

"Rational Deterrence Theory and Comparative Case Studies" by Achen and Snidal

In this paper, the authors use rational deterrence theory as an example for their discussion of the relative roles of theory and case study. Less than an article about rational deterrence theory; this piece is more of a review essay in its defense.

Achen and Snidal discuss the pros and cons of rational deterrence theory; saying that it is "widely regarded as logically compelling" (p.144) on the one hand, while empirically deficient in relation to case studies on the other. The goal of the essay is to address this apparent contradiction, focusing on the limits of the utility of comparative case studies. They argue that case studies "fail when used for two tasks for which they are not suited - theory construction and theory verification" (p.145). What, then is the utility of comparative case studies? Using the field of rational deterrence as their area of study, Achen and Snidal proceed to address this. The limits of cases studies they see as follows: they provide insight, but without deductive theory and statistical inference, they do not "by themselves provide clear guidance for generalization to other cases". (p.146) Case studies cannot build cumulative theory. The authors cite the work of Alexander George, who recommended the construction of contingent empirical generalizations, which are produced by comparisons between cases which are structured along functional (rather than case-based) lines. In the field of rational deterrence, case studies have generally tried to mark out the limits of deterrence theory. They have "emphasized different routes to the failure of rational calculations" (p.148): thought-inhibiting forces affecting the calculus of actors, misperception, the overwhelming complexity of decision-making, etc. These psychological approaches are complemented by approaches which have looked at rational deterrence in terms of its predictability and found it lacking in accuracy. For both schools, therefore, the test of rational deterrence theory is its closeness to historical reality.

Achen and Snidal then discuss rational deterrence theory itself, saying that it is based on three assumptions:

1. rational actors
2. variation in outcomes is explained by variation in actors' opportunities rather than changes in preferences, norms or culture
3. the state is a unitary actor.

The theory is based on a model, which in its simplest form has two actors (initiator and defender) playing an extensive-form game with incomplete information about the capabilities of the defender. The theory predicts that deterrence will break down when the initiator does not see the defender's threat as credible; thus case studies which show that deterrence fails do not disprove the theory. The authors cite the huge effect which rational deterrence has had on policymaking; "like any good theory [it] has been of immense practical importance" (p.153) While case study research has been useful in showing that domestic variables are important, the unitary actor element in the model is just an assumption for the sake of simplicity. And the authors suggest that "not much successful theorizing from any methodological standpoint about the effects of domestic politics has been accomplished in international relations - simply because domestic factors add complications that are currently impossible to deal with" (p.155) The limitations of rational deterrence in terms of the domestic arena are clear from case studies, but the importance of the domestic arena is not theory in itself; the authors suggest. The case studies are necessary but not sufficient. Deductive theory (though it will not provide historical accuracy for individual cases) allows us to limit the range of hypotheses under consideration, and permits universality of conclusions. Case studies or what George calls "plausibility probes", have had less impressive results than they suggest in attacking rational deterrence theory. Achen and Snidal cite two main problems with the approaches. The first is the issue of selection bias in the cases chosen: "studies of crises and wars give no information about the success rate of rational deterrence" (p.161), though they say there is no

good answer to how a population of interstate interactions for study should be chosen. The second flaw the authors call the "descriptivist fallacy": rational deterrence is not a model of the thought process of elites; it is based on incentives, rational behavior and expected utility. Therefore, the study of mental calculations of leaders during crises does not reflect on the applicability of rational deterrence theory. However, case studies are useful for identifying variables and hypotheses to be tested. The approach is limited by the fact that the case studies lack the rigor of inferential logic to stand alone in the place of theory. Thus, rational deterrence theory (and by extension deductive theory) cannot be challenged by case study research, which should have a more clearly defined role in social science research. The use of case studies to attack rational choice theory shows its limitations as an approach.