

An Alternative Model of Peace: The Shortcomings of Democratic Peace Theory

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Prompt 1: Is the International System Experiencing a Democratic or Capitalist Peace?

The democratic-peace theory is such a mainstay of political science that one might be tempted to call it axiomatic. It is not infallible, though, and its flaws generate enough questions to justify a serious theoretical re-examination. In this paper I argue that the democratic-peace model is both insufficient for explaining current conditions and the relationship between the two are purely correlative; and the phenomenon it attempts to explain is, in actuality, caused by several confounding variables, including the balance of power post-WWII and Capitalist Peace argument.

Despite its status and the oft-replicated validity of its data, the underlying explanations for the democratic-peace theory leave much to be desired. During a statistical analysis of existing conflict data, Maoz and Russett (1993) lay out the two primary lines of reasoning: A) Normative logic, which is based on the idea that Democratic nations externalize their norms of nonviolent political competition to the international arena, creating shared expectations and trust between democracies; and B) Structural logic, which asserts that democratic systems are slower to war because of power-diffusing and cumbersome bureaucracies, as well as electorate and legislature control over the survival of the executive. The main issue with these logics is that they fail to neatly match the existing world. As Rosato (2003) points out in regards to Normative logic, democracies often have deeply divergent norms in their domestic and foreign policy: the US, long touted as a model democracy, has participated in the overthrow of seven democratic regimes and the creation of the autocracies that replaced them.¹ This suggests that, contrary to

¹ Additionally, between 1838 and 1920, European democracies were involved in 31 imperial wars—none of which resulted in the establishment of liberal norms in the conquered countries (Rosato 1993).

one of the expectations of democratic-peace theory, it is not the always threat of autocratic leaders that causes the suspension of liberal values in foreign policy. Furthermore, it is clear that the idea of a mutual respect between democracies only exists within limits, that there are freely-chosen political conditions so undesirable that partnership with dictators is preferred. Structural logic, on the other hand does, find some support in the public realm. Through a series of surveys conducted in the US and UK, Tomz and Weeks (2013) found that both populations at large were significantly more likely to support pre-emptive attacks against potentially aggressive and nuclear-aspiring autocracies than similarly posturing democracies. People seem to trust Democratic nations more. If these results are generalizable, then it indicates that a leader may indeed be held back from inter-democratic conflict based on re-election concern. This, of course, is once again followed by the caveat that reality is much harder to pin down. It is quite possible for democracies to deploy troops for extended period of time without legislative approval—for example, though the US Congress has only declared war five times, the US has participated in well over 200 military actions in its history—and because democratic militaries tend to be professional, it is usually the case that a very small section of the populace actually bears the human cost of war (Rosato 2003). The primary difficulty in challenging this logic is the lack of actual inter-democratic conflict to compare it to, which would seem to prove its value. As will become clear, however, the history of inter-democratic interaction has not always been so peaceful.

The following section is primarily concerned with reframing the lens of the discussion, shifting from argument critique to questioning the basic assumptions made of this period. Regardless of the length of time analyzed, be it 40 or 200-plus years, researchers almost always

treat the period as a single block. This is problematic. The situation and pressures of the world have not been constant through time. In an attempt to correct this problem Farber and Gowa (1997) conducted a study similar to that conducted by Maoz and Russett, with the added feature of data separation by time period: Pre-World War I, Post-World War I, and Post-World War II; WWI and WWII were chosen as points of division because of the radical effects they had on the balance of world power afterwards. Though this, they found that “no significant relationship exists between polity type and the probability of war before 1914,” and that it is only with the conclusion of WWII do democratic dyads become much less likely to make war than non-democratic dyads (Farber and Gowa 1997). Take this into consideration in conjunction with Rosato’s (2003) point that pre-WWI disputes among democracies were not unlikely to evolve into warfare, and liberal values hardly played a role when they were resolved. This suggests long periods of time wherein democracies acted toward each other as they would toward any state, regardless of polity. So what changed? Two theoretical answers are immediately obvious: A) the modern expectations and norms of democracies were primarily developed in the era between WWI and WWII; and B) that there was another factor in the Post-WWII era that changed the behavior of democratic states.² In regards to the former, it has been noted by several authors that state perceptions of each can vary wildly from the truth. In fact, states sometimes seem to be incapable of accurately assessing the nature of their opponents—democracy status may be given or revoked depending upon how similar foreign policy goals are. For example, the U.S. grew greatly more liberal through the course of the 19th century, but, ironically, became increasingly viewed as the opposite by other democracies as they asserted themselves in the international

² It should be kept in mind that these are not mutually exclusive answers.

arena (Rosato 2003). In a piece reviewing American perceptions of Imperial Germany, Oren (1995) goes so far as to claim that the modern understanding of liberal norms is shaped not by any objective measure, but rather as evolving reaction to opposing powers. Though these assertions need to be tested, it does stand to reason that a nation's understanding of its own powers and responsibilities changes over time as governments and generations come and go. At the same time, this fails to fully explain all aspects of the problem—why was it in the aftermath of WWII, specifically, that saw the rise of what we call the democratic-peace? And since then, what has held it steady? For this, one final factor needs to be considered.

In the bipolar balance of power that came to be after 1945, nations found that they had an almost unavoidable choice between joining the capitalist and communist blocs. The peace that then occurred between members on the American bloc, rather than being an innate feature of democratic society, actually resulted from this economic and cultural commingling, a feature that has been generalized to the world after the fall of the USSR. The economic aspect should be particularly emphasized, Gartzke (2007) argues, because war between capitalist countries with advanced economies is even rarer than between countries that are merely democratic, according to his data. Economic interdependence between advanced economies makes warfare a costly proposition, one that would likely draw a large amount of protest from an increasingly globalized businesses class. Though Rosato (2003) might bring the counter-argument that there are some business interests that stand to gain from warfare—i.e. the military-industrial complex—and, given that democracies are imperfectly representative, it is possible for one to out-organize the other. It also is clear, though, that alternatives which might benefit both groups exist. Keep in mind the important caveat that even democratic-peace theorists must add: although democracies

tend not to go to war with each other, they still go to war with non-democracies at rates similar to non-democratic dyad warfare numbers (Maoz and Russett 1993). While France's colonial wars in Vietnam and Algeria in the 1950s and '60s challenge the underlying Normative logic of externalized norms, it fits perfectly within the capitalist peace theory. It is a perfectly reasonable to assume that a war with a lesser-developed country will result in net-gain.³ It has often been assumed that democratic populations hold their leaders back from war, but the historical record does not bear this out. Recall the surveys conducted by Tomz and Weeks (2013) which revealed that a plurality of respondents favored war with autocratic nations under the justification of preventing them from acquiring nuclear weapons, even when told that the other nation was of similar power to their own. Additionally, Rosato (2003) found that, of the 15 wars initiated by the most aggressive democracies since 1815, 12 of them were met with intense nationalistic fervor; and that democratic government have little trouble whipping up support for wars, made easier by their professional armies which concentrate the human losses of conflict in small pockets of the population. Finally, I will return to and repurpose an earlier point: the US treatment of lesser-developed democracies. Almost all seven examples of regime change were at least partially driven by economic factors—at the urging of private companies in Brazil and Guatemala, and in response to the planned nationalization of various industries in both previous examples as well as Iran and Chile (Rosato 2003). It seems that respect for similarly advanced economies holds much more value than vague notions of democracy.

Having now considered all of this, it is difficult to interpret the phenomenon in question as one created purely or even mostly by the spread of democratic norms. Instead, it would seem

³ With hindsight, it is also easy to see that this calculation has been wrong on many occasions for myriad reasons too complex to discuss here. See: the French-Vietnam conflict, the US-Vietnam conflict, the Ruso-Afghan war, etc.

that democratic nations largely treated each other in much more realist terms until the advent of the Cold War, which created alliances based on power maintenance that remain to this day. Of course, this argument is not bullet-proof. Gartzke's data has been disputed by Choi (2011), who claims that Gartzke failed to take into account all relevant factors for his analysis. And Gartzke's (2007) criticism of democratic-peace could easily apply to the economic theory, too; it is true that democratic policies may greatly diverge as more develop, thus leading to potential conflict, but it is equally true that the same may happen as more countries become economically advanced. Being a work of purely theoretical argument, this paper impossible to test and does not have any sort of meaningful predictive capability. It may, though, serve as a springboard for further interpretation of nation-interaction including forms of conflict outside of warfare that are outside of the scope of this class, but a interesting pursuit, nonetheless.

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