

Aggressive Democracies

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abstract

Democracies are the most aggressive regime type measured in terms of war initiation. Since 1945, the United States has also been the world's most aggressive state by this measure. This finding prompts the question of whether the aggressiveness of democracies, and the United States in particular, is due to regime type or other factors. I make the case for the latter. My argument has implications for the Democratic Peace thesis and the unfortunate tendency of some of its advocates to use its claims for policy guidance.

The Democratic Peace research programme is based on the putative empirical finding that democracies do not fight other democracies. It has generated a large literature around the validity of this finding and about the reasons why democracies do not initiate wars against democratic opponents. In this paper, I do not engage these controversies directly, but rather look at the record of democracies as war initiators in the post-World War II period. They turn out to be the most aggressive regime type measured by war initiation. The United States, which claims to be the world's leading democracy, is also the world's most aggressive state by this measure. Below, I first document this set of claims using a data set that Benjamin Valentino and I constructed. Next, I speculate about some of the reasons why the United States has been such an aggressive state in the post-war era. In particular, I am interested in the extent to which this aggressiveness is due to democratic governance or other, more idiosyncratic factors. I am inclined to make the case for the latter. This argument has implications for the Democratic Peace thesis and the unfortunate tendency of some of its advocates to use its claims for policy guidance.

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Democracy and War

When we examine the record of war initiation since 1945, democracies are among the countries that turned most often to their military instruments. Of thirty-one wars fought during this period, Israel was involved in six, the United States and China were each involved in five, Vietnam in four, and India and Pakistan in three each (see Table 1). The United States and Israel qualify as democracies. India and Pakistan arguably do so as well. At the very least they might be considered emerging or partial democracies. The United States and Israel are tied in war initiation. Israel initiated four wars and fought in two others (1948 and 1973), in which it was attacked by Arab coalitions. The United States initiated four of the six wars in which it fought.

These comparisons offer evidence that democracies are as likely to engage in war as any other regime.² With a conservative coding (that does not count Russia as a democracy), democracies initiated twelve of the thirty-one wars, and ten of those were begun by mature as opposed to developing or transitional democracies. When we take into account the fact that for most of these years democracies represented only about twenty-seven per cent of the world's states, they account for considerably more than their random share of wars.³ The United States, Israel, and India are the democracies most responsible for war initiation.

Israel is a special case. Only one of the states contiguous with Israel acknowledges its existence, and that recognition only came after four wars. Israel is surrounded either by hostile states or by territory inhabited by Palestinians. It was attacked in 1948, 1970, and 1973 by Egypt, or Egypt in coalition with other Arab states. Four of the wars initiated by Israel (1956, 1967, 1982, and 2008) were in response to Arab provocations. We can debate whether Israeli military action was ethical or effective, but it cannot be denied that the country faced, and continues to face, very real threats to its security, if not its survival.

India is a transitional democracy, and there is some evidence that states of this kind have been more war-prone than mature democracies.⁴ However, more relevant in the case of India is the pattern of violence associated with partitioned countries: multiple countries that came into existence with the break-up of colonial empires due to competing claims on all or part of the territory by different national groups. If this territory was not distributed among claimants by the former colonial powers or the United Nations, post-independence fighting usually resulted in division. India initiated four wars, and all but one of these were fought with its post-colonial rival, Pakistan.¹²²

The United States and War Initiation

The more meaningful peer group comparison for the United States is with the countries of Western Europe, Japan, the “Old Commonwealth” (Canada, Australia, and New Zealand), and certain Latin American states. This is because these are all fellow democracies that—like the United States—are relatively well-established, relatively liberal, relatively wealthy (on a per capita income basis), and—unlike Israel and India—relatively geo-politically secure and relatively lacking in severe religious and ethnic tension. Here the United States is clearly an outlier, as only two of these countries initiated wars (France and Britain against Egypt in 1956). Britain was also a partner of the United States in the 1991 Gulf War and the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

The United States differs from all these countries in several important ways. In *A Cultural Theory of International Relations*, I describe it as a “parvenu” power. These are states that are late entrants into the arena where they can compete for standing and do so with greater intensity than other states. Moreover, due to the ideational legacy left by their parvenu status, such states may continue to behave like this for a considerable time after achieving great power status. They devote a higher percentage of their national income to military forces and pursue more aggressive foreign policies. Examples include Sweden under Gustavus Adolphus, Prussia and Russia in the eighteenth centuries, and Japan and the United States in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁵

Unlike other parvenu powers, the constraints on the United States were more internal than external. Congress, not other powers, kept American presidents from playing a more active role in European affairs in the 1920s and 1930s and forced a withdrawal from Indochina in the 1970s. The United States was never spurned or humiliated by other powers, but some American presidents and their advisers did feel humiliated by the constraints imposed upon them domestically. They frequently sought to commit the country to activist policies through membership in international institutions that involved long-term obligations (for example, the imf and nato), executive actions (for example, the 1940 destroyer deal, intervention in the Korean War, and sending Marines to Lebanon in 1958), and congressional resolutions secured on the basis of false or misleading information (the Gulf of Tonkin and Iraq War resolutions). Ironically, concern for credibility promoted ill-considered and open-ended commitments like Vietnam and Iraq that later led to public opposition and the congressional constraints that subsequent American presidents considered detrimental to presidential credibility. Instead of 123

prompting a reassessment of national security strategy, these setbacks appear to have strengthened the commitment of at least some presidents and their advisers to breaking free of these constraints and asserting leadership in the world, thus ushering in a new cycle of overextension, failure, and renewed constraints.

The United States is unique in other ways. It is by far and away the most powerful economy in the world. At the end of World War II, it accounted for 46 per cent of the world's gross domestic product (gdp) and today represents a still-impressive 21 per cent.⁶ Prodigious wealth allows the United States to spend an extraordinary percentage of its gdp on its armed forces in comparison to other countries. In the aftermath of the Cold War, most countries cut back on military spending, but us spending has increased. In 2003, the United States spent \$417 billion on defence, 47 per cent of the world total.⁷ In 2008, it spent 41 per cent of its national budget on the military and the cost of past wars, which accounted for almost 50 per cent of world defence spending. In absolute terms, this was twice the total of Japan, Russia, the United Kingdom, Germany, and China combined. Not surprisingly, the United States is the only state with global military reach.⁸ Democratic and Republican administrations alike have held that extraordinary levels of military expenditure will sustain, if not increase, the standing and influence that traditionally comes with military dominance. It is intended to make the United States, in the words of former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, "the indispensable nation"—the only power capable of enforcing global order.⁹

An equally important point is that possession of such military instruments encourages policymakers to formulate maximalist objectives. Such goals are, by definition, more difficult to achieve by diplomacy, pushing the United States into "eyeball-to-eyeball" confrontations where the use of force becomes a possibility.

us defence expenditure also reflects the political power of the military-industrial complex. Defence spending has encouraged the dependence of numerous companies on the government and helped bring others into being. In 1991, at the end of the Cold War, twelve million people, roughly ten per cent of the us workforce, were directly or indirectly dependent upon defence dollars. The number has not changed significantly since. Having such a large impact on the economy gives defence contractors enormous political clout.¹⁰ Those who land major weapons projects are careful to subcontract production across the country, often offering a part of the production process to companies in every state. This gives the contractors enormous political leverage in Congress, often *124*

Table 1: Post-1945 Wars

War Name and Participants	Dates	Initiator Military Victory?	Initiator War Aims Achieved?
India vs. Pakistan (First Kashmir War) Side A: India Side B: Pakistan	1947–49	No	No
War of Israeli Independence (Israel vs. Palestine/Arab coalition) Side A: Coalition: Egypt (A1), Iraq (A2), Jordan (A3), Syria (A4) Side B: Israel	1948–49	No	No
China–Tibet I Side A: China Side B: Tibet	1950	Yes	Yes
Korean War Side A: Coalition: China (A1), North Korea (A2) Side B: USA	1949–53	No	No
Russo-Hungarian War Side A: Hungary Side B: Russia (Soviet Union)	1956	Yes	Yes
Sinai/Suez War Side A: Egypt Side B: Coalition: Israel (B1), France (B2), UK (B3)	1956	Yes	Yes
Vietnam War Side A: North Vietnam Side B: USA	1959–75	No	No
Indo-Chinese War Side A: China Side B: India	1962	Yes	Yes
Second Kashmir War Side A: India Side B: Pakistan	1965	No	No
Six-Day War Side A: Coalition: Egypt (A1), Iraq (A2), Syria (A3) Side B: Israel	1967	No	No
USA vs. Cambodia Side A: USA Side B: Cambodia	1971	No	No
Israel vs. Egypt (War of Attrition)	1969–70	No	No

Side A: Egypt
Side B: Israel

Football War (El Salvador vs. Honduras)	1969	Yes	Yes
Side A: El Salvador			
Side B: Honduras			
India vs. Pakistan (Bangladesh War)	1971	Yes	Yes
Side A: India			
Side B: Pakistan			