

# Ethnofederalism: Lessons for Rebuilding Afghanistan, Preserving Pakistan, and Keeping Russia Stable

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*Henry Hale*  
*Indiana University*  
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Ethnofederalism is a federal political system in which territorial governance units are explicitly designated as ethnic homelands. It has proven quite workable in multiethnic states from India to today's Russia, but has gone disastrously wrong in polities like Yugoslavia and the USSR. Nascent ethnofederal structures currently exist also in countries like China and Pakistan, and ethnofederalism has been recommended as one way of rebuilding the multiethnic state of Afghanistan. Due to the immediate geopolitical importance of these countries, understanding whether all ethnofederal states are doomed to follow the bloody path of Yugoslavia or whether ethnofederalism can be an effective part of a strategy of interethnic accommodation is critical.

Recent research on the success of ethnofederalism in the Russian Federation and its failure in the USSR has revealed that the most dangerous forms of instability in ethnofederal systems can be largely traced to a single major flaw in institutional design: the uniting of the dominant ethnic group into a single "core ethnic region" that possesses clear superiority in population. In fact, a preliminary survey of all ethnofederal regimes throughout the world since 1950 reveals that *all* cases of ethnofederal implosion have involved a core ethnic region and that *no ethnofederal state without a core ethnic region has ever collapsed*.

This research has many implications, two of which are of immediate importance to the current war on terrorism. First, ethnofederalism may be a viable solution to ethnically divided Afghanistan, but only if it avoids creating a core ethnic region for the majority Pashtun population. Second, the fact that Pakistan possesses a core ethnic region places it in a "high risk" category for state collapse when it next democratizes. Because it is imperative that this nuclear state not break up into unstable and possibly hostile ministates, Pakistan should be urged to take some kind of institutional measures to mitigate this danger before holding its next elections. The findings also warn that attempts by the Russian federal government to "enlarge" the ethnically Russian regions could be destabilizing and suggest that China, should it democratize, is not likely to have the same experience of ethnofederal strife as the USSR.

### **Ethnofederalism: A Mixed Record**

States that are attempting to resolve or prevent ethnic conflict among territorially concentrated groups have frequently adopted ethnofederalism. For many years, common wisdom held that this was a workable solution because it could satisfy demands by ethnic group for autonomy and reduce opportunities for the central government to exploit

minority regions, while allowing for a statewide identity to develop by keeping everyone together. Success stories include states as varied as India, Switzerland, and Spain.

In the early 1990s, however, the ethnofederal solution appeared to backfire on its advocates. In the wake of liberalization in the former Communist empire, all of the unitary states survived (even those like Romania that had deep ethnic divisions) whereas all of the states that collapsed, notably Yugoslavia, the USSR, and Czechoslovakia, were ethnofederations. This observation has led many specialists to contend that ethnofederalism is *inherently* destabilizing because it tends to reinforce ethnic differences and to provide “political entrepreneurs” with resources and incentives to “play the ethnic card.”

Recent research suggests that this blanket condemnation of ethnofederalism goes too far, but that we need to be careful about how ethnofederal institutions are designed.

## **Why Core Ethnic Regions Threaten Ethnofederal Stability: Russia vs. USSR**

For three main reasons, building a “core ethnic region” into an ethnofederal system tends to create a higher risk of state collapse than would be the case if a core ethnic region were avoided. To illustrate each reason, I point to evidence from in-depth studies of political dynamics in the Russian Federation and the USSR. These cases are illustrative because each is an ethnofederal political system; each has faced virtually identical cultural and contextual pressures (including the traumas of the transition from communism); and each differs from the other in that the USSR contained a core ethnic region (the Russian Republic, or RSFSR) while the Russian Federation does not. Indeed, many observers between 1991 and 1993 predicted that the process of state disintegration would not stop at the doorstep of the Russian Federation but that Russia would collapse just as the Soviet Union did.

### **Dual Power**

Historians have long noted that situations of “dual power” tend to be midwives of revolution. When a “second” center of power makes a claim to sovereignty that rivals that of the state over its people, and when that rival center is not immediately quashed, that state faces a serious threat of collapse. The demise of the Russian Provisional Government in 1917, for example, became imminent when both the Petrograd Soviet and the Kerensky Government claimed sovereign authority. In ethnofederal systems that unite the dominant ethnic group into a single “core ethnic region” that far outweighs other regions in terms of population, that core ethnic region is a natural, preformed potential rival claimant to the sovereignty of the state. First and foremost, this is due to the institutional power that such a regional government has by virtue of its size. It is also due to the core ethnic region’s association with a “dominant” group, which tends to give the core ethnic region political interests distinct from that of the central government (which is more interested in the support of minority groups) and to justify a claim to be the “true voice” of the “leading” group in the state. This is vividly illustrated in the late history of the Soviet Union, when Boris Yeltsin succeeded in becoming the leader of the Russian Republic (the core ethnic region of the USSR) and proceeded to hamper Gorbachev at every turn, declaring the local supremacy of Russian over Soviet law and ultimately initiating the pact with Ukraine and Belarus that formally dissolved the USSR.

When no core ethnic region exists, however, the dynamics tend to be decidedly different. Although members of historically or demographically dominant ethnic groups may voice the exact same grievances against the central government as they would if they possessed a single region of their own, they face far greater institutional hurdles to the kind of *collective* group action that is necessary for the dominant group to present the state with a situation of dual power. We see this very clearly in the case of today's Russian Federation, which contains no single core region for ethnic Russians, but instead a series of 57 separate regions called kraia and oblasts. Just like Yeltsin's Russian Republic did in the USSR, krai and oblast leaders have complained about the central government's economic policies, lambasted "privileges" given to ethnic minority regions, and, in a few cases, actually declared themselves to be "republics" equal in status and sovereignty to the ethnic minority regions (for example, the movement to form a Urals Republic in 1993–1994). The crucial difference between the Russian Federation and the USSR, however, is that the Russian oblasts and kraia are not united. No single one of them poses a credible threat to sovereignty over the bulk of the country, nor can they agree on any single leader to unite them in making a more threatening claim. Their fragmentation thus allows the central government to engage in all kinds of "divide and conquer" tactics, such as paying off loyal regions or buying off strategically placed troublemakers through bilateral treaties or hidden transfer payments. Gorbachev simply did not have this strategy available to him because a united Russian Republic was actively resisting resource flows away from itself and because this Russian Republic was actually destroying the central government's financial infrastructure (such as the banking system), something possible due to its strong and broad authority.

### **Ethnic Security Dilemmas**

A core ethnic region can also frighten minority ethnofederal regions due to the former's claim to speak for the whole dominant nation, its tendency to have more narrowly group-oriented interests than the central government, and its capacity to take effective action promoting its own interests at the expense of minority group interests due to its tremendous institutional and demographic power. This can also be seen clearly in the final days of the USSR. In response to the August 1991 coup, the Russian Republic seized control of key *federal* ministries and then proceeded to dominate transitional government structures after the coup had succeeded. Top Russian Republic leaders, including the vice president and Yeltsin's press secretary, also threatened to seize Ukrainian territory should Kiev try to secede. These actions galvanized Ukrainian fears that Russian interests would dominate any union in place of the USSR, spurring on its secession drive. While the federal government in today's Russian Federation has recently taken a hardline stance regarding its restive minority regions (especially Chechnya), the leaders of the Russian kraia and oblasts have not further inflamed the situation because, although they have at times made quite provocative statements, the minority regions do not see them as being able to do much to act on their impulses.

### **Community Imagining**

When a core ethnic region exists, it becomes much easier for members of that community (as well as outsiders) to imagine the existence of a separate "ethnic" state coinciding with those boundaries. Thus although the idea of an "independent" Russian Republic seceding from the USSR was originally treated as a joke, Yeltsin's administration was able rapidly to turn this into a viable option that won popular acquiescence and even outright support in some quarters. In

today's Russian Federation, on the other hand, no single region can clearly be seen as "Russia" and it remains virtually inconceivable that all of Russia's 32 ethnic minority regions could secede and still leave anything that could be seen as a united "Russia." Instead, the alternative is typically seen as a splintered Russian nation, fragmented into several (if not 57) separate regional states, something that generates far stronger opposition from Russians than did the 1991 idea of Russia "shedding some non-Russians" but still remaining united as "Russia."

## **A Global Perspective**

Although the global evidence is still being compiled and classified, a preliminary analysis of the world's countries has revealed a total of 17 cases of countries with a political system that can be considered ethnofederal since 1950. This list contains countries ranging from Nigeria's First Republic to the USSR to India to Switzerland.

Despite the great diversity of countries studied, and even taking into account problems of interpreting individual cases, one pattern becomes strikingly clear: *All* of the world's cases of "ethnofederal collapse" (Czechoslovakia, Nigeria's First Republic, Pakistan 1956–1971, USSR, Yugoslavia) have occurred in countries possessing a united core ethnic region, whereas *not a single ethnofederation lacking a core ethnic region has collapsed*. Although some ethnofederations have survived with a core ethnic region (such as Belgium, which adopted an ethnofederal solution in 1993), the chances of collapse are found to be far higher than for those without a core ethnic region. These findings strongly suggest that what is unstable is not simply ethnofederalism, but badly designed ethnofederalism. (The author can provide a table of countries on request.)

## **Implications**

### **Afghanistan**

The experience of Yugoslavia and the USSR should not lead us to reject ethnofederalism as a possible system for accommodating ethnic groups in a stable Afghanistan. Indeed, one way to weaken the religious extremist appeal of the Taliban might be to play to regional or ethnic loyalties as a basis of support and legitimacy for the new state. Because the Pashtun group is widely believed to be a large plurality, however, the research reported here strongly warns against uniting the Pashtun into a single, united core Pashtun ethnofederal region. Instead, it would be far better to adopt a system like India's ethnofederation, in which the dominant Hindi-speaking group is divided into *several* federal states but in which the largest linguistic minorities are given their own regions. This could be sold to Pashtun leaders as a way to multiply their influence in federal affairs (more regions = more voices). Perhaps more importantly, however, such a solution could be used to appeal to regionally defined cleavages *within* the Pashtun group, which should be appealing to clans or other groupings that have a regional power base and that might therefore have less power in any united Pashtun administrative region. The federal government would have to be carefully crafted, of course. Moreover, specialists on the country may find better solutions than ethnofederalism. However ethnofederalism should not be prematurely ruled out, and if it is adopted, it must be designed so as to minimize the risk of future collapse.

## **Pakistan**

Pakistan also has an ethnofederal state structure. Currently, this has little meaning because the country is a dictatorship under General Pervez Musharraf, who does not give real autonomy to “federal” units. Nevertheless, should Pakistan start to democratize while keeping its current structure, ethnofederal dynamics are likely to come into play. Critically, Pakistan does possess a core ethnic Punjab region that contains a majority of the population. This means that, according to the logic of ethnofederalism outlined here, we might expect Pakistan to be highly vulnerable to state collapse should it democratize. The external shock of the recent terror attacks in the United States and the U.S. military action in Afghanistan would seem to make Pakistan even more likely to succumb to these dynamics—indeed, the original Pakistan, which included the core ethnic region now known as Bangladesh, did collapse back in 1971. Although we should certainly promote a democratic Pakistan, finding a way for Pakistan to alter its ethnofederal structure so as not to have a core ethnic region might be wise. Exactly how to do this is a question for experts on Pakistan. If breaking up the Punjab state proves politically impossible, this would seem to put a premium on adopting carefully designed systems of ethnic accommodation, such as those that have arguably helped Belgium survive despite its also possessing a core ethnic region (Flanders). Given that Pakistan possesses nuclear weapons, the stakes here are quite high.

## **Russia**

Russia falls into the category of “stable ethnofederations,” not possessing a core ethnic region for Russians. Ironically, however, Putin and other Russian nationalists have sometimes called for reducing the number of Russian regions, perhaps combining many of the oblasts and krais. The study reported here would suggest that this actually would make the breakup of Russia more likely because reducing the number of Russian regions would make it more likely that these regions will be able to coordinate their actions in a way that could present the federal presidency with a situation of dual power, threaten minority regions, and facilitate the imagining of a “Russia” without its ethnic minority units.

## **China**

China, like Pakistan, is an undemocratic state that is structured along ethnofederal lines, including sizable regions such as Xinjiang and Tibet designated for minority groups. Because China has no core ethnic region, instead possessing many regions primarily populated by Han Chinese, this study suggests that China is unlikely to collapse as a state should it democratize.

## **Generally**

Ethnofederalism is a viable arrangement for ethnically divided states so long as it is designed well. This is not to say that ethnofederalism is the best solution—this is a subject for other analyses. However, understanding how core ethnic regions tend to destabilize ethnofederal states allows us to anticipate better and hopefully avoid nightmares of ethnic conflict and regional instability.