

PS369 Critical Geopolitics

Seminar Leader: Boris Vormann

Course Times: Wednesdays and Fridays 10:45-12:15

Office Hours: By appointment

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Course Description

As a field of study, geopolitics examines the spatial dimensions of interstate power relations. Modern thinking about geopolitics emerged at the turn to the 20th century, as the British Empire unraveled and new colonial and hegemonial disputes erupted. After World War II, geopolitics lost much of its analytical lure, due to the fact that the Nazi regime had built many of its political claims on such geostrategic considerations (*Lebensraum*). After the fall of the Iron Curtain, new transportation and communication technologies seemed to make distance and space irrelevant categories for political thinking and action, given the plummeting of transaction costs and globalization processes. Climate change and depleting resources, renationalization tendencies, large-scale infrastructural development projects and resurfacing territorial conflicts have all led to a reinvigoration of geopolitical thinking and practice in the very recent past. What potential futures does this imply for cooperation and for conflict? This course critically engages conceptual and theoretical texts in geopolitics, examines historical examples, and explores three of today's most pertinent geopolitical relationships: China's one-belt-one road initiative, Russia's territorial ambitions, and the reinvention of transatlantic relations.

Requirements

Reading material

- Class Reader (available at the library)
- Books to buy:
 - Dodds, Klaus. 2019. *Geopolitics. A very short introduction*. Third Edition. OUP.
 - Howe, Stephen. 2002. *Empire. A very short introduction*. OUP.
 - Heather, Peter and John Rapley. 2023. *Why Empires Fall*. Penguin.

Class preparation

In preparation for class, read the texts thoughtfully and engage with their core argument. Take notes while reading and try to identify questions in advance: Why do the authors argue as they do? How do they raise and substantiate their claims? How does their line of argumentation relate to earlier readings and discussions in class?

Academic Integrity

Bard College Berlin maintains the highest standards of academic integrity and expects students to adhere to these standards at all times. Instances in which students fail to meet the expected standards

of academic integrity will be dealt with under the Code of Student Conduct, Section 14.3 (Academic Misconduct) in the Student Handbook.

Attendance

Attendance at all classes is a crucial part of the education offered by Bard College Berlin. To account for minor circumstances, two absences from twice-per-week courses will not affect the participation grade or require documentation. Every unexcused additional absence from a 90-min session lowers the participation grade by one step (i.e., from B+ to B). Bard College Berlin does not offer credit for any course in which a student has missed more than 30% of classes, regardless of the reasons for the absences. The full Bard College Berlin attendance policy can be found in the Student Handbook, Section 2.8.

Assignments, Grade Breakdown and Essay Deadlines

Oral

- Classroom Participation (2*15%) 30% (of overall grade)

This seminar involves thoughtful and active participation in class discussions and working groups. The classroom is a protected space and you should feel free to voice your arguments and comments. Please do not hesitate to address the seminar leader if you feel that this is not the case.

- Case Study Workshops 30%

Student groups will organize 90-minute workshops focused on a geopolitical case. Workshops should address one of the following regional themes: China's ascent, Russia, Europe/transatlantic relations, or optionally, Africa or Latin America. Each group must select a specific case and provide required readings to support their workshop. The session will begin with a 15-minute presentation that introduces the case's historical context, current complexities, and connections to critical geopolitics. The rest of the workshop should use interactive methods, such as debates, simulations, or discussions, to engage the class and deepen understanding. Groups will have time during Week 11 to prepare their workshops. The goal is to critically analyze the case while fostering active class participation and applying concepts from critical geopolitics.

Written

- 8 Response Papers (each ~600 words; 8*5%) 40%

Each student is required to write 8 response papers (1.5-spaced, 12 pt., Times New Roman). I expect an analysis that embeds the reading in earlier class discussions, and the articulation of one central synthetic question that engages the issues and debates addressed in the reading as a starting point for broader discussion.

- Response papers need to be submitted per email by the beginning of the respective session. Late submissions will not be accepted!
- Indicate your name, the number of the response paper, and the date of submission in the header of the document.

Students receive mid- and end-of-semester grades for their seminar work. Students are entitled to make an appointment with an instructor to discuss seminar participation, or may be asked to meet with the instructor at any stage in the semester regarding class progress.

Schedule

Week Beginning

Wednesday

Friday

I. Introduction: Concepts, Theories, Themes

1
Jan 27

What is Geopolitics?

Dodds, *Geopolitics*, Ch. 1

Modern Geopolitical Traditions

Atkinson & Dodds, *Geopolitical Traditions*

Agnew, *Geopolitics*, Intro

1 Response
Paper

2
Feb 3

Critiques of Geopolitics

Dodds, *Geopolitics*, Ch. 2

Said, *Orientalism*

Dowler & Sharp, *A Feminist Geopolitics*

Geopolitical Subfields

Dodds, *Geopolitics*, Chs. 3-6

II. Historical Cases

Modern Imperial Histories

3
Feb 10

Defining Empire

Howe, *Empire*, Chs. 1&2

Examples of Empires

Howe, *Empire*, Chs. 3-5

4
Feb 17

Cosmopolitanism on a Global Scale

McNeill, *The Rise of the West*, Ch XIII &
Conclusion

The Rise of the Western World

Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*,
Intro & Ch. 1

3 Response
Papers

5
Feb 24

Roots of European Geopolitics

Heffernan, *Fin du Siècle, Fin du Monde?*

Imperial Logics

Dittmer, Intro to Part One

Excerpts by Mahan (1890), MacKinder (1904),
Haushofer (1942)

Geopolitics in the American Century

6
Mar 3

World War II Assessments

Bowman, *Geography vs. Geopolitics* (1942)
Spykman, *America's Strategy in World Politics*
(1942)

Cold War Strategies

Kennan, *Sources of Soviet Conduct* (1947)
Eisenhower, *Domino Theory Principle* (1954)
Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American
Diplomacy* (1959)

4 response papers

7 Mar 10	<p>Post-Cold War Brzezinski, <i>The Grand Chessboard</i> (1997) Please watch Anne-Marie Slaughter, The Chessboard and the Web</p>	<p>A Necessary Empire? Ferguson, <i>Colossus</i> (2004) Kagan, <i>Dangerous Nation</i> (2006)</p>
8 Mar 17	<p>Rise of the Geoeconomic Cowen & Smith, <i>After Geopolitics?</i> (2009) Cowen, watch Logistics of Life and Death</p>	<p>The Return of Geopolitics? Mead, <i>The Return of Geopolitics</i> (2014) Ikenberry, <i>The Illusion of Geopolitics</i> (2014)</p>
9 Mar 24	<p>Why Empires Fall I Heather & Rapley, <i>Why Empires Fall</i>, Part I (2023)</p>	<p>Why Empires Fall II Heather & Rapley, <i>Why Empires Fall</i>, Part II (2023)</p>
10 Mar 31	<p>Our Current Moment Kaplan, The Tragedy of 21st Century Geopolitics (2024)</p>	<p>Geopolitics of Climate Change Toal, <i>Oceans Rise Empires Fall</i> Please watch Deborah Seligsohn on Geopolitics of Climate Change</p>
11 Apr 7	Workshop Preparations	Workshop Preparations

Spring Break (Apr 14-22)

III. Current Geopolitical Challenges

Case Workshops

12 Apr 21	China	China
13 April 28	Russia	Russia
14 May 5	Europe	Europe

Accommodations

Bard College Berlin is committed to inclusion and providing equal access to all students; we uphold and maintain all aspects of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and the ADA Amendments Act of 2008, and Section 3 of the German Disability Equality Act of April 27, 2002 (Federal Law Gazette I p. 1468). If you have a disability, or think you may have a disability, please contact the Disability Accommodation Coordinator, Atticus Kleen, (accommodations@berlin.bard.edu) to request an official accommodation.

Requests for accommodations should be made as early as possible to ensure adequate time for coordination and planning. Please note that accommodations are not retroactive and may require advance notice to implement.

If you have already been approved for accommodations with the Disability Accommodation Coordinator, please arrange to meet with me outside of class so that we can develop an implementation plan.

Students may face extenuating circumstances related to various personal or external factors, which impact their academic performance. While these circumstances often do not fall within the legal framework of Disability Accommodations, Bard College Berlin is committed to supporting students experiencing such circumstances. A student needing a short extension or a replacement assignment because of an extenuating circumstance is encouraged to make arrangements directly with instructors if possible. If further support is needed, please visit the [Bard College Berlin Accessibility page](#). Questions about this process can be directed to James Harker (j.harker@berlin.bard.edu) or Maria Anderson-Long (m.andersonlong@berlin.bard.edu).