Understanding and Interrupting Modern Day Authoritarian Collaboration

Suggestions for the Democracy Support Community

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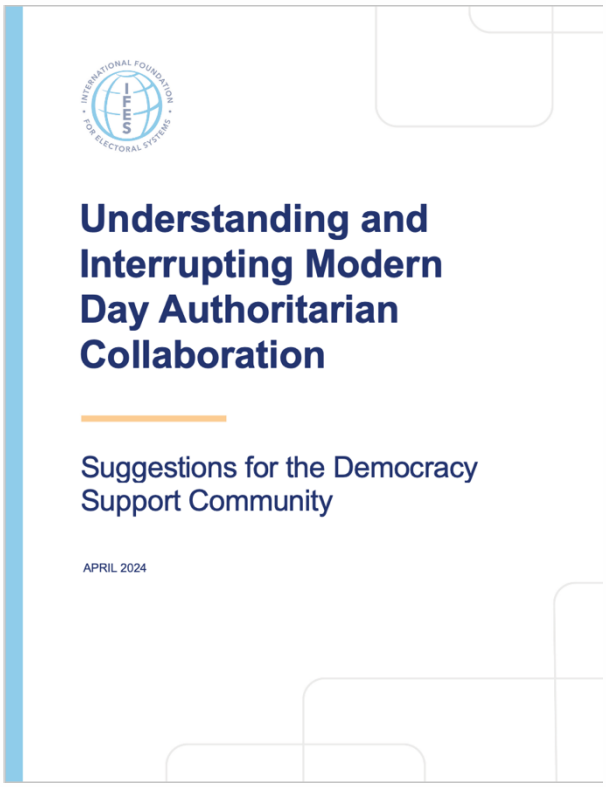

Understanding and Interrupting Modern Day Authoritarian Collaboration

For many decades, autocrats have been considered less cooperative than democrats in international politics. While researchers endeavored to learn how international democratic practices spread through political, economic, and social networks, little attention was paid to autocrats' collaborative tendencies. However, growing bodies of evidence from human rights and democracy support to international security and international development demonstrate that authoritarian regimes are collaborating through formal organizations and informal channels to stabilize or entrench their rule, disrupt democratic civil society, and even extend the reach of repressive institutions beyond state boundaries.

Autocrats face common threats, including: pro-democracy groups and dissenters at home; stigmatization and illegitimacy of their authoritarian governance tactics abroad; conditionalities on critically needed aid or loans that prioritize democratic governance structures and policies; and evolving and increased security threats. In response, authoritarian regimes are sharing information; working to legitimate (or de-stigmatize) repressive practices; supporting one another as they weather shocks and crises resulting from international integration (economic or political); and even lending resources for co-opting and managing critical constituencies. These and other tactics facilitate entrenchment of authoritarian practices.

To enable the democracy support community to effectively bolster democratic resilience in the face of growing authoritarianism, we must better understand these practices. This paper provides an overview of modern authoritarian collaboration, analyzing its purposes and methods. It goes on to suggest that democracy defenders can challenge pernicious authoritarian collaboration by leveraging their own transnational networks to disrupt authoritarian collaboration on surveillance and repression; providing compelling counter-narratives and debunk disinformation through effective civic education campaigns; and supporting international standard setting and rule enforcement that cuts off authoritarian actors from financial and other resources. The paper concludes by considering implications for international order and the democracy support community.

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Introduction

Political scientists have written extensively about the benefits and consequences of ***international collaboration*** – defined as cooperation and coordination for joint gain – focusing primarily on intergovernmental collaboration among democracies.[1] Collaboration between democratic governments was hypothesized to support democratic resilience,[2] reducing the risk of young democracies reverting to authoritarianism. International collaboration was also credited with promoting the "democratic peace,"[3] and intensifying the spread of economic and political openness during the 20th century.[4] By contrast, authoritarian regimes of the 20th century were viewed as peripheral and less cooperative actors in world politics. Because authoritarian regimes were expected to collaborate at a lower rate, fewer scholars studied the consequences of authoritarian international collaboration.

In recent decades, however, it has become clear that autocracies *are* able and willing to collaborate in consistent ways, particularly with like-minded autocracies. Even absolute monarchs, the least accountable and most secretive autocrats, cooperate intensively, particularly through informal agreements and forums.[5] In fact, authoritarian regimes created or comprised the majority of members in a significant share of regional and global international (governmental) organizations throughout the 20th and early 21st centuries.[6] International organizations – once firmly under the control of democracies, either formally (as in the case of the European Union (EU)) or *de facto* (global multilateral organizations) – have had to accommodate authoritarian members.

When cooperating governments are not democratic, the aims and advantages associated with international cooperation shift. Historically, autocrats relied most heavily on repression to prevent (often violent) regime change, but the 20th century's global human rights movement and spread of online open information environments has necessitated *strategic innovation* and *diversification*.[7] In addition to repression, legitimation and co-optation are important "pillars" of modern authoritarian and hybrid regime stability.[8] ***Legitimation*** broadly refers to autocrats' efforts to create positive public

[1] For overviews of the evolving debates on the relationship between democratic or authoritarian institutions and international cooperation, see Bueno De Mesquita, B., & Smith, A. (2012). "Domestic Explanations of International Relations." *Annual Review of Political Science,* 15:161-181; Drezner, D. (2022). "The Death of the Democratic Advantage." *International Studies Review,* 24(2):viac017; and Hyde, S., & Saunders, E. (2020) "Recapturing Regime Type in International Relations: Leaders, Institutions, and Agency Space." *International Organization,* 74(2): 363-395.

[2] Shein and Emmons (2023) define democratic resilience as "the ability to maintain democratic governance functions and principles, despite attempts by illiberal actors to damage or diminish the vertical, horizontal, or diagonal accountability mechanisms core to democracy." See Shein, E., Emmons, C., Lemargie, K., & Buril, F. (2023). "Paths to Democratic Resilience in an Era of Backsliding: A Roadmap for the Democracy Support Community." IFES' Democratic Resilience Lab.

[3] The 'democratic peace' refers to the finding that democracies are less likely to fight with other democracies. This implied that when a larger share of countries democratize, international conflict is less likely.

[4] See Doyle, M. W. (1986). "Liberalism and World Politics." *The American Political Science Review,* 80(4): 1151-1169; Milner, H., & Kubota, K. (2005). "Why the Move to Free Trade? Democracy and Trade Policy in the Developing Countries." *International Organization,* 59(1): 107-143; Pevehouse, J. (2002*a*). "With a Little Help from my Friends? Regional Organizations and the Consolidation of Democracy." *American Journal of Political Science,* 46(3): 611-626.

[5] Carlson, M., & Koremenos, B. (2021). "Cooperation Failure or Secret Collusion? Absolute Monarchs and Informal Cooperation." *The Review of International Organizations,* 16: 95-135.

[6] Cottiero, C., & Haggard, S. (2023). "Stabilizing Authoritarian Rule: The Role of International Organizations." *International Studies Quarterly,* 67(2): sqad031.

[7] Morgenbesser, L. (2020). "The Menu of Autocratic Innovation." *Democratization,* 27(6): 1053-1072.

[8] Gerschewski, J. (2013). "The Three Pillars of Stability: Legitimation, Repression, and Co-optation in Autocratic Regimes." *Democratization,* 20(1): 13-38.

perceptions of their "right" to rule. ***Co-optation*** refers to creating institutions for sharing power and resources with regime supporters; this is one purpose political parties and legislatures serve in autocracies.[9]

A growing body of research considers how autocrats collaborate to promote authoritarian regime stability and reduce prospects for democratization. ***Collaboration*** refers to joint action undertaken for mutual gain that falls on the spectrum from coordination, including self-enforcing agreements, to more difficult cooperation, including agreements where parties have incentives to defect.[10] Scholars and practitioners in the democracy support community have amassed evidence suggesting that autocrats collaborate to extend the reach of repressive institutions beyond state boundaries; to legitimate (or de-stigmatize) repressive practices; to weather shocks and crises resulting from international integration (economic or political); and to lend resources for co-opting and managing critical constituencies.[11] Rising non-democratic powers are also cooperating in new ways across a range of economic and political domains in the 21st century. These developments pose challenges to democracies, organizations in the democracy, rights, and governance sector, and the liberal international order more broadly.

This paper assesses the state of our knowledge on authoritarian collaboration. It presents the argument that authoritarian regimes concerned with remaining in power collaborate primarily to protect themselves from threats to their political (and personal) survival, rather than to promote the spread of authoritarianism *per se*.[12] The scope of the paper is global, but mainly limited to the post-Cold War period. The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews the logic of authoritarian collaboration – whether multilateral or bilateral – through formal or informal channels. Section 3 discusses four categories of threats to authoritarian regime stability and autocrats' collaborative responses to each threat. These threats include pro-democracy groups and domestic opponents; stigmatization and illegitimacy; traditional aid or loan conditionalities; and security threats. Section 4 reviews what we know about how to disrupt the pernicious consequences of authoritarian collaboration. Appropriate interventions include proactive support programs for diaspora groups likely to be targeted by transnational repression and civic education programming about authoritarian-backed international organizations that produce disinformation. The paper concludes by asking whether and how authoritarian collaboration is changing fundamental elements of the international order.

[9] *Ibid*. The domestic strategies modern autocrats use to strengthen these pillars are widely studies in the literature on authoritarian regimes.
[10] Keohane, R., & Victor, D. (2016). "Cooperation and Discord in Global Climate Policy." *Nature Climate Change,* 6(6): 570-575.
[11] Cottiero & Haggard (2023, n. 6); Debre, M. J. (2020). "The Dark Side of Regionalism: How Regional Organizations Help Authoritarian Regimes to Boost Survival." *Democratization,* 28(2): 394-413; Debre, M. J. (2022). "Clubs of Autocrats: Regional Organizations and Authoritarian Survival." *The Review of International Organizations,* 17: 485-511; Libman, A., & Obydenkova, A. V. (2018). "Regional International Organizations as a Strategy of Autocracy: The Eurasian Economic Union and Russian Foreign Policy" *International Affairs,* 94(5): 1037-1058; Schmotz, A., & Tansey, O. (2018). "Regional Autocratic Linkage and Regime Survival." *European Journal of Political Research,* 57(3): 662-686; Tsourapas, G. (2021) "Global Autocracies: Strategies of Transnational Repression, Legitimation, and Co-Optation in World Politics." *International Studies Review,* 23(3): 616-644; and von Soest, C. (2015). "Democracy Prevention: The International Collaboration of Authoritarian Regimes." *European Journal of Political Research,* 54(4): 623-638.
[12] This is similar to the argument in von Soest (2015, n.11), but the focus here extends beyond collaboration during moments of crisis. For a summary of the generally null results on ideologically driven autocracy promotion, see Bank, A. (2017). "The Study of Authoritarian Diffusion and Cooperation: Comparative Lessons on Interests Versus Ideology, Nowadays and in History." *Democratization,* 24(7): 1345-1357.

Approaches to Authoritarian Collaboration

Regional studies scholars were among the first to prioritize understanding authoritarian collaboration, and a growing body of research has drawn cross-regional lessons about the drivers and consequences of authoritarian collaboration. Although autocrats historically have joined fewer formal ***international organizations (IOs)*** – those with three or more member states and a permanent headquarters and staff – or ***regional organizations (ROs)*** – IOs that also have a geographical condition and delimitation for membership – than their democratic counterparts, they nonetheless engage strategically in multilateral cooperation.[13] Today's autocrats collaborate through a variety of formal and informal channels at the bilateral, regional, and, increasingly, global multilateral levels (see Table 1).

TABLE 1: Nature of Autocratic Collaboration: Formal and Informal, Multilateral and Bilateral

	Formal	Informal

Multilateral	• Creating/joining regional organizations comprised of predominantly authoritarian states
	  ○ e.g., the Shanghai Cooperation Organization
	• Undermining international or regional organizations dominated by liberal states as members
	  ○ e.g., nominating authoritarian officials for UN human rights committee positions
		• Establishing private regional policing agreements to respond flexibly and secretively to regime threats
		• Convening forums to share ideas, diffuse authoritarian policies, and socialize authoritarian elites
		  ○ e.g., South-South Human Rights Forum (China-led)

Bilateral	• Investment agreements
	  ○ e.g., joint investments in surveillance technology
	• Military training agreements and joint exercises
		• Statements of public support
		• Symbolic support
		  ○ e.g., diplomatic visits

There are several reasons why authoritarian regimes would cooperate through formal multilateral IOs (especially ROs). Participation in ***authoritarian IOs/ROs*** – defined here as IOs/ROs in which authoritarian governments comprise the majority of member states – has been positively linked to the longevity of authoritarian regimes[14] similar to the finding that collaboration in democratic-state-led IOs supports democracy's longevity in their member states.[15] By cooperating through IOs under authoritarian government control, autocrats can also pool resources; develop mechanisms for routine coordination; and speak with one voice to legitimize member state policies.[16] Pooling

[13] For comparisons of joining rates in formal and informal IOs by autocracies or democracies, see Roger, C., & Rowen, S. (2023) "The New Terrain of Global Governance: Mapping Membership in Informal International Organizations" *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 67(6): 1248-1269.
[14] Cottiero & Haggard (2023, n. 6); Debre (2020, 2022, n. 11); Obydenkova, A. V., & Libman, A. (2019) *Authoritarian Regionalism in the World of International Organizations: Global Perspective and Eurasia Enigma*, Oxford University Press.
[15] Pevehouse, J. (2002*b*) "Democracy from the Outside-In? International Organizations and Democratization" *International Organization* 56(3): 515-549; Poast, P., & Urpelainen, J. (2015) "How International Organizations Support Democratization: Preventing Authoritarian Reversals or Promoting Consolidation? *World Politics* 67(1): 72-113.
[16] Cottiero & Haggard (2023, n. 6).

resources within authoritarian-led IOs entails centralizing resources in the organization – whether for project lending, emergency liquidity, or collective security – to distribute to members facing threats to regime stability. IOs are also important sites of coordination where members can harmonize their policy positions. Authoritarian-led IOs are central actors in much of the work on collaborative legitimation of authoritarian regimes. They help member states frame crackdowns against civil society as efforts to counter terrorism or maintain regional stability, lending their legitimacy to "launder" member state policies.[17] Authoritarian IOs are also useful for legitimating members' policies in part due to their ability to mimic practices established by ***liberal IOs/ROs*** – or IOs/ROs dominated by democratic members. As described in subsequent sections of this paper, authoritarian ROs have participated in the production of pro-regime propaganda and have become ubiquitous at elections in some autocracies, where they deploy monitors to lend a veneer of legitimacy to rigged elections. Authoritarian IOs thus help to stabilize authoritarian regimes.

Autocrats also increasingly collaborate within existing global multilateral IOs founded and dominated by coalitions of liberal states or with mixed regime membership, including those created for ostensibly liberal purposes. While in the past, autocrats often focused on defending and deflecting criticism from these democracy-led organizations, today they increasingly seek to *alter* official procedures as coordinated members. "Hijacking" well-established global organizations from within appeals more to autocrats than leaving or refusing to join such organizations, in part, because these IOs have the potential to lend additional legitimacy to authoritarian practices through the stamp of membership.

Collaboration among groups of authoritarian regimes does not exclusively take place in formal international organizations; coalitions of authoritarian regimes also establish private written or verbal agreements or convene informal forums. In fact, authoritarian regimes that neglect their formal ROs are often highly involved in ***informal regional cooperation***. For example, although absolute monarchs in the Middle East establish few formal treaties, they cooperate through secret, cartel-like arrangements.[18] Particularly in the wake of the Arab Spring, Gulf monarchs were interested in cooperating on cross-border policing and punishing citizens critical to any monarchy in the region, but publicizing their cooperation against dissidents through a formal agreement would both be controversial with domestic audiences and reveal their willingness to flout international human rights agreements.[19] Because secretive informal cooperation among autocrats is difficult to track over time, the literature on informal coalitions of autocrats is limited.

Authoritarian regimes also ***collaborate bilaterally*** on a variety of issues relevant for boosting regime security. Authoritarian regimes are more connected than ever before through formal agreements regulating bilateral investment, trade, bureaucratic exchanges, weapons sales, cross-border policing, and aid flows. China's Belt and Road Initiative, most notably, has created a web of bilateral investment and aid agreements with authoritarian regimes

[17] Abbott, K. W., & Snidal, D. (1998). "Why States Act Through Formal International Organizations." *Journal of Conflict Resolution,* 42(1): 3-32.
[18] Carlson & Koremenos (2021, n. 5) rely on indirect evidence of secret collusion, using comparative events reported in the Integrated Data for Event Analysis (IDEA).
[19] Carlson & Koremenos (2021, n. 5).

across Asia, Africa, and Latin America.[20] Bilateral ties incentivize well-resourced, powerful authoritarian states to support the longevity of weaker authoritarian regimes.[21]

Lastly, authoritarian regimes support each other through ***informal bilateral cooperation***. This includes making supportive statements about their counterparts' policies and sending their leaders on high-level visits. Visits from foreign leaders – and particularly leaders of powerful countries – communicate foreign leaders' respect, confidence in their counterpart's grasp on power, and commitment to maintaining strong relations.[22] Demonstrations of solidarity, whether through speeches or visits, may help autocrats deter their opponents from mounting challenges to their regime.[23]

How Authoritarian Collaboration Sustains Authoritarian Rule: Threats and Responses

Authoritarian collaboration has and continues to evolve in response to common threats to autocratic rule. Such threats to an authoritarian leader include pro-democracy groups (particularly when involved in transnational networks) and domestic opponents, stigmatization and illegitimacy of authoritarian norms, aid or loan conditionalities from "traditional" lenders (e.g., the World Bank or International Monetary Fund), and security-related threats (e.g., from insurgents or coup leaders). Authoritarians have been collaborating with one another to enhance regime stability in response to such threats (see Table 2).

Threat 1: Pro-Democracy Groups and Domestic Opponents

Pro-democracy civil society groups and domestic political opponents present obvious challenges to authoritarian regimes. When pro-democracy civil society groups are embedded in – or inspired by – transnational advocacy networks, their capacity to exert pressure for change on authoritarian governments grows.[24] The spread of Color Revolutions across Central Asia and Eastern Europe followed by the Arab Spring underscored that transnational collaboration and learning among pro-democracy groups enhances their threat to authoritarian stability.[25] In addition to raising concerns about emulation within authoritarian "neighborhoods," these uprisings intensified autocrats' concerns about Western governments encouraging pro-democracy civil society in autocracies. Autocrats often

[20] Notably, aid and other forms of financing from China does not appear to target autocracies more than democracies. See Dreher, A., & Fuchs, A. (2015). "Rogue Aid? An Empirical Analysis of China's Aid Allocation." *Canadian Journal of Economics,* 84(3): 988-1023; Dreher, A., Fuchs, A., Parks, B., Strange, A., & Tierney, M. J. (2018). "Apples and Dragon Fruits: The Determinants of Aid and Other Forms of State Financing from China to Africa." *International Studies Quarterly,* 62(1): 182-194.
[21] Tansey, O., Koehler, K., & Schmotz, A. (2017). "Ties to the Rest: Autocratic Linkages and Regime Survival." *Comparative Political Studies,* 50(9): 1221-1254.
[22] McManus, R. W. (2018). "Making It Personal: The Tole of Leader-Specific Signals in Extended Deterrence." *The Journal of Politics,* 80(3): 982-995.
[23] Malis, M., & Smith, A. (2021). "State Visits and Leader Survival." *American Journal of Political Science,* 65(1): 241-256.
[24] Keck, M. E., & Sikkink, K. (1998). *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics*, Cornell University Press. Additionally, Freyburg (2015) finds that participation in transnational networks increases support for democracy even among authoritarian regime officials. See Freyberg, T. (2015). "Transgovernmental Networks as an Apprenticeship in Democracy? Socialization into Democratic Governance through Cross-National Activities." *International Studies Quarterly,* 59(1): 59-72.
[25] Koesel, K. J., & Bunce, V. J. (2013). "Diffusion-Proofing: Russian and Chinese Responses to Waves of Popular Mobilizations against Authoritarian Rulers." *Perspectives on Politics,* 11(3): 753-768.

responded by limiting the space for civil society, creating new challenges for the democracy support community's practitioners. Even when citizens from autocracies "exit" domestic politics in response to heightened repression by migrating abroad, their ability to criticize authoritarian regimes from the diaspora remains problematic for autocrats.

TABLE 2: How Authoritarian Collaboration Sustains Authoritarian Rule

Threats to Authoritarianism	Autocrats' Collaborative Responses	Examples
Pro-democracy groups and domestic opponents	***Information Exchanges***	• Sharing effective tactics (e.g., peer-to-peer trainings or copying laws restricting NGOs) • Collaborative surveillance (e.g., routinely sharing information on whereabouts of activists or opponents)
	Collaborative Repression	• Coercing the return of "blacklisted individuals" • Cross-border policing and harassment of exiles, migrants
Stigmatization and illegitimacy of authoritarian norms (as promoted by dominant liberal actors)	***Collective Legitimation***	• Illiberal norm promotion (e.g., unlimited sovereignty) • Supportive statements (e.g., speeches praising a fellow autocrat's security crackdowns)
	Mock Compliance	• Inviting low-quality election monitors to flood the information space (e.g., Collective Security Treaty Organization election observers downplaying fraud)
Political conditionalities from "traditional" donors and lenders (e.g., World Bank)	***Diversifying Financial Partnerships***	• Seeking autocratic investment partners • Channeling aid through authoritarian-state led IOs (e.g., Arab Monetary Fund)
Security threats	***Military Interventions***	• Pro-regime interventions • Military equipment provision
	Security Sector Assistance	• Technology and weapons transfers • Military training and joint exercises

Authoritarian Responses to Threat 1: Information-Sharing and Collaborative Repression

Autocracies increasingly incorporate ***democracy prevention*** – deliberate efforts to disrupt pro-democracy groups and reduce prospects for democratization – in their foreign policies. Authoritarian collaboration to stymie pro-democracy civil society takes several forms. First, authoritarian regimes share knowledge about effective policies to disrupt pro-democracy and opposition movements. This practice has been referred to as ***authoritarian learning***, whereby authoritarian governments learn to emulate each other's best (worst) policies and administrative arrangements.[26] Authoritarian learning may occur in meetings and informal communication, including on the sidelines of summits. Efforts to promote authoritarian learning are more readily observable when authoritarian regimes send officials to other autocracies to conduct trainings. These authoritarian peer-to-peer exchanges have produced "legal harmonization" in the authoritarian post-Soviet region.[27] Government security agencies in post-Soviet countries share information regarding which laws and technologies are most effective for internet surveillance and control; this causes diffusion from Russia to other post-Soviet countries of legal, technical, and institutional approaches to digital repression.[28] Autocrats in Central Asia, the Middle East, and Africa have also copied each other's legislation requiring civil society groups to register as "foreign agents" and submit to oversight boards, learning from each other's efforts to cut off funding between pro-democracy groups.[29]

Collaboration between authoritarian regime officials below the level of heads of state and government is an under-studied area of increasing importance. Although cross-national data on authoritarian party or bureaucratic exchanges is not, to the author's knowledge, widely available, case studies and new data collection efforts focused on particular authoritarian parties suggest that these exchanges matter for authoritarian learning and coordination. Notably, the International Department of the Communist Party of China (ID-CPC) maintains contact with more than 400 political parties in more than 160 countries.[30] The ID-CPC holds meetings, provides training, and sponsors "party schools" abroad.[31] Through these exchanges, the ID-CPC aims to spread favorable perceptions of China's governance and development model, increasing authoritarian regimes' willingness to repeat Chinese talking points on the South China Sea and One China policies, among other issues.[32] Whether exchanges between authoritarian regime officials often drive direct policy transfers – whether at the stage of writing or implementing legislation – is less-well understood.

Authoritarian regimes also share information about whereabouts of pro-democracy actors through ***collaborative surveillance*** practices. One goal of collaborative surveillance is to limit citizens' abilities to escape control by their home government by migrating. Cooperating to share information about dissidents becomes habitual as authoritarian regimes,

[26] Hall, S. G. F., & Ambrosio, T. (2017). "Authoritarian Learning: A Conceptual Overview." *East European Politics,* 33(2): 143-161; Heydemann, S., & Leenders, R. (2011). "Authoritarian Learning and Authoritarian Resilience: Regime Responses to the 'Arab Awakening.'" *Globalizations,* 8(5): 647-653.
[27] Lemon, E., & Antonov, O. (2020). "Authoritarian Legal Harmonization in the Post-Soviet Space." *Democratization,* 27(7): 1221-1239.
[28] Kerr, J. A. (2018). "Information, Security, and Authoritarian Stability: Internet Policy Diffusion and Coordination in the Former Soviet Region." *International Journal of Communication,* 12: 3813-3834.
[29] Glasius, M., Schalk, J., & De Lange, M. (2020). "Illiberal Norm Diffusion: How Do Governments Learn to Restrict Nongovernmental Organizations?" *International Studies Quarterly,* 64(2): 453-468.
[30] Hackenesch, C., & Bader, J. (2020). "The Struggle for Minds and Influence: The Chinese Communist Party's Global Outreach." *International Studies Quarterly,* 64(3): 723-733.
[31] *Ibid*.
[32] Benabdallah, L. (2020). "Power or Influence? Making Sense of China's Evolving Party-to-Party Diplomacy in Africa." *African Studies Quarterly,* 19(3-4): 94-114; Hackenesch & Bader (2020, n. 30).

particularly within the same region, develop information-sharing channels and routines over the course of decades. Latin American dictatorships' security services extensively shared intelligence from the 1960s through the 1980s, tracking leftist dissenters. Such intelligence-sharing continues to enable surveillance of exiles by Latin America's remaining autocracies.[33] Similar practices persist in states formerly part of the Soviet Union, which rely on traditions of collaboration developed between their intelligence services during the Cold War.[34] Researchers have also described how autocrats tolerate governments using embassies within their countries as operating bases from which they monitor the activities of diaspora communities and activists in-exile.[35]

Finally, authoritarian regimes with high technological capacity have launched cyber attacks on their allies' opponents. Throughout 2017 and 2018, Chinese hackers targeted opponents of Cambodian prime minister Hun Sen, a fellow autocrat and an ally of China, in the run-up to Cambodia's elections.[36] Although scholars have a reasonably good sense of which states collaborate on surveillance and share information about regime opponents intensively, the scale of authoritarian information-sharing and the uses of shared data are hard to monitor.

As a step beyond collaborative surveillance, ***collaborative repression*** entails the use of the host state's security forces and courts to harass or detain individuals from a partner state's pro-democracy and opposition groups when they travel abroad. Collaborative repression can also entail a host state allowing exiles' home state to directly target them within the host state's territory. This is the cooperative version of ***transnational repression*** – efforts to track and repress citizens across borders. In recent years, organizations like Freedom House have raised the alarm about increasing transnational, often collaborative repression resulting in "forcing people either to flee further afield or to silence themselves."[37]

Coercing the return of exiles is one of the common goals of collaborative repression. Authoritarian host governments are, unsurprisingly, more willing than democracies to coerce exiles' return by kidnapping and extraditing dissidents on their home state's behalf.[38] In contravention of the principle of non-refoulement, authoritarian regimes in China,[39] Egypt,[40]

[33] Shiraz, Z. (2013). "Drugs and Dirty Wars: Intelligence Cooperation in the Global South." *Third World Quarterly,* 34(10): 1749-1766.
[34] Lewis, D. (2015). "'Illiberal Spaces': Uzbekistan's Extraterritorial Security Practices and the Spatial Politics of Contemporary Authoritarianism." *Nationalities Papers,* 43(1): 140-159.
[35] Linzer, I., & Schenkkan, N. (2021). "Out of Sight, Not Out of Reach: The Global Scale and Scope of Transnational Repression." Freedom House (February). Autocrats also use embassies in democracies for these purposes, ostensibly without permission. See Moss, D. M. (2016). "Transnational Repression, Diaspora Mobilization, and the Case of the Arab Spring." *Social Problems,* 63(4): 480-498.
[36] Reed, J. (2018). "Chinese Hackers Target Cambodia Opposition Ahead of Elections." *Financial Times* (10 July); Adamovíc Davies, J. (2021). "Facebook Papers: Chinese State-linked Hackers Targeting Cambodian Opposition." *Radio Free Asia* (15 November).
[37] Linzer & Schenkkan (2021, n. 35).
[38] Michaelsen, M., & Ruijgrok, K. (2023). "Autocracy's Long Reach: Explaining Host Country Influences of Transnational Repression." *Democratization,* 31(2): 290-314.
[39] The Madrid-based NGO Safeguard Defenders has reported on multiple instances of China cooperating with autocracies in Asia, North Africa, and the Middle East to forcibly return dissidents. See Safeguard Defenders (2022). "Involuntary Returns: China's Covert Operations to Force 'Fugitives' Overseas Back Home" (January).
[40] Egypt has forced returns of Eritrean asylum seekers, as well as Chinese Uyghur students, according to independent reporting and experts from the United Nations and Human Rights Watch. See Human Rights Watch (2022) "Egypt: Forced Return of Eritrean Asylum Seekers." (27 January); and Youssef, N. (2017). "Egyptian Police Detain Uighers and Deport them to China." *The New York Times* (6 July).

North Korea,[41] Saudi Arabia,[42] Thailand,[43] Turkey,[44] and the United Arab Emirates,[45] to name a few examples, have cooperated with fellow autocrats to forcibly return dissidents.[46] When exiles reside in democracies, autocrats are more likely to send their own agents to covertly attack them.[46]

Authoritarian regimes coordinate transnational repression through a combination of multilateral and bilateral channels, casting a wide net against opposition actors. Studies find that states that belong to the same authoritarian-dominated ROs are more likely to cooperate on transnational repression.[47] The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is widely recognized as one such venue for authoritarian regimes to collaborate on policies targeting democratic oppositions under the guise of countering what Chinese officials described as the "three evils:" terrorism, ethnic separatism, and religious extremism.[48] SCO members agree to automatically extradite all individuals identified by fellow members on a black list of terrorists and extremists, regardless of whether the individuals are political targets.[49] In 2012, a report from the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) documented numerous instances of SCO members automatically extraditing refugees on the SCO blacklist accused of "extremism, separatism, or terrorism" to co-members in violation of the principle of non-refoulement.[50] Examples included Kazakhstan's extradition of a Uyghur journalist with refugee status and China and Kyrgyzstan's extradition of refugees who faced persecution in Uzbekistan without notifying the refugees' lawyers or UNHCR.[51] In the Middle East, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) also facilitates information-sharing and the maintenance of blacklists of exiles for their member states.[52]

Though it can be more difficult to prove inter-state cooperation on covert, enforced disappearances of dissidents in their host states, some of the same states that cooperate on extradition also appear to tolerate enforced disappearances by hit squads within their territories. Collaboration to "disappear" dissidents is hardly a new phenomenon; in the 1970s and 1980s, Latin America's military dictatorships – Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, and Uruguay – famously collaborated on Operation Condor, causing the enforced disappearances of hundreds

[41] China has forcibly repatriated North Korean escapees at the request of North Korea according to officials from the United Nations, the U.S., and South Korea. See Gallo, W. (2023). "Activists Slam China After Alleged Forced Repatriation of North Koreans." *VOA News* (13 October); Mackenzie, J., & Ng, K. (2023). "China Deported 'Large Numbers' of N Korean Defectors – Seoul." *BBC* (13 October); and Reuters (2023) "US Lawmakers Warn North Korean Refugees Face Repatriation from China." (13 October).
[42] Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salam has reportedly enlisted the help of authorities in Kuwait and Jordan to kidnap and forcibly return individuals he considers potential rivals. See Mohyeldin, A. M. (2019). "No One Is Safe: How Saudi Arabia Makes Dissidents Disappear." *Vanity Fair* (29 July).
[43] Thailand has forcibly repatriated opposition activists to Myanmar and Cambodia at those government's requests. See Human Rights Watch (2021). "Thailand: Cambodian Refugees Forcibly Returned." (12 November); and Human Rights Watch (2023). "Thailand: Myanmar Activists Forcibly Returned." (12 April).
[44] Turkey has forcibly repatriated Uyghurs to China. See Karadsheh, J. & Tuysuz, G. (2021). "Uyghurs are Being Deported from Muslim Countries, Raising Concerns about China's Growing Reach." *CNN* (8 June).
[45] Lemon, E., Jardine, B., & Hall, N. (2023). "Globalizing Minority Persecution: China's Transnational Repression of the Uyghurs." *Globalizations,* 20(4): 564-580; Tsourapas (2021, n. 11).
[46] Michaelsen & Ruijgrok (2023, n. 38).
[47] Michaelsen & Ruijgrok (2023, n. 38).
[48] Ambrosio, T. (2008). "Catching the 'Shanghai Spirit': How the Shanghai Cooperation Organizations Promotes Authoritarian Norms in Central Asia." *Europe-Asia Studies,* 60(8): 1321-1344; Aris, S. (2009). "The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: 'Tackling the Three Evils'. A Regional Response to Non-traditional Security Challenges or an Anti-Western Bloc?" *Europe-Asia Studies,* 61(3): 457-482.
[49] See Cooley, A., & Heathershaw, J. (2017). *Dictators without Borders: Power and Money in Central Asia*, Yale University Press. Members of the SCO include China, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, and Uzbekistan.
[50] Kissenkoetter, M., Knaute, D., & Rizk, V. (2012). "Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: A Vehicle for Human Rights Violations." The International Federation for Human Rights (12 March).
[51] *Ibid*.
[52] Cooley, A. (2015). "Authoritarianism Goes Global: Countering Democratic Norms." *Journal of Democracy,* 26(3): 49-63. Members of the GCC include Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

of political exiles. These military regimes surveilled each other's exiles; undertook join covert actions to disappear, torture, and extralegally deport each other's exiles; and collaborated in teams to assassinate exiles in various countries.[53]

In recent decades, autocrats have abused the International Criminal Police Organization (Interpol) system of red notices – requests that countries issue for police forces worldwide to arrest wanted persons. Rather than exclusively targeting criminals, autocrats attempt to issue Interpol red notices for regime opponents who flee abroad to avoid persecution.[54] Autocracies that have extensively abused Interpol include Russia[55] and the United Arab Emirates.[56] In a worrying sign for those hoping that Interpol will continue to undergo reforms, Major General Ahmed Naser Al-Raisi of the United Arab Emirates was elected to serve as Interpol's president from 2021-2025.[57] Various human rights groups campaigned against General Raisi's candidacy, accusing him of overseeing unlawful arrests and torture of human rights campaigners from the UAE.[58]

While some autocrats buy software and services that they use to surveil and repress civil society from companies based in democracies, there is growing concern about autocracies exporting digital tools of repression. Authoritarian regimes at the frontier of innovation on biometric data collection have collaborated with like-minded autocrats to help set up similar systems. China has signed agreements with several African governments, for example, to roll out biometric data collection and facial recognition software in those countries.[59] Beyond mimicking surveillance practices and software adoptions of fellow autocracies, authoritarian regimes have proven willing to share their algorithms and exchange data. For example, state-owned technology companies from China and the United Arab Emirates have worked together to produce surveillance software.[60] In November 2023, the world's leading AI powers announced their willingness to develop frameworks to regulate AI technology, though it is not yet clear whether these will meaningfully deal with export of AI surveillance technology or biometric data between authoritarian regimes.[61]

Authoritarian-led IOs have also coordinated joint operations of their member states against oppositions online. In December 2010, concerned with democratic contagion from the emerging Arab Spring, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) claimed to have shut down 2,000 websites in member countries that it described as politically damaging to member states.[62] The CSTO justified the coordinated regional take-down of opposition websites by claiming these sites supplied information to terror groups.[63]

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[53] McSherry, J. P. (2019). "Operation Condor and Transnational State Violence Against Exiles." *Journal of Global South Studies,* 36(2 Exploring Facets of the Global South): 369-398; Slack, K. M. (1996). "Operation Condor and Human Rights: A Report from Paraaguay's Archive of Terror." *Human Rights Quarterly,* 18(2): 492-506.
[54] Lemon, E. (2019). "Weaponizing Interpol." *Journal of Democracy,* 30(2):15-29; Lewis (2015, n. 34).
[55] Dunwoodie, S. (2019). "GOP Lawmaker: 'Dangerous' Abuse of Interpol by Russia, China, Venezuela." *The Hill* (13 September); Gilsinan, K. (2018). "How Russia Tries to Catch Its 'Criminals' by Abusing Interpol." *The Atlantic* (30 May).
[56] The UAE has abused the red notices system to target debtors. See MacDonald, A. (2017). "British Woman under 'House Arrest' in Italy over Unpaid Dubai Debt." *Middle East Eye* (28 June); Mackinnon, A. (2018). "The Scourge of the Red Notice: How Some Countries Use Interpol to Go After Dissidents and Debtors." *Foreign Policy* (3 December).
[57] Interpol's Secretary general at the time of writing is Jürgen Stock of Germany. The Secretary General oversees Interpol's day-to-day activities. See Interpol's About Page.
[58] BBC. (2021). "UAE General Accused of Torture Elected Interpol President" (25 November).
[59] Townsend, B., & Gwagwa, A. (2023). "Authoritarian Alliances and the Politicking of Data in Africa." *Journal of Online Trust and Safety,* 2(1).
[60] Gurol, J., Zumbrägel, T., & Demmelhuber, T. (2023). "Elite Networks and the Transregional Dimensions of Authoritarianism: Sino-Emirati Relations in Times of Global Pandemic." *Journal of Contemporary China,* 32(139): 139-151.
[61] Knight, W. (2023). "World Powers Say They Want to Contain AI. They're Also Racing to Advance It." *Wired* (2 November).
[62] Kerr (2018, n. 28).
[63] *Ibid*.

Threat 2: Stigmatization and Illegitimacy of Authoritarian Norms

The global human rights movement with its claims about the universality of human rights also poses a significant challenge to autocrats. When they abuse fundamental human rights, autocrats frequently face shaming, stigmatization, and isolation by IOs and individual democracies. For deeply authoritarian regimes, being a "pariah" in global society comes with financial and political repercussions, in addition to consequences rooted in the state's drive to establish and maintain security of their identity. Therefore, authoritarian regimes have significant interests in image management.[64] On the one hand, authoritarian regimes use shared rhetoric and messaging strategies to convey that even the most stigmatized, repressive crackdowns are actually legitimate (rightful and proper) state policies. On the other hand, many hybrid or competitive authoritarian regimes engage in deception, such as by allowing citizens to exercise voting rights for appearances' sakes but working behind the scenes to rig elections. To boost these efforts, authoritarian regimes engage in collective legitimation practices and collaborate in mock compliance, as demonstrated through low-quality election monitoring co-opted by authoritarian incumbents.

Authoritarian Responses to Threat 2: Collective Legitimation and Mock Compliance

Autocrats engage in ***collective legitimation***: collaboration not only to de-stigmatize authoritarian rule, but to promote the belief that their exercise of power is appropriate. For example, Central Asian autocrats publicly praise each other's efforts to maintain "order and stability," contrasting the virtues of strong, centralized power with the more "disorderly and unstable" politics of the U.S. and other democracies.[65] These shared claims evoke performance-based legitimacy, suggesting that if their authoritarian counterparts were not in power, Central Asian societies would be destabilized. Authoritarian regimes' legitimation efforts are often rooted in cultural relativist claims about incongruence of supposedly western values with local practices and beliefs. Claiming to be protectors of "tradition" and "family values," autocrats in Africa, Latin America, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia have tried to legitimize their rule and rally voters – particularly by copying each other's laws targeting LGBTQI groups and reproductive rights. For example, authoritarian regimes tap into international conservative movements and homophobia not only to acquire legitimacy, but also to foster tolerance for broader contractions of citizenship rights and weakening of the judiciary.[66] The resurgent popularity of rallying against western immorality to protect the family unit is often attributed to Russian President Vladimir Putin.[67]

Authoritarian regimes also collaborate to cast suspicions on dissident and minority groups capable of threatening collective action, countering claims that dissidents are engaged in legitimate free speech and protest activities. Authoritarian regimes' claims that dissidents are terrorists or foreign agents may be more believable if allied countries offer corroboration. Therefore, autocrats repeat each other's claims that crackdowns combat terrorism or Western-backed agitation.[68] For example, although the vast majority of Uyghurs have no connections to terrorist groups, autocracies

[64] Alder-Nissen, R. (2014). "Stigma Management in International Relations: Transgressive Identities, Norms, and Order in International Society." *International Organization,* 68(1):143-176.
[65] Costa Buranelli, F. (2020). "Authoritarianism as an Institution? The Case of Central Asia." *International Studies Quarterly,* 64(4): 1005-1016.
[66] Moreau, J. (2018). "Trump in Transnational Perspective: Insights from Global LGBT Politics." *Politics & Gender,* 14(4): 619-648; Reid, G. (2023). "Russia, Homophobia and the Battle for 'Traditional Values.'" Human Rights Watch (17 May). The spread of "political homophobia" received considerable support from far-right evangelical groups based in the U.S. See Okereke, C. (2023). "How US Evangelicals Helped Homophobia Flourish in Africa." *Foreign Policy* (19 March).
[67] Horvath, R. (2016). "The Reinvention of 'Traditional Values': Nataliya Narochnitskaya and Russia's Assault on Universal Human Rights." *Europe-Asia Studies,* 68(5): 868-892.
[68] Costa Buranelli (2020, n. 65).

such as Saudi Arabia have expressed approval of China's crackdown on Uyghurs.[69] In 2019, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman stated that the Saudis "respect and support China's rights to take counter-terrorism and de-extremism measures to safeguard national security."[70] Saudi Arabia, along with 44 other countries – including Cuba, Bahrain, Belarus, Cambodia, Eritrea, and Iran – endorsed China's Xinjiang policies in a letter read aloud by Cuba's representative at the UN General Assembly's Third Committee (on Social, Humanitarian, and Cultural Issues) in 2019.[71]

Officials in authoritarian ROs have directly participated in the production of member states' pro-regime propaganda. Perhaps most famously, the Secretary-General of the SCO participated in heavily publicized tours of Xinjiang, praising the Chinese government's development of Xinjiang in several scripted, televised interviews.[72] In one segment on China's state-owned broadcaster CGTN, SCO Secretary-General Vladimir Norov can be observed reading directly off a teleprompter while offering praise and listing economic growth figures for Xinjiang.[73]

Particularly in the last ten years, China has shifted from defense to offense, not only countering criticisms of its human rights record, but also attempting to re-write the rules of the human rights monitoring system.[74] With support from the informal "Like-Minded Group" (LMG) of predominantly low- and middle-income regimes with blemished human rights records, China has focused its attention on undermining the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) in particular. In the HRC, China and its allies attempt to keep China's human rights record off the agenda, and promote its vision centering the right to a "harmonious society" and economic development while de-emphasizing democracy and civil and political rights.[75] The LMG has coordinated to defeat resolutions in the UN General Assembly that would strengthen the global human rights architecture and resolutions condemning repressive regimes, while promoting illiberal counter-messaging.[76] China and its allies also nominate officials for key human rights committees, and have worked to limit the access of pro-democracy non-governmental organizations (NGOs) throughout the UN system. Through their position on the UN Economic and Social Council's (ECOSOC) Committee on Non-governmental Organizations, which grants UN consultative status to NGOs, China and Russia block applications from civil society organizations focused on human rights and other sensitive topics.[77]

Authoritarian regimes have also collaborated through technically-oriented, or "functional," multilateral organizations to promote the legitimacy of illiberal practices and displace liberal norms. Recent studies have focused, for example, on authoritarian regimes' efforts to challenge established norms of decentralized internet governance and freedom of expression online. In 2011, China, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan submitted a joint proposal for an "International Code of Conduct for Information Security" at the UN General Assembly (which did not pass). In 2012, at the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) World Conference on International Telecommunications in Dubai, China and Russia spearheaded efforts to advance a multilateral model of internet governance and to establish new content

[69] Lemon, Jardine, & Hall (2023, n. 45).
[70] Jardine, B. (2022). "The Arab World Isn't Just Silent on China's Crackdown on Uighurs. It's Complicit." *Time Magazine* (24 March).
[71] Putz, C. (2020). "2020 Edition: Which Countries Are For or Against China's Xinjiang Policies?" *The Diplomat* (9 October).
[72] Cottiero & Haggard (2023, n. 6).
[73] CGTN. (2021). "SCO Official Impressed by Development in Xinjiang." (2 April).
[74] Inboden, R. S. (2022). "China and Authoritarian Collaboration." *Journal of Contemporary China,* 31(136): 505-517.
[75] Ahl, B. (2015). "The Rise of China and International Human Rights Law." *Human Rights Quarterly,* 37(3): 637-661; Dukalaskis, A. (2023). "A Fox in the Hen House: China, Normative Change, and the UN Human Rights Council." *Journal of Human Rights,* 22(3): 334-350; Inboden (2022, n. 74).
[76] Piccone, T. (2018). "China's Long Game on Human Rights at the United Nations." Brookings Institution Working Paper (September).
[77] Inboden, R. S. (2021). "China at the UN: Choking Civil Society." *Journal of Democracy,* 32(2): 124-135.

control norms.[78] Scholars and officials from democracies initially raised alarms about these proposals representing statist, authoritarian revisions to what is currently a decentralized, multi-stakeholder system of internet governance.[79] However, the authoritarian-backed multilateral model, which aims to transfer power back to states and move away from private involvement in internet governance, has gained popularity with policy-makers in backsliding democracies, including India.[80]

Authoritarian regimes sometimes cooperate to mimic well-established democratic practices and institutions, known as ***mock compliance***. In the wake of the third wave of democratization, western countries increasingly conditioned access to foreign aid on signals of intent to democratize, including through holding elections and inviting international election observers.[81] The rise of disingenuous, so-called "zombie," or "shadow" election monitoring groups is emblematic of authoritarian cooperation to mimic and benefit from these democratic practices without submitting to meaningful accountability.[82] ***Low-quality*** (or disingenuous) ***election observers*** are defined as those that lack the willingness or the capacity to detect and report irregularities and fraud during the election cycle.[83] Low-quality observer missions from authoritarian-backed groups often deliberately resemble credible, professionalized monitoring organizations.[84] Some low-quality international observer missions also include credible-seeming officials from election management bodies and former politicians from well-established democracies.[85] Voters without enough information to distinguish credible observers from low-quality observers wearing similar uniforms may view the presence of the low-quality observers as a positive signal about an election's integrity.

Since the early 2000s, authoritarian-led ROs deploy a growing number of low-quality monitors to their members' elections, while the number of observers from monitoring groups with high standards has plateaued.[86] ROs ranging from SCO to the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) to the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) have deployed observers to validate elections with obvious, serious flaws.[87] Although cross-national research on the effects of low-quality observers is limited, one survey found that voters in Tunisia viewed observers from the Arab League as more credible than observers from other regions, including observers from the EU.[88] Researchers contend that EU observers apply more rigorous election monitoring methodologies and can speak more freely than Arab League observers; however,

[78] Flonk, D. (2021). "Emerging Illiberal Norms: Russia and China as Promoters of Internet Content Control." *International Affairs,* 97(6): 1925-1944; Raustiala, K. (2016). "Governing the Internet." *American Journal of International Law,* 110(3): 491-503.
[79] Kerr (2018, n. 28).
[80] Internet access-focused NGOs raised the alarm about changes in the Indian government's behavior towards tech companies. See Access Now, ARTICLE 19, the Association for Progressive Communications, the Committee to Protect Journalists, Derechos Digitales, the Electronic Frontier Foundation, Human Rights Watch, Mnemonic, Reporters Without Borders and WITNESS. (2021). "India: Tech Firms Should Uphold Privacy, Free Speech" (11 March). On increasing digital authoritarianism in India, see Ruijgrok, K. (2022). "The Authoritarian Practice of Issuing Internet Shutdowns in India: The Bharatiya Janata Party's Direct and Indirect Responsibility." *Democratization,* 29(4): 611-633.
[81] Hyde, S. (2011). "Catch Us If You Can: Election Monitoring and International Norm Diffusion." *American Journal of Political Science,* 55(2): 356-369.
[82] Kelley, J. (2012). *Monitoring Democracy: When International Election Observation Works and Why it Often Fails,* Princeton University Press; Walker, C. & Cooley, A. (2013). "Vote of the Living Dead." *Foreign Policy* (13 October).
[83] Bush, S. S., Cottiero, C., & Prather, L. (2023). "Zombies Ahead: Explaining the Rise of Low-Quality Election Monitoring" Working paper.
[84] Merloe, P. (2015). "Authoritarianism Goes Global: Election Monitoring vs. Disinformation." *Journal of Democracy,* 26(3): 79-93.
[85] The NGO the European Platform for Democratic Elections (EPDE) maintains a database that includes more than 500 individuals who have participated in biased election observation, according to their standards, including many election experts and former politicians from democracies. "Database of Politically Biased Election Observers" EPDE.
[86] Bush, Cottiero, Prather (2023, n. 83).
[87] Bush, Cottiero, Prather (2023, n. 83); See also Debre, M. J., & Morgenbesser, L. (2017). "Out of the Shadows: Autocratic Regimes, Election Observation and Legitimation." *Contemporary Politics,* 23(3): 328-347; Nganje, F., & Nganje, K. (2019). "Liberal Internationalism Meets Third Worldism: The Politics of International Election Observation in the DRC's Post-War Elections." *Third World Quarterly,* 40(3): 521-541.
[88] Bush, S. S., & Prather, L. (2018). "Who's There: Election Observer Identity and the Local Credibility of Elections." *International Organization,* 72(3): 659-692.

Tunisians consider Arab observers to be less biased.[89] Recent research finds that when these low- and high-quality observers issue contradictory statements about the quality of elections, voters are less likely to protest; this indicates that autocrats benefit from low-quality observers muddying the information environment.[90]

Finally, authoritarian regimes also collaborate with illiberal non-state actors to legitimize their rule and imitate compliance. This includes collaborating with public relations firms, lobbying groups, think tanks, accounting companies, private security companies, and other opportunistic businesses that are often headquartered in democracies.[91] Autocracies around the world, from Equatorial Guinea[92] to Rwanda[93] to Azerbaijan[94] have learned from each other's successes with American and (to a lesser extent) European public relations firms, copying this international image management strategy. The United Arab Emirates has reportedly co-opted American think tanks for similar purposes: to write pieces that present the regime in a positive light.[95] The target audiences of authoritarian regimes who hire PR firms are often policymakers in democracies, who autocrats hope to convince of their respectability to access economic opportunities or military aid. While PR firms launder authoritarian regimes' reputations, accounting companies and real estate brokers in democracies have worked to launder authoritarian regimes' ill-gotten financial gains, including money earned from smuggling natural resources.[96] Given that some authoritarian regimes pay tens or hundreds of millions of dollars to foreign PR and accounting firms (based on disclosures required under U.S. law), authoritarian collaboration with western firms is an issue that deserves greater attention from political scientists and practitioners alike. These firms are now important enablers of authoritarian learning and strategic innovation.

Threat 3: Political Conditionalities from "Traditional" Donors and Lenders

Over-reliance on democracies and western-dominated international institutions for development aid, investment, and trade leaves authoritarian regimes vulnerable to the application of ***conditionalities***: the explicit linkage of aid or trade with pressure to liberalize their policies. The demands attached to western loans are problematic for autocratic regime stability. For instance, requiring autocrats to rein in spending by cutting popular subsidies and bloated bureaucracies can inspire elite defections and counter-regime mobilization. To reduce the leverage of western regimes and institutions, autocrats diversify their partnerships. While fellow autocrats also use economic leverage to influence partners' policies,

[89] This is not to suggest that observers from the EU do not have biases, but that they generally observe all parts of the election cycle and adhere to rigorous standards of conduct and reporting.
[90] Morrison, K., Donno, D., Savun, B., & Davutoglu, P. (2024). "Competing Judgements: Multiple Election Observers and Post-Election Contention." *The Review of International Organizations,* (SI: Authoritarian International Organizations).
[91] Morgenbesser (2020, n. 7).
[92] Quinn, E. (2015). "US Lobbying, PR Firms Give Human Rights Abusers a Friendly Face." The Center for Public Integrity (17 December); Sands, W. (2012). "Equatorial Guinea: Legitimizing Obiang." Pulitzer Center (24 April).
[93] Corporate Europe Observatory (2017). "Spin Doctors to the Autocrats: How European PR Firms Whitewash Repressive Regimes." (20 January); Dukalskis, A. (2021). "Projecting Peace and Prosperity: Authoritarian Image Management and RPF Rwanda." In *Making the World Safe for Dictatorship* Oxford University Press, pp. 139-158; York, G. (2012). "How a US Agency Cleaned Up Rwanda's Genocide-Stained Image." *The Globe and Mail* (31 January).
[94] Corporate Europe Observatory (2017, n. 94); Wrate, J. (2018). "US Lobbying Firm Launders Azerbaijan's Reputation – and Gets 'Laundromat' Cash." The Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (23 May).
[95] Jilani, Z., & Emmons, A. (2017). "Hacked Emails Show UAE Building Close Relationship with DC Think Tanks That Push Its Agenda." *The Intercept* (30 July).
[96] Cooley, A., Heathershaw, J.,& Sharman, J. C. (2018). "The Rise of Kleptocracy: Laundering Cash, Whitewashing Reputations." *Journal of Democracy,* 29(1): 39-53.

it seems reasonable to assume that they are less likely to pressure autocrats to engage in regime reforms that could be destabilizing to their rule.

Authoritarian Responses to Threat 3: Diversifying Partnerships

Authoritarian regimes in Asia and the Middle East have promised alternative approaches to foreign aid and investment that eschew unattractive political conditionalities. The so-called "non-traditional" or "new" donors, including China and the Gulf monarchies, instead promise a growing number of recipient states that they will not interfere in their domestic affairs. As the volume of aid from China and other authoritarian lenders has grown, authoritarian recipient countries increasingly skirt the demands of western institutions. Countries receiving aid from China are less likely to implement market-liberalizing reforms and less likely to comply with conditions attached to loans received from traditional donors, including the World Bank.[97] In response to this new competition, the World Bank has changed its lending portfolio to emulate the types of projects China funds and imposes fewer conditions on recipients receiving aid from China.[98] Nonetheless, preliminary evidence suggests that increasing aid from China leads to short-term economic growth in recipient countries and that China does not appear to prioritize lending based on regime type.[99] In sum, ***diversifying aid channels*** to rely more on fellow authoritarian regimes is likely to enhance autocratic stability.

Authoritarian-led regional financial institutions are also important actors in the global financial safety net responsible for stabilizing countries during financial or economic crises. To some extent, these regional institutions are outside options to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for members facing public debt crises. Unlike the IMF, the regional financial institutions typically attach no – or relatively few – conditions to their loans and can disperse loans rapidly.[100] Particularly in regions with significant disparities between low-income and high-income states, authoritarian-led IOs provide institutionalized channels for transfers to stabilize regimes more susceptible to economic shocks. For example, the Arab Monetary Fund (AMF), a sub-organization of the Arab League, provided liquidity to Bahrain's monarchs to quickly stabilize their regime during the Arab Spring crisis.[101] Beyond the Arab Spring, the AMF has typically enabled the Gulf region's oil exporters to stabilize co-members who import oil and face balance of payment difficulties when oil prices are high, including Djibouti and Mauritania.[102] To a lesser extent, the Gulf's oil exporters draw on the AMF when oil prices are low. The AMF alone was used more times than the IMF as of 2019 –174 versus 117 instances – though its loans are also much smaller on average.[103] The Eurasian Fund for Stabilization and Development's (EFSD) lending was five times greater than IMF lending to its members from its founding in 2009 until 2014.[104]

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[97] See Brazys, S., & Vadlamannati, K. C. (2021). "Aid Curse with Chinese Characteristics? Chinese Development Flows and Economic Reforms." *Public Choice,* 188(3-4): 407-430; and Watkins, M. (2021). "Undermining Conditionality? The Effect of Chinese Development Assistance on Compliance with World Bank Project Agreements." *The Review of International Organizations,* 17(4): 667-690, respectively.
[98] See Zeitz, A. O. (2021). "Emulate or Differentiate? Chinese Development Finance, Competition, and World Bank Infrastructure Funding." *The Review of International Organizations,* 16(2): 265-292; and Hernandez, D. (2017). "Are 'New' Donors Challenging World Bank Conditionality?" *World Development,* 96:529-549, respectively.
[99] Dreher, A., Fuchs, A., Parks, B., Strange, A., & Tierney, M. J. (2021). "Aid, China, and Growth: Evidence from a New Global Development Finance Dataset." *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy,* 13(2): 135-174; Mandon, P., & Woldemichael, M. (2023). "Has Chinese Aid benefited Recipient Countries? Evidence from a Meta-Regression Analysis." *World Development,* 166: 106-211.
[100] Clark, R. (2022). "Bargain Down or Shop Around? Outside Options and IMF Conditionality." *The Journal of Politics,* 84(3): 1791-1805.
[101] Fritz, B., & Mühlich, L. (2019). "Regional Financial Arrangements in the Global Financial Safety Net: The Arab Monetary Fund and the Eurasian Fund for Stabilization and Development." *Development and Change,* 50(1): 96-121; Mogielnicki, R. (2018). "The Politics of Aid: GCC Support for Bahrain" Middle East Institute (30 October).
[102] Fritz and Mühlich (2019, n. 102).
[103] Fritz and Mühlich (2019, n. 102). The AMP was founded in 1976. The IMF was founded in 1944.
[104] EFSD's members are Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan. See Clark (2022, n. 100).

When authoritarian regimes alienate their traditional donors during periods of heightened brutality, they may turn to regional multilateral lending institutions to fill in some financing gaps. In recent years, as the repressive Ortega-Murillo regime in Nicaragua grew isolated, the Central American Bank for Economic Integration (CABEI) maintained its plans to fund projects in Nicaragua worth hundreds of millions of dollars.[105] Because the political impacts of regional banks' lending to authoritarian regimes has not been studied extensively, many questions about their effects on member states' domestic or foreign policies are unanswered.

For groups of lower-income autocracies dependent on foreign aid, IOs also serve as a fundraising and donor coordination platform.[106] For example, in the Horn of Africa, the regional Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) raises more than 80 percent of its project and operating funds from donors outside of Africa.[107] These funds pay for projects that benefit members in sectors ranging from security and health to agriculture and climate resiliency. Lower-income authoritarian regimes can also benefit from the patronage functions of such IOs, which allow them to co-opt supporters through the distribution of prestigious positions and project contracts.[108]

Threat 4: Security Threats

The conventional wisdom has long been that authoritarian regimes are less attractive military alliance partners. Nonetheless, autocrats have developed collective security institutions and intervened during members' intrastate conflicts and, to a lesser extent, interstate conflicts. Authoritarian regimes collaborate against traditional and non-traditional or evolving security threats. In the wake of 9/11, authoritarian regimes pivoted to focus heavily on cooperating against the threat of terrorism – as well as to exploit the potential to frame all armed oppositions as terrorists. Security sector assistance and exchanges between authoritarian regimes are seldom studied systematically beyond case studies. Yet, there is evidence that collaboration among authoritarian military and police forces in countering terrorism, organizing peace enforcement operations, and military training are often pursued with the aim of increasing the longevity of authoritarian regimes.

Authoritarian Responses to Threat 4: Military Interventions and Security Sector Assistance

Recent research suggests that autocrats are less likely to cooperate in externally-oriented alliances, but they often expect their allies to assist them when they face domestic and transnational (non-state) threats to regime stability.[109] The extent to which autocrats mobilize collective security institutions to intervene in member state conflicts varies significantly by region. African regional organizations intervene in members' crises most often at the invitation of member state governments, while norms of non-intervention are much stronger in South Asia.[110] At the invitation of leaders in

[105] Berg, R. C. (2023). "Why Is CABEI Funding Nicaragua's Dictatorship and What Can the United States Do about It?" Center for Strategic and International Studies (6 February).
[106] Cottiero & Haggard (2023, n. 6).
[107] IGAD's members are Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan and Uganda. See Berhe, M. G. (2019). "The finances of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD)." in U. Engel & F. Mattheis (eds) *The Finances of Regional Organisations in the Global South: Follow the Money,* Routledge, p. 79-91.
[108] Gray, J. (2015). "The Patronage Function of Dysfunctional International Organizations." Working paper.
[109] Boutton, A. (2019). "Coup-Proofing in the Shadow of Intervention: Alliances, Moral Hazard, and Violence in Authoritarian Regimes." *International Studies Quarterly,* 63(1): 43-57; Cottiero, C. (2023) "Protection for Hire: Cooperation through Regional Organizations." *International Studies Quarterly,* 67(4): sqad082.
[110] Coe, B. N. (2019) *Sovereignty in the South: Intrusive Regionalism in Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia,* Cambridge University Press.

Mozambique and the Democratic Republic of Congo, coalition forces from SADC and the East African Community (EAC) have recently fought alongside government forces against insurgent groups.[111] In these African ROs (whose members are predominantly authoritarian or hybrid regimes), secretariat staff play an important role in coordinating across member state militaries.

Authoritarian-led security organizations also organize regional military exercises to improve the inter-operability of member state militaries and reveal members' capabilities. Despite CSTO members' misgivings about Russia's neocolonial ambitions, the CSTO organized at least 38 military exercises between 2002 and 2016, while the SCO carried out at least 22 military exercises over the same time frame in Central Asia.[112] The rise of China's influence in Central Asia has bolstered the CSTO's ability to fill this role by helping Russia credibly commit not to use CSTO interventions as pretext to "take over" co-members; doing so would upset the regional balance of power between Russia and China.[113] The balance established between China and Russia could have increased the willingness of other autocrats to invite CSTO assistance and cooperate in more complex CSTO exercises, but instead trust in Russia has plummeted among Central Asian governments due to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.[114]

Authoritarian "black knights" also intervene unilaterally to help their allies fend off challengers. Autocrats generally intervene militarily to support regimes with which they share deep economic, social, and security ties, and autocrats whose removal would cause broader regional instability. For example, when Syria was wracked by anti-government protests beginning in 2011, Iran provided technical support, equipment, and military assistance to the Assad government because Iranian leaders view Assad as a critical ally against the U.S., Israel, and liberalizing forces in Western Asia more broadly.[115] Russia also intervened militarily to support the Assad government, motivated to push back against what it viewed as externally-promoted regime change targeting a fellow autocracy.[116]

Beyond crisis response, international collaboration is also essential for most authoritarian governments seeking to train and equip their security forces. On one hand, authoritarian-led ROs facilitate pooling of military resources to respond to security crises and jointly produce regional security benefits. Outside formal IO relationships, authoritarian regimes have fewer qualms than democratic governments about training and equipping certain autocracies' armies over the latter's human rights records.[117] China has become one of the most important providers of professional military education (PME) for African countries in terms of the number of officers trained abroad, and has a "no questions asked" attitude regarding soldiers' prior violations of human rights.[118] Through PME, China imparts its ideological party-army model, which is hostile to the liberal norm of separating the military from party politics. Though the implications of China's

[111] On Mozambique, see Dzinesa, G. A. (2023). "The Southern African Development Community's Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM): Policymaking and Effectiveness." *International Peacekeeping,* 30(2): 198-229. On the DRC, see Verweijen, J., & Vogel, C. (2023). "Why Congo's M23 Crisis Lingers On" The International Peace Institute Global Observatory (30 May).
[112] De Haas, M. (2016). "War Games of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Collective Security Treaty Organization: Drills on the Move!" *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies,* 29(3): 378-406.
[113] Libman, A., & Davidzon, I. (2023). "Military Intervention as a Spectacle? Authoritarian Regionalism and Protests in Kazakhstan." *International Affairs,* 99(3):1293–1312.
[114] *Ibid*.
[115] Vanderhill, R. (2020). "Iran and Its Neighbors: Military Assistance as Support for Authoritarianism." In Kneuer, M., & Demmelhuber, T., (eds) *Authoritarian Gravity Centers: A Cross-Regional Study of Authoritarian Promotion and Diffusion*, Routledge, p. 203-224.
[116] Allison, R. (2013). "Russia and Syria: Explaining Alignment with a Regime in Crisis." *International Affairs,* 89(4): 795-823.
[117] Of course, some geo-strategically important authoritarian regimes with poorer human right records receive considerable military support packages from western countries.
[118] Nantulya, P. (2023*a*). "Chinese Professional Military Education for Africa: Key Influence and Strategy" United States Institute of Peace Special Report No. 521.

military training footprint are not well-studied, experts fear that China's military training programs orient officers toward regime protection and instill loyalty to ruling parties.[119]

The countries most reliant on Chinese PME also purchase military equipment from China and are recipients of Belt and Road Initiative projects.[120] The African countries that rely on China for more than 90 percent of their arms transfers (including Mozambique, Namibia, the Seychelles, and Zimbabwe) as well as those that receive more than 50 percent of arms transfers from China (Burundi, Ghana, and Kenya) represent a mixture of democracies, hybrid regimes, and autocracies.[121] China remains a less significant source of military equipment in Africa compared to Russia, the continent's top arms provider. The top recipients of Russian arms are all authoritarian regimes, including Algeria, Angola, and Sudan.[122] Like China, Russia has been willing to step in when western countries cut military aid and arms supplies due to human rights abuses.[123] Russia has also lent support to some of Africa's diplomatically isolated regimes, including those in Mali and Sudan, through the brutal paramilitary Wagner Group.[124]

Interrupting Authoritarian Collaboration

Countering authoritarian collaboration of all kinds requires vigilance and coordination among democracies and the international democracy support community. While still in early stages, we can point to several successful initiatives to combat authoritarian collaboration that offer lessons for the international democracy support community. These interventions can be grouped into three categories:

- **Targeted support for capacity-building with key non-state groups**, including CSOs and journalists, pro-reform groups subjected to transnational repression, and local actors focused on community security interventions;
- **Civic education campaigns** to, for instance, raise awareness and recognition of authoritarian disinformation among the public, EMBs, and law enforcement; and
- **New regulations coupled with targeted sanctions when non-compliance persists**, such as for companies that sell surveillance technology to rights abusers or multilateral banks that divert resources to corrupt authoritarian regime officials.

[119] Nantulya, P. (2023*b*) "China's "Military Political Work" and Professional Military Education in Africa" Africa Center for Strategic Studies (30 October).
[120] Nantulya (2023*a*, n. 118).
[121] Hendrix, C. (2020). "Arms and Influence? Chinese Arms Transfers to Africa in Context" Peterson Institute for International Economics (15 July).
[122] Kondratenko, T. (2020). "Why Russia Exports Arms to Africa" *DW* (29 May).
[123] *Ibid*.
[124] De Luce, A. (2023) "US Accuses Russia's Wagner Group Mercenaries of Fueling War in Sudan" *NBC News* (26 May); Rampe, W. (2023) "What Is Russia's Wagner Group Doing in Africa?" Council on Foreign Relations (23 May); Office of the Spokesperson (2023) "Imposing Sanctions on Malian Officials in Connection with the Wagner Group" U.S. Department of State (24 July).

Interrupting Authoritarian Information-Sharing and Collaborative Repression

To disrupt authoritarian collaboration on surveillance and transnational repression, democracy and human rights defenders can step up efforts to proactively identify and support individuals and groups which are likely to be targeted based on known predictors of transnational repression. In particular, intensifying domestic repression foreshadows that regime opponents will flee an autocracy to enjoy greater freedom of expression. As dissidents flee, autocracies often respond by targeting them and other exiles with intensified transnational repression.[125] Democracies and the democracy support community can *identify* and *call attention to* early signs of intensifying domestic repression and prepare to support diaspora communities that are likely to be targeted. Support may include digital security trainings for targeted communities; in more extreme cases, different actors could support relocation.[126] At the same time, the agents involved in targeting exiles should face sanctions and prosecution, which will require providing more resources to agencies tasked with monitoring and sanctions enforcement.

The international democracy support community can also learn from instances where civil society groups adapted their practices to try to overcome increasing authoritarian collaboration and policy transfers. For example, in 2014, when illiberal MPs in Kyrgyzstan's parliament introduced legislation targeting all foreign-funded and foreign NGOs working on "political issues" in an effort to copy Russia's Foreign Agents Law, Kyrgyz NGOs and their allies quickly organized broad domestic and international opposition to the bill. By 2016, their pressure campaign convinced parliamentarians to block the proposed foreign agents law.[127] In spite of consistent opposition, Kyrgyzstan appears poised to pass a revived foreign agents law in 2024;[128] civil society will need continued support as they face drawn-out legal challenges. Generally, the international democracy support community should widely communicate the stakes of supporting civil society networks most heavily affected by transnational repression. It will be important to make sure that supportive responses and efforts to shore up civil society groups facing transnational repression, are chosen and designed in collaboration with affected groups. As Shein and Emmons (2023) note, local actors are "best situated to understand the threats and articulate their specific priorities."[129]

For IOs like Interpol that have been co-opted in service of transnational repression, civil society groups have long argued that members committed to preventing abuse must insist on – and provide resources to support – more thorough and transparent reviews of the evidence underlying red notice requests.[130] However, it is important to bear in mind that when Interpol instituted reforms in the past, autocrats adapted. Recently, after Interpol took some steps to prevent

[125] Dukalsiks, et al., (2023) find that domestic repression is associated with subsequent increases in transnational repression. See Dukalskis, A., Furstenberg, S., Hellmeier, S., & Scales, R. (2023). "The Long Arm and the Iron Fist: Authoritarian Crackdowns and Transnational Repression." *Journal of Conflict Resolution,* (online first): 1-29.
[126] Linzer & Schenkkan (2021, n. 35).
[127] Berger-Kern, Hetz, Wagner, & Wolff (2021) attribute their success to quick responses by domestic NGOs, which drafted a strategic plan to oppose the law, and to intensified backing from international partners, who supported Kyrgyz NGOs' mobilization efforts, criticized the law, and amplified "naming and shaming" of the Kyrgyz government. However, Fransen, Dupuy, Hinfelaar, & Mazumder (2021) find that in Zambia and Bangladesh, civil society groups with transnational ties have been forced to operate secretively, cease transnational activities, and in some cases, disband altogether without adequate external support. See Berger-Kern, N., Hetz, F., Wagner, R., & Wolff, J. (2021). "Defending Civic Space: Successful Resistance Against NGO Laws in Kenya and Kyrgyzstan." *Global Policy,* 12(S5): 84-94; Fransen, L., Dupuy, K., Hinfelaar, M., & Mazumder, S. M. Z. (2021). "Tempering Transnational Advocacy? The Effect of Repression and Regulatory Restriction on Transnational NGO Collaborations." *Global Policy,* 12(S5): 11-22.
[128] Putz, C. (2024) "Controversial Kyrgyz 'Foreign Representatives' Bill on Cusp of Becoming Law" *The Diplomat* (8 February).
[129] Shein, Emmons, Lemargie, & Buril (2023, n. 2).
[130] Fair Trials International. (2013). "Strengthening respect for human rights, strengthening INTERPOL" (3 November).

rampant abuse of red notices, several autocracies shifted toward abusing Interpol's Stolen and Lost Travel Document system. Authorities record passports of exiles as lost, stolen, revoked, or invalid in an attempt to have exiles deported by Interpol members without having to issue red notices.[131] This underscores that the potential misuse of IOs such as Interpol should be *consistently and vigilantly monitored* even after transforming to get ahead of threats, with more effort devoted to instituting comprehensive safeguards and transparency. The international democracy support community can also design educational interventions to increase awareness among law enforcement agencies regarding the limitations and problems associated with Interpol notices. Providing legal support to dissidents targeted with red notices is also critical to preventing wrongful arrests.

To disrupt the participation of non-state actors in transnational repression, democratic governments can take up several initiatives. First, democracies can create stricter limits for companies selling surveillance and biometric data collection technologies, as well as companies running PR campaigns for governments deploying this technology. Accountability and reporting requirements for corporations that deliberately collaborate with repressive regimes have, in general, lagged. Some human rights activists and lawyers have proposed the creation of a global court to hold corporations accountable for human rights violations, though there are few signs of progress on this idea.[132] Second, the international democracy support community can continue to support reporting, civic education, and research on collaboration between non-state actors and authoritarian regimes, bringing the information needed to mobilize policymakers into the public domain.

Interrupting Collective Legitimation and Mock Compliance

Authoritarian collaboration to legitimate illiberal norms is less likely to succeed when democracy champions – supported by the international democracy support community – can *provide compelling counter-narratives* and *debunk disinformation*. One way to strengthen such messages is through media trainings for journalists, CSOs, and autonomous bodies such as EMBs. International democracy support organizations should support local journalists and media to produce and disseminate information campaigns that pre-empt if not challenge authoritarian regimes' mis- and disinformation more effectively. Well-meaning EMBs can and are increasingly engaging in crisis communication planning to anticipate threats, identify effective counter messages, and build multi-stakeholder networks to disseminate and amplify counter narratives. This planning is critical to secure the buy-in, networks, and, ultimately, the trust necessary for such counter messages to be effective. Anticipating threats also helps EMBs proactively reinforce key messages to build resilience in advance of damaging disinformation narratives.

Addressing mock compliance also requires broader public information campaigns. As of the time of writing, democratic governments and most democracy support organizations have not produced coherent, public-facing messaging or educational materials regarding how to identify low-quality observer groups. As such, information is seldom available to inform voters in countries where low-quality "zombie" observer groups rubber-stamp flawed elections. Civic education campaigns that give people the tools to differentiate between election monitoring groups can be beneficial where authoritarian regimes collaborate to produce disinformation around elections through deployment of low-

[131] See Bradley, J. (2024). "Strongmen Find New Ways to Abuse Interpol, Despite Years of Fixes." *The New York Times* (20 February).
[132] Gallegos, L., & Uribe, D. (2016). "The Next Step against Corporate Impunity: A World Court on Business and Human Rights?" *Harvard International Law Journal,* 57(Online Symposium): 7-10.

quality election monitors. There are a few notable interventions in the realm of election monitoring that offer lessons for practitioners. As previously mentioned, the European Platform for Democratic Elections (EPDE) database of politically biased election observers demonstrates one way to raise awareness of co-opted observer missions and the threats they pose to democracy.[133] With databases like this, democracy support groups can name and shame individuals or groups involved in subverting democracy, raising the costs to these groups of rubber-stamping authoritarian elections. The EPDE database only includes individuals, but it would be helpful to create a similar list of organizations that deploy at the bidding of authoritarian sponsors.[134]

Democratic countries can also sanction the "worst of the worst" among politically biased observer groups. Without sanctions that send a clear signal, voters may perceive observers from "local" or geographically close ROs as less biased than observers from outside the region, regardless of methodology, and positive reports from these observers may be able to persuade voters that autocrats' stolen victories are legitimate.[135] When individuals affiliated with the Russian government set up the deceptive faux-election monitoring organization Association for Free Research and International Cooperation (AFRIC) in Southern Africa, the U.S. sanctioned and discredited the individuals involved, leading to AFRIC's dissolution.[136] Similar steps could be taken to crack down on other low-quality monitoring groups and meddlers that attempt to legitimate disinformation. Regional election monitoring organizations that have authoritarian members they are unable to expel can also consider dissolving and reconstituting themselves without inviting autocrats. The Association of European Election Officials (ACEEEO) took the drastic step of dissolving after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine due to its inability to otherwise remove Russia and Belarus, two states that threatened ACEEEO's integrity.[137]

In the realm of global IOs, democracies and the democracy support community can continue to call for membership standards that prevent repressive regimes from sitting on committees dealing with the protection of human rights – particularly the UN HRC. Attempts to change these rules will undoubtedly meet stiff resistance. A more attainable goal is for democracies to coordinate on identifying and nominating appropriate personnel for open positions in the UN human rights system – such as positions on committees overseeing compliance with human rights treaties, including the Committee Against Torture or Committee on the Rights of the Child.[138] Democracies can also coordinate to support each other's bids for positions on the HRC whenever possible. Experts have noted that when democracies stop elevating nominees for various committees, it is easy for autocrats to fill the void they leave behind, taking control over IO agenda-setting.[139] Authoritarian collaboration through IOs is more likely to fail when democracies resist the promotion of illiberal personnel and proposals at every turn.

[133] EPDE (n. 85).
[134] On identifying low-quality observer groups, see Bush, Cottiero, & Prather (2023, n. 83).
[135] Bush & Prather (2018, n. 88); Bush, Cottiero, & Prather (2023, n. 83).
[136] Shekhovtsov, A. (2023). "Fake Election Observation as Russia's Tool of Election Interference: The Case of AFRIC." EPDE (10 April).
[137] ACEEEO intended to reconstitute itself, but has yet to do so at the time of writing. See Secretary General ACEEEO (2022) "ACEEEO Dissolved"; IFES (2022) "IFES Statement on Dissolution of ACEEEO Due to Russian Federation War in Ukraine" (11 March).
[138] For an overview of how democracies can defend the UN human rights system, see Inboden, R. S. (2023). "Defending the Global Human Rights System from Authoritarian Assault: How Democracies Retake the Initiative." The International Forum for Democratic Studies at the National Endowment for Democracy (July).
[139] *Ibid*.

Interrupting Diversified Authoritarian Partnerships

When they have seats on the board of multilateral lending organizations, democracies do attempt to limit funding for projects likely to fuel corruption in authoritarian regimes. For example, while the Inter-American Development Bank's (IDB) Charter requires lending decisions to be made impartially based on economic criteria, U.S. officials are required by federal law to take into account recipients' human rights situations when determining their vote. In contrast, democracies do not necessarily have a seat at the table in the regional multilateral banks discussed in previous sections.[140] Nonetheless, development agencies in democracies can revise their terms of cooperation with multilateral organizations that are dominated by authoritarian regimes, or those where safeguards against corruption have failed.

Interrupting Authoritarian Security Assistance and Interventions

Too often, democracies have responded to authoritarian regimes receiving security assistance from authoritarian great powers by engaging in a "race to the bottom."[141] Particularly when they fear losing leverage to China or Russia over geo-strategically important autocracies, democracies overlook significant rights violations. It is important for the international democracy support community to continue calling on democracies to stick to their commitments not to provide security sector assistance or weapons deals to human rights abusers. As the recent wave of coups d'état in Africa has demonstrated, democracies arm and train military units in hybrid regimes and autocracies potentially at the expense of civilian control, producing unintended consequences for international security and the future of democracy.[142] The international democracy support community can also advocate for security sector assistance targeting localized security initiatives led by civil society organizations that are best-positioned to strengthen their communities without shoring up authoritarian regimes. Practitioner messaging should underscore that improving governance in insecure communities is a better investment for national defense than entrenching corrupt national security forces. The international democracy support community should also promote norms of transparency around security sector assistance, so that there is no ambiguity regarding whether democracies are upholding their commitments to cut security assistance to rights abusers.

[140] Regional financial institutions like CABEI have some democratic members while others, like the Arab Monetary Fund, do not.
[141] Cole, E., & Trenkov-Wermuth, C. (2021). "To Consolidate Democracy, Change U.S. Security Assistance." The United States Institute of Peace (16 December).
[142] In Africa, military coups recently succeeded in Gabon (2023), Niger (2023), Burkina Faso (2022), Chad (2021), Guinea (2021), Sudan (2021), and Mali (2020, 2021). Officers involved in the majority of these coups received training from the U.S. See Turse, N. (2023) "15 US-Backed Officers had Hand in 12 West African Coups" Responsible Statecraft (23 August).

Implications for the Liberal International Order

Scholars and practitioners have been raising the alarm about authoritarianism "going global" for some time, in part due to the expansion and sophistication of formal and informal cooperation among authoritarian regimes outlined in this paper, and particularly authoritarian regimes' efforts to "hijack" multilateral organizations.[143] Even when authoritarian influence over important outcomes, including preventing democratization, is limited to their own neighborhood, practitioners in the democracy support community face heightened challenges.[144] Certainly authoritarian regimes with the capacity to project their power, and particularly Russia and China, are concerned foremost about their immediate neighborhoods. However, research reviewed herein suggests broader and more ambitious agendas to supplant certain global liberal institutions, such as the multi-stakeholder internet governance model.

One important question is whether the counter-norms and alternative orders proposed by China, Russia, and like-minded autocrats have sufficient appeal to displace long-standing status quo regimes. New statist norms that undermine human rights seem to appeal not only to long-standing authoritarian regimes, but also to governments engaged in ***democratic backsliding*** – the state-led hollowing out of democratic institutions and norms.[145] Scholars continue to debate the severity and depth of recent democratic backsliding episodes, but, if the trend toward backsliding continues, authoritarian powers may find larger constituencies backing their revisionist order. We might expect that illiberal international regimes are most likely to take root in fast-evolving issue areas, such as the regulation of AI technology, potentially through the creation or co-optation of organizations to regulate technology and internet governance that are friendlier to autocrats.

Another open question is whether authoritarian-led ROs that have proliferated in recent decades will have staying power, or whether they will become "zombies."[146] If authoritarian ROs retain buy-in from member states or even increase in prominence, they will continue to promote authoritarian legitimation, resource pooling to protect autocrats against shocks and crises, and coordination around transnational repression. However, Russia's invasion of Ukraine caused deep divides between members of some of the most widely studied authoritarian IOs in Central Asia, and it is unclear whether Russia will recover its status as being capable of offering meaningful support to fellow autocrats in the near-term.

While this paper argues that authoritarian collaboration is primarily pragmatic and non-ideological, the implications of authoritarian collaboration to reshape international order will differ depending on whether these efforts take on particular ideological bents. Scholars considering whether authoritarian regimes are generally motivated to promote particular authoritarian ideologies reached mixed conclusions,[147] but most agreed that ideology-promotion is seldom a high priority of authoritarian collaboration.[148] The recent resurgence of international collaboration among far-right conservative regimes

[143] Cooley (2015, n. 52); Diamond, L., Plattner, M. F., & Walker, C. (2016). *Authoritarianism Goes Global: The Challenge to Democracy,* John Hopkins University Press.
[144] Brownlee, J. (2017). "The Limited Reach of Authoritarian Powers," *Democratization,* 24(7): 1326-1344.
[145] Shein, Emmons, Lemargie, & Buril (2023, n. 2).
[146] Gray, J. (2018). "Life, Death, or Zombie? The Vitality of International Organizations." *International Studies Quarterly,* 62(1): 1-13.
[147] Bader, J., J. Grävingholt, & Kästner, A. (2010). "Would Autocracies Promote Autocracy? A Political Economy Perspective on Regime-Type Export in Regional Neighbourhood" *Contemporary Politics* 16(1): 81-100; Vanderhill, R. (2013). *Promoting Authoritarianism Abroad*, Lynne Rienner.
[148] Tansey, O. (2016). "The Problem with Autocracy Promotion." *Democratization,* 23(1): 141-163; Way, L. (2016). "The Authoritarian Threat: Weaknesses of Autocracy Promotion." *Journal of Democracy*, 27(1): 64-75; Weyland, K. (2017). "The Authoritarian Threat: Weaknesses of Autocracy Promotion." *Journal of Democracy,* 27(1): 64-75; Yakouchyk, K. (2019). "Beyond Autocracy Promotion: A Review." *Political Studies Review,* 17(2): 147-160.

might call into question earlier conclusions minimizing the ideological aspects of autocracy promotion. As far-right regimes lend experts to other countries to consult on constitutional and legal reform processes, as well as capacity-building, they are not agnostic about the brand of authoritarianism in partner states.

Looking Ahead

This paper is one step towards addressing these concerns. It provides an overview of the modern landscape of authoritarian international collaboration. It summarizes how authoritarian collaboration – whether bilateral or multilateral, and through formal or informal channels – benefits authoritarian regime stability. The paper identifies four broad (albeit, non-exhaustive) categories of threats against which autocrats collaborate: pro-democracy groups and domestic opponents; stigmatization and illegitimacy; aid or loan conditionalities; and security threats. In each domain, autocrats share resources to *protect* like-minded regimes and legitimate their actions. Autocrats seek to *remold* existing norms and institutions to be friendlier to illiberal regimes and *create new* authoritarian-backed institutions to represent their interests.

With this clearer understanding of authoritarian collaboration in hand, the democracy support community can formulate appropriate interventions to interrupt authoritarianism's spread. This paper offers preliminary notions of the interventions worth pursuing which could effectively disrupt authoritarian collaboration, including: targeted support for capacity-building with key non-state groups; civic education campaigns; and new regulations coupled with targeted sanctions when non-compliance persists. While some examples of successful challenges to authoritarian collaboration were highlighted herein, the threat posed by authoritarian collaboration continues to grow. Autocrats also continue adapting as the democracy support community attempts to interrupt authoritarian collaboration. The international democracy support community must keep the evolving face of authoritarian collaboration in view to design effective interventions.

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