Comprehensive Exam Preparation

I. Studying for the Exam

- Keep your notes from all of your classes. Establish a consistent manner for organizing and storing your notes. The sooner you can do this, the better. Keep your textbooks and other readings. This will help when you begin to look at notes from a course you took a year ago (or longer) and lack the recollection associated with a recent lecture or discussion.

- Using your notes from classes, you might consider creating a master outline. The construction of the outline should force you to think through the material as you try to determine how it should fit together. How would terrorism fit within the major theoretical approaches to IR? Where does nuclear proliferation fit? International law? As you think about these things and review your notes, you will be mentally processing the information (active learning). Define key terms and concepts within your outline (i.e. sovereignty, security dilemma, institutions, soft power). Where your notes are weak, go back to the class syllabus and re-read the assignments. Alternatively, you might look at syllabi from other instructors' classes to see where you might need to do some reading. The value in this is the process more than the product, although the final outline should be useful as a study guide.

- Some students find study groups to be an effective tactic. Such groups can help provide structure and accountability when properly undertaken. You may wish to form a study group with others preparing for the exams – site administrators may be able to help in arranging this.

- It is very important that you stay in contact with your Troy professors as you prepare for the examination. They can advise you on the best ways to organize your course materials, plan your study, and practice writing your exams.

II. Prior to Writing Your Answer

- Take a few minutes to collect your thoughts and sketch an outline prior to answering the question. Your exam answers should be well-crafted, logically organized essays.

- Answer the question asked. To do this, break the question into its constituent parts, identifying exactly what you are asked to do. Use this to guide your creation of an outline prior to beginning your answer.

- Consider who the major thinkers and authors are with regard to the question's subject matter. You must include references to relevant thinkers in your answers. While identification of exact titles is not required, citing the key authors/theorists is. The Departmental guide identifies many of the key thinkers with whom you should be familiar. You should have read works by most of these authors in your classes.
• Few things of significance in IR are one-sided. If they were, there would be no problem or controversy worth studying. Most things have both good and bad points associated with them. Thus, be sure to address all sides of an issue in an exam question. Do not treat the questions as opportunities to engage in ideological rhetoric, arguing for a specific position. Some students seem to think that a spirited argument, often from a strongly conservative or liberal ideological position, is sufficient to answer a question dealing with controversial issues. However, the Comps are testing you on your ability to apply unbiased, logical, reasoned analysis. Try to explain the various points of view and the tradeoffs that policymakers must deal with.

III. Drafting Your Answer

• One of the remarks that consistently appears on grading sheets is “ambiguous” or “lack of details.” On the comprehensive exams, it is necessary to demonstrate a mastery of the subject matter – not merely familiarity with a handful of ideas. Many of the most interesting debates in IR involve nuance. Facile characterizations, such as portraying realists as “war-mongering neanderthals” and liberals as “tree-hugging hippies” display a lack of understanding. Accurate real-world examples provide depth to answers and help demonstrate that the student has in fact mastered the material.

• Besides providing basic facts and discussing theoretical approaches, you are expected to analyze the question. Political and IR analysis involves carefully assessing the various implications raised by the topic. Among the approaches used in political analysis are: listing of pros and cons of a particular policy, sketching a typology of actions, discussing the political actors involved and their motives, contrasting external and internal influences on policy, weighing domestic and international political dynamics, and judging possible scenarios for the future.

• You should provide adequate depth to your explanations and arguments. It is not enough to merely drop names of particular scholars or mention in passing specific theoretical approaches or IR concepts. You must thoroughly explain key ideas of those scholars, and provide a detailed overview of leading theories and concepts. Then, you need to directly relate such scholarly work to the question at hand.

• It is imperative to be precise with terminology and definitions. Lack of clarity often indicates that the student does not understand the ideas but rather is simply including “buzzwords.”

• The exam answers should be written as formal academic papers. Part of the exam grade depends on demonstrating adequate skills of expression including grammar and rhetoric. Basic errors, such as incomplete sentences, lack of subject-verb agreement, and misspellings, leave a negative impression. Thus, take the time to proofread carefully.
The comprehensive exam answer is an opportunity to demonstrate what you know about an issue. Avoid the minimalist approach. Most questions are quite broad, allowing for expansive answers. Of course this does not mean lengthen your answer through fluff or redundancy – such tactics are counterproductive and can count against you. What this does mean is consider all facets of the question asked.