

Ph.D. Comprehensive Examination in International Relations

Spring 2016

Morning Exam

Answer *one* of the following questions.

1. From your perspective, what does “good” international relations research look like? What defines best practices in terms of creating theories of international relations and connecting theories to empirical tests?

- Is there a theory or paradigm in IR that is more useful than others for explaining international political phenomena?
- Is there a best approach for linking theoretical concepts and explanations to empirical operationalizations and tests?
- Provide detailed arguments and guidelines about best practices. Support your argument with specific examples from the IR literature that can serve to represent good and/or bad practices.

2. Lake (2011) argues that the field of international relations should eschew a focus on grand theory (or the “isms”) and “focus instead on developing contingent, mid-level theories of specific phenomena.”

- Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Why or why not?
- If you agree, should we still teach our students about grand theory? Why or why not?
- If you disagree, explain what you see as the proper roles of grand and mid-level theories in international relations scholarship. Should all mid-level theories be derived from grand theory? Do grand and mid-level theories serve useful, but separate, purposes?

References

Lake, David A. 2011. “Why “isms” Are Evil: Theory, Epistemology, and Academic Sects as Impediments to Understanding and Progress.” *International Studies Quarterly* 55(2):465–480.

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Afternoon Exam

Answer *two* of the following questions.

1. There is a consensus among IR scholars that domestic politics play a key role in inter-state conflict behavior. In many cases the theoretical link between domestic politics and conflict behavior rests on an argument that democratic institutions have important effects and/or constraints on leaders during international crises. What theoretical reasons and empirical evidence do we have to suggest that democracies and non-democracies behave differently in their interactions with other states? Besides the democratic/non-democratic distinction, what other features of domestic politics might affect the way states interact with each other in foreign policy disputes? Cite relevant research where appropriate.
2. The bargaining model of war dominates the contemporary literature on international conflict. Discuss the advantages and limitations of this analytical framework. Does the model uniquely contribute to our understanding of international conflict (i.e., does it provide any insights that previous explanations for war could not)? Is the bargaining model able to provide a fully comprehensive account for international war? Are there aspects of conflict that it fails to explain? What, if anything, is the model missing? Could it be usefully modified to provide a more complete or realistic account of international conflict? If so, how?
3. At times, it seems as though we know very little about international conflict management – that is, it appears that the field is fragmented and that little knowledge has accumulated. Is this true? Use examples to highlight your position. If the statement is true, how might the field move forward? If the statement is not true, how might the field work to eradicate the perception of its failures?
4. What evidence is there to suggest that international institutions have an independent effect on government behavior? What are the difficulties in identifying the effects of international institutions on state behavior? Discuss how these difficulties can be addressed and cite relevant studies. On balance, does the evidence weigh in favor of or against claims that institutions are important determinants of behavior in IR? Cite relevant studies for at least two policy areas (e.g., security, trade, finance, environmental policy, human rights, humanitarian law, etc.).
5. Assume that explicit assumptions about human decision making are necessary to construct coherent explanations of state behavior. Evaluate rational and cognitive assumptions in terms of their capacity to provide a foundation for building international relations theory and/or for conducting foreign policy analysis.
6. How do individual grievances grow into large-scale, violent, internal conflicts (civil wars)? In your answer discuss the strategic and tactical considerations of the aggrieved in organizing resistance (problems of collective action, etc.), as well as the response of the state to grievances.