

# UNDERMINING DEMOCRACY

**21st Century Authoritarians**

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## STRATEGIES AND METHODS OF 21ST CENTURY AUTHORITARIANS

When asked not long ago about the effectiveness of the European Union's posture toward an increasingly assertive and illiberal Russia, former Czech president and communist-era dissident Vaclav Havel argued that the European democracies had lost their voice and needed to take a firmer, more open stand against abuses by their large and strategically important neighbor to the east.\*

He warned that today's Russia is advancing a new form of authoritarianism, with methods of control that are significantly more sophisticated than the classic totalitarian techniques of the Soviet Union.

Finally, the former Czech leader lamented that as democratic states increasingly gave primacy to economic ties in their relations with Russia, the promotion of human rights was being shunted to the margins. The Kremlin was intensifying its repression of the political opposition, independent journalists, and civil society organizations, but the response from established democracies had softened to the point of inaudibility.

Havel was referring only to Russia, but he could just as easily have been speaking of China, another authoritarian country whose high rates of economic growth and rapid integration into the global trading system have had the effect of pushing the issues of democratic governance and human rights to a back burner. China, like Russia, has modernized and adapted its authoritarianism, forging a system that combines impressive economic development with an equally impressive apparatus of political control.

As in Russia, political dissidents and human rights defenders in China continue to challenge the regime. Chinese activists recently published "Charter 08," a human rights and democracy manifesto that draws its inspiration from Charter 77, the Czechoslovak human rights movement of which Havel himself was a founder.

But while Europe's anticommunist dissidents were the focus and beneficiaries of a worldwide protest movement, the Chinese intellectuals who endorsed Charter 08 labor in

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\* Havel spoke at a conference hosted by the nongovernmental organization ANO pro Evropu (Yes for Europe) in Prague on December 16, 2008.

virtual anonymity. Few in the United States and Europe are familiar with the name of Liu Xiaobo, a respected literary figure and leader of Charter 08, who has been imprisoned by the Chinese authorities since December 8, 2008, for his advocacy of democracy and the rule of law in China. Havel too spent years in jail during the Soviet period for questioning the communist authorities' monopoly on power and their denial of basic human and democratic rights. But the world paid attention to his plight; even government leaders raised his case in meetings with communist officials. In China, Liu remains in detention and effectively incommunicado, and democratic leaders rarely speak out publicly on his behalf.

Today's advocates for freedom may be receiving less attention, and less assistance, from their natural allies in the democratic world because the systems that persecute them are poorly understood in comparison with the communist regimes and military juntas of the Cold War era. As a result, policymakers do not appear to appreciate the dangers these 21st-century authoritarian models pose to democracy and rule of law around the world.

It is within this context of shifting and often confused perceptions of threats and priorities that Freedom House, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, and Radio Free Asia undertook an examination of five pivotal states—Russia, China, Iran, Venezuela, and Pakistan—to advance our common understanding of the strategies and methods these regimes are employing, both within and beyond their borders, to impede human rights and democratic development.

The countries assessed in *Undermining Democracy* were selected because of their fundamental geopolitical importance. They are integrated into larger economic, political, and security networks and exert a powerful influence on international policy at the regional and global levels.

However, they are also geographically, economically, ideologically, and politically diverse. Iran, a unique authoritarian polity ruled by Shiite Muslim clerics, looms over the Middle East. The governing cliques in Russia cloak their kleptocracy in a contradictory blend of Soviet nostalgia and right-wing nationalism. Venezuela is ruled by a novel type of Latin American caudillo who holds up Fidel Castro as his mentor. China sets the standard for authoritarian capitalism, with rapid economic growth sustaining a single-party political system. Pakistan, a South Asian linchpin, is faltering under the legacy of military rule and an extremist insurgency. Three of these countries—Iran, Russia, and Venezuela—are heavily dependent on oil and gas exports, and exhibit all of the peculiar distortions of so-called petrostates.

The present analysis comes at a time of global “political recession.” According to recent findings from *Freedom in the World*, Freedom House's annual survey, political rights and civil liberties have suffered a net global decline for three successive years, the first such deterioration since the survey's inception in 1972. Freedom House's global analysis of media independence, *Freedom of the Press*, has shown a more prolonged, multiyear decline.

While the consolidated authoritarian systems of China, Russia, and Iran are rated Not Free in *Freedom in the World*, and the rapidly evolving, semi-authoritarian states of Pakistan and Venezuela are currently rated Partly Free, all five have played an important role in contributing to the global setbacks for democracy.

It is incumbent on the established democracies and human rights campaigners around the world to both understand the methods of the antidemocratic forces in these countries and actively counter their stratagems. Failure to do so can only grant them victory by default.

### MAIN FINDINGS OF UNDERMINING DEMOCRACY

The authoritarians examined in this study are pursuing a comprehensive set of illiberal policies that are contesting democracy in practical terms, as well as in the broader battle of ideas. Increasingly sophisticated and backed by considerable resources, these efforts are challenging assumptions about the inevitability of democratic development.

- **Democracy Redefined:** Leading authoritarian regimes are working to reshape the public understanding of democracy. A redefined and heavily distorted version of the concept is communicated to domestic audiences through state-dominated media. Especially on television, these regimes put forth a dual message that stresses their own achievements while belittling the core institutions of genuine democracy, which is often kept at arm's length with the appellation "Western." In Russia, the authorities have placed a chokehold on independent media and systematically shut out foreign news broadcasts. Meanwhile, using its own tightly controlled domestic media, the Kremlin pumps out ideological smokescreens—national renewal, historically indiscriminate nostalgia, anti-Western xenophobia, and the curious notion of "sovereign democracy," which essentially provides a semantic shell for each authoritarian ruler to fill as he pleases. A similar usurpation of the term *democracy* by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) complicates domestic arguments about its political system. President Hu Jintao's report to the 17th Party Congress used the words *democracy* and *democratic* some 60 times. Russia and China are working to muddy the waters abroad as well. The CCP plans to spend billions of dollars on expanding its overseas media operations, and Russia Today, the Kremlin's relatively new international television outlet, had benefited from more than \$100 million in funding as of May 2008. Venezuela and Iran, both of which consider themselves democracies of a sort, have also launched international broadcasting platforms.
- **Internet Under Threat:** The leading authoritarians—particularly in China, Iran, and Russia—are using advanced and well-funded techniques to subvert legitimate online

discourse. In addition to controlling access through physical, economic, and technological means, these regimes have enlisted loyal commentators and provocateurs like the “Fifty Cent Party” in China and the “Brigades” in Russia to overwhelm or disrupt undesirable discussions. Furthermore, they use draconian laws to punish outspoken online critics and discourage any who might emulate them. Both Iran and China earned a Not Free ranking in Freedom House’s recent analysis of internet freedom, and Russia was not far behind. These activities cast doubt on the prevailing assumption that the internet will inevitably serve as an open forum for the free exchange of ideas and the organization of constructive grassroots activism. Even in Pakistan, where the government has only occasionally engaged in crude attempts to block opposition or separatist websites, the fallout of authoritarian rule has arrived in the form of the Taliban and other extremists, who actively use the internet to coordinate their activities, attract recruits, and spread their antidemocratic ideology.

- **Authoritarian Foreign Aid:** These regimes are using soft-power methods to advance their interests internationally, particularly through billions of dollars in no-strings-attached development aid. Chinese leaders enunciate a doctrine of win-win foreign relationships, encouraging Latin American, African, Asian, and Arab states to form mutually beneficial arrangements with China based on the principle of noninterference. As part of this strategy, the win-win philosophy is implicitly contrasted with that of the West, which Beijing portrays as pushing a self-serving and alien “democracy agenda” onto developing nations. The Chinese aid program appears to attract willing recipients; the World Bank estimates that China is now the largest lender to Africa. Russia, Iran, and Venezuela have similarly used their oil wealth to build foreign alliances and bankroll clients abroad, particularly in their home regions. This unconditional assistance—devoid of the human rights riders and financial safeguards required by democratic donors, international institutions, and private lenders—is tilting the scales toward less accountable and more corrupt governance across a wide swath of the developing world.
- **Rules-Based Organizations Under Siege:** At the regional and international level, these authoritarian regimes are undercutting or crippling the democracy-promotion and human rights efforts of rules-based organizations including the United Nations, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and the Organization of American States (OAS). In the European context, Russia and its allies in the post-Soviet Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) have pressured the OSCE to move away from election monitoring, the promotion of democratic standards, and the observance of human rights, and urged it to focus instead on economic, environmental, and security

### Authoritarians on the Airwaves

State control over news content and its delivery mechanisms has long been a key feature of authoritarian systems. Recognizing that a genuine competition of ideas and a well-informed public spell trouble for regime security, authoritarian rulers devote extensive resources to managing and manipulating the news. Among the 21st-century variations of this strategy is the emergence of state television broadcasts aimed at overseas audiences. These initiatives—including *Russia Today*, Iran's *Press TV*, and Venezuela's *Telesur*—are part of a broader effort by leading authoritarian states to project their influence beyond national borders. China, meanwhile, has embarked on its own ambitious plan to shape international views.

***Russia Today:*** The television channel *Russia Today* is a Kremlin initiative that broadcasts to North America, Europe, and Asia. It is overseen by the state-controlled RIA Novosti news agency, and at the time of its global launch in 2005, it reportedly had a staff of over 300 and \$30 million in start-up capital.<sup>1</sup> As of May 2008, the Russian government was believed to have invested some \$100 million in the project.<sup>2</sup>

***Iran's Press TV:*** Iran launched the 24-hour, English-language satellite station *Press TV* in 2007, with a reported worldwide staff of 400 people.

***Venezuela's Telesur:*** Launched in 2005, Venezuela's *Telesur* is a multimillion-dollar, 24-hour cable news network designed to advance "a new international communications order," according to Venezuela's minister of information.

***China's Growing International Media Ambitions:*** China's state-controlled news organizations anticipate spending billions of dollars on expanding overseas media operations in a bid to improve the country's image abroad. The plans include opening more overseas bureaus, publishing more content in English and other languages, and hiring English-speaking Chinese and foreign media specialists. The Chinese government in January 2009 announced plans to launch an international, 24-hour news channel with correspondents around the globe.<sup>3</sup> According to reports in early 2009, the government had reportedly set aside between \$6 billion and \$10 billion for this and other media expansion efforts.<sup>4</sup> China Central Television (CCTV), which currently holds a monopoly on television coverage of significant news in China, will multiply its channels from the present 13 to more than 200, all of them digital.<sup>5</sup>

issues. Russia has also blocked reform within the European Court of Human Rights. The OAS has been a target of Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez, who has obstructed almost any initiative that promotes democracy or human rights, and has apparently cowed other delegates with his threats to withdraw from the organization. These regimes have also worked—in some cases cooperatively—to blunt criticism, block proposed sanctions, and advance antidemocratic measures at the United Nations. The governments of Venezuela, Russia, and China have been particularly active in creating new institutions to serve as counterweights to existing rules-based multilateral organizations.

- **Illiberal Education—Tainting the Next Generation:** By either actively promoting or encouraging the presentation of history through a strongly nationalistic or extremist lens, authoritarian regimes are inculcating in the next generation attitudes of hostility toward democracy and suspicion of the outside world. In China, regime-authorized textbooks stress the theme that calls for expanded human rights are an instrument in the West’s grand design to “keep China down.” History courses ignore or explain away the dark chapters in the country’s decades of Communist rule, including the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, and the Tiananmen massacre of 1989. In Russia, textbooks introduced at the Kremlin’s direction depict Stalin as one of the country’s greatest leaders and suggest that the Great Terror was simply a product of the times. In Iran, school textbooks seek to perpetuate the regime’s theocratic ideology and promote an intolerant and illiberal view of the world, while many of Pakistan’s thousands of madrassas teach children to demonize all who do not subscribe to an extreme interpretation of Islam.

### COMMON TRAITS

While there are indisputably major differences among this group of countries, the analysis in *Undermining Democracy* reveals important common traits. Each of the five is ruled by a relatively small in-group—usually with a limited degree of internal rivalry—that uses the power and wealth of the state primarily to serve its own interests, and secondarily to ensure either the explicit or passive support of the masses. In keeping with this oligarchic power structure, each is also promoting or enabling antidemocratic standards and values, both at home and abroad. An absence of institutional accountability leads to repressive and arbitrary governance, and to entrenched, rampant corruption. Finally, the lack of built-in corrective mechanisms like genuinely competitive elections, free media, independent civil society organizations, and the rule of law make these systems inherently unstable, as basic problems and irresponsible policies are allowed to fester and grow into major crises.

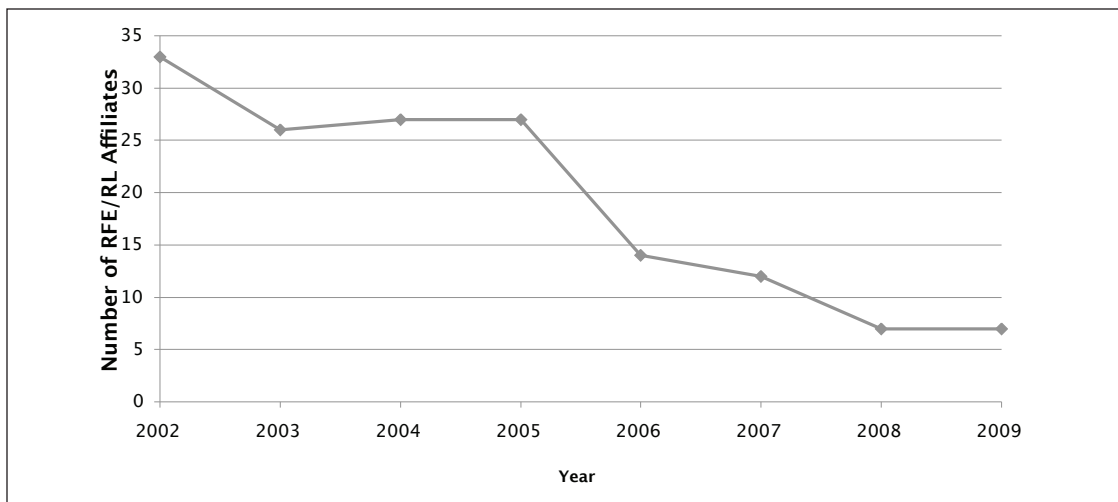
**China**, for example, is ruled by the CCP hierarchy, which has both enriched itself and maintained the necessary degree of public support by opening up new fields of economic and commercial activity. Paradoxically, the party has won praises as the guarantor of national prosperity simply by removing its own long-standing restrictions, allowing the Chinese people to climb out of the crushing poverty and social devastation that had resulted from decades of CCP rule. China's rise has been so dramatic precisely because its starting point was so low. The government has nevertheless burnished its image by means of a sophisticated communications strategy and the studious repression of critical voices. As noted in this study's report on China, the CCP's "efforts have come to include, in addition to censorship, the fashioning of textbooks, television documentaries, museums, and other media that spread seriously distorted versions of Chinese history." Meanwhile, ongoing and growing problems—pollution, human rights abuses, galloping corruption, and social unrest stemming from basic injustice—are largely papered over through the same mechanisms of repression and media control. The latter notably includes both elaborate distractions like the Olympics or the space program and nationalist fear-mongering involving supposed separatist or foreign enemies.

**Iran's** clerical oligarchy and the massive security apparatus that supports it are portrayed as "genuine Islamic" democracy, in which the true interests of the underclass are supposedly protected by a leadership with insight of divine origin. The regime promotes these ideas through its control over all domestic broadcast media and most of the press, and suppresses any remaining criticism by jailing online dissidents and interfering with foreign media broadcasts. In a circumscribed political system in which candidates for elective office are heavily vetted and culled by unelected officials, the government has been free to engage in years of wasteful, graft-ridden, and reckless practices that have seriously undermined Iran's welfare and security, despite the promise of its oil wealth and other advantages. These practices have also had serious consequences abroad, helping to destabilize much of the Middle East.

**Russia's** leadership, a collection of clannish informal cliques, has defended the country's largely decorative elected institutions by devising its own public narrative based on "sovereign democracy" and a vague brand of pugnacious, retrograde nationalism. The Kremlin has secured direct or indirect control over the most important news media, including all national television stations and many newspapers and internet platforms, and this—combined with a convenient boom in oil and gas revenues—has been enough to win at least the acquiescence of the bulk of the population. Unlike the totalitarian system of the past, some intrepid journalists have dared to investigate issues such as corruption and human rights abuses, but in the absence of the rule of law they face intimidation, physical violence, and even murder by the powerful interests they offend. Independent civil society groups have also been targeted by



### Russia's Vanishing Independent Media



the authorities and pushed to the margins of the system. Official mismanagement therefore goes largely unchecked, and an unquestioned foreign policy promotes authoritarian rule abroad while stoking rivalries that bring few obvious benefits to Russia itself.

In **Venezuela**, a country with a tradition of media and political pluralism, President Hugo Chávez has devoted great energy and prodigious state spending to the removal of institutional checks and balances that had limited his own power and that of his cohorts, commonly known as Chavistas. Gradually adapting his techniques based on the strength of his opponents, he has succeeded in dominating all branches of government, acquiring unsupervised access to the country's oil wealth, and drastically expanding the state's—and thus his own—role in the economy. Military spending under Chávez has increased sevenfold, leading to a “militarization of government” and “politicization of the military.” The country's formerly vibrant media landscape has been subjected to a relentless assault by the authorities, and opposition parties' cluster of victories in the 2008 regional and municipal elections have been overshadowed by a 2009 referendum that removed term limits on Chávez and other officials. This study's country report on Venezuela describes how the regime has battered its opponents and enforced loyalty in part through the “promotion of disorder,” which ranges from arbitrary government decisions to the neglect of rising crime rates. As in the other countries examined here, the only true security lies in good political connections. And like the other petrostates, the stability of the system is heavily dependent on volatile oil prices.

**Pakistan** differs from the other four countries in that the antidemocratic ideology promoted by its previous authoritarian rulers has effectively taken on a life of its own. The current, nominally democratic civilian government now faces an extremist insurgency, and

it remains unclear whether the still-powerful military has completely abandoned its long-standing strategy of preserving the Taliban to influence events in Afghanistan. Even the civilian leadership could be described as an oligarchy, with major political parties still dominated by a feudal elite. The situation in Pakistan, and consequently in the region, is plainly unstable, and the deleterious effects of decades of military rule have left both the state and civil society ill-equipped to cope with the country's rising tide of problems.

### **NOT A RETURN TO THE COLD WAR**

The new and significant threat from these authoritarian states does not amount to a return of the Cold War. The China and Russia of today, for example, would be almost unrecognizable to those who lived under Mao and Brezhnev. Ordinary citizens in both countries have far more access to information than they did a generation ago. Travel abroad for holidays, the ability to purchase consumer goods of all descriptions, and a range of other personal freedoms are available to a large portion of the population. And, of course, both countries have joined the global trading system, and international commercial relationships are flourishing.

Indeed, the new authoritarianism is distinguished by a recognition that absolute control over information and economic activity is neither possible nor necessary. These regimes have developed methods that allow them to “guide” and “manage” political discourse; selectively suppress or reshape news and information of political consequence; and squelch, co-opt, or parasitize the most important business entities. The priority is political control, and any societal actor that is prepared to acknowledge the supremacy of the ruling group—and comply with its directives when called upon—is free to operate with a certain amount of autonomy. But the extent to which citizens can exercise their rights depends not on the law as established by freely elected representatives and enforced by impartial courts, but on the state of their relations with the leadership. Loyalists are rewarded, enemies are punished, the neutral are neglected or casually abused, and all of these labels are assigned in an arbitrary and capricious manner.

China's media sector is a telling example of 21st-century authoritarianism in practice. In keeping with the CCP's ongoing experiment in authoritarian capitalism, the party has developed a “market-based censorship” model in which both traditional and online media operate as commercial enterprises—surviving mostly on advertising revenue, and enhancing production quality and entertainment value to attract audiences—but are required to carry out political directives from the authorities. This includes stressing certain topics in the news, suppressing others, and employing an in-house censorship apparatus to ensure compliance.

News professionals who stay within editorial boundaries but nevertheless manage to succeed commercially are rewarded and move up the career ladder. Those who do not risk

### **Assault on International Broadcasting in the Former Soviet Union . . .**

Authoritarian governments use their control over news media to fend off scrutiny and criticism of official activities. While Russian authorities have focused their suppressive efforts on domestic news outlets, international broadcasters including the BBC, Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) have not been spared. Each of these broadcasters, whose programming has attracted a dedicated following of Russian listeners interested in an alternative voice, has been targeted in recent years by Kremlin-orchestrated intimidation campaigns. RFE/RL's local partners—Russian radio stations that rebroadcast its programs as part of their own formats—have been audited and subjected to various other forms of harassment. Since 2005, a total of 20 such RFE/RL affiliates have been closed, the majority due to political pressure. Prior to the crackdown, the Russian Service had affiliates in all 10 of Russia's largest cities, whereas today Russian Service programs can be heard on local stations in less than half. Governments in other parts of the former Soviet Union have undertaken similar efforts to obstruct international broadcasting. There is no local rebroadcasting of RFE/RL content in Azerbaijan, Belarus, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan or Uzbekistan. Several other countries, including Armenia, Georgia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, have used official means such as bans and temporary states of emergency to frustrate domestic access to RFE/RL programs. Many of these governments also hinder access to information on the internet, including news and analysis produced by international broadcasters. In 2008, a massive cyberattack was launched against the website of RFE/RL's Belarus Service, disrupting access to all of RFE/RL's websites for nearly two days. Governments in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Armenia also block domestic access to RFE/RL websites.

### **. . . and in Asia**

Chinese authorities jam U.S. government-funded Radio Free Asia (RFA) broadcasts by co-channeling Chinese opera, funeral music gongs, and static, as well as by overriding RFA's signal with their own programming. The Chinese government publically professed an attitude of openness toward international news organizations and nongovernmental organizations during the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, but it continued to block access to the RFA website. RFA encounters these and similar problems with jamming, censorship, and intimidation by authoritarian regimes elsewhere in Asia, including in North Korea and Burma. Despite these efforts at repression, RFA's audience still manages to access broadcasts through short- and medium-wave radio, satellite links, and on the internet via proxy servers.

professional stagnation or ruin. And media workers are well aware that this system is backed up by the unfettered power of the state to harass, intimidate, imprison, and even execute those who fail to respond to its instructions. Moreover, the media landscape—both online and off—is actively policed by government officials armed with the latest technology available on the world market, one of the benefits of the country’s opening to international trade. Having all but perfected these modern censorship techniques, China is now beginning to serve as a model and mentor for other authoritarian governments around the world.

## CONCLUSION

During the height of the Cold War, there was little ambiguity about the nature and designs of the dominant authoritarian states. The current environment presents a murkier picture. Modern authoritarian governments are integrated into the global economy and participate in many of the world’s established financial and political institutions. And while they tolerate little pluralism at home, they often call for a “multipolar” world in which their respective ideologies can coexist peacefully with others.

The lack of clarity about the nature of these regimes has resulted in a similarly uncertain response from the community of democratic states. Optimistic observers have pinned their hopes on engagement, arguing that interlocking relationships could encourage undemocratic partners to adopt basic democratic standards, or that market-oriented trade and development will inevitably lead to political liberalization. However, leading authoritarian regimes are already well-practiced in the art of allowing economic activity while protecting their political prerogatives, and they are vigorously advancing their own, illiberal values. It is not obvious why they would abandon this approach when dealing with foreign governments.

In fact, as the world’s democracies have struggled to find a common approach to the problem, or even to agree that there is a problem, modern authoritarian states have worked diligently to spread their influence through an extensive web of media concerns, public-relations consultants, diplomatic initiatives, and nontransparent aid packages. Meanwhile, their efforts to disrupt international forums like the United Nations, the OAS, and the OSCE could cripple the ability of established democracies to coordinate their policies and encourage democratic development in other countries. Just as they rule without law within their borders, authoritarian regimes are eroding the international rules and standards built up by the democratic world over the past several decades, threatening to export the instability and abuses that their systems engender.

In a 21st-century context, isolation of or disengagement from these authoritarian states are not viable options. And generally speaking, in order to advance economic interests, these regimes would prefer engagement with the United States and its allies, but only on *their*

terms. An agenda focused selectively on economic or security matters would suit Beijing and Moscow quite well, and this is the type of relationship they have been working toward.

However, if the world's democracies buy in to this restrictive approach, they fall into the authoritarians' trap. The strength and competitive advantage of democratic states lie in their rules-based, accountable, and open systems, and in the values and standards that support them. By extension, an international system that is grounded in human rights and the rule of law is far more desirable than the opaque and capricious alternative being actively pursued by the regimes examined in this study. It is therefore in the democracies' interest to safeguard and promote the very qualities that set them apart from the authoritarians.

Curiously enough, all of the regimes in question routinely invoke the term *democracy* to make their case at home and abroad. It is a testament to the value and power of this idea that those who systematically undermine it seek shelter in its name. But democracy faces a dark future if such attempts to eviscerate the term itself go unchallenged.

#### NOTES

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