

Fall, 2023: The Changing Character of Conflict

Background and Goals

Welcome to “The Changing Character of Conflict: Conflict in the Gray Zone.” This is an advanced seminar course focused on emerging domains of conflict in the 21st century, and the challenges they pose 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.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

- understand the historical context leading to contemporary 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 driving international 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

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 quite recently the Sahel 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 2022 assault on Ukraine has revived the horrors 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. Competing 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 “the Gray Zone”—conflict below the threshold of major war—and appear to be the preferred forms of strategic conflict among major powers today. The exploration and examination of the “gray zone” and these new media are the heart of the class, looking closely at such conflicts as Ukraine/Crimea, latent conflict in the Indo-Pacific region, cyberconflict, and the weaponization of social media.

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—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?

Prerequisites

There are no course-prerequisites for this class; however, an open mind and a robust interest in national and international security will help.

Relationship to other programs

This course is not (yet) part of a Harris School Certificate Program. If you are interested in developing such a program, I would be delighted to discuss this with you.

How this class will work

- The initial class session will be Friday, 29 September, 13:30-16:20 in KELL0007.
- Thereafter class will meet regularly on Monday, 13:30-16:20.
- Due to my “day-job” requirements some flexibility in the meeting schedule may be necessary, however I do not anticipate significant variation.
- Canvas will be the primary medium for course administration and group communication.
- Sessions will be divided by a short break, with the first half session dedicated to lecture and discussion, the second half to interactive activities (though not each session).
- Attendance policy is standard for Harris School. Attendance is assumed in the absence of prior consultation with the professor.

Disclaimer

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

Student assignments

Grading will be based on a combination of two written assignments, in-class verbal participation, and contributions to an ongoing class discussion in Canvas. The two written assignments are essays, due at mid-term (October 30) and close of business the day of the final session (December 4). They should be sent to the professor as word.doc files to miklaucicm@uchicago.edu. In-class verbal participation and participation in the ongoing class discussion in Canvas will be assessed based on quality of contributions (vice quantity). Each grading component will be weighted at 25 percent.

Readings, topics, and schedules

09/29 Session 1: introduction and the enduring nature of conflict

- **Louis Krlesberg, “The Conflict Resolution Field: Origins, Growth, and Differentiation”** (<https://lkriesbe.expressions.syr.edu/wp-content/uploads/2007-Conflict-Resolution-Field.pdf>)
- **Ronald Cohen, “Warfare and State Formation: Wars Make States and States Make Wars,”** in Warfare, Culture, and Environment, edited by R. Brian Ferguson, Academic Press, December 1, 1984 (<http://www.columbia.edu/itc/anthropology/v3922/pdfs/cohen.pdf>)
- **Bianca Torossian and Tara Gorder, “Hybrid Conflict: Neither War nor Peace,”** The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, The Hague, January 10, 2020 (<https://hcss.nl/pub/2019/strategic-monitor-2019-2020/hybrid-conflict/>)

10/02 Session 2: clash of civilizations

- **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)

10/09 Session 3: the Kremlin playbook

- **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>)
- **Fiona Hill and Angela Stent, “The World Putin Wants,”** Foreign Affairs, Volume 101, Number 5, September/October 2022 (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russian-federation/world-putin-wants-fiona-hill-angela-stent>)
- **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>)

10/16 Session 4: the Beijing playbook

- **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)

10/23 Session 5: cyberwar

- **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>)
- **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>)
- **Cyberspace Solarium Commission, “Report: Executive Summary”**
(<https://www.solarium.gov/report>)

10/30 Session 6: information, disinformation, and influence

- **Seth G. Jones, Emily Harding, Catrina Doxsee, Jake Harrington, and Riley McCabe, “Competing Without Fighting: China’s Strategy of Political Warfare,”** CSIS, 8/2/23 (https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2023-08/230802_Jones_CompetingwithoutFighting.pdf?VersionId=Zb5B2Le0lf0kk7.QH7E0meA9phGqQEzf)

MID-TERM DUE

11/13 Session 7: economic warfare, weaponizing migration

11/27 Session 8: islands, institutes, and little green men

- **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>)

12/04 Session 9: escalation paradox

- **Summary of the Irregular Warfare Annex to the National Defense Strategy, U.S.**
Department of Defense, Washington, D.C. 2020
(<https://media.defense.gov/2020/Oct/02/2002510472/-1/-1/0/Irregular-Warfare-Annex-to-the-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.PDF>)

FINAL DUE

Grading policies and procedures

This is a graduate-level 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.

- Mid-term essay; maximum 2,500 words (25 percent). Due COB October 30.
- Final essay; maximum 2,500 words (25 percent). Due COB December 4.
- In-class verbal participation (based on quality of contributions); 25 percent.
- Written contributions in class Canvas discussion; 25 percent.

Instructor Office Hours

The professor is resident in the Washington, D.C. area. Office hours will be prior to class (i.e., Monday, 11:00-13:00), and otherwise by arrangement via MSTeams. In order to catch the return flight from ORD to IAD I will have to leave class promptly at 16:20.

Teaching assistant(s) and/or graders

We will have the support of Teaching Assistants who will help with course administration, technical requirements, tracking student participation, and breakout group support.

Teaching and learning in person, dual-modality, and/or remote environments

This class will be taught on an in-person basis. In order to maximize candid and open participation the sessions will not/not be recorded, and the Chatham House Rule will be maintained.

General Resources Available to Students

Include any texts and links as desired:

- [Harris Academic Support Programs and Handbook](#)
- [Student Wellness](#)
- [University Learning Resources](#)

Harris School and University of Chicago Policies

Include any text and links as desired to highlight or emphasize issues related to academic integrity, disability accommodations, diversity and inclusion, and video and audio recordings.

- [Harris School Policies](#)
- [University General Policies](#)
- [University Academic Polices](#)
- Policies on audio and video [recordings](#) and [deletion](#).