

Gov 365N: Politics of New Democracies

First Mid-term, Take-Home Essay

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*Should democratization be a central part of U.S. foreign policy?*

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Foreign policy is based on national interests, strategic concerns, economic interests and much more. Democratization, or the act of spreading democracy, can be either benevolent or a means towards achieving foreign policy goals. Through the course of this paper I will argue that the Democratic Peace Theory (DPT) is fraught with inconsistencies and does not explain much of the present day maladies, nor does it hold much value in promoting democratization as part of the foreign policy agenda. Also, democratization will be shown to be a hollow tool when it comes to combating international terrorist threats. And will conclude by requesting the foreign policy elites to refrain from ‘liberating’ non-democratic states and spreading democracy by such means.

In the complicated world of political theories, full of exceptions and caveats, simple statements such as “democracies don’t fight one another” have great appeal.<sup>1</sup> But the validity of such statements must often face severe critique and doubt. The Democratic Peace Theory (DPT) broadly suggests that democracies tend to be more peaceful and as such, don’t fight each other. This leads many to believe that spreading democracy would bring more ‘peace’, and it ought to be a central part of US foreign policy. Scholars attempt to substantiate the theory using either theoretical means or empirical evidence.

The theoretical arguments in favor of the DPT emphasize the pacifying force of democracy and a cultural norm of non-violence present in democratic societies.<sup>2</sup> It is also mentioned, that in the current age of globalization and economic-interdependence it isn’t very profitable to fight against a democratic trading partner, for it doesn’t lead to the conquest of territory but, to destruction of an open market. Democracies, but instituting

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<sup>1</sup> James L. Ray, “The Democratic Path to Peace,” *Journal of Democracy* 8.2 (1997), p. 49.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

checks and balances, put obstacles and considerably slow down wanton attempts to wage war. Also, democratically elected officials face accountability problems and political leaders risk not getting re-elected if they loose a war. Another important factor is that it is difficult to show (to the people) another democracy as an enemy. Authoritarian dictators and evil empires lend themselves to such portrayal rather easily, but there are moral and economic factors binding such depiction of democracies.<sup>3</sup>

The empirical evidence would have us believe that democracies don't fight each other at all.<sup>4</sup> This might lead people to believe that, since democracy appears to have a pacifying affect in the world, perhaps spreading democracy ought to be an important part of the foreign policy agenda. But it also brings into question various statistical technicalities, the rather ambiguous definitions of war and democracy, and the theoretical grounding of such evidence directing us towards the various critiques of the DPT.

There are many critiques of the DPT, but the most important one is raised by Mansfield and Snyder when they state the “tendency of democratizing states to be more war-prone.”<sup>5</sup> This in itself should prove to be a huge deterrent in using democratization as a foreign policy tool to propagate peace and national security. A few empirical exceptions are also raised to the DPT, but they explained away on technicalities of the two countries involved in the conflict, not being both democratic or the conflict not escalating to the level of war. Given that there is no consensus on the definition of democracy it seems like the DPT might end up qualifying a country as ‘democratic’, only if it hasn't fought a war against a ‘democracy’! Also, the definition of war is quite

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59. (Etel Solingen highlights five major themes here)

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

contentious.<sup>6</sup> Both of these problems would make legitimizing use of force to democratize non-democratic countries very problematic and chaotic, and possibly leading to more violence than peace. On the statistical side, a correlation, that democracies don't fight each other "does not prove causation."<sup>7</sup> And, most of the data analysis seems to be done over the period of the Cold War and it wouldn't be accurate to use data from a different world setting for foreign policy application. The DPT doesn't explain the impact of democratization on internal conflicts or how it would resolve them, either. Thus, the DPT fails to provide sufficient support in favor of using democratization in US foreign policy.

"9/11 changed everything." This has been a common response elicited after the tragic events of September 11, 2001. They also seem to have changed the US policy establishment's views on the "absence of democracy" in parts of the world.<sup>8</sup> It has become popular belief, that the rise of terrorism can be blamed on the lack of democracy, for it is believed that authoritarianism produces: discontent via repression; feeling of powerlessness/humiliation; relationship between the State and Terrorists; makes violence the societal norm; and leaves no outlets for expressing discontent. And it is assumed, that by promoting democracy the US will be able to: create a more reliable partner in the fight against terrorism; improve internal conditions of the countries and increase its own legitimacy, by forwarding democracy. It is also believed that 'brining' democracy to one country in a non-democratic region would send shock-waves through that region and topple other hostile authoritarian governments and hope for a larger demonstration effect.

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Carothers, "Democracy: Terrorism's Uncertain Antidote," *Current History*, December 2003, p. 403.

Thus, explaining the urgency to promote democracy to fight international terrorism and help safeguard American interests and its emergence as an antidote to terrorism.

All these assumptions are fraught with over simplifications, ethnocentrism and naïve wishful thinking. The first problem that come to mind is that no “straight line exists between progress on democratization and the elimination of the roots of Islamic terrorism.”<sup>9</sup> There are various short-term problems involved with democratization, including: more discontent; increased power struggle; reduced obstacles to terrorist groups. Also, there is the possibility of extremists gaining power in a democratic election. Democracy, in general, is seen as a western imperialistic notion in some parts of the world. It seems so, particularly, when force is used to democratize a nation. These factors taken together should make it quite clear that democracy by itself can not cure the problem of international terrorism or terrorist threats.

It might be useful to consider a recent example to iron out the problems and merits of democratization in US foreign policy. The American ‘liberation’ of Iraq was motivated by various security concerns, geopolitical strategies and economic needs and was intended to reduce terrorism and produce a demonstration effect, by propping democracy in the heart of a non-democratic Middle-East. Thomas Carothers underscores the fact that eradicating authoritarianism wouldn’t automatically lead to the reduction in terrorism by way of pointing out the examples of internal terrorist threats in democratic countries such as Britain, Spain and Italy. It is also important to note the non-existence of any indigenous democratic movement inside the region. Aiding grassroots democratic movements like those in Latin America in the 1980s and Eastern Europe during the early

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 404.

1990s is quite different from ‘liberating’ a country and attempting “to create one from scratch”.<sup>10</sup> The ‘liberation’ is seen as western imperialism by many. The US also faces a credibility problem in the Middle-East for its continued support of non-democratic pro-Western regimes, support of Israel and the war in Iraq. Also, democracy by way of example doesn’t seem to be the most efficient or successful way to go about, for it’ll take “the next decade or two” for a democratic order to emerge in Iraq.<sup>11</sup> The human as well as financial cost of democratizing a nation is too huge. And there is a noticeable spike in terrorist recruitment after the war in Iraq. Also, given that the democratization process is hard, and the risks of democracy not taking root are considerably high, the perils are too high to be gambled upon as foreign policy tool to fight terrorism.

Through our discussion above, it should be clear that democratization should not be a top priority in the US foreign policy agenda, rather the policy makers should refrain from spreading democracy to achieve peace and security, as the risks are too high and legitimizing ‘interventions’ is hard in light of long-term American support for non-democratic regimes and alliance with non-democratic states in the fight against terrorism. But it must be noted that, that shouldn’t prevent the US from supporting grassroots movements in favor of democracy where they exist, rather it should refrain from covert action and overt ‘liberation’ to reduce the threat of terrorism. Also one must point out that this does not insulate the thesis from people who believe in all tenets of the DPT and are unwilling to see the other side of the argument. People who believe in *Pax-Americana* are another group not convinced by this, or for that matter, any other argument!

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 404.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 405.