

# International Law

SOSC 1270, Spring 2026, Wed/Fri 1:30-2:50PM, G010, CYT; Barry Sautman; Rm 3383; 23587821 (沙伯力 sobarrys@ust.hk); TA: Daphne Deng (daphnedy@ust.hk)

Public international law (IL) is based on rules for relations among states (countries), as well as the human rights of people. It covers almost every aspect of human activity and is mainly studied by analyzing legal cases and international agreements (treaties). The topics in an introductory IL course are the same everywhere in the world. The cases used are mostly the “classics” that established the principles of IL. Most topics involve current events of global importance.

## Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs)

HKUST has outcome-based education. Courses here have goals: Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs). Students in Common Core courses have varied interests and willingness to do work, so there should be different ILOs for different kinds of students. Here are the kinds of students who take IL, their rough proportions in the course over the years, their characteristics, and the ILOs for each kind of student. The percentages are **not** the same as the course grade distribution; they are based only on the amount of work that students typically do.

Poor Students	Ave./Good Students	Very Good Students	Excellent Students
about 15% of class	About 60% of class	About 15% of class	about 10% of class
miss most lectures never reads not interested in doing a paper	attends most lectures reads little or nothing may be interested in doing a paper	attends most lectures reads sometimes; interested in doing a paper	Attends almost all lectures; reads a lot very interested in doing a paper
ILO (#1): get a grade and have some idea of what topics are covered by IL	ILO (#2): same as #1, plus, at course's end, can understand news articles on IL topics	ILO (#3): same as #1 and #2, plus can basically discuss key issues affected by IL	ILO (#4): same as #1,2 and 3, plus has basically grasped how to reason legally

## Course Requirement

**There is only one course requirement:** to take one multiple choice (MC) exam totaling 80 bilingual questions (each question is in both English and Chinese). About 64 questions will be based on lectures and 16 will be based on student paper presentations.

## Volunteering to Write and Present a Paper

You can **volunteer** to write and present to the class a research paper on a current IL topic. If you do, the paper will be 50% of your final grade; your exam marks will be the other 50%. There are two benefits to doing a paper. First, **the average grade on papers is generally one full grade higher than the average grade by examination**; for example, if the average grade by examination alone is B-, the average grade given to papers is A-. Second, in your career you will likely have to do research and write papers or reports. Many students go through their whole undergraduate education without having written a research

paper. Almost every student who has written a research paper for one of my courses has later regarded it as a valuable experience for future work or post-graduate study.

You can work on the paper as an individual or (assuming sufficient course enrolment) in a team of two students. The papers should be 12-15 double-spaced pages (roughly 5,000-7,000 words). The paper **must** have *footnotes* with the sources that you used for each bit of information. It cannot have only a bibliography. It **must** be written using almost entirely your own words and **cannot** be written by AI, which you should use only to find sources and correct your English. Plagiarism (copying any work of others and pretending it is yours) can result in failing the course.

Teams or individuals will present papers in class on 24, 29 Apr. and 6 May. The length of presentation depends on how many papers are presented. If the **maximum of 9 papers** are presented in those three class meetings, each of the three presentations per class meeting will be 18 minutes, plus 7 minutes for questions by students and the instructor.

Students can apply to the TA to do a particular paper topic. A list of about 140 *suggested* topics is in this syllabus. You can propose a topic not on the list, but it must be about a *current* issue in IL that can be covered adequately in a short paper. Only one group can select a particular topic -- first come, first served. In the case of a few topics, it may also be possible for a team to present their paper in the form of a debate, with one team member debating the other. For example, they might do so with the topic "Does international law allow states to ban groups that advocate secession?"

Sign-ups for papers begin at 15:00 on 4 Feb. and end at 23:59 on 16 Feb. If more students sign up than we have slots available, the TA will carry out a lucky draw electronically no later than 10:00 on 17 Feb. If you do a paper, you **must** meet with the instructor for 5-10 minutes, in the period from 23-26 Feb. to discuss your topic.

Two optional seminars will be set up for paper writers: one on how to research a paper in IL and the other on how to write one. A few sample papers may be made available. If at least one student in a group of paper writers is literate in Chinese, a **bilingual** .ppt must be used during the presentation. Students will present in reverse order of the date and time that they sign up to do a paper; thus those who sign-up earlier get more time to prepare. Papers are due on 9 May, in soft copies sent directly to the instructor and TA.

### Final Grade Descriptors:

Grades	Short Description	Elaboration on subject grading description
A	Excellent Performance	Attends almost all lectures; reads a lot; very interested in doing a paper; demonstrates a comprehensive grasp of International Law principles.
B	Good Performance	Attends most lectures; reads sometimes; interested in doing a paper; shows good knowledge and understanding of International Law principles.
C	Satisfactory Performance	Attends most lectures; reads little; may be interested in doing a paper; possesses adequate knowledge of International Law principles.

D	Marginal Pass	Miss some lectures; reads little or nothing; not interested in doing a paper; having threshold knowledge of International Law principles.
F	Fail	Miss most lectures; never reads; not interested in doing a paper; demonstrates insufficient understanding of International Law principles.

### Course AI Policy

The use of Generative AI is NOT allowed. For the students who are volunteer to write a research paper, you should use AI only to find sources and correct your English. The paper **must** be written using almost entirely your own words and **cannot** be written by AI.

### Communication and Feedback

You are encouraged to ask questions. **Ask the TA about administrative matters, not the instructor.** To do well in this class, you should pay attention to lectures and presentations. **An optional** tutorial may be arranged before the exam to respond to questions about course topics.

### Academic Integrity

Students are expected to adhere to the university's academic integrity policy. Students are expected to uphold HKUST's Academic Honor Code and to maintain the highest standards of academic integrity. The University has zero tolerance of academic misconduct. Please refer to [Academic Integrity | HKUST – Academic Registry](#) for the University's definition of plagiarism and ways to avoid cheating and plagiarism.

### Course Readings and Videos

**Exam questions are all drawn from lectures and student presentations.** As with any “technical” subject however, you will understand lectures better if you also read a textbook. **You only need to read one textbook, either in English or Chinese.** Here are some textbooks that you can choose from:

In English: Jan Klabbers, *International Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 4th ed. 2023) (“Klabbers”) (e-book); Martin Dixon, *Textbook on International Law*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2013) (Dixon) (e-book); Alina Kaczorowska-Ireland, *Public International Law*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (London: Routledge, 2015) (e-book); *Akehurst's A Modern Introduction to International Law*, 8<sup>th</sup> ed. (London: Routledge, 2018) (e-book).

In simplified Chinese: 董秀丽, 国际法教程 (北京:北京大学出版社, 2006)(“Dong”); 白桂梅, 国际法 (北京: 北京大学出版社, 2018) (“Bai”) (e-book); 杨泽伟 国际法 (第五版) (北京:高等教育出版社, 2022) (“Yang”). In traditional Chinese 魏靜芬, 國際法 (台北市: 五南圖書出版公司, 2021)(“Wei”).

Revision books: Stephen Allen, *International Law* 4th ed. (London: Pearson, 2019) (e-book); Susan Breau, *International Law 2013 and 2014: Questions and Answers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). For topics in great detail, Malcolm Shaw, *International Law*, 9th ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021) or 马尔科姆·N·肖, 国际法: 第六版 (北京: 北京大学出版社, 2011).

These texts are on reserve. The library has many other English and Chinese IL textbooks.

Videos: Videos on IL topics at the Library Media Resources, each 30 minutes, are Law of Treaties: KZ1301.L39; Sources of International Law: JX68.L37; States: KZ4002.S73; Use of Force: KZ6355.U84; International Dispute Settlement: KZ5538.I58. Note: these videos are very boring, but may be useful.

### **Tentative Schedule of Topics and Readings**

A=Akehurst; B = Bai; Di=Dixon; Do= Dong; K= Klabbers; K-I = Kaczorowska-Ireland;  
Y= Yang (Not every book covers every topic; use more than one book where needed)

### **Tentative Schedule of SOSC 1270 Lecture Topics and Optional Readings in Textbooks**

A=Akehurst; B = Bai; Di=Dixon; Do= Dong; K= Klabbers; K-I = Kaczorowska-Ireland;  
Y= Yang (Not every book covers every topic; use more than one book where needed)

4, 6, 11, 13 Feb. Historical Development of IL (A Ch 2; D Ch. 1; K Ch1; K-I Ch 1; Y Ch 1-2) and Customs and Treaties (A Ch 3-4; B Ch. 2, 7; Di Ch 2-3; Do Ch 9; K Ch 2-3; K-I Ch. 2-3; Y Ch 12)

20, 25, 27 Feb.; 4 Mar.: States and International Organizations (A Ch 5-7, 11-14; B Ch. 4, 6, 8, 9, 11, 16; Di Ch 5-7; Do Ch 3-4, 8, 10; K Ch 4-5, 7; K-I Ch 5-7, 11; Y Ch 3,-6, 10-11)

6, 11 Mar.: International Human Rights (A Ch 15-16; B Ch 10; Di Ch 12; Do Ch 7; K Ch 6; K-I Ch 12; Y Ch. 9).

13, 18 Mar.: Sea, Air, Space Law (A Ch 8-9; B 12-13; Di Ch 8; Do Ch 5-6; K Ch 13; K-I Ch 8; Y, Ch 7-8)

20, 25 Mar.: Environmental Law (A Ch 17; B Ch 14; K Ch 14)

27 Mar.; 1, 10, 15, 17, 22 Apr: The Use of Force (A Ch 19-21; B 5, 18; Di Ch 11; K Ch 10-11; Y Ch 14) and Peaceful Settlement of Disputes (A Ch 22-23; B Ch 17; 16; Di Ch 12; Do Ch 11; K Ch 8; Y Ch 13)

24, 29 Apr.; 6 May: Student Paper Presentations (3 per class meeting)

**8 May: Exam (80 questions; 80 minutes)**

### **Appendix: Suggested IL Paper/Presentation Topics**

#### **Human Rights Law**

1. Does IL allow for Hong Kong's National Security Law provisions on secession, terrorism, sedition and collusion?
2. The National Security Law's long-arm jurisdiction: can actions taken overseas be prosecuted?
3. The conviction in Hong Kong of Jimmy Lai: violation of the IL of free speech?
4. The US government's claim of genocide in Xinjiang
5. The International Organization for Migration and rights under bilateral labor migration agreements
6. Do boarding schools for ethnic minorities in Tibet violate IL?
7. Does IL require universal suffrage (voting rights)?

8. US refusal to ratify the Geneva Convention Additional Protocol 1, protecting civilians during warfare
9. States demanding compensation from other states for slavery or genocide
10. The US sanctions against the International Criminal Court
11. Is the “responsibility to protect” (R2P) an excuse for Western domination?
12. Should the death penalty be banned in China?
13. Taking action against diplomats for sexual harassment
14. IL and racial discrimination in Hong Kong
15. Suing multi-national corporations for human rights violations
16. Does the UN Security Council permanent members’ veto power further human rights violations?
17. IL and the right to food
18. Can national laws on free speech be enforced on the internet?
19. Hong Kong’s obligations to asylum seekers
20. Are national governments’ bans on Muslim women wearing face veils a human rights violation?
20. Can states ban the advocacy of secession?
21. Suing foreign officials who have committed crimes against humanity
22. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities
23. Hong Kong’s foreign domestic helpers and the Migration of Labor Convention
24. US opposition to the Cultural Diversity Convention
25. The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
26. Are government assignments of jobs forced labor under IL?
27. US targeted killings of “terrorists”
28. Are there any animal rights under IL?
29. Conventions on reducing statelessness and the UK’s stripping “terrorists” of their citizenship
30. US restrictions on asylum seekers and IL
31. Malaysia’s refusal to ratify the anti-racial discrimination treaty
32. Israel’s anti-boycott law and free speech
33. Can the crimes of the spouses of diplomats be punished by the host state?
34. Does IL provide any protection to whistle-blowers?
35. Were Covid-19 lockdowns a violation of international human rights?
36. Does IL allow states to make vaccinations mandatory?
37. Is the war in Gaza a genocide?
38. Are US unilateral sanctions against other countries illegal under IL?

## Environmental Law

1. Potential consequences of a second US withdrawal from the 2015 Paris Treaty on Climate Change
2. States demanding compensation from other states for environmental damage
3. China’s attitude toward IL regulation of natural resources
4. Hong Kong and the trade in ivory
5. The World Health Organization Framework Convention on Tobacco Control: China and the US
6. Can an international timber organization save the world’s forests?
7. The international trade in pesticides and IL
8. Climate refugees and IL
9. The UN Watercourses Convention, Chinese dams and Southeast Asian floods and droughts
10. International regulation of electronic waste exports: implications for Hong Kong and the Mainland
11. China’s obligations to curb pollution under IL
12. Dealing with rising sea levels through IL
13. Global warming and the Canada/US dispute over the Northwest Passage
14. Problems of the Antarctic Treaty
15. Depleted uranium and IL
16. Global warming, the scramble for Arctic resources and IL

17. IL factors in the ivory trade between Africa and China
18. The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) and the timber trade
19. Does international environmental law have a role in reducing the building of coal-fired power plants?
20. The ongoing effort to create a plastics treaty
21. What has been accomplished by international biodiversity law?
22. How can IL be used to curb endocrine-disrupting chemicals?
23. Evaluating the effects of the Montreal Protocol on slowing climate change
24. China, India and the plan to build the world's largest dam, in Tibet

## Sea, Air & Space Law

1. US "freedom of navigation" activities in the South China Sea: vindicating IL or provoking China?
2. After US withdrawal, is the Open Skies treaty that allows unarmed surveillance overflights dead?
3. Developing countries and the UN deal capping emissions from international flights
4. US refusal of guidelines on military and intelligence-gathering activity in exclusive economic zones
5. With mining asteroids now feasible, is a new Outer Space treaty needed?
6. China's Air Defense Identification Zones: IL dimensions
7. How to deal with space junk falling to Earth, under IL and national law
8. The US/China dispute in the South China Sea: what rules matter?
9. What's happened with the 2016 China/Philippines South China Sea arbitration case?
10. Can transnational internet racism be regulated?
11. IL and the problem of sea pirates
12. The effects of South China Sea reclamation projects on ownership of islands
13. The "New Cod War": the European Union sanctions against over-fishing
14. The South Korea/Japan island dispute (Dokodo/Takeshima)
15. Do governments have a "duty to warn" of an impending tsunami?
16. Providing a share for poor countries from the riches of the seabed
17. The US-Hong Kong quarrel about "open skies"
18. Is there any way to stop the "weaponization of space"?
19. Remote sensing from space and the right to privacy
20. Diaoyutai/Senkaku: the China/Japan quarrel that won't go away
21. Should compensation for air passengers' death or injury vary by jurisdiction?
22. Making prosecution of unruly airline passengers easier
23. The China-Japan East China Sea exclusive economic zones quarrel
24. Why hasn't the US ratified the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea?
25. China's regulations allowing seizure of illegal intruders into territorial waters
26. Who gets treasure discovered in historic shipwrecks in international waters?
27. Shooting down civilian airlines: causes and consequences under IL
28. Can the US legally stop and board North Korean ships on the high seas?
29. Okinotori-shima: fake Japanese island in the Philippine Sea?
30. Does the possibility of outposts on the Moon require updating the law of outer space?
31. Territorializing airspace in the East and South China Seas
32. Can IL help solve fishing disputes in the South China Sea?
33. Can the US authorize private maritime warfare ("privateers") to attack Chinese ships?
34. Evaluating the effects of the Convention on Long-range Transboundary Air Pollution
35. IL implications of the US's huge sea-based territory and exclusive economic zones
36. Is the Taiwan Strait "international waters"?

## Law of the Use of Force and Peaceful Settlement of Disputes

1. Are US attacks on boats on the high seas, coming from Venezuela, international crimes?

2. Are Trump's implied threats to take the Panama Canal and Greenland by force a violation of IL?
3. Is Trump's announcement that he would use "economic force" to annex Canada a violation of IL?
4. The US refusal to join the United Nations' Arms Trade Treaty
5. Do remedies exist for bombings of hospitals in war zones?
6. The war in Gaza: violations of IL by Israel, Palestinian groups or both?
7. Was helping to overthrow the Syrian government an unlawful promotion of terrorism?
8. Punishing companies that do natural resources business in war zones
9. Should all states ratify the treaty against land mines?
10. The International Criminal Court, the US and the Crime of Aggression
11. IL and the development of nuclear weapons by North Korea
12. Is the pre-emptive use of force against terrorism lawful?
13. The US use of civilian "contract employees" to circumvent the laws of war
14. IL and the US detention of "enemy combatants" in the "war on terrorism"
15. The failure to comply with the IL against torture in post-war Iraq
16. The United Nations treaty on the international sale of arms
17. The effort to form a treaty banning cluster bombs
17. Legality of the US use of the Stuxnet computer worm against Iran
18. Russia's annexation of Crimea: IL aspects
19. The war crime of destroying historical buildings or artifacts
20. Russia invaded Ukraine: so what?
21. Israel's population transfer to the occupied West Bank
22. The 2018 Australia-Timor Leste Maritime Boundary Treaty: model of IL success?
23. Would a US "preventive war" against North Korea be illegal?
24. The US effort to keep China out of the Arctic
25. Would Israel's annexation of parts of the Palestinian West Bank be illegal under IL?
26. Disputes among African countries about damming the Nile River
27. What kind of sanctions can the US lawfully impose on other countries?
28. The US assassination of Iranian general Qassim Solemani
29. The legal status of foreign fighters in the Russia/Ukraine war
30. Can Russia's annexation of the Donbas region be legalized?
31. Algeria's suspension of its friendship treaty with Spain over the Western Sahara dispute
32. The US's continued occupation of Syria's territory – a violation of IL?

#### Miscellaneous

1. Can China lawfully respond to the UK's grant of citizenship to Hong Kong people with BN(O) passports by withdrawing their Chinese citizenship and Hong Kong residency?
2. Effects of the US's suspension of its extradition treaty with Hong Kong
3. Was it legitimate for China to arrest two Canadians as "retortion" for Meng Wanzhou's arrest?
4. The proposed International Criminal Court prosecution of US soldiers for crimes in Afghanistan
5. IL aspects of other countries' return of Taiwanese fraud suspects to the Chinese mainland
6. Would luring a Hong Kong criminal suspect to enter Chinese mainland territory violate IL?
7. Is Britain entitled by treaty to monitor Hong Kong's political system?
8. How much can states restrict freedom of speech on the internet?
9. The 2019 International Court of Justice decision that the UK illegally occupied the Chagos Islands
10. Is electronic surveillance of foreign leaders and diplomatic missions lawful?
11. IL and the protection of intellectual property in China
12. International lawsuits to obtain compensation for Japanese war crimes
13. Immunity and states' refusal to turn over diplomatic personnel who commit crimes
14. US "long-arm jurisdiction" and other countries' sovereignty
15. Is Taiwan a state under IL?

17. The whistleblower Edward Snowden's situation under IL
18. Prosecuting corrupt Chinese officials in foreign courts
19. Can international law be used to end the offshoring of wealth?
20. What IL consequences can we expect if Scotland becomes independent?
21. Tensions over who owns what in Arctic: US opposition to Canadian claims
22. The US refusal to allow appointment of new WTO appellate judges
23. China's use of extradition to catch corrupt officials who have fled abroad
24. Hong Kong and the United Nations Convention against Corruption
25. IL aspects of China's protection of its citizens abroad
26. Must Israel return the occupied Golan Heights to Syria?
27. Is an embassy the territory of the country that runs it?
28. How IL deals with cyber espionage
29. The US's forcing of the International Postal Union to allow the US to set its own postal rates
30. Are state cyberattacks a crime under IL?
31. Can the US be sued for Covid-19-related negligence?
32. The effects of China joining the Arms Trade Treaty
33. China and the International Labor Organization's forced labor treaties
34. "Duress" and the US-Iran Hostage Agreement of 1981
35. AI in IL
36. Does Israel's recognition of the breakaway territory of Somaliland violate IL?