

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR
“RACE AND INTERNATIONAL POLITICS”
DR. KEVIN BUSTAMANTE

- Organizing Questions
- What is race, and how is it different from ethnicity?
 - How can race shape relations between countries?
 - How do race-based ideas and racial equality norms influence international politics today?

Summary In January 2026, Dr. Kevin Bustamante, a postdoctoral fellow at the Center for International Security and Cooperation (CISAC) at Stanford University, recorded a 13-minute video on race and international politics. His remarks trace how race has shaped international politics from 1900 through today via prejudice, identity, and global norms. This discussion guide complements and expands upon his video.

After viewing Dr. Bustamante’s remarks, students piece together a timeline of key events mentioned in the video. Next, they review primary sources that demonstrate how race influenced international politics in several of the episodes that Dr. Bustamante highlights. Students then answer questions and work in groups to share what patterns they observed among the primary sources. This discussion guide is appropriate for advanced secondary students and university students.

- Objectives Through the course of this discussion guide, students will
- identify the mechanisms through which race has shaped international politics;
 - analyze historical examples where race shaped diplomacy, war, and great-power relations; and
 - evaluate how racial equality norms operate in contemporary international politics.

Materials Handout 1, *Video Notes*
Handout 2, *Key Events Mentioned in Video*
Handout 3, *Review of Primary Sources*
Handout 4, *Discussion on Primary Sources*
Answer Key 1, *Video Notes*
Answer Key 2, *Key Events Mentioned in Video*
Answer Key 3, *Review of Primary Sources*
Answer Key 4, *Discussion on Primary Sources*

Teacher Information, *Video Transcript*

Video, “Race and International Politics,” online at

<https://spice.fsi.stanford.edu/multimedia/race-and-intl-politics>

Equipment

- Computer with Internet access and an HTML5-supported web browser
- Computer projector and screen

Teacher Preparation

Instructions and materials are based on a class size of 30 students. Adjust accordingly for different class sizes.

1. Preview Video, “Race and International Politics” (running time: 13 minutes). You can use Teacher Information, *Video Transcript*, as a reference for the video content.
2. Make the appropriate number of copies of handouts.
3. Become familiar with the content of the handouts and answer keys.
4. Set up and test your class computer and projector before starting the lesson.
5. Communicate your expectations around whether or how students can use large language models (LLMs) and other forms of generative artificial intelligence to complete the assignments in this guide.

Time

Two 50-minute class periods, plus homework before each class period

Procedures Before Day One

1. Inform students that they will be learning about how race and international politics intersect for the next two class periods.
2. Distribute one copy of Handout 1, *Video Notes*, to each student. Instruct students to watch the video and complete this handout before the next class period. Tell students to reserve 60 minutes to watch the video and complete the handout.

Day One

1. Organize the class into groups of six students each. Distribute one copy of Handout 2, *Key Events Mentioned in Video*, to each student.
2. Inform students that they have 15 minutes to work in their groups to complete Handout 2. In addition to their answers from Handout 1, *Video Notes*, students can use any external resources you approve to complete this.
3. Check in on groups’ progress and use the responses on Answer Key 2, *Key Events Mentioned in Video*, to help any groups who are stuck.
4. After 15 minutes have passed, ask groups to stop working. Ask one group to name the first event along with its significance. Use Answer Key 2 to suggest corrections as needed.
5. Ask the second group to name the second event. Repeat until you have gone through all eight events and the class knows the correct order of the events.

6. Collect Handout 1 and Handout 2 from each student for assessment.
7. Distribute one copy of Handout 3, *Review of Primary Sources*, and explain the assignment clearly to students.
8. Instruct students to work on the assignment for the remainder of the class period.

Before Day Two Students complete Handout 3, *Review of Primary Sources*. Tell students to reserve 60–120 minutes to complete the handout.

- Day Two**
1. Organize the class into groups of four to six students each.
 2. Distribute one copy of Handout 4, *Discussion on Primary Sources*, to each student.
 3. Inform students that they have 30 minutes to discuss the questions on Handout 4 with each other and write down their final responses to each question in the designated spaces on Handout 4. Students should refer to their responses to Handout 3, *Review of Primary Sources*, during their discussion.
 4. As students discuss, roam the classroom to check on their progress and note any discussion points to follow up on. Refer to the model responses on Answer Key 4, *Discussion on Primary Sources*, to assist groups as needed.
 5. If time remains, lead a whole-class discussion on these questions:
 - a. Which events most clearly showed the influence of race on international politics?
 - b. How, if at all, has the effect of race on international politics changed over time?
 6. Collect Handout 3, *Review of Primary Sources*, and Handout 4, *Discussion on Primary Sources*, from each student for assessment.

Assessment The following are suggestions for assessing student work in this lesson:

1. Evaluate student responses to Handout 1, *Video Notes*, based on Answer Key 1, *Video Notes*.
2. Evaluate student responses to Handout 2, *Key Events Mentioned in Video*, based on Answer Key 2, *Key Events Mentioned in Video*.
3. Evaluate student responses to Handout 3, *Review of Primary Sources*, based on Answer Key 3, *Review of Primary Sources*.
4. Evaluate students' notes on Handout 4, *Discussion on Primary Sources*, based on Answer Key 4, *Discussion on Primary Sources*, and how accurately and completely they capture their classmates' remarks.
5. Assess student participation in group and class discussions, evaluating their ability to
 - clearly state their opinions, questions, and/or answers;
 - provide thoughtful answers;

introduction

- exhibit sensitivity toward different cultures and ideas;
- respect and acknowledge other students' comments; and
- ask relevant and insightful questions.

Key Terms (in order of mention)

social construct—an idea created by society that still produces real effects (e.g., money)

race—a socially created category used to group people based on shared physical traits like skin color, with the goal of giving power to some groups and taking it from others

segregation—a system separating groups, often enforced by law or custom

apartheid—the system of racial separation and political domination as practiced in South Africa for much of the second half of the 20th century

ethnicity—identity based on ancestry, culture, language, and shared history

chattel slavery—a system in which enslaved people are treated as property

Jim Crow—a system of laws and practices enforcing racial segregation in the U.S. South after the end of the U.S. Civil War

League of Nations—international organization formed after World War I to prevent war

White Australia immigration policy—a set of Australian laws and practices in place from 1901 until the 1950s designed to keep immigration overwhelmingly white by restricting or excluding non-European migrants

settler colony—colony where outsiders move in to stay permanently and claim land for themselves, rather than just extracting resources and leaving

White Man's Burden—phrase used to describe the belief that white, Western nations had a moral duty to rule over non-white people and “civilize” them; it was mostly used as a justification for imperialism and colonialism

civilizing mission—idea that a “developed” nation has the duty to spread its culture, values, and technology to supposedly “backward” societies

KEY EVENTS MENTIONED IN VIDEO

Match these eight key events mentioned in the video into the correct time periods in the table at the bottom of the page.

A) The United States and the UK underestimate Japan’s military power, contributing to losses in Pearl Harbor and Singapore	E) Countries use human rights shortcomings and racial disparities to shame their rivals
B) The United Kingdom cedes its role as the dominant global power to the United States with minimal resistance due to the fact that the two countries are a shared “English-speaking race”	F) Russia underestimates Japan’s military capability, contributing to lopsided war losses
C) European empires justify colonial rule with racial ideas about who can self-govern and who needs help from more advanced civilizations	G) The Soviet Union uses U.S. Jim Crow segregation as propaganda to gain influence and support among newly decolonized countries
D) Overt racist justification becomes less acceptable internationally even as inequality persists	H) Japan proposes including a racial equality clause in the founding documents of the League of Nations

Timing	Event
late 1800s–early 1900s	
1904–1905	
1919	
Post-World War I to 1950	
1941–1942	
1945–present (norm shift)	
Cold War era	
Post-Cold War (current era)	

Episode 2: U.S. Assessment of Japan's Air Capabilities, Pre-World War II

- “‘Never Thought They Could Pull Off Such an Attack’: Prejudice and Pearl Harbor,” *War on the Rocks*, Caesar Nafrada and Joseph Caddell, 7 December 2021. (This is *not* a primary source, but it is a digestible article that references many primary sources that underestimated Japan’s air capabilities before the war.)
<https://warontherocks.com/2021/12/never-thought-they-could-pull-off-such-an-attack-prejudice-and-pearl-harbor/>
 - “Japan Is NOT an Air Power,” Leonard Engel, *Flying and Popular Aviation*, January 1941. Note that this was printed the same year as the Pearl Harbor attack.
<http://rwebs.net/avhistory/history/japan.htm>
1. What specific claims or depictions do you see about Japanese people’s physical or intellectual capabilities? How did these perceptions lead American military planners to underestimate Japan’s air power?
 2. Why is it dangerous to base military intelligence assessments on assumptions about what a racial or ethnic group is capable of, rather than on evidence of what they have previously accomplished?
 3. Why do you think American leaders in 1941 still underestimated Japan despite its military conquests dating back to the Russo–Japanese War of 1904–1905? What does this tell you about how persistent racial stereotypes can be, even in the face of contradictory facts?

Episode 4: China Playing Up Racial Divisions in the United States Post-2000

- “Still the beacon of human rights?” political cartoon in *Global Times* (China state-owned media), 4 June 2020. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202006/1190604.shtml>
 - “Uncle Sam’s hypocrisy,” political cartoon in *Global Times* (China state-owned media), 2 June 2020. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202006/1190439.shtml>
 - “Report on Human Rights Violations in the United States in 2020,” *China Daily*, posted 25 March 2021. <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202103/25/WS605bc9a7a31024ad0bab1661.html>
 - “246 years on, racism virus still plagues U.S.,” Zhao Wencai, *Xinhua*, 5 July 2022. <https://english.news.cn/20220705/2fe14eb377754a77b6d7c7b8e6192409/c.html>
 - “Hypocrite-in-chief,” political cartoon in *Global Times* (China state-owned media), 19 December 2023. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202312/1303916.shtml>
1. Note the dates of these examples. What events or issues in the United States are these sources responding to? What issues in China might they be trying to deflect attention from?
 2. In what specific ways is China’s strategy like the Soviet approach, and in what ways is it different? Think of the media used, the speed of communication, and the intended audience.
 3. In recent years, the Chinese government has faced international criticism for its treatment of Uyghur Muslims, its crackdown on Hong Kong protesters, and racial discrimination against Black residents in China. Does knowing about China’s own record on these issues change how you evaluate its criticism of American racism? Is it possible for a criticism to be factually valid even if the person making it is acting hypocritically?

DISCUSSION ON PRIMARY SOURCES

Discuss the following questions as a group. Take notes on key points from your discussion and write your own final response to each question in the space provided. Refer to your responses in Handout 3, *Review of Primary Sources*, as you discuss your responses to the questions below.

1. What commonalities seem to recur across these episodes? What differences do you see? Cite specific evidence as much as possible.

Notes from Group Discussion

Final Response

2. Racial stereotypes led to military failures in both the Russo–Japanese War and the attack on Pearl Harbor. What do these two cases teach about the real-world costs of racial prejudice? Can you think of any situation today where similar assumptions might be blinding decision-makers? Informed speculation is acceptable here.

Notes from Group Discussion

Final Response

3. Has the way race functions in international relations fundamentally changed from 1900, or have only the tools and platforms changed while the underlying dynamics remain the same? Cite specific evidence as much as possible.

Notes from Group Discussion

Final Response

VIDEO NOTES

1. Dr. Bustamante says people often define race in two ways. What is the first way, and why does he say it is misleading?

The first way most people talk about race is by differences in physical appearance, especially skin color. Dr. Bustamante says this is misleading because it draws on outdated European “scientific” ideas about human difference that we now know have no real grounding.

2. Although the scientific theories of race that emerged in Europe between the 18th and 20th centuries were wrong, why did they still matter?

Even though European race theories had no scientific or empirical basis, they still mattered because social constructs can shape real life. In this way, race is similar to money, which is an agreed-upon social construct that powerfully shapes our lives. Ideas about race have strongly determined life in many countries, as we saw in the United States with slavery and segregation and in South Africa with apartheid.

3. How does Dr. Bustamante distinguish ethnicity from race?

Ethnicity centers on culture and ancestry, while race is fundamentally about inequality and power. Ethnicity implies shared culture, language, religion, and traditions; race is socially and politically imposed on people.

4. According to Dr. Bustamante, what does W.E.B. Du Bois mean when he says that somebody is Black if they were made to ride at the back of the bus in the U.S. South during the Jim Crow era?

Du Bois is trying to say that Blackness is defined through power: if a society forces you to the back of the bus, that practice is what makes you “Black” in that system. In other words, discrimination isn’t happening because someone considers themselves Black. Instead, whomever society decides has to ride in the back of the bus is effectively Black in that society. As Dr. Bustamante notes, this is a subtle but important difference.

5. What role did race play in negotiations over the founding of the League of Nations?

During discussions over the founding of the League of Nations, Japan pushed for the inclusion of a racial equality clause that would prohibit discrimination on the basis of race. The United States, Britain, and Australia pushed back against the proposal because they worried it would open the door to Japanese immigration to their countries. The clause was thus not included, leading to a sense of humiliation in Japan.

6. In what ways did race play a role during World War II?

Race played a prominent role in World War II:

- *The Japanese leaned into a claim of Asiatic superiority and stated they had to free Asia from their European and American colonizers, even while subjugating neighbors.*
- *U.S. and UK military planners underestimated the Japanese Air Force in part due to race-based beliefs about the structure of Japanese skulls.*
- *Nazi Germany was guided by the ideology that Aryans were a superior race to others in Europe, notably Slavs and Jews.*

7. What three examples does Dr. Bustamante mention of race playing a role in international policies since World War II?

- *During the Cold War, the Soviet Union tried to win influence in Africa and Asia by shaming the United States over its Jim Crow laws. Over time, the United States came to treat Jim Crow as a national security problem, helping explain the international relations case for desegregation in the 1960s.*
- *Today, China often highlights police brutality and racial disparities in maternal mortality in the United States to stir domestic racial division and distract the United States from focusing on competition with China.*
- *Global dedication to racial equality led to widespread sanctions against South Africa until it ended apartheid in the 1990s.*

KEY EVENTS MENTIONED IN VIDEO

Timing	Event
late 1800s–early 1900s	C) European empires justify colonial rule with racial ideas about who can self-govern and who needs help from more advanced civilizations
1904–1905	F) Russia underestimates Japan’s military capability, contributing to lopsided war losses
1919	H) Japan proposes including a racial equality clause in the founding documents of the League of Nations
Post-World War I to 1950	B) The United Kingdom cedes its role as the dominant global power to the United States with minimal resistance due to the fact that the two countries are a shared “English-speaking race”
1941–1942	A) The United States and the UK underestimate Japan’s military power, contributing to losses in Pearl Harbor and Singapore
1945–present (norm shift)	D) Overt racist justification becomes less acceptable internationally even as inequality persists
Cold War era	G) The Soviet Union uses U.S. Jim Crow segregation as propaganda to gain influence and support among newly decolonized countries
Post-Cold War (current era)	E) Countries use human rights shortcomings and racial disparities to shame their rivals

REVIEW OF PRIMARY SOURCES

Episode 1: Russo–Japanese War (1904–1905)

1. How are Japanese and Russian people depicted differently in terms of physical appearance, size, posture, and expression in these sources?

In the Russian postcards from the MIT collection, Russian figures are drawn as huge, calm, and powerful. Japanese figures are the opposite: tiny, ridiculous, and often shown as animals. One postcard depicts a Japanese soldier as a little “puppy” yelping at a towering warrior. Others show Japanese troops as lobsters crawling backward in retreat. In the Puck magazine cover “Running Amuck,” Japan is drawn through exaggerated racial caricature. Russians consistently look strong and dignified, while Japanese figures are shrunk down, turned into animals, and treated as jokes.

2. What racial assumptions do these sources reveal about how Russians (and Europeans) viewed Japan at the time?

These sources show that Russians and Europeans broadly assumed a nonwhite nation could not be a real military threat. The Russian postcards treat Japanese ambitions as laughable and ridiculous. One caption reads, “In your dreams you own the planet.” Japanese soldiers are shown as monkeys, dogs, and lobsters, which sends the message that they are subhuman. The recurring joke is that Japan is too small, too weak, and too dependent on American money to fight a real war. This reflects the “Yellow Peril” worldview that ranked Asian peoples as naturally inferior to white Europeans because of racial assumptions of the time period.

3. Before this war, most Western leaders assumed European armies would always defeat Asian ones. What did racial assumptions prevent Western observers from seeing?

Racial assumptions prevented observers from recognizing that Japan had developed a modern navy, well-trained officers, and a sophisticated military strategy. The Russian postcards portray Japan as broke and desperate, but Japan had invested heavily in modern battleships and trained crews. Western observers also dismissed Japan’s earlier victory over China in 1895 as a win over another “weak” Asian nation rather than proof of real capability. The belief that European armies were naturally superior meant that Russia entered the war overconfident and unprepared. Thus, Russia didn’t take the Japanese military seriously until its Baltic Fleet was destroyed at Tsushima.

Episode 2: U.S. Assessment of Japan’s Air Capabilities, Pre-World War II

1. What specific claims or depictions do you see about Japanese people’s physical or intellectual capabilities? How did these perceptions lead American military planners to underestimate Japan’s air power?

Engel’s 1941 article claimed that Japan’s war planes were at least two years behind Western designs. He dismissed Japanese-built engines as weak copies of foreign models. The “Never Thought They Could Pull Off Such an Attack’: Prejudice and Pearl Harbor” article adds that American leaders believed the Japanese were physically incapable of being good pilots due to supposed problems with their eyesight and balance. These stereotypes led planners to think a long-range carrier strike on Hawaii was impossible, so they focused on protecting against sabotage by Japanese Americans instead of preparing for an air attack.

2. Why is it dangerous to base military intelligence assessments on assumptions about what a racial or ethnic group is capable of, rather than on evidence of what they have previously accomplished?

Racial assumptions replace facts with feelings. Admiral Kimmel admitted he “never thought those little yellow sons-of-bitches could pull off such an attack,” an assessment based on prejudice, not analysis. The actual situation was that Japan had a modern carrier fleet, experienced pilots from years of combat in China, and the British had already shown that torpedo planes could attack a fleet in a shallow harbor at Taranto in 1940. All of this was available but ignored. The “‘Never Thought They Could Pull Off Such an Attack’: Prejudice and Pearl Harbor” article argues this happened because the U.S. military leadership was racially homogenous: everyone shared the same biases, so nobody challenged the flawed assumptions. Good intelligence is based on what an adversary has actually demonstrated, not on stereotypes about their race.

3. Why do you think American leaders in 1941 still underestimated Japan despite its military conquests dating back to the Russo–Japanese War of 1904–1905? What does this tell you about how persistent racial stereotypes can be, even in the face of contradictory facts?

It seems shocking that Japan had already proven itself a serious military power almost 40 years before Pearl Harbor, yet the United States overlooked Japan’s preparedness for war just as Russia had done in 1904. The “‘Never Thought They Could Pull Off Such an Attack’: Prejudice and Pearl Harbor” authors point to a phenomenon of “ethnocentric groupthink,” which is when everyone in a decision-making group shares the same racial biases and explains away contradictory evidence rather than taking it seriously. The lesson is that stereotypes do not weaken automatically when facts contradict them; people find ways to ignore the facts instead.

Episode 3: Soviet Union Shaming U.S. for Racial Segregation (1950s–1960s)

1. What symbols of the United States do you see in the Soviet propaganda image, and how have they been altered or recontextualized? What message are the artists trying to communicate with these images?

“Freedom American Version” by Efimov and Dolgorukov shows the Statue of Liberty, the most famous symbol of American freedom, surrounded by images of racial violence, including the lynching of a Black man. The artists reframe the United States’ greatest symbol of freedom as a mask that hides brutality. Similarly, Koretsky’s posters place symbols of U.S. democracy next to images of colonial violence and racial oppression. The artists seek to convey that American freedom is a fraud because the country, while claiming it is leading the “free world,” is systematically oppressing its own citizens based on the color of their skin.

2. Soviet propaganda was often directed toward audiences in Africa and Asia. Why would Soviet propaganda about American racism be effective in these parts of the world?

In the 1950s and 1960s, dozens of countries in Africa and Asia were winning independence from European colonial empires that had justified their rule partly through racial hierarchy. People in these newly independent nations had lived through direct white racial domination. Soviet propaganda showing Black Americans being lynched or attacked by police hit home because it aligned with what these audiences already suspected: that Western democracies talked about equality while practicing racial oppression. The propaganda was especially hard to dismiss because the Soviets often used real U.S. news photographs rather than fabricated images.

3. The U.S. government's own legal brief in the *Brown v. Board of Education* case (argued from 1952) argued that segregation was damaging America's reputation abroad and giving material to Communist propagandists. What does it tell you about the power of the Soviet propaganda campaign that the U.S. government itself cited foreign propaganda pressure as a reason to end segregation?

The Brown v. Board amicus brief includes a letter from the Secretary of State warning that racial discrimination "furnishes grist for the Communist propaganda mills" and that hostile reactions from "normally friendly peoples" were growing. The brief argues that segregation threatens America's "moral leadership of the free and democratic nations." The fact that the U.S. government used national security language to argue for desegregation is an acknowledgment that Soviet propaganda had created a real strategic problem, not just a moral one. It suggests the Cold War may have sped up civil rights progress, while also raising the question of whether foreign policy should be necessary to seek racial justice.

Episode 4: China Playing Up Racial Divisions in the United States Post-2000

1. Note the dates of these examples. What events or issues in the United States are these sources responding to? What issues in China might they be trying to deflect attention from?

The June 2020 Global Times cartoons appeared within days of the George Floyd protests. The "Uncle Sam's hypocrisy" cartoon of 2 June 2020 directly contrasts the U.S. crackdown on domestic protests with American praise of Hong Kong's pro-democracy movement, which was still relatively recent news. The "Still the beacon of human rights?" cartoon was published on 4 June, which is the anniversary of the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre and is heavily censored inside China. The 2021 China Daily report and the 2022 Xinhua article came out during periods of heavy international criticism of China's treatment of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang. In every case, the timing suggests China was using American racial conflict to change the subject from its own human rights problems.

2. In what specific ways is China's strategy like the Soviet approach, and in what ways is it different? Think of the media used, the speed of communication, and the intended audience.

The core pattern is similar: highlight racial injustice in the United States to undercut U.S. credibility when it criticizes your country's human rights record. Like the Soviet Union, China uses official state media to produce cartoons and articles that put American symbols like Uncle Sam next to images of racial violence. The media formats used have changed; China publishes in English on platforms like Twitter to reach a global audience in real time. For example, the Global Times cartoon appeared within days of George Floyd's death, while Soviet responses to events like Little Rock took weeks. China's potential audience is also much wider and includes anyone with Internet access, not just people in specific countries where Soviet materials were distributed.

3. In recent years, the Chinese government has faced international criticism for its treatment of Uyghur Muslims, its crackdown on Hong Kong protesters, and racial discrimination against Black residents in China. Does knowing about China's own record on these issues change how you evaluate its criticism of American racism? Is it possible for a criticism to be factually valid even if the person making it is acting hypocritically?

China's treatment of Uyghur Muslims, its crackdown on Hong Kong, and discrimination against Black residents in China obviously undermine the sincerity of its concern for racial justice in America. But a criticism can be factually true even when the person making it has bad motives. George Floyd's killing and the systemic problems behind it were real, no matter who points them out.

answer key 3

The important distinction is between whether a claim is accurate and whether the person making it is credible. We should evaluate evidence on its merits, not dismiss it just because the source is hypocritical. At the same time, it's important to note that China's goal is strategic deflection rather than genuine concern for Black Americans.

DISCUSSION ON PRIMARY SOURCES

1. What commonalities seem to recur across these episodes? What differences do you see? Cite specific evidence as much as possible.

One recurring pattern across all episodes is that race is used as a simple way to underestimate an enemy or to embarrass a rival.

In the first two episodes (the Russo–Japanese War and the U.S. assessment of Japan’s air capabilities pre-World War II), racial stereotypes led Russia and then the United States to dismiss Japan’s military prowess. The Russian postcards showed Japanese soldiers as tiny dogs and lobsters; later in 1941 the “Japan Is NOT an Air Power” article concludes that Japanese airplanes are “not big league.”

In the Soviet and China examples, outside powers exploit racial problems to make the United States look hypocritical and deflect criticism of their own shortcomings. The 1950 Soviet poster “Freedom American Version” and the 2020 Global Times cartoons both place an American symbol of freedom amid evidence of racial violence. The USSR and China highlight racial prejudices in the United States to win support from other countries in great-power rivalry.

2. Racial stereotypes led to military failures in both the Russo–Japanese War and the attack on Pearl Harbor. What do these two cases teach about the real-world costs of racial prejudice? Can you think of any situation today where similar assumptions might be blinding decision-makers? Informed speculation is acceptable here.

These cases show that racial prejudice can lead to overconfidence that results in military defeat.

Russia lost its entire Baltic Fleet at Tsushima partly because its leaders could not imagine an Asian navy defeating a European one. Almost 40 years later, Admiral Kimmel admitted he “never thought those little yellow sons-of-bitches could pull off such an attack,” referring to Pearl Harbor. The “‘Never Thought They Could Pull Off Such an Attack’: Prejudice and Pearl Harbor” article calls this “ethnocentric groupthink,” a situation where everyone in charge shares the same biases and nobody pushes back.

Today, a similar risk could apply to how Western leaders assess countries whose technology is advancing rapidly. For example, some observers believe that political leaders in the United States have not fully acknowledged China’s technological achievements in advanced fields such as biomedical research, AI, and renewable energy.

3. Has the way race functions in international relations fundamentally changed from 1900, or have only the tools and platforms changed while the underlying dynamics remain the same? Cite specific evidence as much as possible.

The tools and platforms by which race impacts international relations have changed dramatically over time:

- *In 1904, Russian propagandists mocked Japan on postcards that took weeks to circulate.*
- *In the late 1930s up to 1941, the United States’ low estimation of Japan’s airpower appeared in magazines and books which reached relatively few people.*
- *In 1950, the Soviets put the Statue of Liberty next to lynching images on posters sent to embassies around the world.*
- *In 2020, China’s Global Times published a cartoon in English criticizing U.S. hypocrisy within days of George Floyd’s death, instantly reaching millions on Twitter.*

However, these examples of propaganda share a common strategy of juxtaposing a country's symbol or source of pride with evidence of racial abuse. In 1952 the Brown v. Board brief warned that segregation in the United States "furnishes grist for the Communist propaganda mills," and American officials today say much the same about Chinese state media.

That said, no serious official today would publicly claim that a nation's military ability depends on the physical traits of its race, as Engel did in 1941 when assessing the aptitude of Japan's pilots.

VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

“Race and International Politics”

Dr. Kevin Bustamante

13 minutes, 19 seconds

Recorded 6 January 2026

Hello! My name is Kevin Bustamante. I am the MacArthur Hennessey Postdoctoral Fellow here at Stanford University at the Center for International Security and Cooperation.

Today I’m going to talk about race and international politics. We’re going to think about questions like what is race and how does race affect how countries interact with one another.

What Is Race?

When we talk about race, we usually do it in two ways. So the first way we do it is we think about skin color differences. In the United States, we tend to think about Asians, Blacks, Hispanics/Latinos as belonging to different racial groups. We do it because they look differently from one another.

Now, these ideas of race come out of Europe [between] the 18th and 20th century, where there was a sense that there was a real scientific grounding for these questions of human difference. Some people were considered more advanced, some people considered more militaristic, some were considered more suitable for democracy, some were considered more barbaric.

Now we know today that these scientific theories had no grounding. They were not based on anything meaningful. Now just because these ideas were wrong doesn’t mean that they didn’t matter. Money, for example, is a social construction, it’s an idea, but it really powerfully shapes the way we live our lives.

Now, that being said, different ideas of race have really shaped how countries have governed their racial populations. In the United States, there was a long history of segregation, of slavery. In South Africa, there was a long history of racial apartheid.

Ethnicity or Race?

So it is important to separate ethnicity from race. When we talk about ethnicity what we’re really talking about is different questions of culture, different questions of ancestry. For example, when we think about Christians, Jews, Muslims, what we’re really talking about are different religious groups and ethnic groups, but that doesn’t really tell us much about how they interact with one another. They might coexist, they might fight, might decide to live entirely separate from one another. That’s different from race.

When we’re talking about race, we’re talking about inequality. We’re talking about power. We’re talking about something that is imposed on other people. So for example, the question of blackness is something that arose through chattel slavery, through the transatlantic slave trade. And for example, W.E.B. Du Bois, the famous Black political theorist, had a famous line where he said that somebody is Black if they’re made to ride at the back of the bus in Georgia, if they’re made to ride Jim Crow.

Now, in that formulation, being Black isn’t the reason why you ride at the back of the bus. You

are Black because you ride at the back of the bus. So again, it's a really slight difference, but it's a meaningful difference that really questions, that really centers questions of power, questions of politics, and it really forces us to reckon with the idea that it's not just skin color differences, but it's all about these political and larger social structures that we live in that really guides how groups interact with one another.

Race in International Politics

The second way we talk about race is primarily as a domestic issue. We tend to think about race as something that happens *within* countries. Again, think about the histories of segregation and slavery in the United States, we think about the history of racial apartheid in South Africa. We think about Nazi Germany's treatment of Jews. Now that's an important but a narrow way to think about race. Another way to think about race is at the international level.

For example, after World War I, the United States, Japan, and their allies, they won the war, and they're building a settlement on what the new international order should look like. At the time of the League of Nations, which was supposed to be the founding organization to really establish peace in the world, there was a bid by Japan to establish a racial equality clause.

Now the purpose of this clause was effectively to just eliminate discrimination on the basis of race. Now that clause failed, and it failed because of pushback from the United States, from Britain, from Australia.

And at the time, there were a lot of concerns that if the racial equality clause was allowed, then it would allow Japanese immigration throughout the Pacific. Now, this really threatened the way Australia had their immigration policy set up at the time, which was called the White Australia immigration policy, and the purpose of that was effectively to bar all sorts of Asiatic immigration from entering the continent [of Australia].

And so when we think about the history of the League of Nations and the failure of the racial equality clause, we start seeing immediate impacts and long-standing impacts about how that ultimately led to a sense of humiliation, a sense of revenge in Japan that ultimately culminates with Japan attacking the United States in World War II because they felt that they were racially inferior to the United States and the European empires.

Instead, Japan felt like they needed to be a superior Asiatic race and that rather than trying to play in the same arena as the white powers of the West, they had to "free Asia." They had to make Asia for the Asians, effectively. And now, to be sure, just because Japan pursued those policies doesn't mean that they had the interests of Asian nations at heart. In reality, once they started eliminating the colonial rule of the European empires from Asia, they also started subjugating their [Asian] neighbors.

And so this starts getting us a better sense of how race operates in international politics where, on the one hand, it might lead to a sense of revenge, of humiliation, of discrimination. But it doesn't necessarily mean that it's going to lead to sort of pan-racial solidarity.

How Race Matters

There are different ways to think about how race matters in international politics. A common but popular way to do it is to think about the question of racial prejudices. And racial prejudices are the racist attitudes that certain people have towards other racial groups.

And we can think about how during the Russo-Japanese War in 1904–1905 the Russian Navy really underestimated Japanese military capabilities. Now, on the surface, anybody that was

looking could tell that Japan was going to be a powerful adversary. A decade before in 1894 they had won a devastating war against China with very little, few casualties. Again, European observers at the time had come to appreciate just how well trained the Japanese Navy was, just how well trained the Japanese Army was.

But by the time of 1904, 1905 that perception had shifted again. Again, there was a lot of Russian racism towards Japan that led them to underestimate Japan and ultimately allowed Japan to pull off a decisive sneak attack that eliminated the Russian Navy.

Now, to demonstrate how sticky these ideas are, we can look at how American and British perceptions of Japan also underestimated them during the run-up to World War II. In the American case, it was the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, where there were all sorts of perceptions and theories that because of the Japanese structure of their skull they wouldn't be able to fly well. And so Japan was again able to pull off a sneak attack on Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. And the British had similar attitudes as well that allowed Japan to pull off a devastating attack and eliminate British rule over Singapore.

Now, the most popular case of racial prejudices is Nazi Germany, right? We cannot talk about Hitler and the treatment of Slavs and Jews without thinking about Aryan perceptions of superiority and the inferiority of other races at the time in Europe.

Now that is one way to think about how race matters, and a different way to think about how race matters is to think about the questions of racial identities, racial ideas. Now, when we think about identities, what we're thinking about is, how do people perceive themselves and how do they perceive other people? Who do we belong to? Who do they belong to? How are we separating ourselves?

Now one of the most important cases that we have of how racial identities matter is thinking about the power transition between the United States and Great Britain at the turn of the 20th century, where there's a lot of discourse on the British side that if they allow the United States to surpass them, it'll be okay, it'll be cooperative because they both belong to the same English-speaking races.

And so what we see in one of the few cases of a successful power transition of one great power overcoming another is that this was something that was actually really facilitated by this sense of shared identity, where everything's going to be okay because those people are just like us.

Now remember, the United States was a settler colony of Britain, and so there was a sort of long-standing, deep-rooted sense that they are effectively part of our heritage, part of our civilization, part of our ancestry.

Racial Identities and Ideas

A different way to think about how race matters is to think about questions of racial identities and racial ideas. And when we think about racial identities, what we're really asking is how do people identify themselves? Who do they see them belonging to? What are the groups that they belong to? How do they see other groups? How do they see other people belonging to other groups?

Now we can also think about how racial ideas matter in terms of questions of how the European empires helped govern the world. Now at the time there was all sorts of different ideas of, conceptions of abilities for self-government, who had a right to be able to rule themselves, who needed to be ruled. What was the role of the European empires to their colonial subjects?

And what we see again is a lot of discourse at the time regarding some people needed to be governed and be taught the ways of self-governance. And so again, we see a lot of justifications for empire called things like the “White Man’s Burden,” the “civilizing mission” for France. And these really helped legitimize colonial conquests because no longer did these missions seem to be for the benefit of the empires, but instead they were justified as being of benefit for the people that were being governed instead.

Race Today

Since World War II we have been living in a period marked by racial equality. It has no longer become acceptable to engage in openly racist discourses, to practice openly racist policies.

Obviously, there’s still a lot of racial inequalities in the world, but these things are no longer justified on racial grounds because it’s become unacceptable in the eyes of the international community to conduct racist practices.

Now this new normal of racial equality has also been weaponized. During the Cold War, we saw the Soviet Union shame the United States for Jim Crow segregation, and they were shaming the United States for its treatment of racial minorities with the eye of winning over African and newly decolonized Asian states. So for them, when they were thinking about it, they were trying to say, you shouldn’t be allies with the United States. Look how they treat people like you!

Now, the United States heard this shaming, they heard this criticism, and they saw Jim Crow as a national security imperative. They saw that they needed to fix their own domestic issues before they could start accurately claiming the right to free-world leadership. And so one reason why we see desegregation happen when it does is that it actually has a lot of international sources in the 1960s.

Now these issues are not just historical, of historical interest—these are things that are still happening today. Today, we see Chinese shaming over American human rights practices, towards questions of police brutality against racial minorities. We see Chinese shaming of racial disparities in maternal mortality rates, where Black women tend to die at a higher rate than white women. And so we still see these questions of racial equality being used.

And to be sure, this is not because the Chinese have American national interests at heart. They don’t care about racial minorities per se. What they are trying to do is drive a domestic wedge and trying to incite racial antagonisms so that way the United States is busy dealing with its own domestic issues and not looking towards China.

Now, again, we think about even a country like South Africa and the end of apartheid, we see the power of racial equality norms. And so even though we still live in a world that’s still bereft with inequalities of all kinds, there is also room for hope, for progress, for optimism.

This is an exciting time to study race in international politics. There’s all sorts of questions waiting to be explored, like where do racial prejudices come from? Where do racial ideas come from? How do they travel? How do they affect how countries behave with one another? How do countries think about themselves racially? How do they think of other countries racially?

And I hope you consider these questions as you continue to grow intellectually and as you continue to go through, progress through, your classes. Thank you for listening, and I really hope to engage with you more in the future.