

Study Questions - Week 3

Oct: 15

1. Before the United States began its attack on Afghanistan, Taliban leaders threatened the U.S. with heavy casualties, warning that the U.S. would experience costs similar to those incurred by the Soviet Union in Afghanistan during the 1980s. Why do you think the Taliban's threats did not deter the United States? When answering this question, keep in mind the elements of deterrence outlined by Paul Huth in "Deterrence and International Conflict."

2. Paul Huth mentions the "case specific" theory of reputation (1999: 32, 44, 42), which holds that states may not hold reputations absent the context of a specific situation. Despite the claims by the case specific school, throughout modern history states have expended a great deal of blood and treasure precisely so that they could gain general reputations for toughness. How would you evaluate the likelihood of their success? Be clear in laying out the (competing) causal chains specified by the case specific and general reputation theories. What (unique) testable hypotheses might we derive from each? How might we test them?

Oct. 16

1. The traditional view of nuclear weapons during the Cold War was that they prevented war between the superpowers by inducing caution in the behavior of statesmen and by deterring large-scale aggression. Kenneth Waltz espouses this argument, asserting that nuclear weapons contribute to military stability across the globe. What assumptions (about the nature of states, leaders, the military balance, etc.) underlie his view of nuclear deterrence, and do you believe these assumptions are valid today?

2. Nina Tannenwald (1999: 441) breaks with social science tradition by arguing that normative explanations for outcomes ought to be privileged over rational/material explanations. Evaluate this argument--either in the context of the Nuclear (Non-Use) Taboo, or on other issues of interest to this class. Are material explanations sufficient? Does their greater parsimony (simplicity) make them more effective theories, or are they too sparse to be of much use in the presence of more socially conscious theories?

Oct 17:

1. James Fearon identifies three reasons that rational states might go to war, even though the cost of war is greater than the cost of negotiation. But if a state did not believe it could win, Fearon implies that it would seek to negotiate instead -- if it lost the war, the state would both suffer the costs of battle and lose the dispute at hand. What do you think about this claim? Can you think of possible reasons that a rational leader might still choose war, even if she believes her state will lose? Offer examples where you can.

2. In "Rationalist Explanations for War," James Fearon introduces and then largely dismisses the argument that rational states may go to war because the contested goods are indivisible. Fearon argues that it is almost always possible to divide goods, and when the prized items are not divisible, the winner can offer some form of compensation to the loser. Do you agree, or do you think that there are certain things that cannot be divided, and for which losers cannot be adequately compensated? Evaluate this argument based on what you have learned about conflict (and the factors that lead to it) in this class.