

Playing Games with Nuclear Bombs: Developing Future-Oriented Foreign Simulations

Jeffrey Berejikian
University of Georgia

Molly Berkemeier
University of Georgia

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Jeffrey Berejikian is a Josiah Meigs Distinguished Teaching Professor at the University of Georgia, and Associate Professor in the Department of International Affairs.

Molly Berkemeier is an Assistant Professor in the Department of International Affairs at the University of Georgia, and Resident Fellow at the Center for International Trade and Security.

Preventing the proliferation of nuclear weapons stands as perhaps the critical challenge to the security of the global community. For this reason, the topic is central to instruction in the fields of international affairs, political science, and foreign policy. Learning objectives on this topic include developing an understanding of how countries have confronted the issue in the past and why progress has been so difficult, and designing new initiatives moving forward.

In support of these objectives, we developed a “future-oriented” foreign policy simulation. Simulations grounded in historical events have clear and demonstrated benefits that extend beyond teaching history; they also encourage students to think creatively about the present.¹ We define future-oriented foreign policy simulations as those in which students adopt the contemporary interests of countries in negotiations that are on the global agenda but that have not yet occurred. In this way, students obtain experience confronting real-world foreign policy issues that the international community has yet to effectively address.

Our simulation models the upcoming Review Conference for the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. The conference has been convened every five years since 1975 in order for governments to review the success of previous initiatives and to establish a common framework for realizing the principles, objectives, and full implementation of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). The primary goal at each conference is to produce an updated consensus document outlining national commitments and responsibilities with respect to advancing the global nuclear-nonproliferation agenda. Production of this consensus document is the focus of our simulation.

We developed a 14-country simulation in which student teams adopt the role of national delegations attending the next scheduled NPT conference.² The class receives a briefing packet containing background material on the purposes of the conference and a reference list for self-study. Delegations receive confidential memos containing information about their assigned country including their government’s activities during

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previous review conferences, their country's national interests on each of the specific issues that will comprise the upcoming negotiations, and explicit directives outlining each delegation's objectives at the conference.

This confidential memo is critical to our purposes in that it connects the student experience to the real-world challenge

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Given the obvious connection between progress on the issue of nonproliferation and global security, students are often frustrated when they come to understand that the initial hopes for the NPT have yet to be fully realized. Policy experts and academics agree that the location of this failing rests in the fact that countries have sharply divergent interests on the issues that strike at the core of their perceptions of national security. In a traditional classroom setting, students inevitably push back against this analysis and argue that, nonetheless, governments should come together for the “common good” of the global community and fully implement the initial aspirations of the NPT.

To help students develop a deeper understanding of the inherent, real-world challenges attached to nonproliferation we selected a sub-set of countries for our simulation that represent divergent positions on each of the three main working-group topics for the upcoming conference. This places delegations in authentic conflicts of interests. For example, while the United States and Australia agree that sanctions against North Korea are appropriate, they disagree on the broader issue of eliminating nuclear weapons all together. Alternatively, while Iran and Saudi Arabia stand together, and against the United States, on the