

Building Strategic Competence:

Lessons from Battlefields Overseas and in D.C.

STRAMGT 582

MON / THU, 4:25 PM-6:10 PM

April 3 – May 1, 2025

Instructor: H.R. McMaster (h.r.mcmaster)

Office Hours: By Appointment

Faculty Assistant: Malia Long

Teaching Assistant: Rachael Rhee (rsrhee)

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Course Description:

This course addresses the issues a leader faces when assuming executive responsibility. It focuses on the development of clear visions and missions, the understanding of complex problem sets, the building of teams, the development of strategies for overcoming obstacles, and how to take advantage of strategic opportunities. It is offered for students who might lead large, complex organizations, pursue opportunities leading to partial or full ownership and control of a business, or serve in senior positions in government. The course draws on the lecturer's experience as an officer in the United States Army and as the United States' 26th Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs to illuminate critical aspects of leadership, strategy development, and effective implementation. The course places the lecturer's experiences in the context of history as well as leadership and management literature.

Course Design:

This class will help students design their own theories of strategic competence. After an introductory discussion of the meaning and value of strategy, lessons will focus on elements of strategic competence and effective leadership. The class will use real-world, complex problems to illuminate those elements. The lecturer will facilitate class discussions on topics such as:

- Developing an organization's vision and mission
- Framing complex problems
- Reasoning by historical analogy
- Fostering collaboration and gaining interdisciplinary perspectives
- Building relationships and coping with difficult personalities
- Anticipating and organizing for rapid decision-making
- Assessing progress and building flexibility into plans and organizations
- Balancing short- and long-term perspectives
- Driving sensible implementation

The course will explore complex challenges, including great power competition with Russia and China; asymmetric threats, such as jihadist terrorism and transnational organized crime; hostile states, such as Iran and China; new competitive domains (e.g., space and cyberspace); and disruptive technologies. While the class will focus on challenges to national and international security, the course is meant to develop student skill sets that are relevant across the public and private sectors.

Upon completion of the course, students will have matured their own theories of strategic competence, be better prepared to provide organizations with clear purpose and direction, and be equipped to help teams overcome complex challenges and win in competitive environments.

Teaching Approach:

The teaching team will strive for maximum class interaction. Each session will include a short lecture to frame the class’ discussion for the day. Then, the class will divide into small groups for discussion. The team will use a brief demographic survey ([linked here](#)) to assign students to diverse Strategy Teams prior to the first class. Students will remain with their teams for the duration of the course.

Each Strategy Team will be responsible for leading the plenary (i.e. whole class) discussion for one session each.

Class sessions will follow this format:

ACTIVITY:	LED BY:	DURATION (approx.)
1. Introduction/lecture	Lecturer	20 minutes
2. Facilitation of plenary discussion	The day’s assigned Strategy Team	15 minutes
3. Breakout group discussions	Individual Strategy Teams	15 Minutes
4. Summary of salient points from breakout discussions	Representatives from all (or selected) Strategy Teams	3-5 minutes each (total of 15 minutes)
5. Summary discussion / Forward Look	Lecturer	10 minutes

Assignments:

Prior to Class Sessions 1 through 5, the Teaching Team will solicit stories from students that will help illustrate the content for that session. **These submissions will primarily be graded for completion.** They are **due by 12 PM Pacific on the day of class.**

Every two sessions (once a week), **each student will write a 300-to-500-word reflection and fill out a session feedback form.** The purpose of the reflections is to capture the student’s evolving personal theory of strategic competence. The lecturer will use feedback to tailor the class in

real-time and improve the student experience. The 300-to-500-word reflection shall focus on the following general questions below, *or on* discussion questions specific to that week's sessions.

- What observations from the course readings and discussion were helpful in understanding essential elements of strategic competence?
- How might those observations apply to your future leadership responsibilities?

Reflections are due every Friday evening at 5 PM PT. Reflections should include students' personal reactions, and may include salient points from Strategy Team breakout discussions. Reflections shall be shared with your Strategy Teams via email after submission to the teaching team.

There are also short additional assignments due throughout the quarter, including submissions of stories from your own careers and a required preparatory document before the final simulation exercise. See Canvas for more details.

Core readings are foundational to the class and Strategy Team discussions. Recommended readings are truly optional, and are intended for students who wish to dig deeper on a particular topic during or after completion of the course.

Grades & Requirements:

Final course grades will be based on an assessment of the **quality** and **effort** apparent in each student's (1) written reflections and (2) participation in plenary and Strategy Team discussions. Peer assessments of students' contributions to the group's learning will be solicited via post-class surveys.

Absence Policy:

You are expected to attend every class. TAs will take attendance after class begins. You are allowed one unexcused absence (for any reason) with no penalty. Each subsequent unexcused absence will lower your grade by a letter grade (e.g. P to LP). Two or more unexcused absences will result in a U grade for the course.

Excused absences (per the categories outlined in the GSB Attendance Policy) will not count against your grade. You must submit a GSB Absence Report no later than 72 hours after the absence occurs.

Tardiness:

Students are expected to be on time. You are allowed one late arrival (for any reason) without penalty. **Two subsequent late arrivals will count as one absence.**

Devices Policy:

The use of electronic devices is not allowed in the classroom, except in the case of accommodations from OAE.

Academic Accommodations:

Stanford is committed to providing equal educational opportunities for disabled students. Disabled students are a valued and essential part of the Stanford community. We welcome you to our class.

If you experience disability, please register with the Office of Accessible Education (OAE). Professional staff will evaluate your needs, support appropriate and reasonable accommodations, and prepare an Academic Accommodation Letter for faculty. To get started, or to re-initiate services, please visit oae.stanford.edu.

If you already have an Academic Accommodation Letter, we invite you to share your letter with us. Academic Accommodation Letters should be shared at the earliest possible opportunity so we may partner with you and OAE to identify any barriers to access and inclusion that might be encountered in your experience of this course.

Honor Code and AI Usage:

The Stanford University Honor Code applies to all academic work. Unpermitted collaboration and plagiarism are examples of Honor Code Violations. Inappropriate use of technology, including AI content generators (e.g. ChaptGPT) is not allowed. AI content generators should not be used for story submissions or reflections.

Course Textbook:

H.R. McMaster, *At War with Ourselves*. Harper, 2024.

Schedule of Session Topics, Requirements & Discussion Questions:

Session 1 – Thursday, April 3, 2025: Essential Elements of Strategic Competence

“It is meant to educate the mind of the future commander, or, more accurately, to guide him in his self-education, not to accompany him to the battlefield; just as a wise teacher guides and stimulates a young man’s intellectual development, but is careful not to lead him by the hand for the rest of his life.” -Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*.

What is your foundational understanding of strategy’s meaning and essential elements? Pre-class story submission:

- Think of a strategic leader that you admire - this could be someone you know personally, or someone you know of. What are the essential strategic elements they use?

Discussion Prompts:

- What is your working definition of strategy?
- Why should you even bother having a working definition of strategy?
- What are the essential elements of effective strategy?
- What stories from your past illuminate those elements?
- How did your thinking about strategy evolve based on the readings and discussion?

Required Reading:

- Tami Davis Biddle, “[Strategy and Grand Strategy: What Students Need to Know](#),” US Army War College, pp. 1-5, 9-16.
- *Battlegrounds: The Fight to Defend the Free World*, [Conclusion, pp. 425-445](#).
- Video: [Embracing Strategic Empathy](#)

Recommended Additional Readings:

- H.R. McMaster, “[The Uncertainty of Strategy](#),” Survival
- Philip Zelikow, “[To Regain Policy Competence: The Software of American Public Problem-Solving](#)”
- Video: [What is in the National Interest?](#)
- For an appraisal of recent wartime strategy: Hew Shachan: “[Strategy and the Limitation of War](#)”

Session 2 – Monday, April 7, 2025: Understanding how the Past Produces the Present (Continuity and Change)

“What I suspect is that memory of past and anticipation of future events work together, go hand in hand as it were in a friendly way, without disputing over priority and leadership.” -Carl L. Becker, 1931

“Many of our contemporaries are extraordinarily reluctant to acknowledge the reality of past time and prior events, and stubbornly resistant to all arguments for the possibility or utility of historical knowledge.” -David Hackett Fischer, *Historians’ Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought*.

How do you know that you are learning the right lessons from history?

Pre-class story submission:

- Reflect on a time when a leader in your organization chose to ignore history when making a decision. What was the impact on the organization?

Discussion Questions:

- Can you make effective decisions without understanding the relevant history of the arena in which you operate?
- How should history inform contemporary strategy and decision-making?
- What are the dangers of neglecting history or prioritizing change over continuity?
- What are potential pitfalls of reasoning by historical analogy?

Required Reading:

- H.R. McMaster, *At War with Ourselves*, Chapter 3
- Michael Howard, “[The Use and Abuse of Military History](#)”
- Margaret MacMillan, “[The Rhyme of History](#)”
- H.R. McMaster, “[Pipe Dream of Easy War](#)”

Recommended Additional Readings:

- H.R. McMaster, “[When Gadgetry Becomes Strategy](#)”, World Affairs
- [On Continuity and Change in War](#)
- On pitfalls and learning wrong lessons:
 - Jeffrey Record, “[Perils of Reasoning by Historical Analogy](#)”
 - Conrad Crane, “[Avoiding Vietnam: The U.S. Army’s Response to Defeat in Southeast Asia](#)”

Session 3 – Thursday, April 10, 2023: Building Cohesive, High-performing Teams (Eagle Troop at the Battle of 73 Easting)

“What battles have in common is human: the behavior of men [and women] struggling to reconcile their instinct for self-preservation, their sense of honour and the achievement of some aim over which other men [and women] are ready to kill them. The study of battle is therefore always a study of fear and usually of courage; always of leadership, usually of obedience; always of compulsion, sometimes of insubordination; always of anxiety, sometimes of elation or catharsis; always of uncertainty and doubt, misinformation and misapprehension, usually also of faith and sometimes of vision; always of violence, sometimes also of cruelty, self-sacrifice, compassion; above all, it is always a study of solidarity and usually of disintegration for it is towards the disintegration of human groups that battle is directed.”

-John Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (1976).

When you step into a new position, how can you build off previous experiences to build confident, high-performing teams?

Pre-class story submission:

- Think back to a time that you were part of a high-functioning team. What elements contributed to the success of the team?

Discussion Questions:

- How can historical inquiry help us understand our responsibilities?
- How can we instill confidence and provide purpose, motivation, and direction to our teams?
- How can you encourage initiative and set conditions for flexible, decentralized operations?

Required Reading:

- Video: [Overview of the Battle of 73 Easting](#)
- H.R. McMaster, “[What We Learned From the Battle of 73 Easting](#)”

Recommended Additional Readings:

- For a contemporaneous account of 73 Easting: [Captain H.R. McMaster](#)
- For a retrospective panel discussion twenty years later, see video: “[Victory from Chaos](#)”
- Video of Captain McMaster and Team “[Reconstructing the Battle of 73 Easting](#)”

Session 4 – Monday, April 14, 2025: Understanding Complex Problems and Challenging Assumptions (China)

“Embracing uncertainty does not mean that we stop searching for solutions. It only means that we remind ourselves and each other that our explanations are often based on insufficient understanding. Keeping cognizant of our own uncertainty empowers us to qualify our claims and moderate the solutions we adopt. Even more, it forces us to keep an open mind when we confront complex conditions.” -Zachary Shore, *Blunder: Why Smart People Make Bad Decisions*.

What are the consequences of not identifying and testing assumptions on which we base our strategies?

Pre-class story submission:

- When in your careers have you seen an assumption make or break the success of a strategy?

Discussion Questions

- What were the key assumptions that underpinned U.S. policy toward China since the end of the Cold War?
- What explains the development of those assumptions and why they survived despite evidence and experience to the contrary?
- What role do strategic empathy and narcissism play in forming assumptions?
- What is the role of assumptions in the development of strategy in the development of foreign policy and corporate strategy?

Required Reading:

- H.R. McMaster, *At War with Ourselves*, Chapter 15
- Video: [Confronting Chinese Party Aggression](#)
- [How China Sees the World](#)
- [Declassified Indo-Pacific Strategy Framework](#)
- [Strategic Asia 2020: U.S.-China Competition for Global Influence](#), executive summary
- [Joint Staff J7 Planners Handbook for Operational Design](#), Chapter 2, pp, II-1 to II-11.

Recommended Additional Reading:

- [Strategic Asia 2020: U.S.-China Competition for Global Influence](#), pp. 2-31
- H.R. McMaster, [Review of Shore, Sense of the Enemy](#)

Session 5 – Thursday, April 17, 2025: Collaboration and Interdisciplinary Perspectives (NSC Process, National Security Strategy, and Allies)

“Bureaucratic consensus is often purchased at a high cost in terms of policy sharpness or coherence; bold ideas usually won’t survive, and the results may well be anemic compromises.” -Peter Rodman, *Presidential Command: Power, Leadership, and the Making of Foreign Policy from Richard Nixon to George W. Bush*.

How do you effectively foster collaboration and interdisciplinary perspectives in a large, complex organization?

Pre-class story submission:

- Reflect on a time when you’ve seen a high-stakes decision making process work really smoothly (or not).

Discussion Questions

- Why should you foster collaboration and interdisciplinary perspectives?
- What are tactics and processes to ensure effective collaboration in policy and strategy development?
- Why do people fail in creating a collaborative environment?
- What are tactics and processes to avoid pitfalls in policy and strategy development?

Required Reading

- H.R. McMaster, *At War with Ourselves*, Chapter 13
 - [“The National Security Council: A Tool for Decision”](#), AEI
 - [“Explaining the Army Design Methodology”](#)
 - [Harnessing Conflict in Foreign Policy Making: From Devil's to Multiple Advocacy Brief](#)
 - Watch: [CSPAN video of HRM and APNSA Predecessors](#) (can skim through with links on page)
- Recommended Additional Reading:
- Zachary Shore, *Blunder: Why Smart People Make Bad Decisions*
 - Roger Martin, *The Design of Business*

Session 6 – Monday, April 21, 2025: Coping with Difficult Personalities and Relationships

“When the American power game was organized two centuries ago, the Founding Fathers deliberately spread the chips around so widely that no single political force could drive the others out of the game. The chips have been scattered even more widely in recent years--by reform, money, television, weak parties, and split-ticket voting--and we now need political leadership that can provide not only vision but cohesion.” -Hedrick Smith, *The Power Game*, 1988.

How do you cope with difficult personalities and relationships?

Discussion Questions

- What are the causes of difficult personalities and relationships?
- What are best practices and strategies to cope with difficult personalities?
- How can leaders establish environments that foster collaboration, trust, and respect?
- How did you handle a difficult relationship in the past and what would you do differently in retrospect?

Required Reading:

- H.R. McMaster, *At War with Ourselves*, Chapter 17
- [The Coddling of the American Mind](#)
- [Gen Z at Work](#)
- [How to classify someone's personality: The Big 5](#)

Recommended Additional Reading:

- [“How Smart People Handle Difficult People”](#)
- Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*

Session 7 – Thursday, April 24, 2025: Supplanting Strategic Narcissism with Strategic Empathy (Iran Nuclear Deal)

“Let us turn now to the central task of a coercive strategy: to create in the opponent the expectation of costs of sufficient magnitude to erode his motivation to continue what he is doing.... Success may depend on whether the initial coercive action or threat stands alone or as part of a broader credible threat to escalate pressure further if necessary.” -Alexander George, *Forceful Persuasion: Coercive Diplomacy as an Alternative to War*.

How can you transition from strategic narcissism to strategic empathy?

Discussion Questions:

- What were the assumptions on which U.S. policies toward Iran were based under the Obama and Trump Administrations?
- What were other alternatives to the way the U.S. left the 2015 Iran nuclear deal?
- What are the indicators of strategic narcissism?
- What tactics can you use to replace strategic narcissism with empathy?

Required Reading

- *Battlegrounds*, [pp. 313-318](#); [pp. 328-339](#).
- [Biden on Iran](#)
- Video: [Preventing Hegemonic Iran](#)
- [International Reaction to Trump’s Iran Speech](#)

Recommended Additional Reading:

- [“War with Iran is not inevitable -- but the U.S. must change course”](#)
- Gareth Porter, [“Why ‘Coercive Diplomacy’ is a Dangerous Farce”](#)

Session 8 – Monday, April 28, 2025: Maintaining Strategic Perspective During Crisis Response and Decision-making on a Compressed Timeline (Syria)

“In the difficult world of international competition there is no greater guarantee of safety in cautious passivity than in bold activity, perhaps less. In each case the particularities must determine which course of action or which combination is best.”
-Don Kagan, *On the Origins of War and the Preservation of Peace*.

How can you alter your decision making process to function effectively in a compressed timeline?

Discussion Questions:

- What are critical elements of effective decision making?
- How does implementation change from deliberate to compressed decision making?
- How can we avoid pitfalls and mitigate risk?
- How can we design a decision-making process that allows an organization to respond rapidly and effectively to events?

Required Reading:

- H.R. McMaster, *At War with Ourselves*, Chapter 6
- Video: [Decision to Strike Syria](#)
- [How Obama’s Syrian Chemical Weapons Deal Fell Apart](#)
- Video: [Complexity, Cynefin, and Agile](#)

Recommended Additional Reading:

- Video: [Sec. Tillerson’s 2018 speech on Syria](#)
- [“Timeline: US intervention in Syria’s war since 2011”](#)
- H.R. McMaster, [“Syria, Is the Worst Yet to Come?”](#)
- [“For Sama”](#) Frontline - Full Film

Session 9 – Thursday, May 1, 2025: Essential Elements of Effective Strategic Leadership

“A good leader is a steward of survival not only for the forces they command, but also for the entire nation. Therefore, if a leader encompasses the qualities of intelligence, trustworthiness, humaneness, courage, and sternness, the nation will be strong. If, however, a leader is lacking in one or more of these qualities, the nation will be weak.”
-Sun Tsu, *The Art of War*

How has your theory of strategic competence changed throughout the course, and how will you apply it in the future?

Discussion Questions

- What are the essential elements of strategic competence?
- What might we learn about strategic competence from Grant’s example?
- How might you provide purpose, motivation and direction to a large organization?

Required Reading

- [Grant’s letters to his commanders.](#)
- [General Wisdom of Grant](#)

Recommended Additional Reading:

- Ulysses S. Grant, *Memoirs*.
- [Grant](#) (miniseries; available for free [with ads])