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IGCC POLICY BRIEF

Ethnic Conflict and International Intervention

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To use a pessimistic but apt metaphor, ethnic conflict may be less like a common cold and more like AIDS—difficult to catch, but devastating once infected. *Analysis, page 4.*

Summary: Ethnic conflict stems from "the fear of the future, lived through the past." Given a fear of future exploitation, the party that is likely to become weaker may choose to fight now rather than later. Thus, the ethnic security dilemma is better termed an "insecurity dilemma."

Ethnic conflict at the international level results from the breakdown of existing social and political order, such as socio-economic change accelerated by international economic integration (witnessed today throughout the developing world), or the breakup of multinational states (as occurred in the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia). When the fear of the future sets in, ethnic identities which may have lain dormant for years are called forth and confirmed by memories and myths.

Ethnic differences are not necessarily a source of interstate conflict. Most states live peacefully side-by-side despite the presence of ethnic ties and cleavages that span their borders. However, pairs in which an ethnic group is a dominant *majority* in one state but a repressed *minority* in a second are particularly dangerous.

The promise of the post-Cold War world is that external powers can now intervene to mitigate ethnic conflict. However, hesitant and vacillating interventions have actually exacerbated rather than solved conflicts. Mediation typically requires that the conflicting parties exhaust themselves and reach a "hurting stalemate," but even then promises only occasional success. Far more frequent is the eventual capitulation of one side to the other. ❖

V esna Pesic, a professor at the University of Belgrade and a peace activist in the former Yugoslavia, aptly summarized the origins of ethnic conflict. Ethnic conflict stems, she stated, from "the fear of the future, lived through the past."

Fear of the Future

Ethnic conflict is costly, and all parties would be better off if it could be avoided or terminated. In principle, there must be some negotiated solution that leaves both sides better off than fighting or continuing to fight.

The problem, however, is that parties to a conflict cannot commit credibly to uphold a negotiated solution, especially when the power of the parties is likely to change in the future. Despite the counter-productive nature of the conflict, each group fears that it may be exploited by the other in the future.

Given a fear of future exploitation, the party that is likely to become weaker may choose to fight now rather than later; under these circumstances, conflict becomes a "reasonable" choice. Thus, what is sometimes referred to as the ethnic security dilemma is better termed an "insecurity dilemma."

Lived Through the Past

Ethnicity is neither purely instrumental nor primordially given. Rather, ethnicity is socially constructed through repeated interactions of groups. Ethnicity is malleable within limits, but neither can it be taken on or off at will, nor is it genetically fixed. When the fear of the future sets in, these identities—which may have lain dormant for years—are called forth by ethnic partisans and confirmed by memories and myths of past conflict and mistreatment.

These newly reinforced ethnic cleavages then serve to heighten fears of the future. It is important to emphasize, however, that it is not the identities *per se* that drive groups toward conflict, but rather the fear of the future. Nonetheless, the two interact as the future takes on meaning from past cleavages.

Proximate Causes

Thus, fear of the future, lived through the past is the root of ethnic conflict. The proximate cause of that fear is the breakdown of existing social and political order. Two proximate causes appear to be particularly important:

- *Socio-economic change, accelerated by growing levels of international economic integration.*

This is seen today throughout the developing world as conflicts between traditional, largely agrarian elites who use concepts of ethnicity and nationalism to gather supporters, and the modernizing sectors of society, often tightly embedded into the international economy.

- *The breakup of multinational states, as witnessed in the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia.*

In these areas, the central authorities that guaranteed the existing ethnic pacts were suddenly removed, creating new insecurities. The simultaneous shift to a more market-oriented economy has proven to be a devastating combination.

Other international sources of breakdown in the social and political order examined by IGCC's Working Group on the International Spread and Management of Ethnic Conflict include:

- *democratization and political reform,*

- *the legitimization of ethnicity as a political category,* (see PB No. 2, *"Ethnic" Conflict Isn't*) and

- *environmental degradation. (*See PB No. 1, *Environmental Security.)*

We see all of these trends coming together in the former Soviet Union and the Balkans. The breakdown of central states creates ethnic fears and political

mobilization. The new "traditional" elites—the former communist bosses—use ethnicity and nationalism to reinforce their political positions and resist market reforms. The result is widespread social conflict played out along ethnic lines.

Diffusion Across Borders

IGCC's working group was initially stimulated by fears that Bosnia might be the opening case in a highly contagious epidemic of ethnic slaughter. Our question, then, was how and why does ethnic conflict diffuse across national borders?

The processes of diffusion are subtle and require very close analysis before jumping to any conclusions. For example:

- *Ethnic differences may be, but are not always an important source of conflict between states.*

Particularly dangerous are pairs in which an ethnic group is a dominant *majority* in one state but a repressed *minority* in a second. Yet, when neighboring states *share* an ethnic minority, there is no distinguishable effect on interstate conflict or cooperation. Refugees and patterns of state assistance, irredentist claims, and the degree of political mobilization by minority groups all matter.

- *Information about protest activity, when combined with a history of ethnic divisions and conflict, stimulates new rounds of conflict activity.*

Thus, in a demonstration effect, information about ethnic conflict abroad can stimulate greater ethnic conflict at home.

Yet, there is little evidence in the cases of the former Yugoslavia, the Soviet Union, and throughout Africa, that ethnic-based secession is contagious. In these areas, at least, common timing of exogenous changes appears to be a more powerful cause than any apparent diffusion effect.

There is, then, some reason to doubt that ethnic conflict is as contagious as sometimes supposed. In a pessimistic but apt metaphor, ethnic conflict may be less like a common cold and more like AIDS—difficult to catch, but devastating once infected.

Intervention

Can external actors—other states, or international and regional organizations—intervene in positive ways to help resolve or manage ethnic conflict?

There has been a long history of such interventions, despite the principle of non-intervention embedded in the notion of sovereignty. The promise of the post-Cold War world is that external powers, freed from the shackles of superpower competition, can now intervene to mitigate ethnic conflict by providing guarantees of social order—thereby reducing fears of the future.

The key issue, however, is the commitment of the external powers. External guarantees work only when the local parties to the conflict believe that the outside powers are committed to enforcing the social pact into the indefinite future. It is not the behavior of the external powers today that really matters. Rather, the central question is whether the warring parties or potential combatants believe the external powers will be there to protect them tomorrow. Absent a belief in the stamina of the external powers, intervention in any form will fail to mitigate the conflict.

This is the paradox of the post-Cold War world: At a time when the end of the superpower competition allows unprecedented cooperation in managing ethnic conflicts, the United States and others lack the political interest and will to commit to the role of external guarantors of social pacts. There are many reasons for this lack of commitment, none of which are easy to change. These include a poor understanding of the threat, its nature and magnitude; a blindness, at least in the

United States, to the possibility of irreconcilable differences between social groups; and a lack of consensus, at home and abroad, on intervention and other forms of peace-enforcement. This lack of consensus produces ambiguous policy. The net result is hesitant and vacillating interventions that have actually exacerbated rather than solved conflicts. Ambiguous policies signal weaker parties that they may do better by fighting longer and harder rather than compromising for what they can get now. This is the true tragedy of our present policy in the Balkans.

External powers should limit their roles and the expectations of others in attempting to resolve ethnic conflicts. Decisive intervention to separate the belligerents at the first signs of conflict coupled with a clear commitment to shore up the social/legal order for the long haul may succeed. Yet, it is difficult to rally public support for preventive uses of military force. Mediation typically works only after the conflicting parties have become exhausted by war. Even then, it is no panacea, but may be a more realistic course of action.❖

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How to Think About Ethnic Conflict:

WHAT IS IT?

- Fear of the future, lived through the past.

WHAT CAUSES IT?

- A breakdown in the existing social and political order.

  Examples: socio-economic change accelerated by international economic integration; the breakup of multinational states.

DOES IT SPREAD?

- Yes (but it is not as contagious as is sometimes supposed).

  Example: when an ethnic group is a dominant majority in one state but a minority in a second.

WILL INTERVENTION HELP?

- Only if belligerents *believe* that outside powers will enforce social guarantees *into the indefinite future.*