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Competing Visions of Peace Amidst Declining Democratization

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What is peace? In the age of decreasing global appetite for liberal democracy, how does the notion of peace prefigure in the political discourse of emerging far-right politicians? The concept of peace constitutes one of the most contentious discursive tools in modern politics. Peace is a fuzzy meta-discourse, which means that its discursive invocation in the public sphere facilitates considerable difficulties in distinguishing it from other related but supposedly distinctive concepts such as development, justice, human rights, stability, consolidated regime, strong state, and democratization. By conceiving peace as a fuzzy meta-discourse, its meaning is provisional, contextual, and circumstantial, and therefore, by necessity, its definitional boundaries are malleable and difficult to analytically pin down. The application of the peace concept could vary widely depending on a complex range of factors—such as the user’s agenda, cultural context, temporal milieu, and discursive environment.

Because of the inherent malleability of peace as social discourse, political actors of varying capabilities and range of influence deploy, weaponize, and instrumentalize the moral resonance of peace in order to advance their own substantive political goals. Similar to Clifford Bob’s conceptualization of human rights as a “weapon of conflict,” one could consider peace as a tool for mobilizing actors in support of substantive political goals, often by juxtaposing and underpinning proposed policies and concrete political agendas with the morally appealing notion of peace. The success of a particular vision of peace primarily depends on the effectiveness of the powerful actors’ mobilization efforts in support of such a peace vision, while also delegitimizing its competitors.

Perhaps the most prominent method of defining peace is through negotiation, particularly by defining it as the antithesis of violence. Yet, this

method has its own serious complications. What does violence mean? When does violence occur? What are its empirical features? Those questions, among the many corollary ones, illustrates the similar dilemma of specifying the substantive attributes of peace. Despite the controversies in the definition, the collective public imagination of peace is quite suggestive. Peace broadly refers to the relative absence or decreased level of human violence in a given political territory. It is relative because conflict appears to be inherent in any political community, and resolution of such conflict—whether primarily through violence or nonviolent methods—could widely vary across historical time and territorial space. In domestic constitutional orders, peace may practically mean that murders, physical aggression, threats to physical integrity rights, are rare. At the global level, peace refers to the relatively low likelihood of wars (or the threat thereof) between states and political communities.

One useful way of defining peace is viewing it as a powerful idea that resonates amongst peoples from various backgrounds. Its moral appeal, however, provides opportunities for various political actors to deploy peace discourses in the articulation of their political demands, mobilization of supporters toward their cause, and the delegitimization of political opponents' contending vision of peace. As a fuzzy meta-discourse and tool for political mobilization, peace constitutes the contentious politics that underpin contemporary political discourse including policy debates, contestations amongst politicians, civil society actors, and the masses. Its moral resonance rests on the idea that political communities generally prefer a relative absence of violence over being involved in violent conflicts. More concretely, human individuals are predisposed to preserve their lives against any form of external violence and harassment.

Based on the International Relations literature of “liberal peace,” peace emerges from the successful consolidation of liberal democratic institutions, market-based political economy, and effective state institutions. This liberal peace literature constitutes two core clusters. First, since the 1990s, American political scientists such as Bruce Russett, John R. Oneal, and Michael Doyle, among many others, uphold the democratic peace theory that posits that liberal democracies are less likely to wage war against each other primarily because of the mediating role of several factors, including republican institutions that generally facilitate public resistance to wars abroad. Second, another conceptualization of “liberal peace” concerns the literature on the critique of peacebuilding. Critical peacebuilding scholars include Meera Sabaratnam, David Chandler, Susanna Campbell, Mark Duffield, Oliver Richmond, Edward Newman, and Roland Paris, among many others. Liberal peacebuilding entails the promotion of such liberal

democratic principles, market-based economies, and supposedly modern state institutions in conflict-ridden or post-conflict societies.

Both democratic peace theory and liberal peacebuilding constitute two sides of the same coin. Its eschatological reliance on the trinitarian sanctity of liberal democracy, market economy, and strong state institutions (as a recipe for enduring peace) shows how powerful actors, particularly in the post-Cold War era, have strategically appropriated, reframed, and instrumentalized the moral resonance of the notion of peace to promote its constitutive liberal principles.

Historically, the promotion of liberal peace discourses gained traction, especially immediately after the Cold War, when the United States emerged as the most dominant state actor in the international system. In 1994, for example, United States President Bill Clinton, in his State of the Union speech, asserted that the “best strategy to ensure our security and to build a durable peace is to support the advance of democracy elsewhere ... democracies don’t attack each other.” This statement illustrates that the U.S. government’s aggressive promotion of democracy abroad was legitimized through the invocation of international peace—a policy strategy that coincided when American political scientists such as Bruce Russett, Michael Doyle, and Zeev Maoz, among others, began publishing their ideas on democratic peace theory.

After a decade, during a press conference with the media in 2004, United States President George W. Bush argued that “democracies don’t go to war with each other. And the reason why is the people of most societies don’t like war, and they understand what war means,” and asserted his “great faith in democracies to promote peace.” Remember that Clinton and Bush were speaking to a global audience during two distinctive historical periods. Clinton spoke in the 1990s, when liberal democracy was discursively framed to have successfully eclipsed communism as the ideal form of political governance and conduit for peace. Bush, meanwhile, invoked democratization as a harbinger of peace in the context of the U.S.-led global war on terror—a discursive strategy that sought to legitimize United States’ violent counterterror operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere through the lens of democracy as a peacebuilding strategy. Both cases clearly illustrate the strategic instrumentalization of peace as a tactical tool for international mobilization in support of United States foreign policy aims at that time.

Notably, there are several ways through which political actors instrumentalize peace discourses. The first mechanism demonstrates the use of peace to legitimize a particular set of concrete political goals. In the case of the Israeli-Palestine conflict, the Trump administration has argued that

the Israeli settlements in the highly disputed West Bank area as “not necessarily illegal.” United States Defense Secretary Mike Pompeo suggested that the previous American policy of calling out Israeli civilian settlements as antithetical to international law failed to deliver peace in the region. Pompeo argued that Israeli courts have the jurisdiction to determine if such settlements are legal. Supporting such a discursive move by the Trump administration, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu urged “responsible countries who hope to advance peace to adopt a similar position.” Contesting this vision of peace, Federica Mogherini, the European Union’s (EU) top diplomat, assures that the EU’s stance on such settlements remains “unchanged: all settlement activity is illegal under international law and it erodes the viability of the two-state solution and the prospects for a lasting peace.”

This particular discursive battle for peace shows how world leaders deploy diverging peace discourses in order to advance differentiated political outcomes. For the Israeli and U.S. governments, Israeli civilian settlements in the disputed West Bank area are legitimate, and therefore should be welcomed as they foster peace in the region. For the EU and perhaps for many Palestinians, such Israeli settlements hinder the peaceful resolution of the territorial disputes, amongst many related issues that concern the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians.

Another example of deploying peace discourses to justify policies in contentious territories refers to Turkish President Recep Erdogan’s justification for military operations against Kurds in northern Syria. In October 2019, he argued that the aim was “to destroy the terror corridor which is trying to be established on our southern border and to bring peace to the region.” Historically, Kurds have been one of the largest ethnic minorities living in Turkey and several neighboring countries, and they have been suffering from systemic persecution due to their minority status. Erdogan’s statement shows that peace was ironically instrumentalized to justify systemic violence against a minority group.

In some cases, state leaders invoke peace in order to justify systemic attempts to transform particular facets of the current international order, as this is particularly the case of maritime territorial disputes that have featured intensified rivalry between a challenger power and a status quo power. Particularly, as China asserts itself as a reemerging regional hegemon in the Asia-Pacific, China’s President Xi Jinping’s administration has been active in building artificial islands in the South China Sea and the West Philippine Sea in a bid to undermine several smaller states’ territorial claims as well as freedom of navigation. By building those artificial islands, Beijing has

facilitated increased militarization in those disputed areas, thereby not only engendering military insecurity amongst claimant states, but also dragging the United States into the conflict as Washington attempts to obstruct Beijing's expanding control in the region.

Responding to calls from the EU and U.S. officials to comply with the rules-based international order and to maintain peace, President Xi insisted "on maintaining peace and stability in the South China Sea, and on directly negotiating for a peaceful resolution on relevant disputes with states that are directly involved, based on the respect of history and in accordance with international laws." This assertion of peaceful resolution, however, is problematic as Beijing's increased military activities facilitated counter-responses such as the ongoing military build-up by other claimant states and more active naval presence from the United States. Moreover, Beijing's efforts of massive military build-up and its ambitious territorial claims in the South China Sea region contravene the Permanent Court of Arbitration's (PCA) 2016 ruling on *China v. Philippines* case, whereby the court ruled that Beijing's claims were antithetical to the provisions of the United Nations Conventions on the Laws of the Sea. While invoking peace discourses, Beijing did not participate in the PCA proceedings and consequently ignored the decision.

In another case, illiberal politicians also deploy peace discourses to facilitate dramatic transformation in domestic and foreign policies. During his third address to the United Nations General Assembly, former United States President Donald Trump claimed that, "If you want peace, love your nation. Wise leaders always put the good of their own people and their own country first ... The future does not belong to globalists. The future belongs to patriots." While his predecessors discursively justified multilateralism and international cooperation as instruments of international peace and American interests, Trump abandoned those legitimization tactics and instead contended that peace can only be achieved through the vigorous defense of American national interest. These two examples—Xi Jinping on the South China Sea disputes and Donald Trump on the abandonment of multilateralism as foundations of United States foreign policy—illustrate how populist leaders have instrumentalized peace discourses in ways that transform the status quo in the international system.

The second mechanism concerns how authoritarian and illiberal politicians present themselves as sole harbingers of peace. I call this process the political personification of peace. By presenting themselves as personified embodiments of peace, political leaders seek to increase their moral standing and political legitimacy, while exaggerating their capacities to deliver the needed public goods to their constituency.

In the Philippines, under the rule of Rodrigo Duterte, peace discourses emerged not as a macro-social condition, where systemic state violence has been decimated, but rather, as tools for legitimizing increased state violence. As the longtime mayor of the Philippines' third largest city, Duterte asserted that "the only reason there is peace and order in Davao [City] is because of me." During his time as Mayor of Davao City, Duterte and his allies implemented widespread extrajudicial killings of hundreds of alleged drug addicts, suspected petty criminals, and homeless children. Upon starting his presidential term in 2016, Duterte led and promoted his state-wide extrajudicial killings of alleged illegal drug personalities, thereby causing the deaths of at least 12,000 Filipinos, according to the latest 2019 data from the Human Rights Watch. Duterte's claim that he personifies peace is bizarre, if not false, considering that his administration has been responsible for the ongoing genocide of thousands of civilian Filipinos in his so-called "war on drugs."

Similarly, the personification of peace becomes more visible in the politics behind the awarding of Nobel Peace Prizes. Barack Obama received the aforementioned prize in 2009, just a few months after he started his term as President of the United States. Donald Trump, on the other hand, complained publicly that he was not awarded the Nobel Prize, but it was given to Obama, and "he [Obama] didn't even know what he got it for... he was there for about 15 seconds and he got the Nobel Prize... he said, 'Oh, what did I get it for?'" Trump argued that his policies prevented the deaths of three million civilians residing in Syria's rebel-held Idlib area, after he notified the governments in Moscow, Tehran, and Damascus against an intended violent operation. Moreover, Trump's self-perception as a harbinger of peace became more evident when he resumed peace talks with North Korea's top leader, Kim Jong-Un. Attempting to discredit his predecessors, Trump claimed that "anyone can make war, but only the most courageous can make peace." By describing himself as courageous, Trump proclaimed that the renewed talks with North Korea promote peace in ways that predecessors' foreign policies did not.

The third mechanism pertains to the use of peace discourses as a strategy of delegitimization of political opponents. For instance, the far-right Dutch politician Geert Wilders has been quite prominent in Western European politics for his attempts to mainstream racist and sexist political discourses and white supremacist ideology. Notably, Wilders has also used the notion of peace to undermine the moral legitimacy of those in the political left: "Our contemporary leftist intellectuals are blind to the dangers of Islam. Islam is the Communism of today... They argue that

our enemy is as peace-loving as we are, that if we meet him half-way he will do the same, that he only asks respect and that if we respect him he will respect us.” These statements suggest Wilders’ discursive attempts to discredit his political opponents from the Left by arguing that Islam does not promote peace in the society. In a speech on 2 February 2013, Wilders claimed that “Freedom and Islam are not compatible ... Allow no one to tell you that Islam is a religion of peace ... Islam is an ideology of violence.”

Similarly, attempting to legitimize his Hindu nationalist and fascist policies, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi spoke in 2019 to the UN General Assembly, where he asserted that “India has given the world Buddha’s message of peace, not war ... Its voice against terrorism rings with seriousness and outrage, alerting the world about this evil.” This invocation of peace came amidst the renewed repressive policies in the Indian-controlled Kashmir region, particularly after stripping the area of its semi-autonomous status.

Another example of a far-right populist politician using peace discourses to discredit one’s political opponents pertains to Nigel Farage of the United Kingdom. On May 2019, before the Conservative parties, which constitute what he called as the “Westminster establishment,” Farage claimed that his exclusionary and discriminatory discourses as well as his Brexit campaign were a “peaceful political revolution,” notwithstanding the increasing racist attacks against persons of color and immigrants.

Likewise, albeit in a more sophisticated way, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, a far-right politician, called European liberals hypocritical. Liberals, Orban claimed, are convinced that “they have a theoretical system that will bring salvation, peace and prosperity to all humanity,” yet when such an “ideology of universal salvation and peace encounters resistance, it responds to this conflict not with argument, but with hatred.” These statements illustrate Orban’s beliefs concerning the alleged contradictions of liberalism, which in turn, could discredit his liberal political opponents.

Indeed, multilateralism, global interdependence, and liberal democracy have been constituting the foundations of the post-Cold War international order. American world dominance has primarily depended upon this ideology for its legitimation claims and has offered it as a harbinger of international peace. Yet, in recent years, such an ideology has been facing formidable challenges from far-right, anti-democratic, and illiberal politicians from both the Global North and South. These politicians have used peace discourses in order to provide moral resonance to their vision

of political utopia that seeks to create walls not bridges amongst nations, dehumanizes minority groups, and responds to nonviolent political dissent with state violence rather than rational argumentation. If peace, as a contentious and fuzzy meta-discourse, could recover from the moral bankruptcy of the far-right, the radical and emancipatory social movements should offer a space where peace utopias are radically reimaged through identity politics of universal human dignity and a distributive politics that does justice to those who are historically deprived from the necessary material public goods.

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