IS THE PROCESS OF DEMOCRATIZATION THE MEAN FOR A PEACEFUL WORLD? A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE DEMOCRATIC PEACE THEORY

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Abstract

The article examines democratic peace theory. Considerable research has examined how the regime type and the level of democracy relate with the probability of war. In addressing this issue, the article rests on the premise that democratization can be seen in two forms: a) as an internal process towards democracy b) as an external effort to promote or establish democratic regimes. Contributing to the debate regarding democratic peace theory, it is argued that democratization fails to deter states from pursuing their interests through war. However, and with regard to new forms of ‘wars’ like “terrorism”, democratization can provide both the much needed space for cooperation and the creation of pluralistic societies that will accordingly help to confront some of the sources of rage.

Introduction

With the end of the Cold War, the world believed that a new era was starting - one that would be characterized by democracy, stability, and economic prosperity. As the former Communist regimes were making their first steps towards democracy, some suggested that the world reached the end of history¹, and the majority of public opinion believed that we were reaching a more peaceful world. The question of whether democratization might be the answer for a safer world, however, has been in the world’s agenda again after the last Iraqi elections.

The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the debate regarding democratic peace theory, a well established research field that has been extremely divisive among political scientists. The first part of the paper will mainly focus on the presentation of the debate regarding the democratic peace hypothesis while the second part will focus on my contribution to the topic. It is argued that the theory makes a positive contribution in cases of political exclusion that accordingly lead to acts of terrorism, as democratization confronts some of the sources of rage. In these cases, supporting internal democratic movements may be far more successful and less costly. It fails though to deter states from pursuing their interests

¹ Francis Fukuyama, The end of History and the Last Man (Harmondsworth 1992)
through the use of force. In addition, I argue that democratic peace theory draws necessary attention to domestic factors by widening and enriching the research field of international relations.

**The Democratic Peace Hypothesis**

As early as 1795, the German Philosopher Immanuel Kant posited that governmental form could influence the overall characteristic for peacefulness of a particular state. Republican states would enjoy a “perpetual peace” with other republics.\(^2\) This peace would be the result of a legally protected freedom, representative government, and the separation of powers. “Cosmopolitan law” would characterize their external relations and a “pacific union” would be established by a treaty among the republics. Despite the fact that Kant focuses on ‘republics’, some academics, even politicians, have applied his approach to democracies too.

The debate that linked democracy with peace, called democratic peace theory, was put forward in the early 1980s following the work of R. Rummel, M. Doyle and, in 1993, that of B. Russett.\(^3\)

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The theory of democratic peace has been used to explain and predict the behaviour of international actors with respect to the decision to engage in war. It relies upon two primary principles: a) “major war (over 1000 total casualties) has been occurring between democracies at an extremely low rate, and b) the support of this “proposition relies upon a definition of what constitutes major war that limits it to conflicts that resulted in greater than 1000 casualties”\(^4\) In line with these views, Huntington has argued that “the spread of democracy in the world means the expansion of the zone of peace in the world”\(^3\) and Boutros-Ghali, the former General Secretary of UN, stated that “democratic” states are more legitimate than others and as a result are less likely to have domestic conflicts or become embroiled in regional wars. Other recent efforts to expand the empirical evidence for this claim include the work of Bremer 1992, Maoz and Abdolali 1989, Oneal and Russett 1997, and Ray 1995.

Democratic peace theory challenges realist prospects about peace and their

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emphasis on systemic factors. Even more, it challenges the argument that domestic factors hardly play any role in international relations. As Dixon argues,

international disputes of democratic states are in the hands of individuals who have experienced the politics of competing values and interests and who have consistently responded within the normative guidelines of bounded competition. In situations where both parties to a dispute are democracies, not only do both sides subscribe to these norms, but the leaders of both are also fully cognizant that bounded competition is the norm, both for themselves and their opponents. 5

In spite of the argument that democracies may never fight each other, the theory of democratic peace relies upon the assumption that democracies do not initiate wars, but rather respond in self defence to actions by non-democracies. In this case “liberal democracies can, of course, fight states that are not”, 6 since it will result in a more peaceful world. Democratic peace theory divides the world into peace and war zones. The former includes the zones that are constituted of democracies, while the latter zones are constituted of non-democratic regimes. Democratic governments are more reluctant to go to war because of the importance of public opinion and the existence of democratic institutions. Public opinion is perceived as a moral notion. It plays an important role in questioning and approving the policy makers, as citizens are called to contribute in blood and money. This concept relies upon the idea that in a democracy, the electorate bears the costs of any decision to engage in aggressive military behavior. 7 This appears to be valid, as Lyndon Johnson discovered in 1968 where the Vietnam conflict played a major role in that year’s elections. 8 The existence of democratic institutions imposes restraints on government decisions. “States with executives responsible to a selection body, with institutionalized political competition, and with decision making responsibility spread among multiple institutions or individuals, can be expected to be more highly constrained and hence less likely to go to war.” 9

Importantly, the relationship of relative peace among democracies is a result of some features of democracy, rather than being caused exclusively by economic or geopolitical characteristics correlated with democracy. 10 The phenomenon of democratic peace can be explained by the pervasiveness of the normative restraints on conflict between democracies. The cultural norm of “live and let live” constitutes another important factor that

6 Fukuyama, The end, 263
7 Moore, Solving, 11
8 Nick Cohen, “Come on, you liberals” The Observer (4 November 2001):33
operates between democracies, a spirit which leads them to peaceful resolution of disputes between themselves.

Doyle argues that democratic peace does not result from a commonly shared political system. Rather than constitutional restraints, their common commercial-economical interests and their interest in preserving and guarding the rights of individuals constitute the basis upon which democratic peace is established. In the event that they go to war, they are still more cautious than autocracies. These common principles enable the creation of peace between democracies, but might also be the reason for conflict between democratic and non-democratic states. Doyle suggests that liberalism in this relationship with non-democratic regimes leads to three confusing failings: The first two are what Hume called “imprudent vehemence” and conversely, a “careless and supine complaisance” the third is the political uncertainty that is introduced by the moral ambiguity of the liberal principles which govern the international distribution of property.

Doyle and Russet support the “perpetual peace” that has been represented by Immanuel Kant, based upon states bound by “republican constitutions”. They consider that his meaning is compatible with the basic contemporary understanding of democracy.

Democratic peace theory rooted in the idealist and classical liberalist tradition has come to be widely accepted while equally faced with several logically distinguishable classes of criticism.

Democratization Does Not Lead To Peace

Alexis de Tocqueville seriously doubted the democratic ability to pursue stable and enlightened foreign policies. Following de Tocqueville’s ideas, Waltz and Layne challenge the idea that democratic states abandon the power balance game in order to pursue universal values. Domestic factors or ideology do not have an impact on the international behaviour of a state, since systemic factors of the international system are the ones that determine the behaviour of a state. As Kenneth Waltz argues, “[i]n self-help systems, the pressures of competition weigh more heavily than ideological preferences or internal political pressures”. According to Layne, “[f]ear and distrust of the other states is the normal state of affairs,” whilst “in realist world, survival and security are always at risk, and democratic states will respond no differently to democratic rivals

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12 Doyle, “Kant, Liberal Legacies and Foreign Affairs, 31
than to non-democratic ones”.

Realists support their view with references to wars that have been fought between democracies, like the US Civil War, the Fashoda Crisis, and the Franco-German Crisis in 1923.

Layne examines the normative explanation of why democracies will not go to war. His findings demonstrate that democracies pursue their national interest as the realists predict. Layne dismisses recent perceptions espoused mostly by American policymakers and present even in President Bush speeches, that through the spread of democracy, peace zones will be created, which will serve US interests. As he argues, democratic peace illusions probably will lead to “disastrous military interventions abroad, strategic overextension, and the relative decline of American Power”.

In another study, Mansfield and Snyder equally criticize the theory that democratization promotes peace by suggesting that “democratizing states are much more war-prone than states that have undergone no regime change”. During the transitional era towards democracy the risk of war is greater, since “threatened elites from the collapsing autocratic regime…use nationalist appeals to compete mass allies with each other and new elites”.

According to critics of democratic peace theory, facts and not hope should be what guide the foreign policies of states. The adoption of democratic peace theory among policy makers, especially after the collapse of Communism, jeopardizes stability and creates more dangers for the international system. Interventionism in implementing democracy would lead to a “crusade” and inevitably to the eruption of more conflicts.

**Contesting Democratic Peace Theory?**

Nevertheless, democratic peace theory has triggered an important debate. Its importance has increased with developments in the late 20th century, and more recently, before and after the Iraq war. Many academics, writers, and journalists argued in favor or against the Iraqi war in terms of the benefits or lack thereof that democracy would bring to the country and to the region. This debate enables us to evaluate the democratization process and the hopes put upon it. Although Russet and Doyle present their hypothesis as a proven theory, their ideas are better characterised as a hypothesis. As Layne states: “... the casual relationship between the independent and dependent variables (that Doyle and Russet, using to prove their theory) is

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17 Layne, “Kant or Cant: The Myth Of the Democratic Peace”, 199
19 Mansfield & Snyder, “Democratization and the Danger of War”, 34.
neither nor adequately explained.”20 If we examine democratization as an internal process we see that there is a strong connection, as Mansfield and Snyder argue21, between democratization and internal conflict. During the transition period and because of the power vacuum and the absence of democratic institutions, as the examples of Soviet Union and the former Yugoslavia show, competition between the ruling elites can lead to war. The Soviet Union’s path towards democracy has been characterized by the eruption of internal conflicts. The conflict in the former Yugoslavia and the most recent one of Iraq demonstrate the risks contained during democratization. The institutional arrangements within consolidated democracies and the absence of that aspect in transitional democracies is a crucial factor that alters or ‘endorses’ conflict within a democratic state. The existence of institutional arrangements provides opportunities to negotiate a resolution of their mutual disputes rather than to fight. This is clearly shown in the analysis made by Hegre, Ellings, Scott, Gates, Gleditsch who suggest that “… regime change clearly and strongly increases the probability of civil war in the short run”20.

If democratization is seen as an effort by democratic states to establish democracy elsewhere in the world we may in fact deal with another round of violent conflicts, due to what Chan calls a democratic crusade.21 Democratization as a tool of foreign policy can often be perceived as expansionist and interventionist by those inside the countries in the process of democratization. Such a process can destabilize the status quo and be exploited by internal forces for their own ends, thereby endangering conflict. Pursuing a policy of democratization may create wars in precisely those situations where the intention is to avoid them. Intervention in Somalia is a useful empirical example of a country where the attempts to implement a Western-type democracy lead to disregard of the internal power balance and traditions, with disastrous consequences. In addition, the case of Iraq clearly demonstrates that “the main lesson to be learned is that while the development of democracy can be aided from outside, it cannot easily be imposed by force”.22

I consider the distinction between zones of democratic peace and zones of war forwarded by the democratic peace hypothesis to be as dogmatic as the Islamic division of the world into a peaceful part (the Islamic community, Dar War, 1816-1992” American Political Science Review v95 i1, (March 2001):33
al-Islam) and a hostile part (the unbelievers, the house of war, Dar al-Harb). In fact both the democratic zone and the Islamic world are characterised by internal conflicts and wars. This is a critical factor that the Russet and Doyle hypothesis overlooks. In their hypothesis democracies are presented as a unified and unproblematic variable whilst they fail to capture the power struggle in two crucial stages: a) inside democratic regimes and b) the power balance in relations between democratic states. In international relations and even in organizations that are being formed by democratic states, there is a power struggle.

We should acknowledge, however, that Democratic peace theory has made a positive contribution to International Relations theory by drawing attention to the dynamic and dialectical logic of domestic factors upon the construction of foreign policy. It demonstrates that governments are not the only factors that should be taken into account. In contrast, it has widened and enriched the research field to encompass non-governmental organizations, citizens, lobby groups, corporations, and media.

Contrary to what the “realist” approach suggests, we are witnessing a change in the way governments are conducting foreign policy. Democratic peace theory is right to emphasize the role of public opinion in influencing foreign policy, despite the fact that it is not a factor that permanently advances the cause of peace. That domestic politics matter is proven by the case of Britain when it lost interest in an alliance with Austria-Hungary when the Conservatives took office in 1880, and from Germany, which dropped its alliance with Russia in 1891 partly because of "political shifts within [Germany]". In addition and in contrast to the terrible human losses of World War I, governments are today more reluctant to take action using ground troops and feel the need to appease public opinion. The effort made to persuade the public of the necessity of action both in the Gulf War, in Afghanistan, and recently in Iraq proves that governments cannot ignore other factors in the conduct of foreign policy. I consider that democratic peace theory, whilst having a positive effect on International Relations theory, fails since it ignores the power struggle between and inside the states. In the first case, states might share the same type of regime, but this does not automatically mean that they share the same interests or the methods of securing them. In relation though with the number of casualties that is used as a method of evaluation of what constitutes a major war, it is unclear why an act of aggression resulting in fewer than 1000 casualties should be ignored in the evaluation. Whilst in the second case, and especially in the intermediate period of transition to democracy as Mansfield and Snyder found, “domestic political competition is intense. Politicians, vying for power, appeased domestic hard-liners by resorting to nationalistic appeals that vilified foreigners, and these policies often

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led to wars that were not in the countries’ strategic interests”.

Terrorism and civil wars pose the biggest threat to today’s international system since “these acts are conducted outside normal political bounds, involving symbolic violence …in order to weaken the bonds between the legitimate government and society.” If we perceive terrorist acts as acts of war or acts that lead to war, I suggest that democracy might have a positive effect since “the name of the game is precisely to shift their calculus of self-interest towards peaceful politics, by increasing both the costs of violence and the benefits of participation”. Dictatorships and non-democratic regimes, in particular those in the Arab world, through the prohibition of political parties, have “created a gap that it is being filled by radical religious extremists who represent ‘disintegrative tribalism and reactionary fundamentalism’”. This religious extremism is based mainly on the lack of representative institutions through which people can claim their beliefs and determine their future. The prohibition of political activity, the corruption, and the chasm between the ruling elites and the rest of the population results in people turning to religion extremism. In this case we have to notice that democratization in itself cannot address in whole the problem that terrorism poses to modern societies. After all, the terrorist attacks in London were carried out by British citizens in one of the world's oldest democracies, while the Oklahoma City bombing was carried out by Timothy McVeigh, an American citizen. With regard though to these challenges, democracy can be a useful tool, promoting pluralistic societies and minimizing the chances that citizens will resort to terrorist’s calls, as proven by the recent moderate steps that have been taken in Bahrain, Oman, and Morocco (Nye 2005, 9). As Moore notes “the absence of democracy, the absence of effective deterrence, and, most importantly, the synergy of an absence of both are conditions or factors that predispose to war”. In the case of terrorism, the dynamic and dialectical nature of the democratization process might be a solution, since as Nye suggests, “[w]e need to create a narrative about a better future that undercuts the message of hate and violence promoted by the extremists”. In this case, the development of political institutions will provide the political space needed for

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26 Timothy Garton Ash, “A little democracy is a dangerous thing-so let’s have more of it” p.25
29 Moore, Solving, 67
genuine participation that in turn can be channelled toward social progress.\textsuperscript{31}

**Conclusions**

In the light of the evolution that has taken place in international relations, I have attempted to evaluate the democratic peace hypothesis. As it results from my analysis, the claim that democratic states hardly ever fight each other remains contested since democracy as a regime type fails to deter states from pursuing their interests through war. As Paul and Hall suggest “we do not think that the nature of international relations can be read off the brute structure of the power of states”.\textsuperscript{32} We have to recognize, though, that in cases of political exclusion that encourage people to resort to means of violence, democratization could contribute to some extent in dealing with these issues. The democratic process triggers transformations in institutions that favour participation and thus deter people from resorting to other means of action such as terrorism etc. This process might ‘not deflect them (Al Qaeda) from their course’ but it will certainly limit their possibilities to find followers\textsuperscript{33} since it will contribute to their isolation from the majority of the population. In that sense, what “we in the community of established liberal democracies should do is not abandon the pursuit of democratisation but refine it”.\textsuperscript{34} Bearing that in mind, it is evident that much theoretical, empirical, and methodological work remains to be done, in order to reach firmer conclusions as to whether or not a regime change contributes to the fight against terrorism.

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