COMMITTEE ON INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS
THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

The University of Chicago

# Cost Cooperation: How Authoritarian Regimes Can Make Credible Commitments

By Annamaria Prati

August 2013

A paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in the Master of Arts Program in the Committee on International Relations.

Faculty Advisor: Anne Holthoefer
Preceptor: Diana Kim

## Introduction

Cooperation is one of the most discussed topics in international relations. Traditionally, scholars have confined their studies of cooperation to democratic regimes, emphasizing their predictability through their accountable and transparent domestic institutions signifies their clarity of intent and assurances and allow for effective cooperation. Other scholars who study international cooperation rely on these characteristics without explicitly distinguishing between democracies and autocracies, but, given that it is unlikely that an authoritarian regime would have these characteristics, these studies too seem confined to democratic regimes. However, as can be observed in current events and in history, authoritarian regimes do indeed cooperate, a phenomenon that cannot be explained by a literature that relies on transparent institutions.

In an effort to remedy the focus on democracies, scholars have begun to examine empirical examples of authoritarian cooperation. For example, some have argued that authoritarian regimes cooperate to promote the authoritarian values of non-cooperation, non-interference, or collective security.[1] Others, taking their cue from the extensive literature on the Democratic Peace and its extension into democratic cooperation, have explored a "dictatorial peace," finding a surprisingly peaceful history. By breaking regimes into three categories – personalist, military, and single-party – they found that, since the Second World War, only personalist regimes had fought a war against another authoritarian regime, and all authoritarian

1. For example, see Michael Barnett and Etel Solingen, "Designed to fail or failure of design? The origins and legacy of the Arab League," In *Crafting Cooperation, Regional International Institutions in Comparative Perspective*, edited by Amitav Acharya and Alastair Iain Johnston (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007): 180 – 220.

regimes were equally likely to engage in a militarized interstate dispute as a democratic regime.[2] While these observations are useful for debunking the implied necessity of transparent domestic institutions, they fail to provide theoretical explanations.

How then, using the knowledge from current literature on cooperation and authoritarian regimes, can authoritarian regimes make credible commitments? This paper argues that although authoritarian regimes are not accountable to a large number of citizens in the same way as a democratic regime and do not have transparent domestic institutions, authoritarian regimes are accountable to some citizens and therefore act in predictable patterns. Knowing these patterns allows authoritarian regimes to make credible commitments within certain frameworks, making sustained cooperation over time possible. In the case of bilateral international cooperation, the focus of this paper because of it is the simplest international cooperation scenario, authoritarian regimes should be able to make sustained credible commitments through formal international institutions due to the way institutions are require consensus over a long period of time while they are constructed, as well as their lengthened time horizons for all parties involved once cooperation is in place.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, this paper presents the traditional views of cooperation as stated in the core cooperation literature; second, this paper turns to the framework for cooperation used in this paper to consider authoritarian credible commitments; third, this paper defines authoritarian regimes, as well as the relationship between the leader and the actors who help the leader maintain power; and fourth, this paper explores different possible mechanisms for authoritarian credible commitments. The paper finishes with some concluding

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2. Mark Peceny, Caroline Beer, and Shannon Sanchez-Terry, "Dictatorial Peace?" *American Political Science Review* 96 (1) (2002): 15-26.

remarks, highlighting the implications of institutions facilitating authoritarian regimes' credible commitments.

## Traditional Views of Cooperation

The International Relations cooperation literature traditionally branches in two ways. The first focuses on the role of institutions in facilitating cooperation, which, as will be shown, implicitly relies on institutions more likely to be present in democratic regimes. The second discusses cooperation more explicitly and specifically for different regime types, often focusing on the advantages of democracies in international cooperation through the Democratic Peace. Both of these paths however either fail to incorporate elements of autocratic regimes or mischaracterize autocratic regimes to exaggerate the democratic advantage. To demonstrate this, the following section does a brief overview of the most salient literature from both branches, starting with the liberal institutional theory.

Robert Keohane defines cooperation as the alignment of policies in anticipation of, or with, actual behaviors of partners, a definition that is commonly used across cooperation literature and the definition utilized in this project.[3] Keohane characterizes the impediments to cooperation as primarily an information problem: without information, there cannot be trust and commitment, and without trust that one's partners will not renege on agreements, there is no incentive to cooperate. Another facet of this information problem is the absent guarantee of future interactions. This is important because, according to game theory's classic Prisoner's

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3. Robert Keohane, *After Hegemony* (Ewing: Princeton University Press, 2005): 51-52.

Robert Gilpin, *The Global Political Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001): 89.

Helen Milner, "International Theories of Cooperation Among Nations: Strengths and Weaknesses," *World Politics* 44 (3) (1992): 467.

Dilemma, if there are a finite number of interactions between two actors, there is no concern about how each actor will be treated or perceived in future interactions, and each actor will prefer to attempt to maximize their own personal utility by reneging.[4] One way to overcome this information problem is through coercive force, such as by a hegemon.[5] Another way is through the establishment of institutions, defined as a "set of implicit or explicit principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures around which actors' expectations converge in a given area of international relations."[6] [7] It is true that an agreement to reciprocate cooperative behavior could be un-institutionalized, and it is also true that the mere existence of an institution does not guarantee cooperative behavior. Institutions that include the principle of reciprocity can only reinforce cooperation and delegitimize defection.[8] Institutions help monitor agreements, punish defectors, encourage issue-linkage, as well as ensure future interactions, heightening the stakes for each actor's reputation as well as placing a higher value on future interactions – in other words, more "medium" pay offs in the long term are more valuable than one "high" pay off in

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4. See:
Robert Axelrod and Robert Keohane, "Achieving Cooperation under Anarchy: Strategies and Institutions," *World Politics* 38 (1) (1985).

5. See:
Stephen Krasner, "State Power and the Structure of International Trade," *World Politics* 28 (3) (1976): 317-347.

Charles Kindleberger, "Dominance and Leadership in the International Economy: Exploitation, Public Goods and Free Rides," *International Studies Quarterly* 25 (2) (1981): 242-254.

6. Stephen Krasner, *International Regimes* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983): 3.

7. Specifically, Keohane refers to my word "institutions" as "regimes", but given my future discussion of specific regime types using the same word for both would cause confusion.

8. Axelrod and Keohane, 250

the short term.[9] Not all scholars agree with this assessment of the power of institution to change behavior or that the increased value on the future is beneficial for cooperation,[10] but for the purposes of this paper and examining other cooperation literature, Keohane's theory is assumed to be an accurate baseline mechanism for institutional cooperation.

How is reciprocity established for an international institution? Keohane and Robert Axelrod claim that, "…reciprocity requires the ability to recognize and retaliate against defection."[11] In order to recognize defection, international actors must be able to see present and future actions in the domestic arena of a given partner. Knowing about actions and intentions requires a certain degree of transparency in domestic institutions, such as public speeches and debates or a free media. By definition it is unlikely that an autocracy would have such transparent domestic institutions. Such a high level of transparency would most likely only exist in a democratic society, suggesting that Keohane's theories about the establishment of reciprocity and the benefits of institutions, as well as those based on his theories, implicitly apply only to democracies.[12] In other words, according to these theories, the lack of transparency in authoritarian regimes should bar them from reciprocity, and therefore cooperation and institutions.

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9. Axelrod and Keohane, 249.

10. See:
John Mearsheimer, "The False Promise of International Institutions," *International Security* 19 (3) (1994): 5-49.

James Fearon, "Bargaining, Enforcement, and International Cooperation," *International Organization* 52 (2) (1988): 269-305.

11. Axelrod and Keohane, 249.

12. Keohane. This assertion is supported by Keohane's case study selection, which focuses on the European Union.

The second branch of cooperation literature focuses on regime type explicitly, emphasizing the advantages of a democracy, often in the context of the Democratic Peace, or the disadvantages of an autocracy in international cooperation. To be clear, this paper understands democracy to be a regime with "regular, free, and fair elections" and the necessary institutions to accomplish these criteria, unless otherwise specified by the author.[13] Defining authoritarianism requires a more complex explanation, and will be defined in appropriate depth later in the paper. The regime type literature falls into two important categories – the first focuses on democracies and contracts, represented by Charles Lipson, while the second focuses on the relationship between democratic leaders, their domestic audiences, and the international community, represented by Robert Putnam and Bruce Bueno de Mesquita et al.

Lipson is one scholar who has studied the contractual aspect of the Democratic Peace in a way that is particularly useful for studying cooperation broadly because he de-emphasizes the issue-area by not focusing exclusively on democracies and war.[14] Lipson lists four contractual advantages for democracies: high transparency, continuity of governance, high audience costs and constitutional governance. The high transparency of democratic institutions allows their partners to accurately and easily monitor each other's actions, an important feature as discussed by the liberal institutionalist literature. The continuity of governance refers to the concept that democratic states tend to have constant policies and government stability over time and between leaders. The high audience costs refer to the electoral accountability in democracies – if a leader

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13. Larry Diamond, *The Spirit of Democracy: The Struggle to Build Free Societies Throughout the World* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2008): 21.

14. See:
Charles Lipson, *Reliable Partners: How Democracies Have Made a Separate Peace* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).

makes a promise and then reneges, the domestic audience will punish the leader by not voting for them or their party in the next election. It is worth noting that punishment in the next election (or even impeachment) is an extreme form of accountability, but the threat of such an extreme is considered sufficient for the accountability mechanism to function. And finally, democracies have a constitution that dictates the rules leaders will follow, reinforcing continuity and predictability of state behavior. In summary, democracies are considered to have not only transparent institutions, but also a powerful domestic audience that allows perceptions drawn from the transparent institutions to be accurate portrayals of the future, and therefore the commitments are credible.

The second category within the more regime specific literature focuses on the relationships between the leader and the domestic audience and the leader and the international community. One scholar that encompasses both relationships is Putnam, who created a model of international conflict resolution portraying negotiation as a two-level game between a leader and his domestic public and a leader to his negotiating partner (e.g. another leader).[15] The goal of this model is for the leader to find a mutual win set between the domestic and international levels in order to reach an agreement. Part of the model is transparency: the negotiating partner can see for himself the preferences of the domestic public, and therefore knows the constraints the domestic public is placing on the leader. Knowing that the leader is constrained, and the desire to make a deal, incentivizes the negotiating partner to be more generous with their terms, and the more generous the terms, the less likely an agreement will be ratified and respected.

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15. See:
Robert Putnam, "Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games," *International Organization* 42 (1988): 427-460.

Like Keohane, Putnam does not explicitly say that his model only applies to democracies, but it can be surmised through his model's conditions of ratification and transparency and his examples, such as the Bonn summit between the United States, Germany, and Japan in 1978. The ratification process and the transparency of domestic politics both seem like qualities unique to democracies, leading to this assumption. Despite this lack of specificity, it also belongs in the more regime type specific categories because of its similarities with another model by Bueno de Mesquita et al. that also discusses constraints on a leader presented.

In Bueno de Mesquita et al's theory, the public is divided into two categories: the selectorate, defined as "the set of people with a say in choosing leaders and with a prospect of gaining access to special privileges doled out by leaders;" and the winning coalition, defined as "the subgroup of the selectorate who maintain incumbents in office and in exchange receive special privileges." [16] In a democracy, there is a large winning coalition and a large selectorate. This means a certain degree of transparency to easily demonstrate government actions to a large and diffuse group of people. This transparency also means other positive qualities regimes would want in the character of their negotiating partner, such as anti-corruption. In different authoritarian regimes, the size of the selectorate is arguable but is considered to be weak, and the winning coalition – i.e. the most important members of the selectorate – is guaranteed to be small and weak, according to Bueno de Mesquita et al.[17] The leader's pursuit of maintaining power translates to an exercise of absolutism, since no one can hold the leader accountable. In an autocracy, according to Bueno de Mesquita et al's framework, there are none of these benefits

16. Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, Alastair Smith, Randolph Siverson, James Morrow, *The Logic of Political Survival* (Boston, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2005), xvi.

17. Ibid., 118.

because, given the weakness of the winning coalition, the regime has no group of supporters to please. As this paper will demonstrate later, this characterization is not correct – in order to stay in power, authoritarian leaders must also maintain the support of the strong winning coalition.

## Authoritarian Regimes

These two branches of literature are clearly insufficient since authoritarian regimes do cooperate in the practical world and are active members in the international community. How, then, do authoritarian regimes make credible commitments? For simplicity, this paper is considering two authoritarian regimes in a bilateral agreement. This paper makes two claims. First, winning coalitions are stronger than Bueno de Mesquita et al's framework credits, which lead to a degree of leadership accountability within the regime. This accountability means that authoritarian regimes can behave in more rational, predictable patterns than the current literature assumes. This predictability leads to credible commitments even in the absence of transparent institutions in certain circumstances. In the simplest terms, authoritarian leaders will make agreements when the agreement aligns with the interests of the winning coalition. But such commitments are not necessarily credible, since the interests of the winning coalition might be susceptible to short-term exogenous shocks. Therefore, the circumstance that allows authoritarian regimes to make credible commitments is the circumstance that extends time horizons, which as established by the literature, is when commitments are institutionalized.

This section is as follows: first, this paper defines authoritarian regimes; second, it presents a general framework for cooperation; third, it explains the relationship between an authoritarian leader and his winning coalition in-depth; and finally, it explains the interaction between the leader and the negotiating partner at the international level, highlighting the predictable patterns given the domestic dynamics in different cooperation situations.

*What Are Authoritarian Regimes?*

Often regime specific literature treats regimes like a black box: North Korea, Somalia, and Venezuela are considered to have the same domestic institutions and operate in similar ways. They are also assumed to all be equally invulnerable, and invulnerable in similar ways.[18] However, literature that more specifically discusses authoritarian regimes breaks down the types of domestic institutions, and therefore the types of authoritarian regimes, more thoroughly. This paper follows closely one such framework, first used by political scientist Barbara Geddes and then expanded by political scientist Jessica Weeks. This framework breaks authoritarian regimes into three categories, all of which have slightly different domestic institutions: military, one-party, and personalist.[19] Different types of domestic institutions will render different types of relationships between the public and the authoritarian leader, as well as dictate different degrees of power to both the public and the leader. Regardless of the category, this paper follows Geddes and Weeks in assuming that all authoritarian regimes are rational actors who wish to maintain their position of power. Where both Geddes and Weeks stop short however is how these relationships and degrees of power have important implications for giving a nuanced

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18. For a more complete discussion of this traditional political science treatment of authoritarian regimes, see:

Barbara Geddes, "What Do We Know About Democratization After Twenty Years?" *Annual Review of Political Science,* 2 (1999): 115-144.

Jessica L. Weeks, "Autocratic Audience Costs: Regime Type and Signaling Resolve," *International Organization* 6 (1) (2008): 35-64.

Jessica L. Weeks, "Strongmen and Straw Men: Authoritarian Regimes and the Initiation of International Conflict," *American Political Science Review*, 106(2), (2012): 326-347.

Joseph Young, and Brian Urlacher, "Cantankerous Cooperation: Democracies, Authoritarian Regimes and the Prisoners Dilemma," *New England Political Science Association* (2007): 51-73.

19. In practice not all regimes are easy to classify, an issue that both Weeks and Geddes discuss. However, this paper leaves further discussion of classification issues for future research.

perspective on authoritarian credible commitments, in particular through formal bilateral institutions, which will be demonstrated in the rest of this paper.

In a military authoritarian regime, the state is run by the military, and the military chooses who will be considered the head of state.[20] Using the language of selectorate theory, the top members of the military are the winning coalition. An example of this would be the Latin American juntas of the 20th century. They often come to power through a coup or other military intervention.[21]

In a single-party authoritarian regime, one party dominates leadership, though potentially other parties exist without influence over policy.[22] [23] An example of this would be the former Soviet Union. Most of the authoritarian regimes today fall under this category.[24]

This paper departs from Geddes when approaching personalist regimes. In Geddes' framework, a personalist authoritarian regime has one leader who has created a following for

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20. Geddes, 121.

21. Ibid. 122.

22. Ibid. 121.

23. For my purposes, so-called "hybrid regimes" or "electoral authoritarianism" would also fall under this category. For a discussion on hybrid regimes, see:

Larry Diamond, "Elections Without Democracy: Thinking about Hybrid Regimes," *Journal of Democracy* 13 (2) (2002): 21-35.

Stephen Levitsky, and Lucan Way, "The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism," *The Journal of Democracy* 13(2) (2002): 51-65.

For the purposes of this paper, I am also expanding this category to include other regimes that do not have parties per se, but might also have a strong domestic elite or winning coalition that could influence policy in a similar way as a party, such as in Saudi Arabia.

24. See:
Andreas Schedler, "The Menu of Manipulation," *Journal of Democracy* 13 (2) (2002): 36-50.

their self and has sole influence on state policy. They could develop from a power struggle or emerge from a military or single-party regime.[25] These regimes also are more likely to rule in resource-reliant states with little domestic investment and small populations.[26] After examining the limited change in elites during power transitions in personalist regimes (specifically in North Korea and Syria), this paper proposes a slightly different definition of a personalist regime: the leader does not have sole influence on state policy, but rather must also consider the advice and opinions of a close circle of advisors with a more concrete elite group.

Now that the three types of authoritarian regimes are established, this paper can discuss in more depth the relationships and preferences between the leader and the public in the different categories.

*General Framework for Cooperation*

My framework theory begins with the assumption that all actors are rational. If the regimes are rational actors, they will only enter an agreement of cooperation if the benefits of the agreement outweigh the costs of cooperation for the elites. The decision to enter into an agreement is assumed to be based on demand. Once an agreement is established, both regimes have two options: they can stay in the agreement, i.e. cooperate, or they can renege on the agreement, i.e. defect. A regime will stay in the agreement if the costs of reneging outweigh the costs of staying. A regime will renege on an agreement if the costs of reneging are lower than the costs of staying. Regimes would not have entered the agreement if the benefits of cooperation did not outweigh the costs of cooperation at the time, so in order to reach the

25. Geddes, 121.

26. Joseph Wright, "Do Authoritarian Institutions Constrain? How Legislatures Affect Economic Growth and Investment," *American Journal of Political Science* (52) (2008): 342.

conditions necessary for a regime to choose reneging on an agreement implies that there must have been an environmental change.

As discussed previously in the overview of the regime specific cooperation literature, the credibility of democracies hinges on transparent institutions and the threat of punishment from domestic audiences, even if punishment per se is an extreme outcome. Furthermore, if punishment becomes necessary, the commitment is clearly not credible post facto, rendering the threat of the punishment and its ensuing constraints, as outlined by Putnam, the most important characteristic. If leaders are afraid of punishment for failing to follow through on commitments, they will not make commitments they will not uphold and they will not fail the commitments they make, hence their credibility. As discussed, the transparency of institutions provides potential opportunities for the international community to monitor actions and intentions of the regime, as well as the assumption that part of this transparency is an increased awareness of regime activities in the domestic public. This increased awareness might help provide opportunities for the domestic public to know when to punish the regime, but if the domestic public is not sufficiently powerful, these opportunities are for naught. In an authoritarian regime, this powerful domestic audience is the winning coalition, and the costs and benefits of any given agreement must consider the relative costs and benefits to the authoritarian regime's winning coalition.[27]

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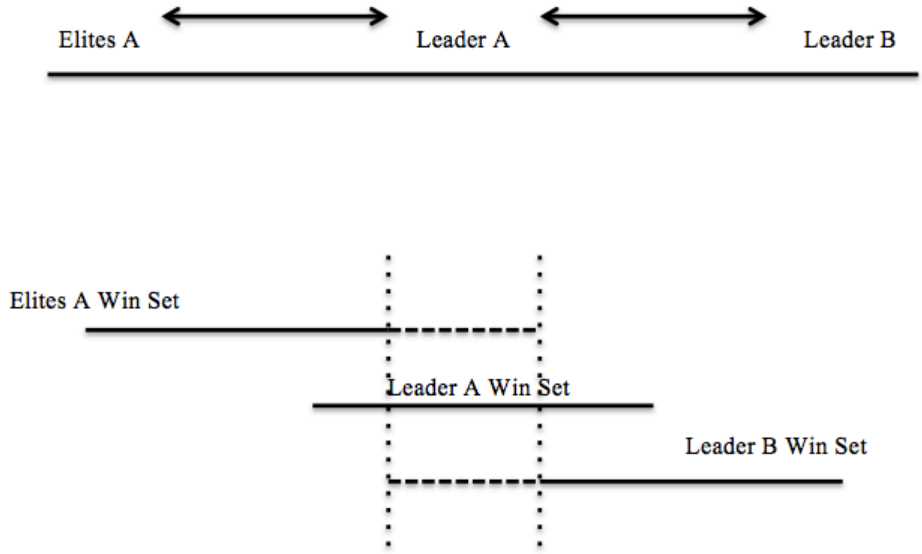
27. See:
Beatriz Magaloni, "Credible Power Sharing and the Longevity of Authoritarian Rule," *Comparative Political Studies* 41 (4) (2008): 715-741.

Xinyuan Dai, "Why Comply? The Domestic Constituency Mechanism." *International Organization* (59) (2) (2005): 363-398.

Weeks, 36.

This affects international cooperation as follows. Although the primary purpose of this framework is to explain the maintenance of credible commitments from the past in cooperation, it is necessary to understand the fundamentals of how the commitment was initially constructed in order to determine future leniency in sustaining the commitment. Therefore, this paper's framework begins with an authoritarian leader (A) wanting to cooperate with another authoritarian leader (B) (taking the demand for cooperation and the timing for cooperation as a given). Authoritarian leaders A and B, in order to stay in power, must maintain the support of their elites (A and B respectively), whether it is the military, the party, or the advisors. Leaders A and B and elites A and B have their own set of preferences on any given issue. Leaders A and B must bargain with their respective winning coalition to accept the terms of the other leader's offer, while also bargaining with the other leader in order to get the most generous offer possible. This whole process is carried out with the international leader not seeing the domestic level, though the characteristics of the elite coalition should be broadly known. Both sides attempt to anticipate their partner's next move, either for the bargaining advantage of generosity or to avoid being cheated. Generosity expands "win sets," or acceptable agreements to the regime, and fear of cheating shrinks win sets. If successful, throughout this bargaining, the set of acceptable outcomes for all parties potentially becomes broader, as seen in Figure 1. Because, as outlined in the previous section, each leader is accountable to their winning coalition, any commitments must align with the interests of the elite at the time of the agreement as well as into the future in order to be credible – a leader who acts unilaterally risks being overthrown. Therefore, the goals of the leaders are to not only achieve overlapping win sets, but to also ensure that those win sets will continue to overlap in the future. The next section explores in more depth the first of these goals based on the frameworks presented by Geddes and Weeks

Figure 1: Two-Level Negotiation




*The dashed horizontal lines are the changed win-sets from the negotiation. Note that this is only from the perspective of one leader, for simplicity.

*Authoritarian Leaders versus Winning Coalitions: Relationships and Preferences*

Based on the basic framework provided in the previous section, it is clear that different authoritarian regime types developed under different circumstances, and therefore have different relationships between the authoritarian leader and the winning coalition.[28] However, despite the differences in these relationships, the outcome is the same, meaning that the solution to rendering authoritarian commitments credible applies to all authoritarian regime types.

The important aspect of the relationship between the winning coalition and the leader hinges on the consideration that the winning coalition has the "means and incentives to coordinate to punish the leader," since fear of punishment should incentivize the leader to act in

28. Wright, 342.

accordance with the interests of the winning coalition.[29] This is more complicated than one might suppose. The means to coordinate and punishment hinges on a member of the winning coalition to be able to signal their intentions and preferences to other members of the winning coalition. In a democracy, where rights for freedom of expression and free organization are protected, this is not problematic (though a collective action problem might still prevail).[30] In any authoritarian regime however where these rights are not protected, the winning coalition might fear surveillance from the security apparatus and violent repercussions for their signaling. However, unlike a democracy, the winning coalition in an authoritarian regime (regardless of type) is a smaller group and is most likely composed of similar actors that socialize in the same circles, so such signaling probably does not have to be as open or as obvious as in a democracy, so eluding surveillance is possible. Furthermore, it is also possible that the people performing surveillance compose part of or all of the winning coalition (such as in a military regime), in which case surveillance would not be a concern.

The second part of this aspect is the incentives of the winning coalition to punish the leader, with the most extreme punishment being overthrowing the leader. Many scholars assume that the fate of the elite is inherently tied to the fate of the leader, so punishing the leader would be punishing themselves. Since the elite is unlikely to want to punish themselves or diminish their own power, if this were the case then there would never be the incentive to punish the leader. However, if the fate of the elite is divorced from the fate of the leader in authoritarian regimes, the incentives could exist since overthrowing the leader does not involve harming

29. Weeks, 37.

30. Weeks, 38.

themselves. How then could the winning coalition punish the leader in different authoritarian regimes without suffering the consequences?

Figure 2: Stag Hunt Game

| | Stag | Rabbit |
|---|---|---|
| Stag | 2, 2 | 0, 1 |
| Rabbit | 1, 0 | 1, 1 |

Weeks describes the punishment of a leader as a "Stag Hunt coordination game" (Figure 2). The concept is that player A can choose to either catch rabbits or catch a stag. The payoff for catching rabbits is small, and the payoff for catching stags is large. It takes multiple people to catch a stag. No one wants to miss out on catching the stag. If player A has a desire to catch the stag and has reliable information that other people also desire to catch the stag, and will act on it, then player A will try to catch the stag. If player A has a desire to catch the stag but there is not this reliable information about other players or it does not seem that there are sufficient players to catch the stag, player A will only catch rabbits.[31] To take this game a step farther than Weeks, assuming that all actors have a desire to catch the stag, there is an additional hurdle called the collective action problem – who will take on which part of the initial costs of hunting the stag, and how will the individual members ensure that all other members follow through with their own commitments? Making these decisions, even if the underlying preference is the same, requires additional coordination. Overcoming the collective action problem is possible because the winning coalition is a small group, who will most likely trust each other and be able to enforce cooperation amongst themselves, following a model similar to Duncan Snidal's coordination model for the provision

31. Weeks, 39.

of public goods.[32] This paper assumes that other hindrances to coordination, such as repression, are too expensive to be constant and thorough, in accordance with other scholars' assumptions.[33]

When then is the Stag Hunt game viable in any given authoritarian regime, and how does it relate to credible commitments? In the extreme case, it is viable when there is a disgruntled elite that believes they have more to gain from overthrowing the leader than keeping the leader, most likely because the leader is not honoring their preferences, and the leader is not either making signaling for the stag game impossible through severe repression or dividing the elite through selected side payments.[34] A less extreme case could mean a less severe punishment to the leader, such as perhaps less generosity in expanding their win sets for a future cooperation negotiation. Fear of any punishment, whether its losing power or more likely losing cooperative elites, in addition to the great expense of side payments and constant surveillance, means the leader would want to avoid scenarios that promote stag hunts. Contrary to what some previous literature might imply (including Geddes and Weeks), the Stag Hunt game is a feasible possibility in any of the three regime types.

Single-party regimes seem to fit the criteria for a Stag Hunt game very well. There usually is a power-sharing relationship between the leader and the winning coalition, and in the case of electoral authoritarianism there is also at least one opposition party for the leader to

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32. See:
Duncan Snidal, "The Limits of Hegemonic Stability Theory," *International Organization* 39 (4) (1985): 579-614.

33. Weeks, 39.

34. See: Magaloni.

Weeks, 41.

Figure 3: Battle of the Sexes Game

| | Opera | Movies |
|---|---|---|
| Opera | 2,1 | 0,0 |
| Movies | 0,0 | 1,2 |

monitor.[35] Scholars disagree to the extent the winning coalition's fate is tied with the leader's in a single-party regime, but it most likely depends on specific empirical cases.[36] Nevertheless, assuming that the winning coalition can find a way to punish the leader without endangering its own elite standing, one should expect a leader of a single-party regime to perceive the acquiescence of the elite's preferences as an integral component of their maintenance of power, and therefore carefully and consistently consider the preferences of the winning coalition as part of their commitments.

The military regimes are a little more complicated. Geddes describes military decision-making like a Battle of the Sexes game (see Figure 3).[37] Actor A would like to go to the movies and actor B would like to go to the opera, but both actors A and B's first preference is to act together. Unlike the stag hunt game, there are two states of equilibrium. Therefore, what matters most in a given individual game is persuading the other to do your preferred activity that night, but the stakes of "losing" and doing the other activity are not very high. However, when there are repeated games, there is also a compromise factor – actor B might become resentful if there are too many movie nights in a row, so actor A might purposefully choose their second

35. Geddes, 122.

36. See: Geddes.

Weeks, 46.

37. Geddes, 126.

choice opera after a few movie nights to appease actor B. In contrast, Weeks argues that a military regime behaves like the Stag Hunt game.[38]

It is clear that these two games are fundamentally incompatible mechanisms for the same elites-leader pair simultaneously. However, these two theories can be reconciled as long as one concedes that the two games are not simultaneous. Let actor A be the leader and actor B be the winning coalition in a Battle of the Sexes game. If actor A is uncompromising, actor B might become resentful and want to punish actor A, switching to the Stag Hunt Game. If actor A knows of the dire consequences from game switching, they will attempt to keep the Battle of the Sexes game going for as long as possible by acquiescing to the elite's demands. Therefore, even though the rationale is different than for a single-party regime, it has the same underlying result: one should expect a leader of a military regime to perceive the acquiescence of the elite's preferences as an integral component of their maintenance of power, and therefore carefully and consistently consider the preferences of the winning coalition as part of their commitments.

The relationship between the leader and the winning coalition in a personalist regime, under the revised framework, is similar to the military regime.[39] Although Geddes and others argue that the survival of the elite depends on both the survival of the personalist leader as well as the personalist leader's good graces, this assumes that there are enough people with the skills and qualifications to completely replace the government periodically when there are power transitions.[40] A brief examination of power transitions in a few personalist regimes shows that either the winning coalition is unchanged from one leader to the next (such as in North Korea,

38. Week, 46.

39. See: Weeks.

40. Weeks, 46.

between Kim il-Sung and Kim Jong-il), or any changes are to winning coalitions who have been openly critical of the predecessor (such as in Syria, between Hafez al-Assad and Bashar al-Assad). Therefore, contrary to previous literature, this paper assumes that the winning coalition has relatively stable membership and is somewhat autonomous from the leader. In other words, winning coalitions can have the incentive to overthrow the leader without punishing themselves, making the Stag Hunt possible. Nevertheless, overthrowing a personalist leader has greater uncertainties, since the cult of personality spans beyond the winning coalition and the overthrow could cause unrest. For example, imagine that Kim Jong-un, the current personalist leader of North Korea, was overthrown by his advisors and one attempted to replace him – it is unclear whether the people would accept the new leader as legitimate. These dangers of oppression and uncertainties mean that the impetus to start the Stag Hunt must be significant. Because of these obstacles, usually the advisors and leader will play the Battle of the Sexes game, and the leader, in an effort to avoid the Stag Hunt, will heed the preferences of his winning coalition.

In conclusion, the relationship between the leader and the elite is different for the three types of authoritarian regimes, but the ultimate effect – i.e. the leader needing to be responsive to elite interests to avoid the Stag Hunt game – is the same. It follows that an authoritarian leader will make commitments based on the interests of the elite. Moreover, because the elite is a larger group, their interests should be easier to deduce than that of a single person. For example, if the elite is compromised of mainly oil tycoons, their interests will follow how to maximize their oil profits. Even in very recluse authoritarian regimes such as North Korea, considerable information is known about the winning coalition. Therefore, by knowing the composition of the winning coalition one can predict the behavior of authoritarian regimes, negating the necessity of transparent institutions.

*Costly Cooperation: Institutions and the Future*

Given the domestic dynamics of the different types of authoritarian regimes and the pay off structures within those dynamics, the paper concludes two crucial factors for credible commitments: the first is that, contrary to most of the existing literature, authoritarian leaders are constrained by their domestic elites in the international arena; the second is that even without transparency, it is fairly simple to infer dynamics in an authoritarian regime. Therefore, authoritarian leaders could know whether the costs of no commitment outweigh the costs of committing to the winning coalition, and would also know whether the costs of staying outweigh the costs of leaving.

But there is another aspect that concerns a negotiating partner about the credibility of authoritarian commitments: what happens if the domestic or international environment temporarily changes, so that the short term costs of reneging no longer outweigh the short term costs of cooperation? As mentioned earlier, leaders must have two factors for sustaining a credible commitment: overlapping win sets and stability of those win sets over time. If the win sets no longer overlap, sustaining the commitment is difficult or impossible, which could lead to counter-intuitive and shortsighted decisions. The question then becomes whether there is a mechanism for authoritarian regimes to avoid reneging in times of short-term crisis.

In terms of flexibility and strength in a changing environment, not all international relationship and cooperation mechanisms are created equal. This paper poses three plausible methods for the different types of authoritarian regimes to make credible commitments: personal friendships between leaders, sinking costs, or establishment of institutions. The ultimate goal is to extend the time horizons for both regimes, an important factor when attempting to preempt future offers from partners and considering degrees of generosity and cheating. Longer time

horizons mean that there is a prospect to leverage present generosity in the future, which runs parallel to the possibility of future revenge for present cheating. As outlined before, greater generosity leads to more acceptable outcomes, and, given the greater generosity (and therefore costs) of the commitment, regimes are also less likely to renege. The potential time horizons in the three agreement mechanisms are knowable, and, given that regime behavior is predictable, one should be able to know the available options and possible payoff structures for these different mechanisms within authoritarian regimes. Since, as derived from the existing literature, formal institutions offer a mechanism for lengthening these horizons, a quality that the other two mechanisms do not, one can conclude that institutions are the best mechanism for authoritarian regime's credible commitments. The logic is behind this conclusion is explored in more depth in the rest of this section.

The first method for cooperation is through personal friendships. This concept seems somewhat feasible by considering the extent of friendships in the authoritarian world, such as Hugo Chavez of Venezuela and Fidel Castro of Cuba. Theoretically, authoritarian leaders (regardless of type) would place additional value in staying in an agreement because they would not want to endanger their personal friendships or their reputations among their closest allies. Moreover, these friendships might be assumed to be long-lasting, serving as a prospect for future interactions and therefore encouraging greater cooperation.

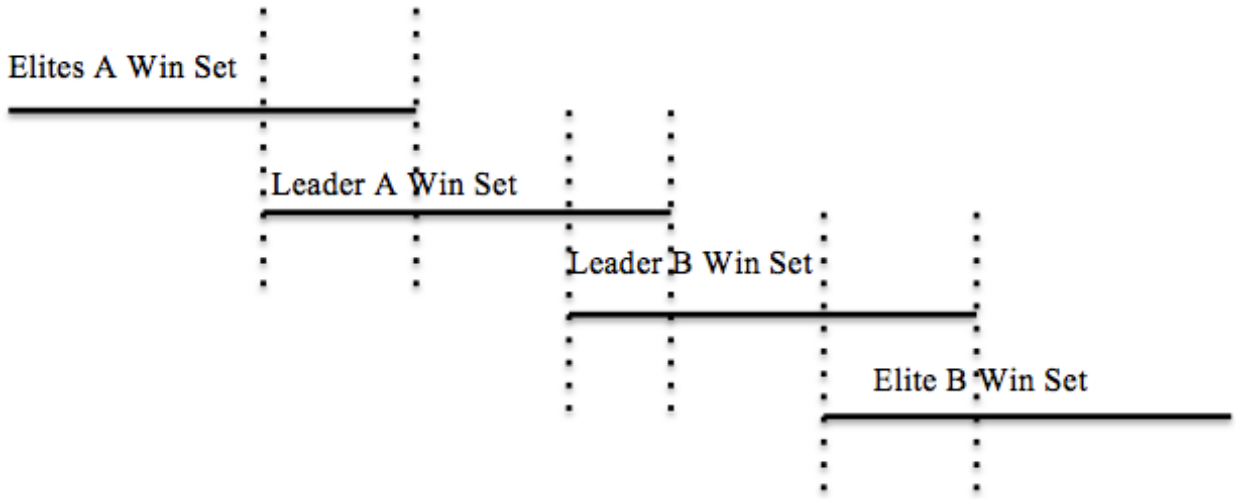
This proposition is problematic. First, it seems somewhat more feasible for a personalist regime since there would be one person for a longer period of time associated with the state, but usually, even in authoritarian regimes, power rotation is too frequent for friendships to be "forever". Relatedly, there is no reason to believe that the friendship with a leader would trump the pleasing the preferences of the winning coalition, since it is unlikely that the friendship

would be sufficient to maintain power for the leader whereas the winning coalition would satisfy that criteria. Second, just as friendships between elites could pose a conflict of interest in decision-making, in theory the same logic could apply to friendships between authoritarian regimes. If states A, B, and C are all authoritarian regimes (the type is irrelevant), leader A has promised to support leader B in a war and has separately promised to support leader C in a war, but then states B and C begin to fight a war, inevitably leader A would break a commitment. Moreover, it is inherently unpredictable which friendship leader A would favor, and the significant chance that leader A chooses to renege on the promise in favor of staying in the other promise makes leader A's commitment not credible in both cases. Third, friendships can be tumultuous, even if it only involves two people. If for whatever reason the two leaders decide that they are no longer friends then there is no prospect of future interactions and no fear of besmirched reputations, so they will no longer honor commitments.

The negotiating partner at the international level can know the inherent volatility of friendships, and therefore infer that commitments through this mechanism are not credible by following the logic of the regime's predictable behaviors. Friendships, as explained above, are temporary. The temporal nature of the agreements have the effect of a one shot game as perceived by the winning coalition, which dis-incentivizes generosity and increases wariness of cheating in cooperation. This leads to all parties' win sets becoming smaller, making it more difficult to find common ground to make commitments in the first place, as well as to keep commitments should interests change in times of panic (Figure 4). Even often-cited successful friendship-based commitments in the modern world, such as Castro's Cuba and Hugo's Venezuela, seem to have weathered through crises and leadership changes because of formal institutional support, as opposed to friendship alone.

The second proposition for credible commitments is sinking costs, as argued by political scientist James Fearon.[41] Fearon argues that authoritarian regimes can only make credible commitments through sinking costs, i.e. spending significant resources in anticipation of honoring the commitment, such as mobilizing troops for a war. [42] The concept is that if a leader has spent resources on the commitment, they are more likely to follow through on their commitment for fear of losing any potential payoffs. In addition, Fearon concludes from his game theory models that leaders will not employ either method unless they have an intention to follow through – i.e. in equilibrium there is no bluffing.

Figure 4: Two-Level Negotiations through Friendship and Sinking Costs




It is clear that sinking costs would alter the pay off structure for the leader for staying and reneging in an agreement. Cooperation means the possibility of reaping benefits, so staying has

41. See:
James Fearon, "Signaling Foreign Policy Interests: Tying Hands versus Sinking Costs," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 41(1)(1997): 68-90.

42. Ibid., 82-83.

a higher payoff, and reneging means losing that possibility, so the costs of reneging are also higher. This would be true for all authoritarian regimes, regardless of type. The primary question remaining is whether this would sufficiently alter the environment for elite preferences and the regime's valuation of the future. Regardless of the type of authoritarian regime, leaders still wish to remain in power as their first preference, so the honoring of sinking costs would have to not endanger that preference.

From an international perspective, sinking costs cannot be a credible commitment. Sinking costs are usually a one-shot game, and a relative quick maneuver for a leader. This means that the leader could sink costs that are aligned with only temporary elite interests, but not necessarily with longer term ones. If a conflict between elite preferences and the commitment related to the sunk costs arose, the leader might be able to use side payments to honor the sunk costs, which in itself raises the costs of staying in the commitment. If the costs of side payments are deemed higher than the costs of losing the sunk cost, the leader would renege.

For example, take the recent relationship changes between Iran and Bahrain. Historically, Iran and Bahrain had been antagonistic, partially because of a large and at times persecuted minority with cultural and ethnic affinities to Iran. However, in the 2000s Iran and Bahrain decided to change course, and attempted to build an economic relationship, investing significant resources as a sunk cost to signal their commitments.[43] But in 2011, the Arab Spring surged in Bahrain, led in part by the same minority that had caused earlier hostility. The Iranian elites win set changed, as they valued supporting their cultural and ethnic group more than continuing to support the economic relationship. They might have voiced their position behind closed doors, but also led protests in the streets in support of the Bahraini protests. Fearing potential unrest

43. This relationship was not through formal institutions as far as I can tell, since there are no documents filed with the United Nations.

and dire short term costs if they continued to support the Bahraini regime, the Iranian leadership decided to sacrifice the sunk costs and terminate their commitment to the economic relationship. Clearly, as demonstrated by this example, if there are environmental changes, and even if these changes are most likely temporary, sunk costs cannot be deemed credible.

These situations are probably less likely under a military regime or a personalist regime, since the winning coalition sometimes plays the Battle of the Sexes game and sometimes plays the Stag Hunt game, and under the conditions of the Battle of the Sexes game the winning coalition would prefer to remain united. Nevertheless, since the Stag Hunt game is still a strong possibility, sunk cost commitments from these types of authoritarian regimes are inherently un-credible. Knowing this, the foreign leader would again not have an incentive to be generous at the international level of bargaining, again meaning that win sets are decreased, and overlapping win sets, especially in the long term, are less likely (Figure 4).

The final proposition for credible commitments is for the establishment of a formal institution around the agreement. As discussed previously, institutions facilitate cooperation because they help ensure repeated interactions and lengthen time horizons. There is some contention in the scholarly community, mostly between Realists and Institutionalists, as to how much institutions truly change this pay-off structure, and perhaps institutions are less influential in authoritarian regimes or when there are "macro shocks" to the system such as changes in elite preferences.[44] According to empirical analysis however, most leaders most of the time honor institutional commitments, rendering this institutional theory plausible.[45] With this in mind, the

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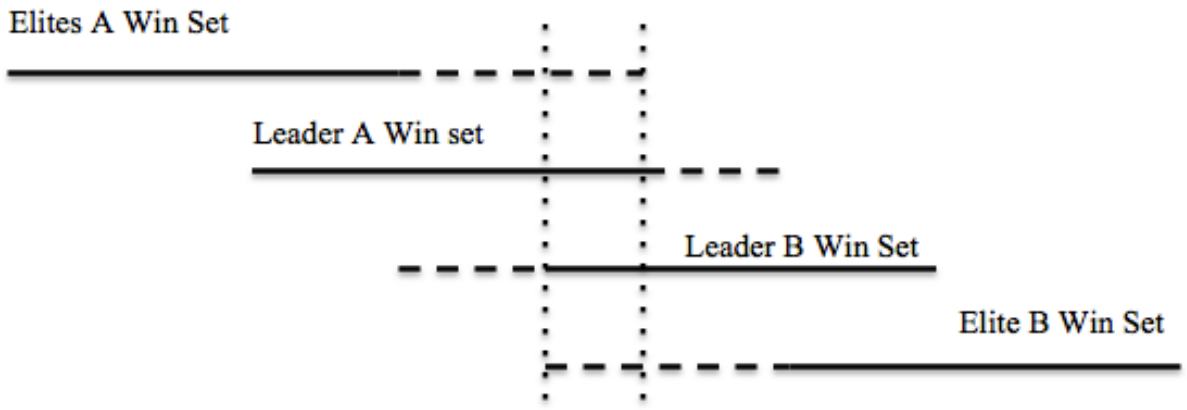
44. See: Dai

45. Brett Ashley Leeds, "Alliance Reliability in Times of War: Explaining State Decisions to Violate Treaties," *International Organization* 57 (4) (2003): 823.

repeated interactions incentivize the elite at the domestic level to be more generous with their present bargaining offers for future bargaining advantages and the benefits from cooperation. For example, hypothetically China's regime might give Venezuela a larger foreign aid package to leverage better oil prices in the future. The negotiating partner, knowing of the longer time horizons and expecting the other regime to jockey for a better bargaining position through generosity, will attempt to top their partner's generosity to gain their own advantage. In this example, Venezuela would pre-empt China's request for lower prices by voluntarily lowering the price in hopes of gaining a better foreign aid package. With this increased flexibility and generosity, there are now four overlapping win sets (Figure 5). These win sets are less likely to change in the short term, since more effort and resources have been exerted to create the institution, and the expectation of future losses deters present cheating. In this example, if the world price of oil skyrockets after Venezuela and China negotiated a price, Venezuela is unlikely to post facto change the price for China because that would translate to less foreign aid in the future.

Figure 5: Two-Level Negotiations through Institutions




*The dotted lines show the four overlapping win sets. The dashed lines demonstrate the flexibility for the Elites and the generosity of the Leaders.

Institutions are a mechanism that should work for all types of authoritarian regime to make credible commitments. Once established, institutions lengthen time horizons, but time is an important factor in another way as well. Institutions take a long time to create and are expensive. Therefore, leaders will not seek to create institutions on issues that are not important, otherwise it would not be worth the resources. Because of the long time horizon to create institutions, in an authoritarian regime where the preferences of the elite matter, the leader has the time to consider their preferences and make commitments accordingly. Therefore, unlike in the sinking costs method of commitments, the preferences of the elite have been institutionalized as well.

In the instance that the environment changes for the elites and their preferences shift, the institutional approach is best equipped to address new incentives to renege as well. Since it takes a long time for an institution to be created, and throughout the creation process the leader will be considering the elite's preferences, the institution most likely reflects the elite's average preference over time. Therefore, if elite preferences change, they will most likely return to the preferences that favor the institution in the near future. Furthermore, institutions encourage path dependence, so once the institution has been well established and proven durable the elite preferences within that institution will be cemented as well. The concept that an institution places more value on the future is important here as well. Since there is a greater cost to reneging, and the leader knows where the elite preferences will lead in the future, they are more likely to pay the costs of short-term damage control until the elites return to favoring the institution. The costs of damage control, which are most likely occasional expenses, are less than the costs of reneging in the long term, and should be sufficient for the leader to maintain power.

The institutional setting also affects the way winning coalitions approach the Stag Hunt game, ultimately simulating relative continuity of regimes to a certain degree through a "lock-in" effect. As discussed previously, elites have an incentive to maintain the domestic structure because they derive their status from the system. Institutions add another incentive to maintain the system, in that the institutions are most likely designed to maximize the utility for a specific type of authoritarian regime. Moreover, most likely when the elites decide to oust a leader, they must replace them with another leader while maintain the same domestic structure.[46] Since the domestic structure will not change, their relative utility from the institution will not change. Therefore, when the elites attempt to limit the repercussions to the system as a whole, the institution will be part of their concerns. As part of this attempt, the elite would be careful to not give the perception of a finite number of interactions in the future, since cooperation and the reaping of benefits would crumble. Therefore the institution would have relative immunity to the changes in leadership, and could expect some continuity over time. Of course if the so-called stag hunters are the general public and not the winning coalition this mechanism would not work, but that is beyond the scope of this project.

Consider an empirical example of formal institutions in bilateral credible commitments between authoritarian countries: the dispute over the maritime boundaries in the Gulf of Guinea between Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea in the 1990s and early 2000s. At the time in question, Nigeria can be categorized as a military regime[47] and Equatorial Guinea as a personalist regime.

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46. Weeks, 41.

47. Nigeria officially transitioned to a democracy in 1999, before the agreement to end the dispute. However, because the election was deemed fraudulent by several independent organizations and the man elected, Olusegun Obasanjo, was a former Nigerian Army general and had served previously under the military dictatorships as vice president and then head of state, for all practical purposes the domestic dynamics did not change until the 2007 elections.

During this time, Nigeria and Cameroon were disputing their own border disputes in the Gulf of Guinea at the International Court of Justice. Because resolving the maritime boundary dispute at the ICJ inherently involved discussing the rights of other states along the Gulf of Guinea, Equatorial Guinea intervened in the Cameroon-Nigeria ICJ case as an observer in 1999. As part of this intervention, Equatorial Guinea wanted to resolve its own maritime boundary disputes bilaterally and outside the court. Examining the resulting treaty between Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea, which was written in 2000 and implemented in 2002, the border does not adopt an equidistant line between Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea. Of particular interest is the favorability of the treaty to the Bioko Island, a small island that is the northernmost point of Equatorial Guinea and where much of the Equatorial Guinean leader's winning coalition resides, in return for additional oil field acreage for Nigeria.[48] Therefore, the treaty was possible because all four parties had overlapping win sets at the time of the commitments. These credible commitments have stood the test of time, despite protests about oil fields and the economy over the past ten years, suggesting that the treaty lengthened elite time horizons beyond any short term crises.

In summary, the only commitment mechanism that is credible for sustained cooperation seems to be formal institutions. Commitments through friendship or sunk costs do not guarantee overlapping win sets at the time of cooperation (which is unlikely), which would render the commitment not credible in the short run, but, even if there are overlapping win sets at the beginning of cooperation, these mechanisms do not guarantee sustained cooperation over time

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48. "Treaty between the Republic of Nigeria and the Republic of Equatorial Guinea concerning their maritime boundary, 23 September 2000." *United Nations*, https://www.un.org/Depts/los/LEGISLATIONANDTREATIES/PDFFILES/TREATIESNGA-GNQ2000MB.PDF (accessed 14 April 2013).

William Wallis, "Nigeria settles offshore oilfield dispute," *Financial Times*, September 26, 2000, 15.

because there are no lengthened time horizons from iterated games. While more empirical studies are necessary to demonstrate this case is generalizable, the institutional theory for credible commitments presented here does seem to hold its ground in reality.

## Conclusion

To conclude, this paper finds that institutions are the best way to make credible commitments for any type of authoritarian regime, either by changing the value of the future and the dynamic between the leader and the winning coalition in the case of military and single-party regimes, or by ensuring higher costs (at least in the short term) to reneging than staying for a personalist regime. A personalist regime could also make credible commitments through sinking costs since the leader does not have to consider the winning coalition's preferences through a similar mechanism. Thus, counter to previous literature claims or implications, authoritarian regimes are fully capable of making credible commitments, although the mechanisms requires more initial costs for the regime than for a democracy.

These findings open possibilities for further research on the topic of authoritarian cooperation, as well rethinking some previous cooperation literature. For example, a more complicated view of this theory could be indirect institutionalization. Perhaps the specific agreement per se is not institutionalized, so through that specific agreement there is no increased value on the future and increased costs for defection. But perhaps mutual membership in other multilateral institutions with enforcement capability could serve the same function indirectly. Whether this is true requires further theoretical and empirical research. Another potential avenue for further research would be to expand cooperation beyond authoritarian dyads, such as mixed dyads, multilateral institutions with only authoritarian regimes, or multilateral institutions with mixed regimes. The mechanisms for credible commitments discussed here are not exclusive to either democratic or

authoritarian regimes, which suggests that analyzing cooperation outside of authoritarian dyads using this framework is possible. Finally, it would be useful to return to the democratic cooperation theories. While this paper has demonstrated authoritarian cooperation is possible without transparency, transparency does offer reassurances that prediction and reality match. Perhaps democracies elect to prefer cases with reassurances and greater certainty, while this matters less to authoritarian regimes, which would suggest that the threshold of information necessary for the two regime types would be fundamentally different. Whether one threshold level is better than the other is a normative debate for another time. Nevertheless, it should not be understated that the possibility of credible commitments by authoritarian regimes, albeit through the more costly mechanism of institutions, undercuts some of democracies' superiority in cooperation.

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