

“The Changing Character of Conflict: Conflict in the Gray Zone.”

PPHA 33840

Harris School of Public Policy

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Mondays; 13:30-16:20

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Teaching Assistant:

Welcome to “*The Changing Character of Conflict: Conflict in the Gray Zone.*” This is an advanced course focused on emerging domains of conflict in the 21st century, and the challenges to national and international stability and security.

Conflict has been a constant companion in human experience from time immemorial. Some argue that conflict is inherent in the human condition, or in human nature; that it is in our DNA. Yet today something is different; something has changed. Conflict seems omnipresent, more intractable, and more dangerous. This class traverses the space between Heraclitus (who said “no man can step into the same river twice”) and Ecclesiastes (“there is nothing new under the sun”), showing that while conflict is a permanent feature of human society, it has evolved to occupy new spaces using a new toolbox. Paraphrasing Clausewitz, the nature of conflict remains constant, yet its character is eternally changing. The course is divided into four segments; 1) introduction and context of contemporary conflict; 2) differing world views as they relate to conflict; 3) new conflict domains and media; and 4) implications for national and multi-lateral policy.

SUMMARY COURSE DESCRIPTION

I. Introduction and Context

Although conflict is nothing new, the academic study of conflict began in earnest only after the devastation of World War 2. In its early stages the discipline rightly focused on the imperative of avoiding great power conflict under the dark cloud of nuclear war. The ultimate policy paradigm that emerged from this period was mutual assured destruction (MAD). Many of today’s leading institutions and programs dealing with issues related to peace, war, and conflict were forged in this crucible, which also generated such institutional innovations as the Helsinki Process and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. As the Cold War came to an end, and the threat of nuclear war receded, many organizations turned their attention to what Mary Kaldor called “new wars” in the post-communist transition countries, and what was then called the third or developing world. Yugoslavia, Kosovo, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, Sudan, and many others have been the foci of much recent scholarship and teaching about conflict.

As the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have come to their respective conclusions, the policy world has returned its attention to great power conflict, and the prospect of war between major states—once thought obsolete—has reappeared. The emergence of China has evoked the image of the “Thucydides Trap;” Russia is resurgent and its February assault on Ukraine has revived the specter of inter-state conflict. Meanwhile, Iran has resumed its active pursuit of nuclear weapons capability, and North Korea remains undeterred in its development of weapons of mass

destruction. In other words, conflict with a capital “C” has returned. Yet, it has not necessarily resumed its old forms.

II. Dark Visions of Global Order

It is often observed that the Western worldview, born in the Enlightenment and evolving through the scientific and industrial revolutions, assumes a binary dichotomy of war and peace, with a faith that knowledge and rationality can vanquish the darker angels of our nature and end war. While such faith may be widespread in the West, it is far from universal. It coexists with competing worldviews that assume the opposite, held by many state and non-state actors. An examination of radical jihadist treatises, China’s “Unrestricted Warfare” doctrine, and Russia’s so-called “Gerasimov Doctrine” reveal a much darker vision of the natural state of global order.

III. All Means Short of War

Three macro-developments of the late 20th century have had dramatic effects on the manifestations of contemporary conflict: globalization, digitization, and weaponization. The unprecedented velocity of advancements in information, communication, transportation, and other interactive technologies have brought diverse populations from around the world together in much closer proximity than ever before. While these macro-developments have certainly generated many benefits, they have also unveiled new domains and created new modalities of conflict.

Conflict between competing states, and between states and non-state actors now takes place in the digital domains of the internet and social media, in economics and finance, in ideology, and in technological competition, among others. Influence campaigns have been designed and executed to disrupt the central political process—elections—in the most powerful democratic states. The weaponization of money has enabled financial and economic warfare. The weaponization of law has generated a new term, “lawfare.” Hybrid war, hybrid threats, and hybrid conflict have emerged to occupy the space known as conflict below the threshold of major war and appear to be the preferred forms of strategic conflict among major powers today. Much of this conflict takes place in the so-called “gray zone.” The exploration and examination of this new domain and these new media are the heart of the class, looking closely at such conflicts as Ukraine/Crimea, cyber-attacks on Estonia, Georgia, and other countries, Islamic State recruitment and proselytizing via social media, trade wars, innovation wars, and weaponization of money by the United States and other powers.

IV. Policy Implications: What is to be Done

The proliferation of new conflict domains and media in the gray zone has profound policy implications, both at the national and multilateral levels. Cyber warfare, for example, is difficult to conceptualize in terms of the fundamental Law of War principles of military necessity, unnecessary suffering, proportionality, and distinction (discrimination). Non-attributability defeats accountability and complicates appropriate response. In many cases the organization most capable of effective response to a cyber-intrusion might be a private corporation that has cutting edge technology; however private corporations may be prohibited by national laws from retaliation. When private military companies—such as Russia’s Wagner Group in Syria—engage in kinetic conflict, are their home countries responsible for their actions? Is the U.S. exploitation of the SWIFT mechanism for international financial transactions an acceptable and appropriate

mechanism for retaliation or retribution? Where is the equilibrium between free speech and disinformation? Such policy issues are the substance of the final segment of the class.

DISCLAIMER

The views expressed by the professor do not represent the official views of any branch of the government of the United States

COURSE OBJECTIVES

- understand the historical context of international relations with respect to conflict
- broaden the concept of conflict to include emerging domains and modalities of conflict
- achieve more nuanced appreciation of the emerging, global threat environment

LEARNING OUTCOMES

- knowledge of the motivations for international involvement with conflict over time
- acquaintance with differing world views with respect to the role of conflict
- familiarity with the strategic implications of emerging domains and modalities of conflict
- appreciation of complexity of meeting the challenges represented by emerging domains and modalities of conflict

GRADING

Grading is based on a short, mid-term essay examination addressing competing views of world order, and the role of conflict within those orders (25 percent); in-class participation including general discussion and participation in class activities, including debate, and flash polls (25 percent); a final, in-class examination built around critical questions bounding the class content (50 percent).

- Mid-term essay; maximum 2,500 words (25 percent). Due November 7.
- Classroom and general participation; verbal / Blackboard / classroom activities (25 percent)
- December 5, 2022: In-class Final examination; (50 percent)

This is a graduate-level (MA) seminar course designed for maximum student engagement and interaction. Discussions are professor-guided, but student driven. Pedagogy includes such tools as role-play, debate, flash polls, and guest experts, in addition to traditional lecture and discussion.

TEXTS

- **Sean McFate, The New Rules of War** (<https://www.harpercollins.com/products/the-new-rules-of-war-sean-mcfate?variant=32116378664994>)
- **Emerson T. Brooking and P.W. Singer, LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media** (<https://booksvoooks.com/nonscrolablepdf/likewar-the-weaponization-of-social-media-pdf.html?page=4>)

- **Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, Unrestricted Warfare** (1991)
(<https://www.c4i.org/unrestricted.pdf>)

SCHEDULE

(Note: Since the class schedule is truncated—only 8 sessions—I will attempt to schedule at least two guest speakers during the course at a time agreed upon in class.)

October 3, 2022; Session 1

Introductions, Syllabus Review, Expectations, Beginning the Study of Conflict

- **Louis Kriesberg, “The Conflict Resolution Field: Origins, Growth, and Differentiation”** (<https://lkriesbe.expressions.syr.edu/wp-content/uploads/2007-Conflict-Resolution-Field.pdf>)
- **George Kennan, “The Inauguration of Organized Political Warfare” 1948**
(<https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/114320.pdf?v=37fa92b991885b165a7074fa1d1a94dc>)
- **Sarah-Jane Corke, “George Kennan and the Inauguration of Political Warfare”**
(<https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/jcs/article/view/2171/2570>)
- **Thomas Rid, “Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation & Political Warfare,”** (<https://hiddenforces.io/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Active-Measures-The-Secret-History-of-Disinformation-Political-Warfare-Thomas-Rid.pdf>)
- **United States Department of State, “Forgery, Disinformation, Political Operations”**
(<https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=807615>)
- **Tom de Castella, “How did we forget about mutually assured destruction?”**
February 15, 2012 (<https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-17026538>)

Optional

- **“Dr. Strangelove”** (1964)

October 10, 2022; Session 2

Introduction and Context (An examination of conflict of the last few decades, return to great power competition and prospect of war between major states)

- **Samuel P. Huntington, “Clash of Civilizations”**
(https://www.jstor.org/stable/20045621?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents)
- **Bethany Lacina, “From Side-Show to Centre Stage: Civil Conflict After the Cold War”** (https://www.jstor.org/stable/26298596?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents)
- **The White House, “National Security of the United States,” 2002**
(<https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/nsc/nss/2002/>)

Optional

- **Margaret MacMillan, War: How Conflict Has Shaped Us**, Random House, (Oct. 6, 2020) (<https://www.amazon.com/War-How-Conflict-Shaped-Us/dp/1984856138>)

October 17, 2022; Session 3: Dark Visions of Global Order (An introduction into darker worldviews held by state and non-state agents and an examination of jihadist treaties)

- **Cole Bunzel, “Jihadism on Its Own Terms: Understanding A Movement** (https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/research/docs/jihadism_on_its_own_terms_pdf.pdf)
- **Ali Soufan, “Geopolitics and Salafi-Jihadist Strategy”** (<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/741055/pdf>)
- **Sayyed Qutb, “Milestones”** (https://philosproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Milestones_Sayyid-Qutb.pdf)

Optional

- **Abu Bakr Naji, “The Management of Savagery: The Most Critical Stage Through Which the Umma Will Pass”** (https://universityofleeds.github.io/philtaylorpapers/pmt/exhibits/2800/Management_of_Savagery.pdf)

October 24, 2022; Session 4: Dark Visions of Global Order (A dive into darker worldviews held by Russia and an examination of the Gerasimov Doctrine)

- **Valery Gerasimov, “The Value of Science Is in the Foresight: New Challenges Demand Rethinking the Forms and Methods of Carrying out Combat Operations”** (https://www.armyupress.army.mil/portals/7/military-review/archives/english/militaryreview_20160228_art008.pdf)
- **Ofer Fridman, “On the Gerasimov Doctrine”** (https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/prism/prism_8-2/PRISM_8-2_Fridman.pdf?ver=2019-09-17-231059-263)
- **Eugene Rumer, “The Primakov (Not Gerasimov) Doctrine in Action”** (<https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/06/05/primakov-not-gerasimov-doctrine-in-action-pub-79254>)
- **Daniel S. Papp, “Russia and the World: The View from Moscow”** (<https://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1010&context=ijos>)

October 31, 2022; Session 5: Dark Visions of Global Order (A dive into darker worldviews held by China in the age of digitization and technology and an examination of the Unrestricted Warfare doctrine)

- **Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, “Unrestricted Warfare” (1991)** (<https://www.c4i.org/unrestricted.pdf>)
- **Elsa Kania, “The PLA’s Latest Strategic Thinking on the Three Warfares”** (<https://jamestown.org/program/the-plas-latest-strategic-thinking-on-the-three-warfares/>)

- **Fumio Ota, “Sun Tzu in Contemporary Chinese Strategy”**
(https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/jfq/jfq-73/jfq-73_76-83_Ota.pdf?ver=2014-03-26-120732-250)

November 7, 2022; Session 6: Mid-Term Essay Due

The New Rules of War (the changing nature of conflict in the 21st century)

- **Sean McFate, The New Rules of War**, Harper Colins Publishers (Jan. 28, 2020),
(<https://www.harpercollins.com/products/the-new-rules-of-war-sean-mcfate?variant=32116378664994>)
- **B.A. Friedman, “Fellow Travelers: Managing Savagery and The Gerasimov Doctrine”**
(https://weaponizednarrative.asu.edu/system/files/library/docs/fellow_travelers.pdf)
- **White House, “National Security Strategy of the United States,” 2017**
(<https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>)

November 14, 2022; Session 7: Shades of Gray Zone (Cyber-warfare)

- **Stephen Herzog, “Revisiting the Estonian Cyber Attacks: Digital Threats and Multinational Responses”**
(https://www.jstor.org/stable/26463926?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents)
- **Stephanie Tamkin, “10 years After the Landmark Attack on Estonia, Is the World Better Prepared for Cyber Threats?”** (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/04/27/10-years-after-the-landmark-attack-on-estonia-is-the-world-better-prepared-for-cyber-threats/>)
- **David Kushner, “The Real Story of Stuxnet”** (<https://spectrum.ieee.org/the-real-story-of-stuxnet>)
- **Cyberspace Solarium Commission, “Report: Executive Summary”**
(<https://www.solarium.gov/report>)

November 21, 2022; no class

November 28, 2022; Session 8: Like War (A look at digitization, cyberwarfare, social media weaponization and modern deterrence through the dark web)

- **Emerson T. Brooking and P.W. Singer, LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media** (<https://booksvoooks.com/nonscrolablepdf/likewar-the-weaponization-of-social-media-pdf.html?page=4>)
- **John Rossomando, “Know This: Hack Attacks are Acts of ‘Unrestricted Warfare’”**
(<https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/know-hack-attacks-are-acts-%E2%80%98unrestricted-warfare%E2%80%99-185772>)

- **Center for International and Strategic Studies, “Band of Brothers: The Wagner Group and the Russian State”** (<https://www.csis.org/blogs/post-soviet-post/band-brothers-wagner-group-and-russian-state>)

December 5, 2022; Final Exam