Peace Theories & Quest for Peace: A Cross-cultural Perspective

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Out of the plethora of peace theories, two stand out in particular: (a) the Kantian democratic theory of peace, which argues that peace depends on a league of democracies, and (b) the liberal economic theory of peace, that a free, open world market conduces to peace. In this essay, concrete examples are cited that would raise doubt on the validity of these theories. It then proceeds to examine whether culture would make a difference on the incidence of war. In this light, the Westphalian system of states is compared with the historical Chinese “tribute system” qua an inherent system of international relations. One distinct difference is found in the much lower incidence of wars in the latter system, as David Kang’s study identified that in 5 centuries (1368-1841) the Chinese tribute system had only two interstate wars within its circle of members, not counting the wars initiated by external, ex-regional Western powers. And, the religious wars that plagued the West were never found in the Chinese tribute system. In search of an answer to this almost incredible record of low incidence of war, this essay finds that the Confucian culture, with its emphasis on harmony and harmonization of opposites, in contradistinction to the teachings on conflict in Abrahamic cultures, seems to hold the key to an answer. If so, culture, rather than institutions (such as democracies, open world market, etc.) deserves to be seriously considered as a relevant factor contributing to peace. Most importantly, culture as such can be taught and disseminated, including through the classroom.

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Introduction

The quest for a world without war, which is the perpetual concern of all ages, is really a quest for peace. While there is a plethora of studies on the causes of war (Pruitt & Snyder, 1969; Singer & Small, 1972; Brown, 1987; Wright, 1940), there is comparatively less research on the causes of peace. For the latter, the best known theory in the West is that of Democratic Peace. This theory dates back to Immanuel Kant, the 18th century German philosopher.

The Democratic Peace Theory (DPT)

In his book titled Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch, Kant (1795) broached the idea that the realization of a perpetual peace depended on the prior existence of a league of democracies. Later scholars, in what has become known as peace studies, have expounded the DPT by offering a conceptual link between democracy and the inherent inclination toward peace, that is, voters are not likely to support resort to war, especially fighting one with another democratic state (Doyle, 1983).
Dissenters, however, are quick to point to a long list of wars fought by, even between, democracies. The following is an incomplete but illustrating list of these examples in history:

1. The Sicilian Expedition (415-413 B.C., during the Peloponnesian War);
2. The Spanish-American War (1898);
3. British Opium Wars in China (1839-42; 1856-60)—to ram opium down the collective Chinese throat;
4. Franco-Siamese War (1893); Franco-Thai War (1940-41);
5. France’s War with China (1858), snatching Vietnam (then a Chinese satellite);
6. The state of war between Britain and Finland during WWII (in which Britain did actually bomb Finland, making it not just a war on paper);
7. The 1974 Turkish invasion of Cyprus;
8. The British-US War of 1812-1815.

Calling Democratic Peace, a “weak theory”, Errol A. Henderson (2002) questioned the validity of the proposition that democracies are more peaceful than non-democracies. The title of his book *Democracy and War: The End of an Illusion* (2002) is very telling. Instead, he offered an alternative explanation for what John Lewis Gaddis (1987) called the “long peace” spanning the entire 45 years of the Cold War. For his part, Henderson combined a number of war-inhibiting factors during the same period, including bipolarity, nuclear deterrence, alliance aggregation, and “trade links”.

I would single out two of the factors for further comment: nuclear deterrence and trade links. First, the efficacy of nuclear deterrence, as a war-inhibitor, becomes apparent only when compared with the erstwhile deterrence by conventional weapons. The record of the conventional deterrence in the 19th century, for example, showed only a 37% success rate (Alexandroff, 1981). Nuclear deterrence during the Cold War (1945-1990), on the other hand, proved 100% successful in preventing a hot war from erupting directly between the two heavily nuclear-armed superpowers.

The other factor deserving a special comment is what Henderson identified as “trade links”. Actually, he was referring to the post-WWII free market system, as found in the Bretton Woods institutions (i.e., The World Bank and the international monetary fund [IMF]) and under the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT)/ World Trade Organization (WTO) regimes. Both innovations showed the influence of the Liberal Economic Theory of Peace (LEP), as will be explained in the next section.

**The Liberal Economic Theory of Peace (LEP)**

The theory, as such, consists of two parts: (a) Free trade substantially reduces the number of targets to which force might be applied in the pursuit of state interests (Knorr, 1973; Keohane & Nye, 1977); and (b) free trade increases the vulnerability of actors because of their increased interdependence, making them disinclined to entertain risks of resorting to force (Keohane & Nye, 1977; Tucker, 1977; Gilpin, 1975).

Both these arguments boil down to a staunch belief in free trade—or a free, non-protectionist world market system. The rationale is that if values or natural resources can be freely exchanged or obtained from the international free market, nations have no reasons to go to war, which would be a much more expensive route. I would add, here, that the successful utilization of the mechanisms for peaceful dispute settlement, found both within the Bretton Woods system and under the GATT/WTO regimes, have obviated the need for resort to force.

Nevertheless, despite the well-argued points of the theory, and despite the by-and-large salutary roles played by the peaceful settlement mechanisms in trade and investment disputes, the post-WWII record is not
entirely even. William Tabb (2007) was able to identify a close relationship between wars and rich natural resources (such as diamonds and oil) in Africa. One additional glaring deviation from LEP expectations is the prolonged and periodically hotly contested claims by two powerful disputants, China and Japan, over East China Sea oil/gas reserves in the Xihu Trough area (Hsiung, 2009), not to mention the on-going feuds over the nearby Diaoyu/Senkaku islands. The latter disputes began since May 1969, when a UN report revealed that, due to a considerable amount of organic matter deposited by the Yangtse River (Changjiang) and the Yellow River, the continental shelf of the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands may be one of the world’s most prolific oil and gas reserves (Hsiung, 2005).

In short, these intense disputes pose a paradoxical challenge to the liberal economic theory of peace. It sports a hidden inadequacy in the theory, because the object of the heated Sino-Japanese spat is over vast natural resource deposits yet to be exploited, not something that can readily be obtained from the world market.

**Test of the Democratic Peace Theory After the End of the Cold War**

In the post-Cold War era, following the implosion of the former Soviet Union, when the world is under the monopolar leadership of the United States, the largest democracy on earth, we are in for a best period for the empirical testing of the DPT’s validity. But, alas, besides the wars engulfing the former components of the collapsing Soviet Union and the disintegrating Yugoslavia, the only two other inter-state wars were initiated by no other than the United States—one on Afghanistan (2002), and the other on Iraq (2003)—not to mention the American invasion of Panama and abduction of its president, Manuel Noriega, in 1989, back to the US for trial (he was later convicted to 105 years in prison).

As such, this is not a best tabulation to substantiate the efficacy of the democratic peace theory.

**Does Culture Matter? Comparisons With a Non-Westphalian System**

Given the above examples, we are led to the inevitable, though discouraging, conclusion that peace is so elusive and enduringly hard to attain in our Westphalian system, despite the persuasive arguments in the DPT and LEP theories. Considering that all the above examples are from our Westphalian system, we are confronted with the unavoidable question whether a different system, like the imperial Chinese tribute system of international relations (1368 through 1841), fared any better in the long corridor of history.

For the uninitiated, the Chinese tribute system, or otherwise known as the Sinic system, was the network of trade and foreign relations between China and its tributaries or vassals whose ideals, for centuries, drove much of East Asian affairs. A widely recognized Chinese “suzerainty” over East Asia governed a Sino-centric international order. This tribute system derived its name from the mostly self-initiated practice by the surrounding nations in literally paying periodic tributes to the Chinese emperor, in return for cefeng (investiture) and bestowals of unspecified benevolence (Vora, 1999). The interactions served to disseminate Chinese culture to the peripheral countries, through a long process estimated variably to have lasted for 4,000 years according to one account (Cohen, 2000) or alternatively for 600 years by another account, which saw the system not operating in earnest until the Ming (1368-1644) through the Qing (Manchu 1644-1911) dynasties (Willis, 2010).

David Kang (2010) undertook a study of the international relations within this imperial Chinese tribute system, stretching over five centuries (1368-1841) as compared with the much shorter Westphalian system. He found two distinct differences: (i) Whereas in the Westphalian system member states were nominally equal
(pursuant to the post-1648 concept of state sovereignty) but in fact unequal, members in the Chinese tribute system, on the contrary, were nominally unequal (they had to defer to the Chinese “suzerain”), but enjoyed equality in reality—as the system “contained credible commitments by China not to exploit secondary states that accepted its authority” (p. 2); and (ii) that the Chinese tribute system had by far fewer wars than did the Westphalia system.

In the five centuries that he studied, Kang found the incidence of only two wars. China, the strongest power therein, was responsible for starting only one of these (i.e., against Vietnam, 1407-1428), while Japan started the other war when it invaded Korea (1592-1598). (I might add that throughout Asian history, there were no religious wars, of the kind that time and again disrupted European history).

Like all other quantitative studies, Kang’s did not provide a reason as to why the traditional Chinese tribute system had so few wars. The answer, I submit, inheres in the influence of Chinese culture, which inculcates the primacy of peace, the pursuit of which is the critical measure of true statesmanship, in the governance of foreign and domestic relations. And, this point will become all the clearer when contrasted with Western culture, including the Abrahamic ideologies.

Harmony in Chinese Culture as Contrasted With Competition/Conflict in Abrahamic Cultures

Two preliminary comments are in order:

(i) First, I am fully aware that culture is not the same as civilization, and in the usual usage “culture” denotes ideals, philosophy, a unique mode of thought, and the higher intellectual, artistic, and moral qualities of a society. In our discussion here, however, it is almost synonymous with civilization, in that it partakes of some, if not all, of the latter’s connotations, namely: a way of life, subsuming such aspects as means of subsistence (e.g., agriculture or industry), types of livelihood, forms of governance, exchange practices, literacy and writing system, standardization of the measures of distance and weight, and, above all, sharing of a common weltanschauung and aspirations, even worshipping the same folklores and deities (Hsiung, 2012). The reason we adopt such a broad concept of culture here is to make possible a comparison of China with the West. The meeting of the two cultures is tantamount to the meeting of two distinct civilizations, each with its own gestalt of cultures and institutions.

(ii) My second preliminary comment relates to Samuel P. Huntington’s well-known book (1996), with its typical title The Clash of Civilizations: Remaking of World Order. Despite its considerable merits, it mistakenly links together Confucianism (with its emphasis on harmony) and Islam (given its vitriolic militancy) in the same breath as a threat to world survival. I might add that the very word “clash” in the book’s title is a subconscious reflection of a Western assumption that strife (hence clash) is the norm of national and international life.

The topic of the Chinese peaceful culture in comparison with Western culture is so vast that it would be impossible to do justice to it in a few lines. But, considering the space constraint, let me make just two points (Hsiung, 2013).

A. Reflecting the mentality and weltanschauung of the early agrarian forefathers of the Chinese, their culture is characterized by an all-inclusive bent and a predilection toward constancy and permanence, as derived from the agrarian people’s preoccupation with the faithful rotation of the sun and the moon, and the unfailing rotation of the seasons (Fung, 1948).
B. As these early forefathers, with their continental farmers’ outlook, found their survival tied to the land they tilled and lived on, conditioning them to a sedentary way of life and a readiness to take whatever came their way, day in and day out, their resultant inclusivist culture, as it was passed on to future generations, is one that prizes the harnessing of opposites and making them into a synergistic whole.

These characteristics are enough to explain why religious conflicts, of the kind as were found in the Crusades in the West were simply unheard of in Chinese history. In contrast to the Aristotelian rejection of the possibility of the coalescence of opposites (as endorsed in Abrahamic cultures), Chinese culture, from Confucianism to Daoism to the Yin-Yang school, all treasured harmony and the harmonization of opposites. Knowing this is to understand why the Dengist reform, in post-Mao China, could make two opposites—socialism and market economy—work in synergy, to produce astounding success. This so-called China model is not likely to be duplicated elsewhere, without a supporting culture like the one found in China.

**Harmonization of the Opposites Playing a Multiple-Sum Game**

I would like to extend this point a bit further. The premium Chinese culture that places on the harmonization of opposites is reinforced by China’s experience with a rule of conduct drilled in from the centuries-long Chinese tribute system, which produced a disposition toward playing a non-zero-sum game. In contrast to the Westphalian system, in which secondary states band together to balance against the strongest power (Waltz, 1979), the behavioral pattern of secondary states in the Chinese tribute system was bandwagoning to, not balancing against, the system’s suzerain. For its part, the Chinese suzerain in that system also acted differently from the way the topmost power, or hegemon, in the Westphalian system behaved. If force was used by the Chinese suzerain, as Kang (2010) noted (p. 83), the aim was to “pacify” to restore order, rather than to seek conquest, as often happened in Westphalia. Under Pax Britania, for example, Britain established by force an empire on which, reputedly, the sun would not set.

The combination of the dictate of harmonization of opposites and the dictum of resorting to use of force only to pacify (not to conquer) seems to underlie post-Mao China’s behavioral pattern in the conduct of its foreign relations. China’s careful conduct in avoiding a veto on crucial US-initiated UN Security Council resolutions (e.g., on Libya and Iran)—and even co-sponsoring the vote on sanctions against North Korea (2013)—is but an example of its bandwagoning to the US (Hsiung, 2012). Under its current president, Xi Jinping, China seems to eschew a competition with the United States in playing a zero-sum geopolitical game. Instead, China is playing what can be best summed up as multiple-sum geo-economic games, as I will explain below.

**Geo-economics and the Avoidance of Conflict**

The post-Cold War world is often said to catapult geo-economics to the forefront, in rivalry with geopolitics. If the overriding concerns of geopolitics are ideology and territorial control, geo-economics means that a country’s economic security may eclipse its military security (or traditional national defense interests). And, to guarantee its economic security, a major power must be concerned with its participation in the global economy, including membership in regional free-trade associations (FTA), access to the global markets and financial resources, and a voice in major decision making on international financial and economic matters.

In what he proffers as the age of “vulnerability interdependence” in depicting the 21st century, Richard Rosecrance (2006) had noted, for example, that Chinese industries, while growing rapidly, may often be
subsidiaries of major world corporations elsewhere (the US, Europe, Japan, etc.). He calls this an age in which not even the United States can boast of having attained uni-polarity of economics. Under the circumstances, it is unlikely that China will risk self-destruction by rocking the boat, or trying to destroy the existing system. Thus, economic ties and cooperation with foreign powers, including the United States, the EU, Japan, India, etc., will be preferable to military expansion against them, so Rosecrance (2006) concluded.

In other words, Rosecrance foresaw China to shun the playing of the geo-politic game (qua zero-sum game), in favor of a game of geo-economics. This prediction is confirmed by China’s foreign-policy directions, especially under Xi Jinping’s presidency since 2013. The deepening of its economic alliance within the Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS), the launching of a new “silk road”, the creation of a BICS-sponsored developmental bank, the initiation of a China financed Asia International Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and the promotion of an Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC)-wide free trade association (FTA)—all confirmed a deliberate Chinese policy answering to Rosecrance’s call for geo-economic cooperation via tightening a “vulnerability interdependence”.

To find confirmation that geo-economics entails a non-zero-sum game, one need only take a look at the two parallel, though competing, economic groupings in the making, namely: the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) brokered by the United States, and the China-sponsored Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). A close examination of the membership in these two groupings will find that eight states have dual membership in both groupings. Hence, economic competition need not be zero-sum.

And, in China’s current conduct of foreign relations, one finds a consistent promotion of multiple-sum endeavors, as dictated by the principles of geo-economics. This, ultimately, is a confirmation of the time-honored Chinese primacy given to the harmonization of opposites, as conceived in its inclusivist culture noted above.

**Concluding Remarks**

All considered, if a generalization can be made from the above discussion, two ingredients stand out as indispensable for the attainment of a peaceful world without armed conflict. They are: (a) a cultural commitment to the primacy of harmony of interests; and (b) the presence of an economic “vulnerability interdependence” between nations. The first attribute can be taught, in an inculcation drive to replace competition with harmony as an overriding cultural virtue. The second condition can be engendered, and deepened, by conscious institution building.

Both will prove to be more reliable as guarantors of world peace, now that the democratic peace theory and the liberal economic theory of peace have proven either inadequate or insufficient to serve the purpose. In their place, we may find a new theory, to be known as the “peaceful culture” theory.

Unfortunately, however, the United States seems still addicted to playing by the rules of geopolitics, as can be seen from its avid but unsuccessful attempt to dissuade Britain from joining the China-initiated AIIB. Three more of America’s European allies, Germany, France, and Italy, have all followed first Luxembourg’s and then Britain’s lead in joining AIIB. In addition to these five EU states, 26 Asian countries have joined China as members of the Bank, including 21 who attended the signing ceremony on October 24, 2014 in Beijing. Among these 21 founding members are India and seven Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) members that included Singapore and the Philippines. Although US pressures allegedly kept Singapore and Australia from signing up as founding members, Singapore joined after the signing ceremony.
And, Australia seems poised to join at any time, according to a report in the *Australian Financial Review*, dated October 27, 2014.

I hope it will not be long before Uncle Sam sees the wisdom of joining the Geo-economic Club, which seems to hold the key to a world without geopolitical conflict in the 21st century.

Let me add a side comment in conclusion. Thanks in part to the efforts of China’s State Council (Cabinet), there are nearly 400 Confucius Institutes established in recent years around the globe, including about 90 in the United States alone. In view of what I just said above, if these Confucius Institutes should concentrate on disseminating the Confucian teachings in harmony, beyond just the teaching of the Chinese language, they would perform a great service in the human search for a peaceful world without war. For all the often unfair criticisms leveled on them, the Confucius Institutes would be above reproach if they prove they can perform this very great service.

**References**


