

Is there a new autocracy promotion?



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March 2010

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There is much talk of a global democratic regression. Such discussion is fuelled by disappointing figures from Freedom House and other organisations that track annual trends in political regimes. In its 2009 review Freedom House even speaks of a 'freedom recession'. There is currently speculation about how far this trend can be attributed to the possibility that leading autocratic regimes are now on the march not just at home, but also in terms of their external relations, influencing other countries around the world. An important question is whether the so-called democratic pushback is benefitting from the help of foreign friends of authoritarian or semi-authoritarian rule? Over the last two decades international democracy promotion had the field more or less to itself. Does it now have to contend with a serious rival? Is there a new autocracy promotion led by resurgent authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes? And if the answer to these questions is yes, then what are the policy implications for the commitment of the established democracies to supporting democratic transition and consolidation in former non-democracies?

This paper addresses these vital topical questions in a way that is intended to guide the gathering and processing of information that we would need in order to reach credible answers. Only then can the evidence be assessed systematically and in ways relevant to drawing policy conclusions. This approach stems from the belief that a coherent, fine-tuned and effective response by the democracy support community must be based on a suitably nuanced understanding of the threats. This involves separating myth from reality, as well as an appreciation of exactly what is at stake. It entails dissecting the who and why, what and how of the phenomenon. It means distinguishing amid all the loose talk precisely what is being referred to, and in particular what the export of autocracy is not.

The time to do these things is now. The role played by external factors in past reverse waves of democratisation needs no highlighting. In the 1940s for instance, the impact of Nazi aggression in Europe was obvious. The role of international influences on the

spread of democracy in the 'third wave' was at first neglected by democratisation analysts. Similarly, a detailed examination of the contribution of external influences generally and autocracy promotion in particular now seems to lag behind the increase in attention to authoritarian revival. This observation is broadly true, notwithstanding popular speculation about the impact the so-called China model of illiberal capitalist development is having in the developing world. And it stands notwithstanding evident concerns in the West about Russia's return to a more assertive foreign policy, especially towards neighbouring countries.

The implications that autocracy promotion has for democracy support policy-making are ultimately a matter for the policy-makers. It would be unwise to expect to find complete agreement there. In part this is because there are different kinds of democracy promotion actor, each with their own mandate, mission statement and capabilities. But in part also it is because establishing whether there is a new autocracy promotion is far from straightforward. As the paper is designed to show, there are a number of issues that must first be disentangled. Only then does it go on to outline some policy alternatives.

A number of comparisons with democracy promotion are worth making before proceeding any further.

Comparisons with democracy promotion

First, the numbers of governments, inter-governmental bodies, and (semi-) autonomous institutes and foundations that endorse the idea of increasing democracy's share of the world's regimes, and lend their support in one way or another, are very high. By comparison, the states that are now being pointed to as foreign sources of influence on authoritarian maintenance, revival or return are actually very few. Russia and China are the two main suspects.

There is but a small supporting cast. Iran is one example, because of its presence in southern Iraq, Lebanon and Palestine. But the extent of popular support for and the legitimacy enjoyed by the regime inside Iran currently appears to be waning. Others include Cuba and Venezuela or more particularly the leadership of President Chávez, who is sometimes credited with growing influence in the Andean region, especially Bolivia, and Central America, notably Nicaragua. Very few other governments of any significance attract much attention as agents of a new autocracy promotion. All in all, the main candidates do not equate to what the George W. Bush administration in the United States and others came to call the 'axis of evil' or, even, 'the axis of evil and beyond'. And so it would be wrong to assume that they draw strength from this alleged axis, or that the threat the core axis members are said to pose to international stability becomes correspondingly greater. North Korea for example, a prominent axis state, lacks the capacity to export anything whether political or non-political, apart from lethal weapons and their associated technology. And Syria – another state associated with the axis and beyond – endeavours to influence the internal politics of but a few immediate neighbours. Syria's direct involvement in Lebanon is now much reduced anyway, and the leadership is seeking improved relations with the West. The majority of the world's authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes are not suspected of promoting autocracy. The fact is many of them are fragile and unstable or preoccupied by grappling with political transitions of their own.

Similarly the inter-governmental organisations that declare an express intent of trying to stem and reverse the democratic tide through collective action of mutual support and self-defence are also comparatively few. They are regionally-based and mainly confined to parts of the post-Soviet territorial space along with China. The Shanghai Cooperation Agreement and Commonwealth of Independent States are the two most obvious examples. Autocracy promotion does not have the good offices of the United Nations on its side. In sum, then, the combined challenge posed by autocracies to democracy's spread in other countries

probably ranks well below the general political instability inside those countries, weak government, bad governance or state decay. These daunting challenges can also have very negative consequences both for a country's own democratic ambitions and those of its close neighbours.

A second major point is that the democracy promoters have the goal of global transformation towards democracy. They do not hide this or, moreover, their distinct preference for a western-style liberal version of democracy. In comparison the authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes declare no such ambition for autocracy. Perhaps explicit evidence of a secret ambition of this kind is by its nature bound to be obscure or hard to detect, and so the lack of evidence may not be conclusive. And yet the autocracies' own internal political arrangements do not offer one model that could be made available for export. Instead there are various types or sub-types of rule, that range from personalistic regimes and military-backed dictatorship to theocracy and *de jure* single party rule. Often there are internal divisions between 'hardliners' and 'softliners'. Some like Venezuela and Russia even have multi-party elections, characterised by varying degrees of meaningful competition.

The potential attractiveness of the different variants to other countries is unlikely to be uniform. This owes much to profound differences in the historical background and other political circumstances of countries. The limited chances of it travelling far and wide even if a strong commitment to exporting autocracy was present can be illustrated by many cases. These include the stamp that was imposed on former territories of the Soviet Union by decades of Communist Party rule; years of open conflict with the US as in Cuba; the paranoia that is fuelled in North Korea by South Korea's manifest economic success; and even autocratic Saudi Arabia's adherence to the conservative Wahabi orientation of Islam. All these examples and their regime-shaping influence are site-specific. Even the leaders of Cuba and Venezuela do not set out to remake the governments of all other countries in their own image, although their shared

interest in replacing capitalism by a version of socialism does look like a universal mission. And if successful, that mission would of course have consequences for political regimes. Naturally the reach of Russia's – and to a greater extent China's – international engagements of all sorts look much more considerable. After all, they are or they aspire to become great powers, poles in what analysts have described as an emerging multipolar world. But that is not the same as having a global ambition to substitute less democratic for more democratic rule. Admittedly the picture becomes somewhat more complicated once non-state actors like social movements and transnational networks of uncivil society are brought into the picture. For example some radical Islamists speak of wanting to change the world – a *jihad* aimed at all humankind.

Third, serious international attempts to promote democracy use recognisably liberal and democratic credentials in their sales pitch. They show no interest in trying to clothe the message of democracy in some other guise. But there is no mirror image on the part of major adherents to authoritarian and semi-authoritarian rule. In fact, at least some such rulers actually employ the language of democracy, albeit with qualifications, such as in Russia's case 'managed democracy' and 'sovereign democracy'. Presumably this is part of a strategy to enhance their legitimacy at home and abroad. However this is not necessarily part or evidence of a strategy of exporting their own types of rule, even though it might make the adoption of such rule by other countries politically easier to accomplish.

Fourth, although in principle the major autocracies have access to most or all of the instruments of both linkage and leverage that leading western democracies can deploy, since the end of the Cold War there have been very few – if any – attempts to impose or re-impose autocracy in foreign lands by force. This does not appear likely to change dramatically any time soon. There has certainly been nothing comparable to the endeavours of the Soviet Union during the Cold War nor – more pointedly – to recent attempts by US and allied forces to bring freedom and democracy to Afghanistan

and Iraq. And nothing comparable to the more broadly-based use of international force to defend human rights in such places as the former Yugoslavia where the massive abuse of human rights has been detected. This contrast might seem strange. After all, authoritarian regimes more so than democracies use or threaten to invoke force to control their subjects at home. Furthermore they are obviously not party to what has been termed the democratic peace thesis, which maintains that democracies do not make war on other democracies. Democracies are believed to have a much stronger predilection for resolving issues, at home or abroad, by consensual means. This could imply they would be the last to adopt really hard forms of power in their dealings with other countries. Nevertheless there is nothing today like the Brezhnev doctrine of the former Soviet Union, which sanctioned the Red Army's invasion of such countries as Hungary and Czechoslovakia. The recent incursions by Russian forces into territory claimed by Georgia and the use of potent covert methods like cyber-attacks to cause havoc in a country like Estonia might seem to be warnings of a more sinister future, but we are not there yet.

The contrast between the recent aggressive conduct of some democracies and the autocracies remains valid despite credible claims that western military adventures in Afghanistan and Iraq were at first largely motivated by ends unrelated to democracy and freedom. This remains the case notwithstanding the equally plausible view that nowhere can sustainable democracy be imposed on a reluctant people, anyway. But even though attempts at 'regime change' by the US and its allies seem to have stained democracy promotion's claims on legitimacy (and international legality), the contrast with autocracy promotion's current reputation may still be judged far less important to the balance of external factors influencing politics inside other countries than what prominent authoritarian regimes do at home. Blatant examples in the spotlight of international publicity range from China's actions in Tibet to repression of all of Myanmar by that country's military rulers. However once again it must be admitted that states are not now the only relevant actors. And the drive by terrorist

movements and other social forces operating from bases in one country with intent to obstruct political liberalisation or democratisation in a different country should not be ignored in the comparison with democracy promotion. Taliban fighters venturing out from Pakistan into Afghanistan are an example. Democracy support practitioners from non-governmental political foundations as well as from government agencies in the West have been accused of many things but planting roadside bombs is not one of them.

That said, authoritarian regimes do take a much more restrictive approach towards foreign entitlements to interfere in the internal politics of countries, starting with their own, when compared to the thinking of most – probably all – democracy promoters. The difference only shrinks when the position that western governments take towards foreign political interference in their own country becomes the point of comparison. That position might even be shared by some of their own democracy support practitioners. In China especially, a central component of its drive for soft power in the world seems to amount to the respect it hopes to gain from an unwavering commitment to the principle of non-intervention. Its own abstinence from force or threats to use force abroad provide backing. So, if Whitehead is right to suggest that international democracy promotion and sovereignty make for an ‘awkward coupling’, then the same claim appears even truer of autocracy promotion by autocrats.¹ This is because of their firmer and less flexible commitment to state sovereignty. Their wariness to approve multilateral interventions in independent countries including efforts under United Nations leadership to protect the population’s most basic human rights serves to underline the point. Put simply, compared to the democracies, the position adopted by authoritarians – and the position that perhaps they must adopt for the sake of their security – poses a greater barrier to certain kinds of uninvited intervention in other countries. But of course it does

not rule out attempts to exercise influence in other, less obviously power-centred ways.

Finally, autocracy export is obviously not the same as a bundle of other characteristics that include opposing the idea of democratic reform at home, let alone mounting resistance to the incoming efforts of international democracy promoters. However in theory these practices could help explain some autocracy promotion efforts, where going ‘on the attack abroad’ is reckoned to be the best form of defence. For instance, Russia’s efforts to counter the effects of the ‘orange revolution’ in Ukraine have been judged in this way.² But in this case Russia appears to have been provoked as much by how President Putin and his advisors chose to see the ‘colour revolutions’ in Serbia, Ukraine and Georgia as products of US interference, and the way this might now be extended to Russia, as by any more direct, immediate foreign interference in Russia’s internal affairs. Nevertheless a successful challenge to international democracy promotion as in Putin’s Russia undoubtedly sends signals of encouragement to authoritarian or semi-authoritarian rulers in other countries. This does not necessarily mean, though, that they will have the ability to repeat Putin’s success.

In terms of agency, intent and design, the idea of autocracy export should be kept distinct from many other contemporary developments. These include all the other ways in which democratic progress around the world is harmed and how authoritarianism is helped by factors and forces that originate in the West or the international system more broadly. For example there is speculation about whether the recent international financial crisis will dent liberal democracy’s image and boost the alternatives. This concern revolves around the failure of financial institutions and shortcomings in the national regulatory frameworks of liberal market economies that are democracies. China in contrast bucked the trend in terms of maintaining impressive economic

¹ L. Whitehead, ‘State sovereignty and democracy an awkward coupling’, in P. Burnell and R. Youngs (eds.), *New Challenges to Democratization* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), at pp. 23–41.

² T. Ambrosio, *Authoritarian Backlash: Russian Resistance to Democratization in the Former Soviet Union* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009).

performance – but then so did the world’s largest democracy, India. But the financial and economic health of some less liberal regimes has proven less resilient; Russia for example, even the economy of Singapore, one of the world’s wealthiest and most successful countries but only ‘partly free’ in Freedom House parlance, shrank in 2009.

The principle of distinguishing autocracy promotion and export from other factors also extends to examples of what Burnell called anti-assistance.³ This refers to where the democracies give precedence to goals in their foreign policy that conflict with democracy promotion and at the expense of supporting democracy’s advance. It also differs from the effects of ‘perverse democracy promotion’. This refers to where international democracy support turns out to be counter-productive because misguided in its conception, delivery or both. This last also includes what has been called benevolent autocracy export. That refers to where the international community in the form of the United Nations or some lesser multilateral agency imposes a form of trusteeship – external control – on a society that may be emerging from violent conflict, with the intention of bringing it to the point where full sovereignty and democratic self-determination can be established. The reality, however, may lay the foundations for a long lasting approach to politics and self-rule that strays from the requirements of full liberal democracy. Critics have portrayed the effects of the international interventions in Bosnia and Kosovo in this regard.

More obvious still is that autocracy export is not the same as the actual persistence or the resurgence of authoritarian rule among non-democracies, even if a new autocracy promotion would have to be closely connected. And just as a growing number of authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes by itself tells us nothing about cross-border influence, so the precise nature and extent of the international connections – the mechanics of cause and effect – must be examined closely before jumping to conclusions. In this context Geddes’ observation that

³ P. Burnell, ‘Promoting Democracy Backwards’, FRIDE Working Paper 28, November 2006.

there is a major weakness in our understanding of the international dimensions of democratisation is well worth repeating: there are few if any convincing theoretical arguments about the interaction between international factors and the behaviour of domestic political actors.⁴ This means that the true significance of the interactions cannot be appraised while they remain poorly understood. These same remarks can be applied to the international dimensions of autocratisation as well as to democratisation.

Autocracy promotion defined

Autocracy promotion can be defined inclusively or exclusively. When viewed from the perspective of societies that are affected, an inclusive account might well include all the international forces that move its political regime away from democracy and towards semi or fully authoritarian rule. The deliberate actions of external actors to export democracy might be but a small part. External factors that would have produced authoritarian effects in the absence of countervailing influences – domestic or international – may also be looked at, although knowing the counterfactual is always difficult.

An inclusive approach to the new autocracy promotion embraces all external initiatives. One of the results of this is to make the international environment more hospitable to authoritarian or would-be authoritarian rulers and regimes. This is additional to the more deliberate attempts to export autocracy, and in practice may be far more significant as a source of influence. There is a view that autocracy could well spread as a consequence of the newly intensified geopolitical competition between powerful countries that happen to subscribe to different ideologies.⁵ The

⁴ B. Geddes, ‘Changes in the causes of democratization through time’, in T. Landman and N. Robinson (eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Comparative Politics* (London and Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2009).

⁵ R. Kagan, *The Return of History and the End of Dreams* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2008).

regional if not global consequences of a return to national power rivalry between Russia and the US offer a good example. However there is no inevitability about the outcome; the reasons why geopolitical rivalries might influence choices of regime type in third countries and the way in which influence works will vary across time and space and across the type or sub-type of regime. Even now the connections are not well understood. When individual countries and the influences on them are subjected to close investigation it is not unusual for different observers to form different views. Mental puzzles like these are likely to deepen because the world order is changing rapidly. In any event, the clarities of national alignments of interests and ideas that were seen during the Cold War or in its immediate aftermath are unlikely to be reproduced.

The less inclusive definitions of autocracy promotion focus more particularly on the agency of actors and their intentions. Of course even the narrowest view that confines autocracy promotion to the export of autocracy still embraces the possibility of a considerable variety of tools, methods and strategies being employed. This includes some that are designed to act directly on another polity and others whose political influence is more likely to be exerted indirectly through economic, financial, cultural and other ways. Naturally the unintended export of political instability would not qualify even where it engenders conditions friendly to the rise or return of authoritarian rule. Indeed its inclusion would look extremely odd if the country where the instability first arises is itself a failed or failing example of authoritarian rule. However, evidence of such weaknesses is capable of causing authoritarian-leaning neighbours to stiffen their own authoritarian rule. It can even lead a stable democracy thousands of miles away to take measures ostensibly in the interests of national security that will impact on the freedom of its citizens. The erosions of civil liberties in the US and UK in the wake of 9/11 offer an illustration.

Yet any understanding of autocracy promotion could still include all of the following:

- (i) Deliberate attempts to influence a regime in an anti-democratic direction, or what might be called true autocracy export. This means manipulating the instruments of hard and soft power so as to bolster authoritarian trends and/or destabilise and subvert democratic ones.
- (ii) The diffusion of authoritarian values across borders and the borrowing of foreign models of authoritarian rule and their institutions. This may happen with or without the active encouragement of the authoritarian source.
- (iii) In international forums, assisting other regimes' efforts to counter the pressures and inducements to democratise that come from international democracy promoters
- (iv) Deliberate attempts to influence the public policies (especially foreign policies) and also the conditions in another country where one by-product, intentional or otherwise, is to move the regime in an anti-democratic direction.
- (v) Doing 'business as usual' with a regime in a way that gives it greater freedom to determine its political trajectory vis-à-vis all its international partners. In principle this can facilitate ownership of democratic reforms and make democratic sustainability more likely. However it can also produce the opposite effect of helping the maintenance or increase of authoritarian characteristics.

Initially, the first of these entries probably appears the most convincing formulation of autocracy promotion, and certainly of autocracy export, if only because it inverts the most well-known examples of support to democratisation. These are the granting of diplomatic, financial, economic, military and other security assistance and the approaches that tie offers of the same to democratic or human rights conditionalities, either *ex ante* or *ex post*.

An important distinction here is between practical support on the one hand, and actions such as legal recognition and other symbolic measures that may directly enhance a regime's legitimacy on the other. In practice of course, an offer of tangible support can

unwittingly send a signal of international legitimacy that the recipients may be able to parlay into enhanced domestic legitimacy too. But the distinction between practical support and enhancements to legitimacy is still important, notwithstanding the normative claims of democracy's international supporters that the legitimacy of any regime other than liberal democratic must depend heavily on its material record. Democracy's international supporters tend to deem such 'output legitimacy' inferior both in moral terms and as a strategy for regime survival. The increase in occasions where foreign election observers from authoritarian or semi-authoritarian countries verify the results of an election that to western eyes seemed far from free and fair is an example of external legitimation. Election observation might seem to endorse the principle that government should rest on the people's consent and not force, bribery or some other undemocratic means. But in reality nobody is fooled into thinking that either the foreign observers in these cases or the politicians who benefit most from their verdict have a genuine commitment to the idea of liberal democracy or to the cause of furthering democracy abroad.⁶

China professes no more than Russia does to offer a model political regime that other countries could and should adopt. But China's growing economic presence in the international system is a well-publicised example of alleged support for autocratisation through the second, third and fifth routes in the list above. The impression made on rulers in the developing world by the example of the developmental benefits of authoritarian/illiberal capitalism offered by China and, much less convincingly, Putin's Russia and a handful of other 'petro-autocracies' has been the subject of speculation. Yet neither this nor a country's standing more generally necessarily guarantees it 'leverage' or translates automatically into an exercise of soft power. Recognition of another country's (growing) power can give rise to fear and stoke a determination to resist being influenced by it rather than induce deference or

an inclination to suborn, conform or comply. Aspects of China's growing economic involvement in Africa for instance have generated some resentment among Africans, and although this may not be a close analogy, the evidence for many African governments borrowing political ideas from China is somewhat scant.

The main point is that as far we know from surveys of public attitudes and the inferences that can be drawn from these, it is the claimed outcomes of authoritarian/illiberal capitalism, especially the economic progress, that appear to hold the greatest attraction for the mass of ordinary people in other countries. In other words, what counts is not what a regime like China's or Russia's is, or even how it operates, but certain achievements it makes. In contrast, what counts most with the political elites could well be the support that the achievements might generate for the political system and its leaders. But what must be set against this is the impression made in developing countries by the majority of authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes whose economic and developmental performance is far from stellar, and whose political stability may be in doubt. The examples include even some potentially wealthy oil rentier states, Iran for example. This side of the coin is well worth investigating as part of a more general undertaking to find more solid evidence of what the people in developing countries actually think.

Autocratic socialisation through diffusion?

Compared to all of the above, the diffusion of authoritarian values (number two in the above list) is probably the most intriguing of all the dimensions of autocracy promotion. The notion of international diffusion of *democratic* ideas and values is coherent and well-established. Studies of democratisation tease out some subtly different applications, particularly in the context of the European Union's influence on prospective new accession states. Nevertheless major issues remain over when it is safe to make an attribution to diffusion, especially in situations where the outturn could owe as much or more to simple coincidence or the presence of favourable underlying conditions, or some other factor than a transfer or

⁶ R. Fawn, 'Battle over the box: international election observation missions, political competition and retrenchment in post-Soviet space', *International Affairs* 82/6 (2007), at pp. 1133–53.

transmission across international borders. How new norms originating from the world outside come to infuse a society is a complicated matter. The contribution made by so-called norm-brokers and by local receptivity to direct learning or imitation raise questions that cannot be answered by traditional approaches to studying the underlying historical and other conditions inside a country, that help shape its present day values, attitudes and beliefs. In other words, assigning causality in democratic socialisation through international diffusion remains far from straightforward. In contrast autocratic socialisation through diffusion enters relatively uncharted waters, but they promise to be no easier to navigate.

A useful start on the receiving end would be made by distinguishing between what is happening at the level of the government or other members of the political elite on the one side and the mass of society on the other. It is incumbent to look for any differences in respect of the socialisation here, and any signs of convergence between the two. For example one possibility is that the socialisation of elites into an authoritarian mindset is more likely to happen if they have mutually beneficial political and economic dealings with a foreign autocratic power, in comparison to the majority of ordinary citizens whose external contact is much less. A contrary reflection is that precisely because elites tend to have more experience of the wider world they come into contact with international norms of democracy, freedom and human rights, and so they stand more chance of being positively influenced as a result. Both sets of claims could have some truth. Moreover empirical studies should look for evidence of sharp divisions within the political class, or within society, or in both.

A further point is that whether the channels of autocratic socialisation take the form of offers of incentives and inducements or comprise emulation and a demonstration effect instead, the mediating and transforming roles played by elites and other opinion leaders must be taken into account. Thus Jackson advises that local compatibility and processes of 'localisation' should be examined when investigating

Russian influence in former Soviet republics of Central Asia.⁷ This recommendation resembles and also finds echoes in what is being said about democracy and rule of law promotion. Magen and Morlino for instance emphasise how important it is to grasp external-internal interactions.⁸ The outside influences should not be viewed in isolation; they cannot explain the outcome all by themselves. A very similar point could be made about 'soft power' more generally, whether exercised by authoritarian regimes or by democracies. Even when 'soft power' is manipulated by a government agency in order to achieve certain effects the consequences are not predetermined. In fact genuinely 'soft' power is closer to the idea of influence than to power, defined as it sometimes is as the production of intended effects.

Aside from issues about the mechanisms, modalities and reach of socialisation through international diffusion, there is also the very relevant question of its substantive content. A moot point is whether there is anything comparable in the realm of autocratic socialisation to the diffusion of liberal democracy's political value and beliefs. The question applies especially to the processes of normative suasion, sometimes called the 'logic of appropriateness'. This differs from the more calculated acceptance of, or compliance with, alien values purely on the basis of instrumental cost and benefit evaluation, namely the 'logic of consequences'. Examples of democratic diffusion through the 'logic of consequences' are anchored in the external trade-offs that are expected to come from modifying political attitudes and behaviour, fulfilling the qualifications for membership of the European Union being a prime example. In contrast a similar sort of authoritarian socialisation probably entails the political elites calculating mainly the direct impact on power relations at home. In regard to diffusion by the 'logic of appropriateness', however, a relevant question is whether authoritarian political values travel well. Although the question is under-

⁷ N. Jackson, 'The role of external factors in advancing non liberal democratic forms of political rule: A case study of Russia's influence on Central Asian regimes', *Contemporary Politics* 15/1 (2010), at pp. 103–20.

⁸ A. Magen and L. Morlino, *International Actors, Democratization and the Rule of Law* (London: Routledge, 2009).

researched, what may be said with some confidence is that certain sets of social and religious beliefs that contain illiberal or anti-democratic tendencies do cross borders. At times they benefit from a distinct push, if not from a government then from a social movement or civil society actor based elsewhere; at other times the spread seems more spontaneous. Either way, the diffusion may be capable of generating authoritarian political consequences.

The two most visible examples are certain fundamentalist religious creeds and xenophobic nationalism. Both have shown the power to socialise converts or alternatively provoke a reaction that may lead to different beliefs, but ones that are equally hostile to liberal democracy. In contrast to the diffusion of liberal democracy, the predilections concerning type of political regime here look contingent and derived. They are also variable. That said, the instruments and channels for diffusing authoritarian values in today's technologically wired-up and highly mobile international society are not difficult to find. For instance, almost a decade ago Rami Khour was asking whether Arab satellite TV is promoting autocracy instead of democracy.⁹ Nevertheless, in principle the democracies' normal commitment to greater openness, freedom and pluralism compared to non-democracies should mean that in global terms, the civic groups involved in spreading democracy's values should outnumber those dedicated to authoritarian-leaning alternatives. These latter groups are usually subjected to closer control by the authorities at home. And just like the external democracy promoters, they can arouse the suspicion of authoritarian rulers abroad and may receive harsh treatment. For example neither the Russian nor Chinese governments welcome the activities of Islamic radicals directed or infiltrated from abroad.

The strength of the ideological challenge that democracy now faces from autocratic socialisation through diffusion in this and other ways is in any case

up for debate. Islamism for instance is not a homogenous set of beliefs uniformly hostile to democracy. The development of freedom and democracy in Turkey and Indonesia underscore the point. Interestingly in her reprise of the challenges to democracy posed not just by Islam but other ideologies like socialism, nationalism and what she calls 'boutique ideologies' (anti-globalisation, for instance) Ottaway cautions against exaggerating the ideological threat.¹⁰ At the same time however she acknowledges that their relative weakness does not mean democracy at the ideological level has now conquered the world. On the contrary, the evidence tells us its appeal remains limited too.

Finally, the inclusion of the fifth and final listed entry of what autocracy promotion could include might be considered debatable, unless the political effects please the relevant external actors. Even that might not comprise sufficient evidence, in the absence of deliberate intent. This candidate for democracy promotion is certainly a far cry from the deliberate export of autocracy. Nevertheless the situation that it captures is one of the most talked about ways in which authoritarianism might now be gaining ground. It probably renders certain non-democracies both more willing and more able to resist international pressures to democratise. The governments of Sudan and Burma – both of whom have strong trade and investment ties with China – are often mentioned as examples.

The burden of the discussion so far has been to clarify differences among modalities of autocracy promotion in order to render the challenges that democracy promotion faces more precise. But in doing so it begs the question, why would autocracies want to promote autocracy anyway? As with any alleged crime, proof of guilt requires there to be a motive, and not just the opportunity and the means to carry it out.

⁹ R. Khour, 'Is Arab satellite TV promoting democracy or autocracy?', *The Arab American News*, 8 June 2001.

¹⁰ M. Ottaway, 'Ideological challenges to democracy: do they exist', in P. Burnell and R. Youngs (eds.), *New Challenges to Democratization* (London: Routledge), at pp. 23–41.

Why promote autocracy, anyway?

Do the explanations conventionally given for democracy promotion help us to predict the chances of the world actually experiencing a new autocracy promotion? Is the size of the potential threat to democracy more imaginary than real?

Democracy promotion has been explained in the following ways.

- (i) Idealism – a sense of moral or other responsibility to advance a cause whose principles are believed to be best for everyone.
- (ii) The claim that democracies do not make war on other democracies (the ‘democratic peace’ thesis).
- (iii) Democratisation removes those wellsprings of international terrorism that lie in political oppression and an unfree society.
- (iv) Democracy is good for national economic development. The development of other countries can be advantageous for prosperity in the established democracies or at least should reduce the necessity and cost of providing foreign aid.

Could autocracy export be explained by reasons that are analogous to these? In regard to (i), the foreign policies of autocracies are often assumed to have no idealistic component at all. However, Kagan reminds us that autocrats could actually believe in the merits of autocracy.¹¹ Moreover this is not out of purely cynical or self-serving reasons but because of the benefits the autocrats believe will flow to society. These might be the preservation of sovereign independence, political stability, social justice, cultural uniqueness, and other desirable public as well as private goods. To believe that authoritarian or semi-authoritarian rule may be appropriate for some other countries than one’s own is intellectually coherent.

¹¹ R. Kagan, *op. cit.*

Also, it is a conceivable motivation for action. Autocracy’s attractiveness can be especially relevant to countries or entire regions where chaos, violent conflict or foreign exploitation and imperialism have loomed large in the past, although any considered judgment should take account of the record of failed autocracies too. Kagan concedes that even though leading autocrats want to make the world safe for their own autocracy, this is not the same thing as wanting to make it safe for all autocracies.¹²

The democratic peace thesis – (ii) in the list – clearly has no formal application here, and moreover there is no corresponding theory of an autocratic peace. Yet even though the dictum that democracies do not make war excludes their relations with non-democracies, the world’s non-democracies can benefit in many ways from the stability that peace among the democracies brings to the international system. In this regard the autocracies are free-riders. As Bader *et al.* argue from a rational choice theoretical framework, an autocracy’s overriding political interest in its neighbours is in the maintenance of political stability there, so long as relations between the governments are non-conflictual.¹³ This interest is blind to the type of regime and to try to promote autocracy in a stable democracy could prove fruitless. To promote autocratisation in a defective or fragile democracy risks an unstable outcome that could turn out to be more threatening. By comparison promoting autocracy where political developments are heading in a more authoritarian direction anyway looks sensible, not least because the chances of being successful are greater. But to be advantageous the outcome must be a stable regime that is favourably disposed to good relations. This is not something that can be guaranteed where the autocracies are of different types or there is a long history of mutual suspicions and rivalry, as existed between the Soviet Union and communist China for example.

¹² *Ibid* p. 61.

¹³ J. Bader, J. Grävingholt and A. Kästner, ‘Would autocracies promote autocracy? A political economy perspective on regime type export in regional neighbourhoods’, *Contemporary Politics* 15/1 (2010), at pp. 83–102.

In principle international democracy promotion may be analysed in a similar way, with broadly comparable results. For it is common knowledge that democracies always have and are bound to continue to lend support to authoritarian and semi-authoritarian rulers where they judge it best for their own interest. Similarly it is a fact that autocracies cultivate relationships with full or partial democracies in ways that produce benefits for the maintenance or furtherance of democracy there. So, while major reasons why democracies might and quite often claim to promote democracy abroad could have parallels in autocracy promotion, the reasons why each type of regime might not do what is normally expected at certain times and in certain places certainly find some mutual echoes. Interestingly, on both sides the validity of the underlying theorising, for example rational choice theory and in democracies' case the democratic peace thesis and the connections with combating international terrorism and advancing development, occasions much debate. There are also disagreements about the true motives behind their foreign policies that particular examples of democratic and undemocratic rule are said to be swayed by. Competing explanations of the United States government's and the European Union's commitment to promoting democracy abroad offer a prime example. Moreover the disagreements are not just between partisans who have clear sympathies towards one type of rule or an individual government.

In regard to (iii) in the list of possible motivations, the differences between autocracy promotion and democracy promotion do look starker. Whereas some democrats might genuinely believe that freedom and democracy are antidotes to international terrorism, adherents to an ideology of order secured through authoritarian rule will believe the opposite. For them, promoting autocracy is a reasonable response especially in a failed or failing state situation like Somalia or Afghanistan. This applies even if a kind of autocratic rule different to their own example might seem to offer the solution. A different kind could even be considered acceptable on that basis.

Finally, in regard to (iv), autocrats who are believed to be essentially self-serving might be thought incapable

of sharing with the democracies a benign interest in seeing poor countries develop economically. The contrasting logic of democracy, which makes democratically elected rulers accountable to what their citizens view as their own interest and not the interests of some foreign constituency, hardly seems to dent the comparison. Yet autocracies certainly can understand the economic and other gains to be made from helping developing countries to develop. This includes their ability to provide public goods for their own people, as well as the prospects for acquiring private goods for the exclusive use of regime insiders and key supporters (as emphasised by Bader *et al.* 2010). In principle autocracies can act on a presumption of mutual gain without thereby having to endorse the idea that democracy and democratisation are the political passports to development. Very clearly in the cases of China and Vietnam for example, their own recent impressive experience of development tells both themselves and their overseas admirers that authoritarian rule is not necessarily an obstacle, and indeed can be a considerable help. In fact mainstream social science in the West is still very much divided over the causal connections between type of political regime and economic growth, in particular over how the dynamics of democratisation and developmental performance interact. Although the data indicates certain broad correlations at the aggregate level there is no firm consensus about the existence, direction and mechanics of the causal chains in general, although some context-specific guesses may be possible when looking inside individual countries.¹⁴

Of course even if the autocracies would patently want to encourage authoritarian rule elsewhere solely for self-serving instrumental reasons, rather than because of political conviction in the idea of autocracy or a purposeful mission to spread it far and wide, the chances that authoritarian rule will gain ground in the world as a result should not be discounted. On the contrary, the transparent basis to the relationship that authoritarian regimes often offer in their external

¹⁴ See G. Williams, A. Duncan, P. Landell-Mills and S. Unsworth, 'Politics and Growth', *Development Policy Review* 27/1 (2009), at pp. 5–31.

dealings and their relative freedom from normative or proselytising baggage can seem quite refreshing. By comparison, there are countries with illiberal rulers where the perceived hypocrisy of some of the efforts at international democracy promotion appears to have harmed the cause of democracy and its promotion among the citizenry as well as the ruling elite.

The policy response of democracy promotion

In formulating the implications of autocracy promotion for democracy promotion it is essential that the exact nature of the problem be specified, so as to tailor an appropriate response. Addressing authoritarian institutions and practices inside non-democracies is not the same as tackling the ways in which these features appear to move across borders. And of course it can proceed independently. In the same spirit, responding to autocracy promotion whether defined inclusively or fairly narrowly as autocracy export indicates a portfolio of possible measures, not a monolithic strategy. Some but by no means all of the choices available to democracy promoters are compatible with one another. They may be pursued simultaneously. Some of the possible choices are open to a range of different democracy promotion actors, such as those that have access to all means possible to further the goal. Others may concern only a few such organisations, including those with very limited resources and a very narrowly defined mandate.

The main alternatives are as follows.

(i) Target autocracy promotion by singling out the most obvious attempts to export autocracy, whether in bilateral relationships or in multilateral forums. Respond to them with counters in the form of competing incentives, countervailing conditionalities or other instruments of soft and

harder forms of power. More specifically, this could mean mounting a vigorous response wherever democracy promoters detect attempts by autocracies to undermine or undercut international democracy promotion activities outside their own country. Further possibilities may include insisting on universal compliance with international legal obligations concerning non-intervention by states in other countries. Pressing all states including autocracies to honour international agreements on universal human rights to which they are already party, and the international obligations that may follow from these, offers another possibility.

- (ii) Intensify efforts to challenge autocracies on their own turf, in other words, tackle autocracy promotion at source. This could mean pushing harder against the international legal boundaries to intervention in the internal affairs of sovereign states and probably requires a multilateral, if possible a United Nations-led, approach.
- (iii) Play it long, that is to say wait for the leading autocracies to break down or implode from the weight of their own contradictions. In the meantime concentrate on supporting reform in countries where democratic transition or consolidation are already well under. That is to say, inoculate the new and emerging democracies against the possibility of infection from outside. This strategy may appear to lack bold ambition but pragmatic considerations are in its favour.
- (iv) Identify then address the underlying conditions that render certain societies or social groups particularly receptive to the international diffusion of authoritarian political values. These conditions might range from poverty and ignorance to lawlessness and insecurity. The diversity suggests that a plurality of very different approaches to addressing the conditions would be advisable and should be tailored on a country case-by-case basis. For example increased aid for economic development and human development, in particular investments in education, might be most helpful in some countries, whereas international peacekeeping efforts could be the

priority in others. However there must also be recognition that indigenous cultural beliefs may predispose a society to authoritarian or semi-authoritarian rule more than in highly modernised western societies. The question of precisely what efforts democracy's international supporters can and should make to block (further) externally-induced autocratisation in these situations has no more obvious and simple answer than do questions about how the active promotion of democracy should proceed there. But the next entry in the list (v) may offer some scope for action.

- (v) Put more effort into countering authoritarian diffusion by demonstrating the superiority of liberal democracy's values. This means putting more resources into public diplomacy and more especially the activities of non-governmental democracy promotion agencies. But it should also include taking steps to eliminate the aberrations from liberal democracy and conflicting practices that are found inside the liberal democracies and in their conduct foreign affairs. These can damage democracy's image around the world even if more logically they are a condemnation of the record of countries that pose as leaders of the free world. This is a matter for their governments to address and for ever-vigilant action by civil society to hold their government to account.
- (vi) Terminate democracy promotion, in the belief that if the autocracies' fears of being threatened are allayed they will be dissuaded from actively promoting authoritarianism abroad. This does not have to be a global strategy but instead one that discriminates among the regions or sub-regions that the autocracies identify with most closely.

Conclusion

Many commentators assume that a global power shift is well under way. Further erosion of the hegemony of the United States and dominance of the West now look inevitable. Exactly how and to what extent this is already affecting the global political balance between the democracies and the non-democracies is a large and important question. The same is true of how and to what extent it is already affecting the global political balance between democracy and non-democracy. The questions are not identical and views on all of them are bound to differ. Nobody truly knows what the future has in store. The alarm bells pointing to a new autocracy promotion have been ringing for two or three years now. But it is worth making distinctions among what might be included under this heading and what is actually being referred to, before proceeding to the sustained empirical investigation that is badly needed. Rigorous investigation is now needed if democracy promotion is to know what it is up against and formulate an appropriate response.

Neither resistance to democracy promotion nor hostility to perceived US imperialism are the same as suspicion of democracy per se. And this last does not equate to a firm belief in the merits of democracy's main alternatives, let alone to a broadly-based receptivity to autocracy promotion generally and some foreign model of autocratic rule more particularly. Similarly an admiration for the very impressive economic and other achievements made by some but not the majority of non-democracies does not amount to a conviction in the rightness of their politics. It does not even promise that the policies are transferable, or mean that there is faith in their transferability, or that an enthusiasm for them is bound to be matched by the ability to carry them out. Autocracy export is still part myth. But autocracy promotion defined more broadly does have more of the feel of reality. Whitehead says we still need 'a more complex and nuanced assessment of the interactions between geo-strategic needs and calculations, and the partially autonomous influence of

democratic norms and values'.¹⁵ A comparable plea could be made – and with perhaps even greater justification – in respect of democratic norms' authoritarian and semi-authoritarian counterparts. Moreover where there is general agreement that we need to better understand how the diffusion of democratic norms and values actually works, a similar plea applies with equal measure to the political norms and values of authoritarianism too.

On the one hand there may be disadvantages to becoming too preoccupied with the alarm bells. For this could deflect democracy promoters from determining their actions in accordance with what they know about democratisation and the valuable lessons they have already gained from trying to support it. There is plenty of material there to inform future policy-making. There are also dangers in being overly reactive, too defensive, or pessimistic even. Equally, being caught in the headlights of speculation about autocracy export could blind the promoters of democracy to a suitably nuanced understanding of the more complex and broader threats.

So on the other hand it would also be unwise for democrats to bank on the likelihood that much of autocracy promotion will fail or, even better, have very contrary effects. This kind of outcome may have happened with some democracy promotion efforts that turned out to be worse than useless. But the view that autocracy promotion is incapable of performing more effectively than democracy promotion is arrogant and hardly warranted. Gambling on the chances that in the long run the main sources of autocracy promotion will collapse anyway looks equally unwise. Similarly, terminating the international promotion of democracy now will not deter the continued efforts by non-state drivers to spread values that have authoritarian implications. So, even if talk of growing autocracy

export is overblown and should not be allowed to dictate the future commitment to or future shape of democracy promotion, we cannot infer that authoritarian and semi-authoritarian rule will not continue their recent comeback. How examples of these regimes deliberately or inadvertently help prop up other regimes with similar characteristics, how they subvert attempts to democratise, and how they undermine the efforts of democracy promotion in other countries are different issues but all of them merit much closer attention than has hitherto been granted.

Of course, significant questions remain about how best to promote democracy in these new circumstances. Indeed, some of democracy promotion's most pressing questions were being aired even before the recent progress of democracy reached a plateau and, by some accounts, started to fall back. They were there even before the emergence of attention to new autocracy promotion. But exiting from the promotion of democracy could be a big mistake. Many democratic reformers do not want to depend exclusively on likeminded support from abroad. They may calculate that being seen to be so reliant could be damaging, even if the appearance belies the reality. There is no reason to think that similar attitudes do not apply to autocratic rulers too. And this can give openings to possible influence by democracy's international supporters, even where the regime displays a taste for promoting autocracy in other countries. The will to support authoritarianism abroad does not necessarily mean that authoritarian rule is strong at home. Political actors who would like to see authoritarian rule become more widespread may hope to learn something useful from the successes and failures of international democracy promotion. But taking full advantage of what can be learned from studying autocracy promotion could serve to improve democracy promotion's prospects too.

¹⁵ L. Whitehead, 'Losing "the force"'. The dark side of democratization in Iraq', *Democratization* 16/2 (2009), p. 237, at pp. 215–42.

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FRIDE

There is talk that autocracy is on the march, seeking to make converts abroad. The fear is that international democracy promotion now faces increasing international competition, adding to its growing difficulties in the face of opposition to democratic reform inside countries. The paper argues that if democracy promotion is to devise an appropriate response then we need to examine more closely the nature of the threat. The challenge takes different forms. And although the export of autocracy should not be exaggerated, other ways in which authoritarian rule and values are being spread do merit serious attention. This means that the evidence should be collected and assessed on a more discerning and systematic basis. Policy-makers for democracy promotion face choices and must devise a suitably differentiated and nuanced response.

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