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Liberal Competence:

The Performance of Democracy in Great Power Balancing

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Received Wisdom. Realists maintain that democracies are incompetent in dealing with non-democracies, particularly in competitive great power circumstances. Thucydides, Tocqueville, Morgenthau. Major theme of postwar realism. Democracies are not effective because of lack of secrecy, inability to respond quickly, inconstant and vascilating. Realists argue that, with regard to foreign policy performance, autocractic and authoritarian regimes are superious. Centralization of decision-making, expertise and longevity, and lack of distraction from domestic politics, can more readily grasp the national interest that is not a simple aggregation of competing narrow interests, capacities to command resources and loyalty -- these are the alleged features of autocratic and authoritarian regimes that give them superior performace in great power competition.

The argument. We hold that liberal democracies have superior performance within great power competitive situations. The following characteristics of liberal democracies and auto/authoritarian regimes matter in performance. These features are rooted in regime types and directly bear on military/strategic performance.

(1) Leadership style. In liberal democracies, leaders are socialized in a give and take environment. They learn to deal with opposition, build coalitions. These skills, gained domestically, equip them to function effectively in competitive and pluralistic international systems.

Conversely, leaders in autocratic/authoritarian systems come to expect obedience to their commands and thus are ill prepared for balancing and bargaining. When a/a leaders replicate domestic pattern (i.e. coerce) they produce balancing not obedience, and they produce self-incirclement.

(2) Leader selection. In liberal democracies, the selection mechanisms for leaders contain elaborate vetting and wide scrutiny, and terms in office are limited. This helps insure that relatively competent leaders hold office, and that failed policies are punished through electoral accountability.

Conversely, a/a regimes select leaders with very narrow and ad hoc procedures, and terms are not fixed, allowing leaders to stay in office for decades. Characteristics unrelated to foreign policy ability -- or ability generally -- are less important than mastery of the selection process. Performance failures do not result in leadership change.

(3) Legitimacy and mobilization. In liberal democracies, it is possible to ask the citizens to bear high costs because the process of arriving at the decisions were democratic. Extraction ability and mobilization is high when legitimacy of policy and leaders is high.

Conversely, in a/a regimes fear of rebellion constrains leaders, e.g. Hitler in WWII.

(4) Secrecy and openness. In modern and highly complex industrial societies, policies of secrecy and information compartmentalization are dysfunctional. Role of the press and public debate in insuring that all sides of options are examined. Bad news is not filtered out by political hierarchy.

(5) Structural rationality. In a/a regimes, the functional rationality must compete with the need to maintain power. In a/a regimes, organizations are structured and inter-related in a "divide and conquer" manner. Allocation of authority is often on the basis of favoritism and clique politics. Potential for corruption is higher in a/a regimes.

Liberal democracies are not perfect in these regards, but in periods of tense foreign threat, meritocratic and functional norms of organization are paramount.

The next set of arguments/hypotheses deal with interactive aspects of democracies and a/a regimes.

(6) Bargaining and negotiations. Liberal democracy effectiveness in international bargaining and negotiation is higher because domestic constraints give credibility to bargaining positions. Also, transparency enables outsiders to understand actual configurations of interests and forces.

In a/a regimes, the absence of transparency of domestic constraints leads outsiders to assume hostile intent with unfavorable consequences.

(7) Alliances and trust. Capacities of a/a regimes to make and consummate/implement alliances is low. In liberal democracies, multiple points of contact and organizational ethos facilitates alliance formation. Transparency allows the level of trust and predictability to be higher in liberal democracies. In a/a regimes, the uncertainty of the closed system raises risks. Moreover, alliances with a/a regimes carry greater risks of being dominated and exploited by more powerful party than alliances with liberal democracies.

(8) Perceptions and information processing. Capacity of liberal democracies to grasp complex and ideologically inconsistent external realities is higher than ability of a/a regimes to do so. e.g. Hitler's view of US, pre-WWII.

Cases. We want to explore these arguments/hypotheses of the great powers during the WWII period.