

WAR AND THE NEW GLOBAL ORDER

POLI SCI 383

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This syllabus is available at www.willreno.org

OVERVIEW

This course is about warfare, and how warfare has always shaped and been shaped by the structure of global order. Wars both reflect shifts in the balance of power and accelerate the transformation of international systems. Now, after decades of US global supremacy, the balance of power is shifting. The decline of US power relative to other states is producing a messy era of multipolar power politics. China's rise has been the rapid and intense. It also is strategically complex due to China's global economic integration. The US economy is roughly 12-13 times larger than Russia's economy, but Russia possesses the world's largest stockpile of nuclear weapons and has been involved in wars around its periphery for the past two decades. The EU has impressive economic and normative power and now explores the role of military might in its strategic ambitions. India, Turkey and other economically dynamic and ambitious powers add to the complexity of this shift in the global balance of power.

Three-quarters of great power transitions in the past 500 years involved highly destructive wars. Nuclear weapons may reduce the risk of great power conflicts and shift the focus of military competition to proxy wars, arms races, irregular warfare and so-called "hybrid" warfare. Expanded domains of warfare—space, cyber, and cognitive—and the rapid development of powerful dual-use technologies such as AI accompany the current shift in the balance of power, with important impacts on the character of warfare and its relationship to international order.

This course also is about strategic thinking—training students to analyze complex situations, anticipate possibilities of warfare amidst rapid shifts in regional and global orders, and understand the long-term implications of political and military choices. This course considers how US political and military leaders conceptualize warfare and the role of the military in the exercise of national power. The course also considers the strategic models of Russian and Chinese military and political leaders to broaden the basis for comparison and critique.

This course is organized around central themes posed as questions.

- Will the current shift in the global balance of power be as war prone as past shifts?
- How do American political and military leaders do strategy?
- How do Russian and Chinese political and military leaders do strategy?
- Are contemporary Strategic concepts appropriate to address the changing character of warfare?

COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND GRADING

This course uses a deliberate mix of assignment types to evaluate not just students' knowledge, but also judgment, syntheses and communication skills.

War Diary (50% of course grade): Each student will receive a notebook in which the student will record their thoughts and analyses of an on-going international conflict of the student's choice. Notebook entries are to be hand-written

- Diaries will be collected for grading on **Monday, 4 May (for 25% of course grade)** and again on **Wednesday, 27 May (remaining 25%)** with the valiant hope that contents will be evaluated so diaries may be returned to students at the last class meeting.

Briefing (40% of course grade): This assignment at the end of the course is designed to simulate real-world strategist and command roles, testing how students think and convey decisions under certainty. The structure & evaluation metrics of this assignment are as follows:

- Students will be grouped into 2-person teams, with each student in turn presenting their [5-minute maximum] briefing to the class, followed by the team member's critical assessment of that presentation before roles are reversed. The class will then be invited to critique each presentation.
- These in-class presentations on **Wednesday, 27 May** and **Monday, 1 June** are to include PPT slides.
- Evaluation metrics will include (1) the ability to distill complexity, (2) responsiveness to questioning / pushback, and (3), decision framing and recommendation skills. Evaluation will stress how students present this information and handle questions more than slide aesthetics.

Class Participation (10% of course grade): The aim is to operate in collegial environment that prizes respectful engagement and the ability to build on others' ideas, and leadership in discussion without dominating, not just in a hierarchy in which one says what the professor wants to hear.

- Examples of good class participation include discussion of the content of assigned readings, comments and discussion of how the day's topic has influenced one's analysis and reactions in the war diary, and discussion of ethical or strategic dilemmas.
- Respectful participation in arguments is better than passive attendance

READING MATERIALS

There are no textbooks required for this course. All reading materials (and an occasional video) are available via hyperlinks on the electronic version of this syllabus and / or in the “files” folder of the Canvas site for this course.

GOALS OF THIS COURSE

The primary goal of this course is to lead students to their own understanding of theories and empirical evidence regarding historical and contemporary relationships between global orders and warfare.

- Educate students regarding the nature and evolution of warfare in the context of international politics.
- Equip students with familiarity with and capacity to evaluate critically the principles of grand strategy and military strategy, understand the arguments of relevant theorists, and consider the impacts of past conflicts on current approaches to complex problems of strategy and policy.
- Familiarize students with the framework of how US leaders define national interests and the role of military in reaching these goals, the coordination of interagency strategy development, how this is translated into military priorities.
- Encourage students to think critically about political and strategic arguments in historical and contemporary cases, and to consider alternative courses of action.
- Think strategically and operationally in the current global environment (i.e., incorporate instruments of state power, identify strategic domains, considerations of escalation management across strategic domains, etc.)
- Promote critical analysis of the impacts of technological innovations in the conduct of war.
- Instill in students the awareness and ability to perform comprehensive assessments at all stages of a conflict.

NOTE: Some materials for this course contain graphic imagery of war and references to such that some may find distressing. At various stages of the course videos will be shown. Students will be warned of content and offered accommodation, should they wish to refrain from exposure to such material.

ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENT

Northwestern University is committed to providing the most accessible learning environment as possible for students with disabilities. Should you anticipate or experience disability-related barriers in the academic setting, please contact AccessibleNU to move forward with the university's established accommodation process (e: accessiblenu@northwestern.edu; p: 847-467-5530). If you already have established accommodations with AccessibleNU, please let me know as soon as possible, preferably within the first two weeks of the term, so we can work together to implement

your disability accommodations. Disability information, including academic accommodations, is confidential under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY STATEMENT

Students in this course are required to comply with the policies found in the booklet, "Academic Integrity at Northwestern University: A Basic Guide". All papers submitted for credit in this course must be submitted electronically unless otherwise instructed by the professor. Your written work may be tested for plagiarized content. For details regarding academic integrity at Northwestern or to download the guide, visit: <https://www.northwestern.edu/provost/policies/academic-integrity/index.html>

PROHIBITION OF RECORDING OF CLASS SESSIONS BY STUDENTS

Unauthorized student recording of classroom or other academic activities (including advising sessions or office hours) is prohibited. Unauthorized recording is unethical and may also be a violation of University policy and state law. Students requesting the use of assistive technology as an accommodation should contact AccessibleNU. Unauthorized use of classroom recordings - including distributing or posting them - is also prohibited. Under the University's Copyright Policy, faculty own the copyright to instructional materials - including those resources created specifically for the purposes of instruction, such as syllabi, lectures and lecture notes, and presentations. Students cannot copy, reproduce, display, or distribute these materials. Students who engage in unauthorized recording, unauthorized use of a recording, or unauthorized distribution of instructional materials will be referred to the appropriate University office for follow-up.

SUPPORT FOR WELLNESS AND MENTAL HEALTH

Northwestern University is committed to supporting the wellness of our students. Student Affairs has multiple resources to support student wellness and mental health. If you are feeling distressed or overwhelmed, please reach out for help. Students can access confidential resources through the Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS), Religious and Spiritual Life (RSL) and the Center for Awareness, Response and Education (CARE). Additional information on all of the resources mentioned above can be found here:

<https://www.northwestern.edu/counseling/>
<https://www.northwestern.edu/religious-life/>
<https://www.northwestern.edu/care/>

RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCE STATEMENT

Northwestern is committed to fostering an academic community respectful and welcoming of persons from all backgrounds. To that end, the [policy on academic accommodations](#) for religious holidays stipulates that students will not be penalized for class absences to observe religious holidays. If you will observe a religious holiday during a class meeting, scheduled exam, or assignment deadline, please let me know as soon as possible, preferably within the first two week of class. If exams or assignment deadlines on the syllabus fall on religious holidays you observe, please reach out so that we can discuss that coursework.

Individuals requiring assistance in requesting an academic accommodation for religious holidays should contact the Office of the Provost at assoc-prov-undergrad@northwestern.edu. In the event that an individual feels they are being deprived of the opportunity to access their academic program due to the lack of a religious accommodation, the individual should report the matter to the Office of Civil Rights and Title IX Compliance at OCR@northwestern.edu. The University also maintains a [comprehensive accommodations policy \(pdf\)](#).

Holidays observed by many members of the university community include, but are not limited to: Rosh Hashanah; Yom Kippur; Sukkot; Passover; Shavuot; 'Id al-Fitr; 'Id al-Adha, and Good Friday. Information (including dates of observance) about these holidays and others is available on the [web page maintained by Religious & Spiritual Life](#). In addition, the Office of Institutional Diversity and Inclusion maintains a [page with religious holiday fact sheets](#) that offer more details such as common practices and celebrations. Please note that Jewish holidays begin at sundown the evening before the date listed.

CLASS SCHEDULE

Will the current shift in the global balance of power be as war prone as past shifts?

Tuesday, 31 March [a WCAS “Monday class”]: Taking Stock—counting wars and trend spotting.

Peace Research Institute Oslo, [Conflict Trends: A Global Overview](#)

Uppsala Conflict Data Program, [UCDP: Sharp increase in conflicts and wars](#)

Wednesday, 1 April: Zones of War, Zones of Peace: The impacts of economic growth and interdependence on the incidences of major warfare.

John Mueller, “The Control of War and the Rise of War Aversion,” in his *Remnants of War*, (Princeton, 2004), 24-38

Azar Gat, “[Is the decline of war a delusion?](#) The long peace phenomenon and the modernization peace – the explanation that refutes or subsumes all others,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 47:6-7 (2025), 776-800.

Monday, 6 April: Is war declining, or just changing form? Is the post-1945 international system an anomaly, an element of long-term decline in war, or the quiet before the storm? What is Thucydides’ theory of hegemonic war? What is the utility of that theory in the present?

Robert Gilpin, “The Origin and Prevention of Major Wars,” in Robert Rotberg & Theodore Rabb. Eds., *The Theory of Hegemonic War* (Cambridge, 1989), 15-37.

Erik Gartzke, et al., “Is the decline of war a delusion? [An exchange](#) between researchers following the publication of Azar Gat’s article on the subject,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 48:4 (2025), 748-809.

Wednesday, 8 April: A glance Backwards—the lessons of tragedy. The Peloponnesian War and the lessons for great power competition and geopolitical critical junctures

Richard Ned Lebow & Robert Kelly, “Thucydides and Hegemony: Athens and the United States,” *Review of International Studies*, 27 (2001), 593-609.

Hal Brands, “The Contemporary Amnesia,” in his *Lessons of Tragedy: Statecraft and World Order*, (Yale, 2019), 90-116.

Monday, 13 April: Contemporary Amnesia: Strategic narcissism and the denial of tragedy. Interstitial warfare as an alternative to hegemonic war.

HR McMaster, "[Statement](#) of LTG H.R. McMaster (U.S. Army, retired) Before The Senate Armed Services Committee Hearing on Global Security Challenges," 2 March 2021 [12pgs.]

Wednesday, 15 April: The irrationality of war between trading partners, shifts in the balance of power notwithstanding. The bonds of interdependence elevate customers and creditors over military matters.

G John Ikenberry, "[The Future of the Liberal World Order](#): Internationalism After America," *Foreign Affairs*, 90:3 (2011), 56-68.

Norman Angell, "[Foreign Trade and Military Power](#)," in his *The Great Illusion: A Study of the Relation of Military Power in Nations to Their Economic and Social Advantage*, (Heinemann, 1911), 68-87

How do American political and military leaders do strategy?

Monday, 20 April: Classic ways of thinking about the relationship of warfare and political purpose. What common challenges do military plans face upon contact with reality, and how does one best prepare for them? Can advanced technology solve Clausewitz's uncertainty principle? What does good strategy look like?

Carl von Clausewitz, "What Is War?" in his *On War*, [trans. Michael Howard & Peter Paret], (Princeton University Press, 1976), 75-123.

Wednesday, 22 April: Sources of national and military power: How does a nation construct an effective military? What is the relationship of a society's patterns of authority, identity, and social relations / cohesion and the effectiveness of its military?

Phillips O'Brien, "Constructing a Military," in his *War and Power*, (PublicAffairs, 2025), 83-101.

Stephen Rosen, "Military Effectiveness: Why Society Matters," *International Security*, 19:4 (1995), 5-31

Monday, 27 April: Strategic Doctrine: American grand strategy and military strategy in the context of Trump 2.0.

[National Security Strategy of the United States of America](#), (White House, Nov. 2025) [29pgs.].

[National Defense Strategy of the United States of America](#), (Department of War, Jan. 2026) [24 pgs.].

Wednesday, 29 April: More detailed consideration of warfare through military and non-military ways and means. What is the boundary between warfare and everyday life? Fighting without fighting: Can an actor win a war without firing a shot?

Mark Galeotti, “The Renaissance of Weaponisation” and “Weaponised Instability,” in his *Weaponisation of Everything*, (Yale, 2022), 7-22 & 195-206.

Buddhika Jayamaha & Lt. Col. Jahara Matisek, « New Battlespaces and Strategic Realities,” in Matisek & Jayamaha, *Old and New Battlespaces: Society, Military Power and War*, (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2022), 141-157.

How do Russian & Chinese political and military leaders do strategy?

Monday, 4 May: Russia: Cognitive Warfare, Hybrid Warfare. Who are the real audiences? What are the second-order effects of cognitive warfare? How and when should cognitive warfare considerations (operational measures) be integrated into strategic planning? How can one defend legal integrity / an open society while operating competitively in a cognitive warfare environment?

General Valery Gerasimov, “The [Value of Science Is in the Foresight](#),” *Military Review*, Jan-Feb 2016, 23-29; original, Герасимов В. В. [Ценность науки в предвидении](#) // *Военно-промышленный курьер*. – 2013. – 27 февраля.

Markus Reisner, “[Little Green Men](#) and the Five Bears: Trolls and Disposable Agents, Österreichs Bundesheer, 22 Jan 2026. [video, 18:44]

War Diaries to be handed in for first evaluation

Wednesday, 6 May: China: Full spectrum warfare

Xiao Tianliang, et al., “Military Conflict in Cyberspace,” & “Military Conflict in the Intelligent Field,” [The Science of Military Strategy](#), (China Aerospace Studies Institute, 2020), 148-155, 174-180 (republished at Air University, 2022).

Yamaguchi Shinji, et al., "[China Security Report 2023](#): China's Quest for Control of the Cognitive Domain and Gray Zone Situations," Japanese Ministry of Defense, 2022.

Monday, 11 May: Expanding the scope—How states exploit dominance over supply chain nodes, financial systems, and standards. The use of dependency as coercive tools. The use of law (lawfare) to achieve military and political objectives. What are lawfare risks, and how can military strategists integrate legal considerations into operational decision-making without ceding the initiative to an adversary?

Ling S. Chen, Miles M. Evers; "Wars without Gun Smoke": Global Supply Chains, Power Transitions, and Economic Statecraft. *International Security* 2023; 48 (2): 164–204.

Orde Kittrie, "A Conceptual Overview of Lawfare's Meaning, Variety, and Power," in his *Lawfare: Law as a Weapon*, (Oxford, 2016), 1-48.

Are Contemporary Strategic Concepts Appropriate to Address the Changing Character of Warfare?

Wednesday, 13 May: Cyber Domain: How does the current US cyber strategy compare to its predecessors? What does it mean to adopt a publicly declared offensive posture for the use of cyber capabilities? How has the role of the private sector in US cyber strategy evolved, both in terms of the development of capabilities and engaging in "hack back" activities on government's behalf??

President Trump's [Cyberstrategy](#) for America, (Washington, DC: White House, March 2026). [6pgs]

Pia Hüsich, et al., "Brief, Dold and Beautiful? [Reactions on the US National Cyber Strategy](#)," (London: Royal United Services Institute, March 2026) [12 min read]

Jason Healey, "[Cyber Effects in Warfare](#): Categorizing the Where, What, and Why", *Texas National Security Review*, 7:4 (Fall 2024), 37-50.

Monday, 18 May: Nuclear age displaces competition to the periphery as it did during the Cold War? What about Ukraine, Taiwan tensions in the multi-polar nuclear-armed present? Clues from Russo-Ukraine War, western Pacific. Managing escalation, ambiguity, and signaling in an informationally crowded, technologically engaged nuclear environment.

DoD, "[Report on the Nuclear Employment Strategy of the United States](#)," (10 U.S.C. § 491 Report to Congress, 15 Nov 2024) [5pgs.].

Caitlin Talmadge, “Multipolar Deterrence in the Emerging Nuclear Era,” and Vipin Narang & Scott Sagan, “The Dangerous Nuclear Future,” Vipin Narang & Scott Sagan, eds., *The Fragile Balance of Nuclear Terror*, (Cornell, 2022) , 13-38 & 230-250.
[The entire book is available at this open access link.]

Wednesday, 20 May: Where do large-scale combat operations (LSCO) fit in US doctrine? Is this doctrine appropriate for modern challenges? What are the implications for LSCO of massive munitions consumption when attempting to sustain LSCO at scale? Ukraine and Iran (?) wars as LSCO laboratories – precision vs mass, attritional warfare, generating mass at low cost.

U.S. Army Combined Arms Doctrine Directorate, “[Take 10: FM 3-0 Update](#) March 2025,” [video, 15:33].

MAJ Trevor M. Brown, “[The Problem with Convergence](#),” *Military Review*, (Jan-Feb 2025), 104-114.

Center for Strategic & International Studies, [Human Domain Lessons from Russia-Ukraine](#), (6 March 2025), [video, 51:01].

Monday, 25 May: What deciders are / were thinking

Marco Rubio, *The World China Made: “Made in China 2025” Nine Years Later*, (Office of Senator Rubio, 2024), [Read 3-8, 57-58: 9 pages].

Elbridge A. Colby, 2021. “Limited War after an Effective Denial Defense,” *The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2021), 170-190.

US Senate, [No NATO Withdrawal Act](#). 2023 [4 pgs.].

Wednesday, 27 May: Presentation of Briefs, I

War diaries to be handed in for second evaluation

Monday, 1 June: [last class]: Presentation of Briefs, II

Additional Resources

[War on the Rocks](#) provides what they call “experience-based commentary and analysis on national security affairs.” The site features commentary and analysis that bring together debates about policy and operations and attract contributions from leading figures in the field.

[Strategy Bridge](#) publishes essays on strategy, national security, and military affairs. Its *Journal* focuses on ‘big picture’ topics and reviews of recent books. Its podcasts provide in-depth interviews with academic and policy experts on topics related to strategy.

[Small Wars Journal](#) “facilitates the exchange of information among practitioners, thought leaders, and students of Small Wars, in order to advance knowledge and capabilities in the field.” Its editor-in-chief is a retired USMCR Intelligence and Counterintelligence / HUMINT officer. Contributions offer diverse perspectives.

[Lawfare](#) publishes essays at the intersection of law, legal institutions, and national security topics, which include (among many others), topics such as cybersecurity, targeted killing, and secrecy & leaks, etc. Contributors include scholars, and military and civilian experts. The editor-in-chief is a Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institute.

The [Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs](#) is a think-tank affiliated with Harvard University. This center’s mission includes advancing policy-relevant information about threats to U.S. national interests and international security threats. It is widely regarded as superior in terms of unbiased and well sourced factual reporting.

The [Center for a New American Security](#) is a Washington, D.C.-based think tank which specializes in U.S. national security issues. It strives to produce research that will inform bipartisan policy debate. The co-founders include a former Under Secretary of Defense for Policy and a former Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs.

[Military Review](#) is an established Army forum to stimulate original thought and debate on topics related to the art and science of land warfare, and introduces emerging ideas related to military strategy that go on to influence the development of doctrine.

[Defense One](#) is an online news site that reports primarily on matters relating to national defense and security and is owned by Atlantic Media. It reports on recent developments and provides policy analysis. It is regarded as well-sourced and accurate among “security professionals” that include government officials, members of the military, and industry.

[Task & Purpose](#) provides news and analysis by and for the military community and the interested wider public. The site also covers general topics of military culture, history, opinion, and post-military career advice. (US military humor, try [Duffelblog](#).)