

# Discourse on Nuclear Weapons post-9/11 and Rogue States Narrative\*

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## Abstract

*Narrative construction plays an important role in the creation of national security policies. The rogue state narrative has been an important part of the conceptualisation and presentation of the security policies of the West. This became more pronounced after the terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001, which presented certain 'rogue' actors as a threat to the security of the international community. A relevant case study in this regard is the possession of nuclear weapons which has been deemed a risk in the hands of such proscribed 'rogue states.' This paper will analyse this assertion through the prism of Kant's seminal work on Democratic Peace Theory which asserts that democracies seldom go to war due to their inherent peaceful tendencies of democracies. Furthermore, the study will look at criticisms of the theory from different theoretical paradigms of international relations.*

**Keywords:** Rogue States, Nuclear Weapons, Kant, Democratic Peace Theory.

## Introduction

Since the first nuclear explosion six decades ago, new threats have imploded the global security calculus. Nine states have become nuclear powers, terrorism remains unabated, and concerns over

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proliferation and rise of authoritarian regimes around the world are keeping policymakers on their toes.<sup>1</sup> Questions are raised over the actual use of nuclear weapons by states which go through many political and physical trials and tribulations to make them in the first place, thus, rendering nuclear weapons 'irrelevant'. However, there are others who argue that nuclear weapons in general, and second strike capability of a nuclear weapon state can avert a full-scale war, and that the risk of nuclear escalation between adversaries instills general compellence and deterrence. Others argue that a 'nuclear revolution' would assist states in countering threats at all levels, resulting in sporadic crises. Despite this substantial heterogeneity in existing literature regarding the possession and utility of nuclear weapons, there are cynical voices which question these assertions. They claim that nuclear deterrence can only be established under exceptional cases. Then, there are those who offer that nuclear weapons have been a major reason behind the prevention of a global war since 1945.<sup>2</sup>

Post-9/11, there has a new narrative which acknowledges the harsh reality of nuclear weapons, and analyses chances of 'rogue states' getting hold of and using them for terrorist activities.<sup>3</sup> While there is no novelty in the term 'rogue state', it became a focus after the 9/11 attacks on the United States (US) in 2001, and the so-called threat posed by these actors to the world. This was infamously reiterated by the former US President George W. Bush in his State of the Union Address in January 2002 when he called Iraq, North Korea and Iran the 'axis of evil'. The 'rogue state' narrative has been used effectively and rigorously by US defence policymakers as a tool by linking institutional insecurity in international relations to supposedly large number of 'irrational and unpredictable actors' which resort to asymmetric approaches to warfare, and are willing to use nuclear weapons to achieve their goals. These actors are considered a threat because of their inability to follow the existing international

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<sup>1</sup> Asa K. Beardsley, "Nuclear Weapons as Shields," *Journal of Conflict Management and Peace Science* 26, no.3 (2009): 235-237.

<sup>2</sup> Georg Cavallar, "Kantian Perspectives on Democratic Peace: Alternatives to Doyle," *Review of International Studies* 27, no. 2 (2005): 229-248.

<sup>3</sup> Alexandra Homolar, "Rebels without a Conscience: The Evolution of the Rogue States Narrative in US Security Policy," *European Journal of International Relations* 17, no.4 (2010): 705-707.

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standards of behaviour of civilised nations, i.e., the general agreement against nuclear weapons' use.<sup>4</sup>

This paper will analyse the assertion that possession of nuclear weapons by democracies is safe, because in doing so, it has created different policy narratives such as the 'rogue state' that has led to a discourse that legitimises their possession by the West, while at the same time, discrediting the security needs of developing countries. To this end, the author will explore real life events in light of the Democratic Peace Theory with regards to 'civilised' states. To present nuanced analysis, the paper will review critiques under Realist and Constructivist schools of thoughts by specifically looking at intentional and unintentional use of nuclear weapons and its relevance to democracies.

### **Democratic Peace Theory**

Kant's moral and political philosophy has made a comeback in the last couple of years.<sup>5</sup> His essay *Zum ewigen Frieden* (1795), theory of international politics and international relations (IR) has become the basis of many books and articles. In the recent past, there has been a lot focus on one of the core ideas of Kant's philosophy of IR – democratic or liberal peace, which asserts that democratic nations do not go to war with each other. He breaks down this concept in his essay's first article which suggests that 'the civil constitution of every state shall be republican'. He gives the following explanation for this:

The republican constitution.....offers a prospect of attaining the desired result i.e., perpetual peace.<sup>6</sup>

Two reasons are given as to why a state with a republican constitution would lead to peace. One, every human being has an innate predetermined desire to have peace and happiness. This desire to achieve peace would make them want to avoid the miseries of war. Furthermore, the possible repercussions of a full-scale war will dissuade states from waging them. On the other hand, it is argued that in a non-democratic

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<sup>4</sup> Homolar, "Rebels without a Conscience."

<sup>5</sup> Cavallar, "Kantian Perspectives on Democratic Peace: Alternatives to Doyle."

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

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dispensation, the despotic leaders would have no qualms indulging in war because a loss would not lead to any personal suffering. This argument is based on Kant's idea of 'enlightened self-interest' of republican citizens. This self-interest is based on the fact that if citizens do decide to participate in a war, they will have to endure all its brutalities, finance it and repair the damage once it is over. This is why they vote against war.<sup>7</sup> The persuasive arguments entailed by the Democratic Peace Theory can be sub-categorised as follows:

### ***Normative Logic***

The advocates of normative logic argue that democracies tend not to go to war because it forces the political elite to work on the basis of democratic norms. The basis of these norms is 'live and let live' and support non-violent negotiations and conflict resolution means. Naturally, it is assumed that democratic leaders, as a result of their commitment to these norms, adopt them in the international community. This would lead to respect and trust between states in situations where they have a conflict of interest. To this end, respect can only be created when both countries follow the same norms leading to accommodation. Trust between countries is created from the expectation that they will respect a fellow democracy and avoid using force.<sup>8</sup> These methods – mutual trust and respect and norm externalisation – are the basis of normative logic which argues that democracies do not fight each other.

However, there are instances when democracies do not consider each other, hence, go to war. There are two reasons for such a situation to arise: first, non-democracies might not be respected because they are perceived to be at war with their own citizens. So, democracies take it on themselves to free citizens of non-democratic rule or state oppression, and as a result, wage war with the aim of introducing a representative, democratic government. Second, non-democratic states may try to exploit the peaceful nature of democracies to gain concessions during a crisis. In

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<sup>7</sup> Cavallar, "Kantian Perspectives on Democratic Peace: Alternatives to Doyle."

<sup>8</sup> Sebastian Rosato, "The Flawed Logic of Democratic Peace Theory," *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 4 (2003): 585-587.

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such situations, democratic states may have to resort to preemptive strikes or similar measures to defend themselves.<sup>9</sup>

#### ***Institutional Logic***

Institutions of a democratic state hold their leaders accountable to many social groups which may oppose war. The power troika between the ruling political elite, opposition parties and the public creates the basis for accountability. The political elite would like to remain in power, the opposition parties use their voice against unpopular policies of the ruling government, and the public use their vote to remove leaders who do not safeguard their interests. This robust accountability keeps check on leaders who only engage in full-scale war if there is popular mandate for it in the country.

Another point of view in this regard is that economic interdependence between states creates mutual stakes leading to voices which are against war because of its repercussions on international investment and trade.<sup>10</sup>

There are five processes of institutional logic. The first two emphasise the hesitancy of democracies from using coercion or military action during international crisis. This hesitancy to wage war is because of the public's aversion to war. The group constraint mechanism considers the interests of anti-war groups. Yet another mechanism argues that democratic states are hesitant to use military force due to their slow mobilisation capability. This is due to the fact that persuading the public and anti-war groups can take longer compared to an autocratic state where the dictator himself is solely responsible for making decisions. Another setback of this mechanism is the fact that mobilisation takes place in the public domain, making a surprise attack redundant. As a result, both parties engage in negotiation in good faith without fearing an attack from the opposite side. Lastly, given information dissemination mechanisms, democracies have free media and press, compared to other political dispensations, hence, wars can be averted due to the availability of information. Given information about each other's resolve, both states would try to engage in a negotiated settlement rather than face the

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<sup>9</sup> Rosato, "The Flawed Logic of Democratic Peace Theory."

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

consequences of war - financial and physical. On the other hand, non-democracies do not have any such mechanisms in place which would create checks and balances, making them far more susceptible to wars and to act aggressively against democracies. Thus, it is said that nuclear weapons would be secure in the possession of liberal democracies as they have several mechanisms in place that would ensure that they are not tempted to use them against other states.<sup>11</sup>

### **Realist Critique**

The Democratic Peace Theory has developed into overarching conventional wisdom in international political research since the 1990s. However, many Realist analysts question its empirical validity and the causality attributed to the primary structures which prevent war.<sup>12</sup> Realists argue that internal mechanisms and structures play an insignificant part in creation of the national security policy of a state. These criticisms are twofold: First, it is argued that Kant's theory on democratic peace does not cover a complete time period, instead, only focuses on the nuclear era; and secondly, it is argued that rather than democracy, realpolitik such as state interests and power, are determining factors behind war and peace between states.

David Spiro argues that statistical analysis of the Democratic Peace Theory has been based on inaccurate accumulation of temporal sub-periods. His analysis, based on all dyads in the international political system, intimates that in most years, except for the years of World War II, the number of wars between democracies is similar to the expected number of wars. However, this argument does not hold weight in light of many examples of rival states and the likelihood of war in extreme cases.<sup>13</sup> For example, the United States (US) and United Kingdom (UK) dyad explains 171 dyad years. Out of these dyad years, there were 42 years in which at least one of the members was non-democratic. Furthermore, 11 militarised interstate disputes took place during these years. After that, both states had democratic dispensation and experienced

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<sup>11</sup> Rosato, "The Flawed Logic of Democratic Peace Theory."

<sup>12</sup> Zeev Maoz, "The Controversy over the Democratic Peace: Rearguard Action or Cracks in the Wall?" *International Security* 22, no.1 (1997): 162-177.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

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only one dispute in the remaining 129 dyad years. The rivalry between Pakistan and India is another pertinent case study where the dyad accounts for three wars and 28 disputes.<sup>14</sup> In contrast, there have been fewer disputes during times of democracy in their respective countries.

Apart from questioning the validity of normative and institutional explanations of the Democratic Peace Theory, Realists argue that the main contributing factors to the decision of going to war are related to balance of power and state interests rather than anything else. For Realists, shared interests and not common polity are the determining factors which prevent states from waging wars on others. However, in this regard, the case of India and Iran are interesting examples. A deal was signed in 2006 between US President George W. Bush and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, which allowed sharing of US nuclear technology with India. This deal was signed despite the fact that India had refused to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). While the US was busy signing the aforementioned deal with a non-NPT signatory state, it was also exerting pressure on Iran to let go of its nuclear efforts, which was originally a signatory of the NPT. The US, along with Britain and France, even pushed United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions that condemned and sanctioned Iran. Legally, the US should have disputed the nuclear ambitions of both countries, but as evident above, its policy was dramatically different. One important reason for this change in policy is the democratic polity of India compared to Iran. The US used the democratic nature of India as an important characteristic for validating its support for the country's nuclear programme. Within this discourse, the element of trust, respect and mutual values shared by both are crucial.<sup>15</sup>

On the other hand, US policy on Iran on the same subject has been completely different. In a press conference held in 2003, President Bush referred to the undemocratic nature of the Iranian state, and said that 'Iran would be very dangerous with nuclear weapons.' It can be seen that this portrayal as a non-democratic state became a central theme in the Western construction of Iran as a security threat.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Maoz, "The Controversy over the Democratic Peace."

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

## **Constructivist Critique**

The fundamental principle of the Constructivist Social Theory is based on the argument that people, including states, act towards others, on the basis of the meaning they hold for them.<sup>17</sup> States act differently with friendly states compared to enemies due to threat perception. For instance, even though ‘structurally’ British and Russian missiles may be similar for the US, both have different importance because of the friendly relations with the former compared to the latter.

The most important theoretical explanations discussed, thus far, are pressures, institutional restraints and the externalisation of democratic norms. The first explanation refers to pressure of the public on the ruling elite, but it does not take into account citizens who support policies that would bring glory and territorial aggrandisement to the state.<sup>18</sup> The second explanation emphasises the bureaucratic nature of garnering national support due to the long and arduous processes in place. This argument does not take into account the fact that even democratic leaders do not always take public opinion and mood into account. The most glaring example in this regard is the US invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Thus, it may be inferred that institutional structures do not determine state interests; instead, state interests are not dependent on any other variable. It is the social context which becomes the underlying reason behind state enmity, friendship or rivalry.<sup>19</sup> This was evident in the near miss war between the US and India, both countries boasting democratic credentials. In 1971, the Nixon administration was considering whether to intervene in a conflict in the subcontinent which could have easily escalated to an all-out war between two democracies of the world. The US even sent a naval fleet to the Bay of Bengal to pressurise India with possible nuclear conflict on the horizon. It is evident from this case that democratic polity alone cannot prevent a war between two democratic states. This also gives credence to the argument that even in democracies, leaders can override public opinion and pursue unpopular policies when required.

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<sup>17</sup> Alexander Wendt, “Anarchy is what States Make of it: The Social Construction of Power Politics,” *International Organization* 46, no.2 (1992): 391-425.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has explored assertions of Democratic Peace Theory which claims that democracies do not use military means or force against other democratic states because of their mutual desire for peace and preference for negotiations over coercive methods. However, it is evident from the discourse that there are loopholes in these assertions as there are other realpolitik factors such as balance of power and state interests that determine whether countries would go to war with one another or not. In doing so, this paper used the problem construction of nuclear proliferation by the West where it is argued that nuclear weapons are secure in the possession of democracies due to their inherent peaceful characteristics. While it is evident that the Democratic Peace Theory has provided a comprehensive framework in international politics and motivates countries to explore non-violent methods for conflict resolution, it falls short in giving due weightage to other Realist and Constructivist factors which are at play in international relations, which shows that trusting democracies does not minimise the dangers of nuclear weapons' proliferation and use. ■