*If democracies don’t go to war with one another, shouldn’t we forcibly convert authoritarian regimes to democracy, where possible?*

Introduction

In the 20th century, mankind fought the two deadliest wars of it history then showcased global ideological conflicts. If these confrontations signaled one thing it is that competing regimes needed to test their respective claim at being the “right one” for human civilization at large. When democracies prevailed, they acted upon the lessons learnt by recognizing as their undeniable priority the avoidance of such deadly conflicts in future.

Intuitively, we all agree that being at peace with one another is better than being at war. That was the basis for Hobbes’ social contract, as his state of nature was one of perpetual conflict between individuals of opposing interests. That is, today, a very good description of the international realm, where, as the realist paradigm understood perfectly, states oppose each-other in an anarchical system. What we need today, if not another level of government hierarchically superior to that of the states, is to seek a solution to the bellicose tendency of past international relations. To this, there is a proposed answer: the Democratic Peace Theory. Seen as democracies don’t, or very rarely, go to war with one another, we ought to encourage every country in the world to become democratic in order to reach the ideal goal of what Kant called “perpetual peace”. The flipside of this theory is that non-democratic states are seen as potential dangers. The question then becomes so tantalizing that it almost slips off the tongue: in order to bring about global peace, shouldn’t democracies forcibly try to convert, where possible, authoritarian regimes into democracies?

Before going any further, we must elaborate on the terms of the question. What kind of coercive action are we looking at? Are we talking about open war? Are we talking about covert operations, such as funding internal dissidents? Are we talking about indirect economic and political pressures, such as trade restrictions or even embargos? There are many ways of using coercive force against another country. However, seen as we are looking at the prospect of ensuring a global peace, we will here understand “coercive force” as the maximum recourse of action: the use of military power in an open war. Also, what do we mean by authoritarian regime? Are we simply aiming at total dictatorships, such as North Korea? Or do we include all non-democratic states under that description, so that theocracies such as Iran are to be seen just as much as enemies-of-peace as communist countries like China, failed states like some sub-Saharan countries and even principalities like Monaco? It would seem in reality that what we intend by “authoritarian state” is not solely the archetypical, grotesquely evil totalitarianism, but every state that does not comply with the moral standards of civilized democracies. Here we face another difficulty: what do we consider to be a sufficiently “civilized” or “modern” democracy? If that question is maybe tricky to answer, it seems nevertheless possible to identify with relative assurance which countries fail to live up to the expected requirements, so that while North Korea, China and Russia fall, to various extents, on the wrong side of the line, Brazil, Australia, and France for instance, can be said to stand on the right side of it.

The ethical core to the question remains: is it wrong to wage a war when long lasting peace can be ensured as a result? This is the main thread on which many moral and practical considerations must be woven. If the goal at hand (living in a state of global peace) is not debatable, the means we choose to get there *are*. The present question purports that the means we envisage are war and democracy; more precisely, war is used first as a means *for* democracy, and then democracy comes in as a subsequent means *for* peace. This distinction brings up two different yet inseparable questions that must be addressed: one, should war be a solution to bring about democracy? And two, would democracy then ensure peace? It seems logical to answer the second question first because it is depending on how we judge the pertinence of the Democratic Peace Theory that we will be able to determine whether waging war for democracy is a good idea for establishing pacific international relations.

I – Would democracy ensure peace? The problem with the Democratic Peace Theory

The basic argument for the Democratic Peace Theory is an empirical one: democracies rarely go to war with one another. As Bruce Russett points out[[1]](#footnote-1), “it is an empirical fact that democracies rarely fight each other […] because they can employ alternative methods of conflict resolution and at less cost than through violent conflict.” On this account, it would seem morally relevant, in any case, that we pursue the emergence of democracies so that the “major features of the international system [become] extensions of the norms and rules of the domestic political behavior” and thus bring about what Fukuyama famously called the “end of History”. President Clinton, for instance, made it clear in 1994 that the spread of democracy was central to his foreign policy.

However, many political thinkers have questioned the true worth of the Democratic Peace Theory, arguing on one hand that the branded peace-between-democracies is empirically far from flawless and on the other that if democracies are perhaps less warlike than other regimes, it isn’t as a result of the democratic form of their political institutions. Research has shown that, in fact, “states in the midst of democratic transition are the most war-prone type of regime, substantially more so than authoritarian states”[[2]](#footnote-2), and that attempts to democratize “countries that are poorer, more ethnically divided, ideologically more resistant to democracy, with more entrenched authoritarian elites […] could give rise to threats to international peace and security”². Rosato also vehemently argued against the Democratic Peace Theory, claiming that the normative and institutional arguments on which it rests are dangerously misguided[[3]](#footnote-3). In an alternative and, it should be pointed here, up-to-date and more pertinent hypothesis, Wenar and Milanovic[[4]](#footnote-4) argue that in reality what binds modern democracies together in predominantly pacific relations is not so much their similar political structures, but their sharing of close cultural heritages, compatible values and common ideals.

On this account, it could be argued that in fact, forcing democracy (strictly understood as the political form of organization) upon non-democratic states may be the wrong way to go about promoting global peace. On a purely consequentialist approach, the argument against the Democratic Peace Theory has considerable weight, and in the light of the recent “Arabic revolutions” of northern Africa, state officials from the West have been quick to take note of this. Despite asserting their unconditional sympathy and support for the claims of Tunisian, Egyptian and Libyan people, the beacon-democracies of this world have also raised warnings about how the transitions should, or should not, be allowed to happen. For instance, as pressure was mounting on Mubarak to resign as head of the Egyptian state, French president Sarkozy urged the Egyptian people to “take the time to get political formations, structures and principles so that they will see the emergence of a working democracy and not another form of religious dictatorship like was the case in Iran after the Shah left.” More importantly, he went on to say that “doing all that is possible to avoid [Tunisia and Egypt] from swapping one regime for an even worse one is not only our *moral duty*, but also in our *interest*”. This just goes to show both the potentially dangerous absurdity of democracy and the hypocritical stance of the West in regards to some authoritarian leaders. If democratic institutions are thrust upon a population that has radically different traditions, belief-systems and ambitions than western democracies, in all probability they will elect leaders who will be far more in contradiction with us than were their predecessors and who on top of that will boast the legitimacy of their mandate. In realist terms, therefore, it would seem that for the sake of international peace, it is sometimes better to deal with a selected dictator than an elected contradictor.

These combined considerations against the Democratic Peace Theory tend to corroborate Wenar and Milanovic’s broader view; after all, we don’t consider a country such as Monaco as a threat to peace even though its political structure is void of anything democratic, and this is because, beyond the fact it is ruled by a prince in a sea-side castle, it shares common values with the rest of the modern democratic world. On the other hand, if Saudi Arabia was suddenly turned into a democracy and their people elected an Islamic fundamentalist who declared war on Israel, it is not so obvious that the West would be too openly enthusiastic about its “pro-democratic” stance anymore. This is why the original question must be slightly tweaked in order to grasp its full complexity: what we signify by “spreading democracy” is in fact much more than that, it means spreading *liberal democracy*, which in turn entails promoting a set number of *universal values and practices* (such as human rights, the rule of law, professional news media,…) that we, in the West, see both as being intrinsically linked to a modern civilized democracy and as the only feasible means to securing long-lasting international peace.

2 – The morality and feasibility of a war for liberal democracy:

If we agree then that *liberal democracy,* and the *values* attached to it, embodies a better, more plausible version of the Democratic Peace Theory, the question becomes: shouldn’t *we*, modern democracies, seek to forcefully convert non-democratic states into liberal democracies in order to share with them *common fundamental principles* of morality and justice? On this widened question, we must now direct our attention to the doctrine of just war in order to gage whether the opportunity of war in such circumstances would be morally right.

First off, for the decision of engaging a war to be justified, it needs to be both moral and feasible. For the moment, let’s assume that such a war would be feasible; in order to be moral, it must be directed at a state that is guilty of an aggression (just cause) and be pursued for the right reasons (just intention). These are the most important rules, and already, there is room for contention. What if an authoritarian regime, where the population is not particularly known to be unhappy, sticks to itself and poses no predictable threat to the international community? What possible justification would an outside state have of intervening in its internal affairs and overturning its regime? As Russett points out, “not all authoritarian states are necessarily aggressive. In fact, at any particular time, the great majority are not”[[5]](#footnote-5). In this case, any war waged against an authoritarian regime could be seen as lacking sufficient cause. However, there are usually legitimate ways of categorizing authoritarian regimes as being guilty to some extent of ills repressible by outside force. On account of causing harm to their own population, first of all, if we accept that not having full access to all basic human rights is a wrong that should be corrected, then authoritarian regimes necessarily fall within the class of “aggressors”. In most cases, authoritarian regimes access power and stay there through violent means that are in blatant violation of human rights and, even in the extreme case where the population of an authoritarian state is not outspokenly unhappy about its situation, that does not mean that it is not a victim of that very situation. In other cases, it is often possible to widen our perception of what constitutes a probable threat in order to include authoritarian regimes in the definition of “potential aggressors”. By virtue of embodying values that are contrary to those of liberal democracies, they become untrustworthy, “unreasonable, unpredictable and potentially dangerous”[[6]](#footnote-6), prone to violent conduct, and therefore muster enough suspicion to legitimize a preemptive strike.

Nonetheless, even when the necessity of just cause can be fulfilled, the intention of such a war, which would be introducing liberal democracies in previously authoritarian regimes, is not unanimously heralded. Some critics view forceful democratization as being just as bigoted as the authoritarian regimes that they aim to bring down, claiming that the imposition of liberal democracy across the world and the values it inspires is nothing more than the result of a westernized view of morality coupled with an imperialistic ambition. Successively branded as “liberal imprudence” (Doyle), “liberal favoritism” (Owen), “liberal bellicosity” (Blaney), “democratic xenophobia” (Russett) and “violent moral crusading”[[7]](#footnote-7), such an intention of spreading democracy can be seen as morally wrong as it does not respect the diversity of political traditions. As John Grey argues, “liberal morality is not a formula for coexistence among regimes that contain diversity of ways of life”7 and, according to Dallmayr, will cause “traditional cultures in developing societies to be progressively defoliated or shunted into folklore”[[8]](#footnote-8).

If the immorality of the intention were not enough, critics are quick to point out the weaknesses in its feasibility. Russett clearly made this point his own by arguing that “the model of “fight them, beat them and then make them democratic” is irrevocably flawed as a basis for contemporary action […]. External military intervention, even against the most odious dictators, is a dangerous way to produce a democratic world order”[[9]](#footnote-9). The problem is that in most cases, authoritarian states, by nature, have not allowed for the necessary infrastructures or education of their people for democratic institutions to be brought in and work the way we would hope. As John Stuart Mill argued, “it would be a great mistake to export freedom to a foreign people that was not in a position to win it on its own”. In many cases, then, liberals coming to power in an externally defeated authoritarian regime would find themselves with little local support and many enemies, a situation which would pave the way to three probable and equally undesirable turn of events: one, this liberal elite would copy the rule of their authoritarian predecessors; two, civil war would erupt; or three, continuous intervention from the outside would be necessary, preventing the turnover from stemming anything more than a puppet government.

III – Outgrowing the Democratic Peace Theory: war for liberal values

In the light of the debate over the morality and feasibility of forceful democratization, no definitive, satisfying answer seems to be able to come out. This is shame, for the establishment of pacific international relations is one of the most eminent priorities for the future of mankind. This is why we must understand the reason behind this difficulty and attempt to draw a line.

It seems that since the end of the Second World War, an ever-growing contradiction in world politics has been setting up the problem we face here. On the one hand, the combined lessons from the abolition of slavery, the process of decolonization, the emancipation of civil societies and the emergence of nation-states following the collapse of the USSR updated the classical notion of *sovereignty of states*, restating principles such as a people’s autonomy in determining its political system and the corollary to this, the obligation of non-intervention on the part of outsiders. On the other hand, the same events have taken us in the opposite direction: the emergence of the UN as a safeguard after the World Wars, the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the imminence of common world-wide problems such as global warming and the uncompromising incompatibility in belief-systems now too strong and close to coexist peacefully have paved the way for the necessity of a unified international system in which the interests of humanity at large prevail over those of its independent parts.

These two opposing dynamics are the reason why it is so hard to give a clear cut answer to the current problem. The goal is there however, and is undeniable - world peace - and it seems that the voices actively calling to ensure it emanate primarily from liberal democracies. Maybe, therefore, it is time that liberal democracies came together in a concerted effort to draft a common set of universal rules and principles, so that whoever fails to respect them can legitimately be seen as a threat and systematically neutralized. Today non-democratic states outnumber democratic ones while three times as many people live under “authoritarian” rule than in “full democracies”. In the face of such a reality, liberal democracies should not shy in the face of ethnocentric criticism and accept the fact that a good idea always has to come from somewhere. It seems that any peaceful and rational person would agree that the principle of non-intervention should not serve as a safeguard for authoritarian states to go by their business as they wish to, and that liberal democracies should not have to wait for actual victims to be claimed before deciding that their values trump any kind of respect they should have for alternative forms of governance.

This leaves us facing nothing more than the problem of feasibility, which is, in all probability, not insurmountable. Those who then argue that intervention is wrong solely because it is unfeasible should instead be actively trying to draft feasible strategies for successful democratization, and those who continuously claim that feasible turnovers are wrong should then be considered themselves as part of the problem. Critics who point their fingers at “liberal fundamentalism”, demonizing the “democratic crusade”, the “Western global design”, or the “global project of homogenization”, fail to grasp the point and are actually, by doing so, the most dangerous players in this whole debate. That global human values emerge in the West doesn’t make them western, and that liberal democracies wish to extend them to the rest of the world doesn’t make wars fought in their name morally wrong. War, of course, should only be used as a last resort, for not only is it sometimes unviable, it is undeniable that an internal revolution is better than an external intervention. This is why other means should be privileged, like supporting anti-authoritarian forces where possible and pursuing democratic consolidation in transitional states. However, admitting that war would be unfeasible against a state like China for instance should not stop us from exposing its wrongdoings and aiming at future change.

Conclusion

The idea is slowly gaining power that we live today in a world where we cannot accept that each state follows its course independently from others. Therefore, if authoritarian states refuse to adhere to the set number of fundamental rules and principles that accompany the correct working of a liberal democracy, and therefore hinder the peaceful coexistence of peoples, they should not be sheltered from coercive action. To paraphrase Michael Doyle, “when a debate becomes a matter only or ‘them or us’, the Realist say and usually convince us that the answer has to be : ‘us’.”

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