

PLAY YOUR ROLE:

A POLICYMAKER SIMULATION TO GROUND EAST ASIAN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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Abstract

International Relations is often confusing for students. IR theories are introduced as parsimonious and elegant and then systematically challenged as students learn more about detailed events. There are rules, there are norms, and states follow them until they don't. East Asia increases these challenges because it often undermines IR theory. Simulations can provide a key means of grounding students studying international relations because they apply IR theory to real world examples – something especially important in a large lecture course. While simulations are effective tools, they often rely on strong institutional arrangements around which the rules of simulations are based. This presents a challenge for studying foreign relations in regions like East Asia, which have weaker multilateral institutions and thus no obvious template for a simulation. To overcome the challenges of weak institutionalization and subject matter difficulty, we present two alternative models of simulations tested in a large lecture course on transpacific relations. The consensus model simulates what an international summit looks like in a weakly institutionalized environment maximizing the realism of the experience for students. The cooperation model captures the motivations of states to seek international cooperation despite the complications faced in international relations maximizing the spirit of urgency that animates weakly institutionalized environments. We provide detailed instructions and materials to adapt these models to similar courses.

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INTRODUCTION

International Relations can be confusing for students. Elegantly parsimonious IR theories are introduced and then systematically challenged as students learn more about detailed events. There are rules, there are norms, and states follow them until they don't. East Asia increases these challenges because it often undermines IR theory (Johnston 2012). Large lecture courses further struggle to maintain student engagement. With more limited interaction between students and instructors, students might feel isolated or less comfortable participating with a larger audience. Active learning styles can be effective at bridging this gap (Huerta 2007; Walker et al. 2008). Based on a previous challenging iteration of our large lecture course on transpacific relations at the University of California, Berkeley, we developed the two simulation models presented here to increase student involvement and engagement throughout the Fall 2017 semester.

Simulations are generally accepted as an effective means of developing an active learning environment for students in political science (Frederking 2005). Previous research has found that simulations are a tool for increasing both analytical skills and substantive knowledge (Shellman and Turan 2006). Simulations also help to overcome particular national understandings of issues and relationships that American and international students may have internalized in their previous education helping them to develop better understanding of and empathy for opposing views (Stover 2005).

Moreover, simulations are particularly common in international relations and foreign policy courses (Starkey and Blake 2001). Model United Nations, an organization widely available on high school and college campuses, allows students to roleplay high level diplomacy. In courses on international institutions, Model UN can be incorporated directly into classroom learning

(McIntosh 2001). Courses on the European Union have employed Model EU simulations since the late 1980s (Zeff 2003), and there are established resources available for classroom instruction. These range from readymade simulations which one can purchase (e.g. the ICONS Project) (Starkey and Wilkenfeld 1996), interuniversity competitions that students can attend (Van Dyke, DeClair, and Loedel 2000), and any number of simulations designed by faculty for use in their courses.

The foreign policy of East Asia provides particular challenges for simulation design because it lacks strong institutions. East Asia has a more weakly developed supranational institutional environment than Europe and supranational bodies tend to be limited in scope, lack significant institutional capacity, and/or are highly consensus-based (see Acharya 1997). The challenge becomes even greater when considering the wider Asia-Pacific region, which has limited permanent institutional structures with purviews beyond a single issue. Indeed, these challenges *simulating* international behavior in East Asia mirror the challenges that IR theory has *explaining* the region (Johnston 2012). Foreign policy simulations as currently designed often depend on the readily established rules, structures, and norms present in European regionalism, but these same rules, structures, and norms are looser in regional bodies elsewhere in the world. Perhaps unsurprisingly, there are a limited number of simulations designed to focus on East Asia (Kempston and Thomas 2014; Fung 2019). Those that exist tend to focus on comprehensive coverage of specific disputes rather than generalizable templates.

We present two generalizable simulation designs that address the institutional challenges of East Asian regionalism. One simulation structure focused on the drive for consensus, while the second focused on the cooperative elements in deal making. Subsequently these two models will be referred to as the Consensus and Cooperation models. In the following sections, we will

present an overview of the course, discuss the design and execution of each model, suggested modifications and generalizations, and conclude. Detailed online appendices are provided to aid instructors in implementing the simulation in their courses about the Asia-Pacific region or foreign relations in weakly institutionalized regional environment involving one global and multiple regional stakeholders.

OVERVIEW OF SIMULATION & COURSE

The simulation was part of a Fall 2017 course on Transpacific relations offered in the Political Science department at the University of California, Berkeley. Most students were upper-division undergraduates. The course focused on the relationship between U.S. foreign policy and developments in East Asia, primarily China, Japan, North and South Korea, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia. The instructor emphasized the ways Asia has been shaped by American actions and how American policies have been shaped by events in Asia, especially after 1945.

Each week students had three hours of lecture divided into two parts, and one hour of discussion section. Each TA taught two sections of 27 students. The penultimate discussion section was exclusively allotted to the graded simulation exercise while related exercises were performed during other weeks. TAs coordinated the topics of the simulation exercise and broad allocation of roles but chose different formats: the consensus and cooperation models.

A preliminary simulation was conducted earlier in the semester to familiarize students with the format without the pressure of grading.¹ The main simulation exercise then covered two topics: transpacific international economic cooperation and the East and South China Seas (ECS/SCS) island disputes. However, this simulation is designed to be “issue agnostic” and could be applied to any topic that might require cooperation between the United States and Asian

Table 1: The Roles and Sub-Roles

American Roles	
Role	Sub-Role
United States Presidency	President
	Vice President
United States Military	Secretary of Defense
	Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff
United States Diplomats	Secretary of State
	UN Ambassador
United States Congress	Republicans
	Democrats
United States Business Firms	Internationally Competitive Sectors
	Internationally Un-Competitive Sectors
United States Opinion Leaders	Isolationists/Libertarians
	Pacifists & Humanitarians
Asian Roles	
Role	Sub-Role
China (PRC)	Communist Party/ General Secretary
	People's Liberation Army
	Min. of Commerce/NDRC/Firms
Japan	Conservatives/Self Defense Force
	Firms/Moderates
South Korea (ROK)	Military/Conservatives
	Civil Society/Progressives
	Chaebols (Firms)
Taiwan (ROC)	KMT & its Allies
	DPP & Other Outsiders
North Korea (DPRK)	Military
	Kim Family
ASEAN Former Anti-Communist	Philippines, Thailand
	Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Brunei
ASEAN Former Communist	Vietnam, Laos
	Myanmar/Burma, Cambodia

states.ⁱⁱ Divided roughly evenly between American and Asian roles, the Consensus model assigned two or three people to play one role while the Cooperation model assigned each student a unique sub-role as detailed in Table 1.ⁱⁱⁱ Assignments were made early in the semester so students could familiarize themselves with their actor. Students were evaluated on their active participation and understanding of how their actor would perceive the relevant points of contention. They were not evaluated on their success in convincing others to adopt those positions.

Following the simulation, students from each section presented their experiences in the simulation exercise during the lecture, allowing for debriefing and comparison between sections to help students understand lessons taken away from multiple roles (Wheeler 2006, 335). Simulation-specific questions were incorporated into the official course evaluation conducted by the department as well as a short reflection essay question on the final exam.^{iv}

SIMULATION EXECUTION: TWO MODELS

Within the course structure described above, the TAs developed separate designs for overcoming the challenges of applying traditional international relations models to the East Asian institutional environment. One simulation structure focused on the drive for consensus in deal making to replicate real world dynamics while the other focused on cooperative elements with more gamification. Both models are process-oriented simulations as each sought to emphasize an aspect of weak institutionalization.(Asal and Blake 2006, 4-5) Each model is designed to fit into a standard 50-minute class period but may be extended or shortened as described below.

CONSENSUS MODEL

The consensus model seeks to replicate the thin institutional environment present in Asian regionalism, where consensus is paramount and the organizational secretariats have limited authority to promote their own agendas or compel national actors to reach solutions beyond the lowest common denominator. This model maximizes realism in a classroom setting by simulating the difficulties associated with achieving transnational consensus, an important goal in teaching international relations (Sasley 2010). It also requires less instructor material preparation compared with the extensive gamification materials used in the cooperation model.

In this model, students are asked to be in character as their respective, randomly assigned role throughout the simulation exercise. Role assignments are more general than in the cooperation model, with two or three student teams assigned to the primary roles described in Table 1.^v This greater generality allowed students to respond on the fly with standard background knowledge the average undergraduate student can be expected to have in an upper division course. Twice during the semester, students wrote two page analytic memos about how their actor would respond to the readings for the week.

SIMULATION RULES AND EXECUTION

In terms of the simulation itself, negotiations were opened by the actor who is hosting the next APEC summit, for some degree of objectivity. Discussions were then designed to flow as organically as possible, with minimal interference from the moderator aside from maintaining some form of a speaker's list and calling for a final vote.

The rules of the game:

1. There are two issues, the ECS/SCS disputes and economic cooperation [approx. 20 minutes discussion per question].
2. Students should remain in character.
3. The classroom should be arranged in a circle to assist students in participating with all actors.
4. Whichever state is scheduled to host the next APEC summit should open and close discussions, with some guidance from the moderator.
5. One student should be assigned to take notes on key points of deliberation/agreement and to formulate these into a final proposal for voting, with some guidance from the moderator.

6. Discussions should largely flow naturally from topic to topic. The moderator should maintain a speaker's list as necessary.
7. Students should have prepared an understanding of their country's positions and may benefit from having some notes on hand but should not have written out any scripted statements, to keep discussion moving.
8. Approximately five minutes should remain for voting at the end of each issue discussion. The notetaker should work with the instructor to formulate a consensus position for a vote. Students then vote in character (one vote per role, rather than one per student), seeking unanimity. A nay vote requires modification of the statement to a more general position that might be acceptable to all actors. A successful vote is *not* required to move on to the next topic.

INSTRUCTOR OBSERVATIONS

As a whole, students did a good job staying in character and had only minor slip-ups where they took a position antithetical to their role. Debate proceeded on each topic for approximately twenty-five minutes, at which students were asked to come up with a sort of proposal that everyone could agree upon. Group B was unable to reach a consensus position on either issue, and indeed the proposals made were not genuine attempts at consensus but reassertions of national prerogatives. Group A was able to reach a consensus statement about island disputes in the East China Sea (though not the South China Sea);^{vi} however, any attempts at a general economic communiqué were derailed by the actors portraying North Korea, who worried about further regional isolation.

In both cases, the vague statements voted on, or the lack of any agreed-upon communiqué, gave an accurate sense of the difficulties of developing Transpacific cooperation. Many of the

hardest-set disputes did not involve any of the American actors, giving a good sense of the difficulties facing Asian regionalism. Debriefing revealed the delicate balance between this realistic sense of halting incompleteness and frustration with classmates assigned recalcitrant roles such as the DPRK.

The simulation also served to underscore the contemporary significance of the Trump Administration's decision to pull out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership. Students easily recognized how hard-fought the negotiations must have been and appreciated the challenges that might face any future American participation in a larger free trade agreement especially in the absence of American mediation during the drafting phase.

COOPERATION MODEL

The cooperation model captures the spirit of international relations in East Asia by providing each student a specific role to identify with on the day of the simulation and throughout the semester. While this model removes the possibility for multilateralism by design, it creates a sense of urgency that spurs students to energetically seek out someone – *anyone* – to be their ally in a zero-sum exchange of treaties. The need to find an ally in a game with scarce partnerships forces students to think creatively and generate some strange bedfellows which they must nevertheless justify in the weakly institutionalized world of East Asian foreign relations.

To create the sense of urgency, the cooperation model uses more granular sub-roles, props, and gamified rules. At the beginning of the semester, each student is assigned a sub-role from Table 1 and instructed that they will be working with the other sub-roles in their role group on simulation day. Depending on class size, the more complex sub-roles (i.e. those of Japan) can be assigned to multiple students, although the total role group sizes should be kept similar to maintain balance on simulation day.

The student's sub-role provides a "character" to follow through the issues and events discussed in lecture and readings throughout the semester. Twice during the semester, students wrote two page memos about how their sub-role would respond to the readings for the week. In the week before the simulation, a pre-simulation activity requires the group of students assigned to a role to focus on the divisions between their sub-roles rather than the overarching role uniting them (see online appendix). With this priming of internal division, the students then must negotiate as united role teams during the actual simulation. Together, the pre-simulation activity and the actual simulation instill in students the spirit of international relations where internally divided roles still strive to present a united front on the world stage.

SIMULATION RULES AND EXECUTION

The cooperation simulation rules move away from the realism of the consensus model and creates a gamified simulation where students personify roles. Props and standardized scorecards are an important part of helping students inhabit their roles. The minimum set of props are illustrated two-sided name badges. On the front appears the role, a symbol of the sub-role, and the sub-role. On the back appears a "cheat-sheet" description of the sub-role^{vii} and a large flag for the country that the role represents. Color printing and consistent formatting are important to creating a gamified atmosphere. An example name badge appears below in Figure 1. The other required materials are one scorecard and two topic stickers for each role.^{viii}

The simulation has four 10-minute sections and is designed to fit a standard 50-minute class period. The rules should be explained to the students in the week before the simulation as listed below.

The rules of the game:

1. There are two issues, the ECS/SCS disputes and economic cooperation
2. For each issue,
 - a. each American Role must find an Asian Role to swap stickers (signifying that they will be allies)
 - b. each Asian Role must find an American or Asian Role to swap stickers (signifying that they will be allies)
3. Any swap may be made, including 3-way swaps
4. Both roles must be able to justify their swap in writing to the satisfaction of the other role.
5. The TA is the “Zeitgeist of History” and circulates to facilitate matches and help with justifications as needed.

On the day of the simulation, the TA should group desks into small islands throughout the room and place the correct name badges for each role (2-3 sub-roles) onto the desks along with a single scorecard for each role. Students should sit with the other members of their role.

Once the students are badged and have their scorecards and stickers, the agenda should proceed as follows:

- [10 minutes] Negotiate a Security Alliance on the ECS/SCS Dispute
 - [60 seconds] With sub-role partners write down your role’s position on the disputes
 - [5 min] Find an ally (swap stickers, discuss a justification)
 - [4 min] Sit with your new ally, write out a justification, both roles sign.

- [10 minutes] TA-proctored Group discussion of ECS/SCS Alliances (and additional time to write justifications)
- [10 minutes] Negotiate an Economic Partnership
 - [60 seconds] With sub-role partners write down your role’s economic interests and preferences
 - [5 min] Find an ally role (swap stickers, discuss a justification)
 - [4 min] Sit with your new ally, write out a justification, both roles sign.
- [10 minutes] TA-proctored Group discussion of Economic Partnerships (and additional time to write justifications)
- [5 minutes] Collect all materials (name badges, completed score cards)

INSTRUCTOR OBSERVATIONS

While more stylized than the consensus model, the cooperation model got students to feel the urgency and necessity of diplomacy. By gamifying the design, all students were moving about the room, energy was running high, and students who had been quiet throughout the semester became deeply involved in negotiating increasingly more eccentric yet justifiable deals between

Figure 1: Sample Illustrated Name Badge



strange bedfellows. Debriefing discussions reflected this energy but also highlighted that not all roles faced the same challenge despite the appearance of uniform rules for all. While this revelation led to some tense moments in the simulation, students agreed in debriefing that this tension was instructive.

Despite the success of the main simulation, the grounding of the material throughout the semester was inconsistently successful as students rarely fell back into their roles when unprompted. Future implementations should consider an explicit role-based activity early in the semester to jump-start role-based thinking throughout.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MODIFICATION AND GENERALIZATION

While the consensus and cooperation models presented above are implemented specifically for contemporary East Asian IR, each is generalizable to a weakly institutionalized regional environment involving one global and multiple regional stakeholders. The models can be adapted to a variety of regions which share these characteristics by identifying roles which correspond to the interest groups identified in Table 1. While the global stakeholder roles might remain American, they could be generalized to the executive, legislative, military, business, and opinion leaders in an alternative country.^{ix}

Class time is always a constraint and the simulations can be shortened by reducing roles or issues. For the East Asian context, economics and security were key themes of the course but either could be dropped for time. Alternatively, different issues such as human rights concerns or trade agreements could be added or substituted at instructor discretion. The number of global stakeholder roles could also be reduced to the executive and military, although the

cooperation model would then have to allow any alliances rather than require global-regional pairings.

Class size also varies, and Table 1 demonstrates options for 13-role and 28-sub-role configurations that can be expanded or contracted. The minimum number of roles for U.S.-East Asia is eight (U.S. President and Military, China, Japan, ROK, DPRK, Taiwan, ASEAN). For a generalized simulation, the minimum number of roles would be two from the global stakeholder (executive and military) and one each from the regional stakeholders. While both models are implemented above at the role level, the cooperation model in particular could be elaborated to the sub-role level which would increase possible matches at the expense of requiring more nuanced justifications, which would be suitable for advanced classes and longer simulations.

CONCLUSIONS

While a staple of university teaching, large lecture courses struggle to engage students. Active learning strategies have been shown to help students learn better in large lecture courses by increasing student engagement (Walker et al. 2008). In IR courses, many teachers turn to simulations to provide this active learning component. In European or global IR courses, institutions like the EU and UN provide natural models on which to base simulations. However, East Asia's more weakly developed supranational institutions make simulation design less obvious and more necessary because this same lack of institutional structure makes East Asian IR more confusing to students who would benefit from active learning through a simulation.

This paper presented two alternative models of simulations built around the weakly institutionalized nature of East Asian IR. The consensus model simulates what an international

summit looks like in such an environment. The cooperation model captures the urgency and necessity which motivate states to seek international cooperation despite the challenges faced in international relations. Both models offer students a chance to successfully apply the knowledge they learn in lectures and readings in an active, even kinesthetic, manner, helping students who learn best through a variety of learning techniques.

The different models achieved their different goals with the students, although those goals sometimes left students happy and sometimes with realistic feelings of frustration, disappointment, or frenzy.^x By realistically simulating a summit in weakly institutionalized Asia, the consensus model left students reflecting on how the lack of structure can lead to frustrating outcomes despite good preparation. True to the gamified intent, the cooperation model generated emotional responses in the students, which made them feel frenzied but engaged with doing right by their assigned role.

Each model helped to ground students in one dimension of the challenging realm of East Asian international relations. From these pilot implementations, we would recommend that future implementations focus, as we did, on a single goal (cooperation, consensus) of the challenging nature of IR in East Asia. Future versions should consider a fictitious but realistic scenario, as suggested by Shaw and Switky (2018), to motivate roles who may not be involved in a specific real-life scenario. Regardless of future modifications, the key to simulating weakly institutionalized regions is focusing on either the drive to cooperate or for consensus in order to facilitate student understanding of the real-life manifestations of international relations.

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ⁱ Both models used a North Korea security crises as the sample simulation.

ⁱⁱ This agnosticism differentiates our simulation models from Kempston and Thomas's (2014) excellent SCS simulation which focuses specifically on the island disputes for graduate education. See Recommendations for Modification and Generalization for additional adaptability.

ⁱⁱⁱ A primer of the roles suitable for students is available in the online appendix.

^{iv} A breakdown of student responses on the course evaluation can be found in the online appendix.

^v There were two minor differences. First, rather than opinion leaders, students were assigned the domestic opposition party. Second, Southeast Asia was a single group; it could be subdivided in larger courses.

^{vi} "We believe that there should be an open dialogue between China and Japan that facilitates cooperation and resolution (without arms) in regard to this maritime region."

^{vii} These provide important contextual information about the actor for the students (Asal and Blake 2006, 3).

^{viii} The scorecards, stickers and illustrated name badges may be downloaded from the online appendix.

^{ix} For example, China in Latin America.

^x Student evaluations, both quantitative and qualitative, may be found in the online appendix.