Use the following hypothetical 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:

Long before the arrival of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) and the global devastation left in its wake, experts had warned of the dire need for countries to be better prepared to deal with infectious diseases. This warning, amplified during previous epidemics such as Ebola, resulted in only moderate and inconsistent improvements, including funding for health initiatives and international agreements such as the 2005 International Health Regulations (IHR), aimed at coordinating and regulating health policy. Those improvements were obviously insufficient. A 2019 survey found that all 195 signatories of the IHR were underprepared for a health crisis, a finding that was borne out by the ensuing chaos as countries across the world struggled to meet the extreme health and economic challenges precipitated by COVID-19. Moreover, the World Health Organization (WHO), which coordinates health policy at an international level, lacked the resources and enforcement capabilities to effectively lead an international pandemic response. As the COVID-19 pandemic overwhelmed health-care systems and halted economies in their tracks, the deadly costs of global health unpreparedness came into sharp relief.

COVID-19 highlighted faults in global health security on two fronts. First, current international norms and regulations proved insufficient: noncompliance with IHR travel restriction guidelines and a lack of government transparency and information sharing hindered containment efforts and accelerated economic damage. Second, national health-care systems were unprepared and uncoordinated in their responses. Many countries, including the United States, failed to implement sufficient testing practices to contain the spread of COVID-19 and strained to handle the resulting surge of patients. Although several countries, including Singapore and South Korea, mounted robust responses that successfully slowed the spread of the virus, the global nature of the pandemic highlighted the need for coordinated action at an international level to detect and prevent future outbreaks and to ensure health-care systems were able to manage a pandemic if containment failed. The measures required to improve preparedness were and continue to be difficult: investing in health care is expensive—sometimes prohibitively so for poor countries—and strengthening international norms can meet with resistance. Moreover, with no way of predicting the next pandemic, gauging the effectiveness of improvements is difficult. It appears that some countries view policies deemed prudent for the future as financially unattainable or inessential in the present. Considering the lessons of COVID-19, policymakers will need to decide what financial and political tradeoffs are acceptable to safeguard against future pandemics.

Learn more:

1. What a Global Health Survey Found Months Before the Coronavirus Pandemic (Council on Foreign Relations)
2. How to Stop the Next Pandemic Before It Starts (Foreign Policy)
3. We Were Warned (Atlantic)

Like Model Diplomacy? Try a full case at modeldiplomacy.cfr.org.
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 teaching online and cannot discuss synchronously, consider a short writing assignment or using an online discussion board (see some excellent tips here). If you are teaching face-to-face or over videoconference and 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.

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.

Note: In our experience, simulations are often most productive if students imagine they are advising a generic president rather than a specific one.

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