Course Syllabus POL212G

**Introduction to International Relations**

**Number of ECTS credits:** 6

**Contact Details for Professor**

Tel: +32-2-6148183  
E-mail: ccarta@vub.ac.be

**Course Description**

The course introduces and explores core concepts, approaches and arguments of International Relations Theories. Students will engage with key debates and controversies in world politics from a distinctly theoretical perspective. By engaging with central theoretical paradigms and key authors (ranging from the realism/liberalism/constructivism paradigm and its 'neo'- variants to more critical and more recent perspectives) students will acquire a nuanced understanding of persistent debates and controversies in International Relations scholarship. On the practical level, the course also focuses on strengthening students’ research, team-work and public speaking skills through essay-writing, presentations and seminar-leading exercises.

**Course Prerequisites (if any)**

POL101P

**Learning Objectives**

*(in terms of knowledge):*

After this course students should be able to:

1. Make sense of a wide range of fundamental issues in contemporary international relations and how to approach them with appropriate theoretical, conceptual and argumentative tools.
2. Critically Assess International affairs from a theoretical perspective.
3. Grasp the ‘Grand Debate’ between realist and liberals as well as neorealists and neoliberals;
4. Understand the conceptual approach of Constructivism;
5. Understand, analyze and apply critical and recent scholarly perspectives that have sought to engage with, and transcend, the Realist/Liberal/Constructivist paradigms;

6. Recognize the role and significance of theory for analyzing and understanding processes and key issues of world politics;

(in terms of SKILLS)
1. Critically compare, contrast and synthesize major IR concepts and apply them in a creative manner to conceptual debates and real-life global problems;
2. Gather, analyze and critically evaluate a broad range of information sources in the field of International Affairs;
3. Apply different theories to the analysis of international cases;
4. Use appropriate style and a correct reference system;
5. Differentiate between empirical and normative statements.
6. Communicate effectively key research findings on core issues of International Affairs;
7. Work in a team.

(in terms of ATTITUDES):
1. A passion for learning and researching, and the ability to be open and critical towards one's own and others' perspectives
2. An international mind-set, multicultural openness and a strong capacity for interaction in a variety of cultural settings.
3. A sense of professionalism, integrity and a self-critical attitude towards one's abilities, limits and constant urge for self-improvement.

Course schedule

Week 1 – Introduction to the Course
No presentation. Assignments to class presentations and groups for the news corner.

Main readings:

Seminar reading:

Main topics to be addressed during the seminar:
What is International Relations? How can we study world politics? Who are the main actors in the International System? Should we strive to preserve the system of sovereign states? Why or why not?

Week 2 – Diversity and Core Paradigms of International Relations Theory: Realism, Liberalism and Constructivism

Main readings:

Seminar reading:
Main questions to be discussed during the seminar:
What is meant with the term ‘international system’? how does it work? What are the distinctive concerns of International Relations as an academic subject? Identify the main schools of thought in the study of International Relations and summarise their respective strengths and weaknesses. Identify the major debates within IR. Why do these debates often linger on without any clear winner emerging?

**Week 3 – Core IR Theories I: Introduction to Realism: Classical, Neo-classical and Structural: Realism**

**Main readings:**

**Seminar reading:**

**Main topics to be addressed during the seminar:**
How do classical realists differ from structural realists? Can we assume that states are unitary and rational actors? If so, why? How does anarchy inhibit cooperation? How can we define the security dilemma? Is there any solution to it?

**Week 4 – Core IR Theories II: Introduction to Liberalism: Liberalism and Neoliberalism**

**Main readings:**

**Seminar reading:**

**Main topics to be addressed during the seminar:**
How do liberals try to explain why democracies rarely fight each other and which explanation do you find most or least plausible? Does trade reduce conflict, or conflict reduces trade, or both, and why? How would you account for the beginning of European integration? How do dynamics of interstate cooperation mould the anarchical character of the international system?

**Week 5 – Constructivism and Post-structuralism**

**Main reading:**
Jackson Robert and Sørensen George (2010), Constructivism.

**Seminar reading:**

**Main topics to be addressed during the seminar:**
What does it mean that International Relations (and the International System) are social constructions? What are the theoretical and normative consequences of this statement? What is the role of language in constructivist accounts of IR? What does it mean that identity and interests are mutually constituted? What are the pros and cons to analyse
topics such as securitization or War on Terror through the lenses of social constructivism?

**Week 6 – Independent Study: Analyzing Key Issues Through Realist/Liberal Lenses**

**Main readings:**

**Seminar reading:**

**Week 8 – Marxism and Critical Theory**

**Main readings:**

**Seminar readings:**

**Main topics to be addressed during the seminar:**
Why do Marxists believe that ‘capitalism’ cannot be regarded as a mainly domestic phenomenon? How has this belief been reflected in the theories of imperialism? What is the purpose of critical theory? How does it differ from ‘positivist’ or ‘problem-solving’ theory? How does a critical understanding of capitalism as a way of life encompassing economic, political and cultural or ideological aspects help us to make sense of US global strategy since the Second World War?

**Week 9 – Feminism**

**Main readings:**

**Seminar reading:**

**Main topics to be addressed during the seminar:**
More than half of the world's labour comes in the form of the unpaid, home-based labour of women. If this type of labour were remunerated, labour costs in the global economy would triple. How does women's free labour affect the global economy? ‘The personal is international and the international is personal’ (Cynthia Enloe). What does it mean? What about men? How does gender affect men's experiences in everyday life? In global politics? Could global politics be de-gendered?

**Week 10 – Post-colonialism**

**Main readings:**

**Seminar reading:**
Main topics to be addressed during the seminar:
What are the goals and agenda of post-colonialism? What is the post-colonial objection to 'human rights' as 'universal' values? How can we describe the relationship between Orientalism and the discourses on terrorism including the war against terror?

**Main reading:**

**Seminar reading:**

Main topics to be addressed during the seminar:
Is green political theory modernist or postmodernist? What is the cause of the ecological blindness of traditional IR?

**Week 11: Green theories and environmental Issues**

**Main reading:**

**Seminar reading:**

Main topics to be addressed during the seminar:
Is green political theory modernist or postmodernist? What is the cause of the ecological blindness of traditional IR?

**Week 12 – The Journey of Integration Theory in Exploring ‘the Nature of the Beast’**

**Main readings:**

**Seminar reading:**

Main topics to be addressed during the seminar:
“Federalize their wallets and their hearts and minds will follow” (James Madison). Discuss in relation to European integration. “How can we explain the continuing and uneasy balance between supranational and intergovernmental solutions in the institutional make-up of the European Union (EU)? How do recent developments (financial crisis, enlargement, institutional fragility) are going to impact theories of European integration? What does “governing without government” mean? How to individuate the locus of authority? Is the EU a N=1 example of regional integration?

**Week 13: Theories, Philosophy of Science and Metatheoretical Debates.**

**Main reading:**

**Seminar reading:**

**Week 14: Independent Study: Analyzing Key Issues through mainstream and critical theories**

**Main reading:**


Course Materials

The Course Material ranges from chapters of core textbooks and original journal articles by key IR scholars. They will be uploaded for you to access electronically via Pointcarre (pointcarre.vub.ac.be).

Main textbook:

Reference text:

Course Assessment

The students will be evaluated on the basis of their performance as follows:

- Class participation and Policy Brief 15%
- Research Proposal 10%
- Written assignment 25%
- Midterm exam 20%
- Final examination 30%

TOTAL 100%

Grading Scale of Vesalius College

Vesalius College grading policy, in line with the Flemish Educational norms, is now as stated follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Letter grade</th>
<th>Scale of 20</th>
<th>Scale of 100</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>17.0-20.0</td>
<td>85-100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A-</td>
<td>16.1-16.9</td>
<td>81-84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B+</td>
<td>15.3-16.0</td>
<td>77-80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>14.5-15.2</td>
<td>73-76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B-</td>
<td>13.7-14.4</td>
<td>69-72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C+</td>
<td>13.1-13.6</td>
<td>66-68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>12.3-13.0</td>
<td>62-65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C-</td>
<td>11.5-12.2</td>
<td>58-61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D+</td>
<td>10.7-11.4</td>
<td>54-57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>10.0-10.6</td>
<td>50-53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>0-9.9</td>
<td>0-49</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Further description of assessment activities and Grading Criteria
The following criteria will be applied in assessing your written work:

- **Written mid-term and final exams**
  The mid-term will be an in-class exam. The midterm exam (20%) will be held in the mid of the semester (W7). The content of the exam covers all the concepts you will have learnt before that date. The final exam (40%) will be held at the end of the course (location and time will be announced once the final exam schedule is posted). It will include questions on theories that you will have learnt during the whole semester.

- **Term Paper**
  You are required to write a short essay on key theoretical perspectives and how to apply them to contemporary and persistent actual policy problems and issues. Here, dialectic way of reasoning and argumentation is of core importance as much as your grasp of the main theoretical approaches you have chosen.

Students can select among the theoretical approaches we have studied during the course (Realism, Neo-Realism, Liberalism, Neo-Liberalism, Constructivism, Marxism, Critical Theories, Feminism, Green Theories). None of these theoretical approaches is better than others *a priori* to explain an issue/event/decision/foreign policy behavior. What matters is the empirical demonstration that the two selected theories are relevant. If students wish to adopt an alternative theoretical approach (e.g. the English School), they need to ask the instructor additional readings. You are requested to consult the course convenor and to get her approval before starting to work on your paper. This should be done by week 3. A hard copy should be submitted in class and by email (ccarta@vub.ac.be). Please, submit an electronic copy on Turnitin. When submitting to Turnitin, postings should be entitled by your surname and the issue covered (for example “Smith_Cuban Missile Crisis”). Extension will not be granted except for attested emergency situations.

**NOTE:** your essay only counts as Accepted if you handed in both a hard and electronic copy. Failure to do so will result in an ‘F’.

Papers should be submitted in Times New Roman font, 12 points type, 1,5 spaced with 2 cm margins. Papers should not exceed 3000 words, excluding the cover page and the bibliography. Longer papers will be penalized.

Papers will be structured in 4 sections (see table below), distinguishable by clear headings. Please, note that the title of each section is your compass to navigate both your topic and your selected theories. Make sure that each section is coherent and that the argument draws on and follows the selected subtitle.

| Part One | The first part clearly identifies the puzzle of the research (*what does the paper seek to explain?*) and provides core factual background information on the selected topics (*What? When? Who?...*). Part One also identifies a clear research question and introduces the structure of the research. |
| Part Two | The second part offers a first theoretical explanation (*why?*) for the selected issue/event/decision/foreign policy behavior. It summarizes the core assumptions of the selected theoretical approach. It offers a coherent explanation of the selected topic through the lens of this theoretical approach. |
| Part   | The third part presents an alternative theoretical explanation. It summarizes |
Three

the core assumptions of the selected theoretical approach and offers a coherent explanation of the selected topic through the lens of this theoretical approach.

Part Four

The last part discusses how the two selected theoretical explanations interact (if they are inconsistent, compatible; which one is more convincing etc.) and presents the main concluding remarks.

In addition, you need to have submitted a research proposal for your Research Essay. The research proposal is the first step towards the final paper. It should include:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A clear research question</th>
<th>The questions should be as clear and simple as reasonably possible. The research question may be a mere empirical or factual question, it may be theoretically inspired, above all it should be clear and straightforward.</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A paper outline</td>
<td>The paper outline should provide an indication of how the student is going to investigate the research question. The student has to explain how she/he is going to research the topic at hand, this entails an identification of sources and the identification of the theoretical approach/concepts adopted in the analysis and of the selected case study (an event, a policy measure, a policy domain, etc.).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A tentative layout</td>
<td>The tentative structure and headings that are likely to appear in the final paper.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preliminary bibliography</td>
<td>A bibliography directly related to the research question or research topic.</td>
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Grading Form

The following criteria will be applied in assessing your written work:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ability to summarize a complex factual background</th>
<th>(0-1)</th>
<th>(2-3)</th>
<th>(4-5)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Some factual information is missing or the topic is not clearly identified</td>
<td>Most relevant information is presented but the topic is not clearly identified</td>
<td>Key facts are presented in an original, succinct, and analytical manner.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding and capacity to apply theoretical frameworks</td>
<td>Theories are simply mentioned. Cited theoretical information is not relevant to the topic analyzed. None of the explanations is convincing to explain the empirical case.</td>
<td>One theory is confusing or oversimplified. Theories are not coherently related to the selected topic. Only one explanation is really convincing to explain the empirical case.</td>
<td>Both theories are presented clearly in their full complexity. Both explanations are convincing if one shares their theoretical assumptions</td>
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<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical thinking</td>
<td>Part 4 merely repeats information contained in parts 1-2-3.</td>
<td>Part 4 brings new information but no critical understanding of IR.</td>
<td>Part 4 reveals a personal and critical understanding of foreign policy analysis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure, bibliography and references</td>
<td>The paper is loosely structured. Language is poor. References are incomplete and quoted in an improper manner.</td>
<td>The argument is not developed in a coherent way; At least 5 good references (peer-reviewed articles or published books)</td>
<td>The argument is developed in a coherent and appropriate way; Language is overall correct; At least 7 good references covering factual background and theories.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

➢ **System of bibliographic referencing**

There are many systems for the citation of references. For this course, I expect you to use the Harvard style of referencing which is a name and date system. Student can find a detailed Harvard Guide at the following website: [http://libweb.anglia.ac.uk/referencing/referencing.htm](http://libweb.anglia.ac.uk/referencing/referencing.htm). Please, also consult the following short guide for “Acknowledging, Paraphrasing, and Quoting Sources”, available at: [writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/Acknowledging_Sources.pdf](http://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/Acknowledging_Sources.pdf)

**Current Affairs Commentary / Policy Brief**
The second assignment consists of a short presentation, based on an analysis of a current affairs issue. You are supposed to explain a current affairs issue (please consult the FT, IHT or The Economist), state the IR issue at stake and offer an analysis and a policy-oriented solution, based on a theoretical perspective of your choice. The policy-brief should be no longer than 2 pages, stating and summarizing the core problem or issue, explaining the core theoretical approach (basic premises and principles) and up to five policy recommendations how this should be tackled. (Imagine you are giving policy advice to the Foreign Affairs Senior Staff of a government of your choice – what's the basic problem? How can it be solved? What action should be taken? What are the likely consequences?)

Each students needs to hand in and e-mail his or her Policy Brief the day before class! Hard copy and via e-mail to ccarta@vub.ac.be – with “Policy Brief: in the Heading.

3. Participation and Reading Tests

Every week a seminar session will take place. During the seminar session, students will present their policy briefs. By the end of the policy briefs’ session, we will extensively work on the second reading of our weekly course schedule. In this session, (marked) reading tests will regularly take place, followed by discussions.

4. How to get extra points for this course!

The following assignments are not compulsory, but are highly recommended, both to acquire new competences and skills and to increase your final grade.

- **Book Review (up to 3 extra points)**
  Book reviews represent both a great occasion for first publication experiences and a way to get acquainted to theories. Students are, therefore, invited to submit a book review. The book review shall not exceed 1500 words. Upon submission, students will receive 3 extra points on their final mark. Students are strongly recommended to consult the book review section of one of the Journals suggested in the syllabus in order to understand the general format. Hard copies should be provided to the professor at the final exam. No extension will be granted. Students can discuss with the instructor a possible book to review.

- **Review of other students’ paper (up to 1 extra point)**
  Students are invited to review the term papers written by their peers. Students who want to review others students’ papers need to communicate and agree with the instructor the term papers they intend to review after the submission of the term papers. They need to use the marking sheet and grading form provided in this syllabus and write an anonymous comment of less that 1000 words. Only papers submitted on time will be available for review. To get one extra point, a minimum of 3 reviews must be handled in. Reviews need to contain specific and constructive comments. General comments that can be written without reading in full the paper will be ignored. Reviews are due by the exam date. Hard copies should be provided to the professor at the exam. No extension will be granted.

**Additional Course Policies**

- Late papers will not be accepted unless there are serious legitimate reasons. Provision of a signed medical note is required, and notice must be given prior to the deadline.
** Academic Honesty Statement **

Academic dishonesty is **NOT** tolerated in this course.

Academic honesty is not only an ethical issue but also the foundation of scholarship. Cheating and plagiarism are therefore serious breaches of academic integrity.

Following the College policy, cheating and plagiarism cases will be communicated in writing to the Associate Dean for Students and submitted to the Student Conduct Committee for disciplinary action.

If you refer to someone else’s work, appropriate references and citations must be provided. Grammar, spelling and punctuation count, so use the tools necessary to correct before handing in assignments.