



THE WATSON SCHOOL
of International
and Public Affairs
BROWN UNIVERSITY

Fighting with Allies: Alliances, Coalitions, Proxies in Conflicts post-1989
J. Liam Wasley, Visiting Scholar in International Affairs,
Watson School of International and Public Affairs
Spring 2026

*“There is only **one thing worse than fighting with allies**, and that is fighting without them.” Winston Churchill*

Dates: Five Thursdays from 2:30-4:00pm preceded by Office Hours

Overview: The post-1989 peace dividend looked nothing like what people expected. The three decades since the end of the U.S.-Soviet Cold War has been characterized by near constant, medium intensity conflict. In no case has the U.S. faced an adversary alone. From Iraq to the Balkans, the Global War on Terror and now in Ukraine, tools that were built for a specific, conventional war in Europe, i.e. NATO, were retooled for a myriad of other missions. In other cases, bespoke coalitions, including a huge range of actors, have come together to address specific adversaries or challenges.

This group will look at the complexity of collective action in today's rapidly transforming world. While we are all probably very familiar with the U.S. national part of these events, we will examine the politics and management of these alliances and coalitions, and discuss how the politics of alliance unity affects options on the ground, and conversely how some of the military choices have implications for Ally or partner governments.

Session 1: Thursday, February 12, 2:30-4pm

“Things Fall Apart; the Center cannot hold.” Shifting Poles in Global Security

Watershed moments can sneak up on you. From France and Algeria, though the Soviet Union's *Perestroika*, sea changes in the internal politics of a key power have often triggered – intentionally or accidentally – a major reordering of the global security landscape.

I propose examining one such deliberate change – the 1968 UK decision to “withdraw to Suez” – where the United Kingdom withdrew almost all of its military assets in South and East Asia to focus its resources on Europe and to better align its global posture with its belated support of decolonization. The UK decision, and its deliberate diplomacy around the messaging, created unexpected choices and dilemmas for the United States which found itself taking on – unexpectedly – greater responsibility for security in the Middle East.

In this session, we will talk about the choices the U.S. faced because of a UK decision. In the second half, we will talk about some of the key elements of the 2025 U.S. National Security Strategy and try to anticipate how other actors may change their approach and what that might mean for U.S. policy long term.

Reading:

Simon Davis, “‘A Bloody Unpleasant Meeting’: The United States and Britain’s Retreat from East of Suez in the 1960s,” *Diplomatic History* 34:1 (2010)

President Trump’s 2025 National Security Strategy

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf>

<https://warontherocks.com/2021/02/there-and-back-again-the-fall-and-rise-of-britains-east-of-suez-basing-strategy/>

Session 2: Thursday, February 26, 2:30-4pm

Ukraine: Proxy Wars and the future of peer-to-peer competition

The Ukraine conflict has become the testbed for the future of conflict. While Putin has characterized the contest as one between Russia and NATO, NATO has taken pains to maintain a strong firewall between the conflict and the Alliance’s military tools. At the same time all NATO countries, with participation of key Asian allies, are providing the weaponry for Ukraine’s self-defense, while the European Union takes an increasingly prominent role in bankrolling Ukraine’s civilian and military needs.

The nature of the fighting has changed continuously since February 2022, with drones replacing artillery, complex infrastructure attacks that reach thousands of kilometers beyond the conflict zone, and now the refinement of mutual warfare on key infrastructure.

In this session we will delve into the complexity of managing the conflict while limiting its spread and look at the constellation of partners on both sides and discuss what that might mean for future conflicts.

The guest lecturer for this session will be Ralph Goff, a retired career CIA officer, with strong current involvement with Ukraine and a rich career working in global conflict zones. His bio can be found at: <https://www.thecipherbrief.com/experts/ralph-goff>

Readings:

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2025/12/30/world/europe/ukraine-war-us-russia.html>

<https://understandingwar.org/research/future-of-war/the-russian-military-forecasting-the-threat/>

Session 3: Thursday, March 5, 2:30-4:00pm

Politics by other means: Hybrid, Asymmetric and Unconventional Warfare

While the United States, Russia, and China take pains to avoid direct conflict, the use of military and non-military tools to probe, undermine, and influence potential competitors is live and well. From “little green men” to disinformation campaigns, cyberattacks to disruption of critical infrastructure, adversaries use non-military means to present political, psychological, and logistic challenges to their opponents and constrain their choices.

In this session we will discuss the variety of tools that states employ short of military action. We will discuss issues of key infrastructure, economic coercion, disinformation and straight up sabotage in contemporary conflicts.

The guest lecturer for this session will be Caroline Alexander, the NATO Desk Officer responsible for NATO-Russia Relations and NATO’s Hybrid Warfare toolkit.

Readings:

<https://www.hybridcoe.fi/publications/hybrid-coe-working-paper-32-russias-hybrid-threat-tactics-against-the-baltic-sea-region-from-disinformation-to-sabotage/>

The Gerasimov Doctrine: https://www.armyupress.army.mil/portals/7/military-review/archives/english/militaryreview_20160228_art008.pdf

Chatham House paper: short overview of what a Russian hybrid threats:
https://www.baks.bund.de/sites/baks010/files/working_paper_2019_16.pdf

Session 4: Thursday, March 19, 2:30-4:00pm

A Monopoly on Violence: Law of Conflict and the Profession of Arms

Our militaries are the only state sanctioned entities authorized to use force and kill in the name of the State. In exchange for that incredible exception to the rules that otherwise govern human interaction, the military is governed by an exceptional set of rules that ensure the legitimacy of their actions. From decisions to initiate conflict, through the day-to-day execution of the fight, to setting the conditions for peace, lawyers are critical to each decision. Their advice and perspective shape each action and have a tremendous impact on the evolution of the war.

In this session we will talk about *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bellum* --how the law impacts decisions to launch a conflict and the obligations of combatants once they are engaged in the contest.

The special guest lecturer is LTG Joseph Berger (ret’d), 42nd Judge Advocate General of the Army. With an outstanding career in both the legal and the special operations community, LTG

Berger has a unique perspective on some of the most challenging issues we face in an adversarial world.

https://home.innsofcourt.org/AIC/About_Us/Our_Executive_Director/AIC/AIC_About_Us/Executive_Director_Pages/LTG_Joseph_B._Berger_III_USA_Ret._aspx?hkey=31cb1337-d29e-4c51-b548-0f67aef63d86

Session 5: Thursday, April 2, 2:30-4:00pm

Managing the Coalition to Defeat ISIS

The rise of the Islamic State in Iraq presented one of the most unusual and challenging threats to international order and required an equally unusual coalition to defeat it. Part Sunni uprising and part Syrian civil war, mingled with strong elements of a millennial death cult, ISIS represented a security threat that echoed throughout the Arab world, through Western Europe and reaching even to Australia and the Caribbean.

The ad hoc coalition that was assembled to defeat it brought together 90 countries with a huge spectrum of interests and capabilities. Included in this mix are countries that usually would have very little to do with each other.

In this session, we will discuss many aspects of the ISIS challenge including radicalization, foreign fighters, ethnic cleansing, resource generation and how the IS was able to manipulate the seams of preexisting regional conflicts.

Guest lecture: TBD

Readings:

National Geographic Documentary: Chain of Command: Episode 1: By With and Through
<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt7928356/>

Further Reading:

Degrade and Destroy: The Inside Story of the War against the Islamic State
<https://www.amazon.com/Degrade-Destroy-Inside-Against-Islamic/dp/0374279896>