Theoretical framework and comparative analysis of Cuba, Venezuela, Russia, Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iran, China

Abstract

The models of autocracy promotion are four: a) Military intervention, through a war. b) Economic blackmail: by applying negative sanctions to pro-West 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 follow the leader. A rigid autocracy promotion 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. Hard power relations are anchored to direct military interventions, while soft power is based on emulation, diplomatic, economic, indirect military inducements and blackmails. The cases under review in this issue are: China, Saudi Arabia, Russia, Cuba and Venezuela.
Keywords

Autocracy promotion, Hybrid regimes, Hard power, Soft power, Foreign policy.

Riassunto

I modelli di promozione dei regimi autoritari sono quattro: a) intervento militare, attraverso una guerra. b) ricatti economici, applicando delle punizioni a regimi filo-occidentali che si democratizzano: sanzioni sul commercio e sugli investimenti, tagli agli aiuti economici e militari. c) incentivi, attraverso premi a regimi autoritari o ibridi, attraverso la pressione diplomatica, gli aiuti economici e militari (indiretti). d) emulazione spontanea, quando un regime autoritario fa da modello culturale, economico, politico e militare per altri regimi non democratici, che decidono autonomamente di seguire il ‘leader’. Una autocracy promotion rigida sostiene solo regimi autoritari, mentre in una relazione flessibile, c’è la possibilità di un ‘piano B’, con il supporto anche di regimi ibridi. Le relazioni di hard power sono ancorate agli interventi militari diretti, mentre il soft power è basato su emulazione, ricatti e incentivi: di tipo politico, economico e militare (indiretto). La comparazione coprirà i casi di Cina, Arabia saudita, Russia, Cuba e Venezuela.

Parole chiave

Regimi autoritari, Regimi ibridi, Hard power, Soft power, Politica estera.

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, like the USA in Iraq in 2003;
political conditionality: by applying negative sanctions to authoritarian regimes: trade sanctions, cuts to economic aid, exclusion from the enlargement process of the European Union; rewards to a democratizing state: democratic assistance, diplomatic pressure, increase of economic assistance; inertial emulation through spontaneous contagion.

A. Control leads to a military intervention to promote democracy.

B. Political conditionality means that foreign policy is implemented by establishing a linkage between certain (usually economic) decisions (foreign aid, trade preferences, or entrance in the EU) and the political performance of the recipient country; it has been applied to strong violations of human rights and democratic procedures.

C. 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.

D. 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.

Finally, all four processes are influenced by the trade-off between linkages and leverages; the latter are more effective when the former are more intense (Levitsky & Way, 2006, 2010). 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 (4th) 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, 2021; 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 the promotion of authoritarian regimes has been coupled with a sort of “second-best-choice”: the fostering of hybrid (limited, protected or no law) regimes (Morlino, 2008). 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 diploma-
cy 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 should help 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. In the following chapters, these case studies of autocracy promotion will be analyzed:

- Rossella Menegol – Autocracy promotion in Latin America: the cases of Cuba and Venezuela.
- Francesco Gabrielli – Russian autocracy promotion towards Belarus and Armenia.
- Giada Canzut – Turkish autocracy promotion towards Libya and Egypt.
- Lisa Michelutto – Egyptian autocracy promotion towards Tunisia and Libya.
- Giulia Morelli – Saudi Arabian autocracy promotion towards Bahrein and Yemen.
• Connor Francesco Lough – Iranian autocracy promotion towards Lebanon and Syria.
• Priscilla Tonetto – Chinese autocracy promotion towards Myanmar and Thailand.

A typology on autocracy promotion

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 blackmalls.

**Figure 1.** Typology on autocracy promotion

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

Source: Author.

Menegol has emphasized that Cuba supported Nicaragua in 1979 and 1980s with soft power (indirect military intervention in favor of a communist regime) and rigid ideological autocracy promotion. Venezuela’s support of other populist governments
RELASP 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; thus, hard power was combined with rigid autocracy promotion. In those conflicts, Iran gave indirect military and economic rewards to Houthis in Yemen and Shiites in Bahrein. According to Lough, Iran did the same in Lebanon (towards Hezbollah, that ‘controls’ Beirut’s hybrid regime), and in Syria (where its ally, Assad, is authoritarian). 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 the military authoritarian Haftar in Libya and al-Burhan in Sudan) and soft autocracy promotion in Tunisian hybrid regime (in favor of president Saied).

Canzut has shown that Turkey applied both military interventions and rewards, occupying all the four 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 Syria (war against Kurds, in Syrian authoritarian regimes). Erdogan’s strategy failed in Egypt, but was successful in Libya, Syria and Iraq. Then, the agreement with Russia led to a compromise between Armenia and Azerbaijan in Arktash, and a conflict freezing.

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 (Fossati, 2013). 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 externalities would have 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 Nagorno 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 Sargsyan 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 Sargsyan’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.

Why did that flexible approach (promoting both authoritarian and hybrid regimes) prevail over the rigid one in China and Russia? That outcome was favored by the so-called ‘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.

The sociological hypothesis on the different outcomes of autocracy promotion

How can we explain this high differentiation in the outcomes of autocracy promotion? Let’s start from the case of Saudi Arabia, that combined a rigid diplomatic approach with hard power. Saudi Arabia militarily intervened in Bahrein and Yemen, without worrying of the reactions of the other governments. That
was typical of the pre-1945 period, where the major powers were used to attack other countries in a very anarchical world, where 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). Thus, Saudi Arabia is materializing a “traditional” foreign policy, very rigid indeed, and not much rational. The Sunnis vs Shiites cleavage seems to be the only relevant conflict influencing Saudi Arabian diplomacy and direct military interventions in favor of authoritarian regimes is the typical answer to the management of those crises. That decision was typical of a ‘traditional’ diplomacy, being both rigid and anchored to hard power.

Instead, modern societies (typical of the post-1945 phase) pushed governments to rational foreign policies. The typical example was Kissinger’s *real-politik*. Nixon’s foreign affairs minister discovered that Vietnam was not a very strategic country for the USA and thus it was more rational to abandon that war. At the same time, Kissinger decided to meet Mao, in order to divide the communist coalition of China and Soviet Union. Thus, in a modern diplomacy, rationality is the main anchor of the foreign policy decision-making process. In autocracy promotion, rationality pushes governments to flexibility, like in China. China is supporting both post-communist governments (like Laos and Vietnam) and hybrid regimes (like Myanmar and Thailand), because a rigid and ideological autocracy promotion only in favor of post-communist allies could damage Beijing’s interests and its *real-politik* diplomatic strategy. China is always preferring soft to hard power, because wars are rationally perceived to have too many negative externalities that could obstacle the high growth rates of Chinese economy: see the debate on “Confucian peace” (Goldsmith, 2014). In sum, Chinese diplomacy is deeply ‘modern’. The same has occurred in Iran, that is flexible, by privileging both authoritarian and hybrid regimes, and is preferring soft to hard power, by giving only indirect military support to their allies in Lebanon, Syria, Bahrein and Yemen. The same happened to Cuba, when Fidel Castro decided to indirectly support Sandinistas in Nicaragua. Venezuela is also applying a modern approach to autocracy promotion, by combining flexibility and soft power.
Russia and Turkey are flexible as well, by supporting both authoritarian and hybrid regimes, but are still choosing to start a war from time to time, 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 externalities 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 (but not always), like in 2022 in Ukraine. This sociological hypothesis seems to be the best one in order to explain the different outcomes of autocracy promotion. Saudi Arabia only applied traditional diplomacies; China, Iran, Venezuela and Cuba preferred modern foreign policies, while Russia and Turkey combined traditional and modern approaches to autocracy promotion.

Western democratic governments (both USA and European states) seem to have forgotten both (pre-1945) traditional and (1945-2011) modern foreign policies. Since mid-2010s they are applying ‘post-modern’ diplomacies in the Middle East (Fossati, 2017). With Trump and Biden, the USA abandoned the post-1989 hard power approach that had pushed them to start some ‘just’ wars in the Middle east (in Kuwait, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya). Their diplomacies seem to be far from promoting both interests (like in the bipolar system) and values, typical of the post-1989 world order project. After their passive reactions to the Arab Spring and their withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, Western governments combined disinterest and resignation in the Middle East. That reluctant attitude is typical of post-modern diplomacies, in which rationality (of the Cold War) and ethics (of the post-1989 world order project), typical of modernity, have both been abandoned. The only exception concerns relations within Russia, and rationality is still being applied in the 2022 conflict between the West and Putin on Ukraine. The USA and EU states rationally avoided NATO’s military intervention to defend Ukraine, to avoid a third world war, but they rejected ethics, that would have pushed them to defend Zelensky within a ‘just war’.
References


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