

## From Democratic Peace to Democratic War?

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The “democratic peace” is not only a fancy idea of academia, most prominently advanced by the philosopher of Enlightenment Immanuel Kant in his famous essay on “Perpetual Peace” (1795), but two hundred years later, is established as a liberal research program in the U.S. International Relations discipline. The famous statement “democracies do not fight each other” seems so far to represent a real phenomenon, at least if we consider consolidated democracies. The very controversial ideational debate between Realist critics and Liberal proponents of the democratic peace argument reigning during the late 1980s and early 1990s, and questioning whether the phenomenon might be a mere statistical artifact has been settled now. In the meantime, even critics acknowledge the empirical finding that consolidated democracies do not fight each other as quite robust. This has culminated into the striking and tremendous success that the idea of the democratic peace has gained in practical politics. Since the end of the Cold War, the linking of democracy and peace has become part and parcel of official political ideology, informing the foreign policy of Western democracies. Promoting democracy has turned to be the foremost strategy to secure peace and prosperity as, for example, the U.S. National Security Strategy of 2006 makes abundantly clear.

As long as democracy is promoted by peaceful means of cooperation and voluntary assistance, one might not object to such a foreign policy strategy. If regime change is to be achieved by force as in the Iraq war 2003, however, the “flip side” of the democratic peace, namely a “democratic war” becomes obvious. Unfortunately, the notion of a democratic peace lends itself to being employed as an ideological underpinning for liberal-expansionist policies. Under the guise of promoting a seemingly “universalist” idea of democracy and freedom, some of the powerful Western democracies arrogate to themselves the right to pursue a “liberal mission.” Not only do such wars by democracies pose a challenge in practical political terms; they also unsettle democratic peace theory (DP). This article briefly outlines how this theoretical challenge might lead to a shift

of focus in international relations research—from democratic peace to democratic war.

Most DP research has supported a dyadic democratic peace theory, with its finding of the “separate peace,” that is, democracies are peaceful toward each other but in general they are as war-prone as any other regime type. Monadic peace theory, however, has recently been gaining ground; an increasing number of voices claim that intrinsically, democracies are in general more peaceful than non-democracies. According to this argument, they are slightly less involved in war, initiate wars and militarized disputes less frequently, and tend to seek negotiated conflict resolution more frequently. The statistical proof of these claims, however, is much weaker than the evidence relating to inter-democratic peace.

To be sure, democracies do fight wars against non-democracies, and they do initiate such wars and other militarized conflicts with them from time to time. Although the war involvement of democracies constitutes a tremendous challenge to the DP theory, it has so far only been a minor element in this field of research. Most of the studies published have been dedicated to establishing and explaining peace among democracies, not the involvement of democracies in war. This is hardly surprising, because DP theory evolved as an effort to overcome, with the help of research on international cooperation and regime building, the dominant Realist assumptions about war as a regular feature of politics in an anarchical system. From this perspective, the pieces of the puzzle to assemble and explain were and still are cooperation and peace, not defection and war. The DP theory remains fragmentary, however, as long as it fails to account for the practice of war on the part of democracies.

This article is motivated by unease about the prevalence of quantitative studies on the DP. Most of the research efforts over the last fifteen years have been focused on hypothesis-testing, but we still have no coherent theory. The statement “democracies are peaceful towards each other and bellicose in general” is an aggregate and fuzzy statement about the behavior of democratic states. This generalization obscures the fact that some democracies are quite frequently involved in military actions that they sometimes initiate, whereas others are apparently at eternal peace, and a third group of democracies is somewhere in-between. At the backdrop of this vast amount of statistical studies, we are arguing for a shift of focus in research. Rather than seeking explanations for an assumed average behavior of democracies, we want to account for the marked differences between democratic states.

**I**nquiries into the reasons for the varying bellicosity of democracies will lead to enhanced knowledge about the causal mechanisms of the DP. Why do some democracies choose the military option in a given case,

whereas others do not? Looking more closely at the several “roads to war” of those democracies involved and “roads to opting-out” of those not involved, by way of comparative in-depth case studies, we hope to compare reasons for participation and non-participation and analyze how and why the institutional, normative, and utilitarian causal mechanisms assumed by DP theory have been suspended in some democracies. It would be troubling indeed if findings were to suggest reasons specific to the democratic regime type that render democracies more conflict-prone.

What exactly is meant by “democratic war” (DW)? Obviously, it is a complementary term for democratic peace, that is, peace between democracies, but it does not mean war between democracies (because so far these did not occur and, in their absence, were the logical repudiation of democratic peace). Actually, a more correct term would be the “resort to the use of force” by democracies. The term DW is useful only with regard to the time period after 1945, when the number of democracies in the world increased, and when the United Nations Organization (UN) was set up. To be sure, the idea of a DW has gained special relevance only after the end of the Cold War with the new wave of democratization. Since the 1990s, there has been no fundamental political challenge threatening the liberal ordering project, and the use of force has become a means of liberal global governance. North-Western democracies thus shape (by peaceful as well as forceful means) world politics as never before, and they make a substantial contribution to the global transformation of war: via their armament and arms control policies, their risk-sensitive mode of warfare, alignment policies (coalitions, alliances), discursive patterns of normative justification of war, and their interpretation of international law.

We might distinguish a continuum ranging from a narrow to broader meanings of the term DW. The key qualifier for a narrow meaning of DW is legitimate authorization by the UN Security Council and war as a “war of enforcement.” There are different forms of the use of force with regard to the international set of rules designed to govern states’ behavior in conflict. At one end of the spectrum is outright aggression; at the other end, there would be (but is not yet) collective action based on norm enforcement in a setting governed by the due process of law, including decision making by a duly authorized body, control of the enforcement agencies by this body, and accountability of this authority secured by courts of law. Between these two poles there is the use of force in the form of individual or collective self-defense, unilateral norm enforcement (humanitarian intervention), individual action authorized by the UN Security Council, and collective action authorized by the Security Council and carried out under UN command.

As the wide range of possibilities between the poles of outright aggression and collective action demonstrates, however, there is a substantial grey

area between aggression and collective action. Those in power usually claim to be acting in self-defense when they attack other states. Those intervening in ongoing conflicts will claim to be serving universal ends such as protecting minorities from persecution or preventing gross violations of human rights. Here, the narrow meaning of DW refers to the unilateral use of force that sidesteps collective authorization and action as provided for by Chapter VII of the UN Charter, and/or which is accompanied by attempts to widen the scope of admissible unilateral force under Article 51 (preemptive strikes in self-defense). In contradistinction, a broader notion of the term DW refers to specific incentives, reasons and objectives that democracies, unlike non-democracies, might have for resorting to the use of force. In analyzing democratic war involvement and DW, one will therefore not only deal with the question of the circumstances under which the causal mechanisms of the democratic peace are suspended, but also take up issue that there are specific features of democratic politics or liberal thought that induce democracies to choose military options.

**B**y exploring the troubling question of whether liberal democracy produces special incentives to go to war, we come also to address practical political significance of the concept of DW. Because DP theory emphasizes the pacifying effects of democracy that are considered positive, it increasingly runs the risk of serving as the ideological underpinning of a self-righteous foreign policy employed by the most powerful bloc of states in world history, namely the community of Western democracies. It is also at this backdrop that we raise our critical considerations and caution against an overly optimistic view that the future development of international politics depends on an increase in the number of democracies in the world. Although the proliferation of democracy across the globe is undoubtedly desirable in itself because it enables people to live in freedom and self-determination, it should not be taken as a guarantee of global peace. The equation “freedom is democracy is peace” is, unfortunately, more complicated than it is made to seem in the popular and simplistic theory DP.

Analyzing the DW in a systematic way is useful for several reasons. First, over time, qualitatively and exponentially, it can be expected that the overall war involvement of democracies would become comparable to that of non-democracies; second, at present, the war involvement of democracies is shaping world politics to a greater extent than the war involvement of non-democracies; third, there seem to be specific features of democratic politics that encourage war involvement; and finally, the variance in the conflict behavior of democracies is greater than the variance distinguishing their respective political systems. For these reasons, there is an urgent need to investigate the factors determining the war involvement of democracies.

When democracies use force, they typically do so in the form of intervention in ongoing conflicts. This intervention is not aimed at acquiring territory but at enforcing order, which is defined in terms of universal values: When democracies wage war, it is in the name of humankind. Democratic wars are wars fought for purposes and objectives that are embodied in the universalistic principles of democratic constitutions. Democracies fight to restore or enforce the rule of law; they fight to stop genocide and to protect human rights; they fight to protect international security rather than national survival alone. Accordingly, the declared cause of DW has a strong kinship with the notion of a “just war.”

Although liberal universalism is coherent within (liberal) theory, it runs into formidable contradictions in practice. People are killed in order to save people; the rule of law is breached in order to install it; international security is undermined in order to strengthen it. These paradoxes can clearly be observed in the armed interventions and full-scale wars fought by democracies in the last ten years. They show up in the unintended consequences of these wars, in the domestic debates within democracies, before, during, and after wars, and in the disputes among democracies about wars that are promoted by some and opposed by others. Arguably, illiberal practices of democracies unveil elements of the dark side of liberal universalism such as its fixation on the “unjust enemy.” The unjust enemy was already introduced by Kant and refers to the importance of creating anti-liberal enemy-images in order to justify liberal wars.

Several questions arise from these considerations. They all relate to the crucial issue of what it is that directs democracies toward peacefulness or toward war-making. One vital consideration pertains to the international normative setting. According to the English School, it is the notion of a normative structure complementing and overlaying the physical, resource-based power structure of the international system that transforms it into an international society. Events in the 1990s saw a weakening of the basic norms of international society as a group of states that recognize each other as equal and sovereign and therefore refrain from intervention. This change drove a bifurcation within the English School into a pluralist and a solidarist version. Whereas the pluralist group adheres to the notion of an egalitarian system of states mutually recognizing each other as sovereign, the solidarist group holds that sovereignty must give way to a conditional right of the international society to intervene in states in order to protect people. Thus, the state owes a duty to conduct its business in a “responsible” manner if sovereignty (as impermeability to intervention) is to be guaranteed.

This further leads into two kinds of responsibility: The first refers to control of terrorist groups based within the territory of a state and

reaffirms the responsibility of the host state for their activities against other states. The second development concerns the post–Cold War interpretation of the behavior of governments towards their own citizens and the latter's protection by way of "humanitarian intervention;" its content, though, is not entirely clear. The concept suggests that on a continuum from "proper" conduct to genocide, there is a line that governments must not cross without risking an international reaction, if necessary by force. Where exactly the tripwire lies is unclear, and cannot be deduced from the practice of the international community. Why Somalia and not Congo? Why Bosnia and not Sudan? Why Kosovo and not Myanmar? This normative fuzziness puts enormous practical discretionary power in the hands of those "capable and willing" to act. Although Western democracies are certainly capable, they are not always willing to act. In cases far removed from their immediate interests, democracies sometimes prefer others (including non-democracies) to step in and provide order.

Another consideration crucial to democracies' choice between peacefulness and war-making relates to the power position that a democracy occupies within the international system. That a ranking higher in the power hierarchy would facilitate a democracy's decision to go to war (less risk or expectation of intolerable cost) is probably only a function of an opportunity structure, not evidence of a causal mechanism. The fact that war is cheap does not imply that it will be fought. Rather, the particular proneness of democracies (encouraged by a common normative structure) to build or join international organizations, alliances and security communities, can be seen to present a democracy-specific empowerment and opportunity structure that makes war more, not less, likely, though it does not by itself cause war.

From this reasoning, further questions arise that direct attention to the domestic features of specific democratic states and societies and their significance to the issue of democratic war proneness. In principle, democratic institutions only help to articulate the preferences of certain actors at a given time—of citizens, interest groups, social movements, and governmental actors. This means that a democracy's peacefulness is crucially dependent on the kind of majority preferences citizens and political actors have with regard to a specific international crisis. The DP literature usually treats such preferences as exogenous and assumes that citizens have peaceful preferences, while governments might have special interests in wars and need to be restrained by citizens' control. In fact, citizens can display any type of attitude toward military action and this will most likely depend on the kind of military action in question, majority attitudes toward violence and war in a society, and their collective role images. Consequently, their responses may range from enthusiasm via rational consent to indifference and outright opposition.

A powerful state that considers itself the world guardian of liberty and freedom such as the United States, for example, is accustomed to the use of force. Former colonial experience, like that of the United Kingdom, France, Belgium, and the Netherlands, might shape a specific record of, and approach to, military actions, particularly when involving their former colonies; whereas other states that were virtually forced to turn pacifist (like Japan and Germany) turned from militaristic into so-called civilian powers.

In conclusion, DP research might be advanced if, instead of focusing on democratic peacefulness, it were to look more systematically at DW involvement. Three interrelated topics for such a new research agenda arise: Does democracy produce special incentives to go to war? Are democracies inclined toward a special type of war? Why do democracies behave so differently with regard to the use of force? It should be noted that these questions have become more significant since 1990, since the global “victory” of democracy, hence also of the notion of a “democratic war.”

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