

# GOVT 745 International Security

DRAFT SYLLABUS (Updated July 10, 2025)

Fall 2025 Tuesdays at 7:20 PM Van Metre

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Office hours by appointment

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This course is one of the required core courses for ISEC students. It provides a bridge between the conceptual study of international relations and international security as a subfield of IR, and the application of those ideas to contemporary issues. You will find some synergy between your courses on Grand Strategy and International Relations Theory and this course. Historically the security studies field has focused on the phenomenon of war; we will consider decisions about the use of force, actual military operations and their consequences, as well as a spectrum of issues including coercion, the threat of force, and the deployment of militaries in contingencies other than war, as well as non-military tools of national power to achieve national security objectives.

Among the topics to be covered in this course are:

- Post-WWII strategic thinking – definitions and early debates about American global power
- the wars in Ukraine and Gaza as contemporary tests of US security concepts and policies
- the dawn of the nuclear age – 1945-1965
- the Korean and Vietnam wars and the US security role in the Asia Pacific
- Tools of national security policy: coercion, security cooperation and assistance, counterinsurgency, counter terrorism
- The political and international legacies of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan
- post-Cold War, post-9/11 strategic ideas
- Climate change as a security issue
- nuclear issues revisited in the 21<sup>st</sup> century
- Reflections on the current international order and debates about geopolitical competition

The course will progress along these themes in roughly chronological order. All students will read the essential readings of four books and 15-20 major journal articles and official government documents that will be posted for each week's session.

The goals of the course are multi-faceted:

- 1) To ensure that students are familiar with the broad evolution of security concepts and major events that dominated and drove US national security policies from World War II to the present.
- 2) To provide students an opportunity to build their own voice, their own analytic views about how to define and bound the field of international security, to explore what emerging 21<sup>st</sup> century challenges belong inside or outside the study of international security.

3) To develop students' analytic skills and written and oral communications for application in the workplace.

## Course Approach

This course is entirely in person, and will utilize several Canvas tools. The rhythm of each week and each topic will be as follows:

Formal Class time Tuesdays at 7:20 pm.

Course content for the following week will be posted on **Wednesdays**. I will use **Canvas Modules and Discussions** to provide you a guide for the coming week, including assigned readings from the assigned books or from journals and monographs, links to various writings and video documentaries or speeches, and other material. These weekly messages will direct you on reading priorities (some readings will be mandatory, others optional) with links to readings not covered in the assigned required books.

Students should work at their own pace to read and watch assigned materials, and **post 200-300 word responses to questions posed**. (These posted responses are part of your "class participation" grade, along with oral class discussions. The posts need to be completed **no later than noon on Tuesdays** for full credit.)

**The Tuesday class will be the culmination of each topic**, and students will be expected to be familiar with the readings and be ready to actively engage in discussion on the topic.

On a few occasions, a portion of our Tuesday meetings will involve small group discussions. Students will be divided into groups of four or five to work together on various topics, and present them to the full class. Early in the semester, I may also experiment with breaking the class into two sections, back to back, so that you will benefit from smaller class size, and I will get to know you better!

## Grading

Requirements for grading will include:

Three short analytic papers/essays (Maximum 1000 words, 4 pages) on distinct topics (20% each = total of 60%)

You will choose three topics from: Nuclear Weapons Policies, War Aims and War Termination, Nontraditional Security Challenges OR a comparison of official documents by two different presidents.

Class Attendance, Participation, Discussion postings and Oral Presentations (40%)

## Required Books:

*American Force: Dangers, Delusions and Dilemmas in National Security*, by Richard Betts  
Columbia University Press 2012

*Command: The Politics of Military Operations from Korea to Ukraine*, by Lawrence Freedman  
(Oxford University Press 2022 available in paper)

*Military Coercion and US Foreign Policy: The Use of Force Short of War*, Edited by Melanie Sisson, James Siebens and Barry Blechman, Routledge Global Security Studies, 2020

*Winning and Losing the Nuclear Peace: The Rise, Demise and Revival of Arms Control*, by Michael Krepon, Stanford University Press, 2021. (You do not need to purchase this book. It is available as an e-book in the library with unlimited access.)

For some weeks, we will rely mainly on these four books. We will all read specific chapters, and other chapters will be briefed by individual students as their oral presentation. On some topics, I will post current material from public institutions, think tanks, and investigative journalism to explore diverse perspectives on international security debates and ongoing conflicts. We will use Freedman's book to explore the national security decision making cultures in conflicts not involving the US.

## Sessions

### Session One: August 26, 2025

#### *Introduction, Overview, Definitions*

Our first class will be a general discussion of the goals of the course and an introduction to some basic concepts of international security and the evolution of the security agenda, from a precise focus on questions of war and peace, to a broader and more complex set of issues. We will read a few chapters from the Richard Betts book. We will then turn to the seminal debate over the purpose of American power in the face of the Soviet threat – from NSC 68 (Nitze) and the Long Telegram (Kennan).

### Session Two: Sept 2, 2025

#### *Ukraine and Gaza: how to these wars change our assumptions about international security?*

We'll spend some time exploring these wars and the challenges they pose to international politics, from the policies of great powers to the ineffectiveness of multinational institutions. We will test some of our security definitions and assumptions against these two cases. We will look at America's role in supporting key players, the geopolitical and humanitarian consequences, and the limits of outside influence on the course of these conflicts.

### Session Three: Sept 9, 2025

#### *The Dawn of the Nuclear Age*

We will do a broad-brush review of the early development of nuclear weapons strategy, including reading some of the seminal works on deterrence and mutually assured destruction. We will consider the relationship with nuclear scientific expertise, military doctrine and civilian control of decisions about war and peace.

**Session Four: Sept 16, 2025**

***Korea, Vietnam and the Foundations of US Policy in the Asia- Pacific Region***

We will examine some of the enduring insights about Vietnam and its meaning for US national security, for the armed forces and the doctrinal debates, for civil-military relations, and for impact on global perceptions of US power.

**Sessions Five: Sept 23, 2025**

***Coercion as a tool of national security***

We will discuss the coercion book and a few related essays, and draw on contemporary cases to examine how coercion (economic, political, military) is integrated into national security strategies and practices.

**FIRST ESSAY DUE**

**Session Six: Sept 30, 2025**

***Tools of National Security: The 3 Ds, Security Assistance, Counter-insurgency, Peace Operations***

We will consider the evolving institutional status of major tools of national security policy making with allies and partners: the interaction of diplomacy/defense/development, the role of security assistance and security cooperation, and training for military and civilian forces engaged in counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism operations.

We'll also consider US strategies for "small wars." From Vietnam through Afghanistan, security professionals (including diplomacy and foreign aid) have struggled to develop effective responses to wars that are not of "vital" interest to the US. We'll consider some of the theories and authoritative narratives about trying to end internal or regional conflicts in places from Haiti to Somalia to the Balkans.

**Session Seven: Oct 7, 2025**

***Iraq War – 2003-2011, and anti-ISIS campaign (2014-2019) and today's Middle East***

The Iraq war can be seen in part as an extension of the war on terrorism, but it has to be viewed with a broader lens, about presidential authorities and decision-making, the threat of WMD, and the aftermath of the US invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003. This is also an opportunity to consider the strategic environment in the Middle East in 2025, in the aftermath of the Gaza War and tensions (and military action) over Iran's nuclear program.

**Session Eight: Oct 14, 2025**

***Rethinking Security: Conceptual Shifts After the Cold War, After the Forever Wars...***

The end of the Cold War, the end of the “forever wars” in Iraq and Afghanistan were both pivotal moments when big thinkers in the field of international relations grappled with how power and influence were changing in the international system. This session will consider whether the new era of great power competition is sufficient as a strategic framework for the current period, or whether new conceptual thinking is due.

**Oct 21, 2025 – SECOND ESSAY DUE – NO CLASS**

**Session Nine: Oct 28, 2025**

***Nuclear Issues Revisited***

We will examine the 21<sup>st</sup> century nuclear weapons agenda, as compared to our earlier discussion of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century doctrinal debates about nuclear weapons. We will look at the current state of nuclear aspiring states, the dynamic between nuclear weapons and nuclear energy, and whether the global governance system for nuclear technology issues (NPT, IAEA) is up to the task.

**Session Ten: Nov 4, 2025**

***Climate Change and International Security***

There is an emerging literature about climate security that helps us think about climate change as a driver of security challenges, from its links to conflict to broader consequences for the conduct of war, and for security cooperation.

**Session Eleven: Nov 11, 2025**

**TOPIC TO BE DETERMINED – Maybe the Future of NATO and alliances?**

**Session Twelve: Nov 18, 2025**

***Technological changes that are reshaping the security agenda***

We'll look at the new security challenges shaped by technologies that are not limited to military application. How does the security community cope with cyber, disinformation, AI, robotics, autonomous weapons, etc. This will be a general look at the emerging literature, knowing that all ISEC students will take a full semester course on Technology and National Security.

**Session Thirteen: Nov 25, 2025**

***Great Power Competition, debates about the international order***

Review of the course and wrap-up discussion about the current dynamics in international security, including the state of the “world order,” the redistribution of power among nation states, and how to think about the enduring attributes of national power and leadership in the international system.

## 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](mailto: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](mailto: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](#).