Role Playing Across Universities: NATO's Response to the Invasion of Ukraine

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In 2020, the global pandemic fundamentally reshaped how students and faculty think about education. The immediate need for meaningful instruction and learning experiences spurred innovation in online and hybrid course delivery. Even as students are returning to the classroom, faculty must anticipate future needs for online instruction. Students enrolled in an international relations course in the Fall 2022 semester at Sam Houston State University and Stephen F. Austin State University participated in a joint, virtual simulation as a class exercise. This cross-university experience allowed students to gain perceptions and relationships outside their own university with students pursuing similar academic interests and goals. The fact that the two universities are traditional rivals provides a competitive nuance to the game. The goals of the simulation were two-fold: (1) enhance international national relations content knowledge regarding a regional intergovernmental organization and alliance behavior, and (2) develop 21st century skills such as collaboration, communication, and decision-making. We hypothesize that collaboration across universities enhances the learning experience. The traditional benefits gleaned from in-class simulations can be enriched further by utilizing multiple universities and faculties which allows for an expanded breadth of knowledge and culture. Further, using online learning environments increases the diversity of experience and enhances the real-world skills simulations can provide to students. This paper focuses on our rationale for the simulation, our experience as faculty members, and our plans to adjust/update/improve the simulation for the Fall 2023 semester.

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Introduction

In 2020, the global pandemic fundamentally reshaped how students and faculty think about education. The immediate need for meaningful instruction and learning experiences spurred innovation in online and hybrid course delivery. Even as students return to the classroom, faculty must anticipate future needs for online instruction. Students enrolled in an international relations course in the Fall 2022 semester at Sam Houston State University and Stephen F. Austin State University participated in a joint, virtual simulation as a class exercise. This cross-university experience allowed students to gain perceptions and relationships outside their own university with students pursuing similar academic interests and goals. The fact that the two universities are traditional rivals provided a competitive nuance to the game. The goals of the simulation were two-fold: (1) enhance international national relations content knowledge regarding a regional intergovernmental organization and alliance behavior, and (2) develop soft-skills such as collaboration, communication, and decision-making. We hypothesize that collaboration across universities enhances the learning experience. The traditional benefits gleaned from in-class simulations can be enriched further by utilizing multiple universities and faculties which allows for an expanded breadth of knowledge and culture. Further, using online learning environments increases the diversity of experience and enhances the real-world skills simulations can provide to students.

This paper focuses on our rationale for the simulation, our experience as faculty members, and our plans to update the simulation for the Fall 2023 semester. The next section lays out the theoretical considerations including a review of the literature on simulations and our arguments for employing a cross-university simulation. The second section provides a discussion of how we developed the NATO simulation including how we came up with the idea and why we focus on alliance behavior for the simulation. We turn to implementation of the simulation in the third section focusing on the Fall 2022 experience, what we observed, and plans for the Fall 2023 simulation. The fourth section outlines our plans for assessment before offering conluding comments.

Theoretical Considerations

Using Simulations

Expressing frustration with a combination of our own stale lectures and activities with the perceived (or actual) difficulty students have at grasping concepts and solving problems, we turned to the idea of a simulation. The use of role-playing simulations in political science courses in general, and international relations courses specifically, is not new.[1] There is a rich literature on the rationale, development and implementation, and the assessment and efficacy of role-playing simulations in both face-to-face and online course delivery. Role-playing simulations provide for an experiential or active learning and enhance problem-solving skills for students (Kolb, 1984; Ruben, 1999; Lantis, Kuzma and Boehrer, 2000; Asal, 2005; Asal and Blake, 2006; Shellman and Turan, 2006; Wheeler, 2006; Asal and Kratoville, 2013).

One of the first reasons to utilize an active learning exercise was to generate more interest and "enliven the content" (Mattlin, 2018). While unfathomable to the authors of this paper, many students find social sciences, including political science and international relations, boring, irrelevant to their lives, or just not interesting (Hess, 1999; Asal and Blake, 2006). The use of role playing simulations can make international politics fun (Youde, 2008; Brandle, 2020) through an active learning experience (Ruben, 1999). Simulations can be used to build on the excitement of topics that students are already interested in. Conversely, simulations can target the least 'exciting' topics on the syllabus, as a means to overcome student apathy on those topics. In either case, simulations give instructors an additional tool to help generate and sustain enthusiasm. Such enthusiasm leads to more interest in research and studying which directly supports knowledge building and retention.

Second, simulations allow students to gain a greater understanding of theoretical material through personal engagement (Asal, 2005; Asal and Kratoville, 2013; Ruben, 1999; Shellman and Turan, 2006) and "examine issues from a wider range of perspectives" (Youde, 2008, 348). In addition, a simulation "promotes an understanding of the interdependence of international issues" (Wilkenfeld and Kaufman, 1993, 468-469) as students learn that one decision can have a domino effect and often unintended consequences. This is particularly critical as a traditional chalk and talk technique often permits students to oversimplify and compartmentalize concepts

[1] In the literature, role-playing games and simulations are often referred to as role-playing or role-play simulations (Asal and Blake, 2006; Pass, 2016).

and theories. A well-developed simulation puts multiple concepts and theories at play simultaneously to better illustrate trade-offs and nuance in international politics.

Third, the use of an active learning and problem-based learning technique such as role-playing simulations fosters a whole host of 21st century skills such as a negotiation and decision-making skills (Wilkenfeld and Kaufman, 1993), communication and public-speaking skills (Wilkenfeld and Kaufman, 1993; Kensicki *et al.*, 2022), teambuilding skills "which students will face in the work place" (Wilkenfeld and Kaufman, 1993, 469; also see Brown and King, 2000), and critical thinking skills. Bean and Melzer (2021) argue that participating in problem-solving exercises are essential in the development of critical thinking skills.

Last, some question whether there is an advantage of simulations and other active learning approaches over traditional methods when it comes to retention. Studies indicate that simulations do contribute to retention in general (Baranowski, 2006; Parmentier, 2013; Leib and Ruppel, 2020). Specifically, studies indicate that role-playing simulations contribute to both short-term retention (Cruz-Martinez, Soto and Belén Benito, 2022) and long-term retention (Smith and Boyer, 1996; Toomey, Zhou and Yan, 2020). Ultimately, Youde (2008, 348) reports that ''students retain more information, gain a deeper understanding of an issue (though this may come at the expense of breadth), examine issues from a wider range of perspectives, and generally report having more fun in class''

Simulations provide benefits but create unique challenges in their implementation. There are a number of pedagogical concerns one must consider in the decision to implement a simulation. The most commonly cited pedagogical consideration is the amount of time devoted to an in-class simulation. The literature outlines the importance of simulation development and preparation (Dougherty, 2003; Asal, 2005; Frederking, 2005), both for the faculty member as well as the students. Often considered an obstacle, a simulation is a time-consuming endeavor (McIntosh, 2001; Wheeler, 2006; Raymond, 2010; Asal and Kratoville, 2013; Pettenger, West, and Niki Young, 2014; Kensicki *et al.*, 2022) both in terms of teacher preparation as well as class time. Moreover, the opportunity cost of utilizing in class simulations must take into account material that will be omitted to make room for the simulation. However, Powner and Allendoerfer (2008) suggest that active-learning assessments are just as valuable as lectures and do not represent lost class time. Ultimately, in simulations, "[t]he trade-off is depth for breadth" (Wheeler, 2006, 335).

Simulations also require particular challenges to assessment. In terms of assessment and efficacy, early studies found little difference or benefit generally due to a lack of clear pedagogical criteria for the inclusion of games and simulations (Robinson *et al.*, 1966; Elder, 1973). In addition, there are concerns on the nature of assessments, specifically how to assess individuals in what are general group assignments (Wheeler, 2006). To overcome this potential pitfall, Wheeler suggests an end of exercise paper or assignment. By contrast, Baranowski and Weir (2015) suggest that pre and post tests are the best assessment method for simulations. A self-assessment where students rate their own performance or contribution as well as the contribution of their teammates can also be effective. Additional concerns involve student absences (Wheeler, 2006) and the free-rider problem inherent in group assignments (Dougherty, 2003; Wheeler, 2006). However, recent research has found that role-playing simulations has a positive impact on student learning (Dougherty, 2003; Wheeler, 2006; McCarthy, 2014; Pettenger, West, and Niki Young, 2014), improves test scores (Raymond, 2010), and provides better learning outcomes than writing papers or exams (Dougherty, 2003).

A Cross-University Simulation

We contend that the advantageous of in-class role-playing simulations can be enhanced by conducting the simulation across different universities. The COVID pandemic isolated learners from instructors and other learners. Instructors had to quickly adapt to online delivery. Adapting simulations to an online environment provides a method by which instructors and students need not sacrifice their in-class role-playing simulations when displaced into a remote environment. Developing such simulations across universities further build on the strengths of online delivery. Cross-university simulations can aid in relevant skill development for today's work environment, specifically remote collaboration. Conducting a simulation across multiple universities forces students to get further out of their comfort zone than a traditional single-class simulation. Students do not have a built-in group of class friends to create a safety net for engagement; rather students must engage with strangers and communicate and cooperate on controversial issues in an online environment. Remote collaboration is a forward-looking, marketable skill that is only likely to increase in importance.

A related advantage, cross-university simulations can help push students out of their cultural learning environment. Students at each university, within each program, and often within

specific classes tend to form a unique learning culture based on a set of norms about classroom behavior. Students often view some theories as truths and dismiss outright other world views based on their particular cohort, classes, and professors. It has been our experience that students not only prefer taking courses from particular professors, but groups of students will take most or all of their major classes together. While such identity building may be good for higher education retention, it does present a barrier to examining the world through multiple lenses. One distinct advantage of a cross-university simulation is that students will be obliged to work with other students, covering the same material, but from a different professor, in a different learning culture, at a different university. The effect of having students from different learning cultures makes it easy for them to bring in an inherent bias in favor of one's own class or professor. As the simulation proceeds, students often have the opportunity to reevaluate that initial bias. Expanding a simulation across universities provides additional avenues to encourage students to consider multiple world views and theories.

The expanded learning environment does not merely benefit students. Professors also benefit from the additional perspectives and approaches of another professor. Although not specifically examining simulations, Pisoni, Marchese and Renouard (2019) point to multiple benefits for the professor in cross university collaborations. Teachers that participated reported learning from their colleagues, expanding their "perception of the body of knowledge and of its application" and opening themselves up to "perspectives outside of the home university".

Developing the NATO Simulation

How did the idea of a simulation come about?

As many of our ideas come to mind, we began to discuss the possibility of a cross-university simulation on the way to an academic conference. Expressing frustration with a combination of our own stale lectures and activities with the perceived (or actual) difficulty students have at grasping concepts, we turned to the idea of a simulation. The Russian invasion of Ukraine presented itself as a perfect and timely topic to discuss NATO's response specifically, and alliance behavior more generally. Over the course of three days, we had the following decided:

- Cross-institution simulation given the common dates and times of our respective international relations courses;

- The list of countries and distribution of team members for each country across the two institutions;
- Topics for a combined lecture on alliance behavior and NATO;
- A list of interventions or "shocks" that each country team will address with actions and justifications;
- A "scoreboard" based on measures of NATO power, country/military power, economic power, reputational or soft power, and level of domestic support.

There were still several questions we had to answer such as the amount of research students needed to do, how much time to commit, how to put students in teams, and how to account for absences and levels of participation.

NATO: A Simulation Focusing on Alliance Behavior

This role-playing simulation is on the nature of alliances in international politics. The focus is on the difficulty in making and maintaining alliances and the strains domestic and international factors can exert on even relatively long-term and stable alliances. The war in Ukraine provides the background for the simulation. The choice of NATO is not an arbitrary one. NATO is arguably the strongest alliance in history and remains the most significant security alliance today. Even as it expands, it remains largely ideologically homogeneous, with some notable exceptions. The actors in the simulation include NATO members, NATO Secretary General, NATO potential members Sweden and Finland, as well as Ukraine and Russia.

The goal of this simulation was to take a topic that students tend to be less engaged with in a traditional chalk and talk environment and use a simulation to illustrate both the nuance and the relevance of that topic. Our experience is that student engagement in some topics, such as war, genocide, terrorism, is relatively high. Other topics taught in international politics courses take more effort to generate similar levels of enthusiasm. Discussing the role of alliances in a classroom setting can sometimes degenerate into a superficial discussion about the history of NATO, the increased irrelevance of the alliance, or the perception of outsized US contributions to the alliance. Our motivation in creating a NATO simulation was to illustrate the competing interests a country must balance, to demonstrate the difficult bureaucratic pressures that exist, and to elucidate the bargaining that has to occur both between states and between domestic

constituencies. At the end of our simulation, we hope our students have a better understanding of what NATO's consensus decision making structure looks like, what diversity and enlargement in NATO mean for decision making, and the real costs and benefits NATO provides for its members. The simulation we planned differed from most international simulations in that it was less about an actual war than it was about alliance behavior. The ongoing invasion in the Ukraine helped peak student interest in a simulation that focused on the nature of alliances. A simulation on alliance behavior set against an ongoing war allowed us to better capitalize on a key strength of simulations, the ability to elucidate interdependence among issues (see Wilkenfeld and Kaufman 1993).

Implementing the Simulation

Fall 2022 Experience

We ran an initial version of the cross-university simulation in the Fall of 2022 as a class exercise. As the respective courses were offered on the same day and time, the professors planned a joint lecture on the topic of alliances. Students were placed in teams representing NATO countries with each country comprised of students from each university. Students engaged in team assignments including preliminary research on their country's current economy, rate of inflation, sources of energy, anticipated winter, and general demeanor towards NATO. During the simulation, the students responded to shocks to the international system (provided by the instructors) including movements of troops, surges in inflation, increases in gas prices, threats of nuclear use, and changes in domestic public opinion. In each round, the teams collaborated, engaged in negotiations and diplomatic relations across teams, and ultimately made decisions for the country.

A real-world explosion just inside Poland near the Ukrainian border was incorporated as a shock during the simulation. This allowed for a unique discussion about the use of Article 4, a NATO Article which otherwise gets less scrutiny from students who focus on Article 5. It further forced the students to check knee-jerk assumptions made about who dropped the bombs and provided a real-world example of the need for measured, deliberate, and even unhurried, response during a crisis. Eventually NATO concluded that the missile was not launched from Russia, but from Ukraine and likely part of the Ukrainian missile defense of Lviv. Student

actions, professor updates, and shocks for the simulation were housed in a folder in Office 365, with content for all participants and private folders visible to each respective country. At the end of each simulation each country was responsible for posting its actions (as defined in the instructions) for that day's simulations.

Our Experience

Our first attempt at running a cross-university simulation provided some expected and unexpected preliminary findings. The biggest obstacle for the simulation was the communication within the teams. The two classes at each university utilized ZOOM during the simulation, but the teams were expected to communicate separately. The teams were allowed to choose their method of communication, with some students using text, GROUPME, ZOOM breakout rooms administered by the professors, phone, and face-time. The countries that used a 'live communication method' (i.e. ZOOM, phone, or face-time) appeared both more satisfied with their counterparts participation and less frustrated with the cross-university nature of the simulation in general. By contrast, countries that relied on passive communications, such as text or GROUPME, would often experience an initial drop off in responsiveness, as the negotiations in the room became the focus and phones were apt to be put down and forgotten during negotiations. This resulted in asymmetric negotiations that had to be resolved or one school waiting for the other school's team to discuss tactics and policy preferences. In the future, the students will have to use a live communication method.

A second observation was that we did not have enough time to implement several of the elements we initially planned. For example, our enthusiasm for the in-class simulation outweighed our ability to provide enough preparation time for the online lecture that we planned on alliances, and we opted for a quick lecture via ZOOM. We found, however, that students were distracted by their desire to start negotiating. The creation of an online lecture where students see both professors delivering content and then having some student accountability for the content is a change we plan for the Fall 2023 simulation.

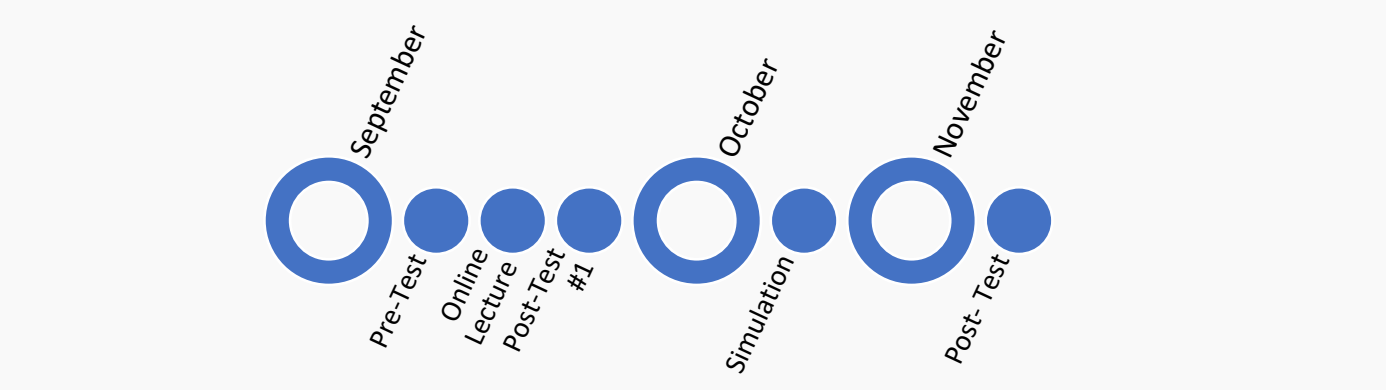
We encountered both absenteeism and free-riders during the simulation. In order to address this, we incorporated a self-evaluation and a team-evaluation assignment that each student submitted as it was difficult for the instructors to monitor all the teams during the simulation. We specifically asked for the level (in terms of percentage) of each participant.

Students were gracious in their response and generally gave each other the benefit of the doubt. However, there were some teams that held each other more accountable than others. In several instances, students that were absent still participated remotely with their team members.

Most interesting, perhaps, was the immediate tendency for students from both universities to prize the work and opinions of their class and denigrate the contributions from the other university. It should, perhaps, not be surprising that students from different schools were apt to view their tribe's contributions more positively and the competing school's contributions with greater skepticism. This tendency lessened as the simulation went on. However, addressing this propensity towards university tribalism is a key goal for the future simulation.

Cross-University Simulation, Part Deux

After our initial attempt, we set out to revise and improve the simulation with particular attention to addressing the initial glitches. The improved NATO simulation will be implemented in the Fall of 2023 at both Sam Houston State University and Stephen F. Austin State University. In order to facilitate the cross-university simulation, our fall courses have been scheduled at the same time. While the simulation is scheduled mid-semester, the preparation for the simulation will start in September (see the graph below).



Two students, one from each university, will be assigned a country, during the second week of class. The students will have two written assignments due before the simulation starts. The first assignment occurs the third week and requires them to research general economic and political background on their assigned country. In the fifth week of classes, students will research their country's specific views on NATO and actions within NATO. The simulation occurs the sixth and seventh weeks of the semester. During the simulation, the professors provide public and private 'shocks' that are designed to both reflect the real-world tensions related to NATO's role in the Russian invasion of Ukraine and to illustrate the distinct, significant domestic incentives to act counter to NATO's current course. The public shocks are announced at the beginning of class; the private shocks are posted in the relevant country's folder in Office 365. The second post-test will be taken at the end of the semester, in part, to test the hypothesis that simulations will create not only a more nuanced understanding of international relations concepts, but that simulations will further create more lasting knowledge. This is a particularly short period, conducting the second post-test approximately seven weeks after the simulation ends. Still, the expectation is a measurable difference from the initial post-test.

Assessment

Our assessment plan is multi-pronged. We have goals related to content acquisition, skills acquisition, and methods effectiveness. Among other things, the assessment will attempt to measure the additive impact of a simulation over traditional chalk-and-talk delivery of content. To that end, the simulation will employ a pre-test, a lecture on alliances, a country profile assignment, a second post-test, the simulation, a debriefing document, a reflective assignment, and a final post-test. The pre-test includes questions about perceptions of NATO's power and ideology, along with basic content questions (see Appendix A). The post-tests will include a wide range of questions related to the theory and practice of alliances (see Appendix B). The post-tests will be given in each class, unannounced, to measure a true point of knowledge acquisition. Each post-test will be administered a week after the conclusion of the lecture or simulation. Ideally, this will permit the analysis of the educational benefit of a simulation beyond the traditional means of lecture. The online lecture on alliances will be the same for both universities and will includes recordings from both participating universities. The bar for the cross-university simulation is relatively high as the second post-test will occur approximately six

weeks after the simulation has concluded, based on the idea that suggests simulations contribute to greater retention of material.

Beyond assessing the content, we also want to examine how the simulation fosters 21st century skills acquisition in terms of remote collaboration, communication, negotiation, and decision-making skills. The debriefing document aims to assess the type and level of remote collaboration and communication utilized by each country-team (see Appendix C). The reflective assignment will ask students to describe their strategy, particularly in relation to their teammates, as well as their perspective regarding working with students from another institution in order to ascertain whether the use of a cross-university simulation method was effective (see Appendix D). Looking forward to the Fall 2023 simulation, the instructors plan to update and refine these assessment tools.

Conclusion

We set out to create and implement a novel approach to the topic of alliances in international relations. NATO's response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine provided a timely case-study to approach alliance behavior. Moreover, we wanted our students to experience and practice soft skills necessary for not only their academic pursuits but eventually for the workplace. The development of 21st century skills is a high priority for our respective universities in response to the *60x30TX* initiative and now the *Building a Talent Strong Texas* plan from the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. Our role-playing simulation provides student engagement in an active-learning exercise that goes beyond the chalk and talk traditional lecture format. In doing so, we aim to increase student understanding and retention of alliance behavior while simultaneously providing students with an opportunity to hone their communication, negotiation, and decision-making skills.

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Appendix A: Sample Pre-Test Assessment Questions

- On a scale of 1 (very weak) to 5 (very powerful), how powerful do you think the NATO alliance is?
- On a scale of 1 (not very) to 5 (very), how ideological do you think the NATO alliance is?
- On a scale of 1 (very unlikely) to 5 (very likely), how likely is it that NATO will deter Russia from using nuclear weapons?
- On a scale of 1 (very unlikely) to 5 (very likely), how likely is it that a NATO member will defect from the alliance?
- On a scale of 1 (very unlikely) to 5 (very likely), how likely do you think it is that Russia gains territory in Ukraine?
- On a scale of 1 (very unlikely) to 5 (very likely), how likely do you think it is that Ukraine regains its
- On a scale of 1 to 5, how much do you know about the status of Crimea?
- On a scale of 1 to 5, how much do you know about the state(s) you have been assigned in the simulation?
- On a scale of 1 to 5, how concerned are you about working with students from another college?
- On a scale of 1 to 5, how much are you looking forward to working with students from another college?

Appendix B: Sample Post-Test Assessment Questions

In addition to the original pre-test questions, the following types of questions will be included in the post-test.

- On a scale of 1 (nothing) to 5 (very much), how much did the simulation help you understand the NATO alliance?
- On a scale of 1 (nothing) to 5 (very much), how much did the simulation help you understand alliance hand-tying?
- On a scale of 1 (nothing) to 5 (very much), how much did the simulation help you understand alliance defection?
- On a scale of 1 (nothing) to 5 (very much), how much did engaging with students from another university add to your understanding of the situation in the Ukraine.
- On a scale of 1 (nothing) to 5 (very much), how much did engaging with students from another university add to your understanding of alliances.

Appendix C: Debrief: NATO Simulation Evaluation

Instructions: Answer the following questions – you can increase the amount of space needed.

Simulation preparation (Country Profile):

How did the team communicate before the simulation start?

How much communication occurred before the simulation started?

How would you divide the preparation between the participants? The total participation should sum to 100 %.

Simulation Participation (during the game):

How did the team communicate during each day of the simulation start?

Was this an effective method of communication? Why or why not?

How would you describe your participation and contribution to your group during the simulation?

How would you describe the participation and contribution of your team members?

Appendix D: NATO Simulation Reflective Assignment

Please answer the following questions.

- What was your country's strategy?
    - Did your preferred strategy differ significantly from other students?
    - Did your preferred strategy differ significantly from students at the other school?

    - In hindsight, do you agree or disagree with the other strategies posed by your team members?
- Did the pressures of the simulation or the sense of competition thwart your strategy or force you to make unwanted decisions?
- Describe the benefits of working with students from another university.
- Did you have a good time? Why or why not?