

# How Convincing is the Democratic Peace Thesis?

Written by Therese Etten

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### How Convincing is the Democratic Peace Thesis When Considered in Relation to Realist (and Other) Counter-arguments?

This paper will discuss the convincingness of democratic peace theory relative to realist and other counter-arguments; in particular, it will compare the democratic peace theory with the clash of civilizations and the constructivist arguments. The theory of democratic peace stems from Immanuel Kant's *To Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch*, which outlines the fundamental principles necessary for democratic peace. He writes that a republican constitution is the most desirable circumstance for perpetual peace, and the absence of war is dependent on mutual respect between states based on regime type (Kant, 1795 trans. by Humphreys, 2003: 9). Other scholars, such as Doyle, developed the idea of perpetual peace using Kant's work.

The most easily observable criticism of the democratic peace theory would be the realist argument, explicitly because liberal and realist ways of thinking represent opposing worldviews. Thus, it is important to evaluate the robustness of democratic peace theory in relation to the realist counter-argument. Layne (1994) argues that the Trent Affair, in 1861, is best explained by realism. I will further examine his example to determine the relevance of the realist counter-argument. Furthermore, the democratic peace versus the clash of civilizations argument, developed by Davies and Johns, sheds light on the importance of religion as opposed to regime type. This recent study compares statistical evidence from the United States and United Kingdom (Davies and Johns, 2012). Both of these counter-arguments have certain merits but do not consider problems of defining democracy, the role of the individual, and lack sufficient explanatory power. This can be resolved by the constructivist argument which focuses on cooperation *or* conflict. I will use Widmaier's (2005) example of the US-India relationship, specifically focusing on the Nixon administration, to demonstrate this argument.

I will focus my critique on Doyle's interpretation of the democratic peace, arguing that although it can generally be supposed that democracies are less likely to go to war with one another, the democratic peace argument is lacking in clarity. I will argue that the constructivist approach is the most thorough criticism of democratic peace theory as it addresses the points which the latter fails to explain.

### Defining the Democratic Peace Theory

Immanuel Kant's theory is based on the assumption that democracies will not go to war with one another due to the role of the public; he favours a republican constitution as the basis of the creation of perpetual peace, which would require citizen consent (Kant, 1795 trans. by Humphrey, 2003: 9). To elaborate further, he says:

If...consent of the citizens is required to decide whether or not war is to be declared, it is very natural that they will have great hesitation in embarking on so dangerous an enterprise. For this would mean calling down on themselves all the miseries of war, such as doing the fighting themselves, supplying the costs of war from their own resources, painfully making good the ensuing devastation... (Kant in Widmaier, 2005: 434).

He believes the decision to use force against another state is based on whether the public is prepared to deal with the consequences (Kant, 1795 trans. by Humphrey, 2003).

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Over a century after Kant, the victory of democracies, at the end of the First World War, created the widespread consensus that a democratic regime was the most favourable regime type (Ray, 1995: 8). These ideas proved especially influential after the Cold War. When Francis Fukuyama published his book entitled *The End of History?* (1989), new light was cast on the idea of the democratic peace. Fukuyama claimed that we had reached “the end point of man’s ideological evolution” and that our final form of human government would be a universal liberal democracy (Fukuyama, 1989: 2).

Michael Doyle based his theory on Kant’s ‘perpetual peace’. In his book *Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs* (1983) he states that the spread of democracy makes the elimination of war possible. The belief in freedom of the individual and the idea that democratic peoples will treat each other ethically is at the heart of his theory (Rasmussen, 2003: 21). Michael Doyle says that:

Liberalism has been identified with an essential principle – the importance of the freedom of the individual. Above all, this is a belief in the importance of moral freedom, of the right to be treated and a duty to treat others as ethical subjects, and not as objects or means only. This principle has generated rights and institutions (Doyle in Rasmussen, 2003: 21).

He also says that, “even though liberal states have become involved in numerous wars with nonliberal states, constitutionally secure liberal states have yet to engage in war with one another” (Doyle, 1983: 213). Doyle claims that democracy is what defines a liberal state; this would mean that peace is defined by democracy. Furthermore, he considers the factor of regime type to be the explanatory mechanism and deciding element in a democracy’s choice to use force (MacMillan, 2003: 234). I will revolve my arguments and evaluation of democratic peace theory around these assumptions made by Doyle, as he is one of the most noteworthy scholars in this field.

## The Realist Counter-argument

Realism is based on the assumption that the world is in a constant state of anarchy, where states are focused on survival and self-help (Dunne and Schmidt in Baylis, Smith and Owens, 2011: 87). In a realist world cooperation is a possibility but it is difficult to uphold due to the competitive, anarchical nature of the international system (Layne, 1994, 11). An important point to note is that, “It is competitive in a manner that differs crucially from domestic politics in liberal societies, where the losers can accept an adverse outcome because they live to fight another day and can, therefore, ultimately hope to prevail” (Layne, 1994: 11).

Realism dictates that states seek to maximize their power in relation to their rivals (Layne, 1994: 11). Unsurprisingly, then, war is a common phenomenon in the realist arena. Layne (1994) examines examples of situations when two states came to the brink of war. One of these is the Trent Affair, which I will now examine.

### *The Trent Affair, 1861*

During the War Between the States, the conflict between Great Britain and the Union arose due to the action of the *USS San Jacinto*, which intercepted the British mail ship *Trent*. The ship was carrying James M. Mason and John Slidell (the Confederacy’s commissioners-designate). The most important cause of friction in this situation was the Northern blockade of Confederate ports which meant that Britain no longer had access to cotton (Layne, 1994: 16). This conflict finally ended when Washington decided to submit to British demands.

But the reason for the end of this conflict was not the mutual respect between democracies, which Doyle refers to. The dissolution of this conflict can best be described through realism. The War Between the States was crucial to this outcome because the Union could not have defeated the Confederacy and Great Britain. Furthermore, in Britain, public opinion during the conflict was actually supporting a war (Layne, 1994: 16). Doyle (1983) addresses the issue of the Trent Affair briefly but merely says that despite reaching the brink of war, the line was never crossed. This does not consider why these two democracies did not go to war. Thus, democratic peace theory is lacking in explanatory power.

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## *Statistical Evidence of the Democratic Peace Theory*

Realist theorists may also argue that the statistical evidence provided in support of the democratic peace theory is inconclusive. This is because until after the end of the Cold War there were not many democratic states to base such research on (Russett, 2010: 106). John Mearsheimer, a neorealist, noted that “democracies have been few in number over the past two centuries, and thus there have not been many cases where two democracies were in a position to fight each other” (in Spiro, 2001: 203). This further discredits the argument of democratic peace. Moreover, Doyle does not include the case of the war between Peru and Ecuador in his statistics because he claims that liberalism has not yet fully imposed its pacifying effects on these countries (Doyle, 1983: 213).

## *Discussion*

Realism certainly raises important issues when examining how convincing democratic peace theory is. This argument shows that democratic peace theory simply does not deliver on an explanatory level when it comes to questions such as: why did these two states choose not to go to war? Yet, the realist argument does not take into account the role of individual actors. We can look, for example, at the role that President Nixon played in US-India relations; it is evident from this that political leaders are able to override public opinion (Widmaier, 2005, 434).

## **Democratic Peace or Clash of Civilizations?**

Graeme Davies and Robert Johns have related their critique of democratic peace theory to Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations*. Huntington argues that future wars will be fought on the “fault lines between civilizations” and that this presents the “latest phase in the evolution of conflict in the modern world” (Huntington, 1993: 22). Huntington's civilizations are cultural entities; there are fundamental differences between civilizations (Huntington, 1993: 25). The study produced by Davies and Johns examines how regime type and dominant faith of a target state can influence public support for the use of force against it (Johns and Davies, 2010: 1043). Religion is becoming a more salient basis for identity resulting in an increasing tendency to associate religion with negative motivations, especially after September 11, 2001 (Johns and Davies, 2010: 1050). Their study focuses on data gathered from the United Kingdom and the United States.

Through statistical analysis of the results Davies and Johns concluded that dominant faith was of higher importance than regime type. The public base their judgements not just on behaviour alone, but also on norms and motivations. British and American people showed an almost equally negative image of the Islamic religion (Johns and Davies, 2010: 1050). Democratic peace theory and the clash of civilizations theory can be identified in this example; people were more likely to support force against dictatorships rather than democracies, and against Islamic over Christian states (Johns and Davies, 2010: 1045).

## *Discussion*

We can see from the example that regime type is not the only deciding factor in terms of supporting or opposing military action or force. It is becoming evident that democratic peace theory dismisses the power of individual actors; public opinion can be shaped by political leaders. President George W. Bush referred to the ‘war on terror’ as a ‘crusade’ (White House, 2001), which demonstrates the importance of language and the creation of narratives. Undoubtedly, Bush's statements were of vital significance in shaping public opinion. Within this particular critique of democratic peace theory the assumption that democracies do not fight one another remains robust. However, we can see an increasing need for democratic peace theory to explain the role of individuals, and that contrary to the theory's assumptions, the public are not inherently peaceful. However, the study does not account for reasons why the public has a greater willingness to act against Islamic states and dictatorial regimes.

## **A Constructivist Approach**

Constructivism derives from social theory; the belief that humans see the world via socially constructed perspectives is essential (Palan, 2000: 576-577). Furthermore, the theory is based on the idea that “historically produced and

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culturally bound knowledge enables individuals to construct and give meaning to reality” (Barnett, 2011: 156). The constructivist approach to democratic peace theory develops the idea that not all norms are positive, thus, not all implications regarding democracies necessarily mean cooperation; democratic differences can cultivate conflict (Widmaier, 2005: 435). When a state is identified as a democracy it can imply cooperative intentions, but how a state interprets democracy is pivotal and can vary (Widmaier, 2005: 435). Widmaier (2005: 435) says “tensions between ‘liberal’ and ‘social’ democracies may engender enmity and conflict”, so conflict will not only arise on the democratic-authoritarian fault line.

## *US-India Relations from 1971*

Between 1949 and 1969 shifts in relations between India and the United States can be identified due to the nature of US political administration. When the republican Richard Nixon became President this relationship became especially turbulent. At this time the US viewed India as an aggressive foreign power rather than a fellow democracy (Widmaier, 2005: 445). On the one side were the US, China and Pakistan, and on the other, India and the Soviet Union. Several events such as the deployment of a US Navy aircraft carrier to the Bay of Bengal and India’s control of East Pakistan escalated tensions. On December 17, 1971, a cease-fire was accepted. In response to this, Nixon and Kissinger claimed that the Soviets, under US pressure, had agreed to coerce India to accept this proposal. Conversely, we could argue that the cease-fire was accepted because of India’s own calculations (Widmaier, 2005: 446). Widmaier (2005: 434) concludes that, “institutional structures do not determine states interests.”

## *Discussion*

The weakening or collapse of democratic peace theory lies within disagreements over the meaning of the word; it has brought about the emergence of democratic differences. Another point would be that Nixon and Kissinger, overriding public opinion, facilitated the projection of internal disputes, with the Democratic Party, into the international arena (Widmaier, 2005: 448). Essentially, democratic institutions do not automatically create and uphold peace (Widmaier, 2005).

## **Conclusion**

These critiques of democratic peace theory have varying strengths and weaknesses, but the constructivist approach is the theoretical concept providing necessary explanations which the other critiques fail to deliver. Realism’s strength lies in the observation the absence of war does not always result from liberal sentiments (Layne, 1994). However, it does not explain the issue of different interpretations of the term ‘democracy’. The democratic peace versus the clash of civilizations argument draws our attention to the role of the public. The public, contrary to assumptions of democratic peace, are not inherently peaceful (Johns and Davies, 2010). However, the argument does not discuss why people are more prone to support the use of force against an Islamic state, or a dictatorial regime.

Constructivism assumes that our interpretations are socially constructed (Palan, 2000). The weakness of the realist argument can be explained through constructivism because it addresses the emergence of democratic differences. Realism also does not address the role of the individual (i.e. President Nixon in US-India relations). He chose to override public opinion, and also projected internal disputes with the Democratic Party into the international arena. This, again, is best explained by the constructivist approach.

The clash of civilizations argument illustrates that religion also plays an important role in the decision to go to war. A definitive weakness of this argument is that it cannot explain why the public responded in the way described in the study. Constructivism would attribute this to the varying ways in which worldviews are created. Although the assumption that democracies are less likely to go to war with one another generally holds true, “democratic peace is what states make of it” (Widmaier, 2005: 431).

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