

Key concepts

The following 16 key concepts weave a conceptual thread through the course. They should be explored both when working with the four core units, the engagement activity and the HL extension, in order to equip students with a conceptual framework with which to access and understand the political issues examined.

Brief explanations of the key concepts are given in the table below to provide teachers and students with a starting point for their conceptual journey of global politics. However, a few sentences could never capture the different and contested interpretations of these big, important and organizing ideas of the theory and practice of politics. A rich and balanced understanding of the key concepts is a key aim and assessment objective of the course and requires their examination from multiple approaches and perspectives in a variety of contexts.

The concepts below are listed in the order in which they appear in the core units, with four concepts attached to each unit. This unit affiliation indicates where the concepts are most likely to surface, but the intention is that any of them can and should be addressed at any point of the course where they add value to the discussion.

Concept	Explanation
Power	Power is a central concept in the study of global politics and a key focus of the course. Power can be seen as ability to effect change and, rather than being viewed as a unitary or independent force, is as an aspect of relations among people functioning within a social organization. Contested relationships between people and groups of people dominate politics, particularly in this era of increased globalization, and so understanding the dynamics of power plays a prominent role in understanding global politics.
Sovereignty	Sovereignty characterizes a state's independence, its control over territory and its ability to govern itself. How states use their sovereign power is at the heart of many important issues in global politics. Some theorists argue that sovereign power is increasingly being eroded by aspects of globalization such as global communication and trade, which states cannot always fully control. Others argue that sovereign states exercise a great deal of power when acting in their national interest and that this is unlikely to change.
Legitimacy	Legitimacy refers to an actor or an action being commonly considered acceptable and provides the fundamental basis or rationale for all forms of governance and other ways of exercising power over others. The most accepted contemporary source of legitimacy in a state is some form of democracy or constitutionalism whereby the governed have a defined and periodical opportunity to choose who they wish to exercise power over them. Other sources of legitimacy are suggested in states in which such an opportunity does not exist. Within any proposed overall framework of legitimacy, individual actions by a state can be considered more or less legitimate. Other actors of global politics and their actions can also be evaluated from the perspective of legitimacy.
Interdependence	In global politics, the concept of interdependence most often refers to the mutual reliance between and among groups, organizations, geographic areas and/or states for access to resources that sustain living arrangements. Often, this mutual reliance is economic (such as trade), but can also have a security dimension (such as defence arrangements) and, increasingly, a sustainability dimension (such as environmental treaties). Globalization has increased interdependence, while often changing the relationships of power among the various actors engaged in global politics.
Human rights	Human rights are basic claims and entitlements that, many argue, one should be able to exercise simply by virtue of being a human being. Many contemporary thinkers argue they are essential for living a life of dignity, are inalienable, and should be accepted as universal. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the UN in 1948 is recognized as the beginning of the formal discussion of human rights around the world. Critics argue that human rights are a Western, or at least culturally relative, concept.

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Justice	There are a number of different interpretations of the concept of justice. It is often closely associated with the idea of fairness and with individuals getting what they deserve, although what is meant by desert is also contested. One avenue is to approach justice through the idea of rights, and what individuals can legitimately expect of one another or of their government. Some theorists also argue that equality not only in the institutions and procedures of a society but also in capabilities or well-being outcomes is required for justice to be realized.
Liberty	The concept of liberty refers to having freedom and autonomy. It is often divided into positive and negative liberty, with <i>negative liberty</i> defined as individuals having the freedom from external coercion and <i>positive liberty</i> defined as individuals having the autonomy to carry out their own rational will. Some scholars reject this distinction and argue that in practice, one form of liberty cannot exist without the other. It is also questioned if such an understanding of liberty is sufficient for an interdependent world, in which the seeming freedom and autonomy of some may depend on lack of some forms of liberty for others. Hence, debates on equality inform our understanding of liberty as well.
Equality	Egalitarian theories are based on a concept of equality that all people, or groups of people, are seen as having the same intrinsic value. Equality is therefore closely linked to justice and fairness, as egalitarians argue that justice can only exist if there is equality. Increasingly, with growing polarization within societies, equality is also linked to liberty, as different people have differing possibilities to be free and autonomous.
Development	Development is a sustained increase in the standard of living and well-being of a level of social organization. Many consider it to involve increased income; better access to basic goods and services; improvements in education, healthcare and public health; well-functioning institutions; decreased inequality; reduced poverty and unemployment; and more sustainable production and consumption patterns. The focus of development debates in contemporary global politics is on issues faced by developing countries, and on the imperative of shifting the focus from modernization (seen as Westernization). However, all societies and communities face questions about how to best promote well-being and reduce ill-being.
Globalization	Globalization is a process by which the world's local, national and regional economies, societies and cultures are becoming increasingly integrated and connected. The term refers to the reduction of barriers and borders, as people, goods, services and ideas flow more freely between different parts of the world. Globalization is a process that has been taking place for centuries but the pace has quickened in recent decades, facilitated by developments in transportation and communication technology, and powered by cheap energy. It is now widely acknowledged that globalization has both benefits and drawbacks and that its benefits are not evenly distributed.
Inequality	Inequality refers to a state of affairs where equality between people or groups of people is not realized and the consequent potential compromises of justice and liberty. Inequality often manifests itself through unequal access to resources that are needed to sustain life and develop individuals and communities. Consequently, the concept is closely connected to discussions of power and of who holds the rights to these resources and their proceeds. Inequality can be examined both as a phenomenon within and between societies.
Sustainability	Definitions of sustainability begin with the idea that development should meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. Sustainability today has three fields of debate—environmental, sociopolitical and economic. In global politics, mechanisms and incentives required for political institutions, economic actors and individuals to take a longer term and more inclusive well-being perspective in their decision-making are particularly important.

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Peace	Peace is often defined as both the absence of conflict and violence as well as a state of harmonious relations. Many also refer to peace as a personal state of non-conflict, particularly with oneself and with one's relationship to others. Peace is the ultimate goal of many organizations that monitor and regulate social relationships.
Conflict	Conflict is the dynamic process of actual or perceived opposition between individuals or groups. This could be opposition over positions, interests or values. Most theorists would distinguish between non-violent and violent conflict. In this distinction, non-violent conflict can be a useful mechanism for social change and transformation, while violent conflict is harmful and requires conflict resolution.
Violence	Violence is often defined as physical or psychological force afflicted upon another being. In the context of global politics, it could be seen as anything someone does that prevents others from reaching their full potential. This broader definition would encompass unequal distribution of power that excludes entire groups from accessing resources essential for improved living standards or well-being, and discriminatory practices that exclude entire groups of people from accessing certain resources.
Non-violence	Non-violence is the practice of advocating one's own or others' rights without physically harming the opponent. It often involves actively opposing the system that is deemed to be unjust, through for example boycotts, demonstrations and civil disobedience. Theorists argue that non-violence can often draw attention to a conflict situation and that it could provide a fertile basis for post-conflict transformation.