# Crisis Diplomacy: How IR Students can Learn from Twitter

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HANNAH SMITH, APR 6 2013

"War-gaming meets Twitter". Few things were more alien to me than this statement, and I immediately recoiled at the thought of 'geeky' board games being transferred to an online platform. Surely this was the stuff of teenage boys and not an MA student? How could diplomacy be reduced to 140 characters? How on earth would this prove useful? Why did I agree to this?

Nevertheless, in the name of exploratory academia, I brushed off my cynicism and soon found myself playing the role of the United States in a crisis simulation over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands – an act that at once I found to be enjoyable but surprisingly useful. There were a number of players (from different professional backgrounds, across the globe) acting as China, Japan, Taiwan, and the United Nations – along with myself as the US. The central 'Crisis Diplomacy' account interjected with 'situations' such as:

Breaking: Six Japanese crew members are feared dead in first exchange of fire in waters around the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. #simulation

— Crisis Diplomacy (@CrisisDiplomacy) March 6, 2013

The five participating simulators responded in turn.

**The Rules of the Game**

The organizer distributed a comprehensive framework for the simulation. Players were to tweet in a designated order, with the UN able to interject at any given time, and the main @CrisisDiplomacy account continually updating the situation. This involved developing scenarios (as above, and including events such as naval dispatches etc) and imagined media reports and statements. Participants were encouraged to act in as realistic fashion as possible – not, for example, employing a preemptive nuclear attack in their first tweet. This ensured a realistic depiction of a potential scenario, and offered not just a more realistic environment for players, but a simulation of more interest and value to the Twitter followers and engaged academics. Participants were to tweet to the main account, indicating their role and importantly including a #simulation tag – so as not to cause any confusion. An example follows:

@crisisdiplomacy [US] remainder of Task Force 70 (of 7th fleet, US Navy) called to be on standby, prepared to immediately deploy. #simu — Hannah Smith (@hsmuzo) March 6, 2013

Participants were also able to Tweet to other player. Though visible to all in the Twitter scenario, these exchanges represented bilateral diplomacy.

@crisisdiplomacy [US] -> [PRC] Regional peace and stability must be maintained. We will act in this regard. Abandon provocative actions #SIM

— Hannah Smith (@hsmuzo) March 5, 2013

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## Battling Crisis: An Overview of the Simulation

The simulation began with China "intensifying its monitoring" of the islands, sending four additional surveillance ships. Japan responded angrily, denouncing a "violation of Japanese waters". Taiwan and the US called for calm. This was followed by Xinhua News reports regarding more Chinese vessels, and a Chinese statement condemning aggression from the Japanese coastguard. According to Reuters, there was contact between Japanese and Chinese coast guard vessels. The UN quoted Ban Ki-Moon calling for restraint.

Tensions continued escalate when sources claimed that the nuclear-powered USS George Washington aircraft carrier was seen preparing to leave its home port of Yokosuka, Japan. China advocated for its sovereign rights, as anti-Chinese protests erupted outside a Japanese embassy. Ban Ki-Moon deemed the situation a "potential threat to international peace and security". Taiwan deployed its coastguard to protect its fishing zone, while the US confirmed that the George Washington carrier was patrolling waters near the disputed islands, to uphold freedom of navigation and Sea Lines of Communication.

China responded by suspending rare earth shipments to Japan for its "provocative acts", and the PLA Air Force conducted a large air combat exercise in a Chinese province adjacent to the disputed islands. Following this escalation, Japanese and Chinese coastguard vessels exchanged fire, resulting in the deaths of 6 Japanese crew member. The UN called for an emergency meeting of the Security Council. The US at once opposed unilateral actions undermining Japan's current administration of the islands, and called for Task Force 70 of the US Navy's Seventh Fleet to be on standby. Hoping to prevent an escalation to war, Ban Ki-Moon hosted bilateral discussions with Japanese and Chinese ambassadors at the UN. He proposed a two-point plan: 1) China withdraws naval and aerial forces; 2) Japan agrees to future talks on the islands status. Taiwan was disappointed that this did not include its own claims.

Detailed media discussion and speculation was an important factor throughout the crisis, reflecting the environment of ambiguity and imperfect information in which decision-makers must act. Finally, the UN proposed a revised plan: 1) All parties must pull back their forces, including submarines, for one month; 2) Japan is to reverse its nationalization policy; and 3) the UN will host talks, including Taiwan, on the future status of the islands. The simulation ended on an uncertain note.

So ends this @crisisdiplomacy simulation, with a violent naval incident having fashioned a tentative new status quo between Japan and China. — Crisis Diplomacy (@CrisisDiplomacy) March 8, 2013

## Thinking on Your Feet

Despite the time differences between players, the simulation moved quickly, and I found myself frequently thinking on my feet. 'What would Obama do!?!', 'China's said WHAT?. Coming from what can be liberal time constraints in the ivory towers of academia, this proved a useful reminder of the real pace at which decisions in crisis diplomacy have to be made, and the limited information available in real time.

## 140 Characters

During each turn, players were restricted to one or two Tweets, reducing our messages to 280 characters maximum (or less when you account for the @CrisisDiplomacy tag, and the important #simulation hashtag). On the one hand, this was a lesson in being succinct, but it was also a lesson in carefully treading diplomatic waters. Appropriately expressing your tone in such a short space was one of the larger challenges, particularly for me, as I aimed to position the US an actor primarily concerned with keeping the peace despite its commitments to Japan. The short length of player statements in some respects enhanced the opaqueness of diplomacy, and given the constantly changing circumstances of the simulation, the game quickly become one of second guessing and forward thinking.

## Conclusion

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Overall, the twitter simulation was a lesson in strategy: in applying knowledge, second guessing motivations, and acting in real time. Even a short simulation offered a unique insight into the challenges of crisis diplomacy and the difficulties of communication and negotiation under tense circumstances. Twitter simulations create the unique opportunity for students to role-play alongside professionals, cross-culturally, and explore some of the most pressing issues faced by the international community.

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