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Global politics

Essay on global politics

This sample Edexcel-style 30-mark essay answer should be read alongside 'Challenges to global security: autocracies and democracies' (pp. 23–25).

Evaluate the view that autocratic states present a greater challenge to regional and global stability than democratic states.

Autocratic states, ruled by a single leader or a small group, are often seen as being unpredictable and prone to conflict. Democratic states, by contrast, have a government chosen by the people and are characterised by transparency and public accountability, traits which are generally associated with greater stability. However, it is not necessarily accurate to argue that autocratic states present a greater challenge to regional and global stability than democratic ones. Democratic states can cause significant challenges to regional and global stability, although ultimately this is less likely to happen than with autocratic states.

One of the primary arguments that autocratic states pose a greater threat to global stability is their unpredictable nature. Autocrats can make decisions unilaterally, without needing approval from parliaments or the public, leading to abrupt and destabilising policy shifts. For example, Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 was a move largely seen as the personal decision of President Vladimir Putin. This act not only destabilised Ukraine but also led to a broader geopolitical crisis. The ability of one leader to make such a significant, destabilising move without internal opposition underscores the potential dangers posed by autocratic regimes. This centralised leadership was further demonstrated by the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Autocratic states are also more prone to human-rights abuses, which can fuel internal unrest and escalate into regional crises. The ongoing civil war in Syria, which began in 2011 under the autocratic rule of Bashar al-Assad, exemplifies how a leader's oppressive policies can spark widespread violence. Assad's harsh crackdown on peaceful protests, coupled with his refusal to implement democratic reforms, triggered a brutal civil war that has destabilised the entire Middle East.

However, it can be argued that autocratic regimes are sometimes more stable than democratic ones due to their ability to enforce decisions swiftly and decisively. For instance, China, under the rule of the Chinese Communist Party, has demonstrated remarkable political stability since 2010, despite global economic shifts and internal challenges. The government's tight control has allowed it to respond quickly to crises like the Covid-19 pandemic, implementing strict lockdowns and surveillance measures. This quick, top-down response contrasts with the slower, more fragmented approaches seen in some democratic nations. Furthermore, autocracies can promote economic growth and stability through centralised planning. China's Belt and Road Initiative (launched in 2013) is an example of how an autocratic government can enhance its global influence and promote regional stability. This project has fostered economic cooperation and growth in many developing countries, creating a form of stability that democracies – constrained by public opinion and electoral cycles – might struggle to achieve.

Democratic states, in contrast, are often praised for their transparency and adherence to international norms, which theoretically makes them more predictable and less likely to engage in aggressive actions that could threaten global stability. Democracies, by their nature, have checks and balances that prevent leaders from making unilateral decisions. The existence of independent institutions, free media and civil society ensures that leaders are held accountable for their actions, making it less likely that a democratic state will engage in destabilising activities without scrutiny. Democratic states tend to rely on diplomacy and international cooperation, which fosters stability and reduces the likelihood of conflict. Additionally, democratic governance generally promotes the protection of human rights, free speech and the rule of law, which can reduce internal dissent and create a more peaceful society. For example, the European Union – a collection of democratic states – has been a bastion of peace and cooperation for decades, preventing the kind of conflicts that plagued the continent in earlier centuries. In this sense, democracies can be seen as forces for stability on both a regional and global scale.

However, democracies are not without their own challenges to stability. In some cases, democratic systems can lead to political gridlock, internal division and policy paralysis. Governments in democratic states are often slow to make decisions, due to the need to reach consensus among diverse political factions. Furthermore, the need to respond to decisions made democratically can itself cause instability. The UK's democratic referendum on leaving the European Union caused economic uncertainty and political rifts. Moreover, democratic states are not immune to foreign-policy blunders that can destabilise entire regions. The US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, justified on flawed intelligence, led to a prolonged conflict that destabilised the Middle East. Despite being a democracy, the US decision to withdraw suddenly from Afghanistan in 2021 led to the Taliban's swift takeover. This demonstrates that democracies can, at times, engage in foreign interventions that result in long-term instability, despite their intentions to promote peace and democracy.

When considering global stability, autocratic states are often perceived as being more willing to break international norms and challenge global stability. Autocrats are less constrained by international opinion and more likely to pursue aggressive actions that serve their personal or national interests. For example, North Korea's nuclear ambitions demonstrate how autocratic states can create significant geopolitical tensions, disrupting global security and trade. Conversely, democratic states – while generally more aligned with international laws and treaties – can also act in ways that destabilise the global order. As seen with the Iraq War, democracies can make decisions that lead to widespread conflict and instability. Additionally, democratic countries may be more vulnerable to populist movements that undermine long-standing alliances and global cooperation. The rise of nationalism and anti-globalist sentiments in many democracies has led to questions about the future of global institutions like the United Nations or NATO, which have traditionally maintained global stability. Despite these challenges, democratic states are more likely to participate in multilateral diplomacy and build alliances, which can foster long-term global stability. While autocracies may be driven by the interests of a single leader, democracies are more likely to act in the interest of collective security. This commitment to cooperation and compromise can prevent large-scale conflicts and promote peaceful resolutions to disputes.

In evaluating whether autocratic states present a greater challenge to regional and global stability than democratic states, it becomes clear that both forms of governance have their strengths and weaknesses. Autocratic states are often unpredictable, prone to aggressive foreign policies and resistant to internal reforms, all of which can destabilise regions and the wider world. However, autocracies can also enforce stability through control and centralised decision-making. Meanwhile, democratic states offer transparency, accountability and a commitment to international norms, but they

are not immune to internal instability and foreign-policy missteps. While both autocracies and democracies have the potential to either contribute to or undermine regional and global stability, the greater instability of autocratic states, and the challenge they pose to Western democratic norms, means that they are more likely to contribute to both regional and global instability.

Student task

Use three highlighter colours to find the AO1, AO2 and AO3 in this essay.

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