

Politics of East Asia

Sample Course Syllabus – Undergraduate Level

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Course Description

How did East Asia become home to some of the world's most durable democracies, powerful authoritarian regimes, and rapidly transforming economies? Why did countries that experienced similar historical shocks develop such different political institutions? And how do domestic political institutions, identities, and historical legacies shape contemporary relations among China, Japan, and the two Koreas?

This course introduces students to the comparative politics of East Asia, with particular attention to China, Japan, South Korea, and North Korea. Rather than studying each country in isolation, we use comparison to examine how historical legacies, state institutions, economic development, political parties, authoritarian rule, democratization, nationalism, and international pressures have produced different political trajectories across the region.

The course is organized around four themes. First, we examine the historical foundations of contemporary East Asian states, including the decline of imperial China, Japanese imperial expansion, colonialism, and the Cold War. Second, we compare the emergence and development of political regimes in China, Japan, North Korea, and South Korea. Third, we examine democratization, authoritarian resilience, political institutions, and public opinion. Finally, we consider contemporary challenges including U.S.–China competition, historical memory, nationalism, the North Korean nuclear issue, and the changing regional order.

Throughout the course, students will connect country-specific knowledge to broader questions in comparative politics about regime change, political institutions, authoritarianism, democratization, political identity, and state-society relations.

Learning Objectives

By the end of the course, students should be able to:

- Explain how major historical developments have shaped contemporary political institutions in East Asia;
- Compare democratic and authoritarian political systems across China, Japan, and the Korean Peninsula;
- Apply theories of democratization, authoritarianism, political institutions, and nationalism to East Asian cases;
- Analyze how domestic political institutions and identities shape foreign policy and interstate relations;
- Evaluate competing scholarly arguments using historical and contemporary evidence;
- Develop evidence-based written and oral arguments about East Asian politics;
- Design a comparative research project using appropriate political science concepts and evidence.

Course Structure

The course is organized around four substantive themes:

1. **Historical Foundations of Contemporary East Asia**
2. **Democracy, Authoritarianism, and Political Institutions**
3. **Political Identity, Nationalism, and State–Society Relations**
4. **Recent Security Issues in East Asia**

Most class meetings will combine a short lecture with student discussion, small-group exercises, comparative case analysis, and interpretation of primary or secondary sources.

Course Requirements

Assignment	Weight
Participation and Discussion	15%
Comparative Response Papers (2)	20%
Midterm Examination	20%
Research Design Exercise	10%
Comparative Research Paper	25%
Research Presentation	10%
Total	100%

Participation and Discussion (15%)

Active participation is an important component of the course. Students are expected to complete the assigned readings before class and arrive prepared to discuss their arguments, evidence, and implications. Participation may include whole-class discussion, small-group exercises, written reflections, and short comparative activities.

The goal is not simply to speak frequently, but to contribute thoughtfully by asking questions, connecting readings, evaluating evidence, and responding constructively to classmates.

Comparative Response Papers (20%)

Students will write two short analytical essays of approximately 800–1,000 words.

Each paper will compare at least two East Asian political systems and address a question such as:

- Why did democratization occur in some East Asian states but not others?
- Why have authoritarian institutions proven more durable in some countries than others?
- How do different historical experiences shape contemporary nationalism?

The purpose of these assignments is to develop comparative reasoning rather than produce descriptive country summaries.

Midterm Examination (20%)

The midterm examination will assess students' understanding of key concepts, historical developments, and comparative arguments from the first half of the course.

The exam will include concept identification, short analytical questions, and one comparative essay.

Research Design Exercise (10%)

Students will develop a preliminary research question and comparative research design for their final paper.

The exercise will identify:

- a research question;
- the cases being compared;
- the principal explanatory factors;
- the outcome to be explained;
- appropriate evidence for evaluating the argument.

Students will receive feedback before completing the final research paper.

Comparative Research Paper (25%)

Students will complete an 8–10 page comparative research paper examining a political question involving two or more East Asian cases.

Possible topics include:

- democratization in South Korea and Japan;
- authoritarian resilience in China and North Korea;
- political parties and electoral competition;
- historical memory and nationalism;
- state responses to social protest;
- public opinion toward foreign adversaries;
- U.S.–China strategic competition and domestic politics;
- political consequences of economic development.

Students will be evaluated on the clarity of their research question, theoretical argument, use of evidence, comparative logic, and quality of writing.

Research Presentation (10%)

During the final week, students will give a short presentation of their research project. Presentations should identify the research question, argument, evidence, and broader implications.

Course Readings

All required readings will be available through the course learning-management system.

Readings will include scholarly books and articles, historical documents, policy reports, and selected contemporary commentary.

Students should complete readings before the class meeting for which they are assigned.

Course Schedule

Week	Topic and Selected Readings
1	Introduction: Why Compare East Asian Political Systems? Course introduction; comparative politics and case comparison.
2	From Empire to Revolution: The Making of Modern China Schoppa, "From Empire to People's Republic," in William Joseph, ed., <i>Politics in China</i> . Kenneth Lieberthal, <i>Governing China</i> , Ch. 2.
3	Imperial Japan and the Making of the Modern Japanese State Kenneth Pyle, <i>The Making of Modern Japan</i> , selected chapters. Saaler, "Bad War or Good War: History and Politics in Post-War Japan."
4	War, Occupation, and the Cold War in East Asia Shambaugh and Yahuda, <i>International Relations of Asia</i> , selected pages. John Foster Dulles, "Security in the Pacific."
5	Revolution and Authoritarianism in Maoist China Kenneth Lieberthal, <i>Governing China</i> , Ch. 4. Judith Shapiro, <i>Mao's War Against Nature</i> , Ch. 2.
6	Reform without Democratization: China after Mao Ezra Vogel, <i>Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China</i> , selected chapter. Cheng Li, "China's Communist Party-State: The Structure and Dynamics of Power."
7	Postwar Japan: Democracy, Institutions, and the 1955 System Kenneth Pyle, <i>The Making of Modern Japan</i> , selected chapters. Duncan McCargo, <i>Contemporary Japan</i> , Chs. 5–6.

Course Schedule (continued)

Week	Topic and Selected Readings
8	The Korean Peninsula: Division, Development, and Authoritarianism Michael Robinson, <i>Korea's Twentieth-Century Odyssey</i> , selected chapters. Midterm Examination
9	South Korea: Development and Democratization Michael Robinson, <i>Korea's Twentieth-Century Odyssey</i> , Chs. 6 and 8. Discussion: economic development and democratic transition.
10	Authoritarian Resilience in Contemporary China Bruce Dickson, <i>Wealth into Power</i> , Introduction. David Lampton, "How China Is Ruled." Richard McGregor, "Party Man: Xi Jinping's Quest to Dominate China."
11	Nationalism, Historical Memory, and Political Identity Yinan He, "Ripe for Cooperation or Rivalry?" Jeff Kingston, <i>Contemporary Japan</i> , selected chapter on historical memory.
12	Domestic Politics and U.S.–China Relations Shambaugh, ed., <i>Tangled Titans</i> , selected chapters. Adam Segal, "When China Rules the Web."
13	Alliances and Security Politics: Japan, South Korea, and the United States Chanlett-Avery and Rinehart, <i>The U.S.-Japan Alliance</i> , selected pages. George Packard, "The United States-Japan Security Treaty at 50."
14	North Korea and Regional Security Nicholas Anderson, "America's North Korean Nuclear Trilemma." Jae Ho Chung and Myung-Hae Choi, "Uncertain Allies or Uncomfortable Neighbors?"
15	East Asian Politics in Comparative Perspective Comparative review: democracy, authoritarianism, nationalism, and regional order. Student research presentations.

Inclusive Learning Environment

My goal is to create a classroom in which students with different academic backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives can participate meaningfully in political inquiry.

Students enter political science courses with different levels of prior knowledge and methodological preparation. I therefore use structured discussion, small-group exercises, scaffolded assignments, and multiple forms of participation so that students have different opportunities to engage with course material.

Because many of the topics examined in this course—including nationalism, colonialism, authoritarianism,

identity, and international conflict—may generate disagreement, students are expected to engage one another's arguments respectfully and to distinguish analytical critique from personal judgment.

Use of Generative AI

Generative AI tools may be used for limited purposes such as brainstorming research questions, clarifying concepts, or identifying possible search terms.

Students may not submit AI-generated prose as their own work.

Any use of generative AI in graded assignments should be disclosed and must comply with assignment-specific instructions. Students remain responsible for verifying factual claims, locating and reading original sources, developing their own arguments, and properly citing evidence.

Academic Integrity

Students are expected to follow the institution's academic integrity policies. All written work must appropriately acknowledge the ideas, arguments, and evidence of others.

Plagiarism, unauthorized collaboration, fabrication of evidence, or submission of work produced by another person or system may result in academic penalties consistent with college policy.

Accessibility and Student Support

Students who require accommodations are encouraged to work with the appropriate accessibility office and to contact the instructor early in the semester.

I welcome conversations about how approved accommodations can be implemented effectively in this course.

This syllabus is a sample and may be revised to reflect institutional requirements, the academic calendar, and developments in East Asian politics.