

Ph.D. Comprehensive Examination in International Relations  
Fall 2014  
Morning Session Study Guide

1. IR scholars have traditionally justified separating international and domestic politics by asserting that international politics take place in an anarchic setting, while domestic politics take place in a hierarchical or ordered setting.
  - a. Are there good reasons to doubt either part of this assertion? That is, is there reason to doubt that international politics are clearly anarchic, or that domestic politics are clearly not?
  - b. Should the two fields be treated completely separate? Can insights from one inform the other? Why or why not?
  
2. David 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.”
  - a. Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Why or why not?
  - b. If you agree, should we still teach our students about grand theory? Why or why not?
  - c. 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?
  
3. Explain your theoretical perspective on international relations. That is, how do you believe international relations work?
  - a. Describe your perspective in detail.
  - b. Demonstrate how that perspective could be applied to answer some research question in international relations.
  - c. Your perspective:
    - i. Can rest on all or part of existing theories or perspectives (for example, realism, neoliberal institutionalism, constructivism, rationalism, etc.). If you take this approach, justify what you include/exclude and be mindful of potential criticisms of your position.
    - ii. May blend existing theories in unique ways. Again, justify your position if you do this.
  
4. Many IR theories rely explicitly on the assumption of rationality, which some have criticized as unrealistic.
  - a. Is there value in the rational actor assumption? Why or why not?
  - b. If you believe there is value in assuming rationality, what are the limits of that assumption? When should the assumption of rationality be relaxed?
  - c. If you do not believe there is value in the rational actor assumption, how would you alter existing theories that rely on it? How would you alter the approach to politics currently embraced by those that assume rationality?
  - d. Please use specific examples throughout your answer.

5. From your perspective, what does “good” international relations research look like? What defines the “best practice” in terms of linking theories of international relations to empirical tests of those theories? Likewise, what is the ideal approach for linking theoretical concepts to their empirical operationalizations?
  - a. Provide detailed arguments and guidelines about best practices.
  - b. Support your argument with specific examples from the IR literature that can serve to represent good and/or bad practices. Feel free to utilize as an illustrative example a theory or concept that interests you.