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'They asked for it': Democratic Peace Theory and Vietnamese perceptions of the Russo-Ukrainian War

Introduction

Perceptions of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 vary significantly, notably at the international level. Governments and most citizens in established democratic countries tend to view Putin and the Russian state as largely responsible for the conflict. However, governments and citizens of countries outside the democratic 'West' often take a different position, as seen in the recent votes taken in the United Nations.¹ In such countries, governments may view Ukraine, the United States, and NATO as partly or even fully responsible for the conflict. Are these views politically driven, or do they reflect an element of culture and national identity?

This paper first discusses Democratic Peace Theory, setting out a theoretical position for understanding the role culture and national identity may play in the formation of perceptions of responsibility for the Russo-Ukrainian war. As an unusual example, the paper then outlines the actions of the Vietnamese government following the outbreak of the war and compares these with the views held by Vietnamese citizens. Finally, the paper explores whether non-democratic countries such as Vietnam can be used to explore key issues in Democratic Peace Theory.

¹ *Ukraine: UN General Assembly demands Russia reverse course on 'attempted illegal annexation'*, United Nations News, 12 October 2022, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/10/1129492> [accessed: 01 May 2023].

Democratic Peace Theory and the origins of differences in perception of conflicts

Most studies of the interaction of national-level politics and broader international relations cite an often-voiced assertion that democratic states seldom, if ever, go to war with each other. This claim has a surprisingly long history. Building on work by Thomas Paine, Immanuel Kant argued in his 1795 essay *Towards Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch*² that the establishment of democratic governments would ensure a more peaceful international system. Kant believed that democratic governments are less likely to go to war with each other than other forms of government. He reasoned that such governments can be punished electorally for engaging in unpopular or unsuccessful wars, restraining the temptation to resort to force to resolve international disputes. When two democratically elected governments find themselves in dispute, both will tend to shy away from military conflict, making ‘kinetic warfare’³ even less likely.

In the last 40 years, a sizeable group of political scientists, including Michael Doyle,⁴ John Owen,⁵ and Bruce Russett⁶ have written extensively on these ideas, first described as Democratic Peace Theory (DPT) by Doyle in 1983. Of importance, authors in this group have provided empirical evidence to support the core assertion that democratic governments rarely, if ever, go to war with each other.⁷

While many authors accept the broad assertions of DPT, the approach has also drawn some prominent critics. John Mearsheimer,⁸ Christopher Layne,⁹ and Edward Mansfield and Jack Snyder¹⁰ have all questioned key assumptions underpinning the theory. These, and later, critics point to the very narrow definition of

² I. Kant, *Zum ewigen Frieden: Ein philosophischer Entwurf*, bei Friedrich Nicolovius, Königsberg 1795.

³ T. Noah, *Birth of a Washington Word*, Slate, 20 November 2002, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2002/11/kinetic-warfare.html> [accessed: 01 May 2023].

⁴ M.W. Doyle, *Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs*, “Philosophy & Public Affairs” 1983, vol. 12, no. 3, pp. 205–235.

⁵ J.M. Owen, *How Liberalism Produces Democratic Peace*, “International Security” 1994, vol. 19, no. 2, pp. 87–125, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539197>.

⁶ B. Russett, J.R. Oneal, M. Cox, *Clash of Civilizations, or Realism and Liberalism Déjà Vu? Some Evidence*, “Journal of Peace Research” 2000, vol. 37, no. 5, pp. 583–608.

⁷ M.W. Doyle, *op. cit.*; J.L. Ray, *Wars Between Democracies: Rare, or Nonexistent?*, “International Interactions” 1993, vol. 18, no. 3, pp. 251–276; D. Reiter, A.C. Stam, *Democracies at War*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ 2002; B. Russett, J.R. Oneal, M. Cox, *op. cit.*

⁸ J.J. Mearsheimer, *The False Promise of International Institutions*, “International Security” 1994, vol. 19, no. 3, pp. 5–49.

⁹ Ch. Layne, *Kant or Cant: the Myth of the Democratic Peace*, “International Security” 1994, vol. 19, no. 2, pp. 5–49, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539195>.

¹⁰ E.D. Mansfield, J. Snyder, *Democratization and War*, “Foreign Affairs” 1995, vol. 74, no. 3, pp. 79–97, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20047125>.

‘democracy’ required to support the theory’s core claim. They argue that DPT fails to explain examples of proto- or quasi-democratic states going to war together, such as the 1812 war between Great Britain and the United States or the ‘football war’ between Honduras and El Salvador in 1969.

Further criticism of DPT, central to this paper, focuses on the failure of the theory to address the role that culture, norms, and national identity play in shaping relations between countries. In particular, Alexander Wendt, a prominent constructivist scholar, argues that DPT ignores the importance of these variables in shaping a state’s international behaviour. In his article *Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics*,¹¹ Wendt suggests it might not be political institutions and systems *per se* that determine the likelihood of a country resorting to force internationally. Rather he suggests it might be deeper cultural norms within countries that drive political decisions to use, or not use, violence to resolve international disputes. In other words, democratic political institutions themselves do not lead to pacificism, but rather, pacificism and democratic norms are both ‘co-variants’ or twin outcomes of deeper cultural beliefs held by individuals within states. In simple terms, Wendt argues that it is a nation’s culture rather than its political system, that determine the stance of nations toward conflict and the exercise of power to resolve disputes.

Wendt’s view is explored further in the next sections of this paper. Wendt’s argument is that cultural norms matter more than political systems when it comes to predicting how nations respond to their *own* international disputes. In the following discussion, we will explore whether key cultural views and experiences matter more than political systems when explaining how citizens and governments react to *other* countries’ international disputes, in this case the reactions of the Vietnamese government and its population to the Russo-Ukrainian war. This nuance has practical implications, discussed in the conclusion of the article.

How does the Vietnamese government view the Russo-Ukrainian war?

Vietnam is one-party socialist republic led by the Vietnamese Communist Party. As such, Vietnam is very far from being the kind of electorally constrained democracy envisaged by Doyle in his seminal work on Democratic Peace Theory.¹² Vietnam scored just 19/100 in a recent *Freedom in the World* Report¹³ and was ranked 145th

¹¹ A. Wendt, *Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics*, “International Organisation” 1992, vol. 46, no. 2, pp. 391–425.

¹² M.W. Doyle, *op. cit.*

¹³ *Countries and Territories*, Freedom House, 2023, <https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores?sort=asc&order=Total%20Score%20and%20Status> [accessed: 01 May 2023].

of 176 countries listed in the Universität Würzburg's Democracy Matrix.¹⁴ While the Vietnamese government holds elections, 99% of the candidates are pre-selected by the Communist Party.¹⁵ As such, the Vietnamese government is largely unconstrained by public opinion and can choose how to act when faced with international disputes without any fear of electoral consequences.

In this case, while Vietnam is not in dispute with either Russia or Ukraine, the Russo-Ukrainian war poses a very significant geo-political quandary for Hanoi. It therefore provides a good case study of an international conflict that does not directly involve Vietnam, but to which the Vietnamese government and people are forced to pay close attention.

Why does this conflict pose difficulties for a state actor who is not directly involved in the dispute? To explain this, we need to discuss the relationships Vietnam has forged with the key parties to the conflict.

First, Vietnam and Ukraine. While not an obvious pairing, Vietnam and Ukraine have, in fact, enjoyed a fruitful thirty-year relationship since Vietnam recognised Ukrainian independence in 1991. Vietnam had a long association with businesses and the military in Ukraine when Ukraine was part of the USSR, and as a result, Kiev rapidly became an important trade partner and access point to Europe for Vietnam, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. To this day Ukraine is a major supplier of Soviet-designed military equipment to the Vietnam military, with Ukrainian companies contracted to maintain this equipment in Vietnam.¹⁶

Second, Vietnam and the United States. Surprisingly perhaps, in recent years Vietnam has become the United States' closest strategic partner in South-east Asia.¹⁷ This increasingly important relationship is driven in large part by Washington and Hanoi's mutual and growing concern over China's military build-up in the region. However, the partnership goes deeper than simply growing military ties. Following normalisation of diplomatic relations in the 1990's, economic ties have grown rapidly with a bi-lateral trade agreement signed in July 2000. In 2015, President Obama hosted Nguyễn Phú Trọng, the General Secretary of the Vietnamese Communist

¹⁴ *Ranking of Countries by Quality of Democracy*, Universität Würzburg – Democracy Matrix, <https://www.democracymatrix.com/ranking> [accessed: 01 May 2023].

¹⁵ T. Bui, *Elections in a Communist Party Regime: Vietnam's Electoral Integrity Reforms and Challenges*, The Australian Political Studies Association Annual Conference, University of Sydney, 2014, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2440088 [accessed: 01 May 2023].

¹⁶ *Trade important to Vietnam – Ukraine relations: PM*, "People's Army Newspaper", 07 September 2017, <https://en.qdnd.vn/foreign-affairs/bilateral-relations/trade-important-to-vietnam-ukraine-relations-pm-484506> [accessed: 01 May 2023].

¹⁷ J. Kurlantzick, *Russia's Ties to Southeast Asia and How They Affect the Ukraine War: Part 3, Singapore and Vietnam*, "Council on Foreign Relations", 07 April 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/russias-ties-southeast-asia-and-how-they-affect-ukraine-war-part-3-singapore-and-vietnam> [accessed: 01 May 2023].

Party, at the White House.¹⁸ In addition, over two million ethnic Vietnamese settled in the USA, following the fall of Saigon in 1975, and many maintained relationships with family in Vietnam. With easing diplomatic tensions, these familial bonds have played a key role in strengthening business and cultural connections between the two countries.

Finally, Vietnam and Russia. While Vietnam's new partnership with the USA and the growing friendship with Ukraine have been generally welcomed in Hanoi, they have grown up alongside Hanoi's much older and much more significant relationship with Russia. The Soviet Union was for many decades Vietnam's closest military, economic, and political ally, and without Soviet assistance in its war with the USA, the North Vietnamese would have struggled and potentially failed to take the South. Russia inherited and then maintained these strong ties and friendship with Hanoi, following the dissolution of the USSR. In 2013, Vietnam and Russia signed a regional military cooperation pact¹⁹ and economic ties between the two countries have remained important throughout the 21st century.

While occasionally awkward, Vietnam's multi-lateral approach to international relations has been manageable for much of the last twenty years. While tensions between Russia, Ukraine, and the United States have mounted over this period, Vietnam was none-the-less able to balance these three relationships. However, this pragmatic multilateralism, enshrined in Vietnam's 'Four Nos' defence policy²⁰ has been severely tested since February 2022.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 caught Vietnam (together with many other countries) largely by surprise and created a set of urgent and complex decisions for the Vietnamese government to make. Since the invasion, Hanoi has been forced to resolve a range of severely conflicting economic, military, and defence priorities. Notably, Ukraine and Russia both supply and service Vietnam's military equipment, and the US and Russia have both attempted to persuade Vietnam to engage more closely with their militaries, and less closely with their rivals, albeit for somewhat different reasons.

In response to these challenges, the Vietnamese government has decided to avoid (as far as possible) taking sides in the conflict. To this end, it has not expressed overt support for either party in the Russo-Ukrainian war. In four of the five United Nations General Assembly votes relating to the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Resolution ES-11/1 through ES-11/5), Vietnam has chosen to abstain from voting.

¹⁸ D.C. Kang, *American Grand Strategy and East Asian Security in the Twenty-First Century*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2017.

¹⁹ S. Blank, *Russia's Growing Ties with Vietnam*, *The Diplomat*, 19 September 2013, <https://thediplomat.com/2013/09/russias-growing-ties-with-vietnam/> [accessed: 01 May 2023].

²⁰ H.T. Sang, *Vietnam's "Four Nos" of defence policy are being tested*, *The Interpreter*, 26 April 2022, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/vietnam-s-four-no-s-defence-policy-are-being-tested#:~:text=Vietnam> [accessed: 01 May 2023].

Vietnam voted against just one of the five resolutions (Resolution ES11/3), introduced by the United States to suspend Russia's membership in the UN Human Rights Council.

In summary, the Vietnamese government is clearly autocratic by design and has very significant historical and ongoing ties to Russia, a similarly autocratic state. Yet, none of these cultural, military, or political similarities appear to have influenced Hanoi's decision-making to any significant extent in the last two years. Rather than offer its decades-long supporter and once-essential ally any clear support, the Vietnamese government has pursued a path of neutrality, acting in effect to grant equal status to the needs of its one-time friend (Russia) and its one-time enemy (the United States) together with America's supposed 'lackey' Ukraine. The decision seems driven by a strategic *Realpolitik*, without any obvious consideration for history, cultural ties, or long-standing national friendships. From the perspective of Wendt's view of the primacy of culture and identity in determining a nation's international relations, the evidence here is not convincing. Vietnam's decisions to strive for neutrality seems more rooted in a politico-military calculus, than in any cultural imperatives.

How do Vietnamese people view the conflict?

In mid-December 2022, the author conducted two in-person focus groups with Vietnamese citizens, one group of business executives and a second of mature business students, both in Ho Chi Minh City. The two sessions lasted an hour each and explored participants attitudes to the Russo-Ukrainian war. Subsequent written correspondence was undertaken to better understand the attitudes of some members.

Such a small-scale effort to understand Vietnamese views can reasonably be criticised. First, the total number of participants was small, numbering just 15 people. Second, participants were arguably unrepresentative of the Vietnamese population as all participants were degree-holding, fluent in English, well-informed, unrestricted internet users, and most had travelled or worked outside of Vietnam. Third, holding focus groups in autocratic states like Vietnam can be problematic. Participants may be inclined to self-censor, particularly given the sensitive nature of the topics discussed.

Given these limitations, the following analysis must be seen as exploratory rather than confirmatory. That said, it can also be noted that focus group research often involves small groups, and while not representative of the overall Vietnamese population, the group was characteristic of young, up-and-coming business and opinion leaders in Ho Chi Minh City. Again, while the possibility of self-censorship remains, participants appeared largely at ease discussing the Russo-Ukrainian war in front of their peers who had been co-students and in some cases friends for some time. When asked, one participant commented that he did not feel overly concerned about speaking his mind on 'these sorts of things' in Vietnam (however,

he noted that he would not 'go out on street protests calling for the overthrow of the government, that would be stupid').

The session began with participants being asked to work individually and privately. The task was to produce an individual rank-ordered list in response to the prompt 'List in order the three countries you believe are the most responsible for the war in Ukraine.' Results were then collected, totals calculated, and the collective, anonymised results presented back to the group for discussion.

All participants identified either Ukraine or the United States as primarily responsible for the war in Ukraine. In total, Ukraine was scored 1st nine times and 2nd five times (total 19) while the US was scored 1st five times and 2nd nine times (total 23). No other countries were listed in first or second place.

Problems emerged with the requirement to list a third country. Some respondents asked permission to list only two countries, which was denied. However, in both groups, eventually one participant asked if NATO could be listed as a 'country.' With this option permitted, all participants completed their forms. Eight students listed 'NATO' as their third choice, while three chose 'England/UK,' two chose 'Russia,' one chose 'Germany,' and one participant wrote 'Zelensky!'.

Following the compilation and presentation of these results students were asked to discuss their choices. Comments below are taken from recordings of the sessions and are occasionally summarised for clarity.

The participants who selected Ukraine as their first choice (in other words, the most responsible for the conflict) explained that in their view Ukraine had 'triggered' or behaved in a manner that 'made' the war by 'trying to join the West.' One asserted: 'I think they asked for it [the war].' The self-imposed exile of Viktor Yanukovich to Russia in February 2014, following the Euromaidan unrest, was described by one participant as an 'overthrow' and another commented 'he was their elected president, but some Nazis overthrew him.' Another used the term 'coup' to describe what happened. In the eyes of these participants, a group of Ukrainians overthrew the elected government and then steered Ukraine toward the West, 'triggering' a reasonable Russian response.

The participants who believed the United States was primarily responsible for the conflict generally described the USA as 'using Ukraine' to establish control over an area Russia historically preferred to retain as a buffer state between itself and the NATO alliance. This was considered unacceptable behaviour by many. One commented: 'They [the USA] just want to control everything and everyone.' Another asked: 'What would they [the USA] do if the Russians took Mexico? They would react the same, they are [hypocrites]!' Others pointed to the actions of the USA in invading Iraq as evidence of an international double standard. Within this group, the CIA was also mentioned by some participants as sparking the Euromaidan unrest. 'They [the USA] do that everywhere, that's how they do it [take over countries].'

By comparison, the participants did not appear to see Ukrainian people as having any agency or control over the events leading up to the war. ‘Ukrainians [are] just being used by America, they should have stayed with Russia, Russia was good to them!’ The USA was seen to be fighting Russia, using Ukrainians who were for some reason powerless to resist. ‘Americans are telling the Ukrainians what to do and giving them guns.’ ‘The Americans are smart, they don’t want to die so they use the Ukrainians to fight, but this is all about the US and Russia, not about Ukraine.’

When it came to discuss third-listed ‘countries,’ opinions varied a little more. Most participants felt NATO or specific key NATO countries, such as the UK and Germany, sought the conflict in order to grow the coalition: ‘They [NATO] wanted to pull Ukraine from Russia and this is how they get it. Look at Finland and Sweden. Same thing!’ Only two participants suggested Russia had some responsibility for the conflict. One explained: ‘They [Russia] were right to be worried [about western influence in Ukraine], but this invasion wasn’t the right way to do it. They needed to talk more. If they’d talked more, they wouldn’t have to invade [Ukraine].’ The one participant who put ‘Zelensky!’ said: ‘Zelensky is... weak... He’s an idiot. He was put in by the Americans to do what they want. If he was stronger, he wouldn’t let them [the USA] do this [use the Ukrainians to fight the Russians].’

The strength and uniformity of responses from these 15 Vietnamese citizens was unexpected, particularly as they were all well-educated, well-travelled, and well read, with unrestricted access to the internet, including Western news and opinion sites. The opinions of this group were also in stark contrast to the actions taken by their government, a point they were less vocal about.

Explanations for the responses of these Vietnamese citizens

Two explanations offer themselves for the responses of these 15 participants. First, as discussed above, it might be that these participants were simply all self-censoring, given the sensitivity of the topics under discussion. While the Vietnamese government has taken pains to portray itself as ‘neutral’ in the conflict, in practice, many political figures and social influencers in Vietnam have expressed ferociously pro-Russian or anti-Western views on Vietnamese social media sites.²¹ Extensive anti-American and anti-Ukrainian online commentary has not been taken down by government censors. The possibility exists that it remains up with the tacit consent of the Vietnamese government. It could be that all these participants were simply

²¹ Q.T.T. Nguyen, *How Vietnamese “Putinistas” are spreading disinformation about Ukrainians*, The Conversation, 03 May 2022, <https://theconversation.com/how-vietnamese-putinistas-are-spreading-disinformation-about-ukrainians-181131> [accessed: 01 May 2023].

echoing this well understood 'unofficial official' line they have seen on Vietnamese TikTok, Facebook, and other such sites.

A second arguably more plausible explanation is that the views expressed by these 15 participants were genuinely held and reflect a shared Vietnamese view of the world. While many countries have been invaded at some point in their distant past, it is worth remembering Vietnam has fought four invading armies in just eighty years, three of which are easily within living memory of older citizens. Japan (invaded in the 1940s), France ('invaded' in the 1950s), and the USA (invaded in the 1960s) are now seen by the Vietnamese as key players in an ex-colonial 'Western alliance,' using Ukraine to fight their ally, Russia. China (who invaded Vietnam in the 1970s) is not the part of this 'ex-colonial western alliance,' but it is still viewed by many Vietnamese with deep suspicion. Indeed such are Vietnamese concerns over Chinese intentions for the area, the Vietnamese government has sought to ally itself with an earlier enemy (the USA) simply to deter Beijing.

Millions of Vietnamese people died in these Japanese, French, American, and Chinese wars, leaving a lasting sense of bitterness toward these four countries among some of the population. In stark contrast, through all four of these wars, the Soviet Union (Russia) was a generous and reliable primary ally, providing weapons, military training, military advisors, ammunition, logistics, and economic support for Vietnam over a period of decades.²² Such behaviour arguably enabled the survival of the North Vietnamese state.

The likelihood is that the views expressed by the 15 focus group participants are not artefactual but are rather evidence of a widely shared Vietnamese worldview. Evidence for this can be seen in two opinion polls. According to a Pew Research Centre Global Attitudes Survey of citizens in 37 countries,²³ 79% of Vietnamese expressed a favourable view of Russian President Vladimir Putin in 2017, and 83% expressed a favourable view of Russia itself. These results are quite remarkable, given that the global median support for Putin in this survey was just 26%, while only 34% of the global survey participants had a positive view of Russia. A Gallup International Global Leaders poll the same year appears to confirm this result. In this second survey, using a very different methodology, 89% of Vietnamese participants were found to hold a 'favourable' or 'very favourable' view of President Putin. Again, this figure has to be placed in international context, and compared with just 79% of Russian participants and 14% of US respondents who expressed positive views of the Russian leader.²⁴ To be clear, more Vietnamese participants in the

²² K.W. Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2013, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139021210>.

²³ M. Vice, *Publics Worldwide Unfavorable Toward Putin, Russia*, Pew Research Center, 16 August 2017, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2017/08/16/publics-worldwide-unfavorable-toward-putin-russia/> [accessed: 01 May 2023].

²⁴ *Gallup International's 41st Annual Global End of Year Survey*, Gallup International, October–

Gallup poll rated Putin favourably than did participants in Russia itself. These polls results suggest the depth, uniformity, and direction of the views of the focus group participants was not artefactual, but a potentially realistic set of views for a group of well-educated, adult, middle-class Vietnamese students.

Finally, one last piece of evidence points to the strength of feeling of some of these Vietnamese participants. While Vietnamese support for Russia and dislike for Western nations is understandable at one level, at another level, when applied to the current situation in Ukraine, Vietnamese views also seem somewhat contradictory. This needs to be explained.

Vietnam has a lot of experience of being invaded by stronger, larger armies. It knows what it is like to fight a nuclear-armed superpower, almost entirely alone, surviving on weaponry, ammunition, and economic support provided by friendly allies, who are reluctant to get openly involved. It knows the terrible cost of fighting against the odds. It knows the suffering and widespread destruction of infrastructure and economic capacity that is the inevitable consequence of refusing to give in. It has been exactly where Ukraine is today, several times in the last century alone. Yet, for all these similarities, some of these participants seemed unsympathetic to what Ukraine is currently experiencing.

When asked about the similarities between Vietnamese and Ukrainian experiences, many participants struggled to see Ukraine as a fellow survivor, desperately fighting, as Vietnam had, to repel an invasion by a much stronger army. For these participants, the parallels simply were not evident. 'You say this is about Ukraine and the Ukrainians fighting Russia,' said one, '[b]ut we think this is about Russia and the Russians fighting the Western powers, in Ukraine. We don't see this the same as you.' Even when the parallels were accepted, a sense of empathy was not always apparent. One participant reflected: 'When China invaded us in 1979, they did it to teach us a lesson. And we learnt it! Ukraine should have done the same. You must understand what your stronger neighbour wants and be careful what you do as a country.' This participant was the individual who commented that in his view '[t]hey asked for it [the invasion].'

In summary, the Vietnamese participants in this small exploratory study expressed views that corresponded closely with those captured in wider, more rigorous opinion polls conducted in Vietnam five years earlier. If Russia's full-blown invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has reduced Vietnamese admiration for Putin's leadership (or for Russia itself) over the last five years, it was not evident in the views of participants in either of these two focus groups.

Vietnamese views on the Russo-Ukrainian war and Democratic Peace Theory

Having laid out the position of the Vietnamese government and the views of a very small sample of Vietnamese citizens, it is possible now to consider these responses and whether they might tell us anything about the role of culture and politics in international relations.

To recap, Democratic Peace Theory suggests that *political* structures largely determine national decisions around international disputes. According to the theory, the structure of routine accountability integral to democratic systems (elections) restricts the impulse of governments to use force internationally. The ‘handbrake’ is a specific political mechanism rather than any particular cultural views or values underpinning the system. The ‘handbrake’ operates in societies as culturally varied as Japan, Iceland, and Costa Rica. By comparison, Alexander Wendt suggests the ‘handbrake’ is deeper underlying *cultural norms* common in democracies rather than surface political structures or processes. Wendt sees political artefacts, such as elections, as just other expressions of the same cultural imperatives that serve to constrain the use of state violence to resolve international disputes.

Can the present study of Vietnamese views add anything to this debate? One point that emerges forcibly from this study is that there is a significant lack of connection between the cultural norms and beliefs of Vietnamese people, and the political decision-making of the government. Public opinion polls, the unrestrained flood of pro-Russian messaging on Vietnamese social media, and the views of the participants in the two focus groups all point to a high level of support for Russian war aims and Russian society in general within Vietnam. Indeed, opinion polling suggests that support for Putin and Russia may have been greater in Vietnam in 2017 than in any other major country.²⁵ Equally, there appears to be some level of active dislike or distrust of Western nations and international agencies seen as being controlled by the West. In a similar vein, the narrative of Russia fighting the West was so powerful in one focus group, it overrode any sympathy for Ukrainian civilians, who are undergoing the very same trauma that the Vietnamese experienced multiple times in the last century. Wendt’s view that political attitudes to conflict reflect underlying cultural value does not make sense here.

To the contrary, despite high levels of cultural support for Russia within Vietnam, the Vietnamese government’s decision to adopt a neutral stance in the matter in the war suggests politics is more important. The Vietnamese government has presumably decided it cannot afford to antagonise its critical new friend, the United States, and thus it cannot support its once critical old friend, Russia.

²⁵ M. Vice, *op. cit.*

This political decision has been taken despite Russia remaining Vietnam's principal arms supplier and a major economic partner. While the decision of the Vietnamese government to remain neutral in this conflict has garnered little media attention in the West, in some regards this erosion in Vietnam's long-standing support for Russia is as momentous as once-neutral Finland joining NATO.

What this lack of connection between the Vietnamese government and the Vietnamese people suggests is that Democratic Peace Theory is correct in at least one obvious respect. The Vietnamese government does not seem to feel at all constrained to make decisions around international relations that solely reflect the views of most of its citizens, its cultural preferences, or its traditional national identity. To bolster the future safety of the nation, it is prepared to pull out some key pillars of its cherished national story. Wendt's criticism that DPT places too much emphasis on political institutions, and not enough on cultural drivers of international relations, does not seem well supported by the decisions of the Vietnamese government in this instance. Political decisions in Vietnam have trumped cultural norms in determining a nation's stance on a significant international conflict.

Conclusions

This paper has reviewed Democratic Peace Theory, the contention that political considerations prevent conflict, and Wendt's alternative view that culture, not politics, drives decision-making. The theory has been extended somewhat to ask whether it might be used to explain the decisions of nations simply observing and reacting to a significant conflict, rather than engaging in it themselves. The outcome of this theoretical exercise remains uncertain, and more research might be warranted. What is clear is that there is a significant lack of connection between the autocratic Vietnamese government's decision to take a neutral stance in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, and the views of the Vietnamese public, who appear generally supportive of Russia and Russian war aims. Should the Vietnamese government have been subject to the democratic processes, it would be very interesting to observe the outcomes of the next elections.

In conclusion, Wendt's suggestion that culture is a better predictor of the governmental decision-making than political structures or considerations when it comes to conflict does not seem well supported by the Vietnamese case. However, a note of caution is required. Vietnam is neither a democracy nor is it at war. Perhaps that places this case too far outside the usual run of examples discussed to be helpful.

That said, looking at unusual examples can be fruitful. While most democracies have (predictably) opted to support Ukraine, not all democracies have thrown their weight behind Ukraine. Notably, India, Mongolia, and South Africa have chosen to remain resolutely 'neutral' on the matter. In a group with Vietnam, these

democracies abstained in all five UN resolutions relating to the war. Indeed, to the frustration of some in the West, South Africa engaged in ten days of joint Naval exercises with China and Russia in early 2023.²⁶

From the standpoint of Democratic Peace Theory, such behaviour might seem a little puzzling for democracies which retain democratic index scores similar to those gained by many countries in Europe.²⁷ However, all three countries have had long cultural ties to Russia and wish to continue their military and economic partnerships with the nation, even at the risk of distancing themselves from the United States. Perhaps these countries' behaviours lend some credence to Wendt's position.

Inside such 'democratic abstainers,' we have also seen very different responses from populations. In Indonesia, which abstained on two of the five UN resolutions, increasingly vocal elements of the population appear to support Russia.²⁸ In Mongolia conversely, popular support for Ukraine appears to be building.²⁹ Similarly, many autocratic countries have consistently voted to support resolutions in the UN introduced by the United States against Russia, such as Egypt and Haiti. Again, this behaviour is very difficult to explain from a purely political perspective. Wendt might argue here that these actions point clearly to the importance of culture and identity when making decisions around international relations.

Finally, the Russo-Ukrainian war has forced many countries to weigh long held cultural beliefs against shifting strategic and political imperatives. The process for some has been awkward. Vietnam, perhaps more than most, has been forced to confront some hard truths about its security needs and its shifting economic and political allegiances. It will be fascinating to watch how an autocratic government shifts a reluctant population away from its long cultural ties to Russia, toward a more western-leaning future.

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²⁶ *What we learned from the Russia-China-South Africa military drills*, Atlantic Council, 28 February 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/what-we-learned-from-the-russia-china-south-africa-military-drills> [accessed: 01 May 2023].

²⁷ *The Economist Democracy Index*, Wikipedia, 25 May 2023, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Economist_Democracy_Index [accessed: 25 May 2023].

²⁸ A.M. Ibnu Aqil, *Pressure mounts for Indonesia to support wartime UN resolution*, Asia News Network, 24 February 2023, <https://asianews.network/pressure-mounts-for-indonesia-to-support-wartime-un-resolution> [accessed: 01 May 2023].

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'They asked for it': Democratic Peace Theory and Vietnamese perceptions of the Russo-Ukrainian War

Abstract

Democratic Peace Theory argues that democratic countries are constrained by political forces in a manner that reduces the likelihood such states will resort to warfare to resolve disputes. This paper extends this argument to consider what happens when countries, democratic or otherwise, are forced to deal with nearby conflicts they are not engaged in themselves. Do political mechanisms still determine what decisions are made, or do cultural forces matter more, as has been suggested by critics of the theory? A case study of Vietnam responding to the Russo-Ukrainian war is used to explore these ideas, and some preliminary conclusions reached.

Keywords: Democratic Peace Theory, Vietnam, Ukraine, Russo-Ukrainian War