WAR AND PEACE: Possible Seminar Paper Topics

The purpose of the paper requirement is to provide students with an opportunity to do individual research and analysis and to apply the knowledge and insights they have gained in the seminar to specific problem areas. Thus, a natural paper topic might be a “case study” of any significant use-of-force situation, assessing why the conflict began, the motives of the various individuals, countries, and groups involved, how different behavior might have prevented or reduced the likelihood of armed conflict, and other issues relevant to the seminar topic. If you elect to address a conflict discussed at length during the seminar, you should be prepared to explore the issue in far greater depth or focus on issues not already discussed.1

Keep in mind that this is a working seminar in which we are seeking to constantly enhance knowledge about the origin and prevention of war. One area of particular contemporary interest in development of a comprehensive theory is the effect of individual psychology and perspectives of regime elites, sometimes referred to as “First Image” issues.

In addition, one subject of considerable interest is the effect of high-level advisors on decision-makers with power to decide on war or peace. Here one might consider the role of advisors to George W. Bush in relation to Iraq, the role of Bismarck in the 19th-c. Franco-Prussian War, and the role of Count Leopold von Berchtold of Austria-Hungary in relation to the beginning of WW1.

Obvious “case studies” to consider for paper topics include:

- The Thucydides Trap: Are American and China destined for war?
- Managing the nuclear crisis with North Korea
- Living with Putin: Challenges to the West
- Strengthening the United Nations

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1 In other words, don’t simply repeat your notes from the class session.
“Image one” and its effect on war
Risks in applying deterrence
Nuclear weapons, including the issue of “no first use”
Global economic crises and their implications for war and civil unrest
The war in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea
The rise and fall of Islamic State (IS/ISIS/ISIL)
Deterring cyber attacks
The Syrian Crisis
The “Arab Spring” and its aftermath
The Libyan Crisis
Iraq: causes of war
Iraq: the end game
Afghanistan and the “war on terrorism”
Afghanistan: the end game
Crisis in the Congo
Genocide in Sudan
Climate change and its implications for conflict
Preventing war between Turkey and the Kurds
Contemporary conflict in Pakistan
Managing the Iranian threat
Iraq and the “war on terrorism”
The push-back against democracy enlargement (for example, in Venezuela)
Relevant lessons of the Vietnam War for the war in Iraq
Indochina (or a component thereof, like Cambodia\(^2\) or Laos)
The Gulf War (1990-91)
Iran-Iraq
Bosnia-Hercegovina
Kosovo
Lebanon (1982-83)
Korea\(^3\)

\(^2\) In addition to the role of Cambodia in the conflict in which the United States was involved in the 1960s and ‘70s, you might also look at the 1978 conflict between Vietnam and Cambodia. See, e.g., Stephen J. Morris, Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia: Political Culture and the Causes of War (1999).

\(^3\) We have in mind primarily the June 1950 invasion of South Korea; but there might also be material for a paper on a more recent period—a rather alarming confrontation resulted from reports that North Korea was violating its obligations under the NPT treaty not to develop nuclear weapons. This crisis has been temporarily defused by the U.S.-DPRK accord. Given what we know about the causes of war, what are the prospects for peace or conflict on
• El Salvador
• Nicaragua
• World War I
• World War II

You might also elect to compare and contrast two or three “case studies” to see if you can find some broad lessons or to show how countries have learned from experience (e.g., contrast the United States response to Indochina in the mid-1960s to the 1990 invasion of Kuwait). Another approach would be to ask “why the dog didn’t bark” in a given situation—e.g., why didn’t Greece and Turkey resort to major hostilities in a given setting, or why didn’t the Cold War produce World War III? In the four decades following World War II, Europe was the focus of a military arms race of unprecedented proportions during a period of intense political confrontation; and yet, during the same period, Europe experienced a longer period of “peace” (at least to the extent that can be defined as an “absence of war”) than it had in several hundred years prior to World War II. Was this because of the UN Charter and the outlawing of aggression? (Keep in mind that the Soviet Union appears to have been perfectly willing to support military conflicts outside of Europe during the period.) Was it because of NATO? What was the role of nuclear weapons and the doctrine of “flexible response,” if any? Were there other explanations? Did the Soviet Union become more adventurous in places like Africa and Central America in the late 1970s—if so, why?

You might also pick a specific time period (or regime) and collect data on Democide and aggression. A substantial amount of previously classified U.S. information is being released by the government, and scholars are also finding some fascinating materials in the archives of the former Soviet Union. If you can find relevant new materials, you might want to take one of Professor Rummel’s examples and do an in-depth, up-to-date study to decide whether his conclusions are sound in the light of the latest evidence.

Another approach would be to explore some aspect of the question “Are democracies inherently less aggressive than other forms of government?” This might involve looking beyond the statistical work already done—for example, taking an existing study premised upon a collection of the number of “wars” democracies and non-democracies engaged in during a specific period of time and evaluating the magnitude and nature of each incident to see if it tells you anything interesting. Was U.S. intervention in Grenada (1983) comparable to Soviet intervention in the Korean peninsula over the next decade or so? What about the situation between the Peoples Republic of China and Taiwan? What do you see as the most important variables?

4 While there might be other case studies involving El Salvador, one obvious example would be the situation in the early 1980s—and, particularly, the international context of the conflict. Cuba, Nicaragua, and the United States were involved directly or indirectly. Why did each act as it did? What was the Soviet role, if any? Could the conflict have been deterred (or its harm mitigated) by a different course of action by one or more actors?

5 There are two obvious case studies here. In July 1979, the Sandinistas seized power with the help of political pressure from the OAS and Washington as well as military aid from countries as diverse as Cuba, Costa Rica, and Venezuela. Why did each country become involved? Was the international action consistent with international law? The other issue involves the behavior of the Sandinista regime towards its neighbors—allegations of “aggression” or “intervention” in El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Costa Rica, etc. In late 1981 the United States became involved in covertly supporting so-called “Freedom Fighters” operating out of Honduras and Costa Rica against Nicaragua. There are lots of rather obvious issues here pertaining to low intensity conflict, international law, and the promotion of peace that might be explored.
Afghanistan (1979) or Iraqi intervention in Kuwait (1990)? Does it matter whether a country was acting aggressively or in response to aggression or threatening military gestures by another State? Compiling a reliable summary of wars during a particular period that distinguishes the role of participants on the basis of whether they became involved as an aggressor or in a defensive role could make a very positive contribution to this whole field.

If there is a “Democratic Peace,” what factors contribute to it? What are the principal causation factors underlying it? Are Democracies, in conflicts in which they do engage, as aggressive as non-democracies; or do they tend to become involved in conflicts in response to prior aggression? Might there be a difference in levels of aggression in minor coercion settings not involving the risk of major war? There is a growing body of literature on both sides of this issue, but perhaps you can find an approach that has not been fully explored and make a useful contribution to the debate.

If one reason for the “Democratic Peace” is the incentive structures underlying “government failure,” does this suggest that deterrence focused on regime elites would make deterrence more effective? There are several issues related to deterring regime elites that need further serious thought. Could economic or other non-military sanctions be made more effective (and also perhaps more just) by directing them against regime elites? What should be the nation’s (or the world community’s) policy toward intentionally targeting regime elites in response to armed international aggression? Is that “assassination”? Is it wrong? How do these options affect future deterrence?

What about the instrument of war crimes trials? It can be argued that announcing you intend to try an accused aggressor as a “war criminal” when the conflict ends is an impediment to meaningful peace negotiations. Others might argue that prior knowledge that they will be held personally accountable might serve to deter some potential aggressors, and that a perception that “the law” has punished at least some of the guilty might reduce the temptation among various ethnic or religious groups to resort to “self help” in situations like Bosnia-Hercegovina—where the fighting has been exacerbated by cycle after cycle of “getting even” for perceived past injustices. What do you think, and why?

Another issue worthy of further study is the role of law in deterring aggression and maintaining international peace. The lack of “teeth” in the Kellogg-Briand Treaty (1928) led many commentators to conclude that law has no serious contribution to make to preserving the peace. The UN Charter has a more successful, but still mixed, record. Can you propose changes in existing legal regimes that you believe might reduce incentives to aggression and make law more effective in preserving peace? Strengthening collective security is another useful topic.

Still other possible topics include the following:

- The relevance and importance of insights from behavioral psychology (behavioral economics) for the democracy/deterrence paradigm, including prospect theory, “myopia,” fairness related judgments in social outcomes, the effect of behavior on social norms, and “extremeness aversion” or the role of biases in general.6

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• An overview discussion of contemporary theory in war/peace.7

• An analysis (response) to the Gelpi 1997 study urging that democracies are more likely to initiate the use of force.8

• An analysis of the theories of influential writers such as Dr. Robert Jarvis or Kenneth Waltz.

• An analysis of other things correlating statistically with war, such as contiguity, levels of trade and economic interdependence, and levels of common participation in international organizations. How do these fit, or fail to fit, into the hypothesis presented in the seminar?

• Assuming for the moment that there is a powerful correlation between democratic government structures and non-aggressive behavior, are there other correlations to democracy that make it especially attractive or that offset the war-peace benefits? We will discuss some of these issues in class, but one that we have as yet explored only generally is whether there is a correlation between drug abuse and government types. For example, do democratic regimes take part in or encourage the international drug trade more or less often than other types of government? Do they deal effectively with drug abuse problems within their own borders? Do you see any significant correlations between drug abuse problems and government structures? If so, can you explain them or offer suggestions about how this knowledge can be used to address drug abuse problems?

These are just a few ideas to get you thinking—feel free to propose something entirely different that you find more intriguing. I will approve a wide range of topics so long as they clearly relate to the subject of the seminar.

A comment may be in order at this point about sources. Papers which reflect original research using primary materials (e.g., archival government documents, treaty texts, autobiographies or other accounts by participants, etc.) are likely to do better (all other things being equal) than those relying entirely upon the summaries and conclusions of scholars and other secondary sources. Keep in mind that, whenever you engage in scholarly research, you run a variety of risks that your end product will be weakened by your own mistakes (careless scholarship, poor interpretation of evidence, personal prejudices on the subject, etc.). This is true whether you are working from original documents or from the published assessments of those documents prepared by scholars who have gone before you. But every step in the process that removes you from the original material increases the risks of further error. People write books and articles for various reasons, often including the fact that they feel passionately about a viewpoint or have a vested interest in an outcome. For the same basic reasons that courts tend to exclude “hearsay” evidence and impose the “original document” rule, I urge you to consult original materials where possible in your own research. (It may be useful as well to have the benefit of the interpretative skills of third-parties—experts who can place events in context and shed light on motivations that may not be apparent from simply reading treaties and government documents—but we urge you to combine such research with a review of original materials where available.)

7 For a start, see Jack Levy, The Causes of War and the Conditions of Peace, 1 ANN. REV. POLIT. SCI. 139 (1998);
8 See id. at 154.
One final bit of advice. Define your topic in manageable terms. Most papers in this seminar over the years have been between 40 and 60 pages in length (although some have been shorter and a few have exceeded 100 pages). You may submit as long a paper as you wish (although quality is more important than quantity), but try to avoid selecting such a broad topic that you simply can’t do it justice in the paper you write. For example, if you elect to write about World War II, you might wish to limit yourself to addressing the decision-making process in Germany or Japan—but not both.