

**WHY ARE DEMOCRACIES LESS LIKELY - THAN NON-DEMOCRACIES -  
TO GO TO WAR WITH EACH OTHER?**

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In 1983 the political scientist Michael W. Boyle wrote “Kant, Liberal Legacies and Foreign Affairs”, in which he presented, what would later become known as the democratic peace theory, based on Immanuel Kant’s idea of perpetual peace (Simpson, 2019). According to this theory, which is closest to an empirical truth in the theory of International Relations, no two democracies have fought a war against each other since 1815. This paper will argue that the reason why democracies are less likely – than non-democracies – to go to war with each other is due to states’ ability to make credible commitments along with shared norms and values. In Kant’s original work, he argued that peaceful relations between states could only exist once they shared three features: democracy, international organizations, and economic interdependence (Simpson, 2019). In line with this, as well as normative arguments, it should be able to provide us with a possible answer to the question. For the purpose of this paper, warfare will be defined as an armed conflict among political entities (Baylis et al., 2020: 227). The focus will be on democracies, where there are free, competitive elections, freedom of expression, rule of law, free market, transparency, a free and independent press, and decentralization of power. These characteristics are prerequisites for the regime to be defined as a democracy.

A reason why democratic states are unlikely to resort to military aggression against other democracies is their joint membership in international organizations. This is because international organizations provide a forum for member-states to address and resolve conflicts before they escalate into potential war. As an example, in 1967 NATO, under the leadership of general-secretary Manlio Brosio, helped mediate the conflict between Turkey and Greece over Cyprus and prevented a widening of the war. (Russett, 2011: 152). By being members of the same international organization states can make credible commitments to each other, which are monitored by the mutual institution and can help to overcome issues without resorting to violence (Russett, 2011: 150). Moreover, democracies are more likely to join international organizations due to the commitment to democratic values IOs require of states in order to make entry or continuation. (Russett, 2011: 151). The European Union, for instance, is a supranational organization founded on the commitment to democracy and has never had a non-democratic member (B. M. Russett, 2011). If a member state fails to uphold this commitment, the EU can put heavy pressure on them with sanctions in order to make them reinforce their democratic commitment (B. M. Russett, 2011). By having access to a mutual institution to supervise these commitments, democracies are more likely to resolve disputes without resorting to war and refrain from military aggression against other democracies.

It is harder for a democratic leader to unilaterally declare war due to the internal institutional constraints of checks and balances embedded in democracies. Research has indicated that governments with the most severe decisional constraints tend to be the least likely to engage in warfare (Mintz & Geva, 1993:486). In the US, it is the legislative branch, Congress, that has the power to issue a Declaration of War. However, it is the executive, the President, who acts as Commander in Chief of the armed forces, who can ask for Congress' authorization to fund and use military force against another state (Mavrot, 2022). The War Powers Resolution from 1973 was adopted over the veto of President Nixon. The resolution was intended to limit the president's ability to commit the US to an armed conflict without the consent of the US Congress. This was in response to the Vietnam War, where the US had been involved in a number of wars without a Declaration of War from Congress, which made the Congress nervous about the President's decision-making power in whether to wage war or not (Realism, Liberalism, and the War Powers Resolution," 1989: 637). This shows that democracies are aware that the separation of power between the branches is always somehow evenly dispersed, especially limiting the executive's power. This also secures predictability for other states as the process of declaring war is harder and longer in a democracy, which makes it easier for states to engage in credible commitments. Due to the decentralization of power in democracies, they are less likely to enter into war with each other.

Trade can provide a strong incentive for peaceful resolutions between states as war would be economically irrational. Studies have shown that if both states are in the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile of trade dependence rather than in the middle, the chance of violent conflict goes down by more than half (Russett, 2011: 192). In 2007 the US and South Korea signed a free trade agreement (KORUS FTA), which eliminated tariffs and other trade barriers, resulting in an increase in trade between the two countries. Lee (2008) argues that the effect of the FTA was an acceleration of economic interdependence between South Korea and the United States, allowing for greater national credibility in Korea and guaranteeing South Korea's security from North Korea's military threats. KORUS FTA was ratified in 2012 and the trade between the two has grown significantly, contributed to closer ties between the two states and is still in effect today (Lee, 2008). From a democratic theory perspective, an FTA like this contributes to peace by creating an economic network of democracies that are mutually dependent. When states' markets are closely linked, events in one state strongly influence conditions in another, which deter democratic leaders from initiating conflict against important trade partners as it would result in mutual economic losses (Suzuki, 1994: 494). The growth of trade between

democracies has been linked to peace, and mutually beneficial trade agreements can serve as a powerful incentive for maintaining peaceful relations between states.

Democracies are less likely to enter war if the cost outweighs the benefits of war. Cost can be divided into the cost of human lives and economical costs (Hausken, 2016). The cost of human lives is not in interests of the people, since they are the ones who ultimately bear the cost. As such, it is expected at an international level that state leaders consider the potential human cost of their decisions. This cost-benefit analysis, which is perceived to be an appropriate one, may be a driving force for two democracies not to go to war with each other since democracies must act by this democratic norm in order to be respected and viewed positively by other democracies. (Carter, 2017). However, it is still seen how different actors assign different weights to these costs (Hausken, 2016). If we look at an authoritarian state such as Russia through a cost-benefit analysis, Putin's actions in the Ukraine War were made on the calculations that the benefit of controlling Ukraine outweighs the economic costs and the cost of human lives. Due to sanctions, the Russian stock market experienced a 30% decline, and the number of Russian casualties is still unsure as the Russian government tries to avoid mentioning a death toll, which somehow also shows indifference to the cost of human lives (Vacroux, 2022). These high costs of war will most likely not have been accepted by a democratic state. This establishes how the interpretation of cost-benefit can have a pacifying effect on democracies.

In a democracy, a leader's power is dependent on domestic responses to war. Doyle argues: "that citizens are overwhelmingly interested in peace, as they pay the price of war in taxes, disruption of trade, material destruction, and lives." (Jahn, 2013: 74). In liberal democracies, people have the right to hold governments accountable if they fail to protect the well-being of their citizens, it is expected that voters will throw the leader out of office (de Mesquita et al., 1992). This is a contrast to Saddam Hussein's dictatorship in Iraq, where decisions to use force were based solely upon his own interests without any consideration for electoral consequences (Gause, 2002). Had this happened in a democracy, the voters would have likely punished Hussein by voting him out of office, as the political survival of a democratic leader is more sensitive to fighting in/or losing a war than a non-democratic leader is (Carter, 2017). Additionally, democracies require more transparency when it comes to the conduct of war, as leaders must be able to justify their decisions in a way that is understandable and acceptable to the public (Voeten & Brewer, 2006). The leverage of the people and public opinion can

prevent them from engaging in war against each other, as it makes democratic leaders anticipate an electoral response before deciding to go to war.

The role of mass media in democracies can tilt public opinion and thereby contribute to preventing a government from going to war. For a state to be referred to as a liberal democracy, we established in the beginning that it must have a free, independent press. Media, often regarded as the fourth estate of democracy in terms of checks and balances, has the ability to shape public opinion through their coverage of news and hold state leaders accountable for their policies and actions, even potentially eliminating public support for war. For example, the media's coverage of the Vietnam War in 1956-1975 arguably tilted public support against the ongoing war and contributed to the withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam due to public pressure created by mass media (Hallin, 1984). In a non-democratic state, the press is often restricted and/or government-controlled thus preventing the media from providing an oppositional stance to the government. In an authoritarian country such as North Korea, the media is among the most strictly controlled in the world, which enables Kim Jong-un to use the media to the regime's benefit and create narratives and manipulate the public (van Belle, 1997). A free press contributes to peace between democracies as it is able to write critically about a state's government and foreign policies, which makes leaders consider how the media is going to portray them and their decisions on a potential war.

For democracies that share similar norms, it is harder to justify the use of military forces against one another. Democratic norms are unwritten rules and expectations that support and promote democracy, but also peaceful resolutions. These norms include the belief in human rights, the rule of law, freedom of expression and the press, and the protection of civil liberties (Andersson, 2000). When two states share similar values, the public will oppose their leaders engaging in war due to the sentiment that it is dishonorable to go to war with people who share the same values as themselves, and the same thinking applies on a state-level (Zimelis, 2012). Democracies trust those states they consider fellow liberal democracies and see no reason to fight them, this adherence to the same norms creates an expectation that each party will also abide by them (Carter, 2017). As a result of this, democratic states will have increased trust in one another and will work out their conflicts peacefully (Zimelis, 2012). The UN is an example of an IGO that is peacekeeping and has the goal of spreading democratic values and norms to other states. They created the Democracy Fund to promote democracy and human rights, with the rationalization that a group of states sharing norms will produce peaceful interactions

(Andersson, 2000). This contributes to Kant's assumption that the spread of democracy reduces the likelihood of war. The UN becomes a tool for the democratic community to improve long-term global peace and security by targeting non-democratic states (Andersson, 2000). Through initiatives like the Democracy Fund, the UN is able to help countries develop democratic systems with democratic norms, which should create a more peaceful and stable environment.

While this assignment has argued that the reason why democracies are less likely – than non-democracies – to go to war with each other is due to states' ability to make credible commitments along with shared norms and values, some scholars have argued that the reason for peace is not the fact that they are democracies, but rather that they are capitalist states with liberal political economies (Gartzke & Hewitt, 2010). Economic interdependence contributes to this Capitalist Peace Theory (CPT) since a potential war against a trade partner would result in mutual economic losses. China is not a liberal democracy but is one of the world's biggest economies with the US as one of its major trading partners. China and the US have different regime types and big cultural differences, but their economies are closely tied together, and should according to the CPT, therefore, provide peace between these two nations (Wyne, 2022). However, the trade war between China and the US in 2019 contradicts this. Even though a trade war is not an armed conflict, it is still somehow aggression towards another state with big economic consequences. Trump's trade advisor, Peter Navarro, said: "President Trump built the most powerful and beautiful economy in the world in three years. The Chinese Communist Party took it down in 60 days", which shows their economic interdependence not as a source of stability but as a vector of vulnerability (Wyne, 2022). Therefore it argues that the reason for peace is not always dependent on economic interdependence and capitalist economies but rather the type of regime.

Another way to explain why democracies do not go to war against each other could be seen through the balance of power. Neorealist theorists believe that states are primarily motivated by power and self-interest and will pursue their own interests at the expense of others. They seek to obtain relative power, where they look at how much power one state has in relation to another with the idea of a zero-sum world where if one state obtains power, another one loses some. Realists believe that all states must pursue power in order to retain their sovereignty (Baylis et al., 2020: 135). If a state has a lot of power, less powerful states will gather in alliances to counterbalance that power. This was seen in the creation of the Warsaw Pact. It was created in response to the integration of West Germany

into NATO, to establish a balance of power that could counterbalance NATO. (Mastny & Byrne, 2005). However, in 1956 Soviet Union invaded Hungary, both members of the Warsaw Pact, which contradicts the idea that alliances between countries always promote peace (B. Russett, 2001). Contrary, the same has not been seen in NATO, where all members are democratic states, which could imply that it is not the alliance itself, but rather the foundation of shared democratic norms and values within the alliance that contributes to the maintenance of peace.

It could be argued that previous enemies cannot cooperate even though they both are democracies, which criticizes the theory of democratic peace. If other states do not perceive a state as a liberal democracy, they will not treat it as one. After the two World Wars, the relationship between Germany and France was damaged as the public of France believed that Germans: “deeply love(d) war” and did not share the same democratic norms as them (Ripsman, 2007). The transition of Western Germany from an authoritarian enemy to a liberal democratic partner did not change the people of France’s perception of Germany. The negative pressure of French public opinion on Germany was reflected in France’s foreign policy, where France resisted German entry into NATO (Ripsman, 2007). However, the relationship and cooperation between France and Germany managed to be restored. Reconciliation was achieved through the creation of an interdependence of economic, political, and cultural character and definitively through the signing of the Elysée Treaty, a treaty of friendship between the two states (Ripsman, 2007). Today, France and Germany are close economic and political partners, with both countries playing a leading role in the European Union. It was through their cooperation and commitments to democratic institutions and their working out a set of common democratic norms, which enabled them to cooperate even though their history made it hard. This shows that democracies in some way always manage to solve conflicts and maintain peace.

The main reason why democracies are less likely to go to war against each other is due to states’ ability to make credible commitments along with shared norms and values. The claim of credible commitments is seen in the peace-making of IOs such as the UN, NATO, and EU, with their ability to act as a mediator in disputes between member-states. The separation of power limits the leader from declaring war unilaterally and secure predictability which makes it easier to engage in credible commitments. Commitments in the form of economic interdependence contribute to a deepening of the interconnections between democratic states, making it more difficult to justify a war against a trading partner. The theory that capitalist economic interdependence is the main factor in preventing

countries from going to war, however, was not supported. A head of state also makes a credible commitment to the public, when he swears to act in the interest of the people, if he does not, he can face electoral consequences, which has a pacifying effect on state leaders. A cost-benefit analysis of war also contributes to state leaders sticking to democratic norms in the international system. A correlation between public opinion, mass media and norms all contribute to accountability to the public as well as other democratic states. Neorealism's balance of power theory could to an extent explain the more likely peace between democracies, but the example of the Soviet Union and Hungary proved that the formation of alliances is not always enough. Even though a history of hostile relations could bring down the idea of peace between democracies, it was still seen how credible commitments and shared norms overruled the post-war relationship between France and Germany. The evidence presented in these arguments provides a possible explanation for why the probability of war taking place between democracies is low. It is important to take into consideration, that this assignment provides a simplification of a very complex answer. As Owen (1994) has put it, "No one is sure why democracies do not fight one another", and even though the above paragraphs provide some kind of answer, there are still many variables to look into when answering this complex and ambiguous question. It is important to note, that conflicts still arise between democracies, even though they do not escalate into war. However, as it was explained in the last three paragraphs, the peacemaking attributes of democracy would almost always, in some way, come down to credible commitments and shared values and norms between democratic states.



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