

James D. Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War", *International Organization* 49, 3 (Summer 1995): 379-414.

Fearon wishes to provide an answer to the puzzle of war: it is costly, yet states fight. He finds that three types of answers have been given thus far: 1) that people and states are sometimes irrational, 2) that leaders do not pay the costs of war, and hence can decide to fight, and 3) that even rational leaders who are aware of the costs may fight nonetheless. Fearon is interested in explanations of the third type, and proposes to advance "a clear statement of what a rationalist explanation for war is and to characterize the full set of rationalist explanations that are both theoretically coherent and empirically plausible". This task is all the more pressing because Neorealist theory lacks an explanation for war, a defect that may have serious implications for the theory as a whole.

Fearon examines five rationalist explanations of war: 1) anarchy, 2) expected benefits outweigh expected outcomes, 3) rational preventive war, 4) rational miscalculation due to lack of information, and 5) rational miscalculation or disagreement about relative power. He finds that these do not explain why leaders would not choose to negotiate in order to avoid the costs of war, and proposes three alternatives:

- 1) Absence of negotiation may be due to the fact that there is private information or to the fact that there is an incentive to misrepresent information about state power
- 2) A settlement may not arise due to commitment problems (i.e. situations in which states would have incentives to renege on the terms)
- 3) No agreement because of "issue indivisibilities" (issues that do not admit compromise).

Fearon approaches the puzzle of war by using a simple formal model, according to which "under very broad conditions bargains will exist that genuinely rational states [sic] would prefer to a risky and costly fight". He then argues that because such bargains "should" exist, there are no grounds for "the conventional view that rational states can and often do face a situation of deadlock, in which war occurs because no mutually preferable bargain exists". Ultimately, Fearon thinks that the first two of the rationalist alternatives suggested above are valid explanations of what is behind the puzzle of why states fight rather than compromise. In his conclusion, he states that his explanation should not be interpreted as a rejection of alternatives based on irrationality or "pathological" domestic politics, but that these should be employed only after a rationalist explanation has paved the way by explaining the "ideal case".