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Abstract

This working paper examines China's role in political developments across the EU's Southern and Eastern Neighbourhoods between 2010 and 2024, assessing whether Beijing has contributed to processes of democratisation or authoritarianisation. Through detailed analysis of four cases in the Southern Neighbourhood affected by the 2011 Arab uprisings (Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria) and three cases in the Eastern Neighbourhood (Ukraine, Belarus, and Georgia), two of them linked to the Colour Revolutions, we challenge prevailing assumptions about China as a systematic promoter of autocracy. Instead, we find that China adopts a pragmatic, case-by-case approach to political developments, prioritising stability and continuity over ideological alignment. China's primary tools—official discourse, UN Security Council veto power, and economic engagement—serve to protect commercial interests, international status, and geopolitical considerations rather than to explicitly advance authoritarian agendas. While Beijing has provided discursive support to both democratic transitions and authoritarian consolidation, accommodating whichever political trajectory emerges, substantial material support for autocratic survival remains limited. Syria's civil war represents the main exception, where China's UN vetoes constituted a significant example of autocracy support, though this was motivated by broader sovereignty concerns and regime change precedents rather than specific support for the al-Assad regime. The study concludes that China's primary challenge to democratisation efforts lies not in active autocracy promotion, but in legitimising authoritarian alternatives through its development model and contesting liberal democratic norms within international discourse.

Introduction

China's (re)emergence in the international arena has deeply impacted and transformed the dynamics of the international system and the global economy. The improvement of China's relative position in the global power structure has increased its confidence to play a more significant role in global politics and to shape and reform the current international liberal order. Indeed, Beijing is showing increasing signs of a departure from the previous role of norm-taker towards norm-making (Holbig and Schucher, 2016; Gegout and Suzuki, 2020).

In the last two decades, China has increased its presence in both the EU's Eastern and Southern Neighbourhoods, which are integral components of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This centrepiece of Beijing's foreign policy aims to connect Eurasia to improve trade and connectivity, while exporting domestic overcapacity through the finance of infrastructure projects in Asia, Africa, and Europe. Parallel to this rise, we have also observed a democratic recession in the EU's Southern and Eastern Neighbourhoods. Indeed, China's growing presence in both Neighbourhoods has coincided with multiple processes of democratisation and the return to authoritarianism for different countries. This has prompted an examination of China's role as a potential actor of autocracy promotion. This interest arises from China's rise as an authoritarian and illiberal one party-state led by the Communist Party of China (CPC).

However, the idea of China's role in autocracy promotion has been shaped by controversy. According to Tansey (2016:142), autocracy promotion requires "a clear intent on the part of an external actor to bolster autocracy as a form of political regime as well as an underlying motivation that rests in significant part on an ideological commitment to autocracy itself." While many authors frame Beijing's foreign policy as such (Mandelbaum and Weiffen, 2023), there is no evidence of intentionality to promote autocratic values in China's international engagement

(Gegout and Suzuki, 2020: 392). Similarly, Bader (2015) argues that Chinese leaders have not shown any significant interest in the type of political regime abroad. Other authors, such as Jessica Chen-Weiss (2021) posit that, rather than pursuing a grand strategy to undermine democracy and spread autocracy, Chinese authorities act to secure the stability of their domestic regime.

This case study aims to analyse to what extent China's rise and growing presence in EU's Southern and Eastern Neighbourhoods has affected the political developments in both regions. More concretely it investigates whether China has played a role in the processes of democratisation and authoritarianism in these countries between 2010 and 2024. To do so, this case analysis starts by examining China's perspectives of democracy and democracy promotion and indicates different areas of increasing contestation against political liberal norms and values. Second, it analyses China's discourse and behavioural practices in both neighbourhoods. Finally, it addresses challenges that China brings to the EU's democracy support efforts in such areas.

1 Contesting liberal democracy and values

China's foreign policy serves as an extension of its domestic politics, designed to create a favourable international environment for modernisation while preventing external interference in domestic affairs. The core interest of Chinese authorities is to uphold the political power of CPC and thus, to secure all the sources of legitimacy associated with its leadership, such as economic growth and prosperity for its population. Additionally, domestic nationalist sentiments have also become a source of legitimacy as far as Chinese authorities assert their position as a great power. This includes being able to protect their own sovereignty, interests and nationals abroad (Ghiselli, 2021), as well as shape international norms and institutions.

According to Lee (2021; 11), the wave of Colour Revolutions in Eastern European countries (2003-5) and the Arab uprisings (2010-11), together with domestic upheavals in Tibet (2008), Xinjiang (2009) and Hong Kong (2014), increased the authorities' anxieties about a potential contagion effect that could threaten their power. While these concerns have been constant since the 1989 Tiananmen protests and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the apparent support of the West to these popular movements enhanced the CPC's suspicions of democracy promotion practices as Western tools for internal destabilisation. As such, China considers Western liberal values and democracy as potential threats when instrumentalised by other actors for their own political objectives. In Document №9 (2013), an internal CPC guideline, the promotion of Western constitutional democracy, universal values –including human rights– and the instrumentalisation of civil society by Western actors were framed as an "attempt to undermine the current leadership" and bring regime change through importing Western political systems.

Given China's authoritarian system, it is often argued that Beijing is increasingly providing developmental, governmental and aid alternatives which compete with liberal systems (Sharshenova and Crawford, 2017: 2). For instance, China is offering competing 'frames' of democracy, human rights and development that align with its own visions of economic and political governance. This growing contestation of the political foundations and norms of the current liberal order serves three purposes: (1) to enhance China's domestic legitimacy, (2) to project itself as a responsible power showing its 'adherence' to democratic norms and fend off international criticism, and (3) to position itself as an equal participant in shaping the global

definition of common values and discourses, including challenging prevailing understandings of democracy (Omelicheva, 2015: 62; Holbig and Schucher, 2016).

Most references to 'democracy' in Chinese official diplomatic discourse often refer to the 'democratisation of international relations', which means support for multipolarity and reforms of global governance to increase the participation of developing countries and the promotion of a diverse world order. However, although it is not a central element of China's international discursive practices, Chinese authorities are ontologically contesting the Western idea that there is a unique definition of democracy or that liberal democracy is desirable and appropriate for every country. Instead, they propose the existence of multiple forms of democracy that can be adapted to align with national conditions (Comerma, 2022: 7). This is often visible in normative aspects within China's strategic partnerships agreements with partners.

Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China (RPC), Chinese elites have described their political system as a "socialist democracy with Chinese characteristics" or, more recently, a "whole-process democracy" (SCIO, 2005; SCIO, 2021). For Chinese authorities, democracy should be evaluated based on different considerations than the procedural approach of Western liberal models. These labels promote the idea of an internally developed model of democracy tailored to cultural, historical, social, and economic context. For example, the Chinese 'model' of democracy is defined through (1) a meritocratic system, (2) a performance-based approach that measures success by improvements in peoples' lives, (3) the inclusion of consultative mechanisms such as online portals and public hearings on specific policies and (4) collective and consensus-oriented 'democracy' that supposedly suits one-party rule (SCIO, 2021; Drinhausen, 2021).

China's challenge to the universality of liberal values is also visible in the human rights discourse. Beijing has consistently supported a concept of human rights based on 'developmental relativism' which prioritises economic, social, and cultural rights over civil and political rights, the latter being more favoured in Western conceptualisations of democracy. China also promotes the localisation of such norms according to the historical, social, economic and cultural conditions of nations (Zhang and Buzan, 2019). Moreover, in Chinese policy circles, there is a prevailing consensus that the sovereignty norm should take precedence to ensure that human rights protection does not violate a state's authority (Wu, 2009).

The prioritisation of economic, social and cultural rights over political ones is also significant in China's vision of peace. Instead of considering democracy as a prerequisite for peace, the prevalent view in Beijing considers the lack of development as the main cause of conflict. A s such, peace should be achieved through prioritising economic development and political stability rather than externally imposed models of peacebuilding. (Sun and Zhang, 2021; Yuan, 2022).

Furthermore, China's exceptional development experience, often dubbed as 'China Model', has often been framed as an alternative political and economic development, different from the one proposed by liberal democracies. Despite of the lack of clear definition of this 'China model' (Breslin, 2011), it has evolved into a concept that encompasses political stability, economic openness and a state-led capitalist development under authoritarianism (Ambrosio, 2011: 393). However, critics have long argued that, instead of presenting a real model or alternative, the so-called China Model shows limited replicability as its development was firmly grounded in innovation and experimentation in a unique context. Hence, the China model is difficult to 'export' (Naughton, 2010).

It is important to highlight that China does not show a 'missionary impulse' to extend authoritarianism or, more specifically, its own political model based on a Leninist one-party system (Nathan, 2015). Instead, Beijing has pledged adherence to its Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, which include the principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of other nations and the respect for state sovereignty and territorial integrity (SCIO, 2011). Building upon this non-interference principle, China has refrained from imposing its views and practices and has shown some reluctance to project its political beliefs or preferences. The argument used by Beijing's policymakers consists of two points: first, China encourages an order based on diversity and cosmopolitan thinking rather than the imposition of certain values preferred by ruling powers. Second, China claims it will never impose its will and vision on other nations as "the imposition of policies, preferences and paradigms is seen as a key cause of both instability and disorder within states, and also international tension and disharmony" (Yang, 2018).

Nevertheless, President Xi Jinping declared a growing willingness and confidence to "offer a China solution to humanity's search for better social systems" in 2016. While it further stated that China won't "'export' a China model, nor ask others to 'copy' Chinese methods", the existence of this discourse may signal a process of reconfiguration (or a search for a consensus) of the role that China should play in international affairs and global governance in the next few years (Xi cited in Chen-Weiss, 2021). As such, despite this rejection of extending its own political model, Chinese authorities may be increasingly willing to share their behavioural authoritarian practices with those interested, including their view on international law or democracy. Indeed, **the International Liaison Department of the Communist Party of China** (CPC-ILD), a body that manages the relations with foreign political parties and overseas political elites, is becoming more active under Xi Jinping, sharing Chinese elites' views to political parties of different political inclinations in both, authoritarian and democratic countries (Cabestan, 2022).

More significantly, although China does not promote any Chinese model, it represents an example of economic prowess and political stability under authoritarianism which challenges the Western understanding that democracy is necessary for development. As Beijing's relative power increases and the country becomes a more assertive norm-maker, its example may legitimise and make more attractive authoritarian practices in front of the decline of democracy worldwide – especially with the promotion of a diverse international order. In this sense, the role of **regional multilateral organisations**, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) or the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum, may help promote (and legitimise) Chinese's views on certain values and norms and ensure the survival of authoritarian regimes through the preservation of the status quo (Ambrosio, 2008). As such, China's growing power capabilities and the proliferation of alternative multilateral organisations where Beijing has a pivotal role may harvest the potential to encourage the **diffusion of authoritarian practices** – understood as an unintentional process in which ideas, norms or policies spread (Von Soest, 2015:628) – to countries and leaders that aim to remain in power and build their legitimacy through economic development (Ambrosio, 2011: 385), without any active effort by the PRC.

2 Supporting authoritarian regimes in the EU's Neighbourhood? China's role in the Southern and Eastern Neighbourhood

While the Southern and Eastern Neighbourhoods are not a priority for Beijing's foreign policy elites, the impact of pro-democracy movements such as the 2011 Arab uprisings or the Colour Revolutions and Euro-Maidan in Ukraine in 2014, have deeply influenced the perceptions of the

CPC on their regime survival (Zhang, 2020; Kaczmaeski, Jakóbowski & Kardas, 2019). Besides, they serve as a test to China's defense of non-intervention principle in the internal affairs of other countries.

2.1 Southern Neighbourhood

The 2010-2011 Arab uprisings represented an important moment to assess China's response to democratisation in other countries, especially in seemingly stable authoritarian regimes. Pollack (2011) argues that Beijing's ties with authoritarian regimes in the Middle East provided for some years a sense of stability and protection of its own interests. While these events caught Chinese authorities off guard, they were perceived with concern for Chinese economic interests and for the safety of Chinese citizens living in the region. More importantly, despite the geographical distance, the possibility of an articulation of a mass movement in China replicating the Tunisian and Egyptian cases was also perceived as a potential threat to regime security of the CPC, prompting fears of a contagion during a sensitive political moment marked by the celebration of the Two Sessions and the upcoming leadership change in 2012. Indeed, Beijing's first reaction to the uprisings was domestically oriented, seeking to prevent any similar mobilisations. In February and March 2011, there was an increase in censorship of information from the protests in Tunisia and Egypt (e.g. banning the word 'Jasmin' on the Chinese Internet), a higher number of security presence around sensitive locations in China and the suppression of domestic pro-democracy mobilisations inspired by the events in North Africa in twelve cities (Koesel and Bunce, 2013). Externally, China's response initially adopted a wait-and-see approach to the political developments in each country, adapting its policy afterwards in a reactive and, sometimes, incoherent manner.

In this section, we assess China's relation with four countries in the region that were at the epicentre of the Arab uprisings: Tunisia and Egypt, which embarked on democratic transition processes after mass protests; Libya, which was the scenario of a NATO-led intervention; and Syria, where civil war erupted after the repression of the pro-democratic movement.

2.1.1 Tunisia

In **Tunisia**, a country with limited interest for China due to its pro-West alignment, Chinese elites kept silent during the protests, closely observing the political events. More than two months after the toppling of President Ben Ali, the Chinese government established relations with the new leadership. In March 2011, then Vice Foreign Minister Zhai Jun visited Tunis and expressed the Chinese respect for "the choice of the Tunisian people" and the willingness "to cement and develop the bilateral traditional friendship and the mutually beneficial cooperation" (MFA, 2011). At that moment, the priority of Beijing was Tripoli, as Tunis helped facilitate the Chinese evacuation of more than 35,000 nationals in Libya. In parallel, Zhai announced $6 million in assistance to Tunis for an undetermined development project (Yerkes, 2021) and, months after, it also donated $2 million in cash and $4.4 million in relief supplies for Libyan refugees (AidData, 2023).

During Tunisia's democratic transition, China-Tunisia relations expanded through diplomatic engagement—representing a form of **democratic accommodation**—alongside security cooperation in counterterrorism and growing economic exchanges. Chinese officials exemplified this diplomatic approach by congratulating President Beji Caid Essebsi on his electoral victory, praising the "smooth presidential election... and its political transition process that is coming to a successful end" (AllAfrica, 2014). Despite these positive gestures, the relationship remains

relatively underdeveloped, with China-Tunisia ties lagging significantly behind Beijing's relationships with Algeria or Morocco or Tunisia's partnerships with Western countries. This limited development persists even though Tunis joined the Belt and Road Initiative in 2018 and the Asian Investment Infrastructure Bank in 2019, moves specifically aimed at attracting Chinese investment and financial support. The modest results reflect China's cautious approach to Tunisia's perceived political and economic uncertainty, evident in the investment figures: China ranks only as the 32nd largest investor in Tunisia and accounted for merely 0.09% of the country's FDI stock in 2022 (Zoubir, 2020: 21, Selmi, 2022; FIPA-Tunisia, 2022).

As President Kais Saied dissolved his government and parliament, putting an end to the democratisation process in the country in July 2021, Chinese elites kept silent again and, after some time, started to accommodate Tunisia's turn to authoritarianism. In a meeting with Saied in 2022, President Xi Jinping expressed support for "Tunisia in pursuing a development path suited to its national conditions, oppos[ing] interference by external forces" (Xi, 2022). However, the most clear example of **discursive autocracy support** until now is the explicit mention of Chinese support for "Tunisia's reform measures and efforts to safeguard sovereignty since July 25, 2021... as well as the development plans and reforms chosen by the Tunisian people based on their national conditions" (MFA, 2024a), included in the strategic agreement signed by both countries in July 2024. While the new strategic partnership may lead to a reassessment of the relationship, it is yet to see if the Chinese discursive authoritarian support to Saied will lead to a stronger (now authoritarian) collaboration than it did in the previous authoritarian and democratic era. In sum, China kept a pragmatic approach to the different governments, accommodating any democratic or authoritarian change and maintaining a limited economic role in the country.

2.1.2 Egypt

As the protests started in Cairo in 2011, Chinese authorities remained mostly silent. Rhetorically, its position was defined by calls to "restore social stability and normal order as soon as possible" (Hong Lei cited in Lam, 2011) and criticising the US pressure on Mubarak to resign (Pollack, 2011), which may amount to indirect support for status quo and Mubarak's regime.

After Mubarak's ousting, China quickly established relations with different actors of all the political spectrum (Kandil, 2012) while vocally supporting the 2012 parliamentary election (Xinhua, 2011). After the election of Mohamed Morsi in 2012, China affirmed its respect for "the choice of the Egyptian people for their political system and path of development" (Ahram Online, 2012), despite Beijing's mistrust towards Islamist movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood. Morsi visited Beijing on his first official visit, breaking the long-standing tradition of visiting Washington first. The visit concluded with the signature of eight cooperation agreements, including further Chinese investments in Egypt and a $200 million loan to support its economy (Chang, 2014).

Given Beijing's support of Morsi, the 2013 military coup shocked the Chinese leadership. However, they swiftly established an ongoing dialogue with the new leadership under Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, maintaining its pragmatism in continuing cooperation and helping stabilise Egypt's economic situation. Following Al-Sisi's undemocratic election in 2014, both countries strengthened their relations with the signature of a comprehensive strategic partnership, Cairo eyeing Beijing as an alternative financer to the West. The agreement included a commitment to enhance cooperation in multiple areas, such as economy, security, military, culture, technology,

and coordination in international affairs. In 2015, Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Egypt, which underscores the importance of personal relations between both leaders (Qin, 2023).

While the relation is primarily sustained by political considerations, its nature is largely economic. Egypt has a key position in the BRI, being home to the Suez Canal where China is the biggest user –around 60% of its goods to Europe go through the canal– and the largest investor in the Suez Canal Economic Zone (Nyabiage, 2022). In 2016, as Cairo faced headwinds to satisfy its financial needs, China offered $4.95 billion in loans between 2016 and 2017 to strengthen the country's foreign reserves and to preserve macroeconomic stability (AidData, 2023). China also invested $5.62 billion in Egypt between 2011 and 2024, which more than half was devoted to a single project by China National Petroleum Company (CNPC) in the oil sector ($3.1 bn). It has also participated in dozens of construction projects amounting to $18.23bn between 2012 and 2024, with up to $5bn dedicated to energy projects (AEI, 2025).

From Mubarak's fall, Morsi's brief leadership to al-Sisi's coup and later leadership, Beijing has kept a pragmatic position, apparently supporting the 'choice' of Egyptians, regardless of the democratic or authoritarian tendencies, while rejecting any external interference (Aoun and Kellner, 2019). As Bader (2015) argues, China's relations with other actors are defined by the opportunities that arise from engaging with any actor at a specific time, not their regime type. This explains the continuity of the Chinese economic support to Morsi's democratic government –during which China made the largest investment in the African country's energy sector– as well as during Al-Sisi's regime. However, while these economic ties, and more specifically China's role as Egypt's fourth largest creditor[1] may appear as **authoritarian collaboration**, Beijing has a strong interest in maintaining the macroeconomic health of the African country and ensuring its stability for its own investments and economic interests - independently of its leaders.

2.1.3 Libya

At the beginning of the 2011 **Libyan** uprisings, China also adopted a 'wait-and-see' stance, calling for a return to stability and defending the principles of non-interference and sovereignty. However, in contrast with Tunisia or Egypt, the instability in the country had dramatic consequences for Chinese investments which exceeded $1.5 billion and the security of its citizens. As such, the priority of Beijing elites was first the evacuation of more than 35,000 Chinese citizens living in Libya (Zerba, 2014).

Libya is considered an exception of Chinese policy during the Arab Uprisings, especially due to Beijing's support of more interventionist approaches to the conflict, including UN Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1970 to prosecute Gaddafi in the International Criminal Court. A few weeks later, China abstained from UNSC Resolution 1973 to authorise a no-fly zone and to protect civilians' lives – allowing the resolution to pass. This abstention is explained by two reasons: first, China's concerns about international isolation if it opposed the intervention (Fung, 2019: 90) and second, China's broader regional interests. Given the disagreement between the Arab League's support for the humanitarian intervention and the African Union's hesitance, China decided to abstain to avoid being perceived as more favourable to one of the different regional organisations (Pollack, 2016). As the no-fly zone seemed to legitimise an attack towards the Libyan government forces under the "all means necessary" rhetoric, China's position switched

[1] According to Roll (2023), China accounted for 4,5% of Egypt's public debt in 2022, behind the International Monetary Fund (33%), the Gulf States (22%) and the Paris Club (6%).

towards one of criticism and concern about the possible implications of such a precedent on its regime security.

When the collapse of the Gaddafi regime was seen as inevitable, China recognised the National Transitional Council (NTC) as the sole legitimate authority in Libya and unfroze $15 billion of overseas assets for the rebels in September 2011 (Megerisi, 2021). However, some reports found in Tripoli in September 2011 proved an offer of a Chinese arms manufacturing company to the Gaddafi regime during July 2011. While the Chinese Foreign Ministry denied such trade deals (The Diplomat, 2011), it cast a shadow on the **(autocracy) support** of Chinese actors to Gaddafi through arms transfers as well as on the challenges of the Chinese government to control its state-owned enterprises (SOEs).

Since the beginning in 2014 of the second Libyan civil war between two competing governments in Tripoli and Benghazi, Beijing has supported the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA). In parallel, Chinese officials have largely repeated calls for greater African involvement in resolving the Libya crisis, a multilateral peace initiative and respect for the country's sovereignty. In 2021, Chinese Foreign Affairs Minister Wang Yi declared support for the political resolution of the Libyan conflict with an explicit mention of "advancing the electoral and political process according to its established plan" (Wang, 2021), a seemingly rhetorical support for democratisation - as far as it brings stability to the country. Similarly, in 2025, Chinese authorities reiterated their support for efforts to build broad consensus on conducting national elections in Libya and advancing the political process, particularly through the work of the UN Support Mission in Libya (Xinhua, 2025).

The GNA has shown significant interest in China's economic engagement in the country –also in the efforts of post-conflict reconstruction–, with the signature of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in 2018 for the return of Chinese businesses. Yet China's economic engagement has been limited, discouraged by the lack of stability and concerns about the ongoing war in Libya. China has preferred to stay outside and avoid taking sides between the GNA and the Libyan National Army (LNA) in the conflict until a clear winner emerges. Indeed, multiple economic actors in China have been careful not to strain ties with the LNA. This is the case, for example, of CNPC, which has been engaging in talks with Libya's National Oil Corporation (NOC) to develop oilfields in the eastern part of the country under Khalifa Haftar's control (Chaziza, 2020), whose allies have blocked the oilfields to pressure the GNA (Wilson, 2023). However, no progress has materialised since talks started in 2019. Nevertheless, this position has been defined as prioritising economic and mercantilist engagement through cautious diplomacy to avoid any military entanglement (Wehrey and Alkoutami, 2020), even if Chinese arms ended up in the hands of the LNA during the Western Libya campaign (2019-2020), supplied by Egypt and the United Arab Emirates to Haftar.

2.1.4 Syria

In the case of **Syria**, China's diplomatic position was largely informed by its determination to prevent another regime change as it occurred after the NATO-led military intervention in Libya. Furthermore, this approach was motivated by China's broader geopolitical and security concerns, including the emergence of transnational jihadi groups and the participation of Uyghurs in these movements, rather than its economic interests (Foot, 2020; Ghiselli and Alsudairi, 2022).

As Syria descended into civil war, China used three vetoes in the UNSC in quick succession between 2011 and 2012, blocking criticism towards the Al-Assad regime, peace plans compliance and potential sanctions under their banner of non-interference policy. In October 2011, China vetoed a draft resolution that threatened sanctions by defending Syria's sovereignty, a veto that they would repeat in July 2012 with a new draft resolution that invoked UN Chapter VII. By February 2012, Chinese diplomats vetoed a new UNSC draft resolution that requested President al-Assad to hand power. In total, Beijing vetoed ten UNSC resolutions during the civil war. These diplomatic tools prevented any action towards the Syrian state, constituting a way of **autocracy support** by protecting the regime during a revolutionary event from sanctions, different forms of accountability or military action.

However, the objective of Chinese actions does not seem to be directed towards protecting Al-Assad. Instead, they appear to be oriented towards influencing the debates on humanitarian intervention and Responsibility to Protect (R2P) to prevent the association of the norm with the overthrow of sovereign governments – which was perceived as a threat to the Chinese regime (Swaine, 2012). As Beijing's position in the conflict was heavily criticised, China's former Special Envoy to the Middle East, Wu Sike, explained that these actions were based on Chinese's perspective of sovereignty, the defence of the legitimate interests of all states and the consequences of unrest after military intervention, as opposed to any special attachment to Syria (Wu, 2019). Besides its veto power as a UNSC permanent member[2], China also used two additional strategies to avoid any (Western) military intervention: 1) rebranding any non-consensual intervention as "regime change" to contest and delegitimise such actions, and 2) modelling and defining the R2P norm, especially, the use of force (Fung, 2019:109) under the proposal of 'responsible intervention'[3] (Ruan, 2012).

In parallel, Beijing's representatives have shown support for a political solution and mediation efforts by the Arab League, the UN or the Action Group for Syria. China has also tried to showcase itself as a potential facilitator. First, they proposed a four-point proposal for the settlement of the conflict in 2014, promoting a local-owned process, without external imposition and encouraging a political transition with 'a transitional governing body of broad representation' (MFA, 2014). Second, Chinese authorities engaged with both, the Syrian government and the opposition, inviting both to Beijing in December 2015 for discussions (Foot, 2020). Third, in 2016, Beijing appointed its first special envoy for the Syrian conflict, Ambassador Xie Xiaoyan, who participated in intra-Syrian talks in Sochi. Despite these efforts, China's engagement in the conflict has yielded minimal progress.

Since 2016, after its international image was severely damaged, China's shifted its approach towards calling for greater conflict mediation and a more passive involvement. This was visible in China's reluctance to veto any UNSC alone and their unwillingness to join any military involvement in Syria, including the international campaign against ISIS. Moreover, as the risk of regime change in Syria dwindled, its (autocracy) support for the Syrian regime also waned (Ghisetti and Alsudari, 2022: 31) – going back to limited interactions as it was before 2011.

[2] Between 2011 and 2020, China vetoed 10 resolutions on Syria at the UNSC.

[3] 'Responsible intervention' is articulated through (1) the protection of the population and not specific regimes or militaries, (2) the UNSC as the only legitimate actor to perform it, (3) the last resort of the use of force and giving priority to non-military means, (4) avoid creating humanitarian disasters or regime change, (5) the protectors should also be responsible for the post-intervention and reconstruction and (6) UN monitoring, evaluation and accountability practices (Ruan, 2012).

The return to a limited interaction is especially visible in the economic sphere, where despite rhetorical commitments, bilateral trade and investment are minimal. As in previous cases, the lack of a stable and predictable political future and stability acts as a strong barrier to deepening economic cooperation or, even, reconstruction efforts. Any financial support to Syria has been directed towards humanitarian organisations such as the Syrian Red Crescent or ICRC or reduced to emergency responses such as donating medical equipment or building a hospital (AidData, 2023). In 2022, bilateral trade amounted to mere $541 million (Fulton, 2024). Therefore, while Syria represents the strongest case of **autocracy support** by China in the Southern Neighbourhood, even if motived by broader goals, its support has been through diplomatic actions in the UNSC instead of through its economic capabilities.

However, after the swift takeover of Syria by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in December 2024, Beijing did nothing to support Al-Assad, despite signing a strategic partnership with him a year before. Instead, Chinese officials only expressed calls for a "Syrian-led and Syrian-owned" political transition, a reconstruction that "meets the will of the people through inclusive dialogue" and respect for "Syrian people to make decisions independently" (MFA, 2024c). Since then, some Chinese delegations have met with their Syrian counterparts to explore new opportunities for cooperation – with the signature of a MoU with Chinese company Fidi to boost Free Zone Investments in Homs (AFP, 2025). This shows Beijing's pragmatism to accommodate any political development rather than strict commitment to any friendly, authoritarian regime.

2.1.5 Conclusions

In sum, China's response to the Arab Uprising has been cautious and pragmatic. While we observe limited signs of authoritarian collaboration in al-Sisi's Egypt, some discursive practices of autocracy support for Saied's Tunisia and the clearest example of autocracy support in Syria, these actions are deployed in parallel with calls for reforms or support of elections for the sake of stability in the different cases. This means that China prioritises the continuity of relations with different parties in each conflict rather than keeping a specific (type of) regime in power. This is the result of Chinese elites' conviction that the protection of China's material interests in the region outweighs "the potential costs of continued support for autocratic rulers if their remaining in power fuels protracted instability or triggers regime change that could threaten the longevity of these investments" (Barber, 2020, 7).

Therefore, China's position is not one of simply supporting authoritarian regimes by default or as a part of a broader strategy. On the contrary, except for Syria, China prefers to not meddle in conflicts or internal political developments in the region, adopting a 'quasi-mediation diplomacy' that implies limited participation and resources directed towards conflict management, only to defend its material interests rather than strategic ones (Sun and Zoubir, 2017). As a result, China engages and accommodates democratic and autocratic leadership in the MENA region based on different economic, security or political interests, prioritising stability, and continuation in their relationship rather than any ideological considerations.

2.2 The Eastern Neighbourhood

In the Eastern Neighbourhood, China is relatively a newcomer, and the region holds a low priority for China's foreign policy elites as well as Chinese businesses (Huseynov and Rzayev, 2018). Even if China's presence, especially in terms of trade and construction, has expanded dramatically in the past two decades, the economic cooperation with the six countries of this neighbourhood is limited when compared to China's engagement in other regions (Samorukov and Umarov, 2020).

Additionally, China's presence in the region is influenced by the positions of Russia and the EU. China prefers these countries to maintain their independence, and perceives Moscow's interference and influence, as well as the EU's agenda for democratisation, as factors of instability and domestic backlash (Kaczmaeski, Jakóbowski and Kardas, 2019: 16).

Ukraine and Belarus are the most important countries for China in this region. Ukraine has been a key provider of cereals to China, and both countries have had significant cooperation in the defence sector. Kyiv was one of the main arms suppliers to China (SIPRI, 2023). Belarus plays an important part in the transit routes linked to the northern part of the BRI, especially after the beginning of the Russo-Ukrainian war in 2014. In contrast, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Moldova have not received significant attention from Beijing. In this section, we will analyse Beijing's position in Ukraine, Belarus and Georgia, given the importance of the Colour Revolutions in the first and latter for Beijing's perceptions of democracy promotion and Belarus' consolidation of authoritarianism and growing cooperation with China.

2.2.1 Ukraine

In 2004, China did not play a significant role in the Orange Revolution in **Ukraine**. After the election of President Viktor Yushchenko in 2005, the Chinese declared support for Ukraine's sovereignty and independence while "respecting the choice of Ukrainian people" and supporting "the presidential election following the legal framework" (Embassy of China in Ukraine, 2005). Despite this rhetorical support for starting a democratisation process, China-Ukraine relations stalled, particularly as Kyiv looked West. However, it is worth noting that military cooperation between the two countries remained constant (SIPRI, 2023).

Under President Viktor Yanukovych, China-Ukraine relations enjoyed solid progress, as high-level visits between both leaders showed. However, 2014 tested Sino-Ukrainian relations. Indeed, as the Euromaidan protests erupted in 2013, President Yanukovych was in Beijing to expand diplomatic and economic cooperation. On the one hand, during the Euromaidan protests and the demise of President Yanukovych, China adopted a low profile, given its perception of these mass protests as Western interference to achieve regime change. Beijing's approach to the political change followed the same process as during the Orange Revolution, recognising and welcoming the early presidential elections in Ukraine. On the other, after Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and the beginning of war in the East of Ukraine, China made vague calls for the defence of every state's territorial integrity (Gerasymchuk and Poita, 2018). Especially, Beijing elites were concerned about the negative precedent it could pose for its own claims in Taiwan, Hong Kong or Xinjiang (Saalman, 2017).

Chinese and Ukraine officials met in different occasions with little progress after 2014. However, in 2017, the relationship warmed, and multiple initiatives were adopted for the deepening bilateral cooperation, with the resumption of political exchanges, economic and development cooperation (including an investment in the energy field) besides the on-going exchanges in defence and military domains (Gerasymchuk and Poita, 2018).

However, in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Beijing has adopted a similar approach as in 2014, trying to balance both actors. While China has expressed support for Ukraine's territorial integrity and refrained from recognising the Russian annexation of Luhansk and Donetsk, it has also engaged in promoting disinformation narratives on the war while continuing to cooperate economically with Moscow. Limited contact with Ukraine since 2022 – except for Xi's call with Zelenskyy in 2023 and multiple exchanges between Foreign

Minister Kuleba with his Chinese counterparts – have restricted any engagement between Beijing and Kyiv beyond conflict dynamics.

In sum, China has accommodated both, democratic and authoritarian processes in the country. While the years after a change in the government after mass protests have often led to a retreat of Chinese interactions with their Ukrainian counterparts, there is no evidence of democratic resistance to the changes in the country.

2.2.2 Belarus

As the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 seemed to discard the Ukrainian route for the BRI, Belarus became central for the China-EU rail trade – even if current estimates suggest that only 5% of their trade go through this route (Jakóbowski and Klysinski, 2021). In 2015, Minsk and Beijing signed a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation and issued a joint declaration to continue strengthening their comprehensive strategic partnership during President Xi Jinping's visit to Belarus – the only visit by the highest level of the Chinese authorities in the region. This opened the way to declarations overstating their political and economic cooperation, which culminated in their upgrading into an "all-weather Comprehensive Strategic Partnership" in 2022. Indeed, Belarus has been portrayed as a successful case of cooperation within the BRI, especially the development of the Great Stone Industrial Park, a special economic zone located near Minsk.

In response to the political crisis in Belarus after the re-election of President Alexander Lukashenko in August 2020, China did not offer any significant political, economic or military support. Only one day after the elections, and before the mass protests against electoral fraud, President Xi Jinping congratulated Lukashenko's victory. This gesture reflected China's preference for the status quo while acknowledging "the choice of the Belarusian people" (MFA, 2020). As the protests arose, China's stance evolved into calls to return to stability (MFA, 2020) and framed the protests as "attempts of external forces to sow discord and chaos" (Zhang cited in BelTA, 2020). Ever since, China expressed support for key political events, including Belarus' Constitution reform in 2022, and Lukashenka's re-election in 2025 despite the repressive environment of the country.

However, according to Yeliseyeu and Aleszko-Lessels (2022), economic cooperation in terms of credit and investment has decreased since 2020. Several factors explain this situation, including Chinese wariness of the political conflict between the EU and Minsk, Western sanctions on Belarus following the violent repression of the 2020 protests, a perceived lack of benefits in trading with the EU through Belarus and, more acutely, the Russia-Ukraine war. China has not allocated any new intergovernmental loans to Belarus since December 2019, when Belarus received a loan of $500 million from Beijing. While China condemned the adoption of Western sanctions against Belarus after the Ryanair flight incident, framing them as Western interference, it simultaneously withdrew its loans for potash fertilisers in Belarus, as European sanctions affected the sector. Indeed, the only economic area with some progress is trade, especially after the signature of a trade and service agreement in 2024. Despite some increase in Belarus' exports, the trade balance is still highly unequal, characterised by Belarussian exports of fertilisers and food and imports of advanced goods from China (Pinelyté, 2025). As such, while both authorities try to portray the bilateral relation as solid and well-coordinated, China's reticence to provide any economic support in a moment of crisis highlights the limits of **autocracy support** –that is, merely in the discursive domain–China is willing to provide to other regimes.

In conclusion, we observe discursive practices of autocracy support aiming at giving international legitimacy to the election's result but with no real substantial material support for the Lukashenko regime. As such, the complex ties between Beijing and Minsk do not seem to enhance any guarantee of increased stability or safeguarding of the regime. Instead, China's actions reflect a lack of interest in becoming politically active in the region and its lack of willingness of any further type of support.

2.2.3 Georgia

When Russia invaded Georgia in 2008, China's reaction was restrained. Beijing expressed concern about the situation because of the violation of the country's territorial integrity and has since refrained from recognising Abkhazia and South Ossetia's independence. In the 2008 SCO meeting, Chinese President Hu Jintao blocked Russia's lobbying for the recognition of independence for both territories. This move prevented Moscow's from using the organisation as a geopolitical instrument (Lo, 2008). Nevertheless, China did not provide any significant military, political or economic support to Georgia during that time.

Since the launch of the BRI in 2013, China's relations with Georgia have improved significantly. This shift came after a period of minimal engagement in the previous decade, coinciding with the 2012 elections and what appeared to be the consolidation of democratic transition in Georgia. However, China's political involvement has been limited, and the economic presence has been disappointing for the local authorities despite renewed interest from Beijing to develop a Middle Corridor through Georgia to connect Central Asia and Europe. Despite the signing of a Free Trade Agreement in 2017 which has positioned China as Georgia's 4th largest trading partner, it has mostly benefitted the extractive industry rather than SME's and local products (OEC, 2024; Tsaava and Balectic, 2023). China's investment in the country stands at $370 million, with no new project initiated since 2012 by the only Chinese investor in the country, Hualing Group, which has been active in the real estate and financial sector (AEI, 2023).

China's most visible presence in Georgia has been in the construction sector via state-owned enterprises competing in public bids. However, some Chinese companies operating in Caucasian countries have been associated with corruption, mismanagement and connections with the local political elite in other countries (Arabidze, 2022). Despite not being an exception, the development of infrastructural projects by Chinese actors have excluded local participation and inclusion, solidifying top-down political and economic projects with little accountability from Georgian authorities and resisting democratic processes around development (Rekhaviashvili and Lang, 2024).

According to Dzamukashvili (2020), there is no evidence to suggest that China had an impact on Georgia's democracy quality between 2013 and 2019. However, the signature of the 2023 Strategic Partnership between Tbilisi and Beijing marked a critical juncture for these actors. Three points are worth highlighting. First, the document acknowledges Georgia's recognition of China's modernisation as an alternative – even if it falls short of showing any willingness of Tbilisi to follow. Second, the agreement also expresses a commitment to closer political collaboration and to conducting high-level political consultation among parties (Chinese Embassy in Georgia, 2023). The visit by a Georgian Dream delegation to China in January 2024, which met with the CPC–IDL and Huawei is the first example of that (Light, 2024). Third, despite Georgia's adoption of the foreign agents law in 2024, the fraudulent elections of October 2024, and subsequent protests, Chinese authorities have refrained from addressing these issues and

have simply resorted to mentioning the respect for "the choice of the Georgian people" (MFA, 2024b), thus offering legitimacy and **discursive autocracy support** for an increasing authoritarian Georgian government.

2.2.4 Conclusion

The Colour Revolutions in Ukraine (2003) and Georgia (2004), which were perceived in China as mass mobilisation incidents encouraged by external (Western) interference to promote regime change, shaped Beijing's concerns about their regime security at the beginning of the 2000s. However, as in the Southern Neighbourhood, China has accommodated the different political changes in these countries, showing its unwillingness to get involved in the internal dynamics of a region with little interest for Beijing. China's position in different political developments in the Eastern Neighbourhood has been cautious, opting for wait-and-see approaches, with no evidence of democratic resistance or support for the processes of authoritarianism in periods of democratic backsliding in Ukraine or Georgia. In the case of Belarus, while we observe some discursive practices of autocracy support through the recognition of the elections' fraudulent result (a way of international legitimacy), no further actions have been taken by Chinese actors to safeguard the Lukashenko regime, even in moments of economic distress. As such, it is doubtful if these actions could account for real support – or simply, the application of the Chinese no-intervention principle in action. In sum, China's role in the Eastern Neighbourhood political developments is residual.

3 Transversal Instruments

In the political domain, China's diplomatic tools have played a central role. **Official rhetoric** has been the most frequently used type of support to both authoritarian regimes and democratisation processes. For instance, China expressed its support to democratisation processes in Ukraine (2004), Egypt (2012), and more recently in Libya (2021), as well as to authoritarian processes in Tunisia (2023) or Belarus (2020). While these examples may appear anecdotal, they may point to two significant elements: first, China may support democratisation processes if they are not against its core interests and, second, if it perceives political reforms or transition as more conducive to stability than the current situation. However, these discursive practices are often conducted alone, without any other mechanism to support democratisation processes or the consolidation of authoritarian regimes.

As a UNSC permanent member, China's **veto power** has also been central in shaping the evolution of specific developments that have reached the multilateral level. While this is particularly evident in the Syrian case, where Beijing's veto has been the most significant form of autocracy support in EU's neighbourhoods, China's abstentions in the cases of Libya and Ukraine may show different considerations. These behaviours are influenced by Chinese officials concerns about their international status, its willingness to be seen as a responsible stakeholder, the broader dynamics of geopolitical competition, and their relations with other partners.

Given China's position as the world's leading trading power and second-largest economy, economic tools have also been highlighted. According to Bader (2015), among the different tools employed by China, only countries with **a positive trade balance with Beijing** show a greater likelihood of autocratic survival. However, in the Eastern and Southern Neighbourhoods, none of these countries have a positive trade balance with China. In most of the cases surveyed, China plays an important role as a goods supplier, but it was only a top five trade partner for exports for Israel, Jordan, Libya, Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, and Ukraine (World Bank,

2023). Furthermore, **investment** in these regions is limited – North Africa only represents 4,5% of China's total global investments – while the Eastern Neighbourhood's relevance to Beijing is even lesser (Arco Escriche and Burguete, 2023).

On **official finance** – including development **aid without conditionality** – Belarus and Egypt stand as the two major receptors in the EU's neighbourhoods with $11.7 billion and $14.4 billion respectively between 2000 and 2019 – which is largely explained by China's lending to both countries. They are followed by Israel ($5.5 billion), Ukraine ($3.6 billion), Jordan ($2.2 billion) and Morocco ($2.1 billion). The rest of the countries stand under less than $1 billion for the same period (AidData, 2023). This limited amount in some of the SHAPEDEM-EU country case studies (Lebanon, Palestine, Tunisia, Georgia and Armenia) shows certain limitations of the extended argument on China's challenge to EU democracy promotion practices because of non-conditional aid, as it is relatively small in comparison to Western donors. While this may change in the future, at least it has had a relatively limited impact during the 2010-2021 period.

Yet, according to González-Vicente (2022), the Chinese approach to development cooperation, which is defined by nationalist, business-centric and elite-led logic, limits active participation by civil society in these projects. This contributes to the erosion of the principles of transparency, accountability and, in some cases, domestic policies that are the result of collective bargaining (such as the minimum wage for Chinese workers). As a result, further examination of authoritarian practices (Glasius, 2018) focusing on Chinese business actors' and transnational – authoritarian – elites' behaviour in EU's neighbourhoods, rather than a state-centric analysis as this one, may uncover other areas of authoritarian influence linked to capitalist profit-driven logics that often resemble those of other transnational corporations and businesses.

While minimal, there are examples of **economic coercion**, primarily related to Beijing's perceived threat to its own core interests. In 2021, China threatened to block vaccine shipments to Ukraine during the COVID-19 pandemic unless the government withdrew from a statement calling for a UN investigation into the Uyghurs' in Xinjiang (SCMP, 2021).

China is becoming a major player in **arms sales**. Algeria has long been one of Beijing's top-4 biggest customers for arms transfers. Moreover, between 2010 and 2021, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Syria and Belarus also obtained Chinese military supplies (SIPRI, 2023). Some of these arms found their way into various regional conflicts, including the one in Libya. China has also participated in **peacekeeping operations**, with Chinese peacekeepers present in Lebanon, Western Sahara and Jerusalem (Gowan, 2020).

Besides the cases covered in this report, various Chinese actors can use a range of tools to influence the internal political processes of these countries, especially for **democracy resistance**. Indeed, while this report has generally framed China as a unitary actor, there are multiple Chinese actors – including the CPC, SOEs and private companies with different agendas. Especially, the **diffusion of surveillance technologies** supplied by Chinese tech companies, while being demand-driven instead that Beijing's plot to promote "techno-authoritarianism" (Triolo and Greene, 2020), carries the risk of facilitating repression and monitoring in the region if used by authoritarian governments. These tools may encourage the adoption of authoritarian and illiberal practices by different state and non-state actors in both authoritarian and democratic countries.

4 Conclusions

Assessing China's contribution to democratisation and authoritarianisation processes in the EU's neighbourhood shows a complex picture which may not fully align with categories of autocracy promotion or even support or authoritarian collaboration. Even if Beijing has dramatically expanded its presence in the last two decades, it is a growing important partner albeit far from challenging the economic, political and security dominance of Western powers in EU's neighbourhoods. China generally settles for a wait-and-see approach, it adapts its response on a case-by-case basis depending on the countries and interests. These considerations include commercial and economic interests, international status, geopolitical dynamics and the interests of other countries. As such, we argue that despite the recent characterisation of China as a promoter of autocracy, there is no real commitment from Beijing to promote this type of political system and, especially, not a Leninist one-party state. As such, Beijing is not reshaping other governments in these two regions in its own image.

Furthermore, we have not observed a systematic approach or preference by China to work with or support autocratic regimes. While China expressed rhetorical support for authoritarian regimes, other types of mechanisms for support – such as military interventions or economic aid – seem off the table. For instance, in the cases of Belarus and Syria, where we have found some practices of autocracy support, it was other variables such as economic interests, status or other foreign relations, that influenced China's decisions. On the contrary, when the fall of the incumbent was linked to internal and domestic vulnerabilities, China merely defended the "people's choice", demonstrating pragmatism rather than support in times of crisis. This is evident even with apparently strategic partners such as Mohammed Morsi in Egypt, Abdelaziz Bouteflika in Algeria or Oman al-Bashar in Sudan. In addition, China's behaviour has shown similarities during periods of democratic transition and periods of growing authoritarianism in different countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, Ukraine, and Georgia, showing a willingness to accommodate rather than to influence political internal changes in the region.

This shows China's willingness to work with authoritarian regimes and democratic (transitional) regimes as far as stability, predictability in their relations and economic, political, or geopolitical benefits are part of the equation. This posture allows Beijing to limit the negative impact of political changes on its economic and political interests in these countries. It also ensures a long-term relationship after refraining from taking sides between potential future leaders or in conflict, it prevents alignment with the strategic goals of regional powers in a specific country or conflict, presents China as a responsible stakeholder, and allows criticism of Western actions in the fields of democracy promotion and human rights.

Finally, although China may not have contributed in a decisive way to autocratic survival or democratisation processes in the EU's Neighbourhood –except for in Syria – it still poses challenges to global democratisation efforts. China has opposed democracy in cases that are vital to its core interests, such as Hong Kong, and by contesting political liberal values and supporting a more diverse order. Thus, Beijing may help legitimise the coexistence of authoritarian with democratic regimes in the international order – which reinforces the processes of accommodation of authoritarian countries by Western countries in the Southern Neighbourhood, for instance. In parallel, it has been active in showing the weaknesses, double standards and limits of the EU's actions through communication campaigns that may reduce the attractiveness of such practices to certain audiences. More specifically, China acts as an example of the success of development under authoritarianism, which may appeal to other

countries, and advocates against specific political liberal values by shaping discourses and norms based on diversity, a strict interpretation of sovereignty, and non-interference.

Finally, it is also important to acknowledge that there are also limits to China's influence, including (1) its relatively smaller role compared to the EU, the United States, Russia or Gulf actors in both regions; (2) the challenges related to the replicability (and attractiveness) of the China Model; (3) the current external and domestic challenges for China to allocate significant resources abroad; and (4) the agency of the local authorities in these countries. Thus, China's primary challenge for democratisation efforts may lie in its potential to diffuse authoritarian practices and serve as a model for authoritarian learning –at least, for now.

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