

Global Conflict Resolution

GLBL 296 | Deli Yang | deliy2@illinois.edu

Revised teaching sample based on the course taught
at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign in Spring 2026.

Course description

Why do governments struggle to settle disputes even when continued conflict is costly? Why do some diplomatic initiatives open the way to agreement, but others provoke suspicion or opposition? And what must happen after leaders reach an agreement for peace to last?

This course examines these questions through international rivalries and efforts to improve relations. We begin with obstacles to agreement: uncertainty about an opponent, doubts that promises will be kept, and resistance at home. We then compare three approaches—secret diplomacy, face-to-face summits, and political apologies—and consider how mediation and monitoring can help sustain an agreement. Cases include the U.S. opening to China, the U.S.–Singapore dispute over Michael Fay, and Britain’s relationship with Argentina after the Falklands/Malvinas War.

You will read political science research, negotiate in classroom simulations, and investigate a conflict of your choice. Each exercise asks you to make a decision under specific constraints, record the result, and compare your explanation with the readings. Our focus is diplomacy between governments; we will also ask whose interests an agreement leaves out and how its terms affect civilians.

Learning goals

By the end of the course, you should be able to:

- Distinguish ending violence, settling a dispute, and rebuilding a political relationship.
- Explain how uncertainty, domestic opposition, and doubts about future compliance can obstruct agreement.
- Compare diplomatic approaches by identifying what each can change and what it leaves unresolved.
- Use readings and case evidence to defend an argument and consider a competing explanation.
- Recommend a feasible response to a conflict and explain its risks and limits.

Preparation and course materials

No prior coursework in political science or international relations is required. There is no required textbook. Assigned articles, excerpts, and short case briefs will be available through the course site or library. Read only the pages specified in the schedule; other readings are optional. Plan for approximately four to five hours of reading, preparation, and writing outside class each week during this short course.

Most meetings combine a short explanation of the day’s problem, discussion of the reading, a structured exercise, and a debrief. Bring your reading notes. Office hours and appointments provide time to discuss a difficult reading, develop your project, or review feedback.

Assignments and assessment

Work	Weight	When
Preparation and activity notes	20%	Sessions 1–5 and 7
Reading responses	15%	Before sessions 2–5 and 7; best four
Paired project plan	10%	Two days after session 3
Project presentation and peer review	15%	Session 6
Individual final paper	35%	Nine days after session 7
Individual reflection on collaboration	5%	With the final paper

Preparation and activity notes

Come ready to discuss the reading and carry out your assigned role. Preparation and constructive contributions to group work count for 5% of the course grade. Listening carefully, asking a useful question, checking a claim, and helping a group record its decisions all count as contributions. Speaking frequently is not required.

At the end of sessions 1–5 and 7, submit a 100–150-word note identifying a decision your group made, explaining its result with a course idea, and considering another explanation. The best five of six notes count equally toward the remaining 15%. Notes are assessed for specific evidence and reasoning, not for reaching an agreement or winning a negotiation.

Reading responses

Submit 150–200 words by 6 p.m. the day before sessions 2–5 and 7. Identify one claim in the assigned reading, point to the evidence or reasoning supporting it, and pose a question about when it might not hold. Include a page reference. The best four responses count equally. A focused disagreement or a carefully explained uncertainty is more useful than a summary of the entire article.

Project presentation and peer review

In session 6, research pairs present their question, evidence, and preliminary recommendations in small panels. Submit up to five slides and individual speaker notes before class. Both partners must explain part of the analysis. The presentation materials and each student's explanation count for 10%; written feedback on another pair's project counts for 5%. Feedback should identify one convincing claim, one competing explanation, and one concrete improvement. Detailed workshop instructions appear in the schedule.

Individual reflection on collaboration

Submit 200–300 words describing your contribution to the shared research, a decision you made together, and a change to your final paper prompted by feedback. Identify any unresolved disagreement between the partners. This reflection is assessed for specificity and thoughtfulness; it is not a popularity rating of your partner.

Research project: explaining a conflict

Choose a bounded episode in an international conflict with a partner. A useful question identifies an outcome and a period: for example, why did a particular summit fail to produce an agreement, or why did a diplomatic statement receive different responses from two governments? “The history of U.S.–China relations” is too broad. Partners share source collection and case preparation, then write separate final papers with their own arguments.

Stage	Task
End of session 2	Submit a proposed case, period, and question. I will help narrow the scope.
Two days after session 3	Submit a joint plan of 500–600 words, plus references: question, short timeline, actors and interests, two possible explanations, and initial evidence.
End of session 5	Submit an individual paragraph stating your provisional argument and a short outline. Identify the strongest evidence against your explanation.
Session 6	Present the preliminary analysis, receive peer feedback, and identify revisions.
Nine days after session 7	Submit the individual final paper and collaboration reflection.

Plans receive feedback before session 4; individual outlines receive comments before session 6.

Final paper

Write 5–7 double-spaced pages, excluding references, in a readable 12-point font. Explain the dispute, identify the main obstacle to improvement, and assess at least two approaches studied in the course. Use evidence from the case to explain why one approach is more promising, why both are limited, or why their order is consequential. Specify what success would mean: reduced violence, an agreement, compliance, or a change in relations. These outcomes need not occur together.

Draw on at least three course readings and three sources specific to your case, including one scholarly source and one primary document, such as an agreement, speech, or official report. Explain what a source can establish and where it may be incomplete or self-serving. You need not collect original data. End with a recommendation that identifies who could act, what they could do, and the strongest objection to your proposal.

The paper will be assessed on its focused question and argument (25%), use of evidence (30%), comparison of approaches and consideration of objections (25%), and organization and citation (20%). A persuasive paper may conclude that no available strategy is likely to resolve the dispute.

Working together and course policies

Participation and access. One absence will not reduce the preparation grade. If you miss an activity, contact me for an equivalent written exercise. Analyst, observer, and written-response roles are available as alternatives to speaking in a simulation. Please discuss access needs early so we can arrange appropriate participation.

Deadlines and academic work. One 48-hour extension is available for a written assignment other than the final paper; notify me before the deadline. Contact me about other difficulties so we can agree on a workable plan. Cite sources and identify shared research. Final papers and reading responses must be written independently. Generative AI may assist with brainstorming or proofreading if disclosed; it may not supply your analysis, reading responses, or invented evidence. You remain responsible for every claim and citation.

Sessions 1–2 | Defining peace and explaining change

Complete readings before the session listed. Case briefs give the shared facts for each exercise. Simulations simplify historical choices; their outcomes are material for analysis, not evidence of what would necessarily have happened in the real case.

1 | What counts as peace?

Read: Johan Galtung, “Violence, Peace, and Peace Research,” *Journal of Peace Research* 6(3) (1969): 167–191; assigned pages 167–171. Instructor note on interests, uncertainty, and promises that may be difficult to keep (3 pages).

Opening problem: Two governments can both prefer a settlement to continued fighting yet still fail to agree. In pairs, list what each side would need to know before accepting an offer and what could make a promise difficult to trust. We distinguish disagreement over terms from uncertainty about intentions and doubts about future compliance.

Activity: has a conflict ended? Write a one-sentence definition of peace. Then examine a short timeline and selected public records on British–Argentine relations after the 1982 war. In groups, assess four separate questions: Has military violence stopped? Are diplomatic relations functioning? Has the territorial dispute been settled? What evidence describes public attitudes? Mark each conclusion as supported, uncertain, or unsupported by the supplied sources.

We also view a brief excerpt from Top Gear’s Patagonia Special. Identify what the edited footage shows and what additional evidence would be needed to make a claim about attitudes across either country. A television scene cannot establish what a whole population believes.

Debrief and output: Compare group assessments and revise your definition. Can the absence of fighting coexist with a continuing dispute? Can two governments cooperate without resolving public hostility? Your activity note should identify one judgment that changed and the evidence responsible.

Optional: Joshua S. Goldstein, “Think Again: War,” *Foreign Policy*, August 15, 2011. Treat its claims as an argument made at that time and ask what evidence would be needed to assess them today.

2 | Why do adversaries change course?

Read: Michaela Mattes and Jessica L. P. Weeks, “From Foes to Friends: The Causes of Interstate Rapprochement and Conciliation,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 27 (2024): 185–204; case brief on the 1972 U.S. opening to China, including excerpts from the Shanghai Communiqué.

Activity: defending a change in policy. Four groups represent Nixon and his advisers, U.S. conservative critics, Mao and Zhou Enlai, and skeptical Chinese party officials. Leadership groups draft a 120-word explanation of why the visit serves their country’s interests. Critics prepare two objections involving existing commitments, ideology, or past conflict. U.S. leaders answer public criticism; Chinese leaders answer an internal party discussion. These are different political constraints, not equivalent public debates.

After hearing the objections, leaders revise one part of their position and identify a concession they cannot defend. Each group records who can obstruct the policy and how. The roles simplify the case; the brief distinguishes documented positions from choices created for the exercise.

Debrief and output: Which objections could a leader address with an explanation, and which required a change in policy? Did a common strategic interest remove domestic opposition? Use the reading to explain one remaining obstacle. Submit your project topic after class.

Sessions 3–4 | How the setting changes negotiations

3 | What can secret diplomacy accomplish?

Read: Austin Carson and Keren Yarhi-Milo, “Covert Communication: The Intelligibility and Credibility of Signaling in Secret,” *Security Studies* 26(1) (2017): 124–156; assigned pages 124–141. Case brief on the 1994 U.S.–Singapore dispute over Michael Fay.

Opening distinction: A private conversation and a covert action are different ways to communicate. Identify who observes each and what could make the message believable. We will ask which parts of the reading’s argument apply to a confidential negotiation and which do not.

Activity: negotiating with and without an audience. Teams represent the two governments. Each receives the same public case history and a confidential role brief identifying priorities, authority, and non-negotiable limits. The agenda covers a request for clemency, language for public statements, and future diplomatic contact. The simulation does not give negotiators authority to rewrite the other country’s law.

After eight minutes of preparation, teams negotiate for twelve minutes in each of two rounds. Half begin with a public exchange recorded for the class; half begin privately. Teams then switch settings. The facts, available options, and role constraints remain the same. After each round, submit the exact proposed terms or identify the point of disagreement. Record one demand you made and one you chose not to make.

Debrief and output: Compare what teams were willing to offer publicly and privately. Who was absent from the private discussion, and what could happen when its terms became public? A better second result may reflect practice or information learned in the first round; it does not by itself demonstrate an effect of secrecy.

A short communication-chain exercise closes the session: pass a conditional diplomatic message orally, then compare the final version with the original. Identify any lost condition or altered deadline and propose a way to check the message before acting. This illustrates transmission errors, not deliberate deception.

4 | Can a summit overcome distrust?

Read: Marcus Holmes and Keren Yarhi-Milo, “The Psychological Logic of Peace Summits: How Empathy Shapes Outcomes of Diplomatic Negotiations,” *International Studies Quarterly* 61(1) (2017): 107–122.

Activity: Redland and Blueland. Two fictional governments must negotiate troop withdrawals, the reopening of a border crossing, and observation visits. Their role briefs assign different priorities and limits. Before talking, each team predicts the other side’s most important objective and states what information could change that judgment.

Teams negotiate for twelve minutes by written messages and twelve minutes face to face; half use the reverse order. No new crisis or concession is introduced between rounds. After each round, record proposed terms, unresolved issues, and your estimate of the other side’s priorities. At the end, compare those estimates with the priorities specified in the role briefs.

Debrief and output: Did contact help teams understand interests, or simply make them feel more confident? Did understanding the other side produce an acceptable agreement? Use the reading to assess a specific exchange. As in session 3, repeated practice limits what the comparison can establish. Confidence and a friendly manner are not proof of honesty.

Sessions 5–6 | Addressing the past and testing an argument

5 | Can an apology improve relations?

Read: Jennifer Lind, “Apologies in International Politics,” *Security Studies* 18(3) (2009): 517–556; assigned pages 517–532.

Opening question: What can an apology settle, and what can remain disputed afterward? Distinguish accepting responsibility, offering compensation, changing conduct, and asking for forgiveness. Consider objections within the country making the statement as well as reactions abroad.

Activity: the same statement, different relationships. In a fictional case, a government accepts that its border patrol wrongfully fired on a neighboring country’s civilian fishing boat. All groups receive the same facts about the incident and the same initial statement acknowledging responsibility. Half receive a history of recent cooperation, and half receive a history of unresolved disputes. Before discussing, each student records whether the statement changes their view of future conduct and what further action they would require.

Groups then divide into the government issuing the statement and the government receiving it. The sender prepares a revision of no more than 100 words and may choose one additional action: an independent investigation, compensation from a fixed fund, or a specified change in patrol procedures. The case brief states the limits and costs of each option. Recipients explain which part they accept, which demand remains, and whether they would support renewed talks. Agreement and forgiveness are not required outcomes.

Debrief and output: Compare responses to the identical initial statement before assessing the revisions. Did acknowledgment reduce disagreement or clarify a claim for further action? Did anyone support talks without believing future harm was less likely? Explain one response using Lind’s argument and identify something the simulation cannot establish.

Due: Your individual argument paragraph and outline. Bring one unresolved question about evidence to the next session.

6 | Research workshop: can the evidence support the argument?

Prepare: Your pair's five-slide presentation and individual speaker notes. Each panel receives the other pairs' project plans before class; there is no new assigned article.

Workshop: Pairs work in panels of two or three pairs. Each pair has eight minutes to explain the conflict, its main obstacle to improvement, and two possible diplomatic responses, followed by seven minutes of questions. Both partners speak. Identify one piece of evidence supporting your explanation and one that could challenge it. Other students ask about the evidence and the feasibility of the recommendation; I circulate to discuss unresolved problems.

After presentations, each student writes feedback on one other project: a convincing claim, a plausible alternative explanation, and a source or comparison that could help distinguish them. Partners then review the feedback together. Use the remaining time to revise your argument and consult with me. The shared research can support different conclusions in the two final papers.

Output: Submit the slides, speaker notes, and individual peer feedback. Before leaving, write two specific revisions you will make and identify any additional evidence you need. "Add more detail" is not a revision plan; specify the claim, missing information, and source you will consult.

Session 7 | Keeping an agreement

Read: Virginia Page Fortna, "Scraps of Paper? Agreements and the Durability of Peace," *International Organization* 57(2) (2003): 337–372; assigned pages 337–350. Revisit the claims and limits you identified in earlier readings.

Opening question: Why might an agreement fail even if both governments wanted it when they signed? Separate an intentional breach from an accident, an unauthorized action, and a disagreement about what the terms required. Ask what evidence would distinguish these possibilities.

Activity: responding to an alleged violation. Return to Redland and Blueland. All groups now receive the same fictional agreement, which provides for phased troop withdrawals and the reopening of a crossing but leaves the reporting of violations unclear. A patrol has crossed the agreed line. Reports establish its location but not whether the crossing was ordered. Each government fears that delaying its response could leave it vulnerable.

Groups include representatives of both governments, a third-party mediator, and a border-community representative. The mediator can convene talks and propose terms but cannot impose a settlement or supply troops. The community representative identifies consequences for civilian movement and trade. After ten minutes of preparation, groups have twenty minutes to draft a response and a procedure for handling future reports.

Required agreement: Write no more than 200 words specifying who checks the facts, what access they receive, how findings are reported, what each side does during the inquiry, and when the parties review compliance. Distinguish what a mediator can help parties agree on from what an observer can verify. Identify one remaining weakness; an agreement need not remove every risk.

Debrief: Would the procedure change the incentives to violate the agreement, reduce uncertainty, or both? What would make an observer's report credible? Could the agreement endure despite continued distrust? Consider whether the needs of border residents changed the terms governments initially preferred.

Closing comparison: Return to your session 1 definition of peace. Choose one course strategy and explain which obstacle it can address, when it might fail, and what another strategy would need to add. Your final activity note should use evidence from two sessions. Bring a final-paper question to the closing consultation.

Further reading

These works offer starting points for projects; none is an additional required textbook.

- Roger Fisher, William Ury, and Bruce Patton. *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In*. Third edition. Penguin, 2011. Negotiating interests, alternatives, and terms.
- Charles A. Kupchan. *How Enemies Become Friends: The Sources of Stable Peace*. Princeton University Press, 2010. Historical accounts of changes in relations between adversaries.
- Séverine Autesserre. *Peaceland: Conflict Resolution and the Everyday Politics of International Intervention*. Cambridge University Press, 2014. International intervention and local knowledge.
- Deli Yang and Paul F. Diehl. “Political Apologies in International Relations.” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, 2025. Research on the causes and consequences of political apologies.