

Achen and Snidal: Rational Deterrence Theory

A&S discuss the limitations of case study critiques of deterrence. Case study critiques are used for two tasks to which they are not suited:

theory construction—the case study method uses side-by-side comparisons of different deterrence crises to produce empirical generalizations. However, lists of relevant variables, like domestic politics, which this method produces are not theory. Instead of lists of variables, what is needed is plausible empirical generalization—well specified causal sequences which can be found across a significant range of historical studies. But this too, is not enough by itself because empirical generalizations lack the universality that is the hallmark of good theory. The difficulty with case studies is that there are so many details in every case that no single theory can reproduce them all. Thus, a deductive theory like rational deterrence is superior because it reduces the problem by providing stricter criteria for admissible hypotheses. Thus rational deterrence has not been seriously challenged theoretically by the case study school.

theory verification—empirical testing of rational deterrence by comparative case studies has been flawed due to two reasons: 1) the selection of cases is systematically biased. Cases are chosen non randomly by criteria that make an evaluation of rational deterrence theory impossible. For example, studies of only crises and war give no information about the success rate of rational deterrence. 2) analysts have misinterpreted the propositions of rational deterrence as descriptions of decision makers' thought processes. Rational deterrence theory deals with choices not mental calculations. It makes no predictions about what decision makers say influenced them only about what actually did so.