



**Jessica L. P. Weeks.** *Dictators at War and Peace*. Cornell Studies in Security Affairs Series. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014. 264 pp. \$75.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8014-5296-3.



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Western victory in the Cold War produced a flood of triumphalist literature on Western liberal-democratic exceptionalism. American social scientists produced a myriad of arguments and hypotheses explaining how and why liberal democracies outlasted and triumphed over its ideological competitors. Authoritarian regimes, in turn, were cast as mere foils and given little analytical attention. However, in the past decade, as nascent democracies stumbled, authoritarian regimes persisted, and Chinese and Iranian ascent threatened US hegemony, political scientists have begun to give authoritarian politics more attention.

*Dictators at War and Peace* by Jessica L. P. Weeks is one of the most significant contributions to this literature. Weeks argues that not all authoritarians are created equal, and this difference affects their likelihood of initiating and winning military conflicts. Building on research from Barbara Geddes and Brian Lai and Dan Slater, Weeks organizes a typology for authoritarian regimes, categorizing them as either “machines” (civilian

leaders constrained by civilian elites), “juntas” (military leaders constrained by military elites), “bosses” (unconstrained civilian leaders), or “strongmen” (unconstrained military leaders).[1] She develops a meticulous questionnaire to ascertain a regime’s type, asking about the military affiliation of the leader and governing elites (militarism), and whether the leader controlled political appointments or created loyalist security institutions (constraints). Weeks argues that machines and juntas are less likely to start international conflicts than bosses and strongmen, because leaders in machines and juntas will face greater domestic punishment for failure, and bosses (e.g., Saddam Hussein) and strongmen (e.g., Muammar Qaddafi) are likely to be more aggressive and risk-prone, given the qualities necessary to become an absolute ruler in the first place. Weeks further hypothesizes that this should make constrained authoritarians more militarily successful than absolute dictators, because they are more prudent about the wars they choose to fight. Thus, while China (machine regime) might pose a greater mili-

tary threat to its neighbors, it is North Korea (boss regime) that may pose the bigger threat, because it is more likely to fight ... but also more likely to lose.

Furthermore, between machines and juntas, Weeks expects juntas to be more aggressive, because military leaders are selected and acculturated to value force and distrust diplomacy, while civilians are likely more wary of conflict and amenable to diplomacy. This makes juntas less selective in the military conflicts than machines and thus less successful in wars. Indeed, Weeks ultimately posits that machines should be just as conflict-averse and militarily successful as stable democracies. As long as the civilian leader is accountable to a conflict-averse audience, s/he is likely to be more mindful about getting involved in foreign adventures. This flies in the face of much of the democratic exceptionalism literature of the post-Cold War era.[2]

Weeks's statistical results bear this out, showing machines to be just as conflict-averse and militarily successful as stable democracies. (Regimes undergoing transitions are counted as "others.") Bosses and strongmen are much more conflict-prone and militarily unsuccessful, with bosses losing 56 percent of their wars and strongmen losing 73 percent versus machines and democracies losing 25 percent and 28 percent, respectively, from 1921 to 2007 (p. 61). The results for juntas are more mixed and less clear, largely due to the limited number of them in the past century. Weeks does an excellent job explaining the statistical results in accessible terms, but the mechanics will likely be difficult for non-statisticians. She also controls for other factors known to explain conflict initiation and success—capabilities, alliances, and geographic contiguity, among others—along with testing the possibility that involvement in conflicts may instead encourage dictatorial consolidation. She finds that none of these are significant factors, though it would have been helpful

for her to consider this reverse causality in the subsequent case studies.

Weeks complements her statistical analysis with several in-depth case studies. The cases include wars involving Argentina (democracy/junta), Iraq (boss), Japan (machine/junta), the Soviet Union (boss/machine), and Vietnam (machine). All are well researched and well written, and they largely establish the effect regime type can have on military performance. However, the cases vary in how well they test the causal connection between regime type and war initiation. The Argentina and Japan cases are the strongest in this regard. Weeks effectively demonstrates that their transitions from a democracy and machine, respectively, to junta regimes increased their faith that military action would overcome diplomatic impasses. She also successfully challenges the long-standing argument that Argentina's initiation of the Falklands/Malvinas war was a diversionary strategy, and instead argues that the military leadership's genuine belief in the efficacy of force—a belief not shared by the previous democratic regime—was determinative. Likewise, Japanese civilian elites in the 1930s were wary of risky foreign adventures, but were eventually overruled and overthrown by the military, who led Japan into war first against China and then the United States. These cases clearly demonstrate the effect regime type had on foreign policy.

Weeks is less successful in demonstrating that the Soviet transition from the Stalinist boss regime to the post-Stalinist machine regimes increased Soviet aggressiveness and military incompetence. Of the four Soviet-initiated invasions from Josef Stalin to Mikhail Gorbachev—against Finland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Afghanistan—all but one occurred under collective leadership. Moreover, under Leonid Brezhnev, whom Weeks lauds as leading the most collectively oriented Soviet regime, Moscow issued the Brezhnev Doctrine, declaring its right to intervene in any socialist country. The Brezhnev

regime then followed through by invading Afghanistan in 1979, initiating the Soviet Union's longest foreign military conflict. Quite surprisingly, Weeks does not examine this war in much detail, explaining that "the Soviets interceded at the invitation of the Afghan government" (p. 166). Yet this was clearly an engineered invitation, and even if not, the Soviet invasion, escalation, and subsequent debacle run directly counter to Weeks's arguments about military initiation and performance. This would have been an ideal least-likely case for Weeks to better elaborate on her causal mechanisms, but this may be left for future scholars to consider.

In contrast to the other cases, the Vietnam and Iraq cases include no variation in either regime type or war initiation/performance. This is less problematic in the Vietnam case, because Weeks notes that General Secretary Le Duan preferred a more aggressive approach toward South Vietnam earlier than others in the government. This suggests a counterfactual that had Le Duan been less constrained, he may have initiated a direct confrontation sooner. The Iraq case, however, has a difficult time fully testing the connection between regime type and conflict initiation. In an earlier chapter, Weeks references Giacomo Chiozza and Hein Goemans's argument in *Leaders and International Conflict* (2011) that vulnerability to harsh domestic punishment makes leaders more likely to "gamble for survival" by engaging in risky foreign adventures (p. 74), as opposed to her argument that *invulnerability* makes leaders more risk-prone. While she tests Chiozza and Goemans's argument in the junta cases and convincingly rejects it, she does not apply it to the Iraq case. Yet the vulnerability argument is a plausible alternative explanation for the foreign policy of Iraq under Saddam Hussein. Arguably, Saddam's decision to invade Kuwait was motivated more by fear than greed. Saddam's absolute rule required paying rents to critical domestic constituencies; Kuwait's over-pumping and slant-drilling drove down Iraq's oil revenues, threatening Saddam's

hold on power. In addition, invading Kuwait allowed Saddam to redirect his battle-hardened and increasingly disgruntled majority-Shi'a army elsewhere. Fear of domestic punishment also offers an alternative explanation of his refusal to withdraw. Saddam justifiably feared revolt, which later came to pass. Weeks acknowledges that there were grumblings among the Sunni generals about a coup as the crisis escalated. The Shi'a and Kurdish uprisings may in fact have saved Saddam, as they rallied the military and Sunni population behind Saddam, who under different circumstances may have overthrown him themselves.

These critiques do not detract from Weeks's extraordinary contribution. Rather, they provide fruitful avenues for future research in an important and still developing research area. Weeks's typology and analysis have laid the foundation for understanding the diversity of authoritarian international politics, and *Dictators at War and Peace* will undoubtedly become the standard for such analysis. Weeks concludes with a brief but very insightful discussion of the policy implications of this authoritarian diversity. Among them is a recommendation to foreign leaders to engage in direct, face-to-face diplomacy with bosses and strongmen, in order to more effectively communicate both threats and assurances. She reasonably worries that sycophantic underlings may water down foreign communications, particularly threats, to appeal to their leaders' existing views. Face-to-face interactions may do a better job of convincing unconstrained dictators that while they may face little domestic punishment for dangerous behavior, there will be severe foreign consequences. It is good advice for a world that is unlikely to be rid of authoritarian governance for the foreseeable future, if ever.

#### Notes

[1]. Barbara Geddes, "What Do We Know about Democratization after Twenty Years?" *Annual Review of Political Science* 2, no. 1 (1999): 115-144; and Brian Lai and Dan Slater, "Institu-

tions of the Offensive: Domestic Sources of Dispute Initiation in Authoritarian Regimes, 1950-1992," *American Journal of Political Science* 50, no. 1 (January 2006): 113-126. Weeks borrows her terminology from Lai and Slater but develops different hypotheses regarding international behavior.

[2]. For a survey, see Michael Brown, Owen Côté, Sean Lynne-Jones, and Steven Miller, eds., *Do Democracies Win Their Wars?* (Boston, MA: MIT Press, 2011).

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