In 2013, reports emerged that Syria’s President Bashar al-Assad had deployed chemical gas as a weapon in Ghouta, Syria, during the country’s ongoing civil war. Months prior, U.S. President Barack Obama had referred to this type of attack as a “red line” that, if crossed, would move the United States to act militarily. The United States now had a choice: whether to uphold its word and respond with military action at the risk of escalating a violent conflict.

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Decision Point: Set in late August 2013

Reports have confirmed that the Syrian government has deployed chemical weapons against Syrians in Ghouta. The president has called a meeting of the National Security Council (NSC) to discuss how the United States should respond, considering U.S. credibility, national security, and humanitarian concerns.

NSC members should consider the following policy options:

• Respond with military action right away. This option would strengthen U.S. credibility by upholding Obama’s statements, demonstrating that crossing a red line based on humanitarian principles will not be tolerated. At the same time, military action would involve the United States in a risky and dangerous foreign conflict when its resources are depleted and public support for such action has diminished in the context of its longstanding engagement in Afghanistan and Iraq.

• Delay action and bring other countries into a coalition to leverage a multilateral response. This option would ensure the United States would not be alone in responding and would strengthen international legitimacy for any action, including military action, by building on multiple countries’ military resources and credibility. The process would likely be difficult and time-consuming, however, potentially rendering such a response ineffective.

• Hold back, avoiding military conflict at all costs while seeking a diplomatic resolution. Given the costs and risks associated with military action, a military strike would carry enormous risks. Avoiding military action and instead seeking purely diplomatic solutions could ensure the United States does not become entangled in the conflict. Holding back could, however, harm U.S. credibility and fail to effectively address the humanitarian disaster.

Additional Resources:

1. Inside the White House During the Syrian ‘Red Line’ Crisis
   (The Atlantic)
2. Obama’s Red Line: Revisited (Politico)
3. The Syria Red Line, Three Years Later (Council on Foreign Relations / Pressure Points)
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 Cabinet Simulation:
Appoint yourself (or a student) to be 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. The president should ask questions and ultimately make a decision and explain their choice.

Cabinet Simulation With Assigned Opinions:
While assigning individual roles for a brief case study is complicated, you could assign the class opinions. For example, divide your class into three groups, and assign each group one of the policy options presented in the case. Let the groups caucus for a few minutes, then present their policy options and debate them, leaving the final decision up to you (or another student) as president.

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