

Department of Social Sciences, Carlos III University, Madrid

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WORLD POLITICS: WEEKLY PLAN OF COURSE

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INTRODUCTION

Week 1. Origins of the Contemporary World Order: The Cold War and the Rise and Fall of the Soviet Union

We cannot fully understand the nature of the contemporary world system without examining the impact of the Second World War, the most cataclysmic military and political event of the 20th century.

With the defeat of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan in 1945, the principal victors (the USA and the Soviet Union) – uneasy allies during the war itself – became the chief protagonists of the ensuing Cold War. The latter was symbolized, above all, by the “iron curtain” which separated the democracies of Western Europe from the Soviet-dominated countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

The Cold War did not exactly divide the world into two rigid “camps” (pro-Western and pro-Communist). For example, the rise of Communist China eventually challenged Soviet hegemony and led to the Sino-Soviet split, while the Non-Aligned movement of developing countries sought to avoid slavish allegiance either to the USA or the USSR. Nonetheless, in geopolitical terms, the Cold War defined and lent coherence to the functioning and dynamics of the world system for much of the second half of the 20th century. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, contemporary world politics – the focus of this course – have become decidedly more complex.

PART ONE: COMPETING THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Part One of the course is more theoretically oriented, focusing on three competing perspectives which together form something of a “perennial debate” in international relations.

Week 2. Realism and the Primacy of the Nation State

We return briefly to the ancient world. In his monumental History of the Peloponnesian War, Thucydides analyzes the titanic and destructive struggle between Athens and Sparta which took place from 431 to 404 BC. In doing so, Thucydides himself emerges as the founder of the school of “realism” in international relations, in which the nation-state is – and has remained ever since – the principal actor in the world system.

We examine the main tenets of this approach to understanding the functioning of the world system.

Week 3. The Liberal World View and International Regimes

Here we examine the first general approach to international relations which questions the overall validity of the realist perspective. The Liberal school of thought does not discard the relevance and importance of the nation-state. However, it posits that the latter's sovereignty may be constrained by the existence of shared international values which reduce, or even eliminate, the incentives to exert brute force as a means of defending national interests. When, for example, have liberal democracies ever gone to war with each other?

Shared international political values, moreover, often form the basis for international "regimes" which, again, constrain the sovereignty of the individual nation-state. Such regimes come in many forms – for example, military pacts, trade agreements, international conventions, or even political unions - and have emerged in different historical circumstances. NATO, the Warsaw Pact, and the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization were massive military alliances emblematic of the Cold War era. Mercosur, NAFTA, and the European Union are examples of treaties promoting free trade with important consequences for national economic sovereignty. The United Nations, which we will examine in detail in Week 6, was and remains the most ambitious (and for that reason, most problematic) international regime designed, in the aftermath of the catastrophe of World War Two, to constrain the ability of the nation state to exert brute force against its neighbors.

Week 4. Marxist Theories of Imperialism and the Political Economy of International Relations

The second general approach which questions the claims of realism, and which is heavily influenced by Marxist theories of economic development, emphasizes above all the role of economic power and economic relations in understanding the nature of world politics. Indeed, if realism poses the fundamental question of "why is there war and why is there peace?", this school of thought asks "why are there rich countries and why are there poor countries?" In so doing, it chronicles the role of colonialism – above all, the expansion of the European powers into South America, Africa, Southeast Asia and the Far East – in creating a "core" of advanced wealthy countries and a "periphery" of poorer, underdeveloped, nations.

According to this perspective, the core-periphery nature of the world economic order endures into the 21st century: the massive wave of decolonization which took place in the 1950s and 1960s meant political independence for many new nations across the globe, but did nothing to alter the unequal and hierarchical nature of international economic relations. "Dependency" theory, for example, even posited the notion of the development of underdevelopment, in which poorer peripheral countries were doomed to remain that way eternally.

While the notion of a clear core and periphery is increasingly questioned by the emergence of newly emerging economic powers (see Week 8), the phenomena of globalization (see Week 7) and that of continuing poverty and underdevelopment for many countries in Africa (see Week 9), South and Central America and Southeast Asia, nonetheless point to the role of economic relations in severely constraining the sovereignty of many nation states.

PART TWO: THE DYNAMICS OF CONTEMPORARY WORLD POLITICS

Part Two of the course is more empirically oriented, focusing on key developments and trends in contemporary world politics, and enabling us to consider the continuing relevance and validity of the competing theoretical perspectives discussed in Part One.

Week 5. The Nature of the Contemporary World Order

One key characteristic of the Cold War era was that of “spheres of influence” whereby the Soviet Union recognized South America as the USA’s “backyard”, while the USA, for its part, accepted Soviet domination of Eastern and Central Europe. In contrast, contemporary geopolitics are far more fluid.

Post-Soviet Russia, still struggling to make a full transition to a consolidated democracy, and beset by economic stagnation and political instability, has seen its global influence wane. Several of its previous satellites in Eastern and Central Europe have entered the EU, while its attempts to retain influence in other former Soviet republics (most notably, Ukraine) have seen it become increasingly embroiled in complicated and destructive regional conflicts.

The USA, dubbed the world’s only remaining superpower in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, has nonetheless struggled to redefine its global role in the absence of its traditional Communist foe. On this issue, the country is riven. On the one hand, some favour the retention of the country’s status as the world’s “policeman” via a forceful military-backed foreign policy. On the other hand, and precisely as a result of the country’s prolonged and costly involvement in foreign conflicts such as those of Iraq and Afghanistan, others argue for a scaling back of the USA’s global security commitments. Deep uncertainties over how to respond to the threat of international terrorism have only served to accentuate these domestic political divisions.

Moreover, the USA’s status as the world’s economic powerhouse is increasingly challenged by China’s emergence as the global colossus of the 21st century. In sharp contrast to the Soviet Union, China has managed to combine a political system of strict one-party rule with phenomenal rates of economic growth and development. The latter, in turn, has transformed the country from being a powerful regional power to a formidable global actor.

Week 6. Problems of World Governance: The History, Achievements and Failures of the United Nations

The fundamental goal of the United Nations (UN), founded in October 1945, was to promote international cooperation and, above all, prevent another catastrophic conflict on the scale of World War Two. In the sense that the world has not fallen into the abyss of a global-scale war, then the UN can be deemed to have been a success. Its Security Council and General Assembly have, over the last seven decades, been important sites for the debating and resolution of conflicts on an international, regional and local level. UN peacekeeping forces have been, and remain, familiar presences in many conflict-ridden areas of the world.

Yet at the same time as the UN has proved an effective vehicle for the promotion of international cooperation, it is also constrained by the specific – and often conflicting – interests of its constituent parts, i.e. the individual nation-

state, whether acting alone or in collaboration with regional neighbours. UN resolutions may be – and have been – routinely ignored by nations whose interests are threatened by such resolutions.

A key question for the 21st century is to what extent the UN is likely to enhance its role as an agent of international cooperation or, on the contrary, be increasingly constrained by the emergence of powerful, and conflicting, regional and local interests.

Week 7. Transnational Actors and International Organizations in World Politics

The United Nations remains, for sure, the most significant and powerful formal international organization. Yet in the later stages of the 20th century, and on into the 21st, its prominence has been challenged by the emergence of an array of organizations and movements – both formal and informal – which now operate on a global scale. Multinational companies, whose operations and markets transcend national boundaries, are now immensely powerful economic and political actors. Non-governmental organizations (“NGOs”), such as Amnesty International or Greenpeace, have also emerged as influential actors shaping debates at a global level. Terrorist movements and organized crime also operate on an increasingly global scale.

The emergence of such transnational organizations is both a cause and effect of the process of Globalization, which we will analyze in detail in Weeks 8, 9 and 10.

Week 8. Globalization I: Changes and Trends in the International Economic Order and their Political Consequences

The term “globalization” is now commonplace, yet its origins and consequences are far from fully understood. Certainly, the growing internationalization, or integration, of the world economy has meant that the economic fortunes of the individual nation-state are heavily affected – for better or for worse – by trends and forces beyond their borders.

What factors have promoted the growing internationalization of the world economy? And if national economic sovereignty is challenged by globalization, what have been the consequences for the individual nation-state?

In Weeks 9 and 10, we examine in more detail the main features and consequences of economic globalization. For at the same time as the world economy has become increasingly internationalized, it has also become more diversified. Put differently, some nations have clearly benefited from globalization, while others remain mired in poverty and economic stagnation and poverty. How is this divergence in fortunes to be explained?

Week 9. Globalization II: Africa and the Continuing Problems of Poverty and Underdevelopment

In contrast to the traditional and newly emerging economic powers of the world, many nations remain mired in poverty and extremely low levels of economic development. In taking the countries of Africa as an example of the latter, we should be careful: Sub-Saharan Africa constitutes a vast and diverse continent. It is true, for example, that

countries such as South Africa and Nigeria are emerging, even on a world scale, as economic powers, or at least potential economic powers.

At the same time, though, the IMF reported in 2013 that 9 out of 10 of the world's poorest countries were located in Sub-Saharan Africa. What explains Africa's chronic situation of poverty and underdevelopment? On the one hand, many scholars in the decades following decolonization blamed the iniquities of the international economic order for the inability of many newly independent African nations to develop and diversify their economies, and to sustain significant rates of economic growth. On the other hand, and more recently, much greater focus has been placed on the quality of governance itself as an explanation for the continent's economic ills, with special emphasis on the costs of war and conflict, authoritarianism, bureaucracy and corruption. Thus while Botswana, for example, characterized by a stable, peaceful, and longstanding multi-party democracy, has achieved the status of a middle-income country, the continually war-torn Democratic Republic of the Congo ranks as the world's poorest country. Post-independence Zimbabwe's steady drift into authoritarianism has been accompanied by economic decline and stagnation. In Kenya, even though multi-party politics continues to function, rampant corruption is held accountable for the country's continuing economic problems.

In this sense, Africa provides us with a test case with which to explore the respective roles of economic and political factors in explaining a country's fortunes in the world order.

Week 10. Globalization III: Rising Powers in World Politics

The potential benefits of Globalization are nowhere seen more clearly than in the emergence of new economic powers that are increasingly challenging the traditional dominance of North America and Western Europe. These include countries from across the continents: in Latin America: Brazil and Mexico; in Europe: Turkey; in Africa: Nigeria; in Asia and the Far East: China, Indonesia and South Korea.

What has enabled countries such as these to develop economically in such dramatic fashion, thereby overcoming the seemingly eternal core-periphery barriers of the world economy? And what are the possible stumbling blocks to sustained economic growth?

The emergence of new economic powers also has global political implications, not least in the way they challenge, or seek to reconfigure, existing international security arrangements (for example the UN Security Council) to reflect the changing balance of global economic power.

Week 11. The Problems of Contemporary International Security

Massive and continuing advances in military and communications technology in the 21st century are changing the character of war and, in doing so, altering traditional concepts of, and approaches to, national security. To be sure, the USA remains the world's foremost military superpower (and spender) and countries such as China, Russia, Britain and France retain formidable military resources and capacity. Yet such traditional military might is being increasingly challenged and tested. Nuclear proliferation, ongoing conflicts at national and regional levels around the world, and the emergence of terrorism and of environmental change (both on a global level), have all placed enormous economic burdens and constraints on the military budgets of the traditional powers in world affairs.

If world order in the 19th century was underpinned by the power of the British Empire (or the "Pax Britannica"), and in the 20th century by the dynamics of the Cold War, its foundations in the 21st century are much more difficult to discern.

In weeks 12 and 13 we examine how two global processes – terrorism and environmental change – are challenging the traditional structures of world order.

Week 12. Challenges to the Contemporary World Order I: Terrorism

If globalization has increasingly challenged the integrity of the nation-state, a new series of challenges in the 21st century – none of which have particular respect for national boundaries – are likely to accentuate that process. Terrorism on a global scale is one such challenge. In the course of the new century, increasing numbers of countries across the globe have fallen victim to terrorist attacks, ranging from Spain and Britain to Nigeria, Indonesia and Iraq. In so doing, terrorism has highlighted the problems of cooperation and coordination entailed in the maintenance of international security. Moreover, there is no apparent international consensus on how best to combat, and respond to, the threat. The terrorist attack on the USA of 11 September 2001 probably stands as the most visible and spectacular in history, and provoked widespread international outrage. Yet the USA's response to the attack not only strained its relations with several of its traditional allies but saw it embroiled in immensely costly and violent regional conflicts, the long-term consequences of which remain uncertain.

Week 13: Challenges to the Contemporary World Order II: Environmental Change and the Struggle for Natural Resources

Here, we focus on the issues of environmental change and natural resources, including the ongoing depletion of the world's oil reserves, the search for viable alternative energy resources, and the phenomenon of global warming. In the course of the 21st century, water – the very basis of human existence – is likely to become an increasingly politicized and conflictive international issue. Global warming brings into conflict those countries and organizations campaigning for the control of pollution with powerful vested interests that even deny the very existence of the phenomenon. These truly global challenges pose the fundamental and perennial question in world politics: what factors promote and what factors hinder international cooperation?

PART THREE:

Week 14. Conclusions