.e., the system’s degree of unipolarity, bipolarity, or multipolarity). What do each of these concepts mean, and how do realists use them to understand and predict what a given country is likely to do in a given situation? If a realist looks out into the future 50 years or so, what kind of world do they see?