

MODEL DIPLOMACY

Pop-Up Case: U.S. Arctic Policy

As melting sea ice opens the Arctic for navigation and resource extraction, new opportunities and obstacles are emerging for countries that border the region. The United States needs to determine whether it should launch a new Arctic policy and, if so, what interests it should prioritize in the region.

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:

For decades, the Arctic has largely been a venue of international cooperation, especially through joint scientific research among the eight countries with territory in the region (the United States, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, and Russia). However, rising temperatures from climate change are causing governments to change their behavior in the region. Melting sea ice on the Arctic Ocean exposes opportunities for economic development, including trade and natural resource extraction. Simultaneously, some countries have increased their military presence, as the opening of the Arctic Ocean creates strategic advantages and vulnerabilities. With new opportunities and risks emerging, many countries—including the United States—need to decide whether and how to pursue their interests in the Arctic.

The Arctic offers considerable economic promise. Melting sea ice facilitates access to remote natural resources and opens trans-Arctic sea routes—such as the Northern Sea Route (NSR) along the Russian coast and the Northwest Passage (NWP), which extends through the Canadian archipelago and around the Alaskan Peninsula. These routes could reduce shipping times and save shippers millions of dollars. Russia and China, which considers itself a “near-Arctic state,” have made the NSR an economic priority, cooperating to develop the route with a vast icebreaker fleet and new ports. However, unresolved questions about the extent of Russia’s jurisdiction over the route have sparked concern that Russia could exercise undue control over shipping through the NSR. Developing infrastructure along the NWP and investing in icebreakers could ensure unfettered U.S. access to Arctic shipping, but the passage is open only for a short season, during which it is still unpredictable. Therefore, some economists worry that developing the NWP is not worth the considerable investment it would require and argue that existing routes remain easier and safer.

The Arctic also exposes new strategic challenges. Russia has increased its military activity in the region, conducting frequent drills and reopening over fifty bases along the NSR. Russia’s growing military presence could strengthen its influence over shipping on the NSR, boosting its economic leverage over the West. Moreover, U.S. strategists worry that Russia’s positioning exposes a strategic vulnerability, allowing it to disrupt communication between the United States and its European allies or hinder their movements. Some experts argue for greater U.S. military presence in the Arctic to constrain any strategic advantage Russia could gain from the region. However, this bears risk as well. A U.S. military buildup could backfire and provoke greater Russian aggression or lead to miscalculations that spark a military conflict.

Despite emerging opportunities and challenges, many policymakers advocate for preserving cooperation in the Arctic, especially in the face of climate change. Environmental experts note that increased traffic due to trade or resource extraction will destabilize fragile ecosystems and communities already threatened by global warming. They advocate for the United States to prioritize cooperation on sustainable development, scientific research, and securing the livelihoods of Arctic communities as climate change intensifies. However, with economic and security development in the Arctic already underway, the question of how to maintain cooperation and whether doing so would disadvantage the United States presents few simple answers.

Additional Resources:

1. [Geopolitical Implications of New Arctic Shipping Lanes \(Arctic Institute\)](#)
2. [What’s at Stake With Rising Competition in the Arctic? \(Council on Foreign Relations\)](#)
3. [A U.S. Security Strategy for the Arctic \(War on the Rocks\)](#)



Reuters/U.S. Coast Guard

Decision Point:

Chinese and Russian development of the Northern Sea Route has enabled both countries to capitalize on shorter shipping times to their economic advantage. Moreover, Russian military buildup in the region exposes new strategic challenges for the United States and its allies. Many non-Arctic countries—including France, India, Japan, South Korea, and the United Kingdom—have released Arctic strategies focusing on economic and security opportunities in the region. As an Arctic country, the United States could enhance its activity in the region, seeking out economic and security gains for itself while countering Chinese and Russian influence. The president has called a National Security Council (NSC) meeting to decide whether the United States should determine a new Arctic policy and, if so, how it should prioritize U.S. interests.

NSC members should consider any combination of the following policy options:

- *Support economic development of the NWP by funding new icebreakers and ports, facilitating resource extraction, and negotiating the administration of the route with Canada.* This option could improve trade between Northeast Asia and the northeast of North America. However, the NWP is undeveloped, meaning this option would require significant time and resources to bear fruit. Even then, the route would still be open for a short period, and the passage would remain dangerous.
- *Build up Arctic security infrastructure, investing in naval bases and a more capable Arctic naval force, stepping up Arctic patrols, and increasing joint military exercises with Arctic allies and partners.* This option could allow the United States to counter Russia’s military presence in the Arctic and safeguard its interests. It could also help protect commercial, natural resource, or environmental interests. However, increasing U.S. military presence could push other Arctic countries to do the same, risking heightened tensions.
- *Maintain a policy focused on scientific research, sustainable development, and the protection of communities in the Arctic, prioritizing cooperation over competition.* This option could entail a diplomatic process with Arctic countries, through bodies such as the Arctic Council, to keep tensions minimal, promote cooperation on research, and address shared challenges brought on by climate change. Although this option costs less than the others, it risks leaving Chinese and Russian Arctic expansion unchallenged, allowing both countries greater strategic and economic leverage.

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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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