

BEING IN THE WHITE HOUSE SITUATION ROOM: DEVELOPING STRATEGIC OPTIONS

SNAPSHOT

Faculty develop a national security crisis and simulate placing the students on the National Security Council Staff to develop strategic options to drive U.S. foreign policy in response. By thrusting students into positions of responsibility for solutions to real-world issues, this activity requires students to draw on what they have learned and to think on their feet, and it fosters a deeper appreciation for the challenges associated with foreign policy work.

SPOTLIGHT

This activity is an exciting way to engage all students, whatever their interests. By having them grapple with actual national security challenges facing the U.S. today, this activity makes classroom material feel relevant and urgent. Students interact with the issues they are hearing about on the news from the position of high-level decision-makers and take responsibility for designing solutions.

A major strength of this activity is its broad applicability. Though it is designed for a class on policy, it can be adapted to classes in a range of disciplines. For a science class, for example, simulate an NIH conference, or for a law class, simulate a landmark trial.

LESSON PLAN

Goals:

Students learn to:

- analyze trends in the security environment.
- re-assess national interests and strategy.
- think strategically about national security.
- **practice working collaboratively in a national security setting.**
- communicate analysis through oral and written presentations.



Class:

Central Challenges of National Security, Strategy, and the Press (Harvard Kennedy School) and Cyberspace and International Security (Harvard Extension School)

Background:

The activity places students in the White House Situation Room to wrestle with contemporary challenges facing the United States. **For a semester-long course,**



WAYS TO ADAPT

To include different viewpoints and foster appreciation for the various interests implicated in any given negotiation, incorporate into the simulation a diverse range of actors, including ones that may not typically be present at the negotiating table in the real-life analog of the simulation. For a climate policy simulation, for example, you might consider assigning students the roles of relevant stakeholders in government, business, public interest, research, and other sectors. Students entering careers in any one sector will often need to coordinate with members of others to design sustainable, effective solutions, and this is a chance to practice the requisite skills.

this activity is used approximately once every three weeks so that students can regularly apply what they have learned to real-world problems and learn from previous attempts to address national security challenges.

By bringing students to engage closely with the policy-writing process under conditions that evoke real-world challenges, it teaches them that there is no correct answer to pressing foreign policy problems. Rather, there are pros and cons to every strategic option for resolving the crisis. **The effectiveness of this activity is evidenced by the fact that graduates regularly report using this format of strategic thinking in their post-graduate work lives, in both government and the private sector.**



Procedure- Before Class:

Using an approach pioneered by HKS professor Graham Allison, faculty write a case scenario that puts students inside the highest levels of the Executive Branch and makes them feel as if they are working on the staff supporting the National Security Council. The case scenario describes the crisis, captures individual bureaucratic roles, and frames the problem for the students. The goal is for the students to present, both orally and in written format, an answer to a challenge for the National Security Advisor.

What follows is a brief excerpt of the case, typically four pages long. Writing such a case study requires faculty to be familiar with the **current state of play** within the National Security Council and the international system. Here is an example of the introduction to such a case scenario:

"After the craziness of campaigning, Donald Trump now finds himself reflecting on why he wanted the job. Specifically, during the recent 2015 visit of Chinese President Xi, he was struck by the rising tensions over cyber espionage (particularly Chinese intelligence's downloading of 22 million personnel files,

WAYS TO ADAPT

You can adjust the frequency with which you run a simulation to suit your course needs, whether it's a half-semester, year-long, or winter-term-only course. We recommend running one simulation per course theme or topic so that students have an opportunity to engage with the key issues raised in the class. If, however, this is not possible, you can run one simulation at the end of the term and use it as a chance for students to synthesize and apply all they have learned.

THINGS WE LIKE

This activity teaches broadly applicable skills for use both inside and outside the classroom, including policy analysis, strategy design, critical thinking, collaboration, and communication. These skills will benefit students going into a range of careers beyond just government.

WAYS TO ADAPT

Adapt this activity for a more historically situated course by running a simulation concerning a challenge the U.S., or another country or political entity (e.g., the UN), has faced in the past. This modification would encourage students to appreciate the difficulties past leaders have faced resolving issues whose solutions or outcomes we now take for granted, and combat the hindsight bias to which students may fall victim when studying historical developments. Make the simulation more realistic by having students engage only with the primary sources that were available at the time of a relevant meeting or conference (e.g., the signing of a treaty). For inspiration, find Dana Mirsalis's "Let's Try to Stop the Tokugawa Shogunate from Collapsing" on our activity database.

Alternatively, you can run a simulation on an inchoate or impending national security challenge, e.g., climate change, nuclear warfare, information wars, biotechnology threats, etc. Students can engage with issues that policymakers are still in the early stages of addressing—or have not yet addressed—and identify hurdles of designing innovative solutions.



including top-secret security clearances from the Office of Personnel Management); cyber theft (China's intelligence communities' successful purloining of \$1 trillion in intellectual property from American corporations); China's claims to exclusive sovereignty over the territories of the South China Sea; and its construction of more than 3,000 acres of islands that were previously underwater shoals."

The case then continues for three pages to get students to feel as if they are "in the room."

Procedure- During Class:

Faculty present case materials and give students readings to prepare them for the scenario. Using these materials, students draft strategic options memos. They frame the core national security issue, identify relevant national interests, and present an analysis of the key drivers and trends concerning the issue. **Having thought about the issue, students develop three strategic options, identify their pros and cons, select one option, and discuss implementation.** At the close of the activity, students submit a three-page strategic option memo addressed to the National Security Advisor. **Finally, students develop talking points to address with the media.**

In implementing this activity, faculty should establish clear directions, written to resemble directions the National Security Advisor would actually give his or her staff. This gives students a concrete framework for delivering a presentation or memo. **It is also important that faculty research and simulate the inner workings of the National Security Council, e.g., to simulate how different personalities interact with one another and to convey what the core issues are.** Including Tweets can help keep things interesting.

THINGS WE LIKE

Simulations such as this one give students an opportunity to practice negotiating their concerns and opinions with those of others. The urgency and stakes of the simulation situation also make students mindful of the trade-off between being efficient in designing solutions to urgent issues and being thoughtful and careful about fully considering the implications of their proposals.

THINGS WE LIKE

Having students prepare talking points for the media serves two important purposes:

- (1) It has students consolidate key points of their proposals and express them in layman terms. This is a great way for them to check their own comprehension of the material and practice essential communication skills.
- (2) It forces students to consider the public digestibility of their proposals and to appreciate the accountability that decision-makers have to the public in deciding the way they do about contentious, high-stakes issues.

WAYS TO ADAPT

To make the simulation as realistic as possible, design group sizes that reflect the membership of the Council (proportional to your class size) and assign roles that correspond to this membership. This will enable students to get a sense of the power dynamics and relationships between different roles and to appreciate the way in which group size and alliances affect the efficiency and effectiveness of different approaches to negotiation and problem-solving.

Post-Activity:



After the activity, faculty moderate a group discussion of the case so that students can contrast their approach to the problem with the approaches of their peers. This debrief enables students to identify considerations they may have missed, appreciate the pros and cons of other solutions, and explore ways of improving their own approach.

Materials:



To ensure that students have a grounding in U.S. national interests, they are expected to read "Report of the Commission on America's National Interests." Further readings will vary by case. To grasp the scope of the US–China challenge, for example, students would read Graham T. Allison's *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape the Thucydides's Trap?* (Houghton Mifflin, 2017). To understand the scale of U.S. foreign policy, in contrast, they would read *Foreign Policy and Defense Strategy: The Evolution of an Incidental Superpower* by Derek S. Reveron, Nikolas K. Gvosdev, and Mackubin T. Owens (Georgetown University Press, 2015). And, to appreciate how cyber is an important tool of power, they would read David Sanger's *The Perfect Weapon: War, Sabotage, and Fear in the Cyber Age* (Crown, 2018).

Submitted by Graham T. Allison, Derek Reveron, and David Sanger.

THINGS WE LIKE

In any setting in which one is expected to defend one's position against those of others, it is crucial that one understand both the strengths and weaknesses of one's position. This post-activity debrief encourages students to reflect on where they can balance out and improve their proposals by looking to their peers' unique experiences and expertise for inspiration.

WAYS TO ADAPT

Depending on the type and goal of the simulation you run, adapt the readings to include comprehensive overviews of the subject as well as some accessible primary sources. Make sure you include texts written from a broad range of angles so that the texts are not biased in favour of any particular position, especially if the simulation concerns a contentious or politically divisive topic. Consider including a range of non-academic sources, such as newspaper articles or op-eds, to expose students to already existing stances on hot-button topics that they can consider in developing a solution that will also garner public support.



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