Academic Synthesis Essay

Introduction

When I was first accepted into the International Security Studies (ISS) program, I knew that it would be a great extension of my undergraduate studies in Political Science with a focus in Foreign Affairs. I was drawn not only to the courses offered, but the fact that students had the freedom to follow their interests by designing their own plan of study. Looking back at the courses I completed, it seems I chose a global track that falls somewhere between non-traditional security threats, and violent and non-violent conflict. Throughout the program, I observed a particular attention to history – including the past political, cultural, economic, and social climates that paved the way for where we are today in international security. I appreciated having such a thorough and robust analysis of each of these topics, for without an emphasis on things like colonialism, war and other conflicts, and the evolution of political parties and policy, it is difficult to grasp the many concepts and theories that exist in this field. Of the 11 courses I finished to attain my graduate degree, there are seven that I would particularly like to reflect upon based on the impression each one had, the lessons learned, and the implications for my professional future.

Reflection of ISS Courses

International Relations of Sub-Saharan Africa (POL 544A)

Sub-Saharan Africa would not be what it is today had it not been for the competitive and violent division of the continent by European colonial powers from the late 19th to early 20th century. Repercussions from this occupation still exist today – with impacts to African notions of ethnic, linguistic and territorial identity, flailing political and economic development, the continued exploitation of labor and natural resources, and the ongoing prevalence of civil war. This course offered a unique look at pre-colonial Africa, civil conflicts and how these have been handled regionally and internationally, Sub-Saharan Africa in a post-colonial global context, and finally – human security concerns for the 21st century. I have always been interested in this region but did not have the opportunity to study it in-depth before taking POL 544A. It was fascinating to see the many ways in which the continent has been shaped by external forces – but also by internal factors. Because of these very elements, many Sub-Saharan countries have emerged as valuable global partners and should be afforded the support and resources necessary to reach their full potential as such.

Psychology of Group Conflict and Cooperation (POL 511A)

I would be willing to argue that the topics covered in this course are the foundation of many issues in international security. How members of different groups interact is the basis of how political issues will be framed and approached, how decisions are made, and ultimately whether groups will cooperate or engage in conflict. The psychology behind group behavior can be used to understand war and peace, ethnic conflict and terrorism, international trade, foreign aid, refugees, and immigration. Students were presented with

different types of conflict – namely economic, power, and value – and were challenged to explore things like bargaining, reconciliation, and appeasement as potential means of reducing the probability of war. Furthermore, we were encouraged to think about the dangers of groupthink, nationalistic ideologies such as statism, and limited contact between groups as underlying factors in why states go to war or participate in major human rights violations. As the world becomes more interconnected through political and economic engagement, the field of group psychology as it pertains to international relations and security will be more important than ever.

Concepts of Human Rights (POL 561A)

This course began with the challenge of defining human rights – which is not easy considering this term means so many things to people based on country of origin, social status, religion, societal norms, and other factors. I suggested that any universal definition should include concrete rights to life, liberty, equality, free speech, privacy, health, food, and housing – while recognizing and acknowledging that this would be difficult to achieve.

In my first reading response I explored the idea from General Karl von Clausewitz that war is not only a political act intended to influence a country's politics, but also an *instrument* of war – a weapon that can be wielded to send a message and generate a response. International humanitarian law aims to limit the effects of war and armed conflict and protect those who are not taking part in the violence, namely civilians. However, the preface to *The Lawful Rights of Mankind* suggests that until the mid-twentieth century it was widely accepted that "how a state treated its own citizens was a matter entirely for its own sovereign determination, and not the legitimate concern of anyone outside its own frontiers" (Sieghart, 1986, p. vii). After the fall of Lenin, Stalin, and Hitler's regimes in which mass atrocities were committed, this mentality shifted entirely and presented new opportunities for international involvement in the affairs of other states. These opportunities came in the form of everything from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, to the Vienna Tribunal, to UN Security Council Resolution 1325. As someone who is committed to preserving human rights and would like to eventually pursue a career in this field, I appreciated the opportunity to study these documents and events more thoroughly. I gained a better understanding of the unintended but expected consequences of armed conflict on civilians – namely women and children, and other noncombatants.

Armed Conflict (POL 569A)

Armed conflict occurs in many forms and can generally be categorized as either interstate war (violence between two or more states), and intrastate war (violence within a single state). In the literature from Week 1, the author claims that while interstate wars "have shaped the evolution of the modern international system" more than any other form of warfare, it is actually civil war that occur more frequently – and especially in the last 50

or so years (Levy & Thompson, 3). Students were introduced to a number of realist theories to explain why states might engage in conflict. One of the primary assumptions of realism is that conflict is that states are naturally in conflict with one another – whether it be politically, socially, economically, militarily, or otherwise. Any one of these issues could potentially contribute to armed conflict. However, it has been argued that international rivalries are likely never to go to war with one another in most cases. The conditions must be favorable and the benefits must outweigh the costs for a state to pursue this course of action. Of the concepts that were presented over the course of 8 weeks, I was most convinced by Democratic Peace Theory – which implies that democracies typically do not engage in conflict with one another but *will* fight with non-democracies given the right circumstances. Things like accountability of leaders, checks and balances, and voter engagement and participation make it more difficult for democracies to fight with other democracies. Other than a few very obvious cases in history, many aspects of DPT appear to be true.

Mexican National Security (POL 580A)

As a native of Tucson with Mexican roots, and as someone who worked closely with the Governor's Arizona-Mexico Commission for two years, I was drawn to take this course and expand upon my existing interest in the U.S.-Mexico relationship as well as deepen my understanding of the security issues that have challenged Mexico for decades. Though Mexico is the third largest trading partner to the United States, boasts the 15th largest economy in the world, and is rich in history and culture, people tend to view it as a country plagued by sub-state violence due to corruption, impunity, crime, drug trafficking and warring cartels. Unfortunately, this aspect of Mexico is still alive and well. Because it has long been a direct route for drug, arms, and human smuggling from Central and South America – and because its transition from single-party rule happened fairly recently, Mexico is in a position of relative instability and not entirely equipped to handle these issues. Furthermore, the current Mexican administration seems to have fallen back on the country's enduring non-interventionist policies when it should be working to become a more engaged global power. Some U.S. security cooperation efforts with Mexico have been effective, but there is still much room for improvement – especially when it comes to addressing corruption, which is both systemic and structural.

Global Health Security (POL 583A)

This course seemed like a great opportunity to take – especially in the middle of the worst global pandemic in over a century. Out of all the courses I took in the International Security Studies program, I feel as though this one was the most eye-opening and gave me new perspectives on issues I had not considered at length before. Some examples of such: major health inequities and vulnerabilities can lead to serious national security issues and pose a threat to nearly all areas of critical infrastructure; biodefense and biopreparedness are severely lacking in most countries; and disease (along with other biothreats) can and have been used as a weapon of war – which interested me so much

that it became the focus for one of my case studies. This course covered everything from coronaviruses and Ebola to synthetic biology and evolving response challenges. It was equally intriguing and unnerving to discover just how easily entire hospital and health systems could collapse when faced with a biological threat – and how unprepared we are globally to withstand the shock of another pandemic or something worse.

How Terrorism Ends (POL 520A)

The final course I took before the professional colloquium in the ISS program was 'How Terrorism Ends,' which ultimately demonstrated through various literature the number of ways and the conditions that must exist for a terrorist campaign to come to a close. Terrorism is not easily defined, but is generally described as a form of violence (or the threat of violence) employed by a nonstate actor. Since my undergraduate studies, I have been interested in why individuals are drawn to joining a terrorist group, what their motives and goals are, and what happens should a campaign fail – or succeed. This course covered all of these questions in great detail, and I think the most surprising concept that I was able to wrap my head around is that terrorism – though perceived as erratic and incomprehensible – is oftentimes a very rational decision based on cost-benefit analysis. Kidnappings, suicide bombings, and other premeditated acts of violence are carefully planned and highly calculated because they are seen as a logical means to achieve a group's political goals. Governments can respond with either coercive or conciliatory tactics to weaken or defeat a terrorist group – and states are most often successful when a combination of the two are employed. Though terrorism rarely succeeds, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that it is *effective* in persuading, coercing, or provoking a government into reacting. For a terrorist group, this can mean anything from getting a seat at the negotiating table, to becoming a legal political actor after concessions are made. The literature provided outstanding examples to demonstrate the various outcomes of terrorist organizations and the conditions that were in place for these to occur. Terrorism and counterterrorism can be difficult phenomena to understand since they are complex and ever-changing, but the psychology behind them is fascinating.

International Security Themes Identified from the Above ISS Courses

The first overarching theme that appears in the reflection of six of the seven courses above is *war* – which can present itself in the form of interstate conflict, civil war, and even terrorism. War is central to the study of international security because of how pervasive and ever-present it is. In the digital age, the threat of *cyberwar* is a looming reality. Though not often perceived as war – at least in the traditional sense of an armed conflict, cyberwar is characterized by aggression with an intent to destroy or immobilize. War happens if the benefits outweigh any potential costs, and/or if there is no other solution to a dispute or grievance.

Another theme that was discussed or alluded to at great length during my time in the ISS program is *human security*. Human security seeks to address the things that may pose a threat to a person's livelihood, dignity, safety, and survival. This is challenged daily and across the globe in a multitude of ways – poverty, displacement, gender-based violence, armed conflict, health

crises, climate change and severe weather events, economic recessions, and terrorism – just to name a handful. There is an element of human security to every one of the aforementioned courses, as well as the ones I did not mention. At the heart of international security is the purpose of protecting human life and ensuring that our most fundamental freedoms remain intact, and it is for that very reason that I was inspired to embark on this academic journey.

Reflecting on Areas of Intellectual Growth

One area of growth that has been further deepened is the fact that (at least for me) so much of what you grow up learning in school, hearing from your parents, and seeing on the news is biased, inaccurate, or just plain wrong. It is so important to gather data that is from reliable and trustworthy sources – preferably ones that are peer-reviewed and written by experts in the field. It is critical to strategically analyze an issue from all angles as to not fall into a trap of taking sides or trying to prove whether one side is right or wrong. It is often *so* much more complicated and complex than that. Responding to conflict, crises, and security issues does not always mean a simple black or white answer. More often than not, different threats require comprehensive strategies with multiple elements and levels of response.

The most meaningful point of intellectual growth was the realization of just how interconnected every area of international security is. Environmental issues are responsible for human rights issues, armed conflict has a direct impact on the advancement of women's rights, and global health is impacted by racial and gender inequities – just to give a few examples. As I stated before, human beings are at the forefront and center of everything in this field. Between ISS staff and fellow students in the program, I have been introduced to current and former intelligence officers, cybersecurity experts, military and law enforcement personnel, humanitarian aid workers, diplomats, politicians, and many others. By exchanging views and ideas these past couple of years, I have come to understand that many of us who wish to pursue a career in international security have a similar common goal: to leave the world better than how we found it, and do so by protecting the lives and the rights of our global community.