
So What If Democracies Don't Fight Each Other?

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About 15 years ago, international relations scholars began observing that democratic states do not actually fight each other. Of course, democracies often get involved in wars, and sometimes engage in aggression and international law violations, but they don't seem to pursue armed conflicts with each other. It's almost as if they've "stipulated" some tacit agreement for a separate peace.

After making historical and statistical analyses, developing data banks, and performing multiple regressions, some scholars have elevated this observation into a law—perhaps the only one of any general value in international relations. The extensive research has been largely descriptive and statistical, whereas little has been done to explain why democracies never fight each other.

The thesis requires more exploration. We must critically evaluate the claim that democracies do not fight each other (or, that they have devised a separate peace). How robust is the historical evidence that democracies do not fight each other? How can we use this finding to create not only a more peaceful but also a more democratic world? Finally, is there any congruence between the internal and external conduct of democratic states?

Let us begin by surveying the historical evidence. Recent studies rightly stress that armed conflicts between democracies are few and far between. Yet this research underestimates two of the most important and bloodiest conflicts in the past two centuries: the American Civil War and World War I.

Many regard the American Secession War as a civil war rather than one between sovereign states. But in the first half of the 19th century the American states still enjoyed considerable political autonomy from each other. The war's outbreak also shows that having a democratic regime does not provide a sufficient condition to keep peace within borders.

World War I is even more significant. Should we really consider it as a war between democratic and authoritarian states? Many studies classify Germany as authoritarian, and France, Great Britain and Italy as democratic. But this contradicts historical accounts that claim that, during the *Belle Époque*, all the leading European countries had comparable political systems, all classifiable as democracies, however incomplete. The only country that had no democratic control over government policies (until the February 1917 revolution, that is) was Russia, which nevertheless joined France and Great Britain in the war. Thus, to consider Germany as a non-democratic country stretches a point. In fact, World

War I provides the emblematic (and, hopefully, unrepeatable) example of a fratricidal war among states with very similar forms of constitution.

The American Civil War and World War I are not the only examples of wars between democracies. Others include republican France's expedition against the Roman Republic in 1849, the Spanish–American War of 1898, and so forth. Admittedly, these are minor episodes that do little to confirm or refute the general rule on wars between democracies. But they suggest that perhaps we should look more closely at the facts and figures, and refine our ideas about the conflicts between democracies.

If we look back over the past 50 years, wars between democracies have become much rarer and less relevant. The few that have occurred seem to have arisen from the weakness of democratic regimes themselves. After Yugoslavia's dissolution, both Croatia and Serbia embraced democracy (albeit more formally than substantially), but the region's political fragility triggered a conflict anyway. Recently, we have witnessed other examples of wars between neo-democracies, even if they might have been caused as much by political transitions as by political regimes.

Over the past half century, another form of conflict has emerged between democratic states, no longer "overt" but rather "covert." Powerful democracies, such as the U.S., have pursued underground actions against democratically elected governments that it deemed to be adversaries. Although such incidents are not technically wars, they show that a democratic government, such as Salvador Allende's in Chile, may be overturned at least in part by hostile actions taken by another democratic government and replaced by a dictatorship supported by democratic countries.

The virtual absence of overt wars between democracies since World War II arose from the Cold War between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, which dominated international relations until recently. Nuclear terror, and the East–West ideological conflict consolidated democratic states into a single alliance, discouraging them from warring over issues secondary to the supreme threat: Soviet communism.

This puts into a different light the tendency for democracies not to fight each other. We should be more skeptical of this claim since it may be only an artifact of broader forces: an international regime dominated by nuclear arsenals and East–West conflict.

Those who support a separate peace among democracies have never argued that democratic states are more peaceful than autocratic ones. To the contrary, their studies have shown that democratic states are just as belligerent as autocratic ones. In contemporary history, democracies have often started wars and launched aggressions. Democracies are far from being peaceful; they simply have stopped fighting one another.

But it begs the question: why are democracies so belligerent? One might expect that democratically elected governments will use similar methods for devising foreign policy to what they use for domestic policy. In a broad sense, we might view democracy as a method for solving conflicts without resorting to violence. But when democracies encounter states with different political systems,

such methods cease to be effective. Who is to blame for this: democratic or non-democratic states?

Resorting to war does not necessarily conflict with democratic principles. Only the most radical pacifists oppose all forms of violent conflict. Most others argue, more pragmatically, that war must be used only as a last resort when fundamental causes are at stake, and when all other political and diplomatic means have failed. Waging war against a dictatorial regime that is committing genocide may even be construed as a democratic state's duty. We must assess, however, the reasons, circumstances, instruments, and effects of democracies fighting wars.

The thesis that democracies never fight each other has the corollary—always subliminally conveyed—that in conflicts between a democratic state and an autocratic one, the former is “right” and the latter is “wrong.” This has yet to be demonstrated, but even if it were, just because democracies do not fight each other does not mean that when they do fight they do so for good reasons, or that non-democracies are always in the wrong.

To assess the strength of the reasons that induce democracies to fight wars, we must classify wars into just and unjust. As the founders of international law have suggested, a war cannot be considered just on both sides. If a just war exists, then either we say that one side is right and the other wrong, or that both are wrong. Was the democratic U.S. right to fight a war against undemocratic Vietnam? Was the democratic state of Israel right to fight against its autocratic Arab neighbors in 1967? Democracy provides no guarantee that a state will only fight just wars.

When we consider the reasons that induce states to go to war, we must make subjective choices. Scholars differ in their assessments: some claim the U.S. was “wrong” to fight in Korea, Vietnam, and the Persian Gulf, others claim it was “right,” and still others have middle-of-the road opinions. But “right” and “wrong” have little value in academic debate. Instead, we need to argue within a framework that qualitatively classifies all conflicts. Such a classification scheme will never please all international relations scholars but even a rough analysis reveals the surprising number of times democracies have fought unjust wars since World War II.

Applying such a classification would help reveal the value judgments and ideological implications underlying the claim that democracies do not fight each other. Such a scheme would show, alas, that democracies are still a long way from applying domestic principles in their foreign policies. In some circumstances (World War II, for example), they fought against autocratic regimes, acting objectively in defense of democracy; in others, they went to war solely to defend their own special interests.

Since so many studies have examined the relationship between war and democracy, perhaps we should now take a broader view of the nature of the foreign policies implemented by democracies. It is not enough to know that democracies do not fight each other to be satisfied with their foreign policies. We can and must expect more from them: democracies should act on their own principles not only at home but also abroad. If democracy is supposed to prevent wars, then it should do so, as a matter of principle.

when democracies encounter not merely other democracies but also non-democracies.

Those international relations scholars who favor quantitative studies should pursue a new and larger empirical exercise. They should test whether a coherence exists between the internal and external conduct of states. Internal conduct has already been translated into a number of indicators. For simplicity's sake, one could use Freedom House annual reports. While their evaluations are debatable, they nevertheless grade the domestic policies of each nation-state for both political rights and civil liberties.

Less regularly measured has been the "democratic nature" or ethical conduct of nation-state foreign policies. But several criteria can nevertheless be considered. First, does the state participate in armed conflicts? If it's involved in wars, this indicates that it has been incapable of using peaceful channels to solve controversies. A belligerent state constitutes a bad member of the international community. Likewise, nation-states should not participate indirectly in armed conflicts by providing political, strategic, and military aid to combatants, nor should they engage in covert actions against other states, or support terrorism or secret service operations. These activities all undermine the democratic principle of transparency—the use of openness in one's policies to build trust and confidence.

We can also evaluate foreign policies by the portion of the Gross Domestic Product that is allocated to military spending. If a country spends a high percentage of its own resources on its armed forces, it provides a threat to other states and undermines its ability to forge cooperative relations with its neighbors. We should also consider how many arms a nation exports to other countries. Dealing in arms and the other instruments of war augments political and military tension.

A third criteria for judging foreign policy stems from the nation's participation and support for the activities of the U.N. and other international organizations. Since international organizations exist to solve conflicts without resorting to force, supporting them helps reinforce international peace. A democratic country should also respect international law, treaties, and the decisions of the International Court of Justice. And to create a climate of international co-operation, nations must reinforce existing peaceful and legal channels for resolving conflicts.

We can also assess foreign policies by their tendency to generate direct and financial participation in peace missions, including those of the U.N. "blue helmets" and "white helmets," and of those pursued by international non-governmental organizations. A nation's policies should support democratic intervention to prevent and regulate conflicts wherever they flare.

A final way to evaluate foreign policies is by their level of aid to poor countries and to populations hit by national calamities. Here the principle is not so much one of democracy as of solidarity. Truly democratic societies promote the redistribution of resources, which must take place not merely inside states but also among them.

A positive correlation should emerge between the indicators of domestic democracy and the indicators of good international conduct. It would be disappointing to discover that democratic nations have more questionable

foreign policies than do non-democratic countries. Some small and medium-sized countries, such as Switzerland, the Netherlands, and the Scandinavian nations, excel both in domestic democracy and in creating conditions for a peaceful, united and eventually democratic international society. But by these same criteria, the world's largest and most powerful democracy—the U.S.—will likely reveal a foreign policy that sharply contradicts the democratic principles that underpin its domestic policy.

This kind of research might influence both governments and public opinion. If foreign policy was evaluated by justice and democracy criteria, some governments might begin to modify their conduct. Maybe even American leaders and the American public will begin insisting that the noble principles that influence the country's domestic political life should also be consistently applicable to international political life.

The thesis that democracies do not fight each other might suggest that to achieve a global democratic society, we need only induce all nation-states to embrace democratic principles. An increase in the number of democratic countries will certainly strengthen the democratic values and procedures that govern global society. Nonetheless, we should not suppose that global democracy will simply emerge from achieving universal internal democracy. To the contrary, historical experience shows us that global democracy has been repeatedly blocked by democratic states that have refused to apply their principles to international relations.

This does not suggest that autocratic states behave better than democratic ones. But, then again, we have no great expectations of autocratic governments, especially in international relations. It doesn't surprise us when a dictatorship launches a war of aggression. It's more surprising when a dictatorship decides to support a good democratic cause. Brezhnev's Soviet Union, for example, supported the struggle against South African apartheid much more than many democratic states. This suggests that U.S. and Soviet foreign policies were motivated more by internal interests than by their internal principles.

The road to global democracy places great burdens on democratic states. Now, for the first time in history, almost half of humankind is ruled by elected governments. Thus, it's indispensable for democratic forces to begin applying their principles to foreign and not merely domestic policy. Even if we concede that democracies do not fight each other, such a system does not necessarily improve the state's internal political life or democratize international relations. If, on the other hand, we could induce democratic governments to genuinely export democratic principles, and to behave democratically in their own foreign policies, we would be much closer to achieving a true and lasting democratic peace.

RECOMMENDED READINGS

- Bonanate, Luigi. 1995. "Peace or Democracy?" in Daniele Archibugi and David Held (eds.), *Cosmopolitan Democracy: An Agenda for a New World Order*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Freedom House Survey Team. 1996. *Freedom in the World. The Annual Survey of Political & Civil Liberties*. New York: Freedom House.

- Ray, James Lee. 1995. *Democracy and International Conflicts: An Evolution of the Democratic Peace Proposition*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press.
- Russett, Bruce. 1993. *Grasping the Democratic Peace: Principles for a Post-Cold War World*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

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