

STUDENTS TAKE NATO HOT SEATS IN SIMULATION AT VMASC



Dick Bedford of ACT preps the simulation participants.

More than 30 Old Dominion University students found out Thursday how it feels to sit in NATO hot seats when a small group of insurgents in a remote country threatens to throw the globe into political - and perhaps military - conflict.

A program, "Decision-Making Simulation 2010," which was staged by NATO's Allied Command Transformation (ACT) based in Norfolk, was facilitated by the visualization capabilities of ODU's Virginia Modeling, Analysis and Simulation Center (VMASC) in Suffolk where the event took place.

Regina Karp, who directs the international studies programs at ODU's College of Arts and Letters, was the university's chief coordinator of the simulation.

The students, some in the Graduate Program in International Studies and others who are undergraduates, played roles in the simulation. Most portrayed ambassadors from the 28 NATO countries that make up the North Atlantic Council (NAC), the permanent NATO decision-making body that sits in Brussels, Belgium. Other students stood in as NAC regulars such as a secretary general and military committee chairman.

Participants had received briefing materials about NAC, NATO and the countries they were to represent, but they knew nothing beforehand about the mission they were given on Thursday morning. Their job was to compose a NATO reaction to an act of sabotage by ethnic Armenian separatists aimed at the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline that runs 1,000 miles from the Caspian Sea oil fields through Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey to the Mediterranean Sea.

The simulation was conducted in a VMASC meeting room that had been set up to resemble a NAC crisis center with huge screens onto which intelligence reports, history reports, maps, international media reports and other pertinent information were projected.

Dick Bedford, the ACT branch head for strategic engagement and the leader of Thursday's simulation, said he and his colleagues are seeking to refine NATO decision-making processes so that they take better advantage of present-day communications technologies. "I'm not one of those people who believe technology is everything," he told the students in his introduction. "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 Europe, but also at Harvard University and the U.S. Naval Academy, 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 in an interview during a simulation break. "This is intuitive for them, this multitasking. And I find it a most fascinating thing the way these students slide into their roles rapidly."

In the simulation, the facts did come fast and harrowing. Russia, which was never a big fan of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline (it was completed in 2005), announces that it is moving troops to where they can quickly come to the support of Armenia in the event of retaliation for the separatists' sabotage.

Turkey and Azerbaijan let it be known that they feel they have been victimized by a terrorist act and, more importantly, that they want action by NATO to counterbalance the saber-rattling by Russia.

The students, trying to act in the best interests of the countries they represent, have vastly different views about how to proceed. Some fear angering Russia. Others express outrage about Russia's actions and want a strong NATO military response. As the debate ranges on, a group of participants in the role of the world media posts articles characterizing NAC as "paralyzed," unable to make a decision about the pipeline incident and Russia's response.

Pressure mounts on the participants to do something, yet it takes them awhile longer to reach consensus even on a media release. And when they put out the release, the media characterizes it as a weak response by NATO.

As the debate continued into the afternoon, more graphics are put on the screen describing strategic opportunities and challenges, such as how to get a NATO naval force assembled and moved to the eastern Mediterranean. Other international events also arise to heighten the tension and make the decision making more difficult. The role players have as many questions as they do answers, and data to help answer their questions is quickly provided by staffers who can call upon vast digital resources.

"Isn't this great," said VMASC Executive Director John Sokolowski as he watched. "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."

Through M&S, he said, decision makers can explore and play out various decision 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 international studies director, said the experience was "invaluable" for the students and that she hopes to develop an entire course designed around international crisis simulations.

Thursday's exercise builds on the decade-long partnership between ACT and ODU, according to Dick Whalen, the retired Navy captain who is ODU's director of military activities. 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."

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