

Developing a Teaching Case Study on Regional Security under Great-Power Competition: The Impact of China–US Rivalry on the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

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ABSTRACT

One of the pedagogical problems in teaching great-power competition in courses of international relations and area studies is the lack of teaching resources that focus on sub-state and semi-autonomous actors as they engage in such competition. Teaching case studies about great-power competition tend to emphasise state-level cases and a limited geographic focus, leaving the instructor little material with which to explore how sub-state and semi-autonomous actors perceive and adapt to such competition. This article seeks to solve this problem by constructing a full teaching case study, suitable for graduate and advanced undergraduate courses, built around the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) as a sub-state actor caught between forms of US and Chinese competition. The case is based on original research by the author conducted from 2014 to 2024, including a structured survey of 43 expert respondents and elite interviews, and is here reframed as a teaching tool, rather than a policy report. The article offers a four-part teaching syllabus, with learning objectives, multi-tiered discussion questions, a role-play game ("The KRG Strategic Council") and a combined assessment rubric. It teaches the concept of asymmetric hedging not as an iron-clad conclusion but rather as a teaching tool with which students can play and experiment. The article provides a contribution to the creation of teaching case libraries (jiaoxue anli ku) in international and area studies teaching and provides a lesson for how research can be repackaged for the classroom.

Keywords: case-based teaching; international relations pedagogy; teaching case library; modular instructional design; Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

INTRODUCTION

Competition between the US and the People's Republic of China (PRC) has reshaped the curriculum of international relations (IR) studies around the globe. International relations (IR), area studies, and security studies programs have adapted by offering new courses on great-power competition, geoeconomics and the international order. But the pedagogic resources available to teachers remain disproportionately focused on a handful of geographies and units of analysis: the South China Sea, the Taiwan Strait, semiconductor supply chains, alliance politics in Northeast Asia, and the Indo-Pacific architecture more generally. These cases represent critical theatres of competition, but they share a common trait - they are structured by interactions between sovereign great powers and their immediate state partners.

This focus creates a pedagogical blind spot. Students who are trained on state-level cases alone tend to develop what can be called a level-of-analysis bias: an analytical tendency that accords explanatory salience to interactions among great powers, while treating sub-state actors, semi-autonomous political units and contested political units as variables, not as units of analysis in their own right. This is not a political statement about international relations; it is an educational insight into the types of cases on which students are trained. For a well-rounded curriculum, cases should be pitched at a range of levels of analysis - and the sub-state stock is limited.

This article addresses this need by offering a teaching case study built on a single sub-state actor - the KRI - to explore how international great-power relations are mediated through sub-state institutional processes. The case is based on archival research undertaken by the author between February-March 2026, including a structured

survey of 43 expert respondents from the academic, political and military milieu of the Kurdistan Region, two attributed elite interviews with senior officials, and a document analysis. The empirical evidence supports the development of an analytical concept - asymmetric hedging - which the article claims as a teachable tool that students learn to apply, test and critique. The article is not intended to present a thesis about current international affairs, but rather to show how empirical research can be used to produce a pedagogical resource.

The article sits at the cross-roads of two contributions, and it is important to clarify their relationship. The first is pedagogical: the article converts an empirical research project into a full teaching resource - narrative, theoretical framework, evidence, pedagogic design and evaluation. The second contribution is conceptual: the concept of asymmetric hedging is framed as a pedagogical tool to support the first. When considered together, the article offers four intertwined contributions. It provides a full teaching case that can be adopted for IR, area studies, or Middle East security classes; it outlines a four-week modular teaching plan that includes stated learning outcomes and multi-level discussion questions, a role-play exercise and an embedded assessment strategy; it treats the concept of asymmetric hedging as an instrument that can be taught rather than a teachable conclusion; and it reflects on how cases organised around sub-state actors can be used to supplement state-centred cases in graduate and senior undergraduate courses.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 contextualises the case in the literatures on case-based and IR teaching, identifies the three anchor theories the case is designed to teach (realism, hedging, securitization), and extends the theoretical foundations with recent scholarship on sub-state diplomacy, strategic autonomy, and hybrid sovereignty. Section 3 sets out the research methodology and presents the case, including the regional powers (Turkey, Iran, Russia) and non-state actors that shape the strategic environment beyond the US–China binary. Section 4 explores the pedagogic design, including a phased plan for classroom implementation and evaluation. Section 5 discusses limitations and the adaptability of the model to other semi-autonomous contexts. Section 6 concludes.

Theoretical Foundations: Case-Based Teaching in IR and Area Studies

The Case Method: From Harvard to Chinese Pedagogy

The case method has a long history, beginning at the Harvard Business School in the early 1900's, then moving into law, medicine, public policy, and finally (more slowly) international relations (Golich, 2000; Lantis, Kuzma, & Boehrer, 2000). The method is premised on the notion that learning sticks when students are confronted with ill-structured problems drawn from the world and need to synthesise facts, concepts and judgement - under conditions of uncertainty. Rather than the synthesis being presented by the instructor, students "kitbash" a synthesis for themselves. This approach has been institutionalised in Chinese tertiary education in the creation of teaching case libraries (jiaoxue anli ku, 教学案例库), especially under the Ministry of Education's drive to build applied analytical skills in postgraduate education.

The design in this article is informed by two threads of pedagogic theory. First, constructive alignment (Biggs, 1996), which contends learning outcomes, teaching and assessment tasks should be designed as an integrated system that enhances the learning outcomes. The module outlined in Section 4 exemplifies this: the four sessions are designed to have cognitive aims, the activities that students undertake in each session are aligned to those aims, and the assessment tasks demand students to demonstrate the competencies that the activities seek to engender. The second is Bloom's revised taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001), which offers a language for ordering the cognitive demand from remembering and understanding to applying and analysing to evaluating and creating. The discussion questions in Section 4.4 are tiered in accordance with the taxonomy: the descriptive tier focuses on remembering and understanding, the analytical tier on applying and analysing, and the critical tier on evaluating and creating.

The case method is particularly useful for IR and area studies for three reasons. First, it provides discipline to abstract theoretical discourse by requiring it to make interpretive work on empirical material. Second, it develops the comparative mind by teaching students which elements of a case are general and which are specific. Third, it exemplifies the analytical stance of the practitioner - the policy advisor, diplomat or analyst - who must make decisions in the absence of complete information and amid contested theoretical advice.

Pedagogical Challenges of Teaching Great-Power Competition

There are special challenges in teaching great-power competition. The phenomenon is multi-dimensional, involving military, economic, technological and ideological dimensions, and it has no temporal limits. Students often tend to reduce the phenomenon into simpler categories. The first views the competition as a chess-like game between China and the US, in which others merely align. The second turns it into a pre-fated clash (a "Thucydides trap") the outcome of which is largely outside the control of the parties involved. Both of these approaches flatten variation and hide the work students need to do.

A carefully crafted case can redress each problem. By highlighting a third actor whose strategic context is shaped by, but not entirely determined by, great-power preferences, the case engages students in the analysis of variation in the translation of external pressure into domestic outcomes. Through its documentation of specific actions at specific times - for example, the KRG's reaction to the ISIS invasion of 2014, or its handling of the 2017 independence referendum - the case highlights that contingency and choice exist even in constrained settings.

Three additional pedagogical challenges should be noted. First, students have preconceived ideas about a course on great-power competition - they support one great power, or they are hostile to the other, or they think the rivalry is exaggerated. A case that asks students to take the viewpoint of a third actor unsettles these commitments, without requiring them to abandon them. Second, great-power competition is occurring across multiple domains (military, economic, technological, ideological) and any teaching case must prepare students to focus on the multiple domains without conflating them. The KRI case, with its distinct US security domain and Chinese economic domain, is amenable to such multi-domain treatment. Third, the competition is occurring in real time, so any case study will be partly out-of-date by the time it is released. Cases organised around structural features (such as security non-substitutability) outlast cases organised around events, which is because the structural features tend not to change even as events do.

The Sub-State Pedagogical Gap

The current teaching resources on great-power competition demonstrate a clear focus on state-level cases from the Indo-Pacific. This is a reflection of the salience of those cases, and not necessarily a problem. The teaching and learning problem is only at the curriculum level: if the entire course is built on state-level cases, the students will have no basis for analysing the gamut of sub-state, semi-autonomous and contested political entities that also play in the field of great-power competition. A case built around such an actor - pitched at the actor's level of strategic decision-making - does not replace state cases but rather supplements them, enabling teachers to build out their course syllabi along level-of-analysis lines.

Sub-state cases pose distinctive teaching opportunities. The actor in question is likely to have a high degree of policy autonomy in some areas, and lower status in others, so the simplifying premise of "unitary" statehood does not apply. Rather, they must specify what institutional resources the actor does and does not possess, and how these institutional endowments affect the range of strategies at the actor's disposition. The more disaggregated nature of the analysis is an important teaching point, which can be applied to many cases.

Theoretical Anchors

The case is designed to teach three theories and how they interact. Realist theory, especially the structural version (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2001), provides the lexical items of anarchy, self-help, and constraint. Hedging theory (Kuik, 2016; Goh, 2005) supplies the vocabulary of ambiguity, diversification, and risk management, as alternatives to balancing or bandwagoning. Securitization theory (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998) provides the language of threat framing, audience acceptance and the politics of securitization.

None of these theories alone is sufficient. Realism captures the structural constraints faced by the KRG but not the way officials "make the case" that US dependency is existential rather than privileged. Hedging theory captures the KRG's double engagement but in its canonical form implies substitutability of security providers - a proposition at odds with the KRG case. Securitization theory captures the rhetorical or discursive construction

of threat, but by itself can be blind to material constraints. The teaching point is the tension between the three theories and the case is crafted to facilitate that tension.

Sub-state Diplomacy, Strategic Autonomy, and Hybrid Sovereignty

The case is also enriched by three further bodies of theory that have gained traction in international relations scholarship over the past decade and that complement the three anchor theories outlined above. Engaging these bodies of literature addresses a recurring limitation of state-centric pedagogy: students trained exclusively on great-power and state-level cases often lack the conceptual vocabulary required to analyse sub-state and semi-autonomous actors as units of analysis in their own right.

The first is the literature on sub-state diplomacy, often termed paradiplomacy, which examines how non-sovereign territorial entities — federated states, regions, and autonomous areas — conduct international relations alongside the central state (Aldecoa & Keating, 1999; Kuznetsov, 2015; Tavares, 2016). This scholarship is particularly useful for analysing the KRG’s bilateral channels with Washington and its representational offices abroad, because it offers vocabulary for studying foreign policy activity that occurs below, but is rarely independent of, the sovereign state. For teaching purposes, the paradiplomacy literature helps students recognise that the KRG is not conducting foreign policy in the same sense that Iraq is, yet is not absent from the international arena either.

The second is the literature on strategic autonomy, which has expanded considerably with debates on European, Indian, and Southeast Asian foreign policy in the era of US–China rivalry (Acharya, 2020; Meijer & Brooks, 2021). Strategic autonomy is generally framed as the capacity of a political unit to formulate and pursue foreign and security policies without being structurally beholden to any single external power. For a sub-state actor such as the KRI, the concept must be applied with care: the KRG’s autonomy is partial, conditional, and asymmetrically distributed across functional domains. Introducing the concept invites students to ask not whether the KRG has “autonomy” but in which domains, against which constraints, and at what cost.

The third is the literature on hybrid sovereignty and contested statehood (Caspersen, 2012; Krasner & Risse, 2014), which provides analytical tools for political units that combine elements of statehood — territory, population, institutions, partial international recognition — with formal subordination to a parent state. Hybrid sovereignty captures the institutional reality of the KRI more precisely than either “state” or “non-state” framings. It also opens a comparative horizon to Taiwan, Kosovo, Somaliland, the Palestinian Authority, and the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, each of which presents a distinct configuration of recognition and capacity.

Together, these three literatures address the teaching risk identified in Section 2.3: that students trained on state-centric cases may lack the conceptual vocabulary to analyse sub-state actors at all. By embedding the case in this wider theoretical conversation, the module equips students with a portable analytical toolkit rather than a single concept tied to a single case.

The Teaching Case: China–US Competition and Kurdistan Regional Security, 2014–2024

Research Design and Methodology

Because the teaching case rests on original empirical research, this section sets out the methodology that produced the evidence presented in Sections 3.2 through 3.7. Three considerations guided the research design: first, the small and politically sensitive population of qualified experts on KRI external relations, which constrained sampling options; second, the need for triangulation across data types, since neither survey nor interview material alone could capture the multi-domain dynamics of US and Chinese engagement; and third, the obligation to allow students who later work with the case to assess the strength of the inferences drawn from it.

Data Collection. Three streams of evidence were generated between 2014 and 2026: a structured expert survey, two attributed elite interviews, and a documentary corpus. The survey was administered between February and

March 2026 to forty-three respondents drawn from three professional milieus in the Kurdistan Region: senior and mid-level KRG officials ($n = 16$), Peshmerga and intelligence officers ($n = 14$), and academic specialists in international relations and Middle East security based at Salahaddin University, the University of Sulaimani, and the University of Kurdistan-Hewlêr ($n = 13$). Respondents were selected through purposive sampling combined with snowball referral: an initial list of candidates was assembled from publicly identifiable expertise (academic publication, official position, or recognised commentary), and each respondent was invited to nominate one further expert known for substantive engagement with US or Chinese policy toward the region.

Sampling Strategy and Inclusion Criteria. To be included in the sample, respondents had to satisfy at least two of three criteria: (a) at least seven years of professional engagement with foreign policy, defence, or international economic affairs in the KRI; (b) demonstrable familiarity with both US and Chinese engagement with the region; and (c) willingness to participate in the aggregate, statistical reporting of responses (individual responses remained confidential). The final response rate from the invited pool was 76 percent.

Survey instrument. The structured questionnaire consisted of twenty-three items grouped in four thematic blocks: (1) assessment of US security cooperation during the ISIS crisis and after; (2) assessment of Chinese economic engagement, including the Belt and Road Initiative; (3) substitutability and diversification of external partners across functional domains; and (4) institutional and political constraints on KRG foreign policy. Most items used a five-point Likert scale; six open-ended items invited brief qualitative comment.

Elite Interviews. Two attributed elite interviews were conducted in March 2026: with Dr. Mohammed Sabir Ismail (former Director-General, KRG Department of Foreign Relations; former Iraqi Ambassador to China, 2004–2010) and with Liwa Ayoub Yousif Ahmed (senior Peshmerga commander). Interviews were semi-structured around an eight-question protocol covering security cooperation, economic engagement, multi-domain trade-offs, and perceptions of regional power influence. Both respondents provided written informed consent for attribution. Interviews were conducted in Sorani Kurdish, recorded with permission, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English by the lead author; translations were verified against the original audio for analytically sensitive passages.

Documentary Corpus. The documentary corpus included KRG official statements (2014–2024), US Department of State and Department of Defense communications referencing the KRG, Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Commerce releases, Iraqi federal government statements relating to Erbil, and reporting in Arabic-, Kurdish-, English-, and Chinese-language sources. This corpus served both as a triangulation check on survey and interview findings and as a source of evidence for the chronology presented in Sections 3.6 and 3.7.

Analytical Procedure. Quantitative survey data were analysed using descriptive statistics; cross-tabulations were used to identify divergences across the three professional milieus. Qualitative material — open-ended survey responses, interview transcripts, and documents — was coded thematically using an initial deductive frame derived from the three anchor theories (realism, hedging, securitization) and then refined inductively. The first cycle of coding produced eleven thematic codes, which were collapsed in a second cycle into four umbrella themes: structural non-substitutability of security goods; economic complementarity; institutional fragmentation of KRG decision-making; and discursive construction of dependency. These themes structure the presentation in the substantive subsections that follow.

Bias and Limitations. Three limitations should be made explicit for both reader and student users of the case. First, the sample is drawn from inside the KRI and therefore over-represents perspectives sympathetic to KRG strategic priorities; the case would benefit from complementary fieldwork in Baghdad, Washington, and Beijing, which the author plans to undertake in future work. Second, the lead researcher is a Kurdish national working on a region with which she has direct personal and professional familiarity, which carries both an interpretive advantage (linguistic access, contextual familiarity) and a risk of confirmation bias; two-cycle coding, supervisor-led memo review, and a deliberately heterogeneous documentary corpus were measures taken to mitigate this risk. Third, the elite interview sample is small ($n = 2$) by design, since the article relies on attribution rather than anonymous saturation; readers should treat interview material as illustrative rather than statistically representative.

Pedagogical use of the Methodology. The methodology is itself a teaching resource. Section 4.2 includes a methodological learning objective, and the policy-memo assessment in Section 4.6 requires students to engage with at least one body of evidence and to comment on its strengths and limits. Instructors are encouraged to share the survey instrument and the interview protocol (available from the corresponding author) with advanced students as templates for their own work.

Setting the Scene: The KRI as Sub-State Actor

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) is a constitutionally autonomous sub-state of Iraq's federal government. The KRI is currently constituted by the no-fly zone of 1991 and the Iraqi Constitution of 2005, and has its own parliament and executive as well as a military (the Peshmerga), but is formally part of Iraq's federation. It is highly autonomous in areas like natural resources development, security and foreign economic policy, and straddles vital regional energy corridors. These factors make the KRI an appealing case for teaching: it is small enough that students can comprehend the relevant institutions in one class; complicated enough that a mere variable will not explain it; and consequential enough that students understand the stakes.

The U.S. Dimension: Security Cooperation

In the survey, 92.5 percent of forty military and political respondents rated US military support during the ISIS crisis as decisive or very important to the KRI's survival. The qualitative interview evidence confirms this point: high-level officials with long experience in foreign service characterised the security goods provided by the United States as not readily substitutable by other external actors in the region (Ismail, personal interview, March 2026). For teaching purposes, the key analytical insight is when security assistance is and is not readily substitutable - a question that students can apply to other cases. The security goods in question are specific (precision weapons, encrypted intelligence traffic), embedded (multi-year training regimens), and integrated (with ongoing operational practices), all in ways to make them hard to substitute quickly.

The Chinese Dimension: Economic Engagement

China's relationship with the KRI is well-documented and follows a different logic, in line with its policy of non-interference, and engaging as a sovereign state. In practice, China is a major source of imports of Iraqi oil, has grown its commercial investments in the KRI, particularly in oil fields, telecommunications and trade, and established a consulate in Erbil in 2015. Iraq became a member of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2019, and trade has grown significantly over the past 20 years.

In line with the non-interference principle, China's engagement has mainly occurred in the economic sphere, with security-related dealings conducted through the federal government in Baghdad rather than the KRG. The senior Peshmerga officers interviewed for the present research confirmed that there was no direct security assistance from China to KRI security forces during the period in question (Liwa Ayoub, personal interview, March 2026). The teaching point here is that the two great powers function in different functional domains, catering to different aspects of the KRI's foreign relations.

Asymmetric Dual Engagement

The two registers of engagement are not substitutes, but complements. The US provides security goods that China is not able to; China provides engagement goods of a scale and duration not seen in the security realm. This is a case of asymmetric double engagement: a situation in which the KRI is surrounded by both great powers in its external environment, in different functional domains.

This produces a strategic environment that is distinct from those that have been the subject of hedging analyses. In the "typical" hedging case - for example, ASEAN states' relations with Beijing and Washington - alignment can be partially disassembled and bartered across multiple potential providers. In the KRI case, the security domain provides little diversification opportunity, while the economic domain does. The KRG's strategic environment can thus be described as one of asymmetric hedging: the KRG can engage with multiple partners on economic matters, but the structure of the security domain is different. For teaching purposes, this is a

generative approach because it raises the question of when we expect hedging strategies to operate symmetrically across functional domains and when they do not - a question that has implications beyond the KRI case.

Critical Moment: The 2014 ISIS Crisis as a Diagnostic Event

The 2014 ISIS offensive in this case functions as a diagnostic event - a moment in time that provides students with an opportunity to observe the response of each external partner in a period of intense regional threat. For the US, this took the form of direct support for the coalition operation, intelligence sharing, and the initiation of training programs that had a profound impact on the Peshmerga's capability in the years since. China's response, in turn, was consistent with its non-interference doctrine: humanitarian aid, support for relevant UN Security Council resolutions, continuing economic ties, and intelligence sharing (with the federal government in Baghdad, rather than with the KRI).

From a pedagogical standpoint, the 2014 moment is invaluable because it is tangible, dated and rich. It provides an opportunity for students to compare responses to a given regional crisis by external partners with different policy doctrines, and to speculate which aspects of these responses are likely to repeat themselves and which are specific to the circumstances of the moment.

Summary Table: The Asymmetric Engagement Structure

Table 1. Comparison of US and Chinese engagement with the KRI, 2014–2024.

Dimension	United States	China
Primary mode	Security primacy	Economic engagement
Key instruments	Air power; intelligence; training (KTCC); financial stabilisation; diplomatic mediation	Oil purchases; energy investment; telecoms infrastructure (Huawei/ZTE); BRI projects
Sub-state engagement	Direct, including bilateral KRG channels	Mediated through Baghdad in line with non-interference doctrine
Response to 2014 crisis	Direct military intervention; transformative	Humanitarian and diplomatic only; no direct security role
Diplomatic engagement	Direct bilateral channels with KRG; political mediation roles	Engagement primarily through Baghdad; consular presence in Erbil since 2015
Substitutability	Low: security goods structurally non-substitutable	Moderate: economic engagement diversifiable across partners

Source: Author's primary research, 2026.

Regional Powers Beyond the US–China Binary: Turkey, Iran, Russia, and Non-State Actors

While the case foregrounds US and Chinese engagement, the strategic environment of the KRI is shaped by at least four other actors whose presence students must learn to integrate into their analysis. A teaching case that omitted them would risk reproducing the binary framing the article seeks to complicate.

Turkey. Turkey is the KRI's principal commercial partner and the chief transit corridor for Kurdish oil exports through the Kirkuk–Ceyhan pipeline. Ankara also maintains a military presence in northern Iraq directed at PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) positions, which periodically generates tension with both the KRG and Baghdad. Survey respondents in this study consistently rated Turkey as the most consequential regional actor for KRI economic security, ahead of Iran. For teaching purposes, Turkey illustrates a regional power whose presence

produces both opportunity (export market, transit infrastructure) and constraint (cross-border operations, conditional access).

Iran. Iran's influence operates primarily through political channels in Baghdad and through cross-border engagement with the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and other actors in Sulaimaniyah. Iranian influence on Iraqi federal politics affects the budgetary, hydrocarbon, and security disputes that shape Erbil–Baghdad relations, and Iranian-aligned components of the Popular Mobilization Forces (al-Hashd al-Shaabi) have at times been deployed in or adjacent to disputed territories. In the survey, sixty-four percent of respondents identified Iran as exerting “significant” or “decisive” influence on the operating environment of the KRG, second only to the United States in the security domain.

Russia. Russia entered the KRI's economic landscape decisively in 2017, when Rosneft committed approximately US\$2.1 billion to Kurdish oil infrastructure and pipeline financing. Russian engagement is concentrated in the hydrocarbon sector and is largely insulated from the broader US–China rivalry. Pedagogically, Russia is a useful third reference point because it demonstrates that the KRI's economic diversification options extend beyond Beijing, while also raising questions about the political costs of partner diversification when those partners are themselves at odds with Washington.

Non-State Armed Actors. The case would be incomplete without reference to non-state armed actors, principally ISIS (whose 2014 offensive is treated as a diagnostic event in Section 3.6) and the PKK and its affiliates in Iraqi territory. Both forms of non-state armed presence shape KRG threat perception and the calculus of external security partnership; the persistent presence of PKK-aligned forces in the Qandil mountains, in particular, complicates the KRG's relationship with Turkey and indirectly affects the political space available for US security cooperation.

Implication for Asymmetric Hedging. Incorporating these actors does not unseat the article's central argument; it specifies it. Asymmetric hedging, as developed here, describes the structural relationship between US and Chinese engagement with the KRI. The presence of Turkey, Iran, Russia, and non-state armed actors operates at a different level: they populate the regional security environment within which the asymmetric structure operates. For students, the analytical exercise is to distinguish the asymmetric great-power structure from the dense regional fabric in which it is embedded, and to identify how the latter constrains the KRG's ability to exploit the former. The role-play simulation in Section 4.5 is designed to surface precisely this distinction.

Pedagogical Design: A Modular Teaching Plan

Here the case study detailed in Section 3 is translated into a four-session teaching module (eight contact hours), which can be incorporated into graduate or advanced undergraduate courses in international relations, area studies, security studies or Middle East politics. The module can be used as a stand-alone module or part of a longer course on great-power competition or sub-state foreign policy.

Asymmetric Hedging as a Teachable Concept

Before we move to learning objectives and a module plan, let us briefly consider the pedagogic nature of asymmetric hedging. In the original research project, asymmetric hedging was an analytical concept that was used to explain the KRG's policy behaviour, which is at odds with conventional models of hedging in the literature. In this article, however, the concept is put to a different use: it is a teachable tool, which students learn how to use, rather than a completed theory, which students learn to recite.

This is important for designing modules. A case that merely communicates the finality of asymmetric hedging would encourage students to memorise the term. A case that presents the concept as an open proposition invites students to experiment with it: to explore when it applies, when it doesn't and what other cases it might explain beyond the KRI. The proposed teaching innovation is thus not the concept, but its transformation into a tool for research. The four sessions invite students to (i) identify the structural conditions that give rise to asymmetric hedging, (ii) apply it to the KRI case, (iii) test its portability in the role-play simulation and comparative discussion, and (iv) critique its limitations in the essay. At the end of the module, students should not only be

able to define asymmetric hedging but also identify potential cases to which it might apply and state the evidence that would prove it true or false.

Learning Objectives

Upon completion of the module, students should be able to:

1. Cognitive: describe the institutional architecture of the KRI, the principal forms of US and Chinese engagement with the region, and the major events of the 2014–2024 period.
2. Analytical: apply realist, hedging, and securitization frameworks to a sub-state case, and identify points of friction among them.
3. Methodological: distinguish among different types of evidence survey data, elite interviews, documentary records and assess how each contributes to a multi-method analysis.
4. Critical: recognise the limits of state-centric framings of great-power competition and articulate the concept of asymmetric hedging in their own words.
5. Normative: deliberate about the strategic and ethical trade-offs facing a sub-state actor caught between competing great powers.

Module Structure

Table 2. Four-session modular teaching plan.

Session	Theme	Learning activities	Required readings
1 (2h)	Setting the scene: the KRI and the global field	Lecture; case briefing; small-group discussion of pre-readings; mapping exercise	Stansfield (2013); KRG (2023) overview; Section 3 of this article
2 (2h)	Theoretical scaffolding	Structured discussion of realism, hedging, securitization; framework comparison worksheet	Waltz (1979) ch.5–6; Kuik (2016); Buzan et al. (1998) ch.2
3 (2h)	Role-play simulation	KRG Strategic Council simulation (see 4.4); debrief	Role briefs; selected primary documents; She (2021)
4 (2h)	Synthesis and critique	Plenary discussion of asymmetric hedging; comparative outlook (Taiwan, Catalonia, Scotland); assessment briefing	Romano (2021); d'Hooghe et al. (2023); instructor-selected comparative reading

Tiered Discussion Questions

Discussion questions are organised in three tiers of increasing analytical demand. Instructors may select among them according to time available and student preparation.

Tier 1: Descriptive

- Map the principal forms of US engagement with the KRI between 2014 and 2024. Which are most consequential for KRI security?

- Map the principal forms of Chinese engagement with the KRI in the same period. Which sectors dominate?
- In what ways does the KRI's status within the Iraqi federal state differ from full sovereignty? Which differences matter most for the case?

Tier 2: Analytical

- Why is US security cooperation described in this case as 'structurally non-substitutable'? What features of the security goods supplied by the United States justify this characterisation?
- How does asymmetric hedging differ from the hedging strategies described by Kuik (2016) for ASEAN states? Is the difference one of degree or of kind?
- Apply securitization theory to the KRG's framing of US security cooperation. Who is the securitizing actor, what is the referent object, and who is the relevant audience?

Tier 3: Critical and Comparative

- Could the KRG, in principle, develop credible security cooperation with a non-US partner over a ten-year horizon? What conditions would have to be met?
- Compare the KRI case with one other sub-state or semi-autonomous actor (e.g. Taiwan, Catalonia, Scotland, the Kurdish Regional Administration in north-eastern Syria). Where does asymmetric hedging travel, and where does it break down?
- If you were advising the KRG on how to manage the technology dependency dilemma posed by Chinese telecommunications infrastructure, what would you recommend, and why?

Role-Play Simulation: The KRG Strategic Council

The simulation places students in a fictional but plausible meeting of the KRG Strategic Council, convened in late 2024 to formulate a five-year strategy for managing relations with the United States and China. The simulation is structured for a class of 12–25 students, runs for 90–110 minutes, and is followed by a 30-minute structured debrief.

Scenario

The Council is meeting against a backdrop of three converging pressures: (a) growing US strategic attention to the Indo-Pacific and persistent rumours of a reduction in US troop presence in Iraq; (b) a Chinese proposal to formally integrate the KRI into a regional BRI infrastructure corridor, including a US\$3 billion package for telecommunications, transport, and renewable energy; and (c) renewed Erbil–Baghdad tensions over hydrocarbon revenues. The Prime Minister has asked the Council to deliver, by the end of the session, a one-page strategic directive.

Roles (assigned by instructor)

- Prime Minister (chair): manages the discussion and is responsible for the final directive.
- Minister of Natural Resources: prioritises hydrocarbon revenues and energy partnerships.
- Minister of Interior / Peshmerga Affairs: prioritises continuity of US security cooperation and intelligence-sharing.
- Minister of Trade and Industry: prioritises Chinese investment and economic diversification.
- Minister of Foreign Relations: balances diplomatic exposure and federal constraints from Baghdad.

- Senior Adviser on US Affairs: briefs on US expectations and red lines.
- Senior Adviser on China Affairs: briefs on Chinese expectations and the BRI proposal.
- Adviser on Federal Relations: tracks Baghdad's likely response to any decision.
- Civil Society Observers (1–2): introduce considerations of public legitimacy, displaced populations, and minority communities.
- Note-takers / Analysts: observe deliberation and report on dynamics during the debrief.

Procedure

1. Pre-class (60 minutes of preparation): each student reads their role brief and the relevant case material.
2. Opening (10 min): the Prime Minister convenes the Council; advisers present situation briefings.
3. Deliberation (60 min): the Council debates options. Note-takers observe but do not intervene.
4. Drafting (15 min): the Council agrees on a one-page directive.
5. Plenary debrief (30 min): note-takers report; the instructor leads reflection on which theoretical framework best illuminates the deliberation observed.

Pedagogical Aims

The simulation is designed to surface the tensions inherent in asymmetric hedging — particularly the trade-off between commercial rationality (Chinese telecoms) and intelligence security (US sharing). It also exposes students to the institutional fragmentation of KRG decision-making, an aspect of the case that purely structural analysis tends to flatten.

Notes for Instructors

Three preparation choices materially affect simulation quality. First, role briefs should be calibrated to ensure that no single role can dictate the outcome; in particular, the Minister of Interior and the Minister of Trade and Industry should both have credible institutional standing so that the security–economy trade-off is genuinely contested. Second, the instructor should resist the temptation to intervene during deliberation; the most pedagogically valuable moments often occur when students discover, on their own, that their role's preferred option is structurally infeasible. Third, the debrief should be tightly disciplined around the analytical frameworks — students will naturally drift toward narrative recap, and the instructor's task is to pull them back to the question of which framework best illuminates what they observed.

Assessment Design

Assessment for the module is organised in three components, designed to evaluate the full range of learning objectives:

1. Policy memo (40%): a 1,500-word memo to the KRG Prime Minister recommending a position on the Chinese BRI integration proposal. The memo must apply at least one of the three theoretical frameworks and engage explicitly with the concept of asymmetric hedging.
2. Simulation reflection (20%): an 800-word reflective essay on the role-play, identifying one decision the student would revise in retrospect and explaining why.
3. Analytical essay (40%): a 2,500-word essay on a comparative question for instance, "Does asymmetric hedging travel? Compare the KRI case with one other sub-state actor."

The assessment scheme is deliberately tilted toward applied judgement rather than pure recall. Students are expected to mobilise concrete evidence from the case material in support of their arguments. Following constructive alignment, each assessment task is mapped to one or more of the learning objectives stated in Section 4.2: the policy memo targets the analytical and methodological objectives; the simulation reflection targets the critical and normative objectives; and the analytical essay integrates all five. Rubrics provided to students should specify the weighting of evidence, framework application, and originality of argument.

Facilitation Strategies and Common Difficulties

There are three common facilitation issues in classroom delivery of this case, with corresponding facilitation strategies. First, discussion can be consumed with descriptive recap of events rather than analysis framed by models. This can be addressed by regularly referring to a designated framework prompt (e.g. "How would Kuik (2016) categorise what we just discussed?") and explicitly time-boxing recap of events so the majority of time is left for analysis.

The second is variable student preparation. The case is rich in empirical detail so unprepared students struggle to contribute. A brief, low-stakes, pre-class reading quiz (5-10 minutes) indicates preparation is required and provides feedback for the instructor on what has been understood. Third, there's a problem of dissent. The case involves issues - sovereignty, disputed territory, regional security - that students may have a strong preconceived opinion about. It is important to ensure norms of discussion are set at the beginning of the module that separate the claim being analysed by the student from their own personal opinion, so as to keep discussion on track.

Reading List and Supplementary Materials

The compulsory readings in Table 2 are only a core. Teachers should add to this list materials tailored to their region's language skills and student needs. For courses in Chinese-medium programs, primary-source readings can be sourced from Chinese language research on great-power rivalry and area studies, such as She (2021) and Tang and Zhang (2019). For English-medium courses, the general literature on hedging theory and Middle East can be used. Additional resources can include short documentary footage, think-tank policy briefs and a selection of primary documents (UN resolutions, statements) for students to examine in class as part of practice in evidentiary analysis.

Classroom Implementation and Planned Evaluation

A reasonable concern raised by reviewers of teaching case studies is that pedagogical claims should be supported by classroom evidence rather than design rationale alone. The module has not yet been deployed in a sustained classroom trial, and this article therefore presents the design as a structured proposal rather than as an evaluated curriculum. The author is, however, planning a phased implementation and evaluation cycle, which is outlined here for transparency and to assist instructors who wish to adopt the module with built-in feedback mechanisms.

Phase 1: Pilot workshop (2026–2027). A condensed pilot is planned for graduate students at China Three Gorges University (School of Foreign Languages) in the 2026–2027 academic year, delivered in two consecutive three-hour sessions in a Chinese-medium course on great-power competition. The pilot will use the case briefing, a shortened version of the role-play simulation, and the policy-memo assignment. Three instruments will be used to capture learning outcomes: (a) a pre/post conceptual mapping exercise in which students are asked to map the KRI's strategic environment before and after the module; (b) a short structured questionnaire on the role-play (clarity of role briefs, perceived realism, perceived analytical demand); and (c) a rubric-based assessment of the policy memos against the learning objectives stated in Section 4.2.

Phase 2: Comparative replication (2027–2028). A comparative replication is planned at a second institutional setting, most likely an English-medium IR program in the region, to test how the module performs with students whose prior exposure to Middle Eastern politics differs. The same instruments will be used to enable cross-cohort comparison.

Phase 3: Refinement and public dissemination. Findings from Phases 1 and 2 will inform a revised version of the case, role briefs, and assessment rubrics. The revised materials, together with student-facing primary documents, will be made available through the open-access teaching case library of the China Three Gorges University School of Foreign Languages, with the aim of contributing to the wider jiaoxue anli ku initiative.

Interim indicators for adopting instructors. While awaiting these data, three interim indicators may be of use to instructors evaluating their own adoption of the module. First, the proportion of student policy memos that explicitly apply at least one of the three anchor theories (realism, hedging, securitization) provides an indicator of theoretical uptake. Second, the proportion of memos that distinguish security from economic substitutability provides an indicator of conceptual transfer, i.e., uptake of the asymmetric-hedging insight. Third, the diversity of comparative referents in the analytical essay (Section 4.6) provides an indicator of conceptual portability. Instructors are encouraged to share their experience and student products with the author for inclusion in future revisions.

Honesty about evidence. Until the pilot data are available, claims about the module's pedagogical effectiveness should be read as design-warranted rather than outcome-warranted. The article's contribution at this stage is the production of a research-grounded, theoretically anchored, structurally explicit teaching resource. The evaluation evidence will follow.

Reflections, Limitations, and Adaptability

Pedagogical Affordances of the Case

The case provides some pedagogical affordances to supplement the cases typically studied in great-power competition courses. First, it operationalises structural asymmetry. When students work with sovereign small-state cases they usually see hedging as a pretty symmetrical game across functional domains. The KRI case challenges them to consider the potential for hedging to operate differently when one functional domain is characterised by low substitutability across providers, and to think through their reasoning. Second, it highlights the confluence of status and capacity. Since China deals primarily with the KRI through the recognised federal government, students must consider how the politics of recognition constrains the opportunities open to a sub-state actor. Third, it offers a concrete referent for discussion of the technological element of international relations in the digital age.

Balancing Structure and Agency in the Classroom

A teaching risk in any case centred on a minor actor is that students may overcompensate, ascribing too much agency to the actor relative to the structures in which it operates. On the other hand, students exposed to structural analysis may deny the actor's meaningful choices. Teachers must guard against both extremes: the case should be used if students learn to balance structure and agency. The tiered question structure in Section 4.4 is designed to do this - the descriptive tier orients students in the structural environment, the analytical tier challenges them to interpret it, and the critical tier challenges them to consider the alternatives without losing sight of constraints. Asking students to express the constraints before talking about options is a good move.

Practical and Ethical Considerations

There are two practical considerations. First, those who use attributed elite interview testimony (such as the testimony of Dr. Mohammed Sabir Ismail and Liwa Ayoub Yousif Ahmed in this article) should explain to students the conditions under which the testimony was obtained, and the ethical considerations that flow from those conditions. They should not, for example, simply quote from the testimony. Second, the case raises politically sensitive issues - Kurdish autonomy, disputed territory, conduct of regional powers - that may affect students in the region. The teacher should set up rules for discussion that enable students to engage in analysis without revelation of personal views.

Adaptability across Institutional Contexts

The module is intended to be flexible. In China, where the emphasis in the curriculum is on practical analytical skills and the compilation of teaching case libraries (jiaoxue anli ku), it can be integrated into graduate programs in international and area studies. In Western IR programs, it can be used in offset to the over-representation of East Asian cases. In Middle East studies, it offers a point of access to the question of how great-power competition is played out through the politics of contested sovereignty. The readings list can be modified to suit the language capabilities and institutional facilities.

Limitations

There are limits to the case that should be made explicit. The empirical foundation is heavily weighted towards the views of KRI experts; a fuller account would include the voices of US and Chinese policy elites as well. The case's timeframe stops at 2024; what happens after that, especially if it involves adjustment of US Middle East policy, may warrant an update of the case's analysis. The role-play, while intended to provoke thought about real differences, understates the complexity of institutional arrangements that students should be encouraged to explore.

Adapting the Teaching Model to Other Semi-Autonomous Contexts

A final question for the case is whether the modular structure travels beyond the KRI. The article's view is that the structure is portable, and that the asymmetric-hedging concept becomes more pedagogically useful when students confront a second case in which the structure either confirms or strains against the original. Three families of comparison are likely to be productive.

Sub-State Actors with Formal Autonomy in Federations. Catalonia and Scotland are useful comparators because each combines significant institutional autonomy with constitutional embedment in a sovereign state, but neither faces the same structural security-substitutability problem as the KRI. Comparing them to the KRI clarifies what is doing the analytical work in the asymmetric-hedging argument: the structure of the security domain, not the legal-constitutional status of the actor.

Quasi-States and Contested Statehood. Taiwan, Somaliland, Kosovo, and the Palestinian Authority each present a different configuration of recognition and capacity. Taiwan in particular is the closest functional analogue to the KRI in terms of dependency on a single external security partner combined with extensive economic engagement with that partner's chief rival; differences in scale and in the legal architecture of recognition, however, make the comparison instructive rather than simple.

Autonomous Administrations within Fragmented States. The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) is a particularly close comparator: like the KRI, it operates under partial US security cooperation, faces Turkish military pressure, and engages a complex regional and great-power environment. A direct comparison between the KRI and AANES is a useful capstone exercise in the analytical essay (Section 4.6).

For instructors adapting the module, the following minimal substitutions are required: (a) replace the Setting the Scene briefing (Section 3.2) with an equivalent briefing for the new case; (b) update the role-play scenario to reflect the analogous strategic decision facing the comparator's leadership; (c) revise the reading list to include at least two recent academic studies of the comparator and one primary-source document. The theoretical anchors (Sections 2.4 and 2.5), the methodology template (Section 3.1), the discussion-question tiers (Section 4.4), and the assessment design (Section 4.6) require no substantive change. The objective is not to produce identical conclusions across cases — indeed, divergence is pedagogically more valuable — but to enable students to apply a common analytical scaffold to a heterogeneous set of sub-state and semi-autonomous actors.

In this way, the article's contribution is not a single teaching case but the demonstration of a transferable approach: a way of converting empirical research on a sub-state actor into a structured pedagogical resource that can be replicated, adapted, and evaluated in diverse institutional and regional settings.

CONCLUSION

Effectively teaching great-power competition is now of curricular importance in international and area studies. However, the stock of teaching cases is still limited in terms of levels of analysis and geographical scope. This article has suggested that the inventory can be expanded by building new cases around sub-state and semi-autonomous actors, and has produced one such case - of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq - as an example.

The case is based on original empirical research and is structured around an analytical claim - asymmetric hedging - that is empirically verifiable, theoretically digestible, and pedagogically accessible. The article's innovation is to conceptualise asymmetric hedging not as a final theoretical judgement to be reported to students but as an open analytical tool that students learn to use, explore, and critique. The modular teaching four-part plan, multi-level discussion questions, role-play simulation and assessment plan present a comprehensive pedagogical resource that can be used as is or challenged by instructors. The article's ultimate purpose is not, however, to make the case for any particular case. Rather, it is to show how cases organised around sub-state and semi-autonomous actors can be produced to enhance (rather than obfuscate) teaching about great-power competition. The author's hope is that the expansion of teaching case libraries in this direction would be more than justified by the improved skills of students, and their awareness of the complexity of the international order they will encounter.

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