

# Key Learning Objectives – POE116

## Introduction to International Relations

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This is a quick overview of the top-level learning objectives for the year, to give you an idea of where the course will take you. You will have a fairly wide choice of cases and issues to examine within the common outline, so the actual course content that leads you to these learning objectives will be influenced by your choices.

### 1. Identify international relations as one of the major fields of political science, within broader disciplines of social science

This is an important objective because it helps you to situate the perspectives and knowledge to which you will be exposed, and to ask yourself what parts of the picture you might be missing.

Social sciences apply scientific method to the study of social relations. They include history, political and cultural geography, sociology, psychology, anthropology, political science, economics, business, and others. These are called “disciplines” because there is a disciplined or organized way of seeking and demonstrating knowledge about these subjects or fields.

One way of thinking about disciplines and fields is to look at universities, which mirror the way we organize and pursue knowledge. They include faculties (e.g. the Faculty of Social Science) and departments (e.g. the Department of Political Science). There may be a lot of overlap in the subjects studied within different departments, e.g. History, political science, and sociology departments may all offer courses about terrorism. However, the assumptions, sources, and methods within each department may be different, because each works within a different discipline.

Broadly speaking, major disciplines in the social sciences are (all definitions from the OED, simplified):

- History – the study of past events
- Geography – the study of physical features of earth and impact on human activity
- Political Science – the study of government and the analysis of relationships affecting power
- Sociology – the study of the development, structure and functioning of human society
- Anthropology – comparative study of human cultures and societies

- Psychology – the scientific study of human behaviour
- Economics – the study of the production, consumption, and transfer of wealth

You can see how these disciplines are inherently linked, and the same is true of the various silos or fields that have developed over time within each discipline. Any serious examination of a particular problem (e.g. failed states, economic development, trade agreements, piracy) is going to draw on knowledge from several disciplines, or it will yield a very incomplete understanding. On the other hand, you can't include everything, so most studies draw boundaries around what they attempt to describe and analyze.

Like other disciplines, political science is organized in several fields, typically (using the RMC course calendar as an example):

- Government (e.g. Canadian politics)
- Public administration and law
- Theory (e.g. ideologies, ways of understanding...)
- Comparative (both a method, and a subject of study) and
- International relations

There are lots of other possible ways of dividing fields of knowledge, and some universities specify fields of strategic studies, political geography, ethnic studies, feminist studies, critical studies, environmental studies, and war studies within a department of political science. It all depends on what scholars are working there.

If you take a PhD in War Studies at RMC, your fields are military history, defence policy, and international relations. Within international relations, some of the fields you might study include (from recent comprehensive exams):

- International relations theory – e.g. how do we understand international relations?
- International political economy – e.g. how do economics and politics interact in the international arena?
- Strategic studies and security – e.g. how do states pursue objectives in international relations?
- International organization – e.g. how do international organizations affect state behaviour?

The purpose of all this subdivision is to increase our knowledge through specialization, but it sometimes has the opposite effect, isolating useful pieces of knowledge. The antidote is to read widely.

## 2. Describe major issues in the study of international relations

You will see from the course outline that we will focus on three types of issues, which correspond roughly to the ideas of international security (relations between states in the state system), national security (the security of entities we label as states), and human

security (preservation and enhancement of individual and collective life). I have labeled these:

- issues of system formation and fracture,
- issues of state formation and fracture, and
- human impacts.

We'll look at Henry Kissinger's (2014) introduction to his book, *World Order*. If we talk about the balance of power in Europe after the Napoleonic Wars or the Cold War order, or the unilateral moment of American hegemony, we are talking about systems of state relations which form over time, and fragment sometimes with a bang and sometimes more slowly. What does the international system look like now? Does it matter that the US has spent trillions of dollars on wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya, while China has spent trillions of dollars on infrastructure for its "One Belt, One Road" project? How will this affect system formation and fracture?

We'll apply Philipp Bobbitt's (2001) explanation of the evolution of states from princely to kingly, to territorial states, state-nations and nation-states, and the emergence of "market states" in a global economic system. How important are corporations as competitors to states in a changing world system? We'll consider the union and fragmentation of states within an international system.

Finally, we'll consider the implications of shifting our focus from national and international security to human security, and we'll explore some problems involved in managing major events with human impacts. When does human security become an issue for national or international security? Buxton and Hayes (2016) *The Secure and the Dispossessed* describes planning for dystopian futures that might face you in the middle of your careers, or even sooner.

### 3. Analyze the impact of events on our understanding of relations between states

Before we get to the big issues, we'll consider different types of events in international relations. These events are probably what you have in mind when you think about international relations, because they are often in the news. In line with our understanding of disciplines, and the staff-college concept of "instruments of national power," I have grouped events in three categories:

- Violent events are of most interest to the military, and include wars and confrontations, threats, attacks, and posturing.
- Economic events may be the largest category of international interactions. They are under-reported in major media, because they aren't as exciting as violence but they probably have a bigger impact on people's lives. Think about where your coffee comes from and how much it costs!

- Diplomatic communications, both routine and urgent, make up a large part of the interaction between states and non-state actors. Understanding how to read these interactions is a vital skill for armed public servants.

What constitutes an event can be defined in different ways for different purposes. The more rigorous your intent, the more precise the “operationalization” of variables needs to be. We’ll have a brief explanation of events data and datasets, and we’ll have a chance to look at indices and tracking mechanism, like International Crisis Group, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Freedom House, and Transparency International. No event occurs in isolation, and understanding precursors, trajectory of a specific event, and downstream effects is part of the challenge of understanding events and linking them to theories for explanation.

#### 4. Evaluate the connection between events and theory development

A theory is simply a story that we tell to make sense of the world around us, particularly causes and effects. Why do wars start? Why do wars end? How do domestic political forces affect a state’s behaviour in the international community? Often our theories are only partially correct, and we have to revise them in the light of contradictory evidence. I’ll tell you the Australian aboriginal theory of birdsong and sunrise, and you’ll figure out why it doesn’t stand closer scrutiny. We’ll talk about a ladder of theory, from general theories at the highest levels, to micro theories that explain very specific phenomena under narrowly defined conditions. Early in the course we’ll distinguish between empirical and normative study, and we’ll ask what kinds of information we need about a case, event, or issue in order to place it within a theoretical construct and explore its implications for action.

#### 5. Judge theories of international relations in light of historical and contemporary events

Theories about international relations purport to explain why international events happen and what should be done about them. Some theories offer better explanations than others under a variety of different circumstances, and there is no universally accepted general theory of international relations. Words and labels are sometimes used rhetorically, like the label “realist” in opposition to the idealistic hope that war and weapons can be abolished. Judging theories, then, involves understanding their substantive claims, the evidence supporting those claims, and determining when they might be usefully implied. Each theory also has ethical or normative implications. If we believe claims about the inevitability of war and the inherent untrustworthiness of every actor pursuing self-interest, we may foreclose opportunities for collaboration. If we believe all actors will cooperate in their self-interest, we may risk attack and coercion. How do we parse these competing views of the world?

I’ll refer to the “Crayola 3” and the “Oxford 9” theories. When you were a kid in a restaurant, and they only gave you three crayons, you drew a yellow house, a black tree, and a red person, because that’s what you had to work with. Realism, Liberalism, and “other” are like those crayons – a useful start, but they might not help you describe and

explain the full range of international relations. The Oxford Handbook of International Relations (2008) includes chapters on nine bodies of IR theory, and their ethical implications, and we'll try to go a bit beyond the Shiraev text to consider the kinds of factors that we might want to explore in looking at issues and events, if we are to get beyond Liberalism and Realism as the only ways to see the world.