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# Soft power beyond liberal democracy. Authoritarian attraction, legitimacy and diffusion

Julia Bader <sup>a</sup> and Neil Loughlin <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Political Science, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands; <sup>b</sup>Department of International Politics, City St George's, University of London, London, UK

## ABSTRACT

Soft power is one of the most widely used concepts in political science, but it has underestimated the attractiveness of illiberal or autocratic states due to its inherent liberal bias. In response, this article proposes a framework of authoritarian attraction emphasising the relational nature of power with three distinct analytical categories: (1) sender strategies, (2) audience preferences, and (3) behavioural outcomes. By drawing on and synthesising existing literatures on (soft) power, authoritarian legitimation, diffusion, and audience studies, the article uses the case of China to explore authoritarian attempts to attract and persuade, how these attempts are perceived abroad, and to what extent authoritarian proliferation is driven by learning and emulation. Finally, the article provides an agenda for further research to sharpen our research questions and improve our methodological approaches towards a better understanding of authoritarian attraction.

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## Introduction

Authoritarian regimes devote significant attention to how they are perceived beyond their borders. Through claims about development, stability, and governance performance, they seek to shape preferences and expectations abroad, often in ways that challenge assumptions about the international appeal of liberal democracy. These efforts are most visible in the external strategies of actors such as China and Russia, but they are not confined to major powers. Across a range of contexts, authoritarian narratives and practices have found varying degrees of resonance, raising questions about how attraction operates in international politics and when it carries political consequences (Buzogány, 2017; Halper, 2010; Keating & Kaczmarek, 2019; Kurlantzick, 2007).

Discussions of attraction in international politics have been shaped largely by the concept of soft power. Introduced by Joseph Nye at a moment of optimism about the global spread of liberal democracy, the concept was closely associated with liberal norms and institutions from the outset (Nye, 1990). As a result, attraction has often been analysed as a feature of liberal democracy while authoritarian influence has been approached primarily through coercion, manipulation, or material leverage (Walker, 2018). Yet this distinction has become increasingly difficult to sustain, both empirically and analytically.

Early research on China's external engagement illustrated how development assistance, economic opportunity, and diplomatic presence could generate positive perceptions among foreign audiences (Kurlantzick, 2007). Subsequent studies have shown that authoritarian attraction can rest on concrete policy outcomes and governance claims that resonate in particular political and social contexts (Halper, 2010). These findings complicate assumptions that attraction presupposes liberal values, while also raising questions about how such appeal should be conceptualised and assessed.

Historical experience further underscores that attraction is not exclusive to liberal systems. Fascism in the interwar period and communism after World War II diffused internationally in part through admiration and emulation rather than coercion alone (Gunitsky, 2019). In the contemporary period, cases such as Singapore

**CONTACT** Julia Bader  j.bader2@uva.nl  Department of Political Science, University of Amsterdam, Postbus 15578, 1001 NB, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

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and Vietnam point to political systems in which development, stability, and welfare provision are often prioritised over liberal democratic participation by significant segments of the population (Le, 2012; see also Nathan, 2020). Putin's sustained mobilisation of anti-liberal and 'traditional values' narratives similarly illustrates how illiberal governance claims can be framed as morally and politically appealing beyond national borders (Keating & Kaczmarek, 2019).

At the same time, attraction does not translate uniformly into influence. In Hungary, for example, Russia under Putin has found resonance among illiberal populist elites, yet diffusion remains limited in important respects, in part because societal scepticism and historical experience constrain receptivity to Russian influence (Buzogány, 2017). This divergence between elite resonance and broader audience reception highlights the importance of domestic political mediation in shaping the effects of authoritarian attraction.

Parallel to debates on soft power, scholars of authoritarianism have long emphasised the external dimensions of autocratic rule. Research has examined how authoritarian regimes manage international relationships, project narratives, and seek legitimacy abroad (Barr et al., 2015; Blanchard & Lu, 2012; Cox & Parmar, 2010; Dukalskis, 2021; Repnikova, 2022b; Sergunin & Karabeshkin, 2015). Studies of diffusion have likewise explored how authoritarian practices and strategies spread through processes of learning and emulation (Ambrosio, 2010). More recent work has shown how authoritarian actors attempt to repurpose supposedly liberal vehicles to shape international agendas and norms in authoritarian ways, with effects that extend beyond other authoritarian regimes to democracies as well (Cooley & Dukalskis, 2025). These developments have coincided with a sustained global decline in political rights and civil liberties (Freedom House, 2025).

Taken together, these literatures offer substantial insight into authoritarian outreach and international positioning. They are less well equipped, however, to explain how such efforts are received by different audiences and how reception relates to political outcomes. Analyses often move quickly from projection to presumed influence, leaving the processes through which attraction is interpreted, contested, or translated into action insufficiently specified.<sup>1</sup> There is a need for a more systematic way of analysing authoritarian attraction, one that moves beyond assumptions about its sources and focuses instead on how it operates in practice.

This article aims to provide a clearer basis for analysing when, how, and with what effects authoritarian attraction shapes political behaviour. We proceed as follows. First, we introduce the analytical framework with three distinct analytical dimensions – sender instruments and resources, audience reception and behavioural outcomes – and elaborate on the interrelationship between its different dimensions. Then, we focus on measurement and methodological implications, outlining how authoritarian attraction can be assessed empirically. The conclusion discusses avenues for further research. Throughout the discussion, empirical examples are drawn primarily, though not exclusively, from China, which is the most consequential authoritarian actor in world politics today, and which serves to illustrate how authoritarian attraction operates across different audiences and issue areas without being treated as an exceptional case (Franceschini & Loubere, 2022).

## **Authoritarian attraction, diffusion, audience reception, and legitimacy**

Our conceptualisation of authoritarian attraction engages with the existing debates and conceptual controversies surrounding soft power, while explicitly setting aside the normative assumptions often embedded in that literature (see Ohnesorge, 2020).

Following Nye's formulation, we understand attraction as the process through which soft power operates: the ability to shape the preferences of others through attraction rather than coercion or payment (Nye, 2004; see also Nye, 2021). Attraction refers to the condition in which others are drawn to, admire, or positively evaluate an actor's culture, political values, or policies, and therefore regard its influence as legitimate or worth engaging with. In our usage, attraction is relational and audience-centred. It does not denote an intrinsic quality that a state possesses. Building on work that distinguishes power resources and instruments from reception and outcomes (Baldwin, 2016; Ohnesorge, 2020), we conceptualise attraction as an audience-side outcome that exists when audiences interpret a sender's narratives, performance claims, or practices positively within specific political and social contexts. States may attempt to cultivate attraction through various strategies, but whether it materialises depends on how those efforts are received and interpreted. Hence, our

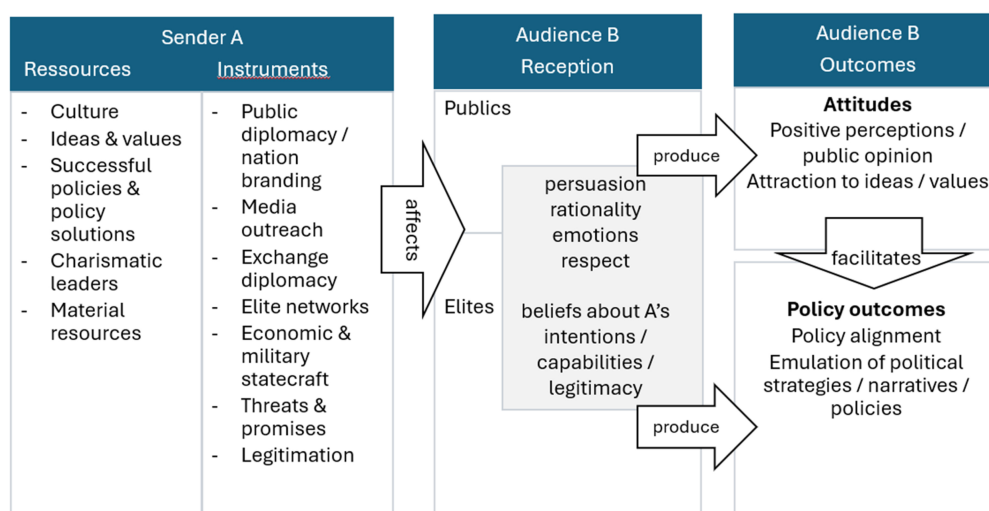
analytical interest lies in how a sender's resources and strategies are perceived by intended audiences – whether as benign or malign, coercive or cooperative – rather than in the mere possession of those resources.

To structure the analysis of authoritarian attraction, we draw on Ohnesorge's distinct analytical dimensions, each requiring different methods and approaches: the sender's resources and instruments, audience perceptions and attitudes, and behavioural outcomes (diffusion). In what follows, we explore how influence through attraction relates to the broader dynamics of legitimacy and diffusion. Placing audience perceptions at the centre avoids prior assumptions about what is, or is not, attractive in a given context (Baldwin, 2016). In line with this approach, we do not treat ideational resources as inherently superior to material ones in generating attraction. What matters analytically is not the intrinsic nature of these resources, but how they are perceived and evaluated by specific audiences in particular contexts. Accordingly, Figure 1 includes material factors as important power resources of attraction, alongside culture, values, policies, and charismatic leadership (Ohnesorge, 2020).<sup>2</sup>

Doing so also allows to incorporate a central insight from the diffusion literature: that emulation and learning are often driven by the logic of effectiveness (Elkins & Simmons, 2005), whereby actors search for models that appear successful in addressing shared political or governance challenges. For authoritarian or would-be authoritarian regimes, these may include strategies to marginalise opposition, constrain civil society, run electoral campaigns, or insulate the regime from political pressure. Material indicators such as sustained economic growth or military capacity can serve as direct sources of attraction, or as proxies for the perceived effectiveness of a model among elites and populations alike (Ambrosio, 2010).

Both democracies and autocracies use various instruments, such as public diplomacy, to shape their image or promote specific messages. Yet, efforts by authoritarian states to enhance their attractiveness are often dismissed as mere propaganda, lacking credibility with foreign audiences (Walker, 2018). Beyond credibility issues, there is controversy over whether the use of misinformation and manipulation to persuade audiences is acceptable. Manipulation, framing, agenda-setting, or even extraterritorial censorship and repression, which authoritarian regimes often use in their eternal image management (Dukalskis, 2021), constrain the choices of target audiences, thereby limiting the voluntarism inherent in attraction or turning it into deception (Nye, 2021; Vuving, 2020). However, while these distinctions are normatively important, they complicate empirical analysis by focusing attention on whether influence is legitimate rather than on how it operates in practice.

We argue that the extent to which audience perceptions are shaped by manipulation should not, in itself, be a concern for the analyst. To prioritise this would be to introduce normative or subjective judgements regarding the sender's intentions – particularly their perceived harmfulness. Empirically, the boundary between persuasion and manipulation is often indistinct, as most forms of persuasion involve some degree of framing (Vanderhill, 2023). What matters analytically is not the moral character of the sender's strategy,



**Figure 1.** A schematic understanding of attraction.

but how it is interpreted and received by the target audience. From the audience's perspective, perceived honesty, credibility, or authenticity may play a central role in shaping responses. Indeed, this is the essence of audience perceptions.

Authoritarian attraction can play out at different levels: at the individual level, as positive attitudes towards an authoritarian actor; and at a collective, group, or state level, where it may materialise in the admiration or adoption of authoritarian policies, party strategies, or state behaviour (Ishiyama, 2018). While studies of the former are often framed as analyses of soft power, the latter has received more attention from scholars of authoritarianism focused on diffusion. Because attraction works with different logics and have different outcomes and implications at each of these levels, it is important to either separate both levels of analysis or to explicate how they are interlinked.

Attitudes and preferences at the individual level and how authoritarian outreach resonates with audiences are often not well understood. Audience perceptions are based on the audience's reading of the sender's intentional and unintentional signals or reputation (Vuving, 2020, p. 24). It matters what a sender says or does, but only analysing the sender's activities is not enough to infer audience perceptions. Audience reactions may be driven by persuasion, rationality, emotions or identity issues that may or may not be related to the senders' actual message and behaviour (Solomon, 2014). Positive audience perceptions may also be motivated by respect for the sender, beliefs that the sender is benign, competent or committed to a common cause, or the belief that the sender's influence is legitimate (Vuving, 2020). Audiences perceive the sender through a filter of preconceptions and personal experiences. They may react to unintended signals, they may react without being intentionally targeted, or react to identity issues unrelated to a sender's actual message and behaviour. Moreover, audiences can reject or accept a sender's narrative, but they can also adapt or localise it to their context or repurpose it for their own objectives.

In and of itself, the attitude of any individual towards an external authoritarian sender may not necessarily be very consequential; however, from a normative perspective we should still be interested in the values and attitudes of individuals and how these are shaped by external (authoritarian) senders. In the aggregate, that is in the form of public opinion, attitudes can constrain or enable decision-makers, particularly – but not only – in democratic settings. How and whose opinions matter depends on the institutional and political structures in place. In liberal democracies, foreign policy is often shaped by electoral incentives and responsiveness to public sentiment (Holsti, 2009). In hybrid or authoritarian regimes, public attitudes may play a role indirectly, for example, by shaping elite narratives of legitimacy or serving as a barometer of regime resilience (Dukalskis & Gerschewski, 2017; Gerschewski, 2018).

The weight of public opinion varies considerably in authoritarian contexts. In highly repressive regimes where political contestation is effectively closed, public preferences have limited direct leverage over policy outcomes (Freedom House, 2025). Research on North Korea's foreign policy, for example, emphasises regime legitimacy, ideology, and domestic political incentives as key drivers of external behaviour, rather than responsiveness to publicly articulated preferences (Hong & Cho, 2016). In less repressive or electorally competitive authoritarian systems, by contrast, rulers remain attentive to social signals because elections, protest risk, and intra-elite competition make legitimacy politically salient (Gerschewski, 2013; Svoboda, 2012). For example, international conflict generated sharp shifts in expressed approval for Russia's Putin while the invasion of Crimea illustrates how foreign policy events interact with authoritarian legitimation via public-facing 'rallying' dynamics (Hale, 2022). Turkey under the AKP similarly illustrates how leaders can capitalise on foreign policy activism for domestic political advantage, linking external positioning to electoral and legitimacy considerations (Öniş, 2011; Öniş & Yilmaz, 2009).

Whether and how individual attitudes matter thus depends on the specific political configuration in any given country. Not all individuals or groups are equally able to translate preferences into influence. Elites and broader publics may reference different external models or attach different meanings to them. Elites may attempt to align public narratives with their own preferences through legitimation strategies, material incentives, media control, or repression. Publics, in turn, may constrain elite alignment through popular pressures, protest, or legitimacy costs – where such mechanisms exist (Weiss, 2013). Malaysia's experience with China-linked Belt and Road Initiative projects in the 2010s provides a further illustration: while segments of the political elite promoted large-scale infrastructure cooperation, concerns over debt, transparency, and sovereignty became politically salient and contributed to the suspension and renegotiation of projects after the 2018 election (Loughlin, 2025). Elite positioning and public receptivity did not fully coincide, and these

dynamics complicate any straightforward account of how attraction operates and underline the need to treat audiences as politically structured rather than unitary.

At a more aggregate or state level, authoritarian attraction may manifest in policy outcomes, such as the diffusion of authoritarian policies, institutions, ideologies or justifications. Yet, authoritarian attraction is neither a necessary nor a sufficient cause for diffusion. Even where actors are attracted, policy alignment or emulation may be blocked, diluted, or selectively adjusted as a result of institutional veto points, bureaucratic interests, coalition dynamics, or regime survival strategies (Svolik, 2012; Tsebelis, 2002). And even where alignment can be observed, apparent affinity does not in itself demonstrate diffusion. For example, Buzogány (2017) argues that Hungary's post-2010 trajectory is better explained by domestic political dynamics than by authoritarian diffusion from Russia.

Diffusion has become an increasingly studied concept in the field of authoritarianism. It can be driven by passive illustration, coercive imposition or cooperative promotion in which the sender actively assists the adopter with policy adoption. Not all of these forms imply attraction. When diffusion is driven by admiration, that is where a target emulates a model out of respect for an exemplar authority, it can be understood as a prototype of influence through attraction (Rothman, 2011; Tolstrup, 2024; Vuving, 2020). Another mechanism that implies attraction is policy learning. In this case, adopters consciously draw lessons from an exemplar because doing so helps them address a specific policy problem (Ambrosio, 2010; Ambrosio & Tolstrup, 2019; Hall & Ambrosio, 2017).

The literature finds that authoritarian diffusion in the twenty-first century is driven more by narrow regime survival interests than by ideational appeal. This has been attributed mainly to the lack of ideology-based regimes that embody innovative models arising from broader ideological families and inspire emulation (Brownlee, 2017, p. 1327; von Soest, 2015; Weyland, 2017). Tracing mechanisms of admiration is empirically more difficult than identifying processes of learning (Tolstrup, 2024). Attraction depends on the observable success of a given policy or idea. Only relatively recently – since around the global financial crisis of 2008 – has the international environment 'been ripe with autocratic success stories – a crucial component for authoritarian diffusion through admiration' (Tolstrup, 2024, p. 6). Compared to earlier periods, the larger number of autocracies and their denser connections today have created conditions that are more conducive to authoritarian diffusion based on both admiration and learning (Tolstrup, 2024).

Understood as positively-perceived influence, attraction overlaps with the concept of legitimacy. Legitimacy describes the condition in which the ruler's authority is being perceived as legitimate and rightful and is therefore followed (Gerschewski, 2018, p. 655). Legitimacy has been applied to the context of autocracies through an empirical-analytical understanding as an equally 'relational concept between the ruler and the ruled in which the ruled sees the entitlement claims of the ruler as being justified, and follows them based on a perceived obligation to obey' (Gerschewski, 2018, p. 655; Weber, 1978). In the same way one can differentiate legitimacy from support for a regime, the scope of attraction is broader than that of legitimacy. Legitimacy narrowly denotes the subjective judgment and belief in its rightfulness as the cause for a subject's consent to authority, while support or attraction may be based on various motivations, including ideational conviction or only utilitarian cost-benefit calculus (Gerschewski, 2018).

Though legitimacy usually refers to somewhat institutionalised 'continuous relationships that extend beyond individual actors and situations' (von Haldenwang, 2017, p. 272), the process of legitimation should be treated as a distinct analytical category describing the activities of a power wielder in justifying their rule (Gerschewski, 2018), and is highly relevant and helpful for understanding authoritarian attraction. It parallels the idea that states actively engage in increasing their attractiveness through public diplomacy, nation branding, or narrative management. Therefore, below, we suggest connecting insights on authoritarian legitimacy claims with the concept of strategic narratives to analyse how authoritarian states attempt to persuade and attract.

Because attraction may shape perceptions without necessarily producing policy alignment, we separate the analysis into distinct analytical stages. Building on Ohnesorge (2020), we propose three analytical starting points for the study of authoritarian attraction: the sender's resources and instruments, audience preferences, and policy outcomes at the group or state level. These categories connect research on the international dimensions of authoritarianism with debates about the nature, reach, and reception of authoritarian attraction. While several categories may be relevant in a given study, each can serve either as a

**Table 1.** Summary of methodological considerations.

Research questions	Methodology
<b>Senders</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Which resources do they have and which do they try to activate and how?</li> <li>• With which actions, through which channels and with which claims do authoritarian states seek to increase their attraction vis-à-vis a foreign audience?</li> <li>• Which particular audiences are targeted?</li> <li>• How does outreach target different audiences differently?</li> <li>• Which non-state channels are used (and how) for this outreach?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Descriptive analysis of instruments of public and elite diplomacy (cultural institutes, exchange programmes, engagement of interface actors);</li> <li>• Analysis of (social) media outreach; ‘influencers’ on social media;</li> <li>• (Comparative) framing analysis</li> </ul>
<b>Audience resonance (individual-level preferences) at the <i>popular</i> level</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do populations perceive the sender?</li> <li>• Which specific aspects are appealing and to whom?</li> <li>• Do audience expectations match their experiences with the sender?</li> <li>• How and with whom do sender narratives land?</li> <li>• How do (local) messengers affect the credibility of A’s messages?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Survey research with specific questions about which and why particular aspects appeal; combination with data on exposure (e.g. geo-location of aid or investment projects);</li> <li>• Survey experiments, testing A’s messages or the role of the messenger;</li> <li>• Case study analysis of mobilisation for/against A, e.g. protests</li> </ul>
<b>Audience resonance (individual-level preferences) at the <i>elite</i> level and with exposed or targeted individuals</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do elites perceive of the sender?</li> <li>• Which specific aspects are appealing to elites?</li> <li>• Do elites’ expectations match experiences with the sender?</li> <li>• Does exposure affect perceptions or behaviour?</li> <li>• Do elite audiences accept, reject or adapt the sender’s claims?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Analysing (student) mobility and migration: interviews, ethnographic methods.</li> <li>• Assessment of changing preferences through interaction with sender and correcting for self-selection, for example through matching in statistical analysis;</li> <li>• Elite interviews; text analysis of speeches or official documents.</li> </ul>
<b>Outcomes at party/state-level</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do governments further diffuse a sender’s claims?</li> <li>• Do policy alignment or diffusion materialise? If so, can it be attributed to attraction? If not, why not?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Analysing foreign policy alignment in multilateral and bilateral settings (e.g. voting behaviour or compliance with A’s preferences) or the adoption or emulation of policies, strategies and practices through (comparative) qualitative and quantitative methods, e.g. process-tracing interviews, counterfactuals, qualitative and automated text analysis</li> </ul>

starting point for investigation or as the analytical core. In the following, we further develop the Table 1 for an overview).

### Authoritarian senders’ domestic and international legitimisation strategies

Although we emphasise the need to focus on the reactions of audiences and targets, it matters whether and how they attempt to *exert influence*. Classical literature distinguishes between power resources – that is the opportunities, acts, objects, and characteristics that an actor can exploit in order to affect the behaviour of another (Dahl, 1957, p. 203) – and the means (or instruments) that states use to influence, often through propaganda, diplomacy; economic or military statecraft; threats; promises; or legitimisation. Means are property concepts that can be observed for one actor without implying anything about other actors (Baldwin, 2016, p. 55). Resources, in contrast, are relational; they only have meaning with reference to a certain context. When and by whom a senders’ resources are perceived positively is situational.

Regarding the sender side, we should consider how they seek to enhance their legitimacy with particular audiences. This includes analysing instruments of public diplomacy, certain policies, and activities aimed at increasing international visibility and alliances, including within international organisations. Existing literature has focused on the channels or instruments used to construct and project a specific narrative abroad, such as public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, nation branding, exchange programmes, or mega sporting events (Edney, 2015; Li, 2008). Russia, China, and Iran have also directly expanded their domestic media to reach international audiences and shape international public opinion (Rawnsley, 2015; see also Akbar, 2023).

Less well understood are instruments beyond newspapers, television, and radio, such as social media, particularly from influencers who use supposedly authentic ‘homegrown’ non-governmental accounts. Additionally, international organisations should be considered stages for legitimisation attempts and platforms for constructing and disseminating narratives about the sender, or a particular (anti-Western) worldview. More generally, autocrats systematically re-purpose the channels, networks and modes of transnational liberal influence such as diverse forms of cultural or educational cooperation, transnational advocacy networks, international sporting events or globalisation for their own purpose of exerting authoritarian influence (Cooley & Dukalskis, 2025). A focus on the aims and strategies – what and how the sender seeks to use international organisations – can then be measured against audience reactions and outcomes (Lynch, 2023).

Regarding the claims through which authoritarian states seek to increase their appeal to foreign audiences, the literature on legitimacy and strategic narratives within authoritarianism research offers insights into strategies of persuasion, indoctrination, demonstration, and legitimisation. Domestically, autocrats employ a range of legitimisation strategies, from ideological indoctrination and performance-based legitimacy to the incorporation of (democratic) procedures (Dukalskis & Gerschewski, 2017; Gerschewski, 2018). Many of these strategies also extend to the international level.

The legitimisation message may draw on different sources, echoing and amplifying domestic claims anchored in ideology, performance, or procedures at the international level (Von Soest & Grauvogel, 2017). These strategies operate within, and at times contest, the international system (Roselle et al., 2014), including in ways that also target domestic audiences (Weiss & Wallace, 2021).

Fundamental to such claims is of course the notion of performance. For example, China’s experience of poverty eradication, its rapid economic advances, technological and social development, its resilience during the 2008 global financial crisis, and now its leading position in green technologies have bolstered China’s confidence as an international model (Halper, 2010; Liao, 2016). Perhaps its most significant instrument, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a ‘branding strategy’ for China’s overseas economic engagement (Joy-Perez, 2019). It showcases China’s hard economic power, and packages it to present China as an attractive economic and political partner that provides aid without democratic or other strings attached (Loughlin & Grimsditch, 2021).

This framing thrives on China’s nationalist discourse and self-portrayal as a developing country with no history of colonial interference in others, partly informed by its own experience of colonial humiliation (Kaufman, 2010; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022). This narrative is then portrayed internationally to contrast with what it describes as US hegemony (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023). In this way, China’s discursive strategies can be seen as an attempt, as Russia and other autocrats have tried, to provide a ‘countervailing discourse that claims soft power and great power status in opposition to the West and its hegemonic discourse’ (Kisileva, 2015, p. 316).

Finally, China’s narrative praises its performance in comparison to the shortfalls of liberal democracy. In this narrative, democracy is redefined not based on universal principles but ‘rooted in history, culture, and tradition’, taking ‘diverse forms [...] along the paths chosen by different peoples based on their exploration and innovation’ (State Council Information Office of the PRC, 2021). Through this discourse, China seeks to undermine global democratic norms by portraying democracy and democratisation as tools of neo-colonialism (Pan et al., 2020, p. 3).

While we have illustrated China’s attempts to construct attraction, the relational nature of power takes audience preferences as crucial to understanding their success (Feklyunina, 2016). We next focus on the target or audience resonance and the outcomes of authoritarian attraction in the form of diffusion.

## Resonance and audience perceptions

When resonating with foreign audiences, a sender’s instruments can be crucial in shaping the audiences’ preferences. At the individual level, attraction means that individuals perceive positively of A as a country or actor, admire A for what it stands for, or agree to A’s actions and influence.

As values, identities, and aspirations can vary widely over time, region, and between different contexts, analysts should refrain from making sweeping claims about what is or is not appealing based on our preferences, and instead empirically investigate preferences in different contexts. A first step when discussing

authoritarian attraction is therefore to differentiate between various types of audiences in their specific contexts: elites versus broader populations, particular segments of the population such as ethnic or religious minorities, rich vs. poor or democratic vs. non-democratic countries, and in different parts of the world – countries in the global South or in a sender's neighbourhood. Each will yield different insights. For example, perceptions of outside actors vary widely between Sunni and Shiite Muslims, Sunni Kurds and Copts in Egypt and Iraq (Köse et al., 2016).

How can attraction materialise, be observed and measured? To gauge preferences and attitudes among populations, survey research is an important methodological approach but it needs to encompass a broader range of countries and audiences and ask a wider range of questions rather than relying on crude favourability scores as has often been the case. Ideally, attitudes collected in surveys can be combined with measurements of respondents' actual exposure to or encounters with the sender, for example through the geo-coding of aid or investments projects.

The case of China is again illustrative; its rising economic presence has delivered interesting insights highlighting regional and other variations in perception. For example, survey studies with specific questions about China show that reactions to China's presence on the African continent vary widely between countries; and China's rise is often seen as an opportunity, even despite anti-Chinese backlashes (Sautman & Hairong, 2009; Shen & Taylor, 2012). Attitudes towards China as a partner for development are not much different from those towards traditional donors, notably the EU (Hanusch, 2012; Keuleers, 2015; F. L. Wang & Elliot, 2014). Data from Afrobarometer reveals that Chinese investments in development and infrastructure enhance its attractiveness, while interestingly, collusion with undemocratic African rulers is hardly noted as damaging China's image (Morgan, 2019).

Clearly, the material rise of China and the connected economic opportunities is a driver of attraction, which is not necessarily hampered by China's own authoritarian regime or its willingness to partner with autocracies abroad. Instead, everyday experience seems significant: Several studies find that perceptions are contingent on the respondent's positive or negative everyday experiences with Chinese investors and activities on the ground, which are sometimes less positive (Blair et al., 2022; McCauley et al., 2022).

Moreover, the effectiveness of authoritarian propaganda outreach in cultivating attraction among foreigners should not be dismissed. Barr et al. (2015, p. 215) called for more insights from audience studies and this call should explicitly also include insights from propaganda literature which has found authoritarian propaganda more effective than often assumed (Crilley et al., 2022; Shirikov, 2024).

Here, survey experiments offer possibilities to test the effectiveness of authoritarian narratives in increasing authoritarian appeal abroad that significantly advance measurement beyond favourability scores and allow to identify which aspects find attraction and, potentially, why. For example, recent sophisticated experimental research using original Chinese and US messaging finds Chinese media quite successful in convincing a global audience of the merits of the Chinese system, particularly in Latin America and Africa, and to a lesser degree in rich democracies, sometimes outcompeting messaging from the United States (Mattingly et al., 2024).

Another approach would be to examine observable expressions of preferences, such as mobilisation for or against the authoritarian sender at the popular level. Although this may appear more straightforward because it relies on observable behaviour, the triggers for backlash can vary widely, ranging from concerns about authoritarianism or corruption to labour rights, fears of economic dependency, security issues, or anxieties about migration and identity. This approach therefore requires careful investigation to identify the underlying causes of mobilisation, assess how broadly they are shared, and determine how they relate to questions of authoritarianism.

Similar concerns hold for observable indicators such as the decision to study in a given country abroad, which is often cited as a soft power indicator (Gauttam et al., 2024). Foreign student numbers say something about an individual's perceptions of future prospects, but deciding on a given country could also have to do with a country's accessibility for foreigners (particularly from the non-rich world) and the cost of studying and living in that country. In addition to counting how many students study where it would be insightful to investigate what students take from that experience and how they assess their personal encounters in an authoritarian context for governance at home. A few studies have investigated the personal experiences of students at China's Confucius Institutes around the globe, as well as in study programmes in China. While the former are heavily motivated and enticed by the benefits of speaking Mandarin as a door opener to job mar-

kets (Repnikova, 2022b), the latter often experience tensions between the aspirations of how China wants to portray itself and the reality of its educational system, including incidents of discrimination (Hodzi, 2020b).

More generally, focusing on individuals particularly exposed to or participating in authoritarian outreach initiatives such as exchange programmes or elite networks would be desirable. Research looking into the (change) in perceptions of participants could be qualitative, like Hubbert's ethnography or Repnikova's work based on interviews (Hackenesch & Bader, 2020; Hubbert, 2019; Repnikova, 2022a). If quantitative research were to be undertaken, it would need to carefully tackle self-selection effects.

Regarding the preferences and attitudes of ruling elites, it might be possible to draw insights from official statements or, in exceptional cases, from interviews, but it will be much more difficult to understand true attitudes because ruling elites speak and act with their political calculations in mind. This could go in both directions: leaders may officially woo authoritarian patrons to maintain a good relationship, while others may wilfully politicise this alignment or engagement with an eye on domestic electoral gains.

To understand whether authoritarian narratives are accepted and reproduced, a focus on speech acts and discourses is needed. Though experiments can help us identify which narratives resonate, they are less powerful in determining whether and how narratives are translated and localised in a specific context. Yet audiences are not passive consumers. They do not only reject or adapt but negotiate narratives (Hodzi, 2020a). Sometimes, agents translate and localise narratives for consumption by specific audiences. One underexplored aspect in this field is the particular role of local amplifiers or interface actors, such as local journalists and editors, educators, political and social elites, or influencers on social media, who deliberately or inadvertently amplify the messages of outside actors (Rivetti, 2024).

Hence, analysis of traditional and social media or political discourses, parliamentary debates, or official statements could offer interesting insights when compared with narratives disseminated from authoritarian senders. One potential problem is that in some countries, Russian and Chinese media and authorities directly provide content for publication in local media. However, comparative studies could potentially tease out where narratives converge and where they are localised (Loughlin, 2021).

To conclude, while surveys are an important tool, analysts have many more methodological instruments at their disposal (for a summary see Table 1) to interrogate authoritarian attraction at the individual level.

### **Behavioural outcomes: policy alignment, policy learning and emulation**

Ultimately, policy alignment or even the emulation of authoritarian practices, strategies and policies can be the result of authoritarian attraction. That powerful states attempt to align the interests and behaviour of others is nothing new, but the idea that powerful authoritarian states may drive policy decisions elsewhere is gaining attention (Cooley & Dukalskis, 2025; Hall & Ambrosio, 2017).

It is interesting to note that a growing body of literature investigates foreign policy alignment with Chinese interests, from UN voting patterns to China's more specific national interests (J. Bader, 2014; Flores-Macías & Kreps, 2013; G. Wang et al., 2023). However, most of this literature focuses on economic linkages and the implied vulnerability to economic and political pressure from China, if not outright punitive economic statecraft in cases where others resist alignment with China's interests. Since China's economic engagement is increasing and can be assumed to be a relevant causal explanation for policy alignment, there has been little systematic investigation into whether or to what degree ideational attraction may motivate policy alignment.

With rising tensions in global politics, heightening Sino-US competition, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the war in Gaza, and the alienation of many Western allies by President Trump's foreign policy this is likely to change. In reaction to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the war in Gaza, many countries reject the US's appeal to shared values as hypocritical or as a cynical attempt to mask ulterior motives or military expansion (Repnikova, 2023). A significant challenge in inferring preferences regarding democracy from a country's stance in geopolitical conflicts between the US, its (former) Western allies, Russia, or China will be to disentangle whether these positions are driven by *anti-colonial*, *anti-American*, or other motives, or a rejection of *democratic values* (Berman, 2023).

In any event, to attribute alignment to attraction would require to established first that alignment exists and then, more importantly, that it is driven by attraction. The latter is by no means a given, considering that

policy outcomes are always the result of a complex process. Again, even though we argue attraction facilitates policy alignment, we consider attraction to be neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition for alignment (or diffusion) to occur.

Next to policy alignment, the diffusion of policies or practices from one country to another can be another outcome of authoritarian attraction. Once the object of diffusion has been identified, it needs to be demonstrated what policies and programmes have been borrowed, from whom, how, why, or why not. Thereby, causal analysis needs to carefully consider several sources of policy learning: Learning can be inspired by the outside, but may also draw from the adopter's prior experience or transfer from one policy field to another (Hall, 2023; Hall & Ambrosio, 2017).

Repressive legislation, such as anti-NGO laws, cybercrime laws, and other repressive legislation, are established objects of diffusion. Autocrats tend to introduce the same type of legal restrictions they observe elsewhere (M. Bader, 2014; Glasius et al., 2020; Lemon & Antonov, 2020). Here, the sequencing and close comparison of legal texts allowed to establish the diffusion from one place to the other (M. Bader, 2014; Glasius et al., 2020) while plagiarism software shows the verbatim diffusion of text passages (Lemon & Antonov, 2020, 2025). As Lemon and Antonov (2025) show, legal harmonisation in the post-Soviet space involves measurable textual borrowing across laws. Moreover, in Tajikistan internet and information-security regulation has converged towards Russian – and to a lesser extent Chinese – regulatory templates (Lemon & Antonov, 2025). Automated text analysis that looks at word embedding is another way to detect the convergence of ideas and arguments in discourses (Lam & Fung, 2024).

More generally, thorough process tracing is needed. The evidence base for such studies can be strengthened by engaging in archival research or, where possible, interviewing those involved in drawing up legislation and policies, something evident in several recent case studies (Lawrence, 2021; Roberts & Ziemer, 2018). Process tracing also helps explain why attraction sometimes fails to produce expected effects, and why divergence between elite and public reference points may produce uneven or partial alignment rather than straightforward imitation.

The sender country's role in such diffusion can but does not need to be passive, which can make analysis more complex (Tolstrup, 2024). For example, as a frontrunner in digital surveillance technologies, China has been facilitating authoritarian learning and the diffusion of illiberal laws and technology by actively demonstrating its technology, propagating illiberal interpretations of human rights or cyber security, and sponsoring platforms to spread them (Feldstein, 2021). It has actively marketed and offered financing for the purchase and provided training on how to operate such technologies, while Chinese companies have been directly complicit in their repressive applications (Layton, 2020). Yet, the secretive nature of such technology transfers and the fact that China's rise coincides with a global shift towards authoritarianism make it difficult to study and isolate the role of China versus the motivations of adopters in this dynamic.

Sometimes, there are several exemplars for diffusion and multilateral platforms can also function as facilitators of learning. Identifying the sources of inspiration for learning and emulation therefore always requires careful reconstruction. The proliferation of Special Economic Zones in Africa is an instructive example, where existing qualitative literature shows that while China's role as a model has historical roots, African elites often draw lessons from (repressive) Asian developmental states more generally, rather than China alone (Eaton & Katada, 2022; Fourie, 2014). Even in cases where authoritarian regimes rhetorically express the desire to learn from China's developmental policies and projects, closer examination reveals that such policies and practices may have been first proposed by other development partners and multilateral organisations before China became a major development player (Bo & Loughlin, 2022). Moreover, because Chinese media are keen to cite foreigners praising the Communist Party's achievements and expressing a desire to learn from China, foreign elites' referencing China as an interesting partner and a model worth replicating should be interpreted cautiously. Adding to the complexity, external models are sometimes not easily replicable, and elites elsewhere may be aware of this (Weiss, 2019). As such, as Hodzi and Åberg (2020) note, the attraction of China's contemporary example lies not so much in a *specific* developmental model, but mostly in its vagueness that can be filled in by local elites to serve their own interests.

To conclude, careful process tracing, including for cross-case, within-case, and counterfactual reasoning is needed (Starke, 2013). Scholars of authoritarian diffusion have already begun to propose ways to identify diffusion across autocracies, and small-N case studies have helped identify what causes and processes are endogenous (Ambrosio & Tolstrup, 2019; Buzogány, 2017; Wong, 2019). Such an approach, identifying how

authoritarian practices that are diffused are adapted in various places and over time – or not – would highlight trends, continuities, and changes in authoritarian interests and strategies globally.

### Conclusion: a research agenda

This article has developed a framework for analysing authoritarian attraction that disaggregates the process into three interrelated components: sender strategies, audience preferences, and behavioural outcomes. While each of these dimensions can be studied independently, their analytical value increases when examined in relation to one another. Investigating how legitimacy claims are tailored to resonate with specific audiences, how those audiences respond or reinterpret them, and how such responses shape or constrain observable outcomes allows us to move beyond static accounts of soft power and towards a more dynamic understanding of authoritarian legitimacy-building.

A core insight of this framework is that attraction is not a property of the sender alone, nor a simple effect on the audience, but a process shaped by mutual interpretation and feedback. This has implications for how we think about public opinion in relation to attraction. Much of the existing literature treats public sentiment as either an output (e.g. survey scores) or a passive conduit for elite influence. Yet the logic of attraction suggests that public attitudes may also facilitate – or obstruct – policy alignment. In liberal democracies, mass approval is often a formal precondition for foreign policy shifts. But in authoritarian and hybrid regimes, public opinion can still matter: as a source of performance legitimacy, a constraint on regime manoeuvrability, or a pressure point in times of crisis (Dukalskis & Gerschewski, 2017; Gerschewski, 2018). Public support should not be understood as a necessary condition for attraction to operate, but future research should interrogate how its role varies across regime types and contexts.

In terms of research direction, we identify several priorities. First, more comparative work is needed on how authoritarian senders craft and adapt their legitimisation strategies. China has received the most attention, particularly in the context of its global media, education, and infrastructure diplomacy. But other regimes – such as Russia, Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia – deploy different narratives and instruments, drawing on religious authority, conservative values, or strategic autonomy. These strategies should be examined not only in terms of intent, but in how they travel through formal and informal channels, including international organisations (Lynch, 2023), and the carriers and channels of engagement originally associated with liberal diffusion such as cultural exchanges, cooperation in educational programmes, civil society organisations, or digital influencers (Cooley & Dukalskis, 2025).

Second, researchers should focus on how different audiences – elites, publics, or sub-national groups – perceive and respond to authoritarian narratives. Quantitative tools such as survey experiments offer insight into which elements of authoritarian governance – such as perceived efficiency, order, or state sovereignty – are seen as attractive, and by whom (Mattingly et al., 2024). But qualitative approaches remain essential to capture the interpretive work audiences perform (Hubbert, 2019; Repnikova, 2022b). More ethnographic studies, text analysis and fieldwork-based analyses are needed to shed light on how audience members do not simply consume authoritarian messages but actively translate and reframe them for local political and cultural contexts. Elites and intermediaries may rearticulate external narratives in ways that make them locally legible, sometimes producing outcomes unintended by the sender.

Third, we call for more precise empirical work on the outcomes of authoritarian attraction. Attraction may result in rhetorical alignment, policy diffusion, or institutional emulation – but tracing these effects requires careful process-tracing and attention to causal mechanisms (Starke, 2013). Comparative legal analysis has helped trace how authoritarian legal innovations spread across regimes (Dixon & Landau, 2021; Glasius et al., 2020; Lemon & Antonov, 2020), while case-based research drawing on interviews and archival material has added depth to our understanding of how and why such policies are adopted (Lawrence, 2021; Roberts & Ziemer, 2018). These approaches are especially important for distinguishing between different logics of alignment: is foreign policy convergence driven by pro-authoritarian sympathy, rejection of liberal democracy, or strategic opposition to Western power? Each may play a role, but conflating them risks obscuring the underlying causal mechanisms and, given today's geopolitical tensions, may have different implications regarding a country's commitments to the existing international order.

Several unresolved issues merit closer investigation. One is the nature of diffusion across autocracies: existing studies suggest that authoritarian diffusion is often less ideological than assumed and more concerned with regime survival (Ambrosio & Tolstrup, 2019; Wong, 2019), but this claim remains under-tested across regions. Another question is whether at the global level, authoritarianism is gaining ground because authoritarian senders have become more active – or because democratic senders are retreating their global outreach. Both dynamics likely matter, but disentangling their effects requires closer comparative work over time.

If we ask sharper questions and apply more targeted methods, we may find that authoritarianism is more – or less – attractive than is often assumed. Either way, we cannot understand the shifting global order without engaging seriously with authoritarian attraction. Future research must explore not only what authoritarians project, but how, to whom, and with what effect.

## Notes

1. See Grix and Brannagan (2016) on underspecified mechanisms; Gurol (2023) on reception and contestation.
2. Material attraction may also include the (prospect of) access to (large) export markets which can, however, also been turned into a more coercive instrument if made conditional on adherence with authoritarian requirements of the host country (Cooley & Dukalskis, 2025).

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## Notes on contributors

**Julia Bader** is associate professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Amsterdam. Julia's work has been published amongst others in *International Studies Quarterly*, *European Journal of Political Research*, *Democratization* and *Journal of Peace Research*. She is the author of the monograph *China's foreign relations and the survival of autocracies*.

**Neil Loughlin** is associate professor of comparative politics at City St George's, University of London. His research focuses on authoritarian politics and the political economy of development and has been published in journals such as *Comparative Politics*, *Democratization*, *Third World Quarterly*, and *Journal of Contemporary Asia*. His book 'The Politics of Coercion: State and Regime Making in Cambodia' was published by Cornell University Press in September 2024.

## ORCID

Julia Bader  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1779-2609>

Neil Loughlin  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0254-184X>

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