

# AUTOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS AND ACTORS

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This chapter discusses the study of foreign policy in authoritarian states. Traditionally, authoritarian foreign policy was studied through coarse comparisons between democratic and non-democratic regimes. Recent scholarship has made considerable advances, however, in studying why some authoritarian regimes are more prone to international conflict than others. The new literature on authoritarian foreign policy places particular emphasis on political accountability, state-society relations, coercive organizations, bureaucratic politics, and leader psychology. Future scholarship can further advance the field through incorporating insights from emerging research on bureaucracy, comparative politics, and foreign policy analysis.

To study authoritarian foreign policy begs two fundamental questions: do differences in how states govern themselves domestically exert systematic effects on the foreign policies they adopt – and, if so, which domestic differences matter most? A long tradition in international relations (IR) scholarship has argued that whether a state is democratic is key to understanding its foreign policy behavior, ranging from the types of wars it is likely to fight to its ability to make credible commitments to free trade. For several decades, a coarse distinction between democratic and authoritarian regimes dominated the field's understanding of how regime type shaped foreign policy. Yet, this conventional wisdom has gradually shifted towards a more nuanced understanding of authoritarian regimes.

The changing consensus is driven in large part by two trends. The first is a growing number of theoretical models that seriously consider the dynamics of authoritarian politics. Scholarship in comparative politics (e.g., [Svolik, 2012](#); [Geddes, Wright and Frantz, 2018](#)) has proven critical to these new insights. Models of comparative authoritarianism have pushed IR scholars to examine whether differences between authoritarian regimes systematically affect their foreign policy. This chapter organizes this new wave of scholarship according to three important dimensions that distinguish autocracies from one another: (1) the relationship between dictators on the one hand and political elites, the mass public, coercive organizations, and the bureaucracy on the other;

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(2) the salience of foreign policy issues for these domestic actors; and (3) the foreign policy preferences of these actors. Collectively, highlighting these differences yield the intriguing idea that the foreign policy of some authoritarian regimes might essentially be no different than those of democracies.

The second trend is the proliferation of methodological approaches that have opened the study of decision-making processes in authoritarian regimes. While early work on the democratic peace privileged cross-national statistical analysis and process tracing using cases inside democracies (in which data was rich), scholars are increasingly opening the “black box” of authoritarian decision-making with newly available archival evidence (Braut-Hegghammer, 2020; Torigian, 2022; Jost, forthcoming), interviews and field research (Weiss, 2014), surveys and experiments (Wallace and Weiss, 2015; Bell and Quek, 2018; Weiss and Dafoe, 2019), and historical case studies (Brooks, 2008; White, 2021).

The remainder of this chapter is divided into four sections. The first introduces the core puzzle motivating this research agenda: why some authoritarian regimes seem to make systematically different foreign policy choices. Utilizing the theory of the democratic peace as an illustrative example, it discusses some of the theoretical and empirical challenges associated with early scholarship. The second and third sections review two strands in the literature that have sought to address these challenges, the first focusing on authoritarian politics and the second focusing on psychology. The final section considers ways in which future scholarship might explore questions not yet fully answered.

## **1 The Puzzle of Authoritarian Foreign Policy**

The study of authoritarian foreign policy is rooted in a puzzle: why do the foreign policies of authoritarian and democratic regimes sometimes look quite different? Consider, for example, democratic peace theory.<sup>2</sup> Several waves of IR scholarship have suggested that, in questions of war and peace, the most salient difference between states is whether those who govern are constrained by those who are governed. As an empirical finding, the contention that democracies tend to fight fewer military conflicts with other democracies is, as Levy (1988, 662) famously sum-

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<sup>2</sup>For an overview of this vast literature, see Hayes (2012).

marized, “as close as anything we have to an empirical law ” in the discipline. While criticisms linger (e.g., [Downes, 2009](#)), the empirical pattern is generally well-established ([Dafoe, 2011](#)).

There is still considerable debate, however, about the mechanisms that undergird this finding. Scholars have offered a range of candidate explanations, including shared norms ([Maoz and Russett, 1993](#)), political accountability ([Reiter and Stam, 2002](#)), the distributions of goods ([De Mesquita et al., 2003](#)), and credible signaling ([Fearon, 1994](#)). Until the early 2000s, however, the vast majority of theories relied upon relatively coarse distinctions between democratic and authoritarian regimes – or features that some *democracies* possessed but others lacked, such as opposition parties ([Schultz, 2001](#)).

One of the limitations of this approach was that it had little to say about authoritarian rule itself. Theoretically, there was comparatively little discussion regarding how dictators governed or held onto power.<sup>3</sup> Empirically, most scholars – even those who cast doubt on the logic of the democratic peace – employed either cross-national statistical analyses that generally treated autocracies as the same (e.g., [Maoz and Russett, 1993](#); [Oneal and Russett, 1999](#); [McDonald, 2015](#)) or case studies focusing on decision-making in democracies. For example, [Oren \(1995\)](#) focuses on American perceptions of Imperial Germany. [Farnham \(2003\)](#) analyzes Franklin D. Roosevelt’s perceptions of Nazi Germany. [Widmaier \(2005\)](#) examines American perceptions of India during the 1971 Bangladesh War. [Peceny \(1997\)](#) focuses on American perceptions of Spain during the Spanish-American War. Comparatively few studies directly investigated the counterfactual setting: decision-making in authoritarian regimes. It is perhaps not an exaggeration to say that democratic peace theory was, true to its moniker, one about the foreign policy of democracies rather than autocracies.

Over the past two decades, however, a new wave of scholarship has opened up the “black box” of authoritarian regimes to explore how institutions and actors shape the foreign policies that autocracies choose. This body of research has deliberately set aside coarse differences between democratic and authoritarian regimes, drawing upon a rich tradition in comparative politics and political psychology. The next two sections discuss the core insights from this literature by thematically dividing them into those that emphasize politics and psychology.

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<sup>3</sup>[De Mesquita et al. \(2003\)](#) is an important exception, as are studies of Soviet foreign policy decision-making, such as [Goldgeier \(1994\)](#).

## 2 The Politics of Authoritarian Foreign Policy

At the heart of the new literature on authoritarian foreign policy is the straightforward intuition that authoritarian leaders (or dictators) want to ensure their political survival.<sup>4</sup> Autocrats do so through a combination of coercion, power sharing, and good performance. Some secure survival through consolidating power such that would-be challengers – either from other political elites or the mass public – cannot credibly threaten to depose them, regardless of the success or failure of their policies. The hallmarks of such regimes, commonly referred to as personalist regimes (Geddes, Wright and Frantz, 2018), are a set of institutions that inscribe the leader’s absolute control: unilateral political appointments, emphasis on loyalty over competence, rubber-stamp decision-making bodies, personality cults, intensive monitoring of society and punishment of dissent, and so on (Weeks, 2014; Frantz et al., 2020).

However, not all authoritarian leaders choose to pursue – or are successful in pursuing – the personalist path to political survival. Such leaders instead rely upon a combination of power sharing agreements and strong performance. We can think of power sharing as opening up pathways for four types of actors to influence foreign policy outcomes: political elites, the mass public, coercive organizations, and the bureaucracy. As summarized in Table 1, the remainder of this section explores three questions for each actor. First, what are the actor’s sources of influence over the ruler? Second, how salient are foreign policy issues to the actor? Third, what are the actor’s foreign policy preferences?

### 2.1 POLITICAL ELITES

In nonpersonlist autocracies, sometimes referred to as collective rule regimes, leaders rule through coalitions with political elites (Svolik, 2012; Meng, 2020). In a pathbreaking study, Weeks (2014) theorized that there are three primary pathways along which political elites shape foreign policy in collective rule regimes.<sup>5</sup> First, when power is shared, elites are better positioned to remove leaders who pursue policies that run afoul of elite preferences and select replacements that share their foreign policy interests. In fact, since the end of World War II, more than two

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<sup>4</sup>I use the terms “autocrat,” “dictator,” “ruler,” and “leader” interchangeably, although others see differences between these terms.

<sup>5</sup>See also Mattes and Rodríguez (2014) and Colgan and Weeks (2015).

Table 1: Domestic Actors and Institutions in Authoritarian Foreign Policy

<i>Actor</i>	<i>Influence Pathways</i>	<i>Issue Salience</i>	<i>Preferences</i>
political elites	removal from office agenda opposition	mixed	cooperative
mass public	mass uprising and protests policy non-compliance	mixed	mixed
coercive organizations	military rule military intervention	high	conflictual
bureaucracy	information provision policy implementation	high	mixed

thirds of dictators who were unseated lost power through a *coup d'état* in which political elites removed the dictator from office through the threat or use of violence (Svolik, 2012, 5). Second, power sharing allows elites to bargain with the leader by threatening to withhold support for the leader's agenda. Dictators wishing to further their political goals might respond strategically through accommodating the elite's foreign policy preferences. Finally, the threat of accountability may itself make dictators more risk acceptant in the foreign policies they choose. Consider an example of a dictator choosing between a status quo distribution of territory and initiating a conflict in which they might gain more, but might also lose some of what they have. Personalist rulers, knowing that regime insiders are unlikely to hold them accountable no matter what the outcome, may be more willing to gamble to acquire more territory even when they have a comparatively low chance of succeeding.<sup>6</sup>

While existing literature devotes considerable attention to how political elites in nonpersonalist regimes exhibit systematically different foreign policies (Weeks, 2014; Mattes and Rodríguez, 2014), there are two potential questions that are central to the framework but that have nevertheless received comparatively little attention. One question concerns when foreign policy issues are salient for political elites. Torigian (2022), for example, argues that foreign policy performance was not a central consideration in leader selection or removal in the Soviet Union and China. This may be because many foreign policy decisions do not immediately affect elite interests or

<sup>6</sup>In addition, the way by which autocrats lose power is thought to condition some foreign policy decisions (Chiozza and Goemans, 2004), particularly choices about war termination (Goemans, 2012).

because elites care more about domestic policy than foreign policy. If elites have a finite amount of political capital by which they can bargain with the dictator to advance their interests, they may choose to prioritize domestic over foreign policy issues. This raises the possibility that foreign policy may be more salient at certain times and for certain elites.

On the other hand, there are several straightforward reasons why authoritarian elites may be interested in the state's foreign policy. For one, a prominent strand of literature on foreign policy attitudes suggests that individuals have relatively stable beliefs and predispositions, even in the absence of information (e.g., [Kertzer and Zeitzoff, 2017](#)). Foreign policy decisions might also affect the material interests of elites, which would motivate them to take an active interest in foreign policy decision-making. Indeed, one past study finds that leaders in nonpersonalist regimes responsible for starting wars lose office at a rate over three times higher when they lose than when they remain at peace ([Croco and Weeks, 2016](#)) – suggesting that elites at least care about major foreign policy outcomes, such as war and peace.

This leads to a second question regarding the nature of elite preferences in nonpersonalist regimes. Past studies of authoritarian foreign policy tend to divide elite audiences into two categories – civilian and military – suggesting that the latter tends to be more hawkish than the former (e.g., [Lai and Slater, 2006](#); [Weeks, 2012](#)). Yet, while the civilian-military distinction is sometimes a helpful predictor of hawkishness, it is not necessarily the prime determinate of foreign policy orientation ([Jost et al., 2021](#)). This suggests that it should be possible that some civilian regimes feature comparatively hawkish foreign policy attitudes. For instance, although ideologies like nationalism ([Powers, 2022](#)) are not necessarily linked to regime type per se, it may be possible to speak of authoritarian nationalism as a distinct phenomenon if elites come to believe that key elements of their political or economic system are central to their identity or worthy of emulation.

## 2.2 MASS PUBLIC

While models of collective rule emphasize the balance of power between dictators and elites, models of the mass public emphasize the balance of power between state and society. Many autocracies possess social and technological tools capable of shaping how the mass public behaves, which can improve the state's ability to monitor and repress dissent. Authoritarian elites

can also attempt to shape public attitudes on foreign policy. “Top-down” models of public opinion suggest that citizens rely upon cues from elites to form beliefs about foreign policy issues (Berinsky, 2007). In authoritarian settings, the government typically has outsized control over the information to which the masses have access, which allows them to manipulate citizen information through censorship (King, Pan and Roberts, 2013), strategic distraction (King, Pan and Roberts, 2017), and framing (Pan, Shao and Xu, 2022). In many states, this balance of power may mean that the regime severely discounts public opinion in its calculus for foreign policy decision-making – perhaps to the point of irrelevance.

Yet, authoritarian governments devote an impressive share of state resources to understanding what their citizens think (Weiss and Dafoe, 2019), suggesting that many autocracies do not entirely dismiss public attitudes about foreign policy. Why might this be the case? For one, citizens dissatisfied with foreign policy choices might move to organize protests and demonstrations. Even when the government can effectively subdue such protests, some may get out of hand and undermine the regime’s legitimacy or public image (Weiss, 2014). For another, dissatisfied citizens might be more likely to engage in small acts of non-compliance or be less willing to mobilize in support of state policy. Christensen (1996), for instance, notes that some autocrats are more concerned that the mass public will fail to mobilize in support of the regime’s policies (e.g., the Great Leap Forward) than they are that the public will move to topple it.

How authoritarian public opinion might affect foreign policy hinges on two factors that mirror the discussion of political elites. The first is the extent to which the masses in authoritarian regimes have well-formed attitudes about foreign policy. Some evidence suggests that authoritarian masses care about foreign policy issues, although the evidence is mixed as to its salience relative to other political and economic topics. Pan and Xu (2018) find that nationalism is a salient dimension in the political ideology of Chinese citizens – and Min and Liu (2016) find that Chinese citizens in some autocracies seek out foreign policy information via the internet during international crises. Similarly, Treisman (2011) finds that public approval in Russia is linked to foreign policy actions, although these issues often appear to be less salient than economic ones. Finally, Telhami (1993) finds that demonstrations in Middle Eastern countries around the time of the Persian Gulf War suggest exhibit interest in foreign policy, but that issue salience was shaped

by economic concerns and did not shape government policies.<sup>7</sup>

A second question regarding how the masses shape foreign policy pertains to citizen preferences. However, there is comparatively little scholarship that theorizes why the content of public opinion might be systematically different in democratic and authoritarian settings. For instance, it is not clear why autocracies are more likely to feature more hawkish (or dovish) domestic audiences. Bottom-up nationalism is well-documented in both authoritarian (Weiss and Dafoe, 2019) and democratic (Powers, 2022) settings. However, one possibility is that some autocracies may have incentives to solidify control over the masses through institutionalizing nationalistic narratives that nudge public opinion towards more hawkish positions. Some authoritarian regimes promote narratives that emphasize the trauma of past colonial and imperial rule, leading to what Miller (2013) terms a “post-imperial ideology” that makes states less willing to compromise during international negotiations. Patriotic education programs in China, for example, are associated with high rates of nationalist public protests (Wallace and Weiss, 2015) and “soft propaganda” (e.g., entertainment with emotional overtones) can shape citizen emotions and nationalistic attitudes in durable ways (Mattingly and Yao, 2022).<sup>8</sup> Still, such behavior is not exclusive to autocracies and future research should probe these dynamics.

### 2.3 COERCIVE ORGANIZATIONS

Coercive organizations, such as the military, can also gain influence in authoritarian regimes through several pathways. First, some authoritarian regimes are directly governed by the military (e.g., Argentina under Jorge Rafael Videla or Pakistan under Yahya Kahn). While military rule has steadily declined since the post-World War II peak in the 1970s, close to one fifth of the world’s countries have passed through periods of military rule during the early twenty-first century (Geddes, Frantz and Wright, 2014). Second, coercive organizations can gain influence through their ability to form explicit and implicit coalitions with elites and the mass in order to oust rulers from power. To be successful, domestic actors contemplating a coup typically need support from military organizations. In fact, by one count, over 96% of coups featured some form of military

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<sup>7</sup>See also Blaydes and Linzer (2012) and Jamal et al. (2015).

<sup>8</sup>Authoritarian elites can also induce more dovish and cooperative attitudes. For instance, Quek and Johnston (2017) find that autocratic elites are able to reduce public support for more conflictual action by framing strategies that invoke peaceful identities, the costs of conflict to economic development, and the role of multilateral mediation. See also Weiss and Dafoe (2019) and Rozenas and Stukal (2019).

participation (Chin, Carter and Wright, 2021, 6). Similarly, military organizations can choose whether to support, repress, or stand aside during mass uprisings (Barany, 2012; Brooks and White, 2022). Thus, the more that autocrats rely upon repression to secure political survival, the more beholden they are to military organizations and their preferences (Svolik, 2012).

How salient are foreign policy issues to coercive organizations? There are several reasons why salience may be higher for organizations like the military than for political elites or for the mass public. For one, the function of military organizations is more directly tied to foreign policy than the most roles that civilian political elites assume. A wider range of foreign policy decisions, ranging from battlefield operations to the size of the defense budget, touch on the organizational interests of the military. Moreover, coercive organizations often possess more information pertinent to foreign policy than political elites or the mass public. In the case of elites and the mass public, informational asymmetries could lead to deference to the ruler's decisions. In the case of coercive organizations, however, these asymmetries are often attenuated by their position in the governmental division of labor.

In what direction does the influence of coercive organizations push authoritarian foreign policy? The bulk of evidence suggests that military organizations skew towards more hawkish and less cooperative foreign policy preferences. As such, states directly or indirectly ruled by the military are more likely to initiate international conflicts (Lai and Slater, 2006; Weeks, 2012; Altman and Lee, forthcoming).<sup>9</sup> This is not to say that military organizations are always more hawkish, particularly when military leaders assess that the balance of power is not in their favor or that the prospects for battlefield victory are low (Scobell, 1999). Nevertheless, the broader pattern seems to hold empirically (Sechser, 2004).

Some authoritarian leaders attempt to curb military influence through organizational strategies, often referred to as "coup proofing" (e.g., De Bruin, 2020; Mattingly, forthcoming). Yet, coup proofing introduces pathologies of its own. Adopting organizational strategies to ensure the military does not intervene in politics may, for example, undermine effective decision-making processes (Brooks, 2008), increase the propensity for international conflict (White, 2021), slow down military adaptation (Fravel, 2019), and degrade battlefield performance (Talmadge, 2015).

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<sup>9</sup>For dissenting views, based largely upon analyzing foreign decision-making in democracies, see Betts (1977) and Gelpi and Feaver (2002).

It also affects an autocracy's ability to effectively manage mass dissent without resorting to violence (Greitens, 2016), which could affect its international reputation. This suggests that coup proofing may yield countervailing effects. On the one hand, decreasing the military's bargaining leverage may mean that authoritarian rulers are less likely to succumb to lobbying campaigns for more hawkish foreign policies. On the other hand, coup-proofed states might be prone to foreign policy miscalculations that cause authoritarian regimes to blunder into ill-advised conflicts.

#### 2.4 BUREAUCRACY

A final category of actor that may influence authoritarian foreign policy is the broader national security bureaucracy. In most modern states, the military represents only one of many diplomatic, intelligence, and defense organizations that contribute to the formulation of foreign policy. Indeed, much of the most important institutional variation between modern states centers less on civil-military relations and more on how different *civilians* – leaders and their civilian defense, intelligence, and diplomatic bureaucracies – relate to one another (Jost, forthcoming).

Bureaucrats in authoritarian regimes matter for two reasons. First, authoritarian rulers depend upon bureaucracies to search for and process information needed to make decisions. While leaders sometimes simply look inward to their deep-seated worldviews (Vertzberger, 1990; Saunders, 2011), they often look outward for information that helps them to determine the facts of the problems they confront (Jost et al., 2021). Even in personalist regimes, leaders do not (and could not) attend every diplomatic meeting or collect every piece of intelligence. Second, whether at the negotiating table or on the battlefield, leaders depend upon bureaucracies to implement the policies they choose. As is the case in information provision, leaders simply cannot carry out all tasks associated with modern foreign policy. In both information provision and policy implementation, bureaucratic influence follows a decidedly different logic than the first three domestic actors: whereas political elites, the masses, and the military gain their power through coercive means, bureaucracies gain their power through the tasks that are delegated to them.<sup>10</sup>

The high salience of foreign policy issues among national security bureaucracies follows from the same logic as for coercive organizations: foreign policy is central to the tasks that national se-

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<sup>10</sup>From this perspective, the military is both a coercive organization and a bureaucracy – and the way it shapes policy can follow these two, quite distinct, logics.

curity bureaucracies perform. The policy preferences of bureaucracies, however, is less straightforward. While the traditional view (Allison and Zelikow, 1999) suggests that bureaucracies derive their preferences from their position in the division of labor (i.e. “where you stand is where you sit”), recent scholarship has cast doubt on this logic (Schub, 2022) – and there are few studies of whether defense, diplomatic, and intelligence bureaucracies in authoritarian countries disagree in systematic ways.

Instead, one of the principal ways that bureaucracy shapes authoritarian foreign policy is through variation in the quality of information it is able to provide leaders. Jost (forthcoming) argues that political trade-offs explain why some autocrats get better foreign policy information than others.<sup>11</sup> Authoritarian leaders stand to benefit from adopting institutions that leverage bureaucratic capacity to collect and process more information than they can on their own. Yet, many authoritarian leaders forgo more effective institutions for utilizing and managing bureaucratic capacity. The reason is that while such institutions offer leaders more complete and accurate information, they also empower bureaucrats. This can pose risks to authoritarian leaders when they fear bureaucrats will form coalitions with domestic political rivals or otherwise oppose their agenda, causing the leader to institutionally marginalize, and sometimes politically persecute, bureaucrats.<sup>12</sup> Such institutions restrict the ability of bureaucrats to relay information they collect and encourages them to prioritize information congruent with the leader’s prior beliefs – even when they know it to be inaccurate. This can degrade the quality of reporting the leader receives, the caliber of bureaucrats upon which a leader relies, and the propensity for decision-making groups to drift towards conformity.

### 3 The Psychology of Authoritarian Foreign Policy

In addition to drawing attention to the politics of authoritarian rule, the new literature on authoritarian foreign policy has also brought to focus two psychological factors: leader characteristics and beliefs about regime type.

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<sup>11</sup>In the parlance of foreign policy analysis, dictators make choices about the decision-making units they utilize (Hermann and Hermann, 1989).

<sup>12</sup>See also Hagan (1993).

### 3.1 LEADER CHARACTERISTICS

The study of how leader attributes shape foreign policy is not exclusive to authoritarian regimes. If anything, much of the recent scholarship on leader psychology tends to privilege case studies taken from democracies (e.g., [Preston, 2001](#); [Schafer and Crichlow, 2010](#); [Saunders, 2011](#); [Kaarbo, 2012](#); [Mintz and Wayne, 2020](#); [Yarhi-Milo, 2018](#); [Davis and McDermott, 2021](#)).<sup>13</sup> What matters is not necessarily the difference between authoritarian and democratic rule, but rather that leaders have different orientations towards risk ([McDermott, 2001](#)), fairness ([Kertzer and Rathbun, 2015](#)), strategic reasoning ([Rathbun, 2019](#)), and so on.

Yet, there may be meaningful connections between the authoritarian institutions and leader psychology. Personalist rulers, for example, tend to exhibit distinct backgrounds, experiences, leadership styles, and beliefs, which tend to be associated with more conflictual foreign policies ([Weeks, 2014](#)). In particular, male gender ([Barnhart et al., 2020](#)), revolutionary background ([Colgan, 2013a](#)), and military experience ([Horowitz and Stam, 2014](#); [Jost, Meshkin and Schub, 2022](#)) are associated with more hawkish foreign policy attitudes and behaviors. This may explain why many personalist leaders hold more conflictual ([Kennedy, 2011](#)) and offensively-oriented attitudes ([Feng, 2007](#)). Put differently, the motives, beliefs, and operational codes ([Schafer and Walker, 2006](#)) of personalist leaders may be quite different from nonpersonalist ones. By way of illustration, whereas some argue that Saddam Hussein was predisposed to perceive threats against him ([Post, 2004](#), 219), others note that Mikhail Gorbachev generally perceived the world as less threatening ([Winter et al., 1991](#), 236).

Why do these leader-level attributes cluster in personalist regimes? One plausible reason is that the same traits that affect a leader's *motivation* to consolidate power also affect the foreign policies they adopt. Leaders who possess certain dispositions – such as risk acceptance, narcissism, or belief in the efficacy and appropriateness of violence – may be more likely to attempt to personalize power. Once in office, these tendencies then spill over into foreign policy decision-making. Risk acceptance tends to be associated with more conflictual foreign policies ([McDermott, 2001](#)). Narcissistic individuals, who exhibit the cognitive need to call attention to

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<sup>13</sup>For exceptions beyond those referenced below, see discussions of Otto von Bismarck in [Rathbun \(2019\)](#), Saddam Hussein and Muammar Gaddafi in [Colgan \(2013b\)](#), Nikita Khrushchev in [Lupton \(2020\)](#), and Mikhail Gorbachev in [Holmes \(2018\)](#).

their own skills, talents, and accomplishments (Post, 1986), are more likely to consolidate power (Glad, 2002) but may also be prone to overconfidence that leads them to enter into ill-advised international conflicts (Johnson et al., 2006). Finally, leaders who believe in the use of violence to achieve domestic political goals may see the use of force as an equally attractive foreign policy strategy as well. These intuitions echo Goldgeier (1994), who found that Soviet leaders applied bargaining strategies in international negotiations that were analogous to those that had served them well in domestic political battles.

A second reason that personalist leaders may have systematically different backgrounds is that certain prior experiences could increase the leader's *capability* to consolidate power. For instance, many personalist rulers – such as Idi Amin in Uganda, Saddam Hussein in Iraq, and Muammar Gaddafi in Libya – had experience in the state's coercive organizations or came to power through revolutionary movements that conferred charismatic authority. While these backgrounds likely improved their ability to personalize power, military and revolutionary experience (Colgan, 2013a; Horowitz and Stam, 2014), it also tends to shape the foreign policies that leaders pursue once in office.

### 3.2 BELIEFS ABOUT REGIME TYPE

A second way in which psychology matters to authoritarian foreign policy is through beliefs about regime type. Whatever one thinks of the theoretical and empirical claims that the academic literature makes regarding how authoritarian institutions affect foreign policy, regime type might still matter if observers of the international environment *think* it does. There is at least some evidence to suggest that regime type shapes the inferences that observers draw about other states, particularly perceptions of threat (Hermann and Kegley, 1995; Haas, 2005; Renshon, Yarhi-Milo and Kertzer, 2021). In a foundational survey experiment, Tomz and Weeks (2013) show that democratic audiences tend to support military action against autocracies, but not other democracies, because the public finds the former more threatening and the use of military force against them more morally justifiable. More broadly, individuals across a number of Western democracies tend to exhibit warmer feelings towards other democratic countries (Gries et al., 2020). Analysis of operational codes suggests that some democratic leaders, such as Bill Clinton and Tony Blair, perceive authoritarian regimes as more hostile (Schafer and Walker, 2006). Hayes

(2009) similarly finds that regime type shaped the way that American policymakers viewed Iran's nuclear weapon program more negatively than India's. Yet, this generalization seems not to hold for all democratic leaders. Some leaders perceive autocracies as threats *only* when their behavior is incongruent with perceived democratic principles – and may argue over what regime features constitute an autocratic regime (Oren, 1995).<sup>14</sup>

There are at least two ways to think about the origins of beliefs about regime type. The first is that domestic institutions are reputations. So, if an observer perceives that authoritarian regimes have more frequently resorted to violence, they might assess that other authoritarian regimes are, all else equal, more threatening. Depending on what one makes of the empirical validity of the connection between regime type and international conflict, it is possible to view these heuristics as stemming from a rational learning process (Mitchell, Gates and Hegre, 1999), in which observers draw inferences about the likely behavior of a given state based the past behavior of states with which it shares similar characteristics.

It is also possible to see beliefs about regime type as a heuristic to inform their judgments about other states. In this view, decision-makers look for mental shortcuts by which to assess things like whether a state is threatening. While not all autocracies may be threatening, the heuristic allows observers to make judgments quickly. In this way, beliefs about regime type might parallel other schemas or stereotypes in social psychology (Fiske et al., 2002). Image theory similarly points to how observers may rely upon these images to “fill in the gaps” in information about another state (Castano, Bonacossa and Gries, 2016). Beliefs about regime type may thus be part and parcel of others images of foreign countries. Image theory holds that leaders and citizens tend to develop stable impressions of other states based upon evaluations along three dimensions: relative capability, perceived threat, and cultural status (Cottam, 1994; Herrmann and Fischerkeller, 1995). Regime type could presumably affect observer perceptions of all three image components.

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<sup>14</sup>See also Owen (1994, 96-97).

## 4 Future Directions

The study of authoritarian foreign policy has flourished in recent years. Many of the field's advances stem from moving beyond coarse differences between democracies and autocracies – and instead unpacking the inner dynamics of authoritarian rule. Yet, as much as the field has benefited from the incorporating insights from comparative politics and psychology into the study of authoritarian foreign policy, these fields continue to advance – and authoritarian rule itself may be changing. This suggests several directions for future scholarship.

The first area might be termed the microfoundations of political accountability in nonpersonalist autocracies. As noted above, while it seems to be the case that collective rule autocracies tend to remove leaders who initiate interstate wars that fail at higher rates, there have been comparatively few studies that trace the process by which elite or mass audiences mobilize to remove leaders on grounds of wartime performance – much less the other types of foreign policy decisions that might motivate elite audiences to remove leaders. In the same vein, we do not know why some collective rule regimes choose not to (or fail to) remove leaders who blunder into failed international conflicts – or, more broadly, why collective rule regimes sometimes adopt foreign policies that fail but leaders nevertheless remain in office.

A second area concerns the foundations of foreign policy preferences in authoritarian countries – and the conditions under which collective rule autocracies might adopt more conflictual and less cooperative preferences. Hawkishness, militant internationalism, and nationalism are comparatively understudied in authoritarian contexts. There are important exceptions (e.g., [Tessler and Robbins, 2007](#); [Fair, Kaltenthaler and Miller, 2013](#)), particularly regarding the study of nationalism in countries like China (e.g., [He, 2007](#); [Reilly, 2011](#); [Wang, 2014](#); [Gries, Steiger and Wang, 2016](#); [Johnston, 2016](#)) and Russia (e.g., [Laruelle, 2009](#); [McFaul, 2020](#)). However, the bulk of these studies tend to be somewhat divorced from the broader study of foreign policy attitudes. This does not suggest that the hierarchical structure of foreign policy attitudes need *necessarily* differ depending on institutional context. Yet, more research is needed if scholars wish to take seriously the possibility (if only to dismiss it) that differences in domestic institutions might shape foreign policy attitudes.

Regardless of how foreign policy attitudes are structured, it seems plausible that hawkish

factions can rise to power in some collective rule systems dominated by civilians – and that some domestic constituencies stand to profit from some types international conflict more than others (Lawson, 1984). One particularly intriguing possibility is that collective rule autocracies may find ways to insulate themselves from war costs by lowering societal burdens (Valentino, Huth and Croco, 2010), adopting limited military strategies (Caverley, 2014), developing novel technologies (Cunningham, forthcoming), deferring taxation (Kreps, 2018), or choosing covert action (Carson, 2018). Another possibility is that some authoritarian regimes may pursue long-term strategies that may promote hawkish or nationalist attitudes. This might stem from long-term characteristics of the regime’s history, such as exposure to trauma by colonialist or imperialist powers (Miller, 2013). It might also stem from mid- or short-term incentives to exploit hawkish or nationalist sentiments as a type of diversionary strategy that substitutes for other types of regime legitimacy, particularly during elite power struggles (Pickering and Kisangani, 2010) or poor economic performance (Carter, 2018).

We also have comparatively little research on how authoritarian regimes adjudicate the costs and benefits of exporting their domestic institutions abroad. It is striking that some autocracies have committed to promoting their domestic institutions abroad but others did not (Owen, 2010; Dukalskis, 2021). There are obvious answers, such as preference alignment, the viability of alternative regimes, and the universalistic logic of single-party communist regimes during the Cold War (O’Rourke, 2018; Hopf, 2012). Yet, if choices surrounding the content of ideology are made purposefully (Goddard, 2009), these answers do not necessarily explain why some authoritarian regimes concluded that foreign regimes with similar domestic features advanced their interests, especially given the costs that interventions impart. Similar questions emerge regarding why autocracies perceive threats to their international reputation or domestic legitimacy stemming from the foreign interventions of other states. Some argue that contemporary autocracies are less interested in creating a more autocratic world and more interested in securing one in which their own type can prosper (Weiss, 2019).

A third area for future research concerns emerging trends in contemporary personalist rule. Much of the existing literature on authoritarian foreign policy takes regime type – or the power balances between leaders and the four types of domestic actors discussed above – as generally stable. Yet, as noted above, personalist regimes emerge as the result of strategic interactions.

Some leaders are better positioned to consolidate power than others (Meng, 2020) – and they may think strategically about when to consolidate power through, for instance, elite purges (Sudduth and Bell, 2018). Yet, existing scholarship has devoted comparatively little attention to the dynamics of foreign policy decision-making during these periods.

Another important question is whether the contemporary wave of personalist rulers is associated with the same types of experiences and foreign policy attitudes as those of the twentieth century, upon which much of our empirical understanding is based. Kendall-Taylor, Frantz and Wright (2017, 8) find that between the percent of dictatorships considered personalist has roughly doubled since the late 1980s. From the perspective of scholars of international politics, however, what is particularly noteworthy about these neo-personalist dictators is that most came to power through gradual erosion of norms constraining executive power rather than through coups or rebellions. In fact, the rate of coups has generally declined across the globe (Marinov and Goemans, 2014). In addition, many of the neo-personalists do not share the same backgrounds leading social revolutions of the twentieth century or working in coercive organizations. As such, it is not clear if the gradual consolidation of power characteristic of neo-personalist dictators will lead to the same risk-acceptant dispositions that made personalist dictatorships prone to interstate violence in the second half of the twentieth century.

Intriguing questions also arise from regimes that are backsliding towards more authoritarian rule (Hyde, 2020; Haggard and Kaufman, 2021). One recent study finds that since the turn of the century, approximately one third of presidents have attempted to evade term limits by amending the constitution, creating a new constitution, or questioning the legality of term limits (Versteeg et al., 2020). Roughly two thirds of those that attempted to remain in power succeeded. Yet, the foreign policy effects of backsliding have yet to be examined systematically.

It may be possible to study authoritarian neo-personalism and democratic backsliding in a complementary fashion. Indeed, one of the key advances in the study of authoritarian foreign policy is to note that authoritarian and democratic regimes need not be studied in isolation from one another (Kaarbo, 2015; Hyde and Saunders, 2020). Such cross-institutional comparisons are likely to remain central as scholars continue to advance the field.

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