

# **GOOD THEORY, BAD POLICY: A STUDY OF THE DEMOCRATIC PEACE THEORY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE WAR ON TERROR**

Ethan Cramer-Flood

Arguably the most fashionable contemporary debate in the endless dialectic between liberalism and realism revolves around the Democratic Peace Theory. Liberals believe they have found the Holy Grail to disprove realist determinism, and for once realists have been thrust on the defensive. Liberals believe they have solved the security problem and proven that conflict is not inevitable. Realists say the theory is wishful thinking based on fudged statistics and unsound social science. The game has been afoot at the highest level of international relations scholarship ever since Michael Doyle rediscovered Immanuel Kant in 1983 and noticed the philosopher may have been right.<sup>1</sup> As democracy has spread since the end of the Cold War, liberals believe their theory is gaining strength; meanwhile, realists poke holes in the historical data and scoff at perceived liberal naiveté.

Jack Levy's famous assertion encapsulates the idea behind Democratic Peace Theory as well as any written, which is perhaps why it is referenced so often: "The absence of war between democracies comes as close to anything we have to an empirical law in international relations."<sup>2</sup> Some liberals believe that no true democracies have ever gone to war with each other, whereas others qualify the event as 'rare'—either way, the theory represents the ultimate attack on realist anarchy. If the concept of the democratic peace holds, then it proves that an organizing principle for the international system is possible. It shows that the Hobbesian state of nature is manageable without the use of force. It also shows that the internal character of a state matters with regard to foreign policy decisions and international behavior. All of this is anathema to realists.

This paper is divided into three parts. First, it will examine the liberal and realist assessments of the consequences of democratization on international relations, and survey the academic side of the debate. Second, it will explore the most fascinating addition to the empirical evidence in the last few years: the violently aggressive nature of emerging democracies. Mature, liberal democracies may never fight other liberal democracies, but societies in transition to democracy not only will fight established democracies, they will fight anyone else as well, and will do so more often than any other form of government. Edward Mansfield and Jack Snyder are at the forefront of this scholarship, and this paper will explore their joint contribution, which could have profound ramifications for

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<sup>1</sup> Doyle, Michael W. "Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs." *Philosophy and Public Affairs*. Vol. 12, No. 3. Summer 1983. pp. 205-235.

<sup>2</sup> Levy, Jack. "Domestic Politics and War." In *The Origin and Prevention of Major Wars*. Robert Rotberg and Theodore Rabb, eds. Cambridge University Press, 1989.

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U.S. policy. Finally, the paper will look at the most salient form of violence currently plaguing the world—terrorism—and see what, if anything, a democratic peace would contribute to this problem. If the most dangerous threat in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will come from non-state actors, should Democratic Peace Theory (hereafter DPT) still be a guiding foreign policy principle under the administration of new U.S. President Barack Obama? What, if any, impact does democratization have on a country's likelihood of producing a terrorist threat?

## The Peace

Immanuel Kant hypothesized in his legendary 1795 essay *Perpetual Peace* that a world comprised of constitutional republics was one of several conditions necessary for creating a perpetual peace.<sup>3</sup> He believed that the majority of people in any given country would never vote to go to war other than in self defense, because war is a painful and costly exercise for the public at large that at best only benefits elites. Thus, in a world of democracies, war would cease for lack of aggressors.

Kant believed that the rule of law provided an opportunity for the flourishing of the human mind, morality and individual freedom.<sup>4</sup> Yet the same system that provided this opportunity for governance and civility—the emergence of sovereign states—resulted in a structure capable of amassing great military power. These states, to Kant's dismay, were using this power to “launch wars of barbaric devastation that were horrifyingly antithetical to civilized ideals.”<sup>5</sup> The territorial state model that provided the potential for an enlightened social life was equally responsible for unheard-of brutality internationally, and Kant realized that with no system for lawful, peaceful relations between states the rule of nature would prevail.<sup>6</sup> In this way at least, he was a realist. Thus he developed his vision of the democratic peace to address these flaws.

At the time, his theory was beyond testing, but the expansion of democracy in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and into the 21<sup>st</sup> has provided much stronger evidence that Kant was on to something. Liberal democracies have increased their numbers by leaps and bounds, and they are not fighting one another. Thus liberal international relations thinkers have picked up and refined Kant's theory. With the end of the Cold War, it was possible to craft U.S. foreign policy around the concept. President Bill Clinton embraced the theory in his rhetoric, and President George W. Bush and his neo-conservatives took the idea into the quagmire of Iraq—to the chagrin of the realists who used to dominate Republican Party thought.

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<sup>3</sup> Kant, Immanuel. *Perpetual Peace, and Other Essays on Politics, History, and Morals*. Hackett Publishing Company, 1983. Kant also required a market economy aimed at improving the well-being of citizens and an expansionary ‘pacific union’ of republics.

<sup>4</sup> Solomon, Benjamin. “Kant's Perpetual Peace: A New Look at this Centuries-Old Quest.” *The Online Journal of Peace and Conflict Resolution*, 5.1, Summer 2003: pp. 106-126.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

Bruce Russett, a leading Democratic Peace theorist, stated in 1993 that in an international system comprising a critical mass of democratic states, “it may be possible in part to supersede the realist principles...that have dominated practice to the exclusion of liberal or idealist ones since at least the 17<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>7</sup> Two years later, he raised the stakes by claiming, “The theoretical edifice of realism will collapse if attributes of states’ political systems are shown to have major influence on which states do or do not fight each other.”<sup>8</sup> Thus the gauntlet was thrown down. A dizzying array of statistical analyses were published examining the history of warfare and military encounters from every possible angle over the last 3,000 years—and almost all found that DPT withstood rigorous testing.<sup>9</sup> A series of empirical and theoretical examinations by the likes of Michael Doyle, Rudolph Rummel, Spencer Weart and Russett himself produced a growing body of evidence in support of the theory and of liberal attacks on realism.<sup>10</sup> These thinkers argued that the spread of democracy did in fact make the elimination of war possible.<sup>11</sup>

Realists disagree with this conclusion, of course. Their critique is based on the inherent belief that internal processes and political structures within states play no discernable role in shaping international behavior on matters of war and peace.<sup>12</sup> Realists repeatedly cite several major arguments against the empirical validity of the democratic peace. A close reading of realists like Kenneth Waltz and Christopher Layne produces three main themes:

1. DPT theorists cannot account for a number of serious crises that have occurred between major, established, mature democracies throughout history that ended in near misses—but could just as easily have been war had not circumstances intervened.
2. The number of wars between democracies is not as rare as Democratic Peace theorists assert, and is certainly higher than ‘never,’ because DPT historians engage in creative tinkering with definitions so as to disqualify warring states that could otherwise be considered democracies.
3. Wars are rare, and throughout human history democracies have been extremely rare, thus statistical chance would predict the number of wars

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<sup>7</sup> Russett, Bruce. “Can A Democratic Peace Be Built?” *International Interactions*. Vol. 18, No. 3. 1993. pp. 277-282.

<sup>8</sup> Russett, Bruce, et al. “The Democratic Peace.” *International Security*. Vol. 19, No. 4. Spring 1995. pp. 164-184.

<sup>9</sup> For a particularly robust and comprehensive recounting of every military encounter in history involving any state or entity that could possibly have been considered remotely democratic, see Weart, Spencer. *Never At War: Why Democracies Will Not Fight One Another*. New Haven: Yale University Press. 1998.

<sup>10</sup> According to Rummel in *Power Kills: Democracy as a Method of Nonviolence* (1997): of 353 pairings of nations fighting in major international wars between 1816 and 1991, none occurred between democracies. However, 155 of those wars did include a democracy on one side.

<sup>11</sup> Solomon, Op. cit.

<sup>12</sup> Maoz, Zeev. “The Controversy Over the Democratic Peace: Rearguard Action or Cracks in the Wall?” *International Security*. Vol. 22, No. 1. Summer 1997. pp. 162-198.

between democracies would be low. Thus the theory currently cannot be proven because it is too new and the evidence is too sparse.<sup>13</sup>

According to Waltz, Kant believed that liberal democracies are peaceful toward each other, but “[Kant’s] definition of a republic was so restrictive that it was hard to believe even one of them could come into existence, let alone two or more.”<sup>14</sup> Waltz also claims that democracies stop being the “right sort of democracies” for liberal theorists as soon as they go to war. He cites the much-maligned Weimar Republic, which was considered a model democracy by the European powers until it launched World War I, when it was reclassified as authoritarian.<sup>15</sup> In the eyes of realists, DPT believers see democracies as less and less liberal when they prepare for war, and less liberal still if they engage in combat. Thus, the theory is irrefutable because any warring state no longer qualifies as a true democracy.<sup>16</sup>

However, regardless of definitional trickery in some cases, the vast majority of data relies on clear-cut examples. Waltz invokes David Hume in his argument against the array of statistical evidence aligned against him: “We have no reason to believe that the association of events provides a basis for inferring the presence of a causal relation.”<sup>17</sup> To realists, it is not democracy that causes peace, but other conditions that cause both democracy and peace together (for instance, that old realist standby—power).

If Democratic Peace theorists fudge the data to support their argument, realists are no less guilty of doing the same in their counter arguments. A common tactic among realists is to mention Finland in World War II, a mature democracy that sided with the Nazis and declared war on the Allies. But it is problematic to count Finland as a case against DPT, because there was not a single combat casualty between Finland and any democracy throughout the entire war. Finland merely wanted to fight the Soviet Union in an attempt to reclaim lost territory, and the war declarations were a formality. Yet some realist empirical surveys have counted Finland in World War II as 17 separate examples of a democracy going to war against another democracy.<sup>18</sup>

On the other side, realists like to mention the U.S. overturning democratically elected governments in both the Dominican Republic and Chile—non-military engagements that liberal studies would never include. Though shots

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<sup>13</sup> Layne, Christopher. “Kant or Cant: The Myth of the Democratic Peace.” *International Security*. Vol. 19, No. 2. Autumn 1994. pp. 5-49; Waltz, Kenneth. “Structural Realism after the Cold War.” in *America Unrivaled: The Future of the Balance of Power*. John Ikenberry, ed. Cornell University Press. 2002.

<sup>14</sup> Waltz. Op. cit.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Russett, et al, Op. cit.

were not fired, realists claim with some validity that these examples prove democracies are capable of aggressive behavior toward one another.<sup>19</sup> Thus the argument goes around and around.

## Democracies in Transition

A long-accepted caveat in the Democratic Peace Theory is that although democracies do not fight each other, they are more than willing to go to war with non-democracies. In fact, they are statistically just as likely to go to war as any type of authoritarian regime. However, new information about the surprisingly violent tendencies of new, transitional, ‘immature’ democracies has reframed the foreign policy debate over the meaning of DPT. The alarming statistics on the war-like nature of transitional democracies throws into stark relief the Kantian requirement that democracies be definable as “liberal” in order to qualify as good for the peace.

Mansfield and Snyder have been tracking this phenomenon for over a decade, and recently published “Electing to Fight: Why Emerging Democracies Go to War,” a book that encapsulates all their accumulated data and theories. They do not challenge the basic tenets of DPT; in fact, they acknowledge immediately that no mature democracies have ever gone to war with each other, but they strenuously challenge the interpretation of DPT that led to the Bush administration’s goal of spreading democracy. They find that emerging democracies with weak political institutions are in fact the most bellicose form of government.<sup>20</sup> As a nation transitions from authoritarianism to republicanism, leaders of emerging parties find it easiest to rally support and consolidate power by invoking nationalist rhetoric and stirring up regional hatreds. This rhetoric often turns belligerent, and the path to war sometimes becomes inevitable.

States that make the widest transition, from repressive regime to complete mass democracy, are about twice as likely to fight wars in the first decade after the change than similar states that remain authoritarian.<sup>21</sup> Even worse, states that begin the transition to democracy but stall along the way find themselves between four and fifteen times more likely to experience internal or external war.<sup>22</sup> The culprit in all cases is weak institutions—absence of the rule of law, an independent judiciary, a free press or civilian control of the military—that leave little mechanism for accountability. The findings show that incomplete democratizing states—those that develop democratic institutions in the wrong order—are unlikely to ever complete the transition to democracy. These states then become the most dangerous of all, as politicians have incentives to pursue

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<sup>19</sup> Waltz, Op. cit.

<sup>20</sup> Mansfield, Edward and Jack Snyder. *Electing to Fight: Why Emerging Democracies Go to War*. MIT Press, 2005.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

bellicose policies. Leaders in these stillborn democracies become popular by making demands of nearby rivals or encouraging repression of disliked minority groups, and they are shielded from the impact of bad policy decisions: if they push for war and it goes badly, they can always declare martial law, suspend elections and freedom of the press, and use the emergency as an excuse to reconsolidate power.<sup>23</sup>

The U.S. has provided assistance, support and advice to emerging democracies around the world, and has pressured undemocratic regimes to reform through diplomacy, sanctions and military force. But according to Mansfield and Snyder, the strategy should focus on institution-building in these states, so the proper infrastructure can be in place before mass political participation and elections lead to the statistical dangers they have uncovered. Mansfield and Snyder compare democracy promotion in nuclear countries such as Russia and China to “spinning a roulette wheel.”<sup>24</sup> Only a policy of nurturing strong institutions capable of channeling conflict resolution into non-violent political processes—and protecting the rights of minorities—can prevent the dangers associated with initial transitional periods. Even states that develop institutions properly turn out to be very aggressive in the early years, but less so than other transitional governments—and they are more likely to grow into mature and stable democracies in the long run.<sup>25</sup>

So what are the implications of these conclusions for the realist/liberal debate on Democratic Peace Theory? Realism is currently enjoying a revival thanks to the debacle in Iraq, as most realist scholars and politicians opposed the war. They saw the quest for democratization as a fool’s errand, and they preferred the traditional use of power politics to deal with Saddam Hussein: deterrence and the threat of annihilation.<sup>26</sup> But Snyder and Mansfield’s results do not lie squarely in support of one side or the other. The violence of transitional democracies makes DPT that much less parsimonious by adding further qualifications, but it also comes to conclusions inconsistent with realism’s basic tenets: if transitional democracies are more likely to go to war, that means that their internal structure determines their external behavior. Most likely, all sides of the debate will use this new information to support their normative goals. For liberals, it’s simply a strategy document guiding the way to a safer approach to supporting the growth of democracies.

## **Terrorism**

If Democratic Peace Theory is the long awaited answer to the scourge of state-to-state warfare, what can it do for the problem of non-state actor (NSA) violence? In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, violence perpetrated on the international stage has less to do with official state actions and more to do with independent terrorist

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<sup>23</sup> Owen, John. “Iraq and the Democratic Peace.” *Foreign Affairs*. November/December 2005.

<sup>24</sup> Mansfield, Edward and Jack Snyder. “Democratization and War.” *Foreign Affairs*. May/June 1995.

<sup>25</sup> Mansfield and Snyder. *Electing to Fight*. Op. cit.

<sup>26</sup> Owen. Op. cit.

organizations (or nationalist rebels dubbed “terrorists” for political purposes). Al Qaeda, Kashmiri separatists, the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka, the Sudanese Janjaweed militias, Chechen rebels, Sunni insurgents in Iraq, Hezbollah and Hamas are just some of the terrorist groups and NSAs that are the focus of international military efforts. Is DPT out of date already, or can it be of help in this regard? Or are the policy ramifications of DPT a hindrance to fighting terrorism?

Theoretical explorations of terrorism and its relationship to the democratic peace are scarce. A search of any database of international relations journal articles for “Democratic Peace Theory” and “terrorism” will turn up precious little. However, a few scholars have tackled the issue, and the preliminary results hold the promise of more disagreement in the future.

John Norton Moore sees a relationship between types of government and shared goals that leads to the phenomenon of the democratic peace. One of those shared goals, in his view, is control of terrorism—and he claims that “government structures rooted in democracy, the rule of law, and human freedom perform impressively better than totalitarian and authoritarian models” at the goal of controlling terror.<sup>27</sup> He provides little empirical evidence, but the theory suggests that he endorses the idea of democratic expansion in order to limit terrorism.

Moore also hypothesizes that democracies are drawn into wars with non-democracies at a heavy rate because they have failed to adequately deter non-democratic elites in other countries from engaging in “high risk behavior.”<sup>28</sup> Aggression, genocide and other illegal activities are pulling democracies into otherwise avoidable combat. He believes that if only the democratic nations were clearer about what they will tolerate and what they will not, they could prevent authoritarian regimes from behaving in an ultimately self-destructive manner. Moore theorizes that ‘deterrence,’ or the lack thereof, is the missing link in DPT. Thus he expands his democratic peace supplement to terrorism: international terror is the result of government failure somewhere—most likely in a non-democratic state—and democracies could deter countries from allowing terrorists to flourish if they acted decisively enough. In other words, there is a need to focus on removing the motives for people to turn to terrorism.

However, he does not use the theory as an excuse for aggressive action. Instead, he believes the idea can shift the paradigm away from the concept that all non-democracies are a threat to the peace that must be dealt with violently. Rather than follow the Bush doctrine of preemption and democracy expansion, he believes that effective deterrence can remove the necessity to act and thus avoid war. He explains that:

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<sup>27</sup> Moore, John Norton. “Solving the War Puzzle.” *The American Journal of International Law*. Vol. 97, No. 2. Apr. 2003. pp. 282-289.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

When terrorism...is taking place, it is the totality of external incentives through deterrence that is the only remaining modality of control. That is, when non-democratic government structures massively fail, affecting the interests and commitments of other nations, the only remaining check is for other nations to structure effective external deterrence through incentives.<sup>29</sup>

He calls it the ‘incentive theory’—incentives being the useful cousins of deterrents. Moore supports removing trade barriers and engaging the benefits of interdependence. He accepts the liberal philosophy that free trade helps both sides and creates positive incentives over time. He thinks democracies can work together to eliminate terrorism—not just through expansion, but also by focusing all their elements of deterrence. A strong military, appropriate advance warning about unacceptable behavior, effective diplomacy and coalition building, and enhancement of international institutions all can serve to reduce the frequency that democracies are drawn into conflict with states or terrorist organizations.<sup>30</sup>

F. Gregory Gause III disagrees with certain premises of Moore’s thinking, but takes an entirely different approach. Gause does not believe there is any evidence supporting the theory that terrorism will not flourish in or around democracies. Though the available data is limited, he finds no strong correlation statistically or anecdotally that justifies current U.S. security policies in the Arab world.<sup>31</sup> He states that terrorism grows out of factors more specific than regime type, thus the pursuit of democracy in the Middle East cannot be expected to serve the interest of terrorism reduction. Similar to Mansfield and Snyder, he believes that the U.S. should instead be focusing its resources on developing “secular, nationalist, and liberal political organizations” in countries that are known to harbor or sponsor terrorists.<sup>32</sup>

Gause reiterates my complaint that the academic literature on the relationship between terrorism and democracy is limited, but he found several older studies. He quotes a survey from the 1980s that discovered both the victims and perpetrators of most terrorist events are citizens of democracies, and that terrorist incidents mostly occur inside democracies.<sup>33</sup> He also uncovered a report that showed that “although terrorist attacks are less frequent when democratic political participation is high, the kinds of checks that liberal democracy typically places on executive power seems to encourage terrorist actions.”<sup>34</sup> This mirrors Robert Pape’s findings in his famous study of suicide bombers, wherein he concludes that suicide terrorists almost always strategically strike against democracies because they consider them to be ‘soft’ and more likely to respond to

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Gause III, F. Gregory. “Can Democracy Stop Terrorism?” *Foreign Affairs*. September/October 2005.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. He quotes a study by William Eubank and Leonard Weinberg.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. Study by Quan Li.

the tactic.<sup>35</sup> Both authors conclude that terrorists are not driven by a desire to fight for or against democracy, per se, but by their nationalist opposition to foreign occupation or domination. Hence, the presence of democracy in a host country would have no bearing on their behavior.

Free countries suffered 269 major terrorist incidents around the world between 2000 and 2003, whereas partly free countries suffered 119, and not free countries suffered 138.<sup>36</sup> Although the vast majority of terrorist attacks in the world occurred in just a few countries, such as Iraq and Afghanistan—thus skewing the statistics—the fact that India suffered one of the highest total attacks speaks to the idea that democratization serves as a miracle cure. If that were true, then the world’s largest democracy would not outpace the world’s largest authoritarian state—China—in international terrorist attacks by a count of 203 to zero.<sup>37</sup>

Anecdotal evidence supports the idea as well. Gause lists an impressive roster of brutal terrorist organizations arising from democratic states since the 1970s:

- The Red Brigades in Italy
- The Irish Republican Army in Britain and Ireland
- The Japanese Red Army in Japan
- The Red Army Faction in West Germany
- The Basque separatists (ETA) in Spain
- The Kurdish rebels in Turkey

Additionally, there are the individual terrorist cells born in Israel, Britain and the U.S. that grew up to assassinate Yitzhak Rabin, bomb the London underground and destroy the federal building in Oklahoma City.<sup>38</sup>

All of this leaves little space for the theory that a world full of democracies would somehow eliminate terrorism in the same way it might eliminate state-to-state warfare. DPT, it seems, will not address the problem of terrorism. As Gause states, “terrorists, who rarely represent political agendas that could mobilize electoral majorities, would reject the very principles of majority rule and minority rights on which liberal democracy is based.”<sup>39</sup>

## Conclusion

Ultimately, Democratic Peace Theory is a fascinating idea, and its importance for international relations cannot be overstated. The debate will

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<sup>35</sup> Pape, Robert. “The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism.” *American Political Science Review*. Vol. 97, No. 3. Aug. 2003.

<sup>36</sup> Gause. Op. cit.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

continue between liberals and realists over the empirical evidence, but until it is actively disproved, it can serve as a cautious theoretical guide for U.S. foreign policy. However, Mansfield and Snyder have provided a valuable fine-tuning of the policy agenda it should inspire, and it is vital that proponents of freedom and democracy balance the need for democratic expansion with the danger of illiberal transitions. The U.S. must renew its focus on institution building at the local and international level before rushing to democratize states that are not ready. Finally, the inability of the democratic peace to create a world free of large-scale violence must be understood as well. Preliminary evidence suggests that violent, aggressive NSAs will be unaffected by the spread of democracy. Thus, policy leaders need to adapt their fight against terrorism appropriately. A different theory must be found to guide that quest.

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