League of Dictators?
Why China and Russia Will Continue to Support Autocracies

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Ever since liberalism emerged in the 18th century, its inevitable conflict with autocracy has helped shape international politics. What James Madison called "the great struggle of the epoch between liberty and despotism" dominated much of the 19th century and most of the 20th, when liberal powers lined up against various forms of autocracy in wars both hot and cold.

Many believed this struggle ended after 1989 with the collapse of communism, the last claimant to "legitimate" autocracy, and was supplanted as the main source of global conflict by ancient religious, ethnic and cultural antipathies, a view seemingly confirmed by Sept. 11, 2001, and the rise of Islamic radicalism.

But the present era may be shaping up as, among other things, yet another round in the conflict between liberalism and autocracy. The main protagonists on the side of autocracy will not be the petty dictatorships of the Middle East theoretically targeted by the Bush doctrine. They will be the two great autocratic powers, China and Russia, which pose an old challenge not envisioned within the new "war on terror" paradigm.

If this seems surprising, it is because neither power took the course most observers predicted. In the late 1990s, despite the failures of Boris Yeltsin, Russia's political and international trajectory seemed roughly to be in a Western, liberal direction. China was, as recently as 2002, assumed to be heading toward greater political liberalization at home and greater integration with the liberal world. Sinologists and policymakers argued that whether Beijing's rulers liked it or not, this was the inescapable requirement for transforming China into a successful market economy.

Today these assumptions look questionable even to their authors. Talk of Russia's impending democratization has faded, as has talk of integration. As Dmitri Trenin recently put it, Moscow has "left the Western orbit and set out in 'free flight.' " China continues to integrate itself in the global economic order, but few observers talk about the inevitability of its political liberalization. Its economy booms even as its leadership firmly maintains one-party rule, so people now talk of a "Chinese model" in which political autocracy and economic growth go hand in hand. Russia's leaders like this model, too, though in their case, economic growth rests on seemingly limitless oil and gas reserves.

Until now the liberal West's strategy has been to try to integrate these two powers into the international liberal order, to tame them and make them safe for liberalism. But that strategy rested on an expectation of their gradual, steady transformation into liberal societies. If, instead, China and Russia are going to be sturdy pillars of autocracy over the
coming decades, enduring and perhaps even prospering, then they cannot be expected to embrace the West's vision of humanity's inexorable evolution toward democracy and the end of autocratic rule. Rather, they can be expected to do what autocracies have always done: resist the encroachments of liberalism in the interest of their own long-term survival.

In small but revealing ways this is what Russia and China are doing, in places such as Sudan and Iran, where they are making common cause to block the liberal West's efforts to impose sanctions, and in Belarus, Uzbekistan, Zimbabwe and Burma, where they have embraced various dictators in defiance of the global liberal consensus. All these actions can be explained away as simply serving narrow material interests. China needs Sudanese and Iranian oil; Russia wants the hundreds of millions of dollars that come from the sale of weapons and nuclear reactors. But there is more than narrow self-interest involved in their decisions. Defending these governments against the pressures of the liberal West reflects their fundamental interests as autocracies.

Those interests are easy enough to understand. Consider the question of sanctions. As China's U.N. ambassador explains, "As a general principle, we always have difficulty with sanctions, whether it is this case [Sudan] or other cases." And well they might, since they continue to suffer under sanctions imposed by the liberal world 17 years ago. China would like to get the international community out of the sanctions business altogether. So would Russia. Its opposition to sanctions against Sudan "isn't really about Sudan," notes Pavel Baev. It "is taking a line against sanctions . . . to reduce the usability of this whole instrument of the U.N. to the absolute minimum."

Nor do Russia and China welcome the liberal West's efforts to promote liberal politics around the globe, least of all in regions of strategic importance to them. Their reactions to the "color revolutions" in Ukraine, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan were hostile and suspicious, and understandably so. Western liberals see political upheaval in these countries as part of a natural if uneven evolution toward liberalism and democracy. But the Russians and Chinese see nothing natural in these occurrences, only Western-backed coups designed to advance Western influence in strategically vital parts of the world.

Are they so wrong? Might not the successful liberalization of Ukraine, urged and supported by the Western democracies, be but the prelude to the incorporation of that nation into NATO and the European Union -- in short, the expansion of Western liberal hegemony? As Trenin notes, the "Kremlin is getting ready for the battle for Ukraine' in all seriousness," and it understands, too, that the departure of Alexander Lukashenko from power in Belarus could well "push Minsk onto the Ukrainian-Euro-Atlantic path."

As usual in eras of conflict between liberalism and autocracy, perceived strategic and ideological interests tend to merge on both sides. Thus the Chinese understandably worry about preserving access to oil in the event of a confrontation with the United States. So they seek improved relations with the governments of Sudan and Angola, both out of favor with the liberal West; with Hugo Chavez in Venezuela; and with the government of Burma in exchange for access to port facilities. They are in a constant struggle for votes
at the United Nations to strengthen their hand against Taiwan and Japan, so they court leaders such as Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe, another autocrat loathed by the liberal West. Although European liberal interventionists such as Mark Leonard criticize China's willingness to offer "unconditional political support, economic aid and weapons to autocratic regimes that might otherwise . . . be susceptible to international pressure," one wonders why in the world the Chinese should do otherwise. Does one autocracy sacrifice its interests to join the West's condemnation of another autocracy?

An irony that Europeans should appreciate is that China and Russia are faithfully upholding one cardinal principle of the international liberal order -- insisting that all international actions be authorized by the U.N. Security Council -- in order to undermine the other principal aim of international liberalism, which is to advance the individual rights of all human beings, sometimes against the governments that oppress them. So while Americans and Europeans have labored over the past two decades to establish new liberal "norms" to permit interventions in places such as Kosovo, Rwanda and Sudan, Russia and China have used their veto power to prevent such an "evolution" of norms. The future is likely to hold more such conflicts.

The world is a complicated place and is not about to divide into a simple Manichean struggle between liberalism and autocracy. Russia and China are not natural allies. Both need access to the markets of the liberal West. And both share interests with the Western liberal powers. But as autocracies they do have important interests in common, both with each other and with other autocracies. All are under siege in an era when liberalism does seem to be expanding. No one should be surprised if, in response, an informal league of dictators has emerged, sustained and protected by Moscow and Beijing as best they can. The question will be what the United States and Europe decide to do in response. Unfortunately, al-Qaeda may not be the only challenge liberalism faces today, or even the greatest.