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How Does Shared Knowledge Shape MUN Activities: Structure, Power Relations, and Hierarchy

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Abstract: In the context of deepening global interdependence and the growing importance of global governance, Model United Nations (MUN) activities have become an essential means of educating young people about world politics and enhancing their understanding of global economics and governance. In today's practice, MUN activities are divided into the "Regular Committee" (RC) and the "Special Committee" (SC), with the latter also referred to as the Joint Crisis Committee (JCC), which pursues realism as its core value. However, perplexing phenomena have emerged within Joint Crisis Committees during their practice. The concept of "academics" holds a significant place in MUN activities, especially in the context of the Joint Crisis Committee, where it becomes paramount. But what does "academic" truly mean in the MUN setting? Do consistent principles and concepts operate throughout the entirety of an MUN conference? This article adopts shared knowledge as a central concept and, based on this foundation, proposes a theoretical perspective focusing on structures built upon shared knowledge, idea-based power relations, and hierarchies within MUN activities. It applies this theoretical lens to analyze the phenomena within Joint Crisis Committees, aiming to provide more satisfactory explanations for these occurrences and offering potential directions for further exploration and theoretical development of MUN.

Keywords: Model United Nations; Joint Crisis Committee; Shared Knowledge; Power Relations; Hierarchy

1. Introduction: Model United Nations Activities and Joint Crisis Committees

At the 77th session of the United Nations General Assembly, the resolution titled "Model United Nations" *A/RES/77/336* was adopted, marking the UN's official recognition of Model United Nations (MUN) activities organized either formally or spontaneously across various countries. The General Assembly acknowledged the significant contribution of Model United Nations to diplomacy and international cooperation, as well as to equipping young people with the skills, knowledge, and opportunities needed to engage in international affairs, which is a valuable aspect of youth development. The UN Secretariat noted that "MUN activities are a popular way for students to gain greater insight

into the United Nations around the world” and “MUN activities attract hundreds of thousands of students each year, helping them to better understand the principles of the UN and how it functions.”

In the *A Practical Guide to China National Model UN Conference*, MUN is defined as “a conference organized around a topical international issue, modeled on the United Nations and related international institutions, in accordance with their *modus operandi* and rules of procedure.” *The Guide to Model UN*, published by the UN Department of Global Communications, emphasizes the functional aspect of MUN: “Model UN conferences help students develop public speaking, writing, and research skills.” It also provides a platform where students have the opportunity to learn about “the role of the UN as an institution in world affairs and the diplomatic activities involved in UN decision-making.”

In the development of Model United Nations (MUN) activities in China, a typology based on the operational mechanisms of conferences has gradually emerged, becoming a key element in understanding MUN. In the tenth-anniversary special issue of *Frontiers*, the most authoritative MUN research journal in China, Tao Yueqian (2023) in “Eighteen Questions about MUN” clearly reflects the prevalence of the concepts of “Regular Committee” (RC) and “Special Committee” (SC). Intuitively, the so-called RC aims to simulate current UN bodies and their agendas, such as the General Assembly, the Security Council, and the Economic and Social Council. In contrast, SC is designed to simulate governmental decision-making, demonstrating the political actions of a state. But the distinction between RC and SC is beyond the scope of this article, it is essential to clarify the meaning of the “Joint Crisis Committee” (JCC). The term “joint” refers to the establishment of multiple platforms within a single committee, all operating within the same time and space while sharing information flow across platforms. “Crisis” denotes the existence of an information processing mechanism within the committee, with delegates’ actions incorporated into this mechanism, becoming part of the information flow. Thus, the Joint Crisis Committee is defined as a form of SC that operates through the exchange of information among multiple, multi-level actors, with the chair simulating the evolution of a specific situation through rational deduction.

As a micro-level yet relatively complex social field, understanding the phenomena emerging within MUN requires careful reference to existing social science theories while avoiding a situation that we can’t see the forest for the trees. What should our expectations be for a so-called “MUN theory”? A theory devoid of value considerations or disconnected from observable phenomena is akin to a river without a source, losing its relevance. However, the diversity of theoretical approaches — each with its distinct concerns and explanatory methods — often leads to fragmented discourses, hindering the development of productive academic debates. Unfortunately, no single perspective has yet emerged to provide a comprehensive explanation for MUN activities.

In social sciences, a “paradigm” is considered an interpretive framework comprising a set of specific premises and assumptions, functioning as both a worldview and a methodological approach. According to Kuhn (2012), a paradigm must have “a sufficient number of adherents” and offer “resolvable questions for future scholars.” Applying this framework, it becomes evident that no paradigm currently exists to comprehensively explain MUN activities. Given the increasingly diversified and complex interplay between MUN and real-world phenomena, academically-oriented MUN activities should endeavor to develop a theoretical system with paradigmatic significance.

However, this article does not aim to construct a comprehensive MUN paradigm. Instead, it seeks to establish several core concepts that can facilitate the analysis of various phenomena within MUN activities, laying the groundwork for a more complete and rigorous theoretical framework in the future.

Drawing on the constructivism paradigm in social sciences, this article adopts shared knowledge as a core analytical concept, using it to examine the power relations, hierarchies, and dynamics within Joint Crisis Committees in MUN activities.

2. The Black Box of Joint Crisis Committees

In a JCC, the primary objective is to simulate government decision-making and accurately reflect the dynamics of global politics. Unlike RC, which establish platforms for UN-related discussions and negotiations, JCCs treat the “state” as the primary actor. To enhance realism of the simulation, secondary actors beyond key government officials are incorporated, including representatives from international organizations (as platforms and delegates) and the media. “The purpose is not to simulate a multilateral conference statically but to dynamically simulate and interpret the international system within the historical context of the specific conference timeframe.” Tao Yueqian (2023) identifies five key distinctions between JCCs and RCs:

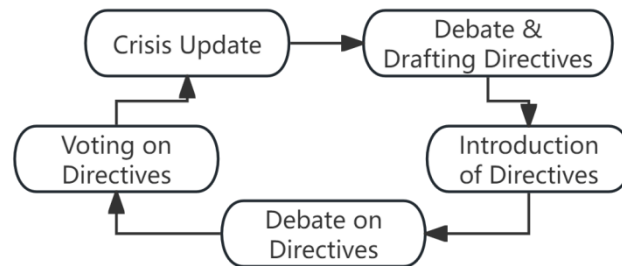
1. **Dynamic Timeline:** JCCs operate with a continuously evolving timeline.
2. **Diverse Actors:** The participants include not only state cabinets but also media representatives and other political entities.
3. **Broad Delegation Mandates:** Delegates wield considerable authority, and the scope of topics discussed is significantly broader.
4. **Unpredictable Outcomes:** The direction of the committee is undetermined, and outcomes — shaped by strategic interactions between actors and the chair’s deductions — are often unpredictable before the conference.
5. **Active Role of the Academic Team:** The academic team plays a proactive role by issuing real-time situational updates and adjusting the conference flow as necessary.

To further develop the discussion, this section will explore various perplexing or dissatisfactory phenomena observed in JCCs, using these examples to illustrate how these committees operate and to identify the shared factors underlying these occurrences. Before beginning the discussion, it is necessary to clarify key concepts. “Crisis” is the most crucial concept in a JCC, with the functioning of the crisis mechanism forming the core structure of the JCC. Unlike its meaning in real-world contexts, “crisis” in MUN activities refers to events released by the academic team that influence the flow of the conference.

In the 2022 BESTMUN Joint Crisis Committee Handbook released at the BEST Model United Nations Conference (BESTMUN) held in Ankara, Turkey, crises are presented as events issued by the academic team and are categorized into four types: Timeline Update, Status Update, Crisis Update, and Spontaneous Update. These four types of “crises” are categorized based on their functions. However, this classification does not clarify the mechanisms of crisis formation and can at best be considered a summary of all possible events that may arise in the conference room. A Model United Nations association from Canada, on the other hand, has integrated its understanding of crises into **Figure 1**. We can observe that this flowchart is based on a cyclical expression, which in fact conflates the mechanisms of crisis generation with the mechanisms of crisis development, resulting in a rigid

interpretation. However, the distinction between initiation and process is fundamental, and conflating these concepts does not aid in understanding the essence of a crisis.

Figure 1: The Crisis Committee Workflow



Source: <https://www.munprep.org/curriculum/the-mun-crisis-committee-ultimate-guide>.

Based on the origin of these crises, they can be divided into two types: **Root-Crisis**: These are pre-planned events prepared by the academic team. The chair follows a pre-written “script” to release these events during the conference. **Derivative Crisis**: These are events developed by the academic team based on delegates’ actions within the committee. The outcomes of delegates’ decisions are extrapolated and shaped into new crises by the academic team. For example, in the simulation of the Cuban Missile Crisis, the academic team might release the following event: “On September 2, 1962, the Soviet Union publicly announced that, pursuant to the agreement between the USSR and Cuba, it would supply weapons to Cuba and provide technical experts.” Since this event reflects an actual historical occurrence and is unrelated to the actions of the delegates, it would be classified as a root crisis. In contrast, the subsequent developments resulting from delegates’ responses to this event, which are projected and released by the academic team, would constitute a derivative crisis. The operational mechanisms of the two types of crisis mechanisms within the Joint Crisis Committee are illustrated in **Figures 2 and 3**.

Figure 2: Mechanism of Root Crisis

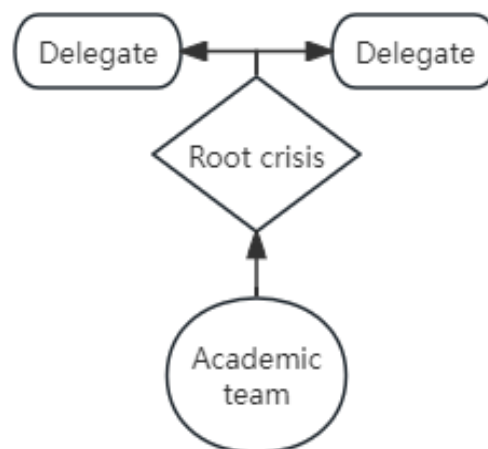
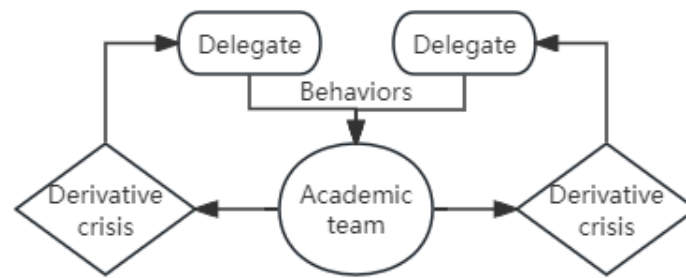


Figure 3: Mechanism of Derivative Crisis

In a JCC, derivative crises are the most likely to generate conflicts both between the academic team and delegates, as well as among delegates themselves. When the academic team conducts simulations and provides feedback, they determine that a particular action by a delegate will lead to a specific consequence. However, the reasoning behind these outcomes often emerges from a “black box” process. This “black box” operates on two levels:

1. For Delegates: Delegates must contend with the outcomes of their actions, but they cannot determine whether the outcomes align with their intentions or strategic goals.
2. For the Academic Team: The results of delegate actions are generated through the intellectual processes of the academic team, but fundamentally, these results are just one interpretation or “opinion”.

Currently, the academic teams in MUN activities are primarily composed of students at the undergraduate or below-graduate level, with their expertise largely based on general knowledge and personal MUN experience. While the academic team may provide crises as feedback for delegates’ actions, closer examination sometimes reveals a lack of clear cause and effect behind these outcomes. This disconnect highlights the inherent challenges of derivative crises: delegates experience unpredictable consequences that may not reflect their strategic intentions, and the academic team, constrained by limited academic depth and experience, may struggle to fully articulate the rationale behind the feedback they provide. As a result, these crises can become a source of confusion or frustration within the committee, undermining the coherence of the simulation. The outcomes of simulations are often negative and punitive. During the process of simulation, the academic team acts like examiners, reviewing the “answers” submitted by delegates and providing feedback in the form of crises. Delegates, relying on their own experience and intuition, may feel dissatisfied with the derivative crises. These crises can impair the delegate experience in two key ways:

Inconsistent Standards of Simulation: The academic team cannot guarantee the same standard of simulation for every delegate’s actions. For instance, the team may be more sensitive to actions that contradict the national context of a country they know well, while neglecting to provide feedback on actions outside their expertise due to a lack of knowledge. This reflects the “black box” nature of the academic team’s crisis mechanism: some actions are scrutinized more closely, while others are overlooked due to knowledge gaps.

Opaque Simulation Process: Delegates only see the outcomes of the simulation, with no insight into the process behind it. They remain unaware of the assumptions or logic used by the academic team in deriving the crisis outcomes.

In summary, although the design of the JCC aims to simulate world affairs more realistically and create a comprehensive MUN field, the complexity of these simulations often undermines the authenticity of JCC. MUN, fundamentally, is a form of theatrical performance according to Wei Kangbo (2023). The academic team and the delegates both act as performers, with the academic team serving as scriptwriters and the delegates as both actors and audience. Even the academic team, as actors within the performance, may not fully understand the entire script. However, it is crucial to highlight that the ultimate judges of this performance are the delegates themselves.

3. Conceptual Clarification and the Existence of Structure

If someone were to visualize the frequency of MUN-specific vocabulary, “academic” would likely be one of the most frequently occurring words. Why is that? The related concept of “academic quality” is often used to evaluate the effectiveness of conference design, while “academic proficiency” serves as a core indicator of MUN participants’ capabilities and is closely tied to their reputation. Moreover, “academic” has become a fundamental value pursued by participants in MUN activities, symbolizing identity and authority within the MUN community. This article does not seek to make a value judgment but aims to uncover the reasons behind this phenomenon to clarify the essence of the so-called structure within MUN. The prominence of “academic” as both a concept and a value within MUN reflects its pivotal role in shaping conference dynamics. Beyond being a benchmark for individual competence, academic elements underpin the organizational framework of MUN, influencing relations, authority, and the perceived legitimacy of decisions. Understanding these dynamics offers deeper insights into the structural elements at play in MUN, as well as how shared knowledge influences the interactions between delegates and academic teams. This section will explore how structure operates in MUN and what it consists of, illustrating the nature of relations among delegates under this structural framework. Finally, it will discuss the issue of “delegate-academic relations” (学代关系) triggered by shared knowledge.

Shared knowledge, as described by Alexander Wendt (1999), refers to “knowledge that is held in common and interrelated among individuals.” This concept emphasizes two key aspects of knowledge:

Normativity: It exerts a directional influence on the behavior of actors and shapes their self-perception.

Sharedness based on Normativity: Actors believe that their understanding of the normative aspect of knowledge should be consistent among each other. It is important to distinguish shared knowledge from two closely related concepts: **common knowledge** and **private knowledge**. In economics and game theory, common knowledge refers to information known by all rational actors and, crucially, each actor knows that other actors also possess this information. More broadly, it encompasses information that is universally known. Private Knowledge, on the other hand, refers to beliefs held by individual actors that are not accessible to others. In addition to this, there is a concept specific to MUN conferences that I refer to as **basic facts**. Basic facts encompass the following elements:

1. Seat Allocation: Determining the identities and roles of delegates within the conference.
2. Operational and Procedural Rules: Guidelines that govern how the conference and its debates are conducted.
3. Documents Authored by Delegates: These include draft resolutions, position papers, and other formal submissions that shape the course of negotiations.

Shared knowledge is a key element in the formation of structure, and the structure within MUN is an ideational one. In MUN settings, shared knowledge plays a vital role in fostering a cohesive environment by aligning the participants' understanding of norms, expectations, and behavior. At the same time, the interplay between shared, common, private knowledge, and basic facts underlies the complexities of decision-making and role-play, influencing both individual and collective actions within the conference. Understanding these distinctions sheds light on how knowledge structures shape MUN dynamics, enhancing the realism and effectiveness of the simulation. Unlike material structures, which are more commonly observed in real-world contexts — where they are defined by the distribution and arrangement of power units — ideational structures in MUN are composed of material factors, shared knowledge, and the relations between actors. Since no social structure is directly observable to the naked eye, it is necessary to clarify how such structures manifest within MUN activities. The operational authority of delegates is determined by two basic facts: the rules of procedure and seat allocation. However, how delegates should act and what goals are worth pursuing depend on their individual beliefs. For these beliefs to become actionable within the conference, they must be publicly declared — at least to the academic team. If a delegate's beliefs are not accepted by the academic team, the simulations conducted by the team may take on a pessimistic or negative tone. Furthermore, if other delegates do not consider these beliefs appropriate for the conference, such beliefs may be disregarded or marginalized.

Throughout the conference, delegates will either actively or passively receive inputs, including the historical facts relevant to the agenda, assessments of those facts, and the attitudes of other participants. In this way, the structural influence and causal power of the ideational framework can be observed. This observable interaction allows us to infer the existence of structure within MUN activities. Thus, the construction of structure in MUN is inherently dynamic, shaped by the shared knowledge among the continuous interaction between delegates and the academic team. Delegates' behavior, shaped by both personal belief systems and the perceived expectations within the committee, reinforces the ideational structure. These structures, though intangible, exert real influence by shaping the outcomes of simulations and the course of negotiations, making them a critical factor in understanding how MUN activities operate.

Shared knowledge constitutes the essence of what is referred to as “academics” within MUN. The power relations, hierarchies, and norms centered around shared knowledge form the structural content within MUN activities. In its conventional sense, “academics” refers to the systematization, accumulation, and innovation of knowledge. However, in MUN, the term “academics” is often used in a broader and more generalized context. Here, it essentially refers to the entire body of shared knowledge underpinning the operation of the conference. Shared knowledge does not negate the existence of common knowledge or private knowledge within MUN. However, since MUN activities do not fall within the realm of general knowledge or common sense, there is no information that is universally known and known to be known by all participants. Instead, basic facts replace the role of common knowledge within the MUN context. Basic facts represent information that, while widely known among participants, does not necessarily carry the cognitive or normative weight of knowledge. They do not influence the participants' beliefs or self-perceptions but serve as foundational elements, such as seat allocation, procedural rules, and the content of submitted documents. Private knowledge also plays a significant role in MUN activities. However, it influences only the individual participant

holding it. A delegate can transform private knowledge into a basic fact by publicly sharing it, potentially elevating it to the status of shared knowledge, but this process is not guaranteed.

4. The Operational Mechanism of Structures Based on Shared Knowledge

The relation between the academic team and shared knowledge is a fundamental component that warrants priority in this discussion. Within MUN activities, the formation of shared knowledge can generally be classified into two processes:

1. Shared knowledge formed by the academic team itself.
2. The elevation of a delegate's private knowledge into the shared knowledge of the committee.

These two mechanisms suggest that, for various reasons, the academic team possibly becomes the sole body responsible for creating the shared knowledge within the conference. This phenomenon can be described as “the academic team holding the highest authority within the conference.”

Once a conference is confirmed, the academic team takes responsibility for establishing the agenda, defining the operational procedures, assessing potential developments, and setting the meeting objectives. In this process, shared knowledge begins to form within the academic team. Subsequently, this knowledge is transmitted to the committee through a series of institutionalized “rituals”, including academic training, *Background Guides* reading, and academic testing. During this transmission, delegates are expected to absorb the shared knowledge established by the academic team. The relations among delegates are also shaped by shared knowledge — particularly through the allocation of seats. Each seat's authority, resources, and context must be validated through shared knowledge. For instance, when a delegate assumes the role of a major power in the cabinet, the delegate does not possess real-world power but assumes the identity and authority associated with that position. This phenomenon relies entirely on shared knowledge: delegates believe, individually and collectively, that they embody their assigned roles and their corresponding influence. During the conference, the academic team conducts simulations based on its internal shared knowledge. However, unlike seat identities, the shared knowledge used for simulations often does not become the committee's shared knowledge — or even, in some cases, shared knowledge within the academic team itself. Consequently, these simulations operate in a “black box”, where the reasoning behind decisions is not visible or accessible to delegates. In summary, the academic team functions as the gatekeeper of shared knowledge within MUN activities, holding the highest authority over the formation and dissemination of knowledge. The success of the simulation hinges on the participants' ability to internalize the shared knowledge provided by the academic team and perform accordingly. However, the opaque nature of the academic team's simulations — operating within a black box — introduces challenges, as delegates cannot fully understand the basis of crisis outcomes.

The meaning and purpose of MUN delegate seats are defined through shared knowledge. Delegates enter the committee with specific intentions — whether shaped by their assigned roles or personal strategies — but the ways in which these intentions can be expressed and understood must align with the structural requirements built on shared knowledge. In this sense, the structure shapes delegates from the top down, defining their identities and intentions. In international politics, the relation between agency and structure is often reciprocal: agents (actors) can shape structures from the bottom up through interaction, and shared knowledge emerges from these exchanges. However, in the context of MUN, the content of shared knowledge is external. Key concepts in international politics — such as sovereignty, states, and nations — which result from the interactions of real-world actors, are pre-

defined in MUN settings. The academic team does not generate new shared knowledge but instead selects existing external knowledge and designates it as the shared knowledge of the committee.

The structure based on shared knowledge reveals the existence of ideational power relations among MUN delegates. The seats represented by delegates in reality hold certain powers, such as a nation's head of state or government leader, but the delegates themselves lack the material basis of these roles. Therefore, for a delegate's identity to be recognized as valid, it must be realized through the shared knowledge within the conference. Furthermore, the power that a delegate holds does not come from any material authority tied to their role, but only from the mutual belief among delegates that both they and others possess such power. If a delegate believes they hold a certain power but fails to gain recognition from other delegates, that power effectively does not exist. A common phenomenon in RCs is when a delegate claims that other delegates support their proposal and will vote in favor, thus offering "assistance". The academic team often views such actions as exceeding the delegate's authority and therefore invalid, but in fact, "delegate authority" is merely a part of the shared knowledge defined by the academic team. When the majority of delegates believe they possess such power, and as long as the academic team does not intervene, delegates can utilize that power during negotiations. Although there are differences in individual delegates' abilities, much like in real-world politics where politicians vary in skill, a politician's competence does not determine a nation's power; it only influences the extent to which that power can be exercised. The power that delegates hold is constructed top-down through the shared knowledge of the committee and is further reinforced by the mutual recognition of this power among delegates, which is closely tied to their interactions within the conference.

The formation and evaluation of shared knowledge by the academic team is essential, but there is also hope that structure can play a vital role. In current JCCs, delegates express their actions and intentions by writing "directive documents", expecting not only the implementation of these directives but also the realization of their underlying intentions. However, in the practical operation of the committee, the academic team serves as the judge of whether these intentions are fulfilled. Tensions arise between the academic team and delegates when the academic team's simulations indicate that a delegate's intentions cannot be realized. While the academic team's judgment is often regarded as superior to that of the delegates, the black box effect — as discussed earlier — means that the academic team cannot definitively assert that a specific action will lead to a particular outcome. A more neutral and depersonalized mechanism, such as structural processes, could potentially facilitate interaction among delegates through structural processes. If other delegates, rather than the academic team, serve as the recipients and evaluators of a delegate's actions, this allows for practical validation of whether the delegate's intentions can be realized. This imbalance highlights an inherent limitation within MUN: while it strives to replicate the interactions of real-world international politics, the authority of the academic team and the structure of the conference based on shared knowledge reduce the ability of delegates to meaningfully influence the committee's outcomes.

The shared knowledge within JCCs is fragmented and fraught with conflicts between the academic team and the delegates. This article seeks to highlight that this fragmentation of shared knowledge is precisely the root cause of the "academic-delegate conflict" in JCCs. Since JCCs often encompass a wide range of fields, such as political struggles, economic operations, and ideological issues — each of which could consume a scholar's entire academic career — the small academic team in a JCC is expected to provide feedback on all these topics, which inevitably leads to dissatisfaction. On the delegates' side, the JCC directly offers them the opportunity to "change history", and those with a strong

intent to influence outcomes are likely to devise “ingenious and correct” solutions to address the crises within the conference. However, due to the unavoidable limitations in theoretical knowledge, it is challenging for complete shared knowledge to be formed among delegates, between delegates and the academic team, and even among different academic teams.

5. Hierarchy as an Expression of Power Relations

The analysis above has clarified that the “power” held by delegates in MUN is ideational power, and that relationships among delegates are inherently power relations. This section explores the interaction between power relations and structural relations, examining how shared knowledge defines the power dynamics between delegates, the relation between these dynamics and structure, and the way we can conceptualize the structure within MUN.

In JCCs, while we strive to simulate international affairs, a fundamental assumption of international politics — the concept of anarchy — is often absent. The reasons are that structure based on shared knowledge provides feedback on the results of delegate interactions, meaning that information, instead of being scarce, is often more abundant than in real-world scenarios. In addition, both the academic team and delegates are individual actors whose actions are inherently imbued with moral and value significance. The academic team, as the ultimate authority, evaluates the outcomes of delegate actions and assigns value judgments accordingly. In the distinction between domestic and international politics, one clear dividing line is that domestic politics operates under a hierarchy, while international politics exists in a state of anarchy. (Waltz, 1979) Rather than criticizing JCCs for failing to simulate the anarchy of international politics, this section proposes that hierarchy provides a more accurate framework for understanding relationships among delegates and between different subcommittees within the JCC. The hierarchical model helps describe the dynamics in JCCs more effectively. Within a JCC, various relations are structured according to the principles of hierarchy.

In this framework, the academic team functions as the highest authority, akin to a sovereign or adjudicator, determining the outcomes of actions and assigning value judgments. Delegates’ actions are not merely strategic moves in an anarchic system but are judged based on the norms and expectations embedded in the shared knowledge of the committee. The hierarchical relations among different platforms reflect a chain of authority and interaction that mirrors elements of domestic politics more than the anarchy of international politics. For Example, in a Joint Crisis Committee (JCC), the decision-making platform exerts a higher level of influence over policy outcomes compared to the negotiation platform, thereby establishing a clear hierarchy between them. While anarchy remains a defining feature of real-world international relations, the structured dynamics of a JCC — where interactions are governed by shared knowledge and regulated by a centralized authority — more closely resemble the characteristics of a hierarchical system.

As previously discussed, the power held by delegates in MUN is ideational power, which relies entirely on shared knowledge for its existence. This reliance also means that the relationships between delegates manifest as hierarchical power relations. It is important to note, however, that although human social relationships are not exclusively power relations, and interactions between individuals are complex, often entangled with various emotions, the power relations among delegates, as discussed here, are considered independently of their social identities. This abstraction is necessary for theoretical clarity. By stripping away the social identities of participants, this analysis focuses solely on the additional roles and identities artificially assigned within the MUN setting. These constructed roles

create conditions in which delegates act differently from how they would in ordinary social activities. In other words, the specific behavioral dynamics within MUN arise from the unique nature of the conference environment, shaped by these roles and shared knowledge. The differentiation of power — such as a delegate representing a powerful nation having greater influence than one representing a smaller state — is not rooted in personal capacity but in the structure of the shared knowledge that governs the conference.

The relationships among MUN delegates exhibit hierarchical characteristics. Some delegates assume higher positions, such as cabinet leaders, while others serve as cabinet members. Delegates in higher-ranking roles can use their hierarchical status to exert influence over their subordinates, and the essence of this influence lies in ideational power. This hierarchy, derived from ideational power, is inherently unstable. If a higher-ranking delegate fails to fulfill the obligations tied to their role — obligations that are part of the committee's shared knowledge — and does not gain the recognition of lower-ranking delegates, the hierarchical structure becomes vulnerable to challenge. Recognition from subordinates is crucial, as the hierarchy depends on mutual acceptance within the framework of shared knowledge. Furthermore, delegates' original social identities and personal resources can also influence the dynamics within the conference. Even seemingly trivial actions — such as purchasing bubble tea — can disrupt the power relations and hierarchy among delegates. What is essential to understand is that the relationships between delegates in MUN are hierarchical, but this hierarchy is also micro-level and fragile. However, only power relations based on shared knowledge are considered “legitimate” in MUN, and only actions aligned with these relations are broadly recognized and accepted. In summary, the hierarchy among delegates is artificially constructed through shared knowledge, but it remains fragile and micro-level. Delegates must align their actions with the expectations associated with their assigned roles and gain recognition to maintain the stability of the structure, which ensures the smooth operation of the conference. Within this framework, only behavior that adheres to the structure defined by shared knowledge is widely accepted within MUN. The subtle interplay between hierarchy and structural fragility highlights the uniqueness of MUN, where the legitimacy of a delegate's identity and actions is contingent on consistency with shared knowledge and the structure it defines.

When multiple delegates form a collective entity (subcommittee), hierarchical power relations based on ideational power also emerge between these subcommittees. This hierarchy is most evident in JCCs, where different decision-making platforms (nations) exhibit varying levels of power. Just like in the real world, some platforms are more powerful than others, yet all entities maintain unit consistency in terms of structural characteristics. This results in a hierarchical structure based on the ordering of unit capabilities, where the actions of more powerful platforms significantly influence the direction of the conference. In committees that include both domestic decision-making subcommittees and international decision-making subcommittees — even if not in a JCC format — the relation between these subcommittees also reflect hierarchical power dynamics. While hierarchical relations among individual delegates are prone to disruption by their external identities and personal resources, the hierarchy among subcommittees or platforms within the committee is more resilient and harder to break. It is also worth noting that a committee with a larger number of delegates does not necessarily hold more power. Although the relationship between delegate numbers and inter-committee power dynamics may have certain identifiable patterns, this article does not intend to explore that issue in detail.

The significance of clarifying hierarchy lies in the fact that it reflects the structure within MUN activities. In practice, a stable hierarchical structure often ensures that a JCC can proceed in an organized

and orderly manner from start to finish. When ideational power flows according to the established hierarchy, delegates can engage in strategic negotiations and produce meaningful outcomes. Conversely, ultra vires directive or incoherent stances signal the breakdown of the hierarchy, reflecting underlying dysfunction or even failure within the shared knowledge structure, which is otherwise difficult to observe. As discussed earlier, while the operation of shared knowledge is largely invisible, the hierarchy based on shared knowledge is intuitive and actionable. Within the microcosm of MUN, relationships among delegates are fundamentally power relations, and these relations take the form of hierarchical structures. When the hierarchy operates smoothly, it ensures effective interaction and decision-making within the conference. On the other hand, when the structure breaks down, it often points to latent issues within the shared knowledge framework. Hierarchy is essential for maintaining the structural integrity of MUN. It provides the necessary framework for the flow of ideational power and enables delegates to participate meaningfully in the conference.

6. Conclusion

Viewing MUN operations through the lens of shared knowledge may seem to undermine the “sacred” status of academics within current MUN activities. However, it is crucial to recognize that the so-called “theory” and “knowledge” in MUN are merely necessary frameworks for the conference’s operation — not enduring intellectual achievements of humanity. This article aims to open the “black box” of simulations at an epistemological level, clarifying the foundational elements upon which MUN functions. By doing so, it hopes to offer new perspectives for pursuing equality within MUN and to guide the design and construction of more effective conference settings based on a deeper understanding of how MUN operates.

Based on the findings above, this article identifies several areas for improvement in the JCCs. In the practical operation of joint crisis management, most cabinets adopt a cabinet head responsibility system, wherein a single delegate simulates the head of state or deputy leader and assumes the role of cabinet leader, while other delegates serve as cabinet ministers responsible for specific affairs.

However, an issue arises when the hierarchical structure is disrupted — when delegates are unable to accurately simulate their roles and positions, leading to insufficient engagement in the conference proceedings. Building on these findings, academic teams can approach the setup and crisis simulations in the committee from multiple angles to ensure broader coverage. By designing various types of crisis scenarios that encompass fields such as diplomacy, military, economy, and domestic affairs, crises can be structured to impact the majority of delegates and require their responses. This approach ensures that delegates in different positions have the opportunity to engage in crisis management, fully utilizing their specific expertise and responsibilities. In a more overarching sense, the academic team must pay particular attention to the fact that the Joint Crisis Committee derives its authority from shared knowledge. The academic team should consciously select real-world knowledge and transform it into shared knowledge within the committee room through various institutional mechanisms. At the same time, it is crucial to handle any private knowledge that delegates may possess with care, integrating it into the committee’s shared knowledge framework in a way that aligns with conference rules. This strategy also plays a vital role in enhancing the overall conference experience for delegates. The article’s normative value lies in the insight that understanding shared knowledge allows us to build MUN structures more thoughtfully, thereby enhancing the overall effectiveness of the simulation.

The lack of a theoretical paradigm identified at the beginning reflects the absence of consistent academic inquiry into MUN — a student activity with a broad participant base and social impact. Without stable and professional academic research, MUN lacks a shared theoretical vision that could serve as a foundation for its further development. Although the study of MUN may seem a micro-level topic within social sciences, MUN practitioners with expertise, who can leverage existing platforms to foster academic discourse and debate. Against the backdrop of changes in the global order, in-depth promotion of contemporary young people to broaden their global vision and participate more effectively in global governance has become the rightful meaning of the development of the Model United Nations in China.

In summary, while the ideas discussed in this article are undoubtedly preliminary, they point to the core foundations of MUN operations and conference design. “Within the framework of shared knowledge, the article aims to elucidate the structures, power relations, and hierarchies that underpin MUN activities. This discussion is not intended to provide definitive solutions, but rather to explore the underlying realities of MUN operations. Given the fundamental role of these concepts in MUN and the fact that they are often overlooked, this article serves to re-establish and clarify the basic principles of MUN practice. Ultimately, the value of this article lies in the critical engagement, dialectical reflection, and debate it sparks among its readers. The development of MUN as both a practical activity and an intellectual pursuit depends on continued inquiry and discussion, empowering future MUN participants to engage more meaningfully with both the simulation and the real-world global issues it seeks to mirror.

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Author Contributions

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Availability of Data and Materials

The data used in this study are confidential at the request of the wind farm operators.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest to report regarding the present study.

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