

Realism, Liberalism and the Democratic Peace

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Abstract

Much has been written both against, and in favour of, the evidence for the democratic peace theory. Advocates point to the relatively strong empirical evidence provided by two centuries virtually free of war between liberal-democratic states, while critics attempt to redefine the theory in order to discredit it, and point to the handful of exceptions as proof against it. The purpose of this paper is to expose the logical errors of which the theory's critics are guilty. Furthermore, it will use the Five-Day War between Georgia and the Russian Federation as a case study to prove that even apparent exceptions can still prove the rule.

Democratic countries, as a rule, do not fight each other. Throughout the last two centuries, arguably no two fully democratic countries have gone to war (Doyle, 1983). This is an extraordinary statistic, considering the scale and quantity of wars fought in these two centuries, but what is the cause? Do democratic countries consider each other to be allies by default? To explore the issue, I will compare the realist denial to the liberal support of this theory, and then compare the explanations these two perspectives provide for a possible exception to the democratic peace: the Five Day War between Georgia and the Russian Federation in 2008. Based on the evidence I will provide, I seek to prove that the liberal case for the democratic peace is valid.

Realism is a theory that attempts to explain the dynamic of the international system in terms of national interests and power politics between state-level actors. Since there is arguably no power greater than the state, realists believe that states must rely on their own power or cunning to ensure their own security. As such, states will, and must always, seek to enhance their own security at the cost of the security of others (Karns and Minsk, 2010).

Political realists do not attach any real weight or merit to the democratic peace, which they see as a statistical anomaly at best. They claim that the recent appearance of democracy, in countries that were mostly allies, is the explanation for the 'apparent' pattern of peace between democracies (Owen, 1994). Realists claim that peace based on shared norms is impossible, as all states must consider their own national interests and security above all other concerns. They insist that the foreign policies of so-called liberal democracies are not significantly different from those of autocratic states, and that a change from one type of government to another is not generally accompanied by a radical shift in policy (Layne, 1994).

Liberalism, like realism, considers states to be important actors, but considers actors inside, outside, and between states to be important too. Liberals believe that states can cooperate based on shared interests, and that cooperation tends to increase as parties become used to working with one another (Karns & Minsk, 2010). Liberalism does not consider the state to be necessarily either unitary or rational, and the different worldviews of various members of the same government administration are often important explanatory tools for liberals (Ibid).

The democratic peace theory is really a liberal idea, as it relies heavily on shared norms, ideas, and perceptions. Liberal political scientists stress the importance of public perception in democratic countries, something that realists dismiss. One liberal explanation for the democratic peace, put forward by John Owen (1994), is that states with liberal ideologies will face intense public resistance to war with any state the general public *perceives* as a liberal democracy. Owen stresses the importance that all states involved share a liberal ideology based on mutual tolerance and the desire for collective well-being. This explanation has the added advantage of explaining the few exceptions to the democratic peace. In these cases, Owen claims, the belligerent parties may simply not have perceived one another as liberal democracies, or may have been in the hands of democratically elected governments that did not hold liberal ideas (Ibid).

The Five-Day War will serve as a case study for a variety of reasons. Firstly, it was fought only five years prior to the time of writing and thus provides a contemporary example. Second, although both combatants were at least formally democratic, both of their statuses as liberal democracies were ambiguous enough to allow exploration of their mutual perception. In addition, the complex circumstances surrounding the beginning of the war allow interpretations from both liberal and realist perspectives. A more important point is that, as the war is an apparent exception to the democratic peace theory, a conclusion drawn from it that favours the theory would be especially strong. An example of this would be if the two countries were more reluctant to fight one another than they would have been if placed in the same position with states that were not liberal democracies.

Realism does a good job of explaining most of the historical background of the conflict and the objectives of the belligerents. Russia has historically been motivated by the need to protect itself from attack, given the vulnerabilities of its geostrategic position (Lohr and Poe, 2002). In the context of the Five-Day War, Russia felt vulnerable because its former Cold-War adversary, NATO, was expanding ever closer to Russia's borders. Despite a 1988 promise not to expand further east than Germany, NATO had, by 2008, expanded as far east as Romania, and talks were underway to include Georgia into the alliance (Dyer, 2008).

The desire of the United States to expand NATO to approach, or even encircle, Russia coincided quite well with Georgia's desire for a strong ally to offset Russia's military superiority over the small Caucasian state. Though European members of NATO were concerned that the inclusion of Georgia would overextend the alliance, the US seemed determined (Dyer, 2008).

Georgia, for its part, also had local interests at stake. The twin breakaway republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia had once been part of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic, but had later been given self-governing status within the USSR. Georgia, a small country, wanted control over the largest population and landmass possible. This desire had already led to one failed attempt to retake the provinces in 1991, and would lead to the 2008 attempt as well (Dyer, 2008). The inferiority of Georgian forces during the first conflict was likely another factor in Georgia's seeking of an alliance with the US.

Where the realist argument falters, however, is the part where Russia did not attack Georgia. Although Russia had been building up troops on its border with South Ossetia, and had ample reasons to want to give NATO a practical demonstration of how overextended Georgian membership would render the organization, it was Georgia that made the first move (Dyer, 2008). Of course, Georgia did not attack Russia directly either but, in their takeover of South Ossetia,

Georgian forces were invading a region Russia had pledged to defend, and in the process they killed several Russian peacekeepers (Ibid). A possible explanation for Georgia's behaviour is that the Georgian leadership believed its alliance with the United States would deter Russia from intervening to prevent the re-annexation of the breakaway provinces (Ibid).

Now, however, one must ask whether this case study is relevant by determining whether or not both countries were liberal democracies. The leaderships of both countries had similar histories. Vladimir Putin and Mikheil Saakashvili both made a name for themselves by reigning in the corruption and decay in their countries that followed the breakup of the USSR. Both leaders promoted nationalism and weren't afraid to bend the rules when it came to democracy. Crucially, though, neither administration was willing to overturn its country's liberal democracy. It is true that the Putin administration had faced international criticism for irregularities in its elections, violence against journalists, and unilateral changes to the Russian constitution. However, multi-party elections continued to be held, and the constitutional changes were legal due to the overwhelming parliamentary majority held by Putin's United Russia party (Dyer, 2012). Likewise, President Saakashvili faced criticism from even his allies in the EU and NATO for his violent crackdown on protestors and suppression of opposition media during anti-administration demonstrations less than a year before the war (Harding, 2007). The Presidential elections held in January 2008, however, were accepted by international monitors as legitimate and competitive, barring a few irregularities (Extraordinary Presidential Election, 2008). Thus, though both states suffered from political strongmen, and the lingering autocratic tendencies of their governments, both were fledgling liberal democracies that at least acknowledged democracy and the rule of law.

The obvious question that must be answered now is: if both combatants in the Five Day War were liberal democracies, how can this case study possibly support the democratic peace theory? There are two critical facts about the war that transform it from a refutation of the theory into a supporting case for it.

First, neither state initiated combat against the other directly. Although a war that proved to NATO that Georgian membership would be a fatal overextension was within Russia's national interest, Russia did not initiate hostilities. The Russian army, according to its commitments under the Sochi agreement (Sochi Agreement, 1992), had a small peacekeeping force deployed in South Ossetia to provide security; however, combat troops were kept out (Dyer, 2008). When those peacekeepers came under Georgian attack, Russia considered it an act of war and responded with a counteroffensive. Georgia, given its military inferiority to Russia, obviously had no desire to fight, and likely assumed its alliance with the United States would deter Russia from intervening in its re-conquest of South Ossetia (Ibid). Thus, war between the two countries was not actively pursued by either side.

Second, hostilities remained limited and ended quickly. Georgia immediately sought a ceasefire when it realized that the Russians were going to fight (Dyer, 2008). Russia, though it conducted extensive combat operations in the breakaway provinces of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, mounted only a single counterattack into Georgia proper. Russian forces did not enter the Georgian capital or overthrow the Georgian government, and they consented to a French-brokered ceasefire within five days of the beginning of hostilities (Ibid). Although Russia enjoyed almost total military superiority at the end of the war, it still belatedly chose peace over conquest.

To fully appreciate the significance of the Russian restraint at the end of the Five Day War, it is perhaps necessary to compare it to some of Russia's military actions before the country became the somewhat-liberal-democracy it was in 2008. Soviet forces, for example, showed little to no restraint in their various conquests and re-conquests of Eastern European states such as Hungary and Czechoslovakia (Velinger, 2003). Neither state had committed any hostile act against Moscow (Ibid), as Georgia did, but nevertheless they suffered much more. There were clearly significant differences between the circumstances of 1968 and 2008, and the most obvious is that, in 2008, Russia and Georgia were both liberal democracies. They were imperfect democracies with entrenched autocratic habits—and old habits die hard—but the fact that a democratic Russia dealt much more reasonably with democratic neighbours than the autocratic Soviet Union dealt with autocratic neighbours, is surely significant.

As the positions of the two competing perspectives have been outlined, it is now time to explain why the liberal case for the democratic peace is superior to the realist denial. The case study on Russia and Georgia is likely as open to interpretation as are many other case studies. For example, incidents in Anglo-American relations in the 19th century are cited by realists as proof against the democratic peace, and by liberals as proof for it (Owen, 1994). The case of Russia and Georgia at least provides an example of a conflict where at least one participant, who is now democratic, showed much more restraint than it would have when it was autocratic. It also provides an example of how two democratic countries might find themselves at war with one another without actively intending to. In the end, however, both states were still in transition between autocracy and liberal democracy, and it is possible that illiberal sentiment on the part of national leaders played a part. However, the democratic peace theory allows for that (Owen, 1994).

Beyond the case studies, however, there is a fundamental reason for the superiority of the liberal theory of the democratic peace. Essentially, the liberal explanation follows the scientific method and the realist method does not. According to this method, one must base a hypothesis on observable facts and then test it as best as possible before drawing conclusions from it (Dawkins, 2006). Testing hypotheses in political science is not as easy as it is in the natural sciences, but deriving them from observations is still feasible. The democratic peace theory was first derived from a historical pattern of nonviolence between liberal-democratic states, as observed in 1976 (Layne, 1994). From there, it was developed into a theory through careful consideration of historical cases and is now presented with some conviction by liberals (Owen, 1994).

Realists, however, follow a much different model. Much of the realist argument bears remarkable similarity to the arguments made by those denying strongly held theories in the natural sciences, such as evolution and climate change. Realist critics of the democratic peace tend to argue based on doctrine rather than evidence, demand standards of evidence in excess of what they would for a theory that was more ideologically compatible with said doctrine, and inflate trivial discrepancies in or exceptions to the theory to use as 'proof' of its invalidity, just like creationists and climate change deniers (Marsden, 2011).

First, instead of deriving a conclusion from observable facts, they start with a conclusion and look for facts that support it. Much of the realist case against the democratic peace is simply argument from realist doctrine. For example, Christopher Layne (1994), in his article *Kant or Can't: The Myth of the Democratic Peace*, simply outlines the terms of the argument and then begins presenting the realist view of the anarchic nature of the international system and claiming

that it proves that all states have to mistrust one another equally. The only real argument being communicated in that particular section of the article is that the democratic peace theory goes against the central assumptions of realist theory, and therefore can't be true. Needless to say, adapting a theory to fit the facts is a better analytical strategy than selectively interpreting the facts to support pre-existing theories.

Second, critics such as Layne inflate the predictions and demand absolute proof for every particle of the theory (Layne, 1994). If there were a democratic peace, Layne argues, liberal-democratic countries would not only refrain from fighting each other, but also from threatening or making any preparations for military action against one another. The inflated predictions in this redefined version of the theory would demand far more proof than that upon which the theory is based. Having done this, critics such as Layne can find plenty of examples of democratic countries threatening one another, and claim that these instances disprove the democratic peace. A very simple explanation for why democratic states might occasionally threaten one another is that states are not unitary actors. Belligerent acts can be explained by the presence of realist thinkers in positions of authority (Owen, 1994). If one does not treat governments as completely unitary and rational actors, then anomalies in their behaviours that might otherwise seem confounding are quite easy to explain.

Finally, of course, realists attempt to find what few exceptions exist and use them to discredit the democratic peace. Layne, for example, points to the War of 1812 and the French intervention into Weimar Germany in the early '20s, as well as a number of small, obscure conflicts in developing states (Layne, 1994). However, the admissibility of these is questionable at best. Britain, for example, was still a firm monarchy in 1812. The Weimar intervention, for its part, was conducted scant years after the First World War, in which both countries expended considerable efforts trying to destroy one another, and the French were not used to perceiving Germany as a liberal democracy (Owen, 1994). There likely are exceptions to the theory, but the sheer difficulty of finding any speaks strongly in favour of the relative consistency of the democratic peace.

In conclusion, the realist arguments against the democratic peace are insufficient to counteract the empirical evidence for the theory. Their arguments are largely based on realist doctrine, distortions of the theory and the evidence for it, and general nitpicking. The liberal arguments for the theory, on the other hand, have much better explanative ability and easily account for the few exceptions and discrepancies in the otherwise solid historical trend towards peace between liberal democracies. The theory provides a positive perspective on international relations. Considering the gradual trend towards the replacement of autocratic governments by liberal democracies throughout the last two centuries (Doyle, 1983), the democratic peace theory could mean that, once there are no more tyrannies in the world, there may also be no more war.

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