

Authoritarian Alignment and Democratic Backsliding: Evidence from East Asia

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Abstract

This project examines whether growing cooperation among China, North Korea, and Russia reshapes democratic identity and citizens' evaluations of domestic political elites in South Korea and Japan. The central argument is that external authoritarian alignment can encourage democratic citizens to understand democracy not only as a set of domestic political principles, but also as an international identity that distinguishes their country from authoritarian states. This internationalization of democratic identity may create a paradox: citizens may identify more strongly with the democratic world while becoming more willing to tolerate illiberal or undemocratic practices at home, particularly when such practices are associated with leaders who present themselves as strong defenders of national security. To test this argument, I conduct a comparative online survey experiment in South Korea and Japan. Respondents are randomly assigned to receive information about recent political, military, and economic cooperation among China, North Korea, and Russia or to a control condition. They then evaluate hypothetical domestic legislators whose partisan affiliation, foreign-policy reputation, and democratic or undemocratic domestic behavior are experimentally varied. The study evaluates whether exposure to authoritarian alignment increases international democratic identification and changes public tolerance of domestic democratic norm violations.

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1. Motivation

Democratic backsliding is often explained by domestic political forces, including partisan polarization, affective polarization, and citizens' willingness to prioritize preferred parties or policies over democratic principles (Svolik, 2018; Graham and Svolik, 2020; Finkel et al., 2020; Kingzette et al., 2021; Krishnarajan, 2022). In this literature, democratic erosion becomes possible when citizens fail to sanction political elites who weaken electoral fairness, civil liberties, institutional checks, or other democratic safeguards.

Yet democratic politics is also embedded in an international environment. Democratic citizens do not evaluate their political system only through domestic institutions; they also encounter international distinctions between democracies and authoritarian states. Regime type can structure perceptions of international friendship, threat, legitimacy, and political community (Russett, 1994; Risse-Kappen, 1995; Kahl, 1998; Tomz and Weeks, 2013). As geopolitical competition intensifies, democracy may therefore become increasingly meaningful as an international social identity: a marker of where a country belongs internationally and which states constitute political in-groups and out-groups.

This project focuses on the changing security environment in East Asia. China, North Korea, and Russia have expanded political, military, and economic cooperation in recent years. These developments may alter how citizens in neighboring democracies interpret both international politics and democracy itself. Rather than understanding democracy solely as a set of domestic rules and institutional commitments, citizens may increasingly understand it as a geopolitical identity that distinguishes their country from authoritarian powers.

The project asks whether this internationalization of democratic identity has consequences for democratic accountability at home. If citizens come to associate democracy primarily with international alignment, they may evaluate domestic political elites partly through the lens of whether those elites appear to defend the democratic in-group against external authoritarian states. This can create conditions under which international democratic identification grows even as commitment to domestic democratic constraints weakens.

2. Authoritarian Alignment and the Internationalization of Democratic Identity

The theoretical argument begins from social identity theory (Tajfel, 1979; Turner et al., 1979). Individuals derive part of their self-concept from membership in social groups and distinguish between in-groups and out-groups. International political categories can provide such identities when citizens perceive states as belonging to broader political communities defined by shared institutions, values, or regime types.

Democratic states have often been understood as sharing political norms related to civil liberties, political competition, and accountable government (Diamond, 2008). These shared characteristics may foster perceptions of an international democratic community (Risse-Kappen, 1995;

Kahl, 1998). Conversely, authoritarian regimes may be perceived as belonging to a politically distinct out-group, particularly when they are viewed as strategic competitors or security threats.

Growing cooperation among authoritarian states can sharpen this distinction. When citizens observe China, North Korea, and Russia cooperating more closely, they may infer that international politics is increasingly structured around competing political camps. Under these circumstances, democracy can acquire greater identity value at the international level. Citizens may become more likely to regard being a democratic country as an important part of national identity, to believe that their country belongs to a broader community of democracies, and to define democracy partly in terms of which countries their state stands with internationally.

H1: Exposure to information about growing cooperation among China, North Korea, and Russia increases international democratic identification among citizens in South Korea and Japan.

3. International Democratic Identity and Domestic Democratic Tolerance

The internationalization of democratic identity may not necessarily strengthen commitment to democratic procedures at home. International identification and domestic normative commitment are analytically distinct. Citizens may strongly identify their country with the democratic world while simultaneously accepting restrictions on political opposition, media freedom, or electoral fairness when such measures are justified in terms of national security, political stability, or protection from external threats.

This distinction creates a potential democratic paradox. Citizens may become more attached to democracy as a geopolitical identity while becoming less attentive to democracy as a set of domestic constraints on political power. In this sense, democracy can shift from being understood primarily as a standard by which domestic institutions and leaders are judged to being understood as a marker of international belonging.

If authoritarian alignment strengthens the salience of international group boundaries, citizens may become more willing to tolerate democratic norm violations by domestic elites, especially when those elites appear to defend the country against authoritarian adversaries. This mechanism differs from conventional autocracy-promotion arguments. The claim is not that citizens adopt authoritarian values because authoritarian states successfully export them. Rather, confrontation with authoritarian states may itself contribute to democratic erosion by changing the meaning citizens attach to democracy.

H2: Exposure to information about growing cooperation among China, North Korea, and Russia increases tolerance of undemocratic behavior by domestic political elites.

H3: The effect of authoritarian-alignment exposure on tolerance of undemocratic domestic behavior is stronger among respondents who exhibit higher levels of international democratic identification.

Because the survey also varies the foreign-policy reputation of hypothetical domestic political elites, the design allows an additional test of whether external alignment changes how citizens evaluate elites who adopt different international postures.

H4: Exposure to authoritarian alignment increases relative approval of political elites who adopt hawkish positions toward authoritarian states, particularly when those elites engage in domestically undemocratic behavior.

4. Research Design

4.1. Sample and Fieldwork

The study will employ a comparative online survey experiment in South Korea and Japan. Respondents will be adults aged 18 years or older residing in the country in which they are surveyed. Participants will be recruited through an established online survey panel provider with appropriate coverage in both countries. The survey will be programmed and administered through Qualtrics or an equivalent secure online survey platform.

The target sample is approximately 1,000–1,500 respondents per country, depending on fieldwork feasibility and budget. Recruitment quotas will be used where feasible to obtain samples broadly balanced on key demographic characteristics, including age, gender, and geographic region. The primary analyses will estimate treatment effects separately by country and in pooled models including country indicators and treatment-by-country interactions.

4.2. Survey Sequence

The survey proceeds in four broad stages. First, respondents complete pretreatment questions measuring demographic characteristics, party proximity, political ideology, and national identification. Second, respondents are randomly assigned to an authoritarian-alignment treatment or a control condition. Third, respondents evaluate multiple hypothetical domestic political figures whose attributes are experimentally varied. Finally, respondents complete post-treatment measures, including perceived international alignment and international democratic identification. Where measurement order is varied or adjusted to reduce priming, such changes will be documented prior to analysis.

4.3. Authoritarian-Alignment Treatment

Respondents assigned to the treatment condition will read a short news-style vignette describing recent political, military, and economic cooperation among China, North Korea, and Russia. The vignette refers to developments including the Russia–North Korea Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty, North Korean military support for Russia, deepening Russia–China strategic cooperation, and high-level diplomatic engagement involving China and North Korea. The article emphasizes that these developments indicate increasingly close relationships while avoiding the claim that the three countries constitute a formal trilateral alliance.

Respondents assigned to the control condition will not receive the authoritarian-alignment vignette and will proceed to the subsequent stage of the survey. The key respondent-level treatment indicator, *Alignment Treatment*, will equal 1 for respondents exposed to the vignette and 0 for respondents assigned to the control condition.

4.4. International Democratic Identity

The survey measures whether respondents understand democracy as an international identity. Respondents indicate their agreement with statements concerning whether democratic status is an important part of their country’s identity in international politics, whether their country belongs to a broader group of democracies, and whether democracy concerns not only domestic governance but also the countries with which their state stands internationally.

The primary international democratic identity outcome will be constructed from the items that directly capture international identification with democracy. Items that explicitly trade off international alignment against domestic democratic principles will be treated separately as measures of internationalized democratic reasoning or domestic democratic permissiveness rather than automatically combined with the identity scale. Scale construction, coding direction, and reliability criteria will be specified prior to confirmatory analysis.

4.5. Manipulation Check

Perceived authoritarian alignment will be measured by asking respondents how closely they believe China, Russia, and North Korea currently cooperate with one another on international political and security issues. Higher values indicate stronger perceived alignment. This item will be used to assess whether the treatment successfully increased perceptions of cooperation among the three states.

Because manipulation checks and mechanism questions can themselves prime respondents, the primary confirmatory analysis of domestic-elite evaluations will prioritize outcomes measured before highly explicit manipulation-check questions where feasible. Any final question-order decisions will be fixed before fielding and documented in the registered analysis plan.

4.6. Hypothetical Political Figures

Respondents will evaluate multiple fictional domestic political figures presented sequentially. In South Korea, the figures are described as members of the National Assembly; in Japan, they are described as members of the National Diet. Their characteristics are experimentally varied.

The first dimension is partisan affiliation. Respondents receive a party cue appropriate to the country in which they are surveyed. The second dimension is foreign-policy reputation. Political figures may be described as having no additional foreign-policy reputation, as hawkish toward authoritarian states, or as dovish toward authoritarian states. The third dimension is domestic political behavior. Each figure is described as supporting either democratic or undemocratic policies concerning core democratic principles, including freedom of political expression and electoral fairness.

The domestic-behavior treatment is designed to test whether respondents accurately sanction political elites who protect or violate democratic principles and whether this sanctioning changes after exposure to authoritarian alignment. Each respondent evaluates multiple figures, generating repeated observations nested within respondents.

5. Outcome Measures

5.1. Approval of Domestic Political Elites

After each hypothetical profile, respondents indicate the extent to which they approve or disapprove of the political figure's behavior. This measure captures overall political support and is coded so that higher values indicate greater approval.

5.2. Perceived Democratic Impact

The primary candidate-level democratic outcome asks respondents whether the political figure's behavior makes their country more or less democratic. Higher values indicate that the behavior is perceived as making the country more democratic. This item is intended to capture respondents' substantive interpretation of the behavior's democratic consequences rather than simply their personal approval of the politician.

5.3. Open-ended Democratic Reasoning

Respondents are also asked to explain briefly why they believe the political figure's behavior makes the country more democratic, less democratic, or makes no difference to democracy. These responses will be used for exploratory qualitative analysis of the reasoning citizens employ when evaluating democratic and undemocratic behavior. Any systematic text analysis will be treated as exploratory unless a coding protocol is preregistered before outcome analysis.

6. Primary Estimands and Statistical Analysis

The primary respondent-level estimand is the average treatment effect of exposure to the authoritarian-alignment vignette on international democratic identification. The primary candidate-level estimand is the effect of respondent-level authoritarian-alignment exposure on evaluations of hypothetical political figures, particularly when the figures engage in undemocratic domestic behavior.

Because each respondent evaluates multiple political figures, candidate-level outcomes will be analyzed using regression models with standard errors clustered at the respondent level or equivalent multilevel models that account for repeated observations within respondents. Country fixed effects will be included in pooled models. Where appropriate, models will also include experimental indicators for partisan affiliation, foreign-policy reputation, democratic versus undemocratic behavior, and policy domain.

A basic respondent-level specification will take the form:

$$Y_i = \alpha + \beta_1 \text{Alignment}_i + \gamma \text{Country}_i + \mathbf{X}_i' \delta + \varepsilon_i, \quad (1)$$

where Y_i is an outcome such as international democratic identification, Alignment_i indicates assignment to the authoritarian-alignment treatment, and $\mathbf{X}_i$ contains pretreatment covariates used for precision or prespecified heterogeneity analyses.

For candidate-level outcomes, the principal model will take the form:

$$\begin{aligned} Y_{ij} = & \alpha + \beta_1 \text{Alignment}_i + \beta_2 \text{Undemocratic}_{ij} + \beta_3 \text{Hawkish}_{ij} \\ & + \beta_4 (\text{Alignment}_i \times \text{Undemocratic}_{ij}) \\ & + \beta_5 (\text{Alignment}_i \times \text{Hawkish}_{ij}) \\ & + \beta_6 (\text{Alignment}_i \times \text{Undemocratic}_{ij} \times \text{Hawkish}_{ij}) \\ & + \gamma \text{Country}_i + u_i + \varepsilon_{ij}. \end{aligned} \quad (2)$$

where j indexes hypothetical political figures evaluated by respondent i . The coefficient on the interaction between authoritarian-alignment exposure and undemocratic behavior is central to H2, while the higher-order interaction incorporating hawkish reputation provides a test of H4.

The analysis will report estimated treatment effects with confidence intervals and exact p -values. The principal conclusions will rely on intention-to-treat estimates based on randomized assignment. Covariate-adjusted models will be reported as robustness or precision-enhancing specifications rather than substitutes for the randomized comparison.

7. Cross-national Comparison

The study is designed to assess whether the proposed mechanism operates in both South Korea and Japan. The main analysis will therefore report country-specific treatment effects in addition to pooled estimates. Treatment-by-country interactions will assess whether the magnitude of the authoritarian-alignment effect differs between the two national contexts. Because the study is not designed to treat one country as a control for the other, cross-national differences will be

interpreted as heterogeneous treatment effects rather than as causal effects of country context itself.

8. Heterogeneous Treatment Effects

Exploratory heterogeneity analyses will examine whether treatment effects vary by respondents' political ideology, party proximity, national identification, age, gender, and other pretreatment characteristics. Particular attention will be given to whether international democratic identity and national identification condition the relationship between authoritarian-alignment exposure and tolerance of domestic democratic norm violations.

Unless otherwise preregistered, these subgroup analyses will be treated as secondary and interpreted cautiously because of lower statistical power and the risk of multiple comparisons.

9. Exclusions and Data Quality

The primary analysis will include respondents who satisfy the study's eligibility criteria, provide informed consent, and complete the relevant experimental and outcome measures. Respondents who fail prespecified attention checks, provide implausibly short completion times, duplicate participation, or otherwise violate prespecified data-quality criteria may be excluded in accordance with rules fixed before outcome analysis.

The main results will be reported both with the prespecified exclusions and, where feasible, with broader intention-to-treat samples as a robustness check. Respondents will not be excluded on the basis of their treatment responses, political attitudes, or whether they correctly infer the study's hypotheses.

10. Multiple Outcomes and Robustness

The study contains several conceptually related outcomes. Confirmatory outcomes will be grouped into two main families: (1) international democratic identity and (2) evaluations of domestic political elites, including approval and perceived democratic impact. Where multiple items are combined into a scale, internal consistency and scale construction will be reported transparently.

Robustness analyses may include alternative coding of outcome scales, country-specific models, models with and without pretreatment covariates, and alternative estimators appropriate for ordinal outcomes. These analyses will supplement, rather than replace, the primary preregistered specifications.

11. Interpretation

The central empirical question is whether exposure to growing authoritarian alignment changes how democratic citizens understand democracy and evaluate domestic political behavior. Evidence consistent with the theory would involve two related patterns: stronger international democratic identification following exposure to authoritarian alignment, and greater tolerance or more favorable evaluation of domestically undemocratic political behavior, especially when undertaken by elites with hawkish foreign-policy reputations. Such findings would suggest that geopolitical competition can strengthen democracy as an international identity while simultaneously weakening the role of democratic norms as standards for domestic political accountability.

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