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EDITORIAL COMMENTS

SOLVING THE WAR PUZZLE

On the eve of World War I, Norman Angell wrote in a popular bestseller that the high level of interaction among nations made war a “great illusion.” Since war would not benefit the people of England or Germany, war would no longer occur. Angell’s thesis, embraced by even the chairman of Britain’s War Committee, died with the guns of August. It has taken almost a century for any other theory of war avoidance to gain the intellectual following enjoyed by Angell’s *The Great Illusion*.¹ Today, despite continuing protestations of skeptics, the “democratic peace” has achieved broad support across the political spectrum. In its more cautious form, the “democratic peace” posits that major war will occur only rarely, if at all, between well-established democratic nations. But obviously, since major war has been occurring at a lusty rate between democratic and nondemocratic nations, the “democratic peace,” despite its impressive acceptance, is not an adequate theory for war avoidance. Equally, however, since the “democratic peace” seems to be one of the most robust correlations with war avoidance found to date, approaches that ignore it would seem themselves to be seriously incomplete. Is there a more complete approach that offers better guidance for war avoidance while incorporating the insights of the “democratic peace”? The answer seems to be a cautious yes. Further, the more complete approach may offer better guidance for virtually all major foreign policy goals and thus serve as a more effective foreign policy paradigm.

The “democratic peace” has achieved broad contemporary support because it reflects an impressive reality about war. Major international war, that is, interstate war with over one thousand casualties, occurs at an extraordinarily low rate among well-established democracies. This insight, postulated by Immanuel Kant over two hundred years ago, seems powerfully supported by recent scholarship, particularly the work of Professors Rudy Rummel and Bruce Russett. According to Rummel, of 353 pairings of nations fighting in major international wars between 1816 and 1991, none occurred between democracies.² And in *Grasping the Democratic Peace*,³ Professor Russett, a former chairman of the Political Science Department at Yale, lends powerful support to the basic proposition, including a careful refutation of the most common counterarguments. While a few scholars still challenge the statistical reality of this seminal proposition, argue that it is principally a product of a unifying Soviet threat during the Cold War, argue that it does not apply to extended transitions to democracy, or question whether it would necessarily hold in a world of all democracies, most now accept that the democratic peace is one of the most important correlations found to date about the nature of war. The significance of this finding is supported by studies of the relationship between type of government and other widely shared goals, including human rights, economic development, environmental protection, famine avoidance, control of terrorism, corruption avoidance, lowering infant mortality, and even ending poverty and mass refugee flows. On each of these human

¹ NORMAN ANGELL, *THE GREAT ILLUSION: A STUDY OF THE RELATION OF MILITARY POWER TO NATIONAL ADVANTAGE* (1913).

² R. J. RUMMEL, *POWER KILLS: DEMOCRACY AS A METHOD OF NONVIOLENCE* 13 (1997).

³ BRUCE RUSSETT, *GRASPING THE DEMOCRATIC PEACE: PRINCIPLES FOR A POST-COLD WAR WORLD* (1993).

goals, government structures rooted in democracy, the rule of law, and human freedom perform impressively better than totalitarian and authoritarian models rooted in Hegelian statist mystique.

This evidence of the relationship between government structures and performance on the principal goals of mankind, some of it initially funded and disseminated by the United States Institute of Peace, is so compelling that leaders all over the world now pepper their speeches with references to democracy and the rule of law. Indeed, the United States in the National Endowment for Democracy, the United Kingdom in the Westminster Foundation, and others of our democratic allies have already built into their foreign policies at least some mechanism for encouragement of democracy.

For all its power, however, the democratic peace proposition is by itself incomplete. In its most common formulations, it focuses only on the correlation between democracy and war, and this in turn fails to capture the real strength of the case for democracy, the rule of law, and human freedom across virtually all of the most commonly shared goals of mankind. Statistical quarrels with the proposition have less ability to persuade when we see that the same correlation is common across a wide variety of human goals. The evidence on some aspects of the correlation, as with the staggering twentieth-century genocide, is even more conclusive.⁴ Perhaps most important, since democracies are all too frequently engaged in major war, as World Wars I and II and numerous "limited wars" since attest, the concept of the "democratic peace" alone has not explained war. After all, Rummel's analysis of wars between 1816 and 1991, which concludes that there were no wars between established democracies in this period, also shows 155 major war pairings between democracies and nondemocracies. How did democracies get into these wars? Are they recklessly attacking nondemocracies? Are wars between democracies and nondemocracies simply random or accidental? Or are democracies engaged in major wars with nondemocracies as a result of attacks by nondemocracies? Questions such as these caused Professors Singer and Small, who in 1972 first uncovered the statistical correlation of the democratic peace in their seminal *Wages of War Statistical Handbook*, to largely dismiss the proposition in their early study of war.⁵ Further, the democratic peace proposition as yet has produced no consensus as to the mechanism accounting for the reduced rate of major war between well-established democracies. Principal competing hypotheses focus on structural or institutional checks peculiar to democracies, on broadly shared normative or cultural perspectives, or on game-theoretic models of democratic nation interactions with adversaries. Finally, there are various other loose ends with the proposition, including questions of how well the proposition applies to minor coercion and to nations in transition rather than to major war and stable democracy. Given the power of the democratic peace correlation and the strongly supportive parallel correlations between government type and other major community goals, it would seem a mistake to ignore the democratic peace. But given the remaining unanswered questions with the proposition, it would seem equally necessary to formulate and test broader hypotheses if we are truly to solve the war puzzle. But first, it may be useful to examine some additional pieces of the puzzle.

I. MORE PIECES OF THE PUZZLE

Once we realize that the correlation with government type holds across a wide range of the most important human goals and that nondemocratic structures and a lack of human freedom go hand in hand with a wide variety of failures, inquiry is pointed in the direction of a general explanation for this government failure in nondemocratic regimes. The explanation is almost certainly rooted in a broad mosaic of differences inherent in governance rooted

⁴ See R. J. RUMMEL, *DEATH BY GOVERNMENT* (1994).

⁵ See, e.g., Melvin Small & J. David Singer, *The War-Proneness of Democratic Regimes, 1818-1965*, 50 *JERUSALEM J. INT'L REL.* 50, 67-68 (1976).

in democracy and the rule of law versus that rooted in statist models. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to speak of competing cultures of democracy and statism.

As a core difference underlying these competing political cultures, there is yet another potentially powerful explanation for the profound difference in levels of government failure. Indeed, I believe this is likely the most important internal mechanism responsible for the democratic peace and other differences in performance between these forms of governance. This mechanism, increasingly referred to as the "theory of government failure," was the insight that won the Nobel Prize in economics for James M. Buchanan in 1986. Widely known as "public choice theory" as initially developed by Professor Buchanan, it posits that government decision makers, like actors elsewhere, will generally act rationally in pursuit of their interests, and that the government setting, as with markets, provides mechanisms by which elites and special interest groups may be able to externalize costs on others.⁶ While this theory of public decision making was developed primarily to explain significant government failure in democracies, the same underlying concept seems to operate off the scale within totalitarian and nondemocratic regimes to produce what might be characterized as massive government failure in those systems. Norman Angell was correct in *The Great Illusion* that the average citizen in a modern democracy is likely only to lose from aggressive war. But he failed to understand that regime elites in nondemocratic systems may be in a position, as was Saddam Hussein before the Gulf War, both to capture personally the benefits of any successful aggression and to externalize the costs on others. Decision elites in nondemocratic nations may, therefore, be far more disposed to high-risk aggressive actions risking major war and other disasters for their people. This conclusion is supported by the empirical work of Professors Dan Reiter and Allan C. Stam set out in *Democracies At War*,⁷ which indicates the greater caution of democratic leaders in war initiation as one of the principal reasons democracies have won more than three quarters of their wars since 1815.

If this "theory of government failure," and of incentives for government decision makers generally, is an important part of the explanation for war, one would expect to find that democracies are, in fact, getting into major war principally, though not exclusively, as a result of aggression by nondemocratic states, either against the democracies directly or against nations or peoples on whose behalf the democracies then go to war. To test the proposition that democracies were likely to have become engaged in major war principally as defenders rather than aggressors, I recently explored these issues through an analysis of major interstate wars since the adoption of the United Nations Charter in 1945. In that time frame, and based on the totality of the historical evidence as presently understood, I believe that clear aggression by a democratic government in a major interstate war has been limited to a single instance out of approximately twenty-eight major wars studied. A further two such wars in this period are also most reasonably scored as democratic aggression. That is, in this time frame there were only three wars with a democratic aggressor for 11 percent of the total wars studied, and there were twenty-five wars arguably with nondemocratic responsibility for 89 percent of the total. The one major war with a clear democratic aggressor was the Suez War of 1956 in which the United Kingdom and France jointly attacked Egypt in the wake of Nasser's nationalization of the Suez Canal. The two wars also most reasonably scored as democratic aggression are the Indian action in the 1971 Bangladesh War and the 1974 Turkish intervention in Cyprus. The former, however, has a powerful argument that it was humanitarian intervention and the latter, though it went too far, was a response by a treaty guarantor to a coup against the elected Cypriot government of Archbishop Makarios in support of *enosis* with Greece. Further, of these twenty-eight major wars, nineteen involved democracies, and in only three of these, or 16 percent, was a democracy acting illegally as an aggressor.

⁶ See, e.g., James M. Buchanan, *Politics Without Romance: A Sketch of Positive Public Choice Theory and its Normative Implications*, in 2 THE THEORY OF PUBLIC CHOICE 11–22 (James M. Buchanan & Robert D. Tollison eds., 1984).

⁷ DAN REITER & ALLAN C. STAM, *DEMOCRACIES AT WAR* (2002).

It is also instructive to compare casualties in wars resulting from illegal actions by coherent democracies with those caused by nondemocracies. Using the *Correlates of War*⁸ casualty figures for wars in the period from the Charter to 1990, and adjusting the 1956 Suez War to ascribe 865 casualties to the illegal British and French action (thus separating the defensive Israeli action in that war), produces a figure of 13,365 casualties for democratic nation wars and 3,320,304 for those with nondemocratic nation responsibility. That is, in human casualty terms, democratic nation major interstate war violence in post-Charter wars from 1948 through the 1990 Gulf War is less than one-half of 1 percent of the nondemocratic nation violence in such wars. This is a very different picture of war responsibility than is generally understood. While this analysis of democratic versus nondemocratic aggression is certainly subject to controversy, I believe that it accurately captures a reality that, at least since the adoption of the United Nations Charter, democratic nations predominantly get into major interstate war as a result of illegal actions of nondemocratic nations rather than the other way around or simply through random distribution of blame or accident. Indeed, there seem to be few major interstate wars in any time frame clearly initiated by a well-established liberal democracy motivated principally by value extension. Most recently, whatever one's analysis of the legal and policy case for the United States/United Kingdom position with respect to the disarming of Iraq, these countries have been principally motivated by defensive considerations rather than by value extension.⁹

In summary, the path to major interstate war of democracies since the adoption of the Charter shows that seven wars involved guerrilla, terrorist, or intermittent attacks against the democracy or a treaty ally; seven involved direct invasion of the democracy or a state then assisted by the democracy; one involved a severe threat of attack against the democracy; and one involved a humanitarian intervention following a related genocide. Further, the three wars scored here as democratic nation aggression under the Charter were in response respectively to an illegal takeover of the Suez Canal, a severe humanitarian crisis, and a military coup threatening the balance under a treaty of guarantee. At least since the adoption of the Charter in 1945, the principal path to war for democracies seems to have been nondemocratic attack, genocide, or other illegal actions.

If democratic nations are getting into major war predominantly as a result of aggression, genocide, or other illegal actions by nondemocratic regimes, then the evidence strongly suggests, at least for purposes of continuing our search for a more comprehensive hypothesis about war, that the key missing link in democratic peace theory is the importance of external deterrence. That is, are democracies getting into war predominantly in settings where they fail adequately to deter a potential nondemocratic decision elite willing to engage in high-risk behavior? Considerable evidence suggests that the answer is yes.

It is important that we first define what we mean by deterrence and effective deterrence for the purposes of this hypothesis. Deterrence for our purposes is the totality of *external* incentives, that is, incentives from the international environment, which may be high or low, adequate or inadequate. Effective deterrence will be regarded as that aggregate of external incentives known to and understood by a potential aggressor as adequate to prevent the

⁸ Available at <<http://www.umich.edu/~cowproj/>>. See also MEASURING THE CORRELATES OF WAR (J. David Singer & Paul Diehl eds., 1990).

⁹ Since at the time this Editorial was initially written no war had occurred concerning Iraq's failure to comply with the conditions that the UN Security Council had imposed at the end of the 1991 Gulf War, no scoring has been made for any such war in this analysis. It is already apparent, however, that there will be a robust legal debate about the United States/United Kingdom actions in that war and that any final characterization is likely to be arguable. Defensive concerns of the United States and the United Kingdom related to Iraq's failure to adhere to Security Council-imposed sanctions to scrap its weapons of mass destruction in the broader context of Iraqi support for terrorism and its demonstrated use of chemical weapons. Further, these concerns also embraced Iraq's continuing attacks against U.S. and UK aircraft lawfully present on a humanitarian mission in the no-fly zones. This Gulf War II is clearly a product of a post-9/11 broader war against terrorism and it likely would not have occurred but for the 9/11 attacks against the United States.

aggression. In this respect, factors affecting deterrence encompass the totality of positive and negative incentives, including potential military responses and security arrangements, power asymmetries, economic relations and trade, diplomatic actions, effects of international organizations and international law, alliances, collective security, contiguity, and other "opportunity" factors, or the lack thereof, with respect to any of these elements. Factors affecting deterrence also include clarity of communication, past actions of the target and any potential defenders, and the perspectives and belief system of the potential aggressor. Ultimately, effective deterrence is a state of mind of the potential aggressor based on perceptions of external incentives.

As so broadly conceived, there is strong evidence that deterrence, that is, the effect of external factors on the decision to go to war, is the missing link in the war/peace equation. An examination of the level of deterrence before the principal wars of the twentieth century shows that in every case the potential aggressor made a rational calculation that the war would be won, and won promptly. In fact, the longest period of time for victory through conventional attack seems to be the six weeks calculated by the German General Staff as the time necessary to prevail on the Western front in World War I under the Schlieffen Plan.

II. DEMOCRACY AND DETERRENCE

Fitting the puzzle together, major international war seems predominantly to be a synergy between a potential aggressive nondemocratic regime and an absence of effective levels of deterrence. That is, democratic nations do not need to deter other democratic nations through external incentives even where contiguity, and thus higher risk, is present. Canada does not, and need not, fear a U.S. invasion, despite the overwhelming military superiority of the United States. And Belgium does not, and need not, fear a French invasion, despite the overwhelming military superiority of France. But NATO was certainly correct to work assiduously to deter an invasion from the then Soviet Union. Indeed, NATO may well have prevented World War III and may have been one of the most effective foreign policy initiatives in U.S. history.

The principal path to major interstate war for democracies seems to be failing to ensure adequate levels of deterrence when confronted by potential aggressors. Deterrence failure can occur because of an absence of adequate military forces, as was true of the U.S. entry into World War I and, in part, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor; lack of communication of intent (or even any advance formation of an intent to defend), as was true in the Korean and Gulf Wars; or lack of believability of the guarantee, as was true of British entry into World War II and, in part, Milošević's decisions to defy NATO in Bosnia and Kosovo. If correct, this theory of deterrence failure means that democracies should focus on ensuring effective levels of deterrence in response to threats of aggression, considering all such factors, in settings where they would otherwise be prepared to go to war. To recognize this imperative, however, is not to supply the answers to the considerable strategic and political difficulties in meeting this challenge in settings such as those Britain faced in Hitler's threat to Europe or those the United States faced in Saddam Hussein's initial threat to Kuwait.

A useful framework in thinking about the war puzzle is provided in the Kenneth Waltz classic, *Man, the State and War*,¹⁰ published in 1959 for the Institute of War and Peace Studies, in which he notes that previous thinkers about the causes of war have tended to assign responsibility at one of the three levels of either individual psychology, the nature of the state, or the nature of the international system. We might summarize my analysis in this popular construct by suggesting that the most critical variables are the second and third levels, or "images," of analysis. Government structures, at the second level, seem to play a central role in levels

¹⁰ KENNETH N. WALTZ, *MAN, THE STATE, AND WAR: A THEORETICAL ANALYSIS* (1959).

of aggressiveness in high-risk behavior leading to major war. In this, the “democratic peace” is an essential insight. The third level of analysis, the international system, or totality of external incentives influencing the decision for war, is also critical *when government structures do not restrain such high-risk behavior on their own*. Quite simply, both democracy and deterrence internalize the costs to decision elites of high-risk behavior leading to major war. As such, they reduce that behavior.

III. TOWARD INCENTIVE THEORY

The “democratic peace” emerged in the effort to solve the war puzzle. The apparent robust correlation between government type and avoidance of war, though, quickly encouraged research about the relationship between government type and other major foreign policy goals. The important findings, all pointing toward the great importance of democratic governance, human freedom, and the rule of law, are too recent to have generated any focused theoretical literature on the underlying commonalities. As has been suggested, however, there is good reason to believe that a core mechanism underlying these extraordinary correlations may be the Nobel Prize-winning insight called “government failure theory.” Thus, war may be, at least in significant part, a product of government failure in which nondemocratic regime elites believe they can externalize costs on others while personally obtaining the benefits of any successes. As with “market failure,” which operates principally from a similar mechanism of externalities, when “government failure” occurs, it needs external checks to right the balance in incentives. With market failure, this role is performed by government. With war, absent such a central government, it must be a product of the totality of external actions creating deterrence through incentives.

Similar mechanisms related to incentives seem to underlie other correlations with government type. Thus, the principal democide seems to be generated either to capture or maintain power or in pursuit of some twisted vision of the regime elite. And the cost is paid by the millions of victims tortured or killed. The forgotten holocaust in the Congo from 1885 to 1908, which may have killed as many as ten million, was a giant forced-labor camp for the personal enrichment of King Leopold II of Belgium. Pol Pot’s slaughter in Cambodia seems to have been intended both to keep Pol Pot in power and to enable him to pursue his twisted vision of utopia.

This expansive focus suggests that the “democratic peace” has now evolved into a broader new paradigm in foreign relations focused on the importance of liberal democracy, the rule of law, and human freedom in achievement of virtually the full range of important goals of foreign policy. Underlying this broader approach may be a pervasive effect of incentives, particularly as they are affected for regime elites by government type.

As with war, which is not simply an internal issue within states, when terrorism or massive genocide (as in Pol Pot’s Cambodia, Rwanda, or the former Yugoslavia) is taking place, it is the totality of external incentives through deterrence that is the only remaining modality of control. That is, when nondemocratic government structures massively fail, affecting the interests and commitments of other nations, the only remaining check is for other nations to structure effective external deterrence through incentives.

It is appropriate, then, that we embrace the “democratic peace,” while moving beyond it to a new, more complete paradigm in foreign policy that may focus our attention more effectively on the nature of the problem and useful methods for response. That new paradigm will focus on democracy and deterrence, but its core underlying mechanism may be that of incentives. Perhaps the new paradigm, which seeks to incorporate the best insights from the full range of past approaches to foreign policy, might be termed “incentive theory.” Such a focus suggests that war is best explained not by any one of Waltz’s three images but rather by a synergy of factors affecting incentives in the war decision. As such, the new theory

blends classical realism and idealism but goes beyond both. The very breadth of the term may also offer greater insight as to the great range of relevant variables affecting incentives and, thus, the decision for war or peace. Response to incentives seems to be the core mechanism by which nature produces both biological and cultural evolution. Should we be surprised if it turns out to be of central importance for foreign policy?

IV. CONSEQUENCES FOR FOREIGN POLICY

New slogans in foreign policy are easier to achieve than effective results. The foreign policy process is inevitably one of constrained options, inadequate information, choice among conflicting goals, and competing views as to the most appropriate actions. In that messy process, as Thomas Kuhn reminded us more than a quarter century ago in his seminal work, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*,¹¹ we are also consciously or unconsciously ruled by our prevailing paradigms. What we believe shapes what we do. It may be useful, then, to look briefly at some of the general consequences for foreign policy of a paradigm rooted in the importance of internal and external incentives.

Before examining some of the consequences for foreign policy of the new paradigm, let us begin with a brief focus on what it is not. It is emphatically not democracy building by aggressive use of force or a democratic "just war" or "crusade for democracy." It is not an effort to impose a *Pax Americana* or to impose American cultural values alien to others. It is not a prescription that all nondemocracies are a threat to the peace. It is not a recommendation to engage beyond our means or to intervene naively in settings where we have little ability to influence or little national interest. Nor is it a doctrine of preemption rather than adherence to the fundamental insight of the United Nations Charter that force should not be used as a modality of major change.

Most important, the full range of correlations of important foreign policy goals with democracy and the rule of law suggests that an important long-term goal is support for democracy and the rule of law. With respect to long-term efforts to assist the development of democracy and the rule of law, it is particularly important that we *not* fall into the all too common trap of believing that promoting democracy is simply promoting free elections. Free elections are an essential element of genuine democracy, but, as the United States articulated for the then Soviet Union in the 1990 rule-of-law talks, liberal democracy is an important mix of principles, including limited government; checks and balances; free elections; freedom of speech, assembly, and the press; protections of the individual from the state; known and efficient legal rules facilitating human creativity and exchange; legal constraints on government officials; an independent judiciary; respect for economic freedom; and many others. While an electoral democracy is certainly superior to totalitarianism, the full benefits of democracy, including quite probably the very stability of democratic institutions, come from achieving liberal democracy.

Incentive theory, with its respect for human freedom, would also strongly support efforts to remove trade barriers and broaden the parameters for human economic choice. Free trade not only benefits both sides in the trade but may also through time contribute to the network of cooperative positive incentives that are likely a factor in reducing war. Indeed, Professors Bruce Russett and John Oneal show in their recent book, *Triangulating Peace*,¹² that there is a strong correlation between an important bilateral trade relationship and the reduction of war. Further, in enhancing economic growth, trade enhances the wealth of nations, which in turn tends to correlate with enhanced environmental standards. The protestors against

¹¹ THOMAS S. KUHN, *THE STRUCTURE OF SCIENTIFIC REVOLUTIONS* (2d ed. 1970).

¹² BRUCE RUSSETT & JOHN R. ONEAL, *TRIANGULATING PEACE: DEMOCRACY, INTERDEPENDENCE, AND INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS* (2001).