

**The Myth of Democratic Peace: Theoretical and Empirical Shortcomings of the
“Democratic Peace Theory”**

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The study of international affairs should be understood as a protracted competition between the realist and liberal traditions. Although not a monolithic paradigm itself, realism depicts that international affairs is a struggle for power among self-interested states and is generally pessimistic about the prospects for eliminating conflict and war. This paradigm dominated the field in the Cold War years because it provided simple, yet powerful explanations for war, alliances, imperialism, and obstacles to cooperation and because its emphasis on competition was consistent with the central features of the American-Soviet rivalry. The principal challenge to realism comes from a broad family of liberal theories, which does not constitute a monolithic view, either. While one strand of liberal thought has argued that economic interdependence would discourage states from using force against each other because warfare would threaten each side's prosperity,¹ the second, more recent liberal view has suggested that international institutions and regimes could overcome selfish state behaviours, mainly by encouraging states to forego immediate gains for the greater benefits of enduring cooperation.² The third view, however, probably has had the most popularity in both scholarship and policy circles, which sees the spread of democracy as the key to world peace, based on the claim that democratic states are inherently more peaceful than authoritarian states. This essay is about the third variant of

liberalist thought, namely the “democratic peace.” The essay will review the “democratic peace” literature critically and will argue that the “democratic peace” is theoretically and empirically overdetermined.

“Democratic Peace” Theory Defined:

The argument that democracy is an important force for peace has its most forceful advocate the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, who nearly two centuries ago argued that the moral element that helps the framework for peaceful relations between democratic states is based on the common principles of cooperation, mutual respect and understanding. More recently, many observers have followed his footsteps and regarded democratic governance as the “path to peace.”³ Indeed, since the early 1980s, the view the democracies do not wage war with one another has been regarded “as close as anything we have to an empirical law in international relations.”⁴

The theoretical foundations of the ‘democratic peace’ proposition, labeled by Bruce Russett, can be divided into 1) the monadic proposition and 2) the dyadic proposition.⁵ Monadic and dyadic interpretations of the democratic peace differ in the extent to which the regime type of the target state is considered important. Monadic proposition simply suggests that the more democratic the state, the less violent its behaviour *toward all other states*, including both democracies and non-democracies, will be.⁶ Most quantitative works done on the monadic proposition seem to have supported the argument. Rummel argued that democracies are *in fact* the most pacific of regimes because costly and unsuccessful wars can increase a leader’s chances of losing his or her position, which makes leaders in democracies less likely to initiate wars that are expected to be severely violent or that are likely to have high overall costs.⁷ Zeev Maoz and Nasrin Abdolai have also found that democratic states are less likely to escalate disputes into

wars,⁸ which has been confirmed by others,⁹ who suggested that domestic political structures constrain democratic leaders from choosing war as a foreign policy. Jack Snyder's qualitative analysis of democratic state behaviour also supported the monadic proposition, which argued that *consolidated* [added by the author] democratic states are less likely to extend their commitments beyond their capabilities; democratic institutions assert an identifiable pacifying effect, regardless of the domestic regime type of others.¹⁰

According to the proponents of the dyadic model, which has usually been seen as more accurate proposition in any discussion on "democratic peace," on the other hand, democratic states do not wage war *with each other* while they are no less war-prone than other types of states.¹¹ In opposition to the monadic proposition, this proposition suggests that the regime type of the opponent will crucially affect war decision and democratic states can be war-prone when facing non-democratic counterparts. Hostility toward non-democratic states is more likely because it is easier to mobilize public support for military actions because non-democratic governments are "in a state of aggression with their own people," which makes "their foreign relations deeply suspect for democratic governments."¹²

The "democratic peace" proponents suggest two explanations why democracies do not fight war *with each other*. The first explanation lies in the *structural/institutional* constraints.¹³ According to the *structural/institutional model*, democracies keep mutual peace because of the constitutional checks and balances that tie the hands of decision-makers and the whole complex of structure of democratic civil society. The *institutional constraints* on a leader's actions signify that the decision-makers are likely to face high political costs for using force in its diplomacy.¹⁴ Moreover, democratically elected leaders are unable to act quickly and this cautious foreign policy behaviour reduces the likelihood that a conflict will escalate to war.¹⁵

The second reason why democracies are considered more peaceful is related to the understanding that democracies have shared *cultural/democratic norms* among themselves. According to this argument, democratic political culture encourages peaceful means of internal conflict resolution, which “come to apply across national boundaries toward other democratic states,”¹⁶ and the decision-makers are in the habit of expecting that their actions will be reciprocated by the *other democratic* states. The *cultural/democratic norms* argument has been considered as more robust and explanatory than the *institutional/structural* explanations since the latter is silent on the issue of democratic public’s willingness to fight wars against non-democracies,¹⁷ while some scholars have argued that the *normative* and *institutional* arguments are not mutually exclusive; they work in “tandem.”¹⁸

Deconstructing “Democratic Peace” Theory:

Although “democratic peace” theory seems persuasive and relevant in the first place, one can criticize the “democratic peace” theory and the findings of its proponents from different angles ranging from mere definitional issues¹⁹ to the existence of “democratic peace” at all.²⁰ One can argue in the first place that a clear definition of both democracy and war or the mere exemption of their definitions has allowed the “democratic peace” proponents to exclude numerous cases of democratic war.²¹ Many “democratic peace” proponents use the concepts of democracy²² and war differently and the value-laden and usually ambiguous character of these concepts makes it impossible to measure the nature of “democratic peace.”²³ Spiro, for example, insists that the changing definition of democracy has made the proponents of the theory to exclude important incidences of “dyadic democratic war” such as the US Civil War, the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. This definitional obscurity seems to have made the “democratic peace” appear more significant than it really is. Moreover, the aggregate data seems to provide

insufficient support for the theory, since democracy is a relatively new phenomenon and interstate wars are generally rare occurrences.²⁴ Farber & Gowa have found no statistically significant correlation between democracy and war before 1914.²⁵ Instead, they have rightly argued that it is only after 1945 that the probability of war and serious disputes is significantly lower between democratic states, which, they have proposed, can be explained by neither *institutional* nor *cultural* explanations but rather by the Cold War.²⁶ One can, therefore, suggest that peace could be the result of foreign hegemony, mutual deterrence, or acquiescence to status quo and not necessarily the result of democracy.²⁷ This point has also been elaborated by Layne, a major opponent of the “democratic peace” theory, who criticized the “democratic peace” theory by incorporating in his study what he calls the “near misses,” such as the 1861 Trent Affair the US and Great Britain, 1898 Fashoda crisis between France and Great Britain among others.²⁸ Layne claimed that the countries involved in these disputes acted in ways much closer to the realist view rather than behaving in accordance with the *norms* and *structures* that the “democratic peace” theory predicts.

One can also dispute the fact that democracy produces peace by claiming that it is the peace that produces democracy.²⁹ This argument presents a new problem to the “democratic peace” theory, suggesting an unclear causal link. Furthermore, as Hermann and Kegley suggested, “democratic peace” theorists have overlooked instances of coercive actions short of formal war by suggesting that there were at least fifteen incidents of *unequivocally* democratic states intervening with military force against other democracies.³⁰ This is a result of “democratic peace” theorists not making any explicit claims about the sources of non-democratic war or peace, and their total negligence, if not ignorance, of constraints on the authoritarian leaders.³¹

More seriously, however, “democratic peace” theorists cannot adequately account for the tendency towards war in *democratizing* countries, especially after the end of the Cold War. As it has been demonstrated many times since the late 1980s, *democratizing* states are most often very volatile and dangerous and, thus more inclined to fight wars “than are mature democracies or stable autocracies.”³² The “rocky transitional period” to democratization may make countries more aggressive and war-prone due to not only domestic competition but also utilization of nationalistic feelings by political leadership and mass public support for aggression. If the “democratic peace” theorists would want to make their cases more persuasive, then, those authors should be more attentive to what is going on in newly *democratizing* countries and modify, not necessarily change, some of their propositions.

The ‘democratic peace’ theory also underemphasizes the role of the political leadership. The scholars of the ‘democratic peace’ theory do not ask the questions of how different leaders view national goals and how they try to achieve them. This neglect downplays the role that extraordinary individuals often play in war and peace decision-making.³³ Literature from political psychology has suggested that when we take into account what happens within the decision-making process in democracies, *institutional* and *cultural* obstacles may not always restrain what decisions are reached, “making democracy and peace more complex and nuanced than is conventionally pictured.”³⁴ Although regime characteristics constantly push for the election of leaders who “respect and respond to democratic values,” as Hermann & Kegley have argued, ideologically driven leaders can come to power, i.e., Reagan in the US, Thatcher in Great Britain. These leaders may either challenge *institutional* and *cultural* constraints or be less open to incoming information in order to maintain their positions and/or divert attention from more disturbing issues. Additionally, even if we accept that *institutional* and *cultural* explanations

account for the “democratic peace,” the questions of how these constraints and the nature of other countries, whether they are democratic or not, are perceived by the leadership are not answered by the “democratic peace” literature.

Conclusion:

The discussion above suggests that the most important drawback of the “democratic peace” theory is the *essentialization* of the political regime as the only factor contributing to international peace and war. The ‘democratic peace’ theory underemphasizes, and most often neglects, the importance of other domestic factors such as political culture,³⁵ degree of development, socio-economic and military considerations,³⁶ the role of interest-groups and other domestic constituencies,³⁷ strategic culture³⁸ among others in decision-making. In other words, it is easily the case that the “democratic peace theory” lacks sensitivity to context and decision-making process. Although one should not dispute the fact that domestic political structure/regime type is an important component of any analysis of war and peace, this should be seen as only one of domestic variables, not necessarily *the* variable. Devoid of an analysis that gives respect to a number of other factors, superficial and sweeping generalizations will leave many details in decision-making unaccounted for. Consequently, although “democratic peace” theory should not be discarded entirely, current emphasis on the importance of “democracy” in eliminating bloody conflicts in the world should not blind scholars and policy circles alike to the fact that “democratic peace” is theoretically and empirically overdetermined.

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NOTES

¹ See among many Rosecrance, Richard. 1986. The Rise of the Trading State: Commerce and Conquest in the Modern World. New York: Basic Books.

² This school is best exemplified by the work by Keohane, Robert O. 1984. After Hegemony. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

³ Brown, Michael E. et al. 1997. Debating the Democratic Peace. Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press.

⁴ Levy, Jack S. 1989. *The Causes of War: A Review of Theories and Evidence*, in Behaviour, Society and Nuclear War, Tetlock et al. (eds.) New York: Oxford University Press, p.88.; Chan, Steve. 1997. *In Search of Democratic Peace: Problems and Promise*, in Mershon International Studies Review, 41:59-91.

⁵ Russett, Bruce M. 1993. Grasping the Democratic Peace: Principles for a Post-Cold War. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; Russett, Bruce M. 1995. *The Democratic Peace: "And Yet It Moves"*, in International Security 19(4): 164-175.

⁶ Ray, James L. 1993. *Wars Between Democracies: Rare or Nonexistent?*, in International Interactions, 18:251-276; Rummel, Rudolph J. 1995. *Democracies ARE Less Warlike Than Other Regimes*, in European Journal of International Relations, 1:457-479; Bueno de Mesquita, Bruce & David Lalman. 1992. *Domestic Opposition and Foreign War*, in American Political Science Review, 84:747-766; Maoz Zeev & Nasrin Abdolai. 1989. *Regime Types and International Conflict, 1816-1976*, in Journal of Conflict Resolution, 33:3-35.

⁷ Rummell, 1995.

⁸ Maoz and Abdolaj, 1989.

⁹ Morgan T. Clifton & Valerie Schwebach. 1992. *Take Two Democracies and Call Me in the Morning: A Prescription for Peace?*, in International Interactions, 17:305-320.

¹⁰ Snyder, Jack. 1991.

¹¹ Doyle, Michael W. 1986. *Liberalism and World Politics*, in American Political Science Review, 80:1151-1169; Russett, Bruce M. 1993, 1995; Owen, John M. 1994. *How Liberalism Produces Democratic Peace*, in International Security, 19(2):87-125.

¹² Doyle, Michael M. 1986: 1161; Owen, John M. 1995:96).

¹³ Russett, Bruce M. 1993.

¹⁴ Bueno de Mesquita, Bruce and David Lalman 1992).

¹⁵ Hermann, Margaret G. and Charles W. Kegley, Jr. 1995. *Rethinking Democracy and International Peace: Perspectives from Political Psychology*, in International Studies Quarterly, 39:511-534.

¹⁶ Russett, Bruce M. 1993:92 in Brown, Michael E. et al. 1997.

¹⁷ Layne, Christopher. 1994. *Kant or Cant: The Myth of Democratic Peace*, in International Security, 19(2):5-49.

¹⁸ Owen, John M. 1994.

¹⁹ Spiro, David. 1994. *The Insignificance of the Liberal Peace*, in International Security, 19(2):50-86.

²⁰ Layne, Christopher. 1994; Farber, S. Henry & Joanne Gowa. 1995. *Politics and Peace*, in International Security, 20(2):123-146.

²¹ Spiro, David. 1994.

²² Democracy is a classic example of an "essentially contested concept". There are profound disagreements about the appropriate theoretical framework, about whether democracy is simply an institutional arrangement for choosing

rulers (Schumpeter, Joseph A., Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1942) or an end in itself (Dahl, Robert A. Polyarchy. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), about how to measure and evaluate democracy and democratic behaviour, and about the importance of various prerequisites for democracy (Lipset, Seymour M., "The Social Requisites of Democracy Revisited," American Sociological Review, 59, February, 1994; Almond & Verba The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations 1963; Huntington, Samuel, Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century. University of Oklahoma Press, 1991; Schedler, Andreas, "What is Democratic Consolidation," Journal of Democracy, 9:2, April, 1998; Linz, Juan and Alfred Stepan, Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

²³ Owen, John M. 1994)

²⁴ Cohen, Raymond. 1995. *Needed: A Disaggregate Approach to the Democratic-Peace Theory*, in Review of International Studies, 21:323-325.

²⁵ Farber and Gowa, 1995.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Chan, Steve. 1997.

²⁸ Layne, Christopher. 1994.

²⁹ Thompson, William R. 1996. *Democracy and Peace: Putting the Cart Before the Horse?*, in International Organization, 50:141-174.

³⁰ Hermann, Margaret G. and Charles W. Kegley, Jr. 1995:8

³¹ Hagan, Joe D. 1994. *Domestic Political Systems and War Proneness*, in Mershon International Studies Review, 38:183-207.

³² Mansfield, Edward D. & Jack Snyder. 1995. *Democratization and War*, in Foreign Affairs, 74(3):79-97, p.6.

³³ Hermann, Margaret G. & Charles W. Kegley Jr. 1995.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Duffield, John S. 1999. *Political Culture and State Behaviour: Why Germany Confounds Neorealism*, in International Organization 53:765-803.

³⁶ Brecher, Michael. 1972. The Foreign Policy System of Israel. New Haven, CO: Yale University Press; Dassell, Kurt. 1998. *Civilian, Soldiers and Strife* in International Security 23:107-140.

³⁷ Putnam, Robert. 1988. *Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games*, in International Organization 42:427-460.

³⁸ Kupchan, Charles A. 1994. The Vulnerability of Empire. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.