Teaching Faculty:
Lt Col Sarah Bakhtiari
Dr. Paige Cone
Lt Col Jennifer “Tuzzi” Hall
Lt Col Aaron “Split” Reid

Syllabus prepared by: Lt Col Sarah Bakhtiari, Course Director

Syllabus approved:

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Dr. Jeff Dennithorne, Col, USAF
Commandant and Dean
School of Advanced Air & Space Studies
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“Strategy is a practical business and the holy grail is not perfect knowledge or elegant theory, but rather solutions to real-world problems that work well enough.”  
Gray, Irregular Enemies, 7.

At SAASS, we spend a year studying the foundations of strategy. But what is strategy? And how is it achieved? Many argue that strategy is conceptual except in its execution as tactics (Gray 2014) and while it can be educated and comparatively improved through the study of history and theory, often we end up simply “muddling through” (Gray 2014). Others argue that strategy is “an illusion,” given the complexities of warfare (Betts 2000) and the unknowability of the future. In this course, we turn to strategy in and as practice to identify the problems frequently associated with strategy and what techniques we might use to ameliorate those problems before practicing strategy-making.

This course has a more applied flavor than most courses at SAASS, given its primary purpose of connecting the dots between the abstract and the concrete. As such, the course only partially follows a traditional graduate seminar format while also including application, student presentations, and workshop formats. The course features a strategy practicum that will be introduced in the first week and will conclude in the final week of the course.

Strategy-to-Practice contains three conceptual blocks: strategy-in-practice, strategy-as-practice, and practicing strategy. First, we explore the problems and pitfalls associated with strategy-in-practice. What hamstrings our political and military leaders from achieving the political ends that they set out to achieve? What complicates the art of strategy development? What disrupts the tethers between strategy and tactics? In the first block, we’ll read texts that treat this subject directly and enable critical engagement and reflection on the practice of strategy. Second, we explore how these problems of strategy-in-practice may be ameliorated by strategy-as-practice. As such, we investigate the ways strategy might be developed intentionally by design, to include in the military and civilian design contexts. We also explore designing the future using strategic foresight and scenarios as aids to imagine the future. The third block of the course focuses on practicing strategy. In this block, students will have time to craft a strategy, present it, and then test it.

In the first block, we investigate the challenges of strategy-in-practice. First, we explore three types of challenges that strategy-in-practice confronts: developing strategy, communicating strategy, and implementing strategy. By reading texts that directly address these challenges, we will be prepared to reconsider historical events and contexts, as well as military campaigns and operations, through new lenses. Each seminar will begin by engaging in discussion about these texts and then examine them in an applied context. The week culminates with brief student presentations and a one-page synopsis of the presentation.
The second block focuses on practicing the approaches to and techniques for strategy work, ameliorating the problems of strategy-in-practice that we explored in the first block. We study some ways strategists might improve these praxis problems by exploring design as one possible approach to strategy development. Design itself is many things, but chiefly among them it is a social technology that works to organize and optimize ideational collaboration and generation, environmental understanding, and problem framing and treatment. Our exploration includes military operational design, commercial design, and future design as vehicles for the intentional sense-making of a problem environment and the creation of an action (i.e. ways and means) space. Finally, students select from the methods, processes, and techniques they encounter in this second block and adapt them to their strategy practicum, creating their own team process for strategy development.

The third block offers an opportunity to synthesize the material in the course in preparation for lifelong work as strategists by practicing strategy. In this block, students spend time using their strategy development design from the second week of the course to craft a strategy that meets the intent laid out in the strategy practicum. Student teams present the strategy to a select audience, including their seminar. The final two days of the course are spent canvassing the techniques strategists might employ to “test” the strategies ex ante and using those techniques to test other teams’ strategies. What might have helped strengthen a team’s strategy in advance? What insights could be gleaned to improve a strategy’s executability?

The strategy practicum will span the entirety of the course to allow time for student teams to consider the challenge and task-organize, with the bulk of the active engagement falling at the end of block two and in block three. Each seminar will field two student strategy teams that will present their own strategy development design (i.e. process, workflow, and/or techniques) and their strategy. Details about the strategy practicum may be found in the syllabus.

Course Assignments:

1. **Challenges of strategy presentation**: Individually, prepare a 5-minute presentation and one-page written and/or visual accompaniment that identifies a challenge associated with strategy and places it in context. Please see detailed guidance in the syllabus under Day 4. Presentation grades will be included in course participation.

2. **Strategy development design**: Craft the strategy development process your team will use to develop its practicum strategy during the final week of the course. Detailed guidance can be found in the syllabus under Days 8-9. Design grades will be included in your overall team practicum presentation grade.

3. **Strategy practicum presentation**: Provide a 20-minute team presentation of your strategy and strategy design. Details for the practicum are listed in the syllabus under Days 10-12. Further guidance will be provided at the beginning of the course.

Grading: Your final grade will be based on seminar participation (40%) and the practicum assignment (60%). If you are in doubt as to how you measure up in seminar participation, speak with your professor.
Books used for the course:


Block 1: Strategy-in-Practice and the Challenges of Strategy

The first week of the course focuses on ensuring we are aware of the different ways the term strategy is used in practice and the multifarious problems associated with strategy work. Amongst these problems are the challenges of designing strategy, communicating strategy, and executing strategy. Each seminar period will consist of discussion of the readings and then an opportunity to apply the insights in a specific context. The week will close with short student presentations on one of the challenges of strategy in a particular historical context, including a written and graphical component.

8 November, Day 1: The challenges of strategy work

What is strategy and is strategy even achievable? Given all of the impediments to strategy work, should we even bother with the effort at all? What particular problems recurrently plague strategy? Where have we seen these challenges in evidence? In the opening day of the course, we will examine competing interpretations of strategy, as well as the challenges inherently associated with strategy. We will examine strategy comparatively and discuss the ways in which these challenges of strategy are reflected in national strategies. We will also discuss student presentations for the fourth day of the course and the course practicum that occurs in the final week of the course.

Required Reading:


**Application:** Select two of the following four national/regional strategies and their companion chapters in Balzacq, Dombrowski, and Reich, *Comparative Grand Strategy*. What are the conceptualizations of grand strategy in evidence here? Are there more implied definitions of strategy than Silove and Betts identify? What makes these documents strategy? Do they reflect the problems of strategy identified in the readings? What patterns can be identified across the strategies, and what noteworthy differences? Be prepared to contribute your observations to your seminar.


Further Reading:

9 November, Day 2: The challenge of developing strategy

How do national civilian and military leaders develop and design strategy? What problems are frequently associated with strategy development? In this class, we’ll explore challenges associated with strategy development, to include comparing doctrinal strategy development processes with strategy development in practice. We’ll examine the Joint Strategic Planning Process and other texts that reflect how strategy should be approached and then compare these prescriptions to how strategy is developed and reflected in practice.

Required Reading:


- Read up to and through Enclosure C, page C-8: U.S. Department of Defense. *Joint Strategic Planning System*. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Instruction 3100.01E. Washington, D.C.: 21 May 2021. *How is national strategy made within the DOD? Does this differ from the CSIS transcript’s description of the making of the 2018 NDS?*

- **Application**: How do the following documents reflect or deviate from the descriptions of strategy development in Gray, Owens, and the Joint Strategic Planning System? Does the Description of the National Defense Strategy reflect the concerns Colby expresses in his testimony?


Further Reading:


10 November, Day 3: The challenge of envisioning, communicating, and implementing strategy

How often do strategists ‘get it right’? The theory-to-practice gap in strategy is vast. As we have read, excellent strategies often do not achieve their intended results, and terrible strategies sometimes achieve strategic advantage. What are the chief challenges associated with envisioning, communicating, and implementing strategy? Do we need strategies for a strategy, to get sufficient stakeholder investment and commitment? What about communication with those responsible for executing a strategy? Who is the intended audience for strategy? And, how well can we anticipate the future the strategy is intended to shape?

Required reading:


Application: Krepinevich and Watts call out “Joint Vision 2010” and “Joint Vision 2020” for their lack of specificity in identifying the ways and means to accomplish the ends they’ve laid out. Evaluate Joint Vision 2020 with respect to this critique and also in terms of how well the Joint Staff of 2000 envisioned the future environment and the demands it would place on the Joint Force. Also consider how well Air Force strategies over this period, as written in Cohen’s “Air Force Strategic Planning”, align with Joint Vision 2020 and how well they envisioned their future environments. Do some of the Air Force strategies stand out relative to others? What makes them distinctive? Do we see evidence today that these strategies have been implemented effectively?


Further reading:


12 November, Day 4: Student presentations

No assigned reading.

Student presentation guidance: Select one of the ‘challenges of strategy’ (either those identified in the course syllabus or those you have identified through your own learning) and reflect on a historical episode, event, context, or book that you’ve encountered at SAASS and make an argument for how one of the problems of strategy is exemplified in this specific context. These problem frames may invite you to reappraise or reinterpret events, operations, strategies, or episodes differently than they were presented originally. Your 5-minute presentation and one-page accompaniment should cover the **situation, the strategic intent, the strategic reality, the definition of strategy you’re using, name the strategy challenge** you associate with it and the **insight** this generates for you about *strategy-in-practice*. Your one page should include a written and/or visual explanation of the challenge of strategy you present in class and should clearly capture the components listed in bold type above. We will compile these documents across Class XXXI and offer them as a strategy problematique playbook, so please ensure that your presentation materials (i.e. graphic, writing, or both) can stand alone as an explanatory device. Please plan to submit the presentation electronically, even if you use hand-written drawings or graphics. Please coordinate submission with your seminar instructor.
Block 2: Strategy-as-Practice

This week we investigate how we might go about ameliorating the challenges associated with strategy work through design. First, we examine how joint doctrine suggests the Joint Force approach strategy development, through the formulation of an operational approach. Second, we zoom out to explore military design’s intellectual roots in commercial design, and the flexible problem-solving approach it offers. We then turn to designing the future for the purposes of strategy through the methods of strategic foresight and scenario development. Finally, student teams will craft their own strategy development design for use in week three of the course.

31 January, Day 5: Operational design for military strategy
What is the doctrinal approach to strategy development for the Joint Force? How are strategy and operational design linked? How does one do operational design? What is the relationship between strategy and planning? How does one organize strategy design? What are the critical considerations strategists must make in undertaking strategy design? We will explore these questions in seminar to understand the value of joint doctrine for strategy development, and also its limitations.

Required Reading:


Further Reading:


1 February, Day 6: Commercial design for strategy development

What does commercial design and all of its variants (i.e. service design, product design, user experience design) have to offer strategy work? Design itself is many things, but chiefly among them it is a social technology that works to organize and optimize ideational collaboration and generation, environmental understanding, problem framing and treatment. Design offers a high-level process tailorable to complex problem sets that can be applied to strategy work, a set of techniques and principles that facilitate productive collaboration. In seminar, we will explore some of the different approaches commercial design offers and how they might be applied to strategy development.

**Required Reading:**


**Further Reading:**


2 February, Day 7: Designing the future
One of the inherent challenges of strategy work is the uncertainty the future presents and the need to make allocative decisions in the face of that uncertainty. Is the future unknowable? While prediction is not possible, using strategic foresights methods can help us anticipate some important features of the future that we may confront as strategists. In this class, we will walk through one of a few scenario-building approaches to strategic foresight that can be used to inform strategy development.

Required Reading:


Further reading:

- Schwartz, Peter. *Inevitable Surprise*.

- --. *The Art of the Long View*.

3-4 February, Days 8-9: Creating Team Strategy Development Designs
Student teams will have seminar time to craft their own process for strategy development, drawing from the approaches, processes, and techniques that were explored in the second block.

Guidance: From the various methods and techniques we’ve covered this week, work in your team to create a strategy development design (i.e. process or workflow or framework). Your method may heavily reflect one extant approach, process, framework, or technique, but should not exclusively mimic what already exists. Both military doctrine and commercial design highlight the benefits of adapting design to suit the problem at hand, rather than blindly following a prescribed process in an unthinking, checklist-style manner. As we have learned, strategy development is a bespoke process, and should be tailored to the problem under study. Your designs will be considered in terms of their creativity, originality, clarity, feasibility, and suitability for strategy work. You will present your strategy design in the course practicum presentation in block three of the course. You should present your design as a design (i.e. an intended approach) and present your design as it occurred in execution (i.e. deviations from your intended approach). See the practicum guidance for details on the desired output from your design.
**Block 3: Practicing Strategy**
The first two days of block three, students will spend seminar time putting their strategy development design to use and crafting their team strategy. Student teams will present their strategy on the third day of the week to a student and faculty group, while the final two days of the week will be reserved for evaluating and challenging these strategies. Too often, we culminate our learning with the evaluation instrument and do not get to discuss and debate the strengths and weaknesses of our work and iterate on it. “The question that matters in strategy is: Will the idea work?” as Bernard Brodie writes. In the final two days of the course, the seminar will learn about some of the ways that strategies can be stress-tested, to include scenarios, table-top exercises, red teaming, and wargames, and then do some critical analysis on other teams’ strategies, before closing with insights gleaned from the course.

**9-10 May, Days 10-11: Strategy Practicum**
Each seminar team will work on developing their strategy, according to the practicum guidance. Seminar teams will present strategies to peers and faculty on Wednesday, 11 May.

Required Reading: none.

**11 May, Day 12: Strategy Practicum Presentations**
Practicum requirements: At a minimum, your strategy presentation must include a framing of the environment and problem, an explanation of the operational approach, significant limitations of the operational approach, risk considerations, and commander’s intent. Your final presentation should also include your strategy design process as a design (i.e. an intended approach) and your design as it occurred in execution (i.e. deviations from your intended approach). See JCS Planner’s Handbook for Operational Design pVI-6 para 3 for further detail. Please discuss details for the strategy practicum presentations with your seminar instructor.

Required Reading: none.

**12-13 May, Days 13-14: Red-Teaming Strategies**
In the final two days of the course, we explore the variety of ways we can consider making strategies more robust and potentially mitigating some of the challenges of strategy work ex ante. In addition to seminar discussion, each team will have the opportunity to provide red team analysis of another team’s strategy. Seminar will conclude with reflections on the experience of strategy development and lessons learned for the future.

Required Reading:
