Summary and Keywords

Deterrence theory is slowly beginning to emerge from a long sleep after the Cold War, and from its theoretical origins over half a century ago. New realities have led to a diversification of deterrence in practice, as well as to new avenues for its study and empirical analysis. Three major categories of changes in the international system—new actors, new means of warfare, and new contexts—have led to corresponding changes in the way that deterrence is theorized and studied. First, the field of deterrence has broadened to include nonstate and nonnuclear actors, which has challenged scholars with new types of theories and tests. Second, cyberthreats, terrorism, and diverse nuclear force structures have led scholars to consider means in new ways. Third, the likelihood of an international crisis has shifted as a result of physical, economic, and normative changes in the costs of crisis, which had led scholars to more closely address the crisis context itself. The assumptions of classical deterrence are breaking down, in research as well as in reality. However, more work needs to be done in understanding these international changes and building successful deterrence policy. A better understanding of new modes of deterrence will aid policymakers in managing today’s threats and in preventing future deterrence failures, even as it prompts the so-called virtuous cycle of new theory and additional empirical testing.

Keywords: deterrence, cyberweapons, terrorism, international crises, interdependence, war, empirical international relations theory

Shannon Carcelli
Department of Political Science, University of California, San Diego

Erik A. Gartzke
Department of Political Science, University of California, San Diego