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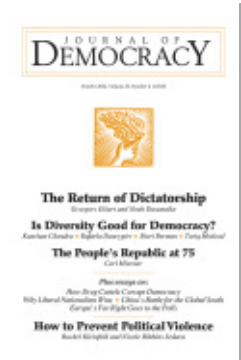
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THE RETURN OF DICTATORSHIP

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Across the world, liberal democracy is on the defensive. The quality of its institutions is eroding as respect for political freedoms and civil rights declines. Opinion surveys show failing trust in governments, representative institutions, and political parties. Long-established party systems fall apart. Mainstream parties lose ground while populist and extremist alternatives both leftist and rightist rise and gain support. Political polarization worsens and autocratic leaders subvert existing political and electoral institutions, increasingly violating the rule of law and exploiting every possible means to cling to power. Civil societies are ever more sorely split. State media are weaponized, independent media restricted. Since the current century began, this spreading syndrome of democratic “deficit” or “backsliding” has warped and weakened democracies both new and old, including many established Western ones.¹

Paralleling this dire trend has been another equally significant and potentially more pernicious one that is far less widely noted. We call this sinister development “dictatorial drift.” A country that is merely backsliding might vote its way out of the rut; dictatorial drift will carry a country to the final waypoint on the route to full autocracy. This drift is marked by the emergence of autocratic leaders who are only weakly constrained; an extreme concentration of executive power that cannot be undone via normal procedures; the absolute marginalization of legislatures and collapse of the rule of law; and the destruction, not merely the degradation, of the fundamental institutions of democracy: competitive elections, the separation of powers, and an independent judiciary, media, opposition parties, and civil society organizations. Dictatorial drift also means physical repression and the use of force against the political opposition and pro-

test movements. Opposition leaders and government critics are violently assaulted, jailed, or even assassinated. Moreover, whereas democratic backsliding seems to have recently stabilized—with several key defeats

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of authoritarian parties in national or local elections and with fewer democratic countries declining in various rankings of political freedom and the quality of democracy—dictatorial drift continues unabated.²

Dictatorial drift also makes force more prominent in international relations—witness Russia’s aggression in Ukraine, Azerbaijan’s assault on the Armenian region of Nagorno-Karabakh, the Turkish war against the Kurds, civil wars in Burma and Sudan, and the military blackmail of Taiwan and other countries around the

South China Sea by the People’s Republic of China (PRC). While democracies do not wage war against one another, countries gripped by dictatorial drift have fewer inhibitions. Threats of invasion and shows of force intimidate neighbors with a potency backed by this renewed practice of warfare. Young dictatorships reject established forms of international cooperation and do not look to negotiation, arbitration, and international tribunals to resolve conflicts. This dictatorial creep involves not only post–Cold War hybrid regimes but other “soft” authoritarian systems that used to at least try to look pluralistic and had some mechanisms for constraining authority. In short, dictatorial drift reprises old-fashioned forms of dictatorship, and brings back their familiar domestic and international repercussions as well.

The distinction between democratic backsliding and dictatorial drift is clear. In backsliding countries, electoral institutions and political competition remain viable, the opposition can challenge for power, and elections are a means of reversing course. Such was the case for Poland in 2023, when the Law and Justice party lost at the polls despite its many efforts to entrench itself, and had to leave office. For Venezuela in 2024, no such path was open: President Nicolás Maduro lost at the ballot boxes, but would not leave. As the trend toward dictatorship unfolds, elections will become wholly uncompetitive, with opposition candidates disqualified, jailed, or forced into hiding while the government reports tallies that international organizations reject.

Neither democratic backsliding nor dictatorial drift is all a matter of supply-side “push” by authoritarian political entrepreneurs. Instead, each of these threats to democracy is also a response to the “pull” of a broad political demand. Surveys from around the world show that people are not only dissatisfied with democracy, but also defend traditional and illiberal values and back authoritarian leaders.³ In response,

populist politicians have increased their appeal to illiberal constituencies, traditional conservative political actors, and religious institutions, achieving unprecedented election results in the process. Before he invaded Ukraine in February 2022, Russia's President Vladimir Putin stood at 71 percent public approval (a low figure for him), reports the Levada Center (a trusted Russian research group). At the time of this writing in September 2024, Levada finds his approval among citizens of the Russian Federation to be a staggering 87 percent. (Even if this figure is artificially bolstered by people's fear of Russia's repressive state, Putin remains broadly popular.) Authoritarian-minded leaders, once elected, enact illiberal yet often strongly supported policies. Institutional reversion that takes place this way—driven not only by illiberal officials but also by popular voting majorities—is especially difficult to counteract.⁴

Despite its demand-side commonality with democratic backsliding, dictatorial drift is distinct from it in being largely engineered from above by authoritarian leaders. These figures often come to power through unfair and manipulated elections, then strive to keep it by eliminating competition and concentrating executive authority. To these ends, illiberal forces are mobilized while sociopolitical violence is incited. Clientelism pushed in a climate of cynicism buys support or at least quiescence. Drifting rulers eliminate opposition and marginalize representative institutions, capture the state apparatus and nonmajoritarian institutions, instrumentalize the judicial system, and manipulate electoral institutions to escape constitutional and political constraints. The idea, scarcely hidden, is to destroy independent media and civil society organizations, eliminate checks and balances, and suppress independent opinions. At the same time, conservative and reactionary tendencies within civil society are encouraged to marshal demand for illiberal and authoritarian measures.⁵ The citizens of dictatorially drifting states such as China, El Salvador, and Russia may on average express support for their autocratic leaders, but if the citizens were to change their minds, this would be unlikely to tip these leaders out of power. Meanwhile, in countries that have experienced backsliding, such as India, Poland, and the United States, would-be “authoritarians” have received democratically inflicted defeats and been forced to accede to them.

Do these two global trends arise from the same causes? Moreover, are the mechanisms that drive the erosion of democracy the same as those behind dictatorial drift? They are not: While democratic backsliding is driven by a mix of demand- and supply-side factors, dictatorial drift is largely engineered from above. The mechanisms that forced restraint on authoritarian rulers after the Cold War have become exhausted, so regimes drifting toward authoritarianism are no longer credibly constrained by international norms and institutions. Most worrying of all, finally, the “linkages” and “leverages” (to borrow terms from Steven

Levitsky and Lucan Way) that Western countries once used to nudge nascent regimes in the direction of democratization are now being increasingly employed *in reverse* by the autocratic hegemons of today. Drifting dictators now link arms to support one another politically, economically, and militarily, and leverage a mirror-script version of the old Western playbook to drive further autocratization.

Authoritarian Rule Since the Cold War

The collapse of communist regimes between 1989 and 1991 gave rise not only to new democracies but to what Levitsky and Way more than two decades ago termed “competitive authoritarian” regimes.⁶ This hybrid regime type, they argue, was adapted to a post–Cold War international environment ruled by liberal values and expectations—a world in which “full-scale dictatorship” would not be tolerated. Autocracy therefore softened itself, allowing competition for political power that was “real but unfair.” Fake democratic institutions served as window dressing while autocratization went on behind them. The window dressing was meant to satisfy popular demands for democracy while also keeping the country qualified to receive social and economic benefits from abroad, benefits that would never be given to an overt autocracy.

Levitsky and Way examined 36 regimes across the globe with hybrid characteristics, including Belarus, Georgia, Russia, Serbia, and Ukraine as well as several current European Union members—Bulgaria, Croatia, Romania, and Slovakia. Today, this list of “hybrid” regimes appears incoherent: Russia and Belarus, with Serbia trailing behind, have fully devolved into autocracy; members of the EU, on the other hand, have by and large become democratic. Despite this, as well as their original doubts about whether competitive authoritarian regimes can be characterized as a stable institutional equilibrium, Levitsky and Way have since affirmed their belief that the regime type persists today.⁷

Contrary to this claim, the evidence suggests that competitive authoritarianism has in fact *not* become the predominant form of authoritarian rule. As Samuel P. Huntington predicted back in 1991, “liberalized” authoritarianism “is not a stable equilibrium; the halfway house does not stand.”⁸ Of the nearly forty regimes classed as competitive authoritarian by the start of the twenty-first century, the vast majority have either democratized or drifted toward dictatorship.⁹ The shrinking number of competitive authoritarian regimes is especially visible in Central and Eastern Europe. The success of many of these postcommunist countries in establishing working democracies can be attributed mainly to the political pressures and economic incentives embedded in the EU’s accession process and membership requirements.¹⁰ In contrast, Belarus and Russia, not EU candidates, are not competitively authoritarian but fully so. Postcommunist countries elsewhere have also gradually drifted

toward authoritarianism, and consolidated authoritarian regimes have become the norm.

These regimes are becoming plain dictatorships, unadorned by democratic façades and equipped with highly centralized states poised to detect, harass, and repress opposition. While not guilty of crimes on the scale of what Stalin, Hitler, and Mao did, these regimes are nonetheless still brutal and murderous, as savaged Ukrainians, Uyghurs shipped en masse to PRC forced-labor camps, and tortured opposition activists in Belarus can attest. Indeed, the posturings of “strongman” leaders are no longer just bad memories from the last century, but increasingly the style favored by dictators and “elected” rulers in countries from Belarus and Russia to China, Iran, and Venezuela.¹¹

This trend is transforming geopolitics in ways that signal dictatorial drift’s arrival as a global phenomenon. The common attribution of dictatorial drift to the return of strongmen is misconceived, however: The strongmen are themselves merely symptoms of deeper problems. These root causes include the 2008 financial crisis and rising inequality since, which has undermined faith in the liberal economic model; deepening social and cultural cleavages and worsened political polarization in Western democracies, which contest the notion of liberal democracy as key to “social peace”; and failed military efforts in Afghanistan and the Middle East that signal the decline of Western might.

Why choose to democratize when democracies everywhere seem to be decaying? Conversely, the ascendance of China—authoritarian yet politically stable with strong economic development—has offered new-found promise to the enemies of liberalism. Indeed, though some argue that the state is most easily captured by authoritarian leaders when it is weak, the most spectacular cases of dictatorial drift have taken place in a group of highly institutionalized and efficacious states that includes not only the PRC but also Russia and Turkey. In each, strong state capacity gives new autocrats extra reach.¹²

What Do the Data Say?

Information from a variety of sources backs our description of dictatorial drift as widespread. According to the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project, which assigns countries “democracy scores” in each year based on expert surveys, countries that were heavily autocratic by the year 2000 experienced a brief period of regime change that might be deemed a competitive authoritarian interlude—marginal democratization without full commitment to institutional change—but in recent years have drifted back to dictatorship. Moreover, gradual dictatorial drift is seen not only in the PRC, where national-level democracy has *never* existed, but also in Russia and Venezuela, where legitimately contested democracy did exist (briefly in the former and for decades in the latter).

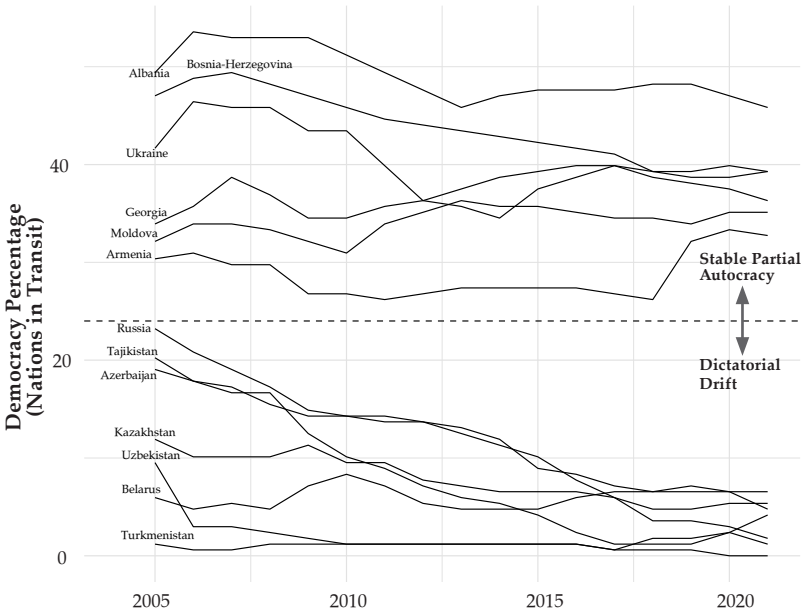
Dictatorial drift has proven especially pernicious in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Of the fifteen countries classified as competitive or fully authoritarian in 2005, eight are absolute dictatorships today. Figure 1, which draws on democracy data from Freedom House, demonstrates this bifurcation between stable partial autocracies and those experiencing dictatorial drift. A common thread among those that have stabilized as only partway autocratic—specifically Armenia, Georgia, Kosovo, and Moldova—is the geopolitical threat that each faces from Russia or (in Kosovo’s case) Serbia. This threat requires the four to seek Western support and hence gives forces of democratization more leverage.

Time-series data from V-Dem align with our broader expectations regarding dictatorial drift. Globally, and especially over the last decade, drifting dictatorial regimes have drastically consolidated executive rule, kicked the ideas of free and fair elections or legislative autonomy to the curb, and built personality cults around the ruler. Two especially striking examples are the drastic rise of personalism in El Salvador and the gradual, drifting decline of constitutional legitimacy in Nicaragua. The data reveal as well that drift occurs even in countries which are *already* strongly authoritarian, such as Syria. The gradual changes across all indices for Nicaragua, Russia, and Turkey demonstrate the creeping threat of dictatorial drift as democratic institutions are dismantled piecemeal, while the sudden shift in Burma underlines how vulnerable new and weak democracies are to authoritarian reversals.

Importantly, many regimes have drifted in ways that resemble their neighbors’ drifting patterns. Dictatorial drift can only occur as dictators support each other economically, especially when it comes to coping with sanctions. In their opposition to the West, dictatorships coordinate their disinformation campaigns and draw on one another to mobilize popular support. Their respective security agencies actively help each other. And as we have seen in Ukraine, dictatorships directly provide one another with the means of warmaking and oppression. As they drift together, dictators also learn together, gathering “best practices” for the dictatorial “brand” and probing the limits of what they can get away with in the current international order.

What Is New About New Dictatorships?

The world’s emerging dictatorships share many characteristics. They no longer trend toward convergence with the West with respect to political institutions or economic policy. They openly reject free society, liberal capitalism, and democratic ideals. They are pragmatic, cynical, and nihilistic. Their legitimation strategy is based on an aggressive nationalism manipulated by intense propaganda and justified by historical grievances. They are tightly focused on serving their specific economic, military, and political interests. They are nonideological and share a sense of

FIGURE 1—THE EVOLUTION OF HYBRID AND AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES

Source: Freedom House Nations in Transit indices, 2005–10.

Note: Scores correspond to the “democracy percentage” out of 100, where higher-scoring countries are deemed more democratic.

being victimized by the West. They also have neoimperial and irredentist ambitions. They strive to insulate themselves and their citizens from Western influence and pressures and seek to redefine the global liberal order. They actively try to silence any criticism of their policies both at home and abroad. They reject global norms and liberal values and wage hybrid, or even active, warfare against Western democracies. Legions of state-sponsored hackers penetrate military, governmental, and corporate entities in the West, stealing industrial and military technologies and individual data. Troll farms manipulate elections and provoke discontent on social media. How are such regimes able to do so now, despite having bent to democratizing pressures in earlier decades?

Although the return of dictatorships can be attributed to country-specific combinations of contextual and systemic factors, several general trends are unmistakable. First, dictatorial drift is caused by a perceived crisis of democracy, the declining hegemony of liberal values, and the exhaustion of Western tools and strategies for promoting liberal democracy and discouraging overt or covert aggression, political repression, and abuses of human rights. Levitsky and Way attribute the success of post-Cold War democratic transformations to Western “linkage and leverage.”¹³ Linkage refers to the intensity of the cross-border ties between a country and the West, while leverage refers to Western democ-

ratizing pressures including diplomatic or economic sanctions. As the West's economic position decays and perceptions grow that democracy is in crisis, Western leverage subsides and with it goes the idea that authoritarian ambitions need to be hidden.¹⁴

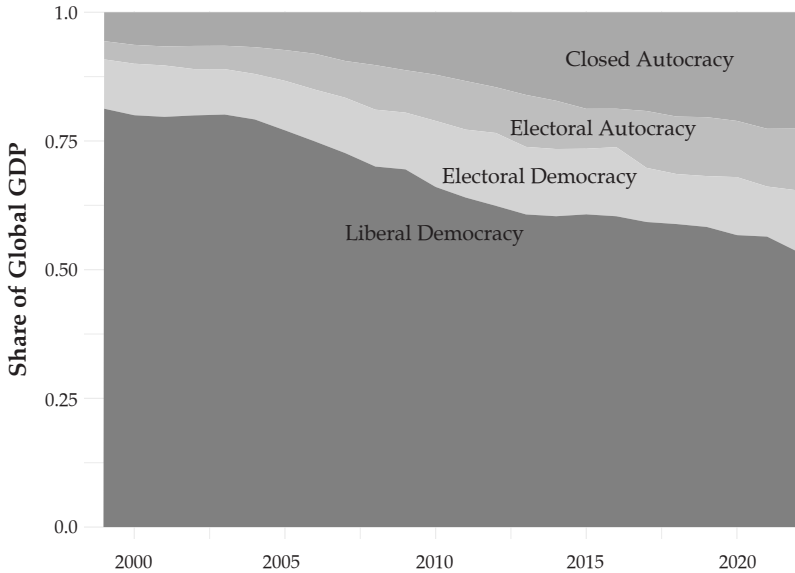
Dictatorial drift is not simply a byproduct of Western political recession, however. Today's dictatorships are more potent economically than ever before. They control critical natural resources—oil, gas, rare-earth minerals—and increasingly are the sole exporters of uranium. Rather than relying solely on imports and technology transfers (legal or otherwise), they are making technology gains through their own domestic manufacturing and innovation. In 2000, autocracies accounted for only a tenth of global GDP; today, that figure is 35 percent. This shift of economic power has made liberal democracies relatively less powerful, and rendered their economic model less attractive. The decline holds even when we control for population growth, meaning that we are not simply seeing a byproduct of inevitable “catching up.”

Authoritarian hegemons today are capable not only of enticing but of politically and economically supporting movements and countries that oppose the West. The opposite pathway that Levitsky and Way never seriously considered—not Western but rather *autocratic* “linkage” and “leverage” influencing regime type—has become real. The mechanisms posited by the academic literature on post-Cold War democratization have not changed, but their “who” and “whom” have switched places: Autocrats are now “doing unto” the democracies in a reversal of the presumed post-Cold War economic and political “normal.”

Furthering dictatorial drift across the world are closely integrated networks led by Beijing and Moscow. Membership in these networks does not necessarily preclude positive diplomatic relations with Western democracies. More broadly, ties among autocracies spur their domestic growth, help them to trade natural resources (weakening sanctions), promote cooperation among their soldiers and spies, and let them put out well-orchestrated propaganda full of scorn for democracy and an ailing West.¹⁵ Trade, security cooperation, and public relations were also means by which the United States and its allies promoted political and economic liberalism after the end of World War II.¹⁶ The same tools can be applied to different ends.

This mix of growing collaboration and economic clout is perhaps the dictators' chief asset in their confrontation with the liberal West. It is unlikely that dictatorial drift would pose the same threat to democracy without the formidable military, political, security, and economic cooperation that today's autocracies engage in. The formation of overt regional alliances led by authoritarian states—this is a goal of the PRC's Belt and Road Initiative—could provide alternatives to liberal regional institutions.¹⁷ Old historical and ideological divisions among these countries seem to have been put aside. Putin's Russia and the Islamic

FIGURE 2—THE GROWING ECONOMIC POWER OF AUTOCRATIC REGIMES



Source: World Bank GDP data.

Republic of Iran wage war together in Syria; the PRC, Iran, and North Korea equip Russia with arms to use against Ukraine; and both Beijing and Moscow prop up Maduro's rule over Venezuela. The common thread is hostility to the West.

As a result of this close autocratic cooperation, an alternative vision of political and economic order and international relations emerges. First, dictatorships promote a state capitalism that combines full political control of the economy with selectively permitted market mechanisms, as in the PRC version of a socialist market economy. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the state it runs lay down political and economic priorities, which in turn guide companies that function as state-sponsored monopolies. Their activities are neither transparent nor under the control of shareholders or independent institutions. Rules of fair competition and respect for intellectual property do not apply. Second, new dictatorships build a closed society isolated from the free flow of information through digital walls and a state-controlled “sovereign” internet. The digital “Great Firewall of China” goes farther than China now, for Beijing has shown Belarus, Cuba, and Iran (among others) how to set up their own versions of this online-censorship system. These regimes exert full control over domestic media consumption and leverage it to shape public opinion and proactively suppress discontent both at home and abroad.

Third, authoritarian rule is promoted as a “natural” system of government claimed to reflect the traditional culture and values of non-Western

parts of the world. Putin's favorite ideologues, Ivan Ilyin and Aleksandr Dugin, not only advocate fascism but claim that the Russian political system must reflect the country's autocratic and religious heritage. According to this perspective, authoritarian rule not only offers stronger law and order but also better realizes social and national interests. Finally, the existing liberal world order is replaced by a system based on the principle of spheres of influence, the limited sovereignty of neighboring countries, and the dominance of specific national and political interests. Western universalism is rejected. In the new multipolar global order, the actions of sovereign countries cannot be judged or questioned.

Beth Simmons and Zachary Elkins have theorized that democratization and the spread of liberal policies are (or were) downstream consequences of Western economic dominance.¹⁸ Today, dictatorial regimes have strongly integrated themselves into global trade and supply chains to achieve the same diffusion in reverse. Whereas conditional lending by the International Monetary Fund once made policies change in a liberal direction, economic support from Beijing and Moscow today sustains illiberal political agendas abroad. This economically driven autocratic linkage and leverage is exemplified by the case of Belarus, the recipient of billions of U.S. dollars' worth of loans from the PRC and Russia alike in recent years. In September 2020, while mass protests were going on over charges of fraud in the presidential election, the Kremlin sent US\$1.5 billion to Minsk.

During the covid-19 pandemic, Belarus refused to join an EU-funded vaccine-distribution program and preferred to have the PRC fly in several million doses of its own vaccine. Russia has used Belarus as a place to hold military drills and even launched part of its Ukraine invasion from Belarusian soil. An estimated 28 percent of Belarus's imports now come from Russia, while another 8 percent come from the PRC. Germany's share of imports, by contrast, is just 3.6 percent. Beijing boasts that the duty-free China-Belarus Industrial Park (part of the PRC's Silk Road Economic Belt) it is building just east of Minsk represents "China's largest overseas economic and trade cooperation zone in terms of planned area and the level of collaboration."¹⁹ Such encompassing support for President Alyaksandr Lukashenka has cushioned the impact of several years of rising EU sanctions and helped him keep what is now a three-decade-old grip on power.

In addition to economic and political linkages, Levitsky and Way identify social, communication, and civil society linkages with the West as having supported democratization after the Cold War.²⁰ So, too, have autocracies increasingly been bending these to their own ends. Russia's 2012 foreign-agent law, meant to suppress civil society, was taken up by Belarus and the post-Soviet autocracies of Central Asia. Recent evidence shows that migration between autocracies has outpaced that between autocracies and democracies.²¹ Belarus says that two-thirds of

its annual immigrants come from fellow members of the post-Soviet Commonwealth of Independent States (primarily Russia). Tourism back and forth among these countries plus China and Turkey is rising as well.

Another distinctive feature of new dictatorships is their unprecedented capacity for surveillance and repression. They have technical tools that twentieth-century authoritarians could barely have dreamt of. As many have noted, early and facile expectations that the web would impel liberation quickly faded as regimes turned the “sovereign internet” into a means of political control and repression. The PRC’s state-of-the-art model melds cutting-edge tracking technology with neighborhood monitoring by CCP cadres.²² Meanwhile, Russia’s Roskomnadzor and the Cyberspace Administration of China work closely together on surveillance, reportedly even more so since Putin invaded Ukraine.²³ Various sources report that the regimes in Belarus, Cuba, and Iran, among others, have also received censorship technology from Beijing.

None of this emerged overnight. Long spells of learning stand behind it as dictatorships experiment and then spread their findings across the global autocratic network.²⁴ Beijing and Moscow’s methods of controlling media and the internet, curbing civil society, banning outside funds for human-rights groups, training police, and silencing foreign and domestic critics are now avidly copied by members of a growing authoritarian club.

A World More Imperiled

Dictatorial drift and increasing cooperation among authoritarian regimes on their common goal of challenging the West’s liberal hegemony have made the world much more dangerous. Russia’s unprovoked aggression against a neighbor, with tacit backing from Beijing and military hardware from Iran and North Korea, is the most striking example of what can happen if the liberal democracies fail to keep unconstrained leaders and their dictatorial ambitions in check. Larry Diamond was prescient when he penned these words of warning in these pages in late 2021:

The dictatorships in Russia and China could destroy world peace before they destroy themselves. As they face the deep contradictions of their stultifying models, the authoritarian rulers of Russia and China will find their legitimacy waning. If they do not embrace political reform—a prospect that fills them with dread, given the fate of Gorbachev—they will have to rely increasingly on the exercise of raw power at home and abroad to preserve their rule. This is likely to propel them on a fascistic path, in which relentless repression of internal pluralism becomes inseparably bound up with ultranationalism, expansionism, and intense ideological hostility to all liberal and democratic values and rivals.²⁵

Despite a widely held assumption that the Soviet bloc’s demise closed the era of brutal authoritarian politics and left behind only gentler forms

of authoritarian rule—complete with limited competition and pluralism—we are now seeing assertive and highly repressive dictatorships make a comeback. The concept of dictatorial drift describes the ongoing transition from “soft” to “hard” authoritarianism in countries once classed as electoral autocracies.

We argue that growing leverage and linkage wielded by members of the “dictators club” has cut down on the West’s ability to restrain dictatorial excesses.

Dictatorial drift occurs via a gradual process that Mátyás Rákosi, Hungary’s infamous Stalinist dictator between 1947 and 1956, once boastfully called “salami-slicing tactics”—you destroy liberal political institutions and opposition parties, independent media outlets, and civil society organizations with one thin cut after another. The result is the destruction of alternative sources of power and of checks and balances, individual freedoms,

and civil rights. In short, dictatorial drift is driven from above by autocratic leaders who in the process of accumulating unconstrained power gradually destroy independent political and regulatory institutions and other potential checks on their authority.

We argue that growing leverage and linkage wielded by members of the “dictators club” has cut down on the West’s ability to restrain dictatorial excesses. The club, for starters, is a study group: Russia is now using proven methods of sanctions evasion that Iran and North Korea pioneered. More broadly, as we have seen, the West is watching its ideological and economic position weaken even as autocracies build global mutual-support networks and look for confrontations both overt and covert with the West that they think they can win.

In contrast to competitive authoritarianism, this combination of domestic and international factors has a much better chance of producing a stable authoritarian equilibrium that rests on three pillars: economic security, lies, and fear.²⁶ Today, economic cooperation among dictatorships gives them a cushion for surviving economic sanctions. Control of the media and of communications as well as collaboration between propaganda systems and troll farms allows an unchallenged pervasion of lies in the public space. Expanding military and internal-security cooperation breeds enough fear to forestall domestic challenges to dictatorial rule. At the same time, internationally coordinated retaliation for domestic autocratization becomes increasingly unlikely, as polarized liberal democracies in turn become less willing to pay the price of retaliatory policies and economic decoupling. Declining support for Ukraine in both the United States and Europe offers a worrying illustration of this point.

Finally, institutional path dependency and dictators’ readiness to play the long game mean that autocratization will not peter out on its own. Often enjoying strong popular support and legitimacy, able to get around

economic sanctions with the help of fellow autocrats, and free of worries about international retaliation, authoritarians will press on. Single-party regimes all too readily learn to institutionalize their power, coopt potential rivals, and close the ring of long-term survival.²⁷ And since the Cold War, dictators run pragmatic and cynical rather than wild-eyed and ideological. They know enough to stay mostly clear of grandiose projects whose failure could discredit them.

The threat to dictatorships, and to dictatorial drift, comes from two sources. First, consolidating dictatorship is no easy task: Many budding authoritarian regimes with weak institutions and state capacity linger for years short of full consolidation, during which they are vulnerable to political challenges from below.²⁸ To establish a stable authoritarian regime, rulers must actively mobilize illiberal groups, build coalitions of anti-democratic actors, and cultivate relationships with illiberal organizations abroad. They also need to provoke conflicts and polarize the electorate to keep their supporters emotionally committed and mobilized. This in turn deepens political chaos and creates a lingering sense of instability, which facilitates support for autocratic policies among elites. Moreover, dictatorships face a fundamental problem of leadership transition. Efforts to institutionalize changes in leadership introduced in the Soviet Union and communist China were ignored by modern dictators in both countries.

While economic stagnation and material deprivation tend to breed political extremism, many contemporary countries drifting in the dictatorial direction are economically stable. Thus, the increased mobilization of noneconomic cleavages and grievance politics drives regime-legitimizing mass support and garners votes for autocrats. Support is further engineered through populist economic policies, clientelism, and corrupt practices.²⁹ Finally, autocrats intimidate and repress those who refuse to be bought. Drifting dictators constantly search for enemies both foreign and domestic. Using relentless propaganda from state-run media, they manipulate the public and hide their own misdeeds and failures. As prospects for global convergence on liberal values have fallen drastically, it remains to be seen whether newly emerging dictatorships can be induced to step back from aggressions abroad and repressions at home.

The second source of threat to dictatorial regimes comes from outside. International resolve and cooperation in countering aggression, intimidation, and efforts to subvert democratic politics and the rules of the market economy can yet prove effective. Democratic states must acknowledge that dictatorial drift is not a random process affecting a select few countries but a global trend with staying power. To survive confrontation with these new dictatorships, the West needs to develop *new* strategies—not simply Cold War leftovers—with the aim of defending democracy and liberal values both at home and abroad. Robust and credible military commitments to allies must be stressed, as must

the goal of less dependence on dictator-controlled foreign resources. To counteract extreme polarization, which increasingly threatens to make democracy seem a failed experiment, politicians should use language that unifies, to the benefit of our institutions and of good governance, rather than intentionally divides, to the advantage only of themselves and of liberal democracy's enemies.

NOTES

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