International Relations Theory and the Russian Invasion of Ukraine

MPhil Seminar

Dr. Steven Ward
University of Cambridge
Department of Politics and International Studies

Course Description

This seminar has two simultaneous objectives: first, to harness insights from the field of international relations to better understand Russia’s February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, and the subsequent course of the war; second, to deepen students’ understanding of classic and recent research in IR (especially in the area of security studies) by applying it to this ongoing case. The seminar begins by using research on identity, status, and the heated historical and theoretical debate over NATO enlargement to investigate the roots of the conflicts between Russia and Ukraine, and between Russia and the “West.” Subsequent sessions explore both classic and cutting-edge work on the causes of war, the determinants of military effectiveness, the dynamics of nuclear deterrence, the influence of economic sanctions, the processes by which wars end, and the challenge of extended deterrence to illuminate the causes, conduct, and consequences of the war in Ukraine.

Once during the term, students will compose a short “blog post” style essay about recent academic work in one of the areas covered by the course, explaining how the insights contained in this research help illuminate some aspect of the Russia-Ukraine war. Students will post these essays on the course Moodle site, and we will use them to direct our discussion during that week.

Assessment will be based on a 3,000-word piece of written work, which can take the form of either 1) a research proposal; or 2) a public-facing, policy-oriented essay (such as would appear in a publication like *Foreign Affairs* or *Foreign Policy*).

Course Schedule and Readings

1) The Roots of the Conflict and the NATO Enlargement Debate

*Required reading:

John Mearsheimer, “Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West’s Fault,” *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 93, No. 5 (2014)


**Further reading:**

Karina Korostelina, “War of Textbooks: History Education in Russia and Ukraine,” Communist and Post-Communist Studies Vol. 43, No. 2 (2010)*


James Goldgeier, *Not Whether But When: The U.S. Decision to Enlarge NATO* (Brookings Institution, 1999)


Andrei Tsygankov, *Russia and the West from Alexander to Putin: Honor in International Relations* (Cambridge University Press, 2012)


Isaac Chotiner, “Why John Mearsheimer Blames the U.S. for the Crisis in Ukraine,” The New Yorker March 1, 2022


Peter Beinart, “America’s Generation Gap on Ukraine,” *The Beinart Notebook* January 24, 2022


Mary Sarotte, *Not One Inch: America, Russia, and the Making of the Post-Cold War Stalemate* (Yale University Press, 2021)


Timothy Andrews Sayle, “Patterns of Continuity in NATO’s Long History,” *International Politics* Vol. 57, No. 3 (2020)


Sara Bjerg Moller, “Twenty Years After: Assessing the Consequences of Enlargement for the NATO Military Alliance,” *International Politics* Vol. 57, No. 3 (2020)


2) The Origins of the War

Required reading:


Further reading:


3) Military Effectiveness and the Conduct of the War

**Required reading:**


**Further reading:**


Dan Reiter, “Avoiding the Coup-Proofing Dilemma: Consolidating Political Control While Maximizing Military Power,” *Foreign Policy Analysis* Vol. 16, No. 3 (2020)


Dani Nedal, Megan Stewart, and Michael Weintraub, “Urban Concentration and Civil War,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* Vol. 64, No. 6 (2020)


Michael Kreuzer, *Drones and the Future of Air Warfare* (Routledge, 2016)
4) Nuclear Weapons and Conventional Conflict

**Required reading:**


**Further reading:**


Paul Kapur, *Dangerous Deterrent: Nuclear Weapons Proliferation and Conflict in South Asia* (Stanford University Press, 2007)

Sumit Ganguly and Paul Kapur, *Nuclear Proliferation in South Asia* (Routledge, 2008)


Olga Oliker, “Moscow’s Nuclear Enigma,” *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 97, No. 6 (2018)


Ryan Kort, Carlos Bersabe, Dalton Clarke, and Derek Di Bello, “Twenty-First Century Nuclear Deterrence: Operationalizing the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review,” *Joint Force Quarterly* Vol. 94 (Fall 2019)

5) Economic Sanctions

*Required reading:*


**Further reading:**


Peter Beinart, “What are the sanctions on Russia trying to achieve?” *The Beinart Notebook* March 14, 2022 [https://peterbeinart.substack.com/p/outrage-is-not-a-strategy?s=r](https://peterbeinart.substack.com/p/outrage-is-not-a-strategy?s=r)


6) War Termination

**Required reading:**
Dan Reiter, *How Wars End* (Princeton University Press, 2010), pages TBD.


**Further reading:**


Scott Wolford, Dan Reiter, and Clifford Carrubba, “Information, Commitment, and War,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* Vol. 55, No. 4 (2011)


7) Deterring Russia Beyond Ukraine

**Required reading:**


**Further reading:**

Nora Vanaga and Toms Rostoks, eds., *Deterring Russia in Europe: Defence Strategies for Neighbouring States* (Routledge, 2020)


Michael Mastanduno, “Partner Politics: Russia, China, and the Challenge of Extending US Hegemony after the Cold War,” *Security Studies* Vol. 28, No. 3 (2019)*

Jo Inge Bekkevold and Bobo Lo eds., *Sino-Russian Relations in the 21st Century* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019)