

Fundamentals of Geopolitics (4th course), Fall semester 2025

Lecturer: Ka Wai Christopher HOR; Seminar Facilitator: Alibek ERMEKOV

Topics of Independent Work of the Student (IWS), Essay Questions and Deadlines

IWS 1: The unfulfilled promise? International organizations in an era of authoritarian challenge

Essay questions (15 points):

Choose ONE essay question below and write an essay in about 1000 words (excluding bibliography). Citation should be in APA style. Please upload the essay by 19 September 2025, Friday, to Univer.

1. Critically evaluate the statement: “The crisis of international organizations is not about authoritarianism vs. liberalism, but a classic geopolitical struggle for hegemony disguised as an ideological battle.”
2. From a geopolitical perspective, is the authoritarian challenge to international organizations best understood as a revisionist bid to overthrow the liberal international order, or as a contest to establish parallel spheres of influence within a fragmented system?
3. The World Health Organization (WHO) became a central arena for U.S.-China geopolitical competition during the COVID-19 pandemic. What does this case reveal about the vulnerability of technical and humanitarian IOs to great power rivalry?
4. Is the world moving towards a “multipolar” order of competing regional institutions (e.g. EU, SCO, USMCA) that serve the geopolitical interests of their leading powers, and what are the risks of such a system?
5. Given the return of overt geopolitics, are the foundational institutions of the 20th century (like the UN Security Council) destined for irrelevance, or can they be reformed to accommodate new power realities without sacrificing their core principles?

(Deadline: 19 September 2025, Friday)

IWS 2: A post-colonial lens on the Ukraine war: beyond the “new Cold War” narrative

Essay questions (15 points):

Choose ONE essay question below and write an essay in about 1000 words (excluding bibliography). Citation should be in APA style. Please upload the essay by 3 October 2025, Friday, to Univer.

1. The “Cold War” narrative implies a world ordered by two poles. How does a post-colonial perspective, which emphasizes a triadic relationship between the West, Russia, and the “Global

South,” provide a more accurate and complex picture of contemporary global power dynamics as revealed by the war?

2. Post-colonial thought often explores the contested nature of sovereignty in formerly colonized spaces. Analyze the Ukraine conflict not just as an invasion of a sovereign state, but as a manifestation of Russia's rejection of Ukraine's “post-colonial sovereignty” and right to a hybrid identity independent of its former imperial core.

3. While not a colonial entity in the traditional sense, how does NATO expansion – and the discourse surrounding it – reflect what critics call a “coloniality of power” that disregards Russian security perceptions born from its own imperial history and sense of vulnerability?

4. Analyze the argument that the West's championing of the “rules-based international order” is viewed by many in the Global South not as a universal good, but as a tool of Western hegemony that can be selectively applied. How has this perception shaped neutral or pro-Russian stances in the Global South?

5. Some commentators argue that Russia's outreach to Africa via the Wagner Group and disinformation campaigns represents a new form of neo-colonialism. Compare and contrast Russian and Western (e.g., French, American) influence in Africa through a post-colonial lens.

(Deadline: 3 October 2025, Friday)

IWS 3: The agency of the “infrastructure state”: how middle powers and regional actors are leveraging new technologies to reshape geopolitical chokepoints and navigate great power rivalry

Essay questions (15 points):

Choose ONE essay question below and write an essay in about 1000 words (excluding bibliography). Citation should be in APA style. Please upload the essay by 17 October 2025, Friday, to Univer.

1. Define and critically assess the concept of the “infrastructure state.” How does a focus on infrastructure, rather than just military or economic power, change our understanding of agency and influence in the modern international system?

2. To what extent does the theory of “complex interdependence” explain the strategies of middle powers in an era of great power rivalry? Do infrastructure investments reinforce or undermine interdependence?

3. Is Turkey's development of the “Middle Corridor” a genuine exercise of regional agency reshaping Eurasia's geopolitical and economic map, or is it ultimately constrained by its relationships with Russia, China, and NATO?

4. To what extent can infrastructure initiatives like the U.S.-led “Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII)” or the EU's “Global Gateway” truly offer middle powers

an alternative to China's "Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)" without replicating its perceived pitfalls?

5. Cybersecurity is often seen as a domain for great powers. Challenge this notion by analyzing how a middle power like Estonia or Israel has leveraged cyber capabilities to punch above its weight and secure its digital sovereignty.

(Deadline: 17 October 2025, Friday)

IWS 4: The new battlefields: power, coercion, and sovereignty in the age of geoeconomics, climate crisis, and cyber contestation

Essay questions (15 points):

Choose ONE essay question below and write an essay in about 1000 words (excluding bibliography). Citation should be in APA style. Please upload the essay by 7 November 2025, Friday, to Univer.

1. If oil was the critical resource of 20th-century geopolitics, is data the critical resource of the 21st? Analyse the emerging "geopolitics of data" through the lens of resource competition, dependency theory, and neocolonialism.
2. To what extent is climate change a "threat multiplier" that is fundamentally rewriting the rules of geopolitics? Analyze its impact on sovereignty, resource competition, and strategic geography.
3. Compare and contrast the logics of coercion employed in geoeconomic statecraft (e.g. gas cuts, sanctions) and in cyber/information operations (e.g. disinformation campaigns). Which domain presents a more significant and insidious challenge to the stability of the liberal international order?
4. "The era of cyber and information warfare has democratized power away from major states." Critically assess this statement with reference to the roles of state and non-state actors.
5. The responses to climate change and cyber threats are often characterized by a "governance gap," where state actions are insufficient and global institutions are weak. In this vacuum, are regional organizations or minilateral groupings (e.g., EU, ASEAN, QUAD) likely to be more effective arenas for developing binding rules and responses?

(Deadline: 7 November 2025, Friday)

IWS 5: The return of geopolitics: hard power, hedging, and the contest for Eurasian dominance in the 21st century

Essay questions (15 points):

Choose ONE essay question below and write an essay in about 1000 words (excluding bibliography). Citation should be in APA style. Please upload the essay by 21 November 2025, Friday, to Univer.

1. To what extent does the war in Ukraine validate classical geopolitical theories, such as Mackinder's "Heartland" thesis? Analyze the conflict through both a classical lens (control of territory, resources, warm-water ports) and a modern one (economic warfare, cyber operations, normative battles).
2. Compare and contrast the strategies of coercion employed by Russia in Europe and China in the Indo-Pacific. How do their respective use of energy (Russia) and economic connectivity (China's BRI) serve similar goals of creating leverage and dividing opposition?
3. Is the concept of "Thucydides's Trap" a useful or deterministic framework for understanding the current tensions between the United States and China? Discuss the factors that make conflict seem inevitable and the forces (economic, nuclear, global challenges) that might work to prevent it.
4. "Middle power agency" has become a central feature of contemporary geopolitics. With reference to specific examples from both Europe and Asia, analyze the strategies (e.g. hedging, balancing, normative leadership) that these states are using to navigate great power competition.
5. How has the war in Ukraine acted as a catalyst, accelerating pre-existing geopolitical trends in both Europe and the Indo-Pacific? Discuss its impact on military strategy, economic decoupling, and the cohesion of international institutions.

(Deadline: 21 November 2025, Friday)

IWS 6: The agency of the middle power: Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy in an era of renewed great power competition

Essay questions (15 points):

Choose ONE essay question below and write an essay in about 1000 words (excluding bibliography). Citation should be in APA style. Please upload the essay by 12 December 2025, Friday, to Univer.

1. Apply a neoclassical realist framework to analyze Kazakhstan's multi-vector policy. How do systemic pressures (great power competition) interact with unit-level variables (domestic politics, leadership, economic needs) to shape Astana's foreign policy choices?
2. To what extent does Kazakhstan's multi-vector policy facilitate or hinder its ambition to be the primary regional leader and integrator in Central Asia? Does engaging with extra-regional powers strengthen or weaken Astana's position within the region?
3. Energy resources have historically been a key source of Kazakhstan's international agency. In an era of energy transition and geopolitical turmoil, is Kazakhstan's energy-based leverage increasing or diminishing? Support your argument with specific examples.

4. Kazakhstan actively presents itself as a bridge-builder and a promoter of dialogue (e.g. hosting the Astana Process on Syria). Is this a genuine attempt to exercise normative middle power influence, or is it primarily a pragmatic tool for regime security and international legitimacy?

5. Identify the single greatest future challenge to the sustainability of Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy (e.g. a further escalation in Ukraine, a Taiwan contingency, a domestic political crisis). Based on current trends, how resilient is this strategy likely to be, and what alternatives might Astana consider?

(Deadline: 12 December 2025, Friday)