



## **The Cyber 9/12 Strategy Challenge Description and Rules - Updated July 2023**

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## **Competition Mission**

The Cyber 9/12 Strategy Challenge is designed to offer students, across a wide range of academic disciplines, a better understanding of the policy challenges associated with cyber conflict. Part interactive learning experience and part competitive scenario exercise, the Cyber 9/12 Strategy Challenge gives students interested in cyber conflict and policy an opportunity to interact with expert mentors, judges, and cyber professionals while developing valuable skills in policy analysis and presentation.

Student teams will be challenged to respond to an evolving scenario involving a major cyber-attack and analyze the threat it poses to state, military, and private sector interests. Teams will be judged based on the quality of their policy responses, their decision-making processes, and their oral presentation to a panel of judges. Along the way, teams will work with coaches at their home institution to develop their policy skills and feedback from expert panels of judges will ensure that all participants have an opportunity to improve their skills, as well as networking opportunities during the competition.

## **Importance of the Rules**

All participants must be familiar with the rules before participating in the event. Because teams will be evaluated based on a combination of written and oral tasks, a thorough understanding of the rules is important to success.

## **Competition Contact**

For any questions about the competition, please contact the Columbia SIPA organizers at [cyber912@columbia.edu](mailto:cyber912@columbia.edu).

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## **Competition Rules**

### **Rule 1. Format**

The Cyber 9/12 Strategy Challenge consists of a cyber-attack scenario that evolves over the course of the exercise, prompting teams to modify their policy priorities and recommendations as part of successive oral presentations.

#### ***Qualifying Round — REPORT***

Before the competition, teams will write a brief exploring and analyzing the key issues and implications related to the cyber incident described in the scenario materials. Further detailed instructions, including page length and word count limits, can be found in the document “Written Brief Instructions,” which will accompany Intelligence Report I.

The qualifying round, held on day one, consists of 10-minute oral presentations, followed by 10 minutes to answer direct questions from a panel of judges. At the conclusion of the round, teams will receive feedback from the judges who will score students based on their oral presentations. The judges’ score on the oral presentation will be combined with the team score from the written brief submitted in advance of the competition (see Rule 8 below). Scores from the Qualifying Round will not carry over to the Semi-Final Round.

#### ***Semi-Final Round — RESPOND***

The Semi-Final round, held in the morning on day two, will give advancing teams the opportunity to respond to a new intelligence report that alters the original scenario. Teams will receive the new intelligence report when advancing teams are announced at the conclusion of day one. The semi-final round consists of one 10-minute oral presentation, followed by 10 minutes to answer direct questions from a panel of judges. Teams will have only little time to prepare and modify their policy priorities and recommendations. Advancing teams will be decided based on the judges’ score on the oral presentation. Further detailed instructions can be found in the document “Written Brief Instructions,” which will accompany Intelligence Report II.

#### ***Final Round — REACT***

The final round, held in the afternoon on day two, will involve a spontaneous reaction to an intelligence report that further alters the original scenario. Teams will have to respond to questions from the panel of judges with only little preparation, testing their ability to analyze information as a team and synthesize a response on the spot. Judges will deliver a final evaluation, and winners will be selected based on the final round scores. No written brief will be required by teams competing in the final round.

### **Rule 2. Registration**

To be considered for the competition, interested teams must submit all registration materials, including CVs and all team information, by the registration deadline. After all registration materials have been received, teams selected to compete will receive invitations and competition materials. Teams registering late may be considered at the discretion of the Competition Director, space permitting.

Teams may modify their team roster and coaches prior to receiving Intelligence Report I. After that date, any team changes including substitution or adding/removing members or coaches must be communicated to organizers and will be considered on a case-by-case basis.

### **Rule 3. Eligibility**

All students currently enrolled in an undergraduate, graduate, doctoral, professional, or law program on the date of the registration deadline are eligible to compete. There is no explicit major, coursework, or prior experience in cyber conflict necessary to compete, but successful applicants will have a strong link between cyber conflict policy and their current academic interest.

Students with an interest in cyber conflict and policy from around the world are invited to apply to compete. However, the NYC Cyber 9/12 Strategy Challenge cannot guarantee any travel funds or accommodation to support teams. Applicants are encouraged to inquire about funding from their home institutions.

### **Rule 4. Team Composition**

**Teams:** Teams may be composed of three or four competitors. There are no requirements for team composition based on the majors or education level of team members. At least three competitors must be present in each round. Teams are required to notify organizers of any changes to their team's composition – including scheduling conflicts, withdrawals, substitutions, and removals.

**Coaches:** Each team is encouraged to recruit a faculty member, competition alumni, or industry professional to act as their team coach and mentor. Coaches are not required to take part in the actual competition, but should provide their competitors assistance in crafting their responses to ensure all teams have necessary support. Co-coaching is permitted and must be disclosed to the organizers. Coaches can be tasked to multiple teams.

### **Rule 5. Pre-competition Preparation**

Background information on the competition scenario for the Qualifying Round will be distributed before the competition. This information will be distributed to all teams after

participants have completed registration and selected teams have been notified. For the Qualifying Round of the scenario exercise (see Rule 7), teams will prepare both written and oral policy briefs based on a response to the initial scenario intelligence report. The written policy brief will be due approximately two weeks prior to the competition. The oral policy brief will be presented at the competition as part of the Qualifying Round and must be accompanied by a “decision document” handed to the judges at the beginning of the competition round (see Rule 8 below). Teams may not use any other visual aid in their oral policy brief, including but not limited to slideshow presentations, additional handouts, binders, or folders.

Selected teams may immediately begin working with their coaches to prepare for the competition. In preparing for the Qualifying Round, teams are permitted to consult with their coaches and external experts to improve their policy recommendations. Once the competition has begun, teams may no longer consult external experts. In preparing for the Semi-Final Round, teams are permitted to consult with their coaches. For the Final Round, teams will not be allowed any consultation with coaches.

#### **Rule 6. Team Selection and Notification**

A maximum of 28 teams will be selected to participate in the competition. Selected teams will be notified via e-mail of their invitation to the competition after their registration has been reviewed.

Team applications will be received on a rolling basis. In the event that more than 28 teams register for the competition, organizers reserve the right to evaluate individual teams based on:

1. Each teams submitted application, including their response to open questions around cyber issues;
2. A desire to maintain a strong competition by promoting diverse backgrounds, professional experiences, and educational institutions;
3. The number of teams participating from an individual school and institution;

Teams competing from a single school are capped at 3 teams. Teams composed from different schools do not fall into this restriction.

For example: Only 3 Columbia SIPA teams or 3 Harvard Kennedy School (HKS) teams will be allowed, but cross-school teams (like SIPA-SEAS from Columbia University) or cross-institute teams (like SIPA-HKS teams from Columbia and Harvard) will still be allowed to compete.

Selected teams will be asked to complete a supplementary information packet (dietary restrictions, scheduling, etc) in advance of the competition. Selected teams will receive Intelligence Report I in advance of the competition to begin their preparations.

## **Rule 7. The Scenario Exercise**

The competition will focus on a single cyber-attack scenario described through various intelligence reports. The exercise encompasses tasks, both written and oral, that challenge students to respond to the political, economic, and security challenges created by the evolving cyberattack scenario. At all stages of the competition, scenario information and tasks will be distributed in a manner that ensures all teams have an equal chance to prepare.

## **Rule 8. Structure**

The competition will focus on a single cyber-attack scenario described through various intelligence reports. The exercise encompasses tasks, both written and oral, that challenge students to respond to the political, economic, and security problems. Further detailed instructions can be found in the document “Written Brief Instructions,” which will accompany Intelligence Report I and II.

### **Qualifying Round**

Teams will be provided with a detailed scenario background packet that sets the scene for the fictional cyber-attack. The scenario will focus on a major cyber-attack with global implications. Teams will also receive three tasks to prepare before the competition event.

- *Written Cyber Policy Brief*
  - Teams will write a policy brief exploring the challenges faced by state, military, and industry actors related to the cyber incident described in the scenario materials. The brief must also recommend appropriate actions and policy responses for the actors involved. The page length and word count limits of the brief can be found in the “Written Brief Instructions” accompanying Intelligence Report I.
- *Oral Cyber Policy Brief*
  - Teams will be given 10 minutes to present their response, followed by 10 minutes to answer direct questions from a panel of judges.
- *Decision Document*
  - Teams will also be required to submit a “decision document” accompanying their oral presentation at the beginning of the competition round. The “decision document” will be a prepared form, a maximum of one single-sided page in length, outlining the team’s policy response alternatives, decision process, and recommendations.

## **Semi-Final Round**

After the advancing teams are announced, participants will receive another intelligence report. This intelligence report will describe some change in, or escalation of, the original scenario and entail new problems for the actors involved.

- *Oral Cyber Policy Brief*
  - Teams will be given 10 minutes to present their response regarding further changes to their policy recommendations, followed by 10 minutes to answer direct questions from a panel of judges.
  
- *Decision Document*
  - Teams will also be required to submit a “decision document” accompanying their oral presentation at the beginning of the semi-final competition round. The “decision document” will be a prepared form, a maximum of one single-sided page in length, outlining the team’s decision process and recommendations.

## **Final Round**

After the advancing teams are announced, participants will receive the final intelligence report detailing further changes to the scenario and will be provided with 15 minutes to use the new information to revise their policy responses.

- *Oral Cyber Policy Brief*
  - One at a time, each team will meet with a panel of judges. The teams will present a 10-minute presentation of their reaction regarding further changes to the scenario and their policy recommendations, followed by up to 10 minutes of questions from the judges.

## **Rule 9. Tiebreaking Procedures**

At the end of the Qualifying Round, the competition organizers will announce which teams will be advancing to the Semi-Final Round. Approximately the top 50 percent of teams from the Qualifying Round will advance to the Semi-Final Round. In the event of a tie, the competition organizers will endeavor to accommodate the two tied teams, contingent on space, staffing and judge availability. Competition organizers reserve the right to determine additional tiebreakers should they be required.

At the end of the Semi-Final Round, the competition organizers will announce which teams will be advancing to the Final Round. The top 4 teams will advance from the Semi-Final to the Final Round. In the event of a tie, the team with the higher Qualifying Round score will advance. If the tied teams have the same Qualifying Round score, the

team with the highest cumulative score (*the team's Qualifying Round score plus the team's Semi-Final Round score divided by two*).

At the end of the Final Round, the competition organizers will announce the final team placement (1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>). In the event of a tie, the team with the highest cumulative average (*the team's written brief score, plus the Qualifying Round score, plus the Semi-Final Round score, divided by three*) will win. Competition organizers reserve the right to determine additional tiebreakers should they be required.

#### **Rule 10. Final Round Procedures**

In the interest of fairness and equity during the Final Round, once the Final Round teams have been announced, the teams will be escorted to a "waiting room." In this waiting room, teams will be asked to place their phones and other mobile devices, including wearable tech, face up on the table in front of them. Teams in the waiting room are not permitted to communicate with anyone outside of the waiting room. Coaches of Final Round teams are not permitted to wait in the waiting room with their students. When it is time for a team to move to the "scenario" room, where their 15 minutes of preparation will begin, they will be escorted by a competition organizer.

Students may take written notes into the "scenario" room. If a team has a student with an accessibility accommodation and would need to use an electronic device for notes, please notify the competition organizers in line with rule 11.

#### **Rule 11. Permissible Assistance and Cheating**

Before the competition, teams are encouraged to seek outside help, including but not limited to their coaches, to develop and revise their policy ideas for the competition.

During the two days of the competition, no outside assistance is allowed for teams. Teams may confer with their coach during the breaks between rounds.

During the competition round, teams are not allowed to use electronic devices, apart from the device they are using for video teleconferencing. However, teams may use electronic devices such as cellular phones and computers during the breaks between rounds. Paper notes are highly encouraged at all times during the competition. If a team has a student with an accessibility accommodation and would need to use an electronic device for notes, please notify the competition organizers.

Cheating during the competition will not be tolerated and will result in the immediate disqualification of a team. All teams are expected to comply by the rigorous standards of academic honesty in place at their home institutions. Any team suspected of cheating



may be subject to immediate disqualification. The home institutions of disqualified teams will also be notified of the disqualification.

## **Rule 12. Judges**

Each round of the competition will be judged by a panel of cyber policy experts. To standardize scoring and encourage consensus, all judges will score the teams based on a common grading scorecard in accordance with Rule 13. Judges may vary between sessions and rounds subject to their availability.

## **Rule 13. Observers, Media, and Broadcasting**

A limited number of observers may be present at the event. Every effort will be taken to ensure that they do not disturb or assist any of the participating teams in the competition.

Teams may observe rounds that they themselves are not competing in. However, teams not competing at that time must leave the room before the judges evaluate teams and give feedback. Teams must also leave the room if at any time they are requested to do so by a judge or competition official.

The NYC Cyber 9/12 Strategy Challenge reserves the right to partner with the media to provide live coverage of the event via broadcast or internet livestream. Additionally, members of the press may be present to cover the event in person and are required to identify themselves when interacting with participants, coaches, judges, and organizers.

By agreeing to participate in the competition, participants, judges, and guests acknowledge that they may be photographed and/or be recorded. If a participant would like to opt out of photos, please contact the competition organizers.

Unless stated otherwise, all proceedings from the event; including the scenario, keynote, panel discussion, competitor and judge statements, and networking socials are under the Chatham House Rule and are not to be shared online.

All participants in the event and observers in the event are expected to conduct themselves in a responsible and professional manner.

Competition organizers should be contacted for any and all clarifications.

## **Rule 14. Timekeeping**

Competition staff will manage a clock to keep track of time limits for the presentations. Teams will be kept advised of the time using a “green-yellow-red” system of cards. At

the five-minute mark a staff member will display a green card to the team; at the one-minute mark a staff member will display a yellow card and give a verbal warning; and at the expiration of time, a staff member will display a red card and give a verbal notice. A penalty will be assessed for teams exceeding the time limit.

### **Rule 15. Team Evaluation and Scoring**

All teams will be evaluated based on five main dimensions of their responses: *understanding of cyber policy; identification of key issues; policy response option - analysis and selected option; structure and communication; and originality and creativity*. These dimensions will be scored based on a common grading scorecard and instructions shared by all the judges. The resulting numerical scores will be used to determine the winners of each round.

At the conclusion of each round, teams will be provided specific, detailed feedback on strengths and areas of improvement for their policy and presentation skills.

Grading scorecards and guidelines will be distributed to all teams in advance of the competition.

### **Rule 16. Elimination**

In the event a team is eliminated, they are invited to participate in the rest of the competition as observers. Eliminated or not, all teams are welcome and encouraged to take part in the networking functions, speeches, and other events accompanying the event. Please note that eliminated teams are still eligible for some of the prizes and awards to be offered.

### **Rule 17. Prizes and Awards**

In addition to the main prize of the competition, the Cyber 9/12 Strategy Challenge will, at its discretion, award additional prizes for outstanding achievement during the course of the competition. The categories of prizes to be offered will be announced before the date of the competition. Teams will also be eligible for awards based on their final standing in the competition.

- Semi-Final Awards - All teams that win their Semi-Final Round will be presented with an award.
- Best Oral Presentation – Judges should nominate teams who show an advanced mastery of the oral briefing. Judges are free to nominate multiple teams

- Best Decision Document – Judges should nominate teams who submit a precise and professional decision document that clearly presents the team’s recommendations and justifications. Judges are free to nominate multiple teams.
- Most Creative Policy Response – Judges should nominate teams who show nuanced and plausible policy response alternatives that also show a high degree of creativity and originality. Judges are free to nominate multiple teams.
- Best Teamwork – Judges should nominate teams who show exceptional teamwork in their presentations.

#### **Rule 18. Notification of Rule Changes**

The above rules are provided for planning purposes only. The Cyber 9/12 Strategy Challenge reserves the right to alter the rules based on logistical and technical considerations. In the event of changes to the competition rules, a new version of this document will be posted and distributed to teams before the start of the competition. All participants must be familiar with the rules before participating in the competition. As teams will be evaluated based on a combination of written and oral tasks, a thorough understanding of the rules is important to success.

#### **Rule 19. Competition Ethics and Scoring Impartiality**

Competition judges are experts in their field and will render scores based upon content and delivery as pursuant to the specifics as outlined in the foregoing Competition Rules. Once scores are issued for each team, they will be passed to a representative of The Atlantic Council who will be attending this competition as an impartial enumerator. At no time during the competition will Columbia University students have authority or control over competition scoring.