
An Extended Debate on the Utility of the Democratic Peace

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INTRODUCTION

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The Democratic Peace thesis (DPT) has for a while now been considered the closest thing the field of International Relations has to an empirically tested truth. And yet, such a claim leaves many questions unanswered, many nuances unnoticed, and many small wars unaccounted for. Two upcoming ISQ articles (and now Early Views) grapple with these questions and continue the discussion here at ISQ Online.

The debate starts with Michael Poznansky's article, "[Stasis or Decay? Reconciling Covert War and the Democratic Peace.](#)" (2015) in which he asserts that democracies assess their policies towards other democracies based on projections of that country's future likelihood to remain democratic. Using empirical evidence from the Cold War, he argues that when that likelihood seems low, covert interventions become more acceptable. Tarak Barkawi responds to Poznansky, in "[Scientific Decay.](#)" (2015) that such an argument reflects the overall poverty of DPT as an analytic device and the dangers of American Exceptionalism.

Extending that original conversation, both scholars have furthered their arguments here by responding to specific claims made by the other. Poznansky begins by pointing out that Barkawi's critique either misreads large portions of his argument or highlights concerns that may be important but are ultimately unsubstantiated. Drawing on the examples of both the Cold War and the War on Terror, Barkawi once again responds that DPT is not an objective frame through which to view foreign policy and suggests that we'd be better served focusing our attentions on more substantive issues instead of continually trying to prove or disprove the thesis.

CRITICAL STASIS: A REPLY TO BARKAWI

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Tarak Barkawi's critical reply to my article – wryly entitled “Scientific Decay” – raises a number of important concerns pertaining to democratic-peace theory, covert action, and Cold War ideology. Here, I take up three of what I believe to be Barkawi's most important challenges: (1) decision-makers were not furthering democracy in the course of the interventions examined in my article, (2) there are multiple interpretations of democracy and I uncritically accept the procedural variant, and (3) covert action has significant implications for *American* democracy, none of which are addressed in my article. In each case, I will argue that Barkawi's critique represents either a fundamental mischaracterization of my argument and/or a potentially valid, but ultimately unsubstantiated, concern.

Did U.S. decision-makers believe they were furthering democracy?

The first critique that figures prominently in Barkawi's reply is that my argument equates the subversion of elected, leftist regimes with democracy promotion. Barkawi's (2015:1) language is telling: “If, before they conduct an operation against an elected government, US policymakers reason that their actions ultimately further democracy, then political scientists can rest assured that these actions do not invalidate the Democratic Peace.” Such criticism betrays a fundamental mischaracterization of my causal logic. One of the key arguments I make is that regimes expected to backslide into authoritarianism are treated as non-democracies in the present (Poznansky 2015:3). As a result, democratic interveners are likely to treat democracies in decay as they would any other autocratic state. My argument says nothing, however, about the type of regime that democratic interveners will promote against decaying democracies. Just as there is variation in patterns of democracy promotion against *bona fide* dictatorships, so too should we expect variation against decaying democracies. The notion that US decision-makers thought they were saving democracy in Iran in 1953, for example – something Barkawi (2015:1) implicitly accuses me of arguing – is a red herring; no serious scholar would argue this. In effect, what Barkawi has done is to read into my argument an additional component—i.e. democracy promotion—that is simply not there.

Defining democracy

Barkawi's second major concern is how I operationalize democracy. In the article, I throw my lot in with scholars that define democracy largely, though not exclusively, in procedural terms (e.g. free and fair elections, protection of civil and political liberties, etc.) (Poznansky 2015:3; see also Boix, Miller, and Rosato 2013; Cheibub, Gandhi, and Vreeland 2010). Barkawi (2015:2) contends that democracy is better thought of “as a project of popular rule”; see also Barkawi and Laffey 1999:407-409). I have no interest in staking out a “correct” definition of democracy; that is a task best left for political philosophers, who themselves disagree. There are, however, two issues at stake. First, Barkawi provides no substantive definition of what he means by “popular rule.” If by popular rule Barkawi simply means *rule by the people*, we would still need a definition that allows us to differentiate “true” democracies from dictatorships that claim to represent the masses, a rhetorical move frequently exploited by authoritarian regimes (e.g. People's Republic of China, Democratic People's Republic of Korea). Absent a clearly articulated definition, one might reasonably

ask where to draw the line. Would Castro's Cuba, which claimed to represent the working masses, represent a project in popular rule? The same could be asked of Venezuela under Hugo Chávez. My intention is not to put words in Barkawi's mouth by arguing that he would recognize these regimes as democracies. Rather, the point is simply that if we are to embrace alternative conceptions of democracy, scholars must be careful to define their terms explicitly.

Even if we accept that democracy should be defined as a "project of popular rule," was this the kind of future that prominent leftist leaders during the Cold War (e.g. Allende) envisioned for their countries (e.g. Chile)? Perhaps. The evidence provided in my article, however, casts doubt on such an assertion ([Poznansky 2015:7](#)). Allende's close affinities with Castro, the Soviet Union, and a number of indigenous, militant organizations within Chile call into question his commitment to democracy broadly conceived; this is as true for popular rule *qua* democracy as it is for any of the procedural variants (*see* [Gustafson 2007:22](#); [Haslam 2005:30, 61-62](#)). Put differently, even if we adopt Barkawi's conception of democracy as our standard, my argument about democratic decay in the case of Iran (1953) and Chile (1970-73) still holds given the available evidence.

Covert action and American democracy

The final critique concerns the implications of covert action for democracy in the US. According to Barkawi ([2015:2](#)), covert operations "most certainly subverted democracy domestically in the United States. The main audience from whom the Executive Branch hid such secret operations were US citizens and their legislative representatives." There are two distinct issues here, one empirical, one normative. In terms of the former, Barkawi may well be right that the primary rationale for going covert in many cases of intervention was domestic in nature. The problem, however, is that we would need evidence to substantiate the veracity of this claim. Not only does Barkawi fail to provide or cite such evidence but the existing literature has also cast doubt on the role of domestic politics as a driver of covert action in high-profile cases like America's intervention against Allende (e.g. [Downes and Lilley 2010:294](#)).

The second component of Barkawi's critique, that covert action undermined democracy in the US, is indeed an important normative question (*see* [Beitz 1989](#); [Huntington 1982:17-18](#)). In this regard, however, Barkawi fails to grapple with the ways in which the use of covert action within the US has changed over time. In the wake of Watergate, for instance, Congress established the House and Senate Intelligence Committees and passed stringent legislation requiring that executives issue a Presidential Finding prior to authorizing a covert operation. The end result was greater legislative control over this hidden tool of statecraft ([Daugherty 2004:25-27](#)). Covert action's relationship with American democracy is thus more complicated than Barkawi's characterization lets on. This is not to say, of course, that the relationship between covert action, secrecy, and democracy should not be a major topic for debate; the recent controversies surrounding torture and the ongoing drone program are testament to the continued importance of the subject. It is to say, however, that if we are to engage in a serious discussion about such things, a much more nuanced understanding of covert action and its relationship with the state will prove necessary. In this regard at least, Barkawi's critique does not take us far enough.

RED HERRINGS, SPLIT HAIRS, AND SMALL WARS

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In my view, the Democratic Peace (DP) is not an interesting or useful frame for thinking about the international relations of democracy and war during the Cold War, particularly with respect to what was known at the time as the Third World. Inquiry and debate becomes wrapped up in the categories of the DP, in “reconciling” them with the historical record. Empiricist scholarship purporting to apply across time and place privileges its terms of analysis. It necessarily takes an “objectivist” stance towards historical questions: was this or that state really democratic? Was this or that conflict really a war? At the same time, this “objectivism” is politically loaded, for liberalism defines the terms.

This liberal empiricism is why [Michael Poznansky \(2015\)](#) gets into questions of whether or not the perceptions of policymakers were objectively justified. He argues that it is possible to ground the beliefs of decision makers in “observable developments”, such that “threat perceptions” have a “firm basis in objective, endogenous events” ([Poznansky 2015:3](#)). Only in this way can he make general claims about the conditions under which certain elected regimes were “treated as non-democracies” ([Poznansky 2015a](#)). Were communists, or communist sympathizers, reasonably seen as threats to democracy at the time? His liberal epistemology forces him to take a position on the Cold War, and he duly does so. The perceptions of US officials that ‘pink’ regimes might backslide into authoritarianism were justified by the historical record. “Communism as an ideology was not only threatening geopolitically but the United States also saw it as inherently anti-democratic” ([Poznansky 2015:5](#)). Accordingly, to prosecute the Cold War was to avert threats to democracy; to save democracy from its communist geopolitical and ideological opponents. This is the sense in which US officials believed they were “saving democracy” in Iran in 1953, or in other places they intervened in during the Cold War. There is no red herring here, only the split hair between anti-communism and democracy promotion that I identified in [my critique \(2015\)](#).

In his response, Poznansky asks what I mean by democracy as a project of popular rule. For me to question procedural definitions which take elections as the *sine qua non* of democracy is evidence that I might possibly be a supporter of the People’s Republic of China, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, Hugo Chavez’s Venezuela or Fidel Castro’s Cuba. For good measure, he reminds us of Allende’s communist connections. Could I provide any better example of the politics that underpin Poznansky’s work than this HUAC-style line of reasoning?

Democracy as a project of popular rule refers to the struggles through which the many acquire rights and privileges from the few. That is the correct definition of democracy, in my view, and I am interested in having one. Such struggles made electoral democracy historically possible by expanding the franchise. What constitutes democratic struggle varies in time and place, from anti-colonial movements to that for the civil rights of African Americans; from demands for the rights of women to those for the five day working week. In the Third World of the Cold War, the United States arrayed its power against many popular struggles. The US backed authoritarians and oligarchs in Latin America, as it had been doing for decades ([Grandin 2007](#)); it sought to bolster declining European empires in

Asia and Africa in exchange for an anti-communist alliance in Europe ([Leffler 1992:92-94](#)); and the US developed new forms of patron-client relations which involved arming regimes against their own populations ([Barkawi 2011](#)). This is the actual historic context in which left-wing elected regimes promising reform were seen as potentially communist (“treated as non-democracies”) and overthrown. Great contortions and distortions are necessary to reconcile such policies and events with the idea that democracies do not wage war on other democracies.

Poznansky closes his reply by asking for evidence and citations to support the claim that US covert operations were intended to be kept secret from the US public and from Congress. In one combination or another, that is what made them covert by definition. I make no claims about whether domestic political considerations were the main reasons for choosing covert instrumentalities; only that these instrumentalities were in fact covert. In an era when intelligence agencies collect metadata on citizens’ email, Poznansky suggests that, because of Vietnam-era reforms, all is more or less well with the secret state and American democracy ([2015a](#)). But like the CIA’s covert action arm in its Cold War heyday, drones, special forces, and other forms of hybrid warfare work around prevailing legal and democratic norms. That is what makes them attractive instruments for the executive branch of an imperial republic seeking to avoid the entanglements of “small wars.”

Taking out *jihadi* leaders with missile fire offers a seemingly cheap tool in respect of the expenditure of blood, treasure, and political capital. But what are the long term consequences of such decapitation strategies? The covert actions of the early Cold War produced unintended consequences. Many on the left decided electoral politics offered little hope of change. They went underground, or out into the bush, and reappeared as armed guerrilla or revolutionary movements. In this new incarnation, they were far more expensive to defeat and sometimes, as in Vietnam and Iran, they could not be defeated. Elsewhere, as in Guatemala, decades of blood-letting ensued. The US shapes its enemies through the weapons it uses against them. ISIS is in part an effect of the way in which the US has prosecuted the War on Terror. Decapitate *al-Qaeda*, lose wars of occupation in Afghanistan and Iraq, and you get a *jihadi* pirate haven amid the wreckage of the Middle East states-system. If anything, militant Islam is even more popular worldwide than it was in the wake of 9/11, while its leaders are younger, more radical and more violent.

Balancing “small wars” to maintain international hierarchies against domestic democratic considerations has long proved challenging for imperial republics. Such wars often involve placing imperial power in opposition to popular forces abroad, while cloaking it from democracy at home. These are the kinds of questions, among others, that inquiry into the international relations of democracy and war might pursue were it not so hamstrung proving and disproving the Democratic Peace again and again and again.

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