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The International System in International Relations: Origins, Evolution, and Contemporary Challenges

PROF. ALESSANDRO QUARENGHI

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| Area of study: | International Relations |
| Area Code: | IR/PO327 |
| Method of Instruction: | in-person |

Description

In the context of international relations, the term "international system" refers to the structured interactions and relationships among the world's states and other global actors, shaped by power distribution and dynamics, values, institutions, and norms. This system provides the framework within which international politics, cooperation, and conflict take place.

This course aims to provide students with a comprehensive understanding of the origins and development of the international system, its key models and mechanisms, and the current challenges to its stability. Through lectures, readings, and discussions, students will explore the processes that led to the creation of a system of states, the distinction between empires and states as political organizations, and the features of the main historical polar configurations. The course also delves into the concept of international order, examining the various models proposed in International Relations Theory. Furthermore, students will engage with pressing issues that challenge the contemporary international order, fostering critical analysis of global dynamics.

By the end of the course, students will have enhanced their research skills and developed their ability to collaborate effectively with peers, present their ideas clearly, and engage in constructive discussions.

Course contents

The course is divided into three parts:

- **Part 1:** Covers how the international system emerged and developed through its main phases: multipolarity, bipolarity, and unipolarity. It highlights each era's main features.
- **Part 2:** Introduces concepts of order (social, political, international, and world) and explains how international order is formed and maintained. It also describes models of international order—balance of power, hegemony, and constitutional orders—and discusses the hybrid nature of today's international order.
- **Part 3:** Explores major challenges to the current international order, such as transition of power/hegemonic change, global environmental issues, global migration, anti-Western movements, populism, and technological change. It examines how these issues are disordering the system and influencing its evolution.

Prerequisites



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This course introduces international politics while including some advanced insights into International Relations Theory. It is suitable for students of all backgrounds who want to understand how the international system works and the key issues shaping it now and in the future. While a background in international politics may be helpful, it is neither required nor necessary.

The course shares about 5% of its content with “International Relations and the Middle East: a Comparative European Perspective” also taught by Prof. Quarenghi. Students may take either course or both.

Method of instruction

The course will combine lectures, student presentations, and in-class debates: students, in groups, will be asked to choose a topic from among those suggested and to a.) research it, b.) briefly present it in class. More detailed instructions will be given in class by the instructor.

Course requirements

- a. Students are expected to regularly attend sessions and to actively take part in debate;
- b. Before each class, students are expected to have read the compulsory readings (and are strongly advised to read the recommended readings);
- c. Students, in groups, are required to orally present the chosen topic in class;
- f. Students will have to take two written exams: a midterm test and a final test, at the end of the teaching period.

Credits

6 ECTS

Grading

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| Participation | 10% of final grade |
| Midterm exam | 30% of final grade |
| Presentation | 30% of final grade |
| Final written exam | 30% of final grade |

The midterm exam will be made of multiple choice and open questions, and it will last 60 minutes. The final exam will be made of only open questions, to be answered essay-style, and it will last 90 minutes.

Books will NOT be allowed in exams. Students may be examined on anything covered or discussed prior to the exam, but final exam questions will focus on topics covered after the midterm. A sample of exam questions will be made available to students.

Course readings and materials



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All readings and materials can be downloaded from the dedicated course blackboard pages (<http://blackboard.unicatt.it>). Further instructions on the downloading procedure will be provided in class. Both readings and lectures/class activities are crucial components of the course and are interrelated.

Instructor bio

Alessandro Quarenghi is a Lecturer in International Politics at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, where he teaches International Relations and International Relations of the Middle East. He holds a degree in Law, a PhD in International Relations, a Specialization in International Economics and Politics, and Master's Degrees in Postcolonial Politics and Cross-cultural Mediation. His work focuses on US foreign policy, international order and international relations and politics of the Middle East.

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