

Strategic Policy Challenge

What makes a good policy paper?

Purpose of the policy paper

The policy paper is the final deliverable of the Strategic Policy Challenge. It is not a conventional academic essay. It is a document designed to help a specific decision-maker address a concrete policy problem by providing a strategic assessment, evaluating possible courses of action, and formulating clear and actionable recommendations.

In this exercise, your group acts as a team of policy advisers. The paper should therefore be targeted to the decision-maker identified in the exercise and written with that decision-maker's needs, constraints and priorities in mind. The objective is not to provide a general overview of the issue, but to help the decision-maker make an informed strategic choice.

Structure and content

1. Strategic diagnosis and key actors (approximately 300 words)

Define the problem clearly and explain why it matters. Identify the main dimensions of the problem, the relevant drivers and constraints, and the key issues that the decision-maker needs to address. Identify the main actors whose interests, preferences or actions matter for the problem and explain how they may facilitate or constrain the possible options. Focus on what is necessary to understand the strategic choice rather than providing an exhaustive background overview.

2. Three possible courses of action (approximately 300 words)

Develop three plausible courses of action available to the decision-maker. They should represent genuinely distinct strategic options rather than minor variations of the same proposal. Explain briefly what each option would involve and what it would seek to achieve. The options should be sufficiently concrete to allow their implications and feasibility to be compared.

3. Assessment and comparison of the options (approximately 450 words)

Assess and compare the three courses of action. Depending on the problem, this may include political, institutional, economic, legal, military or strategic considerations. Identify the principal benefits, costs, trade-offs, risks and constraints associated with each option. Consider the interests and likely responses of relevant actors. A strong assessment

should acknowledge uncertainty and competing objectives rather than presenting one option as self-evidently correct.

4. Recommendation and implementation (approximately 350 words)

Based on your assessment, recommend the course of action that you consider most appropriate and explain why it is preferable to the alternatives. The recommendation should follow logically from the preceding analysis and should take account of relevant trade-offs and risks. Translate the recommendation into concrete action by identifying the first three steps that the decision-maker should take. Where relevant, specify who should act, what should be done, and what major resources, political agreements or institutional decisions may be required.

Evidence and sources

The paper should be evidence-based. Use relevant and reliable sources to support factual claims, assessments and arguments. Sources may include academic publications, official EU and national documents, NATO documents, institutional reports, reputable think tanks, policy papers and high-quality journalism. Use the sources that are most relevant to the problem rather than accumulating references. All externally sourced factual claims or ideas should be appropriately cited.

AI and Sources Statement

AI tools are permitted during the Strategic Policy Challenge. They may be used, for example, to brainstorm ideas, identify potentially relevant sources, test arguments, clarify concepts or improve wording. However, the group remains fully responsible for the accuracy, relevance and originality of the final paper. Information or arguments generated by AI should therefore be critically assessed and, where appropriate, verified against reliable sources.

The policy paper must end with a short “AI and Sources Statement” (maximum 100 words) explaining how the group used AI tools during the exercise. The statement should be transparent and concise. Students are not required to provide a transcript of their interactions with AI tools.

What makes a good policy paper?

- **Clarity.** Use clear, concise and direct language. Define technical terms when necessary and use headings to guide the reader.

- **Strategic relevance.** Focus on the questions, constraints and trade-offs that matter to the decision-maker.
- **Evidence and balance.** Support important claims with credible sources and recognise competing interests, uncertainty and the limitations of each option.
- **Feasibility.** Recommendations should be politically, institutionally and practically plausible rather than merely aspirational.
- **Originality.** Do not simply reproduce information available elsewhere. The paper should demonstrate the group's own analytical judgement and provide clear added value.
- **Audience and actionability.** Write for the specific decision-maker and formulate recommendations concrete enough to guide subsequent decisions or actions.

Common pitfalls to avoid

- Turning the paper into a general academic essay or literature review.
- Describing the problem without identifying a strategic choice or decision.
- Presenting three options without genuinely comparing their implications and feasibility.
- Making recommendations that are broad, vague or disconnected from the analysis.
- Ignoring actors whose preferences or actions could affect implementation.
- Including unnecessary background information at the expense of analysis.
- Relying uncritically on information or arguments generated by AI.

Style and presentation

- The policy paper must not exceed 1,500 words, including the four main sections and the AI and Sources Statement, but excluding the bibliography and any appendices. The suggested word allocations above are indicative and are intended to help you distribute space appropriately.
- Use Times New Roman, size 12, with 1.15 line spacing.
- Section titles should be in bold and subsection titles in italics.
- Do not use colours.
- Use footnotes or endnotes for citations, keeping them concise.
- Include the first name and surname of all group members at the top left of the first page.

Final checklist

- Is the strategic problem clearly defined, and is it clear why it matters?
- Have the key actors and their interests been identified?
- Are the three courses of action genuinely distinct and plausible?

- Have the options been systematically compared in terms of benefits, costs, risks and feasibility?
- Does the recommendation follow logically from the analysis?
- Are the first three implementation steps concrete and realistic?
- Is the paper clearly targeted at the decision-maker?
- Are factual claims supported by reliable sources?
- Has the group critically assessed information obtained through AI tools?
- Does the paper demonstrate genuine collective analytical judgement?