Power, sovereignty and legitimacy

IB DP Global Politics core: power, sovereignty, legitimacy, interdependence and actors

Power, sovereignty and legitimacy

- explain hard, soft and **smart power**, and power as a **relationship**;
- explain internal and **external sovereignty** and the challenges to it;
- explain the sources of legitimacy, inside states and between them;

Power, sovereignty and legitimacy (2)

- explain **symmetric** and **asymmetric interdependence**;
- identify the actors in global politics;
- read a political source for its claim, evidence and perspective, and answer Paper 1.

Power

- **Power** is the ability to make things happen and to influence what others do.
- It is a **relationship** : a state has power over another actor in a particular situation, not in general.
- The political scientist Joseph Nye introduced the term "**soft power**" in 1990.
- Power can also be hard to see.

Sovereignty

- **Internal sovereignty** : the state makes and enforces the law inside its borders.
- **External sovereignty** : other states recognise it as a state.

Legitimacy

- **Legitimacy** is the belief that a government or an action has the right to exercise power.
- Power without legitimacy must rely on force, which is costly.
- The sociologist Max Weber described three types of **authority** :
- Legitimacy can come from **consent** (people accept the government, for example through elections) and from **performance** (the government delivers security, jobs and services).

Interdependence

- It is **symmetric** when both sides depend on each other equally, and **asymmetric** when one side depends more. The less dependent side then has more power, for example the power to threaten **sanctions** .
- It encourages cooperation, because conflict becomes expensive for everyone.
- It also creates risks: a problem in one place (a blocked canal, a pandemic, a financial crisis) spreads quickly.

Actors in global politics

- **States** are the main actors, but not the only ones.
- Check the conditions before using the result.

Reading political sources

- For Paper 1, read each source with three questions:
- 1. **Claim** : what does the source say? 2. **Evidence** : what does it use to support this (data, examples, expert views)? 3. **Perspective** : who is speaking, from what position, and what do they want?
- Then connect the source to a concept and to your own example.
- A sample question from the IB: *"Using Source C and one example you have studied, explain the reasons why international cooperation may be problematic for some states."*

Sources for this lesson

- International Baccalaureate, *Global Politics guide* (first assessment 2026) and subject brief.
- J. S. Nye, ***Soft Power**: The Means to Success in World Politics* (2004).
- M. Weber, "Politics as a Vocation" (1919).

Sources for this lesson (2)

- S. Lukes, *Power: A Radical View* (1974; 2nd edition 2005).
- United Nations Security Council, Resolution 678 (29 November 1990).

Common errors

- Treating power as something a state simply "has"; power is a **relationship** and depends on the situation.
- Using **soft power** to mean any non-military action; sanctions are **hard power**, because they coerce.
- Saying sovereignty is absolute; it is challenged from above (international law), below (separatist movements) and within (weak state capacity).

Common errors (2)

- Confusing legality with legitimacy; a law can be legal yet seen as illegitimate.
- Writing about states only; IGOs, NGOs, companies and social movements are actors too.
- Quoting a source without saying whose **perspective** it gives and what it leaves out.

Key terms

- **Power**: the ability to make others act in ways they otherwise would not.
- **Soft power**: getting others to want what you want through attraction, such as culture, values and policies.
- **Sovereignty**: a state's supreme **authority** over its territory and people, free from outside control.

Key terms (2)

- **Legitimacy**: the acceptance of a person's or a state's right to rule.
- **Interdependence**: a **relationship** in which actors depend on each other, so that what happens to one affects the others.
- **Intergovernmental organisation (IGO)**: an organisation whose members are states, such as the UN or the WTO.

Check yourself

- 1.
- Give one example each of hard, soft and **smart power**. 2.
- What did the Peace of Westphalia (1648) establish? 3.
- Name Weber's three types of legitimate **authority**, with an example of each. 4.