American Security Policy

Fall 2018 / GOVT 346
T/TH 10:30 – 11:45am LH 2
Lecture Hall 2
*Syllabus updated July 30, 2018*

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Office Hours: T/TH 12:00-1:30 pm.

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Course Overview


This course provides an introduction to American national security policy. Through a combination of historical, theoretical, and case study readings students will gain an appreciation of the players, processes, and politics of American national security policy and of the challenges the U.S. faces in creating a coherent and effective grand strategy.

By the end of the course students should be able to critically discuss the following major questions:

1. What are the major threats to U.S. national security and what policy options do we have to confront them?
2. How does the U.S. government make national security policy?
3. How do domestic politics and public opinion shape U.S. national security policy?
4. What are the competing camps with respect to U.S. national security policy?
Course Requirements and Grading

Hot Take Discussion Board (20%) Most weeks we will post a news story or other provocation in the Hot Take discussion board on Monday. Students will read it and then provide their “hot take” – due before class each Wednesday.

Midterm (20%) In-class multiple-choice exam will be held on 23 October, covering only material from the first half of the course.

Final Exam (30%) The final will be held on 18 December during the exam period. Though the exam will focus most heavily on the last section of the course it will be cumulative, asking students to consider the whole sweep of the course.

Terrorist Group Threat Assessment (20%) Each student will conduct a threat assessment of a terrorist group from the State Department’s official list. Due 11 October by midnight.

Attendance (10%) Attendance is rewarded. Absence is...not.

All grading will be on the standard scale: 94-100 = A, etc. There will not be a curve.

Note: The only acceptable reason for missing an exam is a doctor’s note. If you already know you can’t make an exam date please drop the course and take it another time.

Course Materials

Required book: Ian Bremmer, Superpower: Three Choices for America's Role in the World (Portfolio 2015). The book is available at the GMU bookstore as well as online retailers.

Blackboard: All other course readings, announcements, and other relevant materials will be available on the course Blackboard site.

Format and Protocol

We will start each session with a quick round up of relevant news. On Wednesdays this discussion will focus on the “hot take” issue of the week. I expect students to monitor national security related issues during the term so that we can discuss and dissect them in class. We will discuss ways to do this.

Class will typically involve a lecture. I will also ask questions. Students should feel free to ask questions. Occasionally we will run case studies that require everyone to answer questions as well as a variety of short exercises to stimulate the brain and illuminate key ideas from the course.

No Laptops or other electronic gizmos of any kind may be used in class. I know you love them. I love them too. But they are bad for class. I do not want to see phones, tablets, netbooks, laptops, or anything else in the classroom.
Note on Classroom Decorum

In this course we engage issues of the utmost importance to the United States and to the world. We debate questions of life and death; conduct detailed discussions of horrible tragedies, heinous crimes, and strategies for killing people. Given this it is extremely important that we maintain an environment of respect for the people and issues involved in national security policy making and also for your peers in class. Differences of opinion will be the norm. I encourage debate but I will also expect respect for opposing viewpoints. To this end I will tolerate neither personal attacks nor inappropriate language.

University Policies & Information

Honor Code: Student members of the George Mason University community pledge not to cheat, plagiarize, steal, or lie in matters related to academic work.

Disabilities: If you are a student with a disability and you need academic accommodations, please see me and contact the Office of Disability Services at 703-993-2474 or ods.gmu.edu. All academic accommodations must be arranged through that office.

Email: Mason uses only Mason email accounts to communicate with enrolled students. Students must activate their Mason email account, use it to communicate with their department and other administrative units, and check it regularly for important university information including messages related to this class.

Writing Center: A114 Robinson Hall; (703) 993-1200; http://writingcenter.gmu.edu

“Ask a Librarian” http://library.gmu.edu/mudge/IM/IMRef.html

Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS): (703) 993-2380; http://caps.gmu.edu

University Catalog, http://catalog.gmu.edu, is the central resource for university policies affecting student, faculty, and staff conduct in university academic affairs. Other policies are available at http://universitypolicy.gmu.edu/. All members of the university community are responsible for knowing and following established policies.
Course Schedule

I. FOUNDATIONS

NSC Policy Guidance Request ALPHA: Grand Strategy
What should America’s grand strategy be?

28 August | National Security and National Interests

A. What is national security and how should we measure it?
B. What is a threat and how do we know?
C. What is the national interest and how should we determine it?
D. What is grand strategy and why do we need it?

Nye, “Redefining the National Interest,” (15)

30 August | The Shifting International Context

A. How does the international system work and why does it matter?
B. What is power and how does it work?
C. How have both the system and power changed over time?
D. Where does the U.S. fit in the international system?

Bremmer, Superpower, Introduction – Chapter 2 (46)

4 September | The Threat Environment

A. How do nations perceive threats?
B. How should we assess and prioritize threats?
C. What threats does the United States face today? In the future?

Coats, “Worldwide Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community,” Read 1-17, skim the regional threats. (17)

6 September | The National Security System and Policy Making Process

A. How does the president shape national security policy making?
B. Who advises the president on national security issues?
C. How does the national security system really work to produce decisions?

Hadley, “The Role and Importance of the National Security Adviser,” (13)
Rothkopf, “Inside the Committee that Runs the World,”(5)

11 September | The National Security Toolkit

A. What tools does the U.S. have at its disposal to achieve security and pursue other national interests?
B. What can our military do; what can’t it do?
Posen, “Command of the Commons,” (43)
Nye, “Public Diplomacy and Soft Power,” (16)

13 September | The Debate over Grand Strategy Today

A. What’s the track record of the current grand strategy?
B. What are the main alternatives to today's strategy?

Bremmer, Superpower, read half of Chapters 3-5 (58)

18 September | Principals Committee Meeting: American Grand Strategy

A. Which grand strategy should the U.S. adopt and why?

Bremmer, Superpower, read the other half of Chapters 3-5 (58)

II. THREATS AND RESPONSES

NSC Policy Guidance Request BRAVO: Nuclear Weapons
Should the US seek to eradicate all nuclear weapons from the planet? Eradicate nations and groups thinking about acquiring nukes? Or, failing that, should the US continue to pursue effective missile defense?

20 September | The Strategic Logic of Nuclear Weapons

A. How and why does nuclear deterrence work?
B. What are the international political effects of nuclear weapons?
C. Is proliferation of nuclear weapons actually such a bad thing?
D. How does missile defense fit in to the deterrence equation?

Waltz, “Nuclear Myths and Political Realities,” (15)
Office of Technology Assessment, The Effects of Nuclear Weapons, Read executive summary (15) and skim Chapter 2 until you’re terrified.

25 September | Terrorists and Nuclear Weapons: Nightmare or Nonsense?

A. Can terrorists build, buy, or steal a nuclear weapon?
B. How would terrorists use a nuke if they had one or two?

Ferguson and Potter, The Four Faces of Nuclear Terrorism, Chapter 1 (11)
Nuclear Control Institute, Can Terrorists Build Nuclear Weapons?
Mueller, “The Truth about Al Qaeda,” (2)

27 September | Iran and North Korea

A. Why do Iran and North Korea want nuclear weapons?
B. How worried should the United States be about them having nukes?
C. What should the United States do about them?
Sagan et al, “A Nuclear Iran: Promoting Stability or Courting Disaster?” (16)

2 October | Principals Committee Meeting: U.S. Nuclear Policy

Meeting Agenda Items

A. Should the U.S. retain a nuclear force or try to move to Global Zero?
B. Should the U.S. continue building a missile defense system?
C. How should the U.S. handle the threat of WMD terrorism?

Daalder and Lodal, “The Logic of Zero,” (16)
Glaser, “Why Even Good Defenses May Be Bad,” (31)

NSC Policy Guidance Request CHARLIE: Terrorism
How big a threat is terrorism to the US? How should the US confront Al Qaeda, ISIS, and other terrorist groups?

4 October | The Strategic Logic of Terrorism

A. What is terrorism? Can you fight a war against it?
B. What causes terrorism? Can you cure it?
C. What is the strategic logic of terrorism?

Abrahms, “Why Terrorism Does Not Work,” (36)
Crenshaw, “The Logic of Terrorism,” (8)

9 October | Fall break no class

11 October | Transnational Terrorism

A. How scary is Al Qaeda these days?
B. What about the Islamic State?
C. How big a threat is terrorism generally to the United States?

Byman and Williams, “ISIS vs. al Qaeda: Jihadism’s Global Civil War,”
Mueller, “Is There Still a Terrorist Threat?”
Zimmerman, “The Never-Ending War on Terror,”
Zenko, “Terrorism Is Booming Almost Everywhere But in the United States,”

Student Terrorist Threat Assessments Due Today by midnight

16 October | Which Terrorists Should We Worry About Most and Why?

A. How did your terrorist group rank on the threat matrix? Why?
B. How has the United States dealt with your group up until now?
C. What should the United States do about your group moving forward?

No readings today (get a head start on Thursday’s readings)
18 October | Principals Committee Meeting: The War on Terrorism

Meeting Agenda Items

A. How aggressive does the US war on terror need to be?
B. Should the US intervene abroad to reduce terror risks?
C. How far should USG go surveillance wise to track terrorists?

Thrall and Goepner, “Step Back,” (20)
Cronin, “The ‘War on Terrorism’: What Does It Mean to Win?” (24)
Pollack, “Fight or Flight: America’s Choice in the Middle East,” (8)
Habeck et al, A Global Strategy for Combating Al Qaeda and the Islamic State (24)

NSC Policy Guidance Request DELTA: Nation (and Failed) State Threats
How should the U.S. confront various national threats around the world?

23 October | Midterm Exam

25 October | Russia

A. What threat does Russia represent to the United States and its interests?
B. What strategies has Russia used to pursue its security and interests?
C. What should the United States do about Russia?

Ioffe, “What Putin Really Wants,” (30)
McFaul, “Russia as It Is,” (7)
Skim Wikipedia entry on Russia annexation of Crimea, intervention in Ukraine

30 October | China

A. Is America in decline relative to the rest of the world?
B. Will China be a threat to the U.S. as it rises?
C. How should the U.S. engage China?

Mearsheimer, “Can China Rise Peacefully?” (3)
Nye, “The Challenge of China,” (5)
Glaser, “A U.S.-China Grand Bargain?” (41)

1 November | Failed States, Civil Wars, and Genocide

A. How big a threat are failed states and civil wars to U.S. national security?
B. Does the U.S. (and/or the “international community”) have a duty to prevent genocide, prevent governments from killing their own people, or to end civil wars?

Singer, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,” (8)
Evans and Sahnoun, “The Responsibility to Protect,” (12)
Pape, “When Duty Calls,” (39)
6 November | Principals Committee Meeting: Nation (and Failed) State Threats

A. The stick and carrot debate  
B. The humanitarian intervention debate  
C. Libya and Syria  

Kuperman, “A Model Humanitarian Intervention?” (32)  
Ford, “Keeping Out of Syria,” (6)  
Stein, “A U.S. Containment Strategy for Syria,” (3)  
Cafarella, “Don’t Get Out of Syria,” (4)  

IV. THE POLITICS OF NATIONAL SECURITY  

8 November | Hawks, Doves and Owls

A. Why do people disagree so much with each other about national security?  
B. What do people think are the big threats we face and why?  
C. How much does public opinion matter for national security policy?  

Kertzer et al, “Moral Support,” (14)  
TBD

13 November | Will the Public Support the Mission?

A. How do people form opinions about war?  
B. What explains support for particular foreign policies and wars?  
C. Why has there been a dip in support for international engagement?  

Jentleson and Britton, “Still Pretty Prudent,” (23)  
Brands, “Is American Internationalism Dead?” (10)  

15 November | Millennials and U.S. Foreign Policy

A. What does the Millennial Generation think about war and foreign policy?  
B. Why and why does it matter?  

Thrall et al, “The Clash of Generations?” (40 – but mostly charts)  

20 November | The Trump Effect

A. How has Donald Trump influenced foreign policy debates?  
B. What do people think of the Trump Doctrine?  

Thrall, Preble, and Glaser, Beyond the Trump Doctrine, Chapter 7 (in prep)  
Smeltz et al, “What Americans Think of America First,” (just skim the pretty charts)  

V. EMERGING THREATS
NSC Policy Guidance Request ECHO: Emerging Threats
How worried should the U.S. be about rising powers and emerging threats? Can the U.S. maintain its security in the face of pandemics, cyberattacks, and killer robots?

22 November | Thanksgiving Break

27 November | Biological Weapons and Global Pandemics
   A. How worried should we be about biological weapons?
   B. How does BW differ from nuclear weapons and why does that matter?
Koblentz, “Biological Weapons and Bioterrorism,”
Yong, “The Next Plague Is Coming: Is America Ready?”
Charlet, “The New Killer Pathogens: Countering the Coming Bioweapons Threat.”

29 November | Cybersecurity
   A. How worried should we be about cyberattacks?
   B. What was Stuxnet? How should the U.S. use cyberwarfare, if at all?
   C. How will cyberwarfare change the nature of war?
   Readings TBD

4 December | Robots, Drones, and Skynet
   A. Are drones and other autonomous killing vehicles a good idea?
   B. What about military robots?
   C. Will Skynet eventually destroy mankind?
   Singer, “Robots at War,” (12)
   Byman, “Why Drones Work,” (10)
   Cronin, “Why Drones Fail,” (10)
   Something AI-y here (10-15)

6 December | Principals Committee Meeting: How Secure Are We? Will We Be?
   A. What things are you more worried about now than before the course?
   B. What things are you less worried about now than before the course?
   C. What sort of grand strategy should the U.S. adopt today? Why?
   D. How secure is the nation today?
   E. How secure will the nation be tomorrow???
   Bremer, Superpower, Chapter 6 (28)

18 December | Final Exam 10:30 a.m. – 1:15 p.m.