Will it be
**FORCE**, or **Diplomacy**?

NATO Simulation Pressures Students to Forge a Response to Threatening International Incidents

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ODU student Timothy Gorde, in his role as NATO secretary general. Gorde (right) below with Julian Lawson.

Only a few miles separate Old Dominion University and its Graduate Program in International Studies from the headquarters of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's Allied Command Transformation (ACT). The proximity has encouraged collaborations over the years, but none as well received by both sides as a simulation exercise this past spring.

The all-day event put three dozen ODU graduate and undergraduate students in NATO hot seats.

Students were eager to participate because they wanted a realistic learning experience. ACT officials were keen on learning how young people put information technologies to work in decision making. A third player, ODU's Virginia Modeling, Analysis and Simulation Center (VMASC), also got into the act because one of the center's missions is to develop simulations such as this. The result, as the university's director of military activities Dick Whalen put it, was "win-win-win."

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Picture a large conference room at VMASC set up to resemble the command center of NATO's North Atlantic Council (NAC) in Brussels, Belgium. Along tables arranged in a horseshoe configuration sit students playing roles as representatives of each of the 28 NATO member countries. In the hottest of the hot seats are two ODU undergraduates in political science who have been selected by ODU professors to run the show because they are regular participants in intercollegiate international relations simulations. Timothy Gorde, who will begin law school in the fall at the University of Minnesota, is in the role of secretary general. Julian Lawson, whose goal is to work for the U.S. State Department or Department of Defense, is acting as chairman of the NAC military committee.
Flashing on large screens before the role players are military and intelligence reports, maps, and occasionally a news report pertinent to NATO. When the simulation formally begins all of the screens zero in on an out-of-the-way part of the world that borders Russia, Turkey, Iran and the Caspian Sea. This is the South Caucasus region of Eurasia.

‘Arrests’ in Turkey
Turn Up the Heat

A high-priority intelligence report warns of potential guerrilla actions by ethnic Armenian secessionists from the Nagorno-Karabakh region, which the international community recognizes to be part of Azerbaijan.

Armenia, which borders Azerbaijan, is friendly with Russia. Azerbaijan has some ties to NATO, although it is not a member. The intelligence suggests that the intended target of the guerrillas will be a strategic installation or associated infrastructure.

Other reports follow just minutes apart. Turkish officials announce that they have thwarted an attempt by Kurdish militants to damage an oil pipeline that runs from Baku on the Caspian Sea in Azerbaijan through Tbilisi in Georgia and to the Mediterranean port of Ceyhan in Turkey. A statement from the Russian government pledges support for ethnic Armenian minorities in Azerbaijan. Turkey responds with a military alert of its own.

Leaders in Georgia, which itself suffered a violent incursion by the Russian military in 2008, announce solidarity with Azerbaijan and endorse action by NATO to forestall the Russians. Russia immediately warns that NATO should not intervene. Further intelligence reports indicate Russia may be intent on disrupting the flow of oil through the Baku-Tbili-Ceyhan pipeline. Turkey requests support from NATO and Azerbaijan grants NATO permission to deploy air and naval forces in its territory.

As the reports stream in, the student role players try to find the authentic voice of the countries they are representing. About half of the 28 representatives seem reluctant to recommend a military response by NATO. The Portuguese representative does not want NATO to act rashly and irritate the Russians. (She notes later in an informal discussion that Portugal has critical trade ties with Russia.) “We need direct communications with Russia before we take any action,” she argues.

But Gorde, who is acting as the secretary general, fears diplomacy may not be enough to stop another Russian incursion into the southern Caucasus. “I am outraged by this and believe we need to send an immediate signal to Russia that they are not going to have a blank check to do Georgia 2.0.”

Real NATO Officials
Monitor the Action

The debate continues and the 28 members are at gridlock. Another group of role players are at a media desk, representing the world’s news organizations. They post stories on the screens calling the NATO council “paralyzed.” The media taunts are real enough and the council feels the pressure. Exchanges become testy.

Dick Bedford, the NATO official in charge of “Decision-Making Simulation 2010” and the ACT branch head for strategic engagement, is at a side table taking notes and smiling. He says he has run similar simulations with university students in Italy, as well as at Harvard and the U.S. Naval Academy. Each simulation develops its own personality, he says, and adds, “This is going well.”

Regina Karp, who directs the Graduate Program in International Studies (GPIS) at ODU’s College of Arts and Letters and served as a coordinator of the simulation, is just as positive: “This is an invaluable experience for the students.”
Allied Command Transformation is NATO’s agent for change. While its counterpart in the NATO military command structure, Allied Command Operations, focuses on day-to-day operations, ACT looks to the future. It focuses on training and education, concept development and the research and technology that can make NATO more efficient and effective.

Bedford told the simulation participants in his introduction that he and his colleagues are seeking to refine NATO decision-making processes so that they can take better advantage of present-day communications technologies. “I’m not one of those people who believe technology is everything,” he added. “Wisdom and experience are most important. But we’re essentially making decisions the way we made them in 1985, getting information outside the (crisis) room and then going into the room to debate and try to reach a consensus.”

Today’s students, however, are “getting information all the time,” Bedford said. “Smart phones and computers are appendages of yourselves.”

In the past few years ACT has been doing simulations on college campuses, mostly in Italy, to test how technology can best be harnessed to help with decision making of the sort that is required of the NAC and NATO. “Younger people are more open to using technology,” Bedford said. “This is intuitive for them, this multitasking. And I find it a most fascinating thing the way these students slide into their roles rapidly.”

The simulation participants go into the afternoon still at stalemate about their response to the Russians. (They had received briefing materials about NAC, NATO and the countries they were to represent, but they knew nothing beforehand about the crisis that would come their way.)

One option the role players have is to be briefed by experts, and they are happy to have their questions answered. In this case, the experts are real NATO personnel. One gives them a rundown of the history and politics in the South Caucasus. Another is a military expert whose advice opens doors for the deliberators. Yes, the military expert says, NATO putting troops on the ground in such a hot spot, or directing warplanes to fly over a hostile country, could escalate the crisis. What about a naval response, a show of NATO force? This, he says, seems to be the best option.

A Decision is Made

Numerous other complications arise that bring Iran, and even China, into the mix of players in the crisis. In the end, the role players reach agreement. They will pull warships from member countries into a NATO fleet to be based in Greece. Maps and charts on the screens in front of them help the participants determine how quickly certain ships could move into position. Just the announcement of such a move will give Russia second thoughts about a military incursion into Azerbaijan, the students decide.

In post-simulation evaluations, Gorde says he is satisfied with the day’s work. “No troops were sent. I felt this was a good solution, one that wasn’t crazy but that could be escalated if the situation called for it.” His sidekick, Lawson, added, “The simulation played out well. The pipeline situation didn’t really get solved. However, that is the nature of crises. As soon as you begin to respond to one crisis, another one hits you right in the face.”

VMASC Executive Director John Sokolowski had been a simulation spectator. “The world faces an ever increasingly complex set of situations. Decision makers require tools and methods to help them better understand these complex events, and modeling and simulation is one such tool,” he said.

Through M&S, he added, decision makers can explore and play out various options to gain a clearer insight into the problem itself and the ramifications of the decisions being considered. “Decision results can be visualized in a meaningful manner, large amounts of information can be presented in a concise way and several options can be explored in a short period of time to help render a more informed decision.”

Karp, the ODU GPIS director, described the student response as “very, very positive,” and said she hopes to develop a semester course designed around international crisis simulations. She, Bedford and Whalen agreed that a NATO simulation should become a yearly event at ODU, perhaps being lengthened from one to two days.

One advantage of ODU’s involvement in international relations simulations is the extraordinarily diverse student body on the Norfolk campus, Karp said. About half of the participants in the latest simulation were from countries other than the United States. “I did have a rule, though, that you couldn’t represent your native country.”

The simulation also benefited because many participants had taken part previously in ODU’s longstanding Model United Nations program. The sponsor of the university’s Model U.N. Society, Aaron Karp, senior lecturer in political science, recruited students to fill the simulation roster.

A decade-long partnership between ACT and ODU made the simulation possible, according to Whalen, who is a retired Navy captain. A memorandum of understanding between the two extends “a cooperative mode of operation in the interest of sharing resources which support the missions of both parties, and which enable individuals associated with both to benefit from the wealth of expertise represented.”