

Crime and Punishment: The Role of Norms in Crisis Bargaining, Christopher Gelpi, *APSR*, June 1997

Headline: Norms established by settlements of militarized disputes influence future state actions in security-related conflicts. Dispute settlements create norms that make it easier for “defender” states to protect the mutually agreed-upon status quo when opposing states “challenge” it.

Summary

Gelpi tests whether or not normative standards of behavior influence state actions in security-related conflicts. He argues that states that violate a “legitimate” settlement are more likely, during subsequent crises, to capitulate when punished because their behavior conflicts with international norms regarding the maintenance of such settlements. He tests this claim against a realist model of crisis bargaining using a quantitative analysis of 122 “reinitiated” (settled, then restarted) international crises between 1929 and 1979.

The Realist Theory of Crisis Bargaining (“Rational Coercion Theory”)

Before testing his theories of norms, Gelpi articulates the traditional/realist theory of crisis bargaining, when there is no settlement dispute/norm creation. In this model, each side has 3 strategies, *appeasement*, *firm-but-flexible*, and *bullying*, ranging from least to most coercive. These strategies convey each state’s resolve in defending its interests by going to war. In the absence of a previous dispute settlement, violation of a dispute settlement by a challenger leads to one of three defender responses: 1) *appeasement* increases the challenger’s insistence on altering the status quo; 2) a *firm-but-flexible* strategy makes the challenger less insistent; and 3) *bullying* strategies make the challenger highly insistent (out of fear of future demands by the defender – think of this as “reverse *appeasement*”).

The Effects and Impacts of Norms

Gelpi argues that “legitimate” international agreements, in which both sides have “played a role in shaping... stipulations,” create international “norms” (340). These norms influence state behavior in three ways. Norms can *constrain* states’ actions by imposing costs of violators. They can be *enabling* by helping states to coordinate behavior and better interpret the other’s behavior (“focal points”). Finally, they can be *constitutive* by shaping state identity and preferences.

Combining these effects, Gelpi concludes that these **norms alter future crisis bargaining in two ways:**

- Norms serve as focal points that alter the interpretation of subsequent crisis bargaining behavior. They signal that each side is not fundamentally hostile (i.e., a solution is possible), and they introduce the concept of “legitimacy” into the interstate relationship (the prior settlement defines illegitimate behavior).
- Norms established through dispute settlements inflict reputational costs on states that violate them. Violation of norms created through prior agreements can destroy a state’s international reputation (“international audience costs”).

The introduction of focal points and reputational costs changes the outcomes of crisis bargaining when a challenger state violates the dispute settlement. Gelpi hypothesizes how each of the aforementioned outcomes will change:

- 1) An *appeasement* response by the defender results in even greater insistence by the challenger on changing the status quo than in the no-settlement case (the defender is effectively “abandoning” the mutually recognized focal point and encouraging the challenger’s aggression).
- 2) When a defender responds with a *firm-but-flexible* strategy, the challenger’s insistence will be at least as low as in the no-settlement case (“reputational costs” will be severe).
- 3) When a defender responds with a *bullying* strategy the challenger’s insistence on changing the status quo will be lower than in the no-settlement case (the existence of a prior agreement makes

bullying a legitimate strategy rather than an act of aggression by the defender; it also inflicts substantial reputational costs on the challenger if it remains intransigent).

Analysis

Gelpi describes and analyzes his statistical methods and results. He models the *challenger's response* as the dependent variable, with a 3-point ordinal scale of *compliance, compromise, or intransigence* as the possible values. He includes control variables central to the realist crisis bargaining model: military capabilities, interests at stake in the dispute, possession of nuclear weapons, involvement in other disputes etc.). Gelpi's results mirror previous studies as far as the impact of the "realist variables" (e.g., the likelihood of challenger intransigence declines when the defender has nuclear weapons, or when the defender has greater interests at stake). His results support his hypotheses about the role of norms and dispute settlements (for example, the likelihood of intransigence in response to appeasement increases by 28% if the challenger violated an existing settlement. Conversely, the likelihood of compliance and compromise decreases by 15% and 12%, respectively, when the defender appeases). While the "realist control" variables do not strongly predict outcomes of the crisis bargaining model, Gelpi concludes that normative variables play a significant role in determining the outcomes of crisis bargaining situations.

Conclusions

Gelpi concludes that rational coercion theory cannot account for the influence of dispute settlements and norms on the effects of coercion. Dispute settlements stabilize cooperation by constructing referents for the interpretation of subsequent behavior and by investing state interests in a reputation for trustworthiness. Gelpi suggests that his findings challenge the realist theorists, who argue that force and deterrent threats are the only paths to peace. Ultimately, international norms "have as important an influence on the outcome of international crises as do relative power and bargaining strategies" (355).