

Course information 2026-27

IR3207 Power Shift in International Relations

General information

MODULE LEVEL: 6

CREDIT: 30

NOTIONAL STUDY TIME: 300 hours

MODE: Locally Taught, Independent Learner Route and Online Taught

Summary

At the beginning of the 21st century the world stood on the cusp of what most experts assumed would be a golden age of international peace and prosperity guaranteed by American power and underwritten by an ever-expanding world market dominated by the West. But 9/11 and the financial crisis of 2008 followed, leaving the United States in decline, Europe in tatters, and the balance of power rapidly shifting eastwards towards Asia and China and southwards towards the 'Global South'. Pundits even began to talk of a new world disorder in the making. Certainly, with the challenges posed by the rise of populism in the West, a more assertive China and Russia led by Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin respectively, wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, and the impact of COVID-19 and climate change, it does appear as if the international system has become a much less peaceful and stable place. Some even wonder whether the Liberal international order itself is now under threat. But how have all these major changes come about? What has been their impact on international affairs? Is the West in decline and are we heading toward a new world order? These are at least three of the big questions we will be seeking to answer in this course.

Conditions

Please refer to the relevant programme structure in the EMFSS Programme Regulations to check:

- where this course can be placed on your degree structure; and
- details of prerequisites and corequisites for this course.

You should also refer to the Exclusions list in the EMFSS Programme Regulations to check if any exclusions apply for this course.

Aims and objectives

The aim of this course is to:

- Provide students with an understanding of the relevant international relations concepts and theories for the study of power and power shifts in international relations.
- Provide a rigorous theoretical and historical grounding for analysing the causes and consequences of power shifts in international relations.

Promote critical engagement with the relevant literature and debates to enable students to present, substantiate and defend complex arguments.

Learning outcomes

At the end of this course and having completed the essential reading and activities students should be able to:

- Outline key concepts and theories used to explain dynamics of change in international relations.
- Evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of various theories and arguments.
- Apply relevant concepts and theories to empirical cases and recent developments.
- Engage in informed debates on power shift and the rise and decline of great powers.
- Produce written analyses on questions related to power shifts in international relations.

Global Employability Skills

Below are the three most relevant employability skills that students acquire by undertaking this course which can be conveyed to future prospective employers:

1. Adaptability and resilience.
2. Communication.
3. Decision making.

Essential reading

For full details of additional essential readings, please refer to the reading list.

Baylis, J., S. Smith, S. & P. Owens, P. (eds), *The Globalisation of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations*, 8th edition, OUP (2019).

Assessment

This course is assessed by a three-hour and fifteen-minute closed-book written examination.

Syllabus

This course examines both key concepts and theories for the study of power and power shifts in international relations as well as the changing distribution of power in the 21st century and its effects. Thus, the course combines theoretical discussion with its application to relevant historical trends and turning points, key actors, and regions.

The course is structured around four main units (two per term). In the first unit, students will engage relevant concepts and theories in International Relations, focusing in particular on the concept of power and on the drivers of change in international politics (e.g. war, revolutions, etc.). In the second, students will be provided a historical background on the rise of the West in the 19th and 20th century and then its relative decline at the turn of the 21st century. In the third unit, students will focus on recent developments and particularly affecting key great powers (e.g. US, China, Russia) and regions (e.g. Middle East).

In the last unit, students will discuss the consequences of power shift for international security and the so called Liberal International order.

In particular, the topics to be addressed in the course are:

Unit 1-Concepts and theories: power, great powers, and power shifts

- The Rise and Fall of Great Powers and Empires in International Relations.
- Power in International Relations.
- The Balance of Power and Power Transition Theory: Concepts, Theories, Limitations.
- Drivers of Change I: The Economy, War, and the State.
- Drivers of Change II: The State, Ideas, and Revolutions.

Unit 2- Power shifts in historical perspective

- The Global Transformation of the 19th Century and the Rise of the West.
- War, Revolution, and the Crisis of the 20th Century.
- The US and the Liberal International Order in the 20th Century.
- Globalisation under Threat? From the Financial Crisis to the Rise of Populism.
- Emerging Powers and Their Challenge to the West.

Unit 3-Key actors and regions

- The End of the American Empire? From the Unipolar Moment to Joe Biden.
- China's Rise.
- India as an Emerging Power.
- Russia's Great Power Politics.
- Europe in Transition: From Crisis to Strategic Actor?
- War, Revolution, and Power Shifts in the Middle East.
- The Rise of the Global South?

Unit 4- The consequences of power shift

- The Consequences of Power Shifts I: From US interventions to China and Russia's New Interventionism.
- The Consequences of Power Shifts II: Great Power Conflict in the 21st Century.
- The Consequences of Power Shifts III: The End of the Liberal International Order?