



Democracy Promotion in a Time of War

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In the Russo-Ukrainian War, we have witnessed a small coalition of liberal democracies confront an authoritarian Russia. The decision by a third group of countries to sit this conflict out is striking. One such country, India, has consistently avoided condemnation of Russia in the United Nations. India also has taken advantage of Western sanctions to buy Russian energy at a discount. While much has been made of the [historical ties](#) between India and Russia, we need not look far to understand India's ambivalence: Recent concerns around Indian democracy are well [known](#). Authoritarian regimes are simply less invested in the rules-based international order than liberal democracies.

Against such an adverse international backdrop, can the West still use foreign aid to promote democracy? Democracy promotion is feasible, even under the shadow of war, but only if we are realistic in our approach. What does this suggest for the case of India?

Democracy Promotion in General

To build a strategy for democracy promotion using state-to-state foreign aid, we should understand the imperatives of both donors and recipients. Foreign aid is not altruistic; donors use aid to pursue a variety of objectives. Firstly, they might seek strategic concessions with aid. Consider, for example, American aid to Egypt during Hosni Mubarak's reign: Then, the U.S. was using aid to buy Egyptian peace with Israel. Secondly, donors might pursue commercial concessions with aid as in Chinese aid to select African countries such as Angola that happen to be rich in the mineral and oil resources the Chinese economy needs. Thirdly, donors could also seek to use their leverage over foreign aid to apply diplomatic pressure on authoritarian aid recipients to protect human rights, to promote the rule of law, and to democratize. [Empirical studies](#) of aid-giving have shown that this is a tertiary concern for donors. The July 2022 [visit](#) by President Joe Biden to Saudi Arabia despite its poor human rights record is a case in point. Saudi help with energy supplies is simply more important to the U.S. than the human rights of Saudi dissidents. When we have a choice, the data shows we tend to prioritize strategic and commercial concessions that recipients offer over the democratization of the same recipients.

The View of the Recipient

Compounding this is the fact that the political reforms that we want to see enacted are politically painful for the would-be authoritarian recipient. Which self-respecting dictator will give up power voluntarily if he can help

Not all recipients are equal. Some, like Fiji, lack the attributes to make meaningful counteroffers to Western donors. They can try to look for alternative patrons but are unlikely to succeed because they do not have much to offer to them in the first place. Because they lack leverage, they can be persuaded to liberalize, maybe even democratize, with foreign aid. A strategy of aid allocation that filters recipients by their leverage and emphasizes those recipients that are more susceptible to Western pressure is the way forward. "[Liberalization at the margins](#)," as it were.

The corollary is that recipients with strategic and commercial value to the West will have leverage. They can use it to deflect Western pressure to democratize. These recipients — think of them as the “Egypt” of the aid-recipient world — historically got away with non-democratization. India is an illustrative example.

The case of India

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have leverage, we may have to be creative given the limitations. The alternative, a world of resurgent authoritarianism run amok, is much worse.

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