Democracy, Resilience & Security Politics

"Please give an example of two democracies that were at war with each other." If presented with this task, most people will probably fail. There is strong evidence that democracies do not wage war against each other. But what does that mean for security politics, especially in times of democratic backsliding?

Theoretically speaking, democracies should be more peaceful than non-democracies: Firstly, they have power-sharing mechanisms and more inclusive institutions that allow for participation. Secondly, conflicts are mostly settled in a peaceful manner, through discussion and compromise. If people in democracies are discontent with political decisions, they, ideally, can change these decisions without the use of force, through set processes. As democratic leaders are used to democratic decision-making processes, they should also act in this way in foreign policy, towards other states. Additionally, their decisions need to go through more complex decision-making processes and need to be carried by the wider public. Democracies, theoretically, thus are expected to be more peaceful internally and towards other states.

If looking at the world, this connection between democracy and peace is not as straightforward as theory suggests. Democracies are not entirely more peaceful: They wage wars against non-democratic states. Also, civil wars are more likely in partially democratised regimes than in autocracies and democracies. However, there is clear evidence that democracies do not wage war against each other and that democracies provide more security and freedoms for their populations than autocracies.

On the basis of this assumption of peace between democracies and greater overall security and rights for their populations, there have been two debates in security politics.

Firstly, especially in the 1990s and 2000s, policy-makers have argued that more states need to become democracies so that the world became more peaceful. This notion was soon criticised because policy-makers often tried to implement a certain understanding of democracy in other states, one that was based on how European and Northern American states understood the concept. Today, most state-building efforts, e.g. by the UN, do not focus on democracy-promotion, but on factors connected to democracy that can be implemented in a context-specific manner, such as inclusive participation mechanisms.

Secondly, the assumption of democracies being more peaceful internally becomes important against current trends of democratic backsliding and autocratisation. In most regions in the world, democratic regimes have started reducing democratic freedoms such as freedom of expression, flawed elections are increasing, and there is an erosion of formal checks and balances. The main driver of these processes often are democratically elected political leaders that attack these rights and spaces, e.g. in Poland in 2022. Experts have been calling for the strengthening of democratic resilience in the last years, e.g. by making judiciaries stronger, by forming large pro-democratic coalitions, and by fighting disinformation. Whether these processes of autocratisation will have an impact on conflicts remains to be seen.

Future political action, be it at the EU, the UN, or the Munich Security Conference, will need to address questions such as:
- How can democratic resilience be strengthened, internally as well as against foreign influences, e.g. from Russia?
- How can international organisations such as the EU react to member states' democratic backsliding?

Important specialist terminology

There is no one definition of democracy. Mostly, a state is seen as democratic if is "ruled by the people", holding free and fair elections, separating powers, and providing fundamental freedoms and human rights (Freedom House).

Autocracies are normally defined as being non-democratic, thus not providing all rights and freedoms as described for democracies. Autocracies are diverse: there are monarchies, military regimes, or party regimes that provide elections without them being free and fair.

Most experts agree that states are not either democracies or autocracies, but that there is a spectrum of political regime, meaning that states are often somewhere in between full democracies and full autocracies, e.g. partially democratised.

Democratic backsliding and autocratisation describe different types of transitioning from a democratic regime to a more autocratic one.

State-building describes the re-building of governance structures, often after an armed conflict. It is often part of peacebuilding (IDOS).

Democratic resilience describes the ability of a state, organisation or of civil society to anticipate and manage anti-democratic efforts.