

**Department: International Relations**

**Faculty: Social Sciences**

**Course Title: Great Powers in the International System (MPhil/PhD, Optional)**

**Number of Credits: Four**

**Course Objectives:**

The category of the ‘great power’ emerged in the lexicon of international politics almost two centuries ago. Since then, a considerable amount of ink and intellectual energy has been expended in better understanding this category of states. However, a perusal of contemporary scholarship of this much-invoked concept reveals that a great deal of confusion and uncertainty exists. For instance, who exactly is a great power? Can the great powers be identified ‘objectively’ on the basis of certain indicators or can they only be determined historically? How exactly does a state attain the status of a great power? Are capabilities sufficient for the attainment of great power status or is recognition also required? If recognition does play an important role in this regard, then who accords recognition to the state in question? Is it the existing great powers or the international community? This course seeks to expose students to the literature on the great powers to help them reflect on, and develop their opinions, as regards great powers in international politics. Not only will such an exercise help them better understand this concept but it will also enable them to make better sense of international politics - both of the past and the present.

**Course Structure:**

**Unit I: Great Powers as a Category**

*(This unit will cover Week 1)*

In this unit, we will undertake a historical overview of the development of the category of the ‘great power.’ We will also examine how the term has been used as an analytical construct by engaging with the different formulations of great powers in IR scholarship.

**Unit II: Great Powers through the Ages**

*(This unit will cover Weeks 2, 3, 4 and 5)*

In this unit, we will examine how the great powers have operated through the ages. We will engage with the works of 2 prominent historians who have worked a great deal on the great powers: Paul Kennedy and Jeremy Black. By engaging with their work, we will be exposed to the historical and empirical dimensions of great powers. This will help us better appreciate theories dealing with the great powers since much of theorizing in IR generally, and the great powers specifically, is derived from historical cases.

**Unit III: Power and Great Powers**

*(This unit will cover Weeks 5 and 6)*

It is generally understood that great powers are some of the most powerful states in the international system. However, power itself has been broken down into different components and analyzed accordingly. We seek to better understand what power means and which component of power is especially relevant into the making of a great power. In other words, what goes into the making of a great power? In doing so,

we shall engage with formulations of power that have been used by IR scholars when dealing with the great powers.

#### **Unit IV: Non-Material Dimensions of Great Powers**

*(This unit will cover Weeks 6 and 7)*

The category of great powers is as much a social as it is a material category. To that end, it has been observed that contrary to a somewhat crude depiction of great powers as states that are locked in a perpetual zero-sum competition with each other they in fact pay heed to the social dimensions of international life and seek recognition and legitimacy. This section introduces readers to this facet of great powers.

#### **Unit V: Great Power Functions/Roles**

*(This unit will cover Weeks 7 and 8)*

As the dominant states in the international system, great powers are believed to fulfil many system-maintaining functions. Hedley Bull goes so far as identifying them as ‘managers’ that carry out managerial functions in the international society. This section identifies some of the functions that the great powers are believed to carry out in IR and some of the strategies they adopt to impart a central direction in international relations.

#### **Unit VI: Multi-Polar Great Power Politics**

*(This unit will cover Weeks 8 and 9)*

In this unit, we shall look at the scholarship that dwells on the relationship between multi-polarity and system stability.

#### **Unit VII: Unipolarity and Great Power Politics**

*(This unit will cover Weeks 9 and 10)*

In the post Cold War era, the term ‘uni-polarity’ has occupied an important space in the debates on the salience and impact of the great powers in IR. What exactly does uni-polarity mean and what are the debates surrounding this concept? More importantly, what impact does this ‘condition’ have on great powers and their politics?

#### **Unit VIII: Great powers and their contenders**

*(This unit will cover Weeks 10 and 11)*

Power transitions are usually regarded by scholars as a destabilizing process in IR where the clash of power and interest of the rising and dominant great powers can ignite violence across the system. As a result, considerable attention has been paid to the strategies that have been adopted by the great powers to ensure that this ‘tragic’ script is not repeated. This section exposes students to the relationship between power transitions and great powers.

#### **Unit IX: Asia and Great Power Politics**

*(This unit will cover Weeks 11 and 12)*

Asia has emerged as an important site of great power politics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The converging-diverging interest dynamics of some of the principal actors in the region and the varied interests of the US as regards Asia means that this part of the world provides interesting vistas of the unfolding great power politics of our times. Who are some of the main actors in Asia and will Asia’s future resemble Europe’s past?

#### **Reading Suggestions:**

- Bisley, Nick (2012), *Great Powers in the Changing International Order*, Lynne Rienner
- Black, Jeremy (2008), *Great Powers and the Quest for Hegemony: The World Order since 1500*, Oxon, Routledge
- Buzan, Barry and Waever, Ole (2003), *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press
- Hurd, Ian (2007), *After Anarchy: Legitimacy and Power in the United Nations Security Council*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press
- Johnson, Alastair Iain and Ross, Robert S. Ross (ed.) (1999), *Engaging China: The Management of an Emerging Power*, New York, Routledge
- Kennedy, Paul (1988), *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*, London, Unwin Hyman
- Mearsheimer, John J. (2001), *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, New York: W.W. Norton