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Dictatorial Peace: Constraints on Autocrats Waging Wars

Mare Ushkovska

Abstract

The democratic peace theory, a long-accepted axiom of international relations, posits that democracies rarely, if ever, fight other democracies. This is attributed to a combination of shared values, institutional constraints, economic interdependence, and public accountability of leaders. Consequently, it is assumed that other regime types are less reliable in observing international peace. However, this generalisation fails to account for the many instances of non-bellicose autocracies. Hence, in recent decades, the study of international relations has expanded to explore the possibility of a phenomenon called dictatorial/autocratic peace. The paper analyses literature that studies the conflict proneness of autocratic regimes toward other autocracies and democracies. It finds that, similarly to democratic leaders, authoritarians are faced with a variety of constraints in initiating or continuing wars. These constraints can be institutional, economic, and normative. There is evidence to support that peace is more likely between two authoritarian countries of similar regime types, especially dyads of single-party states. The research shows that autocracies face costs and limitations that should deter them from initiating war with democracies. It challenges the general assumption that democratic leaders are more accountable than autocratic leaders because they may lose the next elections. The paper finds that the domestic liability in case of engaging in a losing war for authoritarian regimes can sometimes be higher than in democracies, as autocrats face threats to their power and life.

Keywords: democratic peace theory, dictatorial peace, autocratic regimes, conflict, power

Introduction

One of the most widely accepted stances in modern political science is that democracies rarely, if ever, go to war with other democracies. This is largely attributed to the transparent nature of democratic systems, where leaders are held accountable by the public and policy decisions involve extensive discussion and negotiation. Such a process tends to favor peaceful resolutions, as citizens are generally unwilling to endorse conflicts that would bring the harsh realities of war upon themselves, and even less so if the opposing side is a country like them, a democracy.

The democratic peace theory implies that other types of government are less reliable in observing international peace and that, therefore, the spread of democracy contributes to global security. Consequently, the theory has sparked an interest in studying the trend of conflict proneness of authoritarian regimes. But, aside from certain popularly known and extreme cases of violent autocrats, many of the authoritarian countries of the past and present have not exhibited violence toward other nations. Yugoslavia under Tito, China after Mao, Mexico with the PRI, Spain under Franco, Kenya under Kenyatta, and Cuba after the 1960s have traditionally maintained peaceful relations with other countries. Similarly, we may look at Oman, Venezuela, Vietnam, and Turkmenistan as modern-day examples of non-conflictual non-democracies.

The academic study of politics frequently focuses on democracies; however, a significant portion of the world's population lives in some sort of authoritarian state. Hence, it is pivotal to explore: is there such a phenomenon as dictatorial/autocratic peace and are authoritarian leaders constrained by similar forces to democratic ones?

Theoretical Background and Methodology

Although some authors have reflected on the topic of dictatorial peace throughout the years, scholarship on the foreign policy-making of autocrats remains scarce. Most of the literature on regime types and conflicts centers on the theory of democratic peace, for which the extant literature is prolific. Democratic peace is considered conventional wisdom in the study of international relations and has been called "the closest thing we have to an empirical law in the study of international relations" (Levy, 1989, p. 88). The theory has been frequently tested empirically with conclusive findings that support its validity (Levy & Razin, 2004; Imai & Lo, 2021). Evaluating the rationale for a dictatorial peace, however, is not as simple as

placing all non-democratic systems within a single group and comparing their behavior to democracies. Dictatorships are varied by nature and exhibit diverse traits, which is an important variable. Although scholars have found that pairs of autocratic states in general are less prone to military conflict than pairs containing one autocracy and one democracy (Oren & Hays, 1997; Peceny et al., 2002; Bennett, 2006), such results usually depend on several conditions, and the generalisation does not address the question of dictatorial peace appropriately. In their seminal work, Peceny et al. (2002) argue that, while democratic peace is more robust, there is substantial variation in the conflict behaviour of autocracies to demonstrate that peace may be possible between autocracies and to warrant an alternative approach to the future study of authoritarianism's relationship with conflict. Weeks (2014) argued that in conditions where an authoritarian leader of a country can be punished by a group of elites within that country for a bad military result, the assumptions of conflict avoidance, which are valid for democracies, would be applicable to that authoritarian country as well. Likewise, Marin (2016) posits that expressions of domestic state violence by authoritarian actors do not necessarily correlate with aggressiveness in the foreign policy of those actors, therefore authoritarianism is not a predictor of bellicosity.

Throughout this paper I explore theoretically the case for dictatorial peace by analysing the constraints on autocrats waging wars. To better assess peace between authoritarian regimes, I will use the typology presented by Geddes (1999), who classifies autocratic regimes into three categories: personalist, military, and single-party. By analyzing pairings of countries with similar regime types, I can make more substantive observations on their warring tendencies. The first hypothesis is that if two authoritarian countries have similar regime types, then they will have peaceful relations. However, I seek to assess the constraints not only for dyadic, but also for the monadic peace of authoritarian states. In that respect, the second hypothesis posits that in mixed regime conflicts, autocracies are less likely to initiate war than democracies.

Most of the arguments below suppose the rational choice theory to hold true in the decision-making processes and view the state as a unitary actor represented by its leadership. This research focuses on several constraints (institutional, economic, normative, etc.) that represent the foundation of the democratic peace theory and examines in which aspects they are also true of autocracies. I discuss how the logic of these constraints can be employed to show that autocracies also refrain from waging war with autocracies of the same type and (to some extent) with democracies.

Peace Among Autocratic Dyads

Institutional Constraints on Autocracies

De Mesquita et al. (1999) argue that all autocratic regimes are fundamentally similar in that the size of their winning coalitions is small. Therefore, unlike democracies, they can easily remain in power by providing private gains to the ruling elites and must not fear consequences on their tenure if they draw the country into war. This makes authoritarian leaders less constrained in their decisions to wage war than democrats and, consequently, more militant. These views, however, are overly generalized, and there can be several reasons why an autocratic ruler would rather avoid military conflict with other countries. Studies have shown that some types of authoritarian countries have institutional instruments that allow domestic audiences to hold leaders accountable for their actions, similar to democracies. This holds true particularly for non-personalist, single-party regimes (Peceny & Butler, 2004; Weeks, 2012; Weeks, 2014)

Compared to other autocratic regime types, personalist dictators are the least constrained in their actions due to a disunity of ruling elites, increasing their likelihood of instigating conflicts (Frantz, 2007; Weeks, 2014). Personalist dictators, however, have other limitations to instigating wars. They have motives to keep their military weak, fearing possible coups. Their power is dependent on repressing the emergence of potential rivals and they recognise that no one poses a greater threat to their power than the army. Hence, they are forced to opt for the lesser evil and end up with a self-imposed constraint in terms of military capability for waging international wars (Peceny et al., 2002; Rosato, 2003).

On the other hand, military regimes retain a strong cohesive army that governs the country. In these types of regimes, the military elite has access to the security apparatus, which enables it to, if needed, orchestrate a coup and depose a military dictator whose leadership is found to be inadequate (Frantz, 2007). Additionally, in these regimes, leaders usually employ military resources and strength to subdue domestic dissent, remaining insufficiently strong to fight external wars (Rosato, 2003). The Argentine military leadership in the early 80s is a good example of how an army successful in suppressing opposition at home can be unsuccessful in fighting the UK in the Falklands war (Peceny et al., 2002).

Economic Constraints on Autocracies

Economic openness and global trade make democratic countries highly dependent on one another. They are so integrated in the international economic community that any conflict would reflect negatively on the international cooperation and would lead to economic losses. Therefore, mutual interdependence is considered an important constraint to war between democracies (Oneal & Russett, 1997); in fact, it is one of the pillars of the democratic peace theory. However, Gartzke et al. (2001) find that interdependence is a significant factor that leads to peace, regardless of whether a country is democratic or authoritarian. The presence of democracy has a much lesser role in reducing inter-state conflict than the presence of interdependence between any two countries.

Challenging common misconceptions, states with an autocratic form of government aren't automatically less interdependent. This is best exemplified by organizations supporting economic cooperation between autocratic states, such as the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance in the past, and recently the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. The latter has ten member states, all of which, apart from India, are categorised as authoritarian by the Democracy Index (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2025) and, just like democracies, stand to suffer losses if they disrupt their economic and security collaboration with a conflict. The success of this organization supports the idea that economic interdependence feeds the maintenance of peace between autocratic countries (Yee, 2011), in a similar manner to democracies. Richmond (2025) suggests there is an emergence of the authoritarian international order in the current system of multipolarity, opposing the liberal international order and playing a part in global peacekeeping, albeit with a focus on securitisation, nationalism, and bloc formation.

Another reason for avoiding wars is their implicit monetary cost. Autocrats often depend on financial resources for preserving their power, as these are the means by which they can ensure the continual support of the elites. Autocracies are commonly characterised by clientelist relationships and corrupt practices, where leaders dispense financial resources in a manner that rewards supporters (Magaloni, 2008), represses members of the political opposition (Debs, 2010), restricts access to information for the masses, and suppresses threats to their power (De Mesquita & Smith, 2010). Furthermore, financial resources are crucial for maintaining and increasing public support for the regime through the provision of public goods and services (Ezrow & Frantz, 2011) and the maintenance of a stable economic environment. When a country accumulates an overwhelming expenditure due to

war, no matter how undemocratic it may be, social upheavals and civil unrest could threaten the survival of the current regime (Rosato, 2003). As dictators' priority is to stay in power, autocratic governments have strong incentives to refrain from conflicts with other countries.

Normative Constraints on Autocracies

It is difficult to state that a pair of personalist dictatorships would have shared ideological values and, therefore, refrain from engaging in war with one another, as is assumed to be the case for democracies. This is because in such autocracies "the cult of the leader rather than ideology dominates political life" (Peceny et al., 2002, p.20). One can find little that unifies the rulings of Francisco Franco, Saddam Hussein, or Muammar Gaddafi, for example. Hence, we would expect to find more conflicts between such regimes, especially as personalist autocrats have been found to be less restricted by backlash from ruling elites and more prone to initiating risky interstate wars (Weeks, 2014).

Military autocracies, on the other hand, tend to have more in common. Although they are not installed based on professed ideology, but rather to guarantee national security and stability, most of them adhere to right-wing politics and share the goal of suppressing communists inside and outside their countries. This mutual interest made peace possible among most South American countries when their juntas cooperated in eliminating leftist insurgents in the 1970s. This was confirmed in research by Peceny et al. (2002), where they found that no two military autocracies engaged in war with each other in the period following World War II (notwithstanding temporary use of force). Yet, surprisingly, the same was found to be true for personalist regimes. There is, however, some inconsistency across their results, suggesting that the findings are not as robust as those on democratic dyads. The indications of existing peace among personalist/military dictatorships can be interpreted in two ways. The first is the skeptical stance, allowing for the lack of war between these regimes to be attributed to chance, since both personalist/military autocracies and wars are rare. The second explanation would be to acknowledge that the trend isn't random and that the previously mentioned constraints provide for peaceful relations.

Given that most single-party countries are socialist, it is fair to conclude that these autocracies are most likely to share some normative values. Marxist ideology promotes unity among socialist countries, and we can see that reflected in international relations. Communist/socialist countries have indeed been peaceful toward one

another during the Cold War and after (Oren & Hays, 1997; Peceny et al., 2002). If anything, there has been friendly cooperation and support. The relationship between countries that belonged to the Warsaw Pact in East and Southeast Europe, which extended to other socialist countries around the world pertaining to the Non-Aligned Movement, is evidence of this. This is comparable to the general absence of war observed between democratic countries, due to reasons such as shared worldviews and principles. In fact, Oren and Hays (1997) argue that developed socialist states during the Cold War were by far more peaceful than industrialised capitalist/democratic states.

Peceny et al. (2002) find that single-party regimes have fought a war three times. The research includes outliers such as the right-wing single-party regime in Taiwan, which had an ongoing dispute with the regime in the People's Republic of China. Their research also finds that countries are more likely to experience conflict if they are contiguous and/or involve a major power. Therefore, the small number of disputes between single-party regimes mostly involved, or were between, only two countries, the USSR and China. Thus, controlling for variables such as contiguity and major power involvement, single-party dyads have almost the same negative correlation with war as democratic dyads.

Furthermore, the democratic peace theory is not absolute. The international community post-World War II knows of examples where democratic governments have gone to war with one another or have been involved in some kind of military aggression against other democracies. U.S. backed coups on democratically elected leaders Mosaddeqh of Iran (1953), Arbenz of Guatemala (1954) and Allende of Chile (1973), clashes between India and Pakistan over Kashmir, and the Russian-Georgian conflict of 2008 (a year in which neither country was categorised as authoritarian by the Democracy Index) all showcase that there are exceptions to the democratic peace, as there are exceptions to the autocratic peace. Democracies like the USA have frequently deployed covert military attacks or covert election interventions against fellow democracies (Levin, 2016; O'Rourke, 2018) and a study by Carnegie et al. (2022) found that this is in fact preferred by the public as an approach toward democratic targets. Müllerson (2012, p.9) notes: "It is not so much democracy or its absence that determines whether peace or war prevails as whether a particular state behaves as expected by its more powerful neighbour; or if we speak of global affairs, whether its behaviour is in accordance with [...] expectations of those who belong to the Euro-Atlantic alliance".

Autocracy-Democracy Relations

Accountability of Autocratic Rulers

A strong argument of the democratic peace proponents is that in a democracy, the government leaders are held accountable for their actions by the people who elected them. People living in democracies are thought to be naturally more peace-loving than those in non-democracies because they are used to a political culture in which domestic disagreements are settled by debate and compromises, instead of aggression (Müllerson, 2012). Furthermore, it is the people who suffer the greatest costs of military conflicts, and therefore, they would normally take an anti-war stance when given the freedom of choice. Because a leader's main interest is to remain in power by winning the next elections, he/she will always need to consider the consequences of a decision to engage in war (De Mesquita et al., 1999). It is this constraint of public opinion, part of the institutional constraints discussed above, that is believed to make democracies more peaceful.

This paper challenges the general assumption that democratic leaders are more accountable than autocratic leaders and that their liability in case they engage in a losing war is higher. Elections are just one method of holding leaders accountable. The majority of autocratic leaders rely on the support of groups/elites within their countries, who, like the voting public in democracies, can remove a leader if they have incentives to punish her (Weeks, 2008; Weeks, 2012). Evaluating accountability, the question is: Are autocratic leaders as much subject to a loss of power as democratic leaders? Also, who stands to face higher repercussions if a costly or lost war results in public outrage?

According to Rosato's (2003) and Weeks' (2014) datasets, of all the democratic leaders that lost a war 75% -83% lost office soon after, which is about twice the percentage of autocrats who were removed after losing a war (35%-40%). Yet, these findings cannot serve to make broad conclusions about the probability of democrats losing their position, because the small number of cases of democracies that lost a war is not enough for statistically significant predictions. On the other hand, seeing that about a third of 89 autocrats who lost a war were removed from power allows us to make stronger inferences about the risks autocratic regimes face. In addition to being removed from power, 29% of the autocrats suffered harsher punishments, such as imprisonment, execution or exile, whereas no democratic leader suffered the same fate (Rosato, 2003). The outcomes are similar for leaders who have engaged in costly wars.

Hence, autocrats also suffer consequences for their actions, oftentimes more so than democrats. Weeks (2008, p.61) concurs, stating that although authoritarian leaders hold significant control over their citizens, they "are not usually immune from domestic threats to their tenure". Decision-making on war in autocratic regimes is, therefore, influenced by considerations for future public liability. As Rosato (2003, p.594) puts it: "there is little evidence that democratic leaders face greater expected costs from fighting losing or costly wars and are therefore more accountable than their autocratic counterparts".

The war in Iraq launched by the USA and its allies is an example if these dynamics. While the US President George W. Bush's unpopular policies led to a defeat of the Republican Party in the 2008 presidential elections, former Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein faced a much more severe punishment - domestic trial and execution. Another example is Argentine military dictator Leopoldo Galtieri, who instigated the Falklands War and, after Argentina's defeat, was removed from power, arrested, and sentenced to prison in 1986. This supports the above argument that authoritarian regimes have strong reasons to abstain from wars.

War Initiation Tendencies

Scholars agree that the mixed democratic-autocratic dyads are more likely to experience conflict than homogeneous regime dyads (Rousseau et al., 1996; Hegre et al., 2001). However, there is limited research on the propensity of either regime to strike first and prior studies have returned mixed findings.

Intuitively, the expectation is that autocratic regimes, by definition oppressive and willful in the domestic political sphere, will have a more hawkish foreign policy than democracies. However, there is empirical data demonstrating that a violent domestic regime does not always translate to a greater proneness to waging international wars, as is the case with several post-Soviet countries (Marin, 2016). Gartzke (2001) puts forward the idea that democracies have fewer disincentives to initiate war because they are generally wealthier and can develop sophisticated, unmanned weapons. Thus, they avoid a great number of casualties and mitigate their audience costs. Extant research indeed shows that democracies do win a significantly greater number of wars and tend to have fewer casualties than autocracies (Rosato, 2003). Conversely, the autocratic states that are usually less technologically developed depend heavily on manpower in waging wars and are more prone to losing the military conflict, as well as many more lives. This deters autocracies from initiating war. Several proponents of the democratic peace state that democracies are more likely to initiate war with non-democracies than vice versa (Oneal &

Russett, 1997; Bueno de Mesquita, 1999; Müllerson, 2012). Although they are less likely to fight each other, democracies are not opposed to fighting countries with alternative types of government.

However, Reiter and Stam (2003) have found the opposite to be true in their research, arguing that autocracies are more likely to initiate disputes with democracies than vice versa. Moreover, they've found this to be true for all types of autocracies, whether personalist dictatorships, military regimes, or single party regimes. Hence, there are conflicting conclusions regarding the relationship between regime types and proneness to international conflict initiation.

Conclusion

Searching for policy patterns that would support the existence of dictatorial peace, this research found that, in their foreign policy decisions, authoritarian leaders are constrained by many of the same forces behind the democratic peace. Their ultimate choices and tendencies, though, vary across regime types. Personalist dyads are, on average, most belligerent. Military dictatorships demonstrate smaller inclination to initiating war, while single-party regime dyads are undeniably most likely to maintain mutual peace; their peace is highly comparative to that between democracies. Overall, a world in which more autocratic regimes exist is not necessarily a more war-prone world. There is evidence that peace is possible between dictatorial states of the same kind. The two shortcomings of this research, though, are that data on countries and wars varied across texts and that many of the known autocratic regimes are difficult to classify as they often exhibit mixed traits. Nevertheless, the findings that inter-state peace is not uniquely attached to democracies are not to be underestimated. The conclusions suggest that it is not the institutional framework of democracies that leads to peace, but rather the wish for stability among similar regimes. The implications of this on the democratic peace theory need to be addressed in future research.

Regarding the second hypothesis, the research shows that autocracies face costs and limitations that should deter them from initiating war with democracies. However, empirical evidence on whether autocracies start aggression toward democracies more often, or vice versa, is insufficient and inconsistent across studies. Nevertheless, this research succeeds in dismantling some existing dogmas that overlook the diverse contributors to international peace.

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