

A Refutation of Democratic Peace Assumptions in Liberal Projects for Global Order

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ABSTRACT

From Kant's plan for perpetual peace to Rawls's proposal of a law of peoples, liberal projects for world order assume the homogeneity of states' regimes as a determinant factor for bringing about peace and moral progress. Particularly, at the foundations of Rawlsian internationalism is the 'fact' of democratic peace, considered to be a sound and immutable feature of the international system. This article questions this oversimplified reading of Michael Doyle's hypothesis about the apparent existence of a 'separate peace' among democratic states. It argues that liberal projects for global order should consider the 'separate peace' merely as a working hypothesis and they should address also the problematic aspects related to it, namely the unnecessary aggressiveness that democratic states show towards non-democracies and the coercive – and possibly illiberal – nature of the Society of Peoples.

KEYWORDS

John Rawls, Michael Doyle, liberalism, world order, democratic peace

The long-lasting success of Michael Doyle's two-parted article *Kant, Liberal Legacies and Foreign Affairs*, published in 1983, is surprising: after its publication, it has been widely debated both among international relations and political theory scholars.¹ However, some enthusiastic interpretations of this article present an oversimplified version of the original hypothesis there expressed, so that it appears to be a defence of democracy *tout court* as the best regime in a world of hostile regimes which force democracies to take arms in order to defend the same ideas of democracy and freedom.

The main argument of the article is that Doyle's ideas have been misunderstood or misrepresented, particularly by some liberal philosophers who, in building projects for an international order focused on the idea of the moral superiority of democracy and adapted Doyle's tentative explanation transforming it into a general law of politics. A second argument follows from the first: the 'democratic peace assumption' as a foundation of liberal projects for global order is not heuristically fruitful neither normatively desirable, because of the limited

¹ DOYLE, M.W., *Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs – Part 1*, "Philosophy and Public Affairs" 12 (3), 1983, pp. 205–235; *Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs – Part 2*, "Philosophy and Public Affairs", 12 (4), 1983, pp. 323–353.

explanatory force of Doyle's hypothesis and because of the risks for peace and stability that a world system based on the recognized moral superiority of democracies could entail.

In order to develop the arguments, the first section presents and discusses the main features of Doyle's hypothesis on the phenomenon of an (apparent) absence of war between democratic states, the 'separate peace'; then, the second section briefly highlights some Kantian elements in Doyle's article, which were the starting points for a lively discussion on the nature of the link between democracy and war to which many political scientists took part during the 1980s and 1990s. At the same time, the interest for democracies and their attitude towards war attracted some liberal authors interested in political theory, who – basically misinterpreting Doyle's essay – assumed the so-called 'democratic peace' to be a fundamental feature of the international system and adopted it as a mainstay for their proposals for rethinking international order.² Hence, the third section presents a critical analysis of one among the most prominent philosophical projects for international order, as expressed in John Rawls's *The Law of Peoples*.³ Finally, the fourth section outlines the main arguments developed in the article and envisages two possible avenues for future investigation.

1. Doyle's original separate peace hypothesis

Doyle's investigation aimed at explaining how liberalism affects liberal democracies in their conducting foreign affairs, challenging the classic realist interpretation of foreign policy as a zero-sum game independent from the internal characteristics of the actors involved. For the sake of clarity, before presenting Doyle's position in detail, it is useful to sketch the main features of the realist tradition of thought about international relations.

Traditionally, realist scholars – inspired by the works of modern political thinkers like Machiavelli, Rousseau and Hobbes – assume anarchy to be the normal status of the international realm.⁴ Anarchy does not refer only to the

² In this essay, following Doyle, I will use the label 'separate peace' to refer to the original version of the explanation of the absence of war among democracies. 'Democratic peace', an expression used by many scholars to refer to the phenomenon observed by Doyle and to the debate which aroused among political scientist after the publication of Doyle's article, here is used with the second meaning, to refer to the successive interpretations of the hypothesis.

³ RAWLS, J., *The Law of Peoples*, Harvard University Press, 1999. The book was preceded by an article, *The Law of Peoples*, "Critical Inquiry", 20 (1), 1993, pp. 36–68.

⁴ Realism is a long-lasting tradition of political thought and it embraces many different interpretations on the characteristics of the international system as well as on the nature of the interactions among states. For a general overview of the main realist theories of international relations, see BROWN, C., *Structural realism, classical realism and human nature*, "International

absence of a central authority in the international system; it implies also the (Hobbesian) notion of state of war. So, the international realm is the environment where conflict is always probable, lacking an authority who can settle disputes among rational actors.⁵ Moreover, realist scholars assume that international cooperation is highly problematic and always contingent, because states within the international system face some ‘dilemmas’, often schematised through ‘games’, where states are considered to be monolithic unities acting strategically to realize their own interest.⁶ Thus, alliances within the system are always difficult to realise and rather unstable. Realist students maintain that every state is pushed by systemic constraints to act pursuing their own interest, and that when interests clash, states engage in war, notwithstanding the nature of their regimes.⁷ However, states can limit the occurrence of war adopting prudence – i.e., a ‘policy of safety’ – as the mainstay of their foreign policy, acting to pursue their own interest while maximizing security.⁸ Given the fact that they look for systemic explanations, realist scholars tend to consider that all the units within the system act – or, more precisely, react – following a same logic, irrespectively of their internal characteristics.

relations”, 23 (2), 2009, pp. 257–270; WILLIAMS, M.C., *The Realist Tradition and the Limits of International Relations*, Cambridge University Press, 2005. A concise historical analysis on the heritage of the classics of political thought for realism can be found in PORTINARO, P.P., *Il realismo politico*, Laterza, 1999.

⁵ I refer here to the basic concepts of classic realism in international relations, whose pillars have been clearly stated in CARR, E.H., *The Twenty Year’s Crisis: 1919-1939*, Macmillan & co., 1951; MORGENTHAU, H., *Politics Among Nations*, A. Knopf, 1973. For a thorough study on realism in international relations, see DONNELLY, J., *Realism and International Relations*, Cambridge University Press, 2000.

⁶ For a comprehensive discussion of the problem, see JERVIS, R., *Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma*, “World Politics”, 30 (1), 1978. Doyle in his article considers some of the classical ‘games’ which are used to explain the behaviour of states in realist theories, and he accepts that, when confronted with non-liberal states, democratic states face the same coordination problems. Therefore, he does not deny the validity of the ‘stag dilemma’, the ‘security dilemma’ and the ‘chicken game’ as analytical instruments; on the contrary, he claims that games represent normal problems for the establishment of any stable framework of cooperation among states with different regimes. However, according to Doyle the games have no explanatory value when the context under consideration is the ‘separate peace’.

⁷ WALTZ, K.N., *Theory of International Politics*, Addison-Wesley, 1979. The concept of ‘interest’ has many interpretations expressed in a wide range of realist theories. Here I refer to it in general, preferring the word ‘interest’ to other expressions used in the literature – e.g. ‘national interest’ – in order to embrace any possible definition. For a discussion of the concept within the realist tradition, see DONNELLY, J., *Realism and International Relations*, pp. 45 ff.

⁸ For an interesting discussion on the concept of prudence in international relations, see BROWN, C., *Practice, Prudence and International Relations Theory: Bourdieu, Aristotle and the Classical Realists*, “Spectrum: Journal of Global Studies”, 4 (1), 2012, pp. 27–46.

Doyle adopts a different (liberal) perspective on the nature of the international system as well as on the interactions between states.⁹ Moreover, he challenges the realist idea that regimes do not matter when analysing states' foreign policies: his basic idea is that, if we consider how liberal and authoritarian states conduct their foreign policies, it is possible to observe some relevant differences. He wants to present liberalism as a paradigm for international relations, through the formulation of a "tested, causal theory".¹⁰ To demonstrate that "liberals are fundamentally different" from non-liberal states in the way they conduct foreign policy, he points out that during the past two centuries a "liberal zone of peace", or "liberal union", has been informally established and maintained by liberal states, thanks to the development of "conventions of mutual respect" which formed a "cooperative foundation" for relations among them.¹¹ Also, it does not seem to be the case that in this informal union the establishment of peace is contingent (i.e., limited to the mere absence of war), because not only war did not occur for a long period, but to wage war against a fellow democratic state is no longer conceived of as a legitimate means to pursue foreign policy goals. Therefore, the probability of a war arising between democracies tends to zero.¹² Thus, Doyle argues that within the democratic union a "state of peace" has been established, leaving no room for the possibility of intra-union wars.

To support his intuition, Doyle analyses the database provided by Small and Singer about the occurrence of (international) wars during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and observes that none of the wars fought during this period involved democracies fighting against other democracies.¹³ Moreover, Doyle maintains that, even when democracies get involved in important wars – for instance, during the world wars – they tend to cluster to form an alliance opposed to non-liberal states.¹⁴ However, he does not claim that democracies are intrinsically peaceful; on the contrary, he states that they are "as aggressive and war prone as any other form of government" when they deal with non-liberal states, because outside the "pacific union" they face the international state of war, being subject to the same 'dilemmas' found by realist students.¹⁵ Besides, Doyle circumscribes his hypothesis specifying that the "separate peace" involves only "constitutionally secure liberal states", so excluding from the liberal union new-born, unstable democracies, which would represent exceptions to the general

⁹ See DOYLE, M.W. and RECCHIA, S., *Liberalism in International Relations*, in *International Encyclopedia of Political Science*, edited by B. Badie, D. Berg-Schlosser and L. Morlino, SAGE, 2011, pp. 1434–1439.

¹⁰ DOYLE, M.W., *Ways of War and Peace*, Norton, 1997, p. 285.

¹¹ DOYLE, M.W., *Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs – Part 1*.

¹² DOYLE, M.W., *Ways of War and Peace*, p. 285.

¹³ SMALL, M. and SINGER, J.D., *Resort to Arms*, Sage Publications, 1982.

¹⁴ DOYLE, M.W., *Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs – Part 1*, p. 213-216.

¹⁵ DOYLE, M.W., *Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs – Part 2*, p. 225.

explanation. Thus, in new-born democracies the benign effects of liberalism on pacification come after an assessment period.¹⁶ Indeed, time is a crucial variable: as a matter of fact, one of the features that make the democratic union stable is the growth of mutual trust and respect among liberal states thanks to a continuing cooperation.¹⁷ But, as democracies don't recognize authoritarian states as legitimised forms of government – authoritarian governments lack not only democratic, but also moral legitimacy, because they are perceived to be the aggressors of their own peoples – the lack of trust pushes democracies to abandon prudence and to commit what Doyle calls the “failings” of a liberal foreign policy.¹⁸ Thus, exactly those features which permitted to establish trust and continuous cooperation among democracies make liberal foreign policies particularly aggressive in their relationship towards non-liberal states. Doyle distinguishes three typical failings of liberal foreign policy when democracies deal with non-liberal states.

On the one hand, *powerful* liberal states are not able to adopt an effective and balanced diplomacy when dealing with powerful non-liberal states, and they tend to show an imperialist and interventionist attitude towards *weak* non-liberal states, often with the intention of provoking or helping a change in the regime. However, although liberal states pursue ‘liberal’ foreign policies – aimed at spreading liberal principles such as the protection of human rights, or electoral democracy – their alliances and the means they use abroad are not always coherent with the declared goals.¹⁹ On the other hand, declining or non-consolidated (to put it simply, *weak*) liberal states tend to make the opposite mistake, abstaining from involvement in conflicts and adopting an isolationist line, relying on an allied liberal state more powerful.²⁰ Furthermore, all liberal states appear to lack a coherent policy regarding the matters of humanitarian aid

¹⁶ On the definition of ‘newborn’ or ‘unsettled’ democracy, see GRILLI DI CORTONA, P., *Come gli Stati diventano democratici*, Laterza, 2009; DIAMOND, L., *Developing Democracy. Toward Consolidation*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999, pp. 64–116; MARCH, J.G. and OLSEN, J.P., *Rediscovering Institutions. The Organisational Basis of Politics*, The Free Press, 1989, pp. 53–68.

¹⁷ DOYLE, M.W., *Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs – Part 1*, p. 230. Similarly, time is a crucial factor for the development of stable democratic institutions, insofar as the consolidation of a liberal political culture is concerned. See DIAMOND, L., *Developing Democracy*, pp. 161–217.

¹⁸ DOYLE, M.W., *Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs – Part 2*, pp. 325 ff. The process is better explained in *Ways of War and Peace*, p. 282.

¹⁹ DOYLE, M.W., *Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs – Part 2*, p. 328 ff. Here Doyle analyzes the ‘failings’ in US foreign policies during the Cold War period, both towards the Soviet Union and towards weak Third World states. Particularly, he stresses how finally liberal policies in the Third World failed to promote human rights.

²⁰ Doyle mentions the example of Western European states and Japan during the Cold War.

and international redistribution of welfare in the Third World. This last failing limits the attractive potential of liberal principles in non-liberal states and increases suspect and distrust within the system.²¹

To sum up, it is important to stress that Doyle's idea of separate peace does not imply the assumption of an intrinsic peacefulness of liberal states; it rather advances a plausible interpretation of a striking phenomenon – the absence of war between liberal states – based on the argument that liberalism affects the content and form of foreign policy. Indeed, liberal principles would make democracies act with a double standard: they would be peaceful and cooperative towards other democracies, and suspicious and aggressive towards non-liberal states. It should be kept in mind that Doyle's article pursues two main aims: the first one is to refute the realist idea that any foreign policy is determined only by systemic constraints, irrespectively of states' regimes, arguing instead that liberal states adopt similar foreign policies;²² the second one is to warn liberal scholars (and liberal governments) of the need to adopt a prudent foreign policy towards the Soviet bloc and the Third World – in line with the realist principle of a 'policy of safety' – in order to find a *modus vivendi* based on respect, and to avoid the excesses that a liberal fanatic policy causes. Thus, the separate peace is not a normative ideal; it is rather a political analysis of liberal foreign policies, aimed at proposing an alternative way of implementing liberal principles when acting in the international realm.

Kantian elements in Doyle's separate peace

Doyle maintains that one of the causes of the double effect of liberal principles in shaping liberal foreign policies – cooperative attitude towards fellow liberal states, aggressive attitude and crusade spirit towards non-liberals – is the “inadequate guidance” of liberal theorists in the explanation of the phenomenon of “liberal

²¹ See BEATE, J., *Liberal Internationalism. Theory, History, Practice*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, especially Chapter 4. For a skeptical view about the peacefulness of democratic foreign policy, see BARKAWI, T. and LAFFEY, M., *The Imperial Peace: Democracy, Force and Globalization*, “European Journal of International Relations”, 5 (4), 1999, pp. 403-434; MACMILLAN, J., *Whose Democracy, which Peace? Contextualising the Democratic Peace*, “International Politics”, 41 (4), 2004, pp. 427-493.

²² For a recent study proposing a new perspective on how values influence foreign policy, see KERTZER, J.D., POWERS, K.E., RATHBUN, B.C., IYER, R., *Moral Support: How Moral Values Shape Foreign Policy Attitudes*, “The Journal of Politics”, 76 (3), 2014, pp. 825–840. Drawing on an original dataset obtained from surveys, the authors argue that «while the idealistic foreign policies of humanitarianism and multilateralism ('cooperative internationalism') are grounded in an Enlightenment morality that values the individual, foreign policies that involve the use of force ('militant internationalism') are equally morally motivated, but by values that emphasize the protection of the community» (p. 826).

pacification”.²³ The main problem in classical views about liberalism is the wrong assumption that liberal states are intrinsically peaceful because of the peacefulness of their citizens or because of the benign effects of commerce on international relations. Doyle focuses on Immanuel Kant’s attempt to describe the process of pacification of the whole world thanks to the stimulus and guidance of republican states, as it was presented in 1795 in *Toward Perpetual Peace*.²⁴ This section analyses five main points of continuity and discontinuity between Kant’s “pacific league” (or pacific federation) project and Doyle’s separate peace hypothesis, in order to demonstrate that, although the separate peace explanation takes inspiration from liberal philosophy, it has a different aim – explanatory rather than normative. Acknowledging this enables to realise that assuming one or the other version to ground philosophical projects of global order might have different implications.

A. *Elements of continuity*

A common worry both for Kant and Doyle is the focus on inter-state war in their approach to international relations: civil wars, or intra-state conflicts, are not held into account. This is perfectly understandable from Kant’s perspective, because he considered states and multinational empires as the only relevant actors capable of waging war, the only ones which, banning war from their relations, could realize perpetual peace. Doyle too focuses almost exclusively on inter-state wars. He only incidentally mentions civil wars when describing the undesired non-liberal outputs of liberal foreign policy in cases of covert operations aimed at protecting or sustaining non-liberal allies. However, in the 1990s one of the main problems for security came from the implosion of multinational political entities like Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, and centrifugal tendencies jeopardized also some liberal states – for instance, Spain and Belgium. In many occasions, facing these challenges, liberal states acted with the same spirit of “crusade” that Doyle found in their attitude towards non-liberal states. Thus, an analysis of participation of liberal states in this kind of conflicts does not seem to be superfluous in order to verify the existence of a separate peace, or a distinctively liberal conduct of foreign policy.²⁵

²³ DOYLE, M.W., *Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs – Part 1*, p. 225.

²⁴ KANT, I., *Toward Perpetual Peace. A Philosophical Project*, in Id., *Practical Philosophy*, translated and edited by M.J. Gregor, Cambridge University Press, 1996. For an analysis of the Kantian conception of peace, see LORETONI, A., *Pace e progresso in Kant*, Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 2006.

²⁵ For a defense of a pragmatic approach to foreign policy that justifies alliances with illiberal regimes and rejects activist accounts of liberal internationalism insofar as these measures help to protect the liberal community and its *ethos*, see ETZIONI, A., *Security First. For a Muscular, Moral Foreign Policy*, Yale University Press, 2007. For a critical interpretation of

Another interesting point is the easy transposition of the concept of ‘republicanism’ into the contemporary concept of ‘democracy’, a move that is not clearly explained in Doyle’s text.²⁶ Indeed, the constitutions described by Kant and Doyle appear slightly different, not only because of the two centuries dividing these authors and the different sociopolitical contexts that they analyze, but also because of the difficulty of finding an acceptable definition of ‘liberal state’ or ‘democracy’ which might include both Kantian republics and actual democracies. Furthermore, assuming that we can find a similar concept, its extension to states in the non-ideal (real) world would be problematic, and it would leave room to a number of unclear or hybrid cases that would make it extremely difficult to build a theory on them.²⁷ Indeed, Doyle’s article has been criticised for the inaccuracy of the cases presented in order to support his hypothesis.²⁸ Perhaps it is possible to find some common features between the two forms of government if we consider that republics in 1795 and liberal states nowadays are both representative systems based on the rule of law with a clear separation of legislative and executive powers,²⁹ in which citizens can openly express their preferences about

inconsistencies in liberal foreign policy, see Risse-Kappen, T., *Democratic Peace – Warlike Democracies? A Social Constructivist Interpretation of the Liberal Argument*, “European Journal of International Relations”, 1 (4), pp. 491-577.

²⁶ On this critique of the easy translation from a modern concept of republicanism into a contemporary concept of democracy, see CATTANEO, F., *L’idea di repubblica da Kant a Habermas*, Giappichelli, 2013; GATES, S., KNUTSEN, T.L. and MOSES, J.W., *Democracy and Peace: a More Skeptical View*, “Journal of Peace Research”, 33 (1), 1996, p. 1–10; Cattaneo. Particularly, the authors maintain that the democratic peace literature suffers from the poor theoretical foundation of its arguments and the difficult operationalization of the two variables involved – democracy and war/peace. Interestingly, they also argue that because of the doubts about democracy expressed there, Kant’s *Perpetual Peace* cannot be the only inspiring work for the democratic peace literature. They propose to delve deeper in the philosophical literature produced during the Enlightenment to study authors more supportive of the virtues of democracy. On this, see GATES, S., KNUTSEN, T.L. and MOSES, J.W., *Democracy and Peace*, p. 6, fn 15. For a discussion of how authority and obligation interact in the Kantian normative account of the state which explains the skepticism toward democracy, see MALIKS, R., *Kant, the State, and Revolution*, “Kantian Review”, 18 (1), 2013, pp. 29–47.

²⁷ The difficulties of conceptualizing democracy interested both political scientists and political theorists. Some examples: DAHL, R.A., *On Democracy*, Yale University Press, 1998; HUNTINGTON, S.P., *How Countries Democratize*, “Political Science Quarterly”, 106 (4), 1991-1992, pp. 579–616; BOBBIO, N., *Il Futuro della Democrazia*, Einaudi, 1984; *Il problema della guerra e le vie della pace*, Il Mulino, 1997, or. ed. 1979.

²⁸ For a brief review of the main contributions to the democratic peace debate see ANDREATTA, F., *Democrazia e Politica Internazionale: Pace Separata e Democratizzazione del Sistema Internazionale*, “Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica”, XXXV (2), 2005, pp. 1–16.

²⁹ The republican form of government is, for Kant, the only one which is «in conformity with the concept of right» in virtue of its representative system. See KANT, I., *Toward*

government. However, in Doyle's text this transposition appears to be an easy move, which would probably need further clarification, especially in order to explain the hard cases which seem to weaken the force of the 'separate peace' hypothesis.

B. *Elements of discontinuity*

First of all, there is a fundamental difference of *genre* between the two works under consideration: while Kant proposed a normative account of interstate relations, an ideal application of the command of reason at the international level that is coherent with the whole Kantian project devoted to the triumph of reason, Doyle looks at the reality of international relations and attempts to explain a phenomenon – the apparent lack of wars between democratic states – which he considers to be the actual realization of the Kantian pacific league. Thus, whereas for Kant a state of peace funded on liberal principles is the end of a process voluntarily undertaken by republics but ideally involving all states, for Doyle the state of peace is the output of a slow and non-linear learning process – the development of trust from continuing cooperation – which guarantees friendly relations among liberal states, but at the same time worsens the quality of the relations between liberal and non-liberal states.

Moreover, in his philosophical sketch Kant envisaged a federation of republican states – a pacific league – as the best means to realize a state of peace, i.e., an international order where states, following reason, comply with the moral duty of banning war “as a procedure for determining rights” and eventually realizing a world where states behave in conformity with the concept of right.³⁰ The idea of moral duty is present also in Doyle's interpretation, but only as a useful rhetoric tool adopted by democratic governments in order to justify their aggressive attitude towards non-liberal states, although sometimes the same democracies elude this moral duty, when they find it convenient to ally with non-liberal states for realizing geopolitical goals. However, Doyle maintains that the moral scope of liberalism should not be the base of liberal foreign policy, because there is a concrete risk that a similar policy would be caused by fanaticism or would hide imperialism. So, Doyle introduces an element of realism in his liberal approach to foreign policy analysis, maintaining that prudence should always drive states' actions irrespectively of the nature of their founding values.

In Kant's text there are some ambiguous points regarding the ban of war, which have been already exhaustively debated in the literature, particularly

Perpetual Peace, p. 325. Like Kant, Doyle identifies the main feature of liberalism in the importance attributed to moral freedom, a principle which founds rights and (representative) institutions: DOYLE, M.W., *Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs – Part 1*, p. 206.

³⁰ KANT, I., *Toward Perpetual Peace*, p. 325–327.

about the legitimate means republics might adopt in order to “extend further and further” the pacific league.³¹ As a matter of fact, while reason absolutely condemns war, nature uses war as a means to drive people everywhere on the Earth’s surface and to compel people to leave the state of nature and establish (law-regulated) social relations.³² Thus, as reason through nature finally affirms its own end, i.e., “the rule of right”,³³ it seems that from Kant’s perspective war is not totally irrational; on the contrary, it can serve reason to realize its design, whose final end is perpetual peace.³⁴ The classic question about how the pacific league would expand is indeed a challenging one, to which scholars give different answers, depending on their preferred interpretation of the Kantian text. Did Kant think that non-republican states could be forced to join the league, for instance in case of violation of cosmopolitan right? Or rather, did he assume that the example of republican states, conformingly to reason, would be the only mean to enlarge the union? The Kantian text about the possibilities of war after the establishment of the union is ambiguous, and it does not seem possible to give a definite answer on this point.³⁵ Nonetheless, it is interesting to point out that Doyle recognizes that, while liberal states in the ‘union’ seem to act conformingly to the first interpretation – they wage war and adopt non-liberal means to protect and enlarge the liberal community –, they should rather pursue consistency to liberal principles. This would mean to actively promote human rights even in allied non-liberal states and to work towards progressive institutional innovations in the global economy. Doyle maintains that they should also prefer a policy of accommodation with non-liberal states (be they weak or powerful), because liberalism cannot “*politically* sustain non-liberal policies”.

Finally, the role that Kant and Doyle assign to citizens of republics and liberal states is different: on the one hand, Kant considers the citizens of republican states to be fundamentally peaceful, insofar as they are interested in avoiding the costs of a war, and publicity of the government’s decisions about war would be a guarantee of a commitment to realize perpetual peace; on the other hand, Doyle points out that liberal states often are pushed to wage war because of the demands coming from civil society, or they rely on their peoples’ support when they declare

³¹ KANT, I., *Toward Perpetual Peace*, p. 327. For a reconstruction of Kant’s ideas about the realisation of perpetual peace and especially the possibility of fighting for it, see MALIKS, R., *Kant’s Politics in Context*, Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 144–167.

³² KANT, I., *Toward Perpetual Peace*, p. 327.

³³ KANT, I., *Toward Perpetual Peace*, p. 334. In the *First Supplement* to the treaty Kant defines the end of reason as the synthesis of «the *right of a state*, the *right of nations* and the *cosmopolitan right*».

³⁴ KANT, I., *Toward Perpetual Peace*, p. 335–336.

³⁵ For differing views on this problem see MERTENS, T., *From Perpetual Peace to the Law of Peoples*, “Kantian Review”, 6, 2002, pp. 60–84; FRANCESCHET, A., *Sovereignty and Freedom: Immanuel Kant’s Liberal Internationalist ‘Legacy’*, “Review of International Studies”, 27, 2001, pp. 209–238.

to act conformingly to liberal principles. Thus, while the former sees citizens – i.e., free moral individuals – as the agents ultimately responsible for the realization of peace, Doyle tends to identify liberal states as the unique agents responsible for a peace-generating foreign policy. Doyle does not mention international organizations, NGOs and transnational citizens' associations are not even mentioned as possible promoters of a peaceful coexistence in the international system. Thus, the same goal of preserving peace seems to be incorporated in the interest of each single liberal state, rather than being a desirable status which would improve the conditions of the whole humankind.

To conclude, it is worth noticing that Doyle's idea of 'going back to Kant' to frame a hypothesis based on the empirical evidence of a separate peace among democracies regarding the contemporary international system has provoked a lively debate on the relationship between democracy and peace. By now, the existence of a link between these two variables is seldom questioned,³⁶ although the establishment of the very nature of this link has proven to be difficult and involved many scholars. However, one should worry about two misunderstandings regarding this relationship which are recurrent in this literature. Firstly, Doyle attempted at explaining the separate peace adopting Kant's *Perpetual Peace* in order to highlight the liberal foundations of democratic regimes, basically rediscovering and accepting the Kantian intuition that it is possible to interpret states' foreign policy rejecting the realist account of the international state of war. Secondly, he does not accept the Kantian optimistic idea that liberal foreign policy is necessarily peaceful and he criticised the utopian view that it would lead *tout court* to the realization of a durable and universal state of peace. Quite on the contrary, Doyle warns against the dangers of liberal foreign policy which underestimates the realist advice to prudence as the mainstay of a liberal state's conduct of international relations.

2. *The democratic peace assumption: back to liberal theories*

Doyle attempted to explain a phenomenon – the absence of wars among liberal states during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – starting with a philosophical suggestion, the liberal idea that only the spreading of rights and citizens' representation – in one word, liberalism – can assure a stable peace. Indeed, Doyle corrected this idealistic vision limiting its scope through the demonstration that the pacific union includes only fellow (mature, i.e.

³⁶ GILBERT, A., *Must Global Politics Constrain Democracy? Great-power Realism, Democratic Peace, and Democratic Internationalism*, Princeton University Press, 1999, p. 12. See also LEVY, J.S., *Domestic Politics and War*, "Journal of Interdisciplinary History", 18 (4), 1988, pp. 653–673. Levy considers the absence of war between democracies to be almost an 'empirical law' of international relations, see *Domestic Politics and War*, p. 662.

“constitutional secure”) liberal states; indeed, it not only excludes non-liberal states, but war among states with different regimes becomes more probable than it would be in a ‘realist world’, where alliances were not stable and states waged war regardless of the nature of their own or their opponent’s regime. Another correction to the liberal ‘utopia’ of perpetual peace provided by Doyle regards the supposed intrinsic peacefulness of democracies: liberal states show that they fight wars as often as non-liberal states. Moreover, usually they win the wars that they fight, and sometimes with peace they impose on the defeated enemy the adoption of a liberal-democratic regime.³⁷

As already mentioned, many authors attempted to better operationalize the variables considered by Doyle – war and democracy – in order to explain the ‘hard cases’ and build a fully-fledged theory about the relationship between democracy and war.³⁸ However, none of the explanations proposed so far appears to be conclusive and convincing, and the same causal nexus ‘democracy → peace’ has been questioned and its ‘capsizing’ (peace → democracy) has often been put forward.³⁹ Also, some scholars noticed that it is impossible to explain the apparent absence of war between democracies referring to a unique, internal cause – the democratic regime. Rather, they propose to look for multi-causal explanations,⁴⁰ or to analyze the phenomenon as a process rather than as a given, in order to identify the historical patterns of pacification among Western states and consider the possibility that they will occur again in the future, eventually involving non-liberal states.⁴¹

³⁷ For a recent discussion of the issue that starts from an analysis of Kant’s thought to investigate contemporary theories, see EBERL, O. and NIESEN, P., *Nessuna pace col «nemico ingiusto»? Se sia lecito imporgli la democrazia dopo averlo sconfitto*, Trauben, 2014.

³⁸ See LEVY, J.S., *Domestic politics and war*. “Journal of Interdisciplinary History”, 18 (4), 1988, pp. 653–673; RUSSETT, B. *Grasping the Democratic Peace. Principles for a Post-Cold War World*, Princeton University Press, 1993. For a review, see CHERNOFF, F., (2004), *The Study of Democratic Peace and Progress in International Relations*, “International Studies Review”, 6 (1), pp. 49–78.

³⁹ For a discussion on the different interpretations on this causal nexus and its implications for liberal (especially cosmopolitan) projects of global order see ARCHIBUGI, D., *The Global Commonwealth of Citizens. Toward Cosmopolitan Democracy*, Princeton University Press, 2008, pp. 62 ff. It would be impossible to present an account of all the main works devoted to the discussion of the link between democracy and peace; some of them – written in the aftermath of the end of the Cold War – became particularly influential. See, for instance; FUKUYAMA, F., *The End of History and the Last Man*, Free Press, 1992; RUSSETT, B. *Grasping the Democratic Peace*; PANEBIANCO, A., *Guerrieri democratici. Le democrazie e la politica di potenza*, Il Mulino, 1997; BONANATE, L., *Democrazia tra le nazioni*, Bruno Mondadori Editore, 2001.

⁴⁰ GATES, S., KNUTSEN, T.L. and MOSES, J.W., *Democracy and Peace*, p. 7.

⁴¹ CEDERMAN, L-E., *Back to Kant: Reinterpreting the Democratic Peace as a Macrohistorical Learning Process*, “American Political Science Review”, 95 (1), 2001, pp. 15–31.

When these authors refer to the democratic peace in general, they usually refer to the phenomenon – the absence of war – or to the simplified explanation – democracies do not fight against other democracies because of their liberal-democratic features. As this second meaning is usually adopted by liberal theorists, their philosophical proposals suffer from vagueness.

The following paragraphs demonstrate that the democratic peace is not an adequate premise for founding philosophical projects aimed at realizing a liberal conception of global order through which peace and human rights can be assured to all individuals. Particularly, because of the assumption of the democratic peace, the Rawlsian project is weakened: their scope is limited and the same liberal character of their projects is questionable because of the assumption of the ‘democratic peace’ as a mainstay of the international system.

The democratic peace as a basic fact of the international system

Rawls’s proposal of a *Law of Peoples* aims at challenging the classical realist conception of international relations as the sphere of power struggles in a context of anarchy, proposing an alternative Kantian conception of *foedus pacificum* among well-ordered societies – i.e., liberal states –⁴² in order to make the international system “stable for the right reasons” and realize a durable and universal “state of peace”, or “peace by satisfaction”, avoiding the occurrence in the future of “the great evils of human history” which follow from political injustice.⁴³

⁴² Rawls explicitly refers to the model of Kant’s *Toward Perpetual Peace* when he presents his proposal for an alternative to realist theories of international relations. The updated version of the *foedus pacificum* is the Society of Peoples. Rawls is not the only political theorist who contributed to the revival of the Kantian proposal for bringing about perpetual peace. For instance, Habermas has widely discussed the opportunity of See HABERMAS, J., *Kant’s Idea of Perpetual Peace: At Two Hundred Years’ Historical Remove*, in Id., *The Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Theory*, MIT Press, 1998, or. ed. 1995, pp. 167–201. He has later developed his ideas on the international order in a number of essays, such as *The Postnational Constellation and the Future of Democracy*, in Id., *The Postnational Constellation. Political Essays*, MIT Press, 2001, or. ed. 1998, pp. 58–112; *A Political Constitution for the Pluralist World Society?*, in Id., *Between Naturalism and Religion*, Polity Press, 2008, or. ed. 2005, pp. 312–352. Habermas considers the diffusion of democratic institutions as essential to the realisation of a stable peace, not only as far as the state level is concerned, but also beyond the state. For a reconstruction of the Habermasian conception of international order with explicit reference to the Kantian legacy, see ROULET, G., *Habermas sur la paix perpétuelle. De la difficulté d’une philosophie politique de la globalisation*, in *Kant Cosmopolitique*, edited by Y.C. Zarka, C. Guibet Lafaye, Editions de l’Éclat, 2008, pp. 157–173; FINE, R. and SMITH, W., *Jurgen Habermas’s Theory of Cosmopolitanism*, “Constellations”, 10 (4), 2003, pp. 469–487.

⁴³ RAWLS, J., *The Law of Peoples*, pp. 6–7. The idea of ‘peace by satisfaction’, which is adopted also by Doyle, was proposed by Aron in his seminal work on international

The starting point of Rawls's reflection on the Law of Peoples is the idea of extending justice as fairness beyond the borders of liberal societies, although this extension presents several problems because of the structural differences in the societies analyzed. Indeed, in the first society the basic units are free moral persons (bound together in a fairly cooperating community), whereas in the international system Rawls identifies "peoples", as distinct from states, as the main relevant actors. Peoples have a moral character and they lack some attributes of traditional sovereignty; moreover, the individuals forming a people share a common conception of right and justice. Although societies usually organize themselves through states, only well-ordered societies deserve to be called peoples and can be considered the legitimate members of the Society of Peoples. For this reason, only democratic and "decent" states can take part in the Society of Peoples,⁴⁴ where "great evils" cannot happen because political injustice has been defeated internally by functioning liberal institutions and true equality among peoples is guaranteed. Like citizens in the national context, peoples constituting the Society are considered to be free, equal and reasonable, and in their mutual relations they voluntarily comply with the Law of Peoples. Ideally, the eight principles constituting the Law of Peoples, are those which, being recognized as basic principles of political justice governing peoples' conduct, representatives of free, equal and reasonable peoples would debate in a second-level original position.⁴⁵ Complying with the Law of Peoples, a process of moral learning through which peoples develop mutual trust and confidence in one another leads peoples to establish a state of peace.

relations. He presents a classification of the different forms of peace among nations. See ARON, R., *Paix et guerre entre les nations*, Calmann-Lévy, 1962.

⁴⁴ RAWLS, J., *The Law of Peoples*, p. 29.

⁴⁵ RAWLS, J., *The Law of Peoples*, p. 33–37. The eight principles' list is at p. 37:

- I. «Peoples are free and independent, and their freedom and independence are to be respected by other peoples.
- II. Peoples are to observe treaties and undertakings.
- III. Peoples are equals and are parties to the agreements that bind them.
- IV. Peoples are to observe a duty of non-intervention.
- V. Peoples have the right of self-defense but no right to instigate war for reasons other than self-defense.
- VI. Peoples are to honor human rights.
- VII. Peoples are to observe certain specified restrictions in the conduct of war.
- VIII. Peoples have a duty to assist other peoples living under unfavorable conditions that prevent their having a just or decent political and social regime».

For Rawls's discussion of the eight principles, see pp. 37–42. For different interpretations of the implications of Rawls's choice of principles with a particular interest for the conduct of foreign policy, see KIM, H., *A Stability Interpretation of Rawls's The Law of Peoples*, "Political Theory", online, 2014; BLAKE, M., *Justice and Foreign Policy*, Oxford University Press, 2013; LEAVITT, N., *The Foreign Policy of John Rawls and Amartya Sen*, Lexington Books, 2013; LLOYD WILLIAMS, H., *On Rawls, Development and Global Justice. The Freedom of Peoples*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

The optimistic vision proposed by Rawls of an international system where eventually peace becomes the normal condition of international relations' conduct is based on the concept of realistic utopia and on the possibility of reconciling ourselves with our social world:

Our hope for the future rests on the belief that the possibilities of our social world allow a reasonably just constitutional democratic society living as a member of a reasonably just Society of Peoples. An essential step to being reconciled with our social world is to see that such a Society of Peoples is indeed possible.⁴⁶

Rawls argues that the trust in the possibility of a democratic international society constituted by democratic peoples is well-founded, because of four 'basic facts' of the international system, which are four actual features of the current international system:

1. The Fact of Reasonable Pluralism
2. The Fact of Democratic Unity in Diversity
3. The Fact of Public Reason
4. The Fact of Democratic Peace

Whereas facts 1., 2. and 3. are internal characteristics of liberal democratic societies, fact 4. concerns the normal conduct of international relations among liberal peoples. Rawls infers that the fourth fact can easily be extended to include the relations between liberal and 'decent' peoples. Indeed, although they do not have a democratic regime, decent people are not expansionist and their governments act on the basis of a shared – though not pluralistic neither egalitarian – conception of justice, which is accepted by the citizens.

Regarding the fact of democratic peace, Rawls shows an enthusiastic approval to Doyle's discovery of an "empirical regularity" within the international system. He goes further, demonstrating that the possibility of democratic peace is not incompatible with the actual – i.e., non-ideal – democracies. In his opinion, there is no need to wait for the existence of ideal, flawless democracies since the democratic peace is already a fact. Five institutional features secure a peace by satisfaction among democracies and make them less likely to engage in war, even against non-liberal "outlaw regimes": fair equality of opportunity; decent distribution of income and wealth; society as employer of last resort; basic health care assured for all; public financing of elections and availability of public information on matters of policy.⁴⁷ Thus, Rawls concludes, the possession of these

⁴⁶ RAWLS, J., *The Law of Peoples*, p. 124.

⁴⁷ RAWLS, J., *The Law of Peoples*, pp. 48–50.

five minimal democratic requirements “supports the idea of a democratic peace”.⁴⁸ However, the fact that democracies by nature – that is, in consequence of their basic structure – are less likely to engage in war does not ban war from the international system: democratic peoples never resort to war to pursue their interest or to solve disputes, but they can do it only against outlaw regimes in a few exceptional cases: legitimate self-defence, legitimate defence of allies and intervention to protect foreign populations in severe cases of basic human rights violation.

3. A shaky liberal project for global order?

From the preceding sections, it should be clear that Rawls adopted an oversimplified version of Doyle’s explanation and mistakenly assumed it to be a general law of the international system. This section argues that this caused a weakening of the same idea of “realistic utopia”, because, given the limited validity of this ‘empirical’ assumption, the ‘realistic basis’ of his normative project is shaky and therefore its theoretical solidity and practical feasibility result questionable – leaving itself open to criticisms regarding its utopian character.

Indeed, Rawls maintains that democracies during the last two centuries have been building a pacific system – a “security community” – and he stresses the institutional features that make cooperation among democracies stable. Moreover, he proposes the example of the European Union as the biggest and the most effective democratic security community in the world. In so doing, he refers to the evidence offered not only in Doyle’s article, but also in a number of studies. However, Rawls seems to undervalue the prudential content of Doyle’s contribution on the separate peace: he does not admit that undesired effects like democracies’ aggressive attitude towards non-democratic states – for instance, in the case of covert operations – can be caused by the same liberal values that permitted to found a lasting peace among democracies.

Firstly, his explanation for the hard cases when the ‘law’ of democratic peace fails does not question the validity of this law, but looks at the imperfection of the existing democratic systems. Thus, Rawls’s conclusion is that the exceptions to the democratic peace are caused by ‘various failures in a democracy’s essential supporting institutions and practices’.⁴⁹ That was the case for the US in different periods of their history, when economic interests attained to control the political elite; however, when all (democratic) societies tend to realize the ideal of justice as fairness, they choose to adopt a foreign policy course inspired by and complying with the eight principles of the Law of Peoples. Secondly, the many criticisms

⁴⁸ RAWLS, J., *The Law of Peoples*, p. 51.

⁴⁹ RAWLS, J., *The Law of Peoples*, p. 53.

moved toward Doyle's explanation of the phenomenon of separate peace, particularly those regarding the difficult operationalization of the two concepts of democracy and war, would have required careful consideration, a reassessment of its explanatory potential and a more prudent inclusion of its conclusions within a normative projects. However, Rawls paid no attention at those criticisms. As a matter of fact, it is difficult to explain the nature of the relation between democracy and war. Moreover, it seems impossible to adopt any possible explanation as a general law of politics, because, for instance, the fact that during a certain period of time democracies never fought one against the other is not sufficient evidence to conclude that in the future they will never do it. At the same time, we cannot exclude that among non-liberal states similar dynamics might emerge and produce other, non-liberal, forms of separate peace.

Furthermore, as during the last two centuries the same concept of democracy changed considerably, it is impossible to exclude that it will change in the future. Adopting different definitions of democracy might either confirm the separate peace hypothesis or refute it once and forever; thus, the hypothesis' assumption seems to endanger the tenure of the Rawlsian proposal for a liberal-driven Society of Peoples. Finally, how can we be sure that the democratic peace hypothesis – whose original version was explicitly based on the analysis of democracies' foreign policies – holds also for decent peoples? Is it enough to assume that these peoples are not expansionist and that they have a moral character, so relying on the two fundamental features that make them members of the Society of Peoples? In order to include these societies in the framework, it would be necessary to stretch the hypothesis considerably, not only because of the unclear concept of decency expressed by Rawls, but also because the relations occurring among liberal and non-liberal, non-outlaw societies seem to be quite complex, even at a first glance.

Another implication of the assumption of the democratic peace as a basic fact of the international system is that the Law of Peoples, like similar liberal projects for achieving perpetual peace, can only realize a limited peace or relax its liberal character. On the one hand, as a matter of fact, even if we admit that the democratic peace is a general law of international politics, it seems impossible that a Rawlsian Society of Peoples might ever include non-liberal peoples. Because of the exclusive character of the Society, non-liberal peoples would stay apart, and participate in the liberal-driven international system as enemies (outlaw regimes), as backward, needy societies (burdened societies), or as isolationist actors (rentier states) with no interest to engage in the redefinition of the political global order. Toward these societies war (armed intervention) is possible for the exceptional cases mentioned above. Thus, we would expect to have a double-standard international system involving both moral and non-moral actors organised in states, where a liberal Society of Peoples coexist with non-liberal states, realizing an intra-liberal peace but not a general "peace by satisfaction", which by definition would be general and stable. However, this future perspective does not

seem so different from the real world that we live in, “here and now”. On the other hand, in order to definitely ban war and great evils from the world, all the societies in the system should become well-ordered and comply with the Law of Peoples in dealing with other societies. Which policies could liberal and decent societies adopt in order to enlarge the peaceful community?

We can imagine two kinds of policies:

1. proactive policies, aimed at directly changing the regimes in non-well-ordered societies;
2. passive policies, promoting regime changes through diplomatic effort, developmental aid, conditionality clauses in international treaties, and the example of a liberal (or ‘decent’) people consistently complying with the Law of Peoples.

Nevertheless, both solutions would contradict the same foundations of the Rawlsian liberal project for global order, particularly with regard to the liberal values of international pluralism and equality of peoples.

First, considering only well-ordered societies as rightful members of the Society of Peoples means that the other states within the international system are not considered as having a moral character, and this could lead – assuming Doyle’s original hypothesis – to a scenario where democracies tend to be aggressive towards non-liberal peoples in order to change their regimes, or – assuming the simplified version of democratic peace – we can imagine an alternative scenario where democracies are sometimes forced to resort to war because of the aggressive behaviour of outlaw regimes.

Second, the problem with passive policies is that in a world of non-ideal democracies these policies are never necessarily aimed at causing a regime change accordingly with the citizens’ desire, and the same idea of a bright example offered by democracies can raise irony and scepticism. Moreover, passive policies seem to be useful tools only if the government that democratic governments aim to change is cooperative, but this is not always the case. As a matter of fact, usually non-liberal governments are not so favourably disposed toward conditionalities and diplomatic pressures exerted by democracies.⁵⁰ They tend to choose international isolation or non-liberal donors and openly oppose liberal policies of conditional development aid and foreign support for internal democratic opponents.

Finally, the assumption of the democratic peace as a basic fact of the international system poses a problem of internal coherence for the theory: indeed, it seems to contradict the liberal ideas of reasonable pluralism and equality that Rawls considers fundamental for his project of global order. Recognizing the

⁵⁰ For instance, the Serbian government led by Slobodan Milosevic, the Iraqi government under Saddam Hussein or the Cuban ‘revolutionary’ government preferred to face long-lasting *embargos* and a hostile international community rather than to accept interference by democratic states (or democracy-supporting international organizations) in their internal affairs.

moral superiority of the democratic model over any other – decent or indecent – seems to contradict the idea of equality among the actors within the system, and risks leading to a paternalistic leadership of the Society by liberal peoples. Notwithstanding the imperfections of actual democracies, they could take it upon themselves the right to use coercive means to guarantee order within the international system. Indeed, Rawls seems to concede that war cannot disappear completely from the system – at least in the mid- and long-term, although the authority of resorting to war should be delegated to the Society as a whole. Moreover, war should be permitted only in exceptional cases – individual and collective self-defence, protection of (basic) human rights just in case of “gross violations”. Thus, the foundation of the philosophical project on the moral superiority of democracies could unexpectedly make the system less stable, because it can legitimize paternalistic or fanatic behaviours from the strongest democracies, and this would make every clash of interests much more risky, particularly if we accept the idea that when such conflicts involve actors with different cultural and political background, distrust and misperceptions can precipitate the events and lead to hard confrontations, thus increasing the risk of war.

Although these limitations to the use of war and an increased cooperation among liberal and decent peoples are normatively desirable, it seems that the international society proposed by Rawls in *The Law of Peoples* would not be substantially different from the world we know. Within the larger picture of the international system, the troubling problems of power asymmetry which undermine the principle of equality, political injustices, systemic instability and latent possibility of war would not be solved with the adoption of a Kantian-Rawlsian *foedus pacificum*. This league or federation would include only well-ordered societies – at least until history refutes the democratic peace law of international relations – and it might intensify, rather than soften, the tensions between liberal and non-liberal peoples.

To conclude, along these lines, such a scenario engenders many doubts about the scope and the desirability of a liberal Society of Peoples. On the one hand, if we look at it as a project of perpetual peace, Rawls’s proposal appears to be too limited in scope: it attempts at justifying the actual condition of inequality and injustice, rather than challenging the foundations of the *status quo*, and he proposes to start with the fact of democratic peace in order to enlarge the peaceful community including also decent peoples. On the other hand, if we consider it to be a proposal for extending justice as fairness, it does not seem to be more successful, because the possibility of actively pursuing the spreading of democracy and the guarantee of human rights or of distributive justice is sacrificed in order to enlarge the Society of Peoples thanks to the inclusion of decent peoples.