

## Academic Synthesis Essay

Throughout my time in the International Security Studies (ISS) program, I have taken several courses that have shaped my understanding of global affairs and the many dimensions of international security. The six courses that stand out among them are: Emerging Powers in the Global System, Global Political Economy, European Politics and Society, International Relations of East Asia, Crime & Violence in Latin America, and Gender and International Security.

Although each course focused on a particular region or set of themes, taken as a whole, they demonstrated how security encompasses not only state sovereignty or military might but also structural violence, economic inequality, and human vulnerability.

These courses deepened my awareness of the complexity of international security and challenged me to think more critically about the forces that shape our world. As I reflect on them, I see how they complement one another, progressing from theoretical and macro-level frameworks to case studies that are relevant to a given location. This essay will go over the main concepts of international security that came up in these courses, discuss how they all enhanced my academic experience, and consider how this has helped me grow professionally. I hope to show how my views on international security have changed and how I have grown to have a more thorough and critical knowledge of international affairs.

Being exposed to a wide variety of security-related subjects and viewpoints has been one of the most valuable parts of the ISS program. Even though the six courses I chose focused on various subjects and geographical areas, they all had a few things in common. These include expanding the idea of security beyond conventional state-centered frameworks, the increasing importance of regional power dynamics, and the critical part that structural inequality and political economy play in creating both local and international insecurity.

The redefining of security was a central theme throughout the program. Security is frequently associated with military power, territorial integrity, and reducing the risk of interstate conflict in traditional international relations theories. Courses like Gender and International Security and Crime & Violence in Latin America, however, questioned this limited definition. In Latin America, internal issues like organized crime, corruption, and weakened state institutions are closely linked to security. The course focused on how everyday insecurity, especially for vulnerable communities, is caused by criminal networks and state negligence.

In the same way, Gender and International Security highlighted how gender influences how security is perceived. It made me realize that violence impacts people differently depending on their gender, age, and identity, as seen in current and past wars and conflicts. This means that issues of security, not simply social justice, include gender-based violence, inequality, and lack of access to basic needs. This pushed me to consider how global systems of inequality affect individual safety and political agency. These courses changed my understanding of security, moving from being largely a governmental concern to one that is intricately connected to people's everyday lives.

The significance of regional dynamics and the shifting balance of power also emerged as a major subject. Comparative regional studies provided by European Politics and Society and International Relations of East Asia enabled me to comprehend how history, institutions, and alliances influence the security setting. For countries like Japan, South Korea, and ASEAN members, the history of colonialism, the U.S. military presence, and China's ascent to regional hegemony have led to intricate strategic calculations in East Asia. In addition, internal disputes and the rise of nationalism and populism pose a threat to the European Union's security strategy, which is based on integration, diplomacy, and liberal values. These diverse regional dynamics

made it evident to me that there is no one-size-fits-all framework for international security; rather, it must take historical and political context into consideration.

The connection between many of the courses was the topic of global political economy and how it affects security. The foundation was established by Global Political Economy, which demonstrated how resource dependency, capitalism, trade systems, and financial institutions influence global inequality. This course allowed me to understand how economic decisions frequently have an impact on security. For instance, civil instability, displacement, and international crime can result from economic exploitation, resource scarcity, and debt reliance. Emerging Powers in the Global System expanded on these observations by analyzing how emerging nations like China, India, Brazil, and South Africa aim to transform global governance frameworks in response to past economic disparities and marginalization.

The interconnectedness of the local and global, as well as how identity, power, and inequality influence security, are what eventually bind all these issues together. Every course contributed a piece of the bigger picture, whether it was examining gendered aspects of war, the growth of China, gang violence in Central America, or the development of the European Union. When combined, they demonstrate that security encompasses more than just the existence or lack of conflict; it also includes access to resources, institutional legitimacy, governance structures, and people's ability to live free from fear and want.

The way the classes in the ISS program progressively built upon one another resulting in a more complex and nuanced understanding of international security was one of the most exciting parts of my education. Together, they formed a coherent academic development from basic ideas of global order to intricate, intersectional understandings of power, identity, and violence.

Courses like Emerging Powers in the Global System and Global Political Economy set the foundation for my understanding of the international system at the start of my academic journey. Important frameworks for examining how trade, finance, and international organizations affect international relations and contribute to inequality were introduced by Global Political Economy. It allowed me to understand and analyze how economic disparities and interests fuel conflict, collaboration, and marginalization. Expanding upon this, Emerging Powers in the Global System questioned established international power structures. By studying nations such as China, India, and Brazil, I gained insight into how these countries negotiate and challenge the current international system. The goals, weaknesses, and strategies of emerging players continuously affect security, as this course demonstrated. Security is neither static nor exclusively under the authority of Western countries.

To apply these general ideas to particular geopolitical contexts, the regional courses—International Relations of East Asia and European Politics and Society—provided essential case studies. China's development and North Korea's instability created a dynamic environment in which the themes of economic interdependence, regional competition, and U.S. influence became apparent in International Relations of East Asia. I was able to learn how theoretical concerns about strategic rivalry and power shifts manifest in real life. The European Union's strategy for regional stability and collective governance was the subject of European Politics and Society, which provided an alternative viewpoint. This course allowed me to analyze the advantages and disadvantages of liberal internationalism, particularly considering issues like Russian aggression, Brexit, and migration. When combined, these two courses demonstrated the intersection of regional and global power dynamics and how different parts of the world test out unique political and security approaches.

Later in the program, more critical, human-centered viewpoints were introduced through the courses Gender and International Security and Crime & Violence in Latin America. These courses provided me the opportunity to consider how structural inequality, marginalization, and identity politics lead to insecurity for individuals and communities. In Latin America, I learned how the blurred boundaries between state and criminal actors, as well as weak institutional capacity, contribute to persistent violence and impunity. Furthermore, I learned in the gender course how gendered experiences of displacement, political exclusion, and violence are frequently ignored or downplayed by international organizations. Both courses reinforced the idea that international security must address informal, domestic, and often invisible forms of violence.

In the end, my coursework shifted from comprehending the theoretical frameworks of international politics to critically analyzing the real-world consequences. I gained an extensive understanding of institutions and processes from the earlier courses, but the more recent ones encouraged me to reconsider whose security is prioritized and whose isn't. This development enabled me to form a more thorough and critical perspective on international security, one that considers both the strength of states and the vulnerability of people.

When I think back on the classes I've taken in the ISS program, I can say with confidence that I now have a much deeper, more critical, and multidisciplinary perspective of international security. I mostly thought about security in terms of national defense, military conflict, and geopolitical strategy when I first started the program. However, every course has broadened and questioned that perspective, making me reevaluate long-held beliefs and acknowledge the intricate, multifaceted nature of security in the modern world.

Taking courses like Gender and International Security and Crime & Violence in Latin America inspired one of the biggest changes in my perspective. I understood that poverty, lack of access to healthcare or education, gender-based discrimination, or state neglect may all contribute to insecurity, even if it is not always viewed as a priority. Maintaining international security involves more than just securing borders; it also entails protecting citizens from prevalent, accepted types of violence.

Taking the Gender and International Security course compelled me to consider how identity, specifically gender and race, affects power and safety. Before taking this course, I had not given much thought to how peacekeeping operations and security strategies may perpetuate patriarchal norms or overlook the unique needs of women. This class helped me appreciate the value of intersectional analysis and made me more critical of policy solutions that claim to be neutral but often reinforce existing hierarchies.

Global Political Economy and Emerging Powers in the Global System are two courses that helped me better comprehend the fundamental causes of global inequality. These courses encouraged me to look at the institutional and economic factors that drive insecurity rather than just moral or humanitarian framings of security. For instance, learning about the importance of FDI and its consequences such as the race to the bottom, unequal trade relationships, and the role of the IMF and World Bank led me to question how "development" and "stability" are defined and by whom. I came to understand that a lot of the security issues the Global South faces are closely related to historical exploitation and current global power disparities rather than being just the product of internal dysfunction.

Additionally, my coursework on East Asia and Europe gave me the regional context necessary to see how different parts of the world navigate global security structures. Through these classes, I

was able to understand that no one model can be used to achieve peace and stability, and that regional perspectives and cultural diversity must be taken into account in global governance. I also developed a stronger appreciation for the strategic challenges and agency of middle powers, especially as they navigate the tensions between great powers like the U.S. and China.

I now see global security as a dynamic, contested field influenced by conflicting interests, identities, and institutions rather than as a set framework. Additionally, my research skills and critical thinking ability have improved significantly. In the end, the ISS program has taught me that it is impossible to comprehend international security in isolation. It must be evaluated from several angles, across regions, and at various analytical levels. For me, security now means justice, equity, and dignity rather than just the absence of conflict. This shift in perspective has not only prepared me to engage more thoughtfully with global affairs but has also deepened my commitment to working toward a more inclusive and just international system.

My understanding of international security has been significantly shaped by the ISS program, which has helped me go beyond conventional frameworks and foster a more critical, inclusive, and intersectional point of view. Through a diverse set of courses, I've come to appreciate the complexity of global power dynamics, the importance of regional context, and the pressing need to address human-centered forms of insecurity. In addition to strengthening my analytical and critical thinking abilities, my academic experience has reinforced my passion to help create a world that is safer and more just.

