

Jonathan Mercer, *Reputation and International Politics* (Cornell, 1996) Chs. 1, 2, 4 (pp. 14-73, 110 –153)

Deterrence theory focuses on making threats credible. Threats are credible when backed up by resolve, capability, and interests. Mercer not only wants to assess “the extent to which a state will risk war to keep its promises and uphold its threats,” but he also wants to examine how allies get reputations for loyalty.

Why study this? The conventional wisdom (deterrence theorists + decision-makers) is that threats and promises are interdependent – that our past behavior will affect others’ expectations of our future behavior. Is it reasonable to draw general conclusions about future behavior based on another’s aggregate behavior?

Mercer’s Critique of traditional deterrence theory and game theoretic approaches–

- Self perception is not reputation
- reputation is a “relational” concept not a “property” concept
- therefore, it is not a ‘tool’ that can be controlled or manipulated, and others do not view our behavior the way we do
- rat choicers assume rep.’s form and concern themselves with how to manipulate rep.
- rat choicers treat behavior as a signal that helps to reveal a player’s type, but this relies on two implicit assumptions – perfect observability and common interpretations – without a general theory of how people interpret behavior, there is no basis for judgments about behavior revealing resolve
- rat choicers treat reputation as a property concept. This view is wrong because it assumes that one can manipulate others’ perceptions and that these perceptions do not have a rational baseline
- rat choicers assume that reputations derived from behavior are interdependent over time. But, ‘games’ are not often repeated, situations are rarely similar over time, and outcomes are often indeterminate (multiple equilibria exist).

Mercer’s theory –

To understand when rep.’s form, you have to understand how we expl. others’ behavior. He turns to social psych’s theory of attributions – the inferences we make to expl. events. A reputation for resolve forms if two conditions are met: observers must explain another’s behavior as a function of their disposition (as opposed to the situation) and must use the explanation to predict the future behavior of that person. We can know when reputations will form if we understand if situational or dispositional attributions are used to explain behavior.

Social psych says that when out-groups act undesirably that dispositional attributions will be used to explain it, but desirable actions will be viewed situationally. Vice versa for in groups. Situational attributions are by definition, never interdependent, so reputations cannot form. Mercer has four propositions on when rep.’s for resolve form:

1. adversaries can get reputations for resolve. Cuz observers make dispositional attributions when they stand firm (undesirable).
2. allies can get reputations for lacking resolve. Cuz observers make dispositional attributions when they back down (undesirable).

3. adversaries rarely get reputations for lacking resolve. Cuz observers make situational attributions when they back down (desirable).
4. allies rarely get reputations for resolve. Cuz observers make situational attributions when they stand firm (desirable).

Mercer wants to assess the explanatory power of his hypotheses versus the deterrence hypotheses. To deterrence theorists, all behavior is explained dispositionally, and all behavior is interdependent over time... thus all behavior will impact a state's reputation for resolve. In Mercer's view, allies cannot get reputations if they stand firm and adversaries cannot get reputations if they back down. Also, adversaries get a reputation for resolve if they stand firm and allies get a reputation for irresolution if they back down.

Mercer does several case studies of crises leading up to World War I. The one the professors asked us to read was the Bosnia Hercegovina crisis of 1909, where Austria-Hungary annexed B-H and Russia backed down. Initially, when faced with the undesirable Austrian annexation, Britain, France, and Germany explained this dispositionally – which was congruent with the expectations of Mercer's hypothesis. Because Germany backed down during the previous crisis (Algeciras), deterrence expects everyone to view the Germans as irresolute. But Mercer says that only those who explained German behavior with dispositional attributions will view them this way. The Germans viewed themselves as irresolute, but the English thought the exact opposite. The French case was inconclusive, while Austria and Russia were not involved at Algeciras. When the Russians capitulated over B-H, deterrence says that they should have gotten a reputation for irresolution from everyone, but Mercer says that only the French and English should, while the Germans and Austrians (who desired Russian capitulation) viewed it as a result of situational factors. Mercer's evidence backs up the expectations of his theory.