

International Relations

Unit 2 Focus Questions

As a reminder, the second exam will pick up where the previous exam ended (i.e., unit exams are not comprehensive). Any changes made to this study guide after its initial posting will be indicated in **bold**.

1. 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, along with constructivism). While realism is the dominant theory in IR, alternative theories emphasize the growing extent to which states work together—especially in trade and economic development. The two main alternatives are liberalism and constructivism. What are the core assumptions of liberalism about how international politics works and how it is changing over time? Why do “liberals” (in the IR sense—not as the term is used in U.S. politics; be able to explain the difference) think that most countries want to get along if they can? Why would liberals typically support cooperation with another country even when that country stands to gain more from the relationship?
2. Why do liberals think this century is likely to be more peaceful than the last? Why do they think that states will be more likely to cooperate in the future than they are today, and what kind of international institutions do IR liberals support in order to further that cooperation? What reasons do liberals give for believing that democratic systems are less likely to be aggressive in international politics, especially toward one another? (Pay attention to Mingst’s discussion of democratic peace theory.) Why do most IR liberals support having democracies trade and interact closely with authoritarian or totalitarian countries? (See especially Mingst’s discussion of Kant and “complex interdependence.”)
3. What do liberals think about increasing the strength and reach of international organizations and how do liberal international institutions relate to one another? Joseph Nye and many other IR scholars refer to these institutions and the norms around them as the “Liberal Order.” What is the “What disagreements exist among liberals regarding the use of force to build such institutions or to promote democracy and capitalism? Formulate an answer to these questions as you read Mingst’s theory chapter sections on liberalism as well as Nye’s article, and then return to these questions at the end of the unit after we have covered the course’s content on international organizations.
4. You will need to answer this question a little later in the term, but I would like you to return to the assumptions of IR liberalism after you have had an opportunity to hear and read a realist response to liberalism. Based on a speech President Trump gave to the UN in 2025, the first year of his second term, why do many Americans, including our current leader, reject the value of international institutions and widespread international cooperation in general? Why did Joseph Nye think that the Liberal Order will survive Pres. Trump’s presidencies (note that Nye’s article is from February 2017, when Trump was starting his first term), and how well did that prediction hold up (to answer this question fully, you will need to come back to it after reading non-textbook readings on globalization and America’s withdrawal from several major international institutions).
5. What are the core assumptions of constructivism about how international politics works and how it is changing over time? What does a constructivist mean when she says (as a famous one

has) that “anarchy is what we make of it”? Review Mingst’s discussion of constructivism, especially “identities,” “discourse,” and “socialization.” If constructivists are trying to predict state behavior 50 years from now, where does they look for evidence?

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7. How do constructivists explain the fact that most states do not possess nuclear weapons, and what factors would most likely lead states to develop them? How does this differ from realist and liberal explanations? Beyond the idea that “weapons of mass destruction” are uniquely dangerous, what other major ideas have developed over time to guide state behavior (e.g., sovereignty, the right to self-determination, or human rights)?
8. Based on data presented in class, how has global production (i.e., GDP per capita) changed since the 1950s? (You do not need to know specific numbers—focus on direction and scale.) How evenly is wealth distributed globally, and how is that changing? Is there evidence that globalization is making the world vastly less equal economically? Should poor countries resist globalization on economic grounds? Should developed countries reject it because poor countries are getting richer at our expense?
9. Thomas Friedman (whom you do not actually read, but whose arguments we will go over in class) argued that “globalization has become the new international system.” What is globalization, and what are the defining features of this supposed system? Why does Friedman think the world has become permanently and irreversibly “flat,” and what does he believe this means for the traditional role of the state and military power? These ideas will be discussed in class and appear in the John Green video and, to some extent, the Dyer documentary on India.
10. Some course materials dispute Friedman’s claim that globalization represents a fundamentally new international system or that deeper integration is inevitable. How do social scientists measure globalization? Which parts of the world are the most globalized, and to what extent? How well do informed individuals’ guesses about globalization match reality?
11. Is there reason to believe (see Ferguson’s article) that globalization may be a temporary product of American power rather than a permanent feature of international relations? What might cause globalization to wither, particularly given vulnerabilities in the technological infrastructure that supports it? What evidence suggests that state sovereignty may remain highly important for generations?
12. Drawing again on Niall Ferguson, why has globalization faltered in previous historical periods, and what does Britain’s decline from great-power status teach us about the role powerful states play in sustaining or reversing globalization? Are there parallels between Britain’s experience and more recent U.S. politics?
13. What do Patel et al. mean by “convergence” in their discussion of “hyperglobalization”? How and why did hyperglobalization reduce inequalities in development between rich and poor countries? What forces drove hyperglobalization, beginning in the late 1980s and accelerating in the first decade of the 2000s? Why do the authors think hyperglobalization was the most important driver of convergence, and what do their statistics show about how much hyperglobalization reduced global poverty?

14. Continuing with the hyperglobalization article: when and why did hyperglobalization end, and what has happened to convergence since 2020? Why have Western intellectuals and economists criticized hyperglobalization, and how do the authors respond to claims that trade failed to benefit developing countries or their workers? Why did poor developing country leaders turn away from globalization after experiencing their greatest period of economic growth? Why did the rich West reverse policies that had fueled its global growth for two decades? What do the authors fear will happen if hyperglobalization's decline continues? How does this debate relate to whether globalization is permanent or dependent on specific power arrangements?
15. Realism, liberalism, and constructivism offer different explanations for when and why states cooperate. What are each theory's main assumptions about cooperation, and what kinds of international organizations are states likely to build under each perspective?
16. Why is cooperation harder in an anarchical international system than within states? What is a "collective good"? What are the "tragedy of the commons" and the "prisoner's dilemma"? What do these concepts tell us about the logic of collaboration? Why do social scientists believe that fully rational actors often make choices that leave everyone worse off? How safe is it to assume that people or organizations will always cooperate when it is in their shared interest?
17. Why is collective action so difficult even when cooperation benefits all states? What variables best predict cooperation (e.g., certainty of outcomes, the ability to exclude non-contributors, the number and identity of states required to cooperate)?
18. What is an international "regime," and what are the main types of regimes? Under what conditions are regimes most likely to form, and when do they fail to emerge despite serious global consequences?
19. What roles do the most formal regimes—international governmental organizations (IGOs)—play? Why are there more IGOs today than in the past? What are the major financial (WTO, IMF, World Bank) and security (UN, Security Council, NATO) IGOs, and what are their primary functions?
20. How prevalent and lethal is warfare today compared to previous decades? How has war—especially the targeting of civilians and the use of weapons of mass destruction—changed over the 20th century and through recent agreements?
21. Why do some scholars (especially liberals and constructivists) believe this century will be less violent than recent ones? Is there evidence that a coherent network of international regimes has emerged that could reduce conflict in the future?
22. Drawing on class materials and the Economist reading ("The Future of War"), why do some experts believe war may become more likely? To what extent does major war follow predictable cycles, and where might we be in that cycle?
23. Considering current global conditions—especially the stability of U.S. dominance—and the Vox reading on war, why do some scholars believe conflict between the U.S. and China or Russia is more likely today than in the past? Why is military AI seen as a potential driver of future conflict?

24. Based on the CFR reading on Ukraine and class discussions, what were the main causes of Russia's invasion? What political and economic role did Ukraine play in the USSR, and why does Russia see parts of Ukraine as legitimately Russian? What role, if any, did Western actions play in Russia's decision to invade?
25. How did the structure of Russian politics and economics, Vladimir Putin's personal characteristics, and his assumptions about Western unity shape the invasion? Why has Russia struggled militarily, and why would long-term occupation likely be unsustainable even if Russia achieved regime change in Kyiv?
26. What is the primary purpose of the United Nations, and how successful has it been in advancing the principles of its Charter? Where do the Charter's goals conflict, and how does the UN balance human rights with state sovereignty in practice?
27. Based on The Peacekeepers, what were the UN's strengths and limitations in the Congo? How autonomous is the UN in peacekeeping missions? Whose permission does it need to act, and where do funding and troops come from? How fair is it to criticize the UN for failing to do more?
28. What tools does the UN have to enhance international security? Under what conditions does it authorize force? How are peacekeeping missions used, and what roles do development and sanctions play?
29. How effective has the UN been at limiting conflict? Where have U.S. and UN priorities diverged? How do assigned readings respond to U.S. criticisms regarding UN costs and the General Assembly's role?
30. What are the major proposals to reform the UN? Why is the Security Council so heavily criticized, and how likely is reform? What are the advantages and disadvantages of permanent veto power, and how does the U.S. role on the Council affect its foreign policy?