

GOVT 399 – 001

IR Policy Task Force: Great Power Politics

Draft Syllabus

Instructor: Dr. Ketian Vivian Zhang

Term: Fall 2025

Time: 4:30 pm - 7:10 pm (Mondays)

Location: Enterprise Hall 277

Instructor Contact Information:

- Email: kzhang20@gmu.edu
- Office location: Aquia 329
- Office hours: Mondays 2-4pm (or by appointment)

Course Description/Overview:

What are major contributing and constraining factors to peace and cooperation in international relations? When does the PRC use force against other states? Will the United States and China fight a war over Taiwan? Are export controls an effective tool for great power competition? What is the current status of Russia's relations with China and what are the implications for U.S. foreign policy? How does the Global South view great powers' policies? These are a small sample of the questions we will examine in IRTF. In this year-long program, you will learn about policy relevant questions, engage in your research, and translate it into actionable policy recommendations, while visiting think tanks and government agencies in D.C. and learning about the best practices of policy writing.

Course Learning Outcomes:

IRTF meshes theoretical discussions of international relations with empirical analyses of great power politics. This course aims both to teach students theoretical perspectives on international relations and to critically evaluate whether these theories explain past and present great power competition and cooperation. Moreover, students are expected to improve their analytical skills through research papers and policy writing.

In this one-year program, you will be able to learn the necessary social science skills to conduct your own analytical research on a crucial international relations question of your interest, which is the main task for the fall semester. You will also learn how to translate social science research into actionable policy reports, which is the main task for the spring semester. IRTF blends analytical research with policy relevance. You will be exposed to cutting-edge social science research as well as views from former practitioners and policy

analysts from the nation's capital, through guest lectures, visits to foreign embassies, the World Bank, and Pentagon.

Finally, you will get connected to former practitioners and policy analysts as well as Schar School alums who work in the field of International Relations in both the public and private sectors, which will help with regard to job hunting after you graduate.

Course requirements

- Active participation and attendance (30%)
 - This includes attendance, active participation in class discussions, as well as participation in extra curricular events such as think tank and embassy visits.
- Review essays (20%; 10% each)
 - Write **two** short review essays of approximately three to four pages, double-spaced, on a given week's required readings. Please email me the essay before class on the day of the assigned reading (note: **you need to write two review essays this semester**, on the readings of the week of your choice).
 - This is **not** a summary of the readings. Rather, it **should be** your reactions toward them (**either one or multiple readings would be both fine**). Some examples include:
 - What do you agree on? What is the strength/valuable part?
 - What do you disagree, and why?
 - What has been left out? What should we be looking further into?
 - Any contemporary/historical examples that come to mind during the reading? In other words, any analogies/contrast?
 - The review essays are 10% each.
- Research paper (50%)
 - Write an analytical research paper of 15 pages, double-spaced, normal margin. The paper is due **on the last day of class via email (or can be turned in earlier)**. **Please refer to the grading rubric which will be distributed in the middle of the semester for more details.**
 - Students are encouraged to discuss with the instructor in advance about the topic of the research paper. **Note that you can choose ANY topic in IR that interests you.**
 - The paper can be aimed at explaining the origins of particular parts of a great power foreign policy, for example, China's behavior in the South China Sea or approaches to the U.S.-China trade conflict. That is, explain what factors drive a particular foreign policy behavior – why does China behave the way it did in X, Y, or Z issue area? Please feel free to come to chat with me about the sources and discuss your paper.
 - **Or**, the paper can evaluate current or past great power policy. For example, evaluate U.S. policy towards Russia during the Clinton Administration. If you choose the evaluation paper, in offering your

evaluation, please be specific about your evaluation criteria, some examples to consider: (a) the validity or falsehood of the factual and theoretical assumptions that produced the strategy; and/or (b) the results the policy produced: were they those that policymakers sought to produce? Were they good or bad? If you argue that a policy was mistaken, identify the alternative policy that you prefer.

- The paper should utilize both theories and empirical evidence if it is a paper that explains a particular great power behavior. If it is a paper that evaluates great power behavior, it should specify and justify the criteria of evaluation (for example, but not limited to, cost-benefit, effectiveness, moral considerations, peace and stability, etc.) while providing empirical evidence. I'd strongly recommend that you discuss your paper topic with me in advance and I'd be more than happy to read and comment on a draft outline (e.g., a two pager, but note that I do not take full drafts – there's simply too much sunk-cost related to massively revamping a draft paper).
- **Note that ANY citation style is fine, as long as you do proper citations (e.g., check APA or Chicago styles).** Also, I DO NOT dictate how many citations you should have. The number is not as important as the nature and quality of your sources. Obviously, you should use proper sources, but I personally find it weird to enforce a citation limit. What matters is how well your documented evidence and sources support the arguments you are making. **If a sentence is not written by you, you NEED to properly cite it.**
- **Note: all assignments will be submitted via email.** Also, grading criteria regarding the research paper will be discussed *during* class session and I will upload the slides containing them. So please come to class!
- Absence policy
 - Things happen and it is understandable that you might have to miss class once or twice, for example, because of work. Unless it is documented medical emergency or family emergency, please email me a 3-page make-up review essay for the week in which you will be missing/have missed the class.

Grading

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|------------------------------|----|
| Review Essay | 20 |
| Final Paper (15 pages) | 50 |
| Attendance and participation | 30 |

Total 100 (note that I **will not** curve the grades.)

A: 93-100 (A+ is 96 or more)

A-: 90-92

B+: 87-89
B: 84-86
B-: 80-83
C+: 77-79
C: 74-76
C-: 70-73
D: 60-69
F<60

Course textbooks:

No required textbooks. The readings will be uploaded in the “Files” section on Canvas.

Useful resources

Stay Current. Stay abreast of current developments through the Asia sections of the Washington Post, New York Times, and the BBC. For the latest developments in China, see Pacific Forum: Comparative Connections, China Leadership Monitor, and China Brief. Major news outlets in China have English editions, including the *People’s Daily*, *People’s Liberation Army Daily*, and *Xinhua*, and the central news agency. Also, scan the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and State Council web sites. Note that news outlets or the websites of Chinese government agencies are meant for students to gather primary official Chinese statements and documents, **NOT** to justify PRC foreign policies. U.S. agencies also have good reports, for example, the Congressional Research Service.

If you use twitter and are interested, it might be useful to follow some of the scholars and policy practitioners focusing on China (please **do not** check their tweets during lectures), e.g.,

- M. Taylor Fravel: @fravel
- Oriana Skylar Mastro: @osmastro
- Xiaoyu Pu: @pu_xiaoyu
- Evan Feigenbaum: @EvanFeigenbaum
- Victor Shih: @vshih2
- Jessica Chen Weiss: @jessicacweiss

Policies

Scheduling:

Students are responsible for the accuracy of their own schedules. You should check PatriotWeb regularly to verify that you are registered for the classes that you think you are. I will not allow a student who is not registered to continue to attend class and not grade the work of students who do not appear on the official class roster.

Incomplete:

An incomplete grade (IN) is given only if the student requests it in writing (not email although email attachment is acceptable) at least 48 hours before exam or paper is due. With approval, the student is responsible for completing the exam or the paper. An IN counts as a failing grade until completed, and it automatically turns into an F if a grade is not turned in by the deadline in the Schedule of Classes. As a college policy, instructors are not ever obligated to give an IN.

I will assign an IN only if the student has a very limited amount of work to complete and there is a non-academic reason they cannot do so within the semester. Typical situations for giving incompletes involve a final exam (missed due to illness) or a final paper (not completed because of a family emergency). I will not assign incompletes to give a student time to improve on work already completed.

Special accommodations:

Disability Services at George Mason University is committed to providing equitable access to learning opportunities for all students by upholding the laws that ensure equal treatment of people with disabilities. If you are a student with a disability and you need academic accommodations, please see me and contact the Disability Resource Center (DRC) at 993-2474. All academic accommodations must be arranged through the DRC.

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.

Academic integrity policy: The integrity of the University community is affected by the individual choices made by each of us. Mason has an Honor Code with clear guidelines regarding academic integrity. **Faculty in the Schar School has zero tolerance for academic dishonesty and will strictly enforce Mason's honor code.** Three fundamental and rather simple principles to follow at all times are that: (1) all work submitted be your own; (2) when using the work or ideas of others, including fellow students, give full credit through accurate citations; and (3) if you are uncertain about the ground rules on a particular assignment, ask for clarification.

Suicide prevention: we are here to help. Please come see me if you are in stress. Also, the Student Support and Advocacy Center (SSAC) supports all Mason students by providing services that help them make healthy life choices. SSAC offers educational programming, one-on-one consultations, and resources in the areas of sexual and interpersonal violence, financial well-being, food insecurity, substance use and collegiate recovery, and other general distress concerns. For more information, see:

- [Stress relief](#)
- [Suicide prevention](#)
- [SSAC Students in Distress Referrals and their website](#)

Sexual Harassment, Sexual Misconduct, and Interpersonal Violence: As a faculty member and designated “Responsible Employee,” I am required to report all disclosures of sexual assault, interpersonal violence, and stalking to Mason’s Title IX Coordinator per university policy 1412. If you wish to speak with someone confidentially, please contact the Student Support and Advocacy Center (703-380-1434), Counseling and Psychological Services (703-993-2380), Student Health Services, or Mason’s Title IX Coordinator (703-993-8730; cde@gmu.edu).

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](#).