

Using Twitter to Simulate @CrisisDiplomacy

Written by Daryl Morini

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DARYL MORINI, FEB 6 2013

I had an idea recently. Why not use Twitter to simulate crisis diplomacy and, perhaps, offer real-life decision-makers some possible strategies and solutions to prevent war?

It may sound hyperbolic, I know. But I think it could prove to be an interesting way to harness the talent pool of foreign policy experts on Twitter, and channel their knowledge towards practical and policy-relevant ends.

Governments of all stripes pursue war-gaming, simulations and contingency planning. The only difference is that these exercises are usually wrapped in secrecy and, as far as I can tell, mostly simulate war rather than the crisis diplomacy which precedes it, and potential strategies to avoid it. I am biased in that I study preventive diplomacy, so I am more interested in gaming diplomatic crises, exploring the realistic options available to decision-makers in a crisis, and perhaps suggesting peaceful ways to deescalate disputes. I do not think that war is ever inevitable, and the point of gaming crisis diplomacy is precisely to test this proposition.

So what would a Twitter simulation look like and how would it work?

Well, in my mind, it would look a little something like the following fabled exchange:

A Twitter simulation requires three basic ingredients.

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First, take a contemporary and unresolved crisis scenario drawn from the real world of international relations, such as the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands dispute above.

Secondly, invite two or more participants (or 'simulators') with some expertise in the country, dispute or topic.

Of course, the towering thinkers in the field of IR are not likely to risk their reputations by jumping on board such a project – yet – until they see some potential in it. So it is safe to say that earlier simulators may consist of PhD candidates, early career researchers and more adventurous academics on Twitter. Gradually, if such a project picked up steam and followers, it could feasibly branch out to involve more and more prominent IR professors. The scenarios conjured may eventually become increasingly complex, and, therefore, life-like.

Thirdly, sprinkle a pinch of realism, intellectual rigour and seriousness over the top and *voilà!*

By realism, I do not mean the foreign policy disposition that assumes the worst and plans accordingly. I refer to faithfulness to reality. This is why it is crucial that experts lead the charge here, for they, ideally, should be aware of the constraints on, and possible options of, decision-makers in a crisis environment. Hence, the direction in which the simulation develops very much depends on how seriously the simulators take it.

In contrast to conventional war-gaming, the Twitter simulations I envision do not start when the first shot has been fired in a war and finish when an enemy has capitulated. I do not think that such narrow defence contingency planning is particularly faithful to the essentially contingent, chaotic and unpredictable nature of history.

Instead, it is better to begin in a current or foreseeable international crisis, then allow simulators the leeway to negotiate, bargain, issue threats, etc. to try to resolve the dispute peacefully, or even wage war as they see fit, in full knowledge of the likely real world repercussions of their actions – the destruction of the world (and their own) economy, nuclear fallout on their cities, the decimation of their soldiers' lives and military assets, and their own domestic political survival.

The freedoms and constraints which experts will appreciate from studying real-life international relations should, in theory, make for particularly realistic and insightful simulations.

What Twitter simulations could seek to simulate, in other words, is not the likely winner of a shooting war, but the decisions, strategies and actions most likely to result in war – or to prevent it. Finally, after each Twitter simulation, participants and interested observers could debate its theoretical and policy implications for crisis decision-making, and for the specific international dispute, in retrospective debriefs and blog articles.

If you have ever played strategy board games, such as *Axis & Allies*, *Diplomacy* or *Risk*, you are probably wondering which set of rules would govern the actions of the players in such simulations. At this stage, I think it is best to experiment in order to come to best practices through the grand old scientific principle of trial-and-error. In truth, I am in favour of a minimalistic set of rules governing Twitter simulations. I can only think of three off the top of my head:

1. Simulators must ensure that their actions remain faithful to the foreseeable or likely actions of the player they represent. Each action should be considered plausible or reasonably likely to the best of the player's knowledge. Players should measure their actions with all the seriousness that their sense of political responsibility, personal morality and the action's consequences would entail.
2. Players must respect the current international political context in which the simulation starts. If their player is a nuclear power, then they possess such an arsenal; if not, they cannot declare themselves a nuclear power unreasonably. This is to ensure that the simulation does not devolve into unrealistic counter-factual scenarios, or farcical exchanges divorced from the reality which it is simulating.
3. Players' decisions and interactions must be shrouded in ambiguity, imperfect information and influenced by chance. To reflect the nature of chance and contingency in international relations, the moderator may insert unpredictable events and/or unintended consequences into a simulation. For example, if one simulator imposes economic sanctions, initiates a military action against another simulator's country or makes a similar unilateral move with ambiguous consequences, the moderator may decide upon the unintended consequences with the roll of a virtual dice.

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There are no further rules. Because this is a simulation of crisis diplomacy, with nation-states as the main actors, the conduct of simulators is not governed by a rigid and unambiguous, law-like set of ten commandments, but by the fuzzy constraints of international law and norms, the balance of power and the decision-makers' own psychology. As such, an anarchical lack of rules is more appropriate for simulations of crisis diplomacy, with players acting on their own judgment and assumptions.

In all honesty, I have no idea whether this idea will work out in practice, how seriously IR colleagues on Twitter will take it, or if it will even enjoy more than one retweet of fame. But that is besides the point. I think this is worth trying for a very pragmatic reason: the potential pay-offs of such simulations make it necessary to try. Observing how decision-makers behave under crisis conditions, which decisions may de-escalate a crisis peacefully and which may lead to war is more than a bit of guilty (and geeky) pleasure – it is the original purpose, as I see it, of International Relations as an academic enterprise.

If you have any feedback, critiques or advice on this project, or if you are interested in being considered to participate in an upcoming Twitter simulation – the first will be on the Senkaku islands dispute – please email crisisdiplomacy@gmail.com. And make sure to follow @CrisisDiplomacy for upcoming simulations.

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