Background:
Sanctions are economic measures intended to either pressure or punish bad actors—whether individuals, groups, or countries—that violate international norms or threaten national interests. Sanctions offer governments a way to pressure or punish others with little cost or risk to themselves. However, they can cause collateral damage and are rarely successful in changing their target's behavior. In this hypothetical scenario, the United States needs to decide how best to apply sanctions to influence a crisis abroad.

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

Decision Point (Hypothetical):
Borealia has been locked in a stagnant territorial dispute with its neighbor Yuzhnia for decades. This week, reports emerged that Borealia has just begun a large-scale offensive to seize the disputed territory. Borealia is far larger than Yuzhnia and has a sizable and advanced military. With international condemnations going ignored and any form of military intervention posing immense risk, the U.S. president has convened the National Security Council (NSC) to discuss the possibility of enacting sanctions on Borealia.

NSC members should consider the following policy options:

• Enact broad sanctions on large portions of Borealia’s economy. This option would have the greatest effect on Borealia’s economy, putting strong pressure on the government, but it also risks harming the Borealian population. The sanctions could, moreover, hurt U.S. businesses and drive Borealia to seek alternative trading partners, potentially including U.S. adversaries.

• Enact targeted sanctions on individuals in the Borealian government or military. These would have the least risk of unintentionally harming the Borealian population and could still forcefully convey U.S. opposition to Borealia’s aggression. However, these sanctions would be unlikely to change the state of the conflict.

• Enact no sanctions. The State Department could issue a strong condemnation of the conflict but not enact sanctions. This would be the best option for U.S. businesses and avoid the risks of collateral damage to Borealia’s population that sanctions entail. Still, it would likely have no effect on the situation.

Additional Resources:
1. What Are Economic Sanctions? (Council on Foreign Relations)
2. What Are Economic Sanctions, and How Did They Become Washington’s Foreign Policy Tool of Choice? (Washington Post)

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 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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