Contemporary War: Understanding Change and Continuity

Postgraduate Course Proposal

Owning Programme – International Relations MSc - Credits: 20 (Optional Course – Spring Term)

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Course Description:
The course provides students with the theoretical and conceptual foundation to understand change and continuity in contemporary conflict, and acts as a platform to think about the place and role of war in the modern security environment. Exploring the ongoing debates regarding the changing nature and character of war, the course balances analysis of these debates with comprehension of how these translate to the practical use of military force in the modern world. The course critically engages with contemporary debates and requires students to assess and explore this discourse in relation to traditional approaches to strategic and security studies. It begins by introducing students to the conceptual problems attached to the identification of war as a social phenomenon. Using this as a basis for debate, the course then explores the utility of the military instrument (particular its relationship to the state), the role of technology (the Revolution in Military Affairs debate), the ideas the new war thesis, the place of the ‘great strategic thinkers’, asymmetric warfare and terrorism, as well as examining debate surrounding the concept of victory and defeat in modern war.

This is a postgraduate version of an honours option in International Relations. PG students are invited to attend the undergraduate lecture, however, the core teaching component of the PG version will take place in seminars, where additional and more difficult readings will be offered. The PG course also differs in terms of assessment, seminar participation and learning outcomes. – Please not that weeks 8 and 10 will be taught by Dr Claire Duncanson, and week 9 will be taught by Dr Dominic Johnson

Learning objectives
Students should gain:

1. Balanced and comprehensive appreciation of the complex character of modern strategic/security studies, with particular emphasis on the core strands of the changing character of war debate in the Post-Cold War era.

2. A theoretical foundation with which to understand change and continuity in war.

3. Detailed insight into the theoretical, historical, and contemporary meaning of war and strategy.

4. Appreciation of the sources of political/social/technological change and their impact on war.

Intellectual skills
Students will be required to:

1. Undertake critical, objective analysis of the many controversial, emotive issues which comprise the study of strategic and security studies.

2. Measure the validity of the Clausewitzian paradigm as the theoretical foundation of modern strategic studies – which is set against competing contemporary alternatives.
3. To apply competing theoretical frameworks to practical problems encountered in the modern character of war; to balance qualities of conceptual political and strategic analyses with those of historical examination and appreciation.

Course Instructions/Requirements:

1. The course will be taught on a lecture and seminar basis, with 2 meetings per week (1 hour lecture, and one 2 hour seminar.

2. All students will write two essays of approximately 2500 words (100% final mark), present their work in class, and be the primary respondent to one paper. Those presenting are expected to lead seminar discussion of their chosen topic. Students are required to debate and critically assess ideas and must be prepared to participate during discussions in seminars.

Course Outline:

1. What is War? Definitional Problems

The initial lecture introduces students to the micro-foundations of the subject by exploring the very idea of war itself. What is war? Can and How do we define war? Does the modern era require us to examine our definition of war? The lecture and seminar explores key approaches from strategic studies and international law - from Thucydides to the present.

2. The Military Instrument – From Napoleon to the Cold War

With particular reference to the role of the state in war, the lecture explores the use of war as an instrument of policy, providing students with the conceptual and historical foundation to understand state behaviour and war. It provides the analytical touchstone for students as they assess the impact of change over the following weeks.

3. Great War Thinkers: Thucydides, Sun Tzu, Jomini, and Clausewitz

Building on the preceding week, the lecture and seminar assess the influence of the Great strategic thinkers. What is their contribution to our understanding of conflict? Do these theorists share common ground? What is their role when analysing war today?

4. The Revolution in Military Affairs – 1990 - present

Although technological change has always influenced war, it has been claimed that technological innovation represented by the American RMA has (or is) transforming the nature and character of conflict. Introducing students to the concept of the RMA, the lecture and seminar explore the latest American RMA over the last twenty years: it examines the changing use of technology, from precision guided weapons, to the new robotics revolution. Critically examining the strengths and weaknesses of the RMA, the lecture and seminar will also highlight and assess the intentional aspect of the RMA – to stay ahead of would be peer competitors.

5. The Changing Nature of War: Old Wars, New Wars, or Risk Wars?

Explores the key debates regarding the changing character (and possibly nature) of war in the Post-Cold War era. By critically engaging with the new war discourse of the 1990s, it traces the emergence of the `new war’ idea and its ostensible continuation in Iraq and Afghanistan. Bringing the debate up to date, it introduces students to a competing narrative – war in the risk society.
6 **The Clausewitzian model today: A Theory for Modern War?**

After exploring modern alternatives to traditional approaches, week 6 critically examines the continued validity of the Clausewitzian model. Positioned as obsolete by the new war and RMA debates, the lecture and seminar examine the Clausewitzian Trinity as a modern strategic tool. In particular it introduces students to the interactivity of the concept, providing an alternative model for strategic thought.

7 **Asymmetric War (and Terrorism)**

Set against the new war and RMA debates, week 7 introduces the concept of unconventional war. Students are expected to draw on the experience of the course and critically engage with the notion of change and continuity. The lecture places asymmetry in historical context, and uses case study analysis to further explore the topic.

8 **Counterinsurgency - Lecturer: Dr Claire Duncanson**

Week 8 examines the theory and practice in COIN. Again using case study analysis, the lecture and seminar will examine examples of success and failure in COIN (cases may include: Algeria, Malaya, Iraq – the surge, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Chechnya).

9 **Victory and Defeat in Contemporary Conflict – Lecturer: Dr Dominic Johnson**

The lecture and seminar will examine critical debates surrounding the idea of victory and defeat in modern war. Principal questions: How should victory and defeat be understood in contemporary conflict? Is victory an obsolete concept in an era of non-state war? The lecture explores the relationship between military victory, regime change, nation-building, and security? How do perceptions of success among publics affect domestic political considerations?

10 **War, Security and Peace-building (Iraq/Afghanistan case study) Lecturer: Dr Claire Duncanson**

The final week examines the experience of war in Afghanistan and Iraq. Following on from week 9, week 10 is designed to bring to life the complexity of war in the modern security environment. It explores the dynamic of change and continuity, assesses the increasing nexus between security and development, and evaluates the range of strategic and security challenges posed to international attempts to stabilise failed states.

**Indicative Reading**


Other examples:


