

## **Democracy prevention: The international collaboration of authoritarian regimes**

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**Abstract.** Current scholarship increasingly argues that international factors and, more specifically, authoritarian collaboration fundamentally affect the persistence of authoritarian rule. In order to generate a better understanding of the nature and effects of these international dimensions of authoritarianism, this article provides a conceptual framework for various aspects of authoritarian collaboration to prevent democracy, particularly the relationship between authoritarian regime types and their international democracy-prevention policies. It differentiates between authoritarian diffusion, learning, collaboration and support, as well as between deliberate efforts to avert democracy and efforts not explicitly geared towards strengthening autocracy. The article further distinguishes between crisis events and normal conditions where authoritarian rulers' hold on power is not in danger. It is argued that authoritarian powers' motivations to provide support to fellow autocrats are self-serving rather than driven by an ideological commitment to creating an 'authoritarian international': authoritarian rulers first and foremost strive to maximise their own survival chances by selectively supporting acquiescent authoritarian regimes, maintaining geostrategic control and fostering their developmental goals.

**Keywords:** democracy prevention; authoritarian collaboration; cooperation; international dimensions of authoritarian rule; Russia; China; Saudi Arabia; Gulf Cooperation Council

### **Introduction**

The 'third wave' of democratisation has by no means led to the end of authoritarianism.<sup>1</sup> Instead, authoritarian regimes have demonstrated remarkable 'capacities to adapt to changing external environments even in the wake of increased pressure for democratic reform from actors at home and abroad' (Burnell & Schlumberger 2010: 9). Some authors even argue, contrary to liberal internationalist expectations, that we are currently witnessing an authoritarian 'comeback' (Diamond 2008; Puddington 2008).<sup>2</sup>

It has increasingly become clear that in addition to domestic power resources, international factors have served to prevent the further spread of democracy (Bunce & Wolchik 2011; Koesel & Bunce 2013; Levitsky & Way 2010). However, when international factors have been analysed, scholarly attention has mostly been on external pressure to democratise or on 'regime contention', the countervailing effects authoritarian powers exert on democratisation processes in neighbouring countries (exceptions being: Ambrosio 2010; Burnell & Schlumberger 2010; Vanderhill 2013). The specific circumstances under which authoritarian powers pursue a strategy of support for fellow authoritarians remain among the least explored aspects of this new research agenda. In response, this forum section deals with the motives and effects of authoritarian collaboration to avert democracy. Analysing the nature of authoritarian collaboration not only provides crucial analytical insights into

the international dimensions of authoritarianism, but also contributes to the emerging international relations (IR) and public policy discussion about the rise of ‘authoritarian great powers’ (Gat 2007) and the hypothesised formation of an ‘authoritarian international’ (Silitski 2010).

I argue that three critical distinctions must be made to achieve a better understanding of the specific forms of authoritarian collaboration. First, it is necessary to distinguish between different forms of authoritarianism. Increasingly, comparative politics and IR scholars acknowledge that the nature of ruling coalitions and, in turn, the survival strategies of authoritarian regimes fundamentally affect their international posture (Colgan & Weeks 2015; Escribà-Folch & Wright 2015; Mattes & Rodríguez 2014; Weeks 2014). Second, authoritarian regimes enter into different forms of collaboration when they feel they are facing an existential crisis. Hence, this analysis takes the decision-making context of authoritarian regimes into account and systematically differentiates between normal times and existential regime crisis. Third, I differentiate deliberate support to prevent democracy from general collaboration between authoritarian regimes not specifically intended to strengthen authoritarian rule.

These conceptual considerations provide the conceptual framework for four empirical articles in this forum section. The analyses cluster around the influence of three of the most prominent and powerful authoritarian regimes (China, Russia and Saudi Arabia) engaged in international collaboration to prevent democracy.<sup>3</sup> Bader (2015) focuses on how general economic cooperation from China affects authoritarian persistence under normal conditions at the global level, whereas the other three articles on Russia (Tolstrup 2015a; Way 2015) and the Gulf Cooperation Council (Odinius & Kuntz 2015) provide accounts of ‘regional crisis’.

The article tackles two general questions: Why and to what extent have powerful authoritarian regimes (China, Russia, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf monarchies) sought collaboration with other authoritarian regimes to prevent democracy? And what are the effects of authoritarian collaboration on the persistence of authoritarian regimes?

I argue that authoritarian collaboration – at least in the cases analysed – does not amount to more than a self-serving project. The provision of support to fellow autocrats is mainly driven by the goal of maximising the survival chances of one’s own regime by preventing negative spillovers from democratisation, as well as by fostering geostrategic and developmental interests (see similar in Risse & Babayan 2015; Vanderhill 2013). Authoritarian governments do not aim to promote authoritarianism *per se* as a mirror image to democracy promotion. Collaboration, particularly in crisis conditions, is more opportunistic than strategic.

The main unit of analysis of the articles included in this forum section is the (authoritarian) regime and how it relates to others. Broadly speaking, a regime ‘determines who has access to political power, and how those who are in power deal with those who are not’ (Fishman 1990: 428). This approach to dealing with the international dimensions of authoritarian rule is influenced by the ‘second image’ perspective, which posits an inherent link between domestic politics and its effects on the international system (Gourevitch 1978; Waltz 1959). Authoritarian regimes’ collaboration is therefore treated as a two-level game (Putnam 1988), characterised by the balancing of domestic and international factors. The analyses focus on bilateral engagements between authoritarian regimes as the level of

analysis – not on the international system (Singer 1961) or relationships at the global level (e.g., Strüver 2014).

For the sake of coherence, this analysis cannot cover all the international aspects of democracy prevention. In particular, it does not include the (deliberate and more inadvertent) democracy prevention of democratic powers such as the United States and the European Union – despite its considerable importance (Ambrosio 2014; Bermeo 2009; Brownlee 2012; Youngs 2010). Nor does it assess the unintended rally-round-the-flag effects, including strengthened governmental legitimacy, of Western pressure on authoritarian regimes (Galtung 1967; Grauvogel & von Soest 2014).

This article first briefly summarises the extant research on the international dimensions of authoritarianism. It then analyses the nature of authoritarian collaboration to prevent democracy, making specific reference to the four empirical analyses in this forum section. A further section presents initial findings on the effects of authoritarian collaboration on authoritarian persistence. The article concludes by outlining avenues for further research in the nascent subfield examining the international dimensions of authoritarian rule.

### **Existing research on the international dimensions of authoritarianism**

Following the observation that the much-vaunted ‘third wave’ of democratisation has not washed away numerous authoritarian regimes, scholars and practitioners have debated the ‘durability’ (Brownlee 2007) of authoritarianism. This research agenda has led to a wealth of analyses that focus on the inner workings of authoritarian regimes (for recent overviews, see Köllner & Kailitz 2013; Pepinsky 2014). The factors found to be important include the unity of authoritarian ruling coalitions (Boix & Svobik 2013; Svobik 2008), the provision of political concessions (Gandhi & Przeworski 2006, 2007), elections (Gandhi & Lust-Okar 2009; Howard & Roessler 2006; Schedler 2006), the strength of ruling parties (Geddes 2003; Smith 2005; Brownlee 2007; Magaloni 2008) and repression (Wintrobe 1998; Acemoglu & Robinson 2006). Increasingly, scholars have also rediscovered the importance of legitimisation strategies (Gerschewski 2013; Grauvogel & von Soest 2014; Kailitz 2013). Most fundamentally, institutional characteristics seem to account for authoritarian regimes’ varying persistence. For example, Geddes (1999) has concluded that party-based regimes are the most durable, whereas military dictatorships are the least durable (most currently, Geddes et al. 2014).

In addition to these internal characteristics, the revived research on authoritarian regimes has increasingly recognised the international dimensions of authoritarianism (Ambrosio 2010; Brownlee 2007; Bunce & Wolchik 2011; Burnell 2010; Levitsky & Way 2002, 2010). In this respect, the literature on authoritarian regimes resembles the democratisation literature, which traditionally focused on domestic regime dynamics and has only over the last decade acknowledged the relevance of international factors such as diffusion, democracy promotion, electoral monitoring and explicit sanction pressure to democratise (Pridham 1991; Whitehead 2002).

Yet researchers who have analysed the international dimensions of authoritarianism have mostly focused on external pressure to democratize, on the one hand, and on the effects authoritarian powers have on democratisation processes in neighbouring countries

(‘regime contention’), on the other (Weyland 2010). Scholars have only recently investigated how the collaboration between authoritarian regimes contributes to authoritarian *persistence* (Bader et al. 2010; Dobson 2013; Vanderhill 2013; Vanderhill & Aleprete 2013). However, this nascent field of study, often dubbed ‘autocracy promotion’ (Burnell 2010), is still fraught with conceptual imperfections (see also Tansey 2015; Tolstrup 2015b) and has only provided tentative initial conclusions.

Applying mechanisms identified in the democratisation and diffusion literature, concepts such as ‘authoritarian learning’ (Heydemann & Leenders 2011) have been used to account for the international influences on the political elite’s perceptions in authoritarian regimes. A different starting point has come from foreign policy analysis and IR literature that focuses on the reaffirmation of ‘authoritarian great powers’ (Gat 2007) such as China and Russia, and authoritarian regional powers particularly from the Middle East and Asia, and how they support authoritarian rule in other countries (Burnell & Schlumberger 2010; Kagan 2008; Risse & Babayan 2015).

However, largely missing are systematic analyses that differentiate *deliberate* forms of authoritarian collaboration to fend off democratisation pressures from *general* authoritarian collaboration, diffusion (Brinks & Coppedge 2006), contagion (Whitehead 2002) or linkage (Levitsky & Way 2010) not aimed at promoting a specific regime type and examine their effects on democracy prevention (an exception being Jackson 2010). Scholars have often neglected the specific decision-making calculus of authoritarian regimes that provide (or refrain from providing) support to their authoritarian fellows (exceptions being Brownlee 2012; Vanderhill 2013). Additionally, the specific decision-making context deserves more systematic scholarly attention as powerful authoritarian regimes should be particularly concerned about crisis events (e.g., the Arab Spring, the collapse of communism) that might have negative spillover effects for their own hold on power. They will therefore feel more pressure to intervene abroad under these circumstances than under normal conditions. The forum section sets out to contribute to filling these gaps and to learn more about the nature of authoritarian collaboration.

### **The motives behind authoritarian collaboration to prevent democracy**

Authoritarian governments’ primary concern is to stay in power.<sup>4</sup> The most fundamental interest of authoritarian regimes should therefore be to counter any threats to their rule in order to secure their survival in office. Hence, authoritarian rulers screen all aspects of foreign policy first and foremost for their domestic political repercussions (Odinius & Kuntz 2015). I expect that the nature of authoritarian regimes – their limited competition and participation as well as their structurally higher degree of coercion – and differences among them affect their specific forms of collaboration or lack thereof (Mattes & Rodríguez 2014; Whitehead 2014).

#### *Institutional characteristics*

Authoritarian regimes do not share a common identity. As Geddes (1999) contends, authoritarian regimes differ more among each other than do democracies. Consequently, variations in the collaboration patterns of authoritarian regimes are to be expected.

Most important for this forum section is the fundamental differentiation between closed authoritarian regimes, on the one hand, and electoral or the related but more restricted notion of competitive authoritarian regimes, on the other (Levitsky & Way 2002; Schedler 2006). While full authoritarian regimes 'are characterized by the absence of competition . . . competitive authoritarianism is marked by competition that is real but unfair' (Levitsky & Way 2010: 12; for electoral authoritarian regimes, see Schedler 2006: 3). Having adapted to the new realities of the post-Cold War era, numerous authoritarian regimes have undergone 'upgrading' (Heydemann 2007; Hinnebusch 2012) and regularly conduct elections, even if not in a free and fair manner (Morse 2011; Schedler 2006).<sup>5</sup>

Elections function as a double-edged sword: they may legitimise and thereby stabilise authoritarian rule, or they may weaken it. While prior research saw repeated elections, irrespective of their quality, as a mode of transition (Lindberg 2009), it has become clear that even regular elections do not necessarily lead to democratisation (Bogaards 2013). On the one hand, elections may signal the regime's invincibility and deter elite insiders from defection (Simpser 2013); on the other, authoritarian elections might serve as a focal point for the opposition, popular protest and external democracy promoters to impose pressure (Soest & Wahman 2015). It is thus no wonder that elections are a prime target of 'black knight' support from, for instance, Russia, in order to avert democracy in its 'near abroad' (Tolstrup 2015a).

Further differentiations such as the typology by Geddes (1999; Geddes et al. 2014) that distinguishes between personalist, military, party-based and monarchic regimes are also of fundamental relevance as such characteristics might affect regimes' readiness to enter into authoritarian collaboration and the nature of this collaboration. Regime typologies like that by Geddes et al. differentiate between access to power and survival strategies (see also Haber 2008; Svoboda 2012). Increasingly, it is acknowledged that regime type fundamentally affects authoritarian governments' international posture (Colgan & Weeks 2015; Escribà-Folch & Wright 2015; Weeks 2014; Weiss 2013). The analyses in this forum section deal, following Geddes et al.'s typology, with personalist regimes (Russia: Tolstrup; Way), party-based regimes (China: Bader) and monarchies (Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC): Odinius and Kuntz).

### *Perceived similarity*

Related to institutional characteristics, questions of perceived similarity influence how an authoritarian regime responds to dramatic events such as the Arab Spring or the collapse of communism and whether or not support is extended to authoritarian governments under stress. In addition to authoritarian regime type, notions of similarity are influenced by geographical proximity, shared history and social structure (Weyland 2009). The breakdown of authoritarian regimes therefore generates the potential for spillover effects in similarly structured authoritarian counterparts. It was the monarchies of the GCC that sent troops and provided other types of material support to monarchies under stress during the Arab Spring. Conversely, GCC members supported the authoritarian opposition in the Arab republics. As Odinius and Kuntz (2015: 10) find: 'GCC membership as a whole seems to have drawn a major dividing line between monarchies and republics, focusing on the basic

power structures and policies associated with them.’ The monarchs perceived the potential fall of monarchies to be dangerous to their own rule, whereas they saw regime change in the republics as acceptable or even desirable.

### **The international dimensions of authoritarianism: Introducing the key mechanisms**

The international collaboration of authoritarian regimes remains an undertheorised field of study. Testimony to this incoherence is the fact that scholars use widely different concepts to analyse authoritarian regimes’ international relationships with each other. In the following, I briefly define the main concepts used in this forum section and contrast them with others used in the literature (for a similar differentiation, see Erdmann et al. 2013).

Most fundamentally, the analyses here focus on bilateral engagements between authoritarian regimes, and not on indirect influences such as diffusion, which I understand as ‘the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time’ (Rogers 1983: 5). Diffusion is an unintentional process that occurs without ‘any collaboration, imposition or otherwise programmed effort on the part of any of the actors’ (Elkins 2005: 6; for a broader understanding, see Solingen 2012). In contrast, with Levy (1994: 296), I understand ‘learning’ as ‘change of beliefs, skills or procedures based on the observation and interpretation of experience’. This learning takes place both on the side of opposition movements (Bunce & Wolchik 2011) and, as is increasingly recognised in the literature, among authoritarian governments (on ‘authoritarian learning’, see Heydemann & Leenders 2011; compare also the notion of ‘adaptive capacity’ in Heydemann 2007; Schlumberger 2007; Smit & Wandel 2006). It is thus the purposeful or unintended orientation based on the example set by others.

The contributions to this forum section focus on ‘authoritarian collaboration’. I use this term rather than the more formal ‘cooperation’, which, according to Keohane (2005: 51), ‘occurs when actors adjust their behavior to the actual or anticipated preferences of others, through a process of policy coordination’. Following Whitehead (2014: 23), authoritarian regimes differ from their democratic counterparts ‘in terms of their mutual suspicions and divergences, and their inherent difficulties in working together as voluntary and mutually trusting partners’. Given this widespread expectation that authoritarian rulers are less inclined to enter into legally binding forms of cooperation in which they would forego national sovereignty, and that they are less prepared to create symmetrical forms of policy coordination (Mattes & Rodríguez 2014), I deem the less demanding term ‘collaboration’ the better label to describe and analyse these relationships. Finally, as can be seen in Figure 1, ‘support’ is the one-directional expression of collaboration, provided by one actor (or many actors) to another actor (or many actors). Learning, collaboration and support can all be general processes or specific policies intended to avert democracy in other countries.

### **Authoritarian collaboration: A self-serving project**

When do authoritarian powers render deliberate and general support to other authoritarian regimes? Are authoritarian rulers merely interested in fending off democratisation

|                      | Direction of influence (perspective of recipient regime) |
|----------------------|--|
| <b>Unintentional</b> | ↓↓↓↓↓ Diffusion  |
| <b>Intentional</b>   | ← Learning   |
|                      | ↔ Collaboration  |
|                      | → Support  |

Figure 1. Different mechanisms of influence.

pressures, or do they pursue a project of actively promoting authoritarianism (Vanderhill 2013)? Most scholars would probably concur with Ambrosio (2010: 376), who speaks of ‘a more indirect approach’:

[R]ather than aggressively spreading a particular form of government (for example, fascism or communism), countries such as Russia and China are more interested in creating global conditions under which democracy promotion is blunted and state sovereignty (understood as the ability of leaders to determine the form of government for their country) is further entrenched.

However, there still exist a significant number of communist (Dimitrov 2013), revolutionary (Levitsky & Way 2013) and religiously driven regimes, such as Iran and Saudi Arabia, that should be especially prone to exporting their model of authoritarianism. Hence the question remains as to whether there is an ideological commitment to create an ‘authoritarian international’ (Silitiski 2010) in order to prevent democracy.

Based on the analyses in this forum section it turns out that authoritarian collaboration involving the powers investigated is no more than a self-serving project: it helps to safeguard authoritarian powers’ developmental and geostrategic interests as well as to prevent democracy at home – that is, to maximise the chances of authoritarian regime survival. There are no fundamental normative underpinnings similar to those underlying the promotion of democracy (Tansey 2015; Whitehead 2015). This holds true for all the authoritarian powers investigated: China, Russia and, to a more limited extent, Saudi Arabia – the dominating force within the GCC. They do not support authoritarianism *per se*; rather they seek to strengthen those regimes that are particularly supportive of their own rule.

These powers represent different authoritarian regime types. China’s Communist Party-based regime does not aim to prop up dictators *per se* but rather focuses on preserving regional stability (Bader 2015). Guided by the principle of mutual noninterference, the Chinese leadership rejects the imposition of political conditionality (other than supporting its one-China policy) on its collaboration partners. With its general cooperation policy it does not pursue an authoritarian promotion project, but instead tries to foster geopolitical and material interests in order to strengthen the prospects for the survival of its own regime. Vanderhill (2013: 6) confirms that China ‘has not attempted to affect regime type’ but has instead focused on gaining access to natural and energy resources to support its economic development strategy as well as its national security (see also Nathan & Scobell 2012). This epitomises the general trend that ‘a broad range of external ties – economic,

political, security – between authoritarian states seems to reinforce the status quo and to discourage political change’ (Jackson 2010: 107). This trend supports, as a by-product, the persistence of existing authoritarian regimes and the prevention of democracy, particularly the persistence of other party-based regimes whose legitimation strategies also focus on their developmental successes.

Tolstrup (2015a) and Way (2015) have analysed how Russia, acting as a so-called ‘black knight’,<sup>6</sup> has thwarted democratisation processes in its ‘near abroad’. Yet this competitive authoritarian regime is also not pursuing an international authoritarian promotion project; rather, it is focusing on its ‘narrow’ economic and geopolitical interest (Way 2015) of maintaining control of other post-Soviet states. The Russian government’s interventions are meant to avert external threats to its own rule – be they regional diffusion processes, competing legitimation claims or regional power dynamics. Russia’s selective support for authoritarian regimes casts doubts on the ‘mirror image’ (Whitehead 2015) depiction of authoritarian support as equivalent to the West’s normative concern to promote democracy. In contrast to the case during the communist Soviet period, Russia’s promotion of authoritarian rule is not an end in itself; it is simply opportunistic (Way 2015). Even President Putin’s policy of ‘making Russia great again’ (Holmes 2010: 122) serves the logic of increasing his domestic popularity. Given his focus on Russian identity and Great Russian nationalism, the degree of ideational support for other authoritarian regimes remains limited.

The Russian government calculates the domestic benefits of its external actions and looks at potentially serious domestic repercussions of external developments. Following Tolstrup’s (2015a: 3) analysis, authoritarian regimes provide ‘election bolstering’ to particular parties when ‘they face a particularly acquiescent partner or when electoral defeat is perceived to lead to radical and undesired regime change’. Against this background, the Russian government is particularly attentive to developments in ‘near abroad’ countries, such as Belarus and Ukraine, with a shared history and similar societal structures. Revolutionary ruptures such as that in Kiev constitute a particular danger to the Russian government’s geopolitical ambitions and its own political survival. Clearly, support is only granted to authoritarian governments that support Russia’s own agenda, whereas in other cases – as was also visible in the Arab Spring – (authoritarian) opposition might be seen as more helpful to one’s own cause.

### **Decision-making context: Normal conditions versus regime crisis**

Authoritarian regimes use different measures to prevent democracy under normal conditions than in times of crisis, when they feel that their own survival is under direct threat (e.g., Arab Spring, collapse of communism). Crisis events are characterised by a shortage of reliable information and the need to react swiftly because, for instance, regional instability may ultimately threaten authoritarian rulers’ hold on power (Odinius & Kuntz 2015). It is in these instances of existential crisis that regimes find it necessary to immediately intervene and bolster authoritarian rulers abroad. As Odinius and Kuntz (2015) show for the Arab Spring, authoritarian collaboration in times of crisis is driven by perceptions of similarity, which serve as a filter for assessing threats to supporting powers’ own rule (see

also Shambaugh (2009) for China). Drawing on poliheuristic foreign policy analysis, the authors argue that if regimes perceive the situation in other countries as similar to their own, supporting the authoritarian regimes in these countries becomes the only acceptable strategy.

This explains the variation in the GCC's responses to the revolutionary processes in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Bahrain, not only as a group but also as individual GCC members. 'Their threat perception was guided by a heuristic of representativeness and strongest wherever similar institutional and societal structures were affected' (Odinius & Kuntz 2015: 13). Similarly, elections in Russia's 'near abroad' – Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine – have also had strong crisis potential and have therefore triggered *ex ante* and *ex post* 'black knight' election support from Russia (Tolstrup 2015a).

Authoritarian powers are well aware that the diffusion of revolutionary waves is often regionally bound (Brinks & Coppedge 2006; Bunce & Wolchik 2011). Authoritarian powers are therefore particularly concerned about the political developments in their backyards. It is in situations of (perceived) crisis abroad, which may have serious implications for exerting rule domestically, that authoritarian powers provide deliberate support to strengthen authoritarian regimes. In contrast, China's general economic collaboration is provided under normal conditions and does not specifically aim to foster authoritarian rulers (Bader 2015).

### **Authoritarian collaboration's uneven effects on democracy prevention**

Not only is deliberate authoritarian support rendered by autocratic powers provided selectively, its effects on the prevention of democracy vary considerably. As Way (2015: 6) concludes, it is difficult to find 'clear "smoking gun" evidence of successful Russian autocracy promotion'. Among the targets of Russian support – the competitive authoritarian regimes in Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova and Ukraine – Belarus represents the most obvious example of successful Russian autocracy promotion due to the extremely strong historical and cultural ties as well as the lack of independent statehood. Otherwise, the impact of Russian foreign policy on regime trajectories in the former Soviet Union has been contradictory at best, partly because a lot of the societies targeted are characterised by a strong anti-Russian nationalism. Russian electoral support for authoritarian incumbents has not guaranteed a favourable outcome; it has even triggered a backlash, particularly in those countries where there are strong anti-Russian sentiments (Tolstrup 2015a). Clearly, the bigger neighbour has only limited appeal, to say the least, to decision makers and citizens in countries such as Georgia, Moldova or Western Ukraine. In the long run, Russia's interventions in these cases may even have contributed – unintentionally – to democratisation processes.

In addition, weak domestic democratic prerequisites might be more relevant in preventing democracy than the external influence of the great authoritarian power Russia (Way 2015). However, there are single instances, such as Belarus or Bahrain, where authoritarian support has had a decisive impact on democracy prevention.

The effect of China's general economic collaboration – which is provided to achieve goals other than preventing democracy – on authoritarian persistence is also limited. The provision of infrastructure supports legitimacy-generating economic development but has

a significant effect on the longevity of party-based regimes only. As Bader (2015) argues, this is due to the varying survival strategies of authoritarian regimes (see also Escribà-Folch & Wright 2015). Party-based regimes are most sensitive to their performance in providing public goods to attain popular support. The effects of China's economic collaboration amount to authoritarian stabilisation by default, particularly for other party-based regimes (see also Jackson 2010; Vanderhill 2013: 8–9). More generally, the recipient's survival strategy seems to be the crucial intervening variable conditioning the effects of authoritarian support.

## **Conclusion and avenues for further research**

Overall, authoritarian collaboration involving the autocratic powers investigated is not driven by an ideological commitment to fostering an 'authoritarian international' (Silitski 2010), but by geopolitical interests in securing spheres of influence and supporting acquiescent partners, as well as – particularly in the case of China – countries' desire to gain access to energy and natural resources to strengthen their developmental model.

The main underlying motive is to protect authoritarian regimes' rule domestically – that is, to maximise regime survival. Even the GCC's support to monarchies under stress is driven less by an inherent desire to preserve royal rule abroad than by a desire to prevent a backlash in proximate regimes that are also governed by royal families and exhibit similar societal structures. In this respect, authoritarian powers pursue a self-serving project of maintaining the status quo. Therefore, any 'mirror image' linking of the nature of authoritarian support to active and normatively loaded democracy-promotion projects is inadequate (Whitehead 2015).

The analyses demonstrate authoritarian collaboration's limited and contradictory *effects* on democracy prevention. Not only is deliberate authoritarian support to prevent democracy often not successful, its impact, particularly in crisis situations, is often outweighed by weak democratic prerequisites as a crucial confounding variable. In the post-Soviet region, these weak prerequisites are under-development, ethnic polarisation and/or state collapse (Way 2015). The impact of authoritarian support therefore needs to be carefully analysed in conjunction with other factors that affect authoritarian regime persistence.

The articles in this forum section deal with closed and competitive authoritarian regimes, or, in Geddes et al.'s typology, personalist regimes (Russia), party-based systems (China) and monarchies (Saudi Arabia, GCC). Due to this large degree of intra-authoritarian heterogeneity, the general willingness to provide deliberate support to thwart democracy is low. Clearly, powerful authoritarian regimes make a distinction between supporting autocracy in general and propping up a 'friendly' authoritarian regime. A government might well be happy to see another autocrat tumble if another, preferred autocrat takes his or her place. The GCC's lack of support for republican governments in the Arab Spring is a prime example of this selective positioning. On the other hand, autocrats on good terms with and with close links to an authoritarian power can expect support, particularly in crisis situations that might pose a threat to the domestic authority of rulers in China, Russia or Saudi Arabia.



Figure 2. Authoritarian regimes' level of international engagement.

The scholarly and public policy interest in the international dimensions of authoritarian rule will remain strong in the years to come. The analyses in this forum section (Bader 2015; Odinius & Kuntz 2015; Tolstrup 2015a; Way 2015) present crucial initial insights on the nature and effects of authoritarian collaboration that lay the basis for further work in the field. Systematically differentiating between general and deliberate collaboration to prevent democracy, on the one hand, and between normal conditions and the response to crisis events, on the other, appears to be a promising empirical strategy for investigating these processes. Based on the assessments in this forum section, I propose that three issues related to authoritarian collaboration particularly merit further systematic analysis in future work: further differentiation between forms of authoritarianism; the specifics of authoritarian collaboration; and recipients of authoritarian support.

#### *Further differentiation between forms of authoritarianism*

A promising empirical strategy with which to further investigate international democracy-prevention strategies would be to apply a 'family resemblance approach' (Whitehead 2014: 5) to authoritarianism. Such an approach should go beyond prevalent regime classifications, which focus on institutional characteristics. One strategy could be to unbundle multidimensional 'categorical types' (Haber 2008: 694) and focus on sub-dimensions of authoritarian rule, such as military involvement in politics (Svolik 2012). In addition, ideology (Dimitrov 2013), regime genesis (Levitsky & Way 2013) and legitimation strategies (Gerschewski 2013; Grauvogel & von Soest 2014; Kailitz 2013) may fundamentally influence perceptions of similarity and, in turn, the readiness to provide support, particularly in times of crisis. In conjunction with material and military power resources, these factors may also account for regimes' general international posture in preventing democracy, which can range from isolation to defensive positioning to 'promoting their own model' (Whitehead 2015) (see Figure 2).

#### *Specifics of authoritarian collaboration*

Further research should also uncover the characteristics of authoritarian collaboration, be they deliberate measures to avert democracy or more general in nature and whether there is a fundamental difference between authoritarian powers, such as the ones investigated here, and smaller, less powerful regimes. A key question would be whether authoritarian leaders are really less inclined to cede power to external actors than their democratic counterparts (Brown 2014; Whitehead 2014) and whether they prefer weaker forms of

collaboration over others. This would also help to further develop the concepts of authoritarian collaboration (and cooperation), support, learning and diffusion to prevent democracy.

### *Recipients of authoritarian support*

Authoritarian collaboration is often asymmetrical – that is, dominated by one of the collaborating partners – and the analyses in this forum section have focused on the providers of authoritarian support. Yet the analyses also demonstrate that the effects of authoritarian collaborations vary considerably. As weaker parties are not passive recipients but have varying degrees of ‘receptivity’ (Jackson 2010) and may mold external influences to their own advantage (Fisher & Anderson 2015; Jourde 2007), the systematic analysis of the political dynamics within targeted regimes would shed more light on the effects of authoritarian collaboration *vis-à-vis* those of other domestic and structural factors.

These research strategies will serve (a) to more clearly conceptualise authoritarian collaboration and (b) to gain additional, key insights into the motives behind authoritarian collaboration and its impact on democracy prevention.

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## **Notes**

1. In this article, I use the terms ‘authoritarian’, ‘autocratic’ and ‘nondemocratic’ interchangeably.
2. Critical on the ‘return of dictatorships’ thesis, Merkel (2010). For a current assessment, see Diamond (2015).

3. The notion of 'democracy prevention' is also used by Brownlee (2012).
4. This premise is in line with game-theoretic reasoning, which takes it as axiomatic that actors in a position of power want to retain this position (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003).
5. An issue of scholarly disagreement that cannot be settled here is 'the extent and degree of electoral violation that render a regime nondemocratic' (Morse 2011: 170).
6. For analyses using this designation, see Hufbauer et al. (2007) and Levitsky and Way (2010).

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