

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Unit 3 Focus Questions (last update 3/20/2026)

The third unit test, which is part of your final examination, will pick up where the last exam left off (i.e., the unit exams are not comprehensive). **Any changes made to this guide after the initial version was posted have been marked with bolded type.**

- How prevalent and lethal is present-day warfare when compared to previous decades? How has war (especially the targeting of non-combatants and the use of weapons of mass destruction) changed during the 20th century and through recent international agreements?
- When IR scholars look at the causes of war, what individual-, state-, and international-level factors do they identify as being the most important to predicting where war will break out? What makes individuals and leaders more likely to embrace conflict? What about nations? What about changes in the balance of power, weakening hegemony, and security dilemmas in the international system?
- Why do some scholars (IR liberals and constructivists believe that this century will be less violent than recent ones? Is there any evidence to suggest that a coherent network of intl. regimes has emerged that will reduce the frequency and scope of conflict during the next century? What evidence do realists point to that suggests that perhaps most recent turn of the century is best understood as lull—and an anticipated one at that—in international conflict rather than an end to it. How does data on where and when conflict is occurring, and who is fighting, help us to think about the causes of war and its prevention?
- Thinking about the issues and evidence highlighted in class slides and your reading from the Economist (the Future of War), why do some scholars and experts think that war may be more likely in the future than it has been for the last several decades? To what extent has the outbreak of major war in the past followed seemingly predictable cycles, and where are we in that cycle?
- Thinking about where the international system is today (specifically, how stable US dominance is likely to remain over time) and the Vox reading on the current state of war, why do some scholars think that a war between the US and either China or Russia is more likely today than it was a decade or two ago?
- Why do many experts see technological innovation in weapons—especially military applications of artificial intelligence—as a development that could lead to more conflict in future years? Your best assigned source for thinking about the answer to this question is the Economist reading (and there was an optional short video that covers many of the same ideas). What do changing norms and the actions of hegemony in fighting them (i.e., violating international law, taking territory, and killing large numbers of civilians) say about liberal and constructivist hopes that war would soon be something of the past?
- What is the main purpose of the United Nations, and to what extent has the UN been successful in advancing its core principles?
- What resources and options does the UN have at its command to protect and enhance international security? Under what conditions will the UN “authorize” the use of force against sovereign countries? When, how, and to what effect does the UN use its peacekeeping missions? What role do development and sanctions play in the UN’s attempts to make the world more peaceful?
- How successful has the UN been in limiting conflict? Where have the UN and the US differed in recent years with respect to the priorities and purpose of the UN? Critics in the US complain that America’s UN dues are expensive and counter to our interests since the UN’s “General Assembly” frequently is used as a forum to critique US foreign policy. Based on your assigned readings, what are the counterarguments to these complaints?

- What are the major proposals to reform the UN? Why is the present set-up of the “Security Council” so widely criticized, and how likely is it that its structure will be changed? Is there any upside to allowing a handful of countries to have permanent vetoes? What role does the US play on the UN “Security Council,” and how does this institution enhance or detract from US foreign policy initiatives?
- There are different approaches that countries take when they think about how to interact economically with other countries and international institutions. What are the core assumptions of (1) economic liberalism, (2) economic nationalism (historically, this has been called mercantilism), and (3) economic radicalism? Which of these approaches boosted globalization and guided the actions of international institutions most in the latter half of the 20th century and into this one (especially in the form of the “Washington Consensus”? Which view best fits the “America first,” approach to trade and international institutions that in the recent decade has gained much more support among politicians on the far left and right, both in the US and Western Europe? (See your textbook chapter on “the international political economy.”
- Why did the US view the creation of intl. economic organizations with a global reach as being necessary for international security after World War 2 when they didn’t do so after WW1? Initially, how successful were the major financial organizations in promoting development outside of Western Europe and the industrialized North?
- What are the main missions of the World Bank, and why was it formed? How is its work different than that of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) or the World Trade Exam (WTO)? What is its track record and who decides who the bank will lend to?
- For what purpose was the IMF originally established? What are its main responsibilities today? How important of a role has the IMF played in averting major international economic crises? Reviewing your textbook, how did the IMF respond to the Great Recession, which was a world-wide economic setback? What strategies did it employ to combat the crisis and how effective were they?
- Of all of the major international financial organizations, why is the IMF the most frequently and harshly bashed? What conditions has the IMF typically imposed on developing countries seeking emergency funding to avert a complete economic meltdown? What is the track-record for “conditionality” in saving developing country economies?
- Why do most social scientists think countries should trade more than they do? How and why do countries “protect” their economies from international competition? What are the main arguments for and against “free trade” (carefully review the last sections on “comparative advantage” in your textbook)? What effect—if anything has widespread trade had for development in poor countries?
- What is the main purpose of the WTO? Why does the world need an international organization to coordinate trade? How are the decision-making processes and the political structures (specifically, think about how “rounds” of trade agreements take place) of the WTO different from those of the IMF or the World Bank?
- Most people living in the advanced industrial democracies have little idea about how life has changed for developing countries over the last several decades. Thinking about the specific measures of development compiled by Gapfinder and Hans Rolsing (see the interactive chart), what evidence is there to suggest that the world is making huge strides in economic global development? What evidence is there that these gains are either zero-sum (some countries win; others lose) or positive-sum (everyone is winning) in nature? These are the same topics on which Steven Radlet writes, too.
- Focusing on the arguments advanced in your textbook, what are the main strategies available to poor countries leave persistent poverty? Is there any evidence that specific approaches work better than others? What are some of the complaints leveled against economic liberalism (i.e., free trade and western-style development) and the globalization of trade, production, and consumption?

- Reading through the Wikipedia summary, how long have analysts been writing about the decline of the US and what variables are typically highlighted by these analysts? What is an “empire”? Why might the US better labeled a global “hegemon” rather than an empire? Is there any evidence that the consolidation of American hegemony in various areas since World War 2—most prominently in military affairs—has led us to prevent or assist other countries in advancing socially or economically?
- What is American internationalism (see Ikenberry), and how does American hegemony differ from the typical empire? What evidence is there that the American-led “liberal international order” (this idea is in lots of articles, most prominently John Ikenberry’s article work) has benefited the globe as a whole, including even countries that reject the type of free-market capitalism and political liberty emphasized by western democracies?
- Reading the analyses of China and on the possibility of a “multipolar” distribution of power, what mistakes do US analysts make when they read too much into the rapid economic growth of developing countries as evidence that the US will soon fade from global dominance? Why does Beckley see the US “a ‘system-maker and privilege-taker,’” that not only pays “a large share of system-maintenance costs” for the current international system, but also takes a “disproportionate share of the benefits” (48). Looking again at per-capita income, global GDP shares, and military expenditures (see class PPTs, too), what evidence is there to suggest that the US is successfully reproducing its dominance in global affairs over time rather than diminishing in power?
- What, if anything, distinguishes American hegemony from the empires of the past? (Compare what Niall Ferguson writes about empires and the US to what Brooks and Wohlforth say about the US in their views of the rise of China or other potential adversaries)? What aspects of American spending and patterns military involvement have led some nations to see the US as mostly a self-serving hegemon?
- Niall Ferguson argues that empires typically go through a predictable sequence as their power grows, stabilizes, and then fades rapidly (i.e., hits a “tipping point”). Where does he see the US as sitting in this cycle? Why does the power of hegemon often diminish much faster than most observers expected? What specific threats does Ferguson see, if any, that could lead American power to decline very rapidly?
- What evidence, if any, is there that America’s power and role in international leadership are in decline as many politicians on the right and left now suggest? Thinking about the three forms of power discussed throughout the course—sticky (economic), soft (cultural and diplomatic power , plus norms), and hard (military might and coercion)—in which of these areas does the US appear to be most trouble and why?
- What specific (five of them) threats to continued American hegemony are identified by Michael Mazarr in his article “The Risks of Ignoring Strategic Insolvency?” This article is over a decade old, and your instructor could find more recent examples of similar arguments, this selection is meant to remind everyone that many of the largest threats to American hegemony have been long in the making and thus not solely attributable to one figure or another in American politics.
- Mazarr argues that like many regional and global powers before it, the US will face several consequences if we don’t take steps now to adapt to our changing role in global politics. What are these consequences? What moves, at least according to this Mazarr, can the US make now to ensure that it continues to enjoy both legitimacy and a strong voice in global affairs going forward even if we one day are no longer the predominant global power? (Mazarr’s suggestions are quite similar to what John Ikenberry recommends later in the unit).
- Are the economic threats to long-term American power mainly the product of globalization and other countries expanding more rapidly than the US? To what extent are the economic threats to American hegemony of our own making? Reviewing Ferguson’s 2005 Wall Street Journal article, what is the current

national debt and deficit of the US, what are their main sources, and how normal is the current pattern of federal taxing and spending when compared the decades during which the US consolidated power as a global hegemon (i.e., in the decades right after WW2)?

- Why is Nye so concerned about developments in the second Trump administration as they relate to America's "soft" power?
- How afraid should the west be of Chinese economic competition and growth over time? What is the difference between the international standing of China's overall GDP and its per capita GDP? What distinct features of economic power do these two indicators measure? Why is Chinese economic growth likely to slow as it develops into a fully mature economy? Will population growth continue to drive its economic growth? What is the source of comparative advantage when it trades with other nations, and what limitations may the structure of China's economy and politics impose on its ability to expand its productivity and creativity over time? What price will China pay over the long term if it continues to protect its markets and goods from external competition?
- To what extent is the recent rise of China a true departure from its historical role in East Asia? Thinking about its history, does China have a longstanding tradition of aggression toward the west or its neighbors? Has China historically sought to dominate trade and economic relations beyond its sphere of influence? Why is China, at a minimum, seeking to maximize its independence from the west and influence in regional politics? What specific military steps has China taken (i.e., what weapons systems and priorities is it focusing on?) to increase its regional autonomy. According to Jennifer Lind, what would Chinese regional hegemony look like if China were able to dominate its area of the world in a way similar to what the US established in the Americas in the 20th century?
- Considering the history of Chinese relations with the world over the last 150 years, what role might China be expected to seek in global affairs as it grows stronger? Why does John Ikenberry believe that the liberal international order that emerged under British and then American leadership in the 20th century almost certainly will survive in major part even if China becomes the dominant global hegemon (you read his article in the block of materials arguing that American power will endure)? Why does he think that the present-day international system will be harder to overthrow than previous international systems? What will China and other non-Western powers demand should they gain more power in the coming decades?
- Many scholars, especially realists, are concerned that the rise of China will lead to a major war between the US and China. Why? Why does Graham Allison think that the rivalry between the US and China will be especially dangerous because of the deep cultural differences between the two countries? What makes these two nations so different (at least in Allison's view) in the way they see the world? In what key ways do the tactics and goals of Chinese foreign policy as well as its treatment of weaker countries differ from what the US does? What specifically to Michael Beckley and Hal Brands fear might "Drive China to War?"

I expect that we will not cover WMDs due to time constraints, but if we do, these are the focus questions:

- How do weapons of mass destruction (including chemical and biological weapons, in addition to nuclear devices) differ—if at all—from other types of weapons? When and why did the word categorization of weapons as WMDs emerge? How are WMDs—in particular nuclear weapon blast loads and the ability to make and deliver various types of WMDs—different today than when the world first started to regulate them?
- Beyond the desire to protect themselves from attack, why do some states want to build nuclear weapons (see Scott Sagan)? Which countries currently possess these types of weapons, and what do their present-

day arsenals look like? How are these weapons delivered, and what is the difference between a deployed and stockpiled weapons?

- The vast majority countries do not have nuclear weapons even though scores of nations have the technology to make them. Why don't most nations have these weapons? Why are there varying rules for different countries when it comes to possessing WMDs? Who makes those rules, and who enforces them? What is the Non-Proliferation Treaty, and what are its major provisions?
- How much and in which ways are the nuclear powers expanding their arsenals and delivery systems? Why are they doing this despite the fact that doing so clearly violates provisions of the treaty? Why isn't the UN's Security Council addressing these violations? To what extent is the US honoring its obligations under the NPT, and what is President Trump's view of treaties that aim to reduce nuclear stockpiles (see Hennigan's article).
- What did political scientists find when they recently asked a large, nationally representative sample of Americans whether, in retrospect, the US should have dropped atomic bombs on multiple Japanese cities with no advance warning? What did "survey experiments" show when various samples of Americans were asked about the use of nuclear weapons or conventional bombs to destroy an Iranian city in a hypothetical war that might otherwise involve US ground troops and significant military casualties? What does this study suggest about norms involving nuclear weapons and international laws regarding the targeting of civilians in combat?