

STUDENT GUIDE

SECOND EDITION

With
exam-style
questions
and model
answers

PEARSON EDEXCEL A-LEVEL

Politics

Global politics

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Content Guidance

■ Theories of global politics

Main ideas of realism

Realism is a political philosophy that attempts to explain how global politics can best be understood. According to classical realism, human beings — and consequently nation states — are motivated by a desire for power and security. Niccolò Machiavelli in *The Prince* (1513) declared that humans are ‘insatiable, arrogant, crafty and shifting, and above all malignant, iniquitous, violent and savage’. The realist thinker Hans Morgenthau accepted this, pessimistically stating that ‘the social world is but a projection of human nature on to the collective plane’.

Structural or neo-realists further argue that since nation states are the principal actors in international relations and their primary motivation is self-interest, global politics is necessarily anarchic. As a result of this states compete for influence, thus creating inherent instability within the system. Morality and ideology therefore play no part in power politics. As the Victorian prime minister Lord Palmerston put it, ‘We have no eternal allies, and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow.’

States as key actors in global politics and the balance of power (state sovereignty)

The realist approach to global politics is highly practical. As the key actors in global politics, nation states do not act out of an altruistic desire to make the world a better place. Instead, they seek to establish a balance of power that works in their favour and ensures their security.

- Defensive realists, such as Kenneth Waltz, emphasise that nation states are most influenced by the need for security. Nation states therefore are ‘security maximisers’.
- Offensive realists, such as John Mearsheimer, argue that nation states are more predatory and, as power maximisers, seek influence as well as security.

Since nation states are the dominant force in global politics, they cannot appeal to any higher authority to protect their interests. As John Mearsheimer puts it, there is no ‘night watchman’. This means that in a potentially hostile world order, nation states need to achieve a balance of power that protects their interests and independence. A balance of power can thus establish a stable equilibrium that reduces the potential for conflict.

International anarchy and its implications

Since there is no superior authority to which nation states are equally accountable, a state of **international anarchy** exists. This does not mean that there is complete confusion, nor that what Thomas Hobbes referred to in *Leviathan* (1651) as a state of nature exists. What it does mean is that there is no supranational authority that

Realism According to realism, nation states play the dominant role in international politics and make decisions based on maximisation of their power and security. States thus exist in a ‘self-help environment’ and so are guided by pragmatic considerations of self-interest.

Knowledge check 1

What are the main principles of the realist approach to global politics?

International anarchy

means that there is no supranational authority that can impose rules on nation states. Since international relations are, therefore, conducted without enforceable laws, states can act according to their own interests, creating a state of international anarchy.

can enforce a global rule of law. Nation states are therefore responsible for their own interests, so they exist in a self-help environment in which their security depends upon their military power and the alliances they make. Statecraft is thus the way in which nation states achieve the best possible outcome for themselves in a hostile environment in which there are no rules.

The inevitability of war

According to realism, conflict is inherent in international relations. This is because:

- Nation states seek power, influence and security. According to Hans Morgenthau, 'the struggle for power is universal in time and space'.
- Since nation states continually seek to advance their own interests, instability and uncertainty are inherent within the global system since no state can know for certain the intentions of another state.
- States cooperate only when it is in their national interest to do so.
- There is no authority greater than the nation state that can compel obedience to a global rule of law.

The security dilemma

The way in which nation states seek to protect and advance their interests creates a **security dilemma**. This is because, by trying to achieve a favourable balance of power, a nation state will make other nation states feel vulnerable, so that they also have to increase their power in order to protect their security. The concept of the security dilemma thus challenges the theory that a balance of power maintains peace, since by trying to increase their security nation states may actually make themselves more vulnerable by encouraging a volatile and unstable struggle for power. For example, historians suggest that the outbreak of the First World War (1914–18) was due to the extent to which the European great powers concentrated on military build-ups and alliance building, creating self-defeating suspicion, fear and resentment.

Main ideas of liberalism

Liberalism rejects what it sees as the unnecessary pessimism of realism. According to liberalism, human beings and nation states are not simply motivated by the desire for power and security. Instead, nation states can work together in harmony in order to achieve a collective good. Liberals agree that the international system is anarchic. They argue, however, that nation states appreciate that by cooperating with each other they can all achieve relative gains, so that international relations are not zero-sum. Conflict is therefore not inherent within the system.

According to liberalism, states are also not the only key players in global politics. Instead they share power with intergovernmental organisations and non-governmental organisations, so that international relations are more than simply the way in which nation states react to each other. The way, too, in which the interests of nation states and non-state actors can often be the same creates a world of complex interdependence in which cooperation, rather than conflict, provides the default position for global relations. Liberals thus favour free trade because of the way in which it encourages closer understanding and cooperation between nation states. As the Liberal politician Richard Cobden put it in 1843, 'Free trade! What is it? Why, breaking down the barriers that separate nations.'

Synoptic link

The way in which President Trump dramatically increased the military spending of the United States in response to the emergence of China as a potential global competitor demonstrates a realist use of hard power in international relations (see page 53).

Security dilemma

By building up their military and diplomatic influence in order to create a balance of power in their favour, nation states provoke other nation states to build up their own military forces to protect themselves. Consequently, this actually undermines their security by leading to an arms race.

Knowledge check 2

What is the connection between realism and (core) conservative philosophy?

The significance of morality and optimism in human nature

Liberalism is based upon an optimistic view of human nature. Whereas realists work from the premise that human beings are selfish and self-serving, liberals emphasise our capacity for cooperation and mutual interdependence. Their view of human nature thus derives significantly more from John Locke than it does from Thomas Hobbes. Since human beings can work together in shared enterprises and construct societies based upon the protection of their members, so nation states can cooperate in order to achieve the common good. Moral considerations, therefore, can also motivate the behaviour of states, rather than solely pragmatic considerations of self-gain.

The possibility of harmony and balance

According to the philosopher Immanuel Kant, it is possible to achieve a harmony of interests within a nation state through representative institutions and the rule of law. 'Perpetual peace' between states can also be achieved, if:

- all states protect the rights of their citizens
- states work together to achieve a collective good
- the rights of citizens everywhere are universally respected

Liberals thus argue that it is possible to achieve harmony and balance both within nation states and in global relations if nation states obey Kant's principles. This has recently been called the democratic peace theory, whereby nation states — which base themselves on the rule of law rather than on an egotistical desire for self-gain — make the rational decision that they will benefit more through cooperation than through conflict.

Complex interdependence

Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye argue that global relations have been transformed by the ever-closer connectivity between nation states and societies. This is due to the **complex interdependence** that is established between states through economic globalisation and through shared responses to collective dilemmas such as climate change, terrorism and rogue states. Multiple channels of communication between states through transnational organisations, intergovernmental organisations and non-governmental organisations further establish the conditions for a more collective response to international relations. According to this theory, the realist approach to global politics — which emphasises the power-maximisation and security interests of one state — is rendered obsolete by the shared interests of states becoming so connected and overlapping.

Impact and growth of international organisations

Since the end of the Second World War, the impact of international organisations in determining global policy has dramatically increased. Significant non-state actors include intergovernmental organisations (IGOs), non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and transnational corporations (TNCs), all of which play an increasingly important role in international relations.

IGOs are institutions within which nation states can cooperate in order to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes. Such organisations include:

Exam tip

This section introduces a lot of precise terms, such as 'security dilemma', 'balance of power' and 'complex interdependence'. Use this sort of precise terminology in your work, because it will provide your writing with greater conviction.

Knowledge check 3

What are the main principles of the liberal approach to global politics?

Complex interdependence

A liberal concept that suggests the fortunes of nation states are inextricably connected through multiple channels, encouraging cooperation rather than conflict.

Knowledge check 4

What is the significance of collective dilemmas in global politics?

Section A questions

- You need to answer one 12-mark question from a choice of two.
- You have only 15 minutes to answer this question. You should very quickly jot down the main points you will investigate and then focus on making sure that every point you raise directly answers the question. In brief pieces of writing such as this, narrative or vague responses will be quickly exposed!
- There are up to 6 marks available for AO1 (knowledge and understanding) and 6 marks for AO2 (analysis).
- All questions in this section ask you to 'examine'.
- You will impress the examiner if you cover three or four points/paragraphs. Include contemporary evidence and relate it to the question asked. Remember, too, that precise detail will show real conviction and thus impress the examiner.
- A thematic approach provides the best way of answering these sorts of questions. For example, if the question asked you to examine why France and the UK can both be considered great powers, you could approach it according to themes. These could include significant influence in military power, structural power, soft power and economic power and examples of France and Britain fulfilling these criteria could be provided. This approach is more sophisticated than simply providing examples of the UK being a great power followed by France being a great power.
- Remember that AO3 (evaluation) is not required. Therefore, no marks would be awarded for a student who, for example, as well as explaining criticisms of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund then went on to evaluate to what extent those criticisms were justified.

Question 1

Examine the factors that limit the effectiveness of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and the International Criminal Court (ICC).

(12 marks)

Since this is an 'examine' question there is no need to include any judgement (AO3). What is required is a strong grasp of the detail (AO1) and the ability to show how this relates to answering the question (AO2). An introduction and conclusion are not necessary to achieve full marks. Weaker answers are likely to confuse the roles of the ICC and the ICJ so it is very important that you have an exact understanding of what each does!

Student A answer

The effectiveness of both the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and the International Criminal Court (ICC) is undermined because of the way in which nation states are so often unprepared to accept supranational judicial limits on their sovereignty.

For example, by 2021 only 123 nation states had fully accepted the mandate of the ICC which means that 70% of the world's population is outside the jurisdiction of the Court. The ICJ faces a similar problem. Although all 193 members of the UN are members of the ICJ, only 74 of them have agreed in advance to be bound by its rulings. Thus,

The answer begins strongly by immediately answering the question using appropriate technical language. By identifying criticisms that relate to both institutions it is clear that the student will be adopting a confidently thematic approach.

This is a tightly controlled analytical paragraph. A major problem (limited jurisdiction) is identified and its significance is thoroughly explained.

although the ICJ ruled that Israel had acted in defiance of international law by building a security wall to separate them from Palestine, Israel simply ignored the ruling. More recently, in 2020, Myanmar rejected the ICJ's ruling that it protect its Rohingya Muslims on the grounds that the ICJ had no jurisdiction within Myanmar's internal affairs.

This problem is made even worse because powerful, influential and agenda-setting nation states have failed to provide either court with their full support. The credibility and authority of the ICC has thus been greatly damaged because three members of the UN Security Council (the United States, China and Russia) refuse to accept its legitimacy. Indeed, when the ICC began to investigate possible human rights abuses in Afghanistan, the Trump administration passed sanctions against ICC employees and the US secretary of state, Mike Pompeo, aggressively stated that the United States would not be 'threatened by a kangaroo court'. Russia acted in a similar fashion and withdrew from the ICC when it called the Russian occupation of the Crimea an 'ongoing occupation'. When the ICJ ordered that the United States not sanction humanitarian assistance to Iran it ignored the ruling as irrelevant. The attitude of Russia and the United States to both courts (and the fact that China refuses to join the ICC) thus provide no incentive for less powerful states to accept their jurisdiction.

In order to be effective a court also needs to be able to enforce its judgments. This is something neither court can do, further undermining their authority. The ICC, for example, entirely relies upon member states cooperating with its authority to be upheld. For example, when Kenyan president Uhuru Kenyatta was indicted by the ICC Kenya simply refused to cooperate with the court, while even after the ICC had issued an arrest warrant for former president of Sudan, Omar al-Bashir, he was still able to travel widely in Africa and even attended a summit of the African Union.

In theory, the judgments of the ICJ can be enforced by the UN Security Council. However, growing antagonisms on the Security Council (for example between the UK and China) make it highly unlikely that sufficient consensus could be achieved for this to occur. The fact, too, that the Permanent 5 can veto action being taken against themselves further undermines potential enforcement of the ICJ's rulings. In 2019, for example, in a case brought by Mauritius the UK was ruled to have acted illegally by expelling the population of the Chagos Islands. However, because of its veto on the Security Council it can ensure that that judgement is never enforced.

This is an excellent paragraph. The examples are relevant and interesting and the brief quotations provide conviction. The reference to the courts' problems being made 'even worse' by the non-compliance of powerful states indicates very strong AO2 analysis.

The student begins this paragraph in a strikingly analytical way and immediately supports it with two appropriate examples.

12/12 marks awarded

(Level 4) The way in which the problems relating to the UN Security Council are used to answer the question works extremely well. The evidence deployed continues to be well-selected and accurate.

This response achieves full marks because the student is completely focused on answering the question. Three strong explanations are provided, each with rigorous supporting detail. No time is wasted on narrative, and the implications of the material are fully explained. The thematic approach which the student takes (lack of supranational authority, lack of support from powerful nation states, lack of enforcement ability) works well. By showing how each criticism can apply equally well to both institutions the student is confidently able to maximise their chance of achieving highly at AO2.

Student B answer

The International Court of Justice (ICJ) was established in 1945 to arbitrate cases involving nation states. It sits in The Hague and is part of the UN. It has 15 judges who make judgments.

However, when the ICJ decided against the American government over the imposition of sanctions against Iran the American government refused to cooperate with the court. The British government also ignored the ruling of the ICJ when it argued that it must return control of the Chagos islands to Mauritius. The ICJ has, however, achieved several successes which suggests that it is not that weak. For example, in 2002 the ICJ sorted out a boundary dispute between Nigeria and Cameroon.

The ICC was created in 2002 by the Rome statute. Its chief prosecutor is Karim Khan who is from the UK. It has 123 members.

The ICC is widely disliked in Africa because its critics claim that it has a neo-colonial bias. This is because, so far, all its successful prosecutions have been of Africans. The ICC also lacks an effective way of enforcing its rulings and, therefore, must rely upon the cooperation of its member states. When this is not forthcoming then it is impossible for the ICC to achieve its objectives. For example, Uhuru Kenyatta was indicted by the ICC but never faced trial because Kenya refused to hand him over to the court for trial.

However, it has had successes, too, imprisoning Congolese warlord, Thomas Lubanga as well as many others. The United States, Russia and China do not accept the jurisdiction of the court though.

In conclusion the ICJ is very weak because nation states do not want to cooperate with it. The ICC is stronger but is still quite weak because it lacks jurisdiction.

The answer begins poorly because it does not attempt to answer the question. The statements about the ICJ, although accurate, cannot be credited. When time is so limited it is vital that the student immediately answers the question.

These are two good examples of ICJ failures. However, it would have been much better if the student had explicitly demonstrated how they connect to the vital importance of state sovereignty. No credit can be given for the irrelevant references to ICJ successes.

Again, the student introduces an institution with an unhelpful narrative.

This is a much stronger paragraph. A significant problem of the ICC is identified and the student then explains why it is significant in limiting the authority of the ICC.

The references to successes are not necessary. The reference to three members of the UN Security Council not accepting the court's jurisdiction could have been really helpful. As it is, the student does not explain its significance, so this represents a lost opportunity to gain marks.

The conclusion is unnecessary and the comparison between the effectiveness of the ICC and the ICJ reinforces the impression that the student has not approached the question in the right way.

This was a frustrating response to mark because the student has clearly revised and could have achieved significantly more highly. The main problem is that a significant amount of the material is presented factually without an attempt to demonstrate how it answers the question. References to the successes of the ICC and the ICJ can also not be rewarded.

5/12 marks awarded (Level 2) A useful exercise would be to write the answer using all the same knowledge. If it was presented more analytically, with a clearer focus on the question, the student could well have achieved a significantly higher mark. AO1: 3/6, AO2: 2/6.