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Active resistance to democratic diffusion

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ABSTRACT

Recent research on the international diffusion of democracy has focused on demonstrating how diffusion can change regime outcomes. Although there is still debate within the field of democratization over how important democratic diffusion is relative to domestic factors, autocratic leaders believe that democratic diffusion can be a threat to their rule. It is clear that some countries, such as North Korea, prevent diffusion by severely restricting interactions with foreigners and forbidding access to external sources of information. The more intriguing question is how the states that have economic, diplomatic, and social linkages with democratic states prevent democratic diffusion. In other words, what methods do globally-engaged, autocratic governments use to limit exposure to and reduce receptivity to democratic diffusion?

In addition to using coercion and economic patronage, autocratic states utilize two non-material mechanisms to prevent democratic diffusion: 1) restricting exposure to democratic ideas and 2) developing alternative narratives about democracy to reduce local receptivity to democratic diffusion. Sophisticated autocratic leaders can limit receptivity to democratic diffusion if they convince citizens that those ideas are “foreign,” will cause “chaos,” or if they believe they already have their own form of democracy. I explore these methods of establishing firewalls to prevent diffusion by examining the cases of China and Kazakhstan, two countries where a high level of economic linkage coincides with a successful continuation of autocratic rule, despite the global spread of democratic norms. China has developed extensive methods to restrict access to foreign ideas about democracy while Kazakhstan has mainly focused on developing an alternative narrative about democracy. This article contributes to the literature on authoritarian persistence and democratic diffusion by investigating the internal methods autocratic leaders adopt to ensure that democratic diffusion does not threaten their rule.

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Recent research on the international diffusion of democracy has focused on demonstrating how diffusion can change regime's outcomes. Both large-N studies and qualitative case analyses have shown that democracies cluster together and that democratic ideas, norms, and principles can spread across state borders (Gleditsch and Ward, 2006; Kopstein and Reilly, 2000; Bunce and Wolchik, 2006; Brinks and Coppedge, 2006). Although there is still debate within the field of democratization over how important democratic diffusion is relative to domestic factors, autocratic leaders believe that democratic diffusion can be a threat to their rule. For example, after the Ukrainian Orange Revolution, the Russian government viewed democratic neighbours as a threat to its survival because of concerns about the diffusion of democracy to Russia (Silitski,

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2010). It is clear that some countries, such as North Korea, prevent diffusion by severely restricting interactions with foreigners and forbidding access to external sources of information. The more intriguing question is how the states that have economic, diplomatic, and social linkages with democratic states resist democratic diffusion. What methods do globally-engaged, autocratic governments use to limit exposure to and reduce receptivity to democratic diffusion?

In this article, I focus on the “firewalls,” or barriers to diffusion, used by autocratic states to prevent the diffusion of democracy and help maintain their rule (Solingen, 2012). Current literature on the durability of authoritarian regimes focuses on internal aspects, such as the coercive capacity of the regime (Way, 2010), the strength and solidity of ruling parties (Brownlee, 2007), or how regimes use elections to maintain authoritarianism (Schedler, 2006). However, autocratic regimes also fear external threats to their rule and believe that exposure to democratic ideas from abroad can be a possible trigger for uprisings against their rule. The existing literature on authoritarian responses to diffusion has primarily focused on the foreign policy of authoritarian states, especially their efforts to “bolster or reinforce” other autocratic regimes and to “subvert or undermine” neighbouring democratic regimes (Ambrosio, 2007). Therefore, what domestic strategies autocratic regimes develop to counter external threats to their rule is understudied. Solingen argues that understanding non-diffusion, or what prevents diffusion, “should be as central as what does” (2012, 633). In this article, I contribute to the literature about authoritarian persistence and democratic diffusion by investigating the internal methods autocratic leaders adopt to ensure that democratic diffusion does not threaten their rule.

When explaining authoritarian persistence, scholars primarily focus on material mechanisms, such as a high level of coercive capacity, patronage, and economic growth. Authoritarian leaders see international and domestic threats to their rule as intertwined.¹ Autocratic leaders believe that in successful cases of democracy promotion external actors worked in synergy with domestic factors to bring about democratization and their subsequent overthrow (Givan et al., 2010). Because of the interactive nature of democratic diffusion, autocratic leaders see it as connected to domestic threats to their rule. This interconnectivity leads autocratic leaders to sometimes use similar strategies to limit both international and domestic challenges to their rule. Therefore, coercion, patronage, and economic growth are all ways through which autocratic states can counter both internal and external threats to their rule.

However, the most durable authoritarian regimes use both material resources and nonmaterial resources, such as norms and ideology, to maintain elite cohesion and the support necessary for the stability and longevity of the regime (Levitsky and Way, 2012). Therefore, limiting diffusion requires a combination of material and nonmaterial efforts. I hypothesize that two nonmaterial mechanisms used by autocratic states are: 1) restricting exposure to democratic ideas and 2) developing alternative narratives about democracy to reduce local receptivity to democratic diffusion. When autocratic leaders restrict access to information, they are seeking to “insulate” their countries from democratic diffusion (Ambrosio, 2007). Diffusion is an interactive, strategic process that involves political agency (Givan et al., 2010, 3). It is not just a situation of contagion; people in the recipient state have to be receptive to diffusion for it to work (Givan et al., 2010, 2). Sophisticated autocratic leaders can limit receptivity to democratic diffusion if they convince citizens that those ideas are “foreign,” “inappropriate for their country,” will cause “chaos,” or if they believe they already have their own form of democracy. In this article, I focus on the less studied nonmaterial mechanisms autocratic states use to reduce the influence of diffusion to further develop our understanding of nondiffusion and authoritarian persistence.

I explore these methods of establishing firewalls to prevent diffusion by examining the cases of China and Kazakhstan. China and Kazakhstan are both postcommunist countries that have experienced significant economic reform and growth over the past two decades. I chose these two countries because they are cases where a high level of economic linkage coincides with a successful continuation of autocratic rule, despite the global spread of democratic norms. In addition, as China and Kazakhstan have the same “material” resources to maintain authoritarian rule—high coercive capacity, strong economic growth, and a moderate degree of elite cohesion—this enables me to focus on the ways they differ in their approach to resisting democratic diffusion and to assess the relative importance of the two mechanisms. China has developed extensive methods to restrict access to foreign ideas about democracy while Kazakhstan has focused more on developing an alternative narrative about democracy. Although Chinese leaders have utilized the rhetoric of democracy, they have invested less effort in proving the “democratic” nature of their rule than Kazakhstan.

In this article, I analyse the public comments and writings by state leaders about democracy, democratic transitions abroad, and the role of foreign influence on regime change. A leader's public comments, as opposed to private thoughts, are usually intentional and directed towards framing the narrative about their country's political situation. Although there is overlap between government strategies to prevent internal and external threats to their rule, some methods, such as restricting access to foreign media, are focused on preventing democratic diffusion. In order to assess efforts to restrict access to foreign information, I use non-governmental organizations' reports about media freedom, access to the internet, and human rights for China and Kazakhstan. I utilize public opinion surveys as a proxy for assessing receptivity to the government's efforts to develop an alternative narrative about democracy. Although not a perfect measure, public opinion surveys do provide a limited sense of the public's opinion about democracy in their country. I also examine Chinese and Kazakh responses to democratic transitions elsewhere, especially the “Arab Spring” in 2011, to help separate out strategies focused on preventing diffusion from strategies aimed only at domestic threats.

¹ For example, Aaron Friedberg (2011, 133–37) argues that Chinese leaders see the United States as a threat to their survival because they believe that United States is involved in a plot to overthrow the CCP through promoting democracy and working with dissidents in China.

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