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Review of Model Diplomacy

Model Diplomacy is a new interactive foreign policy simulation offered by the Council on Foreign Relations. The simulation uses hypothetical crises based on real-world challenges facing the United States, allowing students to explore these issues in the context of an emergency meeting called by the President of the United States. In the simulation, students function as members of the National Security Council (NSC) who advise the president on policy implementation. Students take on the personas of key figures like the President, Vice President, Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense, and the National Security Advisor. The cases found in Model Diplomacy cover a range of realistic crises that could be confronted by American foreign policy makers in the future, and allow students to consider options to address those issues in an interactive format. To date, the Model Diplomacy library contains 14 contemporary cases, covering key concepts and issues in international relations like deterrence, development, energy, nationalism, multilateralism, nonproliferation, terrorism, trade and human rights.

Student and instructor accounts are free of charge, but both groups must register online (<https://modeldiplomacy.cfr.org/>) before being able to participate in a simulation. Once the instructor creates an account, she then selects one of the crises to simulate in the classroom based on the content of the course. Each case is accompanied by a “case profile,” which provides a brief overview of the crisis, the number of roles involved in that particular simulation, the general international relations concepts illustrated by the simulation, and the immediate empirical issues at hand. There is also a section of the website devoted entirely to “instructor resources,” which contains guides, customization tips and other ancillary materials.

Once the instructor has decided on a particular case, she then invites the students to join the simulation via email. As soon as students officially register for a particular simulation, the instructor has the ability to assign each student to a specific role. At this point, students are responsible for

researching the topic and developing a position in line with that of their alter egos and the departments they are representing. Each crisis contains four parts: an NSC guide (overview, interagency process, timeline, departments and agencies, and glossary), case background materials (the crisis at hand, context, recent history, timeline, root causes, role of the United States, other interested parties, and glossary), the role-play (roles, research and preparation, reading list and memoranda guide) and wrap-up (reflection and assessment). These are all available online. It is highly recommended that instructors utilize all four components of the simulation, but they may wish to introduce the NSC themselves and have students focus on the case materials and role-play. While Model Diplomacy provides students with a plethora of material from the web to draw on, the simulation materials available on the website itself—including videos, maps, timelines, glossaries, sample memos and templates—provide more than enough information for students to understand the context of the crisis and thoroughly prepare for the role play.

The crisis simulation itself takes place in the classroom. Before the start of the simulation, students will have written a policy memorandum, which they use in providing advice to the designated president. The president and national security advisor run the meeting and establish the ground rules. Generally, the simulation unfolds in three stages. In round one, students present their initial position to the president; the president asks questions of his advisors; and the participants establish the core issues involved in the crisis. In the second round, students deliberate on the proposed positions with the priorities of their particular roles in mind. In this round, the president raises challenges, obstacles and advantages associated with different positions. In the final round, the students make their final recommendations to the president, and the president decides on a course of action. After the third round, the instructor should conclude the simulation by asking students to reflect on the issues involved in the case, analyze the president's policy directive, and evaluate the quality of the arguments presented.

Instructors implementing Model Diplomacy in their courses for the first time might take into account the following suggestions for running a successful simulation. First, students need adequate time to prepare. Ideally, a simulation should take place during the class immediately following a lecture in which the instructor has introduced the material to the class. This way, students are already acquainted with some of the background knowledge they need to address the NSC meeting competently. Instructors should also ensure students have adequate time to research the case on the Model Diplomacy website and write their memoranda. Second, while simulation roles can generally be distributed randomly, the instructor should personally select the president and national security advisor. The reason for this is that these are the most important individuals involved in the simulation, essentially running the meeting in the same way that an actual meeting of the NSC would look like. Students who are both intelligent and extroverted make the best presidents and national security advisors. Conversely, nothing destroys a simulation faster than when those in these positions are unprepared, withdrawn or unprofessional. Third, the simulation should be graded (Model Diplomacy includes built-in assessments). The specific grading criteria can vary from instructor to instructor, but assigning a grade for student participation makes it far more likely that students will take the simulation seriously. Fourth, if running Model Diplomacy for the first time, instructors might consider using the brief “quick start guide” instead of the detailed “instructors guide” for the sake of keeping things simple. The “quick start guide” breaks the simulation down into seven easy-to-follow steps, and is ideal for first-time users. Finally, Model Diplomacy does not work terribly well with large classes. Each crisis contains approximately 14 distinct roles. In classes with more students than available roles, multiple students will have to be assigned to the same position (i.e., Secretary of Defense). Further, the larger the class, the more likely that the meeting will be overtaken by more extroverted students.

As the most comprehensive foreign policy simulation currently available, Model Diplomacy holds much promise for teaching students the challenges of shaping policy in an interconnected world.

The imprimatur of the Council on Foreign Relations naturally lends credibility to the simulation, and the topical nature of the crises in the case library works extraordinarily well for courses dealing with current events. The cases are expertly constructed and thorough. It is evident that an enormous amount of time went into research and writing each case. Participating in Model Diplomacy will help students broaden their perspectives, communicate and defend their ideas, research topics quickly, improve their writing skills, negotiate and compromise, and work within an organizational structure. These are worthwhile goals for any course in international relations.

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