

**DIGITAL AUTHORITARIANISM AND REGIME TYPE: MEASURING THE IMPACT
OF CHINESE SURVEILLANCE TECHNOLOGIES ON TYPES OF US ALLIANCES**

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Abstract

Digital authoritarianism—the use of digital tools to repress and influence domestic and foreign populations—has become a fixture of the authoritarian playbook. China’s extensive use of digital technologies to surveil its citizens and quell dissent has received significant attention from national security practitioners. Countries across the world, including US allies, are incorporating aspects of China’s digital authoritarianism by importing Chinese surveillance technologies. This development raises important questions about their postures towards China, the overall status of their relations with the United States, and whether regime type is predictive of alliance strength. The import of these technologies could threaten US alliances if their implementation is followed by deeper collaboration with China. The incorporation of these technologies could signify a shift away from Washington and towards Beijing.

This study reviews the central arguments regarding alliances before reviewing the literature on digital authoritarianism. The scholarship emphasizes China’s utilization of digital tools, its potential links to economic development, and China’s spread of authoritarianism. This study seeks to analyze these two concepts by measuring the effect that Chinese surveillance technologies within US-aligned countries have on US alliances with democratic and authoritarian states. The study includes four case studies—France, Germany, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia—to address this topic. These countries are US allies who have imported Chinese surveillance tools. Following the implementation of these technologies, this paper analyzes economic indicators, security cooperation, and public opinion polls to evaluate changes in cooperation with and perception of China and the United States over time and whether these countries are merely imitating China or shifting towards China.

The data reveals that US alliances with its democratic allies—France and Germany—are not threatened by the presence of Chinese surveillance technologies, and that their business dealing with Chinese firms do not signify a shift away from Washington. However, the evidence does demonstrate that the US’ authoritarian partners—Egypt and Saudi Arabia—may be willing to explore strengthening their ties to China. To close, the study reiterates the minimal threat to US alliances but also warns against the broader danger that digital authoritarianism presents to democracy and civil liberties.

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Introduction

In recent years, the purported rise of authoritarianism and stumble of democracy have captured the focus of foreign policy and national security practitioners.¹ Trends demonstrating an increase in human rights violations and the weakening of democratic values suggest that democracy around the world is in decline.² A 2021 CSIS report provides a sobering assessment, arguing that “the rise of authoritarianism, coupled with the erosion of democracy, threatens global stability, the United States’ economic and security alliances, and respect for human dignity.”³

The proliferation of emerging technologies in the ever-evolving technological landscape has added a new wrinkle to this dynamic. Authoritarian nations all over the world are leveraging their capabilities in cyberspace to preserve their power at home and spread their influence abroad. This phenomenon, known as digital authoritarianism, cannot be fully understood without accounting for surveillance. Widespread implementation of CCTV cameras and ‘smart’ programs that are supposedly intended to make cities more efficient are also used to collect data on citizens.

China is among the biggest culprits of digital authoritarianism and purveyors of surveillance technologies. The country’s extensive domestic surveillance is well documented and of great concern to human rights advocates. Therefore, China’s export of its digital authoritarian model to other countries is noteworthy. From Latin America to the Middle East, aspects of the Chinese model have been implemented through partnerships with Chinese firms. Some of these countries are allies of the United States, raising questions not only about China’s growing

¹ J Alexander Thier et al., “Reversing the Tide,” Reversing the Tide | Center for Strategic and International Studies, April 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/reversing-tide>.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

influence, but also about the status of US alliances with countries that cooperate with China to augment their surveillance capabilities.

This project will specifically focus on the relationship between the import of surveillance technologies and alliances. The research question is as follows: does the import of Chinese digital tools by countries aligned with the United States signify a shift away from Washington and towards Beijing? Second, does the import of Chinese technologies merely signify an imitation of China or a shift towards China, and does this vary based on regime type? These two questions are relevant to broader debates about the rising tide of authoritarianism and retreat of democracy. The weakening of US alliances with countries that import Chinese surveillance technologies would suggest that core US interests were under assault. In the context of evaluating and formulating current and future foreign policy, the answers to these questions matter a great deal.

This research question will be analyzed through a qualitative, comparative case study analysis. The strength of US alliances with four countries—two democratic and two authoritarian—that have imported Chinese surveillance tools will be assessed to understand the variables in the research question. Juxtaposing these four cases using data from contemporary sources will illuminate trends across the cases that provide relevant insights into the research question. Before stating the hypotheses, the literature review will summarize the overarching themes pertaining to this topic, identify a gap in the scholarship, and situate this research question within the preexisting discourse.

Literature Review

Alliance formation and digital authoritarianism will be the main focus of this literature review. This section will begin by recounting the most noteworthy elements of the literature on alliances.

Alliances – Balance of Power

Balance of power theory is a dominant theme in the alliance literature. Balancing describes the creation of alliances among weaker states to counter a powerful, threatening country.⁴ States choose to balance if they believe that their security and survival is in jeopardy due to a burgeoning hegemon.⁵ Countries may also balance to increase their own power and influence within that new alliance, a privilege they would not have if they had bandwagoned.⁶ Bandwagoning occurs when states align with the threatening state in an effort to evade conflict with that particular country.⁷ Countries may align with the threatening power in order to appease the hegemon or to benefit from its “spoils of victory.”⁸ Numerous conditions, including the source of the threat, geographic proximity to the threat, and intentions and capabilities of the involved actors constitute the calculus that states use to determine whether to balance or bandwagon, and who to balance or bandwagon with.⁹

Alliances – Similar Characteristics

Another predominant question in the literature asks whether states are more likely to create alliances with countries that have similar characteristics.¹⁰ To an extent, the tenets of

⁴ Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 2007), p. 17

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., p. 21

⁹ Ibid., pp. 21-26

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 4

Liberalism apply to this discussion. The Democratic Peace Theory posits that democracies will rarely engage in war with one another. Within democracies, Bruce Russett explains that “the culture, perceptions, and practices that permit compromise and the peaceful resolution of conflicts without the threat of violence within countries come to apply across national boundaries toward other democratic countries.”¹¹ This theory claims that democracies simultaneously have greater institutional obstacles to wage war and have shared democratic norms that motivate leaders to pursue non-violent means to resolve their differences.¹²

Democratic Peace Theory offers limited utility to this discussion; it is concerned with war rather than alliances, and also does not adequately account for non-democracies. Nevertheless, its underlying assumptions apply to the debate about relations between like-minded countries. Parallels can be drawn between Democratic Peace Theory and the “institutional regime type approach,” a framework that closely mirrors the democratic peace model by positing that “the same characteristics that make democracies less likely to fight one another might be expected to make them more likely to ally with one another.”¹³

The role of institutions is critical to Liberalism. The post-World War II liberal international order, marked by US hegemony, underscored how institutions relate to alliances. By acting as a “reluctant hegemon,” the United States displayed its desire not to dominate, but rather to collaborate with its allies to create an agreeable world order.¹⁴ In addition to operating as a reluctant hegemon, the United States also practiced “open hegemony,” a flexible and

¹¹ Bruce Russett, *Grasping the Democratic Peace: Principles for a Post-Cold War World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 31

¹² *Ibid.*, p.4

¹³ Shale Horowitz and Michael Tyburski, “When Are Similar Regimes More Likely to Form Alliances? Institutions and Ideologies in the Post-Communist World,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 32, no. 2 (April 8, 2015): p. 177

¹⁴ G. John Ikenberry, “Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Persistence of American Postwar Order,” *International Security* 23, no. 3 (1998): p. 63

“decentralized” political system that created space for other countries to express their own opinions regarding the new world order.¹⁵ Finally, the “binding institutions” of the post-war order, characterized by “long-term economic, political, and security commitments that were difficult to retract,” reflected an effort to solidify alliances and uphold these shared commitments.¹⁶ The importance of institutions is apparent in alliances, which are not only created to counter external threats, but are also formed as pacts of restraint, or “mechanisms for states to manage and restrain their partners within the alliance.”¹⁷

Another model, the “ideological solidarity” framework, can apply to both democracies and non-democracies.¹⁸ Countries may align with states that are ideologically similar in an effort to preserve their mutually shared “political principles.”¹⁹ In some cases common ideologies may also diminish suspicion between countries, thereby creating an avenue for a partnership. In short, this model “emphasizes the combination of political institutions with characteristic ideological values and policy objectives.”²⁰

Nevertheless, there is robust scholarly opposition to the notion that like-minded states are more likely to align with one another. Regimes that derive their authority and ideology from a single ruler, for example, would have to compromise on their position when aligning with a similar-minded state. Stephen Walt explains that “all regimes save the one that emerges on the top will be pressed to accept the authoritative guidance of the leading power, even if that power is a foreign power.”²¹ The myriad historical and contemporary examples of democracies

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 65

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 67

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 68

¹⁸ Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, p. 34

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Shale Horowitz and Michael Tyburski, “When Are Similar Regimes More Likely to Form Alliances? Institutions and Ideologies in the Post-Communist World,” p. 178

²¹ Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, p. 36

maintaining alliances with non-democracies further undermine the assertion that like-minded regimes are more likely to align with one another.

Alliances – Balancing Against Threats

Other seminal works, like Walt’s *Origins of Alliances*, critique the balance of power framework and claims that like-minded regimes are more likely to form alliances. This school of thought also contradicts theories that foreign aid and political penetration forge alliances.²² Walt’s framework, referred to here as “balance against threats,” is a more nuanced outlook that incorporates domestic factors like intentions and perceptions. Proponents of this view argue that the identity and intentions of the global power in question matter; if the country is powerful but not threatening, the country will be more likely to maintain alliances and prevent other states from bandwagoning against it.²³ The balancing against threats perspective also finds that ideology is *not* a strong predictor of alliance formation, undercutting assertions that similar regime types are more likely to enter into partnerships.²⁴ Next, the following paragraphs will review the literature on digital authoritarianism and related concepts.

China - Making Sense of Beijing’s Intentions

Scholars and pundits are grappling with the rise of China and questioning whether Beijing is a partner, a competitor, or an adversary. China’s authoritarian nature is partly responsible for simplified perceptions that Beijing and Washington are on a collision course to decide whether the future world order will be marked by democracy or authoritarianism. One

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., p. 6

²⁴ Ibid., p. 5

example of this comes from a 2018 Global Public Policy Institute study which claimed that Chinese political influence in Europe represents a grave threat to liberal democracy.²⁵

Some allies of the United States have increased their ties to Beijing through business dealings with Chinese firms. These countries are importing aspects of China's digital authoritarianism, particularly surveillance technologies. The implications of this require more research. How does this development affect US alliances with these countries, and does the effect vary based on regime type? Does the import of Chinese surveillance tools by countries aligned with the United States signify a shift away from Washington and towards Beijing? Are these transactions accompanied by policy changes that threaten relations with the United States?

China's export of surveillance technologies is not necessarily threatening to the United States.²⁶ Still, policy shifts that mimic China or reflect closer collaboration with China could have detrimental effects on US alliances. Developing a clearer understanding of the impact Chinese technologies within US-aligned countries have on US alliances can assist policy makers in gauging the risks that these partnerships may be subjected to due to the implementation of these surveillance tools.

Discussions about digital authoritarianism often intersect with two ideas: China's purported desire to spread authoritarianism and its economic ambitions. Therefore, this part of the review will begin by defining authoritarianism and explaining its potential link to economic growth, the latter of which is especially relevant to China's Belt and Road (BRI) and Digital Silk Road Initiatives (DSR). Digital authoritarianism is not necessarily connected to economic

²⁵ Mareike Ohlberg et al., "Authoritarian Advance: Responding to China's Growing Political Influence in Europe," *Merics*, February 2, 2018, <https://merics.org/en/report/authoritarian-advance-responding-chinas-growing-political-influence-europe>, p. 1

²⁶ "The New Big Brother - China and Digital Authoritarianism," United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, July 21, 2020, <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/2020%20SFRC%20Minority%20Staff%20Report%20-%20The%20New%20Big%20Brother%20-%20China%20and%20Digital%20Authoritarianism.pdf>, p. 30

growth, but the potential connection must be included since this relationship is emphasized in the scholarship. This progression will naturally pivot to a discussion of digital authoritarianism, which itself is linked to BRI and DSR. Taken together, this section will review the overarching themes covered in the literature—digital authoritarianism’s potential links to economic growth and the objectives of BRI and DSR—but will also highlight a substantial gap in the scholarship, namely the impact that the spread of surveillance technologies to US aligned countries has on US democratic and authoritarian alliances. The literature’s focus on these variables is understudied and largely missing. This paper seeks to add to the scholarship by studying digital authoritarianism not only in this context, but also in the broader context of the previous discussion about alliance formation across regime type.

Authoritarianism

Digital authoritarianism is the extension of authoritarianism into the cyber realm. In authoritarian countries, political power is consolidated by a single ruler or party regardless of the will of the electorate.²⁷ Whether through digital or physical means, authoritarian leaders aim to quell dissent and perpetuate their rule. Indicators of authoritarianism include a weak civil society, a historical legacy that legitimizes rule, international support in the form of military assistance or foreign direct investment, the promotion of narratives about grave threats, and the institutionalization of the coercive apparatus and executive authority.²⁸

²⁷ Nicholas D. Wright, “Artificial Intelligence and Domestic Political Regimes: Digital Authoritarian, Digital Hybrid, and Digital Democracy,” in *Artificial Intelligence, China, Russia, and the Global Order: Technological, Political, Global, and Creative Perspectives* (Maxwell Air Force Base, AL: Air University Press, 2019), p. 22

²⁸ Phyllis Dininio, “Authoritarian Literature Review,” Management Systems International (USAID, June 2010), <https://msiworldwide.com/sites/default/files/additional-resources/2018-12/Authoritarian%20Literature%20Review%202010.pdf>, pp. 9-11

Since the literature often links digital authoritarianism with economic growth, this section will focus on ‘developmental authoritarianism.’ This phrase refers to the idea that authoritarian states are better equipped to spark economic development than democracies are. Proponents of this view argue that certain aspects of democracies slow progress; autocrats, often unencumbered by a separation of powers or the threat of free and fair elections, have more latitude to unilaterally make decisions and quickly implement an agenda.²⁹

It is undoubtedly true that authoritarian leaders face fewer obstacles to implement their policies. Nevertheless, there is not a consensus either way regarding the relationship between regime type and the speed of economic development.³⁰ In fact, Przeworski and Limongi’s 1993 study on this very issue produced inconclusive results. After studying eighteen different cases, the authors concluded that they could not definitively map the relationship between regime type and economic growth.³¹ More current studies similarly reach ambiguous conclusions about the relationship between regime type and economic growth and instead posit that additional factors, including the extent of “public deliberation”³² and the quality of state institutions,³³ are superior indicators to predict economic development regardless of regime type.

Belt and Road and Digital Silk Road Initiatives

²⁹ Lawrence Sáez and Julia Gallagher, “Authoritarianism and Development in the Third World,” *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* 15, no. 2 (2009): p. 87

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 92

³¹ Adam Przeworski and Fernando Limongi, “Political Regimes and Economic Growth,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 7, no. 3 (1993): p. 64

³² Siddharth Chandra and Nita Rudra, “Reassessing the Links between Regime Type and Economic Performance: Why Some Authoritarian Regimes Show Stable Growth and Others Do Not,” *British Journal of Political Science* 45, no. 2 (2013): p. 253

³³ Kheang Un, “Regime Types and Economic Development - CD-Center,” Cambodia Development Center, January 19, 2018, https://cd-center.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/P124_20180119_IS1_EN.pdf, p. 1

BRI fundamentally aims to augment Beijing's influence by bolstering economic growth and fostering global linkages to create a more connected world.³⁴ Xi Jinping's vision consists of five overarching priorities: "policy coordination, infrastructure connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and connecting people."³⁵ Infrastructure investment is perhaps the linchpin of the broader initiative. Improving infrastructure across the world is a critical step in engendering economic development and resolving the gap between infrastructure needs and the institutions that are needed to fund them.³⁶

Overall, China's efforts to increase connectivity around the world have been successful. Currently, 140 nations are participating in BRI: 40 from Sub-Saharan Africa, 34 from Europe and Central Asia, 24 from East Asia and the Pacific, 17 from the Middle East and North Africa, 19 from Latin America and the Caribbean, and 6 from South East Asia.³⁷ China's willingness to do business and finance significant infrastructure projects has drawn many BRI countries to China.³⁸ Beijing's influx of capital into its financial institutions has enabled the banks to offer low borrowing costs, allowing the country's state owned enterprises to present more attractive offers for projects compared to foreign companies who have less financial leverage.³⁹

DSR, BRI's digital component, furthers China's interests by providing aid in the form of political support and improving "telecommunications networks, artificial intelligence capabilities, cloud computing, e-commerce and mobile payment systems, surveillance

³⁴ "How Will the Belt and Road Initiative Advance China's Interests?," ChinaPower Project, August 26, 2020, <https://chinapower.csis.org/china-belt-and-road-initiative/>.

³⁵ "Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)," European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), accessed September 18, 2021, <https://www.ebrd.com/what-we-do/belt-and-road/overview.html>.

³⁶ Jennifer Hillman and David Sacks, "Introduction | China's Belt and Road: Implications for the United States," Council on Foreign Relations (Council on Foreign Relations, March 2021), <https://www.cfr.org/report/chinas-belt-and-road-implications-for-the-united-states/introduction>.

³⁷ Christoph Nedopil, "Countries of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)," Green Belt and Road Initiative Center, 2021, <https://green-bri.org/countries-of-the-belt-and-road-initiative-bri/>.

³⁸ "How Will the Belt and Road Initiative Advance China's Interests?," ChinaPower Project, August 26, 2020

³⁹ Ibid.

technology, smart cities, and other high-tech areas.”⁴⁰ It is estimated that one-third of BRI countries are also participating in DSR.⁴¹ China has also implemented initiatives to increase cooperation between Chinese and non-Chinese scientists and engineers in an effort to develop and refine emerging technologies pertaining to smart cities, AI, and robotics.⁴²

Unsurprisingly, these developments have made some democracies uneasy. Concerns over the implementation of 5G networks and the adoption of Chinese surveillance tools and cybersecurity laws within DSR countries are commonplace.⁴³ The effects of this can have both local and global ramifications. At home, countries can increase surveillance and exercise greater control over the internet. In a global sense, this shift threatens to undermine internet freedoms and lessen commitments to preserve an open internet.⁴⁴

Digital Authoritarianism

The internet age has had a profound impact on governing systems. One area of initial debate centered around the effect the internet would have on democracy. The ‘multi-stakeholder governance model’ reflected the sentiment that the internet would benefit democracy. This model describes a free and open internet in which the state plays an active role in protecting user data and privacy.⁴⁵

Despite its positive aspects, the internet is often used for nefarious purposes and can embolden authoritarian regimes. Disinformation campaigns, cyberattacks, and digital

⁴⁰ Joshua Kurlantzick and James West, “China's Digital Aid: The Risks and Rewards,” Council on Foreign Relations (Council on Foreign Relations), accessed September 21, 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/china-digital-silk-road/>.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ “USENIX Enigma 2019 - Digital Authoritarianism, Data Protection, and the Battle,” YouTube (YouTube, February 21, 2019), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j1j1CGzAsVk>.

surveillance are ubiquitous. Digital authoritarianism refers to the repression and surveillance of domestic and foreign populations through technological and cyber means. A 2020 CSIS report put it best by defining digital authoritarianism as “the use of the Internet and related digital technologies by leaders with authoritarian tendencies to decrease trust in public institutions, increase social and political control, and/or undermine civil liberties.”⁴⁶

Digital authoritarianism consists of a range of activities, including surveillance, cyberattacks, espionage, censorship, and social manipulation.⁴⁷ These tactics are not only employed within authoritarian countries, as autocratic nations are also exporting these techniques and technologies to states all over the world.⁴⁸ Some democratic countries are also interested in aspects of digital authoritarianism, some of which have been adopted by political parties or private companies.⁴⁹

To date, democracies have struggled to mitigate the effects of digital authoritarianism. The aforementioned CSIS article explains that “Established democracies lack a consistent and collective strategic approach to combat authoritarian use of digital and online space, even as they often preserve and promote advantageous elements of technology.”⁵⁰ This gap in capability is especially concerning considering the success that authoritarian states have had in developing and exporting their models of digital control. China, perhaps the biggest culprit of digital authoritarianism, employs a framework called the ‘China model’ that is characterized by high-

⁴⁶ Erol Yayboke and Sam Brannen, “Promote and Build: A Strategic Approach to Digital Authoritarianism,” Promote and Build: A Strategic Approach to Digital Authoritarianism | Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 2020, https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/201015_Yayboke_Brannen_PromoteAndBuild_Brief.pdf, p. 2

⁴⁷ Ibid., pp. 3-4

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 2

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid., pp. 1-2

tech innovation.⁵¹ The Chinese government maintains that digital technology is an essential ingredient of economic development that can also expand its political control inside and outside of China.⁵²

A 2018 Freedom House analysis reported that China was the “worst abuser of internet freedom” in that year.⁵³ New cybersecurity laws consolidated internet policy within the Cyberspace Administration of China, imposed requirements on domestic and foreign companies to stem the spread of banned content, and mandated that all data about Chinese citizens be stored within the country.⁵⁴ In addition to these stricter regulations, China has implemented more domestic surveillance. The most topical example of this is the surveillance and detention of the Uyghur population in Xinjiang.

The injustice of the Uyghur case relates to a broader Chinese effort to rate citizens’ allegiance to the state. China’s Social Credit System fuses online data with offline behavior to gauge trustworthiness of individual citizens.⁵⁵ This invasive system is sending chills down the spines of Chinese activists, many of which have reported that their freedoms have been curtailed due to their beliefs.⁵⁶ A database stores all of this data and holds up-to-date information on citizens’ standing, pointing specifically to whether individuals have been banned from certain modes of transportation.⁵⁷

⁵¹ Alina Polyakova and Chris Meserole, “Exporting Digital Authoritarianism: The Russian and Chinese Models,” Brookings, August 2019, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/FP_20190827_digital_authoritarianism_polyakova_meserole.pdf.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 2

⁵³ Adrian Shahbaz, “The Rise of Digital Authoritarianism,” Freedom House, 2018, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/rise-digital-authoritarianism>.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

China's use of surveillance technologies has piqued the interest of other states.⁵⁸ Beijing has previously invited foreign government officials and media staff to tour surveillance company headquarters and also to participate in conferences about cybersecurity law that promoted the China model.⁵⁹ Instances like this demonstrate why the literature is careful to distinguish Beijing's digital authoritarianism from its economic agenda. The two are not necessarily related. A 2020 Senate Foreign Relations Committee report explained that competition in the technological realm is not inherently a threat to US national security interests; rather, "what does raise critical national security concerns is when China's digital efforts erode democratic values and enable the rise of digital authoritarianism around the world."⁶⁰

There is disagreement, however, about China's ultimate objectives in cyberspace. Some experts argue that China's digital authoritarianism lacks a "grand strategy" and that Beijing is not making an "intentional effort to remake other governments in China's image."⁶¹ Proponents of this perspective claim that Beijing does not have a broad agenda and that its interactions with other nations vary depending on the specific factors and interests of specific countries. Meanwhile, other experts argue that China is making a concerted effort to export its developmental model and spread a "variant of authoritarian capitalism."⁶² China's promotion of its technologies and legal and institutional frameworks geared towards enhancing control certainly contradicts the notion that Xi Jinping does not have a greater overarching strategy at play.

⁵⁸ "The New Big Brother - China and Digital Authoritarianism," p. 26

⁵⁹ Adrian Shahbaz, "The Rise of Digital Authoritarianism"

⁶⁰ "The New Big Brother - China and Digital Authoritarianism," p. 26

⁶¹ Steven Feldstein, "When It Comes to Digital Authoritarianism, China Is a Challenge - But Not the Only Challenge," War on the Rocks, February 12, 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/02/when-it-comes-to-digital-authoritarianism-china-is-a-challenge-but-not-the-only-challenge/>.

⁶² Elizabeth C. Economy, "Yes, Virginia, China Is Exporting Its Model," Council on Foreign Relations (Council on Foreign Relations, December 11, 2019), <https://www.cfr.org/blog/yes-virginia-china-exporting-its-model>.

Looking Ahead: Identifying the Lacuna in the Literature

Digital authoritarianism, BRI, and DSR have rightfully garnered attention from the West. Still, questions persist about the relationship between these developments and China's intentions. Most agree that China's initiatives are intended to engender economic development and increase connectivity. But while some are convinced that DSR is evidence of China's desire to spread authoritarianism globally, there certainly is not agreement.⁶³ Empirical evidence of China exporting surveillance tools abroad is insufficient to decisively prove that Beijing is not merely conducting business but is rather making a concerted effort to spread a grand strategy centered around spreading authoritarianism through digital means.

The dominant themes of this section—China's role in the spread of digital authoritarianism and its connection to economic growth—illustrate aspects of this phenomenon that have been scrutinized the most. Considered in the context of the scholarship on alliances, the fixation on China within debates about digital authoritarianism reveals a significant lacuna in the literature, namely the dearth of commentary about the concrete effect that Chinese surveillance technologies are having within US-aligned countries and whether this impact varies across regime type. Academic reports and contemporary journalism have documented that digital authoritarianism has spread to other countries, but there is a lack of scholarship that takes the next step and analyzes the tangible effects of this within democracies and authoritarian countries.

Indeed, many sources tend to speculate about what the spread of digital authoritarianism might mean or lead to, but do not study what the spread has actually led to. The tendency to engage in conjecture on such a broad topic has also overshadowed important nuances, namely

⁶³ Amar Bhattacharya et al., "China's Belt and Road: The New Geopolitics of Global Infrastructure Development," Brookings (Brookings, April 1, 2021), <https://www.brookings.edu/research/chinas-belt-and-road-the-new-geopolitics-of-global-infrastructure-development/>, p. 13

the different aspects of digital authoritarianism and the different ways in which this phenomenon presents a threat. Various sources have questioned how internet freedom, cybersecurity norms, or civil liberties may be impacted by the import of the China model. However, these metrics are insufficient to study the state of US alliances, since the United States has many allies that engage in unsavory, undemocratic processes. This very gap in the literature will set the stage for the focus of this research paper, which will focus not on China, but on the status of US alliances with democratic and authoritarian countries that have imported Chinese digital surveillance technologies.

Hypothesis and Methods

This paper seeks to analyze the relationship between Chinese surveillance technologies and US alliances across regime type. Surveillance technology is a foundational feature of digital authoritarianism. Studying this specific aspect offers a more concrete way to measure digital authoritarianism than disinformation techniques or other nebulous aspects of this phenomenon. Does the import of Chinese digital tools by countries aligned with the United States signify a shift away from Washington and towards Beijing? Moreover, does the implementation of these tools suggest an imitation of China—merely the adoption of similar practices—or a pivot to China through deeper collaboration?

This question will be analyzed in the context of regime type. Governance models ranging from authoritarianism to liberal democracy have imported aspects of China’s digital authoritarianism. Therefore, it is necessary to account for authoritarian *and* democratic states in this analysis to better understand the relationship between the fundamental variables at play. Merely studying the viability of US alliances with other democracies that import surveillance tools would be insufficient, since authoritarian countries that have alliances with the United

States also purchase this technology. Moreover, incorporating regime types, an intervening variable, introduces variation and better enables this study to analyze how the acquisition of Chinese surveillance technologies affects US alliances across different cases.

Hypotheses

My hypotheses are as follows:

- 1) The import of Chinese surveillance technologies by US-aligned democracies is indicative of an imitation of China rather than a shift towards China.
- 2) The import of Chinese surveillance technologies by US-aligned authoritarian countries is indicative of a shift towards China rather than a mere imitation of China.

US alliances with democracies will not be threatened due to the long-lasting relationships that the United States enjoys with these countries. Common values and enduring economic, security, and political ties ensure that democracies will stay firmly in Washington's camp regardless of the import of surveillance tools. It is true that digital surveillance is ubiquitous in the United States and that these practices, when abused, undercut democratic values. But there are still legal guardrails—privacy rights and civil liberties—that restrict the full potential of these technologies in democratic countries. While the growing surveillance state within democracies and abuse of digital tools is a growing concern, these developments ultimately will not threaten US democratic alliances, since the United States and its allies both engage in these activities already.

Authoritarian states, meanwhile, are less likely to be concerned with straying away from the United States. Regarding rule of law and surveillance, authoritarian states are more predisposed to act like China than a democracy like the United States. Therefore, the import of Chinese surveillance technologies may provide an impetus for the enhancement of relations with China, which could undercut relations with the United States.

Methods

A comparative case study analysis is the most appropriate method of analysis for this project. Case studies require collection of data from a broad range of sources, ranging from scholarly articles, to journalistic accounts, to databases containing specific information about relevant variables. The forthcoming data section will contain information from all of these sources.

China has exported its digital authoritarianism to many countries around the world, but this study will focus on four particular cases: France, Germany, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. These countries meet the appropriate selection criteria. First, they are all US allies, albeit to varying degrees. Second, all four countries have imported Chinese surveillance technologies. Third, these cases are split between democracies—France and Germany—and authoritarian states—Egypt and Saudi Arabia. This contrast will test whether regime type affects US alliances with countries that import Chinese surveillance tools.

These countries were also selected due to their importance to the United States. Paris and Berlin have long-standing relationships with Washington. France and the United States have a series of security agreements; France is a strong NATO ally that also assists the United States in its counterterrorism mission.⁶⁴ The two countries have deep economic ties, with France being the United States' third largest trading partner in Europe.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ “The United States and France: Allies, Partners, and Friends - United States Department of State,” U.S. Department of State (U.S. Department of State, June 24, 2021), <https://www.state.gov/the-united-states-and-france-allies-partners-and-friends/>.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

Similarly, Germany is a key US ally in Europe and has prominent roles in NATO, the G-7, the G-20, and the Organization on Security and Cooperation in Europe.⁶⁶ The US and Germany also enjoy extensive economic cooperation. Total trade between Washington and Berlin reached almost \$260 billion in 2016, and the US and Germany invested roughly \$148 billion and \$522 billion in foreign direct investment in each other's countries, respectively.⁶⁷ In addition to economic ties, mutual values ranging from democracy, to human rights, to security explain why France and Germany are core allies of the United States.

The nature of the US' relationships with Egypt and Saudi Arabia are centered on mutual interests more so than on mutual values. Neither country is democratic and both have poor human rights records. In 2021, Freedom House labeled Egypt as 'not free,' assigning the country a 6/40 score for political rights, a 12/60 score for civil liberties, an 18/100 on its 'Global Freedom Score' and a 26/100 on its 'Internet Freedom Score.'⁶⁸ Saudi Arabia fared even worse, scoring a 1/40 score for political rights, a 6/60 score for civil liberties, a 7/100 on its 'Global Freedom Score' and a 24/100 on its 'Internet Freedom Score.'⁶⁹

Nevertheless, the United States still provides significant economic and military assistance to Egypt, and US firms are involved in various sectors of Egypt's economy, including oil and gas, manufacturing, and information technology.⁷⁰ Saudi Arabia and the United States are also strong economic partners. Saudi Arabia is one of the US' largest trading partners in the Middle

⁶⁶ "U.S. Relations with Germany - United States Department of State," U.S. Department of State (U.S. Department of State, June 23, 2021), <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-germany/>.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ "Egypt: Freedom in the World 2021 Country Report," Freedom House, accessed October 1, 2021, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/egypt/freedom-world/2021>.

⁶⁹ "Saudi Arabia: Freedom in the World 2021 Country Report," Freedom House, accessed October 1, 2021, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/saudi-arabia/freedom-world/2021>.

⁷⁰ "U.S. Relations with Egypt - United States Department of State," U.S. Department of State (U.S. Department of State, May 24, 2021), <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-egypt/>.

East, and the United States is Saudi Arabia's second biggest trading partner.⁷¹ Egypt and Saudi Arabia also share security agreements with the United States. Egypt and the United States aim to promote regional stability⁷², and Saudi Arabia is the leading "foreign military sales customer" of the United States.⁷³

Studying democracies and authoritarian states produces a comparative case study that better accounts for the relationship between the variables of interest. Regime type serves as the key intervening variable that will test whether alliance strength is impacted differently in democracies and authoritarian countries due to the import of digital tools. The dependent variable will be US alliances, specifically the strength of them. The independent variable will be the import of Chinese surveillance tools. US alliances will be measured using three main indicators: economic cooperation, security cooperation, and polling data indicating attitudes towards the United States and China. However, it is important to note that security cooperation with China will not be discussed with France and Germany, since cooperation on this front is so minimal. The extent to which these indicators have changed over time since the import of surveillance technologies should provide insights into the research question. While these measures will provide insights into the research question, they are imperfect indicators; their pitfalls will be explained within the limitations section. Surveillance tools will be measured by the purchase of such technology and its implementation within the countries of interest.

If the first hypothesis is correct, I expect to see economic, military, and public opinion towards China and the United States remain relatively constant following the institutionalization of Chinese surveillance technologies in democratic states. This outcome would suggest that

⁷¹ "U.S. Relations with Saudi Arabia - United States Department of State," U.S. Department of State (U.S. Department of State, January 15, 2021), <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-saudi-arabia/>.

⁷² "U.S. Relations with Egypt - United States Department of State"

⁷³ "U.S. Relations with Saudi Arabia - United States Department of State"

countries like France and Germany are copying aspects of China's digital authoritarianism for their own purposes but are not interested in pivoting towards China by deepening economic and security cooperation. Changes in the US alliances—diplomatic obstacles, decreased trade, lowered public opinion—and increased cooperation with China would suggest that the first hypothesis is incorrect.

I will assess the second hypothesis in a similar way. If US alliances have suffered following the import of Chinese surveillance technologies in authoritarian states, that would suggest that these countries are pivoting towards China. Again, diplomatic obstacles, decreased trade, and disrupted military cooperation with the United States and subsequent collaboration with China would be evidence of this. This hypothesis is likely wrong if the nature of the US alliance remains unchanged across those indicators following the incorporation of Chinese surveillance tools into their societies.

Data

Case Study: France

France's dealings with Chinese technology and telecommunications company ZTE are one area in which China's surveillance model has penetrated France. ZTE has been involved with France for over a decade. One of its most noteworthy projects was the "Big Data of Public Tranquility" project that began in 2016.⁷⁴ Located in Marseille, this initiative intends to reduce crime in the city by increasing the surveillance powers of law enforcement. Specifically, this plan includes a "vast public surveillance network featuring an intelligence operations center and

⁷⁴ Álvaro Artigas, "Surveillance, Smart Technologies and the Development of Safe City Solutions: the Case of Chinese ICT Firms and Their International Expansion to Emerging Markets," 2017, https://www.ibei.org/surveillance-smart-technologies-and-the-development-of-safe-city-solutions-the-case-of-chinese-ict-firms-and-their-international-expansion-to-emerging-markets_112561.pdf, p. 33

nearly 1,000 intelligent closed-circuit television (CCTV) cameras;” the number of cameras was projected to double to 2000 by 2020.⁷⁵ This “predictive policing project” seeks to identify trends in the data it collects to better inform police about future criminal acts.⁷⁶

Economic Indicators

Have ZTE projects, including the “Big Data of Public Tranquility,” resulted in a closer partnership between China and France and a strained relationship between France and the United States? Economic data can provide relevant insights. According to the Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC), exports from China to France and from France to China increased each year from 2016 to the present.⁷⁷ French exports to China totaled \$17.7 billion in 2016 and rose steadily to \$23.6 billion in 2019.⁷⁸ Meanwhile, Chinese exports to France totaled \$37.1 billion in 2016 and increased to \$45.2 billion in 2019.⁷⁹ The OEC reports that year-by-year exports have continued to grow between the two countries up to the present.⁸⁰ In 2016, the total stock of Chinese foreign direct investment into France equaled \$5.12 billion and grew modestly to \$5.95 billion in 2019.⁸¹ Still, overall trade between the United States and France outpaces these figures. Total trade in goods and services in 2019 demonstrates this point, as this figure totaled \$139 billion.⁸² And although exports from the United States to France decreased slightly from \$29.2

⁷⁵ Lisa Vaas, “Report: Use of AI Surveillance Is Growing around the World,” Naked Security, September 20, 2019, <https://nakedsecurity.sophos.com/2019/09/20/report-use-of-ai-surveillance-is-growing-around-the-world/>.

⁷⁶ Morgan Meaker, “Marseille's Fight against AI Surveillance,” Coda Story, November 9, 2020, <https://www.codastory.com/authoritarian-tech/ai-surveillance-france-crime/>.

⁷⁷ “China (CHN) and France (FRA) Trade,” OEC, accessed October 2, 2021, <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/chn/partner/fra>.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ “China: Outward FDI Stock in France,” Statista, April 19, 2021, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/721882/outward-fdi-stock-from-china-to-france/>.

⁸² Bruno Le Maire, “The United States & France 2019 - Economic Report,” frenchtreasuryintheus.org (Embassy of France in the United States - Economic Department), accessed October 1, 2021, https://frenchtreasuryintheus.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/2019-France-U.S.-economic_full-report.pdf.

billion in 2016 to \$28.6 billion in 2019, exports from France to the United States increased from \$36.9 billion in 2016 to \$47.4 billion in 2019.⁸³

This overall increase has occurred in the context of Xi Jinping courting Emmanuel Macron to join BRI. France has not officially signed a Memorandum of Understanding for the Initiative. Instead, Macron is interested in securing “cooperation on a project-by-project basis.”⁸⁴ French authorities have also expressed concern about the potential for asymmetric advantages for Chinese companies in forthcoming joint projects and also have concerns about falling into a “debt trap.”⁸⁵

Public Opinion

Public sentiment towards China and the United States is another indicator that can provide insight into shifting perceptions towards both countries. Contemporary polls suggest that a majority of French respondents hold negative views of China. A 2020 poll produced by the French think tank IFRI found that China is the second most “negatively-perceived” country in France behind North Korea, that 62% of the French public have a negative opinion of China, and that for the majority of respondents—52.60%—these negative sentiments have worsened in the last three years.⁸⁶ Overall trends from a Pew poll tracking yearly favorability ratings towards China corroborate these findings, documenting 49% of French respondents having an unfavorable view of China in 2015, and a 70% unfavorability rating in 2020.⁸⁷ Moreover, a 2021 poll conducted

⁸³ “United States (USA) and France (FRA) Trade,” OEC, accessed October 7, 2021, <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/usa/partner/fra>.

⁸⁴ Françoise Nicolas, “France and China's Belt and Road Initiative,” Afficher la page d'accueil du site, April 8, 2019, <https://www.ifri.org/en/publications/publications-ifri/articles-ifri/france-and-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative>.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Marc Julienne et al., “French Public Opinion on China in the Age of Covid-19,” IFRI, accessed October 2, 2021, https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/fr_poll_report.pdf, p. 2

⁸⁷ Laura Silver, Kat Devlin, and Christine Huang, “Unfavorable Views of China Reach Historic Highs in Many Countries,” Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project (Pew Research Center, May 10, 2021),

by the German Marshall Fund demonstrated similar results, finding that the majority of French respondents believe that France should “adopt a tougher stance on trade” and protest “questionable” Chinese policies.⁸⁸ Meanwhile, another 2020 Pew poll comparing the favorability of the United States and China found that 31% of French respondents reported a favorable view of the United States while only 26% indicated their approval of China.⁸⁹ Macron’s own reservations about China’s BRI suggest that the French government understands the potential pitfalls of deepening economic cooperation with China.

Case Study: Germany

Chinese companies have extensive ties to Germany and have exported information and communications technology (ICT) and surveillance tools to numerous German cities.⁹⁰ This partnership began in 2013 after Germany and China signed the “Sino-German Urbanization Partnership” program that intended to grow German and Chinese cities through mutual cooperation.⁹¹ As a result of these partnerships, ZTE and Huawei signed agreements to construct “smart cities” in German towns. Huawei signed contracts in 2018 and 2019 that authorized it to implement ICT and other ‘smart city solutions’ within the smart cities it was constructing.⁹² Meanwhile, ZTE won contracts to implement “Smart Street 2.0,” a program that compiles data

<https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/10/06/unfavorable-views-of-china-reach-historic-highs-in-many-countries/>.

⁸⁸ Bonnie S. Glaser and Garima Mohan, “Poll Shows Increasing Transatlantic Convergence on China,” – The Diplomat (for The Diplomat, June 17, 2021), <https://thediplomat.com/2021/06/poll-shows-increasing-transatlantic-convergence-on-china/>.

⁸⁹ Laura Silver, Kat Devlin, and Christine Huang, “Negative Views of Both U.S. and China Abound across Advanced Economies amid Covid-19,” Pew Research Center (Pew Research Center, April 28, 2021), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/10/06/negative-views-of-both-us-and-china-amid-covid-19/>.

⁹⁰ Katherine Atha et al., “China Smart Cities Development Report - Research Report Prepared on Behalf of the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission,” U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, January 2020, https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2020-04/China_Smart_Cities_Development.pdf, p. 71

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid., p. 72

about open parking spots, traffic, trash disposal, and other factors.⁹³ In total, ZTE, Huawei, Hikvision, CASIC, Gosuncn, and TelChina have signed contracts to install data centers, 5G infrastructure, smart cars, e-government surveillance, traffic control, smart parking, smart waste management, smart streetlamps, smart waste management, IP cameras, and cloud infrastructure across Germany.⁹⁴

Economic Indicators

OECD data reveals that exports between China and Germany increased during the present era of Sino-German cooperation on ICT and surveillance projects. In 2013, the same year of the Sino-German Urbanization Partnership, German exports to China and Chinese exports to Germany totaled \$87.4 billion and \$80.7 billion, respectively.⁹⁵ In 2019, the year in which Huawei's smart city projects ramped up, these figures equaled \$107 billion and \$96.9 billion, respectively.⁹⁶ The total stock of Chinese FDI into Germany has also grown during this time, increasing from \$3.98 billion in 2013 to \$14.23 billion in 2019.⁹⁷ Germany, China's most important trading partner in Europe, invested a modest \$3.68 billion in FDI to China in 2018.⁹⁸ Despite these trends, US-German economic relations have not been weakened. According to the German Federal Foreign Office, "the United States was the biggest buyer of German exports in 2020, and Germany is the United States' most important trading partner in Europe."⁹⁹ Exports

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ "China (CHN) and Germany (DEU) Trade," OECD, accessed October 2, 2021, <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/chn/partner/deu>.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ "China: Outward FDI Stock in Germany," Statista, April 19, 2021, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/721888/outward-fdi-stock-from-china-to-germany/>.

⁹⁸ "FDI Center Releases Study on Foreign Direct Investment to China," FDI Center, April 2, 2019, <https://fdi-center.com/fdi-center-releases-study-on-foreign-direct-investment-to-china/>, p. 2

⁹⁹ "United States of America: Bilateral Relations to Germany," German Federal Foreign Office, accessed October 2, 2021, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/aussenpolitik/unitedstatesofamerica/218718>.

between both countries have also increased, with US exports to Germany rising from \$49.8 billion in 2016 to \$59.8 billion in 2019; German exports to the US increased from \$117 billion in 2016 to \$131 billion in 2019.¹⁰⁰

Similar to France, the German government's skepticism over aspects of China's BRI has discouraged Angela Merkel from signing bilateral agreements with China. Understanding BRI's economic benefits, Merkel has expressed her interest in the Initiative but has stressed that BRI "must lead to a certain reciprocity."¹⁰¹ In fact, Germany has leveraged its elevated status in Europe to caution other EU states about signing bilateral agreements with China through BRI. In 2019, German Economy Minister Peter Altmaier encouraged the EU to assume a shared position vis-a-vis China rather than individual ones that could put the greater EU at risk.¹⁰²

Public Opinion

Public opinion polls in Germany have also pointed to skepticism of China. A Pew poll tracking yearly favorability ratings towards China showed an increase in unfavorability in Germany in 2020. In 2013, 64% of German respondents reported having an unfavorable view of China; this figure fluctuated in subsequent years and dropped as low as 53% in 2017.¹⁰³ But in the Summer of 2020, China's unfavorability among German respondents reached a high point at 71%.¹⁰⁴ An increase in negative perceptions of China can in part be traced to its role in the

¹⁰⁰ "United States (USA) and Germany (DEU) Trade," OEC, accessed October 7, 2021, <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/usa/partner/deu>.

¹⁰¹ Wang Jiamei, "German Business Enthusiasm for Belt and Road Initiative to Prompt Pragmatism from Berlin," *Global Times*, April 2, 2019, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1144461.shtml>.

¹⁰² Tom Daly, "Europe Wants to Deal with China as a Group: German Minister," *Reuters* (Thomson Reuters, April 26, 2019), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-silkroad-germany/europe-wants-to-deal-with-china-as-a-group-german-minister-idUSKCN1S20R3>.

¹⁰³ Laura Silver, Kat Devlin, and Christine Huang, "Unfavorable Views of China Reach Historic Highs in Many Countries"

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁰⁵ The aforementioned 2020 Pew poll comparing the United States and China found that 26% of respondents viewed the United States favorably, compared to 25% of respondents who reported favorable sentiments towards China.¹⁰⁶

Case Study - Egypt

Sino-Egypt relations deepened in 2014 after President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, desperate to improve Egypt's economy, traveled to Beijing to meet with President Xi.¹⁰⁷ Later that year, the two heads of state agreed to a "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership" which set the stage for the signing of at least twenty-five bilateral agreements.¹⁰⁸ In the ICT sector, China has made noteworthy inroads into Egypt. Huawei's "Seeds for the Future" initiative, an educational program catered towards students studying ICT, runs in 126 countries, including Egypt.¹⁰⁹ According to a 2021 Middle East Institute report, 5,000 Egyptian ICT officials received training from Huawei; moreover, the company has constructed multiple training centers and facilities dedicated to developing "smart city solutions."¹¹⁰ These efforts align with the 2018

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Laura Silver, Kat Devlin, and Christine Huang, "Unfavorable Views of China Reach Historic Highs in Many Countries"

¹⁰⁷ Intissar Fakir, Riccardo Fabiani, and Rachid Aourraz, "Towering Ambitions: Egypt and China Building for the Future," Middle East Institute, September 30, 2021, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/towering-ambitions-egypt-and-china-building-future>.

¹⁰⁸ Mohamed El Dahshan, "Egyptian Exceptionalism in a Chinese-Led World," Chatham House – International Affairs Think Tank, July 7, 2021, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/02/egyptian-exceptionalism-chinese-led-world>.

¹⁰⁹ Aurel Constantin, "Huawei's 8th Edition of the Seeds for the Future Program for Students Passionate about Technology Has Been Launched," Business Review (Business Review, August 13, 2021), <https://business-review.eu/tech/huaweis-8th-edition-of-the-seeds-for-the-future-program-for-students-passionate-about-technology-has-been-launched-222342>.

¹¹⁰ Thomas Blaubach, "Chinese Technology in the Middle East: A Threat to Sovereignty or an Economic Opportunity?," Middle East Institute, March 2021, <https://mei.edu/sites/default/files/2021-03/Chinese-Tech.pdf>, p.

memorandum between Huawei and Telecom Egypt to construct a multi-million dollar cloud computing data center.¹¹¹

Security Cooperation

Closer security coordination between China and countries that import its surveillance tools is another indicator that could provide insights into the direction of their relations. For the authoritarian cases, this indicator will be discussed first since it is the strongest measure of the three. The other two-economic indicators and public opinion-offer interesting insights but are ultimately flawed. Their shortcomings will be discussed in the limitations section. Therefore, these two metrics should be understood as supplemental indicators.

In Egypt's case, President Sisi has indicated his commitment to strengthen defense cooperation with China. Following a meeting with the Chinese State Councilor and Minister of National Defense Wei Fenghe, Sisi announced his intention to "further enhance defense cooperation and conduct more cooperation in the fields of counter terrorism, joint military drills, armed forces buildup as well as defense industry."¹¹² Wei endorsed these remarks and conveyed China's willingness to collaborate with Egypt's armed forces and develop common goals that drive future relations.¹¹³

The United States has a long history of supporting Egypt's military and has spent over \$50 billion in military aid since 1978.¹¹⁴ Despite this long history, Egypt in recent years has sought to diversify its sources of weapons by striking deals with other countries. This past May,

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Yang Yi, ed., "China, Egypt to Further Enhance Defense Cooperation," Xinhua, March 26, 2019, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-03/26/c_137922937.htm.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ "U.S. Relations with Egypt - United States Department of State"

Egypt announced a \$5 billion weapons deal with France; Sisi's regime has also acquired attack helicopters and air defense systems from Russia.¹¹⁵

Nevertheless, US security assistance to Egypt has continued in light of these agreements. This September, representatives from both countries convened for the 32nd US-Egypt Military Cooperation Committee (MCC) to discuss military cooperation and common security goals.¹¹⁶ Moreover, the Biden Administration has released \$170 million in military assistance to Egypt, even as it withholds an additional \$130 million in response to its concerns over human rights abuses.¹¹⁷ From the perspective of the United States, the provision of this aid reflects the importance of maintaining robust US-Egyptian relations and working together to promote regional stability and combat nuclear proliferation and terrorism.¹¹⁸

Economic Indicators

Since 2014—when Egypt and China signed their Comprehensive Strategic Partnership—trade between the two countries has increased modestly over the years. Exports from China to Egypt and from Egypt to China totaled \$10.5 billion and \$661 million in 2014 and \$12.5 billion and \$733 million in 2019, respectively. Compared to China, the United States exports less goods to Egypt, but Egypt also exports more goods to the United States than it does to China. Using the same timeframe as a reference, US exports and Egyptian exports equaled \$6.65 billion and \$1.59

¹¹⁵ Bradley Bowman, Jared Thompson, and Ryan Brobst, "Egypt's Transition Away from American Weapons Is a National Security Issue," *Defense News* (Defense News, June 3, 2021), <https://www.defensenews.com/opinion/commentary/2021/05/25/egypts-transition-away-from-american-weapons-is-a-national-security-issue/>.

¹¹⁶ "U.S.-Egypt Military Cooperation Committee," U.S. Embassy in Egypt, September 22, 2021, <https://eg.usembassy.gov/u-s-egypt-military-cooperation-committee/>.

¹¹⁷ Matthew Lee, "US Military Aid to Egypt Released despite Rights Concerns," AP NEWS (Associated Press, September 14, 2021), <https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-africa-egypt-antony-blinken-37f682d24b006766698ed10b1c22d4a7>.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

billion in 2014, respectively; US exports dropped to \$5.06 billion in 2019 but Egyptian exports gradually increased to \$3.24 billion that same year.¹¹⁹

As a member state of BRI, Egypt has demonstrated its interest in signing additional agreements with China to bolster its bilateral relations. Egypt officially joined BRI after signing a Memorandum of Understanding with China to join the Initiative in 2016.¹²⁰ Upon signing the agreement, China announced that it would infuse \$1 billion into Egypt's central bank and \$700 million worth of loans to the National Bank of Egypt.¹²¹

This past summer, Egyptian and Chinese officials established an “intergovernmental cooperation committee” that aims to better align economic priorities.¹²² One significant area of cooperation exists in the Suez Canal Economic Zone, which aims to transform the Canal into an even greater trading hub that attracts businesses and investors from all over the world.¹²³ Egypt's cooperation is particularly important for the feasibility of China's Maritime Silk Road, of which the Suez Canal is a critical component.¹²⁴

Public Opinion

Public opinion polls are not always available in authoritarian states, but the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, in partnership with an Egyptian commercial research firm,

¹¹⁹ “United States (USA) and Egypt (EGY) Trade,” OEC, accessed October 3, 2021, <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/usa/partner/egy>.

¹²⁰ “Belt and Road Countries --- Egypt,” Xinhua Silk Road - Belt and Road Portal, China's silk road economic belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road Website, January 17, 2017, <https://en.imsilkroad.com/p/310633.html>.

¹²¹ Shannon Tiezzi, “Xi's Visit Cements Egypt's Place on the 'Belt and Road,’” – The Diplomat (for The Diplomat, January 22, 2016), <https://thediplomat.com/2016/01/xis-visit-cements-egypts-place-on-the-belt-and-road/>.

¹²² Chris Devonshire-Ellis, “China & Egypt Strengthen Belt and Road Collaborations Including the Suez Canal International Logistics Zone,” Silk Road Briefing, July 23, 2021, <https://www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/2021/07/23/china-egypt-strengthen-belt-and-road-collaborations-including-the-suez-canal-international-logistics-zone/>.

¹²³ “About Us,” SCZone, accessed October 3, 2021, <https://sczone.eg/about-us/>.

¹²⁴ Shannon Tiezzi, “Xi's Visit Cements Egypt's Place on the 'Belt and Road’”

managed to conduct a poll on a range of issues in Egypt this past January. The results demonstrate that the respondents have very similar outlooks towards China and the United States. 52% of those polled believe that maintaining relations with the United States is either very important or somewhat important, while 55% report this same sentiment for China.¹²⁵ It would be wrong to draw definitive conclusions or generalizations from a single poll, especially considering that this poll does not track changes in this question over time. The near-identical scores given to the importance of maintaining relations with the United States and China, however, is *not* evidence that there has been a correlation between the import of surveillance tools and sentiments towards the United States and China.

Case Study - Saudi Arabia

Like Egypt, Saudi Arabia in 2017 also signed on to China's Digital Silk Road Initiative that aims to "improve broadband access, promote digital technologies...develop e-commerce capabilities, [and] promote cooperation of international standards."¹²⁶ Huawei is at the center of various projects in Saudi Arabia. The Kingdom's cooperation with China is partly explained by its pursuit of its "Vision 2030" program that intends to transform its economy by making it less reliant on oil.¹²⁷ Saudi Arabia's National Center for Artificial Intelligence (NCAI), the Alibaba

¹²⁵ Mohamed Abdelaziz and David Pollock, "Half of Egyptians Value U.S. Ties, but Few Want Normalization with Israel," The Washington Institute, January 15, 2021, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/half-egyptians-value-us-ties-few-want-normalization-israel>.

¹²⁶ Paul Triolo et al., "The Digital Silk Road: Expanding China's Digital Footprint" (Eurasia Group, April 8, 2020), <https://www.eurasiagroup.net/files/upload/Digital-Silk-Road-Expanding-China-Digital-Footprint-1.pdf>, p.4

¹²⁷ Karl Flinders, "Saudi Arabian Authorities Work with Chinese IT Giants on Digital Goals," ComputerWeekly.com (ComputerWeekly.com, October 22, 2020), <https://www.computerweekly.com/news/252490964/Saudi-Arabian-authorities-work-with-Chinese-IT-giants-on-digital-goals>.

Group, and Huawei have agreed to work on developing AI tools and implementing smart cities in Saudi Arabia.¹²⁸

Huawei has been a willing partner for Saudi ICT projects that align with the Vision 2030 program. The telecom giant has been instrumental in the development of the smart city in Yanbu, a strategic Red Sea port that is home to roughly 240,000 people.¹²⁹ Saudi Arabia's desire to combat crime in the city naturally attracted it to Huawei's services; in fact, a core aspect of Huawei's marketing campaign for its smart cities is its ability to quell extremism and boost public safety.¹³⁰ As part of the project, the Yanbu city officials have installed an e-Policing system comprised of over two hundred high-definition cameras across sixteen major intersections.¹³¹ Huawei has also used an "optic fiber network covering the city's residential housing, enterprises and key public areas, and deployed smart applications including smart parking, smart heavy vehicle weighing, smart bins, smart energy management, smart streetlights, venue crowd analytics, and smart manhole covers."¹³²

Security Cooperation

In 2019, China and Saudi Arabia launched the "Blue Sword 2019" ceremony, an event that marked the enhancement of military cooperation between the two countries. Joint naval exercises are intended to build trust and compatibility between the two navies and share best

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Thamer Anwar Noori, "With AI, Yanbu Has Become Smarter and Safer," Smart Cities World, July 30, 2020, <https://www.smartcitiesworld.net/opinions/opinions/with-ai-yanbu-has-become-smarter-and-safer>.

¹³⁰ Wendy Robinson, "The Rise of Chinese AI in the Gulf: A Renewal of China's 'Serbia Model'," The Washington Institute, October 13, 2020, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/rise-chinese-ai-gulf-renewal-chinas-serbia-model>.

¹³¹ Thamer Anwar Noori, "With AI, Yanbu Has Become Smarter and Safer"

¹³² "Creating Smart Cities of the Future - Huawei Article | Special Feature," The Economist (The Economist Newspaper), accessed October 3, 2021, <https://huaweiarticles.economist.com/?articles=creating-smart-cities-future>.

practices.¹³³ Sino-Saudi defense cooperation is not new, but certain aspects of the relationship continue to evolve. China is now selling armed drones—CH-4 and the Wing Loong II—to Saudi Arabia, which the Kingdom has deployed in Iraq, Yemen, and Libya.¹³⁴

China's sale of drones to US allies is of concern to the Pentagon, but the United States still maintains its own security ties with the Kingdom. In 2017, the United States and Saudi Arabia signed a 10-year, \$350 billion weapons deal; in a corresponding move, Saudi Arabia signed various agreements with US companies worth tens of billions of dollars as part of a broader effort to enact economic reforms.¹³⁵ The Biden Administration initially adopted a more skeptical posture towards the Kingdom by ending US support of offensive Saudi operations in Yemen and by temporarily freezing the flow of weapons from Washington to Riyadh. Nevertheless, arms sales have resumed with the Kingdom receiving helicopters and a Terminal High Altitude Area Defense anti-ballistic missile defense system.¹³⁶

Economic Indicators

Exports between China and Saudi Arabia increased following the latter's signing of the MoU affiliated with BRI. In 2017, exports from China to Saudi Arabia and exports from Saudi Arabia to China totaled \$19.6 billion and \$25.5 billion, respectively, and grew to \$26.5 billion and \$45.8 billion in 2019.¹³⁷ Saudi Arabia is an important trading partner for China, as the

¹³³ Yang Tao, ed., "Saudi Arabia Joint Naval Training 'Blue Sword 2019' Kicks Off," China, November 20, 2019, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2019-11/20/content_9679466.htm.

¹³⁴ Wendy Robinson, "The Rise of Chinese AI in the Gulf: A Renewal of China's 'Serbia Model'"

¹³⁵ Javier E. David, "US-Saudi Arabia Seal Weapons Deal Worth Nearly \$110 Billion Immediately, \$350 Billion over 10 Years," CNBC (CNBC, May 22, 2017), <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/05/20/us-saudi-arabia-seal-weapons-deal-worth-nearly-110-billion-as-trump-begins-visit.html>.

¹³⁶ Chyrine Mezher, "Why Biden White House Lifted Arms Sales Freeze to UAE, KSA," Breaking Defense, July 28, 2021, <https://breakingdefense.com/2021/04/why-biden-white-house-lifted-arms-sales-freeze-to-uae-ksa/>.

¹³⁷ "China (CHN) and Saudi Arabia (Sau) Trade," OEC, accessed October 3, 2021, <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/chn/partner/sau>.

Kingdom remains China's top supplier of crude oil.¹³⁸ Meanwhile, exports from the United States and Saudi Arabia dropped during this same time frame, falling from \$13.8 billion in US exports to Saudi Arabia and \$17.7 billion in Saudi exports to the US in 2017 to \$13.4 billion and \$12.2 billion in 2019, respectively.¹³⁹

In February of 2019 alone, Saudi Arabia signed over thirty economic agreements with China that cumulatively amounted to \$28 billion.¹⁴⁰ 2019 also marked their most productive trading year, reaching \$78.18 billion in total trade.¹⁴¹ The aforementioned Vision 2030 initiative has been a driving force behind Sino-Saudi relations. Prior to last year's G-20 Summit, the Kingdom's Minister of Communications and Information Technology publicly reaffirmed Saudi Arabia's excitement about Alibaba-led projects in the ICT space and announced that Riyadh would welcome help from any partner to pursue Vision 2030 as long as the agreements aligned with the Kingdom's agenda.¹⁴² Saudi Arabia is open for business, and China is a willing partner.

Public Opinion

The Saudi regime's embrace of China to pursue its 2030 Vision project clearly demonstrates its positive views toward China. Another Washington Institute for Near East Policy poll in 2020 captured Saudi public opinion towards China and the United States. The results show that respondents now place more emphasis on maintaining positive relations with China

¹³⁸ "Saudi Imports from China up 17.8 Percent in 2020 to \$28.1 Billion," Arab News (Arabnews, January 23, 2021), <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1797326/business-economy>.

¹³⁹ "United States (USA) and Saudi Arabia (Sau) Trade," OEC, accessed October 3, 2021, <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/usa/partner/sau>.

¹⁴⁰ Chen Yurong, "Graphics: How Is Bri Bolstering China-Saudi Arabia Ties?," CGTN, November 20, 2020, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-11-20/Graphics-How-is-BRI-bolstering-China-Saudi-Arabia-ties--VzqqKFdXSo/index.html>.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Abhishek G. Bhaya, "Saudi Minister: China a Key Partner in Kingdom's Transformation into an Innovation-Based Economy," CGTN, November 20, 2020, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-11-20/China-Saudi-Arabia-Partners-in-shaping-innovation-based-economies-Vy4a7vts0E/index.html>.

than with the United States. 49% of respondents believe that cultivating and preserving relations with China is either very important or somewhat important, while only 37% of those polled hold this sentiment for the United States.¹⁴³ Moreover, an Ipsos poll published in 2020 found that 84% of Saudi respondents approve of China's political and economic models and believe that they are worth imitating within the Kingdom.¹⁴⁴ While the scarcity of consistent opinion polls hinders the ability to analyze change over time, the current preference of maintaining relations with China—while still below 50%—is a data point relevant to shifting perceptions of China and the United States.

Chinese Surveillance Technologies in the United States

In addition to these four allies, the United States itself imports Chinese surveillance technologies. Certain Chinese firms—Hikvision and Dahua among them—are on the US' economic blacklist.¹⁴⁵ Congress has also barred the federal government from purchasing Hikvision and Dahua technologies and renewing contracts with them.¹⁴⁶ Nevertheless, towns around the United States continue to do business with these firms since federal rules do not apply to the state and local levels. A 2021 report from TechCrunch, an online newspaper that covers high tech and start-up companies, found that Hikvision and Dahua technologies—mostly thermal cameras,

¹⁴³ David Pollock, "Saudi Poll: China Leads U.S.; Majority Back Curbs on Extremism, Coronavirus," The Washington Institute, July 31, 2020, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/saudi-poll-china-leads-us-majority-back-curbs-extremism-coronavirus>.

¹⁴⁴ "Saudi Arabia: Perception on China's Political and Economic Model 2019," Statista, December 8, 2020, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1091386/saudi-arabia-perception-on-china-s-political-and-economic-model/>.

¹⁴⁵ Zack Whittaker, "US Towns Are Buying Chinese Surveillance Tech Tied to Uighur Abuses," TechCrunch (TechCrunch, May 24, 2021), https://techcrunch.com/2021/05/24/united-states-towns-hikvision-dahua-surveillance/?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLmNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAACbkYkSkKfnLwmikRp4P3RgoZcxNlcuRoz0Pf_FVM-Ke7su2FltxZ4nF01IwcUBDYjiUFSKTx3B98AISHtGN4s05TYnBzbZht_oDgkP_vXzwhUkA_aaps12AgNcyMdmCwwvsgHHXiVDKCvNcUGgK6hY-aaWrjp7hr1CpybzWMIBF.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

scanners, and other surveillance cameras—have been acquired and implemented in Fayette County in Georgia, Nash County in North Carolina, Jefferson Parish in Louisiana, Kern County in California, and Hollywood, Florida.¹⁴⁷

US Allies Import US Surveillance Technologies

In addition to Chinese technologies, France, Germany, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia all use US surveillance tools, too.¹⁴⁸ Of the seven leading companies that contribute to surveillance tools, three of them—IBM, Cisco, and Palantir—are US companies; IBM has a presence in fifteen countries, Cisco in six, and Palantir in nine.¹⁴⁹ IBM has contracts in France while Cisco and Palantir do business in Germany.¹⁵⁰ Meanwhile, Honeywell has made inroads into Egypt. In 2019, the Egyptian government signed a contract with the US firm to implement a surveillance system of over 6,000 cameras within Cairo with the purported goals of fighting terrorism and maintaining social order.¹⁵¹ And in Saudi Arabia, the Saudi Authority for Data and Artificial Intelligence in 2019 signed a memorandum of understanding with IBM with the intention of building smart cities.¹⁵² IBM has also opened a security operations center office in Riyadh that “will focus on supporting clients responding to cybersecurity incidents as well as helping manage emerging threats through real-time analysis and early warning notification of security events.”¹⁵³ The US firm Gatekeeper Intelligence Security is also involved with the Saudi

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ “AI Global Surveillance,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, accessed October 29, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/interactive/ai-surveillance>.

¹⁴⁹ <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/09/17/global-expansion-of-ai-surveillance-pub-79847>

¹⁵⁰ “AI Global Surveillance,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

¹⁵¹ Steven Feldstein, “The Global Expansion of AI Surveillance,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 17, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/09/17/global-expansion-of-ai-surveillance-pub-79847>.

¹⁵² “Saudi Arabia Signs MoUs with IBM, Alibaba and Huawei on Ai,” Reuters (Thomson Reuters, October 22, 2020), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-tech-idUKKBN2771LN>.

¹⁵³ “IBM Opens Its First Ever Security Operations Center in Saudi Arabia,” Arab News (Arabnews, December 9, 2020), <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1775046/business-economy>.

government and has sold the regime facial recognition technology that has been used to track individuals suspected of wrongdoing.¹⁵⁴

Discussion

This research project analyzes two specific hypotheses and provides insights into the broader question of whether the import of Chinese surveillance tools by US allies signifies an imitation of Chinese practices or a pivot to China, and whether this varies across regime type. To evaluate the first hypothesis—that the import of Chinese surveillance technologies by US-aligned democracies is indicative of an imitation of China rather than a shift towards China—this paper studies France and Germany, two strong allies of the United States. In total, the data presented supports this hypothesis, finding no evidence that these countries are pivoting to China simply because they have imported aspects of China’s digital authoritarianism.

ZTE, Huawei, and other Chinese companies have succeeded in securing contracts in France and Germany to implement smart cities. However, an analysis of the relevant indicators for these countries suggests that their alliances with the US have not suffered as a result of their collaboration with China. It is true that trade with China increased steadily for both countries after these initiatives with China commenced. Nevertheless, economic indicators with the United States reveal that trade did *not* decrease. In this context, increased trade with China does not represent a weakening of US alliances. Indeed, it is only natural that these countries would seek to maximize trade with their partners, especially when these partners have the world’s largest and second largest economies.

¹⁵⁴ Thomas Brewster, “Manhole Covers That Spy? Saudi Surveillance Cities Are Being Built with American and British Tech,” *Forbes* (Forbes Magazine, December 4, 2018), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/thomasbrewster/2018/12/04/manhole-covers-that-spy-meet-the-westerners-helping-saudis-build-surveillance-cities/?sh=16456bf3eb13>.

It is also relevant that France and Germany remain skeptical about China's BRI to an extent that both countries have refrained from formally joining the Initiative. The French and German governments understand the potential merits of BRI but are nevertheless concerned about entering into agreements that may disproportionately benefit China at the expense of other countries. The German government's public warning to other EU states and its advice on assuming a shared policy towards China reflects this tension. France and Germany's caution, despite their interest in certain aspects of BRI, is a strong indicator that undermines the argument that these countries are moving closer to China and further away from the United States.

Moreover, neither country supports China's defense in any meaningful way. France and China have discussed increasing their defense cooperation in the past,¹⁵⁵ and Germany and China participated in a joint medical military exercise in 2016.¹⁵⁶ Germany has also trained small numbers of Chinese soldiers,¹⁵⁷ but cooperation has not expanded beyond that point. In fact, recent events have strained relations between these militaries. After France signed a weapons contract with Taiwan in 2020, China publicly criticized France and warned that the arms deal could threaten relations between Paris and Beijing.¹⁵⁸ And in the Fall of 2021, China rejected

¹⁵⁵ "China and France Willing to Enhance Defence Cooperation; Indonesian Vice-Minister and Polish Defence Delegation Visits China; Beijing Military Area Command Tests Its Readiness in Hostile Weather; a Chinese Peacekeeping Contingent Sent to Southern Lebanon; Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses," China and France willing to enhance defence cooperation; Indonesian Vice-minister and Polish defence delegation visits China; Beijing Military Area Command tests its readiness in hostile weather; A Chinese peacekeeping contingent sent to Southern Lebanon; | Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, 2011, https://idsa.in/TWIR/2_4_2011_China.

¹⁵⁶ Franz-Stefan Gady, "China and Germany to Hold Joint Medical Military Exercise," – The Diplomat (for The Diplomat, October 4, 2016), <https://thediplomat.com/2016/10/china-and-germany-to-hold-joint-medical-military-exercise/>.

¹⁵⁷ "Germany Should Stop Aiding Chinese Military, Amnesty Warns: DW," DW.COM, November 17, 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-should-stop-aiding-chinese-military-amnesty-warns/a-51283225>.

¹⁵⁸ Kristin Huang, "Beijing Urges France to Cancel Contract to Sell Arms to Taiwan," South China Morning Post, May 13, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3084255/beijing-expresses-grave-concerns-france-over-contract-sell>.

Germany's request to allow one of its warships to dock in a Chinese port; Germany's presence in the region clearly was not welcomed.¹⁵⁹

Public opinion polls in France and Germany mirror their governments' caution towards China. Disapproval of China has increased in recent years, reaching 70% in France and 71% in Germany in 2020.¹⁶⁰ The previously referenced 2020 Pew poll also revealed poor favorability ratings for the United States, but even these figures slightly eclipsed the favorability scores for China. Again, 26% of French respondents reported a favorable view of China while 31% had a favorable view of the United States.¹⁶¹ In Germany, 25% of respondents had a favorable view of China while 26% reported a favorable view of the United States.¹⁶²

In sum, China's export of surveillance technologies to France and Germany have not created conditions that have prompted Paris and Berlin to shift away from Washington and towards Beijing. Despite tensions between the EU and the United States in recent years, Washington still retains a powerful voice in Europe. Although the United States has not succeeded in convincing the EU to implement a complete ban of Chinese firms like Huawei, many countries, France and Germany among them, have taken steps to protect their security by implementing safeguards against these companies. In an effort to purge Huawei from "the more integral parts of its wireless infrastructure," France has instructed phone carriers to remove Huawei services from their products.¹⁶³ Germany has also taken a hard line against Huawei and

¹⁵⁹ "Germany Should Stop Aiding Chinese Military, Amnesty Warns," DW.COM, November 17, 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-should-stop-aiding-chinese-military-amnesty-warns/a-51283225>.

¹⁶⁰ Laura Silver, Kat Devlin, and Christine Huang, "Unfavorable Views of China Reach Historic Highs in Many Countries"

¹⁶¹ Laura Silver, Kat Devlin, and Christine Huang, "Negative Views of Both U.S. and China Abound across Advanced Economies amid Covid-19"

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Helene Fouquet and Tara Patel, "France's Huawei Ban Begins to Kick In With Purge in Urban Areas," Bloomberg.com (Bloomberg, March 1, 2021), <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-03-01/france-s-huawei-ban-begins-to-kick-in-with-purge-in-urban-areas>.

in April passed a new IT security law that “restricts the flow of ‘untrustworthy’ suppliers of 5G technologies” and mandates that companies inform the German government if they agree to contracts pertaining to “critical 5G components.”¹⁶⁴ These developments contradict any perception that countries like France and Germany are opening a door to China. The evidence suggests that democracies may be importing aspects of Chinese digital surveillance to fight crime or introduce high-tech tools into their cities, not to develop closer ties to China.

The second hypothesis— that the import of Chinese surveillance technologies by US-aligned authoritarian regimes is more indicative of a shift towards China than a mere imitation of China—was analyzed through the Egypt and Saudi Arabia case studies. The evidence demonstrates closer Egypt and Saudi ties to China following the implementation of surveillance technologies.

Unlike France and Germany, these two authoritarian states are members of China’s BRI, which led to subsequent bilateral agreements. Trade between China and Egypt and China and Saudi Arabia increased in the years following the implementation of surveillance technologies and entering into BRI. In Egypt’s case, US exports declined over this time, as did exports between the US and Saudi Arabia. However, there is no evidence that this trend is specifically connected to Egypt and Saudi Arabia’s utilization of Chinese technologies. Other explanations, such as the United States’ reduction of its reliance on Saudi oil, are more convincing.

Of all the indicators, China’s defense cooperation with Egypt and Saudi Arabia is the most compelling evidence that supports the second hypothesis. Riyadh and Cairo have publicly expressed their interest in deepening their defense cooperation, while Saudi Arabia has taken more concrete steps to do so through its purchase of Chinese armed drones and its participation

¹⁶⁴ Laurens Cerulus, “Germany Falls in Line with EU on Huawei,” POLITICO (POLITICO, April 23, 2021), <https://www.politico.eu/article/germany-europe-huawei-5g-data-privacy-cybersecurity/>.

in the “Blue Sword 2019” event. Closer defense cooperation with China, however, has not been accompanied by a breakdown in cooperation with the United States. Although Washington has expressed concerns about human rights violations in Egypt and the ongoing war in Yemen, it has still provided both countries with military aid and lucrative arms deals.

Public opinion polls in Egypt and Saudi Arabia offer limited insights but do suggest that increased favorability of China. Favorability ratings in Egypt were slightly in China’s favor, while positive sentiments for China were more pronounced in Saudi Arabia. These figures are useful data points that reveal diminished favorability of the United States. However, it is important to remember that countries do not have to be friendly with one another to work on common issues and shared objectives.

Of all the cases enhanced defense cooperation and participation in BRI are pieces of evidence that indicate that Egypt and Saudi Arabia are more likely to shift towards China. Moreover, their specific use of surveillance tools also supports this claim. The Seeds for the Future campaign in Egypt will likely spread the influence of Chinese tech firms throughout the country. Huawei’s projects in Saudi Arabia are also having a strong impact and are reinforcing authoritarian ideals towards surveillance. The Saudi regime has praised China for its surveillance of the Uyghur population, arguing that the country has a right to fight terrorism.¹⁶⁵ In addition to closer economic and military cooperation, the potential use of surveillance tools to repress internal dissent will only further support the notion that Egypt and Saudi Arabia are not merely imitating China, but are opening a door to collaboration across other areas.

¹⁶⁵ “Saudi Crown Prince Defends China's Right to Fight 'Terrorism',” Mohammed bin Salman News | Al Jazeera (Al Jazeera, February 23, 2019), <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/2/23/saudi-crown-prince-defends-chinas-right-to-fight-terrorism>.

However, the extent of a shift away from Washington should not be overly exaggerated. The United States' own use of Chinese surveillance technologies at the state and local levels undercuts the claim that the four case studies reveal a shift away from the United States. In fact, this data point demonstrates that the four cases are operating similarly to the US in terms of the acquisition of surveillance technologies. Additionally, the strong presence of US firms in all four cases weakens the notion of a shift towards China and a weakening of US alliances. When considering the import of surveillance tools alone, it cannot credibly be argued that US relations with countries that import Chinese surveillance tools are suffering when contracts with Chinese businesses have not impeded the ability of US firms to export their tools to these countries and sign contracts of their own. While authoritarian countries are *more likely* to shift away from the United States than democracies are, it is important to note that such a shift is not guaranteed to occur due to the pre-existing ties to the United States.

Limitations

This study presents compelling insights about two democratic and two authoritarian countries. The evidence validates the first hypothesis that democracies are more likely to imitate China and also provides evidence supporting the second hypothesis that authoritarian countries are more likely to shift towards China. Indeed, increased defense and economic cooperation in authoritarian states indicate that these countries may at least be opening a door to China while democratic countries are merely copying aspects of China's digital authoritarianism.

Despite these findings, there are important limitations. One limitation of this study is the inability to draw generalizations and conclusions to other cases. Since only four countries were studied, it is difficult to argue that these hypotheses are either true or false across all cases. A study with a far larger sample size would need to be conducted to draw such generalizations.

Indeed, just because Egypt's alliance with the United States has not suffered following the purchase of surveillance tools does not mean that a US alliance with another authoritarian regime also would not suffer.

Second, the indicators themselves present their own problems. There is an endogeneity problem with the economic indicator, as trade with China will obviously increase as states purchase more Chinese technologies. The presented economic data also reflects *net* exports between the countries rather than their *percentages of total trade* with China and other countries. For instance, if trade with electronic equipment increases but trade with foodstuffs decreases, the total amount of trade may decrease, thereby complicating efforts to draw conclusions about an imitation or shift towards or away from China. Therefore, in addition to measuring trade in absolute terms, future research should also measure the percentage that these countries trade with China. Finally, increasing trade with the world's second largest economy does not necessarily portend a shift towards China.

Confounding variables are another limitation. There are multiple factors that drive foreign policy and shape alliances. Therefore, it would be wrong to understand this study as one concerned with causation. Indeed, it cannot be proved that the import of Chinese surveillance technologies *specifically* creates a change in an alliance. This is especially true in the case of authoritarian regimes, which are already predisposed to act more similarly to a country like China. Rather, considering whether there is a correlation with the implementation of surveillance tools and the subsequent direction of US alliances is a more appropriate approach.

The issue of confounding variables is also relevant to the indicators of this study. Decrease in trade between the United States and Saudi Arabia, for example, can be traced to the US' expansion of fracking that decreased its need to import energy reserves. Decreased exports

in the Saudi case due to US efforts to increase energy independence is a critical part of the dynamic that has no bearing on the import of surveillance technologies.

This issue also exists for the public opinion indicator. Poor public opinion towards China since 2019 is likely linked to China's role in the COVID-19 pandemic rather than to the specific variables that this study is concerned with. Furthermore, public opinion's bearing on state behavior and the maintenance of alliances is limited. Countries do not consult with their citizens about which countries to align with. There are innumerable examples, current and historical, of alliances that lay citizens would oppose, such as those between certain Arab states and Israel. Public opinion is included here in an effort to gauge sentiments towards China and the United States following the implementation of Chinese surveillance tools, but the connection to alliance strength should not be exaggerated. The limits of opinion polling is especially prevalent in the authoritarian cases, in which change over time could not even be analyzed due to the dearth of yearly publicly available data.

Conclusion

Digital authoritarianism is a concerning phenomenon. The export of disinformation, surveillance, and other AI tools to countries of all regime types is perhaps the most alarming development of all. The expansion of the surveillance state threatens to erode civil liberties and undercut democracy itself. Therefore, the import of these technologies to countries that are aligned with the United States is of particular interest to the United States.

This research study aims to better understand the relationship between Chinese surveillance technologies and democratic and authoritarian US alliances. Does the import of Chinese digital tools by countries aligned with the United States signify a shift away from Washington and towards Beijing, and is the answer affected by regime type? The hypotheses

predicted that democracies importing Chinese surveillance tools are more likely to be imitating China, while authoritarian nations incorporating these tools are more likely to be pivoting towards China. By analyzing economic and defense indicators and public opinion polls, this paper finds evidence that fellow democracies are imitating aspects of China's digital authoritarianism while authoritarian nations may be using these links to China to deepen collaboration. Despite the findings on authoritarian countries, the United States still maintains its relationships with Egypt and Saudi Arabia, demonstrating that a significant shift towards China, while more likely than France or Germany, has yet to occur.

These findings enhance an important nuance within the literature on digital authoritarianism that claims that this phenomenon in and of itself does not represent a national security risk. This research project specifically adds to the literature. Even though the import of Chinese surveillance technologies has not had an adverse effect on US alliances with its democratic and authoritarian partners, the *authoritarian allies are more likely to shift to China*. As technology continues to advance and cultural and normative differences in values persist between Washington and Beijing, it is conceivable that countries—most likely authoritarian ones—might increase their dealings with China, especially if the United States is unable or unwilling to provide them the technology that China is offering.

Again, this research question would benefit from a 'larger N' analysis to test a larger number of cases. Such an undertaking could employ quantitative methods by pulling in data from numerous databases and running statistical tests between variables not only to test the impact of surveillance technologies on US alliances with democracies and authoritarian states, but also to test which variables may have the largest effect on this relationship. For instance, might economic ties be a better measure for the viability of an alliance than defense cooperation

or public opinion? Given time and resource constraints, this kind of study was not feasible. Still, conducting this kind of test could provide a more holistic understanding of all the variables at play.

In sum, the threat of digital authoritarianism varies based on the context in which it is analyzed. This phenomenon undercuts democratic ideals like privacy and civil liberties. Over time, the erosion of these values could point to a rising tide of authoritarianism and a challenge to liberal democracy. Therefore, the United States would be wise to closely monitor digital authoritarianism, take action to promote its own values, and maintain its strategic relations with allies to curb the spread of Chinese influence.

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Curriculum Vita

Nicholas Damianos was born in Wausau, Wisconsin on October 20th, 1996. In May of 2019, he graduated from Bates College with a bachelor's degree in Politics. Following his college graduation, Nicholas began his graduate studies at Johns Hopkins Krieger School of Arts and Sciences, where he received a combined MA in Global Security Studies/Certificate in Intelligence. Throughout graduate school, he served as a Policy Intern at the Intelligence and National Security Alliance (INSA) where he primarily worked on the Security Policy Reform Council. Nicholas looks forward to starting his new job public sector job in 2022.