

The Obama Administration's "Red Line" in Syria

PSCI 131: American Foreign Policy Simulation

Goals:

Your goal is to get your assigned National Security Council (NSC) member's preferred plan of action passed in the final memo of this simulation of the NSC. To do so, you need to first understand what the NSC member you are role-playing as might have thought about the Syrian crisis and what information she or he might have had access to at the time of the crisis.

Research Process:

You will need to research what your NSC member's background is and their views on American Foreign Policy more generally and Syria more specifically. Look for quotes from them in news stories, interviews available online, papers they've written, etc. Not all the members will have the same amount of written material available, so you may have to look more at their position within the NSC and what might ideas someone who has their kind of background might think.

It is totally fine to disagree with the views of the person you are role-playing. That's great! Part of the point of this exercise is to get you to consider new views and ideas and why various policymakers might hold different views. You might also want to, in the course of your research, see who your major opponents on the NSC might be and read up on them for any points of leverage that you might have.

How the simulation will work:

The simulation will begin with a "briefing" from each person about their views of how the U.S. should respond and any information that they might have (based on what your NSC member knew at the time) that is pertinent to the situation. These are 3 minutes maximum and the President may ask follow-up questions.

We will then move into a moderated discussion with speakers being able to speak for up to 1 minute. After each speaker, the President may ask questions. If you would like to ask a question of a speaker, raise your placard and the National Security Advisor (NSA) will call on you. Speakers may take up to 2 questions.

The National Security Advisor (NSA) will be responsible for timing, maintaining a public list of topics covered, and ensuring that all viewpoints are shared. We will solicit initial sign-ups for a speaker's list immediately after the initial briefings end. If you would like to have your name added to the speaker's list, please send a note to the NSA to get on the speaker's list. If there is nobody on the speaker's list, the NSA may either add names or go by speakers raising their placards to talk.

Note-passing and/or emailing/Gchatting with other NSC members is allowed so long as it is on-topic. During breaks, you should stay “in character” and continue to talk, negotiate, even lobby other people on the NSC. The simulation should last approximately 3 hours.

The final action of this simulation will be a “Presidential Memo” that will be composed stating what the President is ordering the United States to do. The NSA will coordinate management of this and may aid in typing it up on the overheard screen for all to see. The President, of course, has the final say in what is in it. But this should be the end result of the simulation--what the United States will say and do in response to the Syrian chemical weapons attack.

It is fine to have your views “evolve” (this may involve being convinced by something you hear or after having struck a sort of deal or understanding with another NSC member). You are free to be creative throughout the simulation, though you cannot make up a false fact or lie.

Date of the Simulation:

We are going to use August 27th, 2013 as the date of our NSC meeting. This means that the only things your NSC member will know will be things that took place up through August 27th, 2013. You may of course consult later publications about the events that led up to August 27th, but you should avoid hindsight bias as much as possible.

Evaluation (counts just like a response paper):

Position Paper [60% of grade]:

You should type up your research (though of course you may bring in additional research to the simulation) as the following in a 600-800 word paper that includes the following (you can title them as sections or as separate paragraphs, whatever you prefer):

- Brief Summary of Your NSC Member’s Motivations
- Brief Summary of Potential Policy Options in Situation
- Policy Recommendation based on your NSC member’s Role/Motivations/Consideration of Context (including from this course) out of those options

Please cite your sources in standard APA style. You should cite at least 3 different sources, which can include the background material links from this handout.

Participation in Simulation [30% of grade]:

Are you representing your NSC member’s views? Are you active and respectfully engaged with the

discussions? In general, so long as you come prepared and work to get your view across, this should be fairly straightforward.

End of Simulation Writing [10% of grade]:

Reflection paragraph at the end of the simulation briefly discussing how happy your NSC member would be with the final outcome, why you succeeded/failed in getting your NSC member's views across, and how the negotiation process worked in the course of the simulation. Also connect it back to what you saw in the course.

Members of President Obama's National Security Council as of August 27th, 2013 (AKA, the people you get to choose from to role-play as):

President Barack Obama: asks questions, challenges subordinates, orders the final memo [Chris]
National Security Advisor Susan Rice: helps run the meeting, needs to be good at keeping time and moderating [This will be Claire's role]

Available roles:

Vice President Joe Biden: has many years of experience on the Foreign Relations committee in the Senate, may have his own presidential ambitions, is prone to shoot off his mouth a bit

UN Representative Samantha Power: journalist and academic on human rights issues, longtime adviser to President Obama and member of the NSC before being appointed to the U.N.

Chief of Staff Denis McDonough: concerned for how the President's response will play with the current political situation, also a member of the NSC in other roles beforehand

Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel: previously a Republican Senator from Nebraska, a little bit jaded by an unexpectedly tough confirmation battle and entering a Democratic administration

Secretary of State John Kerry: former Democratic Senator from Massachusetts, just replaced Hillary Clinton as SecState, now in what he has called basically his dream job

Deputy National Security Advisor for Communications Ben Rhodes: a longtime Obama loyalist who has little experience in foreign policy, but a knack for being concerned with messaging

Director of National Intelligence Jim Clapper: in a fairly new position as the DNI, previously an Air Force general; must coordinate across all US intel agencies, including the CIA

Director of the CIA: John Brennan: longtime CIA analyst and then supporter of the Obama campaign who also has experience on the NSC; concerned primarily with the CIA

Principal Deputy National Security Advisor Antony J. Blinken: an old Bill Clinton-era policy hand who has been on the NSC for a long time and has experience with Middle Eastern conflicts

National Security Council Coordinator for the Middle East Philip Gordon: also an old Clinton-era policy expert, he had previously been involved with the Eurasian office of the NSC and was highly interested in resolving conflict with Iran

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Martin Dempsey: U.S. Army general, as Chair of the Joint Chiefs is the highest-ranking member of the U.S. military and is familiar with the U.S. military's capabilities and interests

Secretary of Energy Ernest Moniz: a nuclear physicist, expert on weapons of mass destruction

Potential Sources:

You may search any reputable news source for information keeping in mind that you should be thinking through the mindset of all the information the a member of the NSC might have had on August 27th, 2013. Note too that interviews and memoirs may be self-serving, so take those with a grain of salt. Here are some that might get you started:

An excellent source of background information about the Syrian Civil War and how the rest of the world responded that dates from around the time period of our simulation:

<https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/syrias-crisis-and-global-response>

The official and public Obama Administration assessment of what happened in Syria:

<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/08/30/government-assessment-syria-n-government-s-use-chemical-weapons-august-21>

Some remarks issued right after the time period in which we are holding the simulation discussing what the Obama administration was thinking:

<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/09/09/remarks-prepared-delivery-national-security-advisor-susan-e-rice>

Some critiques of the way the Obama administration handled Syria:

<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/10/obama-micromanager-syria-foreign-policy/381292/>

<https://www.npr.org/2017/04/08/523141171/former-national-security-council-coordinator-reflects-on-obamas-syria-policy>

An interview with President Obama about his foreign policy and his responses to the various crises around the world during his term, including Syria:

<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>