

Rethinking the “democratic peace theory”: turbulent democratization in North Africa and the Middle East and the external dimension

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Keywords: democratic peace theory, Middle East, North Africa, Arab spring

Introduction.....	2
Relevance of democratic peace: values vs. interests and the reality	3
Conditions for democratic transitions and the lessons for the Transatlantic community.....	5
Democratic transition: goal or process	6
Democratic peace or turbulent transition.....	8
Putting things together: the conclusions for the Transatlantic community	10
Sources.....	11

Abstract

Democracies do not go to war with each other. Is it true in countries in transition? When can we state that a country is democratic? The fate of the Transatlantic community's democracy promotion strategy stems from these question regarding North Africa and the Middle East.

One year after the beginning of the "Arab spring" it is still not clear what will be the future of the region. One thing is obvious: the Transatlantic community has important stakes in supporting smooth democratization of the region and avoiding a failed process. The worst case scenario is full scale civil war as it happened in Libya and happens in Syria. However, the less violent cases pose enormous challenge, too. The article will review the arguments of the democratic peace theory, analyze the options for a country undergoing democratic transitions. Furthermore, the article will draw conclusions regarding the role of the Transatlantic community in supporting the change in North Africa and the Middle East.

Introduction

The events after December 2010 fueled new expectations and debates in the academia about the relevance of democracy and its contribution to development, security and stability. The "Arab spring" proved that in general democracy still has space. More importantly, as Marc Plattner notes in one of his recent articles (Plattner, 2011, pp. 5-6), authoritarian rulers cannot be as confident anymore. The academic consequence is the falsification of the widely accepted thesis that the Arab world is impervious to democratic development.

The "Arab spring" showed that democracy may have a chance even though there are challenges and dangers clearly seen in the process. One of the most important challenges from the Transatlantic community's point of view is the future of stability in this anyway perilous region. The masses which occupied the streets in the Arab world opposed tyranny and not necessarily demanded for democracy in the Western liberal sense. The question is how the process will continue and how much the region will be able to avoid becoming a turbulent source of negative spill-over effects which would directly affect the security and stability of the Transatlantic community.

International involvement in domestic political, economic, or social development has been the key characteristics of international politics, especially since the end of the Cold War. It is obvious that promotion of liberal norms and participatory democracy is not a simple altruistic mission of the Transatlantic community. The most important feature of a democracy in the external dimension is the responsiveness of the government to other countries, too. A democratic government not only protects its own citizens but minimizes the negative spill-

over effects to other countries. On the other hand, the process of democratic transition is highly turbulent and unpredictable.

How should we rethink the democratic peace theory? The article's most important goal is to reassess the arguments of it, analyze the negative effects of democratic transitions, whilst it tries to argue that there is space for the Transatlantic community in supporting democratization in North Africa and the Middle East. The article does not seek to be engaged in debates with cultural relativists' views on democracy. Democracy here means liberal democracy, and it is regarded as a tool of crating stability in a region which is a major security concern for the Transatlantic community.

Relevance of democratic peace: values vs. interests and the reality

It may seem oversimplification, but democratic peace theory (See Doyle, 1986) reflects the liberal conviction that democracies do not go to war with each other. Consequently, if all countries in the world were democracies, the possibility of violent armed conflict would converge to zero. An easy policy recommendation follows: democracies need to spread democracy by all means as it serves the global and universal good of all societies and all people because the final outcome would be peace, stability and prosperity. On the other hand, democratic peace is not simply liberal, but pragmatic goal at the same time in a sense that democracy is a tool to increase stability. The collapse of the alternative system, namely communism, which comprehensively framed and organized politics and society, provided a democratic momentum. The past tense unfortunately is not a mistake. Democratization came to halt by the end of the first decade of the 21st century.

We will be confronted by several ontological and later epistemological problems when analyzing the validity of the democratic peace theory. First, it is true that there is no consistent corpus of democracy theory, or any theory of democracy promotion.¹ The scholars and practitioners on this field are often blamed that talking about democracy and aiming at promoting it reflects ethnocentric thinking. It has to be admitted that democracy was indeed forged in the "North-Atlantic design center", and as Guillermo O'Donnell phrased (O'Donnell, 2007, p. 2) democracy is the historical trajectory of the Western countries. Second, it is difficult to draw empiric and systemic conclusions since there are deep debates on what democracy really is and what should be projected and promoted to third countries. It

¹ However, there are attempts to fill this niche. See for instance: Wolff et al, 2011.

is difficult to offer policy recommendations as the literature often deals with ideal types, thinking on democracy as a descriptive label and a desirable value. Consequently, any existing definition of democracy is inherently and “essentially contestable”. (Whitehead, 2002, p. 7;19)

It is beyond doubt from the Transatlantic point of view that democracy has remained without alternatives and the questions rose by a study of Giovanni Carboni (Carboni, 2009) resonates when we look at the “Arab spring”. We need to answer what democracy is good for. Will it create more stability and more security, and what are the costs of it? Simultaneously, the people in the respective states undergoing the democratization process will ask whether the new regime is better than the old one, or whether it creates more economic opportunities. (Carboni, 2009, p. 128)

In the last decades we experienced that new democracies are less effective in terms that they are not able to distribute rights equally, the executives are centralizing power contributing to the failure of checks and balances, the accountability of the government is low, or the rights of the minorities are in danger. Similarly to the argument of Jack Snyder and Edward Mansfield (Mansfield et al, 2005; Mansfield et al, 2007), we have to accept that transitions are violent and conflict prone. Not only the transition from authoritarian rule to democracy is dangerous, the unstable situation of any large scale social transformation gives the space for latent negative factors. As Francis Fukuyama (Fukuyama, 2007) complemented Snyder and Mansfield’s argument, not democratization, rather the process of statebuilding during the transition is violent. The unpredictability of interim periods during the development of the state gives hope to the opposition of statebuilding that the process will fail. In the interim period the domestic central institutions are not stable enough; peaceful channels of conflict management among the groups are not institutionalized; the demand of the society towards better life is already stresses the system; and the groups with incompatible interests try to mobilize the accumulated energy of the society. Democracy is a marketplace for ideas, where different groups have to compete. Without functioning peaceful mechanisms, competition may lead to violent conflict. Due to the background dynamics, those groups and elites who feel their level of security decreasing are more prone to use radical means. Transition also weakens preexisting structures of rules and the new uncertainty is a security threat for local stakeholders. (Henderson, 2002; Mansfield et al, 2002)

Conditions for democratic transitions and the lessons for the Transatlantic community

Democracy promotion is normative and pragmatic at the same time. It is the liberal conviction on the universal good of democracy and it also pairs with the belief that a more democratic world is more secure and stable. Democracy as a universal value creates the frames for democracy promotion which became a widely accepted foreign policy goal and tool throughout the international community. Even so, elaborating a consistent theory of democracy promotion was neglected. As Jonas Wolff and Iris Wurm mention in their recent article (Wolff et al, 2011), most of the theoretic works focus on different dimensions of democratization rather than on the (external) actors who drive the process. From this standpoint, democratic peace is not only a normative imperative but more importantly a genuine strategic interest of the Transatlantic community. As a foreign policy, democracy promotion is a combination of three different but interconnected goals. First, promote the own interests such as security, trade and investments. Second, secure the collective interests of the international community such as international peace, international cooperation. Third, the well understood interest of the recipient societies is not to live under authoritarian control. Despite we understand these interconnections we need to look at more closely the motivations behind the external promoters of democracy. In the mentioned article Wolff and Wurm give us a good guide and theoretic summary on this. (Wolff et al, 2011) They differentiate two sets of explanations a utilitarian and a normative. According to the utilitarian considerations all individuals favor peace to war because peace protects life, investments and savings. The democratic states in which this individual stimulus can appear on the level of the society, the country is more peace prone. Consequently, the promotion of democracy will protect our own life, investment and savings. However, as Wolff and Wurm emphasize, utilitarian explanations highlight the fact that according to the cost-benefit measures democracy promotion is only rational in very specific circumstances. It is not surprising, because the process of democratization is a lengthy and permanent political and societal struggle. Democracy is the constant strife for something more and the transition enhances rather conflict than stability and peace. For the external promoters of democracy, the outcome of the process is difficult to measure or seen in the short term while the costs are immediate. The rewards for the external promoters are highly unsecured and unfortunately the experience shows that liberal democracy in a Western sense is rather the exception. On the global level, there are two other challenges for the external actors. The success of the transition depends on

the relative power of the external actor(s) and the participation in democracy promotion missions invites free riders.²

The normative explanations emphasize the values on which a democratic politics and society are based. Democracy is a tool to solve conflicts in a peaceful way, and promoting democracy is promoting these values. However, liberal values confront each other when it comes to the role of the external player. The external player promotes its own values which contradicts the norm of self-determination, because the tiniest external support is a specific intervention in the domestic affairs of the recipient country. It can be only avoid if the recipient country invites the external actors because of a common aim, namely to deepen democracy.

Democratic transition: goal or process

Transition from authoritarian rule has established theoretic literature. It became clear long before the “Arab spring” that liberalization of an authoritarian regime does not necessarily leads to democracy. (See O’Donnell et al, 1986) Nevertheless, supporting the opposition does not constitute final success, either, as the opposition being the product of the same regime may be as authoritarian later. (Przeworski, 1995) From the external point of view, not only the outcome is dangerous but the process itself. In states, which lack effective and strong political institutions the new governments are usually unable to satisfy the rising popular demands which lead to further conflicts and in extreme situations to the failure of the state. As we have seen during the last almost two years in North Africa and the Middle East this is a real danger. In terms of economic performance, or jobs for youth being the most neuralgic issue for the future, the new regimes are worse. For instance in Egypt the permanent strikes and demonstrations did not end with the collapse of the Mubarak regime.

Seeking for the creation of sound environment for future democracy is not simply a question of institutional design but it is a central problem in maintaining security. That democracies are peaceful is widely accepted syllogistic reasoning, and since transitions lead to democracy, they lead to peace. It is a conventional wisdom that no mature democracies have ever fought war against each other. (Carothers, 2002) In spite of the fact that we may agree with this argument, it still does not say anything about the countries in transition. The already mentioned Edward Mansfield and Jack Snyder (Mansfield et al 2002) proved in a quantitative

² Look at for instance the amount the members of the United Nations Democracy Fund offered year by year. See: http://www.un.org/democracyfund/Grantees/grantees_index.html

study that countries with weak statehood are prone to war during the transition, because democratization weakens some vital institutions during the transition. The regime easily collapses in countries where the government cannot satisfy the rising demands of the public. Democratization is less dangerous in countries which possess high per capita income, educated population, strong institutions, especially those of the rule of law and independent jurisdiction. Low level of corruption and powerful elites, which are not threatened by the system change, seem to be crucial factors, too. Incomplete democracies are prone to revert in autocracy. The new regime in Egypt may be as autocratic, the survival of Libya is questionable, there is still no stable and strong alternative for Assad in Syria. On the other hand, wealthier societies may have better opportunities for peaceful democratization. Without drawing conclusions on the quality of democracy in Morocco, or Tunisia, it is sure that the stability of these countries is less in danger than the above mentioned few.

The dominating elite are always in a better position to transfer power, and even the more successful cases showed that the old elite would find the ways to keep some power. (Sorensen, 2008, pp. 67-69) Liberalization of authoritarian system would not automatically lead to democracy. (Whitehead, 2002, p. 60) As the system can shape the ways in which democracy can develop, we should not wait from the opposition of a dictator to become democratic automatically after seizing the power. Transition from authoritarianism is possible in several ways (Stephan, 1986), however, the existence of certain factors and conditions determine the outcome of the process. The more than a decade old observations of Robert Dahl resonate aptly the recent situation in North Africa and the Middle East. (Dahl, 1998, pp. 1-2) that during the transition, the danger is real that anti-democratic beliefs and movements continue to exist in form of fanatic nationalism or religious fundamentalism.

Democracy is not an end in itself, it is rather a mean during the complex process of transition, a mean for protecting the citizens from the state, or from each other; democracy makes the elite – that should be capable and accountable – able to take the right decisions; helps protect the liberty of all citizens, and maintains public goods at least at a minimal level. It is a commonly cited phrase from Amartya Sen (Sen, 2008) that in democracies there is no starvation. Some thought before the “Arab spring” that the slowed wave of democratization is due to the fact that countries are more or less democratic, and those which remained intact, are inherently not able to become democratic. The most commonly mentioned condition was Islam. Although, it seems that Muslim countries lag behind because of the nature of the religion; the Islamic orientation has a very limited impact on views about democracy. On the

other hand, as it was argued (Diamond, 2008, p. 34; Zakaria, 2003, p. 127), Islam has significant influence when it comes to social questions. The fears from the “Arab winter” namely the emergence of Islamist groups in North Africa and the Middle East proves this argument. The general public was more concerned about social and economic questions than in general about the exact composition of the parliament or the “democratic” institutions.

Democratic peace or turbulent transition

It is difficult to judge at the beginning of a democratization process whether the outcome is a desired democratic political and institutional constellation of sound factors or a turbulent environment which rather gives space for further challenges and threats both for the domestic players and the international community. We need to revise our knowledge or at least our experiences what in regards to the “Arab spring” can be seen yet. Several experts and scholars (Cofmann Wittes, 2012; Totten, 2012) already call the attention to the fact that the false and misleading expression “Arab spring” should be forgotten and a new phrase would better reflect the reality. However, they are not convincing with the new expression “Arab winter”, either. The real challenge in front of the academia is the several parallel processes in North Africa and the Middle East which simultaneously influence the outcome of the transitions or the struggles for democracy. The events which began in December 2010 generated positive feelings about democracy but the reality proved that general geopolitical factors should not be neglected either. As Zsolt Rostoványi argues in his recent article (Rostoványi, 2012), the “Arab spring” altered the general political constellation in the region. The 21st century began with the strong presence of the United States and the emergence of non-Arab countries on the peripheries – Turkey and Iran. Due to the “Arab spring”, the United States lost from its strategic position whilst its allies – such as Saudi Arabia – began a more independent foreign policy, other allies even changed completely – such as Egypt. The last two years also witnessed the emergence of Russian influence and interests in the region, whilst Iran became weaker. Israel needs to step back to a defensive position but on the other hand Turkey gained new momentums to increase its influence. Going back to domestic politics, the danger to become a failed state is critical in many countries in the region, and the spill-over of failure will be quick due to the tangible interconnectedness of the societies. The “Arab spring” let reemerge pan-Arab identity which is paired with the strengthening of a new organized force Islamism.

It is not surprising that the choice from the different options is not easy for the Transatlantic community. In this sense, the immediate outcome of the “Arab spring” is definitely dangerous. The Transatlantic community needs to measure the pros and cons whether the security of stability or the insecurity of democracy is better. Even though democracy is in line with our values and with our long term interests, the “Arab spring” created a highly versatile geopolitical situation. The democratic peace theory may be not falsifiable here but it is clear that the transitions are a turbulent and messy interplay of external and domestic factors. As Michael Totten argued recently on the pages of the World Affairs, the likelihood of genuine liberal democracies as a consequence of the “Arab spring” is close to zero, and the only common feature of the processes is that all the countries are in turmoil. (Totten, 2012, p. 23) The problem is that the Transatlantic community cannot step back to the old policies of supporting “liberal” dictators, that is those authoritarian regimes which definitely did not serve the fulfillment of the Western values but at least did not threaten the Western interests directly in the short term. The Islamist takeover was feared before the fall of the old regimes, and after the elections Islamists gain in power was not a surprise as they were the most (if not the only) organized political forces in the region. The political turmoil decreases the ability of the new regimes to maintain security domestically and consequently the stability of the region. The new and weak regimes may divert public attention by initiate unpredictable foreign policy steps. (Inbar, 2012) Furthermore, even without direct decisions the events have negative consequences. For instance, Libya and Yemen are on the edge of collapse and the weapons, especially from Libya, have dispersed in the region.³

The turbulent events of the “Arab spring” definitely threaten the interests and indirectly the security of the Transatlantic community. Stability has been our goal in the region which in many times collided with the values of a liberal Western democracy: freedom, rule of law and respect for human rights. Now, democratic opening may bring new scenarios in which the new democracies are not in line with the Western values, consequently it is difficult to judge whether the democratic peace theory is still applicable.

³ Let us only think about the Mali coup in the spring 2012 which was the consequence of the war in Libya. The expression, state failure region, invented by Stefan Wolff (Wolff, 2011) describes aptly the situation in North Africa and the Middle East. State failure regions are regions where the spillover of state failure is likely due the smaller “spillover costs” and the fact that in this region the interactions are more intense than on the global level.

Putting things together: the conclusions for the Transatlantic community

When we try to verify or falsify the democratic peace theory the debate is clearly not about whether democracy is good or bad for the local societies in North Africa and the Middle East. It is rather about whether the path towards it is safe and peaceful for the outside world. Even though the outcome of the process is not clear yet, we cannot hide behind the cultural-relativist standpoint anymore, that the Islam or the Arab societies are not compatible with democracy. The statement of a Saudi Salafist hardliner Sheikh Salman al-Awdah also underlines this point: “Democracy might be not an ideal system, but it is the least harmful, and it can be developed and adapted to respond to local needs and circumstances.” (Quoted by Zelin, 2012)⁴ The change in rhetoric will not immediately make the Islamists liberal in a Western sense, but it still creates hopes for the future. From the external point of view, there are few chances left and it is highly probable that the Transatlantic community needs to learn to live with the “Islamist winter”. (Cofmann Wittes, 2012) The elections in Morocco, Tunisia, Libya and Egypt all showed that the Islamists are strong but they are all but not a unified force. Thus these parties and players can be influenced by external factors, and they need to be more pragmatic in power. Quick elections probably are better than the latent domestic struggle for power inside of the opposition groups as the people can feel that they have the opportunity to influence their future. Nevertheless, the litmus test of survival is yet to come. (Cofmann Wittes, 2012)

The transition is turbulent thus democratization has not been the most important goal – except few momentums and rhetoric – of the Transatlantic community in North Africa and Middle East. Being a strategically important but highly instable region, the interest of security collided with the democratic values. Furthermore, not only democratic transitions but external democracy support projects are prone to fail and they are very costly. So it is not surprising that the decision makers are reluctant to be engaged in new “nationbuilding missions”. It is almost a common knowledge that the United States, and consequently, the Transatlantic community cannot afford another war or major humanitarian intervention, mainly because managing post-conflict situations is expensive. (Etzioni, 2012) The “Arab spring” showed again that democratization is a complex process and bears unpredictable outcomes. The triggering effects of the “Arab spring” were more economic than political, that is the support

⁴ This is a surprisingly positive momentum as before the “Arab spring” most of the Salafis regarded democracy as contrary to Islam because it would lift up humans to the level of God.

needed has to be more economic than political. On the other hand, it is also clear that democratization and wide participation of society in political life cannot be neglected anymore, either.

The “Arab spring” disproved many commonly accepted assumptions about the incompatibility of Islam and democracy or the necessary conditions for the transitions. On the other hand, the events proved other theorems about the characteristics of such processes. The political development in North Africa and the Middle East is indeed turbulent and not predictable, and definitely cannot serve the Transatlantic community’s interest of stability.

It is difficult to conclude in the democratic peace debate and the “Arab spring” rather made the picture more blurry. The thesis of the democratic peace is difficult to falsify in the long term, especially if we alter it slightly: established liberal (Western) democracies do not go to war each other. However, the real substance behind this presumption is still not clear regarding the lessons from North Africa and the Middle East. Democracy may be an instrument of rational foreign policy. In this case, the democratic peace is the pragmatic self-interest of the Transatlantic community. Or democracy is an unquestionable universal norm which spreads through societies by changing domestic preferences. In this case, democracy is rather the wishful goal which helps enjoy security, stability and prosperity. But as we argued in this article, the road is long and exhausting and unpredictable in the short term. There are still open questions: when the “Arab spring” will end and how the new regimes will be able to survive as the authoritarian regimes were rather the consequence of state weakness and the not the lack of domestic social and economic demand. With the fall of the old regimes these demands can be channeled into politics but the states are not yet stronger.

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