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The problem with autocracy promotion

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Recent scholarship has increasingly focused on the international dimensions of authoritarian rule, and the idea of autocracy promotion has gained considerable academic currency. While the literature on autocracy promotion has identified some clear patterns of external support for autocratic incumbents, it has so far failed to demonstrate that these efforts can best be understood as a unified, coherent set of foreign policies that constitute intentional efforts to promote a particular regime type abroad. This article identifies the key deficiencies of existing treatments of the concept and identifies a roadmap to establish some conceptual clarity on the topic. It advances a “strict” definition of autocracy promotion that requires a clear intent on the part of an external actor to bolster autocracy as a form of political regime as well as an underlying motivation that rests in significant part on an ideological commitment to autocracy itself. It also introduces a new typology that places autocracy promotion within the wider context of the international politics of authoritarian rule.

Keywords: democracy promotion; autocracy promotion; authoritarianism; aid; intervention

Introduction

We know much more today about the international sources of authoritarian rule than we did only a few years ago, but still our knowledge remains limited. Recent research has demonstrated that external forces can promote and strengthen authoritarianism in ways that are similar to the international influences on democratization.¹ One of the key subjects of this scholarship concerns the role of “autocracy promotion”, and numerous authors have engaged in systematic analysis of the role that external actors can play in promoting authoritarianism abroad.² A wide array of countries, including Russia, China, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United States (US), have been identified as crucial sponsors of authoritarian rulers in countries such as Bahrain, Syria, and Zimbabwe. As a result of these

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patterns of international support and influence, the idea of autocracy promotion has gained considerable academic currency.³

However, I argue that recent research on the topic of autocracy promotion is seriously flawed. Treatments of the concept have suffered from a number of critical problems that severely limit its analytical utility. While the literature on autocracy promotion has identified some clear patterns of external support for autocratic incumbents, it has so far failed to demonstrate that these efforts can best be understood as a unified, coherent set of foreign policies that constitute intentional efforts to promote a particular regime type abroad. Efforts to define the concept have been beset by ambiguity and conceptual stretching, and few scholars offer a clear definition that delimits precisely what counts, and does not count, as autocracy promotion. Where scholars have sought to identify and classify cases of autocracy promotion, they have tended to define the concept loosely and apply it broadly.

In the discussion that follows, I both identify a number of key flaws in the existing treatments of autocracy promotion and offer a more clearly delineated definition. A number of scholars have already questioned how helpful the idea of autocracy promotion is when examining international influences on authoritarian regimes.⁴ I build on these insights and identify the principal sources of problematic research in this area. The confusion and ambiguity surrounding autocracy promotion clusters around four key issues related to the type of activity under examination, namely the role of agency, intentions, motivations, and effects. By addressing each issue in turn, I both highlight the deficiencies of existing treatments of the concept and identify a roadmap to establishing some conceptual clarity on the topic. I advance a "strict" definition of autocracy promotion that requires a clear intent on the part of an external actor to bolster autocracy as a form of political regime as well as an underlying motivation that rests in significant part on an ideological commitment to autocracy itself. Actions that fall short of these criteria, such as policies designed to promote objectives unrelated to regime type or motivated purely for self-interested objectives, should not be treated as instances of autocracy promotion. Even if they have the effect of bolstering autocracy, they should be analysed using separate conceptual categories. This article presents a new typology of international influences on authoritarian rule that places autocracy promotion within the wider context of the external dimensions of authoritarian rule and highlights a range of alternative concepts that more clearly capture the dynamics at work.

The strict definition of autocracy promotion advanced here raises challenges of measurement and operationalization, although I argue that these are not insurmountable. The recent historical record suggests that there is in fact little evidence of ideologically driven autocracy promotion since the end of the Cold War. To see clear efforts at autocracy promotion in practice, we must look to those historical instances where international powers actively sought to promote authoritarian models abroad, such as the promotion of fascist and communist regimes during the interwar and early Cold War years. Consequently, the international influences

on authoritarian politics in the post-Cold War period are best understood and analysed using a different set of concepts, which are outlined below.

The article proceeds in three main sections. The first section reviews and critiques the existing literature on autocracy promotion, identifying examples of the conceptual ambiguity that mars much of the scholarship on this topic. The second section sets out four considerations that should be addressed when seeking to conceptualize autocracy promotion, and which facilitate clear and precise concept formation. This discussion lays the foundation for establishing the “strict” definition of autocracy promotion I advance here. The third section places discussions of autocracy promotion within the wider context of the international forces that can shape and bolster authoritarian rule, and presents a typology of international influences which builds on the conceptual distinctions developed in the previous section.

The conceptual ambiguity of autocracy promotion

Recent research on the international politics of authoritarian rule has greatly enhanced our understanding of the range and diversity of factors that enable autocratic elites to consolidate their rule and remain in power. Scholars have demonstrated the importance of cross-border learning and diffusion,⁵ the role of fluctuations in the international economy,⁶ and patterns of international aid.⁷ Research on the “authoritarian resurgence” has emphasized the role of external non-democratic sponsors such as Russia and China,⁸ while others have pointed to the autocracy-supporting policies of major democracies, especially the US.⁹

However, this broader research agenda is in the early stages of development, and further work is needed before the international dimensions of authoritarianism are understood as clearly as the international dimensions of democracy. One particular problem is that there has been limited progress in mapping the range of international influences on authoritarianism in conceptually precise ways.¹⁰ One of the clearest examples of this problem is the use of the idea of autocracy promotion, which has become a key focus of scholarly attention in recent years.¹¹ Not all authors who examine the role that external actors can play in supporting authoritarianism at the domestic level use the language of autocracy promotion,¹² but those who do have tended to use this concept in problematic ways. Few offer a clear definition that would help delimit precisely what counts, and does not count, as autocracy promotion, and several key contributions offer conceptualizations that are so loose that the utility of the concept begins to wash away. This is a particular problem because the term “autocracy promotion” carries strong connotations given its similarity to the well-established idea of “democracy promotion”. Although there is no single agreed upon definition of democracy promotion (nor a single view of how it should be pursued), there is wide consensus that it entails policies designed, as Carothers articulates, “to foster and advance democratization”.¹³ The language of autocracy promotion immediately suggests a set of activities that mirrors those of the international community’s democracy promoters. This,

however, creates misleading expectations that the reality of contemporary politics does not meet.¹⁴ While many states do actively support autocratic incumbents, there is little evidence that they seek to promote autocracy in the way that many international actors seek to promote democracy. Combined with the lack of conceptual clarity that characterizes much of the research on this topic, the result is a conceptual innovation that ultimately has limited analytical utility.

Peter Burnell was an early contributor to the literature on autocracy promotion and helped focus attention on this form of activity.¹⁵ However, Burnell defines the concept so widely that it appears to encompass multiple distinct forms of international influence that do not all include active regime promotion. Burnell offers both an inclusive and exclusive definition of autocracy promotion. The former is defined as “all the international forces that move [a] political regime away from democracy and towards semi or fully authoritarian rule”,¹⁶ a definition so broad that it appears to encompass any form of international influence. The latter, exclusive, definition is focused on the agency and intentions of actors, and includes a number of external policies and influences: direct efforts to export autocracy, direct efforts to influence domestic politics in ways that unintentionally produce movement toward authoritarianism, and the process of authoritarian diffusion. While each of these are important international dynamics that may reinforce authoritarian rule, only the first (autocracy export) truly relates to a conscious effort by international actors to promote a particular form of regime type abroad. The other elements of Burnell’s exclusive definition of autocracy promotion are quite distinct from the *promotion of a particular type of regime*. As a result, the concept blurs the lines between distinct forms of external influence and makes it difficult to identify what does and does not count as autocracy promotion.

Other research on the concept shares similar conceptual ambiguity. Vanderhill’s recent work on the international promotion of authoritarianism offers a systematic effort to generate a theory about the effects of international sponsorship of authoritarian elites, with important empirical findings.¹⁷ Vanderhill defines the promotion of authoritarianism as behaviour in which an external actor “is actively supporting illiberal elites, groups, or regimes through direct assistance”.¹⁸ Yet, it is not entirely clear if external support for illiberal elites is tantamount to the promotion of authoritarianism, which refers to regime type rather than individual elites. Indeed, the author comments of external actors that “the primary goal of their support may not be to develop authoritarian regimes, but the outcome of their support is an increase in authoritarianism in the recipient country”.¹⁹ However, this suggests that the process under investigation may not be the *promotion* of authoritarianism but rather the *enabling* of authoritarianism as a by-product of the promotion of some other goal. Many of Vanderhill’s examples, such as Russia’s energy deals with Belarus, Venezuelan economic aid to Nicaragua, and Iran’s influence on Hezbollah’s military strategy towards Israel, seem to constitute strategically-driven support for valuable allies abroad rather than instances of a common policy to promote authoritarianism as a form of rule.

Melnykovska et al. also describe autocracy promotion as a number of external influences that appear to be driven by motives other than support for a particular regime type.²⁰ They show, for example, that Chinese and Russian economic engagement in Central Asia has had the effect of reinforcing the status quo within the region's authoritarian regimes, but it does not follow that it is appropriate to conceptualize this type of external influence as a form of regime promotion. The authors seek to "look at effects rather than intentions", but in framing their enquiry as one that concerns autocracy promotion, they make intentions inseparable from the study. This becomes problematic when the authors refer to Russian intentions that appear unrelated to the promotion of authoritarianism as a regime type, including securing a monopoly over energy supplies in the region and keeping Central Asian states economically dependent.²¹

Yakouchyk has recently sought to offer a clear set of definitions regarding the distinction between democracy promotion and two different types of autocracy promotion.²² Yet, despite offering some of the clearest definitions of diverse types of external regime promotion, Yakouchyk's approach also suffers from conceptual problems. Yakouchyk offers definitions of both active and passive autocracy promotion, with the former being "characterized by intentionality".²³ Direct autocracy promotion constitutes deliberate actions to strengthen autocracy (or weaken democracy) while indirect autocracy promotion takes place "when deliberate actions aimed to strengthen the authoritarian regime are not evident"²⁴ but other, self-interested policies, such as commercial investments, have the side-effect of promoting autocracy. Yet, promotion without intentionality appears to be a contradiction in terms, and the idea of "passive autocracy promotion" seems to lack conceptual coherence. If something is being promoted, there is an intention to encourage its adoption or advancement. If there is no intention, there is no promotion.

Overall, therefore, while this work on autocracy promotion has provided key insights into the activities of international actors who engage with authoritarian regimes, the effort to conceptualize such dynamics in similar terms to democracy promotion risks mislabelling a diverse set of foreign initiatives and influences. In order to properly categorize a distinct form of autocracy promotion, the concept itself would need clear boundaries that relate to the role of actors and their intentions and motivations. In the following section, I set out a series of considerations that allow for the development of more precise conceptual categories, and that identify the scope (and limits) of the practice of autocracy promotion.

Clarifying the concept: towards a "strict" definition of autocracy promotion

At the heart of the problem with the literature on autocracy promotion is a problem with the challenging task of concept formation. The literature on concept formation offers many recommendations for the development of clear and precise concepts that facilitate the goals of classification and theory building, both of which are

central to social science research. Gerring, for example, offers a set of criteria for determining the quality of a concept, and the idea of autocracy promotion appears to have many of the features of a good concept.²⁵ Notably, the concept meets the criteria of familiarity and resonance.²⁶ The words themselves are both well-known and familiar, and the terminology has the kind of “cognitive click” that Gerring identifies as a key feature of resonance,²⁷ not least because it suggests a form of activity that is similar to, but distinct from, the well-known concept of democracy promotion. Yet, I suggest it is precisely this quality of the concept, its resonance, that has led to some of the problems in its use and application. The term suggests a set of activities that is the mirror image of democracy promotion and leads to expectations about the activities of autocracy promotion that cannot easily be met. By considering other aspects of the concept, it becomes clear that current treatments fall short on some other important criteria.

First, it is a concept that often lacks internal coherence, meaning that its defining attributes do not necessarily fit well together. Second, it is a concept that, as currently defined, fails to aid the tasks of differentiation.²⁸ The idea of autocracy promotion is only helpful if it helps us to differentiate exactly what counts as autocracy promotion and what does not. Yet, current treatments of the concept make it difficult to establish the boundaries between autocracy promotion and other foreign policies that affect autocratic states or indeed any form of international influence that bolsters authoritarian regimes. Giovanni Sartori’s classic contribution on this topic warned of the dangers of conceptual stretching, that is, the risk that a concept would be applied to cases that fall outside the limits of the concept’s core definition.²⁹ The treatments of autocracy promotion discussed above suffer from this problem and appear to smuggle multiple forms of external influence under a single banner, over-burdening the concept and reducing its utility for differentiating distinct international activities and influences.

In order to tease out the limitations of the concept and the problems with recent efforts to apply it to contemporary politics, I make a distinction between four different considerations that can help disentangle the elements that should and should not be considered as defining features of autocracy promotion.³⁰ These four considerations relate to: (1) the presence or absence of agency; (2) the intended target of the policy in question; (3) the underlying motives behind the policy; and (4) the effects of the policy.

By working through each consideration in turn, I highlight the flaws of existing approaches and provide a roadmap to a more precise, albeit more limited and narrower, concept of autocracy promotion. I argue that efforts to classify instances of autocracy promotion should rest on consideration of the first three key criteria only (relating to agency, intentions, and motivations) but should eschew any consideration of the fourth (relating to effects). Operationalizing any definition of autocracy promotion will be difficult, not least because the contemporary international climate provides state leaders with incentives to conceal intentional efforts to support or promote autocracy as a form of rule.³¹ In this article, I strive first to make a conceptual rather than an empirical contribution, but in the sections that

follow I provide illustrative examples to highlight the different forms of activity that fall within the different categories of international behaviour I identify. I discuss the challenges of operationalization further in the Conclusion.

The presence of agency

The first criterion to consider when conceptualizing and classifying autocracy promotion concerns the role of agency. Regime promotion, of either the democratic or autocratic variety, requires agency. The presence of some form of intentional policy is built into the terminology of the concept itself: the word “promotion” denotes an act of encouragement or support, a conscious campaign of work towards a particular goal. If promotion is taking place, there must be a promoter acting with intent. Yet, some of the recent discussions of the concept have seemed to apply it to international forces that do not include a significant, or any, role of international agency. Burnell’s “inclusive” definition of autocracy promotion includes “all the international forces that move [a] 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”.³² Yet, any international forces that do not involve the deliberate actions of external actors should not be considered a form of promotion, which by its very definition requires such deliberate action. Burnell also suggests that “any understanding of autocracy promotion” could include forms of diffusion of authoritarian values across borders “with or without the active encouragement of the authoritarian source”, which Burnell views as “probably the most intriguing of all dimensions of autocracy promotion”.³³ Yet, while some forms of diffusion can indeed include a role for intentional regime promotion,³⁴ any form of diffusion that operates without the active encouragement of the authoritarian source simply cannot be viewed as a type of regime promotion. A similar problem can be seen in Yakouchyk’s effort to conceptualize “passive autocracy promotion”, defined in part in terms of the *absence* of deliberate actions aimed at strengthen autocracy.³⁵

In sum, active and intentional agency must be central to any concept of autocracy promotion, and passive or structural influences on authoritarian regimes should not be viewed as instances of the concept. Autocracy promotion is a foreign policy, pursued by external actors (usually state actors) acting with intent. Yet, even if we can agree on the role of agency and intent, we encounter the challenge of specifying which types of foreign policy count as forms of autocracy promotion. This challenge can be addressed in part by examining the intended target of the foreign policies in question.

The role of intentions

Not all policies that are designed to affect the internal politics of autocratic regimes can be counted as policies of autocracy promotion. The next question to address, therefore, concerns the issue of how to determine which policies might reasonably

be classified as acts of autocracy promotion. This issue appears straightforward: to count as autocratic promotion, external policies should be driven by the intention to promote transition to or consolidation of an autocratic regime, just as democracy promotion activities should be those that are intended to promote transitions to or consolidation of democratic regimes.

Intentions are, thus, central to any understanding of regime promotion. In earlier writings, Burnell advanced a definition of democracy assistance that included a key stipulation about intentions: "democratic advance must be the primary objective although not necessarily the only objective".³⁶ Yet, current accounts of autocracy promotion, including Burnell's recent work, have not followed this stipulation. The idea of autocracy promotion has been attached to a wide variety of policies that appear to be driven by a wide variety of intentions, not all of which are concerned with the advance of any particular type of regime. While studies of autocracy promotion have identified some external efforts to promote activities that might be viewed as constituent elements of authoritarianism (e.g. election fraud, repression) they have also pointed to a range of other generally supportive policies, such as trade, development assistance, energy subsidies, and military support, that appear unrelated to the promotion of any particular type of system of government.

Vanderhill's analysis of Russian support for electoral misconduct in Ukraine, for example, appears consistent with the idea that Russia is seeking to promote autocratic forms of rule.³⁷ By contrast, Vanderhill's discussion of Iranian support for Hezbollah's military strategies does not convincingly demonstrate that the intended aim of these policies is the advancement of autocratic rule, rather than some other goal such as the promotion of a Shiite regional revolution.³⁸ Similarly, Melnykovska et al. frame Russian economic policies in Central Asia as instances of autocracy promotion, even as they explicitly state that "Russia's focus is mostly directed at maintaining its monopoly over Central Asian energy resources" and Russia's "central goal" is "keeping the Central Asian states economically dependent".³⁹

I argue that these are instances of misclassification, and that external policies that are designed and intended to achieve objectives unrelated to regime type should not be considered as instances of regime promotion. Any definition of autocracy promotion must take intentions seriously, and must include a stipulation that the policies have the principal purpose of promoting autocracy abroad. This in turn must lead to rigorous and strict classification, so that only those policies that include such intentions are included in discussions of autocracy promotion.

Establishing actor intentions empirically is not always easy, especially in settings where those seeking to assist autocratic actors abroad may have an incentive to conceal their aims. Yet, there are a number of indicators that can be used to identify actors' intentions.⁴⁰ First, scholars can look at the statements of those international actors who are seeking to shape the domestic politics of countries abroad. While actors may sometimes wish to conceal their objectives, at times intervening countries can offer clear indications of their intentions to support

and prop autocratic regimes abroad. For example, Saudi Arabia voiced robust support for President Mubarak in Egypt as his regime became threatened by public uprisings in 2011.⁴¹ Second, it is sometimes possible to infer intentions from the behaviour of external actors, and in particular the type of policies they pursue at the domestic level. Domestic actors often gain and maintain power by pursuing authoritarian practices such as coups, election fraud, and violent repression. When external actors assist domestic actors in the pursuit of these activities, such behaviour can clearly indicate a desire to bolster or protect autocratic actors abroad. By contrast, more general policies of economic aid or the provision of energy subsidies are less obvious indicators of an intentional policy to support autocratic actors, as they may serve to achieve other goals, such as the promotion of economic development or as leverage to extract policy concessions. For example, Russia's support for election fraud in Ukraine in 2004 is a clearer indicator of an intention to bolster autocracy than Russian energy subsidies to the country. Third, scholars can also look at the timing of external support. If there are surges of supportive policies (for example, spikes in economic aid, or in diplomatic support) that coincide with challenges to autocratic rule at the domestic level, such intensification of support can indicate an intention to protect the regime itself. For example, after General Sisi initiated a coup against President Morsi in Egypt in 2013, Saudi Arabia offered a massive aid package to Cairo.⁴² Such a spike in economic aid indicated Saudi Arabia's desire to support the new post-coup regime.

The underlying motives

A third consideration concerns the underlying motivation or strategy that is served by promoting autocracy abroad. Intentions and motives are related, but not the same. Intentions concern the purpose of the policy – what is it intended to achieve. Autocracy promotion is by definition intended to promote autocratic rule as a form of government. The underlying motives behind such an intention, however, may be diverse, and the goal of sponsoring autocratic regimes may be pursued for a variety of reasons: ideological or strategic, altruistic or self-interested.⁴³ I argue that any treatment of autocracy promotion must engage with this issue of motivations; yet, many recent studies treat external motives in only a cursory fashion.⁴⁴ In particular, I argue that only policies that are driven by certain types of motivation should count as instances of autocracy promotion. This is because many of the forms of behaviour that have been identified as autocracy promotion do not reflect a proactive motivation to promote a form of regime abroad, but rather reflect a reactive desire to prevent the spread of democracy. To tease out the importance of this distinction, I identify three principal motivations that might drive policies intended to bolster or support autocratic regimes, two of which rest on instrumental self-interest and the third which rests on ideological commitment. Only the latter motivation characterizes genuine cases of autocracy promotion.

The first motive concerns those instances where transitions to democracy in one setting are viewed as a threat to political authority in another. Outside actors often fear that the collapse of authoritarianism abroad will have a contagion effect and unleash democratic forces at home.⁴⁵ As a result, states will have an interest in seeking to protect autocratic incumbents abroad for domestic interests, primarily in order to preserve political power.⁴⁶ A second motivation that drives support for autocratic regimes concerns instrumental considerations about policy alignment. Powerful states often wish to maintain and protect authoritarian regimes abroad in order to ensure that supportive and compliant allies remain in power. Such support for autocratic regimes becomes paramount when there is disjuncture between government policy and popular opinion, raising concerns that free and fair elections would give rise to a new government that would abandon pre-existing alliances and commitments. The support for autocracy in such cases arises not out of a fear that democratization might lead to instability or loss of authority at home, but rather out of strategic concerns in terms of national security and economic interests. Consequently, both democracies and autocracies are likely to share these concerns when their interests are at stake, whereas only autocratic regimes are likely to support autocracies abroad due to fear of contagion. Brownlee has shown, for example, how US support for Egypt is rooted in the alignment of domestic and foreign policies in Cairo with those of the US.⁴⁷

These two sets of motivations lead to policies that are best described as democracy prevention or resistance rather than autocracy promotion. Several scholars have already sought to identify democracy resistance as a distinct form of foreign policy.⁴⁸ Yet, to date the defining features of this policy have remained somewhat unclear, especially in relation to the boundaries between democracy resistance and autocracy promotion. I argue that the two sets of policies are related, but distinct. They are related in that they both rest on intentional efforts to bolster autocratic regimes abroad. They are distinct in that they are both driven by different underlying motivations. I define democracy resistance as policies designed to support autocratic regimes abroad as a means to avoid the negative externalities that come with transitions to democracy. By contrast, autocracy promotion is defined in terms of the third motivation that can drive external actors to shore up and support autocratic elites abroad, namely an ideological commitment to authoritarianism as a form of regime type.

This definition of autocracy promotion is strict, in that efforts to protect autocratic elites and regimes abroad are only considered cases of autocracy promotion if they are driven in significant part by ideological motivations *related to regime type*. I do not argue that ideological concerns must be the only motivations – most foreign policies are characterized by some mix of motivations. Rather, I argue that ideological motivations must be a major driver of the policy in question, and that there must be a clear ideological commitment to promote a particular, non-democratic regime type. It is also not sufficient for the foreign policy in question to have any ideological goals. Rather, the ideological commitment must relate to autocracy as a form of regime. For example, the foreign policies of Venezuela

under Hugo Chavez were closely linked to ideological preferences for populist, left-leaning, and anti-Western regimes within Latin America,⁴⁹ but these preferences primarily related to public policies rather than any over-arching regime type.⁵⁰ Similarly, while Saudi Arabian foreign policies have included ideological elements, including a desire to promote Islam abroad, they fall short of systematic promotion of authoritarianism as a form of regime.⁵¹ As Gause has observed in relation to Saudi's intervention in Bahrain in 2011, for example, Saudi Arabia's actions should not be viewed as a form of regional autocracy promotion. Riyadh's focus was "on checking and rolling back Iranian influence in the Arab world. That is what drives their policy, not some imagined notion of anti-revolutionary dictatorial solidarity".⁵²

The effects

Finally, I briefly address (and reject) a fourth possible criterion for classifying cases of autocracy promotion, regarding the effects of such activities on the target state. A number of treatments of autocracy promotion have sought to define such activities with reference, at least in part, to the supportive or bolstering effects they have on autocratic regimes. Yakouchyk's definition of passive autocracy promotion essentially defines such activities based not on their intention or target, but on their effects. They are external policies that support authoritarian regimes as a side-effect of policies that are designed for other purposes – it is the unintentional effects on autocracy that appear to qualify them as instances of passive autocracy promotion.⁵³ Similarly, Burnell's inclusive definition of autocracy promotion – "all the international forces that move [a] political regime away from democracy and towards semi or fully authoritarian rule" – is explicitly based on the effects of international forces rather than on actions, intentions, or motives.⁵⁴ Finally, Melnykovska et al. are explicit on this issue, stating that "we look at effects rather than intentions".⁵⁵

In each of these examples, the presence of autocracy promotion is inferred from the strengthening of the autocratic regime rather than the goals or actions of external actors. However, such reasoning is problematic for two reasons. First, defining and classifying autocracy promotion according to its effects allows for scholars to identify cases of autocracy promotion that lack some of the key identifying features discussed above, including actor intention. Even if international forces have the effect of bolstering authoritarian rule, they should not be considered instances of autocracy promotion if they do not entail intentional efforts to support autocracy itself. Second, this kind of reasoning conflates the activity under investigation with its possible outcomes. If autocracy promotion is to be a useful concept, part of that utility will derive from its role in theory building. For example, if we wish to establish if autocracy promotion efforts actually work,⁵⁶ it is imperative to keep the effects of the activities distinct from the definition of the activity itself. To smuggle consideration of the effects into the definition of the policy itself will give rise to tautological reasoning and will undermine efforts at theory

building. The democracy promotion literature is replete with efforts to assess the impact and effectiveness of democracy promotion activities, with often mixed findings regarding their success.⁵⁷ Such findings can only be achieved if the activity is defined in a way that leaves open the effects of the policy on the target of interest. In sum, defining autocracy promotion according to its effects in bolstering autocracy risks including cases that do not involve intentional regime promotion and excluding cases of genuine regime promotion that have simply been ineffective.

A typology of international influences

Autocracy promotion, thus, constitutes one narrow form of international influence that can reinforce authoritarian rule; yet, it has gained a disproportionate amount of attention within the recent literature on the international dimensions of authoritarianism. In order to illustrate some of the key distinctions made above, and to put autocracy promotion within the wider context of the international politics of autocratic rule, in this section I present a typology of international dimensions of autocratic endurance and survival (Figure 1). The typology is derived from asking three questions about the source and nature of the international influence that are related to the discussions above about intentions and motivations. By creating a set of distinct categories based on clear points of contrast, the typology facilitates more fine-grained classifications and overcomes some of the conceptual confusion in the existing literature.⁵⁸ The categories outlined in the typology are ideal types and, in practice, autocratic incumbents may be subject to the interaction of several external influences. They nonetheless provide a useful set of concepts with which to make sense of diverse influences that have often been conflated and over-aggregated.

The first distinction in the typology addresses the question of whether the influence is a *passive* or an *active* one. Active influences are defined by the involvement of intentional policies of external actors. Passive influences, on the other hand, include external forces that reinforce authoritarian rule without the participation of any actor intention. The literature has identified several types of passive influence on authoritarianism, which I group into four distinct clusters: (1) diffusion and learning processes tied to distant events;⁵⁹ (2) the influence of the international system of sovereign states;⁶⁰ (3) the shifting nature of the international economy;⁶¹ and (4) the role of international linkages.⁶² As discussed above, some of these have been included in discussions of external autocracy promotion, but should be treated as distinct influences that are characterized by the lack of intentional foreign policies to shape domestic politics. Many diffusion processes, for example, should not be conflated with autocracy promotion in the absence of intentional promotion. China's ability to learn from distant events in Eastern Europe in 1989,⁶³ and similar learning processes during the Arab Spring that contributed to the strengthening of autocratic regimes,⁶⁴ clearly entailed important international dynamics, but do not meet the criteria of intentional regime promotion.

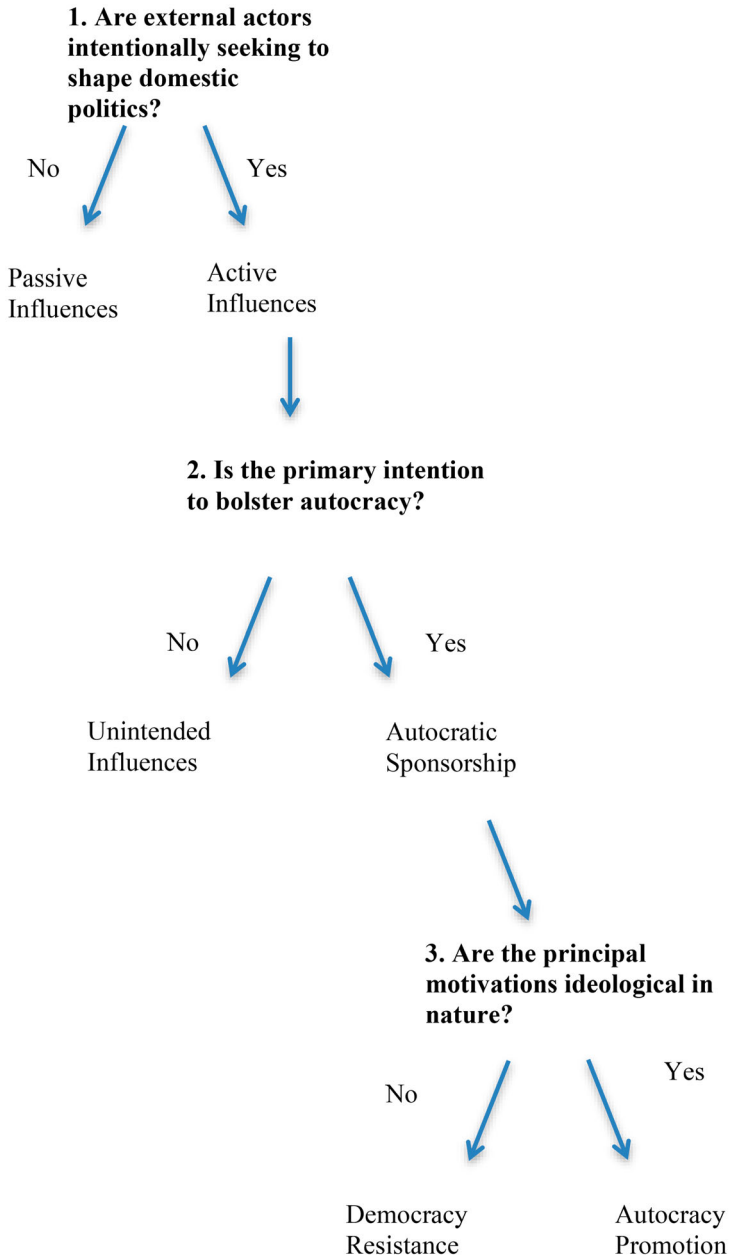


Figure 1. Typology of international influences on autocracy.

Active forces represent fundamentally distinct types of influences by virtue of the role of actor intention. However, as the specific intention of external actors can vary greatly, it is necessary to distinguish those external actions that are intended to support the position of incumbent autocratic elite actors and those that are pursued for some other objective. The second distinction, thus, separates efforts at *autocratic sponsorship* from the role of *unintended consequences*. The latter category entails a broad range of possible policies that can reinforce the position of authoritarian elites despite the intentions of the intervening party. For example, democracy promotion has been shown to be counter-productive in certain settings.⁶⁵ Development aid has been associated with greater authoritarian stability due to the “aid curse”, which can facilitate the politics of patronage that is often central to autocratic rule.⁶⁶ Similarly, international sanctions that are designed to punish authoritarian leaders have sometimes had the unintended effect of bolstering their position.⁶⁷

By contrast, autocratic sponsorship entails intentional international assistance to elite incumbents to help them to assume or retain their positions in power.⁶⁸ Yet, the types of policy that involve external sponsorship of autocratic incumbents are diverse and further disaggregation is needed. The third question, thus, teases out the important differences between democratic resistance and autocracy promotion discussed above.

Much of the activity that has been identified in the literature as autocracy promotion would be better understood as efforts at democracy resistance. For example, several authors have framed Russian support for autocratic practices in the post-Soviet sphere as autocracy promotion, especially with regard to policies in Ukraine and Belarus.⁶⁹ However, Russia’s relations with its autocratic neighbours have rested in large part on a desire to further Moscow’s geopolitical interests by protecting and promoting compliant allies and limiting the chances that genuine democracy might bring to power pro-Western elites who would sever close ties to Moscow.⁷⁰ As Way has observed, Russia “has been less interested in promoting authoritarianism *as such*. Russian leaders have instead focused on countering US influence and promoting Russia’s more narrow economic and geopolitical interests”.⁷¹ Much of Russia’s foreign policy towards its autocratic neighbours, therefore, can be understood as efforts to prevent the negative externalities that would come with democratization in the region rather than efforts to spread a Russian model of autocracy.

I argue that there is little evidence that autocracy promotion as I define it here has been a significant feature of the post-Cold War world. Ideologically driven regime promotion of this kind can be most clearly seen in earlier periods of history. Owen identifies several periods of international history when such ideological clashes led to waves of forceful regime promotion, often including the intentional promotion of autocratic forms of rule, such as absolutist monarchy, fascism, and communism.⁷² In the nineteenth century, republican and monarchical regimes sought to promote their own regime forms, with many monarchies promoting absolutist autocratic regimes abroad. During the 20th century, the struggle was

between democracy, communism, and fascism, and many of the clearest examples of ideologically driven regime promotion can be seen in the projects of fascist and communist internationalism of the interwar and early post-war periods in Europe.⁷³ In the wake of World War II, Stalin's Soviet Union forcefully imposed political regimes in Central and Eastern Europe. This was partly driven by strategic concerns – Stalin wished to control the territories in Eastern Europe to minimize any further threat from Germany and to gain the spoils of economic exploitation.⁷⁴ But the imperial intent was also ideological in nature, and Stalin sought to create *communist regimes* rather than simply *compliant governments*. As a leading scholar of the period has observed, the Soviet take-over proceeded “along the lines of a presupposed set of ideological premises”, involving “institutional and ideological transfer based on the premise of radical transformation and of cultural revolution”.⁷⁵ Stalin aimed to impose new political and social orders modelled on the Soviet regime, with ideological intent.⁷⁶ By contrast, the recent policies that have been identified as cases of autocracy promotion appear to lack this kind of ideological intention to promote a particular model of political regime.⁷⁷

Conclusion

I have sought to demonstrate that current treatments of autocracy promotion suffer from a number of serious conceptual flaws. Scholars have grouped together diverse forms of international influence that include both intentional and unintentional effects, as well as multiple instances of external support that are driven by purely instrumental and strategic motivations rather than any ideological commitment to authoritarianism. By contrast, I have argued that in order for the idea of autocracy promotion to be useful, it must apply only to those cases where there is a clear intention to promote autocracy as a regime type, based in significant part on an ideological commitment to authoritarianism itself. Doing so enables a clearer conceptual distinction between diverse forms of international influence and facilitates more fine-grained analysis of contemporary cross-border policies.

Yet, advancing this strict definition of autocracy promotion is not free from challenging implications, two of which I address here. The first concerns operationalization and relates to the difficulty of identifying the true intentions and motivations of international actors. As Gerring has observed, a concept that facilitates differentiation must also be one that enables operationalization.⁷⁸ Yet, finding reliable and observable indicators for actor intentions and motivations is fraught with difficulty, especially when the activities involved may be ones that the relevant actors will have incentives to conceal. The second implication of a strict definition is that the category may be so narrow as to be effectively analytically useless. If it applies only to a restricted set of cases that can only be found in the political history of the previous century, it may not be worth including in contemporary

typologies. When combined with the challenge of operationalization, this raises the question of whether the concept should be abandoned altogether.

I argue that the answer to this question depends in large part on the research question being pursued. If the researcher is broadly interested in the international forces that protect or bolster autocratic regimes, then it may not be so essential to tease out the differences between the different forms of autocratic sponsorship. It may be sufficient to talk in relatively broad terms about international allies and international sponsors that pursue policies that reinforce authoritarian rule and the principal challenge will be to tease out the causal mechanisms that link international actions to domestic outcomes. Whether some of those effects are intended or unintended may be of secondary concern, if a concern at all.

If, on the other hand, a key element of the research question concerns the nature of foreign policy, then these conceptual discussions remain critical. If we wish to understand why actors support political incumbents in autocratic regimes and if we wish to theorize about the effects of different types of foreign policy, then we need to disaggregate our concepts with reference to intentions and motivations and we need ultimately to tackle the thorny problem of operationalization. This is not easy, but also not impossible. There are many concepts we use in the social sciences that are important, but difficult to observe and measure (e.g. culture, norms, sovereignty). Difficulties of measurement should not, however, preclude the development and use of such concepts, and there are strategies that can be used to mitigate some of the challenges that exist. Some recent research on the international sponsorship of authoritarian regimes has plausibly identified motivations based on consideration of rhetoric, behaviour, and also the correlation of particular foreign policies with regime characteristics that allow for plausible inferences. Brownlee, for example, illustrates the security motivations behind US efforts at “democracy prevention” in Egypt through a comparison of US policy in Tunisia, which contained fewer strategic interests for Washington and received less interference as a result.⁷⁹ Similarly, Kuntz and Odinius evaluate a range of theories about Saudi Arabia’s regional post-Arab Spring policies and draw inferences about Riyadh’s motivations by comparing policies across multiple cases and eliminating those that follow no pattern.⁸⁰ Through careful selection of cases and evidence, scholars can infer the existence of actor intentions and motivations even in the absence of clear statements of intent. Operationalization will always be a challenge with this topic, but not an insurmountable one.

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Notes

1. Ambrosio, "Constructing a Framework of Authoritarian Diffusion"; Koesel and Bunce, "Diffusion-Proofing"; Heydemann and Leenders, "Authoritarian Learning and Authoritarian Resilience"; Tolstrup, *Russia vs. the EU*; Bader, *China's Foreign Relations and the Survival of Autocracies*.
2. Ambrosio, "Democratic States and Authoritarian Firewalls"; Bader et al., "Would Autocracies Promote Autocracy?"; Burnell, "Is There a New Autocracy Promotion?"; Burnell and Schlumberger, "Promoting Democracy—Promoting Autocracy?"; Vanderhill, *Promoting Authoritarianism Abroad*.
3. Burnell, "Is There a New Autocracy Promotion?"; Ambrosio, *Authoritarian Backlash*; Kagan, *The Return of History and the End of Dreams*; Melnykovska et al., "Do Russia and China Promote Autocracy in Central Asia?"; Bader et al., "Would Autocracies Promote Autocracy?"; Vanderhill, *Promoting Authoritarianism Abroad*.
4. Nodia, "The Revenge of Geopolitics," 142; Von Soest, "Democracy Prevention"; Tolstrup, "Problems in Studying the International Dimension of Authoritarianism."
5. Ambrosio, "Constructing a Framework of Authoritarian Diffusion"; Heydemann and Leenders, "Authoritarian Learning and Authoritarian Resilience"; Koesel and Bunce, "Diffusion-Proofing."
6. Morrison, "Nontax Revenue, Social Cleavages, and Authoritarian Stability in Mexico and Kenya."
7. Kono and Montinola, "Does Foreign Aid Support Autocrats?"
8. Diamond, "Facing Up to the Democratic Recession"; Gat, "The Return of Authoritarian Great Powers."
9. Brownlee, *Democracy Prevention: The Politics of the US–Egyptian Alliance*; Ambrosio, "Democratic States and Authoritarian Firewalls."
10. Tolstrup, "Problems in Studying the International Dimension of Authoritarianism."
11. Burnell, "Is There a New Autocracy Promotion?"; Ambrosio, *Authoritarian Backlash*; Kagan, *The Return of History and the End of Dreams*; Melnykovska et al., "Do Russia and China Promote Autocracy in Central Asia?"; Bader et al., "Would Autocracies Promote Autocracy?"; Vanderhill, *Promoting Authoritarianism Abroad*.
12. Tolstrup, "Studying a Negative External Actor"; Jackson, "The Role of External Factors."
13. Carothers, "Democracy Aid at 25," 59; Burnell, *Democracy Assistance*, 5; Gershman and Allen, "The Assault on Democracy Assistance," 48.
14. Whitehead, "Anti-Democracy Promotion."
15. Burnell, "Is There a New Autocracy Promotion?"
16. Ibid., 5.
17. Vanderhill, *Promoting Authoritarianism Abroad*.
18. Ibid., 9.
19. Ibid., 8.
20. Melnykovska et al., "Do Russia and China Promote Autocracy in Central Asia?"
21. Ibid., 79.
22. Yakouchyk, "The Good, the Bad, and the Ambitious."
23. Ibid., 6.
24. Ibid.
25. Gerrig, "What Makes a Concept Good?"
26. Ibid., 368–70.
27. Ibid., 370.
28. Ibid., 373, 375; Collier and Levitsky, "Democracy with Adjectives."
29. Sartori, "Concept Misformation in Comparative Politics."
30. Similar conceptual considerations have been used in the debates over the definition of humanitarian intervention, which are more advanced than those relating to autocracy

- promotion. See Pattison, *Humanitarian Intervention and the Responsibility to Protect*, Chapter 6; Caney, *Justice beyond Borders*, 228–9; Bellamy, “Motives, Outcomes, Intent and the Legitimacy of Humanitarian Intervention.”
31. On the rise of “democracy-contingent benefits” in international politics, see Hyde, *The Pseudo-Democrat’s Dilemma*, Chapter 3.
 32. Burnell, “Is There a New Autocracy Promotion?,” 5.
 33. *Ibid.*, 6.
 34. Bunce and Wolchik, *Defeating Authoritarian Leaders in Postcommunist Countries*.
 35. Yakouchyk, “The Good, the Bad, and the Ambitious,” 6.
 36. Burnell, *Democracy Assistance*, 5.
 37. Vanderhill, *Promoting Authoritarianism Abroad*, 45.
 38. *Ibid.*, 144; Byman, *Deadly Connections*, 91.
 39. Melnykovska et al., “Do Russia and China Promote Autocracy in Central Asia?,” 79.
 40. Pattison, *Humanitarian Intervention and the Responsibility to Protect*, 163.
 41. Cummins, “Saudi Arabia Voices Support for Mubarak.”
 42. Nordland, “Saudi Arabia Promises to Aid Egypt’s Regime.”
 43. On the differences between the intentions and motivations of external actors, see Pattison, *Humanitarian Intervention and the Responsibility to Protect*, 154.
 44. For some exceptions see Tolstrup, “Black Knights and Elections in Authoritarian Regimes”; Von Soest, “Democracy Prevention”; Way, “The Limits of Autocracy Promotion.”
 45. Sarotte, “China’s Fear of Contagion”; Weyland, “The Diffusion of Regime Contention in European Democratization.”
 46. Von Soest, “Democracy Prevention.”
 47. Brownlee, *Democracy Prevention: The Politics of the US–Egyptian Alliance*.
 48. Whitehead, “Anti-Democracy Promotion”; Von Soest, “Democracy Prevention”; Nodia, “The Revenge of Geopolitics,” 142.
 49. Corrales, “*Conflicting Goals in Venezuela’s Foreign Policy*.”
 50. Owen IV, *The Clash of Ideas in World Politics*, 257.
 51. al-Alkim, *Dynamics of Arab Foreign Policy-Making*.
 52. Gause, “Is Saudi Arabia Really Counter-Revolutionary?”
 53. Yakouchyk, “The Good, the Bad, and the Ambitious,” 6–7.
 54. Burnell, “Is There a New Autocracy Promotion?,” 5.
 55. Melnykovska et al., “Do Russia and China Promote Autocracy in Central Asia?,” 77.
 56. Way, “The Limits of Autocracy Promotion.”
 57. Carothers, *Aiding Democracy Abroad*; Finkel et al., “The Effects of US Foreign Assistance”; Crawford, “Foreign Aid and Political Conditionality”; Ethier, “Is Democracy Promotion Effective?”; Knack, “Does Foreign Aid Promote Democracy?”
 58. For a similar critique, and an alternative typology that focuses specifically on the role of external actors, see Tolstrup, “Problems in Studying the International Dimension of Authoritarianism”.
 59. Weyland, “Theories of Policy Diffusion”; Heydemann and Leenders, “Authoritarian Learning and Authoritarian Resilience”; Sarotte, “China’s Fear of Contagion”; Ambrosio, “Constructing a Framework of Authoritarian Diffusion.”
 60. Boix, “Democracy, Development, and the International System”; McFaul, “The Missing Variable”; Narizny, “Anglo-American Primacy and the Global Spread of Democracy”; Gunitsky, “From Shocks to Waves.”
 61. Hurrell, “The International Dimensions of Democratization in Latin America”; Morrison, “Nontax Revenue, Social Cleavages, and Authoritarian Stability in Mexico and Kenya”; Morrison, “Oil, Nontax Revenue, and the Redistributive Foundations of Regime Stability”; Li and Reuveny, “Economic Globalization and Democracy.”

62. Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism*; Tolstrup, *Russia vs. the EU*; Cameron and Orenstein, "Post-Soviet Authoritarianism"; Sasse, "Linkages and the Promotion of Democracy."
63. Sarotte, "China's Fear of Contagion."
64. Heydemann and Leenders, "Authoritarian Learning and Authoritarian Resilience."
65. Roessler, "Donor-Induced Democratization and the Privatization of State Violence in Kenya and Rwanda"; Carothers, "The Backlash against Democracy Promotion."
66. Djankov et al., "The Curse of Aid"; Moss et al., "An Aid-Institutions Paradox?"; Kono and Montinola, "Does Foreign Aid Support Autocrats?"
67. Peksen and Drury, "Coercive or Corrosive"; Escribà-Folch, "Authoritarian Responses to Foreign Pressure Spending."
68. This definition is adapted from Byman's definition of international sponsorship of terrorism; Byman, *Deadly Connections*, 10.
69. Melnykovska et al., "Do Russia and China Promote Autocracy in Central Asia?"; Yakouchyk, "The Good, the Bad, and the Ambitious"; Vanderhill, *Promoting Authoritarianism Abroad*.
70. Tsygankov, *Russia's Foreign Policy*, 119; Nodia, "The Revenge of Geopolitics," 142–3.
71. Way, "The Limits of Autocracy Promotion."
72. Owen IV, *The Clash of Ideas in World Politics*.
73. Bauerkämper, "Transnational Fascism"; McDermott and Agnew, *The Comintern*.
74. Kramer, "Stalin, Soviet Policy, and the Consolidation of a Communist Bloc in Eastern Europe, 1944–1953."
75. Tismaneanu, *Stalinism Revisited*, 3–4.
76. Zubok, *A Failed Empire*, x, 21; Applebaum, *Iron Curtain*, Introduction.
77. Owen IV, *The Clash of Ideas in World Politics*, 256–61.
78. Gerring, "What Makes a Concept Good?," 378.
79. Brownlee, *Democracy Prevention: The Politics of the US–Egyptian Alliance*, 167.
80. Odinius and Kuntz, "The Limits of Authoritarian Solidarity."

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