POL 14: International Security

Department of Politics and International Studies
University of Cambridge
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Overview

“Security” is a contested concept in international relations. To some analysts, it refers primarily to issues related to the use and control of military force. Others contend that this definition is unhelpfully narrow, and suggest that climate change, migration, and other transnational phenomena should also be understood as security issues. Much is at stake here: what we label security issues and what we don’t may have serious implications for how we prioritize and approach different policy problems.

This paper introduces students to the academic field of “security studies”, broadly conceived. Much of the focus of the paper will be on “traditional” security issues. Why do wars happen, and how do they end? What do nuclear weapons deter, and how might a conventional conflict escalate to a nuclear exchange? How should we think about the influence of rapid changes in military technology on crisis stability? Questions like these are particularly pressing in today’s geopolitical context, and the paper will accordingly devote substantial attention to them. However, the paper also explores alternative perspectives on security, and helps students to think about the security implications of issues like global climate change and pandemic disease.

The paper will be taught in four parts. Part I will explore the causes, conduct, and termination of interstate war; Part II will focus on coercive diplomacy; Part III will introduce students to various aspects of “great power competition”; Part IV will explore alternative understandings of international security, and the politics of the process by which some issues become understood as security problems while others do not.
Mode of Teaching and Assessment

In each of Michaelmas and Lent terms, students will have 3 supervisions. Students will be allocated a supervisor at the beginning of Michaelmas term. For two of the three supervisions in each of Michaelmas and Lent terms, students should prepare a 2000-word essay based on one of the supervision questions listed at the end of this paper guide (or a similar question), selected in conjunction with the supervisor. Each supervision essay prompt has an accompanying list of suggested readings. This list is neither exhaustive nor required: it is not necessary to read all of the suggested readings to compose a successful supervision essay, nor is it the case that the list of suggested readings encompasses the entirety of the material that might be relevant to a particular topic. The suggested reading list is merely meant to guide you toward some helpful resources for each topic.

For one supervision in each term, students will not be required to compose a complete essay. Instead, this supervision may be given over to a different sort of exercise - this could involve, for instance, a close reading and discussion of one or two academic journal articles or parts of a book or books; an exploration of historical documents related to a case or episode relevant to some part of the paper material; or a discussion of an essay plan or outline. Supervisors will determine the nature and timing of this exercise, but may take into account student preferences.

In Easter term, we will have a revision seminar, and each student will have one revision supervision. Powerpoint slides will have been uploaded to the Moodle website throughout Michaelmas and Lent, available to all students enrolled in the paper.

Assessment will be via a divided three-hour essay examination, from which students will be asked to answer three questions. There will be two sections, and students must answer at least one question from each section. Section A will consist of questions aimed primarily at material from Parts I and II of the paper; Section B will consist of questions aimed primarily at material from Parts III and IV of the paper. Successful answers will demonstrate an ability to synthesize material across lectures and sections. There is a notional mock exam at the end of this paper guide. As this is the first time that this paper has been taught, there are no exam papers from prior years available.

The exam will be comprehensive, and questions will differ from those set for supervision essays and the mock exam. The exam will aim to evaluate your mastery of material from the entire paper, and your capacity to synthesize this material in ways that demonstrate breadth, depth in selected areas, and an ability to construct and support arguments that draw on and engage with what you’ve learned during the year. The best way to prepare for the exam is to read ALL core readings, attend ALL lectures, and practice writing thorough, well-organized, well-argued, and well-supported supervision essays and mock exam essays.

Readings

Books that appear as core readings in the paper schedule below should be available at your college libraries or the Seeley Library. Core journal articles (and many books, as well) are available online without going into a library. Core readings are very likely to figure prominently during lectures. You
should complete these readings prior to lecture. Supplemental readings may prove valuable to you as you revise supervision essays and prepare for the final exam. You should not feel like you need to read through the entire reading list over the course of the year. Think of it, instead, as a useful bibliography. Some readings on the supplemental list will be mentioned during lecture, though often only in passing. When appropriate, we will draw your attention to supplemental readings that may be useful if you’d like to investigate a particular topic from lecture more deeply. But you should also use the reading guide independently, or in conjunction with your supervisor, to guide your own exploration.

Lecture Attendance and Recording

You are expected to attend all lectures. Material covered in lecture will figure prominently on the exam, and lectures, as guides to thinking through complex topics and organizing often disparate and confusing areas of scholarship, are key elements of the paper. In line with the Department’s overall policy, and based on a firm, considered belief in the importance of in-person learning environments, lectures will not customarily be recorded, and lecture recordings will not be available except to students with an SSD explicitly indicating such a need. Students are prohibited from making their own lecture recordings, either for their own personal use or to distribute to colleagues.

Schedule

Monday lectures run from 9 AM to 10 AM
Thursday lectures run from 11 AM to 12 PM
All lectures will be held in ARB room SG1

Michaelmas Term Lectures:

Thursday, October 5 (Security and security studies)
Monday, October 9 (Bargaining and war)
Thursday, October 12 (Anarchy and the security dilemma)
Monday, October 16 (Domestic politics and war)
Thursday, October 19 (Leaders and war)
Monday, October 23 (Explaining victory and defeat)
Thursday, October 26 (War, states, and military revolutions)
Monday, October 30 (War termination)
Thursday, November 2 (Reputations and credibility)
Monday, November 6 (Signaling and commitment)
Thursday, November 9 (Nuclear weapons and deterrence)
Thursday, November 16 (Emerging technologies and crisis escalation)
Thursday, November 23 (Sanctions and economic coercion)

Lent Term Lectures:

Thursday, January 18 (Classics of Great Power thinking)
Monday, January 22 (Balance of Power)
Thursday, January 25 (Hegemonic Stability; Power Transition)  
Monday, January 29 (Critiques I – Assumptions)  
Thursday, February 1 (Critiques II – History, Theory, and Politics)  
Monday, February 5 (Security: What do you mean?)  
Thursday, February 8 (Securitization Theory)  
Monday, February 12 (Ontological Security)  
Thursday, February 15 (Feminist Security Studies; Gender & Security)  
Monday, February 19 (Hierarchies in Security Studies)  
Thursday, February 22 (Transnational crime as a security issue)  

Reading List

MICHAELMAS LECTURES

1: Thursday, October 5 – Security and security studies (Ward)

Core readings:
Arnold Wolfers, “‘National Security’ as an Ambiguous Symbol,” Political Science Quarterly vol. 67, no. 4 (1952)


Supplementary readings:


Part I: Interstate War

2: Monday, October 9 – Bargaining and war (Ward)

Core readings:


Supplementary readings:


3: Thursday, October 12 – Anarchy and the security dilemma (Sharman)

Core readings:


Supplementary readings:


4: Monday, October 16 – Domestic politics and war (Ward)

Core readings:


Supplementary readings:


Joanne Gowa, “The Democratic Peace after the Cold War,” *Economics & Politics* vol. 23, no. 2 (2011)


5: Thursday, October 19 – Leaders and war (Ward)

**Core readings:**


**Supplementary readings:**

Joshua Byun and Austin Carson, “More than a Number: Aging Leaders in International Politics,” *International Studies Quarterly* vol. 67, no. 1 (2023)


**6: Monday, October 23 – Explaining victory and defeat (Ward)**

*Core readings:*


*Supplementary readings:*


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


Elizabeth Stanley and Risa Brooks (eds.), *Creating Military Power: The Sources of Military Effectiveness* (Stanford University Press, 2007)


7: Thursday, October 26 – War, states, and military revolutions (Sharman)

Core readings:


Supplementary readings:


8: Monday, October 30 – War duration and termination (Ward)

Core readings:


Supplementary readings:


Elizabeth Stanley, *Paths to Peace: Domestic Coalition Shifts, War Termination and the Korean War* (Stanford University Press, 2009)

Douglas Atkinson, “The Issues are the Issue: Intangible Salience and War Duration,” *International Interactions* vol. 47, no. 6 (2021)


John Harden, “Looking Like a Winner: Leader Narcissism and War Duration,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* vol. 67, no. 5 (2023)

**Part II: Coercive Diplomacy**

**9: Thursday, November 2 – Reputations and credibility (Ward)**

*Core readings:*


*Supplementary readings:*


Dustin Tingley and Barbara Walter, “The Effect of Repeated Play on Reputation Building in International Relations: An Experimental Approach,” *International Organization* vol. 65, no. 2 (2011)


Mark Crescenzi, *Of Friends and Foes: Reputation and Learning in International Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2018)


10: Monday, November 6 – Signaling and commitment (Ward)

**Core readings:**


**Supplementary readings:**


Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (Yale University Press, 1966)


11: Thursday, November 9 – Nuclear weapons and deterrence (Ward)

**Core readings:**


**Supplementary readings:**


Todd Sechser and Matthew Fuhrmann, “Crisis Bargaining and Nuclear Blackmail,” *International

Abby Fanlo and Lauren Sukin, “The Disadvantage of Nuclear Superiority,” *Security Studies* vol. 32, no. 3 (2023)


**12: Thursday, November 16 – Emerging technologies and crisis escalation (Ward)**

*Core readings:*


Bryan Early and Erik Gartzke, “Spying from Space: Reconnaissance Satellites and Interstate Disputes,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* vol. 65, no. 3-4

*Supplementary readings:*


Jaganath Sankaran, “Russia’s Anti-Satellite Weapons: A Hedging and Offsetting Strategy to Deter Western Aerospace Forces,” *Contemporary Security Policy* vol. 43, no. 2 (2022)


Erica Borghard and Shawn Lonergan, “Deterrence by Denial in Cyberspace,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* vol. 46, no. 3 (2023)


Dean Wilkening, “Hypersonic Weapons and Strategic Stability,” *Survival* vol. 61, no. 5 (2019)


13: Thursday, November 23 – Sanctions/economic coercion (Sharman)

Core readings:


Supplementary readings:


**LENT LECTURES**

**Part III: Great Power Politics**

**14: Thursday, January 18 – Classics of Great Power Thinking (Zarakol)**

*Core readings:*

Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Addison Wesley, 1979)


*Supplementary readings:*


**15: Monday, January 22 – Balance of Power (Zarakol)**

*Core readings:*

Kenneth N. Waltz, “The Stability of a Bipolar World,” *Daedelus* vol. 93, no. 3 (1964)


*Supplementary readings:*


16: Thursday, January 25 – Hegemonic Stability Theory; Power Transition (Zarakol)

*Core readings:*


*Supplementary readings:*


17: Monday, January 29 – Critiques I - Assumptions (Zarakol)

**Core readings:**


**Supplementary readings:**


Mark Laffey and Jutta Weldes, “Decolonizing the Cuban Missile Crisis,” *International Studies Quarterly* vol. 52, no. 3 (2008)


18: Thursday, February 1 – Critiques II – History, Theory, & Politics (Zarakol)

**Core readings:**


**Supplementary readings:**

Paul W. Schroeder, “Did the Vienna Settlement Rest on a Balance of Power?” *The American Historical Review*, vol. 97, no. 3 (1992)


Gustav Meibauer, “Neorealism, neoclassical realism and the problem(s) of history,” *International Relations* vol. 37, no. 2 (2023)

**Part IV: Alternative Conceptions of Security**


**Core readings:**


Martha Finnemore, “Legitimacy, Hypocrisy, and the Social Structure of Unipolarity: Why Being a Unipole Isn’t All It’s Cracked up to Be,” *World Politics*, vol. 61, no. 1 (2009)

*Supplementary readings:*


Jutta Weldes et al. eds., *Cultures of Insecurity: States, Communities and the Production of Danger* (University of Minnesota Press, 1999)


**20: Thursday, February 8 – Securitization Theory (Zarakol)**

*Core readings:*


*Supplementary readings:*


21: Monday, February 12 – Ontological Security (Zarakol)

*Core readings:*


Maria Mälksoo, “‘Memory must be defended’: Beyond the politics of mnemonical security,” *Security Dialogue* vol. 46, no. 3 (2015)


*Supplementary readings:*


22: Thursday, February 15 – Feminist Security Studies, Gender & Security (Zarakol)

*Core readings:*

Carol Cohn, “Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals,” *Signs* vol. 12, no. 4,


**Supplementary readings:**


Cynthia Weber, “Performative States,” *Millennium* vol. 27, no. 1


**23: Monday, February 19 – Hierarchies in Security Studies (Zarakol)**

**Core readings:**


Kelebogile Zvobgo and Meredith Loken, “Why race matters in international relations,” *Foreign Policy* (2020)

**Supplementary readings:**


24: Thursday, February 22 – Transnational Crime as a Security Issue (Sharman)

Core readings:

Peter Andreas, “Illicit Globalization: Myths, Misconceptions and Historical Lessons,” Political Science Quarterly vol. 126, no. 3 (2011)

Peter Andreas and Ethan Nadelman, Policing the Globe: Criminalization and Crime Control in International Relations (Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 3-45

Supplementary readings:


**Supervision Questions**

**MICHAELMAS**

1. What accounts for the absence of war between democratic states?
   
   Fearon 1995; Lindsey 2015; Maoz and Russett 1993; Owen 1994; Layne 1994; Oren 1995; Gibler 2014; Gartzke 2007; Gowa 2011

2. Does the “bargaining model” yield useful insights about the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war?
   
   Readings for Lecture 2; Weisiger 2013; Reiter 2010.

3. What do nuclear weapons deter?
   
   Readings for Lecture 11

4. Does nuclear superiority matter?
   
   Kroenig 2013; Jervis 1979; Sechser and Fuhrmann 2013; Logan 2022; Fanlo and Sukin 2023

5. Is reputation worth fighting for?
   
   Readings for Lecture 9

6. Are ongoing technological innovations (in areas like artificial intelligence, cyberspace, or autonomous weapons systems) likely to fundamentally change how wars are fought?
   
   Biddle 2004; Horowitz and Grauer 2012; Pape 2014; Byman and Waxman 2000; Biddle 2023; Readings for Lecture 12

7. How different are security concerns in the economic realm from the military realm, if at all?
   
   Readings for Lecture 13

8. Are there any lessons from the early modern military revolution for international security today?
Readings for Lecture 7

9. Do the characteristics of an individual leader influence the likelihood of war?

Readings for Lecture 5

10. Why do some wars last much longer than others?

Readings for Lecture 8

11. Are public threats an effective means of signaling commitment?

Schelling 1960 and 1966; Fearon 1997 and 1994; Snyder and Borghard 2011; Tomz 2007; Trachtenberg 2012

12. Is the “tripwire” metaphor a useful way to represent the role of British troops currently deployed in Estonia?


LENT

13. What are the main differences between balance of power and power transition theories?

Readings for Lectures 15 and 16

14. What is the most compelling classical criticism of thinking about great powers?

Readings for Lectures 17 and 18

15. Is anthropogenic climate change a security threat?

Readings for Lectures 1, 19, and 20

16. Is the concept of ontological security helpful in explaining Russia’s war on Ukraine? Why or why not?

Readings for Lecture 21

17. Does realism get history wrong?

Waltz 1964, 1979; Mearsheimer 2001; Gilpin 1988; Allison 2015; Readings for Lecture 18.

18. Is hegemonic stability theory adequate for explaining developments since the end of the Cold War?
Readings for Lectures 16 and 18

19. How might feminist IR theory critique traditional security studies? Discuss with reference to at least one body of scholarship from Parts I or II or the paper.

Readings for Lecture 22

20. How has the history of “security studies” influenced the way we understand security and insecurity?

Readings for Lectures 1, 19, and 23

Mock Exam

Answer three questions, including at least one from each section.

Section I

1. Do democracies make more credible threats and promises than non-democracies?
2. Is reputation at stake in the Russia-Ukraine war?
3. How do domestic political dynamics influence why and how states fight wars?
4. Is preventive war “like committing suicide from fear of death”?
5. What explains the absence of major war since 1945?
6. What is the value of “prestige” in foreign policy?

Section II

7. Is the security dilemma a universal law of international security?
8. Is realism Eurocentric?
9. What is the best way to define security?
10. Has climate change been securitized?
11. Is the concept of security “gendered”?
12. To what extent might transnational crime actually strengthen the state?