The Myth of the Autocratic Revival: Why Liberal Democracy Will Prevail


ABSTRACT

After years of liberal triumphalism, recently fears have grown that autocracies have found new ways to prosper. In fact, the imperatives of liberal democracy are as strong as ever. The key to defanging autocracies is bringing them into the liberal order, not excluding them from it. [PUBLICATION ABSTRACT]

FULL TEXT

AFTER two decades of post-Cold War liberal triumph, U.S. foreign policy is being challenged by the return of an old antiliberal vision. According to this vision, the world is not marching toward universal liberal democracy and "the end of history." Rather, it is polarizing into different camps and entering an era of rivalry between Western liberal states and dangerous autocracies, most notably China and Russia. Unlike the autocracies that failed so spectacularly in the twentieth century, today's autocracies are said to be not only compatible with capitalist success but also representative of a rival form of capitalism. And their presence in the international system supposedly foreshadows growing competition and conflict and is dangerously undermining the prospect of global cooperation.

Several recent developments seem to support this emerging view. Democratic transitions have stalled and reversed. In China, the Communist Party dictatorship has weathered domestic challenges while presiding over decades of rapid economic growth and capitalist modernization. Rising oil prices have empowered autocratic regimes. In Russia, Vladimir Putin's government rolled back democratic gains and became increasingly autocratic. At the same time, relations between Russia and the West have deteriorated from the near amity of the early post-Cold War era, and China and the West remain divided over Taiwan, human rights, and oil access. Meanwhile, much less powerful autocratic states, such as Venezuela and Iran, are destabilizing their regions. There even appear to be signs that these autocratic states are making common cause against the liberal Western states, with nascent alliances such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. The United Nations, and particularly the Security Council, has returned to the paralysis of the Cold War. In this view, the liberal West faces a bleak future.

The new prophets of autocratic revival draw important foreign policy implications from their thesis. One of the most forceful exponents of this new view, Robert Kagan, insists that it is time for the United States and the other liberal democracies to abandon their expectations of global convergence and cooperation. Instead, they should strengthen ties among themselves, perhaps even through a formal "league of democracies," and gird themselves for increasing rivalry and conflict with the resurgent autocracies. Containment rather than engagement, military rivalry rather than arms control, balance of power rather than concert of power-these should be, according to such theorists, the guideposts for U.S. foreign policy.

Fortunately, this new conventional wisdom about autocratic revival is as much an exaggeration of a few years of headlines as was the proclamation of the end of history at the end of the Cold War. The proposition that autocracies have achieved a new lease on life and are emerging today as a viable alternative within the global capitalist system is wrong. Just as important, the policies promoted by the autocratic revivalists are unlikely to be
successful and, if anything, would be counterproductive driving autocracies away from the liberal system and thereby creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. Although today’s autocracies may be more competent and more adept at accommodating capitalism than their predecessors were, they are nonetheless fundamentally constrained by deep-seated incapacities that promise to limit their viability over the long run. Ultimately, autocracies will move toward liberalism. The success of regimes such as those in China and Russia is not a refutation of the liberal vision; the recent success of autocratic states has depended on their access to the international liberal order, and they remain dependent on its success. Furthermore, the relentless imperatives of rising global interdependence create powerful and growing incentives for states to engage in international cooperation regardless of regime type.

The resilience of autocracies calls not for abandoning or retreating from liberal internationalism but rather for refining and strengthening it. If liberal democratic states react to revived autocracies solely with policies of containment, arms competition, and exclusive bloc building, as neoconservatives advise, the result is likely to be a strengthening and encouragement of illiberal tendencies in these countries. In contrast, cooperatively tackling common global problems—such as climate change, energy security, and disease—will increase the stakes that autocratic regimes have in the liberal order. Western states must also find ways to accommodate rising states—whether autocratic or democratic—and integrate them into the governance of international institutions. Given the powerful logic that connects modernization and liberalization, autocratic regimes face strong incentives to liberalize. The more accommodating and appealing the liberal path is, the more quickly and easily the world’s current illiberal powers will choose the path of political reform.

RECALLING THE GREAT DEBATE

THE RECENT prophecies of autocratic revival mark a new stage in the debate over the prospects for liberal democratic capitalism. This debate began with the Industrial Revolution. The question then was whether there were multiple modernities or only one path to progress—and, if the latter, what that path was. Leading theorists, most notably Adam Smith, Karl Marx, and Max Weber, offered alternative claims about which socioeconomic and political systems would prove most viable given the constraints and opportunities of the Industrial Revolution. In these grand debates, the question of who was on "the right side of history" was contested and unresolved. It is often forgotten that as late as the 1940s, the authoritarian alternative was not only embodied in such states as Nazi Germany but also seriously advanced by some social theorists as the best model for industrial modernity. Indeed, when the American theorist James Burnham claimed in 1941 that "capitalism is not going to continue much longer," this was hardly an outlandish sentiment. Even with the defeat of the Axis states, the theoretical question of whether communism and socialism offered a fundamental alternative to liberal capitalism persisted through much of the Cold War.

Two decades ago, the unexpected collapse of the Soviet Union and the international communist bloc seemed to resolve this debate in favor of the liberal side once and for all. The ability of the Western states to generate wealth and power seemed to prove that liberal democracy represented the sole pathway to sustained modernization; there was but one successful model, pioneered and embodied in the West. It was this juncture that heady proclamations of the end of history seemed so plausible. The near-universal eagerness of peoples and states to join the expanding capitalist international system gave further credibility to this liberal vision.

The debate was not simply about rival socioeconomic systems within states but also about rival ways of ordering international politics. Just as the Nazis envisioned a “new order” for Europe and the Soviet Union designed an interstate economic and political order, so, too, did the liberal West. Beginning in the late 1940s, responding to the crisis of industrial capitalism of the Great Depression in the 1930s and taking advantage of U.S. geopolitical dominance in the wake of World War II, the United States spearheaded the creation of a set of international rules and institutions, most notably the Bretton Woods system, the UN, and various security partnerships. Taken together, U.S. hegemony and this liberal international order gave liberal democratic states a greater presence in world politics than they had ever experienced before; they also provided a structure that other states could engage with and join, one that could reorient those states in a liberal direction.
It is against this backdrop that the recent claims of autocratic viability are being advanced. The spectacular rates of capitalist growth in autocratic China and the reassertion of a tsarist central state in a growing Russia have reopened the great debate. These developments have led many observers to conclude that there are multiple paths to capitalist modernity and that authoritarianism is quite compatible with capitalism. The historian Azar Gat has argued in these pages (“The Return of Authoritarian Great Powers,” July/August 2007) that China and Russia mark “a return of economically successful authoritarian capitalist powers” and “may represent a viable alternative path to modernity.” This implies that there is no inevitable connection between the economic liberalization associated with capitalism and economic globalization, on the one hand, and the political liberalization associated with liberal democracy and limited-government constitutionalism, on the other. Within the two centuries of the debate over industrial modernity, the autocratic revival thesis represents a broadening from the “end of history” position but, importantly, accepts that it is capitalism, not socialism, that is the sole viable economic system. Kagan acknowledges that “in the long run, rising prosperity may well produce political liberalism,” but he holds that the long run "may be too long to have any strategic or geopolitical relevance."

The supposed autocratic revival has also triggered a reassessment of why earlier autocratic states failed. Gat, for example, contends that the earlier failure of authoritarian capitalist states was a product of contingent factors rather than some deep misfit between industrial capitalism and closed authoritarian political systems. He argues that the failure of Nazi Germany and imperial Japan-both of which were capitalist states-resulted from their insufficient territorial size and industrial bases rather than some more essential flaw. Conversely, the U. S.-British victory derived not from the advantages of liberal democratic political institutions but rather from advantages in territory, population, and economic output. In short, the selection out of these earlier authoritarian capitalist states was inappropriately attributed by the liberal narrative to intrinsic weaknesses of the model rather than to contingent circumstances.

This historical revisionism fails, however, to acknowledge the ways in which the relative war performance of the Axis and Allied powers in World War II was profoundly affected by their radically different political systems. First, the formation of grand strategy by Hitler’s Germany, Stalin’s Russia, and Tojos Japan was marked by colossal blunders in assessing adversaries and initiating military campaigns. Hitler’s attack on the Soviet Union and declaration of war against the United States not only doomed his regime but also were intimate manifestations of his particular worldview, which was given complete reign by the regime’s closed and dictatorial rule. Second, the way in which the authoritarian and totalitarian states mobilized for war was haphazard and often grossly inefficient-again reflecting unaccountable decision-making. Despite its extraordinarily ambitious grand strategic goals, Germany did not fully mobilize its industrial economy until late in the war because Hider was afraid of popular discontent; the imperial Japanese army and navy not only did not communicate or coordinate strategy but also maintained separate and incompatible industrial production systems. And finally, the alliance coordination between the United States and the United Kingdom, although marked by constant petty frictions, was vastly superior to that of the Axis states, who were allies more in name than in fact. In short, the relative performance of democratic and autocratic regimes in World War II was profoundly shaped by the features of their political systems, giving heavy advantages to the Allies.

A WEAK REVIVAL

How compatible are authoritarian political systems with privateproperty-based capitalist economies today? The autocratic revivalists claim that the combination of authoritarian political systems and capitalism in major countries such as China and Russia is not a fleeting stage of transition but a durable alternative to the Western combination of political democracy and capitalism. If this is true, then the prospects for liberal democracy are far less bright than the liberal narrative stretching from the Enlightenment to the 1990s allows. The autocratic revival thesis holds that deep political incompatibilities between states will persist alongside the ongoing spread of capitalism, dashing hopes for the transformation of international politics into a universal liberal peace. This thesis, however, has several profound weaknesses.

Proponents of the autocratic viability argument set up something of a straw man in their insistence that the
absence of political liberalization in China and Russia refutes the liberal vision. The spectacular end of the Cold War and the rush of political and economic change in its wake produced unrealistic expectations. And their inevitable disappointment has provided the opening for the larger claims of autocratic revival. On the U.S. political scene, the debate during the Clinton era about the pros and cons of Chinese ascension to the World Trade Organization (wto) was accompanied by assertions that China's opening up to international capitalism would soon bear fruits of political liberalization. These expectations for rapid political opening, however, had little basis in the theories connecting capitalist modernization with political liberalization. (The theories did not claim that the political consequences would be immediate and acknowledged that there would be uneven and lagging transitions.) Also, there are compelling explanations for the short-term persistence of autocracy in China and Russia, related to their historical experience as multiethnic states subject to fragmentation and foreign great-power encroachment. These external and historical factors slowing liberalization were long in the making, but they can be ameliorated by the engagement and accommodation of the Western powers.

Contrary to the autocratic revival thesis, there are in fact deep contradictions between authoritarian political systems and capitalist economic systems. These contradictions exist in today's capitalist autocracies, and the resolution of these contradictions is likely to lead to political liberalization. There are many ways in which capitalism connects to political democracy, but three are most important. First, rising levels of wealth and education create demands for political participation and accountability. The basic logic behind this link is that rising living standards made possible because of capitalism over time generate a socioeconomic strata—loosely, the middle class—whose interests come to challenge closed political decision-making. Second is the relationship between capitalist property systems and the rule of law. In a capitalist economic system, by definition, the means of production are held as private property and economic transactions occur through contracts. For capitalism to function, the enforcement of contracts and the adjudication of business disputes require court systems and the rule of law. The practice of independent rights in the economic sphere and the institutions they require are an intrinsic limitation on state power and, over time, create demands for wider political rights. Third, the economic development propelled by capitalism leads to a divergence of interests. Modern industrial societies are marked by an explosion of complexity and the emergence of specialized activities and occupations, thus producing a plural polity rather than a mass polity. The increasing diversity of socioeconomic interests leads to demands for competitive elections between multiple parties.

Looking at the Chinese experience through this lens suggests two important flaws in the autocratic revival case. First, the foundations for sustainable political liberalization are just now beginning to reach a critical mass in China. Despite rapid rates of growth, China remains a very poor country overall, with a very large population that has only partially tasted the fruits of capitalist modernization. A Chinese middle class is emerging, and there are already ample indicators that it has a growing interest in accountable political institutions. As capitalist modernization deepens, the complexity of interdependence rises in society, creating new stakeholders whose interests, when infringed on, stimulate demands for accountability. For example, in the ongoing tainted-milk scandal, it has become clear that the modernization of China's food production and distribution system has outstripped traditional forms of accountability, a mismatch that is now creating pressures for political regulatory reform.

Second, there is nothing in the liberal vision that specifies the exact timing of political opening as a part of the socioeconomic transformation. Capitalism creates the conditions for liberal democracy, but the trigger for actual political change is utterly unpredictable. If the experience of the emergence of liberal democracy in Western countries is any guide, the process of transformation can take decades and be interrupted by unpredictable stops and starts. In Germany, for example, capitalist modernization arrived early, but liberal democracy emerged only after the dislocations of two world wars. Even without war, the pathway to political change in China is not likely to be straightforward or quick.

The autocratic revival thesis fails because the classic indictment of illiberal government is essentially correct. The liberal argument is that deeply rooted incapacities and dysfunctions are inherent in the structure of autocratic
hierarchies. First is the problem of corruption. The abusive use of state authority for the aggrandizement of government officials is a tendency in every political system, but it is much harder to check in autocratic regimes. In earlier centuries, before the capitalist era, autocratic regimes were straightforwardly predatory, and taxation was essentially confiscatory. As a consequence, merchant wealth was chronically insecure. It is not by accident that capitalism first emerged in places such as England, Holland, and Venice, where government had come to be restrained in various ways by nascent constitutional checks. In the new hybrid of autocracy and capitalism, government officials are in continuous transactions with capitalist firms and face myriad opportunities to demand bribes for the fulfillment of their official duties. Despite periodic campaigns for the rectitude of officialdom and episodic prosecutions, curbing corruption is difficult without institutional checks on state power. Russian President Dmitry Medvedev's recent denunciations of "legal nihilism" are likely to remain impotent so long as Russia remains a single-party autocracy.

Second, autocratic capitalist regimes face deep contradictions related to inequality. In capitalist societies, inequality has been a significant force for political change. Inequality is historically endemic. Premodern autocratic states were highly stratified predatory systems in which the ruling class was essentially parasitic on the vast, politically repressed peasant base. But with the advent of capitalism, particularly industrial capitalism, class stratification and economic inequality became fundamental political challenges and the triggers long political struggles. These conflicts were only resolved by the achievement of universal-franchise democracy, the rise of political parties responsive to working-class needs and interests, and the establishment of the welfare state. The presence of acute inequality in contemporary autocratic capitalist regimes suggests that the other shoe has not dropped in their political evolution. A major source of political democratization in China is likely to be the large numbers of dispossessed peasants, marginalized migrants, and underpaid workers.

Third, autocratic hierarchies have to contend with limitations on their performance because of weak accountability and insufficient flows of information. Their top-down, closed structure chokes off information from outside sources and distorts it, due to the imperatives of political control. Closed political systems are prone to policy mistakes arising from bad information. The historical record of tyrannies, despotisms, and dictatorships bears this out. Contemporary autocratic capitalist regimes show much greater capacities than their precapitalist predecessors, but they are still intrinsically impeded by censorship and the absence of open debate on policy alternatives. The sars outbreak in China in 2003 vividly illustrated both the presence of closed decision-making and its severe consequences for public welfare and political legitimacy. Even faced with something as apolitical as the emergence of a dangerous new disease, Chinese officialdom's routine penchant for secrecy and unquestioned decision-making turned what should have been a manageable problem into an international public health crisis.

Looking at the overall situations in China and Russia, there is little evidence for the emergence of a stable equilibrium between capitalism and autocracy such that this combination could be dignified as a new model of modernity. Compared to where these countries were several decades ago, they have made remarkable progress in throwing off centuries of accumulated economic and political backwardness, and by the yardstick of world historical change, they have moved and are moving in directions consistent with the liberal modernization narrative. China and Russia are not liberal democracies, but they are much more liberal and democratic than they have ever been—and many of the crucial foundations for sustainable liberal democracy are emerging. To be sure, for Russia, the cushion of plentiful oil and gas has delayed political liberalization; high energy prices and exports help subsidize bad government. But China has no such luxury, as it faces an array of developmental restraints, most notably overpopulation, environmental decay, and energy dependence. Autocracy's deep intrinsic flaws remain an impediment to the realization of the full modern development sought by the people of these countries. The problems of corruption, inequality, and unaccountability will continue to drive political change in China, Russia, and the rest of the world's autocracies.

At the same time, Americans should always acknowledge that there will be variation in the preferred liberal democratic model and that the United States is not always the best or the fullest embodiment of liberal democracy. In particular, the tendency to equate Western liberal democracy with the Reagan-era antigovernment
ideology and the minimalist "Washington consensus" version of state regulation does injustice to the protean character of the liberal model and the often important ways in which appropriately crafted state interventions are essential for its success. The Western liberal model has flourished because of its capacity to creatively mutate in the face of new problems and challenges—and its next adaptations to problems such as the current financial meltdown may well produce a new balance between the state and the private sector. As the world becomes increasingly liberal and democratic, there are growing opportunities for even the most successful liberal states—such as the United States—to learn from their partners.

AUTOCRATS ABROAD
Not only do the autocratic revival theorists posit an alternative form of capitalism, but they also envision renewed international rivalries. According to Kagan's version of the argument, the twenty-first century will look much like the nineteenth century. There will be a combination of great-power rivalries and a growing ideological and geopolitical divide between autocracies and democracies. Rivalry among great powers, independent of regime type, will be an increasingly salient feature of world politics, according to this view. Rising powers—most notably China, India, Japan, and Russia—will aspire to improve their international positions and establish hegemony within their regions. As the power of these states grows, their definition of their national interest will expand, placing them on a collision course with one another. Because their envisioned spheres of influence overlap, these rising states will come into increasing conflict and competition. In East Asia, China's rise will come at Japan's expense; China and India will be rivals for leadership in Southeast Asia; and Russia's attempt to reestablish its imperial sphere of influence will put it on a collision course with both China and Europe.

In Kagan's view, this emerging great-power struggle will be exacerbated by several factors. All of the rising great powers have well-developed senses of grievance based on their historical experiences over the last two centuries of decline in the face of encroachment by European imperialism and by one another. China's aspirations and view of itself are heavily shaped by the historical experience of its decline from the Middle Kingdom's hegemony in East Asia to the "century of humiliation," defined by predation by the Europeans and then by Japan in the 1930s and 1940s. Russia's narrative of grievance centers on the sudden loss of its centuries-old domination of eastern Europe, Ukraine, and Central Asia with the end of the Cold War. Another factor that will exacerbate the supposed coming great-power competition is the prospect of a nineteenth-century-style scramble for raw materials and markets. Tightening global oil supplies and voraciously rising demand presage a future of cutthroat mercantilist competition among the great powers.

It is in combination with these factors that the regime divergence between autocracies and democracies will become increasingly dangerous. If all the states in the world were democracies, there would still be competition, but a world riven by a democratic-autocratic divergence promises to be even more conflictual. There are even signs of the emergence of an "autocrats international" in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, made up of China, Russia, and the poorer and weaker Central Asian dictatorships. Overall, the autocratic revivalists paint the picture of an international system marked by rising levels of conflict and competition, a picture quite unlike the "end of history" vision of growing convergence and cooperation.

This bleak outlook is based on an exaggeration of recent developments and ignores powerful countervailing factors and forces. Indeed, contrary to what the revivalists describe, the most striking features of the contemporary international landscape are the intensification of economic globalization, thickening institutions, and shared problems of interdependence. The overall structure of the international system today is quite unlike that of the nineteenth century. Compared to older orders, the contemporary liberal-centered international order provides a set of constraints and opportunities—of pushes and pulls—that reduce the likelihood of severe conflict while creating strong imperatives for cooperative problem solving.

Those invoking the nineteenth century as a model for the twenty-first also fail to acknowledge the extent to which war as a path to conflict resolution and great-power expansion has become largely obsolete. Most important, nuclear weapons have transformed great-power war from a routine feature of international politics into an exercise in national suicide. With all of the great powers possessing nuclear weapons and ample means to rapidly expand
their deterrent forces, warfare among these states has truly become an option of last resort. The prospect of such
great losses has instilled in the great powers a level of caution and restraint that effectively precludes major
revisionist efforts. Furthermore, the diffusion of small arms and the near universality of nationalism have severely
limited the ability of great powers to conquer and occupy territory inhabited by resisting populations (as Algeria,
Vietnam, Afghanistan, and now Iraq have demonstrated). Unlike during the days of empire building in the
nineteenth century, states today cannot translate great asymmetries of power into effective territorial control; at
most, they can hope for loose hegemonic relationships that require them to give something in return. Also unlike in
the nineteenth century, today the density of trade, investment, and production networks across international
borders raises even more the costs of war. A Chinese invasion of Taiwan, to take one of the most plausible cases
of a future interstate war, would pose for the Chinese communist regime daunting economic costs, both domestic
and international. Taken together, these changes in the economy of violence mean that the international system is
far more primed for peace than the autocratic revivalists acknowledge.
The autocratic revival thesis neglects other key features of the international system as well. In the nineteenth
century, rising states faced an international environment in which they could reasonably expect to translate their
growing clout into geopolitical changes that would benefit themselves. But in the twenty-first century, the status
quo is much more difficult to overturn. Simple comparisons between China and the United States with regard to
aggregate economic size and capability do not reflect the fact that the United States does not stand alone but
rather is the head of a coalition of liberal capitalist states in Europe and East Asia whose aggregate assets far
exceed those of China or even of a coalition of autocratic states. Moreover, potentially revisionist autocratic
states, most notably China and Russia, are already substantial players and stakeholders in an ensemble of global
institutions that make up the status quo, not least the un Security Council (in which they have permanent seats
and veto power). Many other global institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, are
configured in such a way that rising states can increase their voice only by buying into the institutions. The
pathway to modernity for rising states is not outside and against the status quo but rather inside and through the
flexible and accommodating institutions of the liberal international order.
The fact that these autocracies are capitalist has profound implications for the nature of their international
interests that point toward integration and accommodation in the future. The domestic viability of these regimes
hinges on their ability to sustain high economic growth rates, which in turn is crucially dependent on international
trade and investment; today’s autocracies may be illiberal, but they remain fundamentally dependent on a liberal
international capitalist system. It is not surprising that China made major domestic changes in order to join the
WTO or that Russia is seeking to do so now. The dependence of autocratic capitalist states on foreign trade and
investment means that they have a fundamental interest in maintaining an open, rule-based economic system.
(Although these autocratic states do pursue bilateral trade and investment deals, particularly in energy and raw
materials, this does not obviate their more basic dependence on and commitment to the WTO order.) In the case of
China, because of its extensive dependence on industrial exports, the WTO may act as a vital bulwark against
protectionist tendencies in importing states. Given their position in this system, which so serves their interests, the
autocratic states are unlikely to become champions of an alternative global or regional economic order, let alone
spoilers intent on seriously damaging the existing one.
The prospects for revisionist behavior on the part of the capitalist autocracies are further reduced by the large and
growing social networks across international borders. Not only have these states joined the world economy, but
their people - particularly upwardly mobile and educated elites - have increasingly joined the world community. In
large and growing numbers, citizens of autocratic capitalist states are participating in a sprawling array of
transnational educational, business, and avocational networks. As individuals are socialized into the values and
orientations of these networks, stark “us versus them” cleavages become more difficult to generate and sustain.
As the Harvard political scientist Alastair Iain Johnston has argued, China's ruling elite has also been socialized, as
its foreign policy establishment has internalized the norms and practices of the international diplomatic
community. China, far from cultivating causes for territorial dispute with its neighbors, has instead sought to
resolve numerous historically inherited border conflicts, acting like a satisfied status quo state. These social and diplomatic processes and developments suggest that there are strong tendencies toward normalization operating here.

Finally, there is an emerging set of global problems stemming from industrialism and economic globalization that will create common interests across states regardless of regime type. Autocratic China is as dependent on imported oil as are democratic Europe, India, Japan, and the United States, suggesting an alignment of interests against petroleum-exporting autocracies, such as Iran and Russia. These states share a common interest in price stability and supply security that could form the basis for a revitalization of the International Energy Agency, the consumer association created during the oil turmoil of the 1970s. The emergence of global warming and climate change as significant problems also suggests possibilities for alignments and cooperative ventures cutting across the autocratic-democratic divide. Like the United States, China is not only a major contributor to greenhouse gas accumulation but also likely to be a major victim of climate-induced desertification and coastal flooding. Its rapid industrialization and consequent pollution means that China, like other developed countries, will increasingly need to import technologies and innovative solutions for environmental management. Resource scarcity and environmental deterioration pose global threats that no state will be able to solve alone, thus placing a further premium on political integration and cooperative institution building.

Analogies between the nineteenth century and the twenty-first are based on a severe mischaracterization of the actual conditions of the new era. The declining utility of war, the thickening of international transactions and institutions, and emerging resource and environmental interdependencies together undercut scenarios of international conflict and instability based on autocratic-democratic rivalry and autocratic revisionism. In fact, the conditions of the twenty-first century point to the renewed value of international integration and cooperation.

THE LIBERAL DEMOCRATIC PROJECT

THE PROPHETS of autocratic revival propose a foreign policy for the United States and the other liberal democracies organized around the assumption that great-power rivalry and the autocratic-democratic divide will dominate in the coming decades. They advocate a foreign policy of confrontation, containment, and exclusion, and they advise liberal states to diminish their support for global cooperation and institution building. This foreign policy, were it to be implemented, would be a recipe for retreat and would risk creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. Instead, the underlying realities of the new era - and the incentives that all states face - underscore the need for a retooled and reinvigorated liberal internationalist program. A new liberal internationalism of consensus building and problem solving must take into account the circumstances and sensitivities of rising states while affirming the record of success and continuing relevance of the liberal democratic project.

A successful foreign policy must start with an acknowledgment of the historically inherited vulnerabilities and grievances of the rising great powers and autocratic states. Autocratic government is partially appealing because it addresses the problems of ethnic separatism and territorial fragmentation that confront many contemporary states. For China, emerging from a long period of national humiliation and foreign encroachment, the territorial viability of the state hinges on the successful maintenance of control over the outlying regions of Manchuria, Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang, which are occupied by restive ethnic groups seeking independence or autonomy. Similarly, Russia, shorn of much of its historical empire by the breakaway of the non-Russian republics at the end of the Cold War, presides over a vast territorial domain whose outlying areas are also inhabited by potentially secessionist peoples. For both China and Russia, nationalism and an ironhanded central state are appealing solutions to these centrifugal forces and important sources of legitimacy for the current regimes. As long as China and Russia view democratic opening and the norms of the liberal international system as threats to their territorial integrity, there will be severe upper limits on their willingness to be accommodating or to integrate themselves further into this system. In these circumstances, the foreign policy of the United States and the liberal democracies should be not to exacerbate these grievances and vulnerabilities but rather to mollify and ameliorate them.

A successful foreign policy should also seek to integrate, rather than exclude, autocratic and rising great powers.
Proposals to "draw up the gates" of the democratic world and exclude nondemocratic states with measures such as the expulsion of Russia from the G-8 (the group of highly industrialized states) - promise to worsen relations and reinforce authoritarian rule. Instead, the United States and the other liberal democracies should seek to further integrate these states into existing international institutions by increasing their stakeholder roles within them. Proposals such as a "concert of democracies" should be configured to deepen cooperation among democratic states and reinforce global institutions rather than to confront nondemocratic states. The United States and the other democratic nations should take the initiative in solving global resource and environmental problems and produce global frameworks for problem solving that draw in nondemocratic states along the way. The democratic states should orient themselves to pragmatically address real and shared problems rather than focusing on ideological differences. Looking for alignments based on interests rather than regime type will further foreclose the unlikely coalescence of an antiliberal autocratic bloc.

The foreign policy of the liberal states should continue to be based on the broad assumption that there is ultimately one path to modernity and that it is essentially liberal in character. The liberal vision allows for considerable diversity based on historical experience and national difference. But autocratic capitalism is not an alternative model; it is only a way station on this path. How long states take in traversing this path will be shaped by many factors, some beyond the control of the liberal states. But a foreign policy appropriately calibrated to the real constraints and opportunities of the twenty-first century will facilitate this progression. Liberal states should not assume that history has ended, but they can still be certain that it is on their side.

Sidebar

There remain deep contradictions between authoritarian political systems and capitalist economic systems.

Sidebar

War as a path to Conflict resolution and great-power expansion has become largely obsolete.

Sidebar

Emerging global problems will create common interests across states regardless of regime type.

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