Setting the Scene for Crisis

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This week marks the beginning of a three-class-long Crisis Simulation in the POL 210 course. Over the courses of the next ten days students will play the part of a state in a global simulation of strategy, geopolitics, energy politics and national security.

As I student I first encountered a truly inspiring classroom simulation when I took a class from University of South Australia professor Katherine Vadura in 2004. Her simulation, based around Kurdistan and the broader Middle East, allowed me to test strategies, push other teams to negotiate and explore some of the complexities of international politics. In the decade that followed I remembered fondly how the simulation helped me to learn more about the practice of international politics which, as a theorist, I was sometimes apt to ignore.

Last year I finally had a chance to construct a simulation of my own. Over the course of some months I read widely in the academic literature, taking inspiration from games and simulations that worked well for others and understanding more and more about what makes a good simulation and a bad one. I also sought inspiration from fiction, with some of the crazier ideas from modern security thrillers acting as kindling for the larger, global scenario I would cook up.

The simulation I eventually designed was created to expose students to the complexity of international politics. It posits three separate areas of international concern (one in East Europe, one in Iran, one in East Asia) and pushes students to try and understand how they might deal with multiple things going 'wrong' at the same time. The areas of concern seem somewhat unrelated at first – despite the clues and subtle hints offered in the briefing – but it becomes clear early on the second day of the simulation just how interconnected and interrelated the world really is…and also how difficult it is for a state to deal with this complexity.

This week I presented the briefing in a class I called, 'The Tension Mounts'. The simulation continues next week with students representing the USA, Russia, China, Japan, North Korea, South Korea, India and the EU learning on Tuesday just what has happened and having until the end of Thursday to negotiate a solution.

Having already used the simulation once last Summer, I know it works well, though like any professor I have learnt from earlier iterations and changed some elements for this time around. Importantly, the students have about two hours less to negotiate their solution this semester, a change that I implemented based on student feedback from the Summer session last year.

International politics is one field where real experimentation is difficult to manage. Unlike a chemistry lab or a wood shop where practice can reinforce theory, I cannot test ask students to test a theory of nuclear deterrence by giving them access to warheads. However, I firmly believe that – just as Professor Vadura was able to teach me about international negotiation via a well thought out and incredibly inventive simulation back in 2004 – my students can learn about the complexity of international security and the difficulty of managing multiple crises in POL 210 today.

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