

# H-Diplo ROUNDTABLE XXII-45

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INTRODUCTION BY JACK S. LEVY, RUTGERS UNIVERSITY

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With the rise of China and with the U.S. government's formal recognition of the return of great power competition, many observers worry that American democracy puts the country at a competitive disadvantage against its authoritarian rivals, complicating the ability of the U.S. to maintain its position of global leadership. In *The Return of Great Power Rivalry: Democracy versus Autocracy from the Ancient World to the US and China*, Matthew Kroenig challenges this argument. He builds on a wide range of classical political theory and contemporary social science research to argue that democratic political institutions give states economic, diplomatic, and military advantages over autocracies in great power competition. Kroenig goes beyond the normative appeal for democracy in advancing freedom, human rights and dignity, and the rule of law to emphasize the "hard power" case for democracy based on economic and military power.

The inclusive nature of democratic political institutions, Kroenig argues, facilitates the development of economic institutions that foster innovation and a superior ability to borrow in international capital markets, which contribute to long-term economic growth. Those institutions also bind leaders in ways that allow leaders to send more credible signals and make them more reliable and hence more attractive alliance partners. Democracies' higher rates of economic growth enhance their military power and potential, but usually not to the point that they threaten others. Whereas "states balance against autocracies... they often bandwagon with powerful democracies" (216).<sup>1</sup> In addition, evidence that democratic leaders face greater political costs from defeat in war than do autocratic leaders incentivizes them to be more careful in getting into wars. This, along with their superior economic and military power, results in democracies being more likely to win the wars that they fight. Kroenig acknowledges that autocracies have some advantages, but argues that those advantages are outweighed by their many disadvantages. Their "extractive" institutions reduce innovation and discourage foreign capital, which limits economic growth. In addition, autocracies' greater restrictions on the free flow of information increases the likelihood of their making big mistakes on issues of war and peace.

After making a strong theoretical case for the advantages of democracies in their long-term competitions with autocratic rivals, Kroenig turns to an empirical investigation of his theoretical arguments. He provides some statistical evidence, mainly for the last two centuries (chap. 3), but focuses primarily on historical case studies of great power rivalries between democracies and autocracies, from ancient Greece and Rome through the Cold War (part II). Kroenig provides a brief but useful discussion of the criteria by which he selects his cases and explains why he omits certain plausible cases (58-60). He then turns to case studies of seven great power rivalries: Athens against Persia and Sparta, the Roman Republic versus Carthage and Macedon, the Venetian Republic against the Byzantine Empire and the Duchy of Milan, the Dutch Republic versus the Spanish Empire, Great Britain versus France, the United Kingdom versus Germany, and the United States and the Soviet Union. Kroenig finds that the historical evidence supports his theoretical argument about the long-term democratic advantages in great power competition against autocracies. After a useful discussion of current U.S. rivalries with the Russian Federation and with the People's Republic of China (Part III), Kroenig concludes that the United States is likely to maintain its position as the world's leading state for the foreseeable future (Part IV).

To review *The Return of Great Power Rivalry*, the editors at H-Diplo have brought together an excellent collection of scholars with deep expertise on many of the book's central themes. All of the reviewers emphasize the importance of Kroenig's contributions to theoretical debates relating to great power competition, rising powers, sources of military power, and the "democratic advantage." They also admire both the extensive historical sweep of the argument and its timeliness in terms of contemporary policy issues. Yet each scholar points to some of the book's significant limitations. Jennifer Lind criticizes Kroenig for failing to note some important distinctions between autocracies that might affect both their economic performance and success in wars, and highlights the importance of a more differentiated conception of autocracies for

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<sup>1</sup> This argument about the impact of regime type on balancing and bandwagoning overlaps with the finding, for the modern era, that great powers tend to balance against leading land powers but not against leading sea powers. Leading land powers have usually been autocratic whereas leading sea powers have usually been democratic, or at least less centralized. Jack S. Levy and William R. Thompson, "Balancing on Land and at Sea: Do States Ally Against the Leading Global Power?" *International Security* 35:1 (Summer 2010): 7-43.

analyses of the sources and consequences of the rise of China. Both Michelle Murray and Joshua Shiffrinson argue that Kroenig fails to demonstrate that democracies' accumulation of power is the causal product of democratic institutions and their predicted consequences, as opposed to other variables. Murray suggests historical examples in which democratic success was due to geography rather than democracy. Lind and Shiffrinson each raise questions about Kroenig's sometimes inconsistent coding of democracy, which in turn raises questions regarding the fit between the theory and the evidence.

The reviewers direct most of their attention to theoretical issues, though each review includes some useful historical examples. I would like to end this introduction with a brief discussion of an important case to which Kroenig gives inadequate attention given its importance for his theory – the rivalry between Athens and Sparta in ancient Greece. It is fair enough to argue, as Kroenig does, that “Athens provides incipient support for the democratic advantage thesis” because Athens, as the world's first democracy, “rose to become the most powerful force in ancient Greece for nearly a century” (66). The problem is that democratic Athens lost the second Peloponnesian War (431-404 BCE) to autocratic Sparta. This is a glaring anomaly in Kroenig's argument that democracies are superior in generating economic wealth and military power and more successful in war.

Kroenig recognizes the problem, but devotes little space to discussing it. Building on the old distinction between a “direct democracy” based on majority rule and a “republic” based on rule by elected representatives and some division of power, Kroenig argues that “Athens's form of direct democracy and decision-making through tyranny of the majority was its undoing” (61). He points in particular to the disastrous Sicilian Expedition in 415 BCE to aid an ally in its war against Syracuse. Kroenig identifies the failure of the Sicilian Expedition as “the turning point in the war” and traces it to “all citizens in the Assembly voting on the number of ships to be sent to Sicily” (69).<sup>2</sup>

The argument that direct democracy in general and the failed Sicilian expedition in particular contributed to Athens's defeat is familiar. Thucydides himself identified numerous instances where popular passions in the Athenian assembly led to bad decisions, and he regarded the Sicilian Expedition as a turning point in the war.<sup>3</sup> The problem is that Kroenig presents this as a monocausal argument and does so without adequate argument and without citation.<sup>4</sup> He does not explain *how* direct democracy led to defeat (other than mentioning the important Sicilian Expedition), and he devotes only a short paragraph to a theoretical discussion of the problems of direct democracy.<sup>5</sup> We can hardly expect a detailed explanation of Athens's defeat in a book covering well over two millennia of international relations. I admire the historical sweep of the book, which is all the more impressive because Kroenig covers many cases that are relatively unfamiliar to most IR scholars. The

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<sup>2</sup> Kroenig correctly points out that the war against Syracuse is probably a violation of democratic peace theory. See also the treatment in Bruce Russett, *Grasping the Democratic Peace* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), chap. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, in Robert B. Strassler, ed., *The Landmark Thucydides* (New York: Free Press, 1996). On popular passions in Athens see also Loren J. Samons II, *What's Wrong with Democracy? From Athenian Practice to American Worship* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> Earlier Kroenig refers to Thucydides's Melian Dialogue to illustrate that democracies tend to be “fearsome competitors on the international stage” (68).

<sup>5</sup> Kroenig contends that “some of the benefits, especially those that rely on checks and balances within the system, do not apply to direct democracies in which simple majority opinion can result in decision making that is every bit as rash as in autocracies. Direct democracies should tend to do better than autocracies, therefore, but not as well as republics” (35). This is an interesting hypothesis in itself, worthy of further exploration. This would require greater attention to the conceptual differentiation among different types of democracy, paralleling Lind's argument about the need for greater differentiation among types of autocracies.

suggestion of a monocausal explanation of the outcome of one of history's most complex wars, however, compels me to add a few comments, which I will relate to reviewer's themes where relevant.<sup>6</sup>

I begin with the Sicilian Expedition. There is considerable debate about why Athens embarked on the Expedition, why it failed, and whether it led inevitably to Athens's final defeat in 404 BCE. With respect to the decision for the Sicilian Expedition,<sup>7</sup> most commentators emphasize both popular passions in the assembly and the influence of Alcibades and the power of his rhetoric, which contributed to imperial overextension driven by hubris.<sup>8</sup> Thucydides does as well, but he gives even greater weight to the lack of political unity in Athens after the death of Pericles in 249 BCE.<sup>9</sup> As Jeffrey Rusten argues, Thucydides "seems to trace Athenian defeat to a single cause, a lack of unity which began after Pericles death."<sup>10</sup> Leadership is an important theme in Thucydides, and variation in leadership emerges as an important variable. After praising Pericles's character and his policies in both peace and war, Thucydides argued that "what was nominally a democracy was becoming in his hands government by the first citizen. With his successors it was different. More on a level with one another, and each grasping at supremacy, they ended by committing even the conduct of state affairs to the whims of the multitude."<sup>11</sup> Thucydides extends this argument not only to the blunder of sending of the Sicilian Expedition, but to the equally important failure to support the expedition after it had left, with the assembly turning to "private squabbles" for power in Athens.<sup>12</sup> These passages provide some support for Kroenig's argument.

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<sup>6</sup> I thank Dennis Bathory, Christiaan Bedrij-Arpa, Shenda Kuang, and Felix Maier for discussions of issues relating to the Peloponnesian War.

<sup>7</sup> The assembly made the decision after rejecting Nicias's attempt to head off the expedition by emphasizing the strength of Sicilian cities and the island's great distance from Athens. Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War*, 6.19-24. This early emphasis on what we now call the "loss of strength gradient," which contributed to Athens's defeat, relates to Murray's emphasis on the importance of geography.

<sup>8</sup> Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War*, Book 6; Donald Kagan, *The Outbreak of the Peloponnesian War*, 4 vols. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969); Ilias Kouskouvelis, *Thucydides on Choice and Decision Making: Why War is Not Inevitable* (Lanham, Rowman and Littlefield, 2018). One might see this as an extension of Kroenig's argument, with the combination of popular passions and an ambitious leader combining to produce the most dangerous outcome. Alcibades was facing domestic problems at this time, leading some to suggest diversionary motivations. On diversionary theory see Jack S. Levy, "The Diversionary Theory of War: A Critique," in Manus I. Midlarsky, ed., *Handbook of War Studies* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 258-88.

<sup>9</sup> Another way in which direct democracy might have contributed significantly to Athens's defeat might apply to the conduct of the entire 27 year-long war, not just the Sicilian Expedition. The Athenian assembly, subject to popular passions, displayed a consistent pattern of fining, exiling, or even executing generals who failed in their missions. Thucydides himself was exiled, after being given command of a fleet in 424 BCE but failing to prevent Sparta from reaching the city of Amphipolis. It is possible that Athenian military and naval leaders made their wartime decisions not only on the basis of sound military judgment, but also by their expectations that they would be judged by the whim of popular passions when they returned. This could have contributed to suboptimal decisions, whether excessively risk averse or risk acceptant. In fact, after bad outcomes military leaders would often not return to Athens, knowing that a trial awaited them. This inhibited the ability of Athens to learn from failure, which could have been another mechanism contributing to defeat. See Victor Davis Hanson, *A War Like No Other: How the Athenians and Spartans Fought the Peloponnesian War* (New York: Random House, 2006).

<sup>10</sup> Cited in Jonathan Kirshner, "Handle Him with Care: The Importance of Getting Thucydides Right," *Security Studies* 28:1 (2018): 1-24.

<sup>11</sup> Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War*, 2.65.

<sup>12</sup> Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War*, Book 6.

As for the consequences of the Sicilian Expedition, there is no doubt that for Athens it was, in Thucydides's words, "total destruction, their fleet, their army – everything was destroyed."<sup>13</sup> There is some debate, however, as to whether this inevitably led to Athens' final defeat. Donald Kagan and others argue that Thucydides exaggerated the impact of the expedition's disastrous outcome on the conduct of the last decade of the war and on Athens' final defeat.<sup>14</sup> Athens fought on for another ten years, with some successes on the battlefield. Some argue that in the absence of Sparta's alliance with Persia (412-411BC), and the massive Persian subsidy that supported the Spartan navy, Sparta would not have been able to win the Ionian (Decelean) War and force Athens to surrender.<sup>15</sup>

The Spartan-Persian alliance is just one of many other causes of the fall of Athens. The Peloponnesian War was not a bilateral struggle between Athens and Sparta, but instead a war between two polarized alliance systems, Athens's Delian League and Sparta's Peloponnesian League, which included the large city-states of Corinth and Thebes, and which received financial support from Persia. Any assessment of the Athenian defeat has to incorporate the relative power of the two alliances systems.<sup>16</sup> This assessment also needs to incorporate the fact that in the second year of the war Athens was devastated by a plague and lost a quarter of its population.<sup>17</sup> Yet Athens fought fairly well in the early years of the war, even after the death of Pericles. This takes us back to Kroenig's direct democracy theme. Some have argued that the Athenian political system, far from being the primary cause of its downfall, was a source of resilience and the ability to sustain a war for three decades against a powerful alliance despite many obstacles.<sup>18</sup> I will leave it to those more familiar with the Peloponnesian War to settle these debates.

#### Participants:

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<sup>13</sup> Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War*, 7.87.

<sup>14</sup> Kagan, *Outbreak of the Peloponnesian War*, book 4: *The Fall of the Athenian Empire*; Hanson, *A War Like No Other*; Lawrence A. Tritle: *A New History of the Peloponnesian War* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

<sup>15</sup> Josiah Ober, *Democracy and Knowledge: Innovation and Learning in Classical Athens* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); Hanson, *A War Like No Other*.

<sup>16</sup> This ties in to arguments by Murray and by Shiffrin about the need to incorporate the role of alliances in explaining military success and failure in war.

<sup>17</sup> The plague highlights the role of contingency in warfare, another theme in Thucydides. See the discussion in Kirshner, "Handle Him with Care," 7-16.

<sup>18</sup> Ober, *Democracy and Knowledge*.

Association and of the Peace Science Society. His most recent book is *The Outbreak of the First World War: Structure, Politics, and Decision-Making*, co-edited with John A. Vasquez (Cambridge University Press, 2014).

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## REVIEW BY JENNIFER LIND, DARTMOUTH COLLEGE

Matthew Kroenig's *The Return of Great Power Rivalry* is a welcome contribution to a first-rate literature in which scholars draw upon international relations (IR) theory to shed light on China's rise.<sup>19</sup> With the book Kroenig joins an evergreen debate about the advantages held by democracies relative to autocracies: a debate that has big implications for understanding the future global balance of power. The book has a broad scope that is both its strength and weakness. Its broad argument ignores distinctions between autocracies—which have big implications for the argument and for China's future. But much to Kroenig's credit, the book is historically sweeping, beautifully written, and will energize both scholarly and policy debates about domestic political institutions and China's rise.

*The Return of Great Power Competition* argues that democracies will be more successful in great-power competition. Kroenig's book nests within a longstanding debate – spanning ancient times to the present– about the extent to which there is, in a variety of important outcomes we care about, a 'democratic difference.' Drawing on Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson's *Why Nations Fail*, Kroenig argues that democracies have "inclusive" political and economic institutions that connect people to the economy and government, and allow democracies to develop greater economic might.<sup>20</sup> Aside from their greater economic capabilities, Kroenig argues that democracies have a host of advantages in "finance, alliance building, and military effectiveness" (17). As a result, he argues, "democracies are better able to accumulate and maintain power in the international system" and so "do a better job in major power rivalries" (3-4). They are also "more likely to become the most powerful state in the system" (56).

Autocracies, Kroenig argues, will be handicapped by many factors. Autocratic states have "extractive" institutions that deny people access to government and the economy. Extractive economic institutions hinder economic growth, and extractive political institutions create a system in which the few benefit at the expense of the many. Autocratic regimes engage in expropriation, corruption, and cronyism, which have many ill effects such as chasing away foreign capital (20). Autocratic leaders, Kroenig argues, "hate" and resist innovation because it threatens the arrangements that keep them in power (21). Autocracies will have less military power because, fearful of internal threats, leaders spend heavily on internal security and engage in coup-proofing practices that undermine military effectiveness (31).

### *Big Swing, Broad Brush*

Kroenig addresses one of the most salient questions in contemporary international relations. Although pundits often bemoan the irrelevance of academia, it is a great sign for the state of the field that scholars such as Kroenig are asking big, vital questions. If he is correct that democracies have a substantial advantage in marshaling national power, then this has profound implications for the future global power balance: not only between China and the United States, but also Japan and India—democracies that could balance with the United States against China. It is an even better sign for the field that Kroenig is not alone in his commitment to focusing on one of the most vital IR questions of our time; his book joins an

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<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Yan Xuetong, *Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019); Stacie E. Goddard, *When Right Makes Might: Rising Powers and World Order* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018); Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrin, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants: How Great Powers Exploit Power Shifts* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018); Michael Beckley, *Unrivaled: Why America Will Remain the World's Sole Superpower* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018); David M. Edelstein, *Over the Horizon: Time, Uncertainty, and the Rise of Great Powers* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017); Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017); Evan Braden Montgomery, *In the Hegemon's Shadow: Leading States and the Rise of Regional Powers* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016).

<sup>20</sup> Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty* (New York: Crown Publishing, 2012).

already rich debate.<sup>21</sup> Within this debate, as Kroenig correctly notes, many people have focused on theories about relations *between* great powers—rather than studying what makes a country successfully rise to great-power status in the first place. Kroenig’s question is thus not only vital but understudied.

Kroenig takes a broad-brush approach. He makes the sweeping argument that democracies will prevail over autocracies in great-power rivalries; he rests this claim on the “democratic difference” literature, which has identified myriad ways in which democracies outperform autocracies. In doing so Kroenig brings together numerous strands of a large body of research, marshaling its theories and evidence toward understanding a critical question of our age.

The book’s breadth, however, is also a weakness. Perhaps the biggest problem is that in a book about democratic advantage in great-power rivalries, some of his “democratic” victors were actually autocracies. Kroenig argues that democracies will prevail over autocratic rivals, but his coding of what makes a country a democracy is unclear. (Indeed, at times he writes that the advantage stems from being “more democratic” than the other state. But more democratic in what ways?) Kroenig references the Polity dataset that draws upon several metrics to code a country as democratic versus authoritarian; he also argues that democracies have “competitive, popular elections” (18).<sup>22</sup> But the liberal countries in his historical cases (for example, Athens, Rome, the Dutch Republic, and Venetian Republic) are not democracies according to these criteria. After all, these republics were rife with most of the extractive institutions lamented by Acemoglu and Robinson (such as slavery, education available only to elite males, voting rights for only a small percentage of the population, and so forth). Thus, the reader wonders what mix of liberal and autocratic policies those countries got right such that they could prevail over their rivals.

The book thus demonstrates not only significant variation in performance between democracies and autocracies, but also variation in the performance of autocracies vis-à-vis each other. Indeed, a glance across time and space shows that while some autocracies are basket cases, others are high functioning. Understanding why requires a shift from the broad brush to a more fine-grained theory.

### *Heterogeneity of Autocracies*

In the past two decades, scholars have pushed past the ‘democracy/autocracy’ binary toward greater disaggregation of authoritarian countries. As Joseph Wright notes, “we are beginning to understand that variation among different types of authoritarian polities can perhaps be as important as the distinction between democracies and dictatorships.”<sup>23</sup> Barbara Geddes’s pathbreaking work distinguished between “personalist,” “single-party dictatorship,” and other kinds of authoritarian regimes.<sup>24</sup> With such disaggregation, scholars have overturned a lot about what we thought we knew about autocracies.

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<sup>21</sup> See footnote 1.

<sup>22</sup> Monty G. Marshall and Keith Jagers, “Polity IV Project: Political Regime Characteristics and Transitions, 1800-2017,” Center for Systemic Peace, 2017.

<sup>23</sup> Joseph Wright, “Do Authoritarian Institutions Constrain? How Legislatures Affect Economic Growth and Investment,” *American Journal of Political Science* 52:2 (2008): 342; Gandhi, Jennifer. “Dictatorial institutions and their impact on economic growth.” *European Journal of Sociology/Archives Européennes de Sociologie* 49:1 (2008): 3-30.

<sup>24</sup> Barbara Geddes, Joseph Wright, and Erica Frantz, “Autocratic Breakdown and Regime Transitions: A New Data Set.” *Perspectives on Politics* 12:2 (2014): 313–31; Barbara Geddes, “What Do We Know about Democratization after Twenty Years?” *Annual Review of Political Science* 2 (1999): 115–44; also, Axel Hadenius and Jan Teorell, “Pathways from Authoritarianism,” *Journal of Democracy* 18:1 (2007): 143-156.



One pillar of this literature focuses on autocracies' military performance. Kroenig and others argue that autocracies are less militarily effective than democracies: to stay in power, their leaders engage in coup-proofing measures that undermine information flows, soldier skill, and so forth.<sup>25</sup> But, following Geddes, international security scholars have challenged this view. Jessica Weeks distinguished among different kinds of autocracies to test their belligerence and war outcomes.<sup>26</sup> Lumping autocracies together, she argued, yielded the inaccurate finding that autocracies were more warlike and less militarily effective than democracies. Through disaggregation, Weeks showed that this result was largely driven by the highly war-prone and militarily ineffective nature of personalist regimes. In fact, she argues, some kinds of autocracies “fare as well in war as democracies.”<sup>27</sup> In this vein, Caitlin Talmadge has shown that dictators do not uniformly engage in coup-proofing: the practice varies significantly across time and space, depending on the severity of external versus internal threats facing the regime.<sup>28</sup> Building on Talmadge's work, Dan Reiter disaggregates different types of coup-proofing instruments, and argues that not all types undermine military effectiveness.<sup>29</sup> In some autocracies, then, clever dictators figure out ways to both create military effectiveness and stay in power.

A second pillar of the literature on autocracies examines economic performance. Kroenig and other scholars often argue that autocracies will be less effective than democracies at generating economic growth. According to the “logic of political survival” model, because dictators must provide private goods to their political supporters in order to stay in power, they are disincentivized to provide the public goods that are necessary for economic growth.<sup>30</sup> As Kroenig writes, leaders will expropriate and will “extract wealth from society to distribute to themselves and their cronies” (20). He argues that this creates a dilemma: dictators “can put in place policies that encourage economic growth only by threatening their own power. Or they can opt for suboptimal economic performance and the protection of their privileged position” (21).

But by disaggregating autocratic regimes, scholars show how some developmentally minded dictators have generated profound economic growth. From Brazil to Singapore and Taiwan, to Park Chung-hee's South Korea, and of course to China, authoritarian leaders have presided over stunning economic growth. Insulating key areas of the economy from expropriation and rent-seeking, authoritarian leaders created what scholars have called “pockets of excellence.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> On coup-proofing and military effectiveness see Caitlin Talmadge, *The Dictator's Army: Battlefield Effectiveness in Authoritarian Regimes* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015); James T. Quinnlivan, “Coup-Proofing: Its Practice and Consequences in the Middle East,” *International Security* 24:2 (Fall 1999): 131–165.

<sup>26</sup> Jessica L. P. Weeks, *Dictators at War and Peace* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014).

<sup>27</sup> Weeks, *Dictators at War and Peace*, 11.

<sup>28</sup> Talmadge, *The Dictator's Army*.

<sup>29</sup> Dan Reiter, “Avoiding the Coup-Proofing Dilemma: Consolidating Political Control While Maximizing Military Power,” *Foreign Policy Analysis* 16:3 (July 2020): 312–33.

<sup>30</sup> Bruce Bueno de Mesquita et al., *The Logic of Political Survival* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003).

<sup>31</sup> Barbara Geddes, *Politician's Dilemma: Building State Capacity in Latin America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); David C. Kang, *Crony Capitalism: Corruption and Development in South Korea and the Philippines* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Michael T. Rock, *Dictators, Democrats, and Development in Southeast Asia: Implications for the Rest* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

Developmental leaders provided certain public goods (public health, education, infrastructure) while denying “coordination goods” (freedom of speech and assembly; a free press) that risked undermining their rule.<sup>32</sup>

In this way, some autocratic leaders figured out how to have their economic development and eat it too: that is, to satisfy their “selectorate” while generating growth. “Threading this needle is difficult, but not, as it turns out, impossible,” argue Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and George Downs. “Gradually, through trial and error, oppressive regimes have discovered that they can suppress opposition activity without totally undermining economic growth....”<sup>33</sup> Sergei Guriev and Daniel Treisman argue that “a less carnivorous form of authoritarian government has emerged.” Autocrats, they observe, are getting smarter, “more surgical;” they “use violence sparingly. They prefer the ankle bracelet to the Gulag.”<sup>34</sup>

Some dictators’ armies are militarily effective; others crumble in battle. Some dictators cultivate economic growth; others loot. Some authoritarian countries prevail in great-power rivalries; others lose. The profound variation across autocracies shows the need for disaggregation: for fine-grained theories about the political and economic institutions and policies adopted by successful great powers.

### *China is Not Your Father’s Autocracy*

The reason we need fine-grained theories is that Kroenig’s case study of interest, China, does not suffer from many of the conditions that he and the wider democratic difference literature attribute to autocracies. China was the modal autocratic basket case under Chairman Mao Zedong but starting in the 1970s it engaged in significant reforms. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has maintained its hold on power all the while investing heavily in human capital, cultivating a professionalized bureaucracy, and maintaining stable macroeconomic conditions. Over multiple stages the government has reformed a bloated, capital-guzzling state sector.<sup>35</sup> As Yuen Yuen Ang has demonstrated, China’s economy is rife with corruption, but of a kind that is less harmful to growth (again, her research shows the importance of disaggregation).<sup>36</sup> China is deeply integrated in the global economy, benefiting enormously from foreign direct investment that has enabled extensive technology transfer. President Xi Jinping has also undertaken sweeping military reforms with the goal of creating a high level of military effectiveness.<sup>37</sup> In short, China does not suffer from many of the maladies that Kroenig and others attribute to autocracies. And for the past four decades it has generated record-shattering economic growth.

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<sup>32</sup> Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Alastair Smith, “Leader Survival, Revolutions, and the Nature of Government Finance,” *American Journal of Political Science* 54:4 (October 2010): 936–950.

<sup>33</sup> Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and George W. Downs, “Development and Democracy,” *Foreign Affairs* 84:5 (2005): 81.

<sup>34</sup> Sergei Guriev and Daniel Treisman, “How Modern Dictators Survive: An Informational Theory of the New Authoritarianism,” Working Paper, Working Paper Series (National Bureau of Economic Research, April 2015).

<sup>35</sup> Autocracies are empirically as successful or more successful at reform compared to democracies. See Stephan Haggard and Robert R. Kaufman, *The Politics of Economic Adjustment: International Constraints, Distributive Conflicts and the State* (Princeton University Press, 1992); Geddes, *Politician’s Dilemma*.

<sup>36</sup> Yuen Yuen Ang, *China’s Gilded Age: The Paradox of Economic Boom and Vast Corruption* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

<sup>37</sup> Phillip C. Saunders, *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2019); Tai Ming Cheung, *Fortifying China: The Struggle to Build a Modern Defense Economy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009).

Kroenig and others argue that although autocracies can sometimes generate economic growth for a time, in the long run they will be unable to keep up with democracies (22). Economists argue that “catch-up” growth inevitably slows as a country approaches middle income; in order to continue growing, economies need to innovate.<sup>38</sup> This brings us to the question on whose answer the future balance of power depends: can China innovate?

Many scholars argue that autocracies are ill-suited for the decentralization, flexibility, and flow of ideas that spur innovation. As Acemoglu and Robinson put it, “even though extractive institutions can generate some growth, they will usually not generate sustained growth, and certainly not the type of growth that is accompanied by creative destruction.”<sup>39</sup> In this skeptical view, autocratic leaders neglect human capital, forbid assembly and free debate, pump out pro-regime palaver, restrict information flows, and manage vast networks of informants. Stunting civil society, they suppress the churn that inspires scholars, artists, writers, designers, and so forth. Autocratic leaders close their borders to the inherently transnational enterprise that is science and technology. The Soviet Union is the poster child of this logic: successful catch-up growth followed by a growth slowdown because it clamped down on freedoms, and because its sclerotic system could not reform. If autocracies are unable to innovate, they won’t be able to compete against high-income, democratic great powers.

To return to the earlier point, a key question is whether all autocracies engage in these innovation-quashing policies—or whether some do and some don’t, and it’s only the ones that do that will be unable to innovate. After all, some autocratic regimes create parties, media, and legislatures that, while controlled by the regime, still improve information flows between the people and the government.<sup>40</sup> Some authoritarian regimes allow civil society to develop to a certain degree;<sup>41</sup> and, as already noted, some autocracies participate in international trade, and invest heavily in human capital—even at the tertiary level that is vital for innovation.

It is clear that many Chinese government policies inhibit innovation. Political loyalty and connections enhance a firm’s ability to raise capital.<sup>42</sup> The state sector continues to soak up more capital than the more innovative private sector.<sup>43</sup> The CCP controls the press and, via the Great Firewall, censors social media and the internet; the regime force-feeds “Xi Jinping Thought;” its internal security services stalk regime opponents and sow fear; its political units and informants spy on every

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<sup>38</sup> Tyler Cowen and Alex Tabarrok, *Modern Principles of Economics*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Macmillan, 2018), Chapter 22.

<sup>39</sup> Acemoglu and Robinson, *Why Nations Fail*, 94; also, Stephen G. Brooks and William Curti Wohlforth, *America Abroad: The United States’ Global Role in the 21st Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Michael Beckley, “China’s Century? Why America’s Edge Will Endure,” *International Security* 36:3 (Winter 2011): 41–78; Kerry Brown, “Why China Can’t Innovate,” *The Diplomat*, August 19, 2014, <https://thediplomat.com/2014/08/why-china-cant-innovate/>

<sup>40</sup> Jennifer Gandhi, *Political Institutions Under Dictatorship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Wonik Kim and Jennifer Gandhi, “Coopting Workers under Dictatorship,” *Journal of Politics*, 72:3 (July 2010): 646–58; Carles Boix and Milan W. Svobik, “The Foundations of Limited Authoritarian Government: Institutions, Commitment, and Power-Sharing in Dictatorships,” *Journal of Politics* 75:2 (April 2013): 300–316.

<sup>41</sup> Elizabeth J. Perry, “Citizen Contention and Campus Calm: The Paradox of Chinese Civil Society,” *Current History* 113:764 (September 1, 2014): 211–17.

<sup>42</sup> Xiaolu Bao, Sofia Johan, and Kenji Kutsuna, “Do political connections matter in accessing capital markets? Evidence from China,” *Emerging Markets Review* 29 (2016): 24–41; Qigui Liu, Jinghua Tang, Gary Gang Tian, “Does political capital create value in the IPO market? Evidence from China,” *Journal of Corporate Finance* 23 (2013): 395–413.

<sup>43</sup> Kevin Zheng Zhou, Gerald Yong Gao, and Hongxin Zhao, “State Ownership and Firm Innovation in China: An Integrated View of Institutional and Efficiency Logics,” *Administrative Science Quarterly* 62:2 (June 2017): 375–404; Jerry Cao, Douglas Cumming, and Sili Zhou, “State ownership and corporate innovative efficiency,” *Emerging Markets Review* (2020).

office and classroom. Thus, the CCP is trying hard to staunch, in one of the world's richest and most creative cultures, the flow and flourishing of ideas. The CCP also seems to be losing steam with respect to key reforms, and, as Kroenig warns, Xi's tightening grip on power may choke Chinese growth (195).<sup>44</sup> Note Acemoglu and Robinson, "there is always the danger that economic institutions become more extractive and growth stops."<sup>45</sup>

At the same time, it is also clear that China's government is doing a lot to encourage innovation and even the flow of ideas.<sup>46</sup> The CCP has invested heavily in human capital, creating a highly educated workforce. Chinese leaders speak incessantly about making China an innovation leader: government initiatives include the "13th Five-Year Plan for Science and Technology," the "13th Five-Year Plan for National Informatization," "The National Cybersecurity Strategy," the "Made in China 2025 Strategy," and "China Standards 2035." Its "Thousand Talents" program seeks to attract top foreign experts. China is also striving to improve the quality of its universities; in 2017 it announced 42 Chinese universities that it sought to catapult into the ranks of the world's top schools.<sup>47</sup> The regime spends heavily on research and development (now second in the world, next to the United States).

All this is paying off. Examining numerous metrics of innovation outputs, Robert Atkinson and Caleb Foote argue that the data reflect

...a clear indication China is making more rapid progress in innovation and advanced technology industries than the United States. There is no reason to believe this progress will slack over the next decade, particularly if China continues its commitment to Made in China 2025, and advanced nations fail to successfully push back against Chinese innovation mercantilist practices and policies.<sup>48</sup>

Indeed, China has so far defied the "China can't innovate" skeptics. The Global Innovation Index in 2019 ranked China as #14 of the world's most innovative countries, recently surpassing France and Canada, and a half-point away from South Korea. China's success contradicts many previous predictions, and more broadly challenges scholarly views about the incompatibility of innovation within autocracies. To understand this success, and to understand whether it can continue, scholars need to draw on business, economics, and other literatures to understand different types of innovation: to figure out what kinds of China is good at producing, what kind it may be struggling with, and what this suggests for its continued growth.<sup>49</sup>

Kroenig asks his readers, "whose side would you choose?" if offered the chance to play Washington's or Beijing's hand in this great-power competition, and notes that he "would not switch places" (208). His optimism reminds us that Americans

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<sup>44</sup> Susan L. Shirk, "China in Xi's 'New Era': The Return to Personalistic Rule," *Journal of Democracy* 29:2 (2018): 22–36.

<sup>45</sup> Acemoglu and Robinson, *Why Nations Fail*, 95.

<sup>46</sup> On the CCP's "strategic" censorship see Peter Lorentzen, "China's Strategic Censorship," *American Journal of Political Science* 58.2 (2014): 402–414; Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret Roberts, "How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression," *The American Political Science Review* 107:2 (2013): 326–343.

<sup>47</sup> Michael A. Peters and Tina Besley, "China's Double First-class University Strategy: 双一流," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 50:12:1075-1079.

<sup>48</sup> Robert D. Atkinson and Caleb Foote, "Is China Catching Up to the United States in Innovation?" (Washington, D.C.: Information Technology and Innovation Foundation, April 8, 2019), <https://itif.org/publications/2019/04/08/china-catching-united-states-innovation>.

<sup>49</sup> On different kinds of innovation see Atkinson and Foote, "Is China Catching Up to the United States in Innovation?."

often exaggerate their country's weaknesses; declinism is a favorite national pastime.<sup>50</sup> Today, in particular, the United States is defeatist and depressed. In addition to confronting a shifting balance of power, the country is staggered by COVID-19, riven by inequality, struggling to understand and combat racism, and snarling at each other across the aisle. Kroenig's book provides an important reminder of the country's many strengths. Yet the evidence about a democratic advantage over autocracies is not as heartening as he suggests. Some autocracies perform quite well, and China is self-consciously trying to emulate them. For the United States to understand the challenge it is up against, scholars need to build on theories of 'authoritarian difference.'

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<sup>50</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, "The U.S.: Decline or Renewal?" *Foreign Affairs* 67:2 (Winter 1988/89); Daniel W. Drezner, "The Declinism Industry in America," *Foreign Policy*, October 7, 2010, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2010/10/07/the-declinism-industry-in-america/>.

REVIEW BY MICHELLE MURRAY, BARD COLLEGE

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Matthew Kroenig's *The Return of Great Power Rivalry: Democracy versus Autocracy from the Ancient World to the U.S. and China* advances a simple but powerful thesis: throughout history democracies have excelled at great power competition because they possess significant advantages in developing the economic, diplomatic, and military resources needed to become leading powers in the international system. Democracies achieve high levels of long-term economic growth because open political institutions enable them to develop policies that protect the economic interests of a broad segment of society, to encourage innovation and to foster openness to international trade. Democracies possess diplomatic advantages because they are able to build durable and reliable alliances, make credible commitments, and wield soft power to appear less threatening. Democracies are better at winning wars because free political institutions facilitate the free flows of information, foster military innovation, and allow democrats to focus their militaries on foreign conflicts. Kroenig argues that these qualities, taken together, mean democracies are better able to amass power and influence than their autocratic competitors, and because of this democracies have a systematic advantage in international geopolitics.

Kroenig illustrates the argument with an impressive set of case studies, spanning Athens and Sparta through the Cold War. The book concludes by applying the argument to contemporary geopolitical rivalries between the United States and China and Russia. These case studies illustrate the reach of the argument and highlight its salience for current debates about American decline and U.S. foreign policy. *The Return of Great Power Rivalry* captures something important about great power politics. A quick glance at the history of great power rivalry does suggest that democracies do better than their autocratic counterparts. What is more, some of the most durable international orders have been led by democracies. The framework presented by Kroenig, however, also raises important questions about the precise relationship between regime type and great power rivalry. Here, I focus on two aspects of this causal relationship.

First, one of the central pillars of Kroenig's argument is that the characteristics of democratic institutions make leaders smarter about the wars they start and when and how they use military force abroad (29-31). Democratic leaders possess such an advantage because the public holds them accountable.<sup>51</sup> Leaders do not want to start a war they might lose because they risk being voted out of office by their constituents. As well, democratic leaders must make the case to an often-skeptical public about why the use of force abroad is in the national interest. Indeed, it is precisely this process of public vetting, it is argued, that makes democracies exceptional and risk-averse when entering wars. While it is certainly true that the marketplace of ideas that is the hallmark of any vibrant democracy means that democratic leaders are more likely to hear all sides of the argument to use force abroad, I want to suggest that public opinion may also operate as a constraint that prevents prudent geopolitical decision-making.

Consider, for example, the United States' late entry into the Second World War. Historical and international security scholarship has long and convincingly argued that President Franklin D. Roosevelt understood long before the American public did that for geopolitical reasons—that is, to prevent Nazi Germany from becoming a regional hegemon in Europe—the United States would need to enter the Second World War and that it would be an incredibly costly fight in terms of blood and treasure.<sup>52</sup> John Schuessler has argued that Roosevelt, constrained by an isolationist public, engaged in an “undeclared war,” maneuvering “the country in the direction of open hostilities while assuring a wary public that the United States would remain at peace.”<sup>53</sup> Marc Trachtenberg argues similarly that Roosevelt, “deliberately opted for a policy which

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<sup>51</sup> Dan Reiter and Allen Stam, *Democracies at War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

<sup>52</sup> John M. Schuessler, “Deception Divided: FDR's Undeclared War,” *International Security* 34:4 (2010): 133-165; John M. Schuessler, *Deceit on the Road to War: Presidents, Politics, and American Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015); Marc Trachtenberg, “Developing an Interpretation Through Textual Analysis: The 1941 Case,” in *The Craft of International History: A Guide to Method* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006): 79-139.

<sup>53</sup> Schuessler, “Deception Divided,” 153.

he knew would in all probability lead to war with Japan.”<sup>54</sup> That is, when faced with a public that was unwilling to consent to a war that was a geopolitical necessity, the president was able to circumvent the need for the public’s consent by steering the country toward war with a series of provocative foreign policy moves. When Japan attacked the United States at Pearl Harbor and Germany’s Adolf Hitler declared war on the United States soon after, the public’s appetite for war increased, giving Roosevelt the rhetorical resources he needed to craft an effective narrative to build public support for the United States’s entry into World War II.<sup>55</sup> But it is also indisputable that the constraint of public opinion hindered the United States’s ability to respond to a serious geopolitical threat.

The United Kingdom was similarly slow to act to contain Nazi Germany’s growing power before the Second World War. Britain’s decision to appease Hitler at Munich emboldened Nazi Germany and dangerously undermined British national security. There are many explanations for British appeasement, ranging from the flaws of individual leaders to the particularities of political economy and class politics within Britain to the view that it was a rational response to an insatiable aggressor. Stacie Goddard argues, perhaps most interestingly, that it was the language that Hitler used, and specifically how it appealed to British democratic sensibilities, that enabled the policy of appeasement.<sup>56</sup> Goddard shows, through meticulous archival research, how Hitler and other German leaders framed their aggression in terms of collective security, equality, and self-determination. These values resonated with Britain’s “sense of ontological security, particularly its self-identity as a liberal, democratic and neutral state.”<sup>57</sup> Britain was only able to recognize the full extent of German revisionism once the nature of its claims became rhetorically incompatible with Britain’s liberal, democratic values. That is, Britain’s liberal democratic values inhibited its ability to respond effectively to German aggression.

These cases are instructive because they suggest that democracy might impede prudent geopolitical decision-making, not facilitate it. Both the United States and Britain were slow to act in the face of the existential threat that Nazi Germany posed to the international order. In the United States, a leader who was constrained by an isolationist public used deception to maneuver the country into war. That is, in order to meet the geopolitical challenge, leaders had to act in ways that were contrary to liberal, democratic values. In the United Kingdom, a rising revisionist power was able to manipulate these same liberal democratic values in order to secure appeasement. In both cases, the necessities of geopolitics were hindered by democracy. Put simply, democratic great powers acted in strategically suboptimal ways because they were constrained by democratic publics.

Kroenig suggests that this case supports his democratic advantage thesis because Germany lost the war and Britain and the United States were able to marshal extraordinary resources to defeat Hitler (136). And he does acknowledge that the democracies were slow to act in this case (137). But this points toward an analytical ambiguity that arises in the case studies between the distinction between foreign policy and international political outcomes. Is the democratic advantage thesis a theory of foreign policy or a theory of international politics? In one sense, the

democratic advantage thesis contends that democracies make better geopolitical decisions than non-democracies. They are smarter about the wars they enter and better at fighting those wars. In another sense, however, the argument is about the ability of democracies to amass the power necessary to compete effectively in great power politics. In the case of the Second

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<sup>54</sup> Trachtenberg, “The 1941 Case,” 121.

<sup>55</sup> Ronald R. Krebs, *Narrative and the Making of US National Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 66-122.

<sup>56</sup> Stacie E. Goddard, *When Right Makes Might: How Rising Powers and World Order* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018), 118-148; Stacie E. Goddard, “The Rhetoric of Appeasement: Hitler’s Legitimation and British Foreign Policy, 1938-39,” *International Security* 24:1 (2015): 95-130.

<sup>57</sup> Goddard, “Rhetoric of Appeasement,” 98.

World War, the argument retreats to simply *suggesting* that democracies were able to muster more raw power to defeat Nazi Germany; it does not show how democratic institutions made that power possible. As a result, it becomes difficult to distinguish the democratic advantage thesis from a simple realist, balance of power argument. This is especially true if we consider the pivotal role that the Soviet Union, a non-democracy, played in defeating Nazi Germany.

Second, and related to this, the case studies illustrate a relationship between regime type and the outcome of great power rivalry—it is, as Kroenig shows clearly, indisputable that throughout history democracies have emerged victorious from great power conflicts. But what are the case studies designed to show? That democracies win great power conflicts or that democracy is an important base of power that enables democracies win these conflicts? The case studies as they stand do not show clearly that the causal mechanism that Kroenig puts forth is what unequivocally explains the supposed democratic advantage. Consider, for example, Imperial Germany’s naval arms race with Britain before the First World War, a case that I know quite well from my own research.<sup>58</sup> At the turn of the twentieth century, Germany set out to attain its “place in the sun” among the established world powers and to do so launched an ambitious program of naval expansion—*Flottenpolitik*—that was designed to challenge British naval hegemony. Germany’s naval challenge to Britain was ill fated from the beginning, but not because Germany lacked the ability to marshal the resources to compete with Britain. Rather, it was Germany’s geopolitical position, its *geography* as a land power in the center of Europe, which limited its ability to win the naval race. Because of Germany’s geopolitical circumstance, it would always have to devote the bulk of its resources to the army in order to ensure its security. Germany’s inability to compete with Britain had little to do with its status as a non-democracy and everything to do with geography.

The case of Imperial Germany raises an important question about the main explananda of the book. Germany’s decision to pursue *Weltpolitik*, and as part of that process to double down on naval expansion even when it was clear Britain would meet Germany’s challenge ship for ship, very well might be explained by its undemocratic political institutions and the fact that the Kaiser was able to surround himself with allies like Admiral von Tirpitz who shared his foreign policy vision. A democracy may not make such a blunder. But it seems that Kroenig’s claim is bigger than this. After all, the main claim of the democratic advantage thesis is that domestic political institutions are “a central, and perhaps the most important, fundamental driver of international power” (33). This means that Britain’s ability to win the naval race with Germany was in important parts determined by its democratic institutions. To illustrate the democratic advantage thesis, then, Kroenig would need to show, through careful process tracing, that *because of its democratic domestic political institutions* Britain was able to amass the resources necessary to meet Germany’s challenge. Likewise, we would want to see detailed evidence that Germany’s autocratic character limited its ability *to build material power*. That is, Kroenig needs to show that it was democracy, not geography, that made the crucial difference in the case. The evidence presented is suggestive, but is not dispositive of his hypothesis.

*The Return of Great Power Rivalry* raises important questions for IR theory about the nature of power and rivalry in international politics. As Kroenig notes in the concluding chapter, IR theorists have not paid enough attention to how states become powerful, and specifically the relationship between power and regime type. This book takes significant steps in helping scholars to unpack these important questions. As well, it will undoubtedly inspire future work in these areas. Likewise, *The Return of Great Power Rivalry* also generates important insights about the long-term stability of the U.S.-led international order and American decline. If democracy is an integral part of American power, then fears of American decline are overblown. Moreover, the very international order that the United States will defend—multilateral and committed to free trade—will be an important element of its power going forward. At the same time, the past four years have raised serious questions about the strength of American democracy and the commitment of the U.S. to the liberal international order it ostensibly leads. What Kroenig’s book tells us is that the incoming Biden administration must invest significantly in restoring faith in American political institutions, mend broken relationships with key allies, and reaffirm

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<sup>58</sup> Michelle Murray, *The Struggle for Recognition in International Relations: Status, Revisionism and Rising Powers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Murray, “Identity, Insecurity and Great Power Politics: The Tragedy of German Naval Ambition Before the First World War,” *Security Studies* 19:4 (2010): 656-688.



American commitments abroad, and reinvest in the liberal international order that will be the basis of American power into the twenty-first century.

## REVIEW BY JOSHUA R. ITZKOWITZ SHIFRINSON, BOSTON UNIVERSITY

Matthew Kroenig has written an ambitious book. Under what conditions and through what mechanisms, it asks, do states' domestic political systems and – especially – the process by which leaders are selected affect international relations? These are no small matters. Over the last four decades, a virtual tidal wave of research has engaged this fundamental question, with a robust literature finding that democracy at home is associated with outcomes – economic capacity, military victory, robust alliances, and so on – that are relevant for the conduct of great power politics.<sup>59</sup> Oddly, however, efforts to integrate these findings into a broader theory of great power politics have mostly been absent (potentially reflecting the field's broader move away from big theory).<sup>60</sup> Now, amid growing interest in whether and how domestic systems affect great power relations, *The Return of Great Power Rivalry* forthrightly attempts to rectify this deficit. The results deserve attention and careful consideration given the scope of the topic and timeliness of the questions.

Of course, this book is not the first project to respond to what others sometimes call the “new era of great power competition.”<sup>61</sup> It would therefore be easy to evaluate it by weighing whether its core arguments look to provide more or less traction in explaining contemporary or historical episodes of great power rivalry than alternate treatments, many of which come from different theoretical traditions. Instead, given the salience of Kroenig's claims – and the reality that many contemporary policy discussions hinge on the supposed distinction between democratic and autocratic great powers – my hope in this review is to tackle *The Return of Great Power Rivalry* on its own terms by asking whether the book successfully makes the case that, as Kroenig puts it, “democracies enjoy a built-in advantage in long-run geopolitical competitions (3)”? For reasons elaborated below, I do not think it does. *The Return of Great Power Rivalry* is thought-provoking, well-written, and helpfully pushes the bounds of second-image theorizing but, by its own standards, it is conceptually, empirically, and prescriptively problematic.

The volume's thesis is straightforward, and laudable in its clarity. Democracies (in Kroenig's rendering) are uniquely advantaged compared to autocracies in generating economic and military capabilities and, in turn, converting these capabilities into political outcomes. The reasons ostensibly hinge on the defining feature of democracies themselves. For Kroenig, democracy is primarily about domestic arrangements whereby “political officeholders are selected through competitive, popular elections” (18). Competition at the ballot box subsequently pushes elites to produce inclusive economic institutions that foster innovation and growth (20-24), to bind political leaders to non-threatening and credible courses of diplomatic action in ways that attract partners (25-29), and to trust their own citizenry while valuing the free-flow of information such that effective militaries can be crafted and sound strategic decisions made (29-31). In contrast,

<sup>59</sup> Illustrative of this work is Michael W. Doyle, “Liberalism and World Politics,” *The American Political Science Review* 80:4 (Winter 1986): 1151–1169; Bruce Bueno de Mesquita et al., “An Institutional Explanation of the Democratic Peace,” *The American Political Science Review* 93:4 (December 1999): 791; Dan Reiter and Alan Stam, *Democracies at War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); Brett Ashley Leeds, “Domestic Political Institutions, Credible Commitments, and International Cooperation,” *American Journal of Political Science* (1999): 979–1002; Brett Ashley Leeds, “Alliance Reliability in Times of War: Explaining State Decisions to Violate Treaties,” *International Organization* 57:4 (2003): 801–827; Hristos Doucouliagos and Mehmet Ali Ulubaşoğlu, “Democracy and Economic Growth: A Meta-Analysis,” *American Journal of Political Science* 52:1 (2008): 61–83, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5907.2007.00299.x>.

<sup>60</sup> Partial exceptions include Caitlin Talmadge, *The Dictator's Army: Battlefield Effectiveness in Authoritarian Regimes* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015); Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2012); on the field's theoretical drift, see John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, “Leaving Theory behind: Why Simplistic Hypothesis Testing Is Bad for International Relations,” *European Journal of International Relations* 19:3 (September 2013): 427–457, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066113494320>.

<sup>61</sup> For a review of these projects, see Joshua Shiffrinson, “Neo-Primacy and the Pitfalls of US Strategy Toward China,” *The Washington Quarterly* 43:4 (2020).

autocracies – the great bugaboo in *The Return of Great Power Rivalry* – enjoy no such advantages: with elites ensconced in office, policymaking is subject to the whims of a narrow group of individuals, resulting in inefficient economic practices, tendentious diplomacy, and unreliable militaries.

Taken together, these democratic advantages produce two overarching results. The first has to do with relative power: democracies “on average” are “better able to amass international power and influence than their autocratic rivals (32). Second, when democracies and autocracies compete, “democracies are more likely to emerge victorious in long-run geopolitical rivalries” (33). Combined, states with the right domestic political institutions, according to Kroenig, are thereby primed to survive and thrive amid the hurly-burly of international relations.

At first glance, Kroenig’s thesis might seem appealing. After all, modern diplomatic history – the success of the Allies in both world wars, the United States’ victory over the Soviet Union in the Cold War, the economic vibrancy and military might of the United States and other democracies since 1991, and so on – seem to suggest there is much to the argument. Tap the surface, however, and cracks start to appear.

One set of issues has to do with *The Return of Great Power Rivalry*’s conception of democracy and, in particular, the logic linking domestic competition to the postulated economic, military, and diplomatic advantages. Given the book’s framing, does it necessarily follow that political contestation on its own pushes the development of inclusive economic institutions, reliable militaries, and effective diplomacy? After all, couldn’t political leaders who are facing electoral pressures actually have the opposite incentives from those that are hypothesized and, among other actions, instead try to co-opt militaries or use preferential economic arrangements to reward supporters and punish opponents?

It certainly appears so. Indeed, other scholars interested in the links between domestic political institutions and international power have found such capricious and self-harming behavior among democracies. Mancur Olson and Jack Snyder, for instance, have compellingly shown that democratic pressures are no impediment to institutional capture by interest groups that do little for the mass public.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, Jasen Castillo underlines that states often need to inculcate ideologies to produce effective militaries, and so suppress the democratic tendency toward discourse; likewise, research in civil-military relations highlights the fact that politicization often emerges because of political contestation rather than its absence.<sup>63</sup> As for diplomatic gains, democracy did not prevent leading states such as the United States and Britain from undertaking costly foreign policy blunders such as the Boer, Vietnam, and Iraq Wars, nor did it ameliorate allied fears of abandonment during the geopolitical contests of the twentieth century.<sup>64</sup> Flipping *The Return of Great Power Rivalry*’s claims around, scholars such as Caitlin Talmadge, Risa Brooks, and Jessica Chen Weiss emphasize that autocracy is no impediment to military performance or strategic evaluation, nor is it often congenial to unilateral decision-making by an

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<sup>62</sup> Mancur Olson, *The Rise and Decline of Nations: Economic Growth, Stagflation, and Social Rigidities* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982); Jack L. Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

<sup>63</sup> Jasen Castillo, *Endurance and War: The National Sources of Military Cohesion* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014); on civil-military dynamics, see Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil–Military Relations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981); Jack L. Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive: Military Decision Making and the Disasters of 1914* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984).

<sup>64</sup> On the Vietnam and Iraq Wars, see George Herring, *America’s Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975: Ninth Edition* (McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 2013); Jane Kellert Cramer, “Militarized Patriotism: Why the U.S. Marketplace of Ideas Failed Before the Iraq War,” *Security Studies* 16:3 (August 24, 2007): 489–524, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636410701547949>; on abandonment, see the discussion of Cold War dynamics in Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945-1963* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); also useful is Glenn Herald Snyder, *Alliance Politics*, Cornell Studies in Security Affairs (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

unconstrained executive.<sup>65</sup> Put simply, competition at the ballot box is at best loosely connected to the sorts of advantages *The Return of Great Power Rivalry* postulates.

A defender of Kroenig's thesis might respond by arguing that democracy requires more than just electoral competition – that it also involves political values and beliefs empowering the individual and constraining leaders to generate the sorts of advantages claimed. And for sure, the book sometimes gestures in this direction, allowing that some definitions of democracy “add a broad set of political and civil liberties,” and noting in places that the theory helps explain “the passing of the torch of *liberal* hegemony” (4) from one democratic power to another (with the word “liberal” implying something about the content of political life).

If so, however, then *The Return of Great Power Rivalry* is not actually making a claim about democracy at all. In fact, by *this* logic, the key to international success is not the domestic institutions running a state, but rather its commitment to liberalism as an ideology at home irrespective of the way decisions are made. Some of the evidence also bolsters this point: how else to explain why Wilhelmine Germany is rated a non-democracy (127), when the growing political influence of German socialists at the ballot box before 1914 played a significant role in convincing German leaders that time was running against Berlin?<sup>66</sup> And because liberalism and democracy are fundamentally not the same thing – there can be liberal autocracies and illiberal democracies – the book's master explanatory variable begins to break down.

What exactly democracy *as a set of political practices and institutions* does for the thesis of *The Return of Great Power Rivalry* is thus surprisingly opaque. Not only is it unclear whether such practices link to the outcomes sought, but portions of the argument and evidence actually suggest that the key causal factor may be ideology – or something else – rather than political institutions that does the heavy lifting. Paradoxically for a study about democracy and great power politics, one almost wants a separate study to determine whether and to what extent democracy is central to the underlying thesis.

What of the evidence? *The Return of Great Power Rivalry* deserves praise for tackling a large array of cases. Indeed, few projects are so ambitious as to explore a theory's fit in cases ranging from the contests between Rome, Greece, and Persia for dominance in the ancient Mediterranean, to the struggles between Venice and the Byzantine Empire, the rivalries that produced the world wars, and the United States' more recent struggles with the Soviet Union and China. Still, issues again emerge, as the reader is struck not by how the evidence supports the theory, but by how far the theory has to be modified and adapted to accommodate the empirics.

One matter again has to do with what, exactly, democracy does in explaining the evidence. Recall that the book's basic claim is that *democracies* enjoy economic, military, and political advantages over *autocracies*. When evaluating the evidence, however, it fudges on the concept of democracy itself – it engages in a fair degree of ad hoc modification to fit the argument to the evidence. In fact, recognizing that states such as Athens, Rome, Venice, the Dutch Republic, and other “democratic” actors were not democracies per the volume's definition, *The Return of Great Power Rivalry* creates a loophole, riffing on the (contested) Polity dataset to argue that it is actually the degree of openness that matters – that, historically it was states which were “more open than their contemporaries” (54) that succeeded. This analytic escape hatch appears in several places (e.g., 77, 89, 113). In doing so, however, the project ends up changing the theory to suit the evidence. After all, if it's the *degree* of openness that matters, then the reason for comparing democracies against autocracies as fundamentally distinct types of states collapses. Having raised this issue, however, *The Return of Great Power Rivalry* then backs away from the

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<sup>65</sup> Risa Brooks, *Shaping Strategy: The Civil-Military Politics of Strategic Assessment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Talmadge, *The Dictator's Army*; Jessica Chen Weiss and Allan Dafoe, “Authoritarian Audiences, Rhetoric, and Propaganda in International Crises: Evidence from China,” *International Studies Quarterly* 63:4 (December 2019): 963–973, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqz059>; Jessica Chen Weiss, *Powerful Patriots: Nationalist Protest in China's Foreign Relations*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>66</sup> Volker Berghahn, *Germany and the Approach of War in 1914* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973).

adaptation – the relative degree of openness disappears from the evidence. For example, the book glosses over the fact that Wilhelmine Germany was relatively more open than many of its contemporaries – Russia comes to mind – yet suffered (in the book’s rendering) from all the problems of autocracies in the pre-1914 great power competition. Similarly, Kroenig claims that it was the United States’ openness that allowed it to triumph over the autocratic Soviet Union during the Cold War. While this is in broad strokes true, if the relative degree of openness matters, one expects the Soviet Union to perform better in the late 1980s and early 1990s as Soviet leadership liberalized the state; instead, *The Return of Great Power Rivalry* observes that this period corresponded with the rapid disintegration of the Soviet Union itself – an accurate statement, but a problem if relative openness matters. Other prominent cases, meanwhile, are missing from the book but cannot help but come to mind and pose questions over the adaptation. To cite one example: if relative openness matters, then one expects the relatively more open France to have triumphed over an ascendant Prussia (*vice*-Germany) in the late nineteenth century when, in practice, the opposite occurred. The net result is both an inconsistent treatment of democracy and an inconsistent effort to fit the argument to the evidence.

If the empirical material raises questions surrounding the causal role of democracy, it also obscures what outcomes Kroenig looks to explain. According to the argument in *The Return of Great Power Rivalry*, democracy is the secret sauce of states’ ability to accumulate power in the first place, and to successfully apply this power in international contests. Here, however, one is struck by how poorly democracies – even in this rendering – actually seem to do relative to autocracies. For one thing, ‘autocratic’ institutions did not prevent – as the book amply details – states such as ancient Persia, the Byzantine Empire, the Soviet Union, or contemporary China (among others) from turning in impressive international performances over an extended period of time. In this sense, the evidence contradicts a major empirical prediction showing that democracy is not closely tied to the accumulation of power for international purposes, nor is autocracy detrimental to the purpose.

Moreover, it is unclear from the cases that democracies perform better in geopolitical contests with autocratic powers due to their domestic institutions. On one level, contingency plays a large role in the history covered. It is far from obvious, for example, that democratic Britain would have triumphed over Wilhelmine or Nazi Germany had it not been for American intervention in the conflicts – interventions that, as diplomatic historians show, were as much based on circumstance as anything else.<sup>67</sup>

Of greater importance, it is also plausible (and perhaps likely) in several major cases that alternate explanations better explain the evidence. Take the Cold War. *The Return of Great Power Rivalry* attributes the United States’ success over the USSR to the democratic advantage. This is possible, but it is worth recalling the United States was, by some estimates, three-to-five times as strong as the USSR at the start of the contest – capabilities that, in contrast to the book’s claims, stemmed as much from having the luxury of dominating an entire continent far removed from other great powers as anything about U.S. domestic institutions. Given this, it is certainly possible that the United States performed well in the struggle against the USSR partly because of divergent domestic regimes, but it is just as likely (1) that the dice were loaded in the United States’ favor from Day 1, due (2) to factors unrelated to U.S. regime type; in fact, depending on how one thinks strong states should perform relative to weaker states, the fact that it took five decades for the United States to ‘defeat’ (I use the term loosely) the Soviet Union can be read as a democratic failure in long-term geopolitical contests. Ultimately, for a project about the democratic advantage in world politics, the evidence mobilized to sustain the claim is strikingly ambiguous.

Of course, a reader might argue that, evidence aside, *The Return of Great Power Rivalry*’s insights about democratic advantages are fundamentally important as a guide to contemporary international relations and U.S. policy therein. Kroenig certainly believes so, spending a large portion of the book discussing the implications of the argument for contemporary

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<sup>67</sup> The best treatment is John A. Thompson, *A Sense of Power: The Roots of America’s Global Role* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015); see also Galen Jackson, “The Offshore Balancing Thesis Reconsidered: Realism, the Balance of Power in Europe, and America’s Decision for War in 1917,” *Security Studies* 21:3 (2012): 455–489.

debates over U.S. leadership. Here, however, a different issue appears: the policy prescriptions advanced in the project are at odds with the book's claims.

At root, *The Return of Great Power Rivalry* develops two core policy insights. First, the United States does not need to overly fear the long-term geopolitical challenge posed by Russia and China. By the book's logic, both are equally unopen autocracies and are thus likely to fade down the stretch in competition with the United States. Still – second – to ensure this outcome, Kroenig recommends that the U.S. invest in its domestic institutions while simultaneously embracing a grand strategy designed to “provide stability and security in important geostrategic regions” (220) against near-term autocratic threats. On this last point, it is further worth noting that Kroenig has elsewhere written on the need for the United States to embrace a leading and highly activist strategy to combat the autocratic threat to the existing “international order.”<sup>68</sup>

The problem is simple: these arguments do not line up. In particular, if *The Return of Great Power Rivalry* is correct that democracies enjoy stark geopolitical advantages over autocracies because of their different domestic systems, then there is no need – and potentially some risk – in embracing an activist grand strategy. On the one hand, if autocracies ultimately fail to generate military and economic capabilities or to translate these assets into political influence, then the United States has little reason to work against China or Russia: even near-term Chinese or Russian gains cannot harm the United States. In fact, because *The Return of Great Power Rivalry*'s thesis rests on *innenpolitik* factors, there is little need for the United States to do much of anything abroad to ensure its security: the U.S. economy and military can be expected to thrive given prudent maintenance of U.S. domestic institutions, just as the United States' appeal as a reliable ally and partner should remain intact.

On the other hand, *The Return of Great Power Rivalry* seems to downplay the risks to the United States from its foreign policy recommendations. Here, it is interesting that several of the book's case studies acknowledge that activism abroad can damage democracy at home (e.g., ancient Athens, Rome) – a problem also mooted by prior U.S. political leaders.<sup>69</sup> Oddly, however, there is no parallel acknowledgment in the policy implications of similar dangers today to (by the book's logic) the taproot of U.S. power and security. In a project designed partly to guide U.S. policy debates during a fractious period of international history, disjunctures appear between *The Return of Great Power Rivalry*'s claims, evidence, and prescriptions.

These problems aside, it is worth recognizing *The Return of Great Power Rivalry*'s contribution. In working toward an integrated theory of regime type and great power relations, the book forces analysts to grapple with the relative importance of second image variables writ large. Although the result is imperfect, it still serves a significant role in pushing *innenpolitik* theories forward, directing attention away from identifying associations between domestic factors and international outcomes, and instead connecting these findings in search of deeper theories of international relations. All of this is to the volume's credit; with Kroenig's work in hand, future researchers are better-equipped to explore the systemic impact of domestic-level forces, just as the project should prompt a search for what second-image factors matter for what outcomes and under what conditions. In the final analysis, the *Return of Great Power Relations* is a provocative and important volume that merits sustained attention from scholars and practitioners alike.

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<sup>68</sup> E.g., Matthew Kroenig and Miyeon Oh, “A Strategy for the Trans-Pacific Century: Final Report of the Atlantic Council's Asia-Pacific Strategy Task Force” (Washington, D.C.: Atlantic Council, 2017), [http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/images/Strategy\\_Trans-Pacific\\_Century\\_web\\_1019.pdf](http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/images/Strategy_Trans-Pacific_Century_web_1019.pdf); Matthew Kroenig, “The Case for Trump's Foreign Policy: The Right People, the Right Positions,” *Foreign Affairs* 96:3 (May 2017): 30–35; Jeffrey Cimmino, Matthew Kroenig, and Barry Pavel, “A Global Strategy for China” (Washington, D.C.: Atlantic Council, September 2020); Matthew Kroenig and Emma Ashford, “Is This the Beginning of a New Cold War with China?” (Washington, D.C.: Cato Institute, July 2020), <https://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/beginning-new-cold-war-china>.

<sup>69</sup> See Aaron L. Friedberg, *In the Shadow of the Garrison State: America's Anti-Statism and Its Cold War Grand Strategy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

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RESPONSE BY MATTHEW KROENIG, GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

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What is the fundamental source of a state's power in international politics? In *The Return of Great Power Rivalry: Democracy versus Autocracy from the Ancient World to the US and China*, I argue that a state's international power stems from its domestic political institutions and that democracies are better able than their autocratic competitors to amass economic, diplomatic, and military strength and to excel in great power politics. I demonstrate the argument with simple statistics and case studies of seven rivalries that feature democracies versus autocracies from the 499–449 BCE Greco-Persian War through the Cold War. I then apply this framework to the current era of competition among the United States, China, and Russia and conclude that, despite its many flaws, Washington is better positioned for this rivalry than its autocratic competitors.

I would like to thank H-Diplo for featuring my book in this forum and my distinguished colleagues for devoting their valuable time to reading and engaging with the book's arguments. I am honored by their appraisals. As Jack Levy writes in his introduction, all the reviewers emphasize the book's contributions to theoretical debates, admire the broad historical sweep of the empirical analysis, and appreciate the relevance to contemporary policy debates. Even the most skeptical reviewer concludes that it is an "important volume that merits sustained attention from scholars and practitioners alike."

While it might be enjoyable for me to dwell on the reviewers' praise, I suspect it would be more useful for me to address the reviewers' various criticisms. I agree with some of their judgements and disagree with others. At least one important objection appears to arise from misunderstanding, which is often the result of unclear writing on the part of the author (in this case, me). In my view, however, while these insightful comments are deeply worthy of discussion, none of them meaningfully detract from the central scholarly contributions of the book.

To begin, Levy provides not only an introduction, but also an erudite analysis of the outcome of the Peloponnesian War. I agree with Levy's analysis and his conclusion that a variety of factors played a role. My narrower objective in this case was to reflect on how the combatants' domestic political systems contributed to the result and I concur with Thucydides, who argued that Athens' system of direct democracy facilitated the disastrous Sicilian Expedition and the city-state's eventual defeat.<sup>70</sup> This is not to deny that other variables mattered we will never know, but my counterfactual claim is that Athens would have been more likely to prevail in the Peloponnesian War had it possessed a republican form of government with greater checks and balances on executive power to prevent the kind of rash decision-making that led to the Sicilian Expedition.

Jennifer Lind writes that "it is a great sign for the state of the field that scholars such as Kroenig are asking big, vital questions." She believes the book is "historically sweeping, beautifully written, and will energize both scholarly and policy debates about domestic political institutions and China's rise."

She also charges, however, that the book's "biggest problem" is that several of the democratic victors it analyzes, including Athens, the Roman Republic, the Venetian Republic, and the Dutch Republic, were not true democracies. She is correct that these countries would not qualify as fully consolidated democracies according to today's standards, but these countries were more democratic than their contemporaries and my argument is that these relative differences matter. This relative conceptualization follows standard political science definitions and measures (including those I co-created), which conceive of domestic political regime type as a continuous variable (ranging from more to less democratic), not in dichotomous, black and white terms.<sup>71</sup> I thought I made this analytical choice clear in the book's first chapter (18, 32), but, given that Shiffrinson had similar questions, this aspect of the argument might have deserved further elaboration.

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<sup>70</sup> Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, trans. Martin Hammond (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>71</sup> Michael Coppedge, John Gerring, David Altman, Michael Bernhard, Steven Fish, Allen Hicken, Matthew Kroenig, Staffan I. Lindberg, Kelly McMann, Pamela Paxton, Holli A. Semetko, Svend-Erik Skaaning, Jeffrey Staton and Jan Teorell, "Conceptualizing and Measuring

Lind also argues that my thesis could have benefited from more analysis of the differences among autocratic systems and that this exercise would prove China to be an exception to my findings because it “does not suffer from many of the maladies that [I] and others attribute to autocracies.” I am also an admirer of research by Jessica Weeks and other scholars that identifies differences among autocratic regimes, but this scholarship (consistent with my arguments) finds that even autocracies with large domestic audiences, like single-party states, are still less effective than democracies with regard to important outcomes, like crisis diplomacy.<sup>72</sup> The other literature Lind cites concerns how autocracies can sometimes overcome their handicaps, not how they are, on balance, stronger than democracies. So, while examining the relative fitness of various types of autocratic systems for great power competition would be a useful extension of my book, existing research does not give us reason to believe that this investigation would invalidate my book’s central finding about the overall superiority of democratic systems.

Moreover, I also disagree with Lind that such an analysis would demonstrate that China has cracked the code on how to design a highly functioning autocracy. The existing literature on autocratic variation finds that personalistic dictatorships are the least effective form of autocracy, and China, under President Xi Jinping, has been moving firmly in this direction.<sup>73</sup> Xi has eliminated term limits and his political opponents through an anti-corruption campaign, setting himself up to be dictator for life and China’s most powerful leader since Chairman Mao Zedong. As autocrats tend to do, Xi has prioritized political control over economic performance, including backtracking on promised economic reforms, and China’s economic growth is slowing as a result. Beijing’s strict capital controls are hobbling the development of China as an international financial center. Its aggressive and ill-considered “wolf warrior” diplomacy is driving negative views of China globally and provoking other leading countries to counterbalance against it.<sup>74</sup> China’s centralized control and fears of domestic insecurity are undermining its military effectiveness, including its nuclear deterrent, and forcing it to devote inordinate resources to repressing its own population. In short, as Xi strengthens his position at home, he is undermining China’s competitiveness abroad. China is, therefore, an exemplar of, not an outlier to, the recurring autocratic maladies I write about in my book.

Michelle Murry writes that the book “advances a simple but powerful thesis,” which “captures something important about great power politics.” She argues the book takes “important steps in helping scholars understand...how states become powerful, and specifically the relationship between power and regime type.” Empirically, she contends that “it is, as Kroenig shows clearly, indisputable that throughout history democracies have emerged victorious from great power conflicts.” And she asserts that the book “will inspire future work in this area” and has “salience for current debates about American decline and U.S. foreign policy.”

She also offers two criticisms. First, she contends that democratic institutions can be a constraint to effective foreign policy decision-making and offers the slowness of democracies to respond to Nazi leader Adolf Hitler’s rise to power as an example. Given the occasional democratic constraints on effective decision-making, she questions whether the theory is about democracies amassing more power resources or superior foreign policy decision-making. Relatedly, she conjectures that in

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Democracy: A New Approach,” *Perspectives on Politics* 9:2 (2011); M. Steven Fish and Matthew Kroenig, *The Handbook of National Legislatures: A Global Survey* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

<sup>72</sup> Jessica L.P. Weeks, *Dictators at War and Peace* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014).

<sup>73</sup> Weeks, *Dictators at War and Peace*. Elizabeth Economy, *The Third Revolution: Xi Jinping and the Chinese State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

<sup>74</sup> Ben Westcott and Steven Jiang, “China Is Embracing a New Brand of Foreign Policy: Here’s What Wolf Warrior Diplomacy Means.” *CNN*, May 29, 2020. Laura Silver, Kat Devlin, and Christine Huang, “Unfavorable Views of China Reach Historic Highs in Many Countries,” Pew Research Center, October 6, 2020. David Wainer, “Biden Leans into Quad Alliance to Counter China,” *Bloomberg*, March 25, 2021.



the case of the Second World War, the allies prevailed due to superior power resources, not the other advantages provided by democratic institutions.

I agree (and acknowledge in the book) that democracies tend to be slow to recognize and respond to gathering threats. My argument is not that democracies are perfect, but that, on balance, their portfolio of strengths and weaknesses are more competitive than that of autocracies.

To the question of whether my argument is about democracy's advantage in amassing power or in foreign policy decision-making, the answer is both, and that they are interrelated. After all, bad decisions, like starting losing wars, tend to deplete power resources. I consider a wide variety of mechanisms and some of them (like democracies establishing sound economic institutions that produce higher long-run rates of growth) result in more power resources and others (such as a free flow of information that helps leaders to make more informed choices) result in better decisions – or at least fewer big mistakes.

Both pathways were relevant to the outcome of World War Two. Superior power resources were central, as Murry acknowledges. As I show in the chapter on Great Britain, the country's democratic institutions helped it to amass those resources through economic innovation, trade, and financial acumen. But institutions also influenced the foreign policy behavior of the combatants in ways that mattered and that are also explained by the theory. Hitler's aggressive actions provoked a counterbalancing coalition, while democracies were better able to forge and maintain effective and reliable alliances. The autocracies made several big mistakes that contributed to their downfall: Hitler needlessly declared war on the United States and forced his ill-equipped troops to advance toward Moscow as winter approached, and Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor is literally the textbook example of poor autocratic wartime decision-making.<sup>75</sup>

Second, Murry points out that the book could have benefited from more detailed process tracing and offers the Anglo-German naval arms race as an example. She suggests, based on her own research, that "Germany's inability to compete with Britain had little to do with its status as a non-democracy and everything to do with geography."<sup>76</sup>

It is true that the book could have benefited from more process tracing. I cover 2,500 years of history and I necessarily excluded much material. I believe I got the big strokes right and I hope that future researchers will go back and fill in the details.

The Anglo-German naval arms race is a narrower outcome than my book was intended to explain, but, still, I believe that my theory is consistent with the case. My chapter on Great Britain explores the country's competitiveness against autocratic competitors from 1688 to 1945; the naval arms race is but a short episode in this broader history. Moreover, as I mention in the book, geography and naval power are at least partially the result of institutions. Open states are more likely to become trading states; expand their territorial holdings, including along the coasts; and build navies to defend their trade routes. An analysis of the sequence of events shows that all of the democracies I examine in my book became democracies first and leading naval powers only later. Although we will never know, my counterfactual claim is that a democratic Germany would have been more likely to become an effective sea power in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

I had wondered how realists would receive the book. On one hand, realists have a theoretical pre-commitment to the idea that domestic institutions do not matter for international politics, which would predispose them against the central argument of this book. On the other hand, realists do not have a clear theory about where power comes from and they have

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<sup>75</sup> Dan Reiter and Allan C. Stam, *Democracies at War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

<sup>76</sup> Michelle Murry, *The Struggle for Recognition in International Relations: Status, Revisionism, and Rising Powers* (New York: Oxford University Press 2018).

been criticized for failing to explain changes in the international system's distribution of power.<sup>77</sup> By providing a theory on the origins of power, I see my book as a complement to realism.

Shiffrinson's review, which offers a realist assessment, describes the book as "ambitious...thought-provoking, well-written, and helpfully pushes the bounds of second-image theorizing." It also fires off several rounds of criticism at the book, but none hit their target. I also sometimes found it hard to follow the review's scattershot approach.

Shiffrinson begins by citing selected literature on the downsides of democracy and about how dictators can compensate for their disadvantages, but I did not understand the purpose of this section. The cited literature involves a range of narrower issues, not my central argument about the sources of international power. Moreover, I acknowledge that democracies are imperfect and that autocracies have some strengths. I do not see anything here that is inconsistent with the arguments in my book.

He writes both that the "volume's thesis is straightforward, and laudable in its clarity" and "surprisingly opaque." I prefer the former interpretation. His argument for the latter is his charge that I introduce continuous measures of democracy as an "analytical escape hatch" later in the book in an effort to make the evidence fit the theory. This is incorrect. As pointed out above, I follow established political science standards by considering continuous measures of regime type, and I explain this choice at the start of the book (18, 32). As I also noted above, given that two of the reviewers flagged this issue, however, I may need to add further clarification in future editions of the book.

Shiffrinson attempts to identify exceptions to my thesis, but his examples actually serve to reinforce my findings, not undermine them. He maintains that Wilhelmine Germany and Russia in the 1990s were fairly democratic, so they should have performed better than they did. But, neither was a democracy according to standard measures and they were both more autocratic than their principal rivals, Great Britain and the United States, respectively.<sup>78</sup> He points to the Franco-Prussian War as an example of an autocracy besting a democracy, but, according to Polity, both Prussia and the Second French Empire were "anocracies" with negative Polity scores in 1870.<sup>79</sup> Moreover, this is social science not physics. Even if Shiffrinson had identified an exception or several, it would not invalidate the broader pattern I identify in the data.

Shiffrinson claims that Britain's victory over Germany in the two world wars was due to "contingency" like American involvement, but my thesis can do better than chalk up an important case to chance. My book explains why a democratic Britain was better able than an autocratic Germany to bring allies to its side. It also describes a half dozen other mechanisms that helped democracies prevail over autocracies in the first half of the twentieth century.

He strangely counts the Cold War as evidence against my thesis on the grounds that the United States should have won sooner given its superior power resources, but this criticism again only buttresses my argument, while also setting an arbitrary and exceptionally high bar for any social science theory. My theory explains why the United States possessed more power resources than the Soviet Union. Moreover, our best theories for the causes of war cannot explain why the First World War started in 1914 instead of 1910 or 1920. My theory would expect the democratic United States ultimately to prevail in its rivalry over the Soviet Union, but it is unrealistic to demand that it provide a specific date for that occurrence.

Shiffrinson concludes his review by arguing that the book's policy recommendations are inconsistent with the analysis because I point to China's fundamental weaknesses while also advocating a robust U.S. and allied strategy to address the

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<sup>77</sup> Richard K. Ashley, "The Poverty of Neorealism," *International Organization* 38:2 (1984).

<sup>78</sup> Monty G. Marshall and Keith Jagers, "Polity IV Project: Political Regime Characteristics and Transitions, 1800-2017," Center for Systemic Peace, 2017.

<sup>79</sup> Marshall and Keith Jagers, "Polity IV Project."

challenge. He also contends that an activist U.S. foreign policy will undermine American democracy at home. I disagree with both claims. Like Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union before it, the Chinese Communist Party has fundamental institutional flaws, but it is still dangerous.<sup>80</sup> Democracies prevailed over autocratic rivals in the past, but they needed to struggle for decades and, in some cases, fight major wars to do so. Unfortunately, intense competition, and possibly even conflict, may also be required in this case. America's fundamentals make it well positioned for the upcoming competition with China. But it still must compete. As it did during the Cold War, the United States can both maintain democratic institutions at home and vigorously compete abroad. If Washington and its democratic allies succeed, they will counter the perceived success of China's autocratic model and keep the world (and the United States) safe for democracy.

Why are some countries more powerful than others? Power is a central concept in international relations theory, but scholars have devoted surprisingly little attention to examining where power comes from. Instead, IR theorists almost always consider power as an independent variable that shapes important outcomes in world politics, like war and peace. In contrast, my book attempts to provide a theory on the origins of international power. It argues that domestic political institutions are the fundamental cause of the wealth and power of nations. I believe this is the correct answer, but my more modest goal is to revive a debate about the sources of international power. I am pleased that the reviewers believe the book will energize this scholarly debate.

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<sup>80</sup> Matthew Kroenig and Jeffrey Cimmino, "China Is Both Weak and Dangerous," *Foreign Policy*, December 7, 2020.