



# THE BALTIC SEA REGION

**Cultures, Politics, Societies**

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# 34 Peace and democracy

## 1. Peace and democracy

Democracies are about as prone to war as are authoritarian states. But stable democracies are very unlikely to wage war against other stable democracies. The explanation for peace among stable democracies lies primarily in normative restraints on conflict behaviour inherent in the democratic political culture. When two democracies face each other in a dispute, mutual trust is maintained as each side perceives the aversion to violent solutions in the other. This is a brief summary of the results from recent research on how democracy influences the willingness of states to enter into war.

In 1993, Bruce Russett published a book reflecting the state of the art of the research on the democracy-peace nexus. The finding that democracies shun war against each other is very solid, and has been characterised as the closest that empirical research in the area of international relations has come. In fact, apart from a few special cases, one of which will be dealt with below, two democracies have not once fought a full-scale war against each other. Democratic peace is thus important and needs to be fully understood. It is also a crucial element in developing a security community.

Learning about this relationship for the first time, one might be beset by doubts, especially if one is used to viewing the world through the mistrustful, perhaps even cynical, lenses of *realpolitik*. A person used to thinking in terms of power politics might argue that the democratic states never fought each other simply because they perceived a threat from a common enemy, and therefore felt a need to keep peace among themselves. Or one might explain the absence of war among the democracies by claiming that most democracies are rich countries, and therefore lack issues of disagreement that are serious enough to cause war. These, and similar arguments, propose that the democratic peace is *spurious*, that is, only illusory. An example of a truly spurious relation can be found in the folklore “wisdom” saying that the stork brings babies. It probably originates in the observation that where there are many storks, there are many babies. Of course the storks have nothing to do with it. Both the number of storks and babies can to a great extent be explained by another influence: the degree of urbanisation. In rural areas the stork population is larger, and the birth rate among humans tends to be higher in the countryside than in towns and cities. Thus the relationship between storks and babies is spurious.

There are, however, ways of checking for shared influences, such as the degree of urbanisation in the folklore example. The relationship between a high degree of democracy in two states and the absence of war between them has been thoroughly checked for many such influences through the use of advanced statistical methods. It is true that other influences, such as wealth, economic growth and common alliance membership, reduce the likelihood of war between two states. But the democratic peace holds for such controls. Recently a consensus

has emerged in the research community that mutual stable democracy is very close to a sufficient condition for peace in the relationship between two states. Democratic peace reigns even when other favourable conditions, such as wealth, are absent. Democratic peace is not limited to, for example, rich industrialised countries or to NATO-members. Furthermore, no other favourable influence can aspire to the status of a sufficient condition for stable peace, since one can find cases of war that clearly refute such assertions. For example, wars between members of the same military alliance system are in fact quite common, as is indicated by wars such as the Hungarian uprising in 1956, when Hungary and the Soviet Union, two members of the Warsaw Pact, fought each other. Another example is the war in 1982 between Great Britain and Argentina, both of which were allied to the United States.

## **2. Democracy as conflict resolution**

Democracy is rule by the electorate on the basis of the peaceful resolution of conflicts. This basis of peaceful conflict resolution is at the heart of the explanation for democratic peace. In democracies, violence is seen as an illegitimate way of furthering one's political ambitions. Actors in the democratic political game abstain from violent means, and trust others to do the same. A competitive political system cannot survive in the absence of this mutual trust in peaceful intentions. Thus the peaceful resolution of conflict is a powerful norm that allows a smooth process of achieving a consensus among wills within the democratic state. Other important norms that constitute the democratic political culture are tolerance and a willingness to compromise. The norms of the democratic political culture carry with them normative restraints on the use of violence in settling a conflict.

The very same norm of peaceful resolution of conflicts can be applied to relations between states, provided that mutual trust is present. In the same way as actors within a democracy view each other as trustworthy, in terms of peaceful intentions, a stable democratic political system works as an identification tag, allowing foreign policy decision makers to distinguish between states. Decision makers in democratic states view other democracies as peaceful, just, and deserving of accommodation. Authoritarian states, on the other hand, rely on the suppression of their own people. If these states are in a state of aggression with their own citizens, how can they be trusted not to have aggressive intentions towards other states? Decision makers in democracies see authoritarian states as inherently distrustful, aggressive and unjust.

Another important aspect of democracy is the institutional constraints on the executive's power to decide in matters of war. It is often a complicated procedure to persuade the people, the legislature, and other independent institutions that war is necessary. Especially ordinary men and women, who, in the event of war, must bear the burden of military service, bombings, shortages and so on, can be expected to dislike costly foreign adventures. If the executives are directly or indirectly accountable to the people, they must take the preferences of the population into consideration if they want to remain in power after the next election.

Due to the high degree of institutional constraint in most democracies, a state in a dispute with another democratic state can count on ample time for conflict resolution processes, such as mediation, and virtually no risk of incurring a surprise attack. However, not all democratic states have highly constrained executives. The presidents of France and Russia, for example, have extensive presidential powers, and could be considered as relatively unconstrained in this regard. Furthermore, a state may have a constrained executive without being truly demo-

cratic. There have been wars between states where both belligerents have been of the latter category.

### **3. Explaining the democratic peace**

Systematic research indicates that normative restraints are more important in explaining the democratic peace, although institutional constraints are important as well. Evidence indicates that normative restraints best explain why democracies rarely engage even in low-level militarised disputes. Institutional constraints, in turn, prevent escalation into war in the rare cases of serious conflict between democracies.

The discussion above, about constrained executives and political culture, indicates that democracy is a complex phenomenon, making it rather difficult to identify democracies. During the Cold War era of great ideological confrontation, the socialist countries of the Soviet bloc used to argue that the so-called people's democracies, dominated by Communist parties, were more democratic in the true sense of the word. Today, however, the notion of a people's democracy has been thrown into the dustbin of history. Instead there are some rather non-controversial criteria of democracy within the field of political science that might be used. In modern states, democracy is usually identified with the right of all citizens to vote, freely contested multi-party elections, and an executive either popularly elected, or responsible to an elected legislature. Often, requirements for civil liberties, such as free speech, are also added. One way of gauging the political culture of a state is to measure the amount of internal political violence, such as terrorism and political executions.

When it comes to democratising countries, special problems arise. As was already outlined above, perceptions are key. It is very important to the process how decision makers in one country view the regime in another country, and whether or not a democratising counterpart is judged sincere in its democratic conviction. In order for mutual trust to develop, the democratic regime must be seen as stable, it must have some duration, and it must have proven its democratic conviction. Some additional criteria are sometimes used against this background when it comes to differentiating reasonably stable democracies from weak democracies that might slide back into authoritarian practices. An observer might require that a working democratic system must have been in existence for a certain number of years for a state to be classified as democratic. Another criterion is that the possibility of the leaders of the government being defeated in an election has been proven by a transfer of power following democratic elections. It is clear that several states on the southeastern shore of the Baltic Sea could be considered in a transitional period in these respects.

### **4. The historical evidence**

In applying the criteria outlined above to the history of warfare, one reaches the conclusion that two democracies never, or extremely rarely, fight full-scale wars against each other. One case that seems to contradict this assertion might be the case of Finland during the Second World War. Following the defeat in the Winter War of 1939-1940, in which Finland suffered large territorial losses in the aftermath of a Soviet war of aggression, Finland joined Nazi-Germany in 1941 in its attack on the Soviet Union. After great pressure from Stalin, the Western Democracies, now allied to the Soviet Union, declared war on Finland. Democratic

Finland, thus, ended up on the “wrong” side, formally in a state of war with several democratic countries. It is important to note, however, that Finland only fought the Soviet Union, and that no battles took place between Finnish forces and forces from a democratic country.

Nothing in the arguments above suggests that democracies will not experience conflicts among themselves. The point is that democracies can handle even serious disagreement when dealing with other democracies without resorting to arms. One example might be the territorial dispute between Sweden and Denmark in 1982, concerning the status of a small island (Hesselö) located between the two countries. The interest in the issue was heightened by the belief that the seabed in the disputed area might contain valuable mineral resources. This conflict was resolved without any references to military power or use of coercive measures. In contrast, the dispute between democratic Great Britain and the military dictatorship of Argentina over the Falkland/Malvinas Islands in the South Atlantic resulted in war the same year.

One might argue that conflict, or more accurately – competition, is inherent in human existence, or at least in the capitalist economic system. Firms and individual entrepreneurs compete at the local level, and great trade blocs and trading nations, such as the European Union and the USA, compete at a global level. Democracy is a manifestation of the human ability to solve conflicts peacefully, and in a context of democratic norms and peaceful mechanisms of conflict resolution, human conflict and competition might be seen as a dynamic force, contributing to progress and pluralism.

## The theory of Kant

The theory of democratic peace actually originates from the Baltic region. In 1795, the famous German philosopher Immanuel Kant in Königsberg, present-day Kaliningrad, finished *Zum Ewigen Frieden – Ein philosophischer Entwurf* (known in English as *On Perpetual Peace – A Philosophical Essay*). In this work, Kant spoke of “liberal republics” that would create a “pacific union” by accepting the principles of a metaphorical “treaty”. In addition to the normative restraints and the institutional constraints, Kant pointed to the pacifying effect of mutually beneficial trade, an argument that was later to become central to the liberal tradition.



Figure 125. At the end of the 18th century, the German philosopher Immanuel Kant published his book *On Eternal Peace*, which contained an initial outline of the concepts of security communities, and a discussion on the prerequisite for lasting peace. Kant was a professor of Philosophy at the old East Prussian University of Königsberg, today's Kaliningrad, a site that has been turned into a military fortress both under German and Russian rule. Painting: Uppsala University Library

In Kant's days, not very many countries were democracies even by the relatively lower standards of that time. As long as Switzerland, the USA and possibly France, were the only reasonably democratic countries, Kant's vision might indeed seem utopian. Today, judging by the global spread of democracy, the prospects for Kant's pacific union to become reality are greater than ever before in history. Particularly important is the dramatic change that followed the end of the Cold War vis-à-vis democracy in the Baltic region – one important element in building a security community.

Figure 126. Inscription on Kant's grave in the cathedral church of Kaliningrad. Photo: Katarzyna Skalska



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