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Understanding Authoritarian Resilience and Countering Autocracy Promotion in Asia

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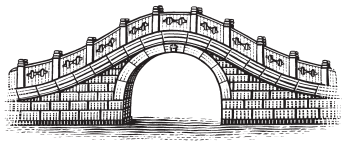

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KEYWORDS: AUTHORITARIANISM; DEMOCRACY; CHINA; SOUTHEAST ASIA

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This article examines some of the reasons for authoritarian resilience and democratic erosion in Asia and assesses options for countering autocracy promotion to create more realistic conditions for democratization in the future.

MAIN ARGUMENT

Proponents of modernization theory postulate that rapid economic growth in Asia will lead to the emergence of independent and politically active middle classes agitating for democracy in the region. Although Asia continues to enjoy rapid economic advances, democratization has stalled, and in some instances, has gone backward. The reality is that many regional countries take a deeply embedded instrumentalist or pragmatic view of democracy and remain unconvinced about the inherent virtues of universal suffrage. At a time when democracy is on the defensive, China has emerged as a regional and global leader in promoting the apparent virtues of authoritarian approaches and the supposed weaknesses of democracy. This increases the importance and urgency of countering China's anti-democratic narrative so as to create more fertile ground for democratization to take root in Asia.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Proponents of democracy must abandon the complacent view that democracy will be the inevitable destination for rapidly growing economies in Asia and accept the reality that China is leading an authoritarian offensive in making the case that one-party rule is a better model for many countries in the region.
- Democracies need to enter this debate and contest over ideas and adapt their message to the regional audience. If established democracies seek to create more fertile ground for democratization, they need to better counter Chinese narratives.
- Rather than simply promoting the virtues of universal suffrage (which might not in and of itself lead to superior results in some countries), democracies need to focus on building practical institutions that increase accountability, transparency, and protections for the rights of individuals and entities in countries undergoing political transitions.

Almost 50 years ago, Seymour Martin Lipset put forward the argument that citizens who are affluent and educated are more likely to reject the appeal of demagogues and, by extension, dictatorships.[1] This was an early expression of what became better known as modernization theory, which focuses on the rise of a middle class and its role in agitating for and entrenching democracy in that respective polity.

When the Tiananmen Square protests (which were in fact countrywide protests occurring simultaneously in hundreds of cities) erupted in China in 1989, followed by the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, hopes were high that Samuel Huntington's "third wave of democratization" could endure and advance in Asia.[2] The "third wave" references the democratic transitions that occurred in at least 30 countries from 1974 to 1990. Japan provided the lead, even though the ruling Liberal Democratic Party had been in government since its founding in 1955 and did not lose power until 2009. In South Korea and Taiwan, economic reforms and growing prosperity paved the way for the rise of democracy. Thailand has stumbled in and out of democracy since it became a constitutional monarchy in 1932. Although far from perfect, democratic processes were entrenched in Malaysia and Singapore. In Indonesia, by contrast, the transition to democracy did not begin until after the fall of Suharto in 1998.

Asia appeared to be the ideal region for the key tenets of modernization theory. The so-called East Asian model continues to do its work, and the ingredients are seemingly all there: economic reforms that create an increasingly large and more powerful entrepreneurial and property-owning class, growing prosperity leading to a rising middle class, and the emergence of educated and socially conscious elites with broad knowledge and first-hand experience of the outside world.[3]

Using the World Bank definition of the middle class as those with per capita incomes in real terms between $10 and $100 per person per day in 2005 purchasing power parity terms, 1.36 billion people, or 46% of the global middle class, lived in Asia in 2015. This is expected to rise to over 2.23 billion people, or 54% of the global middle class, by 2020, and to almost 3.50 billion people,

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1 Seymour Martin Lipset, "Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy," *American Political Science Review* 53, no. 1 (1959): 69–105.

2 Samuel P. Huntington, "Democracy's Third Wave," *Journal of Democracy* 2, no. 2 (1991): 12–34 ~ https://www.ned.org/docs/Samuel-P-Huntington-Democracy-Third-Wave.pdf.

3 Since World War II, rapidly developing East Asian economies—Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, and, most recently, China—have all relied on a remarkably similar export-manufacturing model. They grew rapidly through attracting FDI from firms in advanced economies and through making products for export to consumers in these economies more cheaply, quickly, and reliably than can be done in other countries or regions.

or 65% of the world's middle class, by 2030.[4] Using 2015 figures, it is estimated that more than 60% of all new entrants to the ranks of the middle class in Asia will come from China alone, with the other 210 million coming from the rest of Asia.[5]

Indeed, it was only a few years ago that democratization in China was seen as all but inevitable. In this context, complacency was a common trait of the last three U.S. presidents and perhaps even of those before them, at least with respect to their public pronouncements and general approach to managing China's rise through integrating the country into the post–Cold War strategic and normative order.[6] In 1997, President Bill Clinton argued that China would undoubtedly "increase the spirit of liberty over time…just as inevitably as the Berlin Wall fell," and brazenly told then Chinese president Jiang Zemin at a press conference that "you're on the wrong side of history."[7] Two years later, then presidential candidate George W. Bush declared that "economic freedom creates habits of liberty. And habits of liberty create expectations of democracy" while making the case for free trade with China.[8] When the U.S. Congress granted China permanent normal trading relations status in 2000, an explicit assumption was that the market forces unleashed by trade and investment with China would in turn unleash the forces of economic and political liberalization. President Bush reiterated the same logic in 2005 when he declared that "a whiff of freedom in the marketplace (in China) will cause there to be more demand for democracy."[9] Barack Obama reiterated similar arguments when he stated in a speech to the Australian parliament in 2011:

> History shows that, over the long run, democracy and economic growth go hand in hand…[C]ertain rights are universal. Among them freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, freedom of religion, and the freedom of citizens to choose their own leaders. These are not American rights, or Australian rights, or Western rights. These are human rights. They stir in every soul, as we've seen in the democracies that have succeeded here in Asia. Other models have been tried and they

4 Figures from Homi Kharas, "The Unprecedented Expansion of the Global Middle Class: An Update," Brookings Institution, Global Economy and Development, Working Paper, no. 100, February 2017 ~ https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/global_20170228_global-middle-class.pdf.

5 Ibid.

6 See Kurt M. Campbell and Ely Ratner, "The China Reckoning: How Beijing Defied American Expectations," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2017.

7 Transcript of President Bill Clinton's press conference with Jiang Zemin, January 28, 1997.

8 George W. Bush, "A Distinctly American Internationalism" (speech at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, November 19, 1999) ~ https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/bush/wspeech.htm.

9 George W. Bush, quoted in Ying Ma, "China's Stubborn Anti-democracy," *Policy Review*, no. 141 (2007).

> have failed: fascism and communism, rule by one man and rule by committee.[10]

This earlier optimism has subsided. While there is disagreement with respect to whether democracy in Asia has gone backward,[11] is undergoing a "recession,"[12] or has merely stalled,[13] there is broad consensus that democracy in the region has not advanced in the manner that was expected for the most rapidly expanding economic zone with the fastest-growing middle class in the world.[14]

The earlier optimism is understandable, even if events have yet to pan out as expected. It is also premature to conclude that any backslide or stalling of democratization in Asia is permanent. Some form of liberal democracy characterized by multiparty elections, freedom of press and speech, robust property rights, and independent courts, among other characteristics, may still be Asia's destination.

The problem is not flawed aspirations for Asia but faith in the deterministic and linear analysis that a richer society with a growing middle class will inevitably demand democratic reform. Such analysis leads to complacency in the belief that rising GDP per capita levels will invariably lead to democracy and that its promotion involves little more than supporting the conditions for economic growth and reminding Asian governments that freedom is an innate right desired by every individual.

This article looks at some of the reasons for authoritarian resilience and democratic erosion in Asia that have been under-appreciated by successive U.S. administrations and commentators expecting the development of a stronger liberal-democratic community in the region. It is organized as follows:

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10 Barack Obama (address to the Parliament of Australia, Canberra, November 17, 2011) ~ https://www.smh.com.au/national/text-of-obamas-speech-to-parliament-20111117-1nkcw.html.

11 See, for example, Valeriya Mechkova, Anna Lührmann, and Staffan I. Lindberg, "How Much Democratic Backsliding?" *Journal of Democracy* 28, no. 4 (2017): 162–69; and Joshua Kurlantzick, "Southeast Asia's Democratic Decline in the America First Era," Council on Foreign Relations, Expert Brief, October 27, 2017 ~ https://www.cfr.org/expert-brief/southeast-asias-democratic-decline-america-first-era.

12 Larry Diamond, "Facing up to the Democratic Recession," *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 1 (2015): 141–55.

13 See, for example, Philippe C. Schmitter, "Crisis and Transition, but Not Decline," *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 1 (2015): 32–44; and Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, "The Myth of Democratic Recession," *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 1 (2015): 45–58.

14 See "OECD Sees Global Economy Strengthening, but Says Further Policy Action Needed to Catalyse the Private Sector for Stronger and More Inclusive Growth," Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), November 28, 2017 ~ https://www.oecd.org/newsroom/oecd-sees-global-economy-strengthening-but-says-further-policy-action-needed-to-catalyse-the-private-sector-for-stronger-and-more-inclusive-growth.htm.

- pp. 104–7 introduce modernization theory (that is, the expectation that rapid economic growth would lead to further waves of democratization) and consider the reality that this has not occurred to the extent that many in the West had anticipated.
- pp. 107–14 address the appeal of authoritarian systems among many populations in Asia, China's role as a leader in promoting authoritarianism, and both the failure of democracy to take root and the fragility of existing democratic systems in the region.
- pp. 115–22 conclude with a consideration of some options for countering autocracy promotion to create more fertile ground for democratization in the future.

PUTTING MODERNIZATION THEORY ON HOLD

A Brief Review of Modernization Theory

Modernization theory is concerned with patterns of social evolution and the development of society and the economy. When applied to the period after World War II, the theory is essentially one about the common drivers and ramifications of changes in power when there is continual economic development and greater prosperity in formerly poor authoritarian countries.[15] In poorer authoritarian societies, economic and political power is frequently concentrated in the hands of one individual or party.

Economies cannot become more prosperous without the emergence of a thriving commercial and entrepreneurial class. As these "middle classes" become richer, exercise more control over the reins of economic power, become more cognizant of the "good life" led by middle classes in freer societies, and become less dependent on the government for their livelihoods, they will inevitably want a greater voice in how they are ruled and choose to live their lives. At the same time, the authoritarian government is dependent on the middle class to generate economic growth and cannot simply ignore or suppress these new economic elites. The transition from autocracy to democracy could be peaceful or violent as well as gradual or sudden. Modernization theory asserts that as power becomes more diffused, political organizations and institutions tend to evolve and eventually respond.

[15] See Lipset, "Some Social Requisites of Democracy"; Alex Inkeles, "Making Men Modern: On the Causes and Consequences of Individual Change in Six Countries," *American Journal of Sociology* 75 (1969): 208–25; and Arnold S. Feldman and Christopher Hurn, "The Experience of Modernization," *Sociometry* 29, no. 4 (1966): 378–95.

Many proponents of modernization theory postulate that the democratization process tends to take hold when per capita incomes reach around $6,000 or $7,000, although these figures are only put forward as a rough guide rather than as a strict causal determinant for when democratization begins.[16] By this measure, nondemocratic nations such as China and Brunei would be expected to transition to democracy. It is also important to note that the existence of poor authoritarian countries (on a per capita basis) such as Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, and North Korea is consistent with modernization theory. These economies do not yet exhibit a strong and growing independent middle class that would activate the democratization process.

Wealthier authoritarian countries such as China take modernization theory extremely seriously. The retention and renewal of the state-led political economy that occurred in China from the mid-1990s onward was largely a response by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to the shock of the Tiananmen Square protests and was designed to tie the future of the country's economic elites to that of the party.[17] The CCP's reliance on repression and coercion is increasing as the Chinese economy grows; and many China watchers expect that trend to continue.[18] "Xi Jinping's Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era" was written into the constitution during the 13th National People's Congress in March 2018 and is an explicit counterpoint to expectations that China will evolve into a free-market liberal democracy.[19]

China is not the only country to prove disappointing to those expecting, or calling for, greater democratization in the region. In many Southeast Asian countries, the process of democratization has either stalled or reversed. In Thailand, the military has been in power since its coup in May 2014, and promised elections have been delayed.[20] Aspects of liberal institutions in the Philippines are under challenge from the Rodrigo Duterte government. Myanmar seems

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16 See Larry Diamond, "Economic Development and Democracy Reconsidered," *American Behavioral Scientist* 35, no. 4/5 (1992): 450–99; and Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 2006).

17 John Lee, "Putting Democracy in China on Hold," Center for Independent Studies, Issue Analysis, no. 95, May 28, 2008 ~ http://www.cis.org.au/app/uploads/2015/07/ia95.pdf.

18 See Kristin Shi-Kupfer et al., "Ideas and Ideologies Competing for China's Future," *MERICS Papers on China*, October 2017 ~ https://www.merics.org/sites/default/files/2018-01/171004_MPOC_05_Ideologies_0.pdf.

19 See Nectar Gan, "Xi Jinping Thought—The Communist Party's Tighter Grip on China in 16 Characters," *South China Morning Post*, October 25, 2017 ~ https://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/2116836/xi-jinping-thought-communist-partys-tighter-grip-china.

20 See Joshua Kurlantzick, "Thailand's Junta Faces Mounting Pressure," Council on Foreign Relations, February 12, 2018 ~ https://www.cfr.org/blog/thailands-junta-faces-mounting-pressure.

to be heading toward becoming a "democratic-authoritarian" hybrid,[21] while Singapore remains an incomplete democracy, even if the country is governed cleanly and efficiently.

The Vulnerability of and Impediments to Democracy

Modernization theory has not been disproved. However, despite the recent flourishing of democracy in Malaysia and continued progress in Indonesia, authoritarian resilience or stubbornness in Asia is proving frustrating, and the reasons remain poorly understood.[22] In a 2017 survey by the Pew Research Center of citizens from Japan, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Indonesia, only 26%, 15%, 8%, and 12%, respectively, were "committed democrats" who favored electoral democracy under any circumstances. The majority—51%, 67%, 79%, and 75%, respectively—had a positive view of electoral democracy but would consider less democratic governance by experts, a strong leader, or the military under various circumstances.[23]

According to the survey, "representative democracy" is defined as "a democratic system where representatives elected by citizens decide what becomes law." The next form of government in the scale is "direct democracy," which is defined as "a democratic system where citizens, not elected officials, vote directly on major national issues to decide what becomes law." This is followed by "rule by experts," which refers to a system where "experts, not elected officials, make decisions according to what they think is best for the country." Next is "rule by a strong leader," which is "a system in which a strong leader can make decisions without interference from parliament or the courts." The final category is "rule by the military," which is when "the military rules the country."

Huntington noted about the third wave of democratization that 23 of the 30 countries that had democratized between 1974 and 1990 had previous experiences with democracy. In Asia, only Japan and the Philippines had sustained experience with democratic governance prior

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21 See Max Fisher, "Myanmar, Once a Hope for Democracy, Is Now a Study in How It Fails," *New York Times*, October 19, 2017 ~ https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/19/world/asia/myanmar-democracy-rohingya.html.

22 For further discussion of democracy in Malaysia, see John Lee, "Malaysia's Step Forward—But Still a Long Way to Go," *Australian*, May 11, 2018 ~ https://www.theaustralian.com.au/opinion/malaysias-step-forward-but-still-a-long-way-to-go/news-story/a6421b6279eb2009879e6df830fdef17.

23 Richard Wike et al., "Globally, Broad Support for Representative and Direct Democracy," Pew Research Center, October 16, 2017 ~ http://www.pewglobal.org/2017/10/16/globally-broad-support-for-representative-and-direct-democracy.

to 1990.[24] Although previous experience is not an inherent impediment to democratization, Huntington made the further observation that democratic transitions are vulnerable and reversible if ruling and other elites lack a genuine commitment to democratic values. As he argues, "When they are out of power, political leaders have good reason to advocate democracy. The test of their democratic commitment comes once they are in office."[25]

It is a prescient warning. As the Pew survey cited earlier suggests, there are relatively few genuine, committed democrats in Asia (i.e., those who reject all other forms of government no matter what occurs). Instead, democracy is viewed in somewhat more instrumental terms. This includes the more than half of the region's population who were born after 1981 and have no direct experience with the "hard authoritarianism" that characterized much of Asia in the decades after World War II.[26] Whereas committed democrats will blame the party in power for suboptimal outcomes that do not meet popular expectations, uncommitted democratic societies may well blame the system itself for perceived failures. Indeed, this deeply embedded "instrumentalist" view of democracy appears to help account for the phenomenon of both authoritarian resilience and democratic erosion in Asia in recent times.

AUTHORITARIAN RESILIENCE AND DEMOCRATIC EROSION IN ASIA

Authoritarian regimes are no longer on the defensive, and democracies have not been able to regain control of the narrative or come up with effective counter-messages or policies. While many Western leaders and commentators continue to espouse the inherent virtues of individual freedom, human rights, a free press, and electoral democracy, autocrats are seeking to win the debate with respect to what defines a virtuous political system and good governance.

The Leading Role of China

China leads the way in this regard. On the day of Donald Trump's inauguration, the Chinese state-owned newspaper *People's Daily* devoted an entire page to editorials criticizing Western democracies as chaotic and

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24 Huntington, "Democracy's Third Wave," 24.

25 Ibid., 22.

26 See Yun-han Chu and Bridget Welsh, "Millennials and East Asia's Democratic Future," *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 2 (2015): 151–64.

suffering from "social crises." They claimed that democracy had "reached its limits" and contrasted it unfavorably with China's one-party system, which offered stability, social harmony, competent policymaking and implementation, and economic progress.[27] When announcing that he had abolished presidential term limits during the 19th Congress of the CCP in October 2017, Xi declared that China is moving to the "center stage" and that its authoritarian model "offers an option for other countries and nations who want to speed up their development while preserving their independence; and it offers Chinese wisdom and a Chinese approach to solving problems facing mankind."[28]

Importantly, the model since Deng Xiaoping of "hiding strength and biding time" has been abandoned. According to Xi, as China becomes a leading global power from 2035 onward, the Chinese people will enjoy the "common property" of the international system. Xi also stated that "the Chinese nation will stand with a more high-spirited image in the family of nations" and "socialism with Chinese characteristics" is a "new choice" for other developing nations seeking to grow economically while maintaining their independence."[29]

Beijing's promotion of its political values and standards goes far deeper than official pronouncements and mere declaratory policy. The CCP leadership has augmented support for authoritarian regimes—most recently that of Cambodia's Hun Sen.[30] China is not just promoting authoritarian values but teaching tactics for repression and exporting apparatuses used for domestic coercion to willing authoritarian clients.[31] It has gone beyond forcing foreign firms to agree to its restrictive internet and social media standards to championing its standard of "internet sovereignty," which gives every government the right to regulate online information and rejects a universal

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27 See Rosalind Mathieson and Keith Zhai, "China Slams Western Democracy as Flawed," Bloomberg, January 23, 2017 ~ https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-01-22/china-slams-western-democracy-as-flawed-as-trump-takes-office; and Ben Blanchard, "'Crises and Chaos': China's State Media Slams Western Democracy Ahead of Communist Party Congress," Reuters, October 17, 2017 ~ http://www.businessinsider.com/r-china-state-media-attacks-western-democracy-ahead-of-congress-2017-10?IR=T.

28 Liangyu, "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics Enters New Era: Xi," Xinhua, October 18, 2017 ~ http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-10/18/c_136688475.htm.

29 Zheping Huang, "Your Five-Minute Summary of Xi Jinping's Three-Hour Communist Party Congress Speech," Quartz, October 18, 2017 ~ https://qz.com/1105337/chinas-19th-party-congress-your-five-minute-summary-of-xi-jinpings-three-hour-speech.

30 Hannah Beech, "Embracing China, Facebook and Himself, Cambodia's Ruler Digs In," *New York Times*, March 17, 2018 ~ https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/17/world/asia/hun-sen-cambodia-china.html.

31 See "China's Trade in Tools of Torture and Repression," Omega Research Foundation, Amnesty International, 2014 ~ https://www.amnestyusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/asa170422014en.pdf.

freedom of information standard.[32] In the United Nations, China promotes the innocuous-sounding "community of shared future for human beings" or "community of common destiny" as an alternative to the notion of universal human rights. The former concept is based on the right of each country to interpret what "human rights" actually means and insists that other countries should respect and accept that human rights will have different meanings for each country.[33] Perhaps most concerning is China's increased willingness to interfere in, and covertly influence, the domestic decision-making institutions and debates in democratic nations. This includes the promotion of Chinese authoritarian values.[34]

The proponents of this model in China and elsewhere begin from the position that any political system ought to be assessed according to practical outcomes and that there is no intrinsic value to liberal-democratic systems that emphasize individual rights and freedoms without regard to the consequences. China argues that it has resolved the alleged contradiction between the subordination of individual rights and freedoms to one-party rule, on the one hand, and positive social and economic outcomes, on the other—a contradiction the Communist regimes in the Cold War–era failed to address. As Xi argues, the CCP is meeting the basic needs of over one billion people, and its authoritarian system has made it possible for people to live fulfilling and materially better lives.[35]

The Argument for Authoritarianism: Economic Growth and Stability

In Asia, these and similar arguments for authoritarianism (and the case against democratization) are highly persuasive to ruling and other elites

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32 Lucy Hornby, "China Defends State Control over Internet at Technology Forum," *Financial Times*, December 3, 2017 ~ https://www.ft.com/content/dad122c8-d7e8-11e7-a039-c64b1c09b482; and Jinghan Zeng, Tim Stevens, and Yaru Chen, "China's Solution to Global Cyber Governance: Unpacking the Domestic Discourse of 'Internet Sovereignty,'" *Politics and Policy* 43, no. 3 (2017).

33 H.E. Wang Yi, "Advance the Global Human Rights Cause and Build a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind" (remarks at the Opening Ceremony of the First South-South Human Rights Forum, December 7, 2017) ~ http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/wjbz_663308/2461_663310/P020171211565335323921.pdf.

34 See Christopher Walker, Shanthi Kalathil, and Jessica Ludwig, "How Democracies Can Fight Authoritarian Sharp Power," *Foreign Affairs*, August 16, 2018 ~ https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-08-16/how-democracies-can-fight-authoritarian-sharp-power; John Garnaut, "Australia's China Reset," *Monthly*, August 2018 ~ https://www.themonthly.com.au/issue/2018/august/1533045600/john-garnaut/australia-s-china-reset; and Anne-Marie Brady, "Magic Weapons: China's Political Influence Activities under Xi Jinping" (paper presented at a conference hosted by the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy, Arlington, September 16–17, 2017) ~ https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/magicweaponsanne-mariebradyseptember162017.pdf.

35 "China Focus: Principal Contradiction Facing Chinese Society Has Evolved in New Era: Xi," Xinhua, October 18, 2017 ~ http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-10/18/c_136688643.htm.

in countries without a long-standing tradition of liberal democracy for several reasons.

First, an overwhelming majority of countries in Asia are developing economies that have yet to fully industrialize. Only Japan, South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, Australia, and New Zealand can be considered fully industrialized economies. The rest are straining to become middle-income economies, while only a small number of the others, such as Malaysia and Thailand, are seeking to break out of the so-called middle-income trap.

Authoritarian systems have demonstrated an impressive capacity to generate rapid economic growth through the forced mobilization of capital, land, and even labor in undeveloped and developing economies. Although such approaches tend to become increasingly inefficient and ineffective over time,[36] they have generated impressive GDP growth for some nations at the early stages of development.

China is the most successful modern-day paradigm for the authoritarian approach and has taken the state-led model pioneered by Japan and South Korea to new heights. In 1994, Paul Krugman made the argument about Asia's so-called economic miracles that "economic growth based on expansion of inputs, rather than growth in output per unit of input, is inevitably subject to diminishing returns."[37] Although one can put forward a persuasive case that the only countries to have escaped the middle-income trap and become high-income economies are mature democratic nations with liberal institutions that reward creativity, innovation, and independent enterprise—the exception being oil-rich states and the small island city-state of Singapore—these arguments carry little weight in poorer countries. Creating jobs and achieving middle-income status as quickly as possible is their overriding objective.

For poorer autocratic governments, there is growing confidence that the lack of political freedom or reform need not result in economic stagnation. In 2017, the fastest-growing economies in East Asia were Laos, the Philippines, Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar, and China—all either authoritarian systems or, in the case of the Philippines, suffering democratic erosion. Their strong growth performance was the result of big-ticket infrastructure spending, an increase in net exports (due to growing consumption levels throughout East Asia as well as in advanced economies such as the United States), and

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36 See David Dollar, "China's Rebalancing: Lessons from East Asian Economic History," Brookings Institution, John L. Thornton China Center, Working Paper, October 2013 ~ https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/china-economic-rebalancing-dollar.pdf.

37 Paul Krugman, "The Myth of Asia's Miracle," *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 1994.

expanding service sectors as middle-class populations in these countries enter the digital age.[38]

Their capacity to take advantage of these economic opportunities is aided by changes to, or the loosening up of, regulations and other laws to encourage foreign investment and enhance entrepreneurial initiative. For example, state-owned and other entities are encouraged to engage in market-based transactions with each other as well as with international firms. State assets have been partially privatized to develop commercial know-how. Even so, ruling elites largely continue to control the distribution of land, capital, and contracts: political connections are the gateway to access commercial opportunity.[39] This means that the relationship between the ruling party and commercial elites has become more intimate rather than less, stalling the emergence of an independent middle class. Such an arrangement is clearly appealing to autocrats throughout Asia whose primary objective is to remain in power.

Second, the narrative that autocratic competence is outstripping democratic dysfunction is ascendant. An editorial in China's state-owned Xinhua argues that "endless political backbiting, bickering and policy reversals, which make the hallmarks of liberal democracy, have retarded economic and social progress and ignored the interests of most citizens" and constitute the "crisis and chaos swamp[ing] Western liberal democracy."[40] In contrast, China actively promotes its authoritarian model as one that is politically stable, technically superior, and better able to pursue sensible policies in a consistent manner.[41]

These messages are effective because achieving "order" rather than guaranteeing "justice" for the individual remains highly valued in Asia. Following World War II, the greatest threat to many newly independent and fledging states was internal and external subversion and domestic disunity and disorder. In addition, the state-centered form of Confucianism that was propounded by Chinese emperors from the second century BCE onward gave rise to proponents of "Asian values" in the last decade of the

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38 See OECD, *Economic Outlook for Southeast Asia, China and India 2018: Fostering Growth Through Digitalisation* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2018) ~ https://www.oecd.org/dev/SAEO2018_Preliminary_version.pdf.

39 See Martin Gainsborough, "Elites vs. Reform in Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam," *Journal of Democracy* 23, no. 2 (2012): 34–46.

40 Li Laifang, "Commentary: Enlightened Chinese Democracy Puts the West in the Shade," Xinhua, October 17, 2018.

41 See Stephan Ortmann and Mark R. Thompson, "China and the 'Singapore Model,'" *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 1 (2016): 39–48.

twentieth century. These values included the notion of a social contract whereby rulers provided for the well-being of their citizens, who offered obedience in return. Not surprisingly, China, Singapore, and Malaysia were the chief promulgators of different variations of Asian values.[42]

The significance of the social contract in many developing Asian nations is that delivering on promises is highly prized regardless of the form of government. In Thailand, there have been at least fifteen coups or coup attempts since the country became a constitutional monarchy in 1932. With respect to the latest coup in 2014, the junta experienced its highest approval ratings in the months after seizing control of the government because the public perceived that military leaders had a better chance of restoring order to Thai society and politics. Declining support for the military government has only occurred in recent times because of the failure to tackle problems related to drugs, corruption, and cost of living pressures.[43]

In the Philippines, Duterte was elected on the promise that he would do whatever it took to reverse rising crime rates, destroy the drug trade, reduce corruption, and rebuild the country's infrastructure.[44] His recent approval ratings are the highest on record of any Philippine president since the 1980s, despite his illiberal tendencies (for instance, extrajudicial killings as part of the anti-drug campaign and intimidation of political opponents). According to a January 2018 survey, 79% of respondents were satisfied with his performance and only 9% were dissatisfied. The high approval ratings are widely attributed to the perceived success of Duterte's campaign against drug trafficking and the fulfillment of his promises to invest in infrastructure.[45]

In both of these recent case studies, the Thai and Philippine governments explicitly promoted their resolve to prioritize order before law to address widespread concerns of the citizenry.[46] The promise to achieve results through decisive action is easier to sell than the more abstract virtues of an impersonal

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42 See Michael D. Barr, "Lee Kuan Yew and the 'Asian Values' Debate," *Asian Studies Review* 24, no. 3 (2000): 309–24; and Anthony Milner and Deborah Johnson, "The Idea of Asia," in *Regionalism, Sub-regionalism and APEC*, ed. John Ingleson (Victoria: Monash Asia Institute, 1997), 1–19.

43 See "Popularity of Thai Junta at New Low," *Straits Times*, January 6, 2018 ~ https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/popularity-of-thai-junta-at-new-low.

44 Julio C. Teehankee and Mark R. Thompson, "Electing a Strongman," *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 4 (2016): 125–34.

45 "Survey Shows Filipinos More Satisfied with Duterte Government Than Any Other," Reuters, January 18, 2018 ~ https://www.reuters.com/article/us-philippines-duterte/survey-shows-filipinos-more-satisfied-with-duterte-government-than-any-other-idUSKBN1F70XA.

46 See Thomas Pepinsky, "Southeast Asia: Voting against Disorder," *Journal of Democracy* 28, no. 2 (2017): 120–31.

liberal system of checks and balances vis-à-vis a polity that has little or no history with these institutions.

Third, the transition from autocracy to the early stages of an imperfect democracy in Asia has brought mixed results, with populations often subsequently seeking a return to autocratic rule. While countries that have become mature democracies are generally blessed with robust institutions, such as an independent, competent judiciary and bureaucracy, the shift from autocratic rule to electoral democracy is not commonly accompanied by significant improvements in these and other institutions or the rule of law in the short and medium term.[47] For example, Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index has given Thailand extremely low ratings as it has slipped in and out of democracy since 2001, which suggests that democracy has little correlation with improved rule of law. Similarly, despite beginning its democratic transition in 1986, ratings for the Philippines have not improved since the index began in 1995.

Likewise, the economic benefits for Asian countries in terms of GDP growth after democratization are uncertain. Democratization appeared to have positive economic impacts for Bangladesh, Mongolia, and the Philippines in terms of economic performance, but had negative impacts for Indonesia, South Korea, and Nepal by that same measure of GDP growth. To be sure, focusing only on economic growth does not tell the whole story. South Korea was already becoming an advanced economy with naturally slower rates of growth by the time it held direct presidential elections in 1987, while domestic political and social disruptions in Indonesia (in the mid-1990s) and Nepal (in the early 2000s and since 2015) may be a better explanation for poorer economic performance. A historical study of the economies of Bangladesh, Indonesia, Mongolia, Nepal, the Philippines, South Korea, and Taiwan found that democratization does not appear to help or hinder economic growth in Asian countries in a statistically significant way.[48] If the right to vote in and of itself is not a relevant factor when it comes to improving a country's institutions or economic performance, the argument to begin or continue the process of democratization is less convincing.

Finally, China has become more strategic in its use of developmental assistance and non-concessional loans to bulk up authoritarian regimes.

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47 See Neil Campbell and Shrabani Saha, "Corruption, Democracy and Asia-Pacific Countries," *Journal of the Asia Pacific Economy* 18, no. 2 (April 2013): 290–303.

48 Uk Heo, Sung Deuk Hahm, and Dohee Kim, "The Impact of Democratization on Economic Growth in Asia: An Interrupted Time-Series Analysis," *Korea Observer* 42, no. 1 (2012): 21–45.

From 2009 to 2014, Beijing offered an average of $38 billion per year of aid and loans to other countries, an increase from an average of $7.6 billion per year between 2000 and 2008. Of the top ten recipients of aid from 2000 to 2014, eight were dictatorships or authoritarian states and included Cambodia from the region. Of the top ten recipients of non-concessional loans, seven were dictatorships or authoritarian states (systems characterized by rulers, military leaders, or parties not substantially answerable to elected officials or impartial institutions), including Pakistan and Laos from Asia.[49] It should be noted that Pakistan peacefully transferred power between civilian governments for the first time in 2013 following a general election.

While the rationale for aid and loans (including as part of the Belt and Road Initiative [BRI]) is not necessarily to prop up authoritarian regimes, Chinese economic and political support for Cambodia is a case study of autocratic promotion. In 2011–15, Chinese state-owned firms backed nearly $5 billion in loans and investment to Cambodia, which amounted to about 70% of total foreign direct investment for the latter.[50] China also provided military aid in the form of vehicles, loans to buy helicopters, and a training facility in southern Cambodia.

While Cambodia uses its partnership with China as a counterweight against Vietnam, Beijing has consistently supported the autocratic tendencies of the Hun Sen government. When the opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party was forcibly dissolved in 2017, effectively instating one-party rule in the country, Beijing offered strong support. Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi issued a statement that "China supports the Cambodian side's efforts to protect political stability and achieve economic development and believes the Cambodian government can lead the people to deal with domestic and foreign challenges."[51] This is an example of a regional trend occurring in countries such as Thailand, Laos, and even Myanmar, despite the latter's adoption of a hybrid authoritarian-democratic system in 2015. Autocrats in these countries are less dependent on advanced democracies for aid and investment. This means that they have fewer incentives to offer promises of political reform in exchange for economic and other assistance from democracies.

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49 Minxin Pei, "A Play for Global Leadership," *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 2 (2018): 37–51.

50 Phnom Penh, "Why Cambodia Has Cosied Up to China," *Economist*, January 21, 2017 ~ https://www.economist.com/asia/2017/01/21/why-cambodia-has-cosied-up-to-china.

51 Wang Yi, quoted in "China Backs Cambodia's Political Restructure," CGTN, November 21, 2017 ~ https://news.cgtn.com/news/31496a4d78637a6333566d54/share_p.html.

COUNTERING AUTOCRACY PROMOTION

The global financial crisis from 2007 onward was a blow to the prestige of Western liberal democracies and the United States most of all. The period since 2009 has witnessed far more assertive Chinese behavior in the region, a trend that accelerated when Xi Jinping formally assumed power in 2013. It is no coincidence that perceptions about the inevitability of China's rise and U.S. decline correlate with growing praise for the Chinese authoritarian model and criticism of the U.S. democratic system by many commentators in China and the rest of Asia. The United States was widely blamed for creating global financial and economic turmoil, while China was admired for apparently weathering that turmoil and emerging as an even more important source of economic opportunity for the region and the world. China's response to the global financial and economic turmoil won praise from international financial institutions such as the World Bank, even though Beijing failed to follow so-called neoliberal prescriptions. The rapid growth of the Chinese economy after 2008 helped boost emerging economies in Asia and elsewhere.[52]

This contributes to the narrative that authoritarian regimes have become more competent at solving problems in developing countries than their democratic counterparts, which are weighed down by indecision and short-term priorities stemming from the need to win periodic elections. While it may be true that individuals yearn for freedom, appealing to the abstract principle of checks and balances is no longer as persuasive. In many parts of Asia, democracy has been dealt an image problem and remains on the defensive.

Promoting Peaceful Change and Longer-Term Stability

It is ill-advised for democracy to seek to compete on crude performance measures. As pointed out earlier, mature democracies in advanced economies will not generally grow as rapidly as developing nations, regardless of whether these nations are democratic or autocratic. There is an uncertain correlation between democratization and economic growth in the region. Democratization itself does not improve endemic corruption, and it does not guarantee that every elected government will perform well or be competent.

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[52] Carol Wise, Leslie Elliott Armijo, and Saori N. Katada, "The Puzzle," in *Unexpected Outcomes: How Emerging Economies Survived the Global Financial Crisis*, ed. Carol Wise, Leslie Elliott Armijo, and Saori N. Katada (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2015), 1–24.

Democracy's strongest selling point is that it gives citizens the capacity to put pressure on their governments to change policies or peacefully remove oppressive, corrupt, or poorly performing governments from power. The 2018 election of Mahathir Mohamad and Anwar Ibrahim to oust Najib Razak, who was accused of extreme graft, and with it the fall of the ruling United Malays National Organization (UMNO) from power for the first time since Malaysian independence in 1959, is a case in point. That Najib and UMNO could be removed from power through peaceful means demonstrates the virtue of even an imperfect democracy.[53]

Even so, democratic advance in countries like Malaysia and consolidation in others such as Indonesia is not enough to challenge the narrative of authoritarian competence. It requires the United States and other countries to go on the diplomatic offensive by publicly challenging the perceived virtues of the Chinese model of autocracy that Beijing puts forward as a superior alternative to electoral democracy and that directly challenges the thesis that modernization theory remains relevant to Asia.

Consider the contention that autocracy creates order while democracy leads to chaos. In autocracies, maintaining order comes at an immense cost. Since 2010, China has spent more on the People's Armed Police (PAP) than it has on the People's Liberation Army.[54] Moreover, these expenditure figures from the central government do not include the substantial spending of the individual provinces on domestic security. The PAP is a military-trained domestic militia whose primary purpose is to control unrest within the country. The number of instances of "mass unrest" in China in 2010 was reported to be 180,000—a doubling of the number from 2006.[55] Beijing stopped publishing the figure in subsequent years, suggesting they increased or have not declined significantly. China already has 170 million closed-circuit cameras in place and plans to install another 400 million by around 2020.[56] It is noteworthy that while the CCP is tightening its control

53 See "Malaysia's Najib Maintains Innocence as 1MDB Probe Picks Up Steam," Reuters, June 11, 2018 ~ https://www.reuters.com/article/us-malaysia-politics/malaysias-najib-maintains-innocence-as-1mdb-probe-picks-up-steam-idUSKBN1J710P.

54 Adrian Zenz, "China's Domestic Security Spending: An Analysis of Available Data," Jamestown Foundation, China Brief, March 12, 2018 ~ https://jamestown.org/program/chinas-domestic-security-spending-analysis-available-data.

55 Alan Taylor, "Rising Protests in China," *Atlantic*, February 17, 2012 ~ https://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2012/02/rising-protests-in-china/100247.

56 See "China's Intrusive, Ubiquitous, Scary Surveillance Technology," *Washington Post*, December 17, 2017 ~ https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/chinas-intrusive-ubiquitous-scary-surveillance-technology/2017/12/17/49f25c64-e048-11e7-89e8-edec16379010_story.html.

over all political, economic, judicial, and civil institutions,[57] Singapore, which was once a model of efficient authoritarianism for China, is loosening its grip. This is significant because Singapore's "benign authoritarian" system has long been identified by Beijing as a possible model for China.

Or consider the reality that China spends just over 25% of total government revenue on social goods such as social welfare, healthcare, and education, even as budgets for internal security and other instruments for repression and surveillance increase disproportionately to GDP growth. This compares to an average of 36% among lower-middle-income countries, while the average spending on social goods as a percentage of public revenue for more developed members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) is around 42%.[58]

Questioning Authoritarianism's Economic Success and Benefits

The United States and other democratic countries should also publicly contest the narrative that the skill of authoritarian technocrats enabled China to sail through the global financial crisis unscathed. The reality is that China's then export-dependent model ground to a halt and its leaders responded by demanding that state-owned enterprises embark on an enormous debt-fueled fixed investment program. Chinese corporate debt as a percentage of GDP almost doubled to over 166% from 2008 to 2016. It represents the largest, most rapid accumulation of corporate debt for any eight-year period in economic history. In contrast, the United States, the European Union, Japan, and an index for emerging economies (excluding China) kept debt levels as a percentage of GDP about steady over the same period. In 2008, Chinese household debt was about double the level of disposable income. In 2016, that ratio had increased to 4.5 times.[59]

Other strategic areas of discussion might point to surveys that consistently reveal that a strikingly large percentage of affluent Chinese

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57 Susan L. Shirk, "The Return to Personalistic Rules," *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 2 (2018): 22–36.

58 This is based on the author's calculations using several OECD database sets for individual countries. See John Lee, "China's Economic Slowdown: What Are the Strategic Implications?" *Washington Quarterly* 38, no. 3 (2015): 113–32.

59 "Does China Face a Looming Debt Crisis?" Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), China Power Project, September 7, 2017 ~ https://chinapower.csis.org/china-face-looming-debt-crisis.

citizens are hoping to leave China, despite its rapid economic ascent.[60] The reason these Chinese citizens have less confidence in their country's future than is often thought to be the case is worth considering. The resilience, or otherwise, of authoritarian systems should be openly assessed. The point is not to denigrate all aspects of the Chinese authoritarian model but to expose the weaknesses of that model, just as Beijing increasingly seeks to do with respect to democratic models. Asian countries may at least be persuaded to reconsider the narrative that autocrats are better at economic management (unlike their debt-reliant democratic counterparts) and are better placed to achieve superior results when it comes to improving standards of living, social stability, and public order.

The United States could also be more upfront about questioning the perceived benefits for countries receiving support and largesse from great authoritarian powers such as China. In this context, the recent experiences of Myanmar are salient. The military's decision to hold limited elections in 2015 was largely motivated by resentment about the consequences of excessive dependence on China, which included economic deals weighted heavily in favor of Chinese firms, disregard for the environmental impact of such investments, and the use of Chinese rather than Burmese workers.[61] Similar dynamics may well be playing out in Cambodia and possibly Papua New Guinea in the foreseeable future.

The reluctance of the United States and other democracies to openly question aspects of BRI is surprising, given that the initiative undercuts the Trump administration's emphasis in the National Security Strategy on a "free and open Indo-Pacific" in a number of ways. This includes: weakening the capacity of indebted countries to exist as sovereign nations when these overbearing debts are called in; lowering common standards for economic governance and transparency through the conclusion of opaque agreements; promoting investment for political rather than commercial purposes, thereby conflating commercial and political agency in the region;

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60 Jia Lynn Yang, "If China Is Doing So Well, Why Do So Many Chinese Think of Moving Here?" *Washington Post*, November 16, 2012 ~ https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/if-china-is-doing-so-well-why-do-so-many-chinese-want-to-move-here/2012/11/16/b139e2e2-284d-11e2-96b68e6a7524553f_story.html; Rachel Wang, "Why China's Rich Want to Leave," *Atlantic*, April 11, 2013 ~ https://www.theatlantic.com/china/archive/2013/04/why-chinas-rich-want-to-leave/274920; and Robert Frank, "More Than a Third of Chinese Millionaires Want to Leave China, Here's Where They Want to Go," CNBC, July 5, 2018 ~ https://www.cnbc.com/2018/07/05/more-than-a-third-of-chinese-millionaires-want-to-leave-china.html.

61 "China's Engagement in Myanmar: From Malacca Dilemma to Transition Dilemma," Transnational Institute, Myanmar Policy Briefing, no. 19, July 2016 ~ https://www.tni.org/files/publication-downloads/chinas_engagement_in_myanmar-final.pdf.

and supporting a closed economic and supply-chain system that prioritizes China over other countries.

A study published in March 2018 found that one-third of 68 economies receiving BRI loans are "significantly or highly vulnerable to debt distress."[62] Regional economies such as Laos, Mongolia, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka are particularly exposed. Unlike economic partnerships with democratic nations such as the United States, Japan, South Korea, and Australia, which meet high transparency, environmental, and commercial standards, many projects with authoritarian partners bring disproportionate benefits to the more powerful nation. For example, one recent report found that 89% of contractors working on Chinese-funded transportation projects in Asia and Europe were Chinese firms.[63] As Daniel Kliman and Abigail Grace observe, Chinese funded-projects "are opaque until formally announced, giving government-connected Chinese firms an information edge that allows them to secure deals before foreign companies have an opportunity to bid."[64] In a region where many nations are still sensitive about guarding freedom of action due to memories of colonialism, the message ought to be that countries should keep their options open.

Building Institutions

Finally, and with respect to creating the conditions for democracy, much of Asia still suffers from shortcomings in constitutional design or constitutional commitments.[65] Countries like Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam do not have constitutional or institutional arrangements in place that could give rise to genuine electoral democracy, and Myanmar has imperfect ones. Others like Thailand and until recently Malaysia have established constitutional and institutional arrangements, but their commitment to them has weakened. The Philippines is teetering on the edge in this latter grouping.

For countries without constitutional and institutional arrangements already in place, one starting point would be to discuss what laws and

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62 John Hurley, Scott Morris, and Gailyn Portelance, "Examining the Debt Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative from a Policy Perspective," Center for Global Development, Policy Paper, no. 121, March 2018 ~ https://www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/examining-debt-implications-belt-and-road-initiative-policy-perspective.pdf.

63 Jonathan E. Hillman, "The Belt and Road's Barriers to Participation," CSIS, Reconnecting Asia, February 7, 2018.

64 Daniel Kliman and Abigail Grace, "Powerplay: Addressing China's Belt and Road Strategy," Center for a New American Century, September 2018, 18.

65 Michael C. Davis, "Strengthening Constitutionalism in Asia," *Journal of Democracy* 28, no. 4 (2017): 147–61.

institutions would place greater checks, balances, and restraints on the exercise of executive power even if this occurs within an authoritarian framework. The purpose is to promote habits of accountability and compromise, and encourage greater citizen participation in aspects of governance. As case studies such as Indonesia, Mongolia, and Timor Leste suggest, an active and vibrant civil society makes an eventual democratic transition and democratic resilience much more likely.[66] Calls to move straight to a constitutional framework for multiparty democracy are almost certain to fall on deaf ears.

Thus, the lower-hanging fruit is countries with constitutional and institutional arrangements already in place. It is important to use carrots and sticks to prevent commitment backsliding before the erosion of these structures is complete. For example, the United States and other democracies should prioritize action when democratically elected populist governments advocate authoritarian solutions to manage perceived or actual problems of disorder, whether these be related to drugs, crime, or terrorism. Of high concern would be democratic governments seeking to suspend judicial independence and review.

Sanctions against democratic backsliding are a blunt democracy promotion tool and are rarely effective. While it is not constructive to simply condemn and punish governments—even if the popular vote is temporarily suspended (as in Thailand)—countries can still selectively use leverage from aid, financial assistance, military assistance, or other means to incentivize recommitment to democracy and deter institutional backsliding. This can create ongoing negotiations rather than the definitive imposition of sanctions. The same point can be made about the Philippines, although the country is still nominally a democracy. The importance of working with countries to preserve even imperfect institutions should not be underestimated. Without these institutions, governments and elites are less likely to look for democratic solutions to the many pressing problems endured by their developing societies. The flourishing of democracy in Indonesia and its revival in Malaysia would not have been possible if these institutions were not already in place.

There will always be the risk that China and other authoritarian states will move in and offer largesse and assistance should the United States and other democracies voice disapproval or apply targeted pressure. However, smaller states are aware (or ought to be made aware) that there are costs to

66 Marcus Mietzner, "How Jokowi Won and Democracy Survived," *Journal of Democracy* 25, no. 4 (2014): 111–25; M. Steven Fish and Michael Seeberg, "The Secret Supports of Mongolian Democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 28, no. 1 (2017): 129–43; and Edward Aspinall et al., "Timor-Leste Votes: Parties and Patronage," *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 1 (2018): 153–67.

their freedom of action and sovereignty when they become too reliant on Beijing. No democratic country in Asia desires a downgrade in relations with, or assistance from, the United States in exchange for greater reliance on China. They only make this trade-off if they believe that few other good options are available.

There have been some noteworthy recent examples. The U.S. embassy in Yangon played an important role in directing financial assistance to encourage the development of liberal institutions in Myanmar through promotion of the rule of law, bureaucratic transparency, a freer media, and the technical requirements of a free and fair election ahead of the 2015 elections. Although the Trump administration has withdrawn the United States from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the previous administration was correct to link increased access to the U.S. market with Vietnamese pledges to allow greater freedom of association for workers. In Vietnam, the United States assists with increasing the competence and integrity of judges and with reforming the criminal code. The point is to find ways to support and strengthen civil society, the integrity of decision-making processes, and even imperfect institutions with liberal or democratic potential in all countries, even if the goal of free and fair elections remains elusive. The perfect need not be the enemy of the good.

CONCLUSION

Democracy has been written off before. In the 1930s, democracies appeared to be in decline compared with rising fascist and Communist nations. In the mid-1970s, West German chancellor Willy Brandt lamented that "Western Europe has only 20 or 30 years more of democracy left in it; after that it will slide engineless and rudderless, under the surrounding sea of dictatorship."[67] But as Alexis de Tocqueville observed in the nineteenth century, democracies always appear weaker and less responsive than they really are.

Nevertheless, in Asia's fluid political environment today, where there are few established and mature democracies, perception matters. Democracy is on the defensive and autocracy is on the rise. Expectations that democracy would be inevitable as Asia became more prosperous have bred complacency and been unhelpful. In recent times, many autocrats have become better at selling a story of their competence and the unsuitability of democratic

[67] Quoted in John Mueller, *Capitalism, Democracy and Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 214.

governments for helping the region realize its potential. In many respects, autocrats have become superior at reading the needs and demands of the political marketplace in Asia.

There are reasons for optimism. In a 2016 Ipsos survey, respondents throughout the ten ASEAN states ranked democratic Japan as the first or second "most reliable friend" to their country.[68] Serving as a positive model, Japan is perceived as a "modern country" that has nevertheless managed to "preserve its heritage"—an important consideration for all regional countries considering democratic or other alternative futures. In the latest Lowy Institute poll of Australian citizens, Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe leads the way among leaders in the category of who would "do the right thing regarding world affairs."[69]

Nevertheless, democracy is not the inevitable destination for many countries in Asia. Countering autocracy promotion requires a deeper understanding as to why authoritarian resilience and democratic erosion are occurring in the present time. This article is an effort to advance this understanding. ◈

68 "Japan-ASEAN Relations: Public Survey on Japan among ASEAN Citizens," Ipsos Marketing, report prepared for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Japan), November 25, 2016 ~ https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000209501.pdf.

69 Lowy Institute, "2018 Lowy Institute Poll: Understanding Australian Attitudes toward the World," 2018 ~ https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/2018-lowy-institute-poll.