

# **“Rationalist Explanations for War”**

By James Fearon (1995)

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# **Wars are costly, but they still occur.**

- State leaders are sometimes irrational.
- Leaders that start wars enjoy the benefits, but don't pay the costs.
- Even rational leaders who consider the risks and costs of war still might fight anyway.
  - “rationalist explanations”

# Background:

- Working within neorealism:
  - The world is in a state of anarchy.
  - States act in their own self-interest.
- War is inefficient *ex post*.
  - Both states suffer some costs of fighting.
  - Both states would be better off achieving the same final resolution without paying these costs.
  - An *ex ante* bargain could avoid (or decrease) these costs.

# Central Question:

“What prevents states in a dispute from reaching an *ex ante* agreement that avoids the costs they know will be paid *ex post* if they go to war?”

- War is costly and risky.
- Rational states should have incentives to find bargained settlements that all would prefer to fighting.
- Doesn't always happen!

# Current Rationalist Explanations:

1. Anarchy
  2. Preventive war
  3. Positive expected utility
- Only explain why war might appear attractive to a leader
  - Don't solve the problem of war's *ex post* inefficiency

# Anarchy

- Waltz: when there is no supranational authority to make or enforce law, “war occurs because there is nothing to prevent it.”
  - War sometimes appears to be the best option
- Anarchy encourages opportunities for military conflict, but doesn't explain why wars happen
- The lack of a central authority doesn't prevent states from negotiating

# Preventive War

- When a declining power expects it could be attacked by a rising power, so it attacks the rising power in the present
  - Generally seen as rational
- Doesn't consider whether or not the states could find a bargain
  - Both states have an incentive to do so
- An expected shift in power is not enough to make war rational

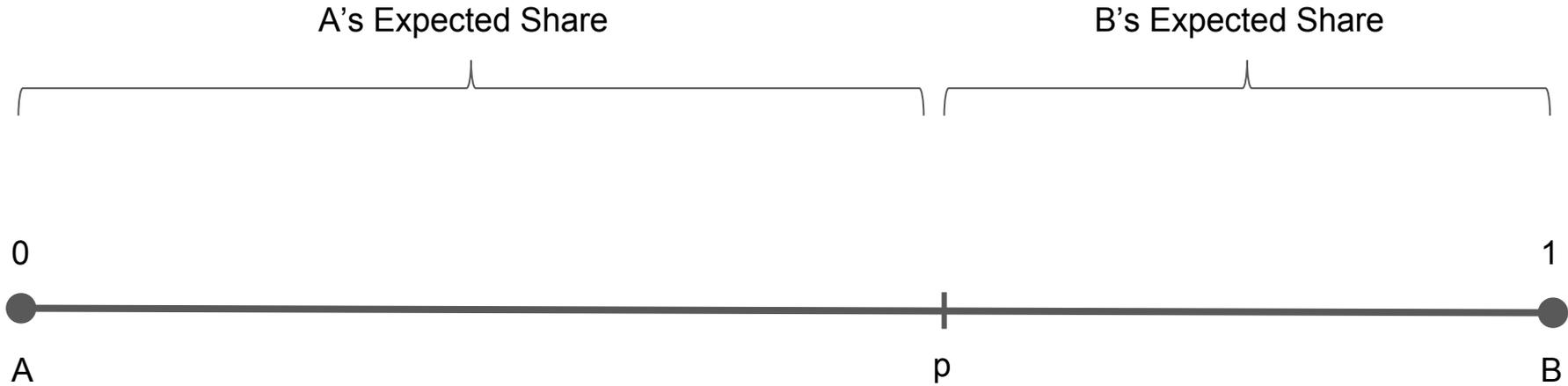
# Positive Expected Utility

- War can occur when two states both estimate that the expected benefits from fighting outweigh the expected costs
- $Eu(\text{war}) > Eu(\text{peace})$
- Informal arguments don't specify conditions that this would occur
- Formal arguments make too many restrictive assumptions

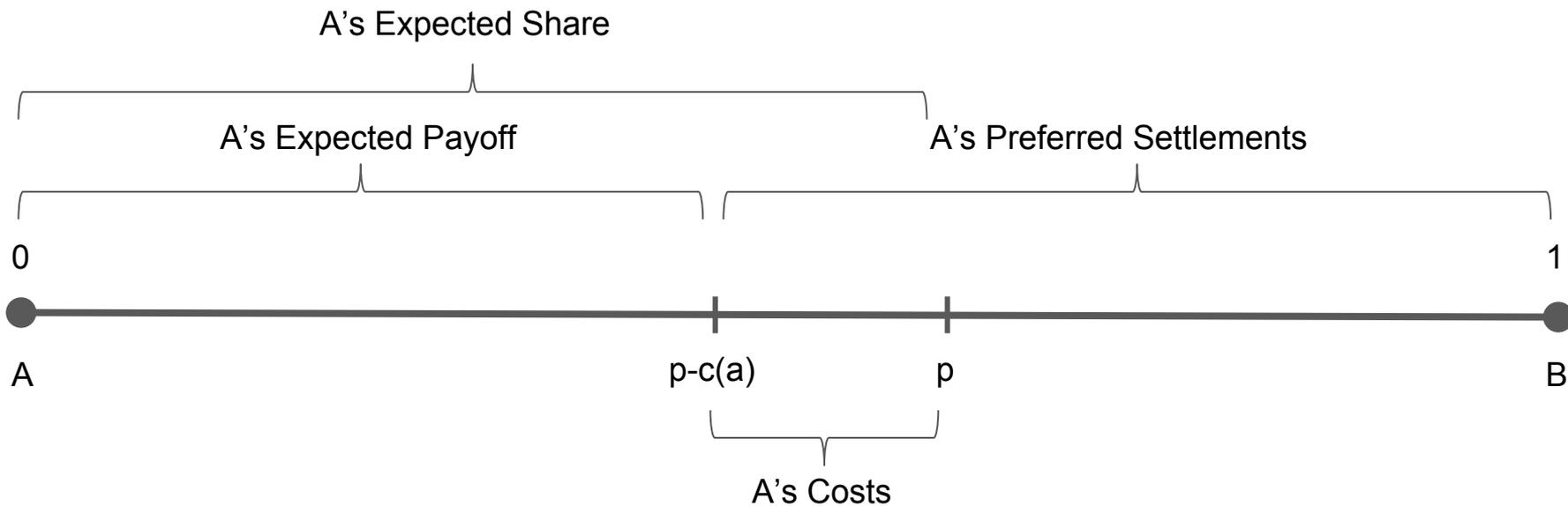
# The Bargaining Range



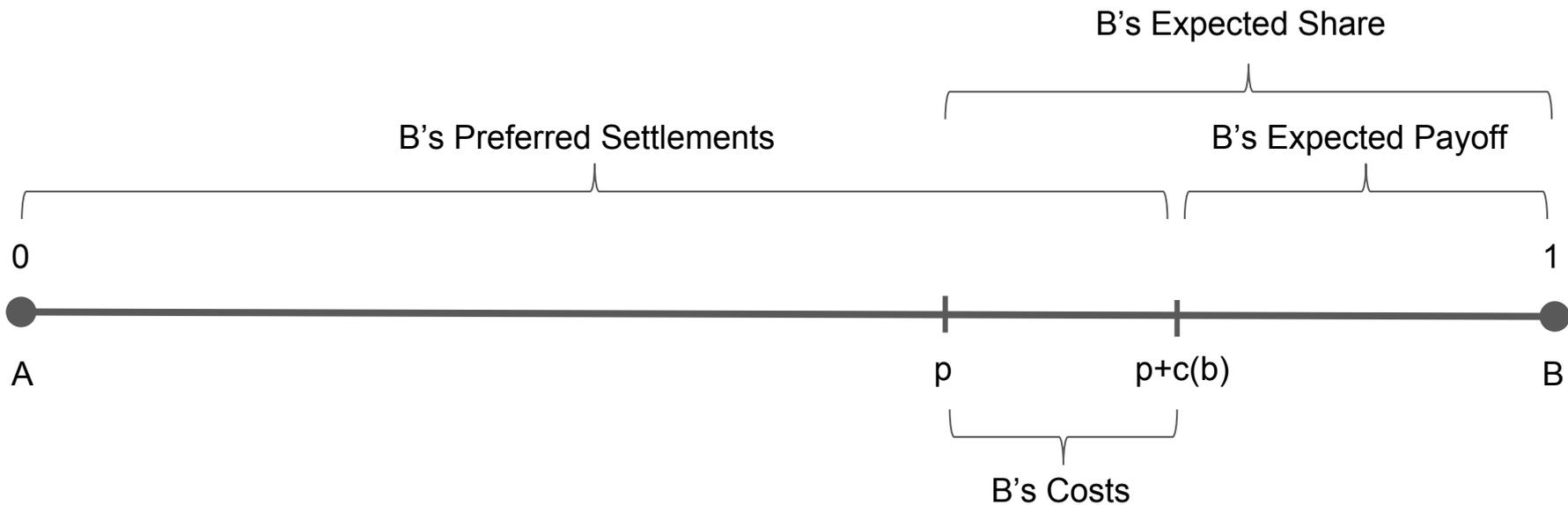
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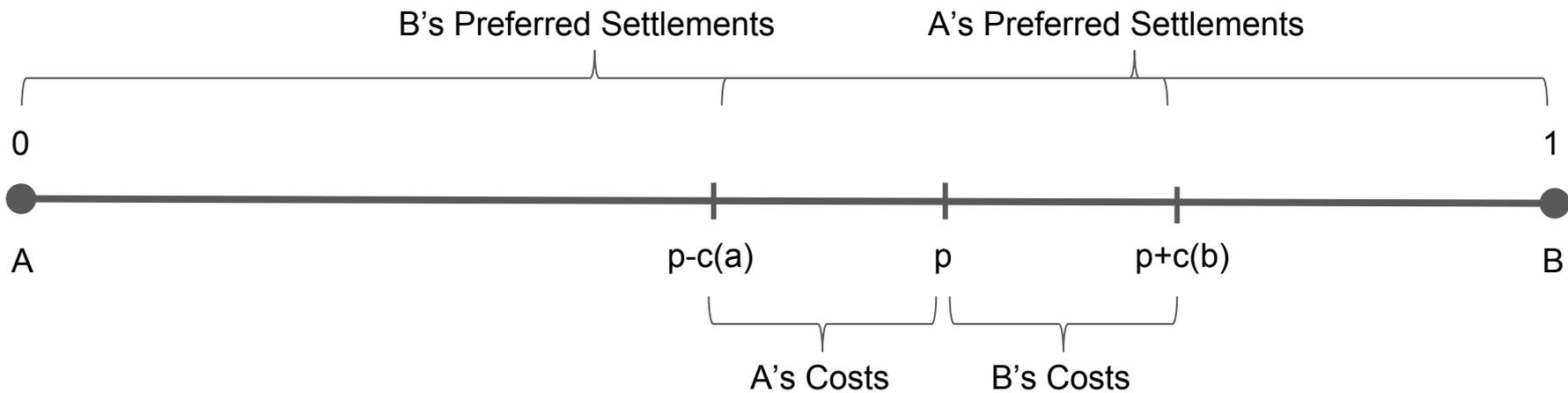
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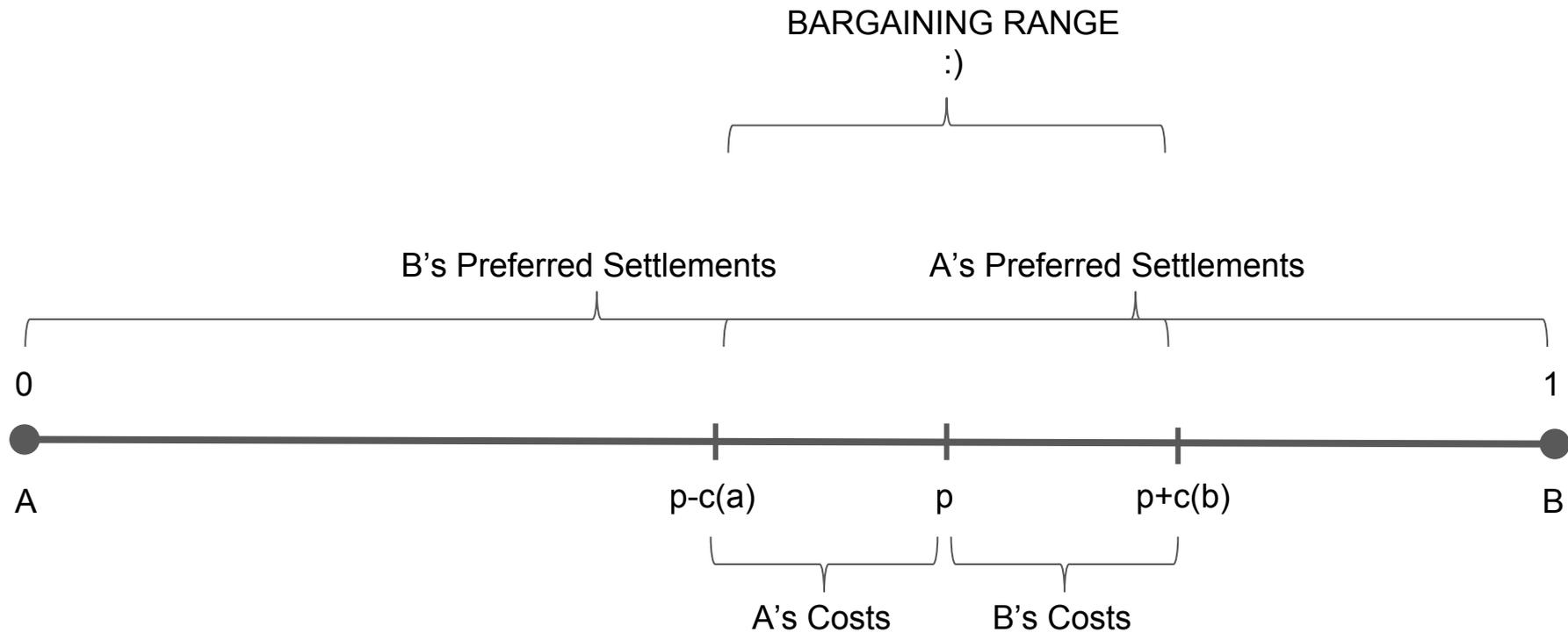
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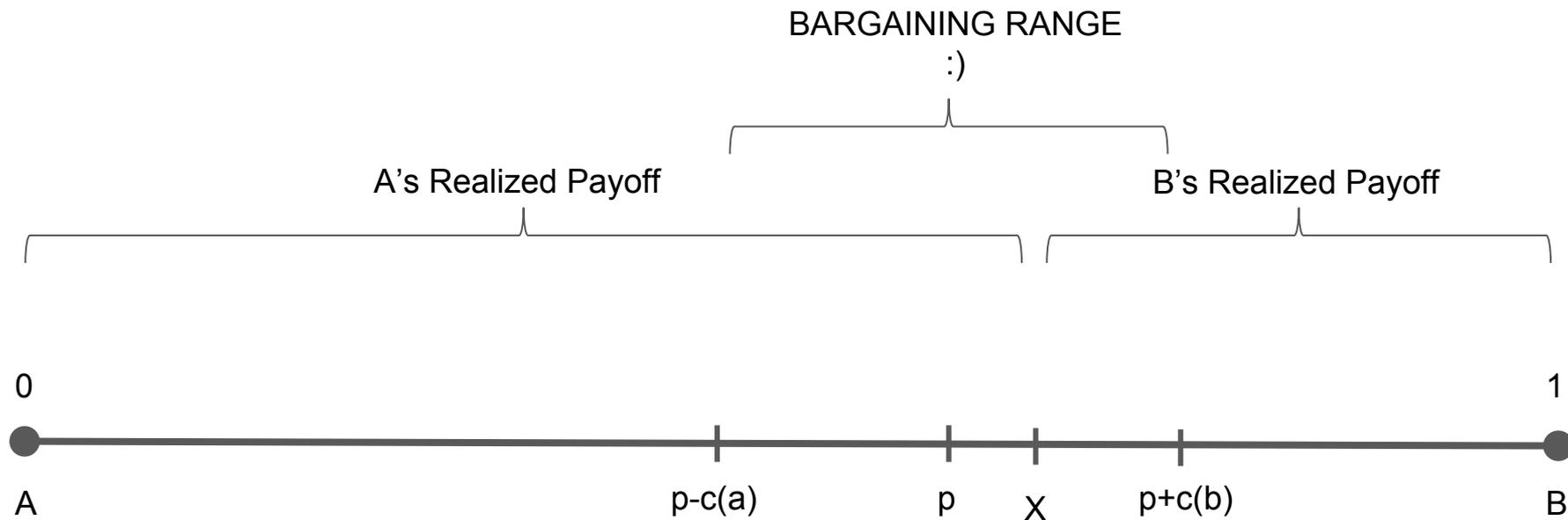
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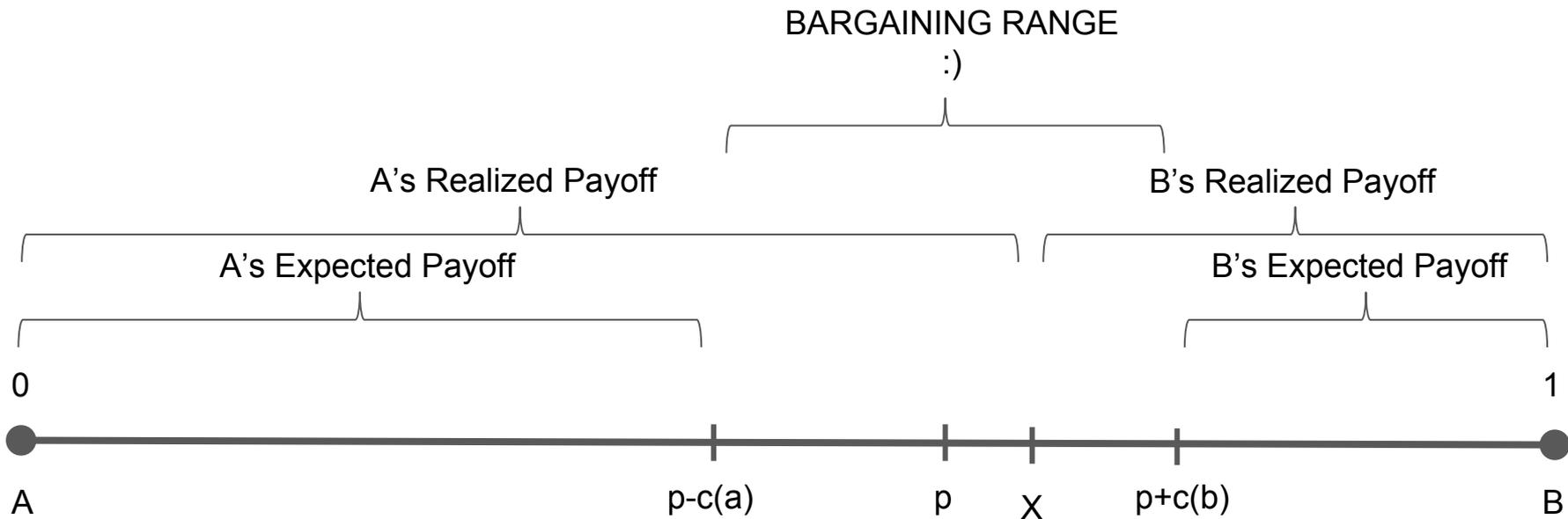
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# The Bargaining Range



# Underlying Assumptions

1. The states know that  $p$  exists (even if they disagree about what it is).
  - A bargaining range exists
2. The states are risk-averse or risk-neutral over the issue.
  - 100% chance of  $\frac{1}{2}$  is better than 50% chance of 0 or 1
3. The issue is perfectly divisible.
  - A feasible settlement exists between  $p-c(a)$  and  $p+c(b)$

# Simple Example

- A and B disputing over how to split \$100
- Can go to war for \$20
  - Each has 50% chance of winning
- Expected value of going to war:

$$(.5)(100) + (.5)(0) - 20 = 50 + 0 - 20 = \$30$$

- Peaceful settlements: (\$31, \$69) to (\$69, \$31)

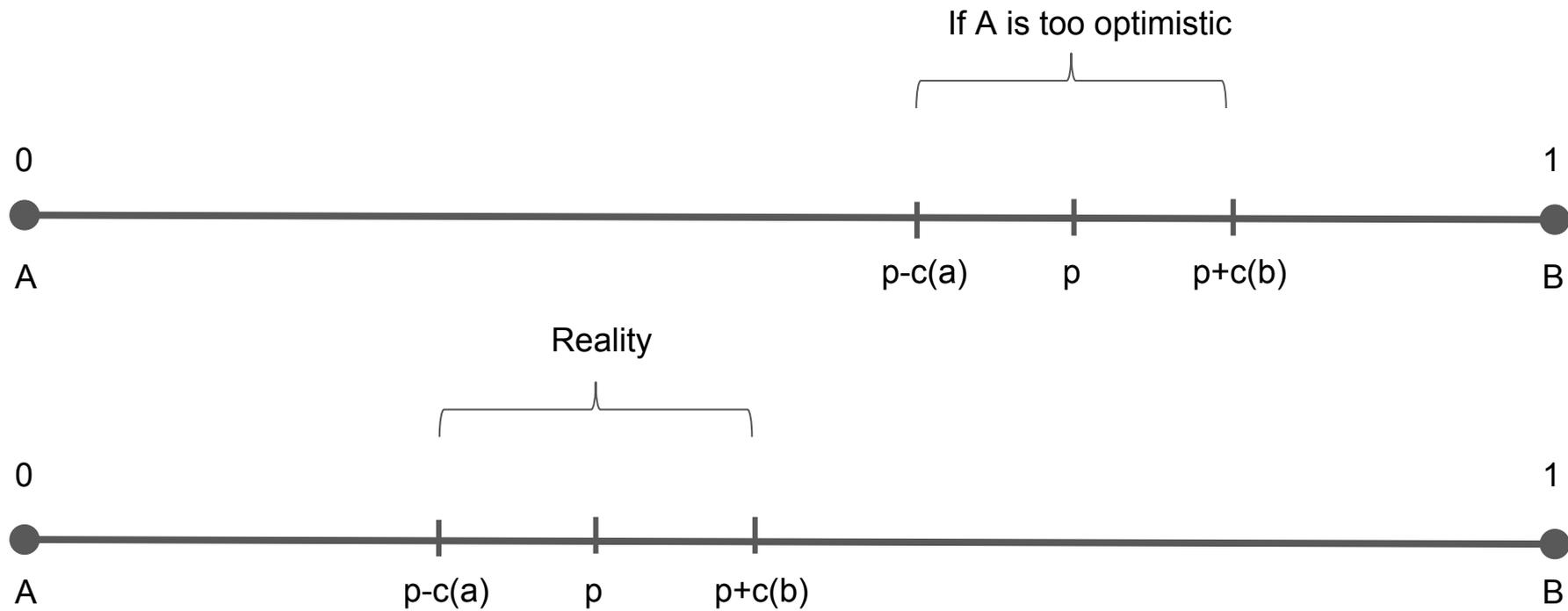
# **Fearon's Rationalist Explanations for War**

1. Private information and incentives to misrepresent
2. Commitment problems
3. Issue indivisibilities

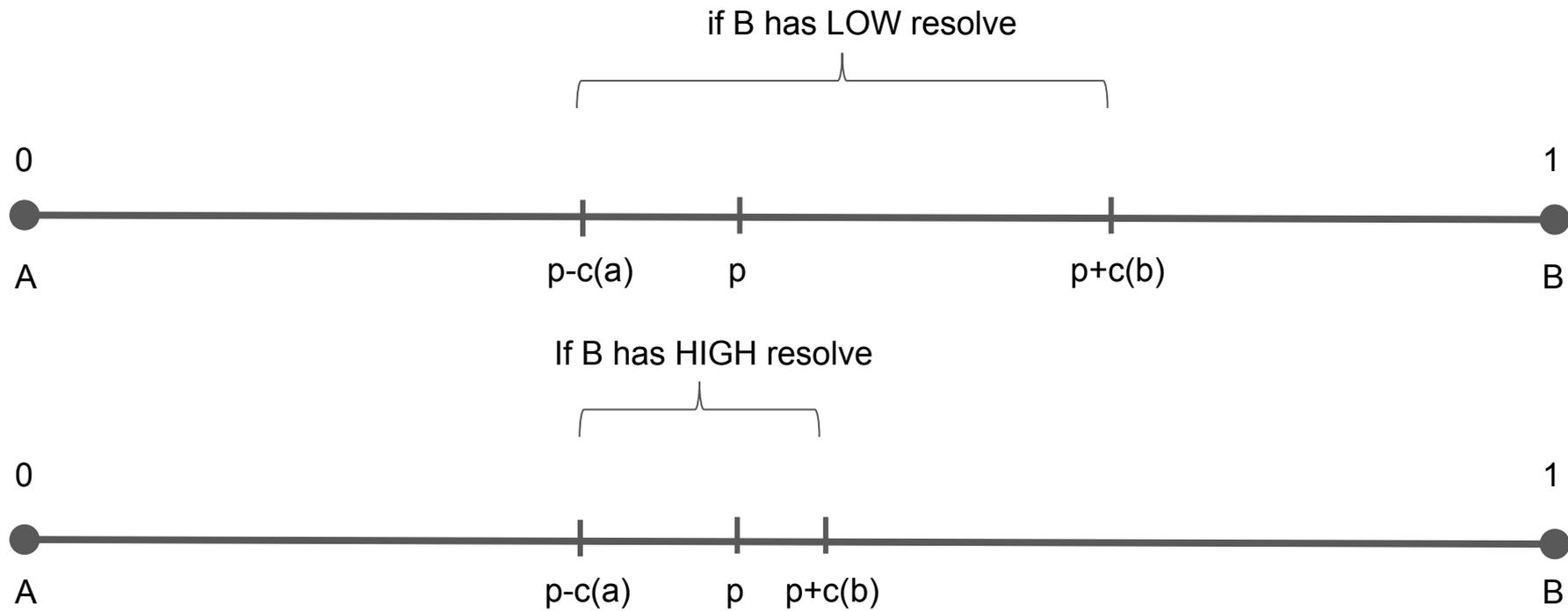
# 1: Private Info and Incentives to Misrepresent

- Existing rational miscalculation literature:
  - Relative power over an adversary
    - Skews  $p$
  - Willingness to fight
    - Skews  $c$
- Skews the bargaining range

# Miscalculation Over Relative Power



# Miscalculation Over Resolve



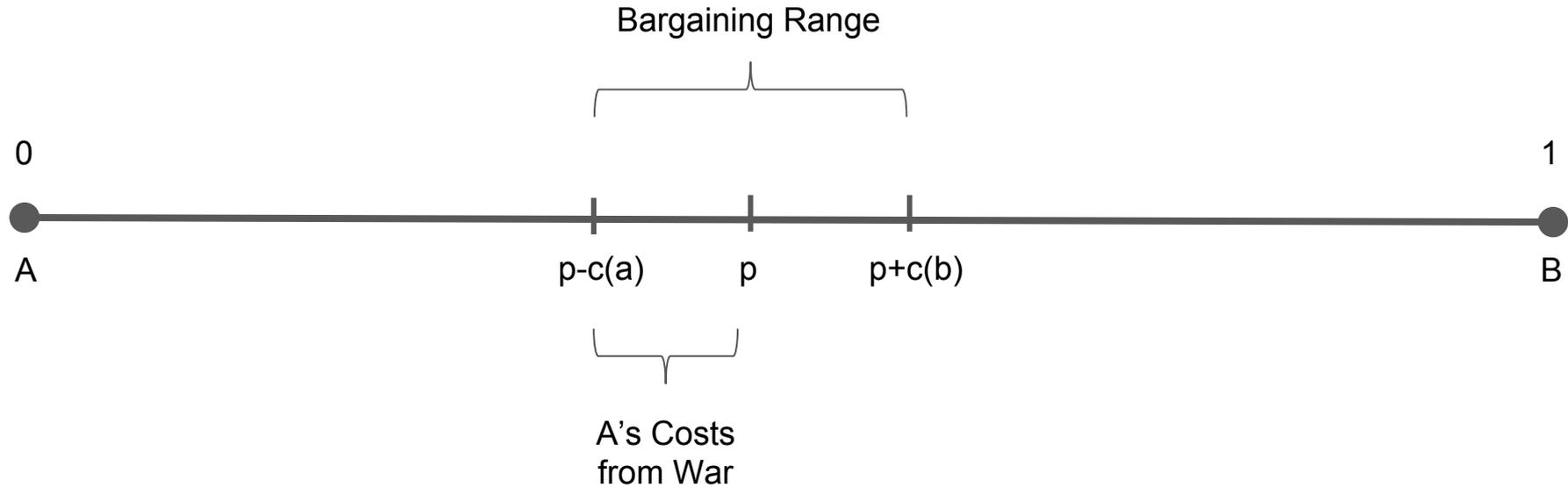
# But...

- What about communication?
  - States would be better off sharing this information and avoiding war
- States have incentives to withhold or misrepresent private information
  - Avoid seeming too weak or too aggressive
  - To gain concessions
  - To deter future challenges

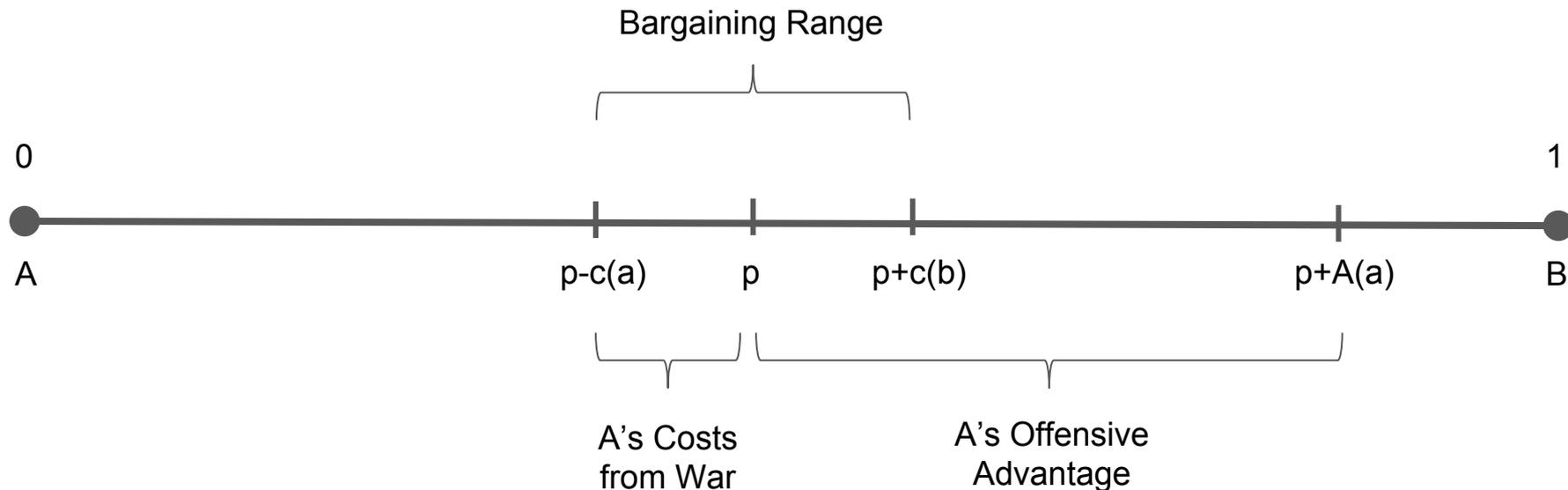
## 2: Commitment Problems

- Even when they agree on a bargaining range, states might not trust each other
- Anarchy comes into play
  - Peaceful bargains cannot be enforced
- Three mechanisms:
  - Preemptive war (offensive advantages)
  - Preventive war
  - Strategic goods

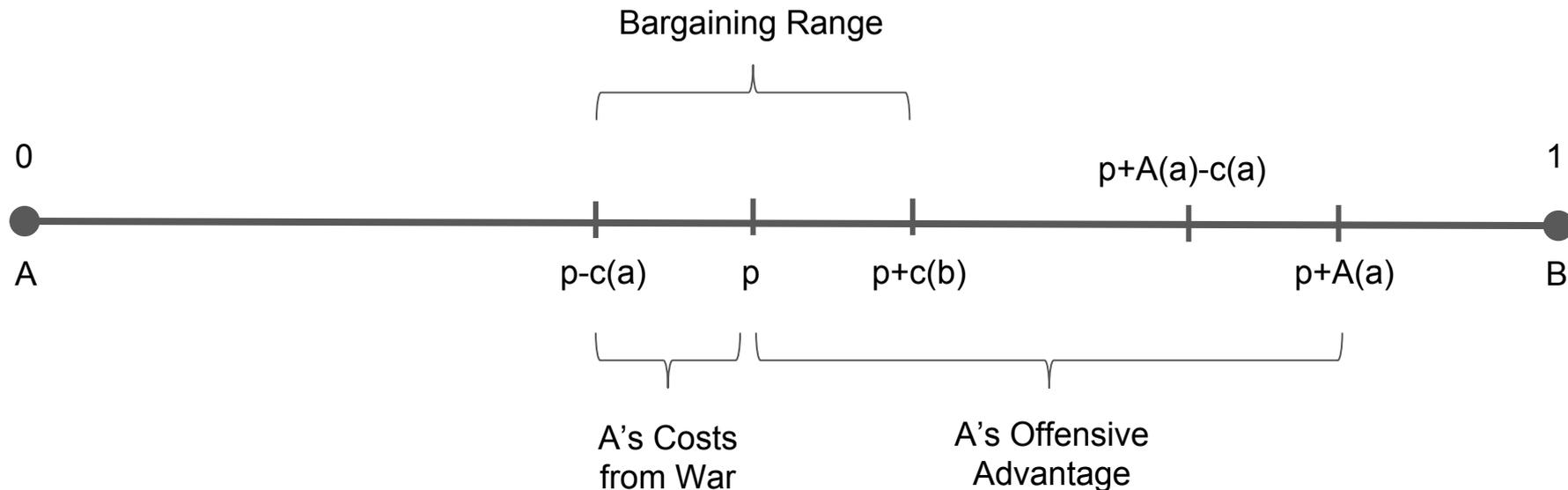
# Preemptive War Commitment Problem



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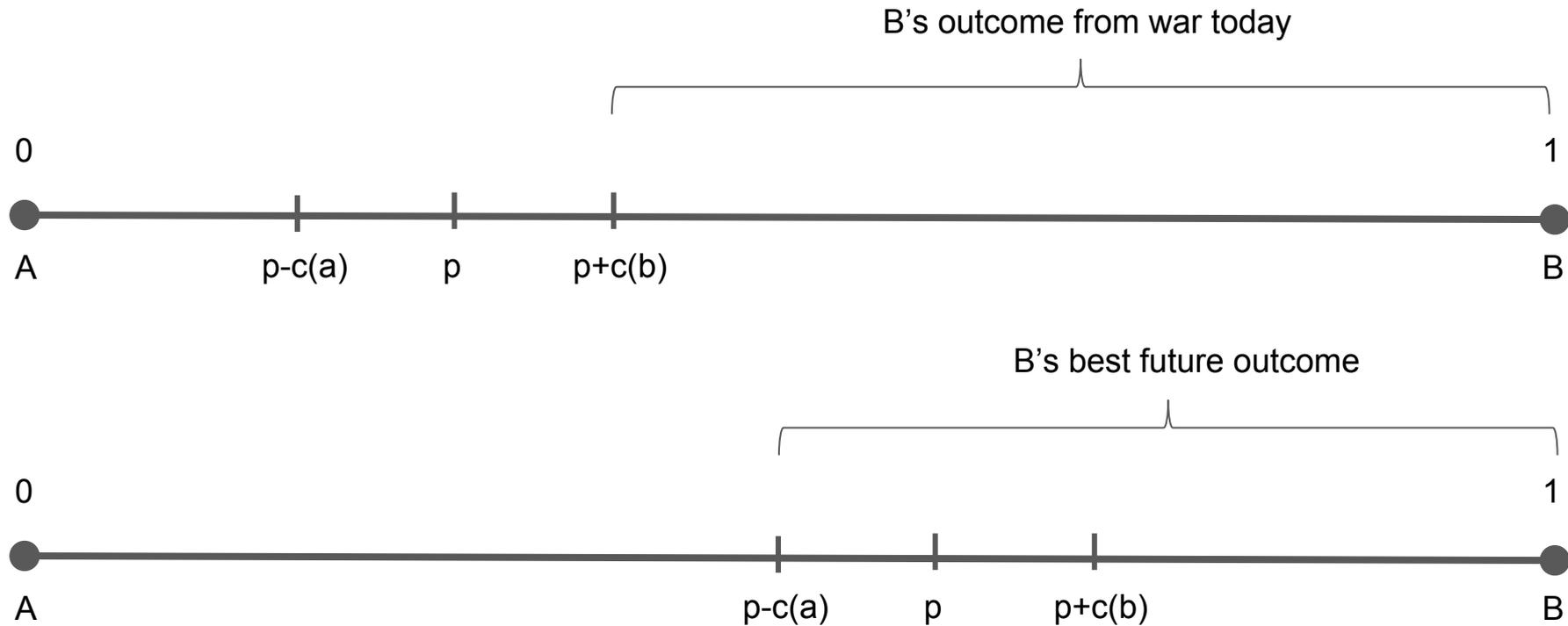
# Preemptive War Commitment Problem



# Preventive War Commitment Problem

- State A: rising power
- State B: declining power
- Agree on bargaining range, but know it will change
  - B prefers today's over the future's
- For B, the outcome from war today is better than any peaceful settlement in the future

# Preventive War Commitment Problem



# Preventive War Commitment Problem

- Under anarchy, no way to enforce settlements
- 2 commitment problems:
  - A can't commit to not exploiting their future leverage
  - B can't commit to a future war (rather than accept A's increasing demands)
- Contrary to the existing arguments:
  - B fears a future peace, not a future war
  - Lack of trust stems from incentives to renege, not uncertainty

# “Strategic Goods” Commitment Problem

- When the good the states are disputing over has some strategic benefit
  - Militarily
  - Economically
- Acquiring the good would shift the bargaining range
  - Ex: territory
- Nothing would stop a state from exploiting this future leverage

### 3: Issue Indivisibility

- Assumption #3: issue is perfectly divisible; there is a feasible settlement within the bargaining range
- Some things can't be divided
  - Ex: who gets the throne
- But:
  - Issues are usually multidimensional
  - Side payments

# Criticisms

- Based on logic, not empirical evidence
  - Some variables are hard to measure
- Some things are overly simplified
  - Ex: uncertainty
- Similar circumstances lead to different outcomes
  
- most critiques result from people misunderstanding him?