

SELF PROGRAM 2024/2025

Geopolitics and International Law

Robert SHERRATT & Milena BISZTYGA

robert.sherratt@univ-lyon3.fr / milena.bisztyga@univ-lyon3.fr

Course information

Number of credits: 6 credits

Contact hours: 30 hours

Hours taught per week: 3 hours

Teaching period: spring 2025

Course description:

1st fifteen hours : Geopolitics (Thursdays)

2nd fifteen hours : International law (Mondays)

Geopolitics

Geopolitics looks at how international affairs can be understood through geographical factors. The latter include physical landscapes, like rivers or mountain ranges, but also climate, migration, demographics, cultural regions and the access to and possession of natural resources. These physical realities play a vital role in national and international politics, and frequently condition how the latter are carried out. Leaders come and go, but the mountain border between China and India, for example, will always impact the fragile relationship between these two great powers.

The wide semantic horizon of geopolitics leads to a variety of discourses. The media and politicians frequently use a geopolitical approach to give a simple model of the global landscape through geographical descriptions, metaphors and templates such as 'The Iron Curtain'. The power of these may be persuasive in times of crisis, but presented as such they are devoid of any particular understanding of places, communities or identities.

The course will look at the origins of geopolitics as a science, characterised by a fundamentally realistic rather than legalistic approach to international politics, and the importance of maps. It will also examine the geopolitical architectures of certain countries, taking into account phenomena such as nation-building, sovereignty, collective geographical imaginaries and identity. Global geopolitical architectures, such as the post WW2 liberal world order, with its rooting in international law and institutions, will also be considered.

Great power confrontations, involving concentration on critical geographical areas and a desire to curb the territorial ambitions of rivals, have long been considered as shorthand for geopolitics. The course looks at the geopolitics underpinning the Cold War and beyond, culminating in the war in Ukraine and the use by Russia of resourcebased tactics to counter Western sanctions. It also undertakes to understand some of the geopolitical considerations underlying the current conflict in the Middle East.

International Law

The second part of the course will adopt a similar structure to the first, comprising an analysis of significant global crises but from an international law perspective. International law is a field of legal study with its own distinctive set of principles, institutions, and regulations. The course will concentrate on the conduct of hostilities in accordance with the relevant legal principles. The foundation of international law can be traced back to a seminal publication by Hugo Grotius, a Dutch lawyer and diplomat, entitled *De jure belli ac pacis* (1625).

The evolution of international law has resulted in the establishment of a comprehensive framework of rules, conventions, and treaties governing the conduct of armed conflicts. The course will commence with an examination of the genesis of international law in relation to international and national armed conflicts, and will proceed to elucidate the extant rules governing armed conflicts. In order to comprehend the manner in which contemporary armed conflicts are conducted, it is essential to gain an understanding of the rules that govern such conduct. Does the current situation remain consistent with the principles set forth by Grotius in the 17th century?

Secondly, the course will examine the contemporary conflicts that are undermining peace in Europe and the Middle East. The course will concentrate on the Russia-

Ukraine conflict and the Israel/Palestine hostilities. The media tends to focus its attention on these two conflicts, but what is the stance of international law in this regard?

Thirdly, the course will examine the phenomenon of international migration, which is a consequence of conflict, and the legal status of individuals who have been compelled to flee their countries of origin in search of refuge. In this context, the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees will be subjected to rigorous analysis and interpretation.

Finally, the course will investigate the function of international justice in the resolution of international disputes. The role of international courts, such as the International Court of Justice, will be scrutinized.

Prerequisites

A keen interest in current and global affairs.

Course schedule

Geopolitics :

Part 1. The origins of geopolitics as a science.

Part 2 : Geopolitical architectures :

- Sovereignty and nation-building. The Treaty of Westphalia, 1648
- Geographical imaginaries and the question of identity.
- The impact of globalization

Part 3 : The Cold War and geopolitical ramifications : the 'Third World'.

- The conflict in Ukraine : 'The return of geopolitics' ?
- Part 4 : Popular and critical geopolitics.

International Law:

Part 1. The law of armed conflicts :

- The extension of the scope of international law : International and non-international armed conflicts
- The hardening of international law : the legal use of force
- The humanization of international law : international humanitarian law

Part 2. International refugee law

- The concept of refugee : classical approach and recent trends
- The international rights of the refugee
- The international refugee's obligations

Part 3. The role of the international judge in dispute resolution

- Recent practices : International Court of Justice and International Criminal Court
- Technical aspects of dispute resolution
- Limits of international justice

Course objectives

The aims of this course are that students will :

- Understand the basic definition of geopolitics and appreciate its importance in the contemporary world
- Gain insight into the geopolitical reasons behind states' positions and ambitions in the arena of international politics
- Clarify their understanding of the Cold War and the conflict in Ukraine
- Expand their knowledge of geopolitics to include popular and critical geopolitics
- Get a clearer picture of the articulation between geopolitics and international law
- Understand fundamental principles of international law
- Understand the problems of implementation of international law
- Measuring the usefulness of international law

Assessment

50% mid-term exam on Geopolitics

50% final written exam on International Law

Attendance

In order to participate, students must be present. Nevertheless, a maximum of 2 (two) unexcused absences will be allowed otherwise no mark will be given. An unexcused absence at a test (final test or continuous assessment) means no credits for the course.

Bibliography

Geopolitics

Class readings supplied by teacher. Otherwise, useful background reading :

Geopolitics A very short introduction. Klaus Dodds, Oxford, 2007

Geopolitics : An Introductory Reader, Jason Dittmer and Joanne Sharp (Eds)
Routledge, 2014

International Law:

Brownlie's Principles of Public International Law, James Crawford, Oxford, 9th ed.,
2019

International Law, J. Klabbers, Cambridge University Press, 2013