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Democracy, Autocracy, and International Cooperation: Re-Examining the Two-Way Relationship

Jon C. W. Pevehouse and Jonas Tallberg

Abstract

How does regime type shape international cooperation, and how does international cooperation, in turn, affect domestic political development? Since the 1990s, scholarship has offered two influential answers. A first generation, developed during post-Cold War liberal optimism, emphasized the cooperative advantages of democracy and the democratizing effects of international institutions. A second generation, emerging amid recent worldwide autocratization, instead shows how authoritarian governments create, use, and reshape international institutions, and how cooperation can stabilize autocratic rule or even contribute to democratic erosion. This review takes stock of these two generations and argues that both tend to understand the relationship through stylized self-reinforcing dynamics: a liberal virtuous circle and an authoritarian feedback loop. We develop an agenda to systematically explore the conditions that shape when and how democracy and autocracy affect international cooperation and vice versa. We highlight three priorities to facilitate this agenda: broadening empirical tests across historical periods, world regions, institutional forms, and issue areas; identifying domestic, institutional, and systemic factors that condition regime effects; and examining reciprocal causality without assuming that regime-based cooperation necessarily produces regime-reinforcing feedback.

Keywords: Democratic backsliding, Regime type, International cooperation, Authoritarianism, Institutional institutions

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Books Reviewed

Resurgence in World Politics. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Cottiero, Christina. 2026. *Protective Clubs: How Leaders Cooperate in African Regional Organizations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Debre, Maria J. 2025. *The Dictators' Club: How Regional Organizations Sustain Authoritarian Rule*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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Obydenkova, Anastassia V. and Alexander Libman. 2019. *Authoritarian Regionalism in the World of International Organizations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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Since the 1990s, an extensive literature in international relations (IR) has documented a reciprocal relationship between democracy and international cooperation (Pevehouse 2005; Mansfield and Pevehouse 2006; Poast and Urpelainen 2018; Ginsburg 2021). This research developed against the historical backdrop of the post-world war era, in which the spread of democratic rule coincided with an unprecedented expansion of international institutions. In one direction, scholars argued that democratic institutions made governments more willing and able to cooperate internationally. In the other, they expected international institutions to promote democratic transition and consolidation. Together, these arguments suggested a liberal virtuous circle: democracy fostered international cooperation, while international cooperation, in turn, helped sustain democracy. This mutually reinforcing relationship contributed to what has widely been understood as the liberal international order (Deudney and Ikenberry 1999; Lake et al. 2021).

Developments since around 2010 have complicated this picture. The third wave of democratization has given way to widespread autocratization and democratic backsliding (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019; Haggard and Kaufman 2021; Nord et al. 2026), while international institutions have become increasingly subject to contestation from authoritarian governments, populist and nationalist leaders, and other critics of liberal internationalism (Copelovitch and Pevehouse 2019; Adler-Nissen and Zarakol 2021; Tallberg et al. forthcoming). Yet authoritarian governments have not simply withdrawn from or rejected international cooperation. They have created organizations of their own regimes, repurposed existing institutions, and used transnational networks to advance illiberal objectives. At the same time, international institutions themselves have sometimes sustained authoritarian incumbents or contributed to democratic erosion. A recent wave of books has brought these dynamics into sharper focus (Obydenkova and Libman 2019; Ginsburg 2021; Cooley and Dukalskis 2025; Debre 2025; Cottiero 2026; Meyerrose 2026).

These developments raise fundamental questions about the relationship between domestic political regimes and international cooperation. Are democracies intrinsically more disposed toward international cooperation, or was their cooperative advantage contingent on the historical conditions of the postwar liberal order? Why do autocracies accept the constraints associated with international institutions, and what political purposes does such cooperation serve? Do democratic and authoritarian governments systematically construct, select, and reshape different forms of international cooperation? Conversely, under what conditions do international institutions promote democracy, sustain autocracy, or contribute to democratic erosion? More generally, how reliably does the regime orientation of states predict the international institutions they support, and how reliably do those institutions subsequently reinforce the domestic regimes from which they emerged?

This paper reviews scholarship on this two-way relationship between regime type and international cooperation. Our principal focus is the second generation of research that has emerged in response to the recent wave of autocratization and democratic backsliding. We situate this scholarship against the first generation that established the democratic cooperation research agenda and assess what the newer literature confirms, overturns, and adds to those earlier conclusions. The books at the center of the review approach the problem from different angles, examining international law, regional organizations, and transnational networks. Our purpose is not only to take stock of accumulating findings, but also to clarify how understandings of the reciprocal relationship between

domestic regimes and international cooperation have changed and what questions remain unresolved.

Our first argument is that the two generations are more similar in their analytical architecture than their contrasting substantive conclusions initially suggest. The first generation identified a liberal virtuous circle. Democracies and democratizing states were especially inclined to construct and join international institutions, while those institutions could subsequently consolidate democracy through lock in, conditionality, monitoring, socialization, and help to provide public goods. The second generation effectively reverses this logic. Autocratic governments construct, join, and reshape international institutions to secure resources, legitimacy, protection, learning, and influence, while those institutions in turn stabilize authoritarian rule and facilitate democratic backsliding. Despite pointing in opposite directions, both arguments emphasize a common causal structure: regime type shapes international cooperation in a broadly regime-congruent direction, and international cooperation subsequently feeds back in ways that reinforce the political conditions from which it emerged.

The comparison between the two generations points to a broader conclusion: international cooperation can be organized around different domestic regime purposes. The close association between democracy and cooperation during much of the postwar era was therefore historically contingent rather than intrinsic to domestic and international institutions themselves. It reflected a distinctive conjunction of expanding democracy, Western power, and institution building. The newer literature shows that international cooperation can also redistribute resources and authority in ways favorable to authoritarian rule. As the conditions sustaining the earlier liberal configuration have eroded, greater scope has emerged for autocratic states to cooperate internationally in support of regime-preserving objectives. In short, the mechanisms at work in international institutions function in universal ways, what changes is the domestic political interests and needs of state members.

Our second argument flows from the first: the shared emphasis on self-reinforcing relationships also constitutes a limitation of both generations. The first generation risked treating democracy and international cooperation as naturally complementary; the second risks replacing that liberal virtuous circle with an equally stylized authoritarian vicious circle. A growing body of evidence sits uneasily with either formulation. The effects of democracy and autocracy on cooperation vary across historical periods; democracies sometimes retreat from international organizations while autocracies accept substantial international constraints; and geopolitical interests can override regime affinities in states' institutional choices (Ginsburg 2021; Davis 2023; Vikberg et al. 2026). Feedback is similarly heterogeneous. Institutions created or dominated by democracies may weaken representative processes, while cooperation initiated by authoritarian governments can sometimes generate liberalizing pressures (Meyerrose 2026; Thomas 2001). Regime type matters, but neither uniformly nor deterministically.

We therefore argue for moving beyond virtuous and vicious circles toward a more conditional understanding of the relationship between regime type and international cooperation. The familiar circles are important causal configurations, but they represent only one possibility. Other configurations become visible once we relax the assumptions that cooperation reflects the domestic regime as a category and subsequently reinforces it. Cooperation may reflect regime-based

preferences yet generate countervailing domestic consequences; governments may participate in institutions that do not correspond to their regime preferences yet derive benefits that reinforce existing rule; or cooperation may neither reflect nor reinforce the originating regime. Explaining this variation requires greater attention to the conditions under which regime type matters. We highlight three priorities to identify and theorize these conditions: broadening empirical tests across historical periods, world regions, institutional forms, and issue areas; identifying domestic, institutional, and systemic factors that condition regime effects; and examining reciprocal causality without assuming that regime-congruent cooperation necessarily produces regime-reinforcing feedback.

First Generation: The Liberal Virtuous Cycle

The first generation of research emerged in the 1990s and 2000s against the backdrop of the third wave of democratization and the expansion and consolidation of the liberal international order. It focused primarily on democracy and democratization, asking how domestic regime type shapes international cooperation and how international institutions, in turn, affect domestic political regimes. On the first relationship, this scholarship argued that democratic and democratizing governments were more willing and able to cooperate internationally. On the second, it showed how international institutions can facilitate democratic transition and consolidation. Taken together, these arguments suggested a liberal virtuous circle in which democracy and international cooperation mutually reinforce one another (Russett and Oneal 2001).

Democracy as a Source of International Cooperation

A first body of scholarship approached democracy as a source of international cooperation. Across a remarkably broad set of domains, studies identified a positive relationship between democratic rule and states' willingness to participate in, deepen, and sustain international collaboration. Democracies were found to be more likely to join international organizations (Shanks et al. 1996; Russett and Oneal 2001; Boehmer and Nordstrom 2008), enter human rights agreements (Simmons 2009; Simmons and Danner 2010), liberalize trade (Mansfield et al. 2002, 2000; Milner and Mukherjee 2009), promote democracy abroad (Pevehouse 2005), provide international public goods (Bättig and Bernauer 2009), and make use of international dispute-settlement mechanisms (Davis 2011). Other research linked democracy to peaceful conflict resolution (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 1999; Russett 1993), greater accountability in international organizations (Grigorescu 2010), and more open institutional arrangements for transnational actors (Tallberg et al. 2013; 2016).

Research on international law reinforced this general pattern. Surveying treaty-making across multiple issue areas, Ginsburg (2021, Ch. 2), in one of the books under review, concludes that democratic governments display a substantially greater propensity than autocratic governments to engage with international law. More democratic states sign more international treaties in general, and bilateral treaty-making appears disproportionately driven by democracies, both in relations with other democracies and with authoritarian states. Similar patterns emerge for specific areas of cooperation. Democratic dyads are more likely to conclude bilateral labor agreements and bilateral investment treaties, democracies are more likely to support UN human rights resolutions, and democracies make greater use of dispute-settlement instruments in international trade.

A related strand of scholarship focused more specifically on transitional democracies and international organizations. Mansfield and Pevehouse (2006, 2008) found that democratizing states were especially likely to join IOs, especially standard-based and economic IOs, while other studies showed that political transitions toward democracy increased governments' propensity to sign human rights agreements (Moravcsik 2000; Hafner-Burton et al. 2015). Poast and Urpelainen (2018), in one of the books reviewed here, identify a closely related but more specific pattern: across a global sample of international organizations spanning five decades, democratization is associated with increased efforts to establish new institutions, but not with a greater propensity to join existing organizations.

Scholars explained these patterns through several mechanisms linking democratic institutions to cooperative behavior. A first emphasized *electoral incentives*. Because political leaders in democracies depend on broad constituencies for their continuation in office, they should be more responsive to popular demands for international cooperation when cooperation promises collective gains (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003; Ginsburg 2021). Autocratic leaders, by contrast, generally depend on narrower selectorates and therefore have weaker incentives to supply broadly shared benefits through international collaboration. Applied to IO membership, Mansfield and Pevehouse (2006, 145) argue that "to retain office, chief executives in democracies need to be more attentive to constituent demands than their nondemocratic counterparts, giving democratic leaders a particular impetus to enter IOs." Democracy, from this perspective, affects international cooperation by altering whose preferences political leaders must satisfy. And while authoritarian leaders value gains from cooperation, the probability that any given cooperative arrangement will benefit the more particularistic interests favored by the autocrat is lower than for a democratic leader.

A second mechanism centered on the *institutional constraints* characteristic of democratic rule. Checks and balances, the rule of law, and multiple centers of political authority were expected to make democratic commitments more credible over time (Gaubatz 1996; Mansfield et al. 2002). Domestic institutions constrain governments' ability to reverse course unilaterally and thereby reduce uncertainty about future compliance. This capacity for credible commitment should make democracies more attractive partners, increasing other states' willingness to enter cooperative arrangements with them. The same institutional constraints may also increase the durability of international commitments once undertaken. Where international agreements become embedded in multiple domestic institutions, they can be harder to abandon and more politically binding (Martin 2000; Lipson 2003). Democratic institutions thus were expected to facilitate cooperation both by reassuring external partners and by constraining governments domestically.

A third line of argument emphasized variation in states' sensitivity to *sovereignty costs*. International cooperation commonly requires governments to accept external constraints on their discretion, submit to third party monitoring, or delegate authority to international institutions (Abbott and Snidal 1998; Hawkins et al. 2006). Democracies were generally expected to be more willing than autocracies to bear such costs, whereas authoritarian governments placed greater weight on state authority and non-interference in domestic affairs (Ginsburg 2021, 48). These concerns should become especially pronounced when IOs possess powers to monitor, criticize, or sanction member governments (Mansfield and Pevehouse 2008). Even where international sanctions do not

immediately threaten an authoritarian leader's survival, they can reduce resources available for rewarding politically essential supporters (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003). Differences in regime type could therefore shape cooperation by affecting how governments evaluate the political costs of external constraint.

Democratizing states were thought to face additional incentives for international cooperation. One prominent argument stressed the value of membership in international organizations as a device for *locking in* domestic reform. Governments committed to democratization could use international institutions to raise the costs of reversal, tie their own hands, and constrain future leaders who might otherwise dismantle reforms (Moravcsik 2000; Mansfield and Pevehouse 2006; Donno 2010). A complementary argument emphasized governments' need to provide *public goods* during periods of political transition, which could create incentives to establish new international institutions tailor-made to provide those benefits (Poast and Urpelainen 2018). In this perspective, the association between democracy and cooperation was especially strong during democratization because international institutions could serve domestic political purposes unique for this stage of political development.

International Cooperation as a Source of Democracy

A second perspective emphasized international cooperation as a source of democracy. This argument formed part of a broader literature on the international dimensions of democratization, complementing domestically oriented explanations centered on modernization, elite transitions, class conflict, and economic incentives (Teorell 2010). Within this literature, particular attention was devoted to international organizations as institutions that could promote transitions to democracy, consolidate new democracies, and guard against democratic reversal. The central claim was that participation in international institutions changed the external environment in which domestic political actors operated, creating constraints, incentives, information, and norms that could strengthen democratic rule.

A foundational contribution was Pevehouse's work on regional organizations (Pevehouse 2005). Examining 55 regional organizations, Pevehouse found that participation in organizations with highly democratic memberships was associated with both transitions to democracy and the subsequent survival of democratic regimes. Importantly, the argument was conditional: regional organizations were expected to be most conducive to democratization when their members were themselves democracies and therefore prepared to pressure autocratic governments, attach democratic conditions to membership, and enforce those conditions. Subsequent research broadened this argument beyond regional organizations with high democratic density. Poast and Urpelainen (2018, Ch. 5), notably, found a strong relationship between a state's number of memberships in international organizations and democratic consolidation, suggesting that embeddedness in international institutions more generally could reinforce democracy.

While this literature concentrated primarily on transitions and democratic consolidation, some contributions suggested that international cooperation could matter beyond these stages. Keohane et al. (2009), for instance, argued that multilateral institutions could improve democratic processes even in established democracies by constraining special interests, protecting individual rights,

improving deliberation, and increasing governments' capacity to address collective problems. Rather than simply helping countries cross a threshold into democracy, international institutions could also contribute to the endurance and quality of democratic governance once democratic institutions were in place.

This literature also sought to identify the mechanisms through which international cooperation could produce these democratic effects. Scholars highlighted several pathways, including lock-in, conditionality, election monitoring, and socialization. These mechanisms differed, however, in the extent to which research demonstrated their operation empirically. Lock-in was theoretically prominent, but empirical research showing how international commitments subsequently prevented democratic reversal scarcer. By contrast, research on the other main mechanisms examined more directly how international institutions affected domestic actors and political outcomes.

Conditionality and external leverage received substantial attention in research on European regional organizations especially. The central argument was that international institutions could induce democratic reforms by making valued benefits conditional on compliance with political requirements. Kelley (2004) showed how the European Union (EU), Council of Europe, and Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) influenced domestic reforms by linking compliance to institutional rewards, while Vachudova (2005) traced how the EU's accession process altered political incentives and encouraged liberal reforms in Central and Eastern Europe. Much of this evidence concerned pre-accession conditionality and therefore demonstrated an effect of the prospect of membership rather than membership as such. Yet research also examined post-membership democracy protection through democracy clauses, suspension, sanctions, diplomatic pressure, and mediation, with studies such as Hawkins (2008) and Donno (2013) showing how regional organizations could impose costs on governments violating democratic commitments.

Election monitoring provided especially direct evidence of an international mechanism at work. International observers were expected to strengthen electoral democracy through deterrence, by increasing the probability that manipulation would be detected and condemned, and through information, by providing credible assessments of electoral integrity. Hyde's (2007) study of Armenia showed that observer presence reduced election-day fraud at monitored polling stations, while Hyde and Marinov (2014) demonstrated how observer assessments shaped post-election mobilization and helped political actors coordinate around credible judgments of electoral quality. Bush and Prather (2018) further showed that the informational effects of monitoring depend critically on the identity, credibility, and quality of the monitoring actor.

A final mechanism operated through *socialization* and norm diffusion. International institutions were understood as arenas in which political and administrative elites were repeatedly exposed to understandings of appropriate democratic behavior. Gheciu's (2005) research on the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) traced how interactions with officials in post-communist countries promoted norms of civilian control and democratic governance, providing process evidence of changes in actors' understandings and practices. Schimmelfennig and collaborators likewise showed how European institutions contributed to sustained compliance with democratic norms through socialization, persuasion, and social influence (Schimmelfennig 2000; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2005).

From Reciprocal Effects to a Virtuous Circle

Taken together, the two strands of first-generation research pointed toward a liberal virtuous circle between democracy and international cooperation. Research on the domestic origins of cooperation showed that democracies and democratizing states were especially likely to create and join international organizations, while research on the international sources of democracy suggested that such participation could, in turn, consolidate and sustain democratic rule. Pevehouse's work illustrated this reciprocal relationship particularly clearly. His research with Mansfield showed that democratizing states were especially prone to enter IOs (Mansfield and Pevehouse 2006), while his own work indicated that participation in democratically dense regional organizations contributed to democratic transition and survival (Pevehouse 2005). Combined, these findings implied a self-reinforcing relationship between democracy and international cooperation.

Poast and Urpelainen (2018) developed this logic more explicitly by integrating both directions of influence within a single argument. They argued that leaders in transitional democracies faced demands from newly expanded electorates for public goods that domestic governments often lacked the capacity to provide. These pressures encouraged democratizing states to create new international organizations suited to their particular governance needs. Participation in these organizations, in turn, helped transitional democracies acquire resources and address governance problems in ways that facilitated democratic consolidation. In this account, reciprocal effects were not simply parallel findings but connected stages in a reinforcing causal process.

This was a key contribution of the first generation. By connecting regime change and international cooperation, it challenged approaches that treated democratization as a purely domestic process and international institution-building as a separate interstate phenomenon. At the same time, the emerging virtuous-circle perspective contained an important limitation. By emphasizing mutually reinforcing relations between democracy and international cooperation, it risked treating the two as naturally complementary and paying insufficient attention to circumstances in which international cooperation might accommodate autocracy or contribute to democratic erosion. For example, Pevehouse (2005) explicitly argues that the democratizing effects of regional institutions was a result of the use of these institutions by domestic interests that desired to democratize, but lacked credible tools to do so. Absent these preferences, there was nothing inherent about regime type that would kick off this virtuous circle.

Second Generation: The Authoritarian Feedback Loop

The limitations of the first generation became increasingly visible as the political context that had sustained it began to change. From around 2010, the post-Cold War expansion of democracy gave way to autocratization and democratic backsliding (Nord et al. 2026; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019; Haggard and Kaufman 2021), alongside growing challenges to the liberal international order (Lake et al. 2021; Adler-Nissen and Zarakol 2021; Tallberg et al. forthcoming). These developments did not simply reverse the historical trends that had inspired the first generation. They also revealed phenomena that sat uneasily with its core expectations. Autocracies were not simply resisting

international institutions associated with liberal norms. They were actively participating in international cooperation, institutionalizing relations among themselves, and seeking greater influence over existing regional and global organizations (Cottiero et al. 2025).

These developments raised a new set of questions. Why do autocracies invest in cooperation despite the sovereignty costs this could entail? Do authoritarian international institutions differ systematically from their democratic counterparts in purpose and design? What, if any, are the domestic political consequences of authoritarian cooperation? And, more broadly, how come the pro-democracy effect failed? A new generation of scholarship has taken up this agenda. Recent work has documented the proliferation of authoritarian cooperation across regions, explored how autocratic and backsliding states reshape established organizations, and examined the implications for domestic political developments. Taken together, these contributions recast the conventional relationships by treating authoritarianism as a source of international cooperation and international institutions as contributors to authoritarian resilience. In this sense, the emerging literature suggests an authoritarian feedback loop that mirrors the liberal virtuous circle of the first generation.

Autocracy as a Source of International Cooperation

A first strand of second-generation scholarship examines autocracy as a source of international cooperation. Challenging the first generation's emphasis on democracy and democratization, this research asks whether authoritarian politics can itself generate demand for international cooperation. Its starting point is that autocratic and autocratizing governments do not resist cooperation, but may actively create, join, and use international institutions in pursuit of their own political objectives. The central task is therefore to establish whether and how authoritarian rule shapes patterns of international cooperation, and to identify the domestic political incentives that make such cooperation attractive. The books under review approach this task through different forms of cooperation and different empirical strategies, but converge in treating authoritarian cooperation as a phenomenon requiring explanation in its own right.

At the core of these explanations is political survival. In this respect, the second generation shares an important assumption with the first: political leaders value international cooperation partly for its capacity to help them remain in power and achieve their domestic interests. What differs is how this objective translates into different strategies under different regimes (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003). Democratic leaders seeking reelection have incentives to pursue gains from cooperation that appeal to broad constituencies. Autocratic leaders, by contrast, face threats from rival elites within the regime, popular challengers outside it, and external actors promoting political liberalization, giving them distinctive reasons to value international arrangements that can bolster regime survival (Ginsburg 2021; Cottiero and Haggard 2023).

Regional cooperation is the setting in which this argument has been developed most systematically. Obydenkova and Libman (2019), in an early contribution to this literature, introduce the concept of non-democratic regional organizations (NDROs) to challenge the conventional association between regionalism and democratization. Combining global comparisons with detailed analysis of post-Soviet Eurasia, they show that autocratic governments develop forms of regional cooperation adapted to non-democratic political settings. Organizations such as the Commonwealth of

Independent states (CIS), Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) bring together politically similar regimes and privilege sovereignty, non-interference, and limited constraints on domestic authority. The implication is that regionalism need not be rooted in democracy and democratization. Authoritarian governments may themselves generate demand for institutionalized cooperation when regional arrangements can accommodate their regime interests without imposing unwanted political constraints.

Cottiero's (2026) recent book develops this logic from a more leader-centered perspective. Drawing on quantitative and qualitative evidence from African regional organizations, she argues that heads of state confronted with coups, intrastate conflicts, and other threats to political survival have incentives to build regional cooperation around mutual protection. Rather than seeking integration principally to realize collective economic gains or bind governments to common rules, leaders adapt regional organizations so that they can coordinate responses to political and security crises. Reciprocity is central to this logic: rulers support other leaders partly because doing so helps sustain expectations of assistance when they themselves encounter threats. While Cottiero's study is not limited to African autocracies, authoritarian politics and regional organizations loom large in the theoretical argument and empirical analysis (see also Cottiero and Haggard 2023).

Debre (2025) offers the broadest comparative account of how authoritarian regime interests shape regional cooperation. Using a mixed-method design that combines cross-regional data with case studies, this book documents systematic regime-type sorting: autocratic governments disproportionately cluster in regional organizations with other autocracies. Debre explains this pattern in functional-political terms: authoritarian governments accept the costs of institutionalized cooperation because organizations composed largely of like-minded regimes can be structured around their shared interest in political survival. These "dictator clubs" are therefore not incidental collections of autocracies but institutional responses to common political vulnerabilities. Debre also shows that they need not be institutionally weak or fundamentally different from democratic organizations on standard measures of design.

Ginsburg (2021, Ch. 5) extends the argument from regional organizations to international law, suggesting that autocracies increasingly are promoting a new form of "authoritarian international law." He argues that autocracies have distinctive incentives to favor legal arrangements that preserve regime control, emphasizing sovereignty, non-interference, and internal security, while avoiding commitments that empower domestic opponents or external monitors. Authoritarian international law therefore tends to be more flexible, less reliant on third-party adjudication, and less intrusive into domestic political authority than its liberal counterpart. As authoritarian states have gained international weight, especially through China's ascent, they have increasingly sought not simply to operate within an inherited legal order but to shape its substantive and procedural characteristics.

Cooley and Dukalskis's (2025) new book broaden the analysis further from formal institutions and law to transnational networks and processes. Their concept of "authoritarian snapback" captures a shift from defensive efforts to insulate authoritarian regimes against liberal transnational influence toward active attempts to repurpose the channels created by globalization. Authoritarian governments stigmatize liberal actors, shield domestic audiences, establish new terms of

engagement, project control outward, and ultimately seek to dictate the global agenda. The central implication for international cooperation is that dense cross-border linkages are not intrinsically liberalizing, which Cooley and Dukalskis show (2025) across the domains of global media influence, consumer activism, higher education, and sports. The same transnational networks and institutions through which liberal ideas and practices previously traveled have been reconfigured to transmit authoritarian preferences and expand the international influence of autocratic states.

These contributions tie in with a growing literature on authoritarian norm promotion. Some research examines the defensive strategies through which autocracies contest liberal norms on human rights, gender, and responsibility to protect—or seek to reinterpret them in ways conformant with their own preferences (Sanders 2018; Fung 2020; Flonk and Debre 2025; Oud 2024; Bettiza and Lewis 2020). Other research shows that autocracies can also act offensively as norm entrepreneurs, promoting alternative principles centered on state control, non-interference, development, and collective rights (Debre and Flonk 2026; Kastner et al. 2018; Fung and Lam 2021). Russia and China, for instance, have sought to build likeminded coalitions within global institutions to advance their preferred norms on internet control and digital sovereignty (Flonk 2021; Hulvey 2026; Foot and Zhang 2026). This work reverses the earlier literature on liberal norm diffusion by showing that autocratic states, too, can use institutionalized cooperation to construct and disseminate alternative normative principles.

The benefits of cooperation that can help autocrats to survive politically recur across the literature (Debre 2025; Obydenkova and Libman 2019; Cottiero 2026; Cottiero and Haggard 2023). One is legitimation: regional organizations may help authoritarian governments justify their rule domestically or lend collective authority to support for threatened incumbents. A second is protection and shielding. Cooperation can reinforce sovereignty, facilitate cross-border policing, provide diplomatic cover, and sustain norms of noninterference. A third is access to resources, whether through material assistance, resource pooling, or support for governing coalitions. A fourth is learning and coordination, as institutions enable governments facing similar political problems to exchange practices and organize common responses. Finally, cooperation can strengthen authoritarian governments internationally by increasing their collective influence and facilitating challenges to liberal norms.

These benefits can be tied to different dimensions of institutionalization. Some follow from membership itself, insofar as participation changes a regime's international status and embeds it in politically useful relationships. Others depend on institutional design, which determines how far governments can reap the gains from cooperation while limiting sovereignty costs. Still others arise from an organization's policies and activities, which can be developed in directions that help authoritarian governments to survive. Authoritarian preferences may thus shape international cooperation at several levels: whom governments cooperate with, how they organize that cooperation, and which substantive purposes international institutions are made to serve.

These arguments reveal both continuity and change relative to the first generation. The continuity lies in the centrality of domestic politics: in both generations, governments turn to international institutions partly to address political challenges at home. What changes is the nature of those challenges and, consequently, the forms of cooperation governments prefer. First-generation

accounts emphasize institutions that enhance the credibility of commitments, generate public goods, and lock in liberal reforms. Second-generation accounts instead highlight arrangements that preserve domestic autonomy, protect incumbent governments, secure access to resources, and facilitate authoritarian coordination. While regime type works through domestic politics in both cases, the interests that cooperation is expected to serve differ substantially.

International Cooperation as a Source of Autocracy

A second strand of scholarship reverses the causal arrow and examines international cooperation as a source of authoritarian stability and autocratization. Whereas first-generation research primarily emphasized the democratizing effects of international institutions, this work asks whether international cooperation can also help autocratic incumbents remain in power or weaken democratic institutions in ways that facilitate backsliding. Some studies focus on how cooperation among autocracies reinforces existing regimes, while others show how even democratically dominated international institutions may inadvertently erode domestic democratic constraints.

Earlier scholarship had already suggested that international cooperation could reinforce authoritarian rule. Research on an "authoritarian international" highlighted collaboration among autocratic regimes as a possible influence on domestic regime trajectories (Tansey 2016; Von Soest 2015; Vanderhill 2013), while case studies of regional organizations documented "regime boosting" practices of legitimation, sovereignty protection, rent seeking, and cross-border policing (Söderbaum 2004; Dukalskis 2021; Cooley and Heathershaw 2017). Yet systematic comparative evidence that international institutions actually strengthened authoritarian survival remained limited.

Obydenkova and Libman (2019) provide an early large-N test of this proposition. Examining thirteen non-democratic regional organizations between 1950 and 2015, they find that leaders of authoritarian states belonging to such organizations remain in power longer than comparable leaders outside them. Debre (2025) evaluates the same expectation, significantly expanding the scope and depth of the test. Analyzing the effects of membership in 72 regional organizations on autocratic regime survival over the period 1945–2020, she finds that membership in more autocratic institutions substantially extends authoritarian incumbents' time in power. The key predictor of leader survival is the autocratic density of the organization, but a more homogenously authoritarian membership also helps. At the same time, the protection is selective: membership in dictator clubs helps deter democratization but does not necessarily shield autocratic leaders from removal by their own elites.

Cottiero (2026) offers complementary evidence from African regional organizations. Her analysis shows how regional institutions can function as vehicles for mutual aid among political leaders facing coups and intrastate threats. Leaders who assist co-members may later receive support when confronting similar challenges themselves, linking regional cooperation directly to domestic political survival. This moves the literature beyond the proposition that autocrats merely value international protection: it demonstrates how reciprocal support can be organized and activated through regional institutions.

Meyerrose (2026), in a new book, extends this argument in a different direction by showing that international institutions need not be dominated by autocracies to generate autocratizing effects. Her theory focuses on democratically oriented organizations that acquired extensive authority over politically salient domestic policies during the post-Cold War period, such as the EU. She argues that policy delegation to such international organizations can weaken representative institutions, empower executives and bureaucracies, and thereby create conditions conducive to democratic backsliding, particularly in newer democracies. Importantly, this argument does not necessarily contradict earlier findings that membership in highly institutionalized organizations is associated with higher levels of democracy. Meyerrose (2026) distinguishes between levels and changes: the same institutions may be associated with higher levels of domestic democracy while nevertheless contributing to erosion over time.

The mechanisms invoked in this literature partly mirror the benefits that motivate authoritarian governments to cooperate in the first place. The analytical perspective is different, however. Whereas the literature on drivers of autocratic cooperation treated resources, legitimation, and protection as incentives for entering international institutions, this stream of research examines how these benefits alter domestic and international constraints on authoritarian rule. Across the literature, five mechanisms stand out: material support, legitimation, authoritarian learning, mutual protection, and international shielding.

A first mechanism is *material support*. International cooperation can redistribute financial, economic, and political resources toward incumbent elites, strengthening their capacity to co-opt supporters, withstand domestic challenges, and finance other survival strategies (Obydenkova and Libman 2019; Debre 2025). Debre (2025) emphasizes how resource distribution raises the costs of opposition by strengthening incumbents relative to challengers, while Cottiero (2026) highlights resource pooling and mutual aid among rulers. Recent research on authoritarian international financial institutions provides particularly direct evidence for this mechanism. Cottiero and Schneider (2026) show that lending by autocratic IFIs increases when authoritarian governments face acute domestic or international threats. Such institutions often attach fewer political conditions and impose less intrusive oversight, giving vulnerable incumbents greater discretion over resources that can be used for politically consequential purposes.

A second mechanism is *legitimation*. International institutions can confer external recognition on incumbent governments and their political practices, thereby strengthening claims to rightful rule and weakening those advanced by domestic challengers (Obydenkova and Libman 2019; Debre 2025). Election monitoring provides a particularly clear illustration. Whereas high-quality monitoring can expose electoral manipulation, authoritarian and low-quality monitoring organizations may validate flawed elections and provide incumbents with favorable international assessments. Bush, Cottiero, and Prather (2025) show that such "zombie monitors" have proliferated and are especially likely to appear in countries connected to authoritarian powers and organizations.

A third mechanism is *authoritarian learning*. Regional organizations can provide institutionalized settings in which authoritarian governments exchange information about political threats and effective responses to them. Obydenkova and Libman (2019) emphasize this informational function of authoritarian regionalism, as regular interaction allows rulers to observe and learn from one

another's survival strategies. Subsequent work develops this mechanism more explicitly, describing regional organizations as "learning rooms" in which authoritarian governments exchange practices, conduct training, and adapt lessons from other members to domestic challenges (Hall 2023; Hall and Debre 2025). By facilitating the circulation and adaptation of experiences, international institutions can thus improve governments' capacity to anticipate opposition, respond to protest, and consolidate political control.

A fourth mechanism is *mutual protection*. International cooperation can shape how neighboring governments respond when an incumbent faces a political or security crisis. Debre (2025) emphasizes relationship management and norms of non-interference that reduce the likelihood that regional actors will side with domestic challengers. Cottiero (2026) develops a related but more reciprocal argument, conceptualizing African regional organizations as protective clubs through which rulers support co-members who have previously demonstrated their willingness to assist others. This support may include security cooperation, mediation, or intervention on behalf of threatened governments. Autocratic incumbents embedded in cooperative networks can expect assistance, or at least non-interference, from neighboring rulers whose own political survival depends on similar understandings of mutual protection.

A fifth mechanism is *international shielding*. Autocratic cooperation can reduce the costs imposed by actors outside the immediate circle of cooperating regimes. Debre (2025) shows how dictator clubs shield member governments from the consequences of international sanctions and other forms of external pressure, allowing incumbents greater scope to employ repression, electoral manipulation, and other costly survival strategies. Cottiero and Schneider (2026) identify a similar logic in development finance, where autocratic IFIs specifically direct support toward regimes that face external democracy-promotion pressures, helping create an international environment more accommodating of authoritarian rule. Similarly, Hafner-Burton et al. (2025) show how authoritarian states adopt good governance standards to placate donor states, but adapt those provisions to apply to other states and not themselves. International cooperation consequently affects domestic regime trajectories not only by strengthening incumbents directly, but also by weakening external constraints.

The mechanism linking international cooperation to autocratization in democratic contexts is distinct. Meyerrose's (2026) argument centers on how *policy delegation* to democratic international institutions inadvertently can generate democratic backsliding. Delegation can first alter electoral incentives by reducing the responsiveness of governments to domestic constituencies when salient policies are increasingly determined at the international level. It can also shift relative power toward executives and bureaucracies, which represent states internationally, at the expense of legislatures and political parties. Finally, delegation can narrow domestic policy space, constraining the range of choices available through representative political processes.

An important question is whether these mechanisms primarily serve regime protection or also enable regime promotion. Much of the second-generation literature points most clearly to a defensive logic. Authoritarian governments use international cooperation to protect incumbents against domestic challengers, external criticism, democracy promotion, and other threats to regime survival, as emphasized by Debre (2025) and Obydenkova and Libman (2019). Yet some

contributions suggest effects that extend beyond preserving existing autocracies. International institutions may facilitate democratic erosion in other states, diffuse authoritarian practices, or reshape multilateral rules in ways that make authoritarian governance more viable internationally. Ginsburg's (2021) account of authoritarian international law, and Cooley and Dukalski's (2025) argument about authoritarian agenda setting point in this direction (see also Debre and Flonk 2026).

The mechanisms identified by second-generation scholarship both parallel and reverse those emphasized in the first generation. While earlier research highlighted how international institutions could strengthen democratization through a variety of mechanisms, the newer literature shows how regional organizations may redistribute resources toward incumbents, shield governments from external pressure, coordinate support among authoritarian regimes, and legitimate efforts to preserve political control. Likewise, delegation to powerful international institutions may strengthen executives at the expense of parties and legislatures, thereby weakening representative constraints. The key difference, then, lies less in whether international institutions matter for domestic politics than in which political trajectories they help sustain.

From Reciprocal Effects to Authoritarian Feedback Loop

Taken together, these two strands of second-generation research point to an authoritarian feedback loop. Autocratic regimes create, join, or reshape international institutions in ways compatible with authoritarian rule, while participation in those institutions can subsequently help sustain autocratic governments. This dynamic provides a counterpart to the liberal virtuous circle emphasized by first-generation scholarship, suggesting that similar processes of reciprocal reinforcement can operate in an authoritarian direction.

Debre (2025) offers perhaps the clearest formulation of this logic. Authoritarian regimes sort into regional "dictator clubs," which in turn help members withstand domestic, regional, and international challenges. Autocracies thereby contribute to institutional environments that subsequently increase their prospects for survival. Obydenkova and Libman (2019) and Cottiero (2026) provide complementary evidence of this mutually reinforcing relationship between authoritarian cooperation and incumbent protection. This feedback loop may also extend to the broader normative environment of international politics, as argued in Ginsburg's (2021) account of the drivers and consequences of authoritarian international law.

This perspective constitutes an important corrective to the liberalization assumption of earlier research. International institutions may not only constrain authoritarian rule or facilitate democratization, but also sustain autocratic regimes and contribute to democratic erosion. Yet this insight also exposes a common limitation of the first and second generations. Both risk interpreting the relationship between domestic regimes and international institutions through overly stylized circles of reinforcement. Just like the earlier emphasis on a liberal virtuous circle, the newer focus on an authoritarian feedback loop may overstate the coherence and self-reinforcing character of authoritarian cooperation. It may also treat autocracies and backsliding governments as more homogeneous in their interests, strategies, and institutional choices than they are. These limitations point toward a broader research agenda that moves beyond virtuous and vicious circles to examine variation and contingency.

Table 1. Two Generations of Research on Regime Type and International Cooperation

Dimension	First generation: The liberal virtuous circle	Second generation: The authoritarian feedback loop
Historical backdrop	The third wave of democratization and the expansion of the liberal international order.	Global autocratization, democratic backsliding, and authoritarian challenges to the liberal order.
Central question	How does democracy promote international cooperation, and how does cooperation support democracy?	How do autocracies reshape international cooperation, and how does cooperation reinforce authoritarianism or undermine democracy?
Primary actors	Democratic and democratizing states, often represented by transitional governments.	Autocratic governments, autocratizing leaders, and authoritarian coalitions.
Role of regime type	A central cause and outcome: democracy generates distinctive incentives for cooperation and benefits from international support.	A central cause and outcome: authoritarian regimes generate distinctive forms of cooperation that reinforce authoritarian politics.
Role of international institutions	Commitment device, provider of public goods, source of democratic legitimation, and external anchor for reform.	Dictators' club, shield against liberal pressure, vehicle for authoritarian norm promotion, or unintended source of executive aggrandizement.
Regime type to cooperation logic	Democratizing governments join or create IOs to make credible commitments, secure assistance, and consolidate liberal reforms.	Autocratic governments establish, join, capture, or repurpose institutions to protect sovereignty, counter liberal pressure, and advance authoritarian interests.
Cooperation to regime type logic	IOs promote democratic transition and consolidation by supplying resources, expertise, credibility, legitimacy, and protection.	IOs support authoritarian survival or backsliding by supplying resources, legitimation, protection, executive empowerment, and insulation from external pressure.
Expected dynamic	Mutually reinforcing movement toward deeper cooperation and more durable democracy.	Mutually reinforcing movement toward authoritarian international ordering and reinforced autocratization.
Main theoretical strength	Establishes that regime change and international cooperation are causally interconnected rather than separate domestic and international processes.	Corrects the liberal bias of earlier research and demonstrates that international institutions can sustain authoritarianism and contribute to democratic erosion.
Main theoretical limitation	Risks treating democracy and international cooperation as naturally complementary and underplaying illiberal or democracy-eroding effects.	Risks substituting an authoritarian feedback loop for the earlier liberal virtuous circle and treating autocracies or autocratizing governments as too homogeneous.
Representative contributions	Pevehouse (2005); Mansfield and Pevehouse (2006); Poast and Urpelainen (2018); Ginsburg (2021).	Obydenkova and Libman (2019); Debre (2025); Cooley and Dukalskis (2025); Cottiero (2026); Meyerrose (2026).

Beyond Virtuous and Vicious Circles: An Agenda for Future Research

The second generation has substantially revised earlier understandings of regime type and international cooperation by demonstrating that autocracies, too, make systematic use of international institutions and that international cooperation can contribute to authoritarian resilience. Yet, despite their contrasting conclusions, the two generations share a tendency to associate democracy and autocracy with distinct, coherent, and self-reinforcing logics of international cooperation. Democracies and autocracies are expected to differ systematically in the forms of international cooperation they establish and support, while those forms of cooperation are in turn expected to reinforce the domestic political conditions from which they emerged. This perspective has generated important insights into the two-way relationship between domestic regimes and international institutions. At the same time, a growing number of findings sit uneasily with such expectations of regime congruence and reinforcement.

Three types of observations are particularly difficult to reconcile with this image. First, some effects of regime type appear more bounded than existing arguments imply. The relationship between democracy and IO membership, for instance, varies across historical periods (Vikberg et al. 2026), while the consequences of autocratization for international institutional ties appear to depend on the character of democratic breakdown (Schmid et al. 2026). Second, state behavior frequently cuts across conventional regime-type expectations. Democracies may retreat from international cooperation under populist and nationalist governments (Choi 2022; Mansfield and Pevehouse 2026), while autocracies sometimes design institutions involving substantial sovereignty costs (Tallberg and Vikberg 2025). Other research suggests that democratic and authoritarian governments may allow other factors, such as geopolitical alignments, to outweigh regime-type affinities in organizing cooperation (Davis 2023). Third, feedback effects do not invariably run in the anticipated direction, as illustrated by episodes of democratization in organizations dominated by authoritarian states (Sun 2024) and autocratization within organizations characterized by high democratic density (Kelemen 2020).

These observations suggest a broader theoretical problem. Regime type appears to matter for international cooperation, but neither uniformly nor deterministically. States belonging to the same regime category may pursue quite different forms of cooperation, while democracies and autocracies may converge when confronted with similar domestic or international incentives. Likewise, the political consequences of international cooperation may vary in strength and direction, sometimes reinforcing existing regime characteristics but sometimes weakening or reversing them. The challenge for future research is to qualify existing accounts of regime-specific and self-reinforcing dynamics by explaining the contingent and causally complex relationship between regime type and international cooperation.

We identify three priorities for this agenda. First, research should broaden the empirical domain in which existing claims are evaluated, establishing whether prominent arguments travel across historical periods, world regions, institutional settings, and issue areas beyond those in which they were initially developed. Second, scholarship should devote greater attention to conditionality by

theoretically identifying the domestic, institutional, and systemic factors that shape how regime type affects international cooperation and how international cooperation, in turn, affects domestic regimes. Third, research should expand its understanding of reciprocal causality by moving to a focus on contingent causality without assuming that regime-based cooperation necessarily generates regime-reinforcing feedback. Together, these priorities shift the agenda from virtuous and vicious circles toward a broader range of configurations in which regime type and international cooperation may reinforce, weaken, or transform one another.

Broadening Scope: From Favorable Settings to Generalizable Claims

A first step to integrate this literature is to establish the generalizability of the relationships identified by the first two generations of scholarship. Both have generated powerful arguments partly by examining empirical settings in which the hypothesized relationships are especially likely to appear. Such settings offer important advantages for developing theory and demonstrating mechanisms, but they provide a less secure basis for assessing how widely the resulting claims travel. Most of the books reviewed here recognize this problem and discuss the limits to generalizabiliy. With some important exceptions, however, the literature has moved further in acknowledging these limits than in testing them systematically. The next step is therefore to extend established arguments beyond the contexts in which they were initially developed.

Historical scope is one important dimension. Much first-generation research linking democracy to participation in international institutions concentrated on the second half of the twentieth century (Pevehouse 2005; Mansfield and Pevehouse 2006; Mansfield et al. 2002; Boehmer and Nordstrom 2008). This was an era in which democracy and international cooperation expanded simultaneously, providing especially favorable conditions for detecting a positive association between them. However, recent research suggests that this relationship is more time-bound than previously assumed (Vikberg et al. 2026), and earlier scholarship identifies a similar pattern for the democratic peace (Farber and Gowa 1997). A parallel issue confronts the second generation, much of which has developed against the backdrop of the recent global wave of autocratization (Obydenkova and Libman 2019; Debre 2025; Cooley and Dukalskis 2025; Cottiero et al. 2025). Most of the contributions to this literature focus explicitly on the post-2010 period, and case studies are typically drawn from this period, while some quantitative analyzes cover a longer time scope. Examining both sets of claims across longer historical periods would help establish whether the observed relationships are enduring or partly products of particular eras in world politics.

Research on the relationship between regime type and international cooperation has also been geographically concentrated. Much scholarship focuses on regional organizations, with particular attention to regions where the hypothesized dynamics are especially likely to be visible. Key contributions to the first generation concentrated on Europe, highlighting how newly democratized countries sought membership in the Council of Europe, EU, NATO, and OSCE, which in turn helped to consolidate democracy in these states (Poast and Urpelainen 2018; Pevehouse 2005; Moravcsik 2000). Similarly, second-generation scholarship develops arguments about regime sorting and protective cooperation largely in regional settings characterized by autocracy and autocratization, such as Africa, Eurasia, and the Middle East (Debre 2025; Cottiero 2026; Obydenkova and Libman 2019; Cottiero and Schneider 2026). These studies provide strong leverage on the processes they

identify, but leave open whether similar patterns emerge in less favorable regional settings. Future research should therefore extend these arguments to regions with more heterogeneous regime profiles and weaker traditions of regime-based cooperation.

An equally important step is to move beyond regional organizations altogether. Many of the mechanisms highlighted by existing research may operate differently in global organizations, where memberships are more heterogeneous and regime-based sorting is less readily achieved (Cottiero et al. 2025; Tallberg and Vikberg 2026; Pevehouse 2005, 49-51). Comparing regional and global organizations would therefore provide a demanding test of arguments developed primarily in regional settings. Institutional scope could be broadened further by examining whether similar relationships hold beyond formal organizations, including in informal institutions and other forms of international cooperation (Vabulas and Snidal 2013; Roger and Rowan 2023; Westerwinter et al. 2021; Barnett et al. 2021). For instance, regime sorting may be more likely when cooperation is formal, involving deeper and more binding commitments, than when it is informal and often less consequential in nature.

Issue-area scope constitutes an additional dimension. Some of the strongest claims about the impact of regime type on global governance draw heavily on human rights, where regime differences are especially politically salient, democratic states have strong reasons promote and defend existing rules, and authoritarian governments have clear incentives to resist external scrutiny (Moravcsik 2000; Hafner-Burton et al. 2015; Simmons 2009; Meyerrose and Nooruddin 2025; Cordell and Dukalskis 2025). Yet it remains uncertain whether the same relationships characterize cooperation in trade, finance, health, environment, security, or other domains where the political stakes associated with regime type may look different. Testing claims across a wider range of policy domains would reveal whether relationships are in fact concentrated in particular areas of international cooperation.

In all, future research should subject prominent claims from both generations to more systematic tests across historical periods, regions, institutional forms, and issue areas. Particularly informative would be studies that move beyond favorable empirical settings: beyond the postwar era of democratization and the recent period of global autocratization, beyond Europe and Africa, beyond regime-homogeneous regional organizations, and beyond politically salient issue areas such as human rights. Similar gains could come from extending analysis from formal organizations to informal institutions and from regional to global forms of cooperation. The objective is not to presume that existing arguments will fail these tests, but to establish their empirical reach more securely.

Moreover, findings of historical, regional, or issue contingency would help evaluate theoretical mechanisms behind these arguments. For example, a finding that the democratizing or autocratizing effects of institutions is limited to specific time periods would cast doubt that these dynamics arise from any universal characteristic of either regime type – unless one theorizes that these institutional features change over time. That is, the need for democratic leaders to provide broad-based public goods should not vary over time, but the level of provision from international institutions could vary temporally. In short, domestic and international institutions may vary over space, time, and issue

areas in ways that are theoretically informative and important. This leads us to a second area of future research, identifying conditionality.

Identifying Conditionality: From Uniform Effects to Moderating Factors

If broader empirical testing reveals that the relationship between regime type and international cooperation varies across settings, the next task is to explain that variation. This requires treating regime type not as a sufficient predictor but as one component of a larger theoretical configuration. Democracies and autocracies differ in systematic ways that matter for international cooperation, but the effects of those differences are likely to depend on the domestic political settings in which governments operate, the international institutions through which preferences are translated into collective outcomes, and the wider systemic context in which cooperation takes place. Existing theoretically informed scholarship contains important clues about each of these conditioning factors, but they have rarely been integrated into a systematic account of when regime type matters more, less, or differently for international cooperation and its domestic consequences.

A first source of conditionality lies in *domestic politics*. The categories of democracy and autocracy encompass substantial variation in the interests governments pursue internationally and the constraints under which they pursue them. For instance, democracies led by liberal internationalists or populist nationalists may attach very different values to multilateral cooperation (Copelovitch and Pevehouse 2019; Carnegie and Clark 2026; Hooghe et al. 2019) as could democracies at varying levels of consolidation (Poast and Urpelainen 2018), even while sharing the same broad regime type. Autocracies likewise vary in their institutional foundations, governing coalitions, and exposure to domestic threats (Geddes et al. 2018; Gandhi 2008; Lundquist et al. 2026). This heterogeneity matters because international cooperation is shaped not only by whether governments are democratically accountable, but also by what incumbent leaders seek to achieve and by the domestic actors capable of constraining them. The same regime type may therefore generate different international behavior depending on the configuration of interests and constraints within the state. This insight has recently inspired scholars to consider how the domestic political constraints confronting leaders in democracies and autocracies may be malleable (Hyde and Saunders 2020).

Parts of existing literature already point in this direction. Poast and Urpelainen (2018, Ch. 4) distinguishing between established and transitional democracies, and argue that new democracies are particularly prone to form new international organizations. Ginsburg (2021, 80-82) differentiates between military, monarchical, and civilian dictatorships, and finds civilian dictatorships more likely to conclude international treaties than military or royal regimes (see also Mattes and Rodríguez 2014). Recent work on autocratization also suggests that international consequences may depend on whether democratic breakdown occurs through incumbent-led or non-incumbent-led processes (Schmid et al. 2026), while effects of international cooperation on democratic backsliding depend on whether states are new or consolidated democracies (Meyerrose 2026). These findings indicate the value of disaggregating regime categories more systematically. Future research should theorize how variation in leader ideology, governing coalitions, political institutions, and regime consolidation conditions both governments' uses of international cooperation and their subsequent effects on domestic political developments.

A second source of conditionality concerns the *international institutional setting*. Regime-type preferences do not translate automatically into collective outcomes; they are filtered through institutions whose memberships, rules, and authority structures vary considerably. Membership composition is one obvious factor (Debre and Sommerer 2026). When member states autocratize, this will have different consequences depending on whether it plays out in a homogeneously authoritarian institution, a mixed-regime organization, or a democratic club (Cottiero et al. 2025). Yet composition alone is unlikely to be sufficient. The consequences of regime change should also depend on decision rules, delegation to independent bodies, and other institutional arrangements that make existing practices more or less resistant to repurposing. International institutions thus differ in how readily shifts in their membership can be converted into changes in organizational purpose and policy.

Again, new scholarship provides suggestive evidence. Debre (2025, Ch. 4) shows how more homogeneously authoritarian organizations are especially likely to help autocrats survive in office, while recent work by Debre and Sommerer (2026) indicates that relatively few formerly democratic IOs have immediately fallen under authoritarian majority control despite the global authoritarian wave. Meyerrose (2026) argues that the domestic consequences of IO membership depend on institutional design, with democratic backsliding particularly associated with organizations characterized by extensive policy delegation. Cottiero (2026, 67-68) likewise identifies circumstances under which regional organizations are less able to function as mutual-aid clubs, including settings with greater institutional transparency. Building on these insights, future research should examine more systematically how membership composition interacts with institutional rules and authority structures to determine whether organizations facilitate or constrain regime-specific strategies.

A third source of conditionality lies in the wider *systemic context*. The relationship between regime type and international cooperation is embedded in changing configurations of geopolitical power (Gunitsky 2014). The liberal international order that expanded after World War II developed under conditions of unusually strong Western power, whereas contemporary cooperation takes place amid greater geopolitical rivalry and the rise of powerful authoritarian states. Such shifts may alter both the opportunities available to different regime types and the costs attached to particular forms of cooperation. The international behavior of democracies and autocracies may therefore depend not only on their domestic political characteristics but also on which great powers dominate institutions, which alternative organizations are available, and how states are positioned within broader networks of geopolitical alignment (Davis 2023; Vikberg et al. 2026).

Several contributions hint at these dynamics without making them central to their explanations. Debre (2025, 178-181) identifies the rise of China and Russia as the elephant in the room when analyzing regional authoritarian cooperation, while Ginsburg (2021, Ch. 6) highlights the contrast between China's efforts to work through and repurpose multilateral institutions and the US' more revisionist posture toward parts of the order it helped create. Cooley and Dukalskis (2025) similarly suggest that the ability of authoritarian governments to advance their agenda in international fora depends on their structural power. In contrast, one recent contribution that puts geopolitical alignments center stage is Davis (2023), which shows that geopolitical alignment can compete with regime affinity in shaping patterns of institutional membership. These observations point toward a

broader agenda in which regime type and international cooperation are situated within changing distributions of power, alliance structures, and patterns of great-power sponsorship. Under some systemic conditions, regime affinities may be amplified; under others, geopolitical interests may override them.

Taken together, these considerations suggest a shift toward examining the conditions that shape how regime type affects international cooperation and vice versa. Domestic politics, institutional settings, and systemic contexts offer useful sources of such conditionality. Moreover, these levels are likely to interact rather than operate independently. A powerful autocracy may find it easier to repurpose a weakly institutionalized organization with a sympathetic membership, just as a democratic government facing strong nationalist pressures may behave differently under conditions of geopolitical rivalry than under liberal hegemony. A key task for future research is therefore not only to identify individual moderators, but also to specify configurations of conditions that strengthen or weaken regime-type effects.

Rethinking Feedback: From Self-Reinforcing Loops to Causal Heterogeneity

Existing scholarship has made important advances by conceptualizing regime type and international cooperation as endogenously related. The previous subsection qualified this account by embedding these dynamics in a wider set of domestic, institutional, and systemic conditions. A further step is to reconsider the structure of the reciprocal relationship itself. Existing accounts commonly rest on two assumptions: that regime type generates distinctive incentives for international cooperation, and that such cooperation subsequently reinforces the domestic regime characteristics from which it emerged. Both assumptions are plausible but need not hold. States pursue multiple international objectives that may override regime-based incentives, while international institutions can generate unintended or countervailing domestic effects.

Relaxing these assumptions reveals a wider set of possible causal configurations (Table 2). Regime-based cooperation that subsequently reinforces the originating regime represents the familiar pattern emphasized by the first and second generations. Yet this dynamic occupies only one cell in a broader universe of reciprocal relationships. The remaining configurations arise when cooperation is not primarily driven by regime-based incentives, when its domestic effects do not reinforce the originating regime, or when both causal steps depart from the expected pattern.

Table 2. Causal configurations of regime type and international cooperation

		Does cooperation reinforce originating regime type?	
		Yes	**No**
Is cooperation driven by regime-based incentives?	**Yes**	Self-reinforcing loop *SCO*	Disrupted loop *ECOWAS*
	No	Unexpected reinforcement *WTO*	Countervailing feedback *CSCE*

A first alternative arises when cooperation is driven by regime-based incentives but does not reinforce the originating regime. Democracies may establish institutions that embody liberal principles, yet those institutions can subsequently generate unintended or countervailing domestic effects. Meyerrose's (2026) account of democratic backsliding points toward this possibility: institutions created and sustained by democracies may provide opportunities that illiberal leaders can exploit rather than constraints that invariably reinforce democratic rule. An example of the reverse pattern is the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which was founded by an overwhelmingly authoritarian membership to promote economic integration, but subsequently took on a role of defending the region against recurring coups (Hartmann 2017).

A second possibility is that cooperation is not driven by regime-based incentives but nevertheless reinforces states' existing regime types. Governments may join or form international institutions for functional or geopolitical reasons that have little to do with their domestic regime type. Yet participation may nonetheless provide material resources, policy benefits, international recognition, or other advantages that reinforce the existing regime rule. China's entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) is a case in point: having joined a core organization of the liberal post-war order, international economic integration generated growth and development that helped to reinforce the control and legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (Weiss and Wallace 2021). Examples of the reverse pattern are harder to identify, possibly because democratic states historically have been better positioned to construct international institutions in accordance with their own preferences. That said, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) may be an interesting test case of this reverse pattern (Rodrigues Vieira 2018; Gutner 2025).

The most far-reaching departure from the conventional logic occurs when cooperation neither is driven by regime-based incentives nor reinforces domestic regime types. An autocracy may enter a relatively liberal institution for functional or geopolitical reasons, only for participation subsequently to create legal commitments, information flows, or transnational linkages that strengthen domestic challengers. The Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) offers a powerful illustration: while seeking to stabilize the European security order, the Soviet Union reluctantly accepted human rights provisions in the Helsinki Final Act, which subsequently provided dissidents with normative and organizational resources to mobilize against communist regimes (Thomas 2001). Conversely, a democracy may enter an international arrangement for reasons unrelated to democratic regime incentives and subsequently experience feedback that weakens democratic rule. The Philippines, for instance, joined the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization in the 1950s as part of the American security architecture, but this relationship subsequently helped Ferdinand Marcos to build the coercive capacity and external support that facilitated his assumption of authoritarian rule in the early 1970s (Slater 2010).

The four configurations in Table 2 should not be understood as fixed categories. As domestic politics or international relationships change, cases may migrate from one category to another. One source of movement is regime change itself. A democracy that autocratizes may remain embedded in institutions originally joined under democratic incentives, while an autocracy that democratizes may inherit forms of cooperation established for quite different purposes. This creates the possibility that

cooperation becomes increasingly detached from the regime-based incentives that originally produced it. Indonesia's experience in ASEAN illustrates this dynamic. Having joined ASEAN under Suharto's authoritarian rule, Indonesia remained a member after democratization but increasingly used the organization to advance concerns with democracy and human rights (Karim 2017; Rüland 2017).

A second source of movement concerns changes in the domestic effects of cooperation. International institutions may initially reinforce the regime under which they were established but later generate countervailing effects. Conversely, arrangements that initially constrained a regime may later be adapted in ways that support it. The same form of cooperation may therefore generate different domestic consequences at different points in time. International election monitoring illustrates this dynamic. Election observation initially raised the costs of overt electoral manipulation and contributed to pressures for cleaner elections (Hyde 2011; Kelley 2012). Over time, however, authoritarian incumbents developed strategies to circumvent, manage, or appropriate monitoring, while more permissive forms of monitoring could provide external validation of flawed elections (Bush et al. 2025).

The familiar virtuous and vicious circles are therefore best understood as special cases within a wider range of reciprocal relationships between regime type and international cooperation. Future research should move beyond asking whether international cooperation reinforces democracy or autocracy and instead explain the mechanisms that generate alternative causal configurations. It should also examine how these relationships change over time, as regime transformation alters the purposes states attach to existing forms of cooperation or as domestic actors adapt to the consequences of international institutions. The central task is thus not only to identify when self-reinforcing loops emerge, but also to explain when they break down, what replaces them, and how states and institutions move between different patterns of reciprocal influence.

Conclusion

This review has traced two generations of research on the reciprocal relationship between regime type and international cooperation. A first generation, emerging in response to the third wave of democratization and the expansion of the liberal international order, emphasized a liberal virtuous circle in which democracy facilitated cooperation and international institutions, in turn, supported democratic consolidation. A second generation, developed against the backdrop of global autocratization and democratic backsliding, has identified an authoritarian counterpart: autocratic governments create, join, and reshape international institutions in ways that serve their political interests, while these institutions may subsequently reinforce authoritarian rule or facilitate democratic erosion. While emphasizing the critical insights delivered by these literatures, this review has also pointed to their limitations and proposed an agenda that calls for future research oriented around conditionalities in regime effects and reinforcement dynamics.

We conclude by outlining three broader implications for research in international relations and comparative politics. First, for scholarship on drivers of international cooperation, this research provides an important reminder of regime type as a source of state preferences and institutional

strategies. This is noteworthy at a time when much scholarship on international cooperation treats domestic regime characteristics as secondary to other sources of variation, such as geopolitical alignment, populist nationalism, and problem pressure (Davis 2023; Barnett et al. 2021; De Vries et al. 2021; Lundgren et al. 2023; Carnegie and Clark 2026; Copelovitch and Pevehouse 2019). The emerging research on authoritarian cooperation shows the risks of overlooking how domestic regime characteristics shape state incentives for collaboration, even as those patterns diverge from preconceived notions of regime effects. At the same time, our review cautions against returning to a simple democracy-autocracy divide, since substantial variation exists within both democracies and autocracies in the actors and institutions that shape governments' preferences concerning cooperation. Reintegrating regime type into explanations of international cooperation therefore requires specifying the domestic political mechanisms which generate particular institutional preferences and strategies.

Second, for research on sources of regime change, this literature similarly renews attention to the international environment. At a time when research on autocratization and democratic backsliding in comparative politics tends to focus on executive aggrandizement and its domestic drivers (Bermeo 2016; Norris and Inglehart 2019; Haggard and Kaufman 2021; Stokes 2025), scholarship on autocratic cooperation underlines the sustained importance of international factors. Much like earlier scholarship demonstrated how international institutions could encourage democratization, recent research shows how collaboration can help sustain authoritarian rule and facilitate democratic backsliding. International cooperation can alter domestic political competition in different directions by redistributing resources, authority, and legitimacy among incumbents and challengers. Understanding regime change therefore requires closer attention to when international institutions reinforce prevailing regime trajectories and when they counteract them.

Finally, the new wave of research on regime type and cooperation invites a reconsideration of the common association between international institutions and liberalism (Deudney and Ikenberry 1999; Jahn 2018; Lake et al. 2021). Democratic and autocratic leaders alike use international institutions to strengthen their political survival and advance domestic objectives. What varies are the threats they confront, the constraints under which they govern, and the international strategies available to them. Nor are international institutions inherently liberal. Their association with liberal outcomes reflects an historically unusual period in which institutional expansion coincided with democratization and liberal hegemony in world politics. The second generation makes visible what this conjunction obscured: the same basic institutional capacities—to confer legitimacy, pool resources, constrain actors, and provide information—can serve very different political projects. The more productive question, then, is not whether international institutions are liberal or authoritarian, but whose political purposes they serve, under what conditions, and with what consequences for domestic political development.

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