Course Companion

International Baccalaureate · IB Diploma · Global Politics · SL

Every topic handout in one volume

exercises.lol

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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

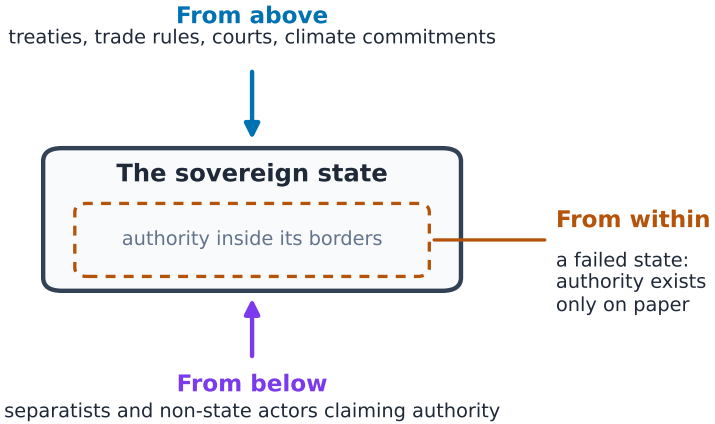
Sovereignty

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:

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."*

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.

Thematic studies

International Baccalaureate · IB Diploma · Global Politics · SL

IB Diploma Programme Global Politics SL (the guide first assessed in 2026). Besides the core, SL and HL students study three **thematic studies**: *rights and justice*, *development and sustainability*, and *peace and conflict*. Each is studied through real, recent cases. Paper 2 (1 hour 30 minutes; 40% at SL, 30% at HL) asks for **extended responses** (essays) on these themes.

In 1990 more than a third of the world's people lived in extreme poverty. By 2019 the share had fallen below one in ten. In China alone, close to 800 million people escaped extreme poverty after 1980, according to the World Bank. Over the same years, wars in Syria, Yemen and Sudan forced millions from their homes, and international courts tried to punish the people responsible for mass crimes. Each theme asks what changed, who made it happen, and whose rights, development or **peace** were left behind.

Must-know for the thematic studies:

Theme	Key content
rights and justice	UDHR 1948; three generations of rights; universalism and relativism; ICC; R2P
development and sustainability	development beyond income; HDI; MDGs and SDGs; aid, trade and debt; Brundtland
peace and conflict	types of conflict; negative and positive peace; structural violence; UN Charter; peacekeeping
Paper 2	essays that apply concepts to named, recent cases and reach a judgement

Rights and justice

Human rights are rights that every person has because they are human. The **Universal Declaration of Human Rights** (UDHR) was adopted by the UN General Assembly on 10 December 1948. In 1966 two treaties made its rights legally binding for the states that join them: one on civil and political rights, one on economic, social and cultural rights.

Generation	Type of right	Examples
first	civil and political	free speech, a fair trial, the vote
second	economic, social and cultural	education, health care, work
third	collective	development, a clean environment, peace

Universalism says that the same rights apply everywhere. **Cultural relativism** says that rights must be understood within each society's culture and values. The debate matters because it decides who can criticise whom.

Most rights are enforced by states themselves. When a state will not act, international **justice** can step in. The **International Criminal Court** (ICC; Rome Statute 1998, working since 2002) tries individuals for genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity. More than 120 states are members, but the United States, China, Russia and India are not, which limits its reach.

In 2005 UN members agreed the **responsibility to protect** (R2P): each state must protect its people from mass atrocities, and if it fails, other states may act through the UN. In 2011 Security Council Resolution 1973 authorised action to protect civilians in Libya. Critics said the action went beyond protection and helped to remove the government. Afterwards, draft resolutions on Syria were vetoed, and the Council did not authorise action there.

Development and sustainability

Development is more than higher income. The economist Amartya Sen described it as expanding the real **freedoms** people have: to be healthy, educated and able to choose how to live. The UN's **Human Development Index** (HDI, since 1990) combines life expectancy, years of schooling and income per person.

Framework	Years	Goals
Millennium Development Goals	2000–2015	8 goals, mainly for poorer countries: poverty, schooling, child health
Sustainable Development Goals	2015–2030	17 goals for every country, linking poverty, inequality and the environment

Sustainable development was defined by the Brundtland Report (1987) as development that "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs".

Key debates for essays:

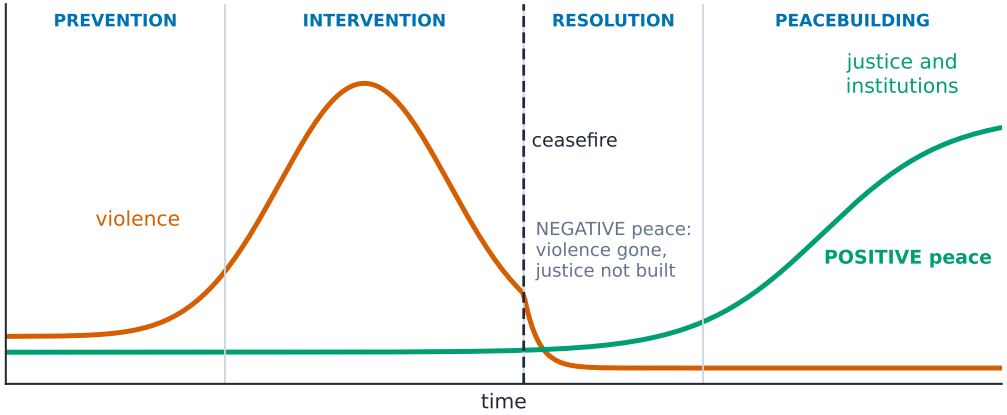
- **Aid**: does it build schools and health systems, or create dependence and support weak governments? The answer depends on the type of aid and the institutions that receive it.
- **Trade**: exports helped East Asian economies grow fast, but rich countries' farm subsidies and tariffs can block poorer countries.

- **Debt** : in the 1980s and 1990s the IMF and World Bank lent money on condition of **structural adjustment** (cuts to spending, privatisation, open markets). Critics say the conditions hurt the poor.
- **Inequality** : growth can reduce poverty while the gap between rich and poor widens, inside countries and between them.

Peace and conflict

Conflict can be **interstate** (between states) or **intrastate** (inside one state, such as a civil war). Since 1945 most wars have been intrastate, and many have outside states involved.

The peace researcher Johan Galtung distinguished **negative peace** , the absence of direct violence, from **positive peace** , the presence of justice, fair institutions and cooperation. He also described **structural violence** : harm caused by unfair social structures, such as poverty or discrimination, even when no one is fighting. A ceasefire brings negative peace; positive peace takes years.



A ceasefire ends the violence; positive peace only arrives as justice and institutions are built.

The **UN Charter** (1945) bans the threat or use of force between states (Article 2(4)). There are two exceptions: **self-defence** (Article 51) and action authorised by the Security Council under Chapter VII. **Peacekeeping** operations are based on the consent of the parties, impartiality, and the use of force only in self-defence or to carry out the mandate.

Case	What happened	What it shows
Rwanda, 1994	about 800,000 people, mostly Tutsi, were killed in about 100 days; the UN reduced its small peacekeeping force	without political will, peacekeeping cannot stop mass killing
Northern Ireland, 1998	the Good Friday Agreement created a government shared by both communities	power-sharing can end violence, but trust takes much longer
Colombia, 2016	a peace agreement with the FARC rebels ended a war of more than 50 years	building positive peace (land reform, justice) is slower than a ceasefire

Writing a Paper 2 essay

The essay plan is the same as in history: a clear thesis, two or three arguments with named, recent cases, a counter-argument and a judgement. Use the theme's concepts by name.

Worked essay plan. A sample question from the IB: *"To what extent is addressing structural violence increasingly important to achieving lasting peace?"*

1. Thesis: to a large extent; most recent wars are intrastate and grow from inequality and exclusion, so a ceasefire alone does not last.
2. Argument: in Colombia, unequal land ownership was a cause of the war, so land reform is part of the 2016 agreement.
3. Argument: in Northern Ireland, power-sharing and equal rights in jobs and housing addressed old discrimination.
4. Counter-argument: direct violence must stop first; without security, reforms cannot happen, and some wars are driven by outside states or armed groups, not structures.
5. Judgement: stopping direct violence comes first, but lasting peace now depends more on reducing structural violence than in the era of interstate wars.

Checklist

- Paper 2: 1 hour 30 minutes; essays on the three themes; 40% SL, 30% HL.
- Rights: UDHR 1948 and the 1966 treaties; three generations; universalism and relativism; the ICC and its limits; R2P with Libya and Syria.
- Development: Sen's freedoms; HDI; MDGs and SDGs; Brundtland; aid, trade, debt and inequality debates.

- Peace: interstate and intrastate conflict; Galtung's negative and positive peace and structural violence; Article 2(4), Article 51, Chapter VII; peacekeeping; Rwanda, Northern Ireland, Colombia.
- An essay plan with a thesis, cases, a counter-argument and a judgement.

The engagement project

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IB Diploma Programme Global Politics SL (the guide first assessed in 2026). The internal assessment is the **engagement project**, which SL and HL students both do. You choose a **political issue**, **engage** with it outside the classroom (for example by interviewing people, volunteering or observing meetings), research it, and write a **report** of up to 2,000 words. It is worth 30% at SL and 20% at HL. HL students also write a separate, evidence-based **recommendation** (up to about 400 words) on how the issue could be addressed.

Every evening in Chinese cities, millions of food-delivery riders race against the clock. An app sets their routes, their time limits and their pay. Who decided those rules, and who can change them? Is a rider an employee with rights, or an independent worker? The same questions are argued in courts and parliaments from London to California. A local scene like this, connected to a global debate, is exactly what an engagement project studies.

Must-know for the engagement project:

Area	Key content
format	report of up to 2,000 words; 30% SL, 20% HL; HL adds a recommendation
issue	political, debatable, connected to a global debate, possible to engage with
engagement	first-hand, purposeful, recorded, ethical
research	published sources and different perspectives, compared and evaluated
report	issue, research, engagement, analysis with key concepts, reflection

Choosing the issue

An issue is **political** when it is about power: who decides, who benefits and who pays. "Plastic in the ocean" is a topic; "who should pay to clean plastic from our coast: the city, the companies that make plastic, or the people who buy it?" is a political issue.

A good issue is:

- **debatable**: different groups really disagree;
- **globally connected**: a local example of a global debate, or a global debate felt locally;
- **engageable**: you can actually meet people, visit places or join activities connected to it.

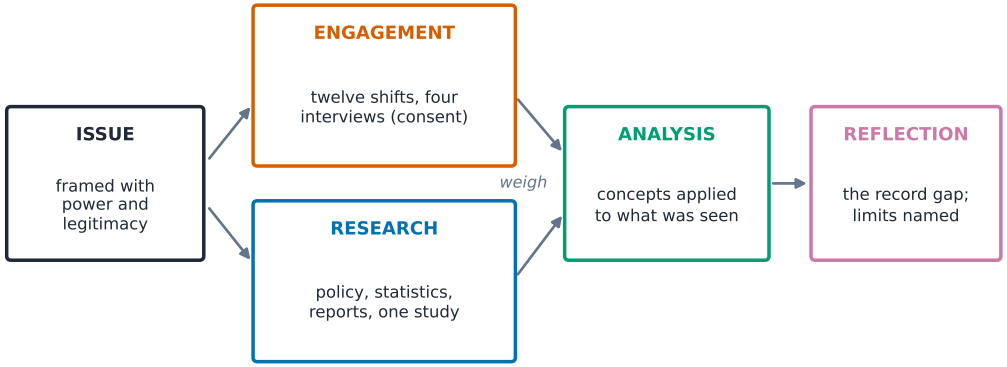
Turn the issue into a question that uses one or two key concepts from the core:

Weak	Strong
Are delivery apps good?	How do delivery platforms use power over riders in my city, and how far do recent rules protect riders' rights?
Is pollution bad?	How far has the river clean-up programme in my district gained legitimacy with local residents?

Engagement and research

Engagement is first-hand experience of the issue. It must be purposeful (chosen to answer your question) and recorded (notes, interview transcripts, a diary, photographs where allowed). Follow basic **research ethics** : ask for **informed consent** before an interview, keep people anonymous if they ask, and never put anyone at risk.

Research adds published sources: official documents, statistics, news reports and academic studies. Compare different **perspectives** (the government, a company, the people affected, independent experts), and evaluate them: whose view has evidence, whose view serves its own interests, and whose voice is missing?



Engagement and research are weighed against each other in the analysis; reflection names what was learned and its limits.

Writing the report

1. **The issue**: the question, why it is political, and how it links to a global debate.
2. **Research**: what the published sources and perspectives show.
3. **Engagement**: what you did, saw and heard.
4. **Analysis**: apply the key concepts (power, sovereignty, legitimacy, interdependence, and ideas such as rights or development) to your evidence. Compare what people told you with what the documents say.
5. **Reflection** : what the engagement showed that reading alone could not; the limits of your evidence; what you would do differently; how your own position (age, background, language) affected what you learned.

> **Worked example.** Question: *How do delivery platforms use power over riders in my city, and how far do recent rules protect riders' rights?*

- Engagement: interviews with six riders at a rest station (with consent; names not used); a conversation with a staff member at a community service centre for riders; two hours observing pick-ups at a busy shopping centre.
- Research: national guidelines on delivery riders' rights issued in 2021; platform statements on how delivery times are set; news reports; a study of platform work in another country.
- Analysis: the app's algorithm sets the agenda (a hidden face of power): riders cannot negotiate times, only accept or refuse orders. The guidelines gained legitimacy with riders when they produced visible changes (longer time limits), but riders said that pay per order still depends on the platform alone. Interdependence: platforms need riders, but each rider depends far more on the platform (asymmetric).
- Reflection: six riders at one station are not all riders; riders may not speak freely to a student; the platforms did not agree to an interview, so their perspective comes only from public statements.
- HL recommendation: an evidence-based proposal, such as publishing how delivery times are calculated, with the reasons from the evidence and the likely objections.

Checklist

- The format: up to 2,000 words; 30% SL, 20% HL; the HL recommendation.
- A political, debatable, globally connected, engageable issue, framed as a question with key concepts.
- Engagement: first-hand, purposeful, recorded, ethical (consent, anonymity, safety).
- Research: sources and perspectives compared and evaluated.
- The report's five parts, with analysis through key concepts and an honest reflection.