

Power, sovereignty and legitimacy

International Baccalaureate · IB Diploma · Global Politics · SL

IB Diploma Programme Global Politics SL (the guide first assessed in 2026). This topic covers the **core** of the course, *understanding power and global politics*, which SL and HL students both study. Four **key concepts** run through the whole course: power, sovereignty, legitimacy and interdependence. Paper 1 (1 hour 15 minutes; 30% at SL, 20% at HL) tests the core through **source-based questions**: you read short sources and use them, with examples you have studied, to explain and evaluate.

In March 2021 a container ship, the *Ever Given*, got stuck across the Suez Canal for six days. Hundreds of ships waited at each end, and factories in Europe ran short of parts made in Asia. No government chose this, and no army could fix it quickly. One ship showed how closely the world's states and companies depend on each other, and how power in global politics is not only about armies. This topic gives you the concepts to analyse events like this.

Must-know for the core:

Area	Key content
power	hard, soft and smart power; power as a relationship; three faces of power
sovereignty	supreme authority in a territory; challenges from above, below and within
legitimacy	Weber's three types; consent and performance; international legitimacy
interdependence	mutual dependence; symmetric and asymmetric; cooperation and risk
actors	states, intergovernmental organisations, NGOs, companies, movements
Paper 1	sources plus your own examples; concepts applied to cases

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.

Type	How it works	Example
hard power	forces or pays others: armies, sanctions, money	a US-led coalition expelled Iraq's army from Kuwait in 1991
soft power	attracts others: culture, values, education	South Korean films and music have made the country's culture popular across Asia
smart power	a planned mix of hard and soft power	aid and trade deals offered together with security agreements

The political scientist Joseph Nye introduced the term “soft power” in 1990.

Power can also be hard to see. Political scientists describe **three faces of power**: the power to win a decision, the power to decide which questions are discussed at all, and the power to shape what people want, so that some ideas are never questioned.



The three faces of power: the deeper the face, the harder it is to see and resist

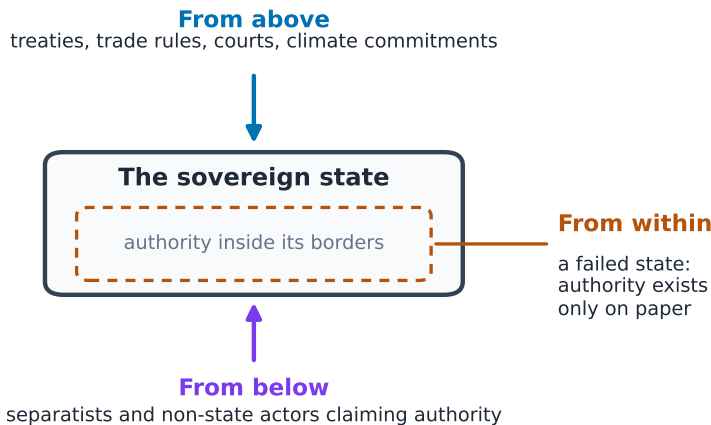
Sovereignty

Sovereignty is supreme authority over a territory and its people. The idea is often traced to the Peace of Westphalia (1648), which ended long wars in Europe: each ruler controls their own territory, and outsiders should not interfere.

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

In practice, sovereignty is challenged from three directions:

Direction	What it means	Example
from above	international organisations and treaties limit what states can do	WTO trade rules; EU members share decisions on trade and, for many, a single currency
from below	groups inside the state claim authority	separatist movements; armed groups controlling territory
from within	the state cannot govern its own territory	Somalia had no working central government after 1991



Sovereignty challenged from above, from below and from within

States often give up some sovereignty by choice, because cooperation brings benefits: trade, security or a voice in decisions.

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** :

Type	Based on	Example
traditional	custom and history	a monarchy that has ruled for centuries
charismatic	the personal qualities of a leader	a leader of an independence movement
legal-rational	laws, elections and offices	a president who leaves office at the end of a fixed term

Legitimacy can come from **consent** (people accept the government, for example through elections) and from **performance** (the government delivers security, jobs and services). A government that fails for years, through corruption or economic crisis, may lose it.

Internationally, legitimacy often comes from law and institutions. In 1990 the UN Security Council passed Resolution 678, which allowed member states to use force to remove Iraq’s army from Kuwait. Because of this resolution, many states saw the 1991 war as legal and legitimate.

Interdependence

Interdependence means that what happens to one actor affects others. States depend on each other for trade, energy, finance, health and the environment.

- 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.

Actor	Example	Source of power
intergovernmental organisation (IGO)	the United Nations (193 member states)	membership, law, legitimacy
non-governmental organisation (NGO)	Médecins Sans Frontières (Nobel Peace Prize 1999)	expertise, public trust, presence on the ground
multinational company	large technology and energy firms	money, technology, jobs
social movement	climate strikes led by school students	public opinion, media attention

Reading political sources

For Paper 1, read each source with three questions:

- Claim** : what does the source say?
- 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."*

Worked answer outline.

Source C argues that cooperation can limit a state’s sovereignty, because states must follow shared rules even when they disagree. For example, members of the World Trade Organization must accept the rulings of its dispute system, which can order a state to change its trade laws. Cooperation can also be asymmetric: a small state that depends on a large trading partner has less power to shape the agreement. However, states usually accept these limits because the benefits of trade and security are greater than the costs.

The answer uses the source, names a real example, uses two key concepts (sovereignty and interdependence), and gives a counter-view.

Checklist

- Paper 1: 1 hour 15 minutes; source-based questions on the core; 30% SL, 20% HL.
- Power: hard, soft and smart, with examples; power as a relationship; the three faces of power.
- Sovereignty: internal and external; Westphalia 1648; challenges from above, below and within.
- Legitimacy: Weber’s three types; consent and performance; Resolution 678 as international legitimacy.
- Interdependence: symmetric and asymmetric; cooperation and risk; the *Ever Given* example.
- Actors: states, IGOs, NGOs, companies and movements.
- Sources: claim, evidence, perspective; concept plus example plus counter-view.