

## Democracy and War

[I]f the consent of the citizens is required in order to decide that war should be declared..., nothing is more natural than that they would be very cautious in commencing such a poor game, decreeing for themselves all the calamities of war.

**IMMANUEL KANT**, 'Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch', 1795<sup>1</sup>

The most important intersection of the developing number-crunching science of international relations and the post-Cold War policy agenda came with the question of whether more democracy could also mean more peace. The West's victory over communism was seen as a triumph for the democratic way of life. If others followed the same path there was a possibility of a transcendent community of shared values that would produce peace if only because there would be nothing to fight about. But the spread of democracy was bound to be contentious and would be resisted by autocrats.

As European communism imploded Francis Fukuyama of the RAND Corporation announced that this was not just 'the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history', but 'the end of history as such'. By this he meant 'the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.'<sup>2</sup> Talking of the 'end of history' invited misinterpretation. He was not suggesting that there would be no more conflict, or other transformational events, only that there was now no

serious ideological alternative to the political and economic model that had been embraced by the Western world, to their enormous benefit.

The collapse of the Soviet empire and its fragmentation into states that all claimed to be embracing democracy appeared as the latest stage in a benign trend. Samuel Huntington described three waves of the democratic ascendance. The first began in the nineteenth century and peaked at twenty-nine democracies, but then went into decline in the 1920s as dictators took advantage of depressed economic conditions. By 1942 there were only twelve. After the Second World War the second wave took the numbers up to thirty-six before there was a further falling away, going down to thirty until the mid-1970s. Then the third wave began with countries in Latin America and the Asia Pacific region adopting democratic forms of government.<sup>3</sup> Lastly, the former states of the Warsaw Pact, along with the Baltic States that had previously been annexed by the Soviet Union, embraced the Western ideology, and having so demonstrated their commitment, were able to join NATO and the European Union. Once the former communist countries were added the number of democracies went up to around eighty (and on some measures even higher).

The momentum behind democracy had international consequences. The communist experience was taken to demonstrate that regimes without basic freedoms tended to instability but spreading these freedoms reduced division and conflict. This challenged the idea that when it came to maintaining international order, systems of government were irrelevant. This idea was central to the UN Charter as drafted in San Francisco in 1945. Then the priority, above all, was to prevent yet more aggressive wars. The preamble acknowledged both state rights and human rights. It opened with a determination to 'save succeeding generations from the scourge of war' while also reaffirming 'faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small'. Yet, as the operating principles of the United Nations were described, the core objective became clear. 'The Organization', the charter explained, was 'based on the principle of the sovereign equality of all its Members.' Each must accept the obligations to settle disputes by peaceful means and 'refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial

integrity or political independence of any state'. Even if states were acting against their people in an unjust or discriminatory matter, so long as they were not actually disturbing international peace and security, they should be left alone.

Nothing contained in the present Charter shall authorize the United Nations to intervene in matters which are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any state or shall require the Members to submit such matters to settlement under the present Charter.<sup>4</sup>

So whatever was said about justice and human rights, the charter at its core was about removing all excuses for wars of conquest and a celebration of sovereignty. What states did within their own borders was up to them. No challenge was posed to this by President Bush when he spoke of a 'new world order' in April 1991. This, he explained:

springs from hopes for a world based on a shared commitment among nations large and small to a set of principles that undergird our relations—peaceful settlement of disputes, solidarity against aggression, reduced and controlled arsenals, and just treatment of all peoples.

The vision, despite the use of the word 'new', was actually conservative. The new world as presented was rather similar to the old except that it would lack some of its disagreeable features. The president had been careful to avoid a promise of 'an era of perpetual peace'. The challenge was to keep the 'dangers of disorder at bay'.<sup>5</sup> Bush gave no indication that he expected the pursuit of justice to take precedence over the preservation of order and stability.

But the shift in the balance of power that had just occurred was bound to have more far-reaching effects than a cautious president was inclined to admit. The United States and its allies were now in a hegemonic position, accounting for the bulk of the world's military assets, and its strongest economies, with an enormous freedom of political manoeuvre. They were in a position to rewrite the rules for the international order. For over seven decades they had fought their internal and external battles with fascism and communism, and had now emerged triumphant. Their constitutions reflected their liberal philosophy, requiring that the 'impartial rule of law,

and not simply the political power of the individual or group, should govern the outcome of state decisions'. Now there was an opportunity to work on the 'constitution of the society of states as a whole'.<sup>6</sup> The key shift was to put more stress on the rights of individuals and minority groups and less on the rights of states.

In November 1990 the heads of government of thirty-four European nations convened in Paris under the aegis of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, their first meeting together since Helsinki in 1975. They blessed the reunification of Germany and signed a new arms control treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe. A Charter of Paris was agreed. In this 'new era', democracy was 'the only system of government for our nations', as based on 'the will of the people, expressed regularly through free and fair elections'. It also affirmed that 'without discrimination, every individual has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief, freedom of expression, freedom of association and peaceful assembly, freedom of movement'. In addition no one should be 'subject to arbitrary arrest or detention, subject to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment'.<sup>7</sup> The challenge to the old order was fundamental. Instead of insisting that the best international practice was to respect the sovereignty of other states no matter how they managed their internal affairs, it was now considered to be not only appropriate but also necessary to encourage all states to embrace liberalism and democracy.

**AT THIS CRITICAL MOMENT THE MOVE TO DEMOCRACY WAS** reinforced by one of the most compelling claims to emerge out of the statistical analysis of war. The idea had been given credence by Michael Doyle in 1986.<sup>8</sup> It was set out clearly by Jack Levy in that transformative year, 1989: 'This absence of war between democracies comes as close as anything we have to an empirical law in international relations.'<sup>9</sup> This was picked up by Western leaders, buoyed by the democratic surge of the last quarter of the twentieth century, who found further comfort in the thought that democracy promotion was a route not only to better governance but also to more peace. At last, it seemed possible to realise the German philosopher Immanuel Kant's utopian vision of a Perpetual Peace, based on

governments resting on reason and law rather than force.

This combination of academic respectability and political enthusiasm led to closer scrutiny. Democracies had not been as brutal to their own citizens as autocracies. Those governments that turned on sections of their own people in a systematic way—in the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, and Cambodia—were usually in the grip of some totalitarian ideology. But the records of the United States, the United Kingdom, and France demonstrated that they had been regularly at war, and not exactly soft touches when fighting against supposedly ruthless and undemocratic countries. This was why the argument was not that democracy made countries more peaceable: but only that they would not then go to war with each other.

Was this correct? The proposition set up a challenge to find instances where democracies had fought each other in order to check whether the findings were as statistically significant as supposed. As most of the time most states did not go to war with each other, did that mean even one instance where two democratic states fought negated the theory?<sup>10</sup> As the analysis used the COW data how much did the high threshold for war influence it? COW might exclude instances where democratic states intervened in the internal affairs of other democratic states, though not to the extent of passing the threshold of 1,000 battle deaths.<sup>11</sup> Or perhaps states with similar types of regimes, even if autocratic, also rarely went to war with each other.<sup>12</sup> When there was no war might this have been for reasons that had little to do with democracy, such as considerations of capacity and prudence?<sup>13</sup>

The debate added to the familiar problems of defining wars an even trickier question of defining democracy.<sup>14</sup> Democracy defined by majority rule and elected leaders did not always come with liberalism, which required openness and tolerance of minorities. The standard fear from the late nineteenth century onwards, after all, was of a belligerent public opinion, especially when aroused by demagogues, populists, and the press. The entry of the masses into politics was one of the conditions for the rise of nationalism over the nineteenth century. At what point did this rise of the masses turn into democracy? The obvious moment might be said to have been when universal suffrage was achieved, but that arrived in stages,

from upper class men to working men, then women, and eventually young adults.

Most relevant, perhaps, was the ability of democratically elected civilian politicians to exercise actual control over decisions on war. This was clearly lacking in Germany at the start of the First World War.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, once a country had become a democracy the status could be lost, as political processes become corrupted and liberties qualified. Russia, for example, became less democratic over the 2010s as did Turkey. Nonetheless, the trappings of democracy were still present in both. Iran had highly contested elections for the president, but among a selected group of candidates, with the scope for public debate constrained and supreme power resting elsewhere. The higher the threshold for war and the more restrictive the definition of democracy, the more likely it was that the democratic peace theory would turn out to be true.

There was also the question of causation. Was it that democracy caused peace or that peace caused democracy? Peace made possible trade, investment, and economic growth, which were supportive of democratisation.<sup>16</sup> If democracy caused peace, what was the mechanism by which a country that might otherwise incline towards war instead turned away? One hypothesis was that democracies must address differences to work out internal conflicts and so come to appreciate the value of empathy, compromise, and reciprocation. These were then in play when they addressed international disputes.<sup>17</sup> Another was that democracies ensured that executives were held accountable through legislatures and could be removed from office through elections if they engaged in imprudent wars.<sup>18</sup> Other democracies might also be considered reliable and suitable allies.

All this raised the possibility that there were a number of factors reinforcing each other. Bruce Russett and John Oneal argued that democracies do go to war, just less often than everyone else. Using the Militarized Interstate Disputes database, and taking 1886 as a starting point, because democracy on any terms was relatively rare before that date, they looked for pairs of countries that might go to war. They evaluated each according to an index of democracy, and took account of alliances and power. The conclusion was that democracy made a

difference. Taking as a base the likelihood that tension between an average pair of countries would turn into a militarised quarrel, this was doubled when a democracy faced an autocracy and halved when a democracy faced a democracy. They found, however, that the effect only kicked in after 1900. They also looked at economic dependence upon international trade and found that the greater the dependence the less risk of getting involved in a militarised dispute, whether or not there was much trade with the potential adversary. Market economies had even stronger pacifying effects than democracy. Lastly, they considered membership of intergovernmental organisations, and when the pairs had shared memberships. This also encouraged peaceful responses.<sup>19</sup>

The absence of war among democracies, therefore, might be for a variety of reasons. One alternative was that it was largely a ‘capitalist peace’. Thus Michael Mousseau considered that peace amongst the advanced capitalist nations was about much more than the high costs of war, but also an interest in encouraging others to be like them. Their wealth created loyalty and the capacity to better non-capitalist states in war. This led to encouraging capitalism as ‘the surest cause of peace and friendship among individuals, groups and states’.<sup>20</sup> Another, and more firmly based, alternative was a ‘territorial peace’. According to Douglas Gibling, ‘settled international boundaries decrease the level of threat to the territorial integrity of states’. This in turn allowed states to cut their armed forces, keep public opinion calm, while reducing the need for the centralisation of power.<sup>21</sup>

It was easiest to have peace when there was little substantial in dispute. These various explanations brought the problem back to the declinist thesis with which this book opened, and whether there was a single determining factor that might explain quite complex and often contradictory trends. Azar Gat identified the underlying process which made a difference to levels of violence, especially in Western societies, as ‘modernisation’, which had begun with the industrial revolution. This made it possible to satiate human desires without recourse to warfare.<sup>22</sup> The benefits of war went down as the costs went up. But that did not preclude terrible episodes of violent conflict, that expanded and escalated. At the heart of the issue was the interaction between social and economic

developments with political choices, which could be egregious or quixotic, as well as perfectly rational.

**THE DEMOCRATIC PEACE THEORY WAS ESSENTIALLY A GENERALISATION** from the post-1945 experience of North America and Western Europe. A mutually reinforcing set of relationships developed among countries embracing liberal democracy, and open economies. The most remarkable example of this determination to break away from the bad habits of the past came when France and Germany, along with Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg formed the original Coal and Steel Community, which grew into a full-fledged customs union and eventually acquired a wide range of competencies and many more members to become the European Union. Whatever else it achieved it gradually calmed one of the most destructive relationships in European history.

But while one set of relationships among liberal democracies became warm and intimate another became hostile and frozen. The expansion of the Soviet system into Central and Eastern Europe in 1945 created a sense of threat that led the United States to accept, once again, some responsibility for European security. In 1949 the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) was formed. In 1954 the Soviet Union established its own alliance, building on the control it had already established over its satellite states in Europe. The positive peace that developed in Western Europe was therefore dependent upon the security provided by the Atlantic Alliance. Any temptations for the West Germans to look east rather than west for their political and economic relationships were cut off by the Iron Curtain, the line across the continent that separated the two ideological and military blocs. This is why democracy was such an aggravating factor in the Cold War. This history helps explain the enthusiasm, once there was a chance to heal the fracture that had divided the continent, to do this on the basis of bringing democracy to the former communist states.

But even in Europe, where this effort was generally successful, there were reasons for caution. In the Balkans, for example, violence and instability resulted from a combination of moves to independence and democracy with nationalism and disputes over borders. There were other demonstrations of problems with a capitalist peace with transitions from



closed economic systems to open systems that lacked the rule of law and so were susceptible to corruption. Jack Snyder noted how democratisation could produce nationalism ‘when powerful elites within a nation need to harness popular energies to the tasks of war and economic development’.<sup>23</sup> A US government task force pointed to states in transition, or not quite democracies, as being prone to conflict, especially when political participation was tied to parochial interests:

By far the worst situation in terms of risks of instability were for a political landscape that combined deeply polarized or factionalized competition with open contestation. The combination of a winner-take-all parochial approach to politics with opportunities to compete for control of central state authority represents a powder keg for political crisis.<sup>24</sup>

Almost as the theory of the democratic peace was propounded, states becoming democracies experienced conflicts and inner violence. In this way the question of democratisation became linked with the other great issue of the 1990s—the apparent surge in the number of civil wars.