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The Rise of Authoritarian Regional International Organizations

Christina Cottiero and Stephan Haggard

Abstract

Over the last few decades, the number and influence of regional international organizations (RIOs) with powerful authoritarian members have been on the rise, helping stall democratization and preserve autocratic regimes. This paper, the first in an IGCC series on authoritarian international organizations, charts the growth of authoritarian RIOs since the end of World War II to present day and analyzes their pathways for influence, including through election monitoring, peacekeeping, and development assistance. It concludes by exploring the implications for U.S. foreign policy, including how the United States can build coalitions of its own; whether (or not) the United States should engage with certain authoritarian RIOs; and why the United States should be cautious when partnering with certain regional organizations.

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Introduction

The last several decades have witnessed a surprising development: the persistence and even growth in the number and activities of authoritarian or autocratic regional international organizations (RIOs). We define authoritarian or autocratic RIOs not in terms of their internal decision-making processes but as *international organizations that are dominated by autocratic members.* Prominent examples include organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which includes both China and Russia as core members; the Gulf Cooperation Council; a dozen such regional organizations in Africa; and experiments in Latin America such as the once-robust *Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América* (ALBA), which was founded in 2004 by Cuba and Venezuela.

A growing body of work is providing new empirical analysis of these authoritarian RIOs, typically focusing on their regional context: Central Asia (Collins 2009; Allison 2008; Ambrosio 2008; Cooley and Heathershaw 2017), the Middle East (Heydemann and Leenders 2011; Odinius and Kuntz 2015; Tansey, Koehler, and Schomotz 2016; Libman and Obydenkova 2018a), Africa (Herbst 2007; Hartmann 2016; Stoddard 2017), and Latin America (Kneuer et al. 2019; Libman and Obydenkova 2018a).

An emerging finding from this body of work is that authoritarian regimes not only act collectively (Mattes and Rodriguez 2014), but can act to blunt prospects for democratization and even stabilize authoritarian rule (Bader, Grävingholt, and Kästner 2010; Burnell and Schlumberger 2010; Debre 2020, 2021; Vanderhill 2013, 2014; Whitehead 2014; von Soest 2015; Libman and Obydenkova 2018b; Obydenkova and Libman 2019; Weyland 2017; Kneuer et al. 2019; Yakouchyk 2019; Söderbaum, 2010). Nor are the activities of these organizations the only evidence on offer in this regard. Authoritarian regimes—small as well as large (Jourde 2007; Bunce and Koesel 2013)— have successfully resisted democracy promotion efforts (Bush 2015), sometimes drawing on regional institutional support.

The theoretical puzzles raised by authoritarian RIOs go to the core of our conception of international cooperation. Both political scientists (e.g., Keohane 1984) and economists (e.g., Alesina, Angeloni, and Etro 2005) take it as axiomatic that international cooperation, including through international organizations, improves welfare.

Moreover, important research has demonstrated that membership in organizations dominated by democracies can have positive effects on human rights and the prospects for democracy (Pevehouse 2002a, 2002b, 2005; Mansfield and Pevehouse 2006, 2008; Hafner-Burton 2005, 2013; Poast and Urpelainen 2015, 2018). But these findings might well be reversed if the contracting parties to international organizations—that is, the

principles—are authoritarian regimes. In this case, the benefits from international cooperation through authoritarian RIOs would redound to autocrats or their selectorates (Siverson and Bueno de Mesquita 2018; Gallagher and Hanson 2015;
Svolik 2012).

This paper, the first in an IGCC series on authoritarian international organizations,
charts the growth of authoritarian RIOs since the end of World War II to present day
and analyzes their pathways for influence, including through election monitoring, peacekeeping, and development assistance. We conclude by exploring the implications for policy.

Regional International Organizations: The Shifting Landscape

Most of today's authoritarian regional international organizations (RIOs) were founded in the post-World War II period, which saw a dramatic increase in the total number of international organizations worldwide.

The United States supported or at least acquiesced in the development of regional organizations where they were not overtly discriminatory. U.S. policymakers have seen regional cooperation as a vehicle for overcoming challenges to economic development among smaller countries and improving cooperation and coordination of regional blocs with the United States. Historically, regional organizations have provided important benefits for the United States and increased the efficiency of U.S. foreign policy, most notably in the Western hemisphere but gradually expanding as the number of such organizations grew.

During the third wave of democratization, beginning in the mid-1970s and cresting with the collapse of the Soviet Union, numerous regional organizations were created that had democratic memberships. Yet many of the regional organizations formed in the early decades of the Cold War with authoritarian memberships persisted into the post-Cold War era. With the rise of authoritarian great powers—China and Russia —and influential authoritarian regional powers—the Gulf States, Iran, and Venezuela—another set of regional organizations was established with an authoritarian cast. Moreover, the composition of existing democratic regional organizations has shifted subtly in recent years as

the rising tide of democracy stalled and reversed among a number of developing countries, from the Philippines and Thailand, to Bolivia, Ecuador, and Nicaragua, and Benin and Zambia. Even the European Union has been forced to confront this problem as Hungary, Poland, and several Balkan countries witnessed democratic backsliding (see for example, Kelemen 2020).

How prevalent are authoritarian RIOs, and what influence do these organizations actually have? Preliminary research for this project provides some sense of the scope of the problem. For our initial survey, we relied on data from the Correlates of War IGO Dataset Version 3.0 (Pevehouse, McManus, and Nordstrom 2019), which includes 317 regional organizations from across the world covering 1815 to 2014. We focused initially on the postwar period (1949 to 2014) and then extended the dataset to new organizations formed in the last six years. The sample in this dataset is extremely heterogeneous, spanning complex and expansive political and economic institutions such as the European Union and narrowly focused functional organizations, such as the Intergovernmental Committee of the River Plate Basin Countries and the Union of Banana Exporting Countries. Although functional organizations may have socializing or other indirect effects on the degree to which regional international organizations have an authoritarian cast, the causal mechanisms outlined above are more likely to operate through organizations with a broader scope.

We therefore re-coded the dataset to distinguish between two different types of regional organizations: purely functional ones and general political, economic, and security organizations, including those involved in development lending. We identified a list of 110 general regional institutions. We then used existing data on democracy (from the Varieties of Democracy or V-Dem project) to calculate how democratic each organization is, on average, for each year. This gives us what we call the "IO autocracy score" (IAS).

The average IAS is constructed using data from the V-Dem Polyarchy index, which we rescale to span 0–10 rather than 0–1 (Teorell et al. 2016). We calculate the yearly average democracy score of co-members in each general political and general economic organization of which a country is a member, excluding the country under observation from the calculation. We then average these IO Polyarchy scores for all the organizations of which the country is a member in a given year, yielding the average IO Polyarchy score among a country's co-members. We multiply this score by -1 to create the IAS. Higher IAS scores are associated with country membership in more autocratic

RIOs. In our full sample, the IAS ranges from -10 (least autocratic) to 0 (most autocratic) with a mean of -2.52. For example, in 2000 Liberia was a member of three political and economic regional organizations. Liberia's IAS for that year is the simple average of its co-members' V-Dem Polyarchy scores for those three organizations, excluding the Polyarchy score of Liberia (-3.569).

We can also calculate the average IO autocracy score of all of the regional institutions
of which a given country is a member; how democratic—or authoritarian—are the organizations of which Nigeria, for example, is a member? We call this the "country IO autocracy score," capturing country-level exposure to democratic or autocratic influences.

This data permits us to identify a list of contemporary authoritarian IOs and also to track the rise of these organizations over time and weight them by the GDP of the members. Clearly, an organization made up of poorer developing countries does not have the same heft as one that is anchored by China, Russia, or Saudi Arabia.

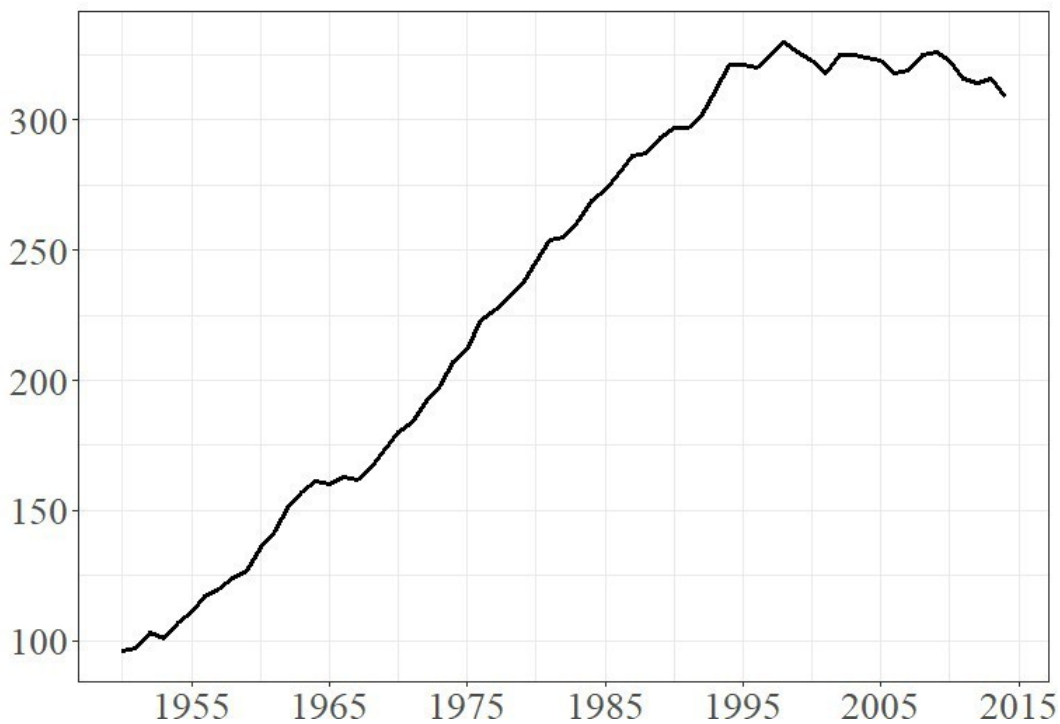**Figure 1.** Total number of RIOs worldwide, 1950–2014

Figure 1 depicts the count of RIOs worldwide each year between 1950 and 2014, including both general political and functional organizations. From the end of World War II until the end of the Cold War, there was a steady growth in RIOs, after which the number of such organizations appears to plateau.

Figure 2 presents the count of regional organizations in which the majority of members are liberal democracies and those in which a majority of members are not liberal democracies. Not all non-democracies are the same. The illiberal organizations range from those comprised of members from "hard" authoritarian regimes—those that exhibit few signs of political competition and extensive repression of oppositions—to those dominated by competitive authoritarian governments. Some authoritarian international organizations have some democratic as well as autocratic members. Yet the figure makes clear that the majority of new RIOs formed in the second half of the 20th century were dominated by non-democratic member states. Though the gap narrowed after the fall of the Soviet Union, non-democratic RIOs have consistently outnumbered their democratic counterparts.

Figure 2. Number of Authoritarian versus Democratic RIOs, 1950–2018
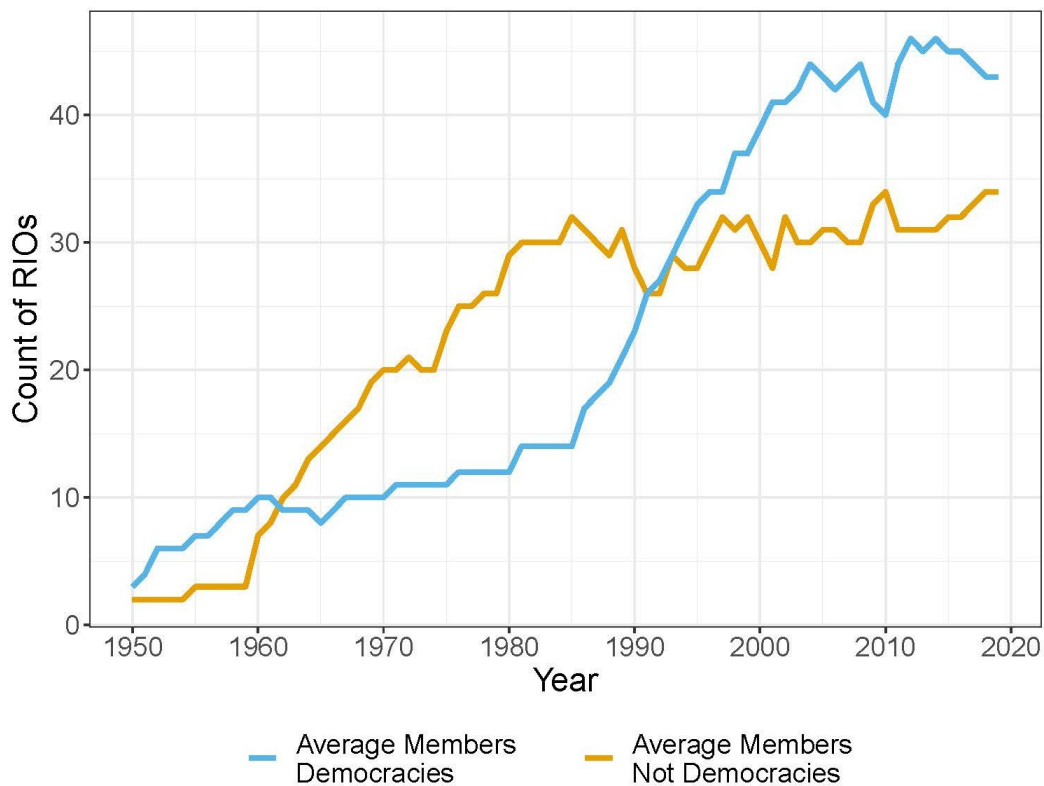
A further sense of the scope of these institutions can be seen by focusing on those engaged in development lending. Among the 36 international development institutions for which data is available, 22 institutions are dominated by autocratic governments. The five autocratic aid organizations for which we currently have data have disbursed almost $70 billion since the 1990s. The most active are the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development with $30 billion in aid commitments, the Islamic Development Bank with $15 billion, and the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), with about $12 billion in aid project commitments. The newest members in this new group of organizations, the New Development Bank (NDB) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), are likely to become even larger lenders and donors. Having started to disburse funds in 2016, the NDB has approved over 42 projects in member countries for a total of over $12 billion. The AIIB has committed roughly $8 billion in the same short time span and aims to finance infrastructure projects worth $10–12 billion annually over the coming years.

Mechanisms of Influence

IOs perform three widely-recognized functions (Table 1): pooling of resources; solving coordination and collective action problems; and legitimation. In the case of authoritarian RIOs, these functions are leveraged to support authoritarian rule and undermine democracy. Below we analyze the potential adverse effects of such organizations on the prospects for democratic rule before turning more briefly to possible economic consequences.

Authoritarian Rios and the Prospects for Democracy

Autocratic RIOs provide means for pooling resources and providing material support. This support may be economic: providing short-term countercyclical finance that members can draw on in times of need or for funding longer-run developmental objectives that redound to the benefit of the autocrat. More narrowly, autocratic RIOs' funding mechanisms can generate contracts that serve important patronage functions for member state leaders.

Table 1. How International Organizations Sustain Authoritarian Rule

Causal Mechanism	Corresponding Treaty Provision or Action
Pooling resources and providing material support	• Financial support through grants or loans • Mutual defense arrangements • Joint military exercises • Intervention
Solving coordination problems	• Summits and regular meetings among members • Police cooperation and information sharing suborganizations • Anti-terrorism policies • Norms against coups or irregular transfers of power
Legitimation of authoritarian rule	• Promoting "stability" (political, security, or economic) as a goal of the organization • Principles of pluralism of regime type and noninterference • Election validation

Provision of economic support not only has a direct effect; it also allows autocratic IOs to counter the influence of global and regional financial institutions largely dominated by democracies. Investment funds and banks tied to regional organizations attract capital not only from wealthier regional member states but also increase access to extra-regional funding. In a 2004 meeting of the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Senator Richard Lugar expressed concern for how regional multilateral development banks, including those tied to regional integration organizations, spread corruption: "Bribes can influence important bank decisions on projects and contractors…Stolen money may prop up dictatorships and finance human rights abuses" (S.Hrg. 108-734, 2004). Although extra-regional organizations and countries can cut ties with regional lenders, it is difficult for them to otherwise punish RIOs that break the rules at the behest of autocrats.

In addition to economic support, we have recently seen an increase in more traditional forms of support indicative of the insurance functions we associate with formal alliances: mutual defense commitments; military cooperation, including training exercises and information sharing across multiple domains; and even outright intervention to deter or defeat challengers. Military interventions by autocratic IOs occur in the context of civil wars, in the wake of *coups d'etat*, and in the form of peacekeeping or peace enforcement operations. But it can also occur in the face of nonviolent domestic challenges such as mass mobilizations; the intervention following extensive protests in Bahrain in 2011, orchestrated through the Gulf Cooperation Council and led by Saudi forces, is a well- known example.

These forms of support overlap to some extent with actions designed to address coordination problems. Just as models of democratization emphasizing international factors have focused on diffusion, autocratic IOs may coordinate in order to limit the opportunities for opposition groups to find safe haven in neighboring countries.

Authoritarian cooperation could seek to limit cross-border access for nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) with democratic values (Christensen and Weinstein 2013; Dupuy, Ron, and Prakash 2016), deny sanctuary for exiled opposition parties, deny operational bases to insurgents and military defectors, coordinate databases to track adversaries, and even cooperate to restrict transnational influence through broadcasting or the Internet.

Since the onset of the war on terror, we have seen increasing cooperation among autocrats with respect to "terrorism," including vis-a-vis groups that simply oppose authoritarian rule. Research demonstrates that RIOs engage in such rebranding in Central Asia, the Middle East, and Africa (see, for example, Whitaker (2010) on East Africa).

Police cooperation transfers repressive tactics for political survival from the domestic to the international level. Autocrats label and seek to delegitimize domestic opposition actors as dishonest criminals, and information about the whereabouts and activities of criminals may be shared among co-members of RIOs. Police cooperation agreements often include or are established in tandem with extradition clauses, allowing members to hand over criminals, coup-plotters, and so-called criminal opposition when they cross borders. RIOs also host summits, educational courses, and working groups of police commissioners and military officials. These regularized meetings enable officials from

authoritarian regimes to build trust, assess co-members' intentions, and demonstrate effective practices, perhaps increasing their willingness to implement information-sharing and extradition agreements.

The 2021 Freedom House report on "transnational repression" cites numerous examples in which authoritarian regional organizations have played a role in this regard. "The SCO [Shanghai Cooperation Organization] helps states maintain a shared 'blacklist,' and facilitates information sharing about threats in the region," the report says. "The Minsk Convention [a legal agreement among some former Soviet republics] also facilitates information sharing, and states in the region have cited it to justify handing over exiles. Additionally, governments of the region are prolific abusers of Interpol to target critics— not only those in Russia, but in Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan."

Finally, authoritarian IOs may have socializing and legitimizing effects. In fact, these mechanisms are the ones emphasized most frequently in the autocratic IO literature (i.e., Ambrosio 2008; Cooley 2015; Diamond, Plattner, and Walker 2016; Vanderhill 2013; von Soest 2015; Weyland 2017; Debre 2021). Autocratic IOs typically do not openly endorse authoritarianism per se. However, such organizations frequently contain provisions suggesting that diversity and pluralism of political form is valued, countering liberal presumptions (Cooley 2015). They function as ideational communities that question the applicability of democracy on the basis of cultural and regional identity (Debre 2020; Ambrosio 2009; Acharya 1997), and argue for prioritizing "stability" above political reforms (Libman and Obydenkova 2018b). In order to deter both domestic and international opposition, legitimating tactics seek to reframe authoritarian laws as simply different, or even better for maintaining social stability, than laws in democracies.

Despite the fact that many autocrats came to power through coups or insurgencies, some autocratic IOs have promoted anti-coup norms, seeking to deter actions not only by democratic forces but by challenges from within their own ranks.

Authoritarian Election Monitoring

A particular practice of concern in these legitimation efforts are authoritarian RIO election monitors sent to endorse the results of dubious elections in contexts where the political playing field remains highly uneven (Merloe 2015; Walker 2016). We refer to this process as

"election validation," and the monitors as zombie election monitors; although the organization's stance is likely a foregone conclusion, these monitors are sent for the political purpose of legitimating tainted elections.

Zombie election monitors may be a particularly effective tool of these organizations as the invitation of these low-quality monitors who validate fraudulent elections allows member states to perform "mock compliance" with the norm of election monitoring without risking criticism by credible monitors (Debre and Morgenbesser 2017). The norm of inviting election monitors traditionally requires governments to invite observers to monitor their elections from international organizations such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe or the Organization of American States as well as from non-governmental organizations such as the Carter Center or the International Republican Institute (IRI), which are headquartered in the United States. These organizations send either long- or short-term teams that observe and report on the quality of elections. It is now common for multiple international organizations to observe a single election (Kelley 2009).

High-quality international monitors seek to level the playing field by supporting the democratic process, regardless of who wins. They make it more difficult for incumbents to steal an election by reporting on irregularities and increasing the costs of cheating through publicizing electoral malpractice. For example, observers from the OSCE and other organizations played an important role in the early 2000s in the Color Revolutions that took place in the post-Soviet region, helping to expose fraud and mobilize citizens in the post-election protests that led to regime change in countries such as Georgia and Ukraine (Fawn 2006, 1139–1140; Beissinger 2007; Bunce and Wolchik 2007; Tucker 2007).

In contrast, low-quality international monitors seek to undermine the democratic process. These so-called zombie election observers are sent by groups such as the Commonwealth of Independent States, a Russia-led NGO, and can be considered to be a form of election meddling since they seek to tilt the playing field in the government's favor (Walker and Cooley 2013). They monitor highly flawed elections in authoritarian countries with the goal of strengthening the position of the incumbent non-democratic government by being present and issuing and publicizing positive reports, despite the flaws of the elections they observe.

While we have a good understanding of how high-quality election monitors work (Hyde 2011), there is only a small literature on zombie election monitors and to date they have focused largely on single-country cases (presence of zombie monitors at a single election such as Cambodia's 2018 elections and case studies on elections in Cambodia in 2013, Zimbabwe in 2013, and Egypt in 2014).

The Economic Agenda

The organizations and processes just described pertain to the effects of RIOs on political outcomes. But the realm of development finance provides another channel through which adverse effects might occur. In 2014, the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) created the NDB. The idea was bold: The development bank would challenge the global development finance architecture known as the Bretton Woods system. In the same year, China launched the AIIB with a starting capital of $100 billion, equivalent to two-thirds of the capital of the Asian Development Bank and half of that of the World Bank. Although these two development banks are two of the first development organizations under the leadership of China, they are by no means the first to be governed by mainly autocratic regimes. The Eurasian Development Bank was established by the Russian Federation and Kazakhstan in 2006. Other authoritarian institutions playing a developmental role include the Arab Bank for Economic Development, the Islamic Development Bank, the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development, and even OPEC, which sustains a portfolio of about $12 billion in aid project commitments.

Observers in low-income countries have welcomed these new organizations as augmenting resources and even being better able to understand the interests of other low- or middle-income countries. The launch of rival international development organizations (IDOs) has caused widespread concern and criticism among observers in the developed world, however. Just as the United States has used foreign aid to coax recipient countries into pursuing policies that advance U.S. economic and security interests, authoritarian development organizations could use foreign aid to promote their own interests. In addition, whereas traditional organizations have used aid conditionality to promote economic policy reform, appropriate regulation, good governance, and transparency, authoritarian organizations may use conditionality for different purposes or waive conditionality requirements altogether. We can imagine a number of pathways through which such aid could have mixed effects at best, for example,

by tolerating or even encouraging corruption or lenders favoring certain companies.

Existing work has already highlighted some of the dark sides of these IDOs. There has been an intense debate about the extent to which Chinese bilateral aid has been detrimental or positive to economic growth in developing countries (Dreher et al. 2018). Ferry, Hafner-Burton, and Schneider (2020) also demonstrate that IDOs composed of corrupt members are more likely to support those corrupt members—and thus corruption—and that anti-corruption mandates have not been effective in addressing this issue. We show a new way in which multilateral aid organizations can foster bias (Dreher, Sturm and Vreeland 2009a,b; Schneider and Tobin 2013) by focusing on how authoritarian regimes can use regional development organizations to pursue their strategic goals, which might be very different from the goals of traditional donors.

Implications for Policy

The rise of authoritarian regional organizations—institutions made up wholly or largely of authoritarian members—pose potential challenges to U.S. foreign policy. Though the Trump administration revived a long-standing debate about the value of U.S. participation in multilateral institutions, the challenge that authoritarian regional organizations present to U.S. foreign policy interests has been overlooked. Where authoritarian RIOs are anchored by the two major authoritarian great powers—Russia and China—they are implicated in the new great power competition. They become additional sources of influence, with what might be called "lock-in" effects—binding countries to the larger geostrategic projects of those two countries. Emerging authoritarian regional organizations in Africa and the Middle East, and even in Southeast Asia, may have similar "lock-in" effects on their members.

At the broadest level, the United States has an interest in ensuring that organizational alternatives—either multilateral or regional—are available for new democracies. The conflict between the U.S.-led Transpacific Partnership and the Chinese-ASEAN[1]-led Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership is an example of starkly different institutional models and political agendas—one supportive of rules-based cooperation and the other with a more shallow agenda, for example, with respect to intellectual property and protection of foreign investment. The United States could build alternative organizations and coalitions supportive of liberal democratic values—as it did on infrastructure with the BUILDS Act[2] or with respect to the influence of Chinese technology companies such as Huawei—to counter "lock-in." This is particularly important in regards to Chinese and Russian political and economic projects supported by organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the AIIB.

However, constructing altogether new organizations is a vast undertaking and not likely to be successful in the absence of regional initiatives. Despite their political agendas, the United States cannot simply shun authoritarian RIOs. Instead, the United States should look closely at how, and whether, to forge working relationships with organizations that exhibit the most openness. For example, the AIIB took on additional shareholders who, while not holding a majority of formal voting shares, can exercise influence within the organization.

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1   ASEAN is the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

2   To learn more see https://www.csis.org/analysis/build-act-has-passed-whats-next.

This is clearly important with respect to regional organizations that the United States funds.

U.S. engagement with authoritarian RIOs is particularly important in Africa, where the
U.S. government provides funding and training to regional organizations dominated by illiberal states on the continent with the expectation that they will manage peacekeeping and peace enforcement missions. Particularly following the so-called Blackhawk Down incident in Mogadishu, where U.S. troops were killed by members of a Somali militia, the United States has come to rely on these organizations to manage local crises, sparing the U.S. government from deploying soldiers to most African conflicts. Despite significant investment in regional militaries, our preliminary research shows that African leaders' willingness to deploy troops or police to regional organization co-members and to resolve local crises varies significantly and that repressive leaders may be among the most robust cooperators (Cottiero 2021). U.S. policy needs to approach such organizations with caution and focus on those with somewhat more democratic memberships and even ad hoc coalitions of democracies to accomplish these objectives.

It also needs to differentiate between those organizations that support hard authoritarian regimes versus those that are more plural in their memberships.

Finally, on the functional front, the United States needs to consider both election monitoring and development assistance in the context of the rise of these new authoritarian organizations. U.S. policymakers should consider whether it is counterproductive to accept invitations to monitor elections where zombie monitors are also present.[3] Bush and Prather's (2018) survey research in Tunisia found that monitors from illiberal institutions (the Arab League) were perceived by Tunisian voters as more credible than monitors from liberal democracies. Careful partnering with organizations within the region and country could reduce the perception that outside democratic observers are biased or interfering in elections.

Regarding foreign aid, the goal of major democratic donor states has traditionally been to foster sustainable economic development (even if the formula for doing so has shifted). Various forms of conditionality have been a component of this process, and they are potentially weakened by aid from authoritarian donors as borrowers secure an "outside option." A key policy issue for the United States will be to determine when multilateral and bilateral aid is complementary to that

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3   See Not Free or Credible: Why Regional Election Observers Failed Benin and Chad, Christina Cottiero, Political Violence At A Glance, April 22, 2021.

of authoritarian donors and when aid from such donors poses risks to the integrity of development projects. As with our discussion of the African cases, partnering with such organizations may be appropriate if adequate influence can be maintained over the policy and project agenda.

Cases where such partnering has been attempted, including projects involving both the AIIB and World Bank, are the subject of forthcoming papers. However as noted earlier, strengthening the influence of democratic institutions may require building alternative organizations, strengthening existing organizations whose interests are more closely aligned with U.S. policy, or developing ad hoc functional coalitions.

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