

Promotion of Liberal Democracy and American Foreign Policy

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ABSTRACT:

The promotion of liberal democracy has been a defining feature of American foreign policy since a long time and it reflects the United States commitment to promote democratic governance, freedoms, human rights, and the rule of law in the world. From the post-Second World War era, this policy is said to be an implicit or explicit part of American foreign policy and is based on the belief that it not only makes the Americans more secure but also creates conditions for the benefit of mankind in the world.

Various methods were used by the successive American Presidents to promote liberal democracy such as through diplomatic engagement, economic assistance, development programs, multilateral cooperation, as well as, in some cases, military intervention.

However, it is argued that though the United States has contributed to democratic transitions in certain regions, its policies have often been influenced by geopolitical, economic, and security interests. Its actions have reflected the inconsistencies in the application of democratic principles. Such contradictions have raised questions regarding the credibility and legitimacy of U.S. democracy promotion initiatives and has made the world to look critically at the U.S. foreign policy

This research paper therefore explores the theoretical foundations of American democracy promotion policy by drawing upon liberal internationalism, the democratic peace theory and tries to understand how it promotes the interest of the United States.

KEYWORDS: Democracy, Foreign Policy, Liberal Democracy, Freedoms, Interest.

INTRODUCTION:

History of American Foreign Policy cannot be understood without serious attention being given to its policy of promoting democracy in the world since World War I. Though American leaders and the people have often differed among themselves about the relative importance and promotion of idealistic principles such as democracy, respect for human rights, the peaceful settlement of disputes, and openness, the ultimate aim of American foreign policy has always been to create “an environment in which free societies could exist and flourish.”¹

The American foreign policy of promoting democracy is based on the ‘Democratic Peace Theory.’² It believes that democracies are hesitant to engage in armed conflict with other identified democracies. It is

¹ Crabb Cecil V., Jr., Policy-Makers and Critics, Conflicting Theories of American Foreign Policy, Praeger Publishers, New York, USA, 1976, p.176

² Hastedt Glenn, Encyclopedia of American Foreign Policy, Fact on File, Inc., New York, 2004, p. 121

a 'Theory of Peace' which outlines the motivating factors that promote peace in a state. According to the proponents of this theory, several factors motivate peace between liberal states such as: leaders have to own responsibility for the losses arising due to the participation in war, they are more inclined to establish diplomatic channels for resolving disputes as they are accountable for their decisions, further they do not prefer to use the policy of war as it involves loss of resources and infrastructure, and finally democracies also tend to view other democracies as less hostile.³

The structural explanation given for the Democratic peace theory puts forward the view that it is the institutions of representative government which make war a poor choice for both the government and the citizens.⁴ Since war and its effects do not bring good results, the elected officials, who are accountable to the government and the citizens, would look for other viable options as the electorate would otherwise vote the officials out of power. War would thus, may lead to the loss of power to the ruling power. According to this view the democratic institutional structures are therefore responsible for the resulting peace in the state.

The normative perspective also puts forward the view that peace exists among democratic nations because they all share the same values. The political culture of democratic nations strives towards non-violent and peaceful means of conflict resolution and since this is the attitude shared by all the democratic nations they thus, have a mutual understanding towards each other. They are more willing to sort out their differences and seek peaceful solutions rather than war.⁵

The basic principles of this 'Democratic Peace' theory, which forms the basis of American policy of promoting liberal democracy are reflected in the works of philosopher Immanuel Kant and political theorist Thomas Paine. Kant his essay 'Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch' (1795) viewed that a republican constitution is necessary to secure international peace. It offers an opportunity to establish a perpetual peace.⁶ Therefore, if all nations were republics, it would end war, as there would be no aggressors. Thomas Paine also made similar or stronger claims about the peaceful nature of republics. Paine puts forward the argument that the Republics of Europe are all in peace. Holland and Switzerland are without wars, foreign or domestic whereas Monarchical form of government, are not in rest for long.⁷ According to Kant his model of a just state, the republic, is peaceable and as the 'Republic' he views is roughly equivalent to a liberal democracy, it is assumed that democracies as being peaceful. Kant expressed that republican form of government would lead to peaceful international relations as in this form individual rights are respected, rulers are accountable and the consent of the citizens is also required to declare war.⁸ The citizens in a republican government usually would hesitate to go for war as they have to suffer the consequences of war whereas in non-democracies, the ruler who is least inflicted by it decides

³ Ibid., pp. 121-122

⁴ Placek Kevin, The Democratic Peace Theory, E – International Relations Students, February 18, 2012, <https://www.e-ir.info>, accessed on 03 March 2014

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Patil S.H., Modern Western Political Thought, (From Hobbes to Laski), Printwell Publishers, Jaipur 1988, p.119

⁷ Paine Thomas, Common Sense, The Capital Net, 2009, p. 40

⁸ Kant Immanuel, Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch, F. Nicolovius Publisher, Germany, 1795, pp. 76-77

for the war. Thus, Kant viewed that when those who must do the fighting have the right to decide between war and peace, history will no longer be written in blood.⁹

Thomas Paine in his book 'Common Sense' also rejects the monarchical and mixed forms of government, in favour of a Republican form of government. According to him, the sovereignty in a republic is exercised to keep right and wrong in their proper and distinct places and it is sovereignty of justice, in contradistinction to a sovereignty of will. According to him, throughout history monarchy and hereditary succession have left the world torn apart 'in blood and ashes.'¹⁰ The revolutions in America and France had also abolished monarchy, the enemy of mankind, and the source of misery. He thus viewed that wherever there is an end to the monarchical sovereignty, the cause of wars would be taken away.

According to Paine, once republican or democratic form of government are established, the world would see the end of warfare and universal peace, because war reflected aristocratic domination, it supports itself by keeping up a system of war instead of promoting peace.¹¹ Thomas Paine viewed that as republican or democratic form of government promotes a system of peace and universal society, the ideals on which America stood can be exported throughout the world.

THE BENEFITS OF THE SPREAD OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

The foundations of contemporary liberal internationalism which is the basis of American democracy promotion policy were laid in the eighteenth and nineteenth century by liberals proposing preconditions for a peaceful world order. They concluded that the 'disease' of war could be successfully treated with the twin medicines of 'democracy' and 'free trade.' These views are reflected throughout the history of American foreign policy, and thus the promotion of liberal democracy and freedom in other countries has always been a part of its unique identity and purpose. It is viewed to be motivated by a sense of enlightened self-interest, a moral duty crucial to its national security as well as its perceived benefits to the other countries of the world.

Along with its other objectives, one of the objectives of American foreign policy has been specified as – a humanitarian desire to do good in the world; to spread Christianity and Democracy, to put an end to the slave trade, to halt the massacres or persecutions of racial and religious minorities, to relieve the victims of flood, fire, earthquake, famine, and civil war, to raise standards of living in backwards countries.¹²

Liberals believe that freedom is required for pursuing self-preservation and material wellbeing and peace is required for freedom. According to them free trade and commerce would dismantle the barriers between individuals and the states and would unite them in a common, peaceful enterprise. Since liberal states are founded on individual rights such as equality before the law, free speech and civil liberties, respect for private property and representative government, they do not have the same appetite for conflict and war. They believe that when the consent of the citizens is required to decide for the declaration of war, they would hesitate greatly as it is they who would have to bear the burdens of war. This further, becomes a reason for maintaining peace in the world.¹³

⁹ Ibid; p. 113

¹⁰ Paine Thomas, Op. Cit., p. 22

¹¹ Ibid; p. 21

¹² Pratt Julius W., A History of United States Foreign Policy, Prentice-Hall International, Inc., Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, Second Edition, 1965, p. 3

¹³ Doyle Michael, 'Liberalism and World politics', American Political Science Review, Vol. 80, Issue 4, December 1986, p - 10

Americans believe that democracy should be promoted in the world as democratic systems best safeguard basic universal human rights. They believe that people generally live better lives under democratic governments. Compared to inhabitants of non-democracies, citizens of democracies enjoy greater individual liberty, political stability, freedom from governmental violence, enhanced quality of life necessary for the development of individual's personality as well as for having a fulfilling life for oneself as well as for others. According to Samuel Huntington, America is a leading democratic country in the world whose identity as a nation cannot be separated from its commitment to liberal and democratic values.¹⁴ Thus, America by its example can lead the world towards the democratic ideals.

Living in a globalized world, improvements in the lives of individuals in other countries matter to Americans because the United States cannot insulate itself from the world. Widespread problems happening in any other part of the world may create political turmoil, economic instability, refugee flows, and environmental damage that will affect Americans. Developments overseas thus, can have unpredictable consequences for the United States.

In addition to improving the lives of individual citizens in new democracies, Americans believe that the spread of democracy will also benefit the international system by reducing the likelihood of war. Liberal democracy would want war only as an instrument to bring about peace. Further, if the number of democracies in the international system continue to grow, the number of potential conflicts that might escalate to war would diminish. It is argued that though wars between democracies and non-democracies would persist in the short run, in the long run an international system composed of democracies would be a peaceful world and the zone of peace would enlarge.

It is also viewed that the global spread of democracy will advance American interests by creating more potential allies for the United States. Based on the logic of the democratic peace theory, it suggests that the United States will have fewer enemies in a world if there are more democracies. As democracies virtually never go to war with one another and are also unlikely to get into crisis or militarized disputes, it would make the United States more secure. According to President Bill Clinton democracies don't attack each other, and the best strategy to ensure American security and to build a durable peace is to support the advance of democracy elsewhere.¹⁵

It is also argued that as democracies do not support terrorist activities. As the origins of terrorism have been linked to political exclusion, social injustice, and bad, abusive, or tyrannical governance, America believes that to overcome the problem of terrorism it requires political change. Policies need to be implemented to bring down zealous, paranoiac dictatorships and to allow aggrieved groups in all countries to pursue their interests through open, peaceful and constitutional means.¹⁶

Islamic Fundamentalism which is considered to be one of the potential threats of worry for Americans is also attributed to corruption, arrogance, oppression and gross inefficiency of ruling regimes. Though force may be needed and is considered legitimate to meet such regimes, it is good governance and far-reaching political reforms towards democracy which would prove beneficial in the long run. Thus, though each

¹⁴ Huntington Samuel, *The Third Wave, Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*, University of Oklahoma Press: Norman, 1991, p. 30

¹⁵ President Clinton's State of the Union Message, *New York Times*, January 26, 1994, p. A17; "*The Clinton Administration Begins*," *Foreign Policy Bulletin*, Vol. 3, No. 4/5, Jan-April 1993, p. 5

¹⁶ Diamond Larry, *Promoting Democracy in the 1990s: Actors and Instruments, Issues and Imperatives*, A Report to the Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict, Carnegie Corporation of New York, Dec. 1995, pp. 7 - 8

region may have a distinctive legacy of cultures, languages, and religions, application of fundamental democratic principles that fit indigenous circumstances can prove beneficial to all.¹⁷

The spread of democracy also serves American direct security and economic interests by reducing the number of refugees who flee to the United States. It is argued that as democracies do not commit genocide and do not generate refugees, the United States would therefore will not be pulled in human rights conflicts. It is believed that as the countries that generate the most refugees are usually the least democratic, and an increase in the number of democratic countries would reduce conflicts and decrease the political causes to flee a country.¹⁸ It is viewed that because of the United States efforts in Haiti to promote democracy, it has dramatically dropped the number of refugees attempting to flee Haiti.

Further, it is argued that with the transformation of autocratic-foes to as allies of democracy it would reduce the spending on weapons. John Owen IV viewed that with the near absence of wars among mature liberal democracies would mean that democratic states need not prepare for war against one another and then the said resources could be used somewhere else.¹⁹ The United States military spending decreased after the end of the Cold War thereby creating a positive impact on its economy in the 1990's. By some estimates, in the United States, it is said that there was more than 20 percent decrease in military spending between 1986 and 2004. According to Economist, Anders Aslund, the American peace dividend after the end of the Cold War to be more than \$1.3 trillion. A study conducted by International Monetary Fund also highlight that a sizable "peace dividend" resulted for all countries that cut military spending since 1985.²⁰ The transformation of former foes into new allies also opens new markets for trade and investment for American firms. American trade and investment expanded exponentially in Germany, Japan, and Italy after World War II.²¹ The spread of liberal democracy, thus benefits the United States as democracies make better economic partners. They would provide better climate for American overseas investment, by virtue of their political stability and market economies.

Thus, along with political, economic, security benefits derived, the promotion of liberal democracy is also likely to increase American's psychological sense of well-being. It is believed that American democracy will be healthier when other countries adopt similar political systems as they would be friendly toward the United States. The United States thus has a special interest in seeing its ideals spread.

CONCLUSION:

The United States has always viewed itself as a country involved in the promotion of liberal democracy in the world providing a moralistic justification for its policy. From American participation in World War-I till the Iraq War of 2003 and beyond, the American policy of promoting democracy seemed to be weaved with moralistic and altruistic objectives and various efforts have been undertaken by them to establish liberal democracies in different parts of the world.

However, an analysis of American foreign policy also shows the implementation of several policies by them which go against their democratic ideals such as the support given to authoritarianism, neglect of human rights violations, role in conflicts etc. for the promotion of its national interests. Their foreign

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 7

¹⁸ Diamond Larry, *Op. Cit.*, p. 5

¹⁹ Mcfaul Michael, *Advancing Democracy Abroad, Why We Should and How We Can*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, INC., 2010, p. 117

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.118

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.120

policy of the entire Cold War period is criticized as their words did not match their deeds in many regions. In the Post Cold-war period also, many policies have been implemented to maintain its hegemonic position and to control the resources as well as markets in the world.

Thus, though the efforts for promoting liberal democracy have differed under the rule of different American Presidents, one cannot deny the fact that promoting liberal democracy in the world also serves American political, economic, and security interest.

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