

The Ambassador's Atlas

Written by Dylan Kissane

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The Ambassador's Atlas

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DYLAN KISSANE, MAY 29 2013

Facing my office desk is a bookshelf full of everything from international relations textbooks I have used, might use, or maybe will never use in one of my course, dozens of journals, more than a few novels that usually make their way into the hands of keen students, and all of those basic books that anyone who writes cannot do without: a style guide, a dictionary, a thesaurus, and a little book of motivational quotations for when the words don't come easily.

Also on that bookshelf is an atlas, specifically the Atlas of Iran. This was gifted to me in 2011 by the then Ambassador of Iran to France, Seyed Mahdi Miraboutalebi. I had travelled to Paris for the morning to meet with him and his staff in an attempt to organise a visit for him to Lyon and to CEFAM. I felt the opportunity for my POL 210 students to meet Ambassador Miraboutalebi would be something not be missed, and I hoped that the Ambassador would appreciate the opportunity to speak to some young and globally focused students. Unfortunately it was not to be. Circumstances did not align the way that we had hoped and we were unable to welcome the Iranian delegation to CEFAM. Yet I did return to CEFAM with that atlas and the story of how I came to be presented with it was something I recalled this week as the POL 210 class jumped headfirst into their Summer Simulation.

At the time of my visit to the Iranian embassy I was preparing to depart for a conference in Iran where I would present a paper on geopolitics and counter-nuclear tactics on the part of the West. The conference was to be held in Qazvin and the Ambassador explained that he knew both the city and the university well. He was a gentle man and it was easy to discern both the intelligence behind his friendly demeanour and the seriousness with which he took even this short visit from a university professor.

In describing my work and my argument I fell into English and spoke ever so briefly of "the Gulf region". I was interrupted immediately with a question from the Ambassador: which Gulf? I clarified that it was the Persian Gulf and the Ambassador smiled, called an aide to fetch a book from the shelf across the room and passed it to me. "Here," he said, "this is for you." He explained that other states in the region, particularly with pan-Arabist movements, have decreed that the Persian Gulf is actually the Arabian Gulf. The United States stoked this dispute between neighbours, referring to the Arabian Gulf instead of the more familiar and historically accepted Persian Gulf. In international politics, as in atlases, names matter.

This week my students began to understand how influential language can be in politics. In the simulation they are currently contesting one state's military forces crossed a recognised international border. What words do we use to describe this action: is it a violation of sovereignty, an error of navigation, an incursion, or an act of war?

I challenge them to consider the motivations of the actors concerned as well as the geographical, geopolitical and economic contexts. Further, in responding to this action, how best can a state present its support, opposition or neutrality to other international actors? Once the word 'war' is used there is no stepping back diplomatically, hence the terms 'issue', 'disagreement', 'dispute', 'conflict' and 'event' being brought into play as negotiations began between states yesterday.

The words we use in international politics, whether teaching, writing, researching, speaking or as political actors, matter a great deal. Whether referring to a body of water in South-West Asia, a simulated crisis in a French classroom, or as real and as impactful as the two letter difference between 'FY Republic of Macedonia' and

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'Republic of Macedonia', we cannot escape that how we name things affects how we interpret them.

That atlas on my bookshelf is a gentle but constant reminder of exactly that.

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Dylan Kissane is Professor of International Politics at CEFAM in Lyon, France. Read more of e-IR's blog *Political Business*.

About the author:

Dylan Kissane is Professor of International Politics at CEFAM in Lyon, France. He is the curator of The Ivory Tower blog on E-IR.