

A photograph of President of China Xi Jinping (left) and President of Russia Vladimir Putin (right) shaking hands. They are both wearing dark suits and ties. The background features the Chinese and Russian national flags and a white emblem on a red wall.

Russia does not have the technical capacity that the Chinese have. Instead, they use a lot of offline measures, particularly legal mechanisms.

The Russia-China Relationship and Democratic Decline

A Conversation with Dr. Andrea Kendall-Taylor

Interviewed by Lukas Bundonis and Grady Jacobsen

Fletcher Security Review (FSR): Good Afternoon Dr. Kendall-Taylor, thank you for speaking with us. Your recent talk at Fletcher on the evolution of autocracy and democratic decline in Europe and Eurasia was fascinating, but it raised even more questions, so let's jump right in.

We'd like to start by digging deeper into your interpretation of the Russian reshuffling that we're seeing. Clearly, Putin is looking for a way to maintain his power after his term ends in 2024. Is there anything you can see that might get in the way of this plan? In other words, do you think it will work?

Andrea Kendall-Taylor (AKT): I do think it will work, based largely on the way these types of transitions tend to play out in other authoritarian regimes. When you look at the data on regimes that look most like Putin—these highly personalized authoritarian regimes where leaders have been in power for fifteen years or more—the most common way that transitions tend to occur is through a natural death in office. It is around forty percent, which is pretty high, then it's about fifteen percent through protests, fifteen percent through coups, and it goes down from there. If I were playing the odds in Las Vegas, I would guess that he has a high prospect of pulling this off in a way that enables him to continue to pull the strings of power well beyond 2024, even until he eventually dies in office. But you know, although a coup is probably unlikely in Russia, the statistical breakdown of protests and coups at fifteen percent each isn't nothing and the country certainly has relatively high levels of discontent over economic stagnation.

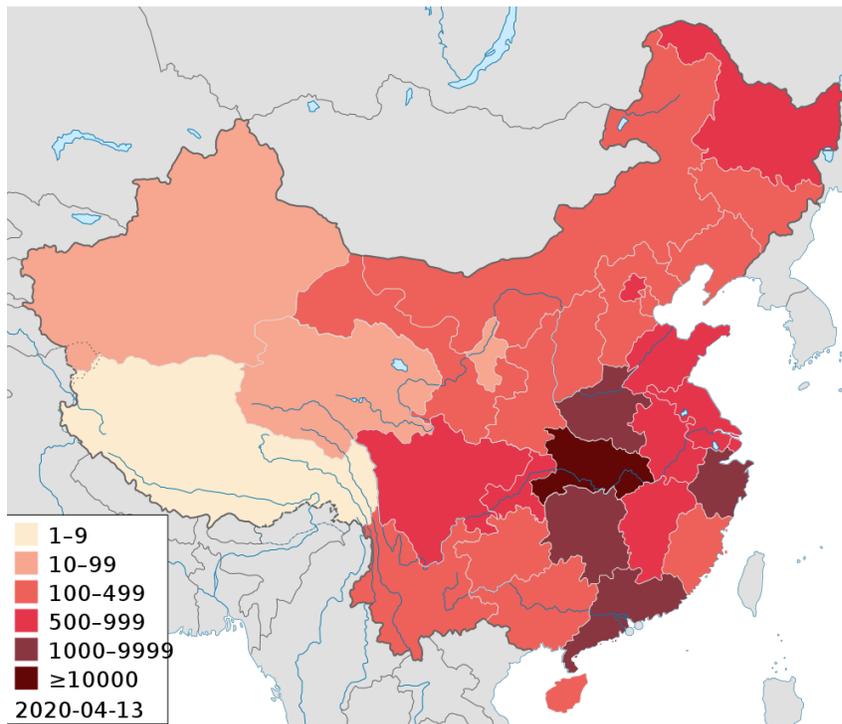
I also think a lot of the kind of euphoria that Putin created over restoring Russia as a great power in the wake of Crimea has faded away, particularly as people are more concerned about bread-and-butter economic issues. I think, surprisingly, there's still a lot of confusion over what this actually means for Putin and his role in a future Russia, so I am not sure to what extent he has actually alleviated elite concerns looking forward, because in the run-up to this we had seen a lot of pretty intense elite infighting, jockeying for position, and a lot of uncertainty over what their future holds. If you are an elite in an authoritarian regime, you want to gauge the political winds and make sure you are backing the right guy, the person who is going to guarantee your interests into the future. I do not think Putin has actually resolved that question yet and so you will probably still see some degree of elite uncertainty until that question is a bit more resolved. For those reasons, going with the odds, it seems likely that he will be able to stay in power. However, because there is some of this underlying fodder of discontent, if Putin misplays it in some

way, it is plausible that this discontent could be mobilized in some fashion—though unlikely.

FSR: Assuming a successful effort on Putin's part, where do you see Central Asian countries falling as Russia and China gain power and seek to develop their own spheres of influence? It seems like both nations would have an interest in controlling the security situation in that region.

AKT: That is a really great question. At the Center for a New American Security (CNAS) we are working on a project about Russia-China relations, and you can see that ties are deepening tremendously across virtually every dimension of the relationship, certainly in the political-diplomatic sphere. I think I have seen that Putin and Xi have spent more time together than any other pair of international leaders. They have a very strong personal connection—they do things for each other's birthdays—and that is beginning to trickle down to lower levels of the Russian government. There is a lot of local-level exchange, particularly in far-eastern Russia with China, and so obviously these political-diplomatic ties are really deepening. The two countries are also continuing to grow closer economically, particularly in the energy sphere with this new pipeline being built. I think China is now Russia's biggest purchaser of oil above Germany, which had been in the number one spot for a long time. The two are also certainly growing closer in the military sphere. They are doing all sorts of joint exercises. For example, the Chinese joined the Vostok 2018 exercises, so you had thousands of Chinese soldiers exercising alongside Russian troops. Then, just before the U.S. strikes on Soleimani, there was a joint naval exercise with Russia, China, and Iran. Their arms sales relationship is also really close; we saw a lot of joint patrols in East Asia, with the Russians and the Chinese flying together; and Russia is now working with China to help develop an early warning missile system.

So, when you just look across the board, it is clear that their relationship is deepening. However, a lot of skeptics will say they will be driven apart by the amount of historical mistrust and asymmetry in their relationship, with China being the far dominant of the pair. Putin is not going to be anyone's junior partner and there are obvious points of friction in the relationship. I would say for at least the last ten years, people have been talking about how competition between Russia and China in Central Asia would be a potential source of friction, and we just have not seen it. So far, China has been really smart about allaying Putin's concerns about being the junior partner. China certainly never treats Russia that way, and in Central Asia they have a very neat division of labor: Russia is



China. Choropleth of confirmed Covid-19 cases in China up to January 2020. (Wikimedians / CC BY-SA 4.0)

the security partner and the political partner, and China is the economic partner. So far, they have been managing to keep that.

Obviously though, as China becomes a more prominent economic partner I think it will naturally look to increase its influence in the political sphere and perhaps the military sphere. We have seen little, tiny encroachments: China has a base on the Tajik border because they are concerned about instability flowing over into the West. So, there are little signs. It will be interesting to see how Russia responds if China is slowly encroaching on territory that it sees as its prerogative in the region, but I would say so far we have not seen that. I am still skeptical that we will. Even with China's Belt and Road Initiative, which goes through Central Asia, I think Putin realizes he can't really stop it, so rather than looking to push back against it he's looked to join his Eurasian Economic Union with the Belt and Road. I also find Russia's view of the Chinese to be really interesting. In many ways, I think when Russia looks at the United States there is a bit of a zero-sum calculation, but it does not seem to be that way with China. Looking at the Belt and Road, even though China will benefit more, Putin seems to be okay with that for the moment as long as Russia benefits a little. Obviously, there are tensions in the relationship, but so far those have not spilled over and you have not really seen any sources of friction in Central Asia, the Balkans, the Middle East, the Arctic, or any of these regions where you could argue they have diverging interests.

FSR: We'd like to focus this next question on China. Across the People's Republic, China boasts expertise on how to make an authoritarian state not only justifiable but thriving. Do you see the struggle to manage the recent coronavirus outbreak as a test of this effectiveness?

AKT: That's an interesting question. I think that natural di-

asters or significant epidemics can be a source of instability for authoritarian regimes, in part because they can put on full display any of the regime's incompetence. They can reveal incompetence in ways that people were not necessarily aware of before. If the epidemic grows and there is a perception that Beijing, and the Communist Party in particular, have grossly mismanaged the situation, I think it could create a vulnerability for the regime.* That's not just from a domestic perspective, but also internationally; if there is more pressure it works in both directions. I am sure this is something the regime is acutely attuned to, so they will be looking to manage it and obviously manage perceptions of the way they do so. That is all going to be important.

FSR: From your intelligence perspective, what are some of the precursors that you observe that indicate a democratic backslide? You mentioned a correlation with digital repression in your discussion today, but could you expand on that or give other examples?

AKT: Yes, digital repression is certainly one piece. I have recently done some research for a digital repression index with my colleagues, Erica Frantz and Joseph Wright, to examine how new digital tools influence democratic backsliding—and there does appear to be a strong correlation. These digital tools are giving regimes new opportunities to target opponents and manage discontent. We have seen that the democratic backsliding is happening in correlation with the increase in the digital tools, and in large part this is because many of the tools are dual-use, so governments and fragile democracies can acquire these technologies with often perfectly legitimate concerns; they are effective for managing crime rates and counterterrorism, for example. The problem is that these technologies can just as easily be turned to target members of the opposition. Again, this is very new and early research, but we should be concerned about how the spread of digital sur-

* Editorial Note: This interview was conducted in January 2020.



Media microphones belonging to Hungarian television news channels. (Unknown / Public Domain)

veillance and other digital repressive capacities could make particularly weak democracies more likely to slide into authoritarianism.

I think the broader trend that we see with democratic backsliding is the process of authoritarianization, where you have democratically elected leaders who come to power and then slowly dismantle democracy. There are a number of key indicators here. For example, you look at what they are doing vis-à-vis the media: increasing control over the media by increasing government control over public broadcasters; discrediting, criticizing, and condemning the mainstream media, ultimately closing down independent media stations and increasing the prevalence or influence of media outlets more closely associated with people friendly to the regime. In addition to the media piece, there is increasing government control over the judiciary. You see countries like Poland and Hungary forcing judges into retirement. They are increasing government control over bodies that manage judges, and there are all sorts of ways that they can do that. Once governments have more control over the judiciary they can effectively weaponize the law and use it to surgically target members of the opposition, making it much easier for them to then dismantle constraints on their power. So there is the media, the judiciary, and then there is civil society: shutting down civil society organizations, increasing restrictions on political and civil liberties, and decreasing the space for autonomous centers of power and organizations that serve as watch dogs. You often see these governments using terrorism or instability as justification for greater restrictions on political and civil liberties, and this sometimes makes citizens more likely to be willing to trade their political and civil liberties for the promise of greater stability. Finally, you see at the end that these leaders basically change the rules of the game, changing electoral laws or gerrymandering in ways that make it really hard to ever get that incumbent party out of office.

Like you were saying, I think this playbook has become fairly consistent across all the countries where we are seeing this. It was essentially the playbook not only in Russia, but in Venezuela, in Turkey, you see elements of it in Hungary and in Poland, and in the Philippines. In all these cases, it is democratically elected leaders that go through these steps and eventually cross the line into authoritarianism.

FSR: Your research raises that digital oppression is the core ingredient of the recipe that comprises a successful autocracy. The question is, in your opinion, who's the best chef? Is it Putin, Xi or is it an example that they can learn from in a western democracy, such as President Trump or Narendra Modi?

AKT: From a digital authoritarian perspective, China is far and away the leading player in the digital autocracy sphere.

FSR: Why is that?

AKT: They are essentially creating a digital autocracy fueled by AI-powered surveillance states. For example, you can think of the human rights atrocities in Xinjiang and what they are doing to the Uighurs with the internment camps. In Xinjiang, they are basically testing out a lot of these digital tools that are used for citizen control. The key with what China is doing though, is that they are able to integrate. They are collecting a lot of data on their citizens through surveillance and other digital means, but what they are doing differently is they are able to integrate data across all different parts of the government: you can marry up your tax records with your traffic tickets with your medical records, and so on. They can bring all this data together, basically using it to predictively control citizens. Then, if someone rises to the threshold that they identify as a risk, they can preemptively go after that per-

son using legal mechanisms and other means. So, China is far and away the leader in the digital authoritarian space. They have highly technical means through AI-powered surveillance, but the scary thing is that they are collecting and sucking up massive amounts of data that AI does not yet have the capacity to process. As technological development advances however, they will have access to all this data that they will then be able to use.

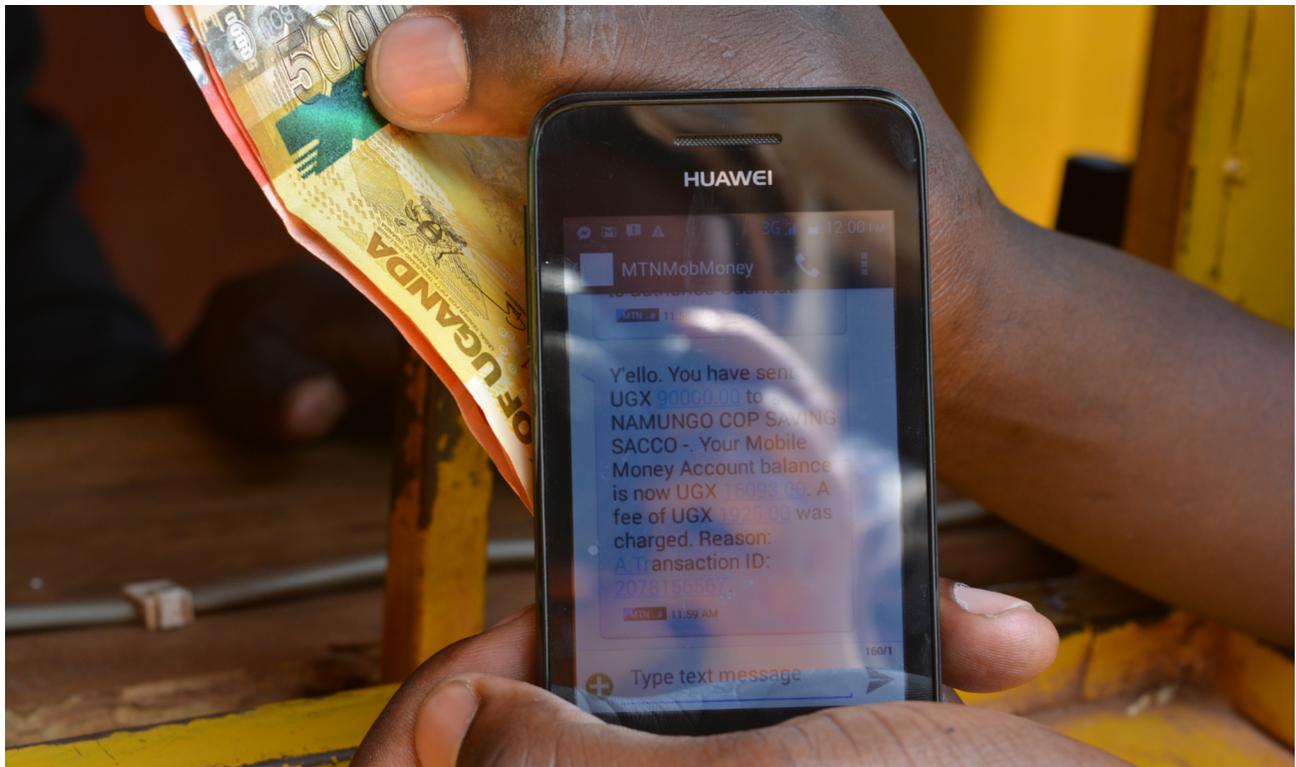
Russia is a really different model of digital authoritarianism: it is a low-tech model. Russia does not have the technical capacity that the Chinese have. Instead, they use a lot of offline measures, particularly legal mechanisms. We have seen that they are passing the digital internet law, and they have all those other legal mechanisms that try to make service providers responsible for the content that people post. The Russian model is really much more about the legal mechanisms. They are just two very different models of digital authoritarianism, but we also see that China is exporting a lot of this technology abroad. A tremendous number of countries, particularly at the city level, have acquired this technology, often in the name of reducing crime and combatting terrorism. The interesting thing is that authoritarian regimes can learn from both countries. You can acquire some of the technology and higher-tech solutions that China sells, but you can also adopt a lot of the legal mechanisms that Russia has put in place to monitor dissent. I am also interested in watching the new prime minister of Russia, Mikhail Mishustin, who was the head of the tax service. Mishustin is basically known for finding technical solutions to rapidly increase the tax revenue in Russia. I think now, within 90 seconds, the central government has record of every purchase that is made at any business to calculate and collect the value-added tax almost immediately. He has won accolades for radically revising Russia's tax admini-

stration and it will be interesting to see what someone like that—whose background is in technology and sees technology as a potential solution to problems—might accomplish in terms of digital autocracy as Russia's prime minister.

FSR: Speaking of tech acquisition, you mentioned the newfound ability of a less-capable autocrat to purchase off-the-shelf technology and go to a more capable autocrat, like Putin or Xi, to receive training on how to use it. Can you expand on one case study?

AKT: I think Zimbabwe and Uganda are both good examples. With Huawei in particular, when they sell a lot of their technology, they often send a team to local government officials who then works with them on the ground to effectively implement and use the technology. We have seen this in multiple countries but, top of mind, we know that they are doing this in Zimbabwe and Uganda. It's also important to remember that China is not the only provider of these technologies—it is also western tech companies, and Israel is at the top of the list. Think of how the Saudis hacked into Jeff Bezos' phone, most likely using the software from an Israeli firm called Pegasus. When we think about stopping or stemming the spread of technologies that are being used to advance human rights abuses, China is the 800-pound gorilla in the room but it's not just China. There are also western tech companies that need to be held accountable.

FSR: As the director of the Transatlantic Security program at CNAS, we wanted to talk with you about NATO. Like Russia, NATO also seems to be looking at a potential reshuffling. A *Foreign Policy* article published in December illustrated how Emmanuel Macron seems intent on taking the lead from Germany with Merkel's departure from office, and managing



Kampala, Uganda. A Huawei phone in a mobile money kiosk. (Fiona Graham / CC BY-SA 2.0)

a reformation of the alliance in some ways. Do you think this potential upheaval in the alliance could serve as an opportunity for Putin and Russia to disrupt it? Do you think they would take that opportunity if it presented itself?

AKT: There was just a NATO summit back in December that was, in part, to help celebrate the 75th anniversary of NATO. This was a summit for which almost everyone was holding their breath with expectations about how poorly it was going to go, and this time it was not just about Trump and his kind of ally-beating. There were a lot of concerns, including those about President Emmanuel Macron because just before the summit he had given a huge interview where he talked about NATO being “brain-dead” and, as you said, calling for a new security configuration in Europe. So yes, I think you are right to note that things are happening beneath the surface in terms of disunity among NATO members, and I think that is certainly cause for concern.

It is interesting to note, though, that when you look purely from a military perspective, NATO is in quite a good place. Following the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, NATO has taken several prudent steps to increase military mobility and help to advance the capability of the alliance. So, it is really in the political sphere where a lot of concerns arise. It's the divisions: it is not just Trump who is consistently berating allies about spending more on defense. Now you have President Macron who is making gestures about needing to take a more accommodating approach to Russia. There is also Turkish President Erdogan purchasing a missile defense system from Russia in violation of U.S. sanctions. He has also made a big point ahead of the summit that he would not be willing to support any increase in NATO's presence in the Baltics if the alliance was not willing to pay more attention to terrorism in Syria. So, there are all sorts of political divisions and then you lay China on top of that. Even though China does not present any direct military threat to the alliance, its growing footprint can create complications that NATO will have to take into consideration. My point is that on the political front, with the 17+1 and other configurations that China uses for working inside Europe, it is also sowing disagreements on what to do about China. So, thinking about this Huawei issue, the UK today just announced they are willing to go ahead with Huawei on their 5G networks. The United States had drawn a redline and said, “We are not willing to share intelligence with any country who does.” So there are all these political divisions inside NATO member countries that raise concern. NATO recognizes that, and they have called for some sort of political reflection group, which came out of the NATO summit. I think part of your question, too, is then “What does that look like from Russia?” Obviously, when you have those types of political divisions inside NATO, that

is good news to Russia because one of Putin's key goals is not just to stop NATO expansion, but if he can work eventually to undermine the political cohesion of the alliance, then that creates a more permissive environment for Russia.

FSR: Quickly before the last question, does the UK's Huawei decision risk breaking the Five Eyes partnership?

AKT: That is the question! Is the United States going to go to the mat over this? I think that is the question that everyone is going to be asking now. I'm not in the administration, and so I don't know how this has been thought through.

FSR: You mentioned Turkey earlier, so I wanted to ask you whether there is an avenue for the NATO alliance to address such a major and longstanding member state that has decided to take an entirely different foreign policy approach when it comes to Russia. Turkey may even potentially partner with Russia, which runs counter to the entire reason behind NATO's establishment in the first place. Do you think there has been any consideration about NATO and Turkey parting ways?

AKT: In my opinion, things would have to get significantly worse with Turkey before we consider kicking them out of NATO, in large part because there still is tremendous benefit to having Turkey in the tent; that still is in the strategic interests of the United States. It is going to be a tricky path to forge in terms of figuring out how to manage Turkey at this particular moment. I do not work a lot on Turkey, in all honesty, so I do not have a good sense of the specific policy measures, but there have been difficult NATO members in the past. You can think of other authoritarian spells with Greece or Portugal, so I think it is very prudent for NATO to look for small opportunities to maintain those channels of communication and to look for other mitigating possibilities. If Turkey is, and they are, fully going forward with the S-400 [missile system], then trying to work through some of those differences in ways that do not compromise U.S.-NATO interests and trying to find little confidence-building measures through NATO channels would keep them in as we try to work through what is clearly a difficult time with Turkey. But kicking them out, I think, would be a measure of last resort and things would have to get a lot worse before we got there.

FSR: So we've dealt with this kind of thing before, and we just have to wait and see?

AKT: Yes I think so, and just work through it.

Dr. Andrea Kendall-Taylor

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