

Blog Article Summary

In *Negotiations over Ukraine are likely to fail. Here's why* (Good Authority, August 14, 2025), Stacie Goddard argues that the prospects for a negotiated settlement between Russia and Ukraine are slim due to three central obstacles: commitment problems, expanded war aims, and the indivisibility of territory.

First, neither side can credibly commit to honoring any agreement. Ukraine fears Russia will renege on territorial concessions, while Russia worries that Ukraine, strengthened by NATO or EU membership, could later overturn the settlement. This lack of trust makes even temporary deals fragile. Second, both countries have expanded their war aims as the conflict has dragged on. Russia insists on recognition of its annexed territories, while Ukraine now demands full restoration of sovereignty, including Crimea. These hardened positions leave little room for compromise. Third, both sides view the contested territories as indivisible, tied to national identity and legitimacy. For Ukraine, conceding territory risks undermining its multiethnic democracy, while Russia frames Ukraine as part of its “spiritual space.”

Goddard concludes that these dynamics, commitment problems, escalating demands, and indivisible claims, make negotiations nearly impossible, even if external actors push for compromise. Her analysis suggests that the war is not simply about military stalemate but about structural political obstacles that prevent meaningful bargaining.

Research Article Summary

James Fearon's article, *Rationalist Explanations for War* (International Organization, 1995), seeks to explain why rational states, which should prefer negotiated settlements to costly wars, nonetheless end up fighting. Fearon argues that war persists not because leaders are

irrational, but because of three rationalist mechanisms that prevent peaceful bargains: private information with incentives to misrepresent, commitment problems, and issue indivisibility.

First, states often possess private information about their military capabilities or resolve. Because revealing this information could weaken their bargaining position, they have incentives to misrepresent it. This leads to miscalculations, where one side underestimates the other's strength or willingness to fight, resulting in war. For example, if a state exaggerates its willingness to resist, its opponent may mistakenly believe compromise is impossible and choose war instead.

Second, commitment problems arise when states cannot credibly promise to uphold agreements in the future. If one side expects the other to grow stronger and potentially renege, it may prefer to fight now rather than risk unfavorable terms later. Fearon emphasizes that these problems are especially acute when power shifts are anticipated, such as when one state expects rapid economic or military growth.

Third, some issues, such as territorial disputes tied to identity or legitimacy, are perceived as indivisible. When neither side is willing to compromise or accept partition, bargaining fails, and war becomes the outcome. Fearon notes that indivisibility is often socially constructed: leaders and populations come to see territory as sacred or essential to national identity, making compromise politically impossible.

Fearon supports his argument by drawing on historical examples and formal models of bargaining. He emphasizes that these mechanisms are not anomalies but structural features of international politics. Wars occur not because leaders fail to recognize the costs, but because rational incentives prevent them from reaching mutually acceptable deals. His framework has

become foundational in political science, shaping subsequent research on conflict and negotiation.

Critical Discussion

Taken together, Goddard's blog article and Fearon's academic work illustrate how rationalist theories of war apply directly to the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. Goddard's analysis essentially operationalizes Fearon's framework in a contemporary case. The commitment problem is evident: Russia cannot credibly promise to respect Ukraine's sovereignty, while Ukraine cannot credibly promise not to leverage peace into NATO membership. Fearon's insight that states fight when they cannot trust future commitments is vividly reflected here.

Similarly, both authors highlight indivisibility. Fearon theorizes that some issues are seen as non-negotiable, and Goddard shows how Crimea and eastern Ukraine have become indivisible for both sides, tied to identity and legitimacy. Expanded war aims further reinforce indivisibility, as concessions now appear politically impossible. Finally, private information and misrepresentation remain relevant. Russia's opaque military intentions and Ukraine's uncertain capacity to sustain resistance complicate bargaining, echoing Fearon's first mechanism.

I find Goddard persuasive in showing how all three rationalist mechanisms converge in Ukraine, making negotiations unlikely. At the same time, Fearon's framework suggests that even if external actors push for talks, structural incentives will undermine them. One implication is that peace may only emerge if the balance of power shifts dramatically, altering incentives. Another is that international institutions may need to design stronger enforcement mechanisms to overcome commitment problems. For example, multinational security guarantees or phased sovereignty agreements could be explored, though their feasibility remains uncertain.

The combination of Goddard's case study and Fearon's theory also highlights the human costs of these structural problems. Fearon's models explain why war occurs despite its inefficiency, but Goddard reminds us of the tangible consequences: hundreds of thousands of casualties, billions in infrastructure damage, and the erosion of democratic legitimacy. This underscores the importance of connecting abstract theory to real-world cases. Future research could examine whether new forms of diplomacy, such as involving neutral third parties or leveraging economic integration, might mitigate the rationalist obstacles Fearon identifies.

References

- Goddard, Stacie. 2025. "Negotiations over Ukraine are likely to fail. Here's why." Good Authority, August 14, 2025.
- Fearon, James D. 1995. "Rationalist Explanations for War." *International Organization* 49(3): 379–414.