

Simulation from Conflict & Warfare

Dispute in the East China Sea in 2016 (NSC)

Set in September 2016. Japan and China challenge each other in the airspace above the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea.

Case Overview

Set in September 2016. Japan has long maintained an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) that encompasses the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, over which it has administrative control. China declared its own ADIZ in 2013, stating it had the right to take military action against any aircraft that entered the zone without prior notification. Japan, along with the United States and South Korea, has protested the Chinese ADIZ and refuses to conform to China's demand for prior notification. Japanese civilian and military aircraft continue to operate in the skies above the East China Sea. The intensification of the island dispute has raised political sensitivities in both countries, making it difficult for leaders to ignore the increasing interaction between ships and aircraft in the area. China now sends its coast guard to patrol the islands alongside Japan's coast guard. The changing balance of military and economic power in Asia, growing popular distrust between the two nations, and deep dependence on the sea lanes for access to energy resources and trade have heightened concerns that Japan and China may inadvertently end up in an armed clash. Miscalculation by their militaries or an unforeseen incident provoked by fishermen or sovereignty activists could trigger a crisis. Washington does not take a position on the disputed sovereignty claims, but the United States has a treaty commitment to defend Japanese territory, including territory under its administrative control, against attack or the threat of attack. Because the use of force between China and Japan would likely lead to U.S. involvement, Washington has a stake in deterring and dissuading aggression by either party. The U.S. government has decided to convene a National Security Council (NSC) meeting to consider any action it should take to ease tensions in the East China Sea and to evaluate its long-term policy in the region.

Guide

Global Literacy

Global literacy is the ability to understand and engage effectively in today's interconnected world. Today's interdependent global economy and geopolitical landscape connect America's interests more than ever to the actions and interests of other countries and their citizens. To ensure students understand this interconnected world, they need to be globally literate. [Learn more about global literacy.](#)

The United States plays a critical role in establishing and maintaining international order. This is particularly true in an increasingly globalized world. The range of foreign policy issues that require its attention is vast. The United States must consider foreign policy issues from conflicts in Afghanistan, Nigeria, and Syria to tensions with Iran and North Korea; from long-standing alliances to complex, evolving relationships with Brazil, China, India, Russia, and South Africa. Issues on the agenda range from the stability of global finance to the promotion of economic opportunity in low-income countries; and from climate to health to nuclear proliferation to terrorism. The United States has a vested interest in myriad world affairs. Further,

issues such as immigration, trade, cybersecurity, climate change, and global health underscore the fading distinction between domestic and international matters.

U.S. leaders use a range of tools to pursue a foreign policy to safeguard national security and achieve U.S. goals:

- diplomatic: consultations and negotiations, treaties, defense and security agreements, resolutions at global and regional bodies such as the United Nations, and public diplomacy to promote U.S. views and culture
- economic: trade and investment agreements, tariffs, sanctions, embargoes, development assistance, loans for the purchase of U.S.-manufactured products, and sales of arms, equipment, and technology
- military: missile strikes, nuclear deterrence, ground force deployments, ship and submarine patrols, blockades, unilateral or partnered military exercises, foreign military training, and special operations forces
- unconventional actions: undertaken by the U.S. government and its proxies, such as training and assisting foreign intelligence services, supporting armed nonstate actors, private security contracting, and cyberwarfare

Effective policymaking requires a deft combination of these tools. To accomplish this, policymakers must clearly define U.S. interests. Policymakers then gauge the interests, resources, and motivations of foreign governments and nonstate actors. The U.S. intelligence community supports policymakers by collecting and analyzing a vast range of information, including satellite images, communications records, and other data.

Foreign policy successes and failures are often associated with presidential decisions. Less explored is the decision-making system that helps the president make those critical choices and coordinate their implementation. This guide will help you understand the system through which the United States creates and implements its foreign policy.

To learn more about the NSC, check out these readings:

- [“What is the National Security Council?”](#) YouTube video, 2:28, posted by CFR Education, August 28, 2023.
- [“National Security Council,”](#) The White House.
- David J. Rothkopf, [“Presidents and the National Security Council,”](#) Interview by Bernard Gwertzman, Council on Foreign Relations, November 12, 2008.

Regardless of the scale of the problem, a successful foreign policy-making process starts by defining interests and goals. Policymakers and their advisors then formulate policy options to meet those goals and consider each option’s strengths and weaknesses. This process is challenging. In the best of times information can be unreliable or incomplete or an adversary’s intentions can be unclear. Often a decision’s consequences can be unknowable. Leaders frequently have to choose from a list on which every option is imperfect. Adding to this uncertainty is the complexity of the U.S. government’s foreign policy machinery. Numerous agencies—each with its own interests and biases—seek to influence how policy is decided and carried out. It takes considerable effort to run a process capable of producing sound policy decisions.

The National Security Council (NSC) plays a critical role in this effort. Its mission is to help the president effectively use a variety of instruments—military, diplomatic, or otherwise—to forge policies that advance U.S. national security goals.

The NSC was created by the National Security Act of 1947. This act defined the NSC as an interagency body intended to “advise the president with respect to the integration of domestic, foreign, and military policies relating to the national security.” The period after World War II was an age of expanded American interests and responsibilities. The NSC was expected to provide a place where the heads of federal departments and agencies could cooperate to develop recommendations for policies that would advance U.S. aims. The NSC and its staff were also meant to manage the policymaking process. This ensured that the president would receive a full range of advice and opinion from the departments and agencies involved in national security.

The NSC has evolved significantly over the years. The NSC has adapted to the preferences of successive presidents and the challenges they faced. Variables such as the attendees, the frequency of meetings, the manner in which information is passed to the president, the importance of consensus, and the relative dominance of the NSC over other government institutions have changed over the decades.

The NSC has evolved to comprise various interagency committees and a large staff to prepare analysis and coordinate policymaking and implementation. The NSC is at the center of the interagency process. This process is one through which relevant government agencies address foreign policy issues and help the president make and execute policy choices.

I. National Security Advisor

The national security advisor (formally assistant to the president for national security affairs) is at the heart of the NSC structure. The national security advisor's role is twofold: to offer advice to the president and to coordinate and manage policymaking. Because they have direct access to the president and do not represent a cabinet department, national security advisors are in a unique position. From this neutral perch they drive foreign policy decisions, manage the actors involved, and mitigate conflict throughout the decision-making process.

II. National Security Council Staff

The NSC staff consists of individuals from a collection of agencies that support the president, the vice president, and the administration. NSC staff members are generally organized into directorates that focus on regions or issues. The size and organization of the staff vary with each administration.

The NSC staff provides expertise for the variety of national security policy matters under consideration. It manages numerous responsibilities, including preparing speeches, memos, and discussion papers and handling inquiries from Congress on foreign policy issues. Staff members analyze both immediate and long-standing issues and help prioritize the agenda.

III. Committee Structure

Committees are at the core of policy deliberation and policymaking in the NSC. They fall into four categories:

- The highest level is the National Security Council itself. Formal NSC meetings are chaired by the president and include individuals named by the National Security Act of 1947 as well as other senior aides the president invites.
- The Principals Committee (PC) comprises cabinet-level officials who head major government departments concerned with national security, such as the secretaries of state and defense. The national security advisor traditionally chairs the Principals Committee.
- The Deputies Committee (DC) includes the deputy leaders of the government departments represented on the principals committee and is chaired by the deputy national security advisor.
- Interagency Policy Committees (IPCs) cover a range of regional areas and issues. Each committee includes officials who specialize in the relevant area or issue at one of the departments or agencies in the interagency system. IPCs are generally chaired by senior directors on the NSC staff. Much of the day-to-day work needed to formulate and implement foreign policy across the U.S. government happens at the IPC level.

This committee structure tackles both immediate crises such as an outbreak of conflict and enduring issues such as climate change. IPCs conduct analysis on an issue, gather views on it and its importance from various departments, formulate and evaluate policy options, and determine what resources and steps would be required to carry out those options. The Deputies Committee manages the interagency process up and down. It decides what IPCs to establish, and gives them specific assignments. It also considers information submitted by the IPCs before relaying it to the Principals Committee or the full NSC.

The Principals Committee is the highest-level setting, aside from the NSC itself, for debating national security issues. It consists of the heads of the NSC's component agencies. The Principals Committee is essentially all the members of the NSC except the president and vice president. Formal NSC meetings, which the president chairs, occur whenever the president sees fit. They consider issues that require the president's personal attention and a direct presidential decision.

The goal of this committee structure is to foster consensus on policy options or highlight where and why consensus cannot be reached. If officials at one level agree on an issue, it does not need to go to senior officials for a decision. This practice reserves the president's time and that of members of the Principals Committee for the most complicated and sensitive debates.

When a crisis erupts issues sometimes do not follow the usual path up from the IPCs. In these cases, NSC staff members and officials in government departments and agencies generally draft papers drawing on their expertise, available intelligence, and any existing contingency plans. Policy options are then debated and decided at the appropriate level. The policymaking process can also deviate from this model based on the preferences of each president.

For the purposes of this NSC simulation, you will role-play the NSC meeting with the assumption that the committees described have already done their jobs. Any critical information has already been passed to the highest-level decision-makers.

Presidential Decisions

When the president makes a policy decision, it can take the form of a verbal instruction recorded and shared with relevant departments and agencies. The president can also issue formal decisions in documents that lay out the administration's policy and explain its rationale and goals. These documents have gone by [different names under different presidents](#). President Joe Biden issues national security memoranda and national security study memoranda. President Donald Trump issued national security presidential memoranda.

The president can also issue an executive order (EO). EOs are a more formal and public declaration of policy. In contrast, national security directives are generally directed internally to federal departments and are often classified. In the past, presidents have [issued EOs](#) for such purposes as facilitating sanctions against foreign individuals and establishing new offices in government departments to carry out foreign policy aims. For federal agencies, both national security directives and executive orders carry the full force of law.

Departments and Agencies

Although many executive branch departments and agencies are involved in foreign policy, the Department of State, the Department of Defense, and the intelligence community form the core of the foreign policy bureaucracy. The Department of the Treasury, the Department of Homeland Security, and the Department of Justice often play crucial roles as well.

[Department of State](#)

The Department of State conducts the United States' relations with other countries and international organizations. It maintains U.S. diplomatic presence abroad. The Department of State also issues visas for foreigners to enter the country, aids U.S. citizens overseas, and manages other programs to promote American interests. The [secretary of state](#) is the president's principal foreign affairs advisor and has a keen understanding of the United States' international relations. They are also well informed on the relationships between foreign countries, and the behavior and interests of their governments.

[Department of Defense](#)

The Department of Defense carries out U.S. defense policy and maintains U.S. military forces. It includes the U.S. [Army](#), [Navy](#), [Marine Corps](#), and [Air Force](#), as well as an array of agencies related to defense. The department employs more than two million military and civilian personnel and operates military bases around the world. The [secretary of defense](#) is the head of the department and the president's principal defense policy advisor. They also stay up-to-date on the security situation in foreign countries and the possibilities and implications of U.S. military involvement. The [chairman of the joint chiefs of staff](#) is the highest-ranking member of the U.S. armed forces and the president's top military advisor.

Intelligence Community

The U.S. intelligence community consists of eighteen agencies and organizations, including the [Central Intelligence Agency](#) (CIA), [National Security Agency](#) (NSA), and [Federal Bureau of Investigation](#) (FBI), which gather and analyze intelligence. Each of these agencies has its own mission; for example, the NSA focuses on signals intelligence (information gathered from communications and other electronic signals) and the [Defense Intelligence Agency](#) on military information. The [director of national intelligence](#) is the president's principal advisor on intelligence issues. They oversee this network of agencies with the aim of ensuring that they work together and deliver the best possible information to U.S. policymakers.

Department of the Treasury

The Department of the Treasury carries out policy on issues related to the U.S. and global economies and financial systems. The [secretary of the treasury](#) serves as one of the president's chief economic advisors and is responsible for addressing a range of economic concerns. The Treasury's ten bureaus, which include the [U.S. Mint](#) and the [Internal Revenue Service](#), do much of the department's work, which ranges from collecting tax to printing currency and executing economic sanctions.

Department of Homeland Security

Created soon after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the Department of Homeland Security works to counter and respond to risks to American security. It focuses on issues such as terrorism prevention, border security and immigration, disaster response, and cybersecurity. Familiar agencies within the department include [U.S. Customs and Border Protection](#), the [U.S. Secret Service](#), and the [Transportation Security Administration](#). The [secretary of homeland security](#) oversees the department and advises the president on relevant issues.

Department of Justice

The Department of Justice investigates and prosecutes possible violations of federal law. The Department of Justice represents the U.S. government in legal matters and works more broadly to prevent and respond to crime. Agencies such as the [FBI](#) and the [Drug Enforcement Administration](#) are part of the department, as are divisions focusing on particular areas of law, such as national security and civil rights. Leading the department is the [attorney general](#), who offers legal advice to the president and the heads of other departments.

Case Notes

Fuel a lively classroom discussion with simulations that put your students in the shoes of either the National Security Council or the UN Security Council.

CFR Education simulations can be run for several days or weeks and include background readings, videos, and assignments to help students understand the situation and their roles.

Instructions

How to Run a CFR Simulation Role-Play

The Issue

Tensions between China and Japan have sporadically erupted in the East China Sea over the five small, uninhabited islands the Japanese refer to as the Senkaku and the Chinese call the Diaoyu. The islands have been the subject of competing [sovereignty](#) claims by China, Japan, and Taiwan for decades. After a 2010 flare in tensions, Chinese and Japanese naval and air forces began to come in increasingly frequent contact, as both countries sought to demonstrate control over the islands. Both countries established [Air Defense Identification Zones](#) (ADIZ) and demanded that all aircraft give notice before entering them. Both of these zones include the disputed islands. Neither country has recognized the other's ADIZ, and both continue to send civilian and military aircraft into the East China Sea airspace, claiming that they are doing so legitimately under [international law](#). The increasing tensions in the East China Sea raised concern among observers about the risk of a miscalculation or accident sparking an armed clash between Asia's two largest powers.

The United States has maintained a long-standing policy of neutrality in the dispute. As tensions rose, policymakers in Washington grew concerned that competing U.S. interests and commitments could drag the country into the fray. On one hand, the United States is treaty bound to defend Japan in the event of an attack. On the other hand, the United States also has a strong interest in maintaining a stable relationship with China, a major trade partner. The dispute has forced the United States to consider what price it would be willing to pay to fulfill its treaty commitment to Japan's defense. This is particularly important given that a change in U.S. policy or a U.S. intervention could alter the United States' relationship with China or Japan. A change in policy could also jeopardize other pressing interests that require the cooperation of either country. These interests include nuclear nonproliferation, global economic growth, climate change [mitigation](#), and the safety of Americans abroad.

Decision Point—*Set in September 2016*

Over the Summer of 2016, tensions in the East China Sea suddenly ratcheted up. [In June](#), a Chinese frigate sailed through the disputed zone of the East China Sea. Although Chinese coast guard ships passed through the area before, this marked the first appearance of a Chinese naval vessel. [In the following weeks](#), China alleged that Japanese fighters intercepted its military aircraft over the disputed islands. During the incident, Japan's fighters briefly locked weapons radar on the Chinese aircraft. Two months later, hundreds of Chinese fishing vessels appeared in the waters near the disputed islands in the East China Sea. For the first time, these vessels were accompanied by seven Chinese law enforcement vessels.

With tensions showing no sign of easing, policymakers and media outlets alike have turned their eyes to Washington to see how the United States will respond. The president has convened a National Security Council meeting to consider possible action it could take to ease related tensions.

Background

Both China and Japan have made historical claims to [sovereignty](#) over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. Japan dates its control over the islands to 1895, when the government claimed the territory on the grounds that the islands were uninhabited—belonging to no one. For a number of years, a Japanese family privately owned the islands. After Japan was defeated in World War II, the country was occupied from 1945 to 1952 by the United States, which administered the islands. The United States retained control of the islands even after the end of its occupation of Japan because of the islands' strategic value as military bases.

In 1969, the islands attracted attention when a geological survey revealed that they likely sit atop [vast oil and gas reserves](#). Then, in 1971, as the United States was negotiating the return of the islands to Japan, both China and Taiwan began publicly issuing claims of ownership. Despite these declarations, President Richard M. Nixon concluded the agreement and gave control of the disputed islands back to Japan.

China's claim argued that Japan illegally annexed the islands during the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–95. Therefore, the islands should have been returned after World War II, when the Allied powers determined that Japan had to [return all the territories](#) it had taken from China. China has dated its sovereignty over the islands to the fourteenth-century. China also provided documents and maps to support this claim. Chinese officials have also described the islands as historically critical to their defenses, shielding China from attacks by the Japanese and other parties.

Taiwan made a similar claim that Japan illegally seized the islands in 1895 and that they should have been returned after World War II. Taiwan argued that when the islands were seized, they were considered a part of its territory. When Japan was ordered to return Taiwan's occupied territory in 1945, both the mainland and Taiwan belonged to the Republic of China. However, in 1949, the Chinese [civil war](#) led to a division of the country. The Communist Party established the People's Republic of China on the mainland. The government of the Republic of China fled to what is today Taiwan. China claims that Taiwan is a part of its territory, but Taiwan considers itself a separate country and argues that its control over the islands should have been restored following World War II.

Although the United States transferred control of the islands to Japan, it stayed neutral in the dispute that followed. Washington has stated that "a return of [administrative rights](#) over those islands to Japan, from which the rights were received, can in no way prejudice any underlying claims . . . nor can the United States, by giving back what it received, diminish the rights of other claimants."

Despite their disagreements over the islands, China, Japan, and Taiwan each tried to minimize the effects of the dispute on their overall relations. Although China challenged Japan over the islands in the early 1970s, the two countries still successfully negotiated a Treaty of Peace and Friendship in 1978. The two countries became increasingly interdependent trading partners as reforms over the 1980s and 1990s transformed China's economy and opened the country to global commerce. Taiwan also continued to assert its sovereignty over the islands but maintained close economic and political ties with Japan.

Tensions flared in 2010, when a Chinese fishing boat collided with Japanese coast guard vessels near the islands. The Japanese detained the captain of the Chinese vessel for more than two weeks. The Japanese charged the Chinese captain with obstructing the coast guard's official duties. China retaliated by temporarily halting exports of critical materials used in Japan's high-tech manufacturing industry. Chinese authorities also arrested four Japanese businessmen, accusing them of spying on a Chinese military installation. Japan and China soon resolved this initial flare in tensions. Japan agreed to release the captain and China agreed to release the detained businessmen. Nonetheless, the dispute remained a sensitive issue in both countries.

The issue continued to cause friction between China and Japan. In 2013, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe stated that his country would "[expel by force](#)" any Chinese landing on the islands. The next day, a Chinese spokesperson responded by labeling the islands a "[core interest](#)." China had typically used the term core interest only to describe regions it would supposedly defend by force, such as Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang. Later that year, China [announced a new ADIZ](#) over the East China Sea, an area that included the disputed islands.

China and Japan both continued to send their aircraft and naval vessels into the area, in the following years. Yet political leaders in Beijing and Tokyo have also recognized the danger inherent in this increasing military interaction. Chinese President Xi Jinping and Japanese Prime Minister Abe met in November 2014, [agreeing to resume various diplomatic talks](#), including over natural resources in the East China Sea. The two leaders have met repeatedly since, but tensions remain high.

Role of the United States

The United States has several interests in the East China Sea. The United States has agreed to defend Japan when territories under the latter's administration are threatened. The United States has maintained a military presence in Japan since its occupation of the country after World War II. As of 2016, some [54,000 troops](#) were stationed in and around Japan, contributing to the U.S. position as an Asia-Pacific power. The bulk of these forces have been stationed in Okinawa Prefecture, close to the disputed islands. The U.S. military command in Japan has maintained a close relationship with the country's Self-Defense Forces and often conducted joint exercises with it.

U.S. policy on the territorial dispute between China and Japan has focused on a de-escalation of military tensions and has sought a peaceful settlement of differences. The United States has also sought to address Japan's defense concerns about the increasing activity of Chinese forces in waters near Japan. Although the United States has maintained its position of neutrality on the issue of [sovereignty](#), it has also stated that the U.S. commitment to defend Japan includes any threat to the islands. In April 2014, Barack Obama became the first U.S. president to state that the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands fall under the protection of the U.S.-Japan security treaty.

Nevertheless, as tensions flared in 2016, the United States had an interest in a peaceful resolution. Japan remained a close ally, but stable relations with China were also a significant interest. Washington had sought to expand cooperation with Beijing in the previous years on other issues, such as nuclear proliferation, climate change, and the global economy.

Both China and Japan wield influence on the U.S. economy. The United States [conducted nearly \\$500 billion in trade with China](#) in 2015, and China invested [more than \\$60 billion](#) in the U.S. economy from 1990 to 2015. Similarly, Japan was responsible for some [846,000 jobs](#) in 2015, and annual trade in goods with Japan [totaled nearly \\$200 billion in 2015](#). Equally important, China and Japan each held more than \$1 trillion in [U.S. Treasury securities](#) as of September 2016.

A miscalculation or use of force between Asia's two largest powers therefore bore the risk of destabilizing the region, and disrupting the global economy. This would likely draw the United States into the dispute.

The United States also had an interest in maintaining and strengthening its presence in the Asia-Pacific region more broadly. In 2012, President Obama called for a "pivot to East Asia," seeking to heighten foreign policy focus on the region. To this end, the United States developed closer military ties with countries in the region, including Australia, Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, and Vietnam, in an attempt to counter China's emergence as a [great power](#). At the same time, the United States sought to bolster its relationship with China, supporting an array of confidence-building measures. The United States also invited the Chinese navy to participate in [joint military exercises](#) in 2014.

In Asia, the pivot was seen as a response to China's growing influence in the region. Many countries had raised concerns about China's rising power and the potential for China to use its regional dominance to restrict other countries' access to trade routes. China's Ministry of National Defense [criticized the U.S. pivot](#) as an effort to contain China. The Chinese foreign ministry repeatedly asked the United States to play a more neutral role in the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute. However, U.S. policymakers have seen Chinese behavior in and around the islands since 2010 as provocative.

Preparation and Role-Play

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[Instructions](#)

[Video: How to Run a CFR Simulation Role-Play](#)

Roles Overview

Print these [custom placards](#) for use during your simulation. If you need to edit them, make a copy to your Google Drive.

Roles

President

The president is the head of state and commander in chief of the U.S. Armed Forces. They preside over National Security Council (NSC) meetings and listens to the advice and information presented by others. The president is not expected to be an expert on any single subject, but instead draws on the expertise of the NSC to analyze options and choose what they feel

is the best policy to advance U.S. interests.

The president's goals are to

- select one or more policy options after considering the opinions and recommendations of NSC members; and
- balance and promote U.S. interests, with an eye toward both immediate goals and long-term foreign policy strategy.

Issues for Consideration

- In what way does this dispute affect U.S. national security? What interest does the United States have in the sovereignty of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and in the maritime security of the East China Sea?
- Should the United States continue its longstanding policy of neutrality toward the islands' sovereignty or should it adopt a new approach?
- What price should the United States be willing to bear—financial, human, and otherwise—to fulfill its treaty commitment to Japan's defense?
- How would various U.S. responses to the crisis affect the perception of American leadership among the United States' allies and friends?
- What effects might U.S. intervention have on other pressing issues, including nuclear proliferation, the global economy, climate change, and the safety of Americans abroad?
- What do the tensions in the East China Sea suggest about China's regional and global intentions? Should China succeed in acquiring control of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands through force or the threat of force, would it be likely to pursue the same option in territorial disputes with other governments in the region, including U.S. allies? What would this mean for U.S. foreign policy?

Vice President

The vice president must be ready at a moment's notice to assume the presidency if the commander in chief is unable to perform their duties. Vice presidents can play a relatively active role on the National Security Council (NSC), serving as a general advisor and freely advocating their own positions during meetings. In particular, the president may ask the vice president to serve as an independent voice, untethered to any of the agencies represented by other NSC participants. The president may also ask about the interaction between the issue at hand and the domestic political situation, including in Congress.

The vice president's goals are to

- provide advice to the president on any topic, including those overlooked by other NSC participants; and
- understand the range of views in Congress and work to build congressional and public support for the president's chosen approach.

Issues for Consideration

- In what way does this dispute affect U.S. national security? What interest does the United States have in the sovereignty of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and in the stability of the East China Sea?
- Should the United States continue its longstanding policy of neutrality toward the islands' sovereignty or should it adopt a new approach?
- What price should the United States be willing to bear—financial, human, and otherwise—to fulfill its treaty commitment to Japan's defense?
- What do political analysts mean when they say that miscalculations or accidents could lead to an armed conflict in the East China Sea?

- What are the attitudes of Congress and the general public toward this issue?
- How would various U.S. responses to the crisis affect the perception of American leadership among the United States' allies and friends?

Secretary of State

The Department of State maintains the U.S. diplomatic presence around the world, conducting foreign relations and using an on-the-ground perspective to generate country-specific knowledge. As head of the department, the secretary draws on this knowledge to present an authoritative view of the United States' bilateral relationships, the relationships between foreign countries, and the behavior and interests of foreign governments.

The secretary of state's goals are to

- serve as the president's principal foreign policy advisor; and
- analyze how policy options will affect the interests, reputation, and relationships of the United States.

Issues for Consideration

- How does the U.S. mutual security treaty with Japan affect U.S. policy options? How will the U.S. response to this conflict affect its credibility as a responsible treaty ally and its [bilateral](#) relationships with Japan and other allies?
- What are the major elements of U.S. relations with China and Japan and of Chinese-Japanese relations? What is the nature of each country's relationship with Taiwan?
- How might the U.S. foreign policy rebalance or "pivot" to Asia be affecting the East China Sea dispute?
- What tools of diplomacy would be most effective in easing tensions in the East China Sea?
- Should the United States establish or support crisis management tools such as hotlines or diplomatic forums in order to prevent escalation?
- What obstacles have prevented the creation of a code of conduct in the East China Sea?

Secretary of Defense

The secretary of defense is the principal defense policy advisor to the president, under whose direction they exercise authority over the Department of Defense. In National Security Council (NSC) meetings, the secretary analyzes the security situation in the relevant region and explains the likely implications of U.S. military involvement, both for the immediate crisis and for the United States' overall strategic position.

The secretary of defense's goals are to

- understand the options for and feasibility of any military action, as well as its possible outcomes; and
- identify ways to prevent the deterioration of a crisis to the point where it mandates U.S. military intervention.

Issues for Consideration

- What is current U.S. policy on this issue? Is the United States obligated to use force to defend Japan against attacks on the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands? What difference, if any, would it make if it were revealed whether China or Japan fired first?

- What tools of diplomacy in the military arena, such as joint training exercises, might help prevent further conflict in the East China Sea?
- If the United States declines to assist Japan, how would this affect U.S. relationships with Japan and other countries that maintain security guarantees with the United States? What would this mean for the global U.S. military presence, which relies on agreements with countries that host U.S. troops?
- Does China's rise as a [great power](#) suggest that an armed clash in the East China Sea or elsewhere in the region is inevitable? What steps by the United States might reduce the risk of such a clash?
- What would be the implications of China's using force to acquire control of the disputed islands?
- What would be the implications of an extended military deployment in the East China Sea for U.S. military capacity in other parts of the world?

Secretary of Energy

The secretary of energy leads the Department of Energy, which carries out U.S. policy on energy, environmental, and nuclear issues. In National Security Council (NSC) meetings, the secretary must consider the energy-related dimensions of foreign policy issues, any energy-related tools that might form part of the U.S. response, and the implications of policy decisions for the American energy supply and environment.

The secretary of energy's goals are to

- formulate and evaluate energy-related measures as part of policy options; and
- gauge the implications of foreign policy decisions on U.S. energy security and environmental concerns.

Issues for Consideration

- How could an intensification of this crisis affect U.S. access to energy supplies, especially oil, that are traded on global markets? How does the ongoing boom in U.S. energy production affect this calculation?
- How might damaged relations with China or Japan affect [multilateral](#) efforts to combat climate change?
- Is access to energy resources a root cause of this dispute? Why or why not?
- Are there energy-related steps the United States might take to ease tensions and facilitate a peaceful outcome of the crisis?

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff

The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS) is the highest-ranking member of the U.S. military and the principal military advisor to the president, the secretary of defense, the National Security Council (NSC), and the Homeland Security Council. The CJCS does not exercise command authority over U.S. troops. Instead, they work with the heads of the U.S. military services to provide advice to the president and other senior leaders.

The CJCS's goals are to

- serve as the president's military advisor on the NSC; and
- advise the president on specific military options and the corresponding risks, benefits, and implications.

Issues for Consideration

- What role is China’s rising military capability playing in the East China Sea dispute, and what does it mean for potential U.S. military involvement?
- What capabilities could Japanese military forces bring to the crisis, either alone or in combination with the United States?
- What are the implications of intervening or not intervening for the regional U.S. military presence, which relies on agreements with countries that host U.S. troops? What are the implications of an extended military deployment in the East China Sea for U.S. military capacity in other parts of the world?
- What is the state of military-to-military relationships among the United States, China, and Japan?
- What could the United States do to promote more transparency by the Chinese military and more trust among the three militaries?

Director of National Intelligence

The U.S. intelligence community consists of seventeen agencies and organizations that gather and analyze intelligence to help policymakers formulate and implement U.S. foreign policy. The director of national intelligence oversees this network of agencies. They focus on providing the latest relevant information to National Security Council (NSC) members and articulating the capabilities and interests of the intelligence community.

The director of national intelligence’s goals are to

- provide complete, accurate, and up-to-date information to the NSC on the situation under discussion; and
- serve as the principal advisor to the president and the NSC on intelligence matters.

Issues for Consideration

- What are the primary interests, motivations, and goals of China and Japan in this dispute? What factors, such as ideology, [nationalism](#), natural resources, broader strategy, and the personalities and interests of individual leaders, are driving each party’s behavior?
- How are the historical relationships among China, Japan, and Taiwan affecting their behavior?
- What role are different elements of each country’s government and society playing in this dispute? Examples of these elements include [nonstate actors](#) such as activists and fishing crews, the state-run media in China and, in Japan, the legislature and opposition parties.
- How is China likely to view any assistance provided by the United States to Japan? How is Japan likely to view an American decline to provide such assistance?

National Security Advisor

The national security advisor (NSA) has a special role in crisis management, serving as the “honest broker” for the national security policy process. Although the president makes final decisions, the NSA is responsible for ensuring that they have all the necessary information, that a full range of viable policy options has been articulated, that the prospects for success and failure have been identified, that any legal issues have been addressed, and that all members of the National Security Council (NSC) have had the opportunity to contribute.

The national security advisor’s goals are to

- facilitate the president’s consideration of issues by keeping the NSC discussion on track and guiding it toward concrete policy options, and

- build trust as an honest broker among the other NSC participants.

Issues for Consideration

- What is current U.S. policy on this issue? Is the United States obligated to use force to defend Japan against attacks on the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands? What difference, if any, would it make if it were revealed whether China or Japan fired first?
- In what way does this dispute affect U.S. national security? What interest does the United States have in the [sovereignty](#) of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and in the stability of the East China Sea?
- How would various U.S. responses to the crisis affect the perception of American leadership among the United States' allies and friends?
- What effects might U.S. intervention, whether diplomatic, military, or economic, have on other pressing national security issues, including nuclear proliferation, the global economy, climate change, and the safety of Americans abroad?
- What are the most important factors for the president to balance when making a decision? What types of analysis would be most useful for other members of the NSC to present?

Chief of Staff

The chief of staff oversees the Executive Office of the President, which provides the president with support to govern effectively. This post has traditionally been home to many of the president's closest advisors. In National Security Council (NSC) meetings, the chief of staff ensures that the president has the necessary analysis on the full range of factors relevant to the case, including the U.S. political situation. They also guide the process of implementing and communicating presidential decisions.

The chief of staff's goals are to

- highlight the domestic implications of U.S. foreign policy choices; and
- develop strategies to carry out the president's policy and communicate it to U.S. and international audiences.

Issues for Consideration

- What does U.S. public opinion say about the East China Sea dispute? What would be the domestic political implications of various policy options, including military action that resulted in American casualties?
- How could the president best articulate her or his decision and communicate it to the American people and the world?
- What steps would be required by the U.S. government, including the executive branch and Congress, to implement various policy options?
- What are the most important factors for the president to balance when making a decision? What types of analysis would be most useful for other members of the NSC to present?

Attorney General

The attorney general is the head of the Department of Justice and the chief lawyer of the U.S. government. The department represents the United States in legal matters, including by prosecuting violations of federal law. In National Security Council (NSC) meetings, the attorney general gives the president advice and opinions on the legal aspects of policies under consideration.

The Attorney General's goals are to

- consider the legal elements and implications of U.S. foreign policy options; and
- ensure that any policies decided by the NSC are in compliance with domestic and international law.

Issues for Consideration

- Are there any options for international or regional adjudication that would help the parties resolve the dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands?
- What are U.S. obligations under treaties or other legal agreements relevant to the dispute?
- What does international law say about maritime claims of the type at issue in this dispute? What are the merits of claims made by the parties over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, and what do these merits suggest about the desirability of U.S. involvement in the dispute?
- Under what conditions does the president have legal authority to use military force? What is the role of Congress in this context?

Secretary of the Treasury

The Department of the Treasury carries out policy on issues related to the U.S. and global economies and financial systems. The secretary of the treasury, as head of this department, serves as one of the president's chief economic advisors. In National Security Council (NSC) meetings, they analyze the economic dimensions of foreign policy issues and weigh the potential impact of policy options on U.S. economic concerns, including growth, trade and investment, and the position of the U.S. dollar.

The secretary of the treasury's goals are to

- serve as a senior presidential advisor on economic policy; and
- determine how foreign policy options might affect the U.S. economy and financial system, the global economy, and economic relations between the United States and others.

Issues for Consideration

- What are the possible effects of the East China Sea dispute on U.S. trade and investment relations with the countries involved? How do U.S. business leaders view the dispute?
- What effect would prolonged tension or conflict in the East China Sea have on American exports and imports? What effect would this have on American workers and consumers?
- Might China reduce or stop its purchases of U.S. debt if the United States intervenes militarily in the dispute? How would such an action affect the U.S. economy?
- Are there any economic incentives the United States could offer to encourage the parties to resolve the dispute peacefully? Are there any economic punishments the United States could impose?
- What economic benefits would China or Japan derive from being able to exploit natural resources in the area of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands?

U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations

The role of the U.S. permanent representative to the United Nations (UN) is to advance U.S. foreign policy interests in the bodies and forums of the UN system. Reporting to the secretary of state, the permanent representative helps formulate and

articulate the U.S. position on all political and security matters under discussion at the UN. At National Security Council (NSC) meetings, they outline policy steps available to the United States at the UN and advises NSC participants on the positions and actions of other UN member states.

The U.S. permanent representative to the UN's goals are to

- advise the president and secretary of state on the diplomatic actions the United States can or should take at the UN; and
- promote the United States' interests and values at the UN.

Issues for Consideration

- What role can or should the United Nations and its component parts play in this dispute?
- What actions aimed at reducing tensions and advancing possible resolutions of the dispute are available to the United States at the UN?
- Should the United States call for an emergency session of the UN Security Council to address this crisis, and why or why not?
- What is the Chinese view of addressing this type of dispute in the UN or other [multilateral](#) forums? What actions have the Chinese and other parties taken regarding this dispute at the UN?
- What role might the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and other UN documents play in identifying a resolution to the dispute?
- What position do other UN member states, particularly those on the UN Security Council, take on the [sovereignty](#) of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands?

General Advisor to the President

The general advisor offers analysis and recommendations that are unconstrained by the interests of any department or agency. They are tasked with providing a comprehensive assessment of the situation at hand and ideas for policy options that serve U.S. interests.

The general advisor's goals are to

- understand the breadth of the issue and outline its stakes for the United States; and
- advise the president on the range of policy options proposed by all NSC members.

Issues for Consideration

- In what way does this dispute affect U.S. national security? What interest does the United States have in the [sovereignty](#) of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and in the maritime security of the East China Sea?
- What policy tools, such as hotlines, diplomatic forums, joint military training exercises, adjudication, and economic incentives, could the United States offer to help prevent escalation and promote a peaceful resolution of the dispute?
- What are the primary interests, motivations, and goals of China and Japan in this dispute? What factors, such as ideology, [nationalism](#), natural resources, broader strategy, and the personalities and interests of individual leaders, are driving each party's behavior?
- What effects might U.S. intervention have on other pressing issues, including nuclear proliferation, the global economy, climate change, and the safety of Americans abroad?
- What are the attitudes of Congress and the general public toward this issue? What might be the domestic political consequences of a U.S. response perceived as "weak" or "strong?"

Guide to the Memorandum

All National Security Council (NSC) members except the president will write a position memo before the role-play. You can find more details about writing position memos under Student Resources. The president will write a presidential directive after the role-play. More details about that are also under Student Resources.

What is a memorandum?

- A memo is a formal, succinct written message from one person, department, or organization to another. It is an important form of formal, written communication in the workplace. A memo is generally short, to the point, and free of flowery language and extraneous information. A memo is typically informative or decision-oriented and is formatted in a way that helps readers quickly grasp the main points.
- In the NSC, memos consider, coordinate, and articulate policy options. They help analyze, evaluate, advocate, and channel those policy options and decisions within the bureaucracy.
- Memos also function as historical record. Many memos related to NSC discussions and presidential decisions are filed in government archives. Some are later declassified and released to help people understand how policy was devised at a given time in U.S. history.

Guide to the Role-Play

- There is no right or wrong way to participate in a role-play, but the better prepared you are, the more likely you will be able to advance a position effectively, and the more you and your peers will get out of the experience.
- Be patient during the role-play. Do not hold back from sharing your perspective, but be sure to give others a chance to do the same.
- Where there are competing interests, make the judgment calls that you would make if you were a government official, as informed by your earlier consideration of potential trade-offs. Ensure that the consequences of various decisions are carefully weighed.

Round	Timing	Objectives	Procedural Notes
One:	2 to 3 minutes per participant	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Present initial positions to the president. 2. Investigate the nuances of the positions through questioning. 3. Clarify the central questions to be debated. 	Each participant presents their position statement. If time permits, the president may ask questions to understand each NSC member's position and bring out the essential questions they wish to debate.
Two	30 to 60 minutes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Clarify the obstacles, risks, opportunities, and threats. 2. Evaluate the various positions on their merits. 	This is the debate portion of the role-play, when participants can defend their recommendations against others' and identify potential areas of compromise agreement.
Three	30 to 60 minutes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Narrow the options to a few comprehensive and well- focused strategies that the president prefers. 2. Provide the president with clear recommendations (from NSC members), perhaps as a consensus or through a vote. 3. Arrive at a final presidential decision. 	This round should start with the president's stating one to three preferred options to be fleshed out.

Wrap-up

Fuel a lively classroom discussion with simulations that put your students in the shoes of either the National Security Council or the UN Security Council.

CFR Education simulations can be run for several days or weeks and include background readings, videos, and assignments to help students understand the situation and their roles.

Instructions

Role-Play How-To Video

After the debate and deliberation close, the president will announce his or her decision, to be later finalized in the form of a written presidential directive. If time permits, you will participate in a debrief following the president's announcement.

Be active in this debrief. The role-play might seem to be the most challenging part of the experience, but the debrief is equally important. It will reinforce what you learned during the role-play exercise and refine your analytical skills. It will also force you to step out of your role and to view the case from a personal perspective. You will have the opportunity to discuss any challenges you encountered as you worked through the discussion with your peers and how you felt about the final presidential decision.

The debrief will close with a reflection on the complexities and challenges of crafting foreign policy. This should help clarify your understanding of what you learned and answer any lingering questions. This exercise will also assist you in completing your final assignment, a written reflection.

What Actually Happened

Ultimately, China and Japan managed to prevent further escalation in the Summer of 2016. The United States observed the situation closely but was not drawn into taking action. Later that year, the United States and other Pacific nations held joint exercises with the Chinese navy in a sign of continued cooperation.

In 2018, Beijing and Tokyo both expressed a desire to “reset” [bilateral](#) ties. To this end, the two countries [resumed economic talks](#) for the first time in seven years and agreed to establish a crisis hotline to avoid unintended military incidents in the East China Sea. The hotline was delayed, but ultimately established in the [spring of 2023](#). In 2019, China and Japan also took steps to plan an official state visit by Xi Jinping to Tokyo. As of 2023, however, little progress toward a state visit has been made.

Meanwhile, neither country has lessened its involvement in the East China Sea. Japan has moved to build up its military strength, in part to counter Chinese activity in the region. China and Japan have each increased their military capabilities in the area, installing radar and missile systems and continuing to conduct military drills. The United States has participated in joint exercises with Japan, flying its aircraft over the East China Sea. Despite increased dialogue between the two countries, the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands remain a potential source of conflict.

Reflecting on the Experience

The following questions are proposed to guide the discussion in the in-class debrief. This is not an exhaustive list and may vary depending on how your role-play exercise unfolded. If your class or group does not hold a debrief, these questions will nonetheless help you reflect on the role-play and write your policy review memo:

- Which issues received adequate attention during the role-play? Which, if any, received excessive attention or were left unresolved?
- Did the group consider long-term strategic concerns, or was it able to focus only on the immediate issue and the short-term implications of policy options?
- Which U.S. interests did the group or the president prioritize in the presidential directive and why? Were you comfortable with this prioritization?
- What techniques did you use to convince others that your policy position was the best option? What were successful strategies employed by others?
- What were the most significant challenges to your position? Did any make you rethink or adjust your position?
- Did your points cause anyone else to change their arguments or position?
- What political, economic, and other issues arose that you had not previously considered?
- If you could go back, what would you have done differently in presenting and advocating your point of view?

Written Reflection

The written reflection is your final assignment in the simulation. In the debrief discussion after the role-play, you and your peers went beyond the role you played and thought about the issue from a variety of perspectives. Now that the National

Security Council discussion and debrief are behind you, you can consider whether you personally support your recommended policy given the full spectrum of arguments and considerations that arose. Shedding your institutional role and writing from a personal point of view, you will craft a policy review memo that outlines and reflects on the policy options discussed, incorporating and critiquing the president's decision where appropriate.

If you played the role of president in the simulation, your memo should still reflect your personal opinion. You can comment on the course of action you ordered as president, further justify it, write more extensively on the options you dismissed, or suggest and support alternate options.

No matter which role you played originally, take into account all you have learned. Your instructor or facilitator will want to see whether and how your understanding of the issue and of the policymaking process has evolved from that expressed in your position memo.

More details about the written reflection are available under Student Resources.

Student Resources

Fuel a lively classroom discussion with simulations that put your students in the shoes of either the National Security Council or the UN Security Council.

CFR Education simulations can be run for several days or weeks and include background readings, videos, and assignments to help students understand the situation and their roles.

[Instructions](#) [How-To Video](#)

Reading List

Essential Resources

- [“Dispute in the East China Sea Case Study,”](#) YouTube video, 2:43, posted by CFR Education, Nov 14, 2016.
- [“China’s Maritime Disputes,”](#) Council on Foreign Relations, 2013.
- Lindsay Maizland and Nathanael Cheng, [“The U.S.-Japan Security Alliance,”](#) CFR.org Backgrounder, November 4, 2021.
- Sheila A. Smith, [“A Sino-Japanese Clash in the East China Sea,”](#) Council on Foreign Relations, April 2013.
- Eric Posner, [“Why are China and Japan Inching Toward War Over Five Tiny Islands?,”](#) *Slate*, February 25, 2014.
- [“Explained: Diaoyu/Senkaku Island Dispute,”](#) *South China Morning Post*, February 21, 2019.
- Liu Dan, [“Diaoyu Islands Dispute: A Chinese Perspective,”](#) *Diplomat*, August 8, 2018.
- [“How Uninhabited Islands Soured China-Japan Ties,”](#) *BBC*, November 10, 2014.
- Michael D. Swaine, [“China’s Maritime Disputes in the East and South China Seas,”](#) Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 4, 2013.
- [YOUTUBE PLAYLIST](#)

Additional Resources

- [“China’s Maritime Disputes in the South China Sea and East China Sea,”](#) YouTube video, 7:25, posted by CFR Education, Sep 17, 2013.
- Elizabeth C. Economy, [“When Xi Meets Obama: Why China Won’t Get What It Wants Most,”](#) CFR.org, September 11, 2015.
- Sheila A. Smith, [“Japan, China, and the Tide of Nationalism,”](#) CFR.org, September 19, 2012.
- Amrita Jash, [“Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands Dispute: Identity versus Territory,”](#) Asia & The Pacific Policy Society, January 11, 2016.

- Parag Khanna, “[Avoiding World War III in Asia](#),” *National Interest*, June 17, 2018.
- Rodion Ebbighausen, “[China Sea Neighbors Fight for Resources](#),” *Deutsche Welle*, April 11, 2013.
- Akiyama Masahiro, “[Geopolitical Considerations of the Senkaku Islands](#),” *Review of Island Studies*, August 7, 2013.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, “[Senkaku Islands Q&A](#),” June 5, 2013.
- David A. Welch, “[What’s an ADIZ?](#)” *Foreign Affairs*, December 9, 2013.

How to Conduct Research and Use Sources

Research and Preparation

- Draw on the case notes, additional case materials, and your own research to familiarize yourself with
 - the goals of the NSC in general and of this NSC meeting in particular;
 - the U.S. interests at stake in the case and their importance to national security;
 - your role and your department or agency, including its purpose and objectives in the government and on the NSC;
 - the aspects of the case most relevant to your role;
 - the elements that a comprehensive policy proposal on the case should contain; and
 - the major debates or conflicts likely to occur during the role-play. You need not resolve these yourself, of course, but you will want to anticipate them in order to articulate and defend your position in the NSC deliberation.
- Set goals for your research. Know which questions you seek to answer and refer back to the case notes, additional readings, and research leads as needed.
- Make a list of questions that you feel are not fully answered by the given materials. What do you need to research in greater depth? Can your peers help you understand these subjects?
- Using the case materials, additional readings, and discussions with your peers, weigh the relative importance of the U.S. interests at stake in the case. Determine where trade-offs might be required and think through the potential consequences of several different policy options.
- Conduct your research from the perspective of your assigned role, rather than the particular perspective of the person who currently inhabits that office. Make sure to consider the full range of U.S. interests at stake in the case, whether diplomatic, military, economic, environmental, moral, or otherwise. This will help you strengthen your policy position and anticipate and prepare for debates in the role-play.
- Consider what questions or challenges the president or other NSC members might raise regarding the options you propose and have responses ready.

Sources

- Consult a wide range of sources to gain a full perspective on the issues raised in the case and on policy options. Seek out sources that you may not normally use, such as publications from the region(s) under discussion, unclassified and declassified government documents, and specialized policy reports and journals.
- Remember: Wikipedia is not a reliable source, but it can be a reasonable starting point. The citations at the bottom of each entry often contain useful resources.
- Just as policymakers tackle issues that are controversial and subject to multiple interpretations, so will you in your preparation for the writing assignments and role-play. For this reason, evaluate your sources carefully. Always ask yourself:
 - When was the information produced? Is it still relevant and accurate?
 - Who is writing or speaking and why? Does the author or speaker have a particular motivation or affiliation that you should take into account?
 - Where is the information published? Determine the political leanings of journals, magazines, and newspapers by reading several articles published by each one.
 - Who is the intended audience?
 - Does the author provide sufficient evidence for their analysis or opinion? Does the author cite reliable and impartial sources?
 - Does the information appear one-sided? Does it consider multiple points of view?

- Is the language measured or inflammatory? Do any of the points appear exaggerated?
- Take note of and cite your sources correctly. This is important not just for reasons of academic integrity, but so that you can revisit them as needed.
- Ask your teacher which style they prefer you use when citing sources, such as Modern Language Association (MLA), Chicago Manual of Style, or Associated Press (AP).

How to Write a Position Memo

- The first memo everyone (except the president) writes is called a position memo. It is written from the perspective of your assigned role. It presents a set of policy options for consideration by the NSC and recommends one of them to the president. The recommendation, or position, outlined in this memo is the one you will present during the role-play. (Keep in mind you may change your position as a result of the role-play discussion.)
- The position memo will help your fellow NSC members consider the issue efficiently and facilitate decision-making by the president. Equally important, it will help you clarify your understanding of the case by forcing you to identify the essential facts and viable policy options.
- If you have been assigned a specific role, remember that you are writing from the point of view of the department, agency, or office you represent, and not directly mimicking the policies or opinions of the person currently in that office (unless your instructor says otherwise). If needed, return to your case role description to understand the interests and position of your institution as well as goals of your role. Using the perspective of your institutional position, you will outline a set of options to address the crisis. Make sure you take into account the pros, cons, and ramifications of each policy option as it pertains to your role, institution, and as it is informed by your reading of the case materials and further research. Also, anticipate critiques of your proposed policy and incorporate your response into the memo. Doing so will help you prepare for the role-play.

Note: If you are assigned the role of president, you will not write a position memo. Instead, you will write a two-page presidential directive (PD) at the conclusion of the role-play. You will address the PD, which will follow a memo format, to the NSC members and inform them of your final decision regarding the policy option or options to be implemented (see below).

If your teacher has chosen to assign you the role of general advisor to the president, you will not need to write the position memo from a particular institutional position. Instead, you will have the flexibility to approach the issue from your own perspective, incorporating a comprehensive assessment of the crisis into your argument.

Click [here](#) to see a sample of a position memo.

How to Write a Presidential Directive

The format of the presidential directive is simpler than that of a position memo. A directive contains a record of the policy option or options that the president has chosen as well as the accompanying orders to various parts of the government with details on how to carry out these decisions.

- Start with a short paragraph describing the purpose of the memo. Everyone you are writing to was in the NSC meeting, so only brief context is needed.
- Explain in numbered paragraphs the decisions you have made, why you have made them, and any details regarding how you want the decisions carried out.
- Explain the communications strategy for the decision, considering both relevant foreign governments and the public. Also, consider that you may wish to keep certain elements of the decision secret from the public.

- Include any additional details before you sign.
- Be sure to include all the information necessary for NSC members to understand and carry out your intentions.

Click [here](#) to see a sample presidential directive.

How to Prepare for Role-Play

During the simulated NSC meeting, you will meet to debate and discuss U.S. policy options in response to the issues outlined in the case. Consistent with the NSC's mission to advise the president, you should raise the issues that are most important for the president to consider. This will enable them to make the most informed decision on policy options. Though you may or may not agree with this decision, your responsibility as an NSC member is to provide the best possible analysis and advice from the perspective of your role.

Role-play Guidelines

1. Stay in your role at all times. (Keep in mind that your role refers to the perspective and duties of the agency or department you represent, and not the specific person currently holding office of the role.)
2. Follow the general protocol for speaking.
 1. Signaling to Speak
 1. The National Security Advisor (NSA) will administer the meeting and should decide on a speaking order. Wait to be called on by the NSA.
 2. If you would like to speak out of turn, signal to the NSA, perhaps by raising a hand or a placard, and wait until the NSA calls on you.
 2. Form of Speech
 1. All NSC members (like the president in the following example) can be addressed as Mr./Madam/[Mx.](#) President or simply President [last name]. Before you begin the role-play, share which title you would like to use, and make sure to respect the title your fellow NSC members choose to use as well.
 2. Do not exceed predetermined time limits. If you exceed these limits, the NSA will cut you off.
 3. Frame your comments with a purpose and stay on topic. Remember that you must advise the president so that they can reach a decision on a precise policy question.
3. Listening
 1. Take notes while others are speaking.
 2. Refrain from whispering or conducting side conversations.
 3. Applause and boing are not appropriate. Your words will be the most effective tool to indicate agreement or disagreement.

How to Write a Written Reflection

Guidelines

- **Subject (one short paragraph):** Offer a brief statement about the significance of the issue as it relates to U.S. [foreign policy](#) and national security. Provide just enough information about the crisis so that the reader can understand the purpose and importance of your memo. Be sure to include an initial statement of whether you agree or disagree with the

president's decision.

- **Options and analysis (one paragraph per option):** Present and analyze the options discussed during the debate, deliberation, or debrief. Discuss their drawbacks, benefits, and resource needs. Be sure to acknowledge any weaknesses or disadvantages of the proposed options.
- **Recommendation and justification (several paragraphs):** Identify and explain your preferred policy option or options in more detail. Here, you can explain why you personally favor one or more of the recommendations that you initially presented or the president chose, or different options entirely. If you choose to support the options you presented in your position memo, make sure to justify why you feel yours is still the best position.
- **Reflection (one to two paragraphs):** Discuss how your position and the presidential directive are similar; if they are not, discuss how they are different. Use this section to give your thoughts on what the president should have included in their directive, or what you would have done differently. Remember, this is from your point of view; you are no longer advocating on behalf of a department or agency.

Click [here](#) to see a full example of a written reflection.

Dispute in the East China Sea in 2016 (NSC)

Educator Simulation Guide

Global Literacy

Global literacy is the ability to understand and engage effectively in today's interconnected world. Today's interdependent global economy and geopolitical landscape connect America's interests more than ever to the actions and interests of other countries and their citizens. To ensure students understand this interconnected world, they need to be globally literate. [Learn more about global literacy.](#)

Case Overview

Set in September 2016. Japan has long maintained an [Air Defense Identification Zone \(ADIZ\)](#) that encompasses the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, over which it has administrative control. China declared its own ADIZ in 2013, stating it had the right to take military action against any aircraft that entered the zone without prior notification. Japan, along with the United States and South Korea, has protested the Chinese ADIZ and refuses to conform to China's demand for prior notification. Japanese civilian and military aircraft continue to operate in the skies above the East China Sea. The intensification of the island dispute has raised political sensitivities in both countries, making it difficult for leaders to ignore the increasing interaction between ships and aircraft in the area. China now sends its coast guard to patrol the islands alongside Japan's coast guard. The changing balance of military and economic power in Asia, growing popular distrust between the two nations, and deep dependence on the sea lanes for access to energy resources and trade have heightened concerns that Japan and China may inadvertently end up in an armed clash. Miscalculation by their militaries or an unforeseen incident provoked by fishermen or [sovereignty](#) activists could trigger a crisis. Washington does not take a position on the disputed sovereignty claims, but the United States has a treaty commitment to defend Japanese territory, including territory under its administrative control, against attack or the threat of attack. Because the use of force between China and Japan would likely lead to U.S. involvement, Washington has a stake in deterring and dissuading aggression by either party. The U.S. government has decided to convene a National Security Council (NSC) meeting to consider any action it should take to ease tensions in the East China Sea and to evaluate its long-term policy in the region.

Decision Point

Over the Summer of 2016, tensions in the East China Sea suddenly ratcheted up. [In June](#), a Chinese frigate sailed through the disputed zone of the East China Sea. Although Chinese coast guard ships passed through the area before, this marked the first appearance of a Chinese naval vessel. [In the following weeks](#), China alleged that Japanese fighters intercepted its military aircraft over the disputed islands. During the incident, Japan's fighters briefly locked weapons radar on the Chinese aircraft. Two months later, hundreds of Chinese fishing vessels appeared in the waters near the disputed islands in the East China Sea. For the first time, these vessels were accompanied by seven Chinese law enforcement vessels.

With tensions showing no sign of easing, policymakers and media outlets alike have turned their eyes to Washington to see how the United States will respond. The president has convened a National Security Council meeting to consider possible action it could take to ease related tensions.

Learning Goals

CFR Education extended simulations use a variety of pedagogical tools to create an effective, meaningful, and memorable learning experience for students that builds their global literacy. Students will develop crucial skills such as critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity. Students will complete authentic assessments that feel relevant: instead of five-paragraph essays and book reports, students will write policy memos and participate in a role-play of a meeting of a foreign policy-making body. There are no right or wrong answers in actual policy deliberations, and there are none here, either; students will walk away from this experience with an appreciation for the complexity of policy questions.

In this simulation, students will learn about the National Security Council, as well as meeting these learning outcomes specific to this simulation:

- Students will understand the multifaceted nature of U.S. interests in the East China Sea dispute between China and Japan.
- Students will consider how a miscalculation or use of force between China and Japan would destabilize the region and disrupt the global economy.
- Students will evaluate the various options that the United States has to help resolve the dispute in the East China Sea.

Concepts and Issues

Concepts

- [Great power](#) rivalry
- Preventative measures
- Dispute resolution
- [Sovereignty](#)
- [Nationalism](#)
- [Alliances](#)

Issues

- U.S. treaty responsibility to Japan
- Relations between established and rising powers in Asia
- Trade and investment relationships among China, Japan, and the United States
- Balance of power in the Pacific

Policy Options: Educator's Guide

This section presents context, potential benefits and drawbacks, and other information about the policy options outlined in the case that you may find helpful as you guide the role-play and assess students.

The United States is especially concerned about the escalating tensions between Japan and China in the East China Sea. The growing interactions between the two nations' militaries, the lack of a political dialogue on risk reduction, and the sensitivity of public opinion in both nations, as well as in Taiwan, have created a challenging situation.

[The United States has a number of options](#) as it considers its role in helping to resolve the ECS dispute. Washington could use its leverage to persuade Tokyo and Beijing to reduce their maritime and air forces in the region, or encourage greater military-to-military communication (such as through the development of hotlines). It could also express greater vocal support for either China or Japan. However, if it were to lean in favor of China, Japan and other U.S. allies in the region could begin to reassess their close relationships with the United States. On the other hand, if Washington were to demonstrate its support for Tokyo,

Japan could interpret this backing as a blank check to behave recklessly, thereby escalating the conflict.

The United States could help build frameworks of cooperation for the East China Sea, working to reinforce the 2008 joint energy agreement and other mechanisms for resource sharing. It could attempt to persuade the parties to accept international [arbitration](#) on this dispute or to involve other regional players such as South Korea.

Before considering specific policy steps, NSC members should clearly establish which objective they believe the United States should aim to achieve. Two broad objectives are possible:

- The United States maintains its current position of neutrality over the [sovereignty](#) of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and maintains or arrives at a stable arrangement, whatever it may be. In this case, the only overriding goal is to avoid hostilities.
- The United States helps establish a new state of affairs, such as recognized Japanese sovereignty over the islands, recognized Chinese sovereignty, or a new status agreed to by all parties concerned.

NSC members' thoughts about the desired goal are likely to affect the applicability of the various policy steps available. Many of these steps can be undertaken together or sequentially.

Use diplomatic measures to reduce tensions

Washington could use its leverage to try to persuade Beijing and Tokyo to reduce their military forces in the region, or to encourage greater military-to-military communication. It could further urge the two parties to return to negotiations to resolve the dispute peacefully. If China and Japan cannot come to a peaceful resolution alone, the United States could attempt to persuade the parties to accept international arbitration and bring the matter before the United Nations' International Court of Justice (ICJ). It could also express greater vocal support for either China or Japan, in hopes that this support would prompt the other party to stand down. However, if the United States were to lean in favor of China, Japan and other allies in the region could reassess their close relationships with the United States. And if Washington were to express support for Tokyo, Japan could interpret the support as a blank check to behave recklessly, thereby escalating the conflict.

A diplomatic approach has several advantages. If successful, it could peacefully achieve a lasting deescalation of tensions in the region. It also entails the least risk of drawing U.S. military forces into conflict and would help maintain stability in the region. Further, a diplomatic approach also poses a lower risk of damage to the United States' economic relationships with China and Japan. That China and Japan can be persuaded to come to the negotiating table, however, is no guarantee. Meanwhile, Japan could criticize the United States for failing to enact a robust response that signals its commitment to Japan's defense.

Use U.S. military forces to prevent escalation

The United States could use its military and naval forces to try to contain the incident and prevent escalation. Those efforts could involve offering search-and-rescue assistance for the downed aircraft, increasing naval and air patrols in the East China Sea, and conducting military exercises with Japan to increase readiness and demonstrate U.S. commitment to Japanese defense. Such action could keep Chinese and Japanese military forces separate, possibly avoiding further incidents, and deter escalation on the part of the Chinese. It would further signal U.S. resolve in the face of China's military growth.

At the same time, involving U.S. military personnel in the dispute carries significant risks. The increase of military presence in the region could raise the chances of an accident or miscalculation; any U.S. military response would need to be effectively communicated to both Chinese and Japanese military forces in the area to minimize the risk of an unintended incident. Moreover, any escalation in the situation could put U.S. military personnel at risk. This response could also damage the U.S. relationship with China.

No action

The United States could simply maintain its neutrality and allow China and Japan to resolve the incident on their own. This option would avoid the risks that the other options pose, both to U.S. military personnel and to U.S. relations with China and

Japan. However, taking no action could also signal a weak U.S. commitment to its presence in the Asia-Pacific region. Further, if China and Japan fail to come to a peaceful resolution and the situation escalates, the United States could face more forceful calls to honor its treaty commitment to defend Japan, requiring greater U.S. involvement than before.

The nature of this scenario—a dangerous situation that could easily turn more violent—could leave room for steps from both categories of policy measures. Still, some of the steps could be most practical in the short-term. Others will take more time and would thus be viable only if an immediate crisis is averted. NSC members may wish to advise that the United States take certain steps now while outlining other steps to be taken if the situation evolves in certain ways.

As noted, the determination of the United States' overall goal in this situation will also shape consideration of particular policy steps. If, for example, policymakers decide to maintain U.S. neutrality over the islands' status, diplomatic steps such as encouraging [bilateral](#) or [multilateral](#) discussions, or encouraging the parties to seek arbitration, could be desirable. Policymakers could also find it useful to reiterate the current U.S. policy, including the applicability of the security guarantee with Japan. If a crisis erupts, a U.S. desire to maintain neutrality could dictate urging the parties to stand down and offering assistance to both sides. If, on the other hand, policymakers wish to change the U.S. stance, they may seek to steer any diplomatic initiatives more directly in the desired direction and to respond militarily to a crisis in a way that advances the new U.S. aim.

Running the Simulation

CFR Education extended simulations are project-based learning activities. Project-based learning (PBL) [leads to](#) better learning outcomes and improves skills, and is more fun than traditional instructional methods. The website that students will navigate throughout the simulation is divided into several parts:

In the **NSC Guide**, students will learn about the National Security Council, the body they will be simulating. Included are details on its history, how it works, who its major players are, and more. There is also a video interview with experts who have served on the body.

In the **Case Notes**, students dive into the actual situation they will be trying to solve in their simulation. At the beginning is a clear decision point: the question that students will debate during the role-play. This is followed by detailed background material and a discussion of the role that the United States plays.

Preparation and Role-Play includes details on the various roles students could take on, guidelines for the memorandum they will write (the student playing the role of president has a slightly different task), as well as an outline of how the discussion will flow during the role-play.

The **Wrap-Up** is an important part of the project and includes reflection questions and guidelines for reflecting in a class discussion and in a second memorandum. For historical cases, this section also includes a short description of how the decision point was addressed by policymakers in real life.

The simulation also includes **Student Resources**, which include a reading list to support research, additional directions and exemplars for writing assignments, and other tips students may find helpful.

Tips for Role-Play

Once students have read the simulation and prepared their position memos, here is how we recommend structuring the role-play:

Round	Timing	Objectives	Procedural Notes
One	2 to 3 minutes per participant	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Present initial positions to the president. 2. Investigate the nuances of the positions through questioning. 3. Clarify the central questions to be debated. 	Each participant presents their position statement. If time permits, the president may ask questions to understand each NSC member's position and bring out the essential questions they wish to debate.
Two	30 to 60 minutes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Clarify the obstacles, risks, opportunities, and threats. 2. Evaluate the various positions on their merits. 	This is the debate portion of the role-play, when participants can defend their recommendations against others' and identify potential areas of compromise agreement.
Three	30 to 60 minutes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Narrow the options to a few comprehensive and well-focused strategies that the president prefers. 2. Provide the president with clear recommendations (from NSC members), perhaps as a consensus or through a vote. 3. Arrive at a final presidential decision. 	This round should start with the president's stating one to three preferred options to be fleshed out.

Tips for the National Security Advisor

In Round 1, call on everyone for their opening statements, keeping to a strict time limit—if students have more to say, they can say it in Round 2. The president doesn't have a specific time limit, but you should keep things moving by not letting the president get bogged down on one issue or policy option.

In Round 2, students do not need to follow a prescribed speaking order; you can call on them as they raise their placards. Work to include everyone and prevent anyone from dominating. As debate goes on, remind students they can change their minds. If it will help move things along, help students see when they are agreeing with each other without realizing it. Feel free to pose questions or propose discussion topics if you feel that certain issues are not receiving adequate consideration. Ultimately, it's up to you to judge when Round 2 has run its course and it is time to move on to Round 3. You will want to move on when all policy options have been discussed and all of the president's questions have been answered. The room does not need to come to a consensus—every option just needs to have a fair airing.

In Round 3, ask students to make a final case for their positions. If, during the course of the discussion, some students seem to have coalesced into blocs, you could ask one student to present on behalf of the bloc. If consensus seems possible, you could work toward it; if not, just make sure each option has been clearly presented to the president. Remember, the NSC is not democratic and is an advisory, not decision-making, body. There is no vote, and the president does not need to choose the most popular option.

Tips for the President

Before Round 1, review all the position memos, if you can. During Round 1, as students are presenting their opening statements, you can ask questions to clarify or help draw out the differences between one policy option and another. Try not to get too deep in the weeds, though—that is what Round 2 will be for.

In Round 2, you can take a more active role. If you have concerns about a policy option, ask questions; if some policy options seem stronger than others, say so. If an element of the issue is not being discussed, raise it.

In Round 3, once you have heard all the policy options, it is all down to you. You should choose whichever policy option you think is best, or combine the strongest elements of several different options. Remember, the NSC is not democratic and is an advisory, not decision-making, body. There is no vote, and you do not need to choose the most popular option. Your decision must be made and announced before the wrap-up discussion, although the written presidential directive can come later.

Tips for Online Classes

We suggest conducting the role-play in three rounds, and that three-round structure is a helpful way to approach chunking the role-play for online learning as well. You can conduct each round synchronously or asynchronously.

In round one, participants present their positions.

- In a synchronous meeting, you can go through opening statements using videoconferencing software, allowing for live clarifying questions.
- However, this is probably the easiest round to conduct asynchronously. You could disseminate positions in writing by having participants share their position memos or write a summary for the purpose of the role-play. You could also have participants record a video of themselves delivering their opening statement and disseminate it for all to watch.

In round two, participants debate the various policy options.

- In a synchronous setting, you can simply run a full-class discussion for round two. If you need more structure or want to prod reticent participants, consider starting by randomly assigning students to breakout rooms, assigning each breakout room one policy option. After working through pros and cons, representatives from each breakout room can share out to kick off the general discussion.
- In an asynchronous setting, consider a discussion forum, with a thread for each policy option. Coach the National Security Advisor and President to be active in the forum, raising questions and responding to points.

In round three, debate begins to coalesce around the policy options that the president favors.

- This round can be approached similarly to round two, but the president should set the topics for breakout rooms or forum threads.

Flashpoints

To add spice or challenge to the role-play, partway through the discussion throw in one of the following flashpoints—additional hypothetical developments that fit within the case’s existing decision point—or create your own.

- Japan’s parliament, the Diet, has convened a special session. The outspoken chair of the lower house’s foreign affairs committee has publicly called on the prime minister to demand American military assistance. The prime minister has requested a phone call with the U.S. president.

After introducing a flashpoint, you might want to help students refocus their discussion by considering critical questions such as these:

1. Who is affected by this event or development, and how?
2. Is there any uncertainty about what has taken place? How credible is the report?
3. Does this event or development affect the feasibility of any policy options? If so, how?
4. Does this event or development affect the desirability of any policy options? If so, how?

Case Assessment

1. What are the three sovereignty claims to the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, from their historical roots to their modern claims?
2. Why do Japan, China, and Taiwan consider sovereign rights over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands valuable or important?
3. According to relevant treaties and official statements, what is the U.S. government's position on the administration and sovereignty of the islands?
4. What are the goals of any U.S. policy decision in this case? How do these goals align or conflict with each other?

NSC Assessment

1. What are the four categories of tools available to U.S. leaders crafting foreign policy, and what is the range of specific tools in each?
2. What is the interagency process and how is it related to the NSC system?
3. What are the various committees in the NSC system and how do they interact to drive U.S. policymaking and implementation?
4. What are the responsibilities of the national security advisor (NSA)?
5. What are the major departments and agencies involved in the U.S. national security and foreign policy-making process? What are their responsibilities?

Writing Assignments

Each CFR Education extended simulation involves writing assignments that help students think through policy options and reflect on their learning experience.

In NSC cases, there are three types of writing assignments.

- Before the role-play, everyone but the president writes a position memo.
- After the role-play, the president writes a presidential directive.
- As part of the wrap-up, everyone writes a written reflection.

Simulations (on the student-facing side) have instructions for written assignments, and samples for each of these writing exercises. You can also find sample rubrics below.

Samples:

- [NSC position memo](#)
- [NSC presidential directive](#)
- [NSC written reflection](#)

Rubric

Below are sample rubrics for your use in assessing the writing students will do as part of this extended simulation.

These are single-point rubrics. Jennifer Gonzalez, who writes the blog [Cult of Pedagogy](#), has a great [explainer](#), but the bottom line is that single-point rubrics are relatively easy for students to digest but still have all the advantages of giving structure to instructors' feedback.

NSC Position Memo Rubric

CONCERNS

What needs improvement

CRITERIA

What is expected

ADVANCED

What is excellent

Subject and Background paragraphs

- Briefly explains the significance of the issue in the context of U.S. foreign policy
- Clearly identifies the central question
- Does not summarize the case

Objectives bullet points

- Lists several objectives of the department the writer represents
- Objectives are grounded in knowledge of the role of the department
- Objectives help to shape the analysis of options described in the next section

Options and Analysis paragraphs

- Lists all options mentioned in the case
- Lists other potential options
- Analysis considers advantages, disadvantages, and trade-offs

Recommendation and Justification paragraphs

- Clearly identifies a preferred option or options
- Supports the choice with appropriate analysis
- Explains why other options are less preferable
- Written with the president as the intended audience

CONCERNS

What needs improvement

CRITERIA

What is expected

ADVANCED

What is excellent

Purpose

- Provides context for the memo
- Is succinct

Decisions

- Clearly states the decisions made
- Explains the decisions convincingly
- Details how to implement them

Communications strategy

- Contains an effective strategy for relevant foreign governments
- Contains an effective strategy for the public

NSC Written Reflection Rubric

CONCERNS

What needs improvement

CRITERIA

What is expected

ADVANCED

What is excellent

Subject paragraph

- Is brief
- Places the issue in the larger context of U.S. foreign policy
- Clearly states whether the writer agrees or disagrees with the president's decision

Options and Analysis paragraph

- Discusses each option that came up during the role-play in discrete paragraphs
- Weighs the advantages and disadvantages of each option
- If options from the position memo are discussed, those options contain additional analysis

Recommendation and Justification paragraph

- Makes a clear recommendation based on the writer's personal position
- Supports the recommendation effectively

Reflection paragraph or paragraphs

- Reflects on and critiques the president's decision
- Is written from a personal point of view, not that of the assigned role

Downloadable rubrics are available here:

- [NSC position memo](#)
- [NSC presidential directive](#)
- [NSC written reflection](#)