**OLLI SPRING 2022**

**RICHARD TEMPEST**

**TRIUMVIRATE:**

**AMERICA, CHINA, AND RUSSIA AS GLOBAL ACTORS AND RIVALS**

The destinies of our world are being shaped by three geopolitical partners and rivals, the United States, China, and Russia. Led by veteran politicians who preside over very different political systems, each nation-state in this triumvirate of great-power competitors faces major challenges, some shared and some unique, while vying for world leadership in a fluid, occasionally chaotic international environment. Our course will look at how Joe Biden, Xi Jinping, and Vladimir Putin are attempting to achieve a historic reconfiguration of the global hierarchies of economic, military, and cultural preeminence. What motivates these men, how representative are they of their nations’ politics and history, and who will emerge the victor in this all-important contest?

**Week One**

A historical prologue: The First and Second Triumvirates of Rome, and the triumvirate of regents during the minority of Emperor Zhao of China’s Han Dynasty. Is war, rather than peace, humankind’s inevitable condition? Or is it, more broadly, chaos and churn across borders and continents? What happened to the War on Terror? What does Ivan the Terrible have to do with the Ukraine crisis, and will the current standoff in Eastern Europe lead to armed conflict? The 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics as a factor in the Ukraine standoff. Status quo states vs. revisionist states. Wilhelmine Germany’s quest for *Weltmacht*, or world power, and the relevance of this historical episode today. The Chinese notion of 命 (*ming* = fate) compared with the Western notion of hubris. The privileging of voluntarism in China’s traditional and communist-era political culture. John Adams’s opera *Nixon in China* (1987) as a source of geopolitical insight.

**Week Two**

Presidents Biden, Xi, and Putin are veteran public actors who have spent decades in the corridors of power. The United States and its march to global preeminence, in war and peace, against Britain, Germany, Japan, and the Soviet Union. The American pivot to Asia. Russia from Prince Vladimir Rurik to Chairman Vladimir Lenin to President Vladimir Putin. Xi Jingping as the successor to Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaping. Deng may have been the single most impactful figure of the twentieth century. The three members of our geopolitical triumvirate are served by highly qualified foreign policy establishments; and the administrations they lead each have a diplomatic doctrine and methodology. So, in geopolitical and geocultural terms, are Biden, Putin, and Xi in complete command of the material, or do they suffer from blind spots and misapprehensions?

**Week Three**

From the Shining City on a Hill to the caves of Yenan, via Lenin’s Mausoleum: International relations as a function of power and mythology. We all know about American exceptionalism, but what about the Chinese and Russian variety? How do the American, Chinese, and Russian publics’ collective aspirations and historical traumas shape their countries’ behaviors? President Xi and his leadership group. Do you remember Bo Xilai? President Xi certainly does! Putin replays the *Game of Thrones*. Nobel Peace Prize laureate Liu Xiaobo (2010): almost forgotten. Nobel Peace Prize laureate Dmitry Muratov (2021): currently impactful. The Westphalian system of non-interference in another country’s domestic affairs. Tibet, Hong Kong, the Uyghurs. The great-power triumvirate was born of two world wars and the Cold War that followed, and bears the imprint of those global conflicts.

**Week Four**

Three varieties of capitalism, or three entirely different economic systems? Global markets and supply chains. Forgive the mixed metaphors, but protectionism is a three-way street and a double-edged sword! Ex-president Medvedev of Russia and his beloved iPhone. The China-America higher education connection. Apple, Boeing, and Tesla in China, to give just three examples. B3W (Build Back Better World) *contra* BRI (Belt and Road Initiative). Russia as Europe’s energy supplier. Remember, the United States, China, and Russia are competitive, but also interdependent: planetary frenemies, in other words.

**Week Five**

“From the taiga to the British seas, there’s no one stronger than the Red Army”: How the Putin administration reformed the Russian military and sent it out to fight in foreign wars. Hybrid warfare: uses and temptations. China’s People’s Liberation Army plans to complete its modernization by 2035 and to attain parity with the United States by 2050: and then, what? Will Taiwan’s survive as an independent entity five, ten, fifteen, or fifty years from now? Does the Pentagon’s National Defense Strategy of 2021 “provide a clear road map […] to meet the challenges posed by a reemergence of long-term strategic competition with China and Russia”? Eurasia’s Necklace of Conflicts: geopolitical hotspots from the South China Sea to Iran, Syria, and Ukraine.

**Week Six**

The nations of the world fall into two categories: States of Laws and States of Rules. President Xi and the evolution and devolution of China’s communist ideology. Is Putin’s “vertical of power” in danger of toppling over? The Russian Federation as a KGB project. Twenty-first-century America in crisis: historical contexts and a look at what may happen three years down the road. The next generation of American political leaders and the challenges they will face. The three powers’ international goals, and the relationship of the latter to their domestic agendas. How each member of the triumvirate views its competitor-partners. Why the (geo)political differences between China and Russia are greater than they seem, and will the United States take advantage of this divergence of interests and identities?

**Week Seven**

Winning international hearts, minds, and eyeballs: A comparison between the United States, China, and Russia in terms of their transcontinental cultural presence. Who among the three powers tops the poll in the international popularity stakes, and why? The global politics of envy. Foreign perceptions of Biden, Xi, and Putin as their nation’s leaders. One of them is a charismatic figure: can you guess who? Positive and negative nation-branding as a tool of geopolitics. Nobel Prize in Literature laureate Mo Yan (2012) and his reception of the Chinese communist aesthetic. Why the Russian cultural establishment so deprecates Nobel Prize in Literature laureate Svetlana Aleksievich (2015). The impact of the Covid pandemic on the three countries’ respective political systems and geopolitical prospects; and their international reputations.

**Week Eight**

It may be that, to quote W.H. Auden, we are living in another “low dishonest decade.” But as objects (and, hopefully) subjects of global change, we should strive, in the words of another poet, to “listen to the music of the centuries / rising above the mushroom time.” And, maybe, to sing along! Biden, Putin, Xi and their respective lines of succession. What Paul Kennedy, Niall Ferguson, and Nassim Taleb, academic authorities on global catastrophe and international grand strategy, can tell us about the geopolitical prospects of the three great powers that are the subject of this course.

**Recommended Reading**

Catherine Belton, *Putin’s People: How the KGB Took Back Russia and Then Took on the West* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020)

Ray Dalio, *Principles for Dealing with the Changing World Order: Why Nations Succeed and Fail* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2021)

Elizabeth C. Economy, *The Third Revolution: Xi Jinping and the New Chinese State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019)

Niall Ferguson, *The Politics of Disaster* (New York: Penguin, 2021)

Fiona Hill and Clifford G. Gaddy, *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin*, 2nd edn. (New York: Brookings Institution Press, 2015)

Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (New York: Vintage, 2015)

Peter Pomerantsev, *Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible: The Surreal Heart of the New Russia* (New York: Public Affairs, 2015)

David Shambaugh, *China’s Leaders from Mao to Now* (New York: Polity, 2021)

Nassim Taleb, *Incerto* (comprises *Fooled by Randomness, The Black Swan, The Bed of Procrustes, Antifragile, Skin in the Game*) (New York: Random House, 2001-19)