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

Key Points

- Explores under what conditions would a nation state see war as a reasonable option.
- cost/benefit analysis where leaders may have weighed potential outcomes
- Main argument is that none of the current rationalist arguments account for the central problem that war is costly and risky, so rational states should have incentive to explore negotiation over the prospect of waging war.
    - 5 rationalist arguments as causes for why this may be the case.
    - Other potentially better explanations: Bluffing, Commitment Problems, Inability to Bargain on an issue.

Summary

The central question of this article could be summed up as asking, if wars are costly, then why do they occur. Using a rationalist approach, Fearon attempts to explore under what conditions would a nation state see war as a reasonable option. They argue that even under conditions where rational leaders have considered the risk and cost of war, fighting still may happen. Possible explanations come from cost/benefit analysis where leaders may have weighed potential outcomes and still see war as an act in their state's best interests. What about the Neo-Realist explanation? War and conflict are caused by defects in human nature. By extension, the innate propensity for conflict means that states will engage in conflict with one another. Fearon's main argument is that none of the current rationalist arguments account for the central problem that war is costly and risky, so rational states should have incentive to explore negotiation over the prospect of waging war. Wars are unpredictable, and its uncertain that the benefits of going to war would happen. Therefore, it would seem more rational to pursue other benefits maximizing alternatives first.

If war should be considered as a last resort option and if there are incentives for states to work with each other, then what prevents heads of state from reaching agreements to prevent war? Fearon list 5 rationalist arguments as causes for why this may be the case. First, anarchy, instability/uncertainty arising in the system may cause leaders to see war as a means of addressing perceived threats. Second, it's possible that leaders simply might expect the benefits of going to war to outweigh the potential costs. If it can be rationally assumed that the payoff is greater than the perceived risk, then we can expect states to consider war as a rational option. Third, states could view a pending conflict as preventing greater threats to their sovereignty. The threat of losing sovereignty pushes them to pursue more radical options. Fourth, after analyzing all alternatives, it's possible that a state could miscalculate based on incomplete or

misinformation. Information asymmetry and miscalculation may cause a state to view the cost/risk as being a lot lower than it is. An example of this would be the German Schlieffen Plan in the First World War. Lastly, there is also the chance that there is a miscalculation or disagreement about a state's relative power. Nation state leaders may see their relative strength/power as greater than it is compared to other regional actors. Therefore, they will assess the prospect of going to war very differently. They might even think that due to their relative power, the need to bargain is lessened and therefore expect other regional players to accept their demands.

Fearon argues that of the potential explanations, the first three don't explain what prevents states from bargaining. Instead, Fearon sees other potentially better explanations. Fearon sees there to be an incentive for a nation state to misrepresent one's power relative to actors or "bluff" in an attempt widen the potential for favorable outcomes as well as to not appear weak. This, however, makes it difficult to pursue resolutions and avoid war as an outcome. Bluffing may lead to conflict. Successful bargaining also relies on all include parties agreeing to uphold the agreement. Thinking of Putnam's two-level games, leaders are often limited to what their domestic partners are willing to allow. Therefore, this sort of clash between both international and domestic pressures may lead state actors to pursue individual rather than collective interests. One such interest may be to strike first to prevent being a victim of another state's potential defection from bargained agreements. Also, there is the potential in the case of bargaining around resources, it's possible that such agreement could backfire domestically. Lastly, there is the potential that the issues being discussed are incapable of being bargained or compromised on. While Fearon sees this as the less compelling of these explanations, but if I were to find a modern-day example, it'd be the negotiations between Russia and Ukraine over the Donbas region. I would wager that either side views relinquishing it as not a reasonable option.