**Nuclear Weapons and Grand Strategy**

**AY 2026 Syllabus**

**Instructor: Dr. Todd Robinson**

Office Phone: 953-5410

Cell Phone: (217) 840-7541

Office: Rm 220

Email: todd.robinson.4@au.af.edu

**Course Description:** This course explores the role of nuclear weapons in the grand strategies of the states that possess them (or that may wish to). It adopts a comparative perspective, in that it focuses on the differences and similarities between the various weapons-possessing states, both past and present, in order to facilitate the development of an understanding of both how states make decisions about their nuclear strategies and why they do so. This course will also introduce students to the study of strategic culture, which will provide a lens with which to analyze the various nuclear strategies covered in the course.

**Security Clearance Requirement**: none (open to all students)

**Desired learning Outcomes:**

1. Understand the role of nuclear strategy in the broader grand security strategies of the states that possess them
2. Develop an understanding of the differences and similarities in the nuclear strategies of the various nuclear weapons possessing states and how they inform each other
3. Assess the changing geostrategic security environment and the role that nuclear weapons may play in shaping it.

**Deliverables and Evaluation:**

1. Class Participation: 20%
2. Country Assessment Presentation: 20%
3. Research Paper: 60%

**Deliverables Explained**

**Class Participation (20%):** Students must complete the readings before each seminar and contribute to the weekly class discussion in a thoughtful, meaningful way.

**Country Assessment Presentation (20%):** Students will be asked to construct and deliver a powerpoint presentation assessing the history, current state, and projected trajectory of one of the nuclear weapons-possessing states. This presentation will be given as a component of that country’s particular lesson and should serve as a launching point for the class discussion for a given day, which the presenter will facilitate. Further details on this assignment will be given out during the first class session.

**Research Paper (60%):** The second requirement of this course is a Research Paper assessing the role of nuclear weapons in the grand, national security, and military strategies of one of the countries covered in this course. This paper should be 8-10 pages in length and conform to the format for research papers located in the *Tongue and Quill*. A minimum of six scholarly sources not found in the course material are required. Further information will be made available during the first class period.

**Texts:**

1. Adamsky, Dmitry Dima. The Russian Way of Deterrence: Strategic Culture, Coercion, and War. Stanford University Press, 2023.
2. Freedman, Lawrence, and Jeffrey Michaels. The evolution of nuclear strategy: New, updated and completely revised. Springer, 2019.
3. Khan, Feroz. Eating grass: The making of the Pakistani bomb. Stanford University Press, 2020.
4. Kroenig, Matthew. *The Logic of American Nuclear Strategy: Why Strategic Superiority Matters*. Oxford University Press, 2018.
5. Narang, Vipin. *Nuclear strategy in the modern era: Regional powers and international conflict*. Vol. 143. Princeton University Press, 2014.
6. Panda, Ankit. *Kim Jong Un and the Bomb: Survival and Deterrence in North Korea*. Oxford University Press, 2020.
7. Rubin, Lawrence, and Adam N. Stulberg, eds. *The End of Strategic Stability?: Nuclear Weapons and the Challenge of Regional Rivalries*. Georgetown University Press, 2018.
8. Sarkar, Jayita. Ploughshares and swords: India's nuclear program in the global Cold War. Cornell University Press, 2022.

Additional Essays and readings available through on-line delivery system.

***Course Schedule and Reading Assignments***

**Class Day 1**

**August 6, 2025**

**EL 1 – Nuclear Weapons 101**

*Lesson Overview:* This introductory lesson presents a crash course in the fundamentals of the science and politics of nuclear weapons.

*Required Readings:*

* None (come ready to listen and learn!)

**Class Day 2**

**August 13, 2025**

**EL 2 – Introduction to Nuclear Strategy**

*Lesson Overview:* What is nuclear strategy? This lesson serves as an introduction to the study of nuclear strategy in a modern context. It seeks to build on decades of research into the role that nuclear weapons play in the national security strategies, and foreign policies more broadly, of the states that possess them. Particular attention will be paid to classical concepts in the study of nuclear strategy, such as deterrence, compellence, counterforce vs. countervalue targeting, the stability-instability paradox, and mutually assured destruction, and whether they translate to modern strategy-making and implementation.

* Lissner, Rebecca Friedman. "What Is Grand Strategy? Sweeping a Conceptual Minefield (November 2018)." Texas National Security Review (2018). < https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/bitstream/handle/2152/73735/TNSRVol2Issue1\_Lissner.pdf?sequence=2>
* Bell, Mark S. "Beyond emboldenment: How acquiring nuclear weapons can change foreign policy." International Security 40, no. 1 (2015): 87-119.
* Bell, Mark S. "Nuclear opportunism: A theory of how states use nuclear weapons in international politics." Journal of Strategic Studies 42, no. 1 (2019): 3-28.
* Narang, Vipin. Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era. Chapters 1, 2.

**Class Day 3**

**August 20, 2025**

**EL 3 – The United States of America**

*Lesson Overview:* This lesson explores how the United States’ nuclear strategy has changed in response to emerging global threats, with a particular focus on the most recent Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) and the role it has played in the US’ subsequent approach to force deployment and modernization.

*Required Readings:*

* SKIM the 2022 National Security Strategy and the Nuclear Posture Review **EL**
* Gavin, Francis J. “Rethinking the Bomb: Nuclear Weapons and American Grand Strategy.” *Texas National Security Review* (November, 2018). **EL**
* Kroenig, Matthew. *The Logic of American Nuclear Strategy*, pgs. 1-38, 81-110.

**RESEARCH DAY!!! (No Class)**

**August 27, 2025**

**Class Day 4**

**September 3, 2025**

**EL 4 – The Russian Federation**

*Lesson Overview:* As the second-oldest nuclear power, the Russian Federation occupies a unique role amongst the nuclear weapons states of the world. It is both a legacy power, in that its actions have helped create, in part, the rules of the road, as far as what might be considered acceptable nuclear strategy and behavior is concerned, but also an emerging threat, due in large part to its somewhat abnormal behavior over the past decade. This lesson explores both what Russia has done with its nuclear arsenal over the past decade and what it might do over the next and why.

Required Readings:

* Adamsky, Dmitry Dima. The Russian Way of Deterrence: Strategic Culture, Coercion, and War. Stanford University Press, 2023.

**Class Day 5**

**September 10, 2025**

**EL 5 – The United Kingdom**

Lesson Overview: This lesson explores the peculiarities of the British nuclear deterrent and investigates why, when presented with the same set of threats as the United States, it arrives at a fundamentally different approach to the deployment of its nuclear forces. It investigates whether any “forks in the road” existed in the past that led it to adopt its current deterrent posture and will also explore the challenges that might exist in continuing to rely on a single-legged nuclear force structure. An understanding of the effects of Brexit on the future of the future of the UK nuclear deterrent will also be explored.

*Required Readings:*

* Futter, Andrew 2016. The United Kingdom and the Future of Nuclear Weapons. Chs. 2-4, 5, 8, 11, & 12, pgs. 19-74, 107-120, 155-190.

**RESEARCH DAY!!! (No Class)**

**September 17, 2025**

**Class Day 6**

**October 8, 2025**

**EL 6 – The French Republic**

*Lesson Overview:* France’s decision to “go it alone” has long been a source of contention between it and its NATO partners. This lesson will explore the ongoing ramifications of this decision, as well as drivers of its particular strategy. Students will develop an understanding of how French culture, particularly, affects both its nuclear strategy and posture.

* Narang, Chp. 6, pgs. 153-178.
* Yost, David, “France’s Evolving Nuclear Strategy,” *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, Vol. 47, 2005 – Issue 3 pgs. 117-146.
* Mills, Claire, “The French Nuclear Deterrent,” *House of Commons Library Briefing Paper* Number 4079, 29 June 2016.

**Class Day 7**

**October 15, 2025**

**EL 7 – The People’s Republic of China**

*Lesson Overview:* The PRC’s acquisition of nuclear weapons was once considered an “atomic-bomb” to the stability of the international order. It is therefore somewhat of a surprise that, for decades, China did little with its capability. Chairman Mao even called it a purely “political” weapon. That being said, there is real concern now that, after decades of relative inaction, the PRC has shown newfound interest in developing a robust nuclear capability, perhaps on par with the capabilities of the other nuclear powers. This lesson will explore what a rising nuclear-powered China might look like and to what extent the Western world should be concerned by its actions.

Required Readings:

* Narang, Chp. 5, pgs. 121-152.
* Talmadge, Caitlin. "The US-China nuclear relationship: why competition is likely to intensify." Global China series. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution (2019). “EL”
* Talmadge, Caitlin. "Would China go nuclear? Assessing the risk of Chinese nuclear escalation in a conventional war with the United States." International Security 41, no. 4 (2017): 50-92. “EL”
* Cunningham, Fiona S., and M. Taylor Fravel. "Assuring Assured Retaliation: China's Nuclear Posture and US-China Strategic Stability." International Security 40, no. 2 (2015): 7-50. “EL”
* Zhao, Tong. "China and the international debate on no first use of nuclear weapons." Asian Security 18, no. 3 (2022): 205-213.

**Class Day 8**

**October 22, 2025**

**EL 8 – The State of Israel**

*Lesson Overview:* The “strategic ambiguity” nuclear posture of the State of Israel stands out amongst the world’s nuclear powers in that it is the only one that refuses to acknowledge its existence. Similarly, just as there is no direct, publicly available evidence that its program exists, neither is there publicly available writing detailing its nuclear strategy. Thus, much of what we know about Israel’s program is from second-hand accounts. Taking this into consideration, this lesson will explore the roots of Israel’s nuclear strategy and will investigate how current issues may be impacting its deployment of nuclear weapons and the strategy that informs it.

* Narang, Chp. 7, pgs. 179-206.
* Bar, Shmuel. "Israeli strategic deterrence doctrine and practice." Comparative Strategy 39, no. 4 (2020): 321-353.
* Barak, Oren, Amit Sheniak, and Assaf Shapira. "The shift to defence in Israel’s hybrid military strategy." Journal of Strategic Studies 46, no. 2 (2023): 345-377.
* BenLevi, Raphael. "The evolution and future of Israeli nuclear ambiguity." The Nonproliferation Review (2023): 1-23.

**WRITING DAY!!! (No Class)**

**October 29, 2025**

**Class Day 9**

**November 5, 2025**

**EL 9 – The Republic of India and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan**

*Lesson Overview:* India’s detonation of a nuclear device in 1974 and a fully-fledged weapon in 1998 both stood as major disturbances in the stability of the international community and resulted in widespread condemnation and the imposition of far-reaching economic sanctions that were intended to force it to reverse course. Twenty plus years later, India is considered a responsible nuclear weapons state and has even received exemptions from laws designed to punish states that proliferate outside of the non-proliferation regime. Its strategy has long focused on balancing against its two principle adversaries, China and Pakistan, with whom they both share disputed borders and also both possess nuclear weapons. This lesson will explore the effect of these dynamics on the future of the India nuclear strategic deterrent, paying particular attention to the recent border skirmish with China and what it says about India’s willingness, or lack thereof, of using its nuclear weapons to resolve its outstanding foreign policy issues.

While India’ detonation of an atomic bomb took many by surprise, Pakistan’s conduct of its own nuclear tests shortly thereafter demonstrated, conclusively, that a state does not necessarily have to have a robust resource base to successfully acquire nuclear weapons. Done so in large part as a counter to India’s own nuclear arsenal, Pakistan’s nuclear strategy has been, for the entirety of its history, solely targeted on one state and one state only. Might this trend continue into the future? Are there things that Pakistan might desire to do with its deterrent besides continuing to stalemating its more conventional superior principal adversary? This lesson seeks to answer these questions by exploring how Pakistan’s unique history and culture informs its nuclear strategy and posture and whether it is likely to continue into the future.

*Required Readings:*

* Narang, Chp. 3, pgs. 55-93.
* Anderson, Robert S. "Pakistan's Nuclear Policy: A Minimum Credible Deterrence." *Pacific Affairs* 89, no. 1 (2016): 215-217.
* Clary, Christopher, and Ankit Panda. “Safer at Sea? Pakistan’s Sea-Based Deterrent and Nuclear Weapons Security.” *The Washington Quarterly* 40, no. 3 (2017): 149-168.
* Sarkar, Jayita. Ploughshares and swords: India's nuclear program in the global Cold War. Cornell University Press, 2022.
* Narang, Vipin. “India’s nuclear strategy twenty years later: From reluctance to maturation.” *India Review* 17, no. 1 (2018): 159-179.

**WRITING DAY!!! (No Class)**

**November 12, 2025**

**Class Day 10**

**November 19, 2025**

**EL 10 – Democratic People’s Republic of Korea**

*Lesson Overview:* The Hermit Kingdom is the world’s most recent nuclear power and presents, perhaps, a case study in modern nuclear weapons acquisition and development. This is because, despite the best efforts of much of the international community, it was able to acquire nuclear weapons and continues to possess them. The question, for many, continues to be what, exactly, it intends to do with its capability. This lesson will explore possible paths that the DPRK may take in the future and what role its nuclear capability might play.

*Required Readings:*

* Panda, *Kim Jong Un and the Bomb*, All.

**Class Day 11**

**December 3, 2025**

**EL 11 – The States that Weren’t (But May Yet Be?)**

*Lesson Overview:* The general consensus, at least in US strategic circles, is that the next most likely nuclear weapons possessing state is the Islamic Republic of Iran. This lesson will explore what Iran’s nuclear strategy might look like and what impact it would have both regionally and globally. It will identify challenges and opportunities that the United States may adopt when dealing with a nuclear-armed Iran and investigate just how necessary, if at all, it is to prevent the Islamic Republic’s acquisition of nuclear weapons.

*Required Readings:*

* Kahl, Colin H., and Kenneth N. Waltz. “Iran and the Bomb: Would a Nuclear Iran Make the Middle East More Secure?” *Foreign Affairs*. 91 (2012): 157.
* Waltz, Kenneth N. “Why Iran should get the bomb: Nuclear balancing would mean stability.” *Foreign Affairs* (2012): 2-5.
* Reading on Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan, South Africa tbd.