

**Columbia University Department of Political Science
Written Qualifying Examination in International Relations
August 2025**

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. The main “grand” theories of IR emerged at a time that is very different from our own. To what extent are they still relevant and to what extent do they need updating? What specific aspects of IR theory/ies endure, and what aspects need revision, and why?

2a. Evaluate the following statement: "Partisan polarization upends what we know about democracies and war." Discuss with reference to the democratic peace and the audience costs literature, among other possibilities.

World Politics B

1b. How should we interpret the strategic intentions underlying Trump-era foreign policy? Is it best understood as narrow, transactional, and ad hoc, focused on bilateral deals and short-term gains, or as part of a broader effort to dismantle the liberal international order and replace it with a system of great power spheres of influence? In your answer, evaluate competing interpretations of Trump’s foreign policy within international relations theory and discuss how a second Trump administration might reshape global politics beyond flashpoints like Ukraine, Gaza, and trade tariffs.

2b. While current projections suggest global warming will avoid the worst-case scenarios of more than 5°C by 2100 initially projected under “business as usual,” it is also increasingly clear that the targets of keeping warming under 1.5-2°C established in the Paris Agreement will not be met. From an IR perspective, how can we understand both the partial progress made in curbing emissions, and the failure to cut cur emissions quickly enough to avoid dire change to the climate?

3b. It is often remarked that multilateralism is in decline in international politics; this can be seen in military alliances, intergovernmental organizations, trade agreements, and elsewhere. What does IR research tell us about who wins, and who loses, from the decline of multilateralism? You are free to discuss both states and nonstate actors in your answer.

4b. The U.S. has dramatically curtailed foreign aid. What does the foreign aid literature tell us about the likely results of this policy for outcomes like political stability, democracy, and economic development? Please discuss theoretical mechanisms in your answer.

5b. In the post-1945 era, great powers used force not for territorial or colonial conquest but for hegemonic influence over nominally sovereign states. But in recent years, powerful nations have sought territorial expansion (e.g., Russia attempting to conquer Ukrainian territory, the Trump administration announcing territorial designs on Greenland and Canada, and China seeking direct territorial incorporation of Hong Kong and Taiwan). Can theories of colonialism explain this development? Or do other theories that predict either change or continuity in international relations provide better explanations?

6b. Under what conditions have liberal international institutions and regimes produced self-undermining rather than self-sustaining effects? What role have global information flows and communication technologies played in shaping these dynamics?

International Security

1is. New forms of security threats, including cyber warfare, AI-enabled conflict, and transnational criminal violence, increasingly blur the line between war and peace, state and non-state actors, and domestic and international arenas. Do existing theories of international security adequately explain these emerging threats or what new conceptual tools or paradigms are needed?

2is. Some scholars credit nuclear weapons for maintaining a "long peace" during the Cold War. Do you agree with this assessment? If not, what factor do you credit instead? In the conclusion of your answer, discuss the implications of your argument for the current international environment.

IPE

1ipe. International cooperation is difficult. Yet countries in the OECD, and more recently almost all countries, have sustained international trading, monetary, and financial orders for about 80 years since World War Two. What has made this possible? Are these orders under threat now? Why or why not? How might we explain threats to the post-war international economic order?

2ipe. Across countries and industries, scholars have documented a steep upward trend in corporate concentration over the last few decades; industries are increasingly dominated by large, productive, "superstar" firms. Discuss the implications of this trend for international politics.