

# Asylum Seekers at the U.S. Southern Border in 2019 (NSC)

Set in 2019. Violence, instability, and poverty in the northern triangle have increased asylum seekers in the United States.

## Case Overview

*Set in 2019.* The Central American region commonly known as the [Northern Triangle](#)—comprising El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras—has experienced growing displacement in the past decade due to chronic violence, political corruption, and a lack of economic opportunity. According to the UN High Commissioner for [Refugees](#) (UNHCR), between 2011 and 2016, the number of people from the Northern Triangle who sought refuge in surrounding countries increased by 2,249 percent, and is expected to continue to grow. Increasingly, [migrants](#) from the region are making the arduous journey through Mexico to the U.S. southern border to seek both new economic opportunities and protections from violence and persecution. The president has called a meeting of the National Security Council (NSC) to determine how to approach a growing number of [asylum](#) claims. Members will need to consider the economic, security, social, and political needs of the United States as they provide advice, while taking into account humanitarian and legal concerns as well as the potential effects of U.S. immigration policy on the rest of the world. As they counsel the president, NSC members will need to consider the interplay between short- and long-term options and determine how to prioritize finite U.S. resources in order to most effectively alleviate the strain on the asylum system.

## 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.

## Interagency Process

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

Migration from Central America has long been debated in the United States. The Central American region commonly known as the [Northern Triangle](#) is made up of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. This region has experienced growing displacement since the 1990s due to chronic violence, political corruption, climate change, and a lack of economic opportunity. Increasingly, [migrants](#) from the region are making the arduous journey through Mexico to the U.S. southern border. These migrants seek both economic opportunities and protection from violence and persecution.

Under U.S. and [international law](#), individuals fleeing dangers in their home country are entitled to certain rights and legal protections. Migrants who want to immigrate to the United States can receive these protections by applying in advance for legal protection as [refugees](#). However, not everyone is able to do so. Migrants can also receive protections by traveling to the United States and claiming [asylum](#) at the border. Being granted asylum allows an individual to legally live in the United States, but it involves a long and complicated process. Although most countries agree on the rights and protections that [asylum seekers](#) are entitled to, no international organization oversees asylum claims. Instead, governments are left to determine whether the various reasons driving individuals to migrate qualify them for asylum. This setup allows countries to make arbitrary decisions or bypass asylum [norms](#) entirely. Distinguishing between those with credible fears—who are entitled to asylum—and those seeking economic opportunity—who are not—can be an extremely difficult task. Meanwhile, the number of asylum seekers arriving at the U.S.-Mexico border is growing. For the period 2015–2019, the number of people migrating from Central America grew tenfold, with most headed for the United States.

Policymakers considering asylum policy need to weigh both economic and security issues. This includes considering the security risks individuals entering the country could pose. Furthermore, it requires crafting a policy to govern those awaiting a decision in their asylum cases as well as weighing the economic costs and benefits of absorbing an influx of migrants. On top of these considerations, an intensifying political debate over immigration policy means that any policy concerning asylum seekers faces potential political backlash. Public attention on and debate about immigration has intensified. As displacement has reached record highs globally immigration policies are crucial to the U.S. economy, national security, and global stability.

## Decision Point—*Set in 2019*

The Department of Homeland Security has recently reported that over the coming months, a surge of migrants—more than double the average in recent years—will arrive at the southern border seeking asylum. The asylum seekers are mostly—though not exclusively—from Northern Triangle countries. U.S. media reports have begun calling the U.S. border “out of control.” Several hard-line anti-immigration groups have begun holding rallies protesting perceived U.S. leniency on immigration. The president has called a meeting of the National Security Council (NSC) and has asked members to consider the economic, security, social, and political needs of the United States. The president has asked NSC members to provide advice, taking into account humanitarian and legal concerns as well as the potential effects of U.S. immigration policy on the rest of the world. NSC members will need to consider both short- and long-term options to manage flows of asylum seekers. NSC members also need to determine how to prioritize limited U.S. resources in order to most effectively reduce the strain on the asylum system.

## Background

[People migrate for many reasons](#), and these reasons shape their legal rights. Some [migrants](#) seek economic opportunity, while others travel to reunite with family members who have migrated. Many migrants are forced to leave their homes because of conflict, persecution, or natural disaster. These reasons often overlap, presenting a challenge to policymakers. A migrant is anyone who has decided to leave their home country, either temporarily or permanently, for any reason. If a migrant has left their home country for economic reasons, such as to look for work opportunities, they are known as an [economic migrant](#). If a migrant has left their home country because of war, violence, or persecution, they are known under [international law](#) as a [refugee](#) and are entitled to different rights than economic migrants. Under U.S. law, people who leave their homes because of war, violence, or persecution are categorized even more precisely. U.S. law uses the term refugee to describe someone who fears war, violence, or persecution and has applied for entry to the United States before arriving at the border. Someone who has already fled their home country for these reasons and applies for entry when they reach the U.S. border is known as an [asylum seeker](#). Other countries use the terms refugee and asylum seeker differently.

Migrants are also classified based on whether they entered the country they are in with or without authorization. Unauthorized [immigrants](#) are often referred to as “undocumented” because they do not have a valid visa or, often, even a valid ID. Due to their lack of identification, [undocumented immigrants](#) often cannot access public services such as health care or education. Undocumented immigrants are also not allowed to work under U.S. law. As a result, they face more risk of labor exploitation and sex trafficking because others can threaten to report them to the authorities for being unauthorized.

International attitudes toward migration, refugees, and asylum largely took shape in the wake of World War II. In the aftermath of the war, an estimated [twenty million people were displaced](#) in Europe alone. After the war, the newly formed United Nations declared that anyone had the right to seek asylum in other countries if they feared persecution in their own. The United Nations adopted treaties establishing the rights of refugees and the responsibilities of nations toward them. One of the most important of these responsibilities is the fundamental principle of [non-refoulement](#), which forbids a country from returning refugees to a country in which they would likely be in danger. Crucially, these treaties require countries to provide asylum to those who have entered without authorization but are found to meet the established definition of a refugee. The United States officially adopted the UN definition of refugee in 1980 with the Refugee Act. This established an annual refugee admissions cap that the president can adjust from year to year, and standardized asylum processes.

International arrangements established to aid refugees have proven helpful but ultimately inadequate to deal with the amount of different people in the world who are forced to move away from their home region. The UN definition of a refugee provides only a general basis for determining refugee status, leaving the interpretation of what persecution means largely up to individual governments. Governments willing to accept refugees could be reluctant to accept and provide for large numbers of these migrants. Moreover, determining a migrant’s status can be challenging because many people migrate both for economic reasons and because they fear war, violence, or persecution. Migrants from the [Northern Triangle](#) are no exception; most make the difficult journey north for a variety of reasons, and often more than one.

Much of the current increase in immigration to the United States is rooted in worsening economic and security conditions in the countries of migrants’ origin—particularly those in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. The Northern Triangle countries are among the poorest in the Western Hemisphere. They suffer from intense economic inequality and violence. Homicide rates in the Northern Triangle are among the world’s highest. Throughout the 2010s, a large majority of those crossing the U.S.-Mexico border from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras have reported fleeing extortion or physical threats from gangs. Children are particularly vulnerable, as they often face a choice between recruitment into the local gang or death. In 2019, El Salvador and Honduras had [Latin America’s highest rates of femicide](#) (murders of women and girls). The region’s governments suffer from high levels of corruption and lack institutions and social services that could effectively combat these problems. In addition, changing climate conditions increase the likelihood of droughts and other natural disasters, further driving migration from the region.

All of these reasons lead many people to leave their home countries in search of increased safety or greater opportunity. Those making the journey north face a long and perilous route. Many migrants hire coyotes (smugglers) for assistance during their journey, putting themselves at risk of abuse and violence. Kidnapping and death—from accidents, violence, injury, and illness—are also major threats. Recent immigration trends show that more unaccompanied children and families are migrating from the Northern Triangle, resulting in more women and girls than ever making the dangerous journey.

Upon arriving in the United States, asylum seekers need to turn themselves over to U.S. officials and make an asylum declaration. The next step is an interview to determine whether the asylum seeker faces a “credible fear of persecution” if they return to their home country. Those who do not pass the interview can be deported in a matter of days. Although 90 percent of asylum seekers pass the credible fear interview, doing so only allows them to proceed to the next step in the process: making their case in immigration court. Asylum seekers can wait years for their cases to be heard, as U.S. immigration courts face a chronic backlog of hundreds of thousands of cases. As migrants wait, their futures remain uncertain. During this time, they need to house and support themselves as well as complete paperwork to secure employment authorization. A successful court hearing leads to permanent residency, the right to work, and a path to citizenship. A denial can be appealed, entailing another multiyear wait. If the appeal is denied, asylum seekers then need to decide whether to leave the United States or attempt to remain without authorization.

As the backlog of those awaiting asylum determinations grows, so does displacement from the Northern Triangle. According to the UNHCR, between 2011 and 2016 the number of people from the Northern Triangle who sought refuge in surrounding countries rose [2,249 percent](#) and is expected to continue to grow. Managing migration flows is therefore an increasingly urgent

challenge for policymakers.

## Role of the United States

The United States has economic, humanitarian, and security interests in managing flows of [asylum](#) seekers from [Northern Triangle](#) countries. The United States is among the largest providers of humanitarian aid globally. It has also sought to strengthen human rights [norms](#) around the world. Given the conditions that many Northern Triangle [migrants](#) are fleeing, as well as the dangers migrants face on their journeys. The United States has clear humanitarian incentives to provide support and protection for migrants. Likewise, the United States also has an incentive to address the root issues causing this increase in migration.

Economic considerations also need to be part of the analysis. Supporters of tighter restrictions argue that migrants from Central America often claim asylum to disguise their economic motives. Many also express concern that [immigrants](#) could displace American workers and strain U.S. resources. Those in favor of a more accepting admissions policy, however, argue that the economic benefits of allowing [asylum seekers](#)—both skilled and unskilled—into the country far outweigh the costs. Most economists agree that increases in the labor force from immigration stimulate the economy.

Any asylum policy also needs to consider national security. Advocates for restrictive policies argue that allowing asylum seekers to enter the United States carries national security risks. These, they argue, include mistakenly allowing entry to members of transnational gangs, [drug cartels](#), or [terrorist](#) organizations. Opponents counter that most immigrants are carefully investigated (although unauthorized immigrants are not), and likely do not pose a threat. Many analysts also argue that security concerns are overblown out of racial bias. Although data is limited, several studies have [suggested](#) that immigrant populations do not pose a greater criminal threat than the native-born population.

Finally, policymakers need to consider the potential for political and popular backlash that a large inflow of asylum seekers could cause. Given that immigration policy in the United States is often subject to intense political debate, a large inflow of asylum seekers could further motivate nationalist anti-immigration groups.

NSC members could consider several policy options to address the influx of asylum seekers from Central America, keeping in mind the political, economic, and security implications of each. These options can be pursued in combination or individually.

## Preparation and Role-Play

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[Instructions](#)

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

### Roles Overview

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

### Roles

## President

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

The president's goals are to

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

### Issues for Consideration

- How does the situation presented in this case threaten U.S. national security?
- What responsibility does the United States have to accept [refugees](#) and [asylum](#) seekers into the country?
- What is the range of attitudes in the United States on asylum policy?
- What U.S. interests are at stake in this situation? How should they be prioritized?
- What are the costs, benefits, and risks that accompany each policy option open to the United States?
- Where does the debate over asylum policy fit in the broader range of domestic concerns facing the United States? How is it similar or different to discussions of refugee [resettlement](#) or [migrants](#) in general?
- How is the present response to refugee entry different or similar to previous periods of high entry?

## 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 the situation presented in this case threaten U.S. national security?
- What responsibility does the United States have to accept [refugees](#) and [asylum](#) seekers into the country?
- What is the range of attitudes in the United States on asylum policy?
- How, if at all, would the White House need to work with Congress to execute any of the proposed policy options in this case?
- What U.S. interests are at stake in this situation? How should they be prioritized?

- What are the costs, benefits, and risks that accompany each policy option open to the United States?
- What, if any, constituencies in the United States have especially strong views on refugee [resettlement](#)? What does this suggest about the domestic political consequences of various responses?
- How is the present response to refugee entry different or similar to previous periods of high entry?

## 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

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- What is the range of attitudes in the United States on asylum policy?
- What U.S. interests are at stake in this situation? 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 most important factors for the president to balance when making a decision on refugee policy?
- Where does the debate over asylum policy fit in the broader range of domestic concerns facing the United States? How is it similar or different to discussions of refugee [resettlement](#) or [migrants](#) in general?

## 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 the situation presented in this case threaten U.S. national security?

- What responsibility does the United States have to accept [refugees](#) and [asylum](#) seekers into the country?
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- 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 on refugee policy?
- What, if any, constituencies in the United States have especially strong views on refugee [resettlement](#)?
- Where does the debate over asylum policy fit in the broader range of domestic concerns facing the United States? How is it similar or different to discussions of refugee resettlement or [migrants](#) in general?
- How can the president best articulate a decision and communicate it to the American people and the world?

## Secretary of State

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

The secretary of state's goals are to

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

## Issues for Consideration

- How does the situation presented in this case threaten U.S. national security?
- What responsibility does the United States have to accept [refugees](#) and [asylum](#) seekers into the country?
- What U.S. interests are at stake in this situation? 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 various capacities of industrialized and developing countries to adapt to changes projected to occur in the global refugee situation?
- What is the range of views among the United States' allies on refugee admissions?
- What are the positions and interests of other countries and organizations that have a stake in this issue? How, if at all, could they help resolve, exacerbate, or otherwise shape the current situation?

## 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 the situation presented in this case threaten U.S. national security?
- What responsibility does the United States have to accept [refugees](#) into the country?
- What U.S. interests are at stake in this situation? 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 United States' historical role in refugee [resettlement](#) factor into the current debate?
- Where does the debate over [asylum](#) policy fit in the broader range of domestic concerns facing the United States? How is it similar or different to discussions of refugee resettlement or [migrants](#) in general?
- What are the positions and interests of other countries and organizations that have a stake in this issue? How, if at all, could they help resolve, exacerbate, or otherwise shape the current situation?

## 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 the situation presented in this case threaten U.S. national security?
- How would changes to the [refugee](#) admittance ceiling affect U.S. national security?
- What responsibility does the United States have to accept refugees into the country?
- What U.S. interests are at stake in this situation? How should they be prioritized?
- What are the costs, benefits, and risks that accompany each policy option open to the United States?
- How is the global refugee situation projected to change in the coming years?
- Where does the debate over [asylum](#) policy fit in the broader range of domestic concerns facing the United States? How is it similar or different to discussions of refugee [resettlement](#) or [migrants](#) in general?
- What are the positions and interests of other countries and organizations that have a stake in this issue? How, if at all, could they help resolve, exacerbate, or otherwise shape the current situation?

## 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 the situation presented in this case threaten U.S. national security?
- What responsibility does the United States have to accept [refugees](#) and [asylum](#) seekers into the country?
- According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, how is the global refugee situation projected to change in the coming years?
- What U.S. interests are at stake in this situation? How should they be prioritized?
- What are the costs, benefits, and risks that accompany each policy option open to the United States?
- What does evidence suggest about refugees' economic situations once resettled in the United States? Do the majority of resettled refugees contribute to the U.S. economy, or do they rely on portions of the welfare state?
- How have other Western countries' economies been affected following refugee [resettlement](#)?
- Where does the debate over asylum policy fit in the broader range of domestic concerns facing the United States? How is it similar or different to discussions of refugee resettlement or [migrants](#) in general?

## Secretary of Homeland Security

Created after September 11, 2001, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) focuses on such issues as terrorism prevention, border security and immigration, disaster response, and cybersecurity. Agencies such as U.S. Customs and Border Protection, the U.S. Secret Service, and the Transportation Security Administration are part of this department. The secretary must help the president and other National Security Council (NSC) members understand any risks to the United States and its citizens that may arise from the situation and possible policy responses.

The Secretary of Homeland Security's goals are to

- advise the president on the homeland security dimensions of crises and potential policy responses, including any threats or implications for U.S. border security; and
- ensure the implementation of steps to protect the country and manage any security risks arising from the issue under consideration.

## Issues for Consideration

- How does the situation presented in this case threaten U.S. national security?
- How would changes to the [refugee](#) admittance ceiling affect U.S. national security? What is the state of national security in other countries with strict refugee admittance ceilings?
- What responsibility does the United States have to accept refugees into the country?
- What U.S. interests are at stake in this situation? How should they be prioritized?
- What are the costs, benefits, and risks that accompany each policy option open to the United States?
- How is the global refugee situation projected to change in the coming years?
- Where does the debate over [asylum](#) policy fit in the broader range of domestic concerns facing the United States? How is it similar or different to discussions of refugee [resettlement](#) or [migrants](#) in general?
- What are the positions and interests of other countries and organizations that have a stake in this issue? How, if at all, could they help resolve, exacerbate, or otherwise shape the current situation?
- To what degree are U.S. military or civilian personnel involved in other countries with high levels of population movement?

## 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 the situation presented in this case threaten U.S. national security?
- How would changes to the [refugee](#) admittance ceiling affect U.S. national security? What is the state of national security in other countries with strict refugee admittance ceilings?
- What responsibility does the United States have to accept refugees into the country?
- What U.S. interests are at stake in this situation? How should they be prioritized?
- What are the costs, benefits, and risks that accompany each policy option open to the United States?
- According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, how is the global refugee situation projected to change in the coming years?
- Where does the debate over [asylum](#) policy fit in the broader range of domestic concerns facing the United States? How is it similar or different to discussions of refugee [resettlement](#) or [migrants](#) in general?
- What are the positions and interests of other countries and organizations that have a stake in this issue? How, if at all, could they help resolve, exacerbate, or otherwise shape the current situation?
- To what degree are U.S. military or civilian personnel involved in other countries with high levels of population movement?

## 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 the situation presented in this case threaten U.S. national security?
- What responsibility does the United States have to accept [refugees](#) and [asylum](#) seekers into the country?
- According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, how is the global refugee situation projected to change in the coming years?
- What U.S. interests are at stake in this situation? How should these various interests influence U.S. actions?
- What is the range of attitudes in the United States on asylum policy?

- How will the refugee admittance ceiling affect immigration courts?
- What are the costs, benefits, and risks that accompany each policy option open to the United States?
- How is the present response to refugee entry different or similar to previous periods of high entry?

## 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 the situation presented in this case threaten U.S. national security?
- What responsibility does the United States have to accept [refugees](#) and [asylum](#) seekers into the country?
- What U.S. interests are at stake in this situation? How should these various interests influence U.S. actions?
- How does the United States' historical role in refugee [resettlement](#) factor into the current debate?
- What role does the United Nations, specifically the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), play in efforts to process and resettle refugees? How does the United States support the UNHCR's work?
- According to the UNHCR, how is the global refugee situation projected to change in the coming years?
- What are the various capacities of industrialized and developing countries to adapt to changes projected to occur in the global refugee situation?
- How could UN accords on migration, such as the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration, and the Global Compact on Refugees, inform the United States' refugee policies?
- What are the costs, benefits, and risks that accompany each policy option open to the United States?

## Commissioner of U.S. Customs and Border Protection

Part of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the U.S. Customs and Border Protection's responsibilities include safeguarding U.S. borders, preventing drug smuggling, enforcing immigration laws, protecting agriculture, and ensuring trade compliance.

The Commissioner of U.S. Customs and Border Protection's goals are to

- highlight the national security dimensions of U.S. border security, including any threats or potential crises, and advise on potential policy responses; and
- develop strategies to promote economic prosperity for the United States.

## Issues for Consideration

- How does the situation presented in this case threaten U.S. national security?
- What responsibility does the United States have to accept [refugees](#) and [asylum](#) seekers into the country?
- According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, how is the global refugee situation projected to change in the coming years?
- What are the costs, benefits, and risks that accompany each policy option open to the United States?
- What changes would need to be made to current U.S. Customs and Border Protection practices with a lower refugee admittance ceiling?
- What is the range of attitudes in the United States on asylum policy?
- How could UN accords on migration, such as the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, and the Global Compact on Refugees, inform the United States' refugee policies?
- What U.S. interests are at stake in this situation? How should these various interests influence U.S. actions?
- What are the most important factors for the president to balance when making a decision on refugee policy?
- How would changes to the refugee admittance ceiling affect U.S. national security?

### **Director, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement**

Created on March 1, 2003, the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement is a federal law enforcement agency within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). Its responsibilities include immigration enforcement, investigating illegal movement of people and goods, and preventing terrorism.

The Director, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's goals are to

- advise the president on the national security dimensions of U.S. border security, including any threats relating to transnational crimes; and
- develop strategies to enforce immigration laws in United States.

### **Issues for Consideration**

- How does the situation presented in this case threaten U.S. national security?
- What responsibility does the United States have to accept [refugees](#) and [asylum](#) seekers into the country?
- What are the costs, benefits, and risks that accompany each policy option open to the United States?
- According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, how is the global refugee situation projected to change in the coming years?
- What are the most important factors for the president to balance when making a decision on refugee policy?
- How would changes to the refugee admittance ceiling affect U.S. national security?
- How would changes to the refugee admittance ceiling affect undocumented people in the United States?
- What is the range of attitudes in the United States on asylum policy?
- How is the present response to refugee entry different or similar to previous periods of high entry?

### **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

- What responsibility does the United States have to accept [refugees](#) and [asylum](#) seekers into the country?
- What are the costs, benefits, and risks that accompany each policy option open to the United States?
- According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, how is the global refugee situation projected to change in the coming years?
- What is the range of attitudes in the United States on asylum policy?
- How would changes in U.S. refugee [resettlement](#) policy affect the United States' role globally?
- What, if any, constituencies in the United States have especially strong views on refugee resettlement? What does this suggest about the domestic political consequences of various responses?
- How is the present response to refugee entry different or similar to previous periods of high entry?
- What are the positions and interests of other countries and organizations that have a stake in this issue? How, if at all, could they help resolve, exacerbate, or otherwise shape the current situation?

## 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"> <li>1. Present initial positions to the president.</li> <li>2. Investigate the nuances of the positions through questioning.</li> <li>3. Clarify the central questions to be debated.</li> </ol>	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"> <li>1. Clarify the obstacles, risks, opportunities, and threats.</li> <li>2. Evaluate the various positions on their merits.</li> </ol>	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"> <li>1. Narrow the options to a few comprehensive and well- focused strategies that the president prefers.</li> <li>2. Provide the president with clear recommendations (from NSC members), perhaps as a consensus or through a vote.</li> <li>3. Arrive at a final presidential decision.</li> </ol>	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.

## What Actually Happened

The surge in [asylum](#) seekers outlined in this case is representative of the increasingly urgent conditions on the U.S. southern border. Then president Donald Trump advocated for stronger anti-immigration policies, including a promise to construct a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border and efforts to restrict the entry of [refugees](#) and [asylum seekers](#). These policies came at a time of significantly increasing immigration; the number of people migrating from Central America grew [tenfold](#) between 2015 and 2019 and continues to rise today.

In January 2019, the administration announced a new policy, informally known as Remain in Mexico. Under this policy, asylum seekers were required to wait in Mexico for a period of forty-five days before their credible fear interview. Asylum seekers were then returned to Mexico to await their date in immigration court. The U.S. government also signed “asylum cooperation agreements” with El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, allowing the United States to reject asylum claims of [migrants](#) who passed through one of these countries without applying for asylum there. These agreements resemble other agreements known as safe third country agreements. These agreements dictate that an asylum seeker should apply for asylum in the first safe country they reach (rather than keep going to a preferred destination).

These policies received criticism both domestically and internationally. The border towns in Mexico where most migrants were forced to wait are known for trafficking, smuggling, and [extraction](#). Similarly, [Northern Triangle](#) countries are generally unsafe for asylum seekers. The Remain in Mexico policy and other Safe Third Country agreements therefore raised questions about whether they violated the principle of [non-refoulement](#).

In 2020, the COVID-19 [pandemic](#) prompted further restrictions on immigration. In March, citing efforts to combat the spread of disease, the Trump administration announced that it would deny entry to noncitizens attempting to cross the border. The administration further began automatically [expelling](#) migrants who had made unauthorized crossings into the United States, effectively shutting down the asylum system.

Upon taking office in January 2021, President Joe Biden expressed a desire to significantly alter U.S. immigration policy. Biden used executive action to roll back many of Trump’s immigration policies, which the administration deemed inhumane. This has included suspending construction of a border wall, increasing the refugee limit, and extending TPS to migrants fleeing Myanmar and Venezuela.

However, some Trump-era asylum policies remained in place. For instance, Biden continued Trump’s policy of expelling migrants making unauthorized crossings during the pandemic until 2023. Although the Biden administration initially suspended the Remain in Mexico policy, legal challenges delayed the administration’s efforts to dismantle the program for years.

These policies have unfolded amid an increasingly urgent situation at the U.S. southern border. Border crossings have reached record highs in recent years. Over 2022 and 2023, U.S. agencies [encountered nearly five million](#) migrants at the border. Compounding the issue, political deadlock over migration policy has deepened. Issues like aid to Ukraine have intensified debates over the prioritization of limited U.S. resources. As debate continues while urgency grows, it is clear that policymakers will need to continue considering U.S. asylum policies for years to come.

## 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?

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

- [“Asylum Seekers at the U.S. Southern Border - Case Study,”](#) YouTube, 7:26, posted by CFR Education, Aug 10, 2020.
- [“What’s the Difference Between a Migrant and a Refugee?,”](#) YouTube, 4:12, posted by CFR Education, June 18, 2019.
- Paul J. Angelo, [“Why Central American Migrants Are Arriving at the U.S. Border,”](#) Council on Foreign Relations, March 22, 2021.
- [“Why are People Fleeing the Northern Triangle?”](#) YouTube video, 2:00, posted by the Council on Foreign Relations, April 23, 2021
- Claire Felter, Danielle Renwick, and Amelia Cheatham, [“The U.S. Immigration Debate,”](#) Council on Foreign Relations, June 6, 2023.
- Claire Klobucista, James McBride, and Diana Roy, [“How Does the U.S. Refugee System Work?”](#) Council on Foreign Relations, February 15, 2023.
- Diana Roy, Amelia Cheatham, and Claire Klobucista, [“How the U.S. Patrols Its Borders?”](#) Council on Foreign Relations, July 26, 2023.
- [“No Refuge: Why Refugees Have Shrinking Options,”](#) Council on Foreign Relations.
- Amelia Cheatham, [“Central America’s Turbulent Northern Triangle,”](#) Council on Foreign Relations, October 1, 2019.
- [“Fleeing For our Lives,”](#) Amnesty International.
- [YOUTUBE PLAYLIST](#)

## Additional Resources

- Shannon K. O’Neil, [“Migrants at the U.S. Border: How Biden’s Approach Differs From Trump’s,”](#) Council on Foreign Relations, February 17, 2021.
- Vanda Felbab-Brown, [“Border Security and Comprehensive Immigration Reform,”](#) Brookings Institution, February 11, 2019.
- José W. Fernández, [“More Aid Won’t Stop Central America’s Migrant Crisis: What U.S. Aid Can and Can’t Achieve in the Northern Triangle,”](#) Foreign Affairs, April 30, 2020.
- Dara Lind, [“The Migrant Caravan, Explained,”](#) Vox, October 25, 2018.
- [“No Refuge: Why the World’s Swelling Refugee Population Has Shrinking Options,”](#) Council on Foreign Relations.
- [“What’s the Economic Impact of Refugees in America?”](#) PBS.
- Ryan Nunn, Jimmy O’Donnell, and Jay Shambaugh, [“A Dozen Facts About Immigration,”](#) Brookings Institution, October 9, 2018.

## 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.

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.

# Asylum Seekers at the U.S. Southern Border in 2019 (NSC)

## Educator Simulation Guide

### Global Literacy

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

### Case Overview

*Set in 2019.* The Central American region commonly known as the [Northern Triangle](#)—comprising El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras—has experienced growing displacement in the past decade due to chronic violence, political corruption, and a lack of economic opportunity. According to the UN High Commissioner for [Refugees](#) (UNHCR), between 2011 and 2016, the number of people from the Northern Triangle who sought refuge in surrounding countries increased by 2,249 percent, and is expected to continue to grow. Increasingly, [migrants](#) from the region are making the arduous journey through Mexico to the U.S. southern border to seek both new economic opportunities and protections from violence and persecution. The president has called a meeting of the National Security Council (NSC) to determine how to approach a growing number of [asylum](#) claims. Members will need to consider the economic, security, social, and political needs of the United States as they provide advice, while taking into account humanitarian and legal concerns as well as the potential effects of U.S. immigration policy on the rest of the world. As they counsel the president, NSC members will need to consider the interplay between short- and long-term options and determine how to prioritize finite U.S. resources in order to most effectively alleviate the strain on the asylum system.

### Decision Point

The Department of Homeland Security has recently reported that over the coming months, a surge of [migrants](#)—more than double the average in recent years—will arrive at the southern border seeking asylum. The [asylum seekers](#) are mostly—though not exclusively—from [Northern Triangle](#) countries. U.S. media reports have begun calling the U.S. border “out of control.” Several hard-line anti-immigration groups have begun holding rallies protesting perceived U.S. leniency on immigration. The president has called a meeting of the National Security Council (NSC) and has asked members to consider the economic, security, social, and political needs of the United States. The president has asked NSC members to provide advice, taking into account humanitarian and legal concerns as well as the potential effects of U.S. immigration policy on the rest of the world. NSC members will need to consider both short- and long-term options to manage flows of asylum seekers. NSC members also need to determine how to prioritize limited U.S. resources in order to most effectively reduce the strain on the asylum system.

### 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 factors contributing to the influx of immigration from the [Northern Triangle](#) to the United States southern border.
- Students will consider the economic, political, and security implications of U.S. asylum policy.
- Students will evaluate several immigration policy options to address the influx of [asylum seekers](#).

## Concepts and Issues

### Concepts

- Human rights
- Multilateralism
- Public opinion
- [Sovereignty](#)

### Issues

- Regional security in the Americas
- Protection of human rights
- Challenges of economic and political development
- U.S. role in Central America and corresponding U.S. interests

## Policy Options: Educator's Guide

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

The United States has economic, humanitarian, and security interests in managing flows of [asylum](#) seekers from [Northern Triangle](#) countries. The United States is among the largest providers of humanitarian aid globally and has sought to strengthen human rights [norms](#) around the world. Given the conditions of instability, violence, and poverty that many Northern Triangle [migrants](#) are fleeing, as well as the dangers faced on the journey, the United States has clear humanitarian incentives to provide support and protection for migrants and ultimately address the root issues causing this increase in migration.

Immigration affects the U.S. economy, so economic considerations need to be part of the analysis. Those who support tighter restrictions argue that [asylum seekers](#) from Central America are using their asylum claim to disguise economic motives for migrating and often express concern that [immigrants](#) could displace American workers and strain U.S. resources. Those in favor of a more accepting admissions policy, however, argue that the economic benefits of allowing asylum seekers—both skilled and unskilled—into the country far outweigh the costs. Most economists agree that increases in the labor force from immigration stimulate the economy.

Any policy to address the influx of asylum seekers on the southern border also needs to take national security into consideration. Those in favor of restrictive policies argue that, despite the potential economic and humanitarian benefits of

immigration, allowing asylum seekers to enter the United States carries national security risks, including mistakenly allowing entry to members of transnational gangs, [drug cartels](#), or [terrorist](#) organizations. Opponents of restrictive policies counter that most immigrants—especially [refugees](#) and asylum seekers—are carefully investigated (although unauthorized immigrants are not), and are unlikely to pose a threat. Many analysts also argue that security concerns are overblown as a result of racial bias and point out that most asylum seekers are fleeing those very concerns themselves. Although data is limited, several studies have [suggested](#) that immigrant populations, both documented and undocumented, do not pose a greater criminal threat than the native-born population.

Finally, policymakers need to consider the potential for political and popular backlash that a large inflow of asylum seekers could cause. Influxes of refugees have caused significant political fallout in the past. Given that immigration policy in the United States is subject to fervent political debate, a large inflow of asylum seekers could further motivate nationalist anti-immigration groups.

As they deliberate, NSC members should consider several policy options to address the influx of asylum seekers from Central America, keeping in mind the political, economic, and security implications of each. These options can be pursued in combination or individually.

## Policy Options

### An Open-Door Policy

The United States has at times opened the door to specific groups of asylum seekers. It has also provided [Temporary Protected Status](#) (TPS) for those who cannot return to their country of origin due to armed conflict or natural disaster. Haitians, Hondurans, and Salvadorans have all received TPS in the past. NSC members could consider adopting a similar open-door policy toward the coming influx of Northern Triangle migrants by offering them TPS or passing a specific law.

This approach would require a decision about which countries to include and how many asylum seekers to admit. NSC members would also need to decide whether to provide temporary or permanent protection to those arriving and how to process them in a timely fashion.

Though an open-door policy would provide the greatest humanitarian protection to those arriving at the Southern border, it carries several risks:

- This option could encourage continued migration from Northern Triangle countries, which could include migrants who are not necessarily fleeing violence but are seeking economic opportunity.
- An open door could cause domestic political backlash that those who favor anti-immigration policies could exploit.
- Absorbing or integrating individuals into the economic, social, and political fabric of the United States could strain social safety nets and create competition for jobs.
- Admitting large numbers of asylum seekers could pose a security risk by straining existing capacity to screen migrants to identify potential security threats to the country.

### Asylum Reform

The years-long backlog in the asylum system puts pressure on both the U.S. government, which is trying to process claims as quickly as possible, and asylum seekers, who live with uncertainty while their cases are processed. The government could commit resources to hire additional immigration judges in order to work through the backlog quickly. The government could also provide legal counsel to some or all asylum seekers (unlike in criminal court, immigration court has no right to counsel) to both speed the system and better protect asylum seekers' rights. Finally, NSC members could consider reforming the detention system—especially the detention of minors.

Asylum reform would help to clear the current backlog of asylum claims in the United States more quickly. However, this option has potential drawbacks:

- This plan demands a higher investment of resources. The process of hiring and training new immigration judges is likely to be long and expensive; even small-scale additions of judges and staff for a fiscal year have cost over \$40 million.
- Providing access to counsel makes asylum seekers more likely to succeed in their claims, which could provoke a domestic political backlash.
- This plan could reduce the backlog but would not address the root causes of displacement from Central America.

## Enlisting Mexican and Regional Support to Stop the Flow

As long as the United States permits asylum seekers to enter the country and file their claims, their numbers are likely to grow. The asylum determination process is a lengthy one, and many asylum seekers live for two or more years in the United States before their cases are resolved. In addition, many who are rejected for asylum do not return home but remain in the United States without authorization. The United States could enlist Mexico as a barrier to most asylum seekers, requiring Central Americans and others arriving in Mexico to request asylum there instead or to remain in Mexico while their claims are processed in the United States.

This policy would likely reduce the flow sharply, but it has several risks:

- Enlisting regional support could open the United States to charges of violating both its international commitments (the 1967 protocol and the principle of [non-refoulement](#)) and domestic law (the [Refugee Act of 1980](#)).
- This option could force asylum seekers to remain in countries such as Guatemala and Mexico, in which some of the towns where immigrants wait are known for trafficking, smuggling, and extraction.
- Migrants who could otherwise have used the asylum process could be pushed to attempt unauthorized entry to the United States.
- This option could face Mexican opposition—NSC members would need to consider what incentives they could offer to convince Mexico to cooperate in such an arrangement.

## Regional Aid and Refugee Processing

NSC members could address the root causes of migration by providing support to Northern Triangle countries. This approach would involve using U.S. foreign aid, perhaps including police or military advisors, to increase security, build government capacity and combat corruption, and provide relief from extreme poverty and the harmful effects of climate change. For those still seeking asylum, the United States could work with stable neighboring countries such as Costa Rica and with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees to set up refugee camps and processing facilities closer to the Northern Triangle countries. The United States could support efforts to process Northern Triangle refugees closer to home by committing to accept a significant number of these processed refugees.

This policy would reduce the incentive for Central Americans to attempt the long and dangerous journey to the United States. However, policymakers need to consider several drawbacks:

- This approach has the greatest amount of uncertainty—it is far from assured that U.S. money and support can bring greater stability to the region.
- It could take the longest time to see the effects of aid on the U.S.-Mexico border. Success, if it comes, would likely take many years.
- This option demands a high investment of resources concentrated outside the United States.

## Running the Simulation

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Tips for Role-Play

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

Round	Timing	Objectives	Procedural Notes
One	2 to 3 minutes per participant	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Present initial positions to the president.</li> <li>2. Investigate the nuances of the positions through questioning.</li> <li>3. Clarify the central questions to be debated.</li> </ol>	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"> <li>1. Clarify the obstacles, risks, opportunities, and threats.</li> <li>2. Evaluate the various positions on their merits.</li> </ol>	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"> <li>1. Narrow the options to a few comprehensive and well-focused strategies that the president prefers.</li> <li>2. Provide the president with clear recommendations (from NSC members), perhaps as a consensus or through a vote.</li> <li>3. Arrive at a final presidential decision.</li> </ol>	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. Reports emerge that a magnitude 7.2 earthquake has hit Central America, with its epicenter located just outside the Salvadoran capital, San Salvador. While currently unknown, the death toll is estimated to be in the hundreds, and early assessments indicate that the earthquake could cause up to \$100 billion in damages throughout El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and surrounding Central American countries. The effects of this earthquake have the potential to be catastrophic in an already-struggling region, destroying buildings, roads, and information and communications technology infrastructure. As a result of the destruction, hundreds of thousands of people could become displaced, many of whom are likely to join the growing number of [migrants](#) seeking refuge in the United States. The last time an earthquake of similar magnitude hit El Salvador, the United States granted [temporary protected status](#) to those displaced.
2. Reports emerge from health workers on the Mexican side of the U.S.-Mexico border describing rapidly deteriorating health conditions among [asylum seekers](#). Rumors suggest that there has been an outbreak of cholera—an [infectious disease](#)—in several camps near Tijuana, along the Mexican side of the U.S.-Mexico border. Local health-care providers have not confirmed the rumors, but analysts predict that providers would lack adequate resources to support the number of afflicted individuals in the event of an outbreak. Humanitarian organizations call on the United States to send medical

teams and resources to the border and to consider admitting afflicted asylum seekers for treatment in the United States, while several anti-immigration groups claim that a potential outbreak could cross into the United States and hold large rallies calling for a complete closure of the southern border.

3. The Mexican ambassador to the United States indicates in a memo that the Mexican government would be willing to consider a formal safe third country agreement wherein Central American asylum seekers are required to apply for asylum in Mexico before they apply in the United States. However, the Mexican government is requesting significant amounts of security and development assistance in order to make such an agreement feasible.

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

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

## Case Assessment

1. What is the situation in [Northern Triangle](#) countries?
2. What is the distinction between [economic migrants](#), [refugees](#), and [asylum](#) seekers?
3. What is the [non-refoulement](#) principle and how might it be applied in this case?
4. What U.S. economic, security, and humanitarian interests are at stake in this case?

## 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?

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.

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### 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

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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](#)