

# Dossier

## **La promoción de los autoritarismos**

### **Editor**

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# Autocracy promotion: theoretical framework and comparative analysis. The cases of Cuba, Venezuela, Russia, China, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey and Iran.

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## Models of external anchorage to democracy

In the political science literature, there has been an intense debate on the patterns of the external diffusion/promotion of democracy (Fossati 1999, 2004, 2011). The classification of the processes of external “anchorage” to democracy is as follows: control by military intervention, political conditionality against authoritarian regimes, rewards to democratizing states, inertial emulation through contagion.

Control leads to a military intervention to promote democracy, like the Usa in Iraq in 2003.

Political conditionality means that foreign policy is implemented by applying negative penalties (trade sanctions, cuts to economic aid, exclusion from the enlargement process of the European Union) to authoritarian countries that strongly violate human rights and democratic procedures.

Rewards may be divided into three categories: democratic assistance (funds aimed at improving the political performance of the recipient country), diplomatic pressure (declarations or

official missions supporting domestic pro-democracy groups), and economic assistance (increased aid to democratizing states). Then, democratic assistance consists in economic aid aimed at organizing electoral monitoring or reinforcing political participation: by financing pro-human rights NGOs and an independent press. It should not be confused with aid intended to improve good governance (reforms in public administration, the judicial system, security forces, fight against corruption...), which may be compatible with an illiberal democracy or a hybrid regime. Finally, emulation is the outcome of the democratization waves (Huntington 1993), and some countries spontaneously 'follow the leader', through non-intentional processes.

These processes have been influenced by political cultures (Fossati 2017). Conservatives assume that democracy cannot be promoted from the outside, and that inertial anarchical contagion is the only instrument to diffuse it, because external manipulation has damaging effects and produces anti-Western attitudes, cultural conflicts, and terrorism. Before 1989, democratic transitions were mostly the outcomes of processes of non-intentional contagion, through three democratization waves involving Europe, Latin America, Japan and India (Huntington 1993, 1996). Liberals sponsor economic negative sanctions against authoritarian regimes, through political conditionality. The link is established between some - usually economic (foreign aid or trade preferences) - decisions of the advanced democratic government and the political performance of the recipient country (defense of human rights and democratization). Leftist constructivists prefer economic or diplomatic positive rewards to democratizing states, like foreign aid, which, before 1989, was channeled by social-democratic governments to the poorest Third World states. Political conditionality, based on negative sanctions towards developing countries, is a 'politically incorrect' coercive diplomacy. Neo-conservatives assume that only war can promote democracy, because economic sanctions are usually weak or ineffective. Leftist Manicheans do not consider democracy to be a priority and do not support any external pressure to foster it. The combination of political conditionality and democratic rewards materializes the typical 'stick and carrot' trade-off. In fact, a less ideological foreign policy mixes different strategies of democracy promotion in a flexible way.

## Autocracy promotion: a theoretical framework

The last (4<sup>th</sup>) post-1989 democratic transition wave has been frozen (Carothers 2002). Several fully or semi-authoritarian regimes have resisted, also because of the international alliances promoted by other leading authoritarian regimes: Russia (towards Belarus, Ukraine, Armenia...), Iran (towards Shiite actors), Saudi Arabia (towards Sunni actors), Turkey (towards African or Asian states), China (towards North Korea, Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam...), Cuba and Venezuela (towards Latin American governments). In the political science literature, there has been a debate on autocracy promotion (Burnell, Schlumberger 2018; Diamond, Plattner, Walker 2016; Kneuer, Demmelhuber 2016, 2020; Tansey 2016a, 2016b; Vanderhill 2013). Autocracy promotion may be defined in exclusive or inclusive terms: with reference to either direct or indirect tools. The former consist in active military, economic and diplomatic support. The latter include passive methods, such as socialization (promoting anti-democratic values), or bargaining processes, such as building a political environment favorable to the authoritarian coalition. That policy has been perceived either as a reaction to Western democracy promotion (an “objection” to the post-1989 world order), or as an independent process, that has always existed in international politics.

The success of autocracy promotion is favored by the existence of domestic illiberal forces in recipient countries: not only in the transition phase, but also in the following “implementation” phase, when authoritarian rules are imported. But these (external and domestic) actors do not necessarily share the same values. During the Cold War, autocracy promotion had been linked to ideologies; the USSR always supported other communist countries in the Third World. After 1989, the type of authoritarianism (Fossati 2018) is not relevant anymore in the cooperation among non-democratic regimes. For example, China is supporting the military regime of Myanmar. Similarly, in Latin America, the ideological dimension has survived, for instance, with Venezuela’s support of other leftist populist governments.

After 1989 autocracy promotion has been coupled with a sort of “second-best-choice”: the fostering of hybrid (limited, protect-

ed or no law) regimes (Morlino 2008, Levitsky, Way 2010). It is not possible for external authoritarian regimes to fully control the evolution of other regimes. Thus, recipient states may live different (authoritarian or hybrid) phases, within the so-called “electoral authoritarian” regimes.

It has to be considered that authoritarian regimes have also been promoted by democracies: especially before 1989. During the Cold War, the USA supported (personalistic or military) authoritarian regimes, which were considered the “lesser evil”, while communism was the “absolute evil”. Before 1989, democracy was not promoted outside the West, because communist parties could have won elections (Fossati 2017). That conservative diplomacy survived after 1989 and has been applied to some Islamic countries, like in Algeria, where a fundamentalist party won the democratic elections at the beginning of the 1990s; thus, Western governments supported a military coup. Later on, that diplomacy was weakened, for example in Iraq in 2003 or after the Arab Spring, when many “lesser evils” were abandoned by the US; also the military coup in Egypt of July 2013 was not promoted by president Obama.

The models of autocracy promotion are four, like those of democracy promotion (Fossati 2017):

**A)** Military intervention, like Vietnam’s invasion of Cambodia in the late 1970s.

**B)** Economic blackmail: by applying negative sanctions to pro-Western democratizing regimes: trade or investments’ sanctions, and cuts to economic or military aid.

**C)** Rewards: by positive sanctions to authoritarian or hybrid regimes, through diplomatic pressure, military and economic assistance.

**D)** Spontaneous emulation: an authoritarian state is a cultural, economic, political and military model for other non-democratic regimes, that autonomously decide ‘to follow the leader’.

The empirical cases (Cuba, Venezuela, Russia, Egypt, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Cina) should help to evaluate if some countries focus on one of the four models, or if they elaborate a mix among the four processes (Bader 2014; Bader et al. 2010; Bank 2017; Brownlee 2017; Burnell 2010a, 2010b; Erdmann et al.

2013; Risse, Babayan 2015; Van der Bosch 2020; Way 2016; Yakouchyuk 2018). All the cultural (relations among various nations and/or civilizations), economic, political and military dimensions of international interactions will be analyzed in the empirical section.

This typology classifies the processes of autocracy promotion. A rigid interaction is based on the support of only authoritarian regimes, while in a flexible relation there is the possibility of a “B plan”, by promoting hybrid regimes too. Then, hard power relations are anchored to direct military interventions, while soft power is based on diplomatic, economic, indirect military inducements and blackmails.

<i>Power</i>	Flexible	<i>Autocracy promotion</i>	Rigid
<b>Hard</b>	Turkey (Libya, Iraq), Russia (Nagorno-Karabakh 1990s, Transnistria, Tajikistan, Georgia, Crimea, Donbass, Ukraine)		Turkey (Syria), Saudi Arabia (Bahrein, Yemen)
<b>Soft</b>	Venezuela, Russia (Arktash 2000s), Turkey (Egypt), Iran (Lebanon), Egypt (Tunisia, Libya II), China (Myanmar, Thailand)		Cuba (Nicaragua), Russia (Belarus), Egypt (Sudan, Libya I), Turkey (Azerbaijan), Iran (Syria, Bahrein, Yemen), China (Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, North Korea)

Menegol has emphasized that Cuba supported Nicaragua in 1979 and 1980s with soft power and rigid ideological autocracy promotion: indirect military intervention in favor of a communist regime. Venezuela’s support of other populist governments was based on soft power (economic aid through oil revenues) and flexible autocracy promotion in favor of the hybrid regimes of Bolivia, Ecuador and Peru. Thus, both Cuba and Venezuela preferred ‘politically correct’ rewards to punishing blackmails.

Morelli has shown that Saudi Arabian made direct military interventions towards authoritarian regimes of Yemen and Bahrein; hard power was combined with rigid autocracy promotion. Iran gave indirect military and economic rewards to Houthis in Yemen and Shiites in Bahrein. According to Vanderhill (2020), Iran gave military assistance to Lebanese Hezbollah, that ‘controls’ Beirut’s

hybrid regime, and to authoritarian Assad in Syria. Teheran's government occupied the two boxes of soft power: with flexible (in Lebanon) or rigid (in Syria, Yemen, Bahrein) autocracy promotion.

Michelutto has emphasized that al Sisi's Egypt military regime preferred rewards, coupling soft power (economic and military aid) with rigid (towards al-Burhan in Sudan and, at first, towards the military authoritarian Haftar in Libya) and soft autocracy promotion: towards Tunisian hybrid regime of president Saied and towards Libya at the end of the war, when he negotiated with Tripoli's hybrid regime.

Canzut has shown that Turkey applied military interventions, rewards and blackmails, occupying all the boxes of autocracy promotion: flexible approach and soft power (indirect rewards to the hybrid regime of Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt); rigid approach and soft power in Azerbaijan (indirect military aid to authoritarian Azerbaijan in Arktash's war of 2020); flexible approach and hard power in Libya (military intervention in favor of al Sarraj's hybrid regime) and Iraq (repression of Kurds in Iraq's hybrid regime); rigid approach and hard power in Syria (war against Kurds, in Assad's authoritarian regime). Erdogan's strategy failed in Egypt, but was successful in Libya, Syria and Iraq. Then, the agreement with Russia led to a compromise and a conflict freezing between Armenia and Azerbaijan in Arktash.

Tonetto has shown that the main instrument of Chinese autocracy promotion has been emulation. China is an economic giant and has always applied the 'Confucian model' (of Japan and Asian tigers in the past), with a combination of an authoritarian regime and moderate market reforms. Many Asian countries emulated China: especially Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. Instead, North Korea partially objected to that model, by maintaining socialist economic institutions. Countries like Myanmar and Thailand remained in the middle, being attracted by both Confucian model and Western combination of democracy and the market. After 1945, Myanmar remained a 'heterodox' military regime, that applied socialist institutions during the Cold War; since the 1990s, Myanmar's opposition parties started to ask for a democratization process, which led to a troubled transition to a hybrid regime. On the contrary, Thailand was a pro-West hybrid regime (with moderate market institutions) before 1989, but after the Cold War the armed forces staged the 2014 coup,



especially to counter-balance rightist oligarch Shinawatra's power. During these different phases, China offered many rewards to both regimes with various instruments of economic support, that favored Myanmar's and Thailand's emulation. The armed forces played the role of the privileged ally of Beijing's government, but there were pro-democracy mobilizations in both countries. China's reaction was flexible, and there has not been a rigid autocracy promotion, and Beijing's government has also implemented cooperative relations with democratic parties. But China applied economic blackmails to both countries, in order to clarify that if their followers were going to abandon Beijing and imitate the West, negative effects would have been much higher for them. That political 'game' reinforced the armed forces. In Myanmar there was the military coup of February 2021, while in Thailand the armed forces neutralized the democratic election of March 2019, and now there is a 'protected' hybrid regime. China has maintained a 'soft power' approach: neither with direct military interventions, nor with any relevant support of non-democratic actors in the critical junctures: military coups, elections... Emulation prevailed in the processes of change, together with the combination of positive inducements and negative sanctions. China maintained a strong governance capability, and favored a flexible domestic political environment with both authoritarian and hybrid regimes, and those countries remained strongly anchored to the above-mentioned Confucian model. Instead, if China had applied a rigid autocracy promotion only in favor of the armed forces, democratic and pro-West actors would have prevailed in both Myanmar and Thailand. In sum, Chinese autocracy promotion in Thailand and Myanmar occupied the box of soft power and flexible approach; instead, in authoritarian Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and North Korea the combination was that of soft power and rigid approach.

Gabrielli has reached similar conclusions for Russia and Armenia. In Belarus there has been an efficient promotion of Lukashenko's authoritarian regime, neutralizing pro-West democratic protests in 2020/21. In Armenia, a hybrid regime had emerged after the Velvet revolution of 2018, and the pro-Russia (rightist Republican) party abandoned power, after nearly 25 years of government. But Putin maintained a high governance capability. In both countries, Russia offered many economic rewards, and in Armenia there was a direct military intervention in the first Na-

gorno Karabakh's war of the beginning of the 1990s. In Armenia, the democratic opposition started to mobilize and won the elections after the 2018 Velvet revolution. But precisely in those years, Putin negatively sanctioned pro-West Pashynian's government with two blackmails: first, he increased economic and military aid to Azerbaijan; second, Russia withdrew its military support of Armenia in the second Nagorno-Karabakh's war of autumn 2020. Pashynian's defeat in that war was coupled with Russian mediation and the peace agreement negotiated with Turkey and Azerbaijan, that conquered one third of the enclave in 2020. After that negative outcome for Pashynian, pro-West democratic forces have been neutralized, and Armenia turned to a privileged relation with Moscow's government. Thus, Russia applied a flexible autocracy promotion, by combining explicit support for either non-democratic forces like Lukashenko in Belarus and Sargysan in Armenia, or pro-West actors, like Pashynian's party. The outcome was the consolidation of a pro-Russia hybrid regime in Armenia. If Putin had maintained a rigid approach to autocracy promotion, the Republican party would have been defeated by Pashynian's opposition, and Armenia would have become allied to the West. Russia has occupied the box of hard power in the 1990s (directly intervening in the first Nagorno Karabakh's war) and that of soft power in the 2000s, but has maintained a flexible approach to autocracy promotion in Armenia, by supporting both Sargysan's authoritarian and Pashynian's hybrid regimes. In Belarus there was a combination of a rigid approach (in favor of Lukashenko) and soft power; the democratic opposition never conquered power and thus its relations with Russia remained weak. In the long term, Russian autocracy promotion has combined both inducements and blackmails, but there also were many direct military interventions. The 'hard power' outcome materialized in Transnistria (in Moldova), Tajikistan, Georgia (in Abkhazia and South Ossetia), Ukraine (in Crimea and Donbass in 2014); in all those armed conflicts, the Russian 'volunteers' promoted an 'indirect' military intervention, while after wars there were the 'direct' military peace-keeping missions of Russia (of the Confederation of Independent States). In 2022, there was the harsh 'direct' military invasion of Russia against Ukraine. In all those conflicts, Russian approach remained flexible, because Moscow's governments maintained relations with both their authoritarian allies and governments of hybrid or democratic regimes.

In sum, all the eight governments gave many (political, economic and military) rewards to their authoritarian allies. Black-mails have been especially applied by China and Russia, and to a lesser extent by Turkey and Egypt. Military interventions have been privileged by Saudi Arabia and Russia, but also by Erdogan's Turkey, even if with more selectivity. Emulation has been relevant only towards China.

The flexible approach, by promoting both authoritarian and hybrid regimes, prevailed over the rigid one in China, Russia, Turkey and Egypt. Venezuela only supported the latter. That outcome was favored by '*real-politik*'. Foreign policy has been maintained anchored to the promotion of interests, typical of the conservative diplomacy. Instead, if Russia and China had rigidly promoted only authoritarian regimes, pro-West and democratic actors would have prevailed, by weakening their interests. Then, ideology mattered more for Moscow's governments, because post-communist Russia supported post-communist Armenia and Belarus (but also pro-West parties in Armenia), and less for Beijing's executives, because post-communist China supported military regimes (as well as democratic parties) in Myanmar and Thailand. But precisely because Russia and China also applied blackmails, those pro-democracy actors had to accept a hybrid regime at last.

Turkey and Egypt started with a strong promotion of values, supporting either religious parties (Erdogan) or armed forces (al-Sisi), but then interests have intentionally been promoted by both of them. A compromise (with two cease-fires) emerged both in Libya (between Tripoli's regime and Haftar) and in Arktash (between pro-Armenia Putin and pro-Azerbaijan Erdogan). If Turkey and Egypt had only promoted values, wars between religious parties and armed forces would have continued in North Africa. An escalation has also been avoided in Caucasus (between Erdogan with Azeris and Putin with Armenians). A transitory compromise has emerged thanks to *real-politik*; all those leader intentionally decided to promote also interests and not only values. In sum, values have been 'frozen' by interests.

In Saudi Arabia and Iran, the rigid approach prevailed and authoritarian regimes were mostly supported, like by Cuba in the Cold War. Both countries strongly promoted values, as the deep cleavage between Sunnis and Shiites pushed them to support their allies. Conflicts have not been definitively resolved. There is

an exchange: Saudi Arabia won in Bahrein, and Iran is prevailing in Syria. In Yemen there is a compromise; Shiites conquered the north, and Sunnis maintained the south. In Lebanon the consensus pact between Sunnis and Shiites is surviving. A 'regional balance of powers' has emerged, but wars are continuing in both Syria and Yemen. Thus, conflict management between Sunnis and Shiites is less stable than in North Africa and Caucasus, because it does not seem to depend upon an 'intentional' choice of all those leaders, but on the inertial effect of that regional balance of powers. In sum, values are currently still prevailing over interests, otherwise violence would have ended in both Yemen and Syria.

## The sociological hypothesis on the different outcomes of autocracy promotion

How can we explain this high differentiation in the outcomes of autocracy promotion? Saudi Arabia combined a rigid diplomatic approach with hard power, and militarily intervened in Bahrein and Yemen, without worrying of the reactions of the other governments. The same is happening to Iran, even if their military interventions are indirect. That was typical of the pre-1945 period, where the major powers were used to attack other countries in an anarchical world, and ethics was not considered relevant in the decisions concerning peace and war. This attitude was typical of traditional societies, that were anchored to rigid hierarchies (men vs women, parents vs children, rural vs urban elites). Saudi Arabia and Iran are materializing a 'traditional' foreign policy, very rigid indeed and not much rational. The Sunnis vs Shiites cleavage is the only relevant conflict influencing Saudi Arabian diplomacy and direct military interventions in favor of authoritarian regimes is the typical answer to crisis management. That decision was typical of 'traditional' diplomacies, being both rigid and anchored to hard power. In Iran, indirect military support prevailed, but this happened in order to avoid a more violent spill-over in the conflict between Shiites and Sunnis. The same happened to Cuba, when Fidel Castro militarily supported Sandinistas in Nicaragua. Putin and Zelensky are also implementing a traditional foreign

policy until 2022, because war (and not diplomacy) is the only feasible strategy in their conflict over Donbass and Crimea.

Instead, post-1945 modern societies pushed governments to rational foreign policies. The example was Kissinger's *real-politik*; the Usa made several 'traffic-light' wars against the Ussr, but were always ready to negotiate and to accept a defeat, like in Vietnam. In autocracy promotion, rationality pushes governments to flexibility, like in China, that is supporting both post-communist governments (Laos and Vietnam) and hybrid regimes (Myanmar and Thailand), as a rigid and ideological autocracy promotion only in favor of post-communist allies could damage Beijing's interests and its *real-politik* strategies. China is preferring soft to hard power, because wars are rationally perceived to have negative effects on the performance of Chinese economy: see the debate on 'Confucian peace' (Goldsmith 2014). Thus, Chinese diplomacy is deeply 'modern'. Venezuela is also applying a modern approach to the promotion of populist hybrid regimes, by combining flexibility and soft power of 'petro-diplomacy'.

Russia and Turkey are flexible as well, by supporting both authoritarian and hybrid regimes, but are still choosing to start a war, on the contrary of China. That probably depends on the poorer economic performance of Russia and Turkey. Putin and Erdogan know that economic costs of wars are high, but their negative effects are not so intense, because their growth rates are lower than those of China. Thus, Russia and Turkey are influenced by both traditional and modern diplomacies. They are 'modern' because flexibility is prevailing over rigidity, but they also are 'traditional', as hard power is applied from time to time, even if not always. The same combination of tradition and modernity concerned Egypt, that has combined indirect military support to Haftar in Libya with diplomatic rewards to Saied in Tunisia.

This sociological hypothesis is the best one to explain different outcomes of autocracy promotion. Saudi Arabia, Iran and Cuba only applied traditional diplomacies: with indirect or direct military support of their allies. China and Venezuela preferred modern foreign policies with diplomacy. Russia, Turkey and Egypt combined traditional (violent) and modern (diplomatic) approaches to autocracy promotion.

Western democratic governments forgot both (pre-1945) traditional and (post-1945) modern foreign policies. Since the

2010s, Usa and European states are applying 'post-modern' diplomacies in the Middle East (Fossati 2017). Their diplomacies are far from promoting both interests (like in the bipolar system) and values, typical of the post-1989 world order project. Trump and Biden abandoned the post-1989 hard power approach that pushed them to start some 'just wars' in the Middle east (like in Iraq and Libya); in Kuwait and Afghanistan also interests mattered. After their passive reactions to the Arab Spring and their withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, Western governments applied 'politically correct' foreign policies, by promoting only pluri-national states (in both Ukraine and Middle East) and by supporting 'weak' actors (like Zelensky). Obama and Biden have not been able to solve conflicts anymore; political correctness led to empty and reluctant diplomacies of a former great power. The Usa lost any 'Grand Strategy' in foreign policy, by combining dis-interest and resignation in the Middle East, together with frustration in Ukraine (Fossati 2017, 2019).

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