What Price Democracy?
How the West Could Learn From East Asia
By Timo Kivimäki

It is taken as orthodoxy in much of the democratic West that intrusive efforts to promote democracy, up to and including armed intervention of the kind seen recently in NATO’s support of the Libyan uprising, are means justified by the ends — namely to support democratic governance. But Timo Kivimäki argues that the benefits of this approach are meager while the costs are too high in terms of human lives and the concept of international law. East Asia’s tendency to avoid infringing national sovereignty, he says, is ultimately smarter and has underpinned peace in this region.

Clearly East Asia and the West have very different ideas regarding international support for democracy. Which approach is the correct one? Should East Asia support democracy more intrusively, or should the West become less aggressive? This to a great extent depends on whether or not aggressive support for democracy is effective and how much it costs in terms of human life. These are major questions, but I will try to answer them with the help of some quantitative tools that help us to see the general tendencies and the “big picture.”

DOES INTERVENTION WORK?
According to the calculations of Rudolph Rummel, a well-known American expert on genocide, dictatorial governments have killed many more of their citizens than all wars put together (Rummel 1997). Even though the latest calculations suggest this is no longer the case (Kreutz 2006), it is clear that autocratic systems are a serious threat to human security. Democracy also has been helpful in the prevention of inter-state and intra-state conflicts. In East Asia after World War II, autocracies had on average 20 times more conflict-related fatalities than democracies (Kivimäki 2011). Thus, autocracy is a threat to stability and human security, certainly in East Asia. But can dictatorial regimes be effectively reversed by aggressive international action?

To identify the most dramatic instances of democratization in world history, it is possible to consult the Polity Database (Eckstein 1975; available at www.systemicpeace.org/polity/polity4.htm) and to look for the greatest changes in the values of indicators of democracy. Democracy was forcibly introduced in Japan and West Germany after World War II. In both countries this came in the aftermath of war, followed by a lengthy occupation of the country and the application of massive resources to develop democratic institutions. In the cases of Argentina (1983) and Greece (1926), military dictators were defeated domestically after suffering humiliating defeats in external conflicts. In eastern Europe at the end of the Cold War, democratization was aided not by defeating the dictators, but by pressuring toward eventual collapse an external power, the Soviet Union, that had forced one-party regimes on these countries. A similar but
Democracy without responsiveness to local wishes is by definition not democratic. Furthermore, any concept of democracy that does not have local ownership tends to lack legitimacy. This is why the elimination of the Soviet Union’s intrusive hand contributed so greatly to democratization in Eastern Europe, not the promotion of the West’s own concept of democracy.

HEAVY HAND

The Latin American experience shows that secret, intrusive operations to promote supposed democracy can be hijacked by motives that are less than altruistic. When the fight for the free world enters the real world, strategic interests and self-centered economic considerations often corrupt it. In Latin America, US policies repeatedly supported anti-communist governments in the name of democracy, regardless of their lack of democratic credentials. The Draper Committee Report (1959) to President Dwight D. Eisenhower had concluded that doing so was a good idea, and as a result, in the 1960s the United States was often caught in secret operations against functioning democracies. In the 1980s and 1990s. In those cases, the United States, which had vigorously supported several anti-communist dictatorships, changed its policy and found that communism could be more efficiently fought through alliances with democratic rulers rather than right-wing dictators. Only in Haiti (1994) and Panama (1989) was democratization aided by direct intervention against autocratic rulers that the United States had previously supported. There are other examples of international support helping to overthrow dictators, but they have not resulted in sustainable change in the countries involved.

We cannot, therefore, conclude that aggressive support for democracy has been entirely ineffective because there are successful examples. However, two of these cases (Japan and West Germany) were exceedingly expensive in terms of human lives, while the cases of Argentina and Greece were not really instances of intentional support for democracy. In both Argentina and Greece, the external conflict was unrelated to the pursuit of democracy. The examples of Latin America and Eastern Europe, at the same time, reveal two major problems with intrusive democratization.

In Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union sustained its autocratic rule for decades under the guise of a “people’s democracy,” and only after its collapse could genuine democracy be pursued. Ironically, Eastern Europe’s communist “democracy” did create a relatively impressive record of gender equality and income distribution, while at the same time being repressive, authoritarian and non-participatory. The Soviet Union was eager to impose its own concept of communist rule, while strategic and self-centered economic interests blended into the ideological mix, making Soviet rule even more sinister. The main problem with the Soviet system in Eastern Europe was that it was imposed from the outside and did not consider local concepts of governance. The US and its allies seem to have the same problem in Iraq. An extensive opinion poll conducted for the US Department of Defense (Simpson 2006; see also ICRRS 2006) showed a lack of appreciation among Iraqis for international democratization efforts, suggesting that the West is facing local resistance to an external concept of governance. Democracy without responsiveness to local wishes is by definition not democratic. Furthermore, any concept of democracy that does not have local ownership tends to lack legitimacy. This is why the elimination of the Soviet Union’s intrusive hand contributed so greatly to democratization in Eastern Europe, not the promotion of the West’s own concept of democracy.

In the context of the past decade’s US war on terror and conflicts with Islamist organizations, support for democracy can be tricky. In 1991, when multi-party elections looked set to hand power democratically to an Islamist party in Algeria, France and the US supported the suspension of the polls by the sitting government; the result was civil war. Western and Israeli opposition to Hamas’s electoral victory in the Gaza Strip is another example of how democracy gets entangled with security interests. In 2002, US President George W. Bush declared Iran a member of an “axis of evil” and one of the regimes the United States wanted to challenge, along with North Korea and Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. However, according to even American polity data (Polity IV dataset, the most used) Iran was, at the time, the Middle East’s most democratic Muslim country. Another reason why aggressive international promotion of democracy does not work is related to local governance capacity. In the summer of 1963, President John F. Kennedy and his advisers, John Kenneth Galbraith, Averell Harriman and Roger Hilsman, planned US support for the coup against Vietnam’s President Ngo Dinh Diem, but this was not just a decision to maximize US interests or to optimize the fight against communism. Instead, as one insider (Winters 1988) writes in an excellent account of this decision-making process, moral considerations and the wellbeing of the South Vietnamese were important elements in the decision. However, from the viewpoint of far-distant Washington, it was not easy to see the available alternatives to Diem, and whether a coup would be sufficient to improve governance in South Vietnam. As a result of the coup, South Vietnam was pushed further into inefficient, undemocratic military rule that was hardly worth defending against communism. External, intrusive support for democracy, therefore, risks alienating the local population and replicating the poor governance and heavy-handed foreign intervention associated with colonialism — which was also touted as something that was good for the colonized country. As a result, it seems that...
even imperfect local governance (but not genocidal tyranny) is a better alternative for citizens than a system imposed from outside.

While one might think that oil interests or geopolitical and strategic interests constitute only a small distraction from consistent support for democracy, a systematic study of the data on the relationship of various regimes with the US reveals that this is not the case. In the silence surrounding special and covert operations, the exception—that is, support for autocracy—has become the rule, even in the Middle East where the United States has recently justified its military support for democratic dissidents by referring to its record of supporting democracy. There it has helped regimes that on average allow only slightly more participation in their polities than regimes the United States has opposed. But this participation has been restricted, most likely to limit popular preferences that do not suit American oil and strategic interests, or its war on terror. Furthermore, neutral regimes have systematically been more democratic than the regimes the United States has supported. But the US record in opposing autocracy is even more dismal. On average, a US-supported country in the Muslim Middle East has been more authoritarian towards its citizens than countries the United States has opposed (see Table 1). This has not changed much over the years, while the administration of President George W. Bush saw an increase in US support for authoritarianism (Kivimäki, forthcoming).

If one looks at the most autocratic Muslim countries the US has opposed in an intrusive manner, one can see that many of the regimes the US has supported have been more autocratic. The two most oppressive regimes the US has opposed have been Saddam Hussein’s Iraq and socialist, pro-Soviet Algeria in the mid-1960s. However, one will find 176 “country-years” of US-support for regimes that were more autocratic than these two. Against this record, it is difficult to justify intrusive measures that cost lives and run counter to international law on questions of sovereignty and non-interference. The same is true for East Asian nations, which since the 1970s have become more adroit about opposing interference in their domestic affairs. Before adopting a strong stand in favor of respect for sovereignty, China and the Soviet Union often offered support to insurgent movements that were fighting capitalist regimes, regardless of their democratic credentials. At the same time, the measures taken by the US to counter such support were often subservive or covert. The war in South Vietnam is, of course, the most extreme example of this, with several US-backed coups after mid-1963 producing little or nothing for the overall objective of democracy. Against this record it seems that the intrusive activities of the West, witnessed by military support for rebels in Libya, might not be easy to justify. East Asian restraint against military interference in domestic power struggles might win out against Western democratic activism.

### ADDING UP THE COSTS

The fact that aggressive international intervention does not do the trick is one argument in favor of a more respectful and circumspect East Asian approach. The other is that aggressive violations of the principle of non-interference can be costly and have unintended negative consequences.

One cost of operations such as the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and NATO’s 2011 military air campaign in Libya is the diminished prestige of the United Nations and the concept of international law. There has been a lot of debate over whether UN Security Council Resolution 1441—which said Iraq had “a final opportunity to comply with its disarmament obligations”—gave a legal mandate to the “coalition of the willing” to invade the country. Despite its unanimous passage, three of the Security Council’s veto powers, Russia, China and France, had deep misgivings about the invasion. It is politically difficult to see how the spirit of the Security Council’s stipulation of veto power to its permanent members can be reconciled with military operations that are conducted by UN member states in the face of such opposition. Similarly, a mandate in Libya that gave the international community the right to protect civilians was used to facilitate regime change. Again, the opposition of China and Russia (but not France this time) suggests that the mandate did not really come from the Security Council. When democracy is being supported in a way that undermines the authority of the UN and international law, the international order pays a price.

Closely related to the authority of the UN and respect for international law, is the cost borne by international norms of democracy. If global organizations with at least some democratic mechanisms, albeit imperfect, can be bullied on the basis of sheer power, one could argue that the promotion of democracy through military means contradicts the ultimate aim of democracy.

A third cost is to the nuclear non-proliferation regime. One can argue that attacks against non-nuclear powers encourage anti-Western autocrats to acquire a nuclear deterrence. If sovereignty is no longer respected in the world order, deterrence based on nuclear destruction could be perceived as an attractive alternative. Whether this logic holds and aggressive democracy-promotion really increases the risk of nuclear proliferation remains to be seen. Certainly, North Korea’s acquisition of nuclear weapons can be seen as a hedge against outside efforts to promote regime change.

Fourthly, it can be suggested that illegal wars caused by Western eagerness to promote democracy have had costs for Western countries themselves. In addition to physical casualties, these wars have divided and brutalized societies and public administrations. Public acceptance of “collateral damage” of various kinds, for example, has become sadly commonplace. Also, placing such a great emphasis on security priorities has contributed to compromises in the democratic checks and balances of Western countries. Western intelligence and military services have become involved in questionable interrogation techniques, torture and limitations on civil rights and media freedom. While in some democratic countries misdeeds are being investigated, in others legal proceedings have been mounted against people who have leaked information about their government’s illegal activities. In general, democracy has taken a step backwards in societies coercively exporting democracy.

Of course we know that military interventions cost lives. For Libya, it is too early to tell exactly how many people died as a result of the war. Celebrations of victory, moreover, do not guarantee that the fighting is over, as we saw in Iraq. We already know that in Iraq the war’s body count was extensive. If we take the low estimates and high estimates of battle death datasets from Uppsala University (Harbom, Melander & Wallensten 2008) and the Peace Research Institute Oslo (version 3.0, Lacina and Gleditsch, 2005), we can calculate that the Iraq war since it began on March 20, 2003, has contributed between 20 percent and 41 percent of battle deaths worldwide since then. For a population of less than 0.5 percent of the world total, this share of global conflict fatalities has been a considerable sacrifice.

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**Table 1: Democracy, Authoritarianism and US Support in the Middle East, 1946–2010**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>US stance</th>
<th>Average level of democracy</th>
<th>Average level of autocracy</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Opposes</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>6.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>1.29</td>
<td>6.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supports</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>6.94</td>
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Note: Muslim Middle East here means the following countries: Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey, UAE and Yemen.
CONCLUSIONS

It is clear that the coercive export of democracy has not been very successful. The approach does not respect the sovereignty of other states and introduces opportunities for legitimizing the self-centered economic and strategic interests in ways that fail to create local ownership. Furthermore, externally imposed changes in governance have not always been well informed, because mastery of local conditions is key to understanding what solutions are needed. As a result, external support for democracy has not ended up having a net benefit for democracy itself, even if we measure it by Western standards. In the case of Libya, whether support for rebel fighters will lead to democracy, anarchy, civil war or the rise of another dictator is not known yet. While spontaneous processes of democratization in the Arab region are bearing fruit, the record for international intervention is not impressive. The influence of the liberation of Libya on the global fight against terror is another question that remains open.

Furthermore, because there are many alternative concepts of democracy, the intrusive promotion of the concept has often provoked and escalated disputes, conflicts and wars. According to some interventions such as the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq have contributed to a decline in the authority of the UN, the rule of international law and even the international concept of democracy itself. It may also have contributed to the desire on the part of some states to acquire nuclear weapons.

However, what cannot be disputed is that aggressive support for various concepts of democracy has contributed to conflict-related fatalities while the humble, sovereignty-respecting approach of East Asia since the 1970s has led to the great pacification of the region. It seems that the East Asian concept that allows democracies and authoritarian states to coexist is superior to the approach taken by various “coalitions of the willing.” In any case, East Asian non-intervention has clearly been successful in this region, but it would be alien to the nature of Asian debate to insist that the East Asian Way should become a global formula. Perhaps, however, Western countries are paying attention and may learn from the East.

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