

[Simulation](#) from [Nuclear Proliferation](#)

North Korean Nuclear Threat (NSC)

North Korea has reportedly acquired the technological capability to hit North America with a nuclear weapon.

Case Overview

Fictional, set in the present day. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) has for decades pursued its nuclear ambitions to the dismay of both Western countries and its neighbors in East Asia. It recently announced the successful launch of a satellite from a three-stage rocket, and U.S. and allied intelligence services conclude that North Korea now possesses the reentry technology for an intercontinental ballistic missile that could reach the North American west coast. The director of national intelligence informs the president that the missile launch, combined with North Korea's ongoing nuclear tests and its mastery of warhead miniaturization technology, means the country is capable of following through on past threats to fire a nuclear-armed missile against the United States. The president has called an NSC meeting to discuss how to respond to North Korea's enhanced capabilities.

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

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea, also known as North Korea, has been pursuing nuclear weapons for decades. This has led to growing concern among Western countries and North Korea's neighbors in East Asia. In September 2017, North Korea conducted its most powerful nuclear test yet and declared that the country had perfected its nuclear warhead design. Analysts doubt that North Korea has the rocket technology to accurately deliver a nuclear weapon to the continental United States. Still, most analysts agree that North Korea has a reliable nuclear weapons capability to strike Japan and South Korea, both close U.S. allies.

The United States, alongside other countries and the United Nations, has used [sanctions](#) and diplomacy to try to convince North Korea's leadership to give up its nuclear weapons. Despite these efforts, North Korea's leader, Kim Jong-un, continues to pursue the ability to strike the United States with a nuclear weapon. He is also determined to deter any initial conventional or nuclear attack by the United States by building a nuclear arsenal that could survive such a strike. Analysts believe that if Kim Jong-un gains these capabilities, dealing with the North Korean threat will become much more difficult for both the United States and other countries.

Hypothetical Decision Point

U.S. military officials have just told the president that, based on debris recovered from a recent North Korean satellite launch, they now believe North Korea has the technology needed to reach the west coast of North America. The launch came days after Kim walked away from nuclear negotiations with the United States, citing concerns over proposed inspections of its nuclear sites. The director of national intelligence informed the president that the launch, combined with North Korea's ongoing nuclear tests, means that the country is now capable of following through on past threats to fire a nuclear-armed missile at the United States. The president has called a National Security Council (NSC) meeting to discuss how to respond to North Korea's enhanced capabilities.

Background

At the end of World War II in 1945, the United States and the [Soviet Union](#) each helped liberate Korea from Japanese control. The two countries agreed to divide Korea at the thirty-eighth parallel into two occupation zones. The zones would later become North Korea (backed by the Soviet Union and China) and South Korea (backed by the United States). North and South Korean leaders each wanted to reunify the peninsula under their own leadership and thought that they could do so with the support of their backers. This led to the Korean War, a three-year conflict that started when North Korea invaded the South in an attempt to take control of the entire peninsula. The military conflict ended with an [armistice](#) in July 1953. To date, there has been no peace treaty to officially end the war. Throughout much of the [Cold War](#), the two Koreas, each backed by a superpower, competed politically, economically, and militarily for control of the entire peninsula. This struggle has continued to the present day.

North Korea's leaders have tried to develop nuclear weapons since at least the mid-1950s. They were impressed by the power of the [atomic](#) bomb that the United States used on Japan. North Korea was also on the receiving end of U.S. nuclear threats during the Korean War. Because of this, North Korean leaders came to see nuclear weapons as a way to ensure survival and enhance their status. This desire for nuclear weapons became even more pressing following the end of the Cold War when the Soviet Union collapsed. Without the support of its former ally, North Korea found itself in a more vulnerable position. By the early 1990s, South Korea had a much larger economy, a better international reputation, and an increasingly powerful military. It was also a young democracy and U.S. ally. North Korea, by contrast, was in economic ruin, militarily weak—at least in terms of conventional, nonnuclear, military power—and largely isolated from the rest of the world (other than China).

North Korea's continuing nuclear development became a growing concern for the United States in the 1990s. In 1992, Pyongyang threatened to pull out of the [Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty \(NPT\)](#), designed to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons. Initially, efforts to negotiate the issue with North Korea seemed successful. In 1994, the country promised to dismantle its nuclear program. By 2003, however, these efforts had collapsed. That year, North Korea pulled out of the NPT, kicked out international inspectors from a nuclear facility, and prepared to conduct nuclear tests. Attempts to bring North Korea back to the negotiating table through an initiative known as the [Six Party Talks](#) failed over the following years, and on October 9, 2006, North Korea conducted its first nuclear test.

North Korea's longtime dictator Kim Jong-il died in 2011. The rise of his son Kim Jong-un, gave some analysts and politicians hope that North Korea would return to the negotiating table. However, North Korea has continued to develop its nuclear program. The country conducted nuclear tests in 2013, twice in 2016, and in 2017.

So far, economic [sanctions](#) imposed by the United States and other countries have not deterred North Korea's commitment to developing nuclear weapons. As a result, tensions on the Korean Peninsula have escalated. Although Kim has participated in

denuclearization talks with both the United States and South Korea in recent years, these negotiations produced limited results. Since failed summits in 2019, North Korea entered a period of increasing diplomatic isolation. During this time, it repeatedly halted communications with both the United States and South Korea. The coronavirus [pandemic](#) along with ongoing sanctions has isolated North Korea economically as well. Despite strong financial pressures, North Korea continued to strengthen its nuclear development in 2020, testing short-range ballistic missiles and claiming that its nuclear ambitions are a [deterrence](#) strategy against U.S. threats.

Even amid growing isolation from the United States, Japan, and South Korea, North Korea is not completely without partners. China has opposed North Korean nuclear development, but also sees North Korea as a strategic buffer against a U.S.-allied South Korea. Accordingly, although it has supported some UN sanctions against the country, it has [undermined others and advocated for some to be lifted](#). Observers also claim that China regularly helps North Korea evade sanctions by exporting goods like coal to the country.

Russia also maintains a strategic relationship with North Korea. Like China, Russia has historically opposed North Korean nuclear development. However, Russia sees the country as a strategic partner in its opposition to the United States. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Russia has sought closer relations with North Korea. Russia has specifically sought to buy artillery shells from North Korea to replenish its dwindling stocks. This renewed cooperation is especially concerning for the United States. [Analysts fear](#) that in exchange for military supplies, Russia could provide North Korea with rocket technology and materials that could enable the country to improve its missile program.

Role of the United States

North Korea regards the U.S. military presence in South Korea ([which hosts nearly 28,000 U.S. troops](#) as of September 2023) as an obstacle to a North Korea-led unification of the peninsula. It also sees the United States as the most dangerous military threat it faces. One objective in its pursuit of nuclear weapons has been to develop a deterrent against the United States. Meanwhile, the United States views North Korea as a source of tension and instability, and as a threat to its ally South Korea.

The most important U.S. interest on the Korean Peninsula is eliminating North Korea's nuclear weapons program. North Korea already has the capability to hit South Korea and Japan, two critical U.S. allies in Asia, with nuclear missiles. Advancements in its nuclear technology and missile capabilities could pose a serious security threat to the United States. A nuclear attack from North Korea could destroy U.S. cities and kill millions of people.

The United States is also concerned that a nuclear North Korea could spread, or proliferate, nuclear weapons to countries that do not currently have them. Preventing nuclear proliferation has long been a U.S. foreign policy goal. North Korea could sell nuclear weapons or related technologies to other U.S.-opposed governments or nonstate groups. Worse, its actions could also encourage other countries to acquire nuclear weapons. Japan and South Korea could become concerned that the United States would hesitate to honor its [alliances](#) and defend them against an attack out of concern that the North Koreans could launch a nuclear strike at the United States. This could create political pressure within Japan and South Korea to acquire nuclear weapons of their own to deter North Korea. Such pressure would be a defeat for global nonproliferation efforts and would make any conflict in Northeast Asia far more destructive.

Last but not least, a North Korea with nuclear weapons could come to believe that it can engage in provocations without consequences. This could include an attack on South Korea aimed at unifying the peninsula. North Korea, with a fully-fledged nuclear arsenal, could become a far more destabilizing force than before.

Preparation and Role-Play

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

[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

- How does North Korea, and particularly the situation presented in this case, threaten U.S. national security?
- What U.S. interests are at stake in this crisis? How should they be prioritized?
- What is the nature of the U.S.-North Korea relationship? How does this inform U.S. action in this case?
- What is the U.S. relationship with other parties relevant to this case, especially China, Japan, and South Korea? How does this affect the proposed U.S. policy options?
- What are the costs, benefits, and risks that accompany each policy option open to the United States?
- What are the trade-offs raised by the potential policy options in this case?
- What are the positions and interests of other countries and organizations that have a stake in North Korea's nuclear proliferation? How, if at all, might they affect the current situation?

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

- How does North Korea, and particularly the situation presented in this case, threaten U.S. national security?
- What U.S. interests are at stake in this crisis? How should they be prioritized?
- What is the nature of the U.S.-North Korea relationship? How does this inform U.S. action in this case?
- What are the costs, benefits, and risks that accompany each policy option open to the United States?
- How, if at all, would the White House need to work with Congress to execute any of the proposed policy options in this case? How might congressional attitudes towards North Korea, nuclear proliferation, and other interests in East Asia influence the U.S. response to the situation in North Korea?
- How do the media and public opinion affect U.S. policy toward North Korea?

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

- How does North Korea, and particularly the situation presented in this case, threaten U.S. national security?
- What U.S. interests are at stake in this crisis? How should they be prioritized?
- Where does a North Korean nuclear weapon capable of reaching North America fit into the broader context of national security concerns facing the United States?
- What are the costs, benefits, and risks that accompany each policy option open to the United States?
- What are the most important factors for the president to balance when making a decision? What information would be most useful for other members of the National Security Council to present?
- What past examples, if any, exist of the U.S. policy options presented in this case? How might these examples inform U.S. action toward North Korea?

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

- How does North Korea, and particularly the situation presented in this case, threaten U.S. national security?
- What U.S. interests are at stake in this crisis? How should they be prioritized? How should they influence a U.S. response?
- What are the costs, benefits, and risks that accompany each policy option open to the United States?
- How, if at all, would the White House need to work with Congress to execute any of the proposed policy options in this case? How might congressional attitudes towards North Korea, nuclear proliferation, and other interests in East Asia influence the U.S. response to the situation in North Korea?
- How do the media and public opinion affect U.S. policy toward North Korea?
- What are North Korea's likely reactions to various U.S. policy options? How might these reactions influence the effectiveness, as well as the domestic political impact, of the chosen U.S. approach?

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 North Korea, and particularly the situation presented in this case, threaten U.S. national security?
- What U.S. interests are at stake in this crisis? How should they be prioritized?
- What is the nature of the U.S.-North Korea relationship? How does this inform U.S. action in this case?
- How many U.S. diplomatic personnel and U.S. citizens live in South Korea, Japan, and other neighbors of North Korea? How should their presence affect the U.S. policy decision in this case?
- What is the U.S. relationship with other parties relevant to this case, especially China, Japan, and South Korea? How does this affect the proposed U.S. policy options? How would various U.S. responses affect these countries' perception of American leadership?
- What are the costs, benefits, and risks that accompany each policy option open to the United States?

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

- How does North Korea, and particularly the situation presented in this case, threaten U.S. national security?
- How many U.S. military personnel are stationed in South Korea, Japan, and other neighbors of North Korea? How should their presence affect the U.S. policy decision in this case?
- What military capabilities does the United States possess to conduct air strikes against North Korea? What do we know about how effective air strikes might be in destroying facilities related to North Korea's nuclear and missile programs? How should this assessment affect consideration of U.S. policy options?
- What is the state of military relationships among the United States and other countries involved in this case, which include China, Russia, South Korea, and Japan? What is the likelihood that any of these countries would be willing or able to assist the United States with the military dimensions of certain policy options in this case?
- What are the costs, benefits, and risks that accompany each policy option open to the United States?

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

- How does North Korea, and particularly the situation presented in this case, threaten U.S. national security?
- What U.S. interests are at stake in this crisis? How should they be prioritized?
- What are the legal considerations surrounding the various U.S. policy options in this case? What are the roles of the president and Congress on this issue?
- What kind of legal backing, such as congressional legislation or UN Security Council resolutions, might be useful or necessary for any U.S. policy response to North Korea in this case?
- What is the role of the International [Atomic](#) Energy Agency in the international nonproliferation regime? What legal authority does it have in dealing with North Korea in this case?

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

- How does North Korea, and particularly the situation presented in this case, threaten U.S. national security?
- What U.S. interests are at stake in this crisis? How should they be prioritized?
- What are the costs, benefits, and risks that accompany each policy option open to the United States?
- How many U.S. military personnel are stationed in South Korea, Japan, and other neighbors of North Korea? How should their presence affect the U.S. policy decision in this case?
- What military capabilities does the United States possess to conduct air strikes against North Korea? What do we know about how effective air strikes might be in destroying facilities related to North Korea's nuclear and missile programs?
- What is the state of the North Korean armed forces and North Korea's nuclear and missile capabilities?

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 does North Korea, and particularly the situation presented in this case, threaten U.S. national security?
- What U.S. interests are at stake in this crisis? How should they be prioritized?
- What are the costs, benefits, and risks that accompany each policy option open to the United States?
- What are the positions and interests of other countries and organizations that have a stake in North Korea's nuclear proliferation? How, if at all, might they affect the current situation?
- What is the role of the International [Atomic](#) Energy Agency in the international nonproliferation regime? What legal authority does it have in dealing with North Korea in this case?

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

- How does North Korea, and particularly the situation presented in this case, threaten U.S. national security?
- What U.S. interests are at stake in this crisis? How should they be prioritized?
- What are the costs, benefits, and risks that accompany each policy option open to the United States?
- How does the situation in North Korea as presented in this case threaten the U.S. economy and the economies of U.S. allies? How would possible outcomes, such as a North Korean attack on the United States, affect U.S. and allied economies?
- What are the chief characteristics of North Korea's economy? What economic ties does North Korea have with the United States, South Korea, and China, and how do those economic ties—or lack thereof—affect North Korea's strategic interests?
- What has the role of **sanctions** been in current and historical U.S. policy toward North Korea? What are the costs, benefits, and risks of imposing further sanctions in response to North Korea's new capabilities?

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

- How does North Korea, and particularly the situation presented in this case, threaten U.S. national security?
- What U.S. interests are at stake in this crisis? How should they be prioritized?
- What are the costs, benefits, and risks that accompany each policy option open to the United States?

- What position do UN member states, particularly those on the UN Security Council, take on North Korea's nuclear ambitions? How are these governments likely to react to various policy responses by the United States? How should the United States take these views into account when deliberating its policy options?
- What has been the role of the United Nations and its component parts in dealing with North Korea? What has this role been in dealing with nuclear proliferation in other countries? What role could or should the United Nations play in addressing the current crisis?
- Which of the proposed policy options might require or benefit from a UN Security Council resolution? How important is it for the United States to secure such a resolution for any action it takes in response to North Korea?

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

- How does North Korea, and particularly the situation presented in this case, threaten U.S. national security?
- What U.S. interests are at stake in this crisis? How should they be prioritized?
- What are the costs, benefits, and risks that accompany each policy option open to the United States?
- What is the current state of the North Korean armed forces and North Korea's nuclear and missile capabilities? How reliable is this assessment?
- What are the primary interests, motivations, and goals of the major actors in this crisis? What factors drive their potential responses to it?
- What past examples, if any, exist of the U.S. policy options presented in this case? How might these examples inform U.S. action toward North Korea?

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

- How does North Korea, and particularly the situation presented in this case, threaten U.S. national security?
- What U.S. interests are at stake in this crisis? How should they be prioritized?
- What is the nature of the U.S.-North Korea relationship? How, if at all, does the United States typically interact with North Korea, and how does this inform U.S. action in this case?
- What is the U.S. relationship with other parties relevant to this case, especially China, Japan, and South Korea? How does this affect the proposed U.S. policy options?
- What are the costs, benefits, and risks that accompany each policy option open to the United States?
- What past examples, if any, exist of the U.S. policy options presented in this case? How might these examples inform U.S. action toward North Korea?

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](#)

The Debrief

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.

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

- From CFR Education:
 - [“North Korean Nuclear Threat Case Study,”](#) YouTube video, 3:46, posted by CFR Education, Nov 16, 2016.
 - [“What is Nuclear Proliferation?,”](#) YouTube video, 7:02, posted by CFR Education, September 21, 2021.
 - [“The Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty,”](#) CFR Education, July 27, 2023.
 - [“Tools of Nonproliferation,”](#) YouTube video, 3:02, posted by CFR Education, June 18, 2019.
- [“North Korea Crisis,”](#) *Global Conflict Tracker*, Council on Foreign Relations.
- [“North Korea’s Missile Programme,”](#) *BBC*, August 10, 2017.
- [“North Korea’s Military Capabilities,”](#) Council on Foreign Relations, June 28, 2022.
- [North Korea](#), Nuclear Threat Initiative.
- [“North Korea Crisis in 300 Words,”](#) *BBC*, June 12, 2018.
- Alex Ward, [“9 Questions About North Korea You Were Too Embarrassed to Ask,”](#) *Vox*, Last Updated Jun 11, 2018.
- Yarno Ritzen, [“North Korea: All You Need to Know Explained in Graphics,”](#) *Al Jazeera*, September 17, 2017.
- *Wall Street Journal*, [“The Rogue-State Nuclear Missile Threat,”](#) February 11, 2016.
- Mark Thompson, [“Is It Time to Attack North Korea?”](#) *Time*, March 9, 2016.
- [YOUTUBE PLAYLIST](#)

Additional Resources

- Jayshree Bajoria and Beina Xu, [“The Six Party Talks on North Korea’s Nuclear Program,”](#) Council on Foreign Relations, September 30, 2013.
- [“What to Know about the Sanctions on North Korea,”](#) Council on Foreign Relations, July 27, 2022.
- [“21st Century Nuclear Deterrence & Missile Defense,”](#) *U.S. Department of Defense*.
- Reuters, [“Explainer: What will it Cost to Denuclearize North Korea?”](#) June 29, 2018.
- Zack Beauchamp, [“‘The Textbook Definition of Unstable’: Why North Korea’s Newest Nuclear Test Is Scary,”](#) *Vox*, September 9, 2016.
- Madison Park, [“North Korea Declares 1953 Armistice Invalid,”](#) *CNN*, last updated March 11, 2013.
- Eleanor Albert, [“The China-North Korea Relationship,”](#) Council on Foreign Relations, June 25, 2019.
- Jane Perlez and David E. Sanger, [“John Kerry Urges China to Curb North Korea’s Nuclear Pursuits,”](#) *New York Times*, January 27, 2016.
- Georgy Toloraya, [“Russia’s North Korea Conundrum,”](#) *Diplomat*, March 17, 2016.

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 booing 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.

North Korean Nuclear Threat (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

Fictional, set in the present day. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) has for decades pursued its nuclear ambitions to the dismay of both Western countries and its neighbors in East Asia. It recently announced the successful launch of a satellite from a three-stage rocket, and U.S. and allied intelligence services conclude that North Korea now possesses the reentry technology for an intercontinental ballistic missile that could reach the North American west coast. The director of national intelligence informs the president that the missile launch, combined with North Korea's ongoing nuclear tests and its mastery of warhead miniaturization technology, means the country is capable of following through on past threats to fire a nuclear-armed missile against the United States. The president has called an NSC meeting to discuss how to respond to North Korea's enhanced capabilities.

Decision Point

U.S. military officials have just told the president that, based on debris recovered from a recent North Korean satellite launch, they now believe North Korea has the technology needed to reach the west coast of North America. The launch came days after Kim walked away from nuclear negotiations with the United States, citing concerns over proposed inspections of its nuclear sites. The director of national intelligence informed the president that the launch, combined with North Korea's ongoing nuclear tests, means that the country is now capable of following through on past threats to fire a nuclear-armed missile at the United States. The president has called a National Security Council (NSC) meeting to discuss how to respond to North Korea's enhanced capabilities.

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 history behind U.S.-North Korean tensions since 1945 as well as North Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons.
- Students will consider the threat posed by the North Korean nuclear weapons program to the national security of the United States.
- Students will evaluate the options that the United States has to address the nuclear threat posed by North Korea.

Concepts and Issues

Concepts

- [Alliances](#)
- [Nationalism](#)
- Nuclear nonproliferation
- [Sanctions](#)
- [Deterrence](#)
- Negotiations
- Rogue states
- Preventive attacks

Issues

- Security and diplomacy in Northeast Asia
- U.S. alliance commitments in Asia
- Legacy of the [Cold War](#) and the Korean War
- Chinese support of North Korea
- Nuclear-related agreements and institutions

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.

North Korea regards the U.S. military presence in South Korea (which hosts nearly 28,000 U.S. troops as of September 2023) as an obstacle to a North Korea–led unification of the peninsula. It also sees the United States as the most dangerous military threat it faces. One objective in its pursuit of nuclear weapons has been to develop a deterrent against the United States. Meanwhile, the United States views North Korea as a source of tension and instability, and as a threat to its ally South Korea.

The most important U.S. interest on the Korean Peninsula is eliminating North Korea's nuclear weapons program. North Korea already has the capability to hit South Korea and Japan, two critical U.S. allies in Asia, with nuclear missiles. Advancements in its nuclear technology and missile capabilities could pose a serious security threat to the United States. A nuclear attack from North Korea could destroy U.S. cities and kill millions of people.

The United States is also concerned that a nuclear North Korea could spread, or proliferate, nuclear weapons to countries that do not currently have them. Preventing nuclear proliferation has long been a U.S. foreign policy goal. North Korea could sell nuclear weapons or related technologies to other U.S.-opposed governments or nonstate groups. Worse, its actions could also encourage other countries to acquire nuclear weapons. Japan and South Korea could become concerned that the United States would hesitate to honor its [alliances](#) and defend them against an attack out of concern that the North Koreans could launch a

nuclear strike at the United States. This could create political pressure within Japan and South Korea to acquire nuclear weapons of their own to deter North Korea. Such pressure would be a defeat for global nonproliferation efforts and would make any conflict in Northeast Asia far more destructive.

Last but not least, a North Korea with nuclear weapons could come to believe that it can engage in provocations without consequences. This could include an attack on South Korea aimed at unifying the peninsula. North Korea, with a fully-fledged nuclear arsenal, could become a far more destabilizing force than before.

With those concerns in mind, the United States has few viable policy options toward North Korea. They include the following:

Attempt to negotiate with North Korea

The United States could try to revive past negotiations with North Korea to convince it to give up nuclear weapons. The United States could offer several things in return. First, it could broker a peace deal to officially end the Korean War. Washington could also lower or remove [sanctions](#) against Pyongyang. The United States could also provide humanitarian aid to North Korea.

If successful, negotiations with North Korea could peacefully remove the threat of nuclear weapons on the Korean Peninsula. This would avoid the risk to U.S. military personnel and the costs of military action. It could also avoid any damage to the U.S. position in East Asia that a military strike could cause. Successful negotiations could also build a foundation of trust for further diplomacy. This could include starting a process toward the reunification of the Korean Peninsula.

This option, however, comes with many risks. The United States has attempted to negotiate many times before without success. There is little guarantee that negotiations will work this time around. Even when past negotiations did produce results, agreements have proven difficult to enforce and have not led to lasting changes. Furthermore, the United States is limited in the incentives it can offer in exchange for denuclearization. North Korea continues to survive under current sanctions. Kim could ultimately decide that a nuclear program is not worth giving up in exchange for relief. If negotiations do produce an agreement and North Korea violates it, the United States risks having given North Korea aid or sanctions relief but received nothing in return. At best, failed negotiations would result in a return to the status quo. At worst, they could prolong the Kim Jong-un regime and the North Korean nuclear program, damage U.S. credibility in the region, and potentially result in nuclear conflict.

The NSC could choose to pursue negotiations first; should they prove unsuccessful, it could then resort to either of the following options:

Launch preventive military strikes

The United States could launch air strikes to destroy as many missile and nuclear-related sites and as much equipment as possible. Even if these strikes could not completely eliminate North Korea's nuclear program, they could set it back for the foreseeable future. Given the current phase of North Korea's nuclear weapons development, this option would likely require a large-scale military operation to succeed.

This option offers a crucial benefit: it could reduce the threat of North Korea's missiles and nuclear weapons for years to come. Successful preventive strikes would increase the security of the United States and its allies. It would also demonstrate the strength of the U.S. commitment to nonproliferation. Lastly, it would show the commitment to combating North Korean provocations. This could send an effective warning to North Korea and others against developing nuclear weapons.

However, this option comes with significant risks. The United States cannot be confident that a preventive strike will guarantee the destruction of all North Korean nuclear capabilities. Moreover, a military strike risks prompting a North Korean retaliation against the United States or against Japan or South Korea, both allies that the United States is treaty-bound to defend. South Korea's densely populated capital, Seoul, is particularly vulnerable to North Korea's military because of how close it is to the North. Even limited retaliation by North Korea could lead to many deaths and a high level of destruction in Seoul. The tens of thousands of U.S. soldiers in South Korea and any U.S. personnel deployed into or over North Korea as part of the airstrike campaign could also be at risk. Moreover, if North Korea fears losing its nuclear weapons, it could also decide to use them

first.

Accept North Korean nuclearization and attempt to manage the country's nuclear and missile capabilities

The United States could accept North Korean nuclear weapons as an unavoidable reality. Instead of trying to roll back North Korea's nuclear and missile development, it could focus on slowing it down as much as possible through a combination of nonproliferation measures, [deterrence](#), and defense. This approach would include expanding sanctions and cracking down on North Korea's illegal activities abroad to restrict its access to funds and nuclear materials. Deterrence would entail signaling that any North Korean nuclear use would prompt a U.S. response that could destroy North Korea. The U.S. military would also maintain strong deterrence through greater cooperation with Japan and South Korea. Finally, the United States would expand its defense capabilities in the region. This could entail increasing troop levels in South Korea. The United States could also place additional advanced weapons systems on the peninsula, or move U.S. naval units into the region.

These efforts would be driven by the assumption that North Korea is highly unlikely to negotiate and that the best path forward is to isolate North Korea until the regime collapses or changes. This would essentially constitute a continuation of existing U.S. policy. For the United States, this option is the least demanding but also the least rewarding. North Korea's nuclear and missile programs would likely remain in place, posing a continued threat to the United States and its allies. The management option could be attractive, however, should NSC members find the other two options to be too risky.

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.

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.

1. North Korea conducts another missile test, firing a medium-range missile over the Sea of Japan. Unlike previous tests in which missile debris fell in waters near Japan, this time debris fall on the northern part of the main Japanese island of Honshu. Though the debris hit a rural area, some property damage and injuries—possibly fatal—are reported. Japan’s prime minister immediately declares on television that “Japan will take strong action, together with our allies, to combat the North Korean threat.” Several Japanese government officials are calling their U.S. counterparts seeking to coordinate a response.
2. North Korea’s permanent representative to the United Nations pulls a U.S. official aside at an unrelated UN meeting in New York. The North Korean diplomat says that Pyongyang wants to resume negotiations with the United States over its nuclear program and that all ideas would be considered. To demonstrate its seriousness, the permanent representative says, North Korea would be prepared to allow inspectors from the International [Atomic](#) Energy Agency into its nuclear facilities and to refrain from further nuclear or missile tests for two years. Pressed by the U.S. official, the North Korean insists that the proposal comes from Kim Jong-un’s government.

3. Following a state visit by Kim Jong-un to the northern Chinese city of Shenyang, the Chinese government announces that China plans to strengthen its economic partnership with North Korea. China, which accounts for 90 percent of North Korea's foreign trade, will increase the flow of both food and raw materials that could be used to develop North Korea's missile program despite UN [sanctions](#). Analysis from the U.S. intelligence community, as well as the intelligence services of South Korea and Japan, indicates that the Chinese government is aiming to demonstrate that it will not fundamentally change its relationship with North Korea despite its concerns about Kim's behavior.

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. Why do the United States and other countries consider North Korea's nuclear and missile development a threat to the United States and its allies?
2. What have the United States and other countries done in the past to stop or limit North Korea's development of nuclear facilities, nuclear weapons, and missiles?
3. What interests and goals motivate North Korean policies, particularly in its pursuit of a nuclear program?
4. How do historical tensions, specifically those related to the [Cold War](#) and the Korean War, affect the dispute over North Korea's nuclear and missile development today?
5. What are the main interests of the United States in North Korea and in Northeast Asia more broadly? How would you prioritize them?

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](#)