

Drones in Pakistan in 2011 (NSC)

Set in Spring 2011. The United States has the opportunity to eliminate or capture a senior al-Qaeda leader in Pakistan.

Case Overview

Set in Spring, 2011. Since the attacks of September 11, 2001, the United States has pursued a vigorous campaign against [terrorist](#) groups like [al-Qaeda](#). The U.S. intelligence community believes they have identified the location of al-Qaeda's leader, [Osama bin Laden](#). The United States must decide whether to try to kill or capture bin Laden—and if so, how. Each policy option—including a [drone](#) strike, a raid by special operations forces, a request that Pakistan act, and inaction—has costs and benefits for U.S. security and the U.S.-Pakistan relationship. Drones, in particular, have become a core element of the U.S. [counterterrorism](#) strategy, but their use is controversial.

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.

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Instructions

How to Run a CFR Simulation Role-Play

The Issue

After the attacks of September 11, 2001, combating [terrorist](#) organizations became a core concern of U.S. foreign policy. This led the United States to conduct operations against terrorist and militant groups around the world. Although the United States targeted various groups, its primary target was [al-Qaeda](#)—the group responsible for the September 11 attacks—and its leader, [Osama bin Laden](#).

The United States' efforts to combat terrorism led it to wage fully-fledged wars against terrorist groups and those who harbor them. The war in Afghanistan was the primary example. However, terrorist groups do not obey national boundaries. Therefore,

the war on terror also led the United States to conduct operations in countries with which it was not formally at war. These included Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen.

The United States used various tools in its pursuit of terrorist and militant groups beyond the battlefield. In many cases, the United States has cooperated with various countries by providing training and intelligence to their security forces. The goal is to help them conduct their own operations against terrorist groups. In some scenarios, the United States has decided that it needs to take action itself. Washington has authorized special forces operations to capture or kill members of terrorist organizations. The United States also increasingly began to conduct precision air strikes from [drones](#). Such attacks could target members of terrorist organizations without putting U.S. personnel at risk.

U.S. [counterterrorism](#) operations proved controversial both at home and abroad. Critics highlighted that U.S. operations, especially drone strikes, carried the risk of causing collateral, including killing civilians alongside their targets. Counterterrorism operations, especially in non-battlefield countries, also risked tarnishing the U.S. reputation overseas and straining U.S. relationships with other countries. U.S. counterterrorism operations have been condemned by foreign governments as a violation of their [sovereignty](#). These operations have also sparked public protests both at home and abroad, and drawn sharp criticism from human rights organizations over their legality and ethics.

Decision Point—Set in Spring 2011

After a decade-long search, the CIA has come upon credible evidence of the location of Osama bin Laden. A man whom they believe to be the al-Qaeda leader is living inside a large compound in Abbottabad, a populous city near Pakistan's capital of Islamabad. The compound also houses roughly twenty women and children, believed to be bin Laden's relatives. However, based on [surveillance](#) of the compound, no one can say with absolute certainty that the individual they have identified is indeed bin Laden. Most of the CIA analysts involved have put their confidence level at 80 percent; some report 95 percent confidence, others rate their confidence as low as 40 percent.

The president has convened a meeting of the National Security Council (NSC) to receive advice on how to proceed. If the president decides to authorize action, three main options exist. The first is to conduct a drone strike against the compound, likely killing those in it. This option would risk civilian casualties and potential damage to an already tumultuous relationship with Pakistan. The second option is a raid by special operations forces. A raid could be effective in that troops could correctly identify individual targets and take caution to protect civilians. Troops could also collect computers and documents for intelligence. However, this option poses greater risk to the lives of U.S. service members and could also damage the U.S. relationship with Pakistan. Third, the president could ask the Pakistani military to capture or kill bin Laden. This would respect diplomatic ties but has a lower chance of success. Given the lack of complete certainty, the president could also decide to wait for additional confirmation or a better opportunity to strike. However, waiting risks losing the chance to act entirely if the occupants of the compound move and the CIA loses track of them. The president needs to decide quickly whether to authorize action to kill or capture the man believed to be bin Laden and, if so, what action to take.

Background

The War on Terror

Following the end of the [Cold War](#) in 1991, the risk of [great power](#) conflict diminished significantly. However, new dangers came to the fore as [terrorist](#) activity posed an increasing threat against U.S. citizens both at home and abroad. One terrorist group, [al-Qaeda](#), would become the primary focus of U.S. [counterterrorism](#) efforts.

Al-Qaeda was established in 1988 by [Osama bin Laden](#) and Ayman al-Zawahiri with the aim of supporting Islamist causes around the world and countering what it saw as profane Western influence in Muslim countries. Over the following years, the United States became the group's primary target. Al-Qaeda conducted several attacks against the United States and its allies in the late 1990s. The group's deadliest attack came on September 11, 2001, when militants hijacked four planes and crashed them into targets in the United States. The attacks killed 2,977 people and caused extraordinary destruction at the World Trade

Center and the Pentagon.

The 9/11 attacks brought terrorism definitively to the center of U.S. foreign and domestic policy. Abroad, the United States embarked on an expansive campaign to eliminate al-Qaeda and ultimately combat the very notion of terrorism. One week after the attacks, Congress passed an Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF) that formed the basis for a U.S.-led war in Afghanistan, where the ruling Taliban regime had harbored al-Qaeda.

However, many al-Qaeda leaders and militants—including bin Laden himself—were able to flee Afghanistan, with many escaping to the border regions of neighboring Pakistan. This led President George W. Bush to authorize [targeted killings](#) of al-Qaeda leaders outside the designated combat zone in Afghanistan.

Pakistan's government quietly allowed the United States to carry out targeted strikes within its borders. However, it refused to publicly acknowledge that such strikes were occurring at all. Yet as it became more obvious that the United States was conducting regular [drone](#) strikes, the Pakistani public grew to strongly oppose the program. The issue of drone strikes became an enduring wedge in U.S.-Pakistan relations.

The Bush administration claimed that these counterterrorism operations were needed because of Pakistan's unwillingness to counter the threat al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups posed. That unwillingness was partly due to Pakistan's lack of capacity and the fact that it remained primarily focused on its tensions with neighboring India. Yet Pakistan's reluctance could also have been partly caused by links between terrorist groups and elements of the Pakistani government.

Between 2004 and 2009, the CIA carried out [fifty-one reported drone strikes](#) in the country. Initially, the Bush administration used drones sparingly. The administration carried out targeted strikes against known individuals while informing Pakistani military and intelligence officials of each strike. In 2008, however, the Bush administration escalated its drone use in Pakistan, ceasing the practice of notifying Pakistani officials of strikes.

The Obama administration significantly escalated the global war on terror. Correspondingly, non-battlefield operations in Pakistan greatly increased, reaching a peak in 2010 when the United States conducted [122 drone strikes](#). Obama also expanded non-battlefield counterterrorism operations beyond Pakistan. Still, the United States' primary counterterrorism focus remained on eliminating Al-Qaeda and finding its leader, who remained at large.

The Tools of Counterterrorism

The United States employed numerous tools in its fight against terrorist organizations. Drone strikes quickly became one of the most frequently used options. This is because Drones offer several advantages over other types of operations. First, drones can fly directly over hostile territory without putting military personnel at risk. Moreover, a fully armed drone can stay in flight over potential targets for over fourteen hours, far longer than any piloted aircraft. As a result, drone strikes can be timed for an ideal moment that minimizes collateral damage. Finally, drones can fire smaller, more precise missiles.

However, drones have several limitations as well. First, drones require a robust intelligence network that can provide accurate targeting information. Faulty intelligence can lead to a failed strike or cause unintended casualties. Moreover, drones fly lower and slower than other aircraft, making them vulnerable to attack. Successful drone operations therefore can often only be effective in countries that lack robust air defense systems or where the United States can depend on the country's support, or at least consent.

Drone strikes have also proven a controversial tool of counterterrorism. Despite claims of their precision, drone strikes still cause unintended civilian casualties. By some estimates, between 2004 and 2011, U.S. drone strikes in Pakistan caused [up to 638 civilian casualties](#). U.S. drone practices raise legal and ethical questions as well. The U.S. government argues that it can lawfully conduct targeted killings of members of terrorist organizations, even outside battlefield zones. However, many countries have condemned drone strikes as a violation of their [sovereignty](#). Human rights groups have also claimed drone strikes violate international human rights law. This has made their use costly both to the United States' relationships with its partners and to the U.S. image worldwide.

Drones were not the only instrument of U.S. counterterrorism operations. The United States also employed special operations forces to capture or kill targets. Special forces operations can be effective in areas a drone strike cannot reach. They can also

ensure the identification of the targets and retrieve intelligence. However, these operations risk being more costly than drone strikes. In addition to putting U.S. personnel in harm's way they are higher-profile operations that can cause increased diplomatic tension. Washington has also sought to counter security threats by cooperating with its partners. The United States does this by providing financial and logistical support to countries conducting counterterrorism operations of their own. The United States has provided training assistance, intelligence support, and financial aid to bolster counterterrorism efforts in numerous countries, including Kenya, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Somalia. However, in many cases U.S. assistance and cooperation have not sufficiently improved the recipient's capacity to combat terrorist groups within its borders.

Role of the United States

The U.S. involvement in this case stems from not only September 11 but also a long history of [al-Qaeda](#) attacks against U.S. service members, civilians, and interests. Especially since 9/11, U.S. military forces, diplomats, and intelligence personnel have operated both unilaterally and in conjunction with local security forces in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and elsewhere in the world to detect and disrupt [terrorist](#) plots. A primary tactic has been killing certain al-Qaeda leaders and a vastly greater number of anonymous militants through [drone](#) strikes and other [counterterrorism](#) operations.

The principal options available in this case are as follows:

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 [CFR](#) of more policy options after considering the [Principles and Terms of Use](#) 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 international terrorism threaten U.S. national security? In particular, how much of a threat to the United States are [al-Qaeda](#) leaders?
- What diplomatic, reputational, or other costs should the United States be willing to bear to eliminate [terrorist](#) leaders? What is the best way to think about the costs and benefits involved?
- What are the major characteristics of the United States' relationship with Pakistan? How important is this relationship to U.S. foreign policy goals, including but not limited to [counterterrorism](#)?
- What has been Pakistan's position on and response to U.S. [drone](#) strikes and counterterrorism raids on its territory? How have these events affected U.S. cooperation with Pakistan, and what does that suggest about the implications of different options in this case?
- What is the effect of various counterterrorism practices on terrorist recruitment, global extremism, and public support for extremist ideologies? Could certain policies fuel the forces they are trying to extinguish?

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 international terrorism threaten U.S. national security? In particular, how much of a threat to the United States are [al-Qaeda](#) leaders?
- Is Pakistan a friend, an adversary, or a combination thereof? What does this suggest about the most effective approach to U.S. [counterterrorism](#) policy in that country?
- What diplomatic, reputational, or other costs should the United States be willing to bear to eliminate [terrorist](#) leaders? What is the best way to think about the costs and benefits involved?
- What have been the successes, drawbacks, and overall effects of the U.S. use of [drones](#) for [targeted killings](#)? What about raids by special operations forces?
- What are the major elements of congressional and public opinion about various counterterrorism options?

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 state](#) 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

- What are the major characteristics of the United States' relationship with Pakistan? How important is this relationship to U.S. foreign policy goals, including but not limited to [counterterrorism](#)?
- What has been Pakistan's position on and response to U.S. [drone](#) strikes and counterterrorism raids on its territory? How have these events affected U.S. cooperation with Pakistan, and what does that suggest about the implications of different options in this case?
- What are the major components and characteristics of U.S. military and humanitarian assistance to Pakistan? What has been the effect of this assistance, especially in the area of counterterrorism?
- Is Pakistan a friend, an adversary, or a combination of the two? What does this suggest about the most effective approach to U.S. counterterrorism policy and broader diplomacy in that country?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of involving the Pakistani government in U.S. counterterrorism plans versus proceeding alone?

Secretary of Defense

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

The secretary of defense's goals are to

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

Issues for Consideration

- What are the principal capabilities, including [drones](#) and special operations forces, that the United States could deploy in this case? What are their main strengths and weaknesses?
- What are the immediate security risks of the policy options being considered in this case? For example, what would be the implications if U.S. forces involved in a raid were captured or killed?
- What have been the successes, drawbacks, and overall effects of the U.S. use of drones for [targeted killings](#)? What about raids by special operations forces?
- What have been the major successes and failures of [counterterrorism](#) efforts conducted by the Pakistani government? What does this record suggest about asking Pakistan to pursue specific [terrorist](#) leaders?
- What is the effect of various counterterrorism practices on terrorist recruitment, global extremism, and public support for extremist ideologies? Could certain policies fuel the forces they are trying to extinguish?

Secretary of the Treasury

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

The secretary of the treasury's goals are to

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

Issues for Consideration

- What are the economic dimensions of the U.S.-Pakistan relationship? What are the United States' principal economic interests in Pakistan?
- What are the costs of terrorism to the U.S. and global economies? This includes direct costs, such as the cost of recovery from a [terrorist](#) attack, and indirect costs, such as the cost of increased security measures, insurance for private interests, and more.
- How do groups such as [al-Qaeda](#) fund themselves, and how have U.S. and international efforts to cut off their financing streams affected their capabilities?
- What are the major components and characteristics of U.S. military and humanitarian assistance to countries where the United States has conducted [drone](#) strikes? What has been the effect of this assistance, especially in the areas of economic development and [counterterrorism](#)?

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 international terrorism threaten U.S. national security? In particular, how much of a threat to the United States are [al-Qaeda](#) leaders?
- What are the immediate security risks of the policy options being considered in this case? For example, what would be the implications if U.S. forces involved in a raid were captured or killed?

- How could various policy options affect the security of the U.S. homeland and U.S. citizens and interests abroad, such as through retaliatory efforts by al-Qaeda or other groups?
- What is the effect of various [counterterrorism](#) practices on [terrorist](#) recruitment, global extremism, and public support for extremist ideologies? Could certain policies fuel the forces they are trying to extinguish?

National Security Advisor

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

The national security advisor’s goals are to

- facilitate the president’s consideration of issues by keeping the NSC discussion on track and guiding it toward concrete policy options; and
- build trust as an honest broker among the other NSC participants.

Issues for Consideration

- What danger does international terrorism pose to U.S. national security? In particular, how much of a threat to the United States are [al-Qaeda](#) leaders?
- Is Pakistan a friend, an adversary, or a combination of the two? What does this suggest about the most effective approach to U.S. [counterterrorism](#) policy in that country?
- What diplomatic, reputational, or other costs should the United States be willing to bear to eliminate [terrorist](#) leaders? What is the best way to think about the costs and benefits involved?
- What are the immediate security risks of the policy options being considered in this case? For example, what would be the implications if U.S. forces involved in a raid were captured or killed?
- What is the effect of various counterterrorism practices on terrorist recruitment and global extremism? Could certain policies fuel the forces they are trying to extinguish?

Chief of Staff

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

The chief of staff’s goals are to

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

Issues for Consideration

- What danger does international terrorism pose to U.S. national security? In particular, how much of a threat to the United States are [al-Qaeda](#) leaders?
- What are the major characteristics of the United States' relationship with Pakistan? How important is this relationship to U.S. foreign policy goals, including but not limited to [counterterrorism](#)?
- What diplomatic, reputational, or other costs should the United States be willing to bear to eliminate [terrorist](#) leaders? What is the best way to think about the costs and benefits involved?
- What are the costs of terrorism to the U.S. and global economies? This includes direct costs, such as the cost of recovery from a terrorist attack, and indirect costs, such as the cost of increased security measures, insurance for private interests, and more.
- What are the attitudes of Congress and the general public toward this issue? What could be the domestic political consequences of a U.S. response perceived as “weak” or “strong”?

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 international terrorism threaten U.S. national security? In particular, how much of a threat to the United States are [al-Qaeda](#) leaders?
- What is the effect of various [counterterrorism](#) practices on [terrorist](#) recruitment and global extremism? Could certain policies fuel the forces they are trying to extinguish?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of involving the Pakistani government in U.S. plans versus proceeding alone?
- What diplomatic, reputational, or other costs should the United States be willing to bear to eliminate terrorist leaders? What is the best way to think about the costs and benefits involved?
- Is Pakistan a friend, an adversary, or a combination of the two? What does this suggest about the most effective approach to U.S. counterterrorism policy in that country?

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

- What does U.S. and [international law](#) say about the practice of [targeted killings](#), for example via [drones](#)? What do these laws say about other policy options, such as raids conducted in another country's territory?
- What is the range of opinion among officials of international legal bodies and international law scholars about the U.S. drone program and other [counterterrorism](#) tools?
- To what degree should the United States be bound by international human rights laws and [norms](#) in its counterterrorism practices? What are the costs and benefits of adhering to such laws and norms?
- What are the legal issues surrounding a drone strike or raid resulting in the death of civilians?
- How do groups such as [al-Qaeda](#) fund themselves, and how have U.S. and international efforts to cut off their financing streams affected their capabilities?

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 international terrorism threaten U.S. national security? In particular, how much of a threat to the United States are [al-Qaeda](#) leaders?
- What are the principal capabilities—including [drones](#) and special operations forces—that the United States could deploy in this case? What are their main strengths and weaknesses?
- What have been the successes, drawbacks, and overall effects of the U.S. use of drones for [targeted killings](#)? What about raids by special operations forces?
- What have been the major successes and failures of [counterterrorism](#) efforts conducted by the Pakistani government? What does this record suggest about asking Pakistan to pursue specific [terrorist](#) leaders?
- What are the immediate security risks of the policy options being considered in this case? For example, what would be the implications if U.S. forces involved in a raid were captured or killed?

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 international terrorism threaten U.S. national security? In particular, how much of a threat to the United States are [al-Qaeda](#) leaders?
- What is the role of the United Nations in combating al-Qaeda and in the debate over [drones](#) and other [counterterrorism](#) tools?
- What are the major characteristics of the United States' relationship with Pakistan? How important is this relationship to U.S. foreign policy goals, including but not limited to counterterrorism?
- What does U.S. and [international law](#) say about the practice of [targeted killings](#), for example via drones? What do these laws say about other policy options, such as raids conducted in another country's territory?
- To what degree should the United States be bound by international human rights laws and [norms](#) in its counterterrorism practices? What are the costs and benefits of adhering to such laws and norms?

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 are the principal capabilities, including [drones](#) and special operations forces, that the United States could deploy in this case? What are their main strengths and weaknesses?
- What are the major characteristics of the United States' relationship with Pakistan? How important is this relationship to U.S. foreign policy goals, including but not limited to [counterterrorism](#)?
- What diplomatic, reputational, or other costs should the United States be willing to bear to eliminate [terrorist](#) leaders? What is the best way to think about the costs and benefits involved?
- What are the immediate security risks of the policy options being considered in this case? For example, what would be the implications if U.S. forces involved in a raid were captured or killed?
- What are the attitudes of Congress and the general public toward this issue? What could be the domestic political consequences of a U.S. response perceived as "weak" or "strong"?

Guide to the Memorandum

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

What is a memorandum?

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

Guide to the Role-Play

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

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

Wrap-up

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

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

[Instructions](#)

[Role-Play How-To Video](#)

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

In the months leading up to the operation, Obama and his advisers had vigorously debated the best course of action. Without complete certainty in the intelligence some advocated waiting for additional confirmation. Others argued that a [drone](#) strike was the safest option. Most agreed that for a target like bin Laden, the United States could not rely on cooperation from Pakistan's security services. Even providing Pakistani forces advance notice of the operation was deemed too risky. Ultimately, Obama and his NSC decided that a raid was necessary. The administration wanted to be certain of the operation's success and to gather [intelligence](#) about the activities of al Qaeda.

In the early hours of May 2, 2011, a team of U.S. Navy SEALs conducted a covert raid, code-named Operation Neptune Spear, on the compound where bin Laden was suspected to be located. Ultimately, the raid was a success, killing bin Laden and four others on the compound, including one of bin Laden's sons. SEALs also retrieved a large amount of intelligence from the compound that would be used to shed light on [al-Qaeda](#)'s activities.

The raid put considerable strain on the United States' already tense relationship with Pakistan. Initially, the Pakistani government praised the operation as a victory against terrorism. It quickly also condemned the raid as "[an unauthorized unilateral action](#)." Pakistan warned the United States that future violations of its [sovereignty](#) would not be tolerated. Ultimately, the event did not completely rupture relations. Cooperation between the two countries on [counterterrorism](#) operations continued in the following years, although tensions routinely flared. The tumultuous relationship has prompted a significant decrease in counterterrorism operations in the country since their peak in 2010.

The successful operation marked a significant U.S. victory in the war on terror, but it did not bring that war to an end. Al-Qaeda, though diminished, continued to operate. New threats, including the self-proclaimed Islamic State, emerged. U.S. counterterrorism operations, especially drone strikes, continued both in Pakistan and beyond, in countries such as Somalia and Yemen. The Bureau of Investigative Journalism [has reported](#) that between 2001 and 2020, the United States conducted an estimated total of over 14,000 drone strikes. The United States has additionally conducted other special forces operations to kill [terrorist](#) leaders, such as a 2019 [raid in Syria](#) killing Islamic State founder and leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

Ultimately, counterterrorism will likely remain a prominent U.S. national security issue for years to come. Washington will need to contend with an ever-shifting landscape of terrorist threats and balance its national security with its reputation and relationships with partners and allies.

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

- [“How a Single Phrase Defined the War on Terror,”](#) CFR Education, August 30, 2023.
- Jayshree Bajoria and Greg Bruno, [“al-Qaeda \(a.k.a. al-Qaida, al Qa’ida\),”](#) Council on Foreign Relations, June 6, 2012.
- Thomas O. Falk, [“How drones have added a new dynamic to conflicts,”](#) *Al Jazeera*, February 20, 2021.
- Jonathan Masters, [“Targeted Killings,”](#) Council on Foreign Relations, May 23, 2013.
- Charlie Savage and Eric Schmitt, [“Biden Secretly Limits Counterterrorism Drone Strikes Away From War Zones,”](#) *New York Times*, March 3, 2021.
- Daniel J. Rosenthal and Loren Dejonge Schulman, [“Trump’s Secret War on Terror,”](#) *Atlantic*, August 10, 2018.
- Adrian Brown, [“Osama Bin Laden’s Death: How It Happened,”](#) *BBC*, September 10, 2012.

- Max Fisher, “[Does Killing Terrorist Leaders Make Any Difference? Scholars are Doubtful](#),” *New York Times*, August 30, 2016.
- Jason Lyall, “[Drones Are Destabilizing Global Politics](#),” *Foreign Affairs*, December 16, 2020.
- [YOUTUBE PLAYLIST](#)

Additional Resources

- BBC.com, “[Drones: What Are They and How Do They Work?](#)” January 31, 2012.
- Owen Bowcott, “[Drone Strikes by US may violate international law, says UN](#),” *Guardian*, October 18, 2013.
- Center for Global Development, “[Aid to Pakistan by the Numbers](#).”
- CFR.org, Global Conflict Tracker, “[Instability in Pakistan](#).”
- Judy Dempsey, “[Europe Stays Quiet Despite Unease About Drones](#),” *New York Times*, June 11, 2012.
- Sarah Kreps and Miles McCain, “[Congress keeps quiet on U.S. drone policy - and that’s a big problem](#),” *Washington Post*, August 24, 2017.
- PBS Religion & Ethics Newsweekly, “[The Ethics of Drones](#),” March 2, 2012.
- Bruce Hoffman, “[Al- Qaeda’s Resurrection](#),” Council on Foreign Relations, March 6, 2018.
- Bob Dreyfuss, “[General Cartwright Warns of ‘Drone Blowback’](#),” *Nation*, March 22, 2013.
- Amanda Erikson, “[The Long History of Incredibly Fraught Relations between the US and Pakistan](#),” *Washington Post*, January 5, 2018.
- “[U.S.- Pakistan Military Cooperation](#),” Council on Foreign Relations, June 26, 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.

How to Prepare for Role-Play

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

Role-play Guidelines

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

How to Write a Written Reflection

Guidelines

- **Subject (one short paragraph):** Offer a brief statement about the significance of the issue as it relates to U.S. [foreign policy](#) and national security. Provide just enough information about the crisis so that the reader can understand the purpose and importance of your memo. Be sure to include an initial statement of whether you agree or disagree with the president's decision.
- **Options and analysis (one paragraph per option):** Present and analyze the options discussed during the debate, deliberation, or debrief. Discuss their drawbacks, benefits, and resource needs. Be sure to acknowledge any weaknesses or disadvantages of the proposed options.
- **Recommendation and justification (several paragraphs):** Identify and explain your preferred policy option or options in more detail. Here, you can explain why you personally favor one or more of the recommendations that you initially presented or the president chose, or different options entirely. If you choose to support the options you presented in your position memo, make sure to justify why you feel yours is still the best position.
- **Reflection (one to two paragraphs):** Discuss how your position and the presidential directive are similar; if they are not, discuss how they are different. Use this section to give your thoughts on what the president should have included in their directive, or what you would have done differently. Remember, this is from your point of view; you are no longer advocating on behalf of a department or agency.

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

Drones in Pakistan in 2011 (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 Spring, 2011. Since the attacks of September 11, 2001, the United States has pursued a vigorous campaign against [terrorist](#) groups like [al-Qaeda](#). The U.S. intelligence community believes they have identified the location of al-Qaeda's leader, [Osama bin Laden](#). The United States must decide whether to try to kill or capture bin Laden—and if so, how. Each policy option—including a [drone](#) strike, a raid by special operations forces, a request that Pakistan act, and inaction—has costs and benefits for U.S. security and the U.S.-Pakistan relationship. Drones, in particular, have become a core element of the U.S. [counterterrorism](#) strategy, but their use is controversial.

Decision Point

After a decade-long search, the CIA has come upon credible evidence of the location of [Osama bin Laden](#). A man whom they believe to be the [al-Qaeda](#) leader is living inside a large compound in Abbottabad, a populous city near Pakistan's capital of Islamabad. The compound also houses roughly twenty women and children, believed to be bin Laden's relatives. However, based on [surveillance](#) of the compound, no one can say with absolute certainty that the individual they have identified is indeed bin Laden. Most of the CIA analysts involved have put their confidence level at 80 percent; some report 95 percent confidence, others rate their confidence as low as 40 percent.

The president has convened a meeting of the National Security Council (NSC) to receive advice on how to proceed. If the president decides to authorize action, three main options exist. The first is to conduct a [drone](#) strike against the compound, likely killing those in it. This option would risk civilian casualties and potential damage to an already tumultuous relationship with Pakistan. The second option is a raid by special operations forces. A raid could be effective in that troops could correctly identify individual targets and take caution to protect civilians. Troops could also collect computers and documents for intelligence. However, this option poses greater risk to the lives of U.S. service members and could also damage the U.S. relationship with Pakistan. Third, the president could ask the Pakistani military to capture or kill bin Laden. This would respect diplomatic ties but has a lower chance of success. Given the lack of complete certainty, the president could also decide to wait for additional confirmation or a better opportunity to strike. However, waiting risks losing the chance to act entirely if the occupants of the compound move and the CIA loses track of them. The president needs to decide quickly whether to authorize action to kill or capture the man believed to be bin Laden and, if so, what action to take.

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 evolution of [drone](#) usage as a tool of U.S. [counterterrorism](#) operations.
- Students will consider the concerns raised with the usage of drones to conduct [targeted killings](#) and precision strikes against members of [terrorist](#) organizations including circumstances that may violate a national [sovereignty](#).
- Students will evaluate the options available to the United States to capture or kill a high profile leader of [al-Qaeda](#).

Concepts and Issues

Concepts

- Terrorism and [counterterrorism](#)
- U.S. military options
- Weak states
- [Sovereignty](#)
- [Alliances](#)

Issues

- Costs and benefits of U.S. counterterrorism tools
- Debates surrounding the U.S. use of [drones](#)
- Trust and mistrust between the United States and its counterterrorism partners
- Threat posed by [al-Qaeda](#)

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 could find helpful as you guide the role-play and assess students.

The U.S. involvement in this case stems from not only September 11 but also a long history of [al-Qaeda](#) attacks against U.S. service members, civilians, and interests. Especially since 9/11, U.S. military forces, diplomats, and intelligence personnel have operated both unilaterally and in conjunction with local security forces in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and elsewhere in the world to detect and disrupt [terrorist](#) plots. A primary tactic has been killing certain al-Qaeda leaders and a vastly greater number of anonymous militants through [drone](#) strikes and other [counterterrorism](#) operations.

The principal options available in this case are as follows:

Conducting drone strikes on the compound believed to be inhabited by bin Laden

A drone strike offers a relatively low-risk option that could provide a strong chance of eliminating bin Laden if he is present at the compound. It would not put U.S. personnel in harm's way. Drones can also be incredibly precise, capable of killing targeted individuals while leaving those nearby unharmed. Despite this precision, drones do still pose the risk of killing or injuring any civilians in the immediate area of the strike. The precision of strikes only matters if the intelligence is timely and accurate. Additionally, after a drone strike, it could be impossible to confirm the identity of the target. Given the range of confidence levels in the available intelligence and the extremely high priority of bin Laden as a target, this option could therefore leave an intolerable amount of uncertainty over whether the strike indeed killed bin Laden. Finally, given the public opposition to drones in Pakistan, this option would risk further damaging already delicate relations with Pakistan.

Ordering a U.S. special forces raid on the compound

A special forces raid offers certain advantages over drone strikes. Primarily, U.S. forces can confirm the identity of those in the compound to ensure that bin Laden was present. Moreover, special forces teams could capture individuals to interrogate and collect information and equipment that could provide intelligence about al-Qaeda. Additionally, personnel can take greater care to protect civilians. However, a raid would expose the individuals involved—and the United States' reputation—to extreme risks. U.S. forces could be killed in a battle at the compound or by the Pakistani military should it become aware of the mission and try to disrupt it. Al-Qaeda could also capture members of the raiding party, giving the terrorist organization hostages of incalculable value and immediately presenting the United States with the agonizing choice of how to respond. All of this raises the risk of deeper U.S. involvement. Additionally, Pakistan would likely perceive a high-profile American raid—especially one so close to its capital—as an intolerable violation of its [sovereignty](#). The operation could lead to a rupture that would end what little cooperation remained between the two countries. If the United States gave Pakistan prior warning of the mission to avoid such a rupture, elements of Pakistan's government could pass on the information to al-Qaeda leaders allowing bin Laden and others to flee.

Asking the Pakistani government to capture or kill bin Laden

This option would spare American lives and eliminate the chance of an irreparable diplomatic breach. However, it also offers a far more uncertain chance of success. The Pakistani government could refuse to pursue bin Laden or it could agree but tip off bin Laden or execute the mission incompetently. Despite occasional successes, the United States has had a long history of frustration with Pakistan's counterterrorism efforts. This frustration has contributed to [bilateral](#) tensions and the belief among many American policymakers that the United States needs to pursue major terrorist targets itself. Especially for such a high-value target, the risks of entrusting this operation to another country would be significant.

Doing nothing

Given the drawbacks of the other available options and the lack of complete certainty from the intelligence community, the president could choose to delay action and continue to monitor the compound. Such a step has the downside of diminishing the utility of timely intelligence and allowing bin Laden to continue operating unhindered, possibly leading to further attacks on the United States or its allies. Moreover, similar issues to those considered here are likely to arise the next time intelligence on his location emerges. Given the particular circumstances of this case—including the possible presence of civilians at the targeted site—the president could decide to pass on this opportunity. There is a chance that the target's whereabouts and U.S.-Pakistan relations will be more favorable in the future. At times in the past, the United States has carefully considered the consequences of a counterterrorism operation for its relationship with Pakistan. In 2005, then Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld aborted a large-scale raid on senior al-Qaeda members located in Pakistan's tribal areas because it had the potential to jeopardize U.S.-Pakistan relations and place many American lives at risk.

Running the Simulation

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Tips for the National Security Advisor

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

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

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

Tips for the President

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

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

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

Tips for Online Classes

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

In round one, participants present their positions.

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

In round two, participants debate the various policy options.

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

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

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

Flashpoints

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

1. A new intelligence report reveals that one of the senior [al-Qaeda](#) members expected to be present at the compound is a U.S. citizen.
2. A group of American and international nongovernmental organizations releases a major report contending that U.S. [drone](#) strikes have killed significantly more civilians than previously believed. The report—filled with stories of hundreds of people, including children, said to have been killed by drones—immediately makes international headlines. Demonstrators fill the streets of major Pakistani cities. Pakistan’s prime minister bars all U.S. drones from Pakistani airspace and vows to shoot down any that violate his order. Pakistani military and intelligence officials privately convey the same message to their U.S. counterparts, emphasizing that they cannot guarantee the safety of any U.S. military aircraft that enter the country.
3. A U.S. military aircraft, operating in support of Afghan military forces, fires on Pakistani soldiers at a post on the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Initial reports indicate that two Pakistani soldiers are killed and several more are injured. The U.S. secretary of defense, after brief consultations with military commanders, declares the attack a mistake and apologizes. The U.S. president also calls Pakistan’s prime minister to offer condolences over the deaths and makes a

public apology from the White House. Still, the prime minister, speaking on Pakistani television, condemns what he calls “unjustified American aggression, which has taken Pakistani lives again and again and again.” He pledges to “urgently reassess” U.S.-Pakistani ties.

4. The U.S. Embassy in Islamabad reports a sudden military lockdown in the city amid strong rumors of a [coup d'état](#). Pakistani television stations report that a faction of senior army leaders has decided to arrest the prime minister and take power themselves “in order to preserve the unity and security of the Pakistani state.” The U.S. secretary of state briefly reaches the prime minister by phone; he promises that he is in no danger before the call is abruptly cut off.

After introducing a flash point, you can 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 extent and nature of the international [terrorist](#) threat posed by terrorist organizations such as [al-Qaeda](#) leaders operating in Pakistan and elsewhere?
2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of using [drones](#) for [targeted killings](#) and what has the United States sought to accomplish through their use?
3. Besides drones, what tools has the United States employed as part of its [counterterrorism](#) efforts? What are the costs and benefits of these tools?
4. How does the public, both in the United States and in countries where the United States conducts drone strikes, regard the use of drones and how, if at all, should this public opinion influence U.S. policy decisions?

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.

NSC Position Memo Rubric

CONCERNS

What needs improvement

CRITERIA

What is expected

ADVANCED

What is excellent

Subject and Background paragraphs

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

Objectives bullet points

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

Options and Analysis paragraphs

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

Recommendation and Justification paragraphs

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

CONCERNS

What needs improvement

CRITERIA

What is expected

ADVANCED

What is excellent

Purpose

- Provides context for the memo
- Is succinct

Decisions

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

Communications strategy

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

NSC Written Reflection Rubric

CONCERNS

What needs improvement

CRITERIA

What is expected

ADVANCED

What is excellent

Subject paragraph

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

Options and Analysis paragraph

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

Recommendation and Justification paragraph

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

Reflection paragraph or paragraphs

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

Downloadable rubrics are available here:

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