Global autocratic collaboration in times of COVID-19:
Game changer or business as usual in Sino-Gulf relations

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While democratic backlash and a resurgence of autocracies have been identified by scholars since the 2000s, empirical evidence grows that the COVID-19 pandemic facilitates autocratization trends. Expanding executive power at the expense of legislative/judicial branches for the sake of handling COVID-19 constitutes a window of opportunity for political leaders to foster authoritarian structures. This trend is visible across the globe – regardless of whether the respective regimes are autocratic (e.g., Arab region), hybrid (e.g., Latin America) or democratic (e.g., Europe). We argue that this development of fostering autocratic order is not intrinsically national but reinforced externally. Similar to the 'waves of democracy' throughout the last century, this development is characterized by the promotion and diffusion of a certain model of political rule. This project explores the pathways, mechanisms, modes, scope and circumstances of the authoritarian surge and seeks to uncover its effects and repercussions for (trans-)regional power constellations, asking: *Why, how and under which circumstances are autocratic elements disseminated in the current COVID-19 pandemic, with which results?* On a theoretical and conceptual basis, we thereby contribute to the debate on how foreign policy is used as an instrument of authoritarian power consolidation. We identify the transregional sources, diffusing elements (including ideas, institutions, policies, models, behaviors and techniques) and reciprocal pathways of authoritarian collaboration in a time of global fragility and uncertainty, capturing the interplay of global and regional games.

As little is known about the concrete mechanisms of how foreign policy is used as an instrument of authoritarian power consolidation, the project applies an explorative approach, conducting country-specific analyses within the overall Sino-Gulf relationship. The case selection comprises China, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Thereby, we focus not only on countries that reveal a density of linkages and high level of autocratization, but also include several of the "Big Five" authoritarian countries (China, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Russia and Venezuela) that are assumed to be responsible for the authoritarian surge.

The project consists of two research packages (RPs). RP1 deals with the traveling of autocratic practices: How does global autocratic collaboration manifest in times of crises? To what extent and under which circumstances do Gulf countries use China's modes of Corona-governance as a blueprint? Are there channels of autocratic learning/emulation? In this RP, we examine COVID-19-related practices/tools such as tracing apps, surveillance technology or disinformation campaigns aimed at fostering autocratic practices. RP2 addresses competition for China's favor: How are regional actors competing in terms of their 'special relations' with China? How are they trying to be better than the neighbors, who have so far been seen as part of the same "epistemic community"? And ultimately, how does the current crisis affect regional power games of cooperation, conflict and competition?