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Nikolaos Biziouras^a

^a United States Naval Academy

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Bureaucratic Politics and Decision Making Under Uncertainty in a National Security Crisis: Assessing the Effects of International Relations Theory and the Learning Impact of Role-Playing Simulation at the U.S. Naval Academy

NIKOLAOS BIZIOURAS

United States Naval Academy

Using a pre-/posttest research design, this article measures the learning impact of active-learning techniques such as role-playing simulations in an international relations course. Using the students' different responses to the pre- and postsimulation surveys in a quasi-experimental design whereby two sections that were taught by the same instructor were given different sets of theoretical readings, this article shows how exposure to different decision-making theories has a measurable effect on how students behave in the role-playing simulation.

Keywords assessment, decision making, international relations theory, quasi-experimental, role-playing simulations

Introduction

The message screen blur reads as follows: “PRC vessels closing in on Taiwan. Above average traffic moving out of all PRC naval stations. The President has called an emergency meeting in the Situation Room.” What should the President of the United States do in response to this development? If you were the Secretary of Defense or the Director of National Intelligence or the Chief of Naval Operations, what advice would you give? How will this advice be weighted? Will it become policy? If not, why not? If so, will it be successful? If not, why not?

I use a role-playing simulation in two sections of my Introduction to International Relations course at the U.S. Naval Academy to test whether exposure to different theories on international relations and models of decision making lead to different simulation outcomes. I complement this testing with a pre-/postsimulation questionnaire that seeks to illustrate the effects of active-learning techniques such as role-playing simulations upon simulation outcomes. Using this assessment design, I show that students exposed to different theories of international relations perform differently in the same role-playing simulation and that their questionnaire responses indicate changes that result from their participation in an active-learning technique.

Address correspondence to Nikolaos Biziouras, Political Science, United States Naval Academy, 121 Blake Rd., Annapolis, MD 21402, USA. E-mail: nikolaos.biziouras.gr@usna.edu

Active Learning, Simulation, and Role-Playing

Given an increasing level of commitment to active learning within the political science curriculum, role-playing exercises are becoming increasingly commonplace. Proponents of active learning have consistently illustrated to traditionalist skeptics that students who are enrolled in courses with an active-learning component have acquired a deeper and more long-lasting knowledge base (Boyer 1999; Preston and Cottam 1997; Smith and Boyer 1996), have become more enthusiastic about the material (Flynn 2000; McCarthy and Anderson 2000), have enjoyed the application of theoretical knowledge to empirical circumstances (Merryfield and Remy 1995; Shellman and Turan 2006) and have increased their skill development (Brock and Cameron 1999; Caruson 2005; Smith and Boyer 1996). This skill development has included, but has not been limited to, an increased capacity for public speaking, an increased ability to communicate and work with others as well as an increased appreciation for others' viewpoints (Smith and Boyer 1996), an expanded ability to conduct independent research (Marsh and Bucy 2002), a unique opportunity to shift from a passive recipient of knowledge into an active participant (Belloni 2008), and last, but not least, a heightened realization about the importance of critical thinking, especially when confronted with unexpected challenges and unfamiliar environments (Burch 2000).

Accordingly, political science instructors have increasingly utilized simulations not only within the more rule-bound, in a pedagogical sense, setting of international relations but also within comparative politics and American politics. Hence, simulations have been used as an active-learning tool to study decision making at the United Nations (Chasek 2005; McIntosh 2000), decision making during the Cuban Missile Crisis (Stover 2007), two-level negotiation games (Young 2006), decision making within the European Union (Zeff 2003), negotiations in the anarchic Isle of Ted (Thomas 2002), brinkmanship crisis in the Arab-Israeli conflict (Dougherty 2003; Raymond and Sorensen 2008), cabinet formation in a country with a proportional-representation electoral system (Shellman 2001), ethnic conflict in a postcommunist setting (Ambrosio 2004), Supreme Court decision making (Hensley 1993), and crisis decision making (Franke 2006; Kanner 2007). Such broad applications have only increased the appeal of role-playing simulations (Endersby and Webber 1995; Kaarbo and Lantis 1997; Shaw 2004).

Yet, this increased use of role-playing simulations has only reinforced the need for role-playing exercises that are methodologically sound in their construction. Clear rules of engagement matter (Asal and Blake 2006). There is a particular need for well specified and realistic learning objectives (Kille 2002; Shaw 2004). The break from the traditional and hierarchical lecture style increases student involvement but also necessitates the active management of the actual simulation in order to prevent "social loafing" and "free riding." Debriefing, in a written and/or oral form, is necessary in order to enable the participants to share lessons learned and to evaluate whether the learning objectives were met (Chasek 2005; Lantis 1998; McIntosh 2000; Zeff 2003). Last, but not least, a properly constructed role-playing simulation requires some form of a written evaluation of the students' experience in the form of a graded assignment.

Building upon these methodological innovations, I used this role-playing simulation to generate more assessment-oriented results. First, I wanted to examine how the students implemented the different theories of international relations, especially

in crisis decision-making situations under time constraints that would impact their ability to process information and influence their decision-making prowess (Boyer, Trumbore, and Fricke 2006, 67; Kleiboer 1997; Youde 2008, 349). Second, I wanted to use this role-playing simulation to test whether exposure to different international relations theories impacted student learning. Accordingly, I utilized the two otherwise identical (in terms of the students enrolled) sections of the Introduction to International Relations course to run the following experiment: While one section read Allison's work on bureaucratic politics (Allison 1969; Allison and Halperin 1972), the other section read articles by Kahneman and Tversky (1974, 1979) on prospect theory, while all the other readings in the course were identical. Finally, in order to test if the active-learning component had any impact upon the students, I conducted pre-/posttreatment assessment by running two in-class surveys with identical, open-ended questions. I administered the presimulation survey after the students had read their assigned readings on decision making, either by Allison or by Kahneman and Tversky, but before we ran the simulation, and I administered the postsimulation survey after we had run the simulation.

Role-Playing at the U.S. Naval Academy

This role-playing simulation was conducted in an Introduction to International Relations course at the U.S. Naval Academy during the 2010–2011 academic year. The class consisted of political science majors in their sophomore year, for whom this course was required in their political science major course matrix and who accounted for 80% of the students in the course, and upper class, nonpolitical science majors in their junior and senior year who accounted for the remainder of the students and had picked this course as an elective. It followed the standard sequence of readings and lectures in a traditional Introduction to International Relations course: namely, the three major theories of international relations (neorealism, liberal institutionalism, and constructivism), applications of the theories into different analytical areas such as security dilemma, alliance formation, use of force, war onset and war termination, deterrence and compellence, international regimes, and international institutions, as well as topic areas of particular policy interest to the midshipmen such as national security decision making, the post-Cold War era, asymmetric conflict, violent nonstate actors, terrorism, and the rise of China. Last, but not least, given the knowledge base of the student audience, it was safe to assume a certain level of familiarity with naval warfare tactics, naval weapons systems, and the organizational cultures of the different naval warfare communities, both within the United States and between the United States and China.

Role-Playing in Preparation

In order to prepare for the role-playing exercise, every midshipman was assigned a specific role, which ranged from President of the United States to Secretary of Defense to Chief of Naval Operations to Submarine Force Squadron Commander to People's Republic of China (PRC) Ambassador in Washington. With the exception of the midshipman who was playing the President, and whom the class had voted on in the previous week, the remaining midshipmen were divided into six separate groups, with four players each, representing the following organizations: the

National Security Council, the Department of the Navy, the Department of Defense, the Department of State, White House staff, and the PRC Ambassador's staff. Each player had a specific and well-demarcated role within each organization and each organization had a clear set of capabilities, while all organizations and both countries operated within a certain and equally well-known institutional environment.

The midshipmen were given a week to prepare a 7- to 10-page background paper on their adopted role and were instructed to profile them in a way that would render the midshipmen as knowledgeable as possible within the time frame of one week with their role in terms of their goals, their careers, their interests, their capacity for action, and the organizational and institutional environments in which their roles operated in order to be able to know how to act within the actual confines of their role.¹ In addition, they had to know their role's position, to the greatest extent possible, on whether American hegemony in the post-9/11 era has been operationalized in an effective and appropriate way, the direction American foreign policy should take in the post-9/11 era and whether it should change or not, how America's relationship with an increasingly powerful China should change or remain on the same course, and finally, how American foreign policy should or should not engage in multilateralism and international organizations. Finally, they were asked to show what type of decision-making errors can happen and are most likely to happen, to demonstrate how American policymakers will decide whether to engage or confront China's rising power, and to show how neorealist, liberal institutionalist, and constructivist theories would differ on the chances for cooperation between the United States and China. They were not informed about what their role-playing exercise was going to be about, but they were informed that it would last exactly 75 minutes. Upon submission of their simulation preparation reports, I administered the presimulation survey in class.

Role-Playing in Action

Upon arrival in the classroom, students were presented with the first part of the role-playing exercise: China was threatening a naval blockade of Taiwan. Shortly after that, they were presented with a tactical analysis of the situation that stressed the different tactics, weapons systems, and logistical and planning issues as well as a policy analysis of the situation that stressed the importance of the Taiwan issue in the Sino-American relationship and argued the Chinese Communist Party's political concerns over losing face on the Taiwan issue. With these two overall points in mind, each participant was told that they would have access to information about the Chinese naval blockade and its varying degrees of tactical flexibility, intelligence on the possible Chinese naval strategies that could be implemented, and the tactical weighing of the asymmetries of action, equipment, and geography.

Upon receiving all this information, the midshipmen were given 20 minutes to process the information, to decide upon a course of action for their character given the character's set of policy responsibility, and then to relay their actions to their groups. Group leaders, in this case, organizational leaders, then relayed the information to the midshipman acting as the President. The President then convened a principals and staff meeting in the White House, mirroring the standard organizational practices of the National Security Council, and over the next 15 minutes decided upon a course of action and summoned the PRC Ambassador to the White House.

Upon the PRC Ambassador's arrival at the White House, and while the President was ready to inform the PRC Ambassador of the American response to the increasing Chinese naval blockade of Taiwan, the President is informed that there has been a collision between one of the two American submarines, which had been sent to patrol Taiwan's main shipping ports, and a Chinese diesel submarine. Upon hearing of this information, the President decided to require all the different departments to reconvene their staffs and have 15 minutes to come up with another set of policy recommendations. Upon being notified of the new developments, the PRC Ambassador decided to return to the PRC embassy and to reconvene his staff as well.

After the 15-minute interval had passed, the principals and the White House staff reconvened with the President and were given a 10-minute slot in order to make their case while the PRC Ambassador was returning to the White House. Again, right before their scheduled meeting, the President and the PRC Ambassador are informed that the American submarine that had collided with its Chinese counterpart was forced to surface and was not able to re-submerge due to a ruptured ballast tank. While on the surface, Chinese surface vessels had surrounded the submarine and were not permitting it to leave what they claimed were sovereign Chinese waters. Confronted with this information, the President and the PRC Ambassador both stalled for time and sought the counsel of their staff that now had 15 minutes to devise an official American policy on this issue and a Chinese formal response to it.

Debriefing

Upon the conclusion of the game, the midshipmen were given instructions to quickly write down their answers to the following questions²: What did they learn from the role-playing simulation? How did it fit in with the rest of the course? What did they most and least enjoy from the simulation? What would they change from the simulation? Which one of their group members shirked any of his or her responsibilities during the simulation? What type of resources did they want to have more of/less of? When they turned in their short-response comments, they had an opportunity to have an open discussion with the instructor present.

Unsurprisingly, their reactions varied depending on their class level, their major, and their interest in decision making and national security, but there were three overwhelmingly common responses that they shared. They were enthusiastic and enjoyed the active-learning component of the simulation, especially that they could interact with their classmates in a structured, but not hierarchical, setting, especially when they were on a learning mission. They had especially appreciated the opportunity to engage their classmates within a learning environment in which they could share their arguments and engage in healthy debate and do so in a goal-oriented manner. Additionally, they appreciated how their independent research, which they had conducted for their background papers, had given them the opportunity to engage in a hands-on project while enabling them to play their part in the simulation more effectively. Last, but not least, without an exception, they all enjoyed the opportunity to combine theoretical knowledge with an actual case.

Overall, the Allison section emphasized the inability of the American administration to generate a quick response. Moreover, the Allison section students stressed how breaking-up the participants into their bureaucratic component units increased parochialism and interdepartmental conflicts, especially between the Department of

Defense and the State Department, and decreased the speed with which the President could respond to a crisis situation. Last, but not least, the Allison section recommended a more tightly controlled and clearly demarcated organizational chart in order to make intradepartmental decision making more centralized and to increase the speed of interdepartmental decision making.

In contrast, the Kahneman and Tversky section, while remarking on the same level of discussion and difference of opinion among the different departments, reveled in the importance of multiple points of view and the need to share opinions. Rather than perceive this as an argumentative sharing of opinions, the Kahneman and Tversky section perceived it as a required and important step in terms of reducing uncertainty, increasing knowledge, and minimizing the chances for decision-making biases. For the Kahneman and Tversky section, the biggest problem was the lack of sufficient information especially within the context of multiple changes in the direction of the simulation.

Evaluation of the Learning Impact of International Relations Theory

When examining the impact of different theories of international relations upon the students, there were significant differences among the two sections, which accompanied exposure to different theoretical readings in each section.³ The Allison section thought that leaders should use caution when handling a foreign policy crisis (47%), and they would increase information during the handling of a crisis (33%) in order to avoid mistakes. In sharp contrast, the Kahneman and Tversky section responded that, when handling a foreign policy crisis, leaders needed more information (33%), and the most common mistake that they made during a crisis was to make the wrong assumption (25%). When asked how these mistakes in foreign policy can be best avoided, the Kahneman and Tversky section ranked cooperation with foreign powers (25%) as their most preferred solution whereas the Allison section responded “more information” and “more rules,” each earning 20% respectively, with only 6.5% of the Allison section stressing “more cooperation.” While both sections agreed that leaders and organizations mattered, 75% of the Kahneman and Tversky section believed that leadership change mattered whereas only 40% of the Allison section shared those responses. Last, but not least, there was significant agreement, and with overwhelming support, that perceptions, ideas/beliefs, regime type, and cultural differences all matter and play a role in international relations, consistent with the assumptions and the theoretical bent of the Allison/Kahneman and Tversky approaches (see Tables 1 and 2).

Evaluation of the Learning Impact of the Role-Playing Simulation

When testing for the learning impact of the active-learning format upon the students, there were effects within, and across, the two sections. The differences between the two sections that emerged in the presimulation surveys continued in the postsimulation surveys.⁴ In terms of how leaders should handle crisis, the Kahneman and Tversky section was even more adamant about the need for more information (50%) whereas the Allison section continued to think that caution was the best option, albeit by a lower margin (33% down from 47%). Similarly, whereas the Kahneman and Tversky section thought that it was lack of adequate information (50%) that led to the most common mistakes in foreign policy crisis, the Allison

Table 1. “Kahneman and Tversky” section ($N = 23$)

	Presimulation student responses	Postsimulation student responses	Changes in student responses (pre-/postsimulation)
How do you think leaders should deal with a foreign policy crisis in international relations?	Self-Interest 33%, More Information 33%, Caution/Moral Need/Cooperative/Resolute 8.5% each	Self-Interest 33%, More Information 50%, Caution & Cooperative 8.5% each	More Information +17%, Moral Need -8.5%
What do you think are the most common mistakes that leaders make in a foreign policy crisis?	Learning 7%, Misjudgment/Domestic Politics/Wrong Cause/Underinformed 17% each Wrong Assumptions 25%	Learning 7%, Misjudgment 17% Dom Politics & Wrong Cause 0% each Underinformed 50% Wrong Assumptions & Communication 12.5% each	Underinformed +33%, Dom Politics -17%, Wrong Cause -17%, Communication +12.5%
What would you change in the decision-making process to avoid these mistakes?	More Rules & Human Nature & More Transparency/Communications 17% each, More Cooperation 25%, Less Bureaucracy & More Advice & More Information 8% each	More Rules 0%, Human Nature & More Information 17% each, More Transparency/Communications 42%, More Cooperation 25%, Less Bureaucracy & More Advice 0% each	More Rules -17%, More Transparency/Communications +25%, Less Bureaucracy & More Advice & More Information -8% each
How effectively do you think that mistakes in foreign policy can be avoided by changes in leader behavior?	Leaders Matter 50%, Only Large-scale Leadership Change Matters 17%, Leaders do not Matter 33%	Leaders Matter 75%, Only Large-scale Leadership Change Matters 8%, Leaders do not Matter 17%	Leaders Matter +25%, Only Large-scale Leadership Change Matters -9%, Leaders do not Matter -18%
How effectively do you think mistakes in foreign policy can be changed by changes in the organizational dynamics behind foreign policy decision making?	Organizations Matter 58%, Organizations do not Matter 25%, Organizations Matter Less than Leaders 17%	Organizations Matter 58%, Organizations do not Matter 25%, Organizations Matter Less than Leaders 17%	No change

How effectively do you think that mistakes in foreign policy can be avoided by changes in perceptions?	Perceptions Matter 75%, Perceptions do not Matter 25%	Perceptions Matter 92%, Perceptions do not Matter 8%	Perceptions Matter +17%, Perceptions do not Matter -17%
What role do you think that ideas and beliefs play in foreign policy decision making?	Ideas/beliefs Matter 92%, Ideas/Beliefs do not Matter 8%	Ideas/beliefs Matter 92%, Ideas/Beliefs do not Matter 8%	No change
Do you think that changes in leaders lead to changes in outcomes in the international system?	Leadership Change Matters 75%, Leadership Change does not matter 25%	Leadership Change Matters 92%, Leadership Change does not Matter 8%	Leadership Change Matters +17%, Leadership Change does not Matter -17%
Do you think changes in regime type lead to changes in outcomes in the international system?	Regime Type Change Matters 92%, Regime Type Change does not Matter 8%	Regime Type Change Matters 75%, Regime Type Change does not Matter 25%	Regime Type Change Matters -17%, Regime Type Change does not Matter +17%
Do you think that cultural differences play a role in outcomes in the international system?	Cultural Differences Matter 100%	Cultural Differences Matter 92%, Cultural Differences do not Matter 8%	Cultural Differences Matter -8%, Cultural Differences do not Matter +8%

Table 2. “Allison & Halperin” section ($N = 20$)

	Presimulation student responses	Postsimulation student responses	Changes in student responses (pre-/postsimulation)
How do you think leaders should deal with a foreign policy crisis in international relations?	Self-Interest 20%, More Information 20%, Caution 47%, Resolute 13%	Self-interest 6.5%, More Information 27%, Caution 33%, Cooperative 6.5%, Resolute 27%	Self-interest -13.5%, More Information +7%, Caution -14%, Cooperative +6.5%, Resolute +14%
What do you think are the most common mistakes that leaders make in a foreign policy crisis?	Misjudgment 6.5%, Underinformed 33%, Wrong Assumptions 6.5%, Haste 13%, Overcommitted 13%, Selfish 20%, Overcaution 8%	Misjudgment 33%, Underinformed 20%, Wrong Assumptions 13%, Overcommitted 6.5%, Selfish 6.5%, Overcaution 6.5%, Too Cooperative 13%	Misjudgment +26.5%, Underinformed -13%, Wrong Assumptions +6.5%, Overcommitted -6.5%, Selfish -13.5%, Overcaution -1.5%, Too Cooperative +13%
What would you change in the decision-making process to avoid these mistakes?	More Rules 20%, More Information 20%, More Comms/Transparency 13%, More Cooperation 6.5%, Less Bureaucracy 6.5%, More Advice 20%, More Bargaining 14%	More Rules 6.5%, More Information 6.5%, More Comms/Transparency 33%, More Cooperation 6.5%, Less Bureaucracy 6.5%, More Advice 41%	More Rules -13.5%, More Information -13.5%, More Comms/Transparency +20%, More Cooperation + Less Bureaucracy no change %, More Advice +21%, More Bargaining -14%
How effectively do you think that mistakes in foreign policy can be avoided by changes in leader behavior?	Leaders Matter 60%, Leaders do not Matter 40%	Leaders Matter 53%, Leaders do not Matter 47%	Leaders Matter -7%, Leaders do not Matter +7%
How effectively do you think mistakes in foreign policy can be changed by changes in the organizational dynamics behind foreign policy decision making?	Organizations Matter 60%, Organizations do not Matter 20%, Organizations Matter Less than Leaders 20%	Organizations Matter 60%, Organizations do not Matter 20%, Organizations Matter Less than Leaders 20%	No change

How effectively do you think that mistakes in foreign policy can be avoided by changes in perceptions?	Perceptions Matter 87%, Perceptions do not Matter 13%	Perceptions Matter 87%, Perceptions do not Matter 13%	No change
What role do you think that ideas and beliefs play in foreign policy decision making?	Ideas/Beliefs Matter 87%, Ideas/Beliefs do not Matter 13%	Ideas/Beliefs Matter 87%, Ideas/Beliefs do not Matter 13%	No change
Do you think that changes in leaders lead to changes in outcomes in the international system?	Leadership Change Matters 40%, Leadership Change does not Matter 60%	Leadership Change Matters 66%, Leadership Change does not Matter 34%	Leadership Change Matters +26%, Leadership Change does not Matter -26%
Do you think changes in regime type lead to changes in outcomes in the international system?	Regime Type Change Matters 87%, Regime Type Change does not Matter 13%	Regime Type Change Matters 93%, Regime Type Change does not Matter 7%	Regime Type Change Matters +6%, Regime Type Change does not Matter -6%
Do you think that cultural differences play a role in outcomes in the international system?	Cultural Differences Matter 93%, Cultural Differences do not Matter 7%	Cultural Differences Matter 87%, Cultural Differences do not Matter 13%	Cultural Differences Matter -6%, Cultural Differences do not Matter +6%

section believed that it was misjudgment that led to leadership error in crisis (33%). When asked about what to change in order to avoid mistakes in crisis, the Kahneman and Tversky section stressed increased transparency and communications (42%) while the Allison section ranked expert advice (41%) as its most favored response.

More importantly, there were significant variations in terms of the effects that the role-playing simulation had upon each section, illustrating that there were significant effects from the role-playing simulation. The respondents in the Kahneman and Tversky section became even more interested in information in order to deal with crisis (up from 33% to 50%) and in order to avoid mistakes in crisis decision making (up from 17% to 50%). Having played in the simulation, they were adamant about the need for the proper flow of information, stressing the need for increased transparency and communication (up from 17% to 42%). When asked about leadership, after the simulation, the Kahneman and Tversky section agreed that leaders matter even more (up from 50% to 75%), that their perceptions of the international system matter (up from 50% to 75%), and that leadership change leads to changes in outcomes in the international system (up from 75% to 92%).

The respondents in the Allison section continued to believe in their presimulation beliefs. Respondents in the Allison section still believed that caution was the manner in which leaders should deal with a foreign policy crisis (even with the reduced margin from 47% to 33%) and they thought misjudgment was the most common mistake leaders made in a foreign policy crisis (33% up from 6.5%). Unlike the Kahneman and Tversky section, the Allison section, after having played the simulation, responded that there was less need for information (20% down from 33%). While the Allison section believed that more transparency was needed in the decision-making process (33% up from 13%), it ranked expert advice as the most important change in the decision-making process (41% up from 20%). While the respondents in the Allison section still believed that leaders mattered, they believed it slightly less (53% down from 60%). They did, however, drastically change their views on leadership change and changes in outcomes in the international system, strongly believing in it after having played in the simulation (66% up from 40%).

Conclusion

Overall, this role-playing simulation accomplished its learning objectives: Midshipmen operated in a national-security decision-making environment and appreciated the importance of time constraints and the requirements of information processing. More importantly, their different responses to the pre- and postsimulation surveys in the quasi-experimental design of the two “different” sections illustrated the power of a carefully constructed role-playing simulation to show the impact upon students through active-learning techniques such as a role-playing simulation. Not only does exposure to different decision-making theories have an effect on how students engage in the role-playing simulation, it also demonstrates the power of theory in affecting how the students thought about the role-playing simulation.

Notes

1. See Shaw (2004, 6) about a similar design.
2. These debriefing questions followed other role-playing simulation debriefing questions such as (Lantis and Krain 2006).

3. For the impact of international relations theory, I will use the questionnaire responses, as they are aggregated in Tables 1 and 2 under the presimulation column.

4. For the impact of the role-playing simulation, I will use the questionnaire responses, as they are aggregated in Tables 1 and 2 under the postsimulation column.

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