Democratic Peace Theory: Is the Patient Terminally Ill or Recuperable?

The democratic peace theory (henceforth, DPT) has been a widely acclaimed proposition in international politics in the last few decades. The idea that democracies are unlikely to fight each other has been embraced by many International Relations scholars and policy-makers alike. Yet, despite its appearing elegance and parsimony, the theory displays a number of serious inconsistencies and weaknesses at closer look.

Nevertheless, there is room for optimism. Although DPT in its current flawed form is a dubious conceptual tool and a policy guiding principle, a promising way to 'repair' the theory's questionable nature is to find points of convergence with competing explanations. Some of these convergence strategies are sequence, sameness, relevance, and hierarchy.

The shaky premises of the democratic peace theory

First of all, let me offer coherent classification of existing and potential claims with regards to DPT. I propose to categorize the vast array of the theory's weak points into definition, ontological, substantive, and methodological issues.

Thus, on the *definition* side, different authors advocating for DPT have unpacked the meaning of democracy and autocracy in different ways. Furthermore, even commonly accepted terms appear implausible, such as a case of war defined as a conflict resulting in over a thousand victims. This is especially dubious in view of the changing nature of warfare, with information and cyber wars replacing traditional warfare in the globalized world.

On the *ontological* side, DPT looks into a dyadic relationship, that is the relationship between two democracies. Yet, if domestic factors (whether normative or institutional ones), as DPT claims, account for the 'peacefulness' of democracies, shouldn't such behaviour manifest within democracies themselves via the lack of civil wars, ethnic conflicts, or civil unrest? By removing a monadic dimension DPT makes itself redundant. Moreover, some scholars have suggested that transitions to democracies can be rather violent. Focusing on the fixed and perfect conditions (democracy or autocracy) DPT displays reductionism once again.

Regarding *substantive* dimension, DPT can be and has been used as an intellectual justification for 'spread of democracy' via humanitarian interventionism. Does this in turn really substantiate the peaceful nature of democracies? Besides, while DPT offers several causal mechanisms to account for the peaceful relations between democratic states, we can rather speak of correlation than causation here.

Synthesis as a repair kit

Based on the discussion above, what follows is a set of four synthetic solutions for DPT.

In the logic of *sequence*, different variables exert their influence across different points in time. The revised causal logic of DPT in this case can go as follows. New democracies are still prone to follow rationalist power politics by

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balancing against or bandwagoning with other states; as they get embedded in economic and dependency networks with other states, economic factors come into play replacing power politics; as they get even more mature, states start sharing and projecting democratic norms, ideas and values.

In the logic of *sameness* several explanations can be conceived at the same time. In other words, several independent variables affect *simultaneously* the dependent variable. For DPT this would mean that structural, economic and domestic factors all contribute to peaceful and cooperative environment among nations-states.

Further on, according to the logic of *relevance* different states can have different preferences and intentions in the international arena. Some states are driven by power accumulation and therefore can exhibit balancing or bandwagoning behaviour. Other states are deeply embedded in the framework of international economic institutions and try to increase their benefits from globalization. Yet others can see their national interest in promoting shared values and norms across the globe. Peace among democracies appears as a by-product of all these types of motivations.

The last synthetic logic proposed here is that of *hierarchy*. Several variables can come into play, yet they are all subsumed by a major one. As one example, realist, liberal and constructivist 'phases' mentioned in the sequential logic can be seen as different manifestations of a state's power – whether military, economic, or ideational one – which structure the international arena and make it less conflictual. Thus, the core idea of power encompasses all behavioural patterns of a democracy.

To sum up, different synthetic approaches can provide fresh perspectives on the subject matter of DPT and its connection to other alternative explanations. While this may seem to leave policy-practitioners in a more complex and volatile world, they actually become more aware of different possibilities out there and end up with a wider freedom of choice in the process of decision-making.

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