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Autocratic power? Energy megaprojects in the age of democratic backsliding[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Cross-border energy megaprojects play an important role in global energy transition. However, energy megaprojects have enormous impacts on socio-political systems. The global decline of democratic norms in the last decade has important implications for energy megaprojects, which have not been systematically examined. This article examines the mutual constitution between autocratization and energy megaprojects. It develops a conceptual framework that appraises the link between authoritarian durability and the incentives and risks of energy megaprojects. The article engages with data on political rights and civil liberties in 16 countries involved in five forthcoming energy megaprojects. It finds that energy megaprojects offer five pathways to the enhancement of authoritarian durability, namely 1) Autocratic Linkage, 2) Coercion of Rivals, 3) Cultivating Dependence, 4) Symbolic Politics and 5) Spheres of Influence. The research also finds that autocratization exacerbates known risks of energy megaprojects. This suggests that autocratization can increase the likelihood of megaprojects being constructed but magnifies the prospect of megaproject failure. The article advances knowledge on autocratization and democratic backsliding by proposing that forthcoming energy megaprojects can be a key element of authoritarian durability. The research contributes to an understanding of energy megaprojects as dynamic entities that respond to and influence diverse governance systems across political boundaries. The analysis proposes that policy choices between environmental protection and the economic development is made more complex by autocratic capture of energy technologies, indicating that global efforts towards balancing climate change mitigation with poverty alleviation must also consider the impact of these initiatives on democratic backsliding.

1. Introduction

Energy megaprojects can facilitate the large-scale generation and distribution of low-carbon energy, thereby contributing to the goal of limiting global warming to 1.5 °C above pre-industrial levels. Off-grid and decentralized renewable energy projects offer flexible solutions to growing demand for renewable energy. Yet, megaprojects can exploit comparative advantages in renewable energy potentials between countries and address the variable nature of renewable energy supplies. In a likely scenario of energy transition, global supplies will be met by a combination of decentralized energy systems and transnational energy megaprojects [1–3]. In addition to the important role of megaprojects in energy transition, they may also facilitate regional peacebuilding and integration by reducing political tensions between countries in the Asia Pacific [4,5].

Notwithstanding the importance of energy megaprojects to national energy policies and regional integration agendas, their impact on sustainable development is impeded by technical complexity, frequent cost over-runs and high levels of stakeholder conflict [6–8]. Megaprojects have come under increasing criticism for not delivering perceived

economic benefits, while extracting disproportionate ecological, social and environmental costs [9]. Despite these disadvantages, a number of factors such as the economies of scale, the agglomeration of industry and growth in regulation have led to an exponential rise in the development of energy megaprojects around the world [10,11]. As per a study by the McKinsey Global Institute [12] sustaining global economic growth will require an aggregate investment in infrastructure of \$69.4 trillion between 2017 and 2035, of which energy projects comprise the largest share of \$20.2 trillion. Energy megaprojects, which are known to be recession proof are likely to be prioritized within post-COVID-19 economic recovery plans [13,14]. Currently, multiple transnational gas pipelines, regional hydroelectric dams and electricity grids are at various stages of construction or negotiation in the Asia Pacific and Eurasia [15–17].

The exponential rise in the number of energy megaproject initiatives has somewhat overlapped with the global decline in democratic norms. A report by Freedom in the World states that 2021 was the 16th consecutive year of global democratic decline [18]. The Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project's 2022 Democracy Report shows that the share of the world's population living in autocracies increased from 49%

[☆] The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the OSCE Academy in Bishkek.

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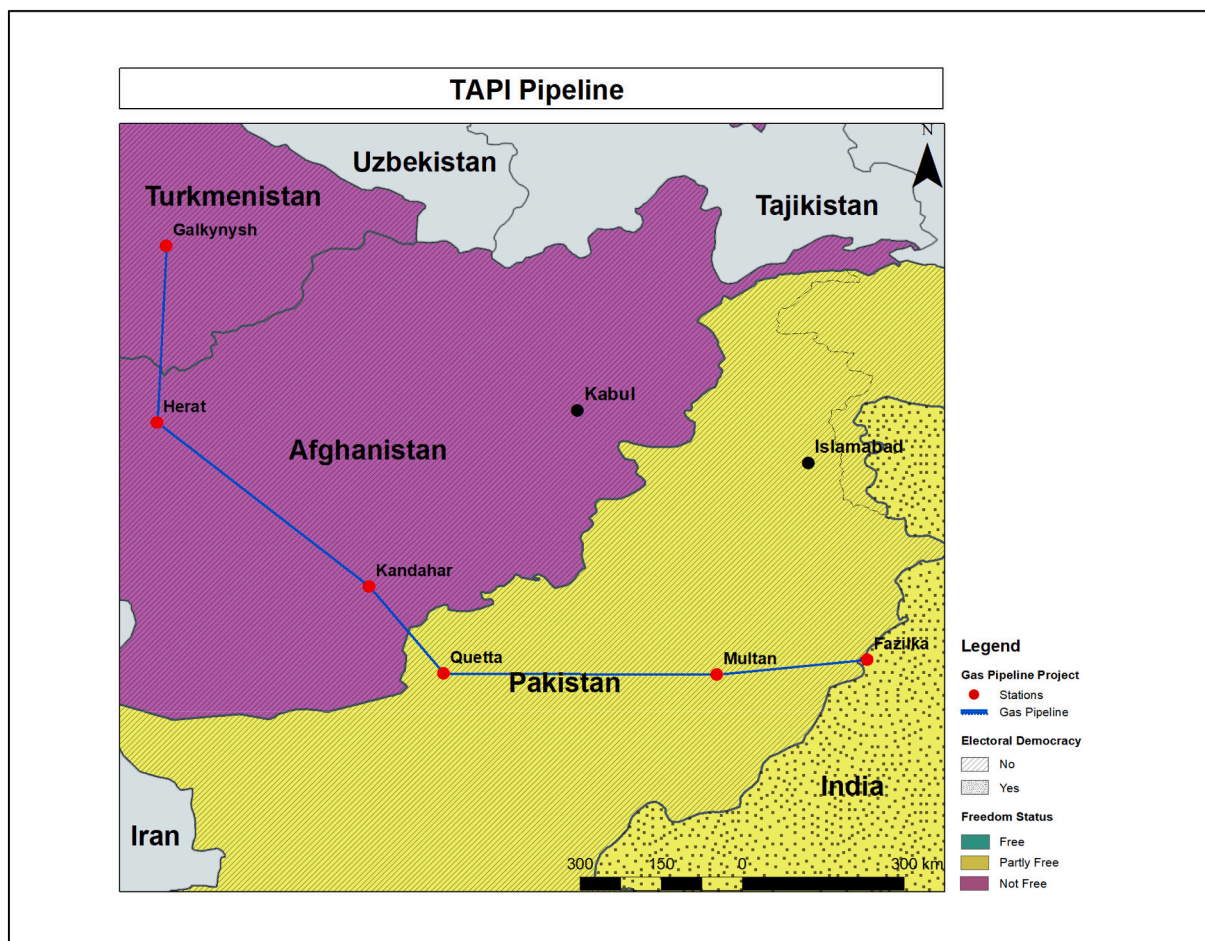


Fig. 1. Political regimes of the TAPI Pipeline.

in 2011 to 70% in 2021 [19]. Multiple countries across the globe, including established and new democracies and hybrid and closed regimes have experienced an increase in repressive practises such as curtailing of freedom of speech, reduction in executive accountability and judicial autonomy and repression of legitimate forms of dissent [20–23]. The COVID-19 Pandemic provided further impetus to autocrats to curb freedom of speech and implement mass surveillance programs. The contemporary decline of democratic norms is expected to impact upon all aspects of the international system, including international cooperation on infrastructure development [24,25].

The link between autocratization and energy megaprojects is increasingly become relevant. Figs. 1–5 [26] demonstrates cartographic representations of the level of freedom and type of political systems in five forthcoming energy megaprojects, based on data from ‘Freedom in the World 2013–2020 Raw Data Set’ and the ‘Electoral Democracies in Freedom in the World 2020’ developed by Freedom House [27]. These megaprojects are briefly described below:

1) The Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India (TAPI) pipeline: The TAPI aims to transfer 33 billion m^3 of gas from Turkmenistan's Galkynysh field (with a capacity of 16 trillion $ft.^3$) through Afghanistan to Pakistan and then into India. Construction on 1600 km pipeline began in 2015 and is expected to be completed in 2022. The ADB has been TAPI's secretariat since 2002 and has spearheaded the legal, institutional and technical aspects of the project that costs \$7.6 billion USD [28]. As shown in Fig. 1, none of the countries involved in the TAPI are classified as ‘Free’ and only one is an electoral democracy.

2) The Central Asia-South Asia power project (CASA-1000): This project envisions the transfer of 1300 MW of hydroelectricity from the Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan to Afghanistan and Pakistan. The majority of electricity export will take place in the summer months when Central Asia has excess capacity, while South Asian urban centres face energy shortages. Construction of the transmission lines has commenced in Afghanistan and the project is expected to be completed in 2023. CASA-1000 will cost 1.17 billion USD and is supported by the World Bank, the Islamic Development Bank and USAID [29]. Fig. 2 demonstrates that three of the countries involved in the CASA 1000 are classified as ‘Not Free’ while none of them are electoral democracies.

3) The Upper Karnali Dam: The Upper Karnali Dam is a 900 MW run-of-the-river hydropower project on the Karnali River in Nepal. A majority of the generated electricity will be exported to India and Bangladesh through cross-border transmission lines. The project is being developed by India's GMR Group and is expected to be completed by 2025. In November 2019 a Power Purchase Agreement was signed between the government of Bangladesh and the GMR group on energy export. The estimated cost of the project is \$1.5 billion USD and is supported by the International Finance Corporation (IFC) [30]. As shown in Fig. 3, all three countries involved in the Upper Karnali project are classified as ‘Partly Free’ and two are electoral democracies.

4) The Dorjilung Dam: The Dorjilung Dam is a 1125 MW hydroelectric project on the Kurichhu River in Bhutan. The main objective of this project is to export electricity to Bangladesh and India via regional electricity interconnections. Bhutan's Druk Green Power Corporation is developing the project with support from the World Bank. The

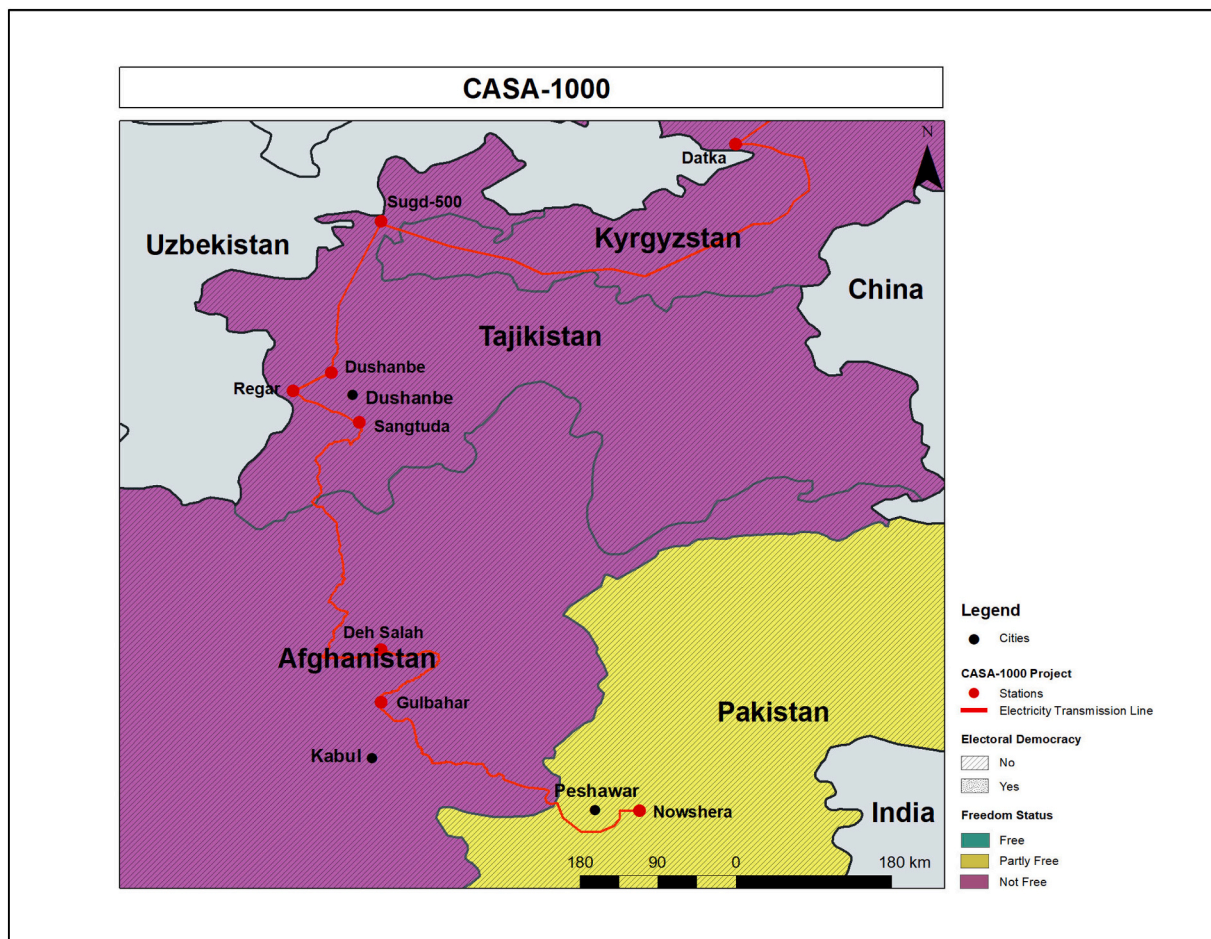


Fig. 2. Political regimes of the CASA 1000 Project.

Dorjilung dam is expected to cost \$1.25 billion USD and the preliminary agreements related to the project is expected to be completed by 2023. Currently, discussions are being undertaken on an MoU between Bangladesh, Bhutan and India on the specifications of the project [31]. Fig. 4 shows that all countries involved in the Dorjilung project are 'Partly Free' but unlike the other megaprojects, a majority are electoral democracies.

- Gobitec: The Gobitec project aims to harness the wind and solar resources in the Gobi Desert to provide clean energy to urban centres in Mongolia, China, North Korea, South Korea and Japan [32]. The Gobitec is expected to produce 100 GW of electricity and cost around \$550 billion USD. The project is expected to foster the development of the 'Asian Super Grid', which is a more ambitious plan of connecting the grids of Northeast Asian countries to Russia. Currently, the Gobitec is at the planning and feasibility stage and international organizations such as the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA) have developed studies on the technical and economic aspects of the project [33]. As show in Fig. 5, while three of the members of the Gobitec are considered to be 'Free', China and North Korea are classified as 'Not Free' and do not fall under the category of electoral democracies.

The maps above highlight that a majority of countries participating in forthcoming energy megaprojects are classified as "partly free" or "not free" and many do not meet the requirements of an electoral democracy. While, it can be argued that these regions have traditionally faced democratic challenges, analysis of historical data, demonstrated by Fig. 6 shows that in recent years there has been a marked increase in autocratization, with global freedom scores decreasing by as much as 17

in Bangladesh and 16 in Tajikistan between 2013 and 2021. China and India, the largest and third largest energy consumers in the world respectively have come under international scrutiny for authoritarian and repressive practises, which has seen their scores in the global freedom index decrease by 8 and 9 in the last eight years [34,35]. These two countries are also participants and financiers of numerous transnational energy projects around the globe and can influence the political systems of multiple countries through economic and political patronage.

Scholars of regime change perceive autocratization as a process that changes the very nature of governance [36,37]. The growth of illiberal regimes can therefore influence the response by state and non-state actors to the challenges and opportunities offered by energy megaprojects. In turn, energy megaprojects through their disproportionate impact on societies, environment and finance can influence political systems [38]. Examining the interactions between energy megaprojects and the global decline in democratic norms is therefore of critical importance. Yet, the link between energy megaproject development and autocratization remains unexplored. Literature on autocratization and energy megaprojects are largely insulated from each other, which prevents the development of interdisciplinary theoretical approaches that can advance existing knowledge of the impact of regime changes on transnational infrastructure projects.

To address this research gap, this article aims to answer the following research question: *How does autocratization influence and is influenced by the development of energy megaprojects?* To answer this question, I contextualise Cassani and Tomini's [39] interpretation of autocratization on the four "sublimes" or incentives of megaprojects as conceptualized by Flyvbjerg [40] and the 5 risks of megaproject failure as suggested by Sovacool and Cooper [41]. I draw on data produced by Freedom House

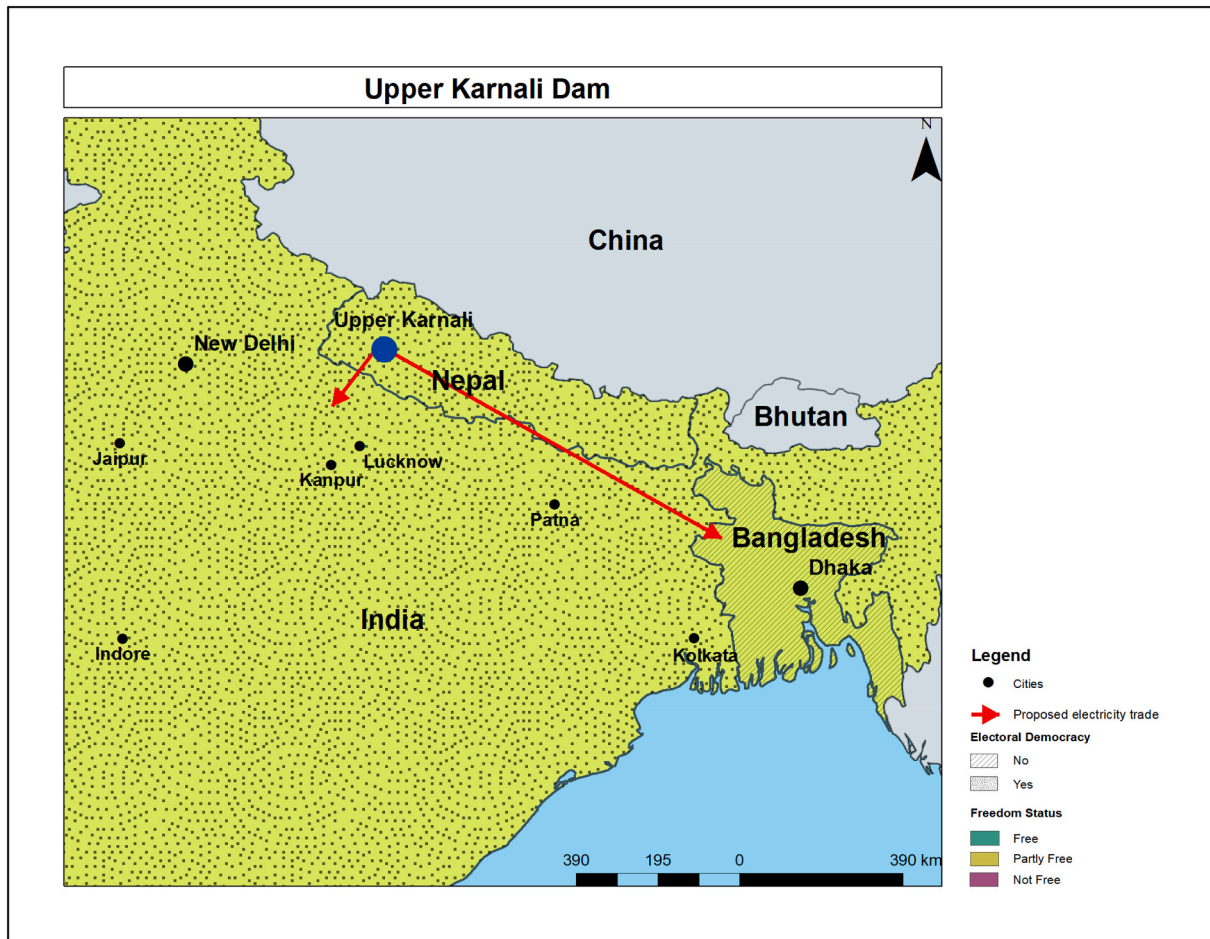


Fig. 3. Political regimes of the Upper Karnali Dam.

to facilitate analysis of autocratization in 16 countries involved in five upcoming energy megaprojects. The data analysis is explained further in the methodology section.

The findings of this article suggest that energy megaprojects offer five pathways to the enhancement of authoritarian durability, namely 1) Autocratic Linkage, 2) Coercion of Rivals, 3) Cultivating Dependence, 4) Symbolic Politics and 5) Spheres of Influence. The research also shows that a decline in pluralistic and democratic approaches to governance facilitated by autocratization increases the key political, social and environmental risks of energy megaprojects. The results suggest that autocratization can increase the likelihood of megaprojects being constructed but magnifies the prospect of megaproject failure [42]. While acknowledging the environmental benefits and peacebuilding potentials of energy megaprojects, the article draws attention to the challenges presented by autocratization.

This article is one of the first studies to systematically examine the impact of autocratization on energy megaprojects. The research advances knowledge on the contemporary phenomenon of autocratization by proposing that transnational energy infrastructures are a key element of authoritarian durability. This article contributes to an understanding of energy megaprojects as dynamic entities that respond to and influence diverse governance systems across political boundaries. The analysis provides a transnational context to the four incentives of megaprojects suggested by Flyvbjerg to propose that cross-border megaprojects are also driven by a fifth incentive, which I call the 'geo-strategic sublime'.

The article is divided into four parts. Firstly, the article analyses existing literature before providing a conceptual framework through which the relationship between autocratization and energy

megaprojects can be understood. It then describes the methodology of the research. This is then followed by an appraisal of the mutual constitution between authoritarian durability and energy megaprojects. The concluding section of the article summarizes the findings and highlights areas of future research.

2. Literature review

The theoretical rationale of mutual constitution between infrastructures and political systems is rooted in literature on constructivism [43,44] which argues that the world is constituted socially through intersubjective interaction and ideational factors such as norms and identity play a key role in world politics. Bermeo [45] and Waldner and Lust [46] point towards the systematic impact of illiberal policies on the institutions and functions of the state, which are then co-opted to further the agenda of autocrats. Cassani and Tomini [47] argue that regime change towards autocratization is constituted through the "modification of the formal and informal institutions regulating how to assign and exercise political power". Scholars of energy megaprojects engage with similar philosophical frameworks that account for mutual constitution between infrastructure, politics and ideational factors. Sovacool and Cooper [48] propose that energy megaprojects are "congealed cultures" in the sense that the "social interests of those designing the project get built into the system, rather than becoming a latent or unintended result". The authors argue that energy megaprojects reflect the values and interests of society and are powerful cultural and political symbols. While, energy megaprojects are influenced by socio-political dynamics, they in turn impact upon society through "trait making" characteristics that initiate structural change in socio-political systems

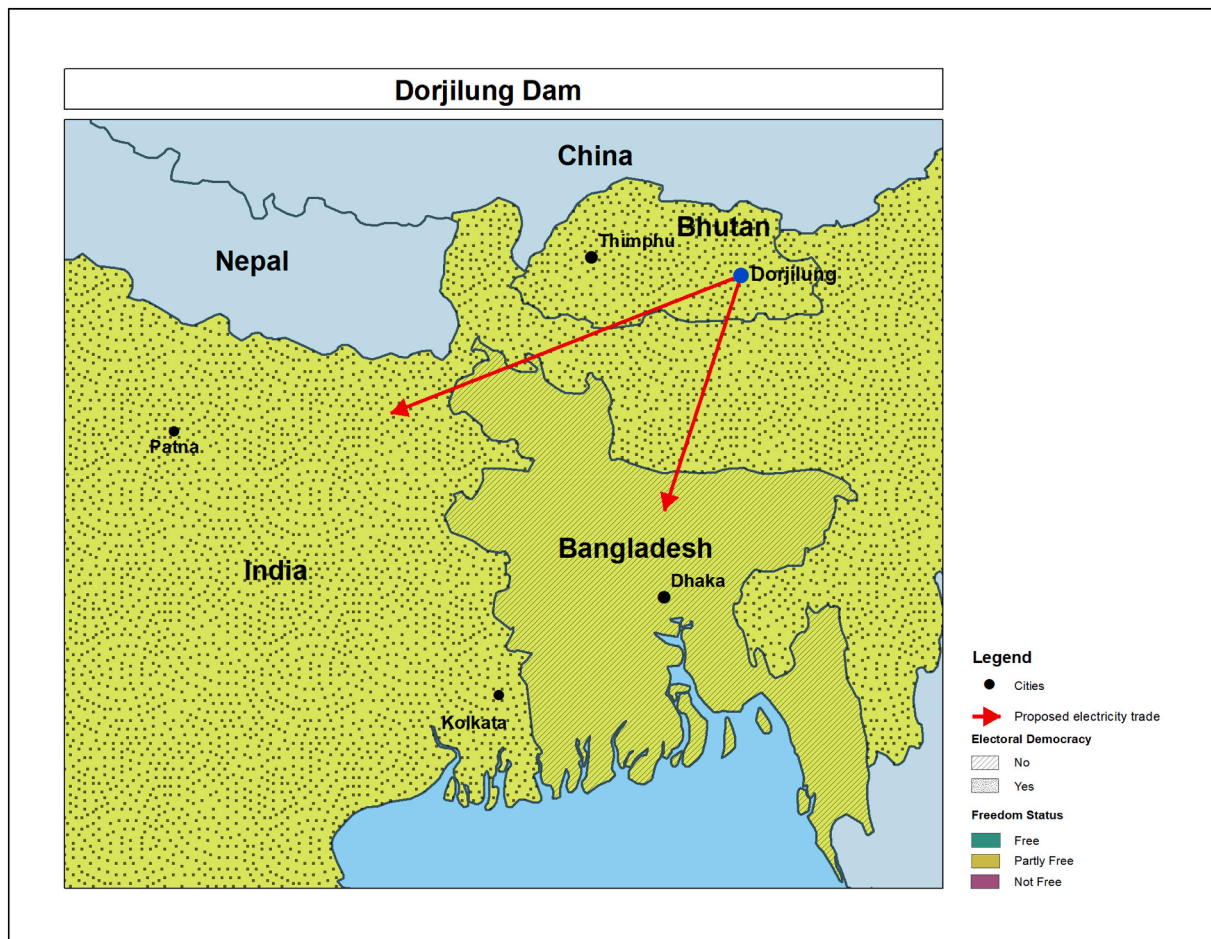


Fig. 4. Political regimes of the Dorjilung Dam.

[49]. In the sections below, I delve into the main implications of studies on autocratization and energy megaprojects, before accessing potential theoretical linkages between these two fields of literature.

2.1. Autocratization

Academics have used quantitative and qualitative methodologies to demonstrate the contemporary decline in democratic norms across multiple geographic regions, including Southeast Europe [50], Southeast Asia [51], South Asia [52] and Africa [53]. Yet, there is substantial debate about whether the decline of democracies is a global, transformative phenomenon or confined to specific countries or socio-economic systems. Mechkova et al. [54] uses data from the V-Dem to find that while democracies are facing significant challenges, there is little evidence of a global crisis. This finding is contradicted by Hyde [55], whose empirical study uses the Electoral Democracy Index to establish the contemporary decline in democracy across multiple regions. A nuanced perspective is provided by Bauer and Becker [56], who conclude that while predictions about the collapse of liberal democracy is exaggerated, the current global political climate is marked by a notable deterioration in democratic and liberal norms. While some scholars argue that the global deterioration of democratic norms are attributable to a decline in Western support for democracy [57] others argue that powerful autocratic regimes have directly and indirectly promoted illiberal regimes, leading to the global phenomenon of “strong man” governments [58].

A majority of existing studies on the deterioration of liberal democracies have classified this phenomenon as “democratic backsliding” [59–61] which is sometimes also referred as “democratic erosion” [62]

or “democratic decline” [63]. Waldner and Lust [64] describe democratic backsliding as “a deterioration of qualities associated with democratic governance, within any regime”. Bermeo [65] engages more specifically with agent-structure constructs of democratic backsliding, which is defined as “the state-led debilitation or elimination of any of the political institutions that sustain an existing democracy”. Hyde [66] infers democratic backsliding as a process that facilitates regime change through “incremental changes away from representative democracy and toward authoritarianism”.

While there are subtle variations in interpretations, there is general consensus on two important characteristic that makes democratic backsliding distinct from reversion to autocracy: Firstly, unlike the dramatic transition facilitated by coup d'états, democratic backsliding occurs through what Waldner and Lust has called “fine-grained degrees of change” [67]. As demonstrated by Hyde [68] and Bermeo [69] this process of democratic erosion has enormous implications for free and fair elections, accountability of the executive and freedom of speech. Secondly, democratic backsliding in the form of curbing media freedom and judicial autonomy is often facilitated through legal channels and framed as a result of a democratic mandate, a process which Bermeo [70] calls “executive aggrandizement”.

Literature on democratic backsliding provide adequate frameworks to access the contemporary decline of the quality of established democracies. However, by stressing democracy as the point of departure, existing definitions of democratic backsliding do not account for increasing repression in hybrid or closed regimes. As shown in Figs. 1–6, countries involved in forthcoming energy megaprojects include democracies, hybrid as well as closed regimes, a majority of which have faced increasingly levels of autocratization. To identify a conceptual

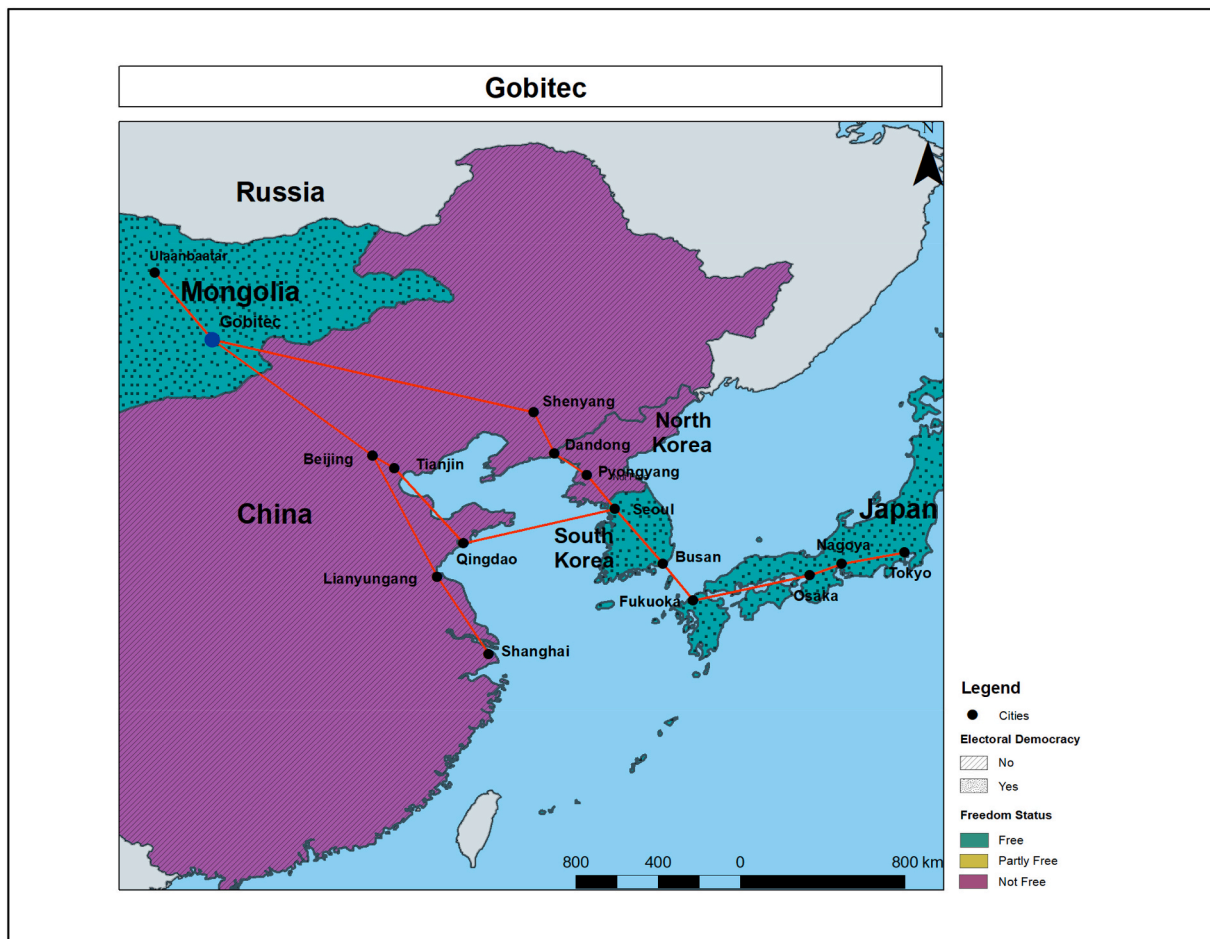


Fig. 5. Political regimes of the Gobitec.

framework that captures the growth of illiberal norms in democratic and non-democratic regimes involved in energy megaprojects, reference can be made to Cassani and Tommini's [71] theory of "autocratization". The authors offer autocratization as a conceptual tool to study regime changes opposite to democratization, and defines it as "a process of regime change towards autocracy that makes politics increasingly exclusive and monopolistic, and political power increasingly repressive and arbitrary" [72]. Autocratization in this context has broader application than democratic backsliding as it "arches over any process of regime change that shares a direction towards autocracy, regardless of the point of departure" [73]. This study therefore adopts Cassani and Tommini's definition of autocratization to measure the impact of regime change on energy megaprojects. In doing so, it also engages with perceptions within literature on democratic backsliding on the impacts of illiberal practices on governance, institutions, accountability and participation.

2.2. Energy megaprojects

Energy megaprojects have been the subject of a small but growing body of academic literature [74–77]. These studies use diverse frameworks to access the political, social, environmental and economic aspects of energy megaprojects [78,79]. Callegari and Schaeffer [80] applies a probabilistic distribution functions of cost overruns and delays to large-scale hydroelectric dams in Brazil to demonstrate that energy megaprojects fail to deliver economies of scale as the exposure to risk is disproportionate to the financial benefits. Kian et al. [81] argues that project complexity is one of the biggest challenges to the success of energy megaprojects. The authors suggest a Project Complexity

Assessment tool that enables quantitative measurement of energy megaprojects. Köberle et al. [82] claim that while energy megaprojects suffer from "diseconomies of scale" due to construction cost overruns, optimistic assumptions about their techno-economic performance have prevented higher shares of non-hydro renewables and other low carbon energy options.

A majority of extant literature has not provided a definition of energy megaprojects [83–85]. These studies have drawn from the broader field of literature on megaprojects, particularly the seminal studies by Bent Flyvbjerg [86,87] and Edward Merrow [88] to describe the unique features of these initiatives in terms of costs, influence and complexity. Almost all studies have conceptualized energy megaprojects as a variant of megaprojects, which is defined by Flyvbjerg [89] as "Large-scale, complex ventures that typically cost a billion dollars or more, take many years to develop and build, involve multiple public and private stakeholders, are transformational, and impact millions of people".

Arguably, the most comprehensive text on energy megaprojects is Sovacool and Cooper's seminal study "The governance of energy megaprojects politics, hubris and energy security". In this volume, the author's draw on literature on energy governance, energy security and theories from social governance, technological systems, democratic politics, externality economics and risk assessment to appraise the development of energy megaprojects in the United States, Asia, Europe and the Middle East. The authors define energy megaprojects as initiatives involving "at least \$1 billion of capital investment and a geographic scale transiting at least three countries" [90]. This definition incorporates the financial complexity identified by Flyvbjerg but contributes a much-needed spatial dimension to the understanding of energy megaprojects. As energy issues are increasingly driven by global

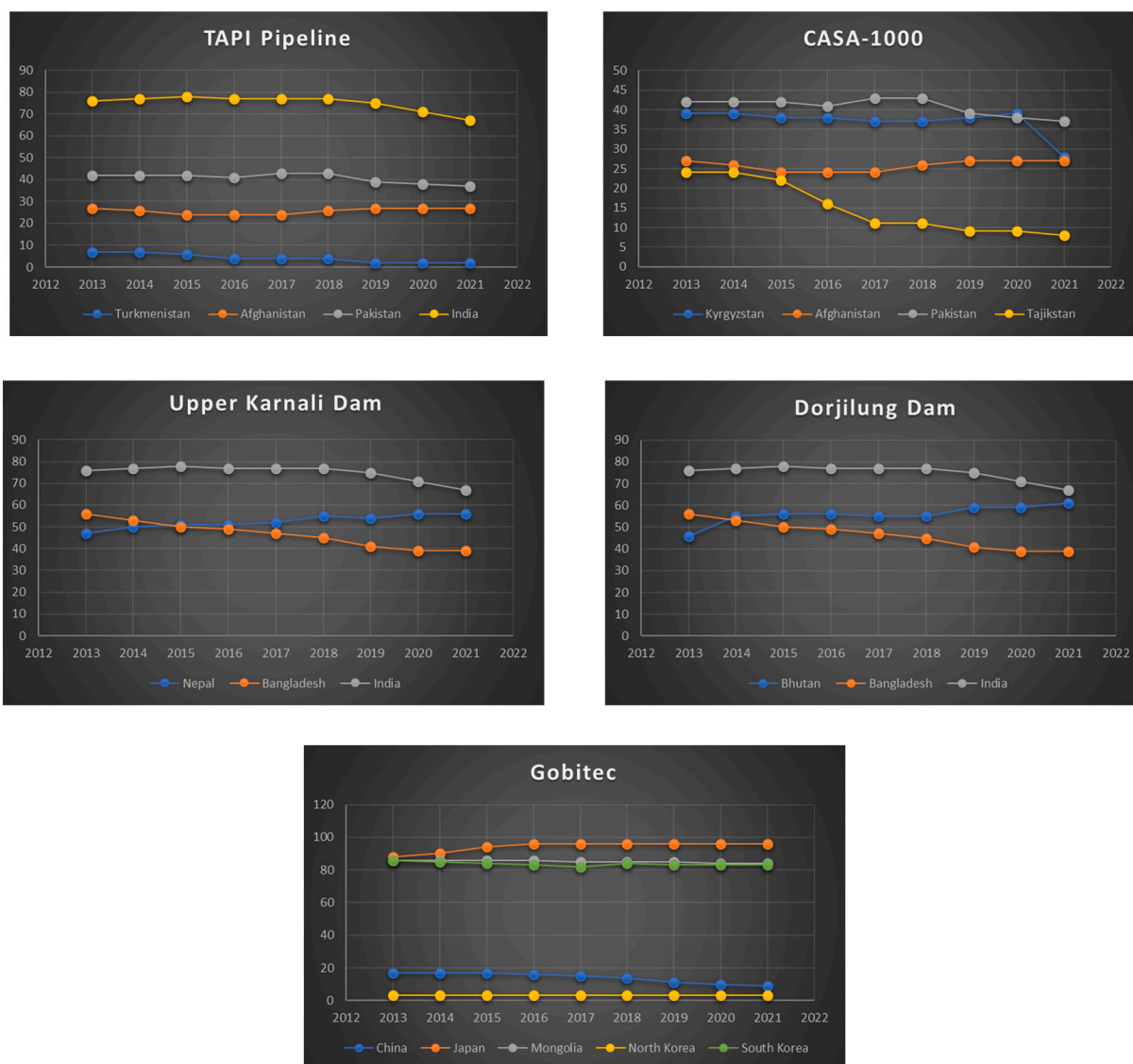


Fig. 6. Energy megaprojects and global freedom scores 2013–2021.¹
¹X axis represents Global Freedom Scores. Y axis represents years from 2013 to 2021. Source: ‘Freedom in the World 2013–2020 Raw Data Set’ Freedom House (2020). 2021 scores take from ‘Countries and Territories’ Database, Freedom House, <https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores>.

integration framework such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) [91,92] and the Free and Open Indo Pacific Strategy (FOIP), it is important to consider energy megaprojects as transnational infrastructures that exist across multiple political boundaries. This research therefore incorporates the definition of energy megaprojects provided by Sovacool and Cooper.

2.3. Conceptual framework: authoritarian durability and incentives and risks of energy megaprojects

Identifying contextually relevant definitions of autocratization and energy megaprojects leaves open the question of how these two issues connect to each other. One point of departure in creating this conceptual linkage is an examination of connections between survival strategies of autocratic regimes and the incentives offered by energy megaprojects.

Literature on “authoritarian durability”, also known as “authoritarian stability” and “autocratic resilience” provide insights into the various policy mechanisms that dictators use to prolong their rule [93,94]. Slater and Fenner [95] provide an overarching appraisal of the particular state apparatuses that autocratic regimes employ to coerce

rivals, register citizens, extract revenues and cultivate dependence. Other studies examine the connection between authoritarian durability and the extraction of natural resources [96], social media [97], diplomatic relations [98] and elections [99]. Mullenite [100] and Middeldorp and Le Billon [101] provide important insights into the use of water resources and environmental governance by illiberal regimes to consolidate power. However, the focus of these studies is on domestic, rather than transnational projects. While literature on authoritarian durability do not explicitly engage with energy megaprojects, they provide key insights into the assets, technologies and relationships that are utilized by autocrats to negate democratization. These insights can provide clues on how autocratic regimes will respond to energy megaprojects.

Within literature on energy megaprojects, one of recurring themes is the issue of vested interests. Support for transnational pipelines, hydroelectric dams and renewable energy hubs exists within national governments [102], multilateral development banks [103] and regional organizations [104]. However, while extant literature has made important contributions towards understanding the desirability of megaprojects, they provide little clues on the underlying factors that

Table 1
Energy megaprojects and political rights and civil liberties.

Project	Type	Cost (US \$ billion)	Status	Completion date	Member countries	Political rights	Civil liberties	Average political rights	Average civil liberties	Classification
TAPI Pipeline	Gas Pipeline 33 billion m ³ of gas export	7.6	Construction	2022	Turkmenistan	0	2	16	18	PF
					Afghanistan	13	14			
					India	34	33			
					Pakistan	15	22			
CASA-1000	Hydroelectric Dams and Grid 1300 MW of electricity export	1.17	Construction	2023	Kyrgyzstan	4	24	8	17	NF
					Afghanistan	13	14			
					Pakistan	15	22			
					Tajikistan	0	8			
Upper Karnali Dam	Hydroelectric Dam and Grid 900 MW installed capacity	1.5	Negotiation	2025	Bangladesh	15	24	25	29	PF
					India	34	33			
					Nepal	25	31			
Dorjilung Dam	Hydroelectric Dam and Grid 1125 MW installed capacity	1.25	Negotiation	TBA	Bangladesh	15	24	26	29	PF
					Bhutan	30	31			
Gobitec	Solar and Wind Farms 100 GW of installed capacity	550	Planning	TBA	China	-2	11	21	33	PF
					Japan	40	56			
					Mongolia	36	48			
					North Korea	0	3			
					South Korea	33	50			

drive multistakeholder interest in these initiatives, apart from broad references to geopolitical, economic or environmental incentives [105,106]. Such narratives do not comprehensively explain why pipelines and hydroelectric dams that are uneconomical or environmentally unsustainable receive support from a wide range of stakeholders. One of the few frameworks for measuring vested interests in megaprojects is provided by Flyvbjerg [107] (2014; 2017). The author systematically draws on empirical analysis of multiple megaprojects to propose that these initiatives are driven by four types of incentives, namely political, technological, economic and aesthetic. While Flyvbjerg's analysis provides valuable insights, it is somewhat disconnected from the transnational dimensions of megaprojects, which are increasingly becoming relevant through initiatives such as the BRI and FOIP.

Literature on megaprojects also highlight challenges of these initiatives such as cost over-runs, delays and environmental harm [108,109]. However, these studies fall short of providing a theoretic framework that can account for the mutual constitution of these risks with dynamic socio-political systems. In a marked exception to this trend, Sovacool and Cooper [110] draw on literature on social governance, technological systems, democratic politics, externality economics and risk assessment accountability to highlight 5 key risks of energy megaprojects, namely stakeholder conflict, complexity and costliness, externalization of costs, corruption and autocratic practises, and biased projections of costs and benefits.

Literature on authoritarian durability and studies on the incentives and risks of energy megaprojects therefore provide certain parameters and frameworks through which the impact of autocratization on energy megaprojects can be measured. In the next section, I describe the methodology of the study before analyzing the mutual constitution between energy megaprojects and autocratization.

3. Methodology

This research employs a variant of the mixed method research approach, namely the Triangulation Design, which is used to obtain different but complementary data on the same topic in order to best understand the research problem [111]. The Triangulation Design has been chosen as it allows the comparison and contrast of quantitative data with qualitative findings, thereby producing valid and well-substantiated research findings [112]. As described by Sovacool et al.

[113] research on energy social science can benefit from the effective implementation of multiple methods, which can “lead to more sophisticated answers to research questions and can help overcome the limitations of individual research approaches”.

The quantitative component of the methodology utilizes the ‘Freedom in the World 2013–2020 Raw Data Set’ and the ‘Electoral Democracies in Freedom in the World 2020’ data set produced by Freedom House to facilitate cartographic and quantitative analysis of autocratization in countries involved in upcoming energy megaprojects. The ‘Freedom in the World’ data set has a two-tier methodology: It provides a numerical score of freedom in over 200 countries and territories of the world over the last seven years based on a combination of points for 10 political rights indicators and 15 civil liberties indicators; based on these scores it provides a status to each country ranging from ‘Free’, ‘Partly Free’ and ‘Not Free’. The ‘Electoral Democracies’ data set distinguishes between countries that meets minimum scores for electoral process, political rights and civil liberties and those that don't.

The quantitative data is appraised in the context of 16 countries involved in five major energy megaprojects: The TAPI Pipeline, the CASA-1000, the Upper Karnali Dam, the Dorjilung Dam and Gobitec. The choice of these projects has been based on three criteria: 1) Conformity to the definition of energy megaprojects as defined by Sovacool and Cooper [90]; 2) Projects that connect sub-regions, such as South Asia with Central Asia and Europe with East Asia; and 3) Projects that are important in the context of energy transition, which includes “bridge fuels” such as gas and renewables such as solar. To analyze the quantitative data, I used Microsoft Excel to extract relevant numerical scores related to political rights, civil liberties and aggregate freedom for each country. Extracted data was compared with alternative datasets, such as the V-Dem project to identify bias or omissions.

I then used these data to undertake cartographic and quantitative analysis through Figs. 1–6 and Table 1. In Fig. 1–5 the 2021 “Freedom Status” of each country is cartographically represented using Geographic Information Systems. A second map layer is used to demonstrate the number of electoral democracies involved in these energy megaprojects. In Fig. 6, I draw on global freedom scores from 2013 to 2021 to demonstrate incremental levels of change over time. In Table 1, I calculate the average level of political rights and civil liberties of the participants of five energy megaprojects. I apply this score to existing matrix provided by Freedom House to designate the collective

political status of the members of the five energy megaprojects as “Free”, “Not Free” and “Partly Free”.

The qualitative component of the methodology relied extensively on literature review. Due to the nature of the research topic, this paper employed a semi-systematic or narrative review approach, which is “designed for topics that have been conceptualized differently and studied by various groups of researchers within diverse disciplines” [114]. The semi-systematic approach is therefore suitable to this particular review, as it covers studies on megaprojects, energy megaprojects, autocratization and democratic backsliding. The review used two broad types of literature. First, relevant academic articles were extracted from Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect and JSTOR. Second, the review engaged with reports from the Asian Development Bank, the World Bank, the International Energy Agency, Freedom House, and V-Dem Institute. From these two sources, four groups of literature were collected: megaprojects, energy megaprojects, autocratization and democratic backsliding. The collected qualitative data was then analysed by identifying overlapping themes between the incentives and risks of infrastructure projects and the modus operandi of autocratic states.

The final step in the Triangulation Design is the synthesis of qualitative and quantitative data through a process of interpretation, which ensured that the analysis is both rigorous and generalizable.

The research design is limited by the lack of interviews with policymakers and community members, which would have added to the richness of the discourse. This limitation was a result of the relatively broad geographic scope of the research, which covered 16 countries, as well as difficulties of conducting fieldwork during the COVID-19 pandemic.

4. The mutual constitution between autocratization and energy megaprojects

In this section below, I systematically analyze the impact of autocratization on the development of energy megaprojects. To do this, I apply literature on autocratization to the 4 incentives of megaprojects suggested by Flyvbjerg and the 5 risks to megaprojects proposed by Sovacool and Cooper, which are described above in the Conceptual Framework section. In addition to the four incentives suggested by Flyvbjerg, I propose that cross-border megaprojects are also driven by a fifth incentive, which I call the ‘geo-strategic sublime’.

The qualitative findings are complimented by analysis of quantitative data in Table 1, which demonstrates the political rights and civil liberty scores of each participating country and a cumulative classification of the participants of each megaproject as “Partly free” and “Not free”. The analysis proposes five broad pathways through which energy megaprojects enhance authoritarian durability, namely 1) Autocratic Linkage, 2) Coercion of Rivals, 3) Cultivating Dependence, 4) Symbolic Politics and 5) Spheres of Influence.

4.1. Autocratic linkage

One of the key propositions of Flyvbjerg’s study on megaprojects is that politicians support these initiatives as they provide public and media attention to themselves and their cause, which he calls the “political sublime” [115]. As exemplified by the political overtures related to the development of the Parliament Building in democratic Scotland and the Grand Renaissance Dam in autocratic Ethiopia, this proposition holds true regardless of regime types. However, autocratic regimes that participate in energy megaprojects are also incentivized by regime survival. Scholarship on “autocratic linkage” [116] and “autocratic support” [117] illuminates how international cooperation and external support has a systematic effect on the duration of illiberal regimes. Political support for certain energy megaprojects stems from a patron-client relationship between powerful and less-powerful autocratic states. In such cases, the political incentive of energy megaprojects

includes both the “rapture” of media attention [118] and the “international politics of autocratic survival” [119]. A case in point is the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) Pipeline. The United States supported the BTC Pipeline to counter Russian influence in the Caspian Sea region, and also to support the growth of democratic institutions and civil society [120]. 16 years after the completion of the BTC, illiberal regimes are firmly entrenched in Turkey and Azerbaijan, while Georgia has failed to create a vibrant democratic system. Rather than promote democracy, energy megaprojects such as the BTC and the South Caucasus Pipeline have consolidated the “autocratic linkage” between Turkey and Azerbaijan, as exemplified by the Ankara’s unconditional political and military support to Baku in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Kaya’s [121] empirical study on transnational oil and gas pipelines demonstrates that energy megaprojects promote authoritarianism in autocratic regions and reduces the probability of regime failure, which resonates strongly with the underpinning objectives of autocrats to “reduce negative spillovers that arise from democratization elsewhere and to maximize own chances for survival” [122].

In Asia, existing bilateral energy projects between powerful autocratic patrons such as India and China and autocratic clients like Bangladesh and Kyrgyzstan provide insights on the potential political incentives of these countries to engage in energy megaprojects. Bangladesh has accommodated Indian investment in coal-fired power plants in ecologically sensitive regions, despite significant political and popular opposition [123]. Chinese investment in hydroelectric dams in Kyrgyzstan has gained momentum in recent years despite growing Sinophobia in Central Asian countries [124]. These projects have been driven by the interests of political elites to maintain status quos in their respective neighbourhoods rather than economic or environmental objectives [125]. Such incentives are likely to be replicated when these countries implement proposed energy megaprojects in Asia.

Ultimately, the use of energy megaprojects to strengthen ties with fellow autocrats will depend on the relative strength of domestic constituents to resist projects that advance regime survival at the cost of sustainable development. Freedom House provides a numerical score for Political Rights in countries, which consists of 10 indicators grouped into three subcategories: Electoral Process, Political Pluralism and Participation, and Functioning of Government. Table 1 demonstrates that several countries involved in energy megaprojects such as China, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan have very low scores for Political Rights. While national governments are critical stakeholders in transnational infrastructure development, as discussed in the literature review, energy megaprojects influence and are influenced by politics, norms and values, which makes it important to engage with the cumulative political systems through which these projects traverse. Table 1 illustrates the average political rights of countries involved in five major energy megaprojects. The results show that energy megaprojects that have the lowest average score for Political Rights are the TAPI and the CASA-1000, both of which are supported by the United States and its allies. These two projects may be particularly susceptible for use by despots to support each other’s through autocratic linkage.

Sovacool and Cooper [126] argue that one of the key risks of energy megaprojects is that they can erode democracy by consolidating wealth among elites and by operating as a “closed system” that reinforces authoritarian styles of decision making. Interestingly, the authors contend that autocratic practises are an enabler as well as an outcome of energy megaprojects. On the one hand planners of energy megaprojects are likely to target countries with undemocratic tendencies to enable smooth project implementation. On the other hand, the inherent secrecy attached to energy megaprojects result in the exclusion of meaningful inputs from the public and reduced accountability, thereby entrenching autocratic practises [127,128]. In illiberal regimes, the reduction of accountability facilitated by energy megaprojects is exacerbated by “executive aggrandizement” [129], the process through which elected executives use legal means to weaken checks on executive power. In the last decade, defamation laws have been used in Turkey, India, Tajikistan

and Pakistan to punish critiques of ruling regimes, which can undermine debate on energy megaprojects and facilitate corrupt practises [130].

In summary, energy megaprojects can be used by autocratic regimes to cooperate with neighbouring autocratic states to undermine democracy, thereby enhancing regime stability and survival.

4.2. Coercion of rivals

Flyvbjerg [131] argues that technocrats are driven by the “technological sublime” of megaprojects, which is the professional satisfaction derived from working on ground breaking initiatives. In autocratic regimes, the desire by engineers and technology companies to spearhead scientific breakthroughs often merge with the domestic and foreign policy agendas of state actors. For example, New Delhi’s “Digital India” campaign, which aims to enhance the country’s information technology infrastructures has received enthusiastic support from a wide range of stakeholders in industries ranging from energy to financial services. However, some scholars argue that autocratic regimes constrain innovation and entrepreneurship by prioritizing political objectives over economic ones [132].

Technology is also co-opted by autocratic governments to enhance regime survival. Accusations have been made against the multinational technology company Huawei on facilitating domestic and foreign surveillance for the Chinese government. Literature on “repression technology” provide key insights into how autocratic regimes use technology to persecute opposition, stifle dissent, disseminate propaganda and unleash physical violence [133,134].

Sovacool and Cooper [135] argue that energy megaprojects are authoritarian as opposed to democratic technologies due to their consolidated and centralized nature and ability to operate without ecological and social limits. In the context of future energy megaprojects, the concepts of “repression technology” and “authoritarian technology” may manifest in the form of policing or forced resettlement and disenfranchisement of populations that are perceived as undesirable or security threats to autocratic regimes [136]. For example, within the national security discourse in Pakistan, the ethnic Balochi community is perceived as threats to the energy and transport networks of the \$62 billion-dollar China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). A response to this threat has been met by the overwhelming presence of security personnel in the insurgency-prone Baluchistan region [137]. While the explicit objective of security personnel is to protect energy and other infrastructures, it also provides Islamabad the opportunity to expedite a military solution to the Baluchistan crisis, rather than address entrenched economic and social issues.

In addition to being used as a tool for securitization, energy megaprojects can also be exploited by autocratic regimes to deliberately persecute ethnic minorities that fall outside majoritarian nation-building agendas. During the construction of the Yadana gas pipeline in Myanmar, the Burmese military committed a number of atrocities against ethnic minorities, including forced labour and forced relocation [138]. Scholars of illiberal regimes argue that the coercion of rivals is one of the key mechanisms of authoritarian durability, a purpose that energy megaprojects may be well positioned to serve [139].

The use of energy megaprojects to securitize stigmatized populations is likely to occur in areas where civil liberties are low. Freedom House measures civil liberties across the globe through 15 indicators that are grouped into four subcategories: Freedom of Expression and Belief, Associational and Organizational Rights, Rule of Law, and Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights. As shown in Table 1, the average score for civil liberties is the lowest for the countries involved in the TAPI and CASA-1000, followed by the Upper Karnali and Dorjilung dams and then the Gobitec. Coincidentally, the TAPI and CASA-1000 projects include countries that have deep-set ethnic and religious cleavages, where autocratization has resulted in increased persecution of minorities and securitization of international borders [140].

Sovacool and Cooper contend that energy megaprojects can fail by

excluding key stakeholders, leading to resentment and social opposition [141]. In autocratic regimes, this risk is amplified by the lack of independent civil society organizations that can advocate for the rights of citizens affected by energy megaprojects. State actors in illiberal regimes either neutralize or co-opt civil society organizations, which leaves little space for negotiated outcomes. Historical precedents exist of undemocratic energy policies galvanizing insurgency movements in developing countries [142]. In recent years, non-state actors who are excluded from nation-building agendas have targeted energy infrastructure, with one such attack leading to a nation-wide black out in Pakistan in 2015 [143]. Such technical failures instigated by disenfranchised groups compound the complexity and interdependence of energy megaprojects, where failures in one segment quickly spreads throughout the system [144]. Therefore, by enhancing stakeholder conflicts, autocratization is also likely to exacerbate the technological risks of energy megaprojects.

Thus, energy megaprojects can be used by autocratic regimes to facilitate a military solution to ethnic and religious conflicts that would otherwise require long-term restructuring of existing political and socio-economic systems. In extreme cases, these projects can also be used to exploit or expel communities who do not conform to exclusionary narratives of nationalism.

4.3. Cultivating dependence

The millions of dollars invested by energy megaprojects provide financial incentives to a wide group of stakeholders, which Flyvbjerg refers to as “economic sublimines” [145]. While the COVID-19 pandemic is expected to have an adverse impact on the global economy, megaprojects have historically proven to be recession proof [146]. In addition, stimulus packages that prioritize infrastructure development as a key element of post-COVID economic recovery goals will provide greater momentum to energy megaprojects in the coming decades [147].

While the actual amount invested by energy megaprojects in local or host communities is debatable, such initiatives are buoyed by the infrastructure-driven economic development model that has considerable support among policymakers in emerging economies [148,149]. As exemplified by New Delhi’s “Make in India” campaign, the “Build Build Build” program in the Philippines and the CPEC in Pakistan, infrastructure development garners considerable support from multiple actors across the political and economic spectrums. These infrastructure projects have strengthened mutually beneficial relationships between corporations, politicians and the military-security apparatus in autocratic states. Chandra and Walton [150] and Bal [151] argue that a symbiotic relationship between the Adani group, the largest power producer in India and the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government has led to a system of political patronage where preferential business terms is provided to corporations that contribute towards specific development projects. These development projects in turn serve the political agendas of incumbent governments.

The aligning of government and corporate interests is not unique to autocratic regimes and is known to happen in strong democracies [152]. However, Chacko [153] demonstrates that autocratic governments seek to insulate neoliberal policies from dissent while also building consent for neoliberalisation through populist rhetoric that lionizes advocates of “development” and stigmatizes critiques as “anti-national”. Energy megaprojects thus become a tool for autocratic regimes to build patronage not only among corporate actors but also among economically mobile global middle class whose legitimate aspirations of emancipation are co-opted by the neoliberal agenda. Slater and Fenner [154] call this the process of “cultivating dependence” through which autocratic regimes use the provision or promise of benefits to secure support and undermine alternative political discourses.

Autocratization enhances the economic risks of energy megaprojects by increasing opportunities for corrupt and unsustainable practises. One of the key economic challenges of energy megaprojects is that they externalize costs to society while consolidating benefits to a small group

of elites [155]. As shown in Fig. 6, global freedom scores have steadily declined in the last seven years in countries participating in forthcoming energy megaprojects, which includes rapidly developing states such as Bangladesh and economic powerhouses such as India and China. In these countries, dependencies between state actors and corporations result in governments actively diluting environmental legislation and providing immunity to corporations that cause social and environmental harm [156,157]. Shell's operations in Nigeria demonstrate that the monopolization of power in autocratic regimes make them particularly susceptible to state capture by corporations, which result in the externalization of costs of energy projects to broader society [158].

Therefore, autocratic regimes can use energy megaprojects to engage with corporations to secure financial support that can be crucial for regime stability. Corporation on the other hand will be motivated to use megaprojects to influence governments to provide preferential bidding opportunities and protection from litigation.

4.4. Symbolic politics

Flyvbjerg [159] argues that megaprojects offer an “aesthetic sublime” to designers who are interested in creating large, complex and visually appealing structures. The aesthetic incentive of megaprojects is more apparent for buildings such as the Sydney Opera House or bridges like the Golden Gate Bridge, than for pipelines, hydroelectric dams or solar farms. Energy infrastructures are often inaccessible to broader citizenry due to national security concerns, which reduces incentives to invest in their visual appeal. However, despite the minimalistic focus on aesthetics, the designs of energy projects play an important role in the projection of power and influence through the use of symbolism. For example, the Hoover Dam constructed in 1935 was promoted as a representation of American resilience and innovation during the Great Depression [160].

In democracies, the construction of megaprojects is moderated by parliamentary limitations and an active civil society, and political symbols are often attached to projects that have some element of economic rationale. In contrast, autocratic regimes invest in megaprojects that solely serve aesthetic purposes to perpetuate the cult of particular leaders or majoritarian national myths [161]. Studies in the field of “symbolic politics” demonstrate how autocratic regimes use a plethora of symbols such as international events [162] and monuments [163] to distract or deceive domestic and international audiences from actual political reality. The contemporary growth of autocratization has spurred an increase in the development of projects that serve symbolic purposes. This includes the \$420 million “Statue of Unity” in India completed in 2018 [164], the restoration of 47 monuments in Uzbekistan between 2018 and 2019 [165] and the “Gold Dog Statue” unveiled in Turkmenistan in 2020 [166].

Autocratic regimes in contemporary years have increasingly attached various levels of symbolism to energy projects to perpetuate particular national or transnational narratives. For instance, the under-construction Rogun hydropower dam has been used by the ruling elites in Tajikistan to gain legitimacy and foster a sense of national identity and patriotism [167]. The plethora of renewable and non-renewable energy projects being developed through the CPEC has been manifested by Pakistani media as symbols of national pride and regional peace [168]. The recently completed petroleum pipeline between India and Nepal and the under-construction Upper Karnali project between India, Nepal and Bangladesh is as much about energy integration as it is about New Delhi projecting itself as the regional hegemon in the face of growing Chinese influence in the subcontinent [169].

Figs. 1–5 shows that Freedom House classifies some countries involved in upcoming energy megaprojects such as Mongolia as “Free”. However, the calculation in Table 1 suggests that when the average scores for political rights and civil liberties of countries participating in five energy megaprojects are applied to Freedom House's matrix, none of the combinations meet the minimum requirements for classification as

“Free”. The average scores for countries involved in CASA-1000 is “Not Free”, while the others receive a status of “Partly Free”. Such cumulative calculations do not imply that cross-border energy megaprojects such as Gobitec will transcend the vast differences in political systems between North Korea and Japan. However, they imply that once completed, these pipelines and electricity grids will overwhelmingly be subject to narratives of autocratic success and serve as symbols that facilitate authoritarian durability.

The use of political symbols influences one of the key challenges of energy megaprojects, which is bias in projection of costs and benefits. Sovacool and Cooper [170] claim that information regarding the benefits and costs of energy megaprojects are often distorted to woo investors. Flyvbjerg [171] offers the concept of “strategic mismanagement” to explain the deliberate overestimation of benefits and underestimation of costs by those with vested interests in megaproject development. However, by attaching symbols such as “national security” and “patriotism” to megaprojects, autocratic governments undermine the very basis of technical forecasting. Symbolism prioritizes the entrenchment of narratives that facilitate authoritarian durability, and attaches less importance to the economic, social and environmental benefits or costs of infrastructure development. A case in point is the Rampal project, a coal-fired power plant in the Sundarban mangrove forest in Bangladesh. Huq [172] argues that the development of the Rampal has been driven by its association to the government's “development-nationalist” narrative, which has discounted ecological, financial and social costs. Autocratization thus facilitates an extreme form of strategic misrepresentation, where projection of costs and benefits are superficially associated with energy projects that primarily serve symbolic purposes. In addition, by monopolizing power, suppressing dissent and disseminating propaganda, autocratic regimes undermine diverse opinions on the costs and benefits of energy projects. In the case of the Rampal plant and the Rogun dam, state machinery has been utilized to substantiate the benefits of these projects, while subverting critical voices on their costs.

Thus, autocratic regimes can use energy megaprojects to perpetuate narratives that are central to regime durability. Transnational pipeline and electricity grids are likely to serve as symbols of “development”, “peace” and “national pride” that entrench the legitimacy of autocrats. Such symbolism undermines rational forecasts of energy megaprojects, which become subservient to the cult of the autocrat, rather than enablers of economic and social goods. In the era of post-truth politics, autocratic regimes can use state institutions to falsify predictions of benefits and reject adverse forecasts of energy megaprojects.

4.5. Spheres of influence

In his seminal book *Connectography*, Parag Khanna [173] contends that contemporary geopolitical competition has shifted from its traditional focus on resources and borders to the development of what he calls “connective infrastructures”. He proposes that by facilitating the movement of people, ideas, resources and data, connective infrastructures allow great powers to gain access to key markets and establish spheres of influence. Arguably, the competition between China, the United States and India to establish spheres of influence in the Indo-Pacific is one of the primary drivers of energy megaprojects. Through the BRI, China has invested \$183.4 billion dollars into the energy infrastructure of numerous countries in Asia, Africa, Latin America and Europe [174]. The United States and its allies India, Australia and Japan perceive the BRI as an attempt by China to reduce Washington's influence in the region and has therefore responded with the FOIP which has facilitated alternative and at times overlapping infrastructure projects [175]. Therefore, in addition to the four suggested by Flyvbjerg, I propose that cross-border megaprojects are also driven by a fifth incentive, which I call the ‘geo-strategic sublime’.

Democratic as well as autocratic governments have engaged in competition to develop energy megaprojects in order to establish

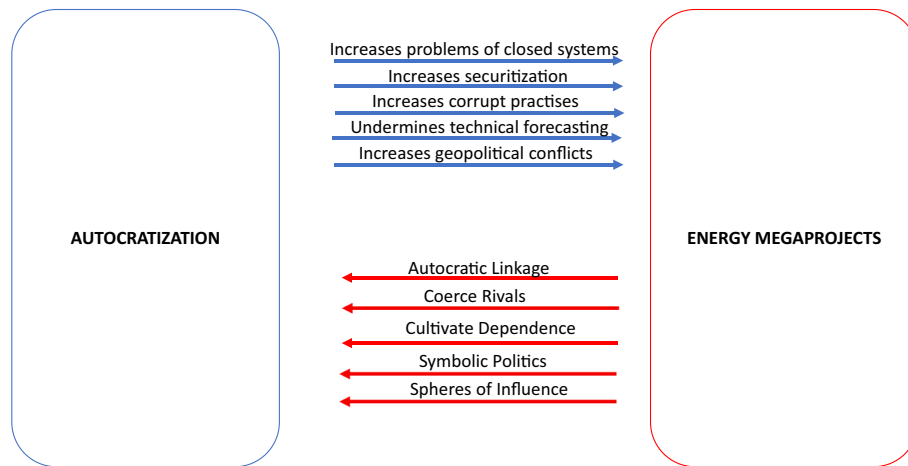


Fig. 7. The mutual constitution between autocratization and energy megaprojects.

spheres of influence. However, the proliferation of illiberal practises in democratic India and the entrenchment of autocrats in socialist China has altered the milieu of international interactions over infrastructure development between the two Asian powers. India has been wary of China's infrastructure development in South Asia since the early 2000s, when the "String of Pearls" theory gained prominence among New Delhi's defence and security establishment. For almost a decade, while China developed transport and energy infrastructures in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal, the centrist Indian National Congress (INC) made little progress in coherently responding to Beijing's growing influence. The right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government which overwhelmingly won consecutive elections in 2014 and 2019 prioritized time-bound, multilateral cooperation in South Asia with a particular focus on energy. Within 7 years, the BJP's "Neighbourhood First" policy culminated in construction of the very first cross-border electricity line between Bangladesh and India, the region's first cross-border pipeline and concrete progress towards multiple energy megaprojects [176]. These projects are part of the BJP's attempt to wean South Asian countries away from Beijing's Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Corridor (BCIM) by promoting the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), which brings together Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand on a range of energy and transport projects [177].

The rapid development of regional infrastructure during the BJP's tenure contrasts sharply with the intractability of South Asian cooperation during the 53 years of INC rule in India. Arguably, one of the primary drivers of India's regional cooperation agenda is the particular brand of ultra-nationalism promoted by the BJP, which perceives infrastructure development as a zero-sum game. As demonstrated by Adhira [178] autocratization has enhanced xenophobic and anti-China rhetoric in India, while undermining discourses on mutually beneficial collaboration. It can be argued that the primary motivation for New Delhi to develop energy megaprojects in South Asia is to undermine Chinese influence, rather than economic or environmental objectives [179].

In 2018, China abolished term limits for the incumbent President Xi Jinping, making him eligible to be the head of the government indefinitely. The repression of dissidents and the persecution of the Uighur minority further entrenched China's autocratic credentials. The COVID-19 pandemic provided additional incentives to Beijing to punish critics and monitor citizens. Increase in illiberal practises in the domestic arena also led to a more confrontational foreign policy, which has been described as the "Wolf Warrior" style of diplomacy. In recent years, Chinese policymakers have expressed discontent with what they perceive as Indian propaganda on Chinese infrastructure development in South Asia [180].

Autocratization, through its diverse impacts on foreign policies of India and China has resulted in violent conflicts between the two nuclear armed powers in recent years. While a majority of conflicts in Asia have occurred over borders, in 2017 and 2020, India and China engaged in conflict over infrastructure development in Bhutan and Ladakh respectively, resulting in significant casualties. Such geopolitical realities resonate with existing literature on autocratization and international conflict. Scholars have demonstrated that conflict between two dyads are least likely if both are democratic and most likely if both are autocratic [181,182]. In addition, autocratization reduces the likelihood of dyads resolving rivalries through peaceful means [183]. Overall, autocratization is likely to intensify the competition between India and China on the development of energy megaprojects in Asia, which may result in violent conflicts.

In summary, autocratic regimes can use energy megaprojects to engage in zero-sum competitions on maintaining and establishing spheres of influence. Autocratic regimes are likely to prioritize the maximization of geopolitical power rather than exploring options for mutually beneficial cooperation with regional rivals, thereby undermining the potential of energy megaprojects as conflict resolution mechanisms.

As shown in Fig. 7, the mutual constitution between autocratization and energy megaprojects takes shape through the interactions of incentives and risks. The political, economic and technological incentives of energy megaprojects are co-opted by autocratic regimes to enhance regime durability. Energy megaprojects in this context serve as conduits of autocratic power. Autocratic regimes influence energy megaprojects by undermining governance systems and intensifying multiple levels of risks.

5. Conclusion

Energy megaprojects can facilitate energy transition while also enhancing regional peacebuilding and integration. They play a particularly important role in reducing the use of coal and encouraging peaceful resolution of territorial conflicts. However, the impact of these projects on the environment and politics is dependent on global and domestic political systems within which they are embedded. This article has attempted to demonstrate the mutual constitution between autocratization and energy megaprojects. In response to the research question of this study, it can be stated that autocratization enhances the probability of energy megaprojects being constructed and exacerbates the key risks of such projects. The development of energy megaprojects in turn facilitates the durability of autocratic regimes. This indicates that the recent growth in global levels of autocratization may fast-track forthcoming energy megaprojects which are then likely to result in

significant social, environmental and economic costs. Given that a number of the energy megaprojects examined in this study are being supported by the West and are part of global efforts to use cleaner fuel sources, international cooperation on global energy transition may unwittingly entrench some autocratic regimes. The results of this study suggest that policy choices between environmental protection and economic development is made more complex by autocratic capture of energy technologies, indicating that global efforts towards balancing climate change mitigation with poverty alleviation must also consider the impact of these initiatives on democratic backsliding.

The findings of this article have several implications for the development of future research. First, there is an urgent need to undertake empirical analysis on forthcoming energy megaprojects. Data collected through ethnographic fieldwork in areas where transnational pipelines and electricity grids are meant to traverse can make important contributions to extant literature. Second, research on infrastructure development must engage more broadly with studies on the contemporary trends in autocratization. The impact of the proliferation of illiberal regimes on global integration projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative can inform the development of novel theoretical frameworks. Third, some critical analysis needs to be undertaken on the ways by which the development of energy megaprojects can advance and not impede democratization.

Energy megaprojects and autocratization interact in complex, multifarious ways to facilitate change in the global system. Given that the social and political values of planners are absorbed into energy megaprojects, and pipelines and electricity grids in turn impact upon society and politics, deciphering the contextual nuances of these interactions will be of academic and policy relevance.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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