

DEMOCRACIES AND WAR

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The politics of peace

The belief that democratic states do not go to war with one another has become a commonplace of western policy. Plausible as it may have been in the past, it is a dangerous presumption with which to approach the future

WHEN Bill Clinton was explaining in a television broadcast last year why he was ordering troops into Haiti, he declared that the restoration of democracy there was a wise security investment because "democracies here are more likely to keep the peace". The pairing of democracy and peace has been one of the few consistent elements of Mr Clinton's world-view: he advanced it in a 1992 campaign debate with George Bush and Ross Perot; and in his "state of the union" address last year he said:

Ultimately, the best strategy to ensure our security and to build a durable peace is to support the advance of democracy elsewhere. Democracies don't attack each other.

Mr Clinton's national security adviser, Anthony Lake, arranged a policy talk in 1993 around the proposition that "democracies don't tend to go to war with one another". Nor is this a line for liberals only: James Baker, Mr Bush's secretary of state, said in 1992 that "real democracies do not go to war with one another". Either man might have been echoing Margaret Thatcher, who said on a visit to Czechoslovakia in 1990:

If we can create a great area of democracy

stretching from the west coast of the United States... to the Far East, that would give us the best guarantee of all for security—because democracies don't go to war with one another."

The idea that democracies are inherently disposed to peace, dear in its time also to Woodrow Wilson and Dwight Eisenhower, can be traced back at least to Immanuel Kant, an 18th-century German philosopher, who made a similar argument for republics in an essay called "Perpetual Peace". The proposition has been elevated recently from a scholarly conceit to an axiom of American policy-making, in large measure because it has offered the Clinton administration some semblance of a "vision" with which to ennoble an otherwise disorganised set of foreign policies. For if democracies are really the best bulwark against war, many seemingly hard choices between idealism and *Realpolitik* can be simplified abruptly. All good things can be made to go together.

The idea of democratic peace has, in fact, almost too much charm: it smacks of the theories bandied about a century ago that commerce between states would keep Europe at peace—until the first world war

shattered that hope. It is, however, an idea susceptible to historical analysis, and the crude figures are persuasive at first glance.

Of the 416 wars between sovereign powers recorded between 1816 and 1980, only 12 were even arguably wars between democracies, and most of those had extenuating factors. The Boer republics and, even more so, Wilhelmine Germany were embryonic democracies at best, for example; and Finland against the anti-Hitler allies in 1941 was mainly Finland against the Soviet Union. Lower your standards for what constitutes a democracy, and more exceptions emerge. But if there is plenty of scope for political scientists to argue about what constitutes a democracy and what constitutes a war, there is a pattern nonetheless: democracies have fought one another only rarely.

For king or country

To say that there has been a correlation between democracy and peace in the past is one thing, however. To say that it will endure into the future, as Mr Clinton and others seem so ready to do, is quite another. Statistical extrapolation is notoriously prone to mislead. The more important question for predictive purposes is not what happened in the past, but why it did so.

For one argument that attempts to link democratic political structures directly to peace, turn back to Kant and his hope that a world of republican governments would be free of war. An absolute ruler, Kant thought, could plunge his country into war on a whim and expect to be largely insulated from its effects in his everyday life; whereas the citizens of a republican state, if they went to war, would be choosing to bring death and hardship upon themselves. Kant came to this conclusion:

If the consent of the citizenry is required in order to determine whether or not there will be war, it is natural that they consider all its calamities before committing themselves to so risky a game.

Kant, it will be seen, is not saying that republics will not fight other republics. He is saying that republics will tend to be more reluctant than dictatorships to fight anyone at all. And if it is impossible to measure reluctance as such, simple observation suggests that there remains much truth in what Kant said. Liberal nations do go to war, but they agonise deeply when they smell war ahead; some agonise openly when they are engaged in it. Think of America during the Vietnam war, for example, and of the diplomatic contortions being performed by the western nations trying to keep peace in Bosnia without getting their troops hurt. But a

drawback of Kant's argument is that, even if true, it is of less practical value than it may at first appear.

Kant offers some help in assessing how a democracy is likely to behave when war threatens: at first it will be reluctant to fight—which is useful information for dictators. But in general, democratic governments can hardly make a practice of going to war with non-democratic countries solely in order to turn them into democratic countries so that they are less likely to have to go to war with them. (That having been said, Mr Clinton came close to such an argument in the case of Haiti and got away with it.)

A second problem with Kant's argument, at least when tested against modern societies with universal suffrage, is that it risks imputing too much gentleness of spirit to the average voter. True, people tend to recoil at the prospect of shedding their own blood, which is why the fiercest and earliest critics of wars tend to be people of an age to be conscripted, and sometimes serving soldiers—as happened when America fought in Vietnam, and Israel fought in Lebanon in 1982. But even otherwise kind-hearted citizens may not worry much when someone from another part of the country goes off to fight, especially if that other person has volunteered to do so.

People who have nothing much to lose and no great stake in society may even quite like the idea of a fight, particularly if encouraged by press jingoism and government propaganda. There were mobs in London and Paris clamouring for that muddy and bloody war in 1914; and governments know that a foreign war, once begun, will command a show of popularity as the country "rallies round the flag". This rule can hold true even for the most inept of operations: the Bay of Pigs fiasco won John Kennedy an upward blip in the opinion polls.

The Gulf war has pointed to a further lesson about the behaviour of democracies at war. Reluctance on the part of a democratic government to shock its public with too much televised bloodshed may translate, not into a diminution of war, but into a determination to wipe out the enemy as quickly as possible. This was the essence of the "Powell doctrine" as tested in Iraq—a modern version of *guerre à outrance* (total war), but for one's own protection as much as for an adversary's destruction.

The kind of popular disposition against war presumed by Kant would probably be sharpened, too, by first- or second-hand memory of what war can mean. Countries need to know how to recognise a hot potato without tasting it. Not all of them have that knowledge. After a fantastically bloody century, the West seems to be passing through a lull in its willingness to countenance slaughter. But as memories fade, and new forms of danger present themselves, unscarred citizens may not realise what horrors

they risk. This is especially true for countries emerging or re-emerging from the domination of another power. There, nationalism offers an easy option for shallow-rooted governments to make common cause with their peoples. But that way, too, lie belligerence and territorial ambitions.

Even in older and wiser countries, the freedoms associated with democracy may permit a climate in which chauvinism and belligerence can easily be incited. It is at least conceivable that a more democratic Egypt might never have made peace with Israel, or that a more democratic Jordan might never have followed Egypt's example.

It takes two not to tango

As to the specific proposition that democracies are especially unlikely to fight other democracies, a subjective question is begged. John Owen, of Stanford University, argues that the all-important criterion is whether one "liberal" country recognises its rival as a kindred spirit. If so, it will be disposed to behave decently. If not, all bets are off. Mr Owen thinks such subjectivity helps explain some past wars between democracies, including the Spanish-American war of 1898: although Spain had universal male suffrage, Americans did not regard it as a "liberal" country like their own. Likewise, Germany under Wilhelm II had some claim to rank among democracies, but few West Europeans saw it that way.

Such differences persist. The Palestinian National Authority reckons itself democratic, but Israelis (and increasing numbers of Gazans) may think otherwise. Israel reckons itself democratic, but Palestinians under occupation scoff. Some Americans still do not see Japan as a fully liberal nation.

A deeper worry about the "democracies don't fight one another" argument is that it may owe much of its force to the relative paucity of democracies in the past. Most simply, one would expect fewer democracies to be involved in fewer wars. To the extent that democracies were more thinly spread, they would have fewer shared borders over which to fight. And, since some of

the biggest conflicts of the past century have been ideological as much as territorial, liberal countries have almost by definition found themselves allies in the struggles against fascism and communism. Democracies have thus tended not to fight each other lately because they have been strategic allies, and they have been strategic allies in part—score one for the peace-through-democracy theorists—because they are democracies. Again, however, this does not mean democracies will always be allies. In the absence of a communist or fascist block of enemies, there will be less need for democracies to huddle together for survival.

Perhaps, too, if liberal democratic governments continue to proliferate around the world, then democracy as such will count for less and less in one country's evaluation of another. Some democracies may get on well, like France and Germany; some nervously, like Russia and America; and some dreadfully, like India and Pakistan. And, almost inevitably, as more liberal states crowd into the world, the more they will quarrel over the things states always quarrel over: territorial ambitions, economic interests, spheres of influence, feuding allies, arms build-ups, irredentist minorities, nationalist grievances and so on.

The real danger, then, is that too great a confidence in a simple correlation between democracy and peace, based on outdated assumptions, may lull into a false sense of security those who proclaim it. This is not to devalue democracy, nor to advocate a tolerance of dictatorship. Democracy carries overwhelming advantages, including a close correlation with prosperity. The individual freedom it promotes is inherently good. The argument is rather that there is no easy route to perpetual peace, whether through democracy or anything else. Human nature tends to get in the way.

Kant knew as much. The title of the essay in which he developed his theme, "Perpetual Peace", was a Germanic irony. There was, Kant thought, only one kind of perpetual peace on which man could unfailingly rely: the peace of the grave.

