CHAPTER SEVEN

Do Democratic–Autocratic Rivalries Muddy the Monadic Waters?

There are a number of puzzles associated with the democratic peace phenomenon. The most central one, the dyadic puzzle, raises the question of why is there such a phenomenon in the first place? Why are two democratic states less likely to engage in, or escalate, conflict with one another in contrast to how the same two states might deal with non-democracies? There are, of course, a number of possible answers but since we are not sure, the explanation for the dyadic behavior remains a puzzle. Yet this same puzzle also implies a second one, the monadic puzzle. If two democratic states are less likely to be conflictual with one another, why is it that this pacific trait does not extend to all foreign policy behavior in which democratic states engage?

We make no claim in this analysis of being able to answer the dyadic puzzle. However, we do advance one partial solution to the monadic puzzle. Whatever the precise roots of the democratic peace phenomenon, democratic political systems are of fairly recent origin. As novel strategies for organizing domestic political systems, they encountered resistance from both earlier formulas and others that were also relatively novel. As a consequence, the late nineteenth and almost the entire twentieth century has been characterized by a struggle between an emerging democratic community and its various ideological opponents. Two world wars, a cold war, and large number of crises and disputes have taken place not so much between democracies and autocracies per se. Rather, the fight has been mainly between the leaders of the emerging democratic community and leaders of the various rival strategies (aristocracy, fascism, and communism). We test this argument primarily by examining the differential tendencies for democratic major powers to conflict with autocratic rivals more so than autocratic major powers conflict with democratic major powers rivals. We view these findings as support for the idea that the greater-than-anticipated (by some) monadic belligerence of democratic states, and especially major powers, is due to the nature of democratization as an emergent property in world politics. As such, the monadic belligerence of democratic states should be a temporary phenomena.

The Monadic Puzzle and an Evolutionary Solution

If we knew the answer to the dyadic puzzle, the monadic question might be less interesting. For instance, if the primary explanation for the democratic peace is that it is strictly a dyadic phenomenon and requires the reciprocal interaction of two of democracy’s political cultures, both of whose elites are operating on the assumption that the other side will follow the types of norms exercised in their own domestic politics, then we would have less reason to expect the same influence to work at the monadic level. If, on the other hand, the primary explanation involved institutional restraints on democratic foreign policy or the greater transparency of democratic foreign policy, we should be able to observe some constraints operating on the behavior of individual democratic states.

We might call this the theoretical dimension of the monadic puzzle. How does one account for the foreign policy behavior of democratic states in general if we believe they operate distinctively in pairs? But there is also an empirical dimension to this puzzle. While most of the analysts who have examined democratic peace related questions seem to operate on the premise that democratic states, in general, are no more or no less pacific than nondemocratic states, the relevant empirical literature actually remains divided on this question. Without stretching the point too much, the question has been debated for over half a century without attaining any real resolution. As noted in table 7.1, a number of analysts argue for, and find, that democracies are not more pacific or less conflict-prone than nondemocracies. A smaller number argue for, and find, that democracies, in various ways, are more pacific, or, at least, less conflict-prone than nondemocracies. In some cases, the same authors find support for both positions, just as they sometimes switch their positions over time.

In the early 1990s, the literature consensus sided with the no difference position. Less than a decade later, Russett and Starr (2000: 97) argue that the majority view has swung to the opposite position—that there is some discernible difference between democracies and autocracies in both monadic and dyadic conflict behavior. Whether the earlier consensus or current “majority view” possess sufficient justification for their claim to a representative stance remains unclear. Presumably, the division in opinion revolves around distinctions between overall frequencies of conflict that most analysts find to be no different and particular forms of behavior in which some less conflictual trait, such as the escalation of conflict once initiated, is manifested. Still, the issue would appear to remain a matter of some contention.

There are a number of conceivable reasons why there is disagreement on this empirical question. Analysts have posed different questions. For instance, one analyst may ask whether democracies are more or less war-prone while another asks whether they are simply more or less conflict-prone than nondemocracies? These are two different questions that may yield different answers. Then there are a forbidding host of methodological