

UC scholars claim ethnic conflict stems from fear of the future, not "ancient hatreds" or communism's collapse

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Researchers at the University of California's Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation (IGCC) have released the results of a 2-year study on ethnic conflict and international intervention, suggesting that a poor understanding of the origins of ethnic conflict has led to equally poor prescriptions for its resolution in some of the world's most beleaguered regions.

"Ethnic conflict is not caused directly by inter-group differences, 'ancient hatreds,' or the stresses of modern life within a global economy," said David Lake, a professor of political science at UC San Diego and IGCC's research director for international relations. "Nor did the end of the Cold War simply uncork ethnic passions long bottled up by repressive communist regimes--despite widespread acceptance of this idea in the current political debate. Rather, ethnic conflict is caused by collective fears of the future."

The project's final report, "Ethnic Fears and Global Engagement: The International Spread and Management of Ethnic Conflict," authored by Lake and co-investigator Donald Rothchild, a professor of political science at UC Davis, is the result of six conferences, 20 academic papers, and four policy panels. The study, funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts, looked at a number of post-Cold War case-studies, including Bosnia, Chechnya, and Rwanda, examining the origins of ethnic conflicts, how they spread across state boundaries, and how they can be managed through confidence-building measures and international intervention.

Lake and Rothchild will release the full report in a series of briefings over the next month in San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Washington, D.C., for policymakers, journalists, and interested members of the public.

In their report, the authors explain how ethnic conflict often takes root "as groups begin to fear for their physical safety, and a series of dangerous and difficult to resolve strategic dilemmas arise that contain within them the potential for tremendous violence. Ethnic activists and political entrepreneurs, operating within groups, reinforce fears of physical insecurity and polarize the society, often by using political memories and myths to push groups further apart."

These interactions can produce a toxic brew of distrust and suspicion that can explode into murderous violence--up to and including genocide.

"Ethnic conflicts usually diffuse only to states that already contain the seeds of violence within them," according to the report. Politicizing ethnicity in one conflict may also send messages across borders that affect other ethnic groups; for example, Chechens may have surmised from events in Bosnia that it was in their best interests to continue fighting rather than compromise.

Escalation of ethnic conflict, said the authors, is driven by alliances between transnational kin groups, attempts to divert attention from domestic problems, or predatory states seeking to take advantage of the internal weaknesses of others.

Managing ethnic conflicts, the study concedes, is an imperfect process that, no matter how well conducted, leaves some potential for violence. Nonetheless, effective management should seek to reassure minority groups of their physical and cultural security: "Respect, power-sharing, elections engineered to produce the interdependence of groups, and autonomy and federalism are all important confidence-building measures that promote the rights of minority groups and thereby mitigate the strategic dilemmas that produce violence."

If such efforts fail, Lake explained, "international intervention may be needed to protect minorities against their worst fears as well as to deter the further spread of ethnic conflict.

But, the authors cautioned, a key ingredient in successful interventions is the credibility of the international commitment. "External interventions that the warring parties fear will soon fade may be worse than no intervention at all. If the warring parties do not believe that the external powers will be there to protect them tomorrow, any intervention is likely to fail. Ambiguous policies signal weaker parties that they may do better by fighting longer and harder rather than compromising for what they can get now. In today's world, there is no practical alternative to an international community actively engaged over the long term in containing ethnic conflict."

IGCC briefings on "Ethnic Fears and Global Commitments: The International Spread and Management of Ethnic Conflict," will take place at the January 17 meeting of the World Affairs Council of Northern California in San Francisco; the Pacific Council on International Policy in Los Angeles on January 25; and at a University of California IGCC Policy Seminar on February 9 in Washington, D.C.

For more information about the IGCC study or the briefings please contact Ron Bee at IGCC, (619) 534-6429/ FAX: (619) 534-6429/ E-mail: rbee@ucsd.edu.

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