

STUDY GUIDE

ACADEMIC
WORLDQUEST
2026

TOPICS



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Pop Culture and Soft Power in International Relations

Round Description

In 1990, scholar Joseph Nye coined the term “soft power” to refer to how countries can influence others with means other than military force. Pop culture, broadly defined as popular mass media, has emerged as a potent form of soft power. Through this topic, you will explore how pop culture influences international relations, including as an exercise of soft power. You will also engage with contemporary instances of pop culture influencing global politics, its ability to change global attitudes in the internet age, and how countries like the US and China have recently shifted their cultural soft power approaches.

Round Sources

Council on Foreign Relations | [What Is Soft Power?](#)

Council on Foreign Relations | [Soft Power](#) (Simulation)

The Conversation | [Is China the new cool? How Beijing is using pop culture to win the soft power war](#)

University of Toronto | [The China dream in Fiji: Migrant perspectives of the Belt and Road Initiative](#)

Korean Cultural Center | [Leading the Way in Video Games and E-Sports](#)

Brill | [Soft Power and Public Diplomacy Revisited](#)

Time | [How the U.S. Used Jazz as a Cold War Secret Weapon](#)

Centre for Social and Economic Progress | [India rising: Soft power and the world's largest democracy](#)



The FIFA World Cup

Round Description

Since its founding in 1904, the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) has strengthened the international ties of the soccer community. The World Cup's unparalleled popularity often provides a significant economic and cultural draw to host countries, cities, and communities – especially relevant in 2026 given that the USA, Canada, and Mexico will share tournament hosting duties. This topic familiarizes you with some of soccer's roles in international relations. You will also explore some controversies surrounding the largest global athletic event after the Olympics.

Round Sources

World Trade Organization | [FIFA-WTO study shows economic impact of the FIFA Women's World Cup 2023](#)

International Monetary Fund | [2022 FIFA World Cup: Economic Impact on Qatar and Regional Spillovers](#)

SKEMA Business School | [Geopolitical Economy of Sport: Power, Politics, Money & the State](#)

World Economic Forum | [Does hosting a World Cup make economic sense?](#)

The Conversation | [When big sports events expand, like FIFA's 2026 World Cup matches across North America, their climate footprint expands too](#)

Baker Institute | [Global Sports and Soft Power Diplomacy](#)

Council on Foreign Relations | [The Mixed Record of Sports Diplomacy](#)

Kera News | [FIFA World Cup projected to bring \\$2 billion to North Texas. Here's what it means to the region](#)



Migration and Immigration

Round Description

Human movement is a phenomenon as old as history. But migration (movement of people across international borders) is a topic with heightened significance today. According to the United Nations, more people than ever live in a country other than the one in which they were born. Immigration (movement into a country) and emigration (movement out of a country) are motivated by a host of factors. Delve into these “push” and “pull” factors shaping our world, as well as the effects of large-scale migration on countries and people affected.

Round Sources

Refugee Educational Advancement Lab, George Washington University | [Three Reasons the U.S. Should Prioritize Education in Conflict and Crisis Settings](#)

Council on Foreign Relations | [For Migrants, Labels Matter](#)

Council on Foreign Relations | [Migration Today](#)

UN Refugees | [Syria Refugee Crisis Explained](#)

PBS | [How a small Wisconsin community is responding to a recent migrant surge](#)

Gallup News | [Desire to Migrate Remains at Record High](#)

Carnegie Endowment for International Peace | [Migrants at the Gate: Europe Tries to Curb Undocumented Migration](#)

Crash Course | [Where and Why Do People Move? Crash Course Geography #32](#)



The U.S. Constitution and Foreign Policy

Round Description

The question of how the Constitution shapes U.S. foreign policy is a rich one, with debates about constitutional power over foreign affairs as old as the nation. The Constitution makes the President the Commander in Chief, but gives Congress the ability to declare war. In this topic, especially relevant as we celebrate the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence in 2026, you will study the history of these debates, as well as how constitutional concerns affect the modern foreign policy landscape. You will also examine to what extent values enshrined in the Constitution (democracy, human rights, and the rule of law) influence U.S. foreign policy.

Round Sources

Constitution Center | [A Brief History of the Constitution and Tariffs](#)

Council on Foreign Relations | [What Roles Do Congress and the President Play in U.S. Foreign Policy?](#)

Council on Foreign Relations | [How a Single Phrase Defined the War on Terror](#)

Bill of Rights Institute | [The President as Chief Diplomat](#)

Brookings | [What does America's foreign and military policy have to do with democracy?](#)

Freedom House | [A Freedom-focused Foreign Policy: Good for the United States, Good for the World](#)

Quincy Institute | [Americans, Go Home?](#)



The Belt and Road Initiative

Round Description

In 2013, China launched an ambitious foreign economic development program titled One Belt, One Road (later renamed Belt and Road Initiative, or BRI for short). While historically the Chinese Communist Party prioritized self-reliance rather than engagement with the international community, in recent years China has pivoted to global engagement to expand economic influence and access to markets. Through this topic you will become familiar with the geopolitical implications of this policy, its economic effects on China and the rest of the world, and how the United States is reacting to China's increasing role on the world stage.

Round Sources

Chatham House | [What is China's Belt and Road Initiative \(BRI\)?](#)

Economics Observatory | [The Belt and Road Initiative: what impact on China and the global economy?](#)

NPR | [As China's Belt and Road project turns 10, it's about more than just development](#)

East Asia Forum | [Pacific sovereignty maintains the same malleability down China's belt and road](#)

Center for Strategic and International Studies | [Enabling a Better Offer: How Does the West Counter Belt and Road?](#)

Council on Foreign Relations | [Will the U.S. Plan to Counter China's Belt and Road Initiative Work?](#)

Council on Foreign Relations | [What Is Economic Statecraft?](#)

UN Trade and Development | [China's BRI isn't like the Marshall Plan, but Beijing can still learn from it](#)



Tariffs and Trade

Round Description

Since the end of the Second World War, openness to free international trade has increased markedly. More countries have signed agreements to allow free exchanges, and entities like the World Trade Organization have lowered trading barriers and increased the flow of capital and goods across borders. Some countries have maintained trade barriers consistently, while other countries have restricted once-free trade to protect domestic industries and jobs. In this topic, you will research tariffs, a signature tool used to raise trade barriers, as well as how attitudes towards global trade are changing in today's geopolitical landscape.

Round Sources

Council on Foreign Relations | [What Gets in the Way of Free Trade?](#)

NPR | [Tariffs: What are they good for?](#)

UN Trade and Development | [Key evolutions in trade and development over the decades](#)

UN Trade and Development | [The reshaping of global trade: How developing countries can strategize](#)

Brookings | [Why South-South trade is already greater than North-North trade—and what it means for Africa](#)

Council on Foreign Relations | [The Globe-Trotting Journey of a Sneaker](#)

BBC | [A timeline of global trade](#)

Council on Foreign Relations | [Trade as Foreign Policy](#)



Coffee and Chocolate: A Global Perspective

Round Description

Coffee and chocolate are extremely lucrative goods whose trade is highly sought after. At the same time, concerns have developed surrounding those who farm these products and the environmental impact of these industries. Through this topic, you will research aspects of coffee and chocolate production, as well as efforts to institute ethical trade and consumption of these goods. You will also explore how COVID-19 affected the trade of coffee and chocolate.

Round Sources

BBC | [How the World Came to Run on Coffee](#)

Harvard International Review | [Bittersweet: The Harsh Realities of Chocolate Production in West Africa](#)

NPR | [Fair Trade Helps Farmers, But Not Their Hired Workers](#)

Fair Trade Certified | [Fair Trade USA™ and Education in Ivory Coast](#)

US Bureau of Labor Statistics | [Historic coffee prices percolated after a bitter global supply crisis](#)

Council on Foreign Relations | [Climate Change and the Coffee Industry](#)

Council on Foreign Relations | [Trouble Brewing for Coffee](#)

Corporate Accountability Lab | [From Cote d'Ivoire to Chicago: The Impact of Covid-19 on Workers in the Chocolate Supply Chain](#)



Nuclear Policy Issues

Round Description

Nuclear power occupies a prominent place in the public consciousness. Atomic bombs and radiation are often the first terms that accompany a discussion of the word “nuclear,” but nuclear power is a much wider concept. In this topic, you will study how nuclear weapons factor into military strategy for the US and other nations, and efforts to prevent the spread of dangerous nuclear technology or even abolish nuclear weapons entirely. You will also explore civilian applications of nuclear power and debates over whether nuclear energy can meaningfully combat climate change.

Round Sources

NPR | [Small modular reactors and the future of nuclear energy](#)

US State Department | [The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty \(NPT\), 1968](#)

Center for Strategic and International Studies | [Kazakhstan’s Emerging Civilian Nuclear Energy Industry: Implications for U.S. Strategic Interests](#)

American University School of International Service | [What Does ‘Oppenheimer’ Get Wrong?](#)

Council on Foreign Relations | [The Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty](#)

Atlantic Council | [Atoms for Appalachia: The role of nuclear energy in economic development](#)

Council on Foreign Relations | [Tools of Nonproliferation](#)

Council on Foreign Relations | [South Africa: Why Countries Acquire and Abandon Nuclear Bombs](#)



Focus Country: Australia

Round Description

The Commonwealth of Australia is both the smallest continent on Earth and one of the largest countries on the planet. While the government has its roots in British penal colony administration, Australia has a rich pre-European history; Australia's indigenous peoples have lived on the land for more than 60,000 years. Today, Australia boasts a proudly multicultural population as a parliamentary democracy and constitutional monarchy. Through this topic, you will navigate an overview of the Australian state, its contemporary politics and culture, and the U.S.-Australia relationship.

Round Sources

CIA | [Australia – The World Factbook](#)

US Department of Defense | [AUKUS Defense Ministers' Joint Statement](#)

Brookings | [The other 'special' relationship: Australia](#)

Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade | [DFAT – Trade Through Time](#)

NPR | [Australia's Prime Minister Anthony Albanese heads to a second 3-year term](#)

RosterCon | [Australian Pop Culture's Global Influence](#)

Carnegie Endowment | [Beneath the Mateship, a Quiet Crisis Is Brewing in the U.S.-Australia Alliance](#)

Council on Foreign Relations | [Australia's Growing Defense and Security Role in the Indo-Pacific](#)



Current Events



Round Description

This yearly dive into the world of the news tests your knowledge of what's happening around the globe and to help you spot larger trends in these events. The two required sources in the box below provide different yet complementary perspectives, helping you think more critically about information you encounter. Understanding the narrative arcs of current events assists in making more informed choices, joining in on important discussions as young leaders, and deciding how to contribute to your community most effectively.

Round Sources

GlobalPost

The Enemy of My Enemy...: The New Saudi-Pakistan Defense Pact Is Rattling Some Capitals

<https://globalpost.com/2025/10/22/the-enemy-of-my-enemy-the-new-saudi-pakistan-defense-pact-is-rattling-some-capitals/>

Mali Is 'On Edge' as Jihadists Make Gains

<https://globalpost.com/2025/10/22/the-enemy-of-my-enemy-the-new-saudi-pakistan-defense-pact-is-rattling-some-capitals/>

The Fire and the Fury: A Devastating Blaze in Hong Kong Unleashes Public Anger as Elections

Approach

<https://globalpost.com/2025/12/05/the-fire-and-the-fury-a-devastating-blaze-in-hong-kong-unleashes-public-anger-as-elections-approach/>

The Geography of Violence: Nigeria Grapples with Militants, Bandits, and Tribal Conflicts as the US Mulls Intervention

<https://globalpost.com/2025/11/13/the-geography-of-violence-nigeria-grapples-with-militants-bandits-and-tribal-conflicts-as-the-us-mulls-intervention/>

Peruvian Roulette: Peruvians Take to the Streets Against Another New Government that Feels All Too Familiar

<https://globalpost.com/2025/11/19/peruvian-roulette-peruvians-take-to-the-streets-against-another-new-government-that-feels-all-too-familiar/>

A Healing Scar: After a Tense Election, Northern Cyprus Gets a Fresh Start

<https://globalpost.com/2025/11/05/a-healing-scar-after-a-tense-election-northern-cyprus-gets-a-fresh-start/>

Caribbean Countries, Worried About US, Shore Up Their Own Bloc

<https://globalpost.com/2025/10/14/caribbean-countries-worried-about-us-shore-up-their-own-bloc/>

Shaking It Up: Sri Lanka's First Presidential Arrest Tests Its Revolution

<https://globalpost.com/2025/10/16/shaking-it-up-sri-lankas-first-presidential-arrest-tests-its-revolution/>



**WORLD AFFAIRS COUNCIL
OF GREATER HOUSTON**
Global Perspectives, Local Conversations

**February 17, 2026
9:30 AM - 2:30 PM**

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