

SELF PROGRAM 2025/2026

Geopolitics and International Law

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Course information

Number of credits: 6 credits

Contact hours: 30 hours

Hours taught per week: 3 hours

Teaching period: spring 2026

Course description:

1st fifteen hours : Geopolitics

2nd fifteen hours : International law

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 focuses on international law, as it represents one of the main modes of regulation of international political life. The course will analyse the way in which international law operates in practice with regard to crisis situations.

The case of conflicts between States or within States will be particularly studied. What does international law say about war and the way it is waged? The example of the aggression in Ukraine will be commented on, this time from the sole angle of international law. It will be shown that this law concerns relations between States, but also the fate of populations. The law of armed conflict will be studied, as well as international humanitarian law.

The question of international migration will also be studied, as it is often a consequence of internal or international armed conflicts. How does international law protect, in such contexts, individuals who fear the violence of a conflict or persecution based on their ethnicity, their religion or their political opinions?

Finally, a focus will be proposed on the role of the international judge in the settlement of international disputes. The particularly rich activity of the International Court of Justice over the last ten years will be examined.

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