BA IN WAR STUDIES
YEAR 1

Causes of War

Strengths and weaknesses of the democratic peace theory:
A critical evaluation

Author: Damian Strugliński

Word count: 1803

Teaching Assistant:
Eduardo Periz Deprez
The idea of a lasting, ideally global, peace has been present in the minds of people for centuries. The most notable formulation of this idea is in Kant’s vision of perpetual peace. He saw it as a condition that needed to be maintained by politics between states with governments which represented society and separation of power. From this basic framework stems the idea called “democratic peace theory”. While there are many variations, one aspect remains core – that democracy is a cause of peace. Its hypothesis states that democracies don’t go to war and are more prone to peace, though usually this is meant in dyadic peace, rather than monadic; democracies don’t go to war with each other. In this essay I intend to analyse the strengths and weaknesses of this particular interpretation of the theory with regard to both its descriptive and normative elements. I will look at the structure and testability of the idea, whether it upholds in the realities of the modern world, how it takes into account the complexity of inter- and intrastate relations, and what effects can it have on political action. I will argue that even though the theory has merit, there are still significant flaws that undermine the validity of the hypothesis.

First of all, what is probably most appealing in the democratic peace theory in general is its simplicity. A straightforward explanation encapsulated in the strong statement that democracies do not fight each other appeals to both the public and the academic. The former can easily relate to the clear idea and the latter has to admit the value in the inherent parsimony. That constitutes its first strength, making it a popular and engaging perspective on international relations.

This inevitably leads to the next of the striking features of the democratic peace theory – the way it is formulated. As noted by the academic Jack S. Levy in his oft-quoted statement, “absence of war between democracies comes as close as anything we have to an empirical law in international relations.” This immediately sets the theory in opposition with most of the constitutive theories in that it can be subjected to testing against actual facts and data. Therein lays its next strength – in principle it is one of the very few empirical theories in international relations. As can be seen in academic works on this topic such a characteristic leads to an in-depth analytical approach, allowing use of for example propositional calculus to examine validity of democratic peace in certain conditions.

---

1 Immanuel Kant, Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch, 1795, via http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/kant/kant1.htm, accessed 25th November 2011
Another merit in the democratic peace theory is the scope of its descriptive value. Contrary to its main opposing theory, Realism, it does not only interest itself with international relations. As it bases itself on the principles of liberalism, especially individual determination, it is imperative that it addresses also internal politics. By taking into account intra-state dynamics democratic peace theorists bolster their argument and create a more comprehensive theory. Moreover, as well as incorporating the situation inside the state into the equation, it also does not perceive supra-national institutions as contradictory to the core idea, making it even more applicable in the current trends of globalization.

Finally, the normative side of the theory also makes for another strong point. While being descriptive and providing two approaches to explaining its hypothesis it also provides clear moral guidance for political action. Thanks to that, it is not only a theory that explains the conditions under which peace is maintained but may also serve additional purpose of directing international policy of states. Likewise, it also provides a lucid vision of the global security in the community of democracies, as seen for instance in the opinion of Bill Clinton that “the best strategy to ensure our security and to build a durable peace is to support the advance of democracy elsewhere”.

As can be seen from the aforementioned points, the theory possesses merit in several aspects. Nevertheless, most of the points that it makes are often times met with equal flaws leaving the hypothesis in a dubious state.

The first two points for the democratic peace theory rely on its parsimony and empirical basis. Upon closer inspection however, the apparent simplicity becomes more and more deceptive. The major issue of these aspects is the question of defining democracy and liberalism. Without a universally agreed definition of these core terms the theory weakens significantly. On the one hand it becomes tangible and loses the clarity and straightforwardness which are so appealing. On the other hand it loses merit in terms of credibility, as it is impossible to decisively prove or falsify the hypothesis without precisely defined set of data. Christopher Layne goes so far as to arguing that lack of clear-cut definitions is the saving grace of democratic peace theorists.

---

Another major weakness of this notion also stems directly from the lack of unified understanding of liberalism and democracy. What democratic peace theory fails to take into account is human perception. The idea that democracies do not go to war with each other is based around two core explanations. The first one is that going to war is difficult in democracies because of institutional constraints, as it requires approval of the whole society. The second one is normative, stating that democracies see fighting other democracies as unjust in view of liberal ideals. Both of them however revolve around the recognition of one state as democratic by the other one, and vice versa. Yet without a universally, or at least mutually agreed definition of a democracy it becomes difficult to establish a benchmark for such a state. Furthermore, even if such an agreement is somehow achieved, there is no guarantee that said states will necessarily subjectively see the other as adhering to objective standards. As a result, a clear theory becomes weakened and prone to interpretation.

This problem deepens when analysing other circumstances as well. Following the assumption that it is liberal values that provide a common ground between democratic states, it is highly probable that if a non-liberal government was to be elected via democratic means, other democracies would not feel unjust in waging war against it. John Owen saw a similar issue with the ancient Greek democracies and hence modified the conditions for democratic peace so that two liberal democracies were required for the hypothesis to be true. However, this elevates the previous issue to another level by introducing a second subjective term of liberalism in conjunction with the already vague democracy. This distinction further limits the scope of the democratic peace theory by introducing another parameter which needs to be evaluated as well as decreasing its empirical characteristic by subjecting it further to interpretation.

The argument of the scope of the descriptive value is also debated in critiques of the hypothesis. Democratic peace supporters often see an advantage over realism in the fact that the theory incorporates various levels of state relations, but this view is also not free from debate. Realists argue that encapsulating intra-state and supra-state affairs in the analysis is a fallacy. Firstly, by interpreting the normative part of the democratic peace theory as non-empirical it can be claimed that only the structural elements are relevant to the hypothesis. Hence, the actual internal dynamics of a state are extraneous as long as the mechanisms preventing the country from going to war are in place. Furthermore, a problem of externalizing internal norms arises. It can be argued that in the past liberal democracies have

---

7 John M. Owen, op. cit., p. 98
not been able to adopt their own ideals of conflict resolutions internationally. As a result, arguing that intra-state dynamics are a part of the theory becomes more difficult. Similarly, it can be argued that supra-national part of the theory is also irrelevant, since in theory international law does not distinguish between democracies and non-democracies.

Finally, the normative side of the theory, while powerful, may be seen as a double-edged sword. While it indeed provides the subjectively “right” direction for foreign and international policy, the theory can be dangerous in its interpretation. As the idea of global security in a community of democracies is normatively strong it can be easily used as a justification of war. This has already been the case in the past. Woodrow Wilson, a firm believer in Kant’s ideas, told the Congress that “the world must be made safe for democracy” when asking it to declare war on Germany. Similarly, the justification for the war in Afghanistan in 2001 and in Iraq in 2003 provided by George W. Bush and Tony Blair during the later stages of the conflicts included arguments of “bringing democracy to Afghanistan” and stating that G. W. Bush “has got great faith in democracies to promote peace.” This, in combination with the subjective interpretation of what is a democracy, can be used to validate aggression.

In conclusion, the critical evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the democratic peace theory shows that it has solid foundations but upon closer inspection its ambiguity and conditional nature allows for major criticism. Upon analysing the structure and empirical characteristics of the idea it proved difficult to establish a uniform definition of core terms, which proved detrimental to the falsifiability and the supposed parsimony. The theory is however successful in adapting to the realities of the modern world, in spite of the questionable relevance of its intra- and supra-state aspects. Consequences of the normative connotations of the ideals are twofold; it can both facilitate lasting peace and justify war. It has to be noted though, that in the limited scope and with precise definitions the theory seems to be empirically valid to this day.

---

Bibliography


Thompson, William R. “Democracy and Peace: Putting the Cart before the Horse?” International Organization 50/1, 1996