Pop-Up Case: Coronavirus Response

The Wuhan Coronavirus has spread to tens of thousands of people across several countries, threatening to become a global pandemic. How should the United States respond to contain the virus and ease public fears?

Use the following case to spark discussion and help students to think through what they would do if they were decision makers. See the back of the page for some inspiration for how to structure your conversation.

The Situation:

In December 2019, a new strain of coronavirus was identified in the Chinese city of Wuhan. The virus causes pneumonia-like symptoms, and—while likely less fatal than other coronavirus outbreaks such as severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS)—it is believed to be more contagious. The Chinese government was initially reluctant to acknowledge the extent of the disease and did not take robust action until it locked down the entire city in January. However, the outbreak had already begun to spread. Facilitated by China's integration with global travel and trade networks, the coronavirus reached over two dozen countries, including the United States. By the end of January, the outbreak had infected over twenty thousand people and killed over three hundred, leading the World Health Organization (WHO) to designate it a public health emergency of international concern, its highest threat designation.

Many governments and international organizations are working to care for patients, contain the disease, and develop a vaccine, but several factors complicate the implementation of an effective response to coronavirus. Global health infrastructure is weak, and organizations such as the WHO are unable to enforce their regulations. For instance, WHO regulations prohibit restrictions on travel and trade during an epidemic, as they can block the flow of resources, hamper efforts to track the disease, and make countries hesitant to accurately report cases for fear of economic consequences. Despite this, several countries—including the United States—have imposed restrictions on travelers from China. Several airlines have also stopped travel to China and canceled cargo flights. Moreover, while the United States has often been a leader in global health initiatives, the Donald J. Trump administration has made significant cuts to programs aimed at fighting pandemics, leaving observers concerned that the United States is underprepared to coordinate an effective response. Analysts predict that the epidemic is likely to continue spreading and could have significant economic consequences, especially given China's considerable role in the global economy. Many major companies have suspended operations at factories in China or at those that rely on Chinese supply chains.

Learn more:

- Panicky Responses to the Coronavirus are Dangerous—Here's Why (Think Global Health)
- What You Need to Know About the Coronavirus Outbreak (CFR.org)
- How Bad Will the Coronavirus Outbreak Get? Here Are 6 Key Factors (*New York Times*)

Reuters/Stringer

Decision Point:

The Wuhan coronavirus has spread across several countries, infecting tens of thousands of people and killing hundreds. Despite efforts to contain the virus, global health experts are increasingly reaching the consensus that it will become a major pandemic, spreading to multiple continents and risking significant political and economic consequences. Public concern is growing in the United States, where a number of U.S. citizens are confirmed to have been infected. As the disease continues to spread and economic disruptions become increasingly likely, the National Security Council (NSC) is meeting to advise the president on how to coordinate a U.S. response to the outbreak. Policymakers will need to consider how to contain the spread of the virus in the United States and ease public fears, how—if at all—to cooperate with China and international organizations on an international response, and how to mitigate the economic effects of the epidemic.

NSC members should consider any combination of the following options:

- Drop existing travel restrictions and urge others to do the same while continuing screening procedures. This option would facilitate the flow of resources and assist efforts to track the virus, but it risks stoking public fears.
- Further restrict all travel and trade to China and encourage others to follow suit. This option violates WHO regulations, could disrupt the U.S. and global economies, and could potentially discourage China from cooperating with an international response.
- Coordinate a multilateral response by committing U.S. resources to international containment and treatment efforts and offering to send resources and/or teams to China.
- Offer economic aid to support U.S. companies affected by trade, manufacturing, and travel losses from China and commit funds to strengthen U.S. health systems.

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Pop-Up Case Guidelines

Pop-up cases from Model Diplomacy are short case studies on current events that put students in the shoes of policymakers facing the most pressing issues in international relations. There are lots of ways to organize a discussion using a pop-up case. It is always helpful to think about your goals for the discussion and then to consider any time or participation constraints you could have. If you are looking for some inspiration, here are a few ideas:

Gauge reaction:

If you want to show what students are thinking before diving into the discussion, here are two easy ways to do it. In one, often called "four corners," assign each policy option to a corner of the room, and then ask students to stand in the corner associated with the policy option they support. In the other, if you want your students to think along a spectrum instead (e.g., interventionist-isolationist, unilateral-multilateral, more urgent–less urgent), put the ends of your spectrum at either end of your blackboard and have students stand along the board to indicate where along the spectrum they fall. With both approaches, everyone will sit down again with a sense of where they stand regarding the case. Use this knowledge to shape discussion—eliciting less popular opinions, challenging more popular ones, encouraging like-minded students to further develop their ideas, or having students who disagree discuss in small groups.

Think-Pair-Share:

This exercise is particularly useful for groups where some students are hesitant. Ask everyone to spend a few minutes quietly gathering their thoughts and articulating them in a notebook ("think"), then have them turn to the person sitting next to them to compare notes ("pair"), and then have students report out to the whole group ("share"), knowing that everyone will have had time to think through something to say.

Whiparound:

Ask students to briefly share their position one after the other without responding to each other. Typically, everyone speaks in the order they are sitting. This can be a way to see where everyone stands before launching into a discussion. If you expect a topic to be particularly contentious, you could have students listen to each other and then reflect in writing.

Don Pollard

Simple NSC simulation:

If you would like to simulate a simplified version of a more realistic policy debate, you can appoint yourself (or a randomly chosen student) president. Ask students to debate the policy options (or come up with new ones) and try to reach consensus on a recommendation to the president.

NSC simulation with assigned opinions:

While assigning individual roles for a brief case study is complicated, you could assign opinions. For example, assign one-third of the class to be isolationist, one-third to favor a military response, and one-third to favor a diplomatic response. Let the groups caucus for a few minutes, then present their policy options and debate them, leaving the final decision up to you (or a student) as president.

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