
The Idea of the Democratic Peace Theory in the United States

The democratic peace theory postulates that liberal democracies are hesitant and unlikely to engage in armed conflict with other democracies. This idea dates back centuries to German philosopher Immanuel Kant and other 18th-century Enlightenment thinkers. By examining the political similarities, economic system, geographical location, and other factors of generic democracies, proponents of the democratic peace theory argue that democracies have a vested interest not to war with one another. However, other forms of government are exempt from these principles unique to democracies. Autocracies, a system of government which assigns one individual absolute power and control, violate all facets of the democratic peace theory. Autocracies lack the constructed identities, political institutions, and domestic social norms that contextualize the purpose of democracy. In fact, autocracies not only disobey the beliefs of the democratic peace theory, but also actively work against those beliefs, causing autocracies to be more inclined to act in war. The nature of both government and people in autocracies contribute to armed conflicts. While the government consists of one individual to domineer all power and invest it as he will, the people of autocratic nations also actively take part and fight in conflicts both in internal conflicts and against other nations. Autocracies are more likely to engage in war due to the validity of the democratic peace theory: democracies are more accountable to the people, democracies generally have more established economies and a greater incentive to preserve their wealth, and, furthermore, autocracies entrench and further breed terrorism.

Democratic decision-making constraints prevent liberal, and even illiberal, democracies from waging war on one another frequently. Candidates running for any political office in a democracy understand that they must be elected by the people and after election, must be accountable to their people. This sense of accountability creates a sort of amicable relationship between candidate and civilian, knowing that both parties have the ability to check one another. However, autocracies, such as those in the Middle East, lack this liability safeguard. When the President of the United States plans to engage in war, his action must be checked by both the people that constitute this democracy as well as the other branches of government, namely, the legislative and executive. Similarly, if the citizens of the United States have an interest in declaring war, the government has the power to check the public will. Autocracies, on the other hand, lack this capacity. Authoritarian rulers have a monopoly on power and decision, which allows them to completely bypass the will of the people and other members of government. Sean Lynn-Jones of the Center of International Studies furthers the argument that democracies force governmental officials to remain accountable to the people, writing, "At the most general level, democratic leaders are constrained by the public, which is sometimes pacific and

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generally slow to mobilize for war. In most democracies, the legislative and executive branches check the war-making power of each other. These constraints may prevent democracies from launching wars” (Lynn-Jones). Democratic authorities, who have been elected into office by the people and argue on a platform that agrees with the majority, generally have the majority’s interest at heart more than their authoritarian counterparts. Furthermore, when two democracies confront one another, there is a greater chance for them to not rush into war. Abiding by the restraints of government and the people and taking time to gauge the interest of the public gives democratic leaders time to deliberate and negotiate. These advantages are unique to democracies, as autocracies lack a checking system that make it easier for authoritarian leaders to declare war, and makes it easier to rush into war, without deliberating with peers or the opposition.

As the democratic peace theory confirms, most democratic nations possess greater public wealth and have larger economies, and engaging in war could risk that capital. Most democratic nations in the modern world have affluent economies, such as the United States, Spain, and England. Democratic leaders, who have been elected by the general population, have an interest to invest in the greater public and incentivize citizens to contribute to the financial system. Keeping the citizenry content through pecuniary means keeps a democratic leader in his position, as a leader is accountable and elected for and by the people. Autocratic rulers, however, only intend to please the select individuals who keep them in power, but not the overall population. Thus, democracies are prone to investing in the public and sustaining a profitable fiscal system. At best, engaging in war for these well off democracies would risk losing a large amount of wealth in building arms and actually conducting battle. At worst, citizens and leaders in a democracy could lose all of their wealth and proceed to suffer from a stagnant economy. Furthermore, a larger economy with more money to spend results in increased security and militarization, which is a defining characteristic of most modern democracies. With superior surveillance and military force, democracies have a greater tendency to cause large scale destruction. This capability also serves as a deterrent to other democracies which might have an interest in starting a conflict. Economist Thomas Friedman devised a theory with a similar mindset entitled The Golden Arches Theory. This supposition argues that no two countries with McDonalds franchises have ever gone to war and rests on the premise of the democratic peace theory. The underlying reasoning for this liberal ideology is that once economies have become successful, profitable, and integrated, the cost of going to war is far more expensive and the amount of contact between said countries increases. Both these factors lead democracies to careful decision-making, effective conflict resolution, and the pursuit of the most economically advantageous option. Autocratic leaders, due to a lack of public investment and incentives, do not have the same safeguards as their democratic counterparts and have a greater chance of escalating to war with other nations.

Citizens in autocracies are more likely to resort to terrorism and interstate and intrastate

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conflicts due to the oppression of citizens. When dictators in autocracies continually oppress their citizens, disrespect their rights, and gain power through illegitimate means, citizens are motivated to act in a violent manner, join terrorist organizations, and support conflicts and wars. In Syria, for example, Sunni Muslims constitute almost three-quarters of the population. However, the current Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, an Alawite Muslim, has led several campaigns of mass killings, torture, and starvation against the majority. These series of actions incentivize Sunni Muslims, along with others, to take part in terrorist organization to fight against the state that oppresses them. Similarly, citizens in Afghanistan, Yemen, and Libya are persecuted and maltreated and, thus, contribute to the conflict. Seung-Wang Choi of the University of Illinois demystifies the effects of autocracies on terrorism, writing, "When authoritarian leaders use threats of punishment and violence through corrupt domestic legal authorities, ordinary citizens have more incentives to challenge the legitimacy of authoritarian rule" (Choi). Democracies, on the other end of the spectrum, are far less susceptible to this predicament. In fact, other forms of government prevent the spread of this ideological and physical conflict. Democratic polities discourage civilians from resorting to ideologically motivated violence to incite fear by giving them several avenues to express their grievances. Thus, democracies and other forms of government aid citizens in resorting to other means besides terrorist violence. Relative to democracies, autocracies, which often clamp down in the rights of their citizens, are more vulnerable to war and conflicts, as an increase in terrorist participation contributes to interstate and intrastate conflicts, as well as wars with other nations.

Authoritarian states are more likely to engage in war due to the validity of the democratic peace theory: democracies are more accountable to the public, democracies generally have more established economies and a greater incentive to preserve their wealth and remain nonmaleficent, and, furthermore, autocracies entrench and further breed terrorism through the oppression of their citizens. Although there have been several instances in which democracies have declared war, autocracies have both the capability and incentive to do so more often. Furthermore, democracies are less likely to become involved in wars with other democracies, while wars started by the autocracies transcend governmental systems. A democracy creates an environment which checks and pacifies both the people and the government. In contrast to autocracies, the governmental decisions and policies are determined by both elected individuals and sometimes citizens. Similarly, citizens are encouraged and obligated to participate in civil society to shape it how they please. This balance between governmental officials and citizenry fosters a somewhat cordial relationship between the two parties, which prevents the need for unnecessary conflict. Autocracies, however, fail to reconcile this balance which results in a more hostile environment for foreigners and citizens alike.

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