

The Cities Are Moving

Instructor guide

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Use this individual browser simulation to help introductory IR students turn theory labels into explanations. Students advise a fictional city, compare competing accounts, and revise their reasoning after new evidence. Assign it after students have encountered the basic approaches; no background knowledge of the fictional setting is needed.

<https://yoavduman.com/lab/the-cities-are-moving>

What students should learn

- Explain a specific action through a causal mechanism or a process that shapes interests, identities, and legitimate conduct.
- Compare plausible explanations and identify evidence that would help distinguish them.
- Revise an earlier account without rewriting what was known at the time.
- Transfer the method to a new case and recognize what the evidence or model cannot establish.

Assignment at a glance

Part	Main work	Planned time	Writing
A	Explain adoption and give initial advice	60 min	14 responses
B	Investigate, revise, negotiate, and transfer	75 min	26 responses

The enhanced edition has 56 focused screens, eight knowledge checks, and 40 required written responses. Field minimums total 1,195 words. These are completion requirements, not a target essay length or a measure of quality. Students may need longer for careful reading and revision.

Prepare the class

Post the game link, due date, collaboration policy, and requested report format in your LMS. Ask students to bring a device suitable for writing and to keep a downloaded progress file. Explain that their work stays in their browser until they choose to share a report; the game does not submit to the LMS.

Allow about 135 minutes plus a short debrief. For three 50-minute meetings, use the first for most of A, the second to finish A and build the escort explanations, and the third for the remaining B work. Add a flexible finish outside class. Save at each stopping point; there is no need to force a checkpoint at the bell.

Keep the theoretical distinctions clear

Students use five working approaches within three broad families. The exercise groups realism and neorealism for introductory application. It does not require students to settle their internal debates or identify one theory that explains everything.

Approach	What the explanation must connect	A limit to watch
Realism and neorealism	Security, capabilities, uncertainty, or dependence to prudential choices under anarchy.	Cooperation and restraint can serve security. Anarchy does not mean chaos or constant war.
Economic interdependence	Costs of disruption and affected economic interests to government preferences.	Trade can be unequal and create vulnerability. It does not guarantee peace.
Neoliberal institutionalism	A particular rule or procedure to information, monitoring, coordination, or credible cooperation.	A treaty is not an explanation by itself. The observer team cannot compel compliance.
Kantian and democratic peace	Public and institutional constraints and relationships among democracies to restraint.	Democracies still fight wars. The approach need not explain every agreement or commercial purchase.
Constructivism	Shared identities, roles, norms, or practices to what actors want or find appropriate and threatening.	Go beyond personal opinions or slogans. Ideas can sustain conflict, and a shared role can have contested boundaries.

Do not equate a policy with a theory

The same recommendation can follow from different reasoning. A joint verification visit could address a security concern, reduce uncertainty, protect commerce, or express reciprocal standing. Assess how students explain the recommendation, including the limits they acknowledge.

Treat evidence as evidence

A source can support several accounts. Official statements are attributed claims to assess, rather than a direct window into the decisive motive. Later records may test an earlier explanation; later events cannot cause an earlier decision. Acknowledging partial explanatory reach is stronger than inventing missing facts.

Aster and Brin are democracies in the case; Corda has an unelected executive; Dune is mixed. Students need not force Dune into a binary category. Populations contain competing interests, and regime type does not make an entire population trustworthy or villainous.

Guide students through the investigation

Part A establishes the first account

The Day 0 Twin Reef Protocol has already been adopted by all four governments. Students first recommend an implementation priority and then explain adoption through all five approaches. Keep explanation and advice distinct. The first-night report can prompt revised advice without changing the original agreement or its adoption date.

The toolkit provides worked examples and knowledge checks. Students must attempt the checks and read the authored feedback; correctness is not a hidden political score. Encourage them to return to these examples when an answer names a concept without explaining how it matters.

Part B uses two separate outcomes

First, students build rival explanations of Aster's different replies to Brin and Corda escorts. The conduct is comparable in specified respects; the countries and histories are not identical. The game preserves both accounts and a prediction before opening the new investigation records.

The next screens return to the Day 0 agreement and ask students to reassess each Part A explanation. They then return to the escort replies and compare the archive with their preserved prediction. If a student is lost, ask: Which action, by whom, on what date are you explaining? The current task labels supply that distinction.

B08 links technical recommendations to differing replies while leaving more than one motive plausible. B09 records a later shared practice with contested boundaries. It can illuminate how a role works; its Day 11 occurrence cannot cause Day 0 adoption or the earlier escort replies. Avoid telling students that either record proves a whole theory.

Negotiation tests feasible advice

On Day 12, two days remain before expiry. Students propose renewal and respond to a counteroffer. Observer teams and civilian tug crews have stated limits, and revised terms require all four governments' approval. The authored responses are practice possibilities. Selecting a proposal does not establish that governments accepted it or that its hoped-for effects occurred.

Transfer and scope use separate variations

Students first explain Norhaven's recorded satellite purchase. X01-X03 then change the offers while preserving stated relationships; no purchase has been observed in that variation. Keep the original answers intact and assess conditional expectations. The final excluded-community prompt is another stated variation, not a hidden fact about the original cities.

Optional Evidence Remix notes are ungraded practice, saved separately from the assessed portfolio. They need not be assigned to complete the enhanced exercise.

Assess the reasoning and its revision

Use the portfolio to assess application rather than agreement with a preferred policy. The app checks names, required writing, selections, and review steps. It does not evaluate the academic meaning of an essay, use an AI grader, or reward a political choice.

A compact assessment rubric

Score each criterion from 0 to 2 for a ten-point assignment. Use the same standard across approaches. For a lower-stakes activity, mark completion and give one substantive comment on a selected response.

Criterion	2 points	1 point	0 points
Outcome and context	Explains the requested action and keeps dates and variations distinct.	Target is partly clear, with a minor mix-up.	Explains a different event or merges separate cases.
Theory and process	Uses the approach accurately and explains how facts shape behavior.	Relevant concept with an incomplete connection.	Label only or a fundamental theoretical error.
Evidence and uncertainty	Uses specific records and states a material gap or limit.	Uses a fact with weak support or qualification.	Unsupported assertion or invented case fact.
Rival and comparison	Gives a plausible rival and a reason evidence could distinguish it.	Names an alternative with little comparison.	Omits or misstates the requested rival.
Revision and transfer	Explains what changes or survives and applies the method to the new case.	Revision or transfer is present but thin.	No relevant reconsideration or transfer.

Calibrate with an independent example

Two towns keep a bridge open while joint engineers publish damage checks. "Institutions create cooperation" names a theory. A stronger explanation says how published checks reduce uncertainty about repairs and help councils coordinate while the bridge stays open. A further comparison asks whether lost toll income could explain the same choice and what earlier minutes would reveal.

Reward that reasoning habit in the game. Length alone does not make the answer stronger. Students may reasonably retain an earlier explanation if they justify why the new record does not change it.

Give selective feedback

Ask students to flag one response they want discussed. The flag appears in the exported portfolio; it sends no message. Comment on one mechanism, one use of evidence, or one rival that needs development. Completion marks and self-review examples help students inspect their work but do not certify theoretical accuracy.

Debrief and collect the work

Choose a few debrief questions

- Which case fact did two approaches use differently? What process made the explanations different?
- What did you predict before the archive opened? What did B08 change, and what did it leave unresolved?
- When could cooperation serve a security interest? When could an institution fail despite mutual benefits?
- How did the helper role shape conduct? What would a strategic rival explanation emphasize?
- In the satellite variation, which changed condition pulled against the established relationship?
- Who bears a negotiated agreement's costs without having a vote? What can the model establish about consent?

Collect a readable portfolio

Ask students to complete Part A and Part B, preview Combined A + B in Portfolio, and choose Print / Save PDF or Download HTML. Specify the format your LMS accepts. A JSON progress backup restores the editable attempt; a readable PDF or HTML report is the normal submission. The game does not upload either automatically.

Completed parts are preserved. A new Part B revision keeps the original Part A and investigation baseline. Revising Part A creates a new Part B lineage while keeping earlier completed records in history. Use those records to discuss intellectual change rather than penalizing a defensible initial hypothesis.

Support access and continuity

Settings offers larger text, stronger contrast, reduced motion, and text-first presentation; Focus view gives the response and reference desk more room. Theory cards, dictation, and pasting text remain available. There is no timer. Offer time and format accommodations through your usual class process.

Remind students to download Save progress before stopping or changing devices. Local drafts depend on the browser and device. Cleared site data and private browsing can remove them. Restore a downloaded JSON file to continue; Portfolio also offers recovery copies when available. Avoid editing the same attempt in multiple tabs.

Use the model within its scope

The fictional cities are not coded equivalents of real countries. The original model assumes recognized sovereignty and settled platform rights. It does not model occupation, expulsion, or disputed sovereignty. The excluded-community variation opens a discussion of representation without retroactively changing those assumptions.

The planned time is a teaching estimate, not a measured student completion time. After using the activity, ask where students lost the target question and which explanation they revised. Use those observations to adjust pacing and feedback, and assess learning through the reasoning students actually produce.