Can Liberal Democracy guarantee Perpetual Peace?

The problem of war and peace has been of primary political importance since the advent of time, with armed conflict seemingly existing as a “universal norm in human history”. The great wars of the twentieth century and the dawning of the nuclear age has threatened the future existence of human society and reaffirmed the need for a peace which is perpetual and everlasting. While peace may indeed be the “end to all hostilities” as Kant famously proclaimed, peace cannot be considered valid if it is embedded in fears of a future war and thus the relevance of Kant’s political philosophy and his search for an eternal peace through international law and constitutional systems, is ongoing. It would appear to be the case that perpetual peace is achievable only through republican constitutions as the basis of civil society, a principle which has been adopted by the modern democratic peace theory and based upon a need for liberal democracies to bring about a state of right and civil law to replace peace treaties and bring perpetual peace to the international community. However, it remains that peace is more complicated than war and the difficulty in maintaining peaceful relations between nations, as evident throughout human history, calls into question whether or not perpetual peace is an achievable reality or a faint hope, unattainable in the current state of perpetual war.

The notion of perpetual peace depicts a state in which peace is permanently established in a certain area without the threat of war in the future. The work of Immanuel Kant in his essay on Perpetual Peace 1795, forms the basis of an extensive field in political philosophy and the need for the establishment of lasting Liberal democracies to ensure the maintenance of an everlasting peace within society. For Kant, and indeed for subsequent political theorists, the notion of political peace is embedded in the idea of constitutional republics, which act as a necessary condition for perpetual peace. In his essay on perpetual peace Kant identifies six preliminary articles necessary for the advent of perpetual peace, articles which depict laws of nature as they should be and need to be for society to advance towards perpetual peace. Kant’s preliminary articles express the need for conclusions of peace to be made without reservation for future war, for standing armies to be abolished, to prevent independently existing states from acquiring another through inheritance or purchase, to prevent national debt from being contracted outside the affairs of the state, to prevent states from forcibly interfering in the constitutions of another and to prevent acts of hostility against other states so as to make mutual confidence impossible in times of peace. While these preliminary articles are necessary for the establishment of a perpetual peace, for Kant, the state of peace must be formally instituted as the preliminary articles cannot guarantee peace. The way in which perpetual peace can be guaranteed is through Kant’s definitive articles which bring into play the notion of the federal republic and liberal democracy. The definitive articles state that all states should be republican, founded upon the federation of free states and limited to conditions of universal hospitality, it is through these definitive articles that perpetual peace can be guaranteed in all of society.

It is the case therefore that republican states, states whose elected government exists within a constitutional framework and is subjected to judicial review, can ensure perpetual peace. As F.H.Hinsley notes, by republican Kant refers to that which we, in modern democracies, know as constitutional; the principle in which executive power is separate from legislative power and protected by the constitution. Such a definition of republican states, appeals to the modern notion of liberal democracy, in which representatives are subject to the rules of law, whereby the constitution emphasises individual rights and constrains rulers and is protected by an independent judiciary. The basis of Kant’s arguments on perpetual peace is ultimately rooted in the ideals of liberal democracy and provides the foundation of the democratic peace theory, the philosophy that holds that liberal democracies will never go to war with one another. Democratic peace theory proclaims that popular and responsible governments are more inclined

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2 H.Reiss, Kant’s Political Writings. Cambridge:CUP 1971 p.93
3 H.Reiss, Kant’s Political Writings. Cambridge:CUP 1971 p.93-96
4 F.H.Hinsley Power and the pursuit of peace Cambridge:CUP 1967p.70
to promote peace and commerce than war. It is a theory which is compatible with that of Kant’s thesis on perpetual peace and the idea that nations can and ought, by the dictates of the categorical imperative, spread republican constitutions, through the very nature of the republican state, throughout the international community and thus fulfil the requirement of the first definitive article of Kant’s perpetual peace. It is arguable that republics form the end point of political evolution and are the “highest task nature has set to mankind”⁶, driving mankind toward liberal peace.

As well as being a condition necessary in the achievement of perpetual peace, it is arguable that the existence of liberal democracies is in fact a guarantor of such a peace. Kant’s theory is founded in the principle that if all nations were republics or indeed liberal democracies then war would end in an absence of aggressors. Small and Singer ‘76, found an absence of war between states that were both liberal and democratic and that the correlation between democracy and peace remains significant even today. Arguably one of the forerunners of modern liberal democracy, the United States, has an international policy based upon the principles of the democratic peace theory, with President Clinton noting the “best strategy to ensure security and build a durable peace is to support the advance of democracy elsewhere. Democracies don’t attack each other”⁷. The principle of dyadic peace, that democracies will not fight each other, is arguably the “closest thing to an empirical law in international relations”(J.Levy) indeed one would be hard pressed to identify wars between established liberal democracies. Liberal and republican constitutions ensure perpetual peace through a process of institutional constraints, in which influence is given to those in society most likely to be affected by the atrocities of war. Citizens are given the right to control major political decisions that affect them, as nothing is more natural to the morals of man than to hesitate in regards to war, all citizens in liberal republican democracies share the ideology to avoid conflict with one another and avoid the calamities of war. For Kant, republican constitutions are necessary for peace as sovereigns are inclined to take a Machiavellian or Hobbesian stance and pay little attention to morals and the sacrifice of pleasures, thus liberal democracies are, it would seem, the only way to do justice to the rights of man.

Republican governments and liberal democracies are not in themselves sufficient to produce peace, a state of peace must be founded through a league of nations necessary to enforce Kant’s preliminary and definitive articles. In liberal democracies, reason is the highest legislative moral power and sets up peace as an immediate duty, peace can only be secured however, through an agreement of pacific nations and the renunciation of lawless freedom and the formation of an international state based upon public law. The idea of a world republic is, as Kant agreed, unattainable and must be replaced with the idea of a union of nations which values the individual freedoms of the states and provides structure to the international society through treaties between independent states. The existence of international rights and the separate existence of states naturally lead to a state of war unless federal unions are established to prevent hostilities from breaking out.⁸ It is through this federation of state that liberal democracies can consent to civil laws and prevent the balance of power within the international community from becoming too precarious and war from breaking out. It is not however, the organisation that preserves peace, rather the acceptance of the states’ role as continuing independent liberal nations under constitutional laws and the voluntary acceptance of the rule of law. Thus the combination of liberal democracy and the federation of nations can help to guarantee the perpetual peace.

While it cannot be denied that liberal democracy and the federation of nations are a necessary condition for perpetual peace, the extent to which they can guarantee such a peace is questionable. The very problem in establishing perpetual peace lies in the nature of liberal democracy and the idea of the democratic peace theory. Although liberal democracies do not wage war on one another, not all states within the international community can lay claim to being a liberal democracy, it is with this struggle between liberal and illiberal states that modern conflict has escalated. Kant’s ideologies can only support the claim that joint democracies cause peace, liberal democracies are not peaceful towards each other because they are democratic, rather because they are similar. It is as Doyle

⁶ M.Doyle Kant and political philosophy:the contemporary legacy. 1993p. 6
⁸ H.Reiss, Kant’s Political Writings.Cambridge:CUP 1971 p.113
notes that “peace holds only in the interaction between liberals but not in relations between liberal and non liberal states.” The ideologies that cause liberal democracies to be at peace with each other are the same ideas which inspire idealistic wars with illiberal nations and attract aggression from seemingly non democratic states. It is often argued that the democratic peace theory is used to justify the 2003 invasion of Iraq with President Bush stating the great faith held in democracies to promote perpetual peace in the Middle East, yet, the forcible democratisation of another nation surrounded by autocratic societies has seen the increase in the threat of war and not the advent of peace as initially hoped. Furthermore, the federation of nations cannot guarantee peace, indeed it is the case that the liberal democracies in these federations will not wage war on one another, the modern threats of war lie not between liberal democracies but between liberal democracies and their communist counterparts, as seen in the Cold War which posed potentially the greatest threat to human kind in the twentieth century. Liberal Democracy and the perpetual peace has taken an increasingly western ideology and despite the attempts to establish enlightened principles to the global community, the tension between normative values has threatened social cohesion with the supranational entities, such as the United States, viewed as a symbol of oppression and dictating the sovereign powers of individual states. This liberal peace, is limited to a zone of liberal states which exist in a perpetual state of war with other non-liberal states and cannot be considered true peace in Kantian terms.

Obedience to the liberal democratic principles and the republican state, has made it possible to wage wars more terrible than the wars of the monarchy. Yet, while the state makes war possible, it also brings the possibility of peace closer to fruition, however, the assumption that republics will always act rightly and prevent conflict from becoming endemic, is what led Rousseau to dismiss perpetual peace as an absurd dream. While Kant remained convinced that the development of the rule of law between states would produce international peace, the advent of the twenty first century and the current war on ‘terror’, has seen the notion of perpetual peace as “only and ideal laid up in heaven” whereby liberal democratic peace functions only as an ideological justification for a policy of global domination by the world’s superpowers and not the maintenance of the state of perpetual war.

9 M.Doyle Kant and political philosophy:the contemporary legacy. 1993p. 7  
11 F.H.Hinsley Power and the pursuit of peace Cambridge:CUP 1967p.79