

EDU GUIDE

IS INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THE RIGHT MAJOR FOR YOU?

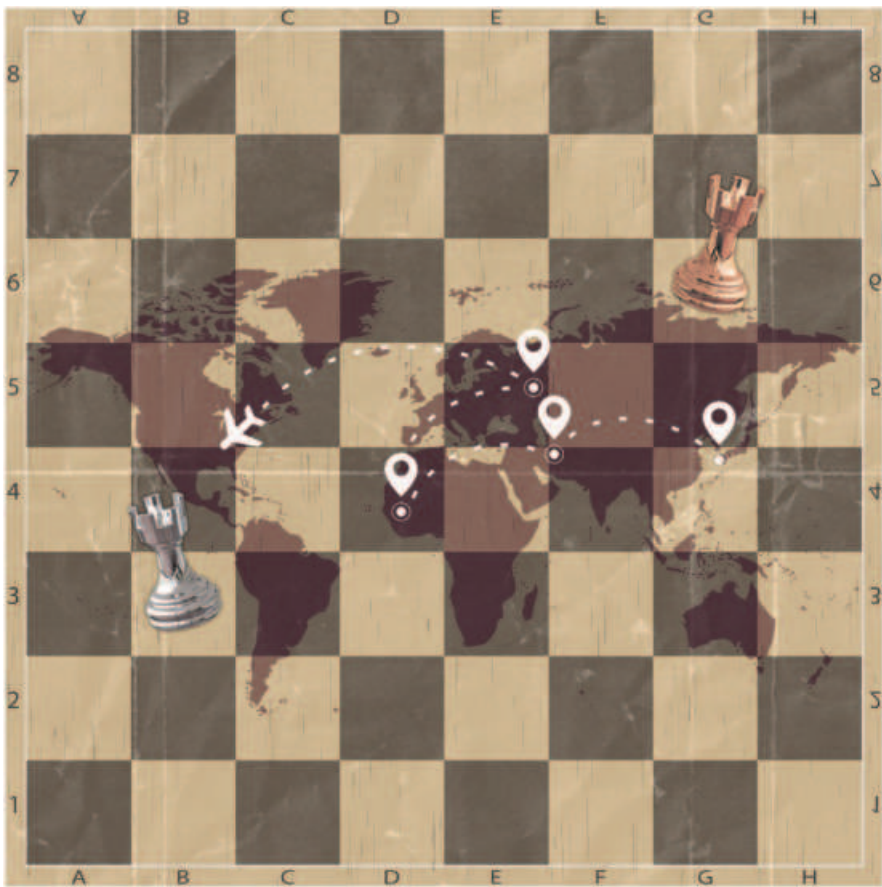


ILLUSTRATION: SYEDA AFRIN TARANNUM

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Have you ever wondered why nations go to war or how peace agreements are made? If you're someone who's always asking 'why' when it comes to global events, International Relations (IR) might be the perfect major for you.

IR dives into the fascinating world of diplomacy, global conflict resolution, and international cooperation, offering you the tools to understand how countries interact and make decisions that impact the world. That being said, is this major the right fit for you?

“IR teaches you how the world functions,” says Nilufer Amin, a third-year student studying IR at Dhaka University (DU). “As an IR major, you will have to learn relevant history, geography, law, sociology, and economics while studying diplomacy, strategic studies, policy-making, and the roles of international organisations.”

The study of IR is dynamic and ever-changing. Today's IR graduates do not study the same material as graduates from a decade ago. As the field continues to grow, more theories are introduced. In IR, objectivity is rare, as new theories and discourses constantly emerge.

“We have had almost every subject from the social sciences in our courses, such as Political Science, Economics, Sociology, History, etc,” says Tasneem

Tabassum Zahir, a third-year IR student from DU. “If I have to talk about some courses, Political Geography, Strategic Studies, Foreign Policy Analysis, and Theories of International Relations particularly stood out for me. In Political Geography, we had an overview of how geography can influence political outcomes. Strategic Studies gave us an overview of wartime strategies and the philosophies of different figures, such as Kautilya, Clausewitz, Sun Tzu, etc. In Foreign Policy Analysis, we learned how and when a policy becomes foreign, the psychology of leaders, and how and why countries make controversial decisions.”

Although IR's heavy focus on theory may seem intriguing to some, it can quickly become exhausting, especially if you're not mentally prepared for such theory-focused coursework.

“As a naive first-year student, I thought studying IR was going to be my pipeline to becoming a diplomat or policymaker,” says Zerida Rahman, an IR graduate from Bangladesh University of Professionals (BUP). “It felt like such a serious and decorated degree. I know better now. As a fresh IR major, I did not expect the amount of reading I would have to do. I have also decided not to pursue a master's in IR even though that was my initial plan. It's just too broad and theoretical.”

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However, the balance between theory and application varies between institutions. In that regard, more research should be done into a university's IR curriculum.

“The last government class I took was an international relations class with a focus on theory, but we had a lot of applications too,” says Hrishik Roy, a sophomore at Dartmouth College. “For example, once our professor discussed how the main theories explain conflict, he went on to describe how you could apply those theories to analyse statecraft in the real world. He talked about how the Saudi-US military alliance would impact global politics through the lens of liberalism and realism. So, while the class did teach theories, I think it had its fair share of analysis too, and I genuinely think that it equipped me with the practical skills required to analyse state behaviour, even if at a rudimentary level.”

One of the biggest obstacles an IR student will face is the fact that there is no

standard career path or roadmap for an IR graduate.

“While IR as a degree offers flexibility, it doesn't directly translate to a specific career path,” says Zerida. “The civil service is the most sought-after route, followed by careers in local and international NGOs. It is not impossible to land a job relevant to your degree, and academia is not the only answer. I graduated in January and am currently working in an organisation that is a joint project between an embassy and a prominent NGO. I know IR grads working in MNCs, marketing agencies, media, etc. as well. If you are willing to put in the work and utilise the essential soft skills an IR degree equips you with, you can get in just about anywhere.”

Corporations, especially multinational companies, rely on IR graduates for roles in international business development, global supply chain management, and corporate social responsibility (CSR).

IR can lead to careers in industries like international consulting, global marketing, public relations, and even working for tech firms that operate globally. The analytical, strategic, and communication skills gained from an IR degree make it highly adaptable to various corporate roles.

It is recommended that prospective students read up on IR before choosing it as their major. Without a genuine interest in the subject's intricate blend of political and social science theories, it may be challenging to stay engaged.

Fariha Alam Piu, a first-year IR student from BUP, adds in this regard, “Anybody considering a major in IR should develop the habit of reading. In our country, we face a lot of limitations when studying Social Sciences, so this journey is not going to be as smooth as it sounds. IR is also not a place for people who want to stay inside their echo chambers and refuse to educate themselves. People are often entitled to their beliefs, but holding biases will negatively impact how you view this subject. So, if you want to study IR, you should be prepared to let go of your biases and be open to learning about diverse perspectives and ideologies.”

“The perk of studying IR is that you get to critically view everything in a way most people can't. It can be an incredibly interesting subject if you put effort into reading about it and figure out if it's the right fit for you,” adds Fariha.

With courses spanning Political Science, Economics, History, and Geography, an IR major is a rewarding but demanding journey. Whether you're looking to work in government agencies, NGOs, or multinational corporations, IR gives you a broad foundation for a variety of career paths.