

James D. Fearon, "Commitment Problems and the Spread of Ethnic Conflict," in David A. Lake and Donald Rothchild, eds., *The International Spread of Ethnic Conflict: Fear, Diffusion and Escalation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 107-126.

### ***In Short***

Commitment problems give rise to ethnic conflicts, because ethnic minorities cannot trust ethnic majorities to play fair in the future.

### ***Central Question***

When motivates ethnic groups to fight each other, and what motivates them to refrain from doing so?

### ***Central Hypotheses***

The ethnic conflict in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union are unlikely to cause widespread interstate war. Ethnic violence arose in the first place because the collapse of Communist central governments created a commitment problem whereby two groups found themselves without a third party to guarantee agreements between them. Ethnic majorities, for instance, are unable to credibly commit to not exploiting ethnic minorities in the future. Therefore, depending on their chances of winning secession from the newly formed state, minorities have an incentive to try to break away, violently if necessary.

### ***How he Makes his Argument***

Violent ethnic conflict is generally about a group's secession to form an autonomous state. Whereas prior to World War II, the formation of new states could potentially tip the balance in favor of one alliance or another, this became a far less likely possibility in the aftermath of the war, and with the development of nuclear weapons. Moreover, the fact that unlike class issues, ethnic conflicts are "particularist rather than universalist," (111). What about possible chain reactions and demonstration effects? Fearon believes that governments and international organizations can easily control the impact of such possibilities, in order to avoid violence. He is concerned about Russia, which faces numerous possible secessions.

Against the argument that the various ethnic groups in the former Yugoslavia had always hated each other, and that argument that ethnic elites polarized the masses, Fearon describes the polarization of the ethnic groups as driven by the commitment problem faced by Croats and Serbs in the new Croatian state. The Serb minority in this new state feared exploitation, and the Croat government had no way of guaranteeing its long-term well-being. Therefore, the Serb extremists who had been advocating for violent secession ultimately won out.

Fearon sets up an ethnic majority/minority game. In the first round, the minority chooses to acquiesce in the new state or to fight for secession. This depends upon the probability that it will win (secession), and the payoff structure associated with defeat and acquiescence. The majority also considers what offer it is going to make the minority in terms of the latter's wellbeing. After the majority makes its offer, the minority decides between secession or acceptance again. The problem is that if the minority prefers fighting to receiving none of the benefits in the new state, it is going to secede in the first round. But fighting is the optimal solution for neither the majority nor the minority. If the majority could commit itself to offering the minority a package that the latter would prefer to secession, then conflict could be avoided. But the majority's commitment is not credible, because once the minority has acquiesced, the majority's bargaining power will have increased with the consolidation of the state police and army.

Fearon recognizes that he is characterizing the ethnic group as a unitary actor, which leaves out intra-group politics. Moreover, he does not incorporate the role of external actors, such as Serbia in the Serbo-Croat case. He argues against Posen that emergent anarchy has no impact on dynamics of ethnic conflict, resting his model instead on the existence of a set of substantive issues over which the ethnic groups have conflicting preferences. He also asserts that there are five additional factors that will influence whether the commitment problem will lead to ethnic war or peace. The first is the relative military strength and cultural preferences of the minority, which will not fight if it is extremely weak compared to the majority, or if the costs of fighting are extremely large relative to its value for an autonomous state. The second factor is the minority group's settlement patterns—if the minority group is well-concentrated, then secession would place the escalatory burden on the majority. Intermixed populations are more prone to conflict. The presence of external guarantors can force the majority to commit credibly to preserving the wellbeing of the minority, although Serbia's irredentist leanings caused it to play the role of provocateur. Fourth, the expected decline in the ability to secede will shape the exigency that the minority feels. Finally, the degree to which individuals within a minority have an exit option will impact their willingness to fight, as individuals might choose to migrate (this is more likely in the case of urban-dwellers and professionals than in the case of rural farmers). Additionally, the better the minority member can do by exiting, the lower the majority's incentive to oppress in the future, which means that the commitment problem may be more severe for rural populations.

Fearon concludes by saying that the commitment problem is most likely to operate where there are nested minorities, whereby there is a minority within a majority that is itself a minority within a larger state population. He also warns that the veiled provocative statements being made by the Russian government on behalf of Russian-speaking minorities abroad could cause conflict in the future.