International Constraints and the U.S. Foreign Policy Agenda: A Semester-Long Class Simulation using the Blackboard Web Platform

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I recently began a classroom discussion on U.S. foreign policy toward the Middle East by asking a question concerning the likely actions of the administration toward Iraq. I was immediately greeted with this response from most of the class: "Do you mean in the simulation or in real-life?" This response only amplifies the reactions of other students—"*der Deutsche Weg*" was constantly advocated by the student representing Germany, the student representing Argentina sought the commitment of "funds" from U.S. officials before and after every class, and most students claimed that the Iraqi representative had been co-opted by his role and called him "Saddam."[1]

These and similar student comments show that students like and immerse themselves in the simulation. Yet the real payoffs of the exercise lie elsewhere: increased attentiveness to other materials presented in class, greater knowledge of contemporary events, and deeper overall understanding of complex concepts. The simulation is designed to give students a better understanding of the international constraints placed upon U.S. policymakers when crafting the foreign policy agenda. Students role-play various country leaders and other international actors and attempt to bargain and place pressures on the U.S. in order to alter both the content and saliency of items on the foreign policy agenda. The simulation represents an effective "active learning" technique that has proven to be quite useful at getting students involved in the class material while teaching both effective research and communication skills. Additional benefits include the relatively little preparation and maintenance time required of the instructor, the modest amount of classroom time that must be dedicated to the simulation, and the adaptability of the simulation to alternative learning goals. I outline the simulation here in the hope that other international relations teachers can use it effectively in their American Foreign Policy, Introduction to International Relations, and other related classes.

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Outline of the Simulation

The First Assignment: A Short Paper

I begin the simulation by assigning students the roles that will play throughout the semester. This should be done after the first few meetings or whenever the instructor has a good idea of the final class size. Roles can be assigned in many ways, often dependent upon class size. Large classes are more likely to have multiple representatives for influential actors, thus ensuring proper coverage of important issues. Smaller class sizes may force the instructor to more carefully select the assigned roles, as an important actor who stops contributing in the middle of the semester can greatly damage the simulation for other actors. In my class of 50 students, I had the students choose two possible roles and then assigned the students a role based upon their selections, coverage of the major actors, and my assessment of the potential quality of student participation.

Actual roles played in the simulation are at the discretion of the instructor. The instructor may decide to focus upon NGOs or IGOs, or perhaps upon European or Middle Eastern actors. The focus can be easily shifted by manipulating the composition of available actors at the start of the simulation. My goal in the simulation is to have the students identify important international constraints in the U.S. policymaking process; I therefore concentrate role selection on major states like China, Germany, Russia, and Japan, key U.S. Administration officials (chief of staff, national security director, secretary of state, etc.), and the more influential states of the Middle East—Israel, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia, for example. I also include representatives from NGOs (Greenpeace and Amnesty International) and a few smaller countries such as Venezuela and Argentina; these actors represent the gadflies of the simulation, and these students have to bargain extensively in order to be heard. All role assignments are posted in the Course Material section of Blackboard so as to facilitate communication throughout the simulation.

After the roles are selected, I give each student approximately two weeks to research and write a short (three-page) paper that assesses the interests, resources, and possible tools their actor has in affecting U.S. foreign policy. I give no details of the simulation so that the students will not be influenced by the rules of the game; at this point, the student should simply begin to develop a general knowledge of their actor.

Second Assignment: Threaten, Cajole, Bargain, and Otherwise Manipulate

The simulation runs throughout the semester. After collecting the first set of papers, I tell the students that their goal is to shape the stated policies of the U.S. administration to better coincide with preferences of their assigned role. The students are then told that their performance in the simulation is going to be judged by how well they threaten, cajole, bribe, or otherwise influence the policy process. This means that the students will be pooling resources, linking issues, and creating and maintaining personal relationships in the simulation—any action that increases their ability to affect U.S. foreign policy.

The simulation takes place almost entirely on the Blackboard web platform according to the following weekly schedule:

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096504004706 Published online by Cambridge University Press

1. By noon, Wednesday, of every week, a rank-ordered list of U.S. administration agenda items is broadcast on Blackboard's Announcements page and via email. These agenda items also comprise separate fora in the Discussion Board section of the course web site. These fora may be used by all participants as rhetorical tools to influence other actors.

2. By 5pm, Friday, of every week, non-U.S. administration actors post responses to these Discussion Board postings. Postings are not required, but the simulation grade in the class is determined largely by how often students try to influence policy, as well as their effectiveness. Instructions for postings are as follows:

   a. Students may respond to one, two, or all of the original postings.

   b. Postings should include the actor's response to the issue, what the actor plans to do to influence policy, or anything else the actor feels is pertinent. Students should emphasize the resources that can be brought to the issue by their actor, and why their actor is concerned.

   c. Groups of actors, like the United Nations, EU, OPEC, etc., often carry more weight than individual actors. However, groups must often provide a consensus view on issues in order to be effective. Dissension will likely cause a loss of influence, and the group will be ignored by the U.S.. Students are cautioned to use their resources wisely.

3. By noon, Monday, of every week, the U.S. government officials are required to assess international opinion on their issues of interest and communicate these to the chief of staff for the president. These assessments take the form of short emails (one paragraph) detailing suggestions for revised (stronger or weaker) foreign policy goals for the administration. All of these emails are sent through the U.S. administration officials group communication tool (more on this later). The simulation grade for U.S. officials is determined by how effectively they communicate both their position and the position of the administration on these issues. In other words, the U.S. officials try to influence as well as report on public opinion. How this is done is up to each official.

4. The chief of staff submits revised U.S. administration responses to the Simulation Administrator (the instructor) by 10am every Wednesday morning, and the instructor begins the process anew, posting revised agenda items by noon each Wednesday.

This formal process should not preclude bargaining or other communication among the actors. Students are instructed to carbon copy emails to the Simulation Administrator in order to make sure credit is given for their participation.

At the end of the simulation rules discussion, the instructor announces (and posts on Blackboard) five initial U.S. administration agenda items. I often choose to be as controversial as possible in this posting so as to better facilitate discussion and conflict among the actors. I also mirror several current U.S. administration proposals and actions—most recently these have included steel tariffs, the role of Israel, increased visas for foreign tourists, and Amnesty International policy papers. These choices allow the students to see how they should initially react (as their real-life actors had done) and also makes the simulation a closer fit to contemporary world politics.

For example, the first five agenda items in the simulation run described at the beginning of this article were: 1) weapons inspections in Iraq; 2) an outline of a free and democratic Palestinian state; 3) the U.S. relationship with Pakistan and Saudi Arabia; 4) increased immigration restrictions; and 5) possible steel tariffs on European exports. The European states immediately (and rightly) felt that several of these agenda items conflicted with their economic and political goals. In order to add weight to their argument, they responded to each of the agenda items in unison via the EU group page. The individual country representatives also sent emails to U.S. administration officials and tried to solicit support from several Middle Eastern and South American countries. They threatened retaliatory tariffs and included an analysis of the potential impact and legality of unilateral sanctions by the U.S.. The "pressure" wrought by the EU countries was great enough to limit and eventually curtail any mention of future tariffs.

Of course, not all agenda items are met with such concerted opposition, and effective U.S. officials can take advantage of "sleeping" actors, pushing the overall agenda to favor ultimate U.S. goals. Pitting the actors against each other in this way results in a fairly accurate representation of international interests and politics.

Third Assignment: Another Short Paper

The third and final assignment completes the simulation by assessing how active and effective students were in representing their actor. In a short paper (three pages), the students describe their strategies during the simulation, assess how these strategies impacted the other actors in the system, and make some general conclusions about the constraints placed upon the U.S. administration. This paper is an excellent guide to assessing the overall simulation grade for each student. It also gives the instructor a chance to gain feedback on how well the assignments worked.

Running the Simulation

Blackboard has several tools that reduce the costs involved in running this simulation. Blackboard's email system allows for private communication where email addresses can remain confidential, encouraging safe student-student contacts. Groups (within Communication Tools) can also be set up for the major actors (United Nations General Assembly, United Nations Security Council, OPEC, and the EU), facilitating semi-private communication, coordination, and the pooling of resources. Student postings, representing most of the student simulation activity, take place on the Discussion Board section of the course.

I use at least five fora on the Discussion Board—one for each agenda item. Student postings can take place at anytime and represent either separate responses to the agenda items or responses to other student postings. I also use a separate forum in the Discussion Board section to relay "News Flashes" to the course; these news flashes are contained in the first forum of the screen shot above. News updates allow the instructor to keep the simulation within the bounds of reality by threatening the simulated roles with domestic riots and crises over unpopular actions or punishing the U.S. administration with declining polls for poor performance. If relations between simulated

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096504004706 Published online by Cambridge University Press



countries degenerate too greatly, news flashes become a useful way of pulling the students back to the overall goals of the simulation. In other words, the instructor can threaten riots, the possibility of overthrow, or other domestic disturbances to make students aware that their actions violate the interests of their citizens.

The order of the remaining fora is important; actors in the simulation have an interest in both the content and intensity of the U.S. administration preferences. For example, the Chinese representative may not be able to alter the simulated U.S. stance on Taiwan; however, the importance of this issue could decline enough to greatly aid Chinese interests, perhaps even leaving the "top five" listing of U.S. policy goals.

Students are encouraged to bargain with other simulation actors in order to gain as much leverage as possible in influencing the agenda of the U.S.. They are also encouraged to provide links to Internet sources that detail specific analyses on the merits of their positions. These rhetorical moves may put enough pressures on the U.S. administration or other actors to elicit a change of policies. The simulation is adaptable so that the bargaining of simulated actors can influence the importance of issues, just as world politics suggest. The instructor can also control the emergence of "unforeseen issues" and the occurrence of "unforeseen events" in the simulation, also mirroring the reactions found in real-world politics.

The Group Pages of Blackboard allow for private, group-only communication and discussion postings. These Group Pages can be defined so widely as to include all UN voting members or more narrowly construed to include only Security Council members. Other international organizations such as the EU may wish to pool their resources, and the group emails and discussion board can facilitate consensus building. The second screen shot details a list of five groups I used during the last run of this simulation. I generally allow any actors to form groups but also encourage students to mirror extant international organizations and other institutions. Copying real world institutions increases student attention in these organizations and also demonstrates to students the power and limits of these actors.

Table 1 presents a summary of the tools available to each of the different simulation actors. The chief of staff should be chosen carefully because this position represents the direct link between both "sides" of the game. U.S. officials guide the chief of staff, analyzing the actions and views of non-U.S. actors, and the chief of staff collates the analyses of the U.S. officials and



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Table 1
List of Possible Actors, Their Simulation Tools and Techniques for Instructor Assessment of Actors

Actor Roles in the Simulation	Tools Available to Actor	Assessment Techniques for Instructor
United States Chief of Staff	US Policy Agenda for rewarding and punishing simulation actors Discussion Board for posting views US Group Discussion page for influencing US administration officials IgO Group Discussion pages for influencing other actors in IgO Group and Individual Email for influencing all simulation actors	First short paper Control of Policy Agenda Contributions to Discussion Boards Contributions via email to other actors Second short paper *Statistics page for overall simulation use
United States Officials	Communications link between other actors and US Chief of Staff Discussion Board for posting views US Group Discussion page for influencing US administration officials Group and Individual Email for influencing all simulation actors	First short paper Contributions to Discussion Boards Contributions via email to other actors Second short paper *Statistics page for overall simulation use
State-level Actors Non-State Actors Inter-governmental Organization Heads	Discussion Board for posting views IgO Group Discussion pages for influencing other actors in IgO Group and Individual Email for influencing all simulation actors	First short paper Contributions to Discussion Boards Contributions via email to other actors Second short paper *Statistics page for overall simulation use

responds to the rest of the simulated world. As with other simulation actors, the U.S. officials can communicate through a private group page or through larger groups aimed at specific sets of actors—the Security Council, the WTO, the UN, or the world page. The chief of staff and other U.S. officials can also threaten or promise policy changes through emails to individual simulation actors. All of these actions can be monitored by the instructor and, together with the short papers and Blackboard statistics page, provide ample evaluation opportunities.

The U.S. foreign policy agenda is the item by which all actors are judged. Representatives of other states and non-state actors all must compete to influence the agenda, and they do so through threats and promises to the U.S. and other actors in the simulation. Again, the group pages and discussion fora facilitate communication and resource pooling, as large blocs of actors can threaten trade embargoes, increased tariffs, or even conflict should the U.S. officials not respond. It is the responsibility of the instructor to see that these threats and promises remain within real-world bounds. The instructor can also use these emails, postings, and overall statistics to evaluate the progress of in dividual actors or the simulation in general.

In sum, I hope it is apparent to readers that little direct classroom time is needed to run this simulation. The instructor needs to 1) post the U.S. agenda items once a week, 2) monitor the simulation activity of the students through the Statistics page of Blackboard's Control Panel, and 3) occasionally play the role of facilitator in order to aid struggling students. The simulation takes place out of the classroom throughout the semester while the instructor monitors student activity through Blackboard's tools. A provocative agenda encourages simulation activity, and an excellent "chief of staff" can often guide both U.S. officials and other actors to be more effective in their communication strategies. Students benefit through increased attention to the course and to world politics. The instructor should feel free to amend this generalized outline and tailor the simulation to their course and the teaching objectives they wish to pursue.

Notes

*My thanks to Stephen Yoder and an anonymous reviewer for helpful comments on an earlier draft and to the students of PS430 American Foreign Policy during the fall of 2002 for making the simulation so successful. All errors remain mine.

1. These comments were made during the simulation running in the fall semester of 2002. Throughout this article I refer to the Blackboard system, but the principles are easily transported to WebCT or other platforms.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096504004706 Published online by Cambridge University Press