Gov 94UN: United Nations

Thursday 9:45-11:45 a.m., CGIS Knafel K450

Instructor: Prof. Christoph Mikulaschek

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Office hours: Monday and Wednesday at 1:30 p.m. You can schedule them (even at very short notice) at this link.

Course website: https://canvas.harvard.edu/courses/106144

Course description

An interactive discussion of the origins, present work, and future prospects of the United Nations. The UN is the only international organization with global scope and nearly universal membership, and it is a central component of the rules-based international order. The seminar critically examines whether the UN lives up to the promise of promoting peace and prosperity. We analyze its inner workings and its impact on world politics by surveying recent international relations scholarship, practitioner accounts by diplomats, and journalistic works. Topics include peacekeeping, sanctions, the use of force, human rights, international justice, economic development, and climate change mitigation.
Course aims

In this seminar, we read and discuss a mix of cutting-edge research articles about the United Nations, insider accounts by diplomats and international civil servants, and news reports. We critically engage with a range of different perspectives on the promise, practice, and shortcomings of the United Nations. We debate whether, when and why the organization succeeds or fails in promoting international peace and security, human rights, international justice, economic development, and climate change mitigation.

The goal is to develop a nuanced understanding of how states, political leaders, and domestic interest groups utilize the United Nations to pursue their political objectives. The seminar aims to help students develop an informed opinion about the tradeoffs involved in the choice between cooperation through the United Nations, alternative multilateral or bilateral channels, and unilateral foreign policies. An additional goal is to introduce students to the practice of social science research.

Performance will be evaluated on the basis of comprehension of and critical engagement with the reading materials, active participation in class, presentations, and writing.

Course policies and expectations

You are expected to have read all required readings before class and to actively engage in classroom discussions. You should come prepared to defend or question arguments presented in the readings. Take notes as you read and bring any questions you have on the readings to class. Clarifying questions as well as well-documented counterarguments – from other classes or readings you have done outside of class – are welcome and encouraged. This being an advanced seminar, regular attendance is essential. If you have a valid reason to miss a class (with prior excuse) you need to submit a response essay about the material covered in the missed class, due by the beginning of the following class. This essay will count toward your total submissions of response essays.

No prior courses in international relations are required. Even if this is your first course in political science, you can excel in this seminar, but you will have to work harder than others who have already acquired an understanding of international relations concepts in other courses. If you are new to reading political science, this four-page guide may help you tackle the readings:


In order to fully understand the readings for this course you should be familiar with key concepts of international relations (such as anarchy, liberalism, and realism). If this is your first international relations course, I recommend that you read one of the two readings listed below. The first book chapter is more concise but also more dense than the second one.

Materials and access

All course readings can be accessed through the course website on Canvas. It will not be necessary to purchase any books.

Assignment and grading procedures

Grades will be composed of:

- Participation: 20%
- Presentations: 20%
- Response essays: 25%
- Final paper: 35%

**Participation:** Student participation in class is the single most important factor influencing the quality of a seminar. You are expected to attend all classes and to actively participate in the discussion of the readings.

**Presentation:** Together with a colleague you will conduct a case study and deliver a ten-minute presentation. You will choose the case from a long list of options, and you will independently pursue and present research on this topic. The use of slides is highly encouraged, and you should send me your presentation slides by the beginning of class. Since the skill to deliver effective presentations is invaluable in many settings, you will receive constructive feedback both on the substance and the style of the presentation. The list of presentation topics will be posted on Canvas.

**Response essays:** The purpose of these essays is to synthesize the week’s readings succinctly, scrutinize how they complement or contradict each other, and to use them to respond to the questions posed on the syllabus. Often the readings present contrasting arguments or shed light on different aspects of the topic. You are encouraged to critique the readings and to adopt and defend a clear position on the main debate(s) covered in the week’s readings. Your response essay has to address each reading (except for recommended readings, which are optional). At the end of each essay, you should propose two questions to motivate our conversation for the class. Response essays should be no longer than three pages (1-inch margins, 12-point font, double-spaced). You can write up to three response essays, and the best two will be considered for your grade. At least one response essay has to be written during the first six weeks of this seminar. Response essays are due at 8 p.m. in the evening before the seminar.

**Final paper:** You will write a research paper on a topic of your choice, which is due at the end of the semester. By Thursday, October 27 you need to send me a one-page outline summarizing your argument, the evidence you plan to present, and where you intend to find it. You will receive feedback on your outline. While the outline will not be graded, failure to submit it will
adversely affect the final paper grade. The final paper (15-18 pages, 1-inch margins, 12-point font, double-spaced) will be due in early December (date t.b.d.). The assignment will be posted on Canvas.

All written assignments and presentation slides should be submitted by email or through the course website. Response essays will not be accepted after the beginning of class.

**Collaboration and academic integrity policy**

The exchange of ideas is critical for academic work. Collaboration on the presentations is required, and dialogue and debate among seminar participants before working on an assignment is encouraged. At the same time, any written work you submit for evaluation must be the result of your own research and writing and reflect your own ideas and arguments. After all, one key objective of the course is for you to develop your own arguments and practice your writing and critical thinking. You must adhere to the standard citation practices in Political Science and clearly cite any books, articles, or speeches you refer to. The [Harvard Guide to Using Sources](#) provides guidance on this topic. If you receive help with your writing, such as for example feedback on drafts, you should clearly acknowledge it.

**Technology policy**

Laptops should be strictly used for note taking and accessing reading material. Access to the Internet should be switched off during class. If laptops prove too much of a distraction I reserve the right to change this policy.

**Special accommodations**

Students needing academic adjustments or accommodations because of a documented disability must present their Faculty Letter from the Accessible Education Office (AEO) and should speak with the instructor by the end of the second week of the term in order to make sure that the arrangements can be implemented on time.
Course schedule

PART I. INTRODUCTION

Week 1. United Nations in a Divided World


**Recommended:**


Week 2. The Founding of the United Nations: A Revolution or Evolution of World Politics?


**Recommended:**

PART II. INTERNATIONAL PEACE AND SECURITY

Week 3. Does the UN Security Council Live up to its ‘Primary Responsibility for the Maintenance of International Peace and Security’?


Recommended:


Week 4. Are UN Blue Helmets Effective at Peacekeeping and Protecting Civilians in Armed Conflict?


Recommended:


Week 5. Can the UN Enforce Peace through Member States’ Military Interventions and Sanctions?


Recommended:


PART III. UN COOPERATION ON HUMAN RIGHTS, JUSTICE, ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, CLIMATE CHANGE, AND OTHER ISSUES

Week 6. Secretary or General? The Roles of the UN Secretary-General and International Civil Servants

Traub, James. 2007. “The Secretary-General's Political Space.” In: Secretary or General? The UN Secretary-General in World Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press): pp. 185-201.


**Recommended:**


**Week 7. World Senate or Paper Tiger? The UN General Assembly**


**Recommended:**


**Week 8. Human Rights for All? The Politics of UN Human Rights Institutions**


Recommended:


Week 9. The Wheels of Justice: The World Court and other UN Tribunals


Week 10. Development cooperation


Recommended:

**Week 11. Climate change**


**Recommended:**


**PART IV. TAKING STOCK AND LOOKING FORWARD**

**Week 12. Which Future for the United Nations?**


Recommended: