Global Authoritarians and the Arab Spring: New Challenges for U.S. Diplomacy

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Introduction

As the “Arab Spring” enters its third year, the contours of a new strategic landscape are taking shape in the Middle East. Reflecting the disordered state of regional politics, this landscape is far from stable. Yet it contains features that will pose significant challenges for U.S. diplomacy. Among them is the role that leading authoritarian states have assumed, notably Russia and China, but also Iran, as critical actors in regional and international diplomacy, complicating U.S. efforts to respond to the uprisings that began in Tunisia in December 2010 and rapidly swept across the region. Even as these authoritarian actors themselves struggle to absorb the consequences of the Arab Spring—including the uncertain effects of Arab democratization on their regional influence and ambitions—they have worked to consolidate their standing as a counterweight in the Middle East to the United States and its Western allies.

Efforts by leading authoritarian regimes to enhance their regional influence are unfolding on several levels. How these regimes view the opportunities and constraints posed by the Arab Spring, how they are trying to exploit the former and mitigate the latter, and how their efforts have in turn shaped the strategic calculations of newly elected Arab governments are questions that will dramatically affect the region’s emerging strategic architecture and thus the political environment that the United States will face in the coming years. While we cannot provide a detailed analysis of all these complex issues in this one paper, what we can do is highlight and selectively illustrate the main empirical and conceptual contours of the new strategic-political map that is emerging as Russia, China, Iran, and other like-minded states respond to the political forces unleashed by the Arab Spring.

In setting out this new map, we accentuate two related dynamics: First, the ways in which powerful authoritarian regimes collaborate to advance collective interests in sustaining—or consolidating—institutional and strategic alternatives to Western democracy; and second, their associated bid to use the Arab Spring to mobilize support from regional, democratic powers including Turkey, Brazil, India, South Africa, and others. Sympathetic to critiques of Western economic and geo-strategic dominance, these states are viewed by global authoritarians as potential allies that might be enlisted in efforts to redefine regional and global security and governance structures, thus complicating the diplomatic and strategic environment in which the United States works to advance its interests.

The thesis that the Arab Spring may be generating changes that are compounding U.S. security and diplomatic challenges in ways that benefit global authoritarians is
certainly open to challenge. After all, the region’s political rebellions have rung alarm bells in Moscow, Tehran, and Beijing as well. Indeed, Russia and Iran will probably lose one key state ally in the region, see a second leading state ally weakened, and in turn, will have to grapple with the weakening of their key non-state allies—Hamas and Hezbollah. Moreover, the new governments in Tunisia and Libya, and possibly Yemen, not only have a largely favorable view of the United States, they must also look to Washington and its Western allies for support as jihadist groups expand their bases of operation in North Africa and beyond.

That said, other trends could prove favorable for global authoritarians. Escalating conflicts between Israel and the Palestinians, Sunnis and Shi‘ites, and emerging Arab democracies and authoritarian status quo regimes are opening spaces for Moscow, China, and even Iran to exercise new leverage. Indeed, Washington’s key Arab ally, Egypt, is now led by Islamist leaders who are profoundly unhappy with if not opposed to the regional order the United States has promoted. Further to east, the escalating civil war in Syria has created new space for radical jihadists, thus raising the possibility that a post-Bashar al-Assad Syria might be led by an Islamist government that will seek to make common cause with other Sunni-Islamist governments or non-state actors. Although such a “Sunni axis” may in theory view Shi‘ite Iran as a threat, growing popular dissatisfaction with U.S. policies may tilt that axis against Washington far more than Tehran.

Such a possibility suggests that the fundamental historical-structural challenge facing the United States is not the emergence of new Islamist governments per se: rather, it is the reassertion of the link between democracy and foreign policy making in Arab states in response to the Arab Spring. With newly empowered citizens questioning a regional order anchored in strategic and military relationships with the United States, the worldview articulated by Russia, China, and even Iran may create new opportunities to exert influence. Their critique of U.S. power and of an international system dominated by Western states, their resistance to democratization along Western lines, and their economic resources may also be viewed with interest by newly elected Arab leaders, especially as they struggle who to find their balance in volatile domestic contexts and to secure the resources they will need to respond to the economic grievances that helped launch the Arab Spring. Moreover, because the United States maintains close relations with many Arab autocracies, Arab public opinion will continue to be animated by deep—and in many ways legitimate—concerns regarding U.S. double standards. Add up the ledger, and the strategic picture is mixed: Global authoritarians will find points of leverage, but they will also encounter limits to their influence, some of which, as we suggest below, are intrinsic to the internal dynamics of global authoritarianism itself.

Globalized Authoritarianism: Assets and Liabilities

In recent years, political scientists and policy makers have published a range of studies examining what our colleague Charles Kupchan calls the “Rising Rest.” While disagreeing as to whether the post-Cold War global order is undermining U.S. power, most admit that Washington must now exercise influence in global and regional strategic
arenas framed by elements of lopsided multi-polarity. For the purposes of this paper, four intertwined facets of “globalizing authoritarianism” (GA) merit attention.

First, the three states which constitute GA’s inner core—Russia, Iran, and China—do not exercise influence through any overarching formal alliance, or even by a virtue of shared vision of authoritarian governance. True, all four are hostile to pluralist democracy, all four seek to restructure international institutions to enhance their influence in matters of global governance, all four have economies in which states have, to varying degrees, a strong influence over the market, and all three of these states use oil rents to maintain domestic political control. But because their economic, institutional and even ideological ruling mechanics differ profoundly, there is little shared basis for a common project to export a distinctively authoritarian model abroad. The globalization of authoritarianism is less about the diffusion of a distinctive ideology or model of governance, than it is about strengthening collective action, enhancing mutual political, strategic, and economic assistance, and sharing lessons about how best to sustain authoritarian systems as viable alternatives to liberal democracy.

Second, and flowing from the above point, it is essential to keep in mind while the drive for collection action is not animated by shared commitment to a specific model of governance, Global Authoritarians are negatively united by opposition to the universal norms of democracy, global governance, and human rights promoted by the West and by multi-lateral institutions such as the United Nations and the International Criminal Court. Whatever their revolutionary pretensions, their leaders defend a distinctly status-quo or conventional notion of state sovereignty that is at variance with new global conventions such as the Right to Protect (R2P).

Third, because this global agenda is tied to their quest to enhance mechanisms of authoritarian control and contain Western influence, all three GA states have an interest in working together to build regional and international institutions that expand authoritarian influence. While their efforts are sometimes buttressed by formal agreements and treaties, the informal, tacit, or improvised nature of their collaboration that equips them to adapt flexibly to both exploit the opportunities and mitigate the constraints that come with political and social shifts on a regional and global plane.

Fourth, the ad hoc nature of global authoritarian collaboration is provides a mechanism to mitigate competing or conflicting economic, political, and ideological interests among leading authoritarian powers. For example, economic interdependence between China and the West necessitates prudent, focused calculation among Chinese leaders concerning where and when confrontation versus cooperation with the West is warranted. Thus, as we show below, the very conditions which necessitate flexibility also generate potential conflicts that could limit the capacity for collective action among global authoritarian regimes.
Global Authoritarianism Prior to the Arab Spring

During the decade prior to the Arab Spring, the rise of global authoritarianism accelerated in tandem with the attempts of Arab autocracies to adapt their ruling mechanisms to new domestic and regional challenges. Part of this adaptation dynamic pivoted around strategies of “authoritarian upgrading,” namely regime-controlled processes of economic and/or political liberalization. As the club of semi-authoritarian regimes grew—particularly following 9/11 and the initiation of the “Freedom Agenda”—the United States seemed well placed to sustain its security interests while simultaneously applauding the limited economic and political “reforms” that its closest Arab allies were pursuing in an effort to sustain their rule.

Looking back, however, the (failed) attempt by the United States to balance regional stability and regional reform had two deleterious consequences. First, Washington’s policy accentuated the growing gap between the foreign policies of pro-Western Arab governments and the preferences of their deeply estranged citizens, thus magnifying the legitimacy crisis facing Arab regimes. Second, processes of authoritarian upgrading created incentives for Arab autocrats to diversify their strategic and economic relations by reaching out to global authoritarians such as China. While Beijing’s investment strategy did attract the attention of U.S. policy makers, the wider structural implications of authoritarian collective action were only just beginning to make themselves felt in the years leading up to the Arab Spring.

Those structural implications transcended the particular economic ties between global authoritarians and Arab regimes or non-state actors. Certainly, the consolidation of democratic governments in regionally influential powers such as Brazil, South Africa, and Turkey, combined with the shock of mass uprisings and regime change in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen, suggested that global democratization might be entering a new, more vibrant, phase. But such a prospect did not necessarily portend a strategic or political setback for global authoritarians. After all, despite their status as democracies, regional powerhouses such as Turkey, Brazil, and South Africa endorsed much of the global authoritarian critique of Western dominance. Moreover, some of their leaders espoused illiberal, culturally “authentic” or “Third Way” notions of democracy that found an echo not only in Arab states, but also in Beijing, Moscow, and even Tehran. These coinciding—if far from coherent—ideological sensibilities created a field of overlapping opportunities for cooperation between new Arab regimes, regional leaders such as Turkey, and global authoritarians.

Global Authoritarianism in a Transforming Region

This is not to suggest that the opportunity field was bereft of its own risks or dangers. On the contrary, it also reflects tensions between its core members and thus constraints of a new model of authoritarian concertation whose assets were amply balanced by its liabilities. The bid by Iran, China, and Russia to respond to the Arab Spring in ways that enhance their respective authoritarian agendas must contend not only with continued U.S. influence, but also with the contradictions that flow from their
different social, economic, and political ties with both the Middle East and the wider international community. Keeping this balance of advantage and constraints in mind, we can point to three key components of authoritarian responses to the Arab Spring. These components are:

1. The use of international institutions to obstruct diplomatic initiatives targeting the Arab allies of leading authoritarian regimes.

2. The provision of financial, military, and political support to both existing authoritarian regimes and to emerging autocracies such as Egypt.

3. The manipulation of pervasive anti-U.S. sentiments within Arab societies by articulating a counter-hegemonic discourse that assails the dominant position of the United States while advocating a restructuring of both international institutions and norms to provide for a more equitable distribution of power and resources. Although designed to enhance the credibility and legitimacy of global authoritarians, this discourse is also public good available for any government—including a new democracy—that finds it to be a useful instrument for advancing its own interests and agendas.

Below we will highlight some elements of each of these three strategies, and then consider how the leaders of the Arab world’s emerging (and struggling) new democracies have responded to such efforts.

Global Authoritarianism and International Institutions

The fate of Syria in the UN Security Council (UNSC) is perhaps the most visible recent instance in which global authoritarians have cooperated to stymie diplomatic efforts backed by the United States and Europe—and, in this case, by most member states of the Arab League, an organization not often aligned with U.S. and European diplomacy. Since the start of the Syrian uprising in March 2011, the United States, together with European and Middle Eastern allies, have struggled to secure passage of UNSC resolutions designed to pressure the government of Bashar al-Assad.

To date, however, their efforts have been almost entirely unsuccessful. Exploiting the veto-power accorded to permanent members of the UNSC, Russia and China have blocked resolutions calling for President Bashar al-Assad to step down (in February 2012), threatening sanctions against Syria under Chapter VII for its noncompliance with previous resolutions (July 2012), and condemning the Assad regime’s “grave violations of human rights” (October 2012). Russia and China have also fended off efforts to refer leading officials of the Syrian government, including Bashar al-Assad, to the International Criminal Court in the Hague (since Syria is not a signatory to the Rome Convention establishing the ICC, a UNSC referral is required for it to initiate proceedings against Syrian officials). Russian and Chinese vetoes have not only further eroded the already shaky legitimacy and effectiveness of the UN, they have also given the Assad regime critical support in its brutal suppression of what began in March 2011 as a
peaceful protest movement, and has since morphed into an armed self-defense and anti-regime uprising—largely, we should emphasize, in response to the regime’s unrelenting violence. Absent UNSC authorization, the diplomatic, humanitarian, and even military instruments that can legally be deployed to end the violence of the Assad regime and address its devastating humanitarian consequences have been severely constrained.

Moreover, Russia and China have not always acted alone in using UNSC votes to express reservations about how business is conducted within the UNSC. In the February 2012 vote calling for Assad to step down Russia and China stood apart, with the remaining 13 members of the UNSC voting in favor. In both July and October, however, a number of non-permanent members of the UNSC abstained, using their votes to offer a symbolic but nonetheless pointed critique of initiatives strongly backed by the United States, its Western allies, and many Arab states. During the July vote, Pakistan and South Africa abstained. During the October vote, abstentions were cast by Brazil, India, and South Africa, as well as by Lebanon.

The October abstentions provoked an especially sharp response from both U.S. officials and the human rights community, given the timidity of the resolution. Indeed, the text did little more than demand an immediate end to violence from all sides (drawing an equivalence between the regime and the opposition which the United States has long rejected), and express “profound regret at the deaths of thousands of people including women and children.” The stakes, as noted by the head of a prominent human rights organization, were seen by all parties in terms of the ambitions of Brazil, India, and South Africa to become permanent members of the Council. “By abstaining,” the official said, Brazil, India, and South Africa “have not only failed the Syrian people, but [have] also failed to offer a credible alternative to end the bloodshed . . . This vote erodes their credibility in the global arena and might come to define their tenure in the Security Council and undermine their claim to permanent membership.” For these rising regional powers, however, the votes affirmed the intent of non-Western governments to carve out a “third way” in international diplomacy, even if in the process they extended political cover to global authoritarians and undermined a large majority of Security Council members.

The justifications offered by Brazil and India for their votes mirrored the rhetoric that Russia and China have used to challenge not only U.S. policy toward Syria, but also the role of the United States in the international system more broadly. Their views underscore how much is at stake for these rising regional powers in containing U.S. influence within an international institution, which Brazil and India, like Russia and China, see as tilted in the West's favor, and in the process vastly complicating U.S. and Western diplomacy. Officials from both countries, like their Russian and Chinese counterparts, expressed reservations about the lack of balance in the language of the resolution as one justification for their votes. The core of their arguments, however, focused on the importance they attached to the principles of state sovereignty and non-intervention, and the prerogative of sovereign governments to be protected from the meddling of outside powers.
By couching their opposition to these three UNSC resolutions in such terms, global authoritarians are able to broaden their appeal, advance their own diplomatic objectives, and protect a leading Arab ally from international sanction or intervention.

Global Authoritarian Investment in the Arab World

The August 2012 trip of newly elected President Mohamed Morsi to China illustrates the converging benefits that both the Chinese government and the region’s new emerging leaders have sought as they pursue economic cooperation, investment, and trade. His trip occurred against a backdrop of greatly accelerated economic activity in the region during the previous decade. As a report from the National Defense University indicates, from 2005 to 2009 the total trade volume between China and the Middle East rose 87 percent, to $100 billion, with Middle East exports to China rising 25 percent, and investment growing by a factor of ten, from $1 billion to $10 billion. In fact, by 2010 China was the largest foreign investor in both Iraq and Iran, while in that same year, “Saudi Arabia, hired the state-owned China Railway Construction Corporation to work on the Mecca monorail project, which went into operation . . . just in time to accommodate the 2.8 million people who arrived for Hajj.”

The readiness of China to invest in Middle East states irrespective of religious or ideological differences highlights Beijing’s intense pragmatism, as do the direct and indirect investments that are channeled through both public and private firms (many of which have privileged relationships with state actors), often at terms favorable to the host country. What is more, China has cultivated diplomatic and economic links with key regional and global organizations such as the Arab League, the Gulf Cooperation Council, and the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC). These efforts have not only made China an important economic presence in the Middle East, they may also have boosted China’s popularity among Arab citizens. For example, a 2010 BBC poll indicates that 43 percent of Arabs surveyed had a favorable view of China’s role in the region, while 29 percent indicated a similarly favorable view of the U.S. role.

The above dynamics help to explain why President Morsi chose to visit China before he attended the annual conference of the Non-Aligned Movement in Tehran. Egyptian-Chinese trade had already risen the previous year by 40 percent, to $8.8 billion, while the New York Times reports that “China’s exports to Egypt came to $5.4 billion last year, making it the second-largest supplier to the country after the United States, which exported $6.3 billion, according to U.N. It is also noteworthy that while the agreements Morsi struck for both loans and investment were relatively modest, he emphasized (in implicit contrast to U.S.-Egyptian bilateral investment patterns), that “we are now planning to draw up a strategy with China,” and that “instead of offering some kind of grant, to agree together about a three-to-four-year strategy to specify megaprojects financed and implemented by the Chinese.”

It is hardly surprising that by comparison to China, the trade, investment, and aid linkages between Russia and the Arab world, and between the Iran and the Arab world, are far weaker. Reflecting Moscow’s geo-strategic priorities, Russia’s Arab world linkages focus on Damascus. In 2012, two-way trade between Syria and Russia climbed
to $1.97 billion, a 58 percent increase over the previous year. Although arms contracts accounted for a little more than half of this, by 2011 Russia had invested some $20 billion in Syrian infrastructure, energy and tourism, while two Russian private sector firms, Stroitransgaz and Tatneft, announced plans to expand their natural gas, pumping, and oil exploration projects. In the wider context of Moscow’s reliance on its naval base in Tartous—Russia’s only such base in the entire Mediterranean—these economic linkages help explain the tenacious support that President Vladimir Putin has given Assad, as well as Moscow’s opposition to both Western sanctions on Damascus and Western military intervention Syria’s escalating civil war.

As for Iran, the lion's share of its relatively limited economic linkages with the Arab world are found in the Gulf Arab states. According to Iran’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in 2012 the total value of trade between the two stood at about $30 billion annually, principally in the U.A.E. and Oman. As Karim Sadjadpour notes, these linkages help to account not only for the ambivalence that Arab Gulf states have shown regarding the adoption of a more confrontational stance with Tehran, they also explain tensions within the UAE itself—particularly between the security-oriented Abu Dhabi and the business-oriented emirate of Dubai. With the former endeavoring to abet the West’s enhanced sanctions regime and the latter tolerating trade “leaks,” Tehran can mitigate some of the costs and pains of sanctions while sustaining economic linkages that are of no small benefit to some Gulf Arab autocracies.

However, it is in the field of Iranian-Turkish economic relations that the assets and liabilities of global authoritarian-Middle East economic engagement are most obvious. In the years following the first electoral victory of Turkey's Ak Party, Turkish-Iranian economic and diplomatic exchanges attained unprecedented heights, with Turkish exports to Iran rising from $1.5 billion in 2002 to $7 billion in 2010, and imports from Turkey climbing from $1 billion to $2.7 billion during the same period. This interdependence helps to explain Istanbul’s very qualified support for sanctions on Iran—not to mention its previous efforts, along with Brazil, to promote diplomatic solutions for the Western-Iranian standoff on the nuclear question.

Given these linkages and Istanbul’s energetic diplomacy, it is not difficult to understand why, from the vantage point of both Tehran and Damascus, Turkey’s subsequent support for the uprising in Syria came as great shock. Indeed, Istanbul’s open opposition to the Assad regime has thrown a monkey wrench into Tehran’s calculations, thus complicating the pragmatic diplomacy of GA regimes. While we shall return to the implications of these developments for both the efficacy of GA diplomacy and for the policies of new Arab leaders, it is worth emphasizing here that the investment dynamics described above not only represent considerable sunk costs for Tehran, Beijing and Moscow, they also represent enduring economic resources for Arab states, particularly those struggling to establish and legitimize new democracies. While these states will certainly look to Arab Gulf states for economic support, they cannot afford to ignore the considerable financial and investment resources of GA states. Indeed, by illustration, Turkish-Iranian economic ties remain strong, and Istanbul’s own leaders have continued to emphasize their desire to expand these linkages with Tehran, despite growing Turkish-Iranian strains, and despite the growing regional backdrop of Sunni-Shi’ite tensions.
From Libya to Syria: Counter-Hegemonic Discourse in a Changing Region

The Libyan Crisis

In the arena of global international discourse, the goal of global authoritarians is to disseminate notions of national sovereignty and independence that challenge, impugn, or defy norms of democratic governance and human rights which—the rulers of Russia, China, Iran argue—have been selectively and hypocritically advanced by Western states to legitimate their dominant position in the global order. However, in the context of Third World democratic rebellion and change—including the Arab Spring—global authoritarians must also be careful to couch their anti-hegemonic aspirations in language that does not offend the political sensibilities of new democratic actors, many of whom share the GA states’ purported quest for a more equitable global political and economic order, but who also seek to embrace some of the universal democratic norms that global autocracies implicitly or explicitly reject.

To get a sense of how this complex game is played, consider the diverse reactions of global authoritarians to the 2011 debate regarding Western intervention in Libya, and to the issuing of a UN Security Council’s Resolution 1973 to back this action. Because this was the first time that that UN Security Council incorporated the doctrine of “Responsibility to Protect” into a resolution, the reactions of the global community to the council’s actions took on potentially historic significance.

Iran articulated the most truculent opposition to the resolution. That resolution, it argued, was nothing less than a Western effort to highjack yet another phase in the Arab world's “Islamic awakening.” Thus while praising the rebellion itself, Tehran condemned any UN backed resolution authorizing military intervention. “In one breath,” Iran’s UN ambassador asserted, “we are deeply worried about the plight of people in Libya, while in the same breath we are concerned by the [prospect of] military strike in the country.” But such concerns were not sufficient to dull Iran’s objections to the principle of international intervention to protect lives. “Iran,” he added, “has showed that it is not interested in meddling in any country's [internal affairs], nor wants military presence, and thus condemns any such actions.”

In contrast to Russia and China, Iran was not in a position to stop the UN Security Council from endorsing intervention in Resolution 1973. Indeed, Moscow and Beijing’s veto power was just one of several factors that placed their own global interests—and stature—in some measure of conflict with those of Iran. These differences help account for their contrasting political and rhetorical responses to the Libya crisis. On the morrow of that crisis, China had some $18 billion invested in Libya’s oil industry, not to mention some 35,000 workers present in the country. With the African Union and Arab League indicating support for some kind of UNSC resolution, its extensive economic links to the Arab world, and its interest in securing good relations with a post-Qaddafi regime, Beijing hedged its bets, backing UN Security Council sanctions on Qaddafi while abstaining from the UN Security Council vote. As for the political rhetoric that China’s leaders used to defend this balancing act, Beijng initially refrained from expressing its familiar opposition to any notion of international intervention. Subsequently, having chosen to abstain on SC Resolution 1973 its UN ambassador issued a relatively restrained statement, asserting that “we oppose the use of armed force in international relations, and have serious reservations about some of the content of the resolution.”
Moscow’s similarly dissonant response to the Libya crisis was shaped by its multiple economic and strategic interests in Libya itself and in the wider Arab world. Although Russian firms had far less investment in Libya’s economy, ongoing railway and oil production projects represented real sunk costs. Moreover, with Qaddafi threatening to annihilate his opposition and Western states joining with Arab and African countries to back a UN resolution, to have simply retorted to the old rhetoric of “sovereign rights” would have isolated Moscow and thus ceded global leadership to the United States and its allies. Such concerns probably played some role in the reported conflict between President Dmitry Medvedev on the one side, and Prime Minister Putin (in concert with the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs), on the other. Indeed, with Medvedev arguing for UN Security Council Resolution 1973 and Putin denouncing it as “moronic” and a “medieval call to crusade,” some Russian experts speculated that this internal foreign policy debate may have presaged a veritable “paradigm shift” in Moscow’s stance on international norms of intervention and rights protections.

In retrospect, the evidence suggests not so much a decisive paradigm shift, but rather the essential pragmatism and dexterity that Russia has frequently shown in adapting its diplomatic rhetoric as circumstances evolved. Moreover, the initiation of Western air attacks on Qaddafi’s troops provoked a much more consistently—and familiar—hardline approach in both Beijing and Moscow. In their June 17, 2011 joint communiqué, Presidents Medvedev and Hu Jintao reiterated their conviction that “the two sides agree that the China-Russia strategic partnership is an important factor for peace, stability and prosperity,” and condemned any move that would “allow the willful interpretation and expanded application” of UN Resolution 1973.” This statement was preceded by similar protests from Arab League then-Secretary General Amr Moussa, who warned that the Arab League might withdraw its support for Resolution 1973. Although Moussa soon backtracked on this threat, taken in their entirety, these statements presaged a backlash not only from the leading global authoritarians, but also from the leadership of the Arab League itself—a backlash that would take full form—and exercise its great effect—in the debate over the Syria crisis.

The Syrian Crisis

Syria at the UNSC is discussed elsewhere in this paper, but for the purposes of this section, the key point to note is that on that level of discourse, the international debate over possible intervention in Syria was marked by a renewed intensification of “principled” objection to norms of global intervention and human rights protections. Moscow’s response reflected something far greater than the not insignificant fact that its military sales to Damascus had jumped from $6 billion in 2005 to $11 billion in 2011. Putin probably viewed the situation in Syria as yet another chapter in the unfolding—and clearly threatening—color revolutions, which he had earlier asserted were nothing but “a well-tested scheme for destabilizing society.” Thus when Moscow-based radio commentator, Konstantin von Eggert asserted that the Kremlin’s deeply held view of sovereignty as an unlimited right for political regimes to do as they please inside their states is one of the cornerstones of Russian foreign policy, and it has been especially dominant since the war in Libya,” he signaled—at least for the time being—who had won the Moscow foreign policy debate when it came to drawing a Russian line in proverbial
Arab sand. As for China’s leaders, they insisted that they stood by the principle of non-intervention in sovereign affairs, while at same time backing a political transition in Syria led “by the Syrian people.” The latter caveat, i.e. that China backed the idea of a political transition in Syria, was one that Moscow eventually endorsed. This may very well have been little more than a rhetorical sop to the international community and to the Arab world in particular; but it also reflected the desire of two leading global authoritarians to be seen as responsible leaders and international actors whose adherence to traditional norms of sovereignty did not, at least in theory, translate into absolute opposition to some form of actual democratic change in Syria.

By contrast, Iran—which has even more at stake in the survival of the Assad regime than any regional or global player—had no strategic or ideological constraints that might have necessitated a more nuanced or at least qualified position. Its leaders not only opposed Western intervention by invoking norms of national sovereignty, they placed this argument in a far more expansive strategic frame. As Supreme Leader Khamanei put it, “Iran will defend Syria because it supports its policy of resistance against the Zionist regime (Israel), and is strongly opposed to any interference by foreign forces in Syria's internal affairs . . . America . . . accepts no nation as an independent one . . . and this should be taken into consideration in the decision-making of Islamic countries.”

**New Arab Leaders: Leveraging the Diplomacy of Global Autocracy**

It is instructive that Khamanei made the above statement during a meeting with Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Not surprisingly, that meeting marked another escalation in the political conflict between Tehran and Istanbul. That conflict transcended the specifics of the Syria situation. On a deeper structural level, it reflected the inevitable tensions arising out of the efforts of global authoritarians to court emerging democracies, many of whose leaders distrust the international system, but who nevertheless advocate norms of democratic change.

The effort of global authoritarians to navigate these tensions finds its mirror-image in the emerging foreign policies of the Arab world’s new leaders. Thus, for example, while in his speech before the Non-Aligned Movement conference in Tehran President Morsi defended the uprising in Syria and condemned the Assad regime—thus implicitly rebuking Iran for its support of Syria’s rulers—he also spent even more arguing a case that his Iranian hosts might have found somewhat reassuring:

The new Egypt, after the blessed revolution of the 25th of January 2011, is seeking a just international system that brings the developing countries from the realm of poverty, subordination and marginalization, to the realm of prosperity, leadership and power . . . It’s no longer acceptable at all to respect the foundations of democracy on the level of the state and to ignore them on the international level . . . from here . . . Egypt believes that one of the core pillars of this new . . . international system . . . lies in enhancing the contribution of developing countries in managing and reforming the institutions of global governance to guarantee the
fairness of participation . . . and framing the directions on the international arenas politically, economically and socially.

We emphasize “somewhat” reassuring if only because, as the above citations make clear, Morsi would like to make a familiar Third Worldist argument regarding the international distribution of power, while as the same time embracing this concept with a view to defending notions of democracy and pluralism itself. Thus, in the complex dance between new emerging democracies and global authoritarians, each partner tries to direct the steps and tempo in the direction it most desires. In the Middle East—and beyond—this unfolding dance is further complicated by the multiple and even conflicting interests both within the core circle of global authoritarians, and within the circle of Arab states where political rebellions have toppled regimes and/or are threatening existing ones.

On this score, the different settings that distinguish one Arab rebellion from another are considerable—mediated as they are by a host of local or national conditions. Among the latter, one crucial question is whether these different rebellions are actually fostering democratic governments, or something else, be it a new authoritarianism or simply state collapse. The answers to these questions have huge strategic implications, not only for global authoritarians, but also for the United States and its Western allies, particularly given the undeniable fact that at least in the near and even medium future rebellion or democratization may empower Islamists while isolating non-Islamist or secular groups, as well as religious minorities.

The prospects for the emergence of illiberal Islamist regimes or state collapse outcomes are both less likely in Tunisia. There, the moderate-Islamist Nahda Party is trying to sustain some semblance of power sharing with secular political parties. As for Libya, elections did not empower Islamists, but instead created a multi-party government. However, the proliferation of militias, some of which are closely linked to jihadist Islamist groups, has called into question the very authority of Libya’s elected national leadership and the state itself. The recent assault by jihadist forces in Algeria—many of which had used the chaos in Libya to attain arms and organize—poses a severe challenge to the West, and to the region’s newly elected governments.

However, from both the West and its rivals in the global authoritarian camp, it is in Egypt and Syria where the diplomatic and security stakes may be the highest. The growing influence of Salafists and jihadists in some areas of Syria increases sectarian tensions, alienates secularists and minorities, and makes it more likely that the fall of the Assad regime will be followed by a period of conflict among contenders for power in Syria. As for Egypt, there the political game is unfolding in a way that is not reassuring. Indeed, while it is too early to say, one cannot preclude the possibility that under the tutelage and hegemony of the Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt will emerge as new form of electoral autocracy, i.e. a regime organized around a political machine that can use the laws and institutions of democratic governance to sustain a permanent incumbency.
Conclusions: Global Autocracy and U.S. Diplomacy

If the emergence of an electoral autocracy in Egypt would not present the outcome that Washington most wants, it may nevertheless be an outcome that the United States will learn to live with, so long as Egypt’s new leaders—and the military—do not propose a radical revision of Cairo’s global and regional strategic relationships. Such a policy turn may not be in the offing in the immediate or even medium future. However, given the persistence of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict (and the associated failure to produce a stable two state solution), the possibility of a U.S.-Iran military conflict, and even more so, and the clear desire of Egypt’s new leaders to redefine the regional and international system in ways that would not only enhance Cairo’s diplomatic leverage but also promote a more multi-polar world, the day of reckoning may eventually come, with serious implications for the region’s security architecture.

Working against such an outcome are a host of factors, not least of which is the continued—if somewhat attenuated—influence of Egypt’s military, as well Cairo’s competition with other regional players, most notably Turkey and Iran. But with the prospects for “strategic drift” looming somewhere on the Egyptian diplomatic horizon, global authoritarian regimes will be watching closely, deepening their relations with Cairo and other Arab states whenever this is possible, or avoiding conflict when necessary or expedient. Certainly, by itself, the prospects of another electoral autocracy emerging out of the ashes of a hobbled transition will not trouble China, Russia or even Iran, three autocracies that have learned the art of using elections to defend regime power. And even if, by some stroke of luck, Egypt moves in a more pluralistic direction, the pragmatism of global authoritarianism, as well as the allure of its counter-hegemonic discourse, will give any government in Cairo incentive to leverage GA states in ways that enhance Egypt’s diplomacy and regional influence.

We have given Egypt considerable attention because it, along with Turkey, are the regional diplomatic heavyweights whose policies have enormous implications for both the United States and global authoritarians. But precisely because the origins, nature and trajectories of the Arab uprisings differ from state to state, the diplomatic and strategic challenges facing Washington presents distinct challenges. For example, the leaders of Tunisia’s Nahda Party do not articulate, or seem to be drawn to, the counter-hegemonic impulses of Egypt’s new leaders. Indeed, for both ideological and practical reasons, Tunisia welcomes a closer relationship with Washington. Similarly, Libya’s political leaders not only remain deeply grateful to the West for its intervention they will also need Western economic, political and military assistance if they are going to have any hope of establishing a credible and effective central government. Even as Russia and China strive to reestablish their diplomatic credibility and economic linkages with the country’s new political leaders, Libya sees the United States and its Western allies as central to its future.

As for Syria, while the implacable opposition of Moscow, Beijing and especially Tehran to Western military intervention or military assistance to the Syrian opposition will surely undercut the influence of global authoritarianism, the failure of the West to
take a more decisive stand, combined with the central role played by Islamist militants in the Syrian opposition, will create a contradictory diplomatic field when and if any coherent and credible post-Assad government can be stood up. Critical issues—such as the status of the Golan Heights and Syria's relationships with Lebanon and Iran—could suddenly loom very large, thus demonstrating that a regional system that had been effectively preserved by autocratic governments could become increasing fragile.

This point reminds us that the Middle East regional order is not a mere expression of the domestic politics or foreign policies of its constituent states and their governments. There is a broader regional dynamic to which Washington must be attentive. Indeed a regional crisis, sparked by an extended war between Israel and the Palestinians (and or Hezbollah), or the outbreak of a sustained military confrontation between Washington and Tehran, could spark popular mobilizations throughout the region in ways that could enhance the allure of global authoritarianism in both popular and elite circles.

Under these complex conditions, the challenge for U.S.-Middle East diplomacy is manifold. With respect to Arab world domestic politics, Washington will have to work with governments that do not have the luxury of ignoring or even defying public opinion regarding both domestic and foreign policy. Under these new conditions, the effort to find diplomatic solutions for both the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the Iranian-Western nuclear dispute may acquire even more urgency than they have in the past. In short, the United States must craft a multi-dimensional regional policy, one that seeks new relationships with emerging regimes while sustaining effective regional and international coalitions in support of its diplomacy and its geo-strategic interests. Recent developments suggest that in pursuit of these multiple goals, the United States will have to rely less than in the past on institutions such as the UNSC in which global authoritarians have veto power, and instead establish its own counterweights to the economic and diplomatic leverage of global authoritarian regimes. Doing so will probably also require relying less on military power, and far more on a nuanced, patient and creative diplomacy.

This task bring us to the third challenge posed by global authoritarianism, and that is in the wider arena U.S. foreign relations and the related fate of multi-lateral efforts to advance new norms of global governance and human rights such as R2P. On this score, it is hard not to conclude that events in the Middle East have dealt a setback to promoting such norms. This development cannot be ascribed solely to the efforts of global authoritarians. Indeed, given the reluctance of both Washington and its Western allies to intervene in Syria despite the ongoing humanitarian crisis, and given that U.S. security interests in the Arab Gulf have thus far tempered its response to Gulf regimes that have repressed democratic uprisings, U.S. global diplomacy will continue to be framed by a multiplicity of conflicting interests. Such dissonance will hardly be bad news for some of our Arab Gulf allies. Viewing the on-going domestic struggle in Bahrain with concern, they probably welcome evidence of the enduring constraints that impede any bid to consolidate norms of global governance that conflict with a traditional notion of state sovereignty.

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