

The Power Politics Game

Written by Dylan Kissane

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DYLAN KISSANE, MAR 18 2013

As an educator I am of the firm belief that students remember and understand more if they learn by doing rather than being expected to learn by listening to a professor. For that reason, the POL 210 course at CEFAM includes two small, lesson long games and a longer, three day international politics simulation on its calendar each semester. All three of these offer opportunities for students to apply what they have learnt about IR in weeks previous to the game or simulation, as well as open up learning opportunities emerging from the game itself. Last week the POL 210 classes played the first of the games and, as hoped, left the classroom understanding a little bit more about the world they are studying.

The game I used in class is a slightly modified version of David Reilly's 'Power Politics Game'. The game simulates a closed international system where states are differentiated by varying levels of quantifiable power and, in each round of the game, teams make a choice about what they will do next. Teams can either attack (or join and attack) or defend (or join a defence of) another state, or they can abstain from action. Should a conflict ensue, the 'winner' of the battle is determined to be the state or states with the greatest total power, and that state or states are rewarded. However, should the winning state or coalition win by more than 10 power units, the losing team is entirely destroyed.

The game usually takes about an hour to play from start to finish and I promise at the start to reward the winners – whoever they may be, and I am deliberately vague about this – of the game with a cash prize, usually currency I have picked up on one of my trips but never traded back for euros on return to France. I also explain at the outset that the goal of the game is simple and the same for every state: they must survive. Besides some basic game play explanations, these are all the instructions I give the students as the game begins.

The competitive, numbers driven students at a business school like CEFAM quickly fall into huddles doing on-the-fly calculations to determine the best coalition partner and the best strategy for attacking another state, winning by more than 10 points, and throwing that competitor out of the game. There is almost always a team destroyed in the first round, and the game continues until there is a final, victorious team and some depressed looks on the faces of the losing teams, and then we begin the debrief.

A game like Reilly's 'Power Politics' is fantastic for illustrating a couple of concepts in international politics. For example, one of the first questions to ask of the team that started the attacking in the very first round is, 'why did you attack anyone?'. After all, at the beginning of the game there was no real threat from another state, there was no previous behaviour on which to imagine one team might threaten another, indeed, there was a lack of information about the other teams at all. Most usually the answer I receive is that if they had not attacked, someone would attack them, and so they just made the first move. This is usually enough to launch a discussion of realism, neorealism, existential threats and the notion of a security dilemma.

The game also opportunities to reflect on constructivism and international norms – the norm of all states save one attacking and destroying the excluded state is a common occurrence in this game at CEFAM – and exploring why such norms emerge when it is clear that they serve the interests of only the powerful states who set the international agenda. We also consider issues of polarity, especially as the game shrinks rapidly from 9 or 10 teams down to three or four, and then a final two. Is a multipolar system really stable? Why did the game trend towards a single winner, or a unipolar system?

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Games allow professors to demonstrate to students that the knowledge they are delivering does not only have to be read or ingested from a lecturer, but rather can be experienced. Students who discover the security dilemma or who find themselves acting in typically realist ways after a semester claiming to be liberals remember the lesson and can more easily appreciate the complexities of international politics. This is, of course, entirely the point.

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