

COOPERATION THEORY IN NATIONAL SECURITY

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ABSTRACT

Regional Security Cooperation is a graduate-level course at American Military University that addresses regional security cooperation. The course aims to answer the question: *Will states cooperate to solve multilateral problems that cross international borders?* The course asks students to apply theory to real-world examples of cooperation, starting with multiple national and homeland security theories, classic international relations theory, game theory, and behavioral theory. It includes case studies from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the European Union, and the African Union. Topical issues include power, anarchy, security, and collective theory.

Keywords: *cooperation theory, homeland security, international relations, national security*

INTRODUCTION

Regional Security Cooperation (NSEC 608) is a graduate-level course at American Military University (AMU) that averages 25–30 students annually. The course is offered six times a year. AMU's classes are eight weeks long. NSEC 608 is a required course in the National Security: Regional Studies program and is offered as an elective to graduate students. The course examines how states cooperate to ensure their security. The course is predicated on the notion that homeland and national security are interdependent, as nations are interdependent in international relations.

States desire security and join mutual-security organizations/agreements to achieve that goal. The number of regional organizations worldwide (organized by geographical proximity, not ideology) doubled from 1945 to 1965 and from 1965 to 1985 to about 30 organizations/agreements. They doubled again in the following 20 years. By 2011, when the NSEC 608 course was started, about 65 regional organizations covered the globe. As of 2020, 76 such enterprises exist. Most policy goals focus on trade and economy, followed by technology and infrastructure and defense and security (Panke & Soren, 2020). NSEC 608 examines theories and examples of security cooperation among states, focusing on when states are more likely to cooperate to solve global problems.

The first half of NSEC 608 introduces security, dilemmas, absolute and relative power, polarity, anarchy, and norms. Next, students examine concepts closely related to cooperation, including rationality, state and non-state actors, hard and soft power, and democratic peace. Game theory presents reciprocity, payoffs, the prisoner's dilemma, stag hunt, multi-level games, and regime

theory. The remainder of the course uses case studies of cooperative security arrangements to illustrate the theoretical underpinnings of international, regional, state, and individual collaborative initiatives.

This article examines the competencies and goals of NSEC 608 on regional security cooperation using mostly explanatory theory at multiple levels of analysis. The course applies to international relations, homeland security, intelligence, and national security studies. The article reviews the course's description, goals, theory, and assessments used to consolidate lessons learned regarding security and other kinds of cooperation.

AMERICAN MILITARY UNIVERSITY

American Military University (AMU) comprises one-half of the American Public University System (APUS) and is accredited by the Higher Learning Commission. Although headquartered in West Virginia, it is an entirely online university with students from all over the country. Most students are active or retired from the U.S. military (AMU, n.d.).

The total enrollment at APUS in 2022 was approximately 50,000 students (41,000 undergraduate, 9,000 graduate). NSEC 608 is housed in the School of Security and Global Studies, which contains about 24% of the total number of students in APUS. The National Security program (NSEC) and the Homeland Security program are interdisciplinary programs under the same department chair within AMU; this department included approximately 2,600 students in 2022 (2,000 undergraduates, 600 graduates) (AMU, n.d.)

COURSE BACKGROUND

NSEC 608 is required for the regional security concentration in NSEC and is a recommended class for all NSEC graduate students. This course has no prerequisites but is typically taken during the graduate degree program. It is entirely online, utilizing an asynchronous delivery over eight weeks. It was first offered in 2011 to ensure students were aware of the increasing numbers of regional security organizations worldwide. AMU students come from all areas of the globe, and the asynchronous nature of NSEC 608 benefits students by presenting multiple avenues of learning while conforming to their schedules. Students can study the theories and examples presented in NSEC 608 at length while challenged with significant writing assignments.

In 2023, the course was updated to include regional, local, and international examples of cooperation on security, economic, and other problems. Every year, new cooperative models are built on cooperation theory and provide ample opportunities for students to discuss why states cooperate (or do not cooperate). Students in NSEC 608 may enroll in a blend of military-related theory and security courses and national and homeland security theory courses at the graduate level.

COURSE OBJECTIVES AND THEORIES

The course objectives for NSEC 608 include:

1. Measuring the impact of the international system on cooperation among states
2. Evaluating state and non-state actors in security cooperation
3. Assessing the decision-making process between states and security organizations
4. Analyzing instruments of hard and soft power in security cooperation
5. Determining why states cooperate

Impact of the International Cooperation System

To measure the impact of the international cooperation system among states, students examine the three grand theories of international relations: realism, liberalism, and constructivism. Realism explains why states are motivated by the system around them, which is anarchic. Without a more robust power to dictate rules to other states, rational actors seeking to increase their power will determine cooperation and conflict. Liberalism posits that states are more likely to cooperate to improve economic security. Cooperation is more beneficial than conflict because it encourages security. Constructivism concludes that states create norms of international behavior, including cooperation, through interactions, and those norms can perpetuate cooperative agreements (Grieco, 1990). Students are also acquainted with Huntington's (1993) theory of civilization at the system level of analysis, including the cultural, religious, and regional bases that encourage states to cooperate.

State and Non-State Cooperation

To evaluate state and non-state actors, students are introduced to state levels of analysis, including Fukuyama's (1989) end-of-history argument that democracy has shown to be the most effective means of governance and, thus, the future of the liberal world order. At the state level of analysis, the style of government encourages cooperation or conflict, and non-state actors also play a role. Similarly, regime theory posits that when states join collectives to solve problems, they create regimes encouraging successful cooperation. In this theory, partners in cooperative agreements will eventually develop behavioral norms. In other words, they make formal and informal rules of state actions. The theory holds that long-lasting institutions become non-state actors that create international norms that states are unlikely to dispute (Enia, 2014). When cooperative institutions such as the United Nations or the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development grow, their adopted norms can encourage cooperation. Non-state actors can influence collaborative or conflictive outcomes based on their interests and power. Non-state actors can erode state power and promote decision-making pathways outside the state system.

The Decision-Making Process

Students discuss rational actors and decision-making theory to assess the decision-making process between states and security organizations. In the rational actor model, state decision-makers obtain and process information according to their prioritized goals. They calculate the cost and benefits of each option and confront trade-offs. Observers can infer state intentions from prior actions. Rational actors select choices that maximize their interests. So, by taking what an actor has done in the past, scholars can create a model of intentions and then make predictions regarding the next likely moves (Friedman, 1953). Decision-making theory brings the internal characteristics of states (or groups), such as style of governance, location of power, capabilities, culture, expectations, public opinion, and others, to students' attention.

For example, game theory takes a mathematical approach to decision-making by calculating preferences in various worldwide “games” resembling simplified cooperation or conflict metaphors. Each game is built on the theory that players follow rational utility maximization based on the specific benefits of each strategic choice. From there, games can be changed according to the payoff structure, iteration, and number of players (Ross, 2014). Accordingly, game theory can explain and predict state behavior and cooperation based on how decisions are made. To illustrate this principle, Axelrod (1984) invited game theorists to submit specific strategies for a prisoner’s dilemma tournament. He ran the experiments on a computer for thousands of moves. The options were “always defect,” “always cooperate,” or unpredictable strategies. The winning strategy was “tit for tat.” In this strategy, the player starts with a cooperative approach and then copies whatever the opponent chooses—otherwise known as reciprocity. This simple strategy shows that regional and international cooperation is possible; it needs collaborative partners who wish to solve global problems together.

Regional Cooperation

Students explore the importance of power in regional cooperation. Soft and hard power can influence neighbors to work together or not. Power is about getting other states to do what is in your best interest through persuasion or coercion (Nye, 2008). When states agree to work together in security agreements, their collective power increases when they share an arrangement umbrella that attempts to protect all from harm. They all rise to the same level of security (so long as all retain a reasonable and accurate expectation of compliance). Further, these security agreements encourage intelligence cooperation, joint military exercises, and training (Lee, 2021), thus encouraging more cooperation as success builds success.

Theory to Practice

Students apply the theories they have learned to specific examples of cooperation. In doing so, they answer the question of why states cooperate. Is it because they have interests in common? Is

it because they cannot achieve the level of security they need without working together? Is it because there is a common threat to their security?

Regarding common interests, mass society theory tells us that shared grievances or problems encourage individuals to cooperate in managing change. It is in the psychology of collective behavior (Kornhauser, 1959). Everyone must know their shared goal for it to become part of their identity. A common goal could result in increased interaction and cooperation among states.

Regarding the level of security, resource mobilization theory supposes that the structure of the cooperative setting is critical to the likelihood of joint problem-solving (Sandler, 2004). Thus, variables like government funding, capabilities, and skills could be more important to cooperation than the existence of a collective problem that needs to be solved.

Regarding common threats, in collective action theory, Olson (1965) argued that it would take more than a common interest (such as a global security threat) to encourage a group (such as neighboring states) to act to solve a problem. Working together would solve problems faster and easier than acting alone. In answer to why there is a reluctance to share the burden of a solution even if there is some common interest, Olson posited that it is not rational for an individual to support a collective good when he does not receive a profit for his actions. Thus, cooperation is not automatic even when everyone (or every state) has a common goal.

Security cooperation among states must be studied to determine its most likely variables, situations, and problems. At its heart, NSEC 608 tasks students to answer the most fundamental question that all national security scholars ask: *Why do states do what they do?* All other issues, including regional security cooperation, address this question.

COURSE ASSESSMENT

Through four assessments (each worth 25%), discussion posts, a literature review, a white paper, and a creative project, students must demonstrate mastery of specialized knowledge, intellectual skills, applied and global learning, and digital literacy. They explain and incorporate major theories, adapt contested ideas and techniques, evaluate and contribute to consensus ideas about cooperation, apply advanced field knowledge, develop public policy positions, and address new global challenges.

The discussion posts encourage comprehension and analysis of theories and examples of cooperation, while the literature review asks for an inclusive answer to the questions of cooperation. The white paper asks for a proposal to increase policy cooperation, while the creative project tasks students with creating original work justifying their positions on the likelihood of cooperation in specific geographic regions. Of the more than 300 students who took the course, the majority passed with an A or a B, and approximately three percent failed.

CONCLUSION

Regional Security Cooperation is an online graduate-level course designed to introduce and synthesize the likelihood of cooperative regional organizations/agreements among states. By starting with theories of international relations at a system level, then introducing state-level theories about cooperation and games before examining individual-level behavioral theory, the course presents a comprehensive analysis of cooperation that students apply to regions of the world. Following a series of case studies, students create original work imagining the future and the likelihood of collaboration on a regional or global basis.

Cooperation among states tends to be an issue we assume is working behind the scenes. The liberal world order has been so ingrained in most international relations theories, courses, and scholars that we sometimes forget to examine its underpinnings. It behooves us to open the history of cooperation and subject it to thorough investigation. *Why does it work? Does it work all of the time? When does it not work?* We never lack examples of cooperation and non-cooperation worldwide in the 21st century.

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