Background:

Deterrence means discouraging unwanted behavior through the threat of significant punishment. Sometimes the threat of severe consequences is enough to discourage or deter a threat without requiring governments to act. However, to be effective, deterrence requires that a country make credible threats and be capable of carrying them out. In this hypothetical scenario, the United States needs to decide how best to use deterrence to block threats against itself and its allies.

First, cover the fundamentals of this foreign policy tool with World101’s lesson, What Is Deterrence? Then, put these principles into practice with Model Diplomacy’s hypothetical decision point below.

Decision Point (Hypothetical):

Relations between Berezia, a regional powerhouse and long-time U.S. adversary, and its neighbor Oratania have grown strained in recent years as Oratania has built closer ties with the United States. Fearing the expansion of U.S. influence over Oratania, Berezia has escalated tensions. Yesterday, new satellite images of the region showed Berezian military forces massing on the border with Oratania, potentially signaling an impending invasion. Oratania would likely be unable to defend itself for long against its militarily stronger neighbor. Complicating matters further, Oratania borders several U.S. treaty allies, raising concerns that a conflict in Oratania could threaten their security as well. Accordingly, the president of the United States has convened the National Security Council (NSC) to discuss what steps it can take to deter Berezian aggression against Oratania and reassure regional allies of their security. NSC members will need to consider how they can credibly deter an attack while safeguarding against any actions that could provoke one.

NSC members should consider the following policy options:

1. **Threaten severe economic sanctions on Berezia if it invades.** This option is relatively low-cost and minimizes the risk of an accident or miscalculation sparking conflict, or of drawing U.S. forces into a conflict. However, the threat of sanctions alone could be insufficient to deter Berezia.

2. **Provide the Oratanian military with equipment and training.** This would show more robust U.S. support for Oratania, and a stronger Oratanian military could raise the costs of an invasion for Berezia, potentially changing their calculations. However, it also carries a greater risk of escalating tensions or provoking an attack if Berezia misinterprets U.S. efforts as a provocation.

3. **Provide Oratania with direct military assistance by sending military assets, such as an aircraft carrier group, to the region.** This option provides the strongest deterrent, demonstrating U.S. resolve to defend Oratania and preparing the United States to do so if necessary. However, it also requires a large and sustained commitment of U.S. resources and bears the most significant risk to U.S. lives if deterrence fails and a conflict breaks out.

Additional Resources:

1. [The Best Defense? An Alternative to All-Out War or Nothing (Brookings)](https://www.brookings.edu/)
2. [Nuclear Deterrence Today (NATO Review)](https://www.nato.int/)
3. [Deterrence: I Don’t Think It Means What You Think It Means (Modern War Institute)](https://www.modernwarinstitute.org/)

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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 teaching online and cannot discuss synchronously, consider a short writing assignment or using an online discussion board (see some excellent tips here and 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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