

Foreign Policy: Theories of Decision-Making

Sample Syllabus

Instructor: Jungmin Han, Ph.D.

Office Hours: By appointment

Course Description

Why do governments sometimes adopt foreign policies that appear inconsistent with their interests? How do leaders interpret threats, evaluate risks, and choose between diplomacy and coercion? Why do states facing similar international pressures respond differently?

This course introduces students to major theoretical approaches to foreign policy analysis, with an emphasis on how political leaders and institutions make decisions under uncertainty. We begin with rational actor explanations and then examine organizational processes, bureaucratic bargaining, leaders' beliefs and cognitive biases, risk-taking, and small-group dynamics. We subsequently consider how public opinion, political institutions, domestic coalitions, national identity, and strategic culture influence policy choices.

The course combines theoretical debates with historical and contemporary case studies, including the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Vietnam War, the Iraq War, U.S.–China competition, and security challenges on the Korean Peninsula. Students will learn to distinguish competing explanations and evaluate which mechanisms best account for a given foreign policy decision. Throughout the course, particular attention is paid to the interaction between international security pressures and domestic political behavior.

Learning Objectives

By the end of the course, students should be able to:

- Identify and explain major theoretical approaches to foreign policy decision-making;
- Compare rational, organizational, bureaucratic, psychological, and domestic-political explanations;
- Apply theories to historical and contemporary foreign policy decisions;
- Evaluate causal arguments using evidence from speeches, archival sources, scholarly research, and public opinion data;
- Analyze how leaders, institutions, and citizens shape foreign policy under conditions of uncertainty;
- Develop and communicate an evidence-based case study of a foreign policy decision.

Course Structure

The course is organized around four themes:

1. **Theoretical Foundations and Institutional Models**
2. **Psychology, Leadership, and Group Decision-Making**

3. Domestic Politics, Public Opinion, and Political Identity

4. Applications, Crises, and Contemporary Foreign Policy Choices

Most sessions combine a brief lecture, critical discussion of readings, and application of theory to a case. Students will also undertake structured case comparisons and a foreign policy simulation.

Course Requirements

Assignment	Weight
Participation and Discussion	15%
Short Analytical Response Papers (2)	20%
Case Study Presentation	15%
Research Proposal and Outline	10%
Foreign Policy Simulation and Reflection	10%
Final Research Paper	30%
Total	100%

Participation and Discussion (15%)

Students should complete assigned readings before class and contribute substantively to discussion. Participation is assessed through preparation, engagement with evidence, constructive exchanges with peers, and contributions to small-group activities—not simply frequency of speaking.

Short Analytical Response Papers (20%)

Students will submit two response papers of approximately 800–1,000 words each. Each paper should compare at least two approaches to a decision-making problem, articulate their distinct expectations, and assess the evidence. For example, students might ask whether bureaucratic bargaining or leaders' perceptions better explains a particular crisis decision.

Case Study Presentation (15%)

Working individually or in small groups, students will give a 10–15 minute presentation on an assigned case. Presentations should identify the policy decision, key actors, relevant evidence, and the explanatory strengths and weaknesses of at least two theories.

Research Proposal and Outline (10%)

Students will submit a 2–3 page proposal identifying a foreign policy decision, research question, theoretical framework, alternative explanation, and preliminary sources. A subsequent outline will set out the argument and planned evidence. Feedback will be provided before the final paper.

Foreign Policy Simulation and Reflection (10%)

Students will participate in a structured crisis decision-making exercise, assuming roles such as chief executive, national security adviser, diplomat, intelligence analyst, or legislative representative. A short reflection (approximately 750 words) will connect the experience to course concepts including uncertainty, information constraints, bureaucratic interests, and group dynamics.

Final Research Paper (30%)

Students will write a 10–12 page analytical case study explaining a consequential foreign policy decision. The paper should pose a clear question, engage relevant scholarly theories, evaluate at least one alternative explanation, and use appropriately cited empirical evidence. Possible subjects include U.S. decisions in the Cuban Missile Crisis or Iraq War, alliance management in East Asia, North Korean nuclear diplomacy, and changing policies toward China. Students may propose other cases in consultation with the instructor.

Course Readings

Required readings will be made available through the institution's learning-management system or library, subject to access and copyright arrangements. The weekly list below is illustrative; selected chapters, excerpts, and additional case materials will be specified before the course begins.

Core texts informing the course include Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*; Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War*; Rose McDermott, *Risk-Taking in International Politics*; Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*; and Steve Smith, Amelia Hadfield, and Tim Dunne (eds.), *Foreign Policy: Theories, Actors, Cases*.

Course Schedule

Week	Topic and Selected Readings
1	Introduction: What Explains Foreign Policy Decisions? Smith, Hadfield, and Dunne (eds.), <i>Foreign Policy: Theories, Actors, Cases</i> , introductory chapter. Discussion: levels of analysis, decision-making, and evaluating explanations.
2	Rational Actors, National Interests, and Strategic Choice Allison and Zelikow, <i>Essence of Decision</i> , selected chapters on the rational actor model. Case: the Cuban Missile Crisis.
3	Organizations, Routines, and Bureaucratic Politics Graham Allison, "Conceptual Models and the Cuban Missile Crisis" (1969). Allison and Zelikow, <i>Essence of Decision</i> , selected chapters.
4	Leaders' Beliefs, Perception, and Misperception Robert Jervis, "Hypotheses on Misperception" (1968). Ole R. Holsti, "The Belief System and National Images" (1962).

Week	Topic and Selected Readings
5	Historical Analogies and Foreign Policy Learning Yuen Foong Khong, <i>Analogies at War</i> , selected chapters. Case: analogies and U.S. decision-making during the Vietnam War.
6	Heuristics, Biases, and Bounded Rationality Daniel Kahneman, <i>Thinking, Fast and Slow</i> , selected chapters. Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, “Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases” (1974).
7	Prospect Theory, Risk, and Crisis Decisions Rose McDermott, <i>Risk-Taking in International Politics</i> , selected chapters. Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, “The Framing of Decisions and the Psychology of Choice” (1981). First response paper due.
8	Small Groups, Conformity, and Groupthink Irving Janis, <i>Groupthink</i> , selected chapters. Case: the Bay of Pigs invasion.
9	Domestic Institutions and Two-Level Games Robert Putnam, “Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games” (1988). Case discussion: constraints on international bargaining.
10	Public Opinion, Elections, and Foreign Policy Matthew Baum and Philip Potter, “Media, Public Opinion, and Foreign Policy in the Age of Trump” (2019). Timothy Hildebrandt et al., “The Domestic Politics of Humanitarian Intervention” (2013).
11	Threat Perceptions, National Identity, and Political Rhetoric Oliver Turner, “‘Threatening’ China and US Security” (2013). Jeffrey Lantis, “Strategic Culture and National Security Policy” (2002). Research proposal due.
12	Leadership, Advisers, and Intelligence Failures Daniel Byman and Kenneth Pollack, “Let Us Now Praise Great Men” (2001). Richard Betts, “Two Faces of Intelligence Failure: September 11 and Iraq’s Missing WMD” (2007).
13	Foreign Policy in East Asia: Alliances, Rivalries, and Reconciliation Smith, Hadfield, and Dunne (eds.), <i>Foreign Policy: Theories, Actors, Cases</i> , relevant regional case material. Comparative case workshop: U.S.–China relations and security diplomacy on the Korean Peninsula. Second response paper due.
14	Foreign Policy Crisis Simulation Preparatory briefing and role-specific primary-source materials distributed in class.

Week	Topic and Selected Readings
	Simulation and reflection assignment.
15	Comparing Theories and Explaining Foreign Policy Choices Student case study presentations; synthesis of competing theoretical explanations. Final research paper due during the designated assessment period.

Inclusive Learning Environment

My goal is to create a classroom in which students with different academic backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives can participate meaningfully in political inquiry. Structured discussion, small-group case analysis, written reflections, and presentations provide multiple opportunities for engagement. Because foreign policy questions often involve contested judgments about war, security, identity, and national interests, students are expected to discuss disagreements respectfully and evaluate arguments through evidence rather than personal attacks.

Use of Generative AI

Generative AI tools may be used for limited preparatory purposes such as brainstorming research questions, clarifying concepts, and developing search terms, unless an assignment specifies otherwise. Students may not present AI-generated writing, citations, or analysis as their own. Any permitted use must be disclosed, and students remain responsible for verifying sources, accurately representing evidence, and producing their own arguments.

Academic Integrity

Students must follow the institution's academic integrity policies. All work should acknowledge others' ideas and evidence through appropriate citations. Plagiarism, fabrication, unauthorized collaboration, and misrepresentation of authorship are not permitted.

Accessibility and Student Support

Students who require accommodations are encouraged to contact the relevant institutional accessibility office and communicate with the instructor early in the course. Approved accommodations will be implemented in accordance with institutional policy.

Deadlines and Communication

Specific due dates, the grading scale, and procedures for extensions will be announced in the finalized course version and will follow institutional regulations. Students facing circumstances that affect their ability to meet deadlines are encouraged to communicate with the instructor in advance where possible.

This is a sample syllabus prepared for a faculty job application. Readings, assignments, and policies may be adapted to the institution, course level, and academic calendar.