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Can Democracy Create World Peace?

Democratic Peace Theory: Misguided Policy or Panacea

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Can democracy create world peace? The idea that representative liberal governments can diminish the occurrence of war is one of the most appealing, influential, and at the same time, controversial ideas of our time. For centuries, thinkers have proposed that a world of democratic countries would be a peaceful world. As early as 1795, Immanuel Kant wrote in his essay *Perpetual Peace* that democracies are less warlike. Within the United States, this idea has held particular sway. Presidents like Woodrow Wilson have embraced this idea and advocated the creation of democracies to create a less belligerent world. Harry S. Truman once said, “Totalitarian regimes imposed on free peoples...undermine the foundation of international peace and hence security of the United States.”¹

The Democratic Peace Theory is based on several premises. The first argues that in democracies, populations will restrain elected leaders. This is to say that given the choice, people will be reluctant to bear the costs of war in terms of human life and financial treasure. Second, many think that democracies will use political institutions to settle their domestic disputes. Therefore, when conflict arises with another democracy, they will be more apt to use international institutions (i.e., the United Nations, International Court of Justice, G-8 Summits, etc.) to resolve their international disagreements. Others believe that democracies produce a political culture of negotiation and conciliation, claiming that people in democracies are taught that violence is not an appropriate means of conflict resolution. The argument holds that if a war-prone leader comes to power in a democracy, other institutions (e.g., Congress) will present cross-pressures (here checks and balances) and prevent an aggressive head of state from moving a country to war. Finally, people in democracies are believed to be more sympathetic and tolerant of people in other democracies.² Thus, whether it is common norms, institutional constraints, mutual respect, or popular will—democracy is viewed as a treatment for war

Democratic Peace and Political Science

In the 1970s, scholars began using the tools of social science to explore this thesis and have uncovered a significant amount of empirical research that supports these claims. Today there are over a hundred authors who have published scholarly works on the Democratic Peace Theory. One study examined 416 country-to-country wars from 1816-1980 and found that only 12 were fought between democracies.³ Bruce Russett writes that “Established democracies fought no wars against one another during the entire twentieth century.”⁴ Another proponent found that the probability of any two democracies engaging in war is less than half of 1%!⁵ This is not to say that democracies have not gone to war, but when considering pairs (or dyads) of democracies, there are almost no instances of war between two democracies. Four decades of research consistently finds significant support for this position. Moreover, the findings remain robust as the number of democracies in the world continues to grow. In fact, as Jack Levy points out, Democratic Peace Theory is “as close as anything we have to an empirical law in international relations.”⁶

Democratic Peace and American Foreign Policy

Beyond academics, the last two presidential administrations have particularly embraced this research as a policy objective and a way to build world peace. President Clinton in his 1994 State of the Union Address proclaimed, “Ultimately, the best strategy to ensure our security and to build a durable peace is to support the advancement of democracy elsewhere. Democracies don’t attack each other.” More recently, current President George W. Bush stated, “And the reason why I’m so strong on democracy is democracies don’t go to war with each other. And the reason why is the people of most societies don’t like war, and they understand what war means... I’ve got great faith in democracies to promote peace. And that’s why I’m such a strong believer that the way forward in the Middle East, the broader Middle East, is to promote democracy.”⁷ This

discussion has generated considerable excitement and promoted growing expectations by both policy makers and Western publics that this is something we should be pursuing.⁸ This theory has come close to conventional wisdom and served as a foundation for both moral and political missions. Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger writes, “[a] majority of the American leaders were convinced then as they are now that America has a special responsibility to spread its values as its contributions to world peace.”⁹

The Problems of Democratic Peace

Just as the Democratic Peace Theory has its supporters, it has also generated considerable criticisms. Alexander Hamilton presents an early rejection of this idea in Federalist No. 6, writing: “Sparta, Athens, Rome, and Carthage were all republics; two of them, Athens and Carthage, of the commercial kind. Yet were they as often engaged in wars, offensive and defensive, as the neighboring monarchies of the same times. Sparta was little better than a well regulated camp; and Rome was never sated of carnage and conquest.”¹⁰

In terms of the current research, establishing the correlations have been relatively easy; however, establishing causation is more problematic. In fact, most scholars do not agree on why democracies are more peaceful. In addition, the research itself has come under heavy criticism with scholars claiming that the evidence changes depending on how you define “democracy,” “war,” and “peace.” One rebuttal to the democratic peace theory is found in the Big Mac Peace Theory; this cheeky modification points out that no two countries with a McDonald’s have ever gone to war.¹¹ The argument claims that what the scholars are actually measuring is economic development, not democracy. Here some argue that a stable middle class (people who like their current status) will not support a war that may jeopardize their standard of living. Alternatively, the causal factors may be powerful economic elites who block any move towards aggression against a country where they hold financial ties and where war puts their economic interests at risk. Along these lines, one compelling study finds that the Democratic Peace Theory only holds true between two democracies that have reached high standards of economic development. Here the research finds that poor democracies are more likely to fight each other.¹² So, perhaps it is economic development, global capitalism, and the interdependence of foreign trade that impedes war, not democracy.¹³

Stronger opponents actually argue that “good science” is creating dangerous policy. There are those that fear that the research provides justification for countries to go on democracy crusades. One issue they raise concerns the assumption that democracies create peaceful peoples. Here, scholars question the idea that popular will can mitigate war, particularly since war seems to be rather popular in certain democracies.¹⁴ The United States presents an interesting example of this as public approval ratings of U.S. presidents tend to skyrocket during war. For example, President George H.W. Bush saw his public approval ratings rise to an unprecedented 89% during the 1991 Persian Gulf War when Americans “rallied around the flag.”

Perhaps the most problematic aspect of the Democratic Peace Theory concerns implementation—**how** do you create a world of democracies? Here we find two minds, one that advocates the active pursuit of a globe full of democracies and one that promotes a more passive policy. The latter view is found in the early writings of Thomas Jefferson as he proclaimed, “A just and solid republican government maintained here will be a standing monument and example for... people of other countries.”¹⁵ Jefferson held that leadership by example (where Western and American governments practice virtue, self-restraint, and rule of law) would be contagious. The second, stickier position involves the active or even forceful pursuit of democratic political systems. This position assumes that democracy will be welcomed across the globe and can be transplanted with relative ease. However, we are beginning to see that some people do not see democracy as desirable. In fact, there are people who view the Democratic Peace Theory and its policy implications as thinly veiled imperialism. In effect, they view the spread of democracy as an effort to homogenize the world, rejecting local culture, indigenous institutions, and even popular preferences. Thus, rather than viewing themselves as liberated, people and their leaders in many non-democratic countries hear this policy mandate as smug rhetoric. This also touches on the very contentious debate about whether “gunpoint democracy” will work or whether this actually presents a contradiction to the ideas of conflict resolution through nonviolence.

Another thorny issue is that democratically elected governments may not guarantee peaceful interests. Here “one must be careful what one wishes for” as democratically elected leadership may not always be benign and/or may pursue agendas in contrast to American interests. For example, during the Iraqi war Turkish voters pressed their government not to provide support to the

U.S. invasion of Iraq. The newly elected Hamas majority in the Palestinian National Authority has also demonstrated its agenda is far from peaceful.

In conclusion, there is strong support on both sides of the debate. One finds the quest for democratic universalism as a powerful panacea to interstate war, while the other sees it as a misguided and dangerous foreign policy. What the debate does point out is that creating democracies is enormously complicated and requires significant time. One cannot just set up ballot boxes, hold elections, and create moderate Democrats and Republicans. Issues like rule of law, civic culture, a stable and committed middle class, and legitimacy of a democratic system may take years, if not decades, to build. Furthermore, in *Electing to Fight: Why Emerging Democracies Go to War*, Edward Mansfield and Jack Snyder point out that transitional states or “semi-democratic regimes” may be extremely dangerous and actually **more likely** to start wars.¹⁶ There is no guarantee that the introduction of democratic institutions will be smooth, permanent, or accepted by either the political elites in a country or by the masses. In fact, some scholars point out that in most cases of newly created democracies (the third-wave democracies) the political institutions are weak, frail, and easily reversible.¹⁷

Perhaps it is helpful to remember that in the United States (typically regarded as **the** democratic success story) it took almost 200 years, a civil war, a woman’s suffrage movement, and a violent civil rights movement before we had universal suffrage and granted most citizens of the country the right to participate in politics. Thus, it may take decades or even generations to establish embedded norms of tolerance, compromise, and the value of power sharing in transitional countries. One thing remains clear: the ideas and debate on Democratic Peace Theory will persist in both academic and policy circles. This is particularly true as the United States attempts implementation of these ideas in Iraq. In fact, Presidential candidate Senator John McCain recently affirmed his support for this view, calling for a “new League of Democracies [to] form the core of an international order of peace based on freedom.”¹⁸

The research is exciting and leads this author to optimism. At the same time, this is a guarded optimism, as the scholarship needs to be implemented with a sophisticated understanding and a fine instrument. Forcibly pulling the weeds of non-democratic regimes by their roots and bluntly transplanting western democracy into areas where the soil may not be fertile

may be ineffective and actually promote violence. A fact that policymakers tend to overlook is that in order for the Democratic Peace Theory to hold, democracy itself must be authentic, robust, stable, and accompanied by economic development.

Endnotes

¹ Mark Rupert, (2000) *Ideologies of Globalization: Contending Visions of a New World Order*. Routledge; London: 27.

² Spencer R. Weart, (1998), *Never at War*, Yale University Press.

³ Michael Doyle, (1996) “Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs,” in Sean Lynn-Jones, Michael Brown and Steven Miller, eds., *Debating the Democratic Peace*. Cambridge: MIT: 3–57.

⁴ Bruce Russett, (2000) “How Democracy, Interdependence, and International Organizations Create a System for Peace,” in Charles W. Kegley Jr. and Eugene Wittfopk (eds.) *The Global Agenda* 6th ed. Boston: McGraw-Hill: 235

⁵ R.J. Rummel, (1997) *Power Kills: Democracy as a Method of Nonviolence*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers.

⁶ Jack S. Levy, (1988) “Domestic Politics and War,” in Robert I. Rotberg and Theodore K. Rabb, eds., *The Origin and Prevention of Major Wars*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press: 88.

⁷ George W. Bush, (2004) “President and Prime Minister Blair Discussed Iraq, Middle East, The East Room” November 12, 2004, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/11/20041112-5.html>.

⁸ Alyssa Lyon and Christopher Dolan, (2007) “American Humanitarian Intervention: Toward a Theory of Coevolution,” *Foreign Policy Analysis* 3 (1):146–78.

⁹ Henry Kissinger, (1994) *Diplomacy*. Simon & Schuster; New York: 33.

¹⁰ Alexander Hamilton (1787) *The Federalist No. 6* <http://www.law.emory.edu/cms/site/index.php?id=3138>

¹¹ Thomas Friedman, (2000) *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*. New York: Anchor Books. This has recently been updated as *The Dell Theory* in which Friedman argues that “no two countries that are both part of a major global supply chain, like Dell’s, will ever fight a war against each other as long as they are both part of the same global supply chain.” Thomas Friedman (2005) *The World is Flat*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux: 421.

¹² Michael Mousseau, (2005) “Comparing New Theory with Prior Beliefs: Market Civilization and the Democratic Peace,” *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 22(1): 63–77.

¹³ Erich Weede, (2004) “The Diffusion of Prosperity and Peace by Globalization,” *The Independent Review* 9(2).

¹⁴ Sebastian Rosato, (2003) “The Flawed Logic of Democratic Peace Theory,” *American Political Science Review* 97(4): 585–602.

¹⁵ Thomas Jefferson to John Dickinson, 1801. ME 10:217

¹⁶ Edward Mansfield and Jack Snyder, (2005) *Electing to Fight: Why Emerging Democracies Go to War*: MIT Press.

¹⁷ Georg Sorensen, (1993) *Democracy and Democratization: Processes and Prospects in a Changing World*. Boulder: Westview Press: 62.

¹⁸ John McCain, (2007) *Address to The Hoover Institution*, May 1. <http://www.johnmccain.com/informing/news/Speeches/43e821a2-ad70-495a-83b2-098638e67aeb.htm>.