

**Columbia University Department of Political Science  
Written Qualifying Examination in International Relations  
January 2026**

**Instructions**

This examination consists of four sections: World Politics A (WPA) consists of general international relations questions; World Politics B (WPB) consists of somewhat narrower or more specific questions; the last two sections consist of questions on international security (IS) and international political economy (IPE).

Majors in IR must write three essays: one from WPA, one from either the IS or IPE section, and one from any other section (that is, you may not write more than one essay in any one section).

Minors in IR must write two essays: one from WPA, and one from any other section. You are advised to demonstrate breadth as well as depth of knowledge in your set of essays. You should therefore avoid writing essays with answers that overlap substantially with respect to either theoretical arguments or substantive examples.

**World Politics A** (*All IR majors and all IR minors must write one essay from this section.*)

1a. Under what circumstances does a “sphere of influence” increase or decrease the security of a major state in the international system? Take into account economic, military, and any other dimensions of power that you consider relevant. Define key terms.

2a. Our understanding of IR has tended to minimize the importance of particular individuals, focusing instead on characteristics of the international system, or of the national/domestic politics of states, or on other actors. Can developments in IR in the Trump era be explained without reference to individual leaders? Why or why not?

**World Politics B**

1b. Ten years after the historic Paris Agreement was reached, climate scholars and activists debate whether it has made any difference. On the one hand, emissions have continued to climb, and the world remains dangerously far off track to meet the goal set out in Article 2.1a: “holding the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2 °C above pre-industrial levels and pursuing efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5 °C.” On the other hand, emissions have fallen relative to projections for their growth at the time. Has the agreement, and the UNFCCC system made a difference? How would we know empirically? What do theories of international cooperation in general,

and work on the economic and political drivers of states' emissions, tell us about this question?

2b. When is norms entrepreneurship likely to produce a successful norms cascade and when is it likely to produce norms contestation and backlash? What are the implications of your argument for activists' choice of strategies and tactics for advocacy?

3b. Civil wars are increasingly shaped by global geopolitical rivalries, with external powers supporting opposing factions and transforming intrastate conflicts into proxy theaters of competition. How should we understand civil wars in the context of intensifying great power competition among the United States, China, and Russia? In your answer, draw on both the civil war literature and international relations theory to assess how proxy dynamics influence conflict duration, intensity, settlement, and re-escalation risks. Discuss the implications of these trends for international stability, referencing relevant empirical cases.

4b. The Trump administration has reduced U.S. cooperation in many international institutions. What does the literature tell us about the purpose of these institutions? What, therefore, is the likely impact of the U.S.'s reduced participation for both the U.S. and global cooperation?

## **International Security**

1is. What is the offense-defense military balance? Referring to any two or three contemporary armed conflicts or potential armed conflicts, discuss whether and how this concept is useful in assessing the likelihood, intensity, outcome, or strategies for these conflict situations.

2is. Recent research has reopened the debate over whether military or civilian leaders are more likely to initiate wars. Evaluate this research and assess how it informs our understanding of the causes of war and peace.

## **IPE**

1ipe. Economic warfare is a common feature of modern-day international economic policymaking. Using the IPE sanctions literature, discuss the conditions under which you expect such tactics to achieve their stated goals, as well as potential unintended consequences.

2ipe. Discuss the balance of power between multinational firms and their host states. Do firms ever have the upper hand? If so, when? If not, why not?