

PUBP 505

Politics and Practice of International Security Policy

Fall 2025

Mondays at 4:30 PM in Van Metre 476

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Office Hours: By appointment

Course Description:

This class is a core course in the master's program in international security. Drawing on current and historical cases, the course provides greater understanding of how international security policies in the United States are conceptualized, organized, and advanced through the policy process. The course is organized around two major topics: (1) understanding the roles and cultures of national security organizations, institutions, and bureaucracies within the American context, and (2) presidential decision-making, which involves using specific cases from history to delineate international security decision-making and frame contemporary issues.

Course Goals:

Effective participation in international security analysis and policy action requires a range of skills. Individuals must be able to assess and evaluate the threat environment and the drivers of international security challenges and crises. They must understand how decisions are made, and what are the constraints on decision makers, from domestic and international sources. They also need to address how strategies are developed, and what mechanisms monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of various strategies. The course complements other core courses in the ISEC program by focusing on domestic institutions and their bureaucratic behavior, and the political factors that shape or limit presidents as they are faced with key decisions about international security and US engagements overseas.

Learning Objectives:

Upon completion of this course, students should have acquired:

- fundamental knowledge about the institutions and processes that comprise the US national security system
- improved understanding of the evolution of the threat environment that sets the international security policy agenda

- improved critical reasoning skills regarding the decision making process and the motivations and behavior of participants in domestic and international security forums
- expanded skills in communicating in written and oral formats about major international security issues
- enhanced ability to work collaboratively

Course Materials

All students must ensure they have access to the course page on [Canvas](#). Canvas will be used for assignment submission, in addition to serving as a repository for lecture slides or serving as a medium for virtual meetings, if necessary.

For readings, in addition to four full-length books, the course will draw on case studies available on line and for purchase from the [Harvard Kennedy School Case Program](#) and the [Georgetown Institute for the Study of Diplomacy Case Studies](#), supplemented by think tank essays and monographs and other online materials. These readings are all linked to in the syllabus, but additional readings may be assigned during the semester through Canvas. You should be prepared to spend at least 2-3 hours weekly on assigned readings before class time.

Required Books:

The National Security Enterprise: Navigating the Labyrinth. Eds. Roger George and Harvey Rishikof, Georgetown University Press, 2nd edition, (2017).

National Security and Double Government. Michael J. Glennon, Oxford University Press; Reprint edition (December 15, 2016).

Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis. Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow, 2nd Edition (New York: Longman Press, 1999).

The Last Empire: The Final Days of the Soviet Union. Serhii Plokhy, Reprint edition (Basic Books, 2015).

Requirements and Grading:

Class Participation – 35%

Students are required to complete all assigned readings prior to class meetings, to come to class prepared to participate fully and thoughtfully, and to contribute constructively and consistently to both class and small-group discussions and exercises. As a general guide for class participation, you should aim to regularly contribute on a weekly basis to receive full credit, whether through engaging in discussion, posing questions, or fully participating in group projects and exercises.

Any missed class must be coordinated with the instructor in advance, barring exceptional circumstances.

Class Presentation(s) – 15%

Throughout the semester, each student will also conduct at least one “briefing” (i.e. oral presentation) to the class on an assigned topic. Students will be graded primarily on their preparation - expressed through knowledge conveyed during the brief and their ability to answer questions from the class and the instructor. Students will have the opportunity to volunteer for pre-selected briefing topics, but in the event of excess volunteers the instructor will assign the briefer at random.

Prep Memo – 15%

The first writing assignment requires students to assume the role of an agency staff member and produce a short memo [no more than two pages] to prepare their notional agency principal for an engagement with an interagency counterpart or member of congress. Students can select any agency (i.e. DoD, Commerce, FBI, etc.) and any topic (i.e. budget issue, global crisis, etc.) relevant to national security affairs. Students will be graded on their ability to accurately and succinctly convey key details and context, as well as highlight potential disagreements or “landmines” that might come up during the engagement, and propose 3-4 talking points.

Final Paper – 35%

The final paper is the main deliverable of the course: a study of a specific presidential decision. You will make your choice early in the semester, and will submit an outline and preliminary list of sources a month before the paper is due. The paper [10-12 pages] must demonstrate a thorough understanding of National Security Enterprise dynamics by selecting a presidential decision that took place between 1945 – 2014, identify 2-3 divergent options presented to the President by the interagency process, and draw upon the theses presented in Glennon’s *Double Government* and Allison and Zelikow’s *Essence of Decision* to make a convincing argument as to who served as the primary driver of the ultimate decision. [i.e. President (top-down) or an element within the National Security bureaucracy (bottom-up)].

Grading Scheme

For final grades, A+ = course average of 97-100%; A = 93-96%, A- = 89-92%, B+ = 86-88%, B = 82-85%, B- = 80-81%, C = 71-79%, D = 65-70%, F = 65 and below. Any violation of [GMU Academic Standards](#) may result in a failing grade.

Academic Accommodations for a Disability:

If you are a student with a disability and you need academic accommodations, please see me and contact the Office of Disability Services (ODS) at 703-993-2474. All academic accommodations must be arranged through the ODS.

Schar School Policy on Plagiarism:

The following is Schar School policy on plagiarism:

“The faculty of the Schar School takes plagiarism seriously and has adopted a zero tolerance policy. Any plagiarized assignment will receive an automatic grade of F. This may lead to failure for the course, resulting in dismissal from the University. This dismissal will be noted on the student’s transcript. For foreign students who are on a university sponsored visa (e.g., F-1, J-1, J-2), dismissal also results in the revocation of their visa. The [Schar School policy on plagiarism](#) is supplementary to the [George Mason University Honor Codes](#); it is not intended to replace it or substitute for it.”

All work submitted in this course must be your own original work; submission of written assignments generated by AI writing tools, such as ChatGPT or Gemini, are prohibited in this course and will be considered a violation of academic integrity. Student work may be analyzed using an originality detection tool focused on Generative AI tools.

Use of Electronic Devices in Class

Students are expected to focus entirely on seminar discussion during class. They are expected to refrain from carrying on other professional or personal activities while the class is meeting. This means on both phones and computers. Devices should be turned to vibrate and only used in case of emergency (personal or professional). Computers are permitted only for use pertaining to the course and may be prohibited at the discretion of the instructor.

Assignment Guidance:

GUIDANCE FOR PREP MEMO ASSIGNMENT:

Due 10/06/25

This is a 1-2 page assignment that requires students to assume the role of an agency staff member and produce a short memo [no more than two pages] to prepare their notional agency principal for an engagement with an interagency counterpart or member of congress. We will go over an example product in class.

- Students can select any agency (i.e. DoD, Commerce, FBI, etc.) and any topic (i.e. budget issue, global crisis, etc.) relevant to national security affairs.
- You must accurately and succinctly convey key details and context of your chosen policy issue or crisis.
- Given the assignment length parameters, be selective with what general background information you share.
- Your memo must highlight potential disagreements or “landmines” that might come up during the engagement. Be professional and politic in describing disagreements.
- Finally, you must propose 3-4 talking points for your principal to deliver during the meeting.

GUIDANCE FOR FINAL PAPER ON PRESIDENTIAL DECISIONMAKING:

Outline Due 10/20/25; Final Paper Due 12/01/25

This paper is an 10-12 page research paper that explores the various factors that influence presidents' hard choices in national security. Each case is different in terms of the factors that shaped the president's decision. You should read both background assessments by historians as well as first-hand accounts such as official documents and contemporaneous media.

- The paper should look in depth at one decision, **not** an analysis of a policy position over time. The decision has to have a timeframe, and some reliable reporting on when/how/why the president made the decision. The Georgetown and Harvard case studies should provide some helpful analysis.
- The paper must identify 2-3 divergent policy options presented by Presidential Advisors or interagency actors, taking care to highlight the fundamental differences between the options [i.e. Bin Laden raid – CIA recommends go, VP recommends no-go].
- Drawing upon the arguments presented by Glennon in “Double Government,” [citing Glennon is not necessary] and Allison in “Essence of Decision,” you should make an argument for where in government the primary driver of the decision emerged from (i.e. did the President drive the policy from the top-down, or were they boxed in by bottom-up advice from the interagency, etc.)
- Your citations should include at least two first-hand (i.e. primary source) accounts by a president, advisor, or Cabinet official.
- Your paper should include footnotes using the Chicago Manual of Style. Failure to adhere to the Chicago Manual will result in points off.
- Paper should be formatted in Times New Roman font size 12 and double spaced.
- You will submit a 1 page paper outline on March 24th detailing the topic you chose, how you plan to structure and source the paper, and any anticipated findings or argument you will present.
- This paper represents the final project for the course. There is no final exam.

Academic Standards

Academic Standards exist to promote authentic scholarship, support the institution's goal of maintaining high standards of academic excellence, and encourage continued ethical behavior of faculty and students to cultivate an educational community which values integrity and produces graduates who carry this commitment forward into professional practice.

As members of the George Mason University community, we are committed to fostering an environment of trust, respect, and scholarly excellence. Our academic standards are the foundation of this commitment, guiding our behavior and interactions within this academic community. The practices for implementing these standards adapt to modern practices, disciplinary contexts, and technological

advancements. Our standards are embodied in our courses, policies, and scholarship, and are upheld in the following principles:

- **Honesty:** Providing accurate information in all academic endeavors, including communications, assignments, and examinations.
- **Acknowledgement:** Giving proper credit for all contributions to one's work. This involves the use of accurate citations and references for any ideas, words, or materials created by others in the style appropriate to the discipline. It also includes acknowledging shared authorship in group projects, coauthored pieces, and project reports.
- **Uniqueness of Work:** Ensuring that all submitted work is the result of one's own effort and is original, including free from self-plagiarism. This principle extends to written assignments, code, presentations, exams, and all other forms of academic work.

Violations of these standards—including but not limited to plagiarism, fabrication, and cheating—are taken seriously and will be addressed in accordance with university policies. [The process for reporting, investigating, and adjudicating violations is outlined in the university's procedures here.](#) Consequences of violations may include academic sanctions, disciplinary actions, and other measures necessary to uphold the integrity of our academic community.

The principles outlined in these academic standards reflect our collective commitment to upholding the highest standards of honesty, acknowledgement, and uniqueness of work. By adhering to these principles, we ensure the continued excellence and integrity of George Mason University's academic community.

Student responsibility

Students are responsible for understanding how these general expectations regarding academic standards apply to each course, assignment, or exam they participate in; students should ask their instructor for clarification on any aspect that is not clear to them.

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities

Disability Services at George Mason University is committed to upholding the letter and spirit of the laws that ensure equal treatment of people with disabilities. Under the administration of University Life, Disability Services implements and coordinates reasonable accommodations and disability-related services that afford equal access to university programs and activities. Students can begin the registration process with Disability Services at any time during their enrollment at George Mason University. If you are seeking accommodations, please visit the [Disability Services website](#) for detailed information about the Disability Services registration process. Disability Services is located in Student Union Building I (SUB I), Suite 2500. Email: ods@gmu.edu. Phone: (703) 993-2474.

Student responsibility:

Students are responsible for registering with Disability Services and communicating about their approved accommodations with their instructor in advance of any relevant class meeting, assignment, or exam.

FERPA and Use of GMU Email Addresses for Course Communication

The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) governs the disclosure of education records for eligible students and is an essential aspect of any course.

Students must use their GMU email account to receive important University information, including communications related to this class. Instructors will not respond to messages sent from or send messages regarding course content to a non-GMU email address.

Student responsibility:

Students are responsible for checking their GMU email regularly for course-related information, and/or ensuring that GMU email messages are forwarded to an account they do check.

Title IX Resources and Required Reporting

As a part of George Mason University's commitment to providing a safe and non-discriminatory learning, living, and working environment for all members of the University community, the University does not discriminate on the basis of sex or gender in any of its education or employment programs and activities. Accordingly, **all non-confidential employees, including your faculty member, have a legal requirement to report to the Title IX Coordinator, all relevant details obtained directly or indirectly about any incident of Prohibited Conduct** (such as sexual harassment, sexual assault, gender-based stalking, dating/domestic violence). Upon notifying the Title IX Coordinator of possible Prohibited Conduct, the Title IX Coordinator will assess the report and determine if outreach is required. If outreach is required, the individual the report is about (the "Complainant") will receive a communication, likely in the form of an email, offering that person the option to meet with a representative of the Title IX office.

For more information about non-confidential employees, resources, and Prohibited Conduct, please see University Policy 1202: [Sexual and Gender-Based Misconduct and Other Forms of Interpersonal Violence](#). Questions regarding Title IX can be directed to the Title IX Coordinator via email to TitleIX@gmu.edu, by phone at 703-993-8730, or in person on the Fairfax campus in Aquia 373.

Student opportunity:

If you prefer to speak to someone confidentially, please contact one of Mason's confidential employees in [Student Support & Advocacy \(SSAC\)](#), Counseling and [Psychological Services \(CAPS\)](#), [Student Health Services \(SHS\)](#), and/or the [Office of the University Ombudsperson](#).