Advanced Seminar
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Applied Geopolitics, Political Change Management, and International Law
Case Studies in International Relations and Geopolitics
Winter Term 2026
(as of 15/07/2026)

Lecture Times:	Mondays from 12 October 2026 to 25 January 2027 (except on 26 October 2026) 16:00 to 17:30 h The lectures on 11 and 18 January 2027 will be "double entities" (16:00 to 17:30 h and 17:45 to 19:15 h)
Room:	Seminar room S 101 (Room 0.235), Building 211 (IBW Building)
Consultation:	Same dates as sessions, 14:30 to 15:30 h Please register via email
Convenor:	Prof. Dr. Klemens H. FISCHER
Email:	klemens.fischer@uni-koeln.de

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Geopolitics is the art of territorial foreign and security policy that aims at gaining command or even control over geographic space.

The whole exercise of geopolitics results in change, either initiated (= active) or tolerated/endured/ suffered (= passive). Particularly in case of the latter, pro-active change management is a question of survival for the respective political entity.

Change management comprises not only political action. States and the international community alike have to find both transitory and long-term legal solutions in the field of international law. The rules and terminology of international law play an eminent role in both conflict and post-conflict settlement. Furthermore, international law can be seen as guideline for international political change management.

The course will lay a firm foundation of understanding with regard to options, constrains, challenges, and risks of political decision making in the field of international relations. During the course, students will embark on a virtual round-trip that leads them from MENA, Central/Eastern Europe, the Atlantic. The Americas, the Pacific, the Indian Ocean, Central Asia, and Africa back to Europe. The tour is brought to a close with a sojourn into space and cyberspace.

During their journey, students will analyse and apply the various concepts of geopolitics and change management against the background of different theatres and different driving forces in "real life" scenarios that will include the latest developments in geopolitics.

Upon completion of the course, students will have assessed the impact of geopolitics and geoeconomics on foreign and security policy relations from a global, bipartisan perspective. The course will entitle them to assess the options of a state or a union of states both in terms of their domestic and foreign policy and the application of international law, and so to develop political and legal change management strategies.

READINGS

The reading list contains both essential and supplementary literature. The reading list is neither comprehensive nor mandatory, but rather provides an overview of recommended reading.

ASSESSMENTS

Presentations [30%]

Students will actively contribute by both presentations.

The presentations will be given by groups on selected special geopolitical issues of the lecture topics. Each presentation (designed as "Newsroom Presentation") is supposed to be no longer than 10 minutes. The Newsroom Presentation shall comprise (i) a headline and (ii) a compact background analysis. It shall be supported by power point (maximum three slides). The topics for these presentations will be submitted to the groups before January 2027.

Final Paper [70 %]

Students will hand in a paper on a self-selected topic related to one of the lecture topics. The term paper shall comprise 13 to 15 pages including bibliography.

OVERVIEW OF GRADING SCHEME AND ASSESSMENTS

70 % term paper
30 % presentation

SUBMISSION DEADLINE(S)

Term paper: 14.March 2027, 23:59 h
Mail to: klemens.fischer@uni-koeln.de

SCHEDULE

#	Date	Topic
01	12.10.2026	Introduction and General Issues – Setting up Level Playing Field Intro: Geopolitics, Geostrategy, Geoeconomics, Political Change Management and International Law – The Manual to the Toolbox General Issues: Administrative Issues
02	19.10.2026	MENA – One Map – Many Layers – Reading a Map Once is not Enough
03	02.11.2026	Central and Eastern Europe – Intermediate Europe and the Return of a Presumed-dead Superpower – The Art of Multi-theatre Acting and the Location-Force-Time Calculus
04	09.11.2026	Atlantic – From the Pillars of Hercules to Ultima Thule and Beyond – From the Centre of Gravity to an Inland Sea
05	16.11.2026	The Americas – The Big Island in the Vastness of the Sea – From Superpower to Supporting Actor
06	23.11.2026	The Pacific – And if Thou'rt Unwilling, Then Force I'll Employ – The Rise of a New Superpower – One Hegemon vs Many Alliances
07	30.11.2026	The Indian Ocean – One Cannot Change the Direction of the Wind, but One Can Adjust the Sails – Bridgehead or Hidden Champion
08	07.12.2026	Central Asia – The Great Game Reloaded – When Change Mismanagement Meets Cross Misjudgement of the Situation
09	14.12.2026	Africa – When the Steam Boiler Starts to Whistle – Prevention is Better Than Repair
10	21.12.2026	Europe and the Mediterranean – An Ounce of Prevention is Worth a Pound of Cure
11 12	11.01.2027	Outer Space – A Journey of a Thousand Miles Begins With a Single Step Cyber – Nothing Is Certain but Death and Taxes – and the Attack Out of Nowhere
13 14	18.01.2027	Newsroom Presentations – Wrapping up the Seminar
15	**25.01.2027**	**Newsroom Presentations – Wrapping up the Seminar – Part II = TBC**

TOPICS

Session 1

Introduction: Geopolitics, Geostrategy, Geoeconomics, Political Change Management and International Law – The Manual to the Toolbox

Against the background of history and theory, students will study the main drivers and agents, identify key actors and their options in reaction to change, and will learn how to apply the tools of pro-active international relations.

Session 2

MENA – One Map – Many Layers – Reading a Map is Not Enough

The so-called Arabellion added to the decade-long Israeli-Palestinian conflict, leading to a quagmire where friend and foe are changing daily. Students will analyse how misinterpretation of political developments may lead to a political stalemate that might result in totally unforeseen new geopolitical alliances. A part of the world being called the *Holy Land* – and its surrounding countries – turns out to be one of the most contested territories, turning it to an *Unruly Land*. War-by-proxy is on the daily agenda. The still ongoing conflict in Syria brings together all main geopolitical powers both from a regional and a global perspective. Participants will study how capacity constraints, overstretched lines of logistics, and limitations imposed by domestic factors lead to an unexpected champion in the field.

Session 3

Central and Eastern Europe – Intermediate Europe and the Return of a Presumed-dead Superpower – The Art of Multi-Theatre Acting and the Location-Force-Time Calculus

After two decades of loss in power and global influence, Russia is back on stage again. Stu- dents will evaluate the influence of geography on security-political decisions and the necessity of a sustainable change management approach. Are we experiencing a new era of containment or an era of gaining influence without occupation?

Session 4

The Atlantic – From the Pillars of Hercules to Ultima Thule and Beyond – From the Centre of Gravity to an Inland Sea

For the Europeans, the Atlantic Ocean is the maritime door to the world, for the United States of America it is the bridge to their allies within NATO. For centuries, the Atlantic played a decisive role for both Europe and the Americas, its geopolitical importance could not be overestimated. In the time period from the end of the Cold War until China's rise to a global player, the Atlantic lost its pivotal position to the Pacific at least for the United States of America. Students will draw their conclusions from this change of meaning and will develop concepts for the EU to make better geopolitical and geoeconomic use of the Atlantic.

Session 5

The Americas – The Big Island in the Vastness of the Sea – From Superpower to Supporting Actor

The Americas are geographically divided into a northern and a southern sub-continent but that division falls short of the geopolitical core element: the domination of the continent by one out of thirty-five states. The United States of America not only dominate the whole continent but are one of three global superpowers (or the one-and-only according to their self-assessment). In the presumed shadow of the USA, thirty-four other states follow a totally different geopolitical logic than the monolithic hegemon in the northern sphere. Students will explore both (i) the challenges and opportunities that the unique location between two oceans opens up for the USA and (ii) the constraints and interdependencies of the South American states, which are shaped not only by the overwhelming neighbour to the north and the two oceans, but also by massive mountain ranges running from north to south.

Session 6

The Pacific – And if Thou'rt Unwilling, Then Force I'll Employ – The Rise of a New Superpower – One Hegemon vs Many Alliances

The camp of those states that want to dominate the Pacific is currently getting quite crowded. Russia, China, Japan, and the United States struggle for leadership. Russia with only one foothold and Japan by losing its dominant economic position have to give way to China and the USA. The United States of America have gradually turned from the Atlantic to the Pacific to challenge China in her bid for regional dominance and ultimately hegemony over the region. Russia keeps an eye on the region but turns more inward and to the west, whereas Japan is building up alliances with her former war opponents and is seeking closer cooperation with India. With her Belt-and-Road-Initiative, China has developed a parallel strategic option by striding westwards both land- and seabound. The other Pacific Rim States are caught between Scylla and Charybdis, between open confrontation with China and conflict-free coexistence. Students will explore the various strands of geopolitical opportunities for the Big Four and the challenges for the Pacific region in the light of an ever-growing hegemonial attempt.

Session 7

The Indian Ocean – One Cannot Change the Direction of the Wind, but One Can Adjust the Sails – Bridgehead or Hidden Champion

The sub-continent of India lies like a promontory between Southeast Asia and Africa. However, the end of British colonial rule did not lead India into calm waters; rather, India was confronted with new geopolitical challenges on several land borders that continue to this day. Economically, India was treated for decades as an extended workbench particularly by countries of the western hemisphere. The possession of the atomic bomb, a steady economic boom and the increasing importance of safe sea routes have made India the dominant power in the Indian Ocean. Meanwhile, the race for influence in Africa is no longer conceivable without India. Students will evaluate the central location of the Indian Ocean between Southeast Asia and Africa. Special attention will be given to the role of safe sea lanes and the costs and challenges from both a security and economic perspective.

Session 8

Central Asia – The Great Game Reloaded – When Change Mismanagement Meets Cross Misjudgement of the Situation

Afghanistan is back to where it was in 2001. The chaotic scenes at Kabul Airport in mid-August 2021 will be etched in the public memory like those of the evacuation of the US embassy in Saigon in 1975. Nevertheless, these images are only the last piece in the mosaic of a long process that culminated in the implosion of a dream. After twenty years, the Western alliance left the country in a mixture of retreat and flight, leaving behind a divided people, betrayed dreams of a young generation, and an unpredictable power vacuum. The Great Game for Central Asia has started again. Students will analyse (i) both the change process started in 2001 by the Western alliance and the change process started in 2021 by the Taliban and (ii) the consequences for the immediate neighbourhood of Afghanistan for Central Asia and beyond.

Session 9

Africa – When the Steam Boiler Starts to Whistle – Prevention is Better Than Repair

For hundreds of years, Africa's fate was determined by slavery and exploitation. Only after the end of WW II, the process of decolonization led to independent states. During the Cold War, part of Africa rendered a plaything between East and West. Today, the continent runs the risk of becoming the playing field of a new quest: rare-earths and other resources alike. Students will analyse the influence of structural geology on political decisions, as illustrated in the emerging race between the EU, China, India, and Japan on that continent.

Session 10

The Mediterranean – An Ounce of Prevention is Worth a Pound of Cure

Compared to the sheer vastness of the oceans, the Mediterranean is an inland sea. Dense sea traffic from West to East and from North to South, the enormous number of countries surrounding it, and the fact that it is enclosed by three continents, give the Mediterranean Sea a special significance. For some it is the last bulwark that protects the European Union against unrestrained migration, for others it is the last obstacle on the way to a better life. The domination of the eastern Mediterranean will be decided around the island of Cyprus, and the future of North Africa in Libya. The comparatively small dimension of the Mediterranean means that any geopolitical action by one state affects the fate of all the others. In this context, it should not be forgotten that there is only a narrow strait between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. Students will review the effectiveness of the European Union's various sea-based peacekeeping missions and evaluate the implications of a resurgent Cold War.

Session 11 – Part I

Outer Space – A Journey of a Thousand Miles Begins With a Single Step

Ever since the first rocket has successfully penetrated the fluid border zone between Earth and space and left the high atmosphere, the race for dominance in space is on. Whereas in the beginning the goals were exclusively military and strategic, commercial intentions began to emerge, secondly the initially exclusive circle of states that had the necessary technology expanded significantly, and finally a purely state-dominated technology and use became an area in which private operators and users play an equal role today. Students will explore the various strands of politics of Outer Space, respectively the framework of international law (e.g. space treaties, law in space), the different geopolitical approaches to international cooperation and conflict in space exploration, and the main streams in international economics related to outer space. We will not go Where No Man Has Gone Before, so the course does not get lost in the infinite vastness of space; we will deal with science faction, but not science fiction.

Session 11 – Part II

Cyber – Nothing is Certain but Death and Taxes – and the Attack Out of Nowhere

The Cyber Realm develops to be the most contested battlefield of the 21st century. In the 1970 movie "Colossus: The Forbin Project" the world was threatened with nuclear war, when massive computer systems from the USA (codename Colossus) and Russia (codename Guardian) connected each other. Once science fiction, today such cyber threats cannot be ruled out anymore, they are already omnipresent. The international community is only at the beginning of developing robust defence strategies against cyber-attacks. The geopolitical future of states and international organisations will increasingly be determined by the security of energy networks and other critical infrastructure. Students will examine various strategic geopolitical approaches for cooperation among states to create a safer, more secure, stable, and interoperable cyberenvironment.

Session 12 (+ Session 13 tbc)

Newsroom Presentations – Wrapping up the Seminar

READINGS

Session 1:

Flint, Colin: Introduction to Geopolitics, 3rd Edition, Oxon – New York 2016

Scott, Shirley V.: International Law in World Politics – An Introduction, 2nd Edition, Boulder/CO 2010

Kotter, John P.: Leading Change, Boston 2012

Session 2:

Mackintosh-Smith, Tim: Arabs, New Haven–London 2019

Smith, Dan: The State of the Middle East Atlas: Regional Change and Global Impact, 3rd Edition, Brighton 2016

Session 3:

Youngs, Richard: Europe's Eastern Crisis – The Geopolitics of Asymmetry, Cambridge 2017

Session 4:

Dumont, Gérard-François/ Verluise, Pierre: The Geopolitics of Europe: From the Atlantic to the Urals, Wrocław 2017

Session 5:

Ambrose, Stephen E./ Brinkley, Douglas G.: Rise to Globalism: American Foreign Policy Since 1938 9th Edition, London 2011

Kelly, Philip: Checkerboards and Shatterbelts: The Geopolitics of South America, Austin 1997

Session 6:

Ball, Desmond/ Béraud-Sudreau, Lucie/ Huxley, Tim/ Mohan, C. Raja/ Taylor, Brendan Asia's New Geopolitics: Military Power and Regional Order (The International Institute for Strategic Study), London 2021

Charlton, Sue Ellen M.: Comparing Asian Politics – India, China, and Japan, 4th Edition, Boulder 2014

McGregor, Richard: Asia's Reckoning – The Struggle for Global Dominance, New York 2017

Session 7:

Ball et al.: see Session 6

Charlton, Sue Ellen M.: see Session 6

Menon, Shivshankar: India and Asian Geopolitics – The Past. Present, Washington 2021

Session 8:

Qayyum, Abdul: Understanding Afghanistan: History, Politics and the Economy, London 2021

Session 9:

Hugon, Philippe: African Geopolitics, Princeton 2008

Session 10:

Dumont et al: see Session 4

Fischer, Klemens H. (Ed): European Security put to the Test – Perspectives and Challenges for the next Decade, AIES Series on European and Security Policy, Volume 6, Baden-Baden 2021

Session 11:

Dawson, Linda: War in Space – The Science and Technology Behind Our Next Theater of Conflict, Chichester 2018

Session 12:

Guiora, Amos N.: Cybersecurity: Geopolitics, Law, and Policy, London–New York 2017