

POLI 211: Introduction to International Relations

Dogus Aktan

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MWF // 09:00-09:50

Contact Information

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Office Hours: Monday 10:00-11:30 // Thursday: 2:30-4:00

Course Overview and Learning Outcomes

This course introduces students to key concepts, themes, and approaches in the scientific study of global politics. We start with foundational concepts on how scholars think about international politics through the lens of strategic interaction. We then examine international conflict by looking at historical trends, its different causes and conduct. Following that, we examine how countries negotiate, cooperate, and bargain during peacetime by looking at trade, finance, and international agreements. We finish by looking at salient issues of today and possibly tomorrow, such as climate change, terrorism, and great power conflict.

This course is designed as a survey of some of the major questions and findings in International Politics, which will help students think rigorously about global politics . It will also provide solid foundation for students to prepare them for more advanced classes.

The course will also explore how political scientists try to understand complex real world phenomena by using theory and empirical evidence.

Students who apply themselves will have:

- **Substantive knowledge:** Students will be able to apply a large number of key terms in political science. They will also be familiar with many of the criteria and theories used to understand how global politics unfold.

- **Critical thinking:** Students will be able to use the concepts and theories in International Politics to explain real life political events. They will also gain proficiency in summarizing and evaluating academic writing in political science.
- **Informed Citizenship:** Students will be able to place the foreign policies of all countries in a broader a strategic context, enabling them to engage more thoughtfully with global affairs.

Course Readings

There are no required books to purchase for this course. Instead, we will read a variety of materials, including articles from academic journals, excerpts from textbooks, and pieces from the popular press. All required readings will be made available on Canvas. If you would like to have a textbook as an additional reference, I am happy to recommend a few options.

While I do not assign a large volume of reading, I expect you to complete *all assigned reading before class* and to come prepared to discuss them. As a rule of thumb, you should expect to read between 20 to 30 pages for each Monday and Wednesday session.

You are not expected to read every word of every reading with equal intensity. However, you should be able to identify the author's main goals, arguments, and evidence, and to explain how the reading connects to the broader themes of the course.

Some readings may be challenging at first glance, particularly if they include methods or terminology that are new to you. Do not be discouraged. The readings are selected so that their main arguments are accessible, even if some details are unfamiliar. When appropriate, I will provide guidance on which sections to focus on.

Class Format and Policy

Class meetings will combine lecture, discussion, and structured in-class activities designed to reinforce key concepts and develop analytical skills.

Monday and Wednesday sessions will primarily focus on lectures that introduce core theories, concepts, and empirical findings in international politics. Students are encouraged to ask questions and engage with the material during these sessions.

Friday sessions will be devoted to structured class activities, including discussions, simulations, review workshops, and applied exercises. These activities are an integral part of the course and are designed to help students work through key dynamics and concepts such as bargaining, signaling, and principal-agent problems.

Friday activities also provide opportunities to clarify expectations for written assignments, review challenging material, and practice the kinds of reasoning expected in assessments.

Assignments and Grades

Participation	: 20%
Short Reaction-Papers (2 Total)	: 20%
Response Papers (2 Total)	: 30%
Final Exam	: 30%

Participation 20%

Regular attendance is *necessary but not sufficient* for earning participation credit in this course. Participation is evaluated based on active engagement with course material across **all class meetings**—including lectures, discussions, and in-class activities.

Attendance matters because many core components of the course take place in class and cannot be replicated outside of it. However, simply being physically present does not automatically earn participation credit. Students are expected to engage actively by contributing to small-group work, participating in in-class exercises, completing short activity submissions, and being prepared to discuss assigned readings.

Students can demonstrate engagement in multiple ways, including thoughtful small-group contributions, written in-class responses, and consistent preparation. Participation is tracked through completion of structured in-class activities rather than through manual roll call.

Because engagement builds cumulatively over the semester, students who miss class regularly or who are consistently disengaged during class sessions will find it difficult to earn full participation credit, even if they attend most meetings.

Short Reaction Papers 20%, 10% each

Each student will write **two short reaction papers** (approximately 3 pages each). These papers respond to a specific prompt related to the course material and ask students to take a clear analytical position (e.g., agree, disagree, or partially agree) and justify it using concepts from readings and lectures.

Reaction papers are *not* summaries of the readings. Successful papers focus on developing an argument, identifying relevant mechanisms, and explaining how course concepts apply to the prompt. Bullet-point format is permitted, provided that each point is written in complete and clear sentences.

No outside research is required. Papers are due on the dates listed in the course schedule.

Response Papers 30%, 15% each

Each student will write **two response papers** (approximately 5 pages each). These papers ask students to apply course theories and concepts to a specific empirical case or policy question.

Response papers require students to move beyond description and to explain outcomes using analytical tools developed in class. Students are expected to draw on assigned readings and lectures from the relevant modules, but no additional outside research is required unless explicitly stated. Papers are due on the dates listed in the course schedule.

Final Exam 30%

The final exam for this course will be an **individual oral exam**. Each student will meet one-on-one with the instructor during the scheduled exam period.

The oral exam will cover the core concepts, arguments, and cases discussed throughout the course. Students will be asked to explain ideas in their own words, apply course concepts to examples, and respond to follow-up questions. The goal is to assess understanding and reasoning, not memorization.

Additional details about the format, expectations, and preparation strategies for the oral exam will be discussed in class well in advance.

Assignment Calendar

	Assigned	Due
First Reaction Paper	Friday, February 6	Friday, February 13
First Response Paper	Friday, February 20	Friday, February 27
Second Response Paper	Friday, March 27	Friday, April 3
Second Reaction Paper	Friday, April 17	Wednesday, April 24
Final Exam	Scheduled 1 on 1	

Grade and Assignment Policies

All assignments and exams must be completed on time in order to pass this course. Make ups will only be granted under extraordinary circumstances such as documented and verified medical or family emergencies. All documentation corresponding to such emergencies should be forwarded to the professor. Personal reasons are insufficient excuses for making up missed assignments, exams, or quizzes.

All written assignments include a built-in **24-hour no-questions-asked grace period**. Work submitted within 24 hours of the deadline will be accepted without penalty. After this 24-hour window, a **10% penalty** will be applied to the assignment grade. This penalty includes the grace period (i.e., submissions more than 24 hours late automatically incur the penalty).

Requests for extensions beyond the grace period must be made **in advance of the deadline**. Personal reasons or poor time management are not sufficient grounds for extensions.

All assignments must be submitted via Canvas. I do NOT accept assignments via e-mail.

Students must complete ALL mandatory assignments to be able to receive a passing grade.

This course is not graded on a curve. Each student's work is evaluated independently based on the quality of their performance. It is possible for every student in the class to earn a high grade. However, doing so will require consistent effort, preparation, and engagement throughout the semester.

If a student wishes to dispute their grade on an assignment, they must contact me within 48 hours of receiving their grade and set an appointment to discuss it. At this appointment they must bring a typed summary of the reasons why they believe the grade is unfair. I will then reevaluate the assignment on the basis of these reasons. All revised grades are final, and they may be lower than the original grade.

Calculating Final Grades

Course grades are assigned according to the following scale. Final course grades are calculated based on a percentage rounded to the nearest percent. For example, a final score of 92.6 is rounded to 93.0, but an 82.4 is not rounded and is a B-. This grading policy is not subject to appeal.

Letter Grade	Percent Score
A+	97–100
A	93–96.9
A–	90–92.9
B+	87–89.9
B	83–86.9
B–	80–82.9
C+	77–79.9
C	73–76.9
C–	70–72.9
D+	67–69.9
D	63–66.9
D–	60–62.9
F	0–59.9

Absence Policies

I expect you to attend all scheduled classes. An absence will be considered unexcused unless you give me documentation of the absence. You should also check out the Rice University absence policies [here](#).

When an absence is excused under university policy, students should notify the instructor and provide appropriate documentation as soon as reasonably possible. Unexcused absences may affect participation credit and the ability to complete in-class activities.

Policy on Student Questions and Emails

I am happy to answer student questions during office hours or by email. I typically respond to emails within **24 hours on weekdays**. If you have not received a response within **two business days**, feel free to send a brief follow-up or remind me in person.

Before emailing, please take a close look at the syllabus and Canvas. Many common questions about assignments, deadlines, and course policies are answered there. When you do email, please include the course number in the subject line and make your question as specific as possible.

Syllabus check: After you have read the syllabus for the first time, send me a short email with the subject line **“Poli 211 Syllabus Check”** and tell me your favorite animal.

Policy on Artificial Intelligence (AI) Tools

This course is designed to help students develop the ability to explain political arguments, apply theoretical concepts, and reason through real-world international problems. These skills are central to the written assignments, in-class activities, and the final oral exam.

Consequently, students are not allowed to use advanced automated tools (artificial intelligence or machine learning tools, such as ChatGPT) to:

- generate full or partial responses to reaction papers or response papers,
- produce argumentation, explanations, or analyses that are submitted as the student's own work,
- paraphrase or rewrite AI-generated content to mask its origin,
- generate responses for in-class activities, worksheets, or participation submissions,
- prepare scripted answers for the final oral exam.

If you are found to have used AI for an assignment in a probited manner, this will be treated as a violation of the Rice Honor Code. Using AI will not only result in a poor assignment, but it also undermines the whole reason why you are taking this course – to build writing and analytical skills that will help you understand and critically evaluate current events!

Rice Honor Code

In this course, all students will be held to the standards of the Rice Honor Code, a code that you pledged to honor when you matriculated at this institution. If you are unfamiliar with the details of this code and how it is administered, you should consult the Honor System Handbook at <http://honor.rice.edu/honor-system-handbook/>. This handbook outlines the University's expectations for the integrity of your academic work, the procedures for resolving alleged violations of those expectations, and the rights and responsibilities of students and faculty members throughout the process.

Disability Resource Center

If you have a documented disability or other condition that may affect academic performance you should: 1) make sure this documentation is on file with the Disability Resource Center (Allen Center, Room 111 / adarice@rice.edu / x5841) to determine the accommodations you need; and 2) talk with me to discuss your accommodation needs.

Mental Health Statement

If you are having trouble completing your coursework, please reach out to the Wellbeing and Counseling Center. Rice University provides cost-free mental health services through the Wellbeing and Counseling Center to help you manage personal challenges that threaten your personal or academic well-being. If you believe you are experiencing unusual amounts of stress, sadness, or anxiety, the Student Wellbeing Office or the Rice Counseling Center may be able to assist you. The Wellbeing and Counseling Center is located in the Gibbs Wellness Center and can be reached at 713-348-3311 (available 24/7).

Title IX Responsible Employee Notification

Rice University cares about your wellbeing and safety. Rice encourages any student who has experienced an incident of harassment, pregnancy discrimination or gender

discrimination or relationship, sexual, or other forms interpersonal violence to seek support through The SAFE Office. Students should be aware when seeking support on campus that most employees, including myself, as the instructor/TA, are required by Title IX to disclose all incidents of non-consensual interpersonal behaviors to Title IX professionals on campus who can act to support that student and meet their needs. For more information, please visit safe.rice.edu or email titleixsupport@rice.edu.

Syllabus Change Policy

This syllabus is only a guide for the course and is subject to change with advanced notice.

Course Schedule

Module 1: Introduction, Overview, and Building Blocks

Week 1: Introduction, Overview

- Monday, January 12, Introduction and Logistics
 - Syllabus
- Wednesday, January 14, IR as a Discipline and Subfield
 - Dan Reiter, “Should We Leave Behind the Subfield of International Relations?”, *Annual Review of Political Science*
- Friday, January 16, Pop Quiz (Ungraded)

Week 2: Actors, Institutions, and Strategic Interaction

- Monday, January 19 - NO CLASS
- Wednesday, January 21, Crash Course on Basics of Game Theory
 - Jeffry A. Frieden, David A. Lake, and Kenneth A. Schultz, *World Politics*, pages 86-91 (read the entire section called “A Primer on Game Theory”)
- Friday, January 23, Class Simulations

Module 2: War and Conflict

Study of war has been central to the discipline of IR. In this module we look at the trends in international conflict and war to get a baseline understanding on its prevalence. Then we look at the bargaining framework as a key tool to understand causes of war. We finish by looking at how international organizations can mitigate the occurrence or conduct of war.

Week 3: How Common is International War? How to Think About It?

- Monday, January 26, Is the world getting more peaceful?
 - Bear Braumoeller, *Only the Dead*, pages 3-29
- Wednesday, January 28, How to think about war?
 - Christopher Blattman, *Why We Fight*, Introduction
 - Harrison Wagner, *War and the State*, Chapter 3
- Friday, January 30: Class Discussion

Week 4: Bargaining Framework for War

- Monday, February 2, Bargaining Framework

- Jeffrey A. Frieden, David A. Lake, and Kenneth A. Schultz, *World Politics*, pages 93-107
- Wednesday, February 4, Why Bargaining Fails
 - Jeffrey A. Frieden, David A. Lake, and Kenneth A. Schultz, *World Politics*, pages 107-135
- Friday, February 6: Review Session and Q&A

Week 5: Domestic Politics and War

- Monday, February 9, Domestic Politics and War
 - Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, *Principles of International Politics*, Chapter 6 (read until section Selectorate Theory and the Conduct of War section)
- Wednesday, February 11, Selectorate Theory and War
 - Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, *Principles of International Politics*, Chapter 6, (read until the end)
- Friday, February 13 - NO CLASS

Week 6: International Organizations and Rules of War

- Monday, February 15, Military Alliances
 - James Morrow, Alliances Why Write them Down?, *Annual Review of Political Science*
- Wednesday, February 18, Rules of War
 - James Morrow, When Do States Follow the Laws of War?, *American Political Science Review*
- Friday, February 20, Review Session and Paper Workshop

Module 3: Trade and Governance

In this module we focus on peacetime relations. We look at when countries can cooperate on trade for mutual benefits and when they cannot. We then examine why governments create and comply with international laws and regulations.

Week 7: International Trade

- Monday, February 23, Mutual Gains from Globalization
 - The Nation and the World Economy, Unit 18 in CORE-Econ (Read until 18.5)

- Wednesday, February 25, Conflict over Distribution of Gains
 - The Nation and the World Economy, Unit 18 in CORE-Econ (Finish Unit 18)
- Friday, February 27, Small-group discussion

Week 8: International Finance, and Monetary Relations

- Monday, March 2, Monetary Relations
 - Thomas Oatley, *International Political Economy*, Chapter 10
- Wednesday, March 4, Conflict and Cooperation in Monetary Relations
 - Thomas Oatley, *International Political Economy*, Chapter 11
- Friday, March 6, Small-group discussion

Week 9: International Agreements and Compliance

- Monday, March 9, Why Comply with International Agreements?
 - Beth Simmons, “Treaty Compliance and Violation.” *Annual Review of Political Science*
- Wednesday, March 11, Do international courts cause compliance?
 - Clifford J. Carrubba, “Courts and Compliance in International Regulatory Regimes.” *Journal of Politics*
- Friday, March 13, Group-based class activity

Week 10: Break

- Monday, March 16 - NO CLASS
- Wednesday, March 18 - NO CLASS
- Friday, March 20 - NO CLASS

Week 11: Governance and Human Rights

- Monday, March 23, Global Human Rights Regime
 - Emilie M. Hafner-Burton, “International Regimes for Human Rights.”, *Annual Review of Political Science*
- Wednesday, March 25, Breaking the Laws?
 - James R. Hollyer and B. Peter Rosendorff, “Why Do Authoritarian Regimes Sign the Convention Against Torture? Signaling, Domestic Politics and Non-Compliance.” *Quarterly Journal of Political Science*
- Friday, March 27, Review Session: Discussion and structured Q&A

Module 4: Current and Future Issues in Global Politics

In this module we look at enduring issues in the global politics of today and tomorrow.

Week 12: Civil Wars and Terrorism

- Monday, March 30, Civil Wars
 - Barbara F. Walter, The New New Civil Wars, *Annual Review of Political Science*
- Wednesday, April 1, Terrorism
 - Andrew H. Kydd and Barbara F. Walter, The Strategies of Terrorism, *Security Studies*
- Friday, April 3, Small-group discussion

Week 13: Great Power Conflict: China and the US

- Monday, April 6, The Thucydudes Trap?
 - Graham Allison, “The Thucydides Trap: Are the US and China Headed for War,” *The Atlantic*
 - Jonathan Kirshner, “Handle Him with Care: The Importance of Getting Thucydides Right.” *Security Studies*
- Wednesday, April 8, China’s strengths and aspirations
 - Suisheng Zhao, “China’s Pragmatic Nationalism,” *Washington Quarterly*
 - Daniel Drezner, “Bad Debts: Assessing China’s Financial Influence in Great Power Politics,” *International Security*
- Friday, April 10, Class Discussion and Prediction Exercise

Week 14: Climate Change and Foreign Aid

- Monday, April 13, Global Climate Politics
 - Thomas Bernauer, “Climate Change Politics”, *Annual Review of Political Science*
- Wednesday, April 15, Foreign Aid
 - Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Alastair Smith, “A Political Economy of Aid”, *International Organization*
- Friday, April 17, Review Session

Module 5: Review and Recap

Week 15: Review and Recap

- Monday, April 20, What Was not in the Syllabus and Oral final exam Q&A
- Wednesday, April 22, No Lecture
- Friday, April 24, No Lecture