The Cities Are Moving

Instructor guide

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Use this individual browser simulation to help introductory IR students turn theory labels into explanations. Students advise a fictional city, compare competing accounts, and revise their reasoning after new evidence. Assign it after students have encountered the basic approaches; no background knowledge of the fictional setting is needed.

Assign For Class as the sole assignment for the exam-prep week. Open For Class online

What students should learn

- Explain a specific action through a causal mechanism or a process that shapes interests, identities, and legitimate conduct.
- Compare plausible explanations and identify evidence that would help distinguish them.
- Revise an earlier account without rewriting what was known at the time.
- Transfer the method to a new case and recognize what the evidence or model cannot establish.

Assignment at a glance

Part	Main work	Planned time	Writing
A	Explain adoption and give initial advice	60 min	14 responses
B	Investigate, revise, negotiate, and transfer	75 min	26 responses
C	Rehearse an exam answer and revise	70 min	2 responses

Students complete 42 written responses across A, B, and C with a combined 1,425-word minimum. The minimums establish completion. Judge the reasoning using the rubric.

Prepare the class

Post the For Class link, due date, collaboration policy, and Canvas submission instructions. Have students enter their name and keep a downloaded progress backup.

Plan about 205 minutes in three sittings, with flexible breaks. Allow 60 minutes for A, 75 for B, and 70 for C. These are pacing estimates.

Keep the theoretical distinctions clear

Students use five working approaches within three broad families. The exercise groups realism and neorealism for introductory application. It does not require students to settle their internal debates or identify one theory that explains everything.

Approach	What the explanation must connect	A limit to watch
Realism and neorealism	Security, capabilities, uncertainty, or dependence to prudential choices under anarchy.	Cooperation and restraint can serve security. Anarchy does not mean chaos or constant war.
Economic interdependence	Costs of disruption and affected economic interests to government preferences.	Trade can be unequal and create vulnerability. It does not guarantee peace.
Neoliberal institutionalism	A particular rule or procedure to information, monitoring, coordination, or credible cooperation.	A treaty is not an explanation by itself. The observer team cannot compel compliance.
Kantian and democratic peace	Public and institutional constraints and relationships among democracies to restraint.	Democracies still fight wars. The approach need not explain every agreement or commercial purchase.
Constructivism	Shared identities, roles, norms, or practices to what actors want or find appropriate and threatening.	Go beyond personal opinions or slogans. Ideas can sustain conflict, and a shared role can have contested boundaries.

Do not equate a policy with a theory

The same recommendation can follow from different reasoning. A joint verification visit could address a security concern, reduce uncertainty, protect commerce, or express reciprocal standing. Assess how students explain the recommendation, including the limits they acknowledge.

Treat evidence as evidence

A source can support several accounts. Official statements are attributed claims to assess, rather than a direct window into the decisive motive. Later records may test an earlier explanation; later events cannot cause an earlier decision. Acknowledging partial explanatory reach is stronger than inventing missing facts.

Aster and Brin are democracies in the case; Corda has an unelected executive; Dune is mixed. Students need not force Dune into a binary category. Populations contain competing interests, and regime type does not make an entire population trustworthy or villainous.

Guide students through the investigation

Part A establishes the first account

The Day 0 Twin Reef Protocol has already been adopted by all four governments. Students first recommend an implementation priority and then explain adoption through all five approaches. Keep explanation and advice distinct. The first-night report can prompt revised advice without changing the original agreement or its adoption date.

The toolkit provides worked examples and knowledge checks. Students must attempt the checks and read the authored feedback; correctness is not a hidden political score. Encourage them to return to these examples when an answer names a concept without explaining how it matters.

Part B uses two separate outcomes

First, students build rival explanations of Aster's different replies to Brin and Corda escorts. The conduct is comparable in specified respects; the countries and histories are not identical. The game preserves both accounts and a prediction before opening the new investigation records.

Students preserve the escort prediction, then compare it with the archive. They return to the Day 0 agreement in a separate set of questions. Ask which action, actor, and date their answer explains.

B08 links technical recommendations to differing replies while leaving more than one motive plausible. B09 records a later shared practice with contested boundaries. It can illuminate how a role works; its Day 11 occurrence cannot cause Day 0 adoption or the earlier escort replies. Avoid telling students that either record proves a whole theory.

Negotiation tests feasible advice

On Day 12, two days remain before expiry. Students propose renewal and respond to a counteroffer. Observer teams and civilian tug crews have stated limits, and revised terms require all four governments' approval. The authored responses are practice possibilities. Selecting a proposal does not establish that governments accepted it or that its hoped-for effects occurred.

Transfer and scope use separate variations

Students first explain Norhaven's recorded satellite purchase. X01-X03 then change the offers while preserving stated relationships; no purchase has been observed in that variation. Keep the original answers intact and assess conditional expectations. The final excluded-community prompt is another stated variation, not a hidden fact about the original cities.

Optional Evidence Remix notes are ungraded practice, saved separately from the assessed portfolio. They need not be assigned to complete the enhanced exercise.

Assess the reasoning and its revision

Use the portfolio to assess application rather than agreement with a preferred policy. The app checks names, required writing, selections, and review steps. It does not evaluate the academic meaning of an essay, use an AI grader, or reward a political choice.

A compact assessment rubric

Score each criterion from 0 to 2 for a ten-point assignment. Use the same standard across approaches. For a lower-stakes activity, mark completion and give one substantive comment on a selected response.

Criterion	2 points	1 point	0 points
Outcome and context	Explains the requested action and keeps dates and variations distinct.	Target is partly clear, with a minor mix-up.	Explains a different event or merges separate cases.
Theory and process	Uses the approach accurately and explains how facts shape behavior.	Relevant concept with an incomplete connection.	Label only or a fundamental theoretical error.
Evidence and uncertainty	Uses specific records and states a material gap or limit.	Uses a fact with weak support or qualification.	Unsupported assertion or invented case fact.
Rival and comparison	Gives a plausible rival and a reason evidence could distinguish it.	Names an alternative with little comparison.	Omits or misstates the requested rival.
Revision and transfer	Explains what changes or survives and applies the method to the new case.	Revision or transfer is present but thin.	No relevant reconsideration or transfer.

Calibrate with an independent example

Two towns keep a bridge open while joint engineers publish damage checks. "Institutions create cooperation" names a theory. A stronger explanation says how published checks reduce uncertainty about repairs and help councils coordinate while the bridge stays open. A further comparison asks whether lost toll income could explain the same choice and what earlier minutes would reveal.

Reward that reasoning habit in the game. Length alone does not make the answer stronger. Students may reasonably retain an earlier explanation if they justify why the new record does not change it.

Give selective feedback

Ask students to flag one response they want discussed. The flag appears in the exported portfolio; it sends no message. Comment on one mechanism, one use of evidence, or one rival that needs development. Completion marks and self-review examples help students inspect their work but do not certify theoretical accuracy.

Debrief and collect the work

Choose a few debrief questions

- Which case fact did two approaches use differently? What process made the explanations different?
- What did you predict before the archive opened? What did B08 change, and what did it leave unresolved?
- When could cooperation serve a security interest? When could an institution fail despite mutual benefits?
- How did the helper role shape conduct? What would a strategic rival explanation emphasize?
- In the satellite variation, which changed condition pulled against the established relationship?
- Who bears a negotiated agreement's costs without having a vote? What can the model establish about consent?

Collect a readable portfolio

Ask students to complete Parts A, B, and C, choose Print / Save PDF and upload the single portfolio to Canvas. A progress JSON backup restores the editable run in the same mode.

Completed parts are preserved. A new Part B revision keeps the original Part A and investigation baseline. Revising Part A creates a new Part B lineage while keeping earlier completed records in history. Use those records to discuss intellectual change rather than penalizing a defensible initial hypothesis.

Support access and continuity

Settings offers larger text, stronger contrast, reduced motion, and text-first presentation. Focus view gives writing more room. Students can type, dictate, or reuse text within the same assessed answer. The Part C clock is optional.

Remind students to download Save progress before stopping or changing devices. Local drafts depend on the browser and device. Cleared site data and private browsing can remove them. Restore a downloaded JSON file to continue; Portfolio also offers recovery copies when available. Avoid editing the same attempt in multiple tabs.

Use the model within its scope

The fictional cities are not coded equivalents of real countries. The original model assumes recognized sovereignty and settled platform rights. It does not model occupation, expulsion, or disputed sovereignty. The excluded-community variation opens a discussion of representation without retroactively changing those assumptions.

The planned time is a teaching estimate, not a measured student completion time. After using the activity, ask where students lost the target question and which explanation they revised. Use those observations to adjust pacing and feedback, and assess learning through the reasoning students actually produce.

Run the exam rehearsal

Part C asks why a government approved a fictional wildfire aircraft pact. Its separate airspace authorization is pending. The five records point to different mechanisms and can support more than one account. Ask students to name the government action their explanation concerns.

Recall and read 20 minutes

Allow about ten minutes for short retrieval across the five approaches and ten minutes to read the new case. Retrieval feedback is for practice.

Draft an answer 25 minutes

Ask for a 150-word comparison of two plausible explanations, one relevant record for each, and an observation that would distinguish them. A student can explain why the records leave two accounts tied.

Review the rubric 15 minutes

Students compare their reasoning with an annotated parallel example. Keep the first draft visible so they can trace what changes. Record support when a student elects it.

Revise an inference 10 minutes

Ask for an 80-word revision or defense of one inference and a concrete next test. The evidence can justify retaining an earlier claim.

Review the submitted work

Use the same criteria as the main investigation. Look for the specified outcome, a correct mechanism, relevant dated evidence, a fair comparison, and a warranted revision. Read the first draft and revision together. The Class PDF includes the A and B responses and both rehearsal answers.