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An Analysis of Why the West  
Engages in War**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Democratic Peace Theory (DPT) has been one of the most influential schools of thought in Western policy making of the past 70 years. It holds that democracies do not tend to go to war with each other. As a result, democratisation of the world is seen as a desirable goal, and one that justifies aggressive foreign policy by democracy-proselytising actors. We argue that DPT does not hold up to scrutiny, and has been a vehicle for significant damage to global peace. Political convenience has allowed it to thrive, and that it has facilitated unnecessarily aggressive foreign policy by democratic states. DPT logically leads to the ambition of global democratisation because of the asserted peace and stability it would bring. This has been a persistent yet mistaken view; artificially accelerated democratisation of the world is undesirable.



## **THE DARK SIDE OF DEMOCRACY: AN ANALYSIS OF WHY THE WEST ENGAGES IN WAR**

Ever since its beginnings in the 18<sup>th</sup> century<sup>1</sup>, Democratic Peace Theory (DPT) has been one of the most influential intellectual movements in international relations. It is centred on the idea that democratic states are less likely to engage in violent conflict with other likeminded countries. This is particularly true, according to the theory, among a community of multiple democracies. There are both persuasive analytical arguments as well as strong geostrategic motivations to support such a thesis. In this paper, however, we argue that DPT does not hold up to scrutiny, and has been a vehicle for significant damage to global peace. Political convenience has allowed it to thrive, and that it has facilitated unnecessarily aggressive foreign policy by democratic states. DPT logically leads to the ambition of global democratisation because of the asserted peace and stability it would bring. This has been a persistent yet mistaken view; artificially accelerated democratisation of the world is undesirable.

This paper is divided into three parts. The first focusses on empirical evidence, and in particular on a number of case studies illustrating the dynamics of how democracies have been drivers behind international violence and other aggressive foreign policy. Secondly, we analyse those key dynamics and contrast them with DPT. Thirdly, we combine this into a general framework, showing the failure of democracies to be a force for peace and cooperation.

### **WARRIOR DEMOCRACIES**

The idea that democracies are generally inclined towards peaceful solutions and cooperation rather than aggressive coercion is quickly put in doubt when looking at the dynamics of international relations since the end of the Second World War. Even though it is true that Western<sup>2</sup> states have been promoters of transnational institutions during much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century- as well as advocates of peace and cooperation on many occasions-, their foreign policy has also led to much of the international violence witnessed during this time. Democracies accounted for roughly 25% of the world states, and yet initiated or intervened in nearly 55% of

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Kant (1795), De Tocqueville (1835)

<sup>2</sup> In this paper, “Western” states are used interchangeably with “democracies”. This is neither precise nor fully accurate, but a reasonable short-cut as European and North American states- together with a few others such as Japan- are consistently viewed as the democratic vanguard of international relations.



all wars<sup>3</sup>, including most of the largest and bloodiest ones. Whereas “intervention” could be argued to be peaceful in intent, the ambiguous nature of such action makes such action at the very least suspect. In most cases, democratic states were interested parties, rather than selfless actors promoting peace and prosperity<sup>4</sup>.

A benign explanation for this would be that while responsible for specific wars and other aggressive acts toward others, such policy took place within a context of first the Cold War and, more recently, a global war on “terror”. As such, it could be argued that a broader war was waged against them and that specific events should not be analysed outside of such context.

Another often mentioned defence is that wars initiated by democracies have generally been targeted at non-democratic regimes, and as such are part of humanity’s path towards Fukuyama’s End of History<sup>5</sup>.

In the final sections of this paper we reject both of the above explanations as valid arguments for championing any peaceful nature of democratic states. Both the Cold War and the War on Terror have mostly been vehicles for underlying agendas that led to aggression, rather than explanations for defensive action.

The most infamous of such post-WW2 wars is undoubtedly the conflict in Vietnam during the 1960s and 70s. The origins of this conflict lay in the French decision to reclaim control of the country’s north after the regional chaos caused by the Second World War. Unable to make significant progress, the French accepted a division of the country in 1954, setting up a Southern government ruled by Ngo Dinh Diem.

Unsurprisingly the US, following its “Domino Theory”, would support Diem, a brutal fascist dictator. After all, Diem was a catholic and abhorred communism just as much as the US did. However, the ferocity of his government, the numerous murders of those who opposed his regime, the preference of Catholics over Buddhists and the lack of economic and agricultural reforms drove the greatest part of South Vietnam to support Communism. His unpopularity grew to the point that in November 1963 Diem was assassinated in a coup d’état plotted by its own generals.

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<sup>3</sup> Data from Sarkees, Meredith Reid and Frank Wayman (2010) and Roser (2017).

<sup>4</sup> It can also be argued that DPT merely states that democracies are peaceful towards each other, and that the theory does not offer a similar claim with respect to non-democracies. This is a more complex issue that will be analysed below.

<sup>5</sup> Fukuyama, 1993



By 1964, the Viet Cong, was advancing deep into South Vietnam. America feared the communist threat and started to formulate military plans in order to safeguard its interests in the country. The US started to deploy troops in South Vietnam which escalated tensions with North Vietnam. In August 1964, the United States government falsely claimed that an American destroyer had been attacked by North Vietnamese forces while in international waters. In August that same year, president Johnson addressed Congress to ask for permission to initiate a war and to assist any country soliciting help in defence of its freedom. By 1969 there were over 500,000 American troops stationed in the country.

Regardless of the calamitous outcomes of the Vietnam war, for the US- but, more importantly, for the Vietnamese themselves- this war displayed none of the restraints which democracies are often assumed to display when it comes to initiating such organised violence. Western interests being threatened in another sovereign nation eventually led to violent interference by democracies, a dynamic witnessed throughout the past sixty years.

The 2003 Iraq war was in many ways an even starker example of such aggressive foreign policy. Without a Soviet Union threatening the region, the US-led invasion of the country was a voluntary step, without any serious basis to claim self-defence. Saddam Hussein had fallen from grace after his failed invasion of Kuwait a decade earlier. An amalgamation of internal political interests- including neoconservative urges to accelerate democracies around the world, an unjustified fear of weapons of mass destruction, and an early War on Terror context- drove this war. Going against the wish of the United Nations, and without any true casus belli, the US, UK and dozens of other allied democracies once again participated in offensive military aggression.

In 2011, NATO chose to militarily intervene without directly being threatened itself, this time in Libya. Overthrowing Muammar Gaddafi- yet again a previously tolerated dictator who had fallen from grace- was nominally one of humanitarian concerns. In reality, the main interests were geostrategic in nature, with the UK and France in particular being concerned about the impact Gaddafi's regime had on economic and political interests in the region.

Most democratic aggression during the past decades, however, has not been in the form of open warfare, but rather through active support for the violent overthrow of local regimes, artificially maintaining foreign dictatorships through military support, and local control through military presence. The first two categories were particularly popular tools during the Cold War, whereas



the latter is currently being employed as part of the War on Terror, in particular in the Middle East, Afghanistan and the Sahel region.

The 1954 Guatemalan coup d'état was a covert operation carried out by the CIA which deposed the democratically elected Guatemalan President Jacobo Árbenz and ended the Guatemalan Revolution of 1944–54. It installed the military dictatorship of Carlos Castillo Armas, the first in a series of U.S.-backed authoritarian rulers in Guatemala. The then code-named Operation PBSUCCESS was authorized by Eisenhower in August 1953. The operation was granted a budget of 2.7 million U.S. dollars for "psychological warfare and political action",<sup>6</sup> with a total budget estimated at between 5 and 7 million dollars, and involving over 100 CIA agents.<sup>7</sup> The coup led to four decades of civil wars between the left resistance and US backed dictatorships.

Eisenhower also approved Operation Ajax, a joint US/UK led coup d'état to put the Shah of Iran back in power. The shah was favourable to the United States and agreed to sell oil to five American oil companies. Secretary of State Dean Acheson later admitted that the Communist threat was a smokescreen to replace a democratic regime with an autocracy friendly to Washington interests<sup>8</sup>.

The CIA also played a well-documented role in other attempts to control Latin America through puppet regimes. The 1973 Chilean coup d'état, replacing Allende with Pinochet, the US actively supported the right-wing strong man. Extensive evidence<sup>9</sup> exists for destabilisation of the Allende government, direct involvement in the coup, and later support for the subsequent dictatorship. Henry Kissinger and president Nixon even made clear of their disappointment with the lack of recognition that the US received during the coup in a phone call "Well, we didn't - as you know - our hand doesn't show on this one," the president said<sup>10</sup>.

What is striking about the examples above is their ineffective nature. The outcomes have been highly destructive not just for local populations affected by foreign military presence, but also for the aggressive democracies themselves. The Vietnam and Iraqi wars both were costly in terms of lives lost as well as financially, without any clear gain to be observed. The wars in Libya and Afghanistan brought chaos to local societies, providing a rich feeding ground for

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<sup>6</sup> National Security Archives, 2017

<sup>7</sup> Immerman, 2017, pp. 138 - 143

<sup>8</sup> Brown and Abrahamian, 2001, p. 190

<sup>9</sup> Fermandois and Falcoff, 2005

<sup>10</sup> Shane, 2007



anti-Western forces, including terrorist organisations. The coup in Iran eventually caused the rise of a theocracy highly antagonistic to Washington and London, and Latin America's anti-US populism is still an important headache for US diplomats.

This makes the lack of internal consequences for the decision makers behind the above examples even more striking. Despite claims to the contrary to DPT, none of the main players in the above cases were punished either electorally or legally for their involvement. Presidents Eisenhower, Johnson, Nixon and George W. Bush all won their second presidential elections after their disastrous foreign interventions. So did Tony Blair, the British prime minister during the invasion of Iraq. This directly goes against the idea that democracies have a corrective mechanism that prohibits voluntary, unjust wars<sup>11</sup> to be fought on foreign soil.

### **DEMOCRATIC PEACE THEORY: A FLAWED PREMISE**

Kant argued that democracies do not fight each other due to the participation of the citizen in the decision making. "If ...the consent of the citizens is required to decide whether or not a war is to be declared, it is very natural that they will have great hesitation in embarking on so dangerous enterprise. For this would mean calling down on themselves all the miseries of war, such as doing the fighting themselves, supplying the costs of the war from their own resources, painfully making good the ensuing devastation..."<sup>12</sup>.

Kant and others formed the basis for modern-day DPT. It advocates for a fully democratic world, declaring that if this utopian reality would be reached, international security and peace would come upon all nations. All Western countries have implicitly embraced this philosophy, focussing on securing and expanding the hegemony of the West, traditionally led by the United States. We will analyse the validity of DPT's claims through three statements that are typical within its literature.

*First claim: If the whole world is democratic, free market oriented and nations coexist- likely regulated by some type of transnational structures- war will no longer occur.*

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<sup>11</sup> Nabulsi, 2011

<sup>12</sup> Kant, 1991:100





This is the most important tenet of DPT, namely that democracies might be aggressive against non-democracies, but have no interest in belligerence versus other democratic regimes. There are various problems with this hypothetical scenario, most of which are related to the fact that the fundamentals of such a situation would likely significantly impact the behaviour of states and international balance.

Historically, all democracies that have survived across time share some common traits and characteristics, from which the most important ones are: a strong and broad middle class, steady economic growth rates and moderate or low inequality. Nonetheless, the stagnation brought upon developed economies by the democratization of the world would directly lead to political instability, economic crises, shrinking middle classes and higher rates of inequality. This would directly threaten the political class which would try to avoid it by any means to maintain order and consent.

Hegemonic nations and resource consuming nations would try through diplomatic means and pressure to reach a more beneficial deal, which would probably be declined (Venezuela vs the US and Spain). If the agreement talks failed the next step would be to engage in boycott, trade wars and economic and even diplomatic isolation (Venezuela, Iran, Qatar). These are non-conventional types of war that leave many indirect casualties such as individual freedoms, economic growth, political stability and national security. If the targeted nation would not give in to the pressure, a propaganda machine would be initiated to destroy the public image of the state, destabilizing the internal politics and portraying it as undemocratic. Which would culminate with a coup d'état or a military invasion of the state in order to place in power policymakers that guarded the interests of the aggressor.

This tactic has been used by the United States over the 20<sup>th</sup> century against democratic nations all over the world, especially in Latin America where it overthrew 14 democratically elected regimes in order to place fascist dictators that would comply with American interests. This was the case of Chile, Nicaragua, Argentina, Brazil and Guatemala (which led to a 50 years' civil war) and Mossadegh's Iran among other nations.

History has proven to us that this is not the case even in the oldest and strongest democracies. When the US rose as an imperialistic power it decided to initiate a war against democratic Spain over the control of Cuba and Philippines. Secondly in WWI France and the UK fought against Germany which was almost as democratic as the former states. Moreover, due to



economic and political crisis, democratic Germany saw itself turn into one of the most aggressive dictatorships in history prior WWII.

*Second claim: There is a deeper consciousness and common identity present in each individual, which bind us together within economic liberal and democratic regimes.*

Fukuyama strongly believed just like most idealists do, that economic liberalism and democracy would build a common identity, slowly eliminating nationalism and making us more homogenous. He also stated, “we are far more likely to see the "Common Marketization" of world politics than the disintegration of the EEC into nineteenth-century competitiveness”<sup>13</sup>. This assertion is both speculative and unsubstantiated by recent developments. These past decades, populism, mass psychology and non-economic drivers of human behaviour have been increasingly powerful factors in shaping international relations.

For Fukuyama, there was a prior consciousness that paved the way for economic liberalism and economic openness, which would make it almost impossible to be reversed. The tendencies of human societies have proven volatile to economic pressure and adapt quickly, changing history in non-deterministic ways. Brexit, the election of Donald Trump, the irrational response to a perceived threat of international terrorism and numerous other recent dynamics have moved Western societies in directions inconsistent with DPT. This suggests that there is no psychological equilibrium based on market forces and corresponding democratic systems.

*Third claim: liberal federalism provides an equilibrium status quo within international anarchy.*

In an anarchic democratic world, conflicts of interests would not disappear, and hegemonic nations would continue to have an expansionistic and aggressive approach to international relations. Therefore, a Pacific Federation<sup>14</sup> such as the one proposed by Kant and Fukuyama would be necessary to keep world order. Throughout history different attempts have been put in place such as the League of Nations, the United Nations etc. However, their impact has been very limited and most of the times it has pushed for the interests of the most powerful nations

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<sup>13</sup> Fukuyama, *op. cit.*

<sup>14</sup> We understand Pacific Federation to be a particular league of democracies organised under a supranational organization.



of the world. Democracies do not always respect international organism. This is the case of the United States that does not recognize the International Criminal Court.

The only ‘successful’ league of nations in truly Kantian fashion modern history has been the European Union, which is displaying deep, long-term weaknesses. Moreover, a world government would be as complicated, rigid and utopian as communism as an ideal. The structure would be so large that it would not be able to be democratic, if centralised examples from the past are an indicator. So, this argument falls by its own weight. There is simply no clear model that would accommodate the inherent weaknesses of a federal system: it is either impotent in terms of war- as is the case of the United Nations- or it would be too large and powerful to be able to provide a true democratic framework.

## **THE INHERENT VIOLENCE OF DEMOCRACIES**

There is a generalised assumption in the Western world that democracies are inherently peaceful, while authoritarian regimes are considered intrinsically aggressive. There exists a level of comfort even with the examples provided in the previous section among democratic populations; they are seen as exceptions that prove the rule, examples of serious mistakes made, rather than an inherent problem in the workings of their political process.

On the surface, this makes sense. As 26 out of the 30th largest economies are democratic states<sup>15</sup>, it seems rational to solve tension through diplomatic ways or third parties, especially if one assumes that the costs of initiating a conflict are extremely high and the outcome will probably be devastating for the country and its economy. In reality, however, costs of violent conflicts tend to be significantly underestimated, and the benefits exaggerated, in the run up to conflict.

Moreover, in the case of many conflicts (including Libya in 2011, for example) the population of the aggressor countries notice very few short-term effects after the military intervention. In those cases, financial costs are relatively low, with few casualties on the democratic side because of technological superiority. Long-term effects may be severe (such as increased

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<sup>15</sup> World Bank (2017)



terrorism or global instability), but populations do not tend to associate those to previous military events.

As a result, the consequences for the decision makers behind military disasters tend to be negligible in democratic societies. Whereas DPT argues that political leaders in democracies are punished faster and more severely than those in autocratic states, reality shows the opposite. Even in those cases where democratic leaders are blamed, typically the worst that happens is losing subsequent elections, even if their policies destabilised the country, as those of George W. Bush did during this time in office.

Contrasting this with the potential consequences for dictators shows this point even more clearly. Dictators typically play a dangerous power game, in which they are under continued threat not just of being thrown out of office, but of losing their wealth and even their lives. As a result, autocratic regimes tend to be much less risk-taking than democracies.

This leaves the question of what makes democracies actually enter into aggressive foreign policy in the first place. Five main reasons can be used to explain this: the political benefits for policy makers of having external enemies; the economic set of interests that democracies typically have across the globe; complex lobbying mechanisms; the proselytising tendencies of democracies; and the psychological need to identify insiders and outsiders, i.e. enemies.

Governments in democratic regimes typically benefit substantially from external wars. When president Ronald Reagan faced significant domestic problems at home, his administration decided to invade the Caribbean island of Grenada. With a population of less than 100,000, the country was irrelevant to US interests. But the invasion allowed patriotism to flourish, as wars tend to do. This, in turn, significantly increased Reagan's approval ratings, as it diverted attention away from his failing political agenda. Limited warfare helps democratic leaders to be re-elected.

More generally, it is worth pointing out that warfare in the 21st century does not display the same characteristics as during the origins of DPT, namely the 19th century. When Western nations go to war, they typically know that the violence will not reach their own shores. As a result, the cost-benefit calculations have changed dramatically. In other words, resources and infrastructure within the homeland are typically safe from warfare instigated abroad, making the economic push-back to war much less potent.



Secondly, and given that economic growth and democratisation of a country often go hand in hand<sup>16</sup>, it is no surprise that democracies are among the largest economies in the world. This, in combination with the fact that democracies tend to favour free trade and have outward looking economic policies, means that they tend to be heavily invested in foreign nations. Whereas free trade theorists typically argue that trade brings peace, having substantial economic interests across the globe also means having a corresponding political stake in foreign societies. Even if violent intervention may disrupt short-term trade, long-term consequences may very well be positive from an economic point of view, especially if the consequent local leader is an ally. Furthermore, in the case of natural resources- an important percentage of imports for most Western countries- destabilised and war-torn regions can actually facilitate resource extraction, as it reduces local government control and negotiating power.

Thirdly, because of the complexity of democratic political systems, lobbying forms an important driver behind policy making. Governments and their respective political parties are often beholden to special interests, pushing for decisions that are beneficial for sub-groups within the population. Such interests tend to be diverse and are not necessarily warmongering in nature. But in the cases of the 2003 invasion of Iraq and of Libya in 2011, for example, there was substantial evidence for a number of firms- including oil companies- pushing for aggressive action<sup>17</sup>. While such mechanisms are not exclusive to democracies, the complexity of the web of economic and political ties does make it a particular potent phenomenon in Western nations.

Fourthly, democracies have an inherent tendency to proselytise their political system across the globe. Whereas it is unusual for autocratic regimes to spread their non-ideological<sup>18</sup> systems to other countries, democracies tend to have a strong belief in their responsibility to spread their system to places where it has not taken hold yet. Development aid and cooperation are usually the first steps in this process<sup>19</sup>. But it also permits justifying military action. After all, if your nation is seen as politically superior to that of your rival, your intervention into your rival's

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<sup>16</sup> See for example Acemoglu et al. (2015)

<sup>17</sup> Bignell, 2011

<sup>18</sup> With communism and fascism clearly being ideological.

<sup>19</sup> Very few aid projects exist that do not pay specific attention to democratisation and human rights.



territory can be argued to be humanitarian; it sets free the local population. Time and time again, this phenomenon can be observed.

Fifthly, any society, democratic or otherwise, requires insiders and outsiders. Tribalism is a fundamental driver behind human psychology, and is quickly transposed onto larger groups, including entire nations. Whereas democracies may not seem particularly prone to this on the surface, their behaviour to those living under different regimes tends to display a sense of superiority and group divide.

This assertion of an ideal, Kantian, globally democratic scenario is without much merit. Currently the focus of democratic policy makers is on the non-democratic world. Military action is taken against dictatorial regimes rather than likeminded nations. But what were to happen if Western-style democracy actually was the only system left? There is no significant reason to believe that the need for enemies, or the hunger for resources, or the usefulness of war, would cease to exist. The easy, autocratic targets would likely be replaced by other democratic regimes. Democracies have consistently shown how much value they attach to military action, and this is not something that is likely to change if external circumstances change. It's in our nature, after all.



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