

Abstract

In his classic novel, *Catch-22* (1961), Joseph Heller describes a thoroughly frustrating situation faced by a combat pilot in World War II. This is generalized to a “generic” 2 x 2 strict ordinal game, in which whatever strategy the column player chooses, the best response of the row player is to inflict on the column player a worst or next-worst outcome, and possibly vice versa. The 12 specific games subsumed by the generic game are called *catch-22 games*. These games, along with 4 *king-of-the-mountain games*, turn out to be the only games in which moving power is “effective,” based on the “theory of moves” (TOM).

A generic “Mobilization Game” applicable to international crises, in which some of the rules of play of TOM are modified, is used to divide the catch-22 games into three mutually exclusive classes. Predictions for each class are compared with the behavior of decision makers in two Egyptian-Israeli crises. In the 1960 Rotem crisis, Egypt retracted its mobilization after a discreet countermobilization by Israel, which is consistent with being in a class I game. In the 1967 crisis, escalation moved up in stages from a class I to a class II to a class III game, which precipitated war and is consistent with cycling in such games. It is argued that the catch-22 and king-of-the-mountain games better model the *dynamics* of conflict spirals than does the usual static representation of the security dilemma as a Prisoners’ Dilemma.

JEL Classification: C72, C73, D74. *Keywords:* Catch-22; escalation; international crisis; security dilemma; theory of moves; cyclic games; moving power.