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The Modern Regency

Leadership Transition and Authoritarian Resilience of the Former Soviet Union and China

ABSTRACT Extant literature has shown the importance of routinized leadership succession for authoritarian resilience. However, the factors leading to orderly power transitions in autocracies are unclear. This article argues that an orderly succession requires relatively peaceful exit of the incumbent. Through a comparison of the power transition trajectories of the post-Stalin USSR and China in the Age of Deng Xiaoping, this article proposes three conditions that facilitate the voluntary retirement of dictators, including their strong political will to institutionalize successions, adequate capacity to initiate the plan, and reliable retirement packages. Meeting all three conditions, leadership succession in China has resulted in the emergence of the “modern regency” in which the elder leaders can retire relatively voluntarily and continuously influence the politics of a regime after their retirement, especially by proactively supervising future leadership successions. In contrast, without meeting the initial requirements for a dictator’s exit, the case of leadership succession in the USSR is characterized as *parallel succession*, which includes neither a credible plan on routinization of elite politics nor simultaneous coexistence of the elder leaders and the younger cohort as in the case of China. Moreover, during similar regime crises in the late 1980s, the arrangement of the modern regency helped prolong the authoritarian regime in China, while the USSR collapsed without this safeguard.

KEYWORDS single-party authoritarian regimes, leadership succession, China, the Soviet Union, modern regency

Political regimes that can iron out some form of orderly leadership succession and adhere to it are generally more resilient (Blondel, 1980). Routinized succession, being a feature of highly institutionalized authoritarian regimes (Slater, 2003), not only shores up the autocrat (Frantz & Stein, 2017), it also benefits various social actors (Clapham, 1988). This echoes the argument that the more leadership generations an organization manages to transit, the more institutionalized it is (Domínguez, 2002; Huntington, 1968). Notwithstanding all seeming benefits, regularized leadership transition of autocracies is still a perplexity: Why do some of them manage to institutionalize power succession, whereas others fail to do so? Under what circumstances can autocracies institutionalize, and how do they get on particular trajectories of institutionalization?

This article answers these questions by comparing the two most similar cases, the former USSR and the PRC (hereafter “China”). We argue that an orderly succession

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must begin with a relatively peaceful exit of the incumbent. By tracing the power transition trajectories of the USSR after the demise of Stalin and China in the Age of Deng Xiaoping, we propose three conditions that facilitate the voluntary retirement of dictators, including (1) their *strong political will* to institutionalize successions, (2) *adequate capacity* to mobilize resources for establishing the rules, and (3) presence of a *credible retirement plan* for incumbents so that they are willing to step down in favor of successors. Meeting all three conditions, the case of leadership transition from Deng Xiaoping to Jiang Zemin in China saw the emergence of the “modern regency,” an arrangement in which the elder leaders can retire relatively voluntarily yet continue to influence the politics of a regime after their retirement, especially by proactively supervising future leadership successions. In contrast, without meeting these prerequisites, the case of leadership successions in the USSR is characterized as *parallel succession*, which includes neither a credible plan for routinization of elite politics nor the coexistence of the elder leaders and the younger cohort as in the case of China. Moreover, during similar regime crises in the late 1980s, the paradigm of modern regency helped the authoritarian regime in China to weather the crisis and reinforced regime resilience afterward, while the USSR collapsed without this safeguard. To avoid ambiguities, we define *regime resilience* as the ability of a regime to survive through several instances of leadership transition and simultaneously sustain the institutions and rules of the game that governed relationships among the rulers (Geddes, 1999). The incumbent leader could be removed, but the dominant party would remain in power.

Our comparative study contributes to the existing literature in several ways. First, it enriches the research about the role of informal politics in autocracies. We reveal that institutionalization, conjoined with informal politics, significantly boosted the resilience of an authoritarian regime. Informal groups of conservative elders in China, to a large extent, helped to resolve the problem of the dictator’s exit, whereas the Soviet elites failed to do so. This contrast means that informal politics could benefit regime resilience once the informal groups achieve a quasi-institutionalized status, despite widespread assumptions that informal politics does not lead to stable development of institutions (Fewsmith, 1999). Second, while the current literature on enduring leadership transition leans toward the notion of dynastic succession being the most stable mechanism for authoritarian power succession (Brownlee, 2007), we show the possibility of an alternative paradigm—modern regency—that has not been theorized in the extant literature. We explain how the power play between outgoing and current leaders in the modern regency came into being and why power succession with the retired informal leader(s) involved alleviates hazards for the regime, though it might be costly for the successor.

We first propose our theoretical framework about the three conditions inducing peaceful exits of authoritarian incumbents. Then, by applying this framework to the cases of post-Stalin USSR and China under Deng, we show how the presence and absence of these conditions can lead to different trajectories of power transition in two very similar cases right after the deaths of respective former strongmen. Continuous comparisons of later histories further reveal the different leadership configurations and regime consequences generated by different transition paradigms. The final section

concludes the article and discusses the possibility and limitations of generalizability of our theory to further cases, including China in the post-Deng era.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: THREE PREREQUISITES OF DICTATORS' VOLUNTARY EXITS

Authoritarian regimes that extensively rely on institutions are argued to survive longer. Institutions, such as legislative branches (Gandhi & Przeworski, 2007; Wright, 2008), political parties (Cammett & Malesky, 2012), and competitive elections (Magaloni, 2008), grant autocrats not only venues to manipulate the society (Lai & Slater, 2006), but also means to reconcile with political elites (Boix & Svobik, 2007; Svobik, 2009). Underlying these measures is a core issue affecting authoritarian resilience: leadership transition from one ruler to the next. Regimes that can maintain relatively peaceful power transitions in a credible and sustainable manner are particularly more stable and durable (Nathan, 2003). However, we still lack sufficient understanding of why many regimes failed to generate rules of power succession and broke down with leader assassinations, coups, or civil wars.

Herz (1952) raised the importance of leadership succession in autocracies, interestingly, a year before Stalin died. He argues that regimes solve successorship in varied and haphazard fashion and specifies four modes of regulating succession: (1) a founded chamber elects the successor appointed primarily by the dictator, (2) the dictator nominates a candidate-successor, (3) the dictator establishes a particular law on succession, or (4) the dictator appoints a successor directly. Once the successor is chosen, the “crown-prince problem” emerges, which implies the growing intentions of the heir apparent to demote the dictator. Herz reasons that constitutional procedures are effective in authoritarian succession, whereas the explicit designation of the successor determines a proper succession. In line with Herz’s proposition, Tullock (1987) suggests that one of the means of power transition in autocracies is to have a voting body formed by several potential successors, wherein one of them emerges as the actual successor (e.g., the pope’s elections in the Vatican). But he also points to hereditary succession as another approach conducive to authoritarian regime stability. Comparing regular and irregular successions in various regime types, Blondel (1980) classifies leadership transition mechanisms by the *flexibility* or *rigidity* of the institutes involved. In contrast to the “truly restrictive” leadership transition, such as those based on universal suffrage, authoritarian successions are “flexible” and suffer from a shortage of determined rules. After one irregular succession, more may occur, resulting in increasing uncertainty in elite politics. Thus, hereditary successions and primogeniture become the relatively “rigid” institutes among authoritarian successions, which may decrease the occurrence of coups and allow the dictator to coexist with the successor more peacefully (Brownlee, 2007; Kokkonen & Sundell, 2014). Here a considerable gap emerges: How can power be transferred in an autocracy without shifting the regime into a sort of hereditary monarchy? How can an orderly and sustainable power succession be carried out in case neither hereditary nor primogeniture transitions fit its nature?

We argue that the answer also lies on the other side of the coin: the exit of the incumbent dictators. Existing literature has largely focused on the successor side as the way out for orderly authoritarian power successions, such as the designation of the successors and their consolidation of power. However, all the essential leadership transitions are possible only with the departure of the autocrats, in the form of either removal by coups d'états, their natural or violent death, or their decisions to retire. Relatively peaceful power transitions are always conditioned on relatively peaceful exits of the autocrats, such as voluntary retirement. In the following, we propose three prerequisites of dictators' voluntary exits.

Autocrat's Strong Political Will to Institutionalize Succession

Regardless of the type of dictatorship, dictators are the topmost rulers in a regime. Their political will can greatly influence the regime's commitment to reaching important political goals. As the cases of battling corruption show, top leaders' political will to fight corruption is the starting point to ensure effectiveness of anti-graft measures (Quah, 2010). Similarly, autocrats' strong political will to institutionalize succession paves the way for their own intent to exit from power voluntarily. The political will may come from such intentions to retire because of age, pressure from peers (Buena De Mesquita & Smith, 2017; Tullock, 1987, p. 153), or expectations of the country to endure long and to be remembered as "benign" leaders.

The autocrats' intent to retire voluntarily alleviates the issue of the search for a successor. A dictator who resigns voluntarily is more likely to consider training an heir apparent for a smoother leadership transition. In contrast, if the established leader does not have the political will to institutionalize successions and wants to dwell on the "throne," the ruling coalition may also long remain in office. As a result, the dictator is unlikely to draw new allies and clients from younger cohorts, which can block political mobility and generational turnovers of leadership.

Adequate Capacity to Initiate the Plan

Autocrats also need to have the capacity to initiate the succession plan with the ruling inner circle. Most dictators need to rule with the collaboration of other oligarchs and the obedience to orders by subordinates at different levels (Ezrow & Frantz, 2013). Thus, earning adequate support of other oligarchs and having the ability to impose their political will on subordinates are important for autocrats in carrying out the succession plan (Li, 2013). Although compromise with other oligarchs may be needed for support, connections and influence in the civil and military powerhouses are still the primary makeup of the autocrats' capacity to push their will through the ruling inner circle. Higher numbers of powerful oligarchs supporting the autocrats reflect a greater capacity owned by the autocrats. The amount of power held by the ruling coalition also determines whether the autocrats can appoint successors and set the provisions on which they will retire. Established autocrats with real influence may also prevent splits among putative successors and leverage oligarchs who are hungry for power, to sustain the succession plan after their exit from power.

Reliable Retirement Packages

Finally, autocrats would consider the *way* they leave office to ensure their post-exit survival (Goemans, 2008). Irregular exits often entail violent post-exit fate, such as prosecution or capital punishment (Chiozza & Goemans, 2011), whereas regular removals tend to result in peaceful retirements. If we assume that the dictators prefer retiring regularly to having undesirable outcomes, they may need to take specific measures to guarantee themselves favorable retirement treatment. They want to ensure that any potential payoff or regular pay after retirement will be higher than the outcome of renegeing on the rules and conventions about retirement if such rules exist (Wintrobe, 1998). The retirement package negotiated will likely include retaining power to police new leaders, leverage and bargain with the new leaders; post-exit immunity and access to rent-seeking through their networks; and the condition that their accomplishments/regulations are respected and not rolled back (Goemans, 2000). If the autocrats are incapable of establishing a mechanism that keeps them safe, they will lose their legacy and ability to prosper after resignation. This possible result may prevent a dictator from stepping down, since the lack of power may pave the way to disappearance in obscurity.

In addition, if institutionalized succession also implies the dictator's peers being removed from power, the dictator must provide peers with credible retirement plans as well by providing them the approximate equivalent to staying in power. Once the entire ruling coalition is bought off, the subordinates should also admit generous payments and retire along with the dictator.

The Emergence of a Modern Regent

We argue that if the autocrats meet the proposed prerequisites of voluntary retirement, they are more likely to quit office in a peaceful way. They may also preserve a certain amount of power to engage in overseeing successors because the retired autocrats have a stake in the successor's policies. The retired autocrat often becomes a political chief who exerts pressure on the new ruler from behind the curtain, or a *modern regent*. Such a condition has allowed various dictators or organizations to keep regimes stable despite coups and splits, such as in Deng's China and PRI's Mexico (Gil-Mendieta & Schmidt, 1996) and in the less pronounced cases of communist Laos and Vietnam, where resilience was ensured by the consensus of families of revolutionaries and their princelings. This mode of power transition constitutes a modern regency in authoritarian regimes.

DICTATORS AFTER THE TYRANTS: CHINA AND THE USSR

The cases of China in the Age of Deng Xiaoping and the USSR after Stalin are outstanding examples for comparison of autocracies that have institutionalized power transitions in different manners. The two regimes share numerous similarities: both are autocratic party-states where Leninist parties enjoy a monopoly on the use of force, control the information flow, prohibit opposition parties, and substantially intervene in the economy (Dimitrov, 2013). The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) inherited many institutions and norms from its Soviet elder brother (Shirk, 1993), such as the

mechanism of cadre selection (Burns, 1987), principles of collective leadership, and de jure leadership selection, and the practice of regular convening of plenums and congresses.

After the respective deaths of Mao and Stalin, political elites in China and the USSR both acknowledged the importance of institutionalization of elite politics. In China, institutionalization commenced with Deng Xiaoping's speech at the Third Plenum of the 11th Party Congress in December 1978 (Dittmer, 2003), which intended to solve significant political and economic challenges that had been plaguing the country. The Chinese leadership was generally aware of imperfections in the CCP's organization, such as the lack of effective institutions and checks on arbitrary authority, and wanted to avoid falling under a new dictatorship (Fewsmith & Nathan, 2018; Teiwes, 2001). As Deng summarized in 1980, the major political concerns of the CCP were leaders' overconcentration of power, concurrently holding numerous posts, ambiguity in the division of labor between the CCP and the government, and leadership succession. Deng subsequently announced political reforms to address the problems.

Likewise, the Soviet elites who survived the death of Stalin shared a common intention to avoid absolutist rule in favor of collective leadership. They realized that overcentralization of power in Stalin's hands atrophied institution and reinstitutionalized the party after its disintegration under Stalin's reign (Gill, 1985). The concerns that paved the way for further institutionalization of the Soviet Union's elite politics were expressed in the famous Khrushchev report "On the Cult of Personality and Its Consequences." He condemned Stalin for inspiring the personality cult, violating the Leninist principle of collective leadership, and disregarding such essential institutions of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) as the Central Committee and Party Congress.

Nevertheless, while Chinese leaders demonstrated an eagerness to search for appropriate successors and set up corresponding institutions for power transition, Soviet leaders appeared to be more obsessed with the restoration of collective leadership. This set the two regimes apart regarding the institutionalization of elite politics (i.e., routinization of politics in the highest bodies of the communist parties such as the Politburo, Standing Committee of the Politburo, Secretariat, and Presidium), leading to the emergence of very distinct power transition mechanisms in the two countries, thereby entailing different consequences for regime survival.

Autocrats' Political Will

Stalin died without clearly appointing a successor. He intentionally avoided the emergence of any of his subordinates above others. By providing them access to information sources selectively, he kept them in an inferiority complex, making them experts only in their own domains. By the end of his rule, a quasi "collective leadership" of putative successors was supposed to solve the problem of succession to Stalin. Having survived through the command of the unpredictable tyrant, each of the men yearned to rule the country collectively, as their declarations about collective leadership reflected, and none of the oligarchs wanted to let any of their peers become the next tyrant (Khlevniuk, 2015). They were still relatively young and desired to choose a successor among themselves: the average age of the Presidium members when Stalin died was 57.7, with the

TABLE 1. Soviet Union Presidium, March 1953

Leader Name (birth year)	Age, years
Beria (1899)	54
Bulganin (1895)	58
Kaganovich (1893)	60
Khrushchev (1894)	59
Malenkov (1902)	51
Mikoyan (1895)	58
Molotov (1890)	63
Pervukhin (1904)	49
Saburov (1900)	53
Voroshilov (1881)	72
Average age	57.7

Note: Members are ranked by the alphabetical order of their last names.

oldest of them, 72, and the youngest, 49 (Table 1). Such a situation led to a contest for the top leadership position. The power struggle between Beria, Malenkov, and Khrushchev ended with the execution of the first, the purge of the second, and the establishment of Khrushchev in the post of the first secretary in 1957 at the age of 63.

Several years into his rule, Khrushchev, at that time 67, finally ventured to impose term limits on officials and regular renewal of the leading bodies by implementing a new version of the Rules of the CPSU at the 22nd Congress in 1961. According to the newly implemented Article 25, a quarter of the Central Committee and Party Presidium were supposed to be renewed at each regular election. Term limits were set for the members of the Presidium: as a rule, none of them were allowed to take their post for more than three consecutive terms, with the most extended period of rule reaching 12 years, except for outstanding members of the Presidium of generally recognized prestige and high political, organizational and other qualities (CPSU, 1961). Khrushchev was going to entrench these developments in the new constitution and utilize the turnover rule to marginalize his opponents while retaining his clients in the leading body (Brown, 1978). However, the party oligarchs did not share Khrushchev's enthusiasm about rejuvenating the system. When his former protégé Brezhnev replaced him as a result of a coup, Article 25 was abolished. During the 23rd CPSU Congress, the leaders agreed to rule by collective leadership, regulations on term limits having failed to remain in the Party Constitution.

China also went through a succession crisis before Deng Xiaoping could take command. The demise of Mao Zedong left the country not only with a crisis of faith spawned by the ten-year Cultural Revolution but also with intense political rivalries between contending factions of political elites (Baum, 1994). After the arrest of the Gang of

TABLE 2. Chinese Leadership Age after the Death of Mao Zedong

August PSC Members August 1977		August PSC Members September 1982	
	Age, years		Age, years
Hua Guofeng (1921)	56	Hu Yaobang (1915)	67
Ye Jianying (1897)	80	Ye Jianying (1897)	85
Deng Xiaoping (1904)	73	Deng Xiaoping (1904)	78
Li Xiannian (1909)	68	Zhao Ziyang (1919)	63
Wang Dongxing (1916)	61	Li Xiannian (1909)	73
		Chen Yun (1905)	77
Average PSC Age, years	67.6	Average PSC Age, years	73.8

Note: Members are ranked by the officially publicized order.

Four and the rehabilitation of several elites who were victimized by the Cultural Revolution, the major showdown was between Hua Guofeng, a putative successor to Mao followed by a faction of Maoist loyalists, and Deng Xiaoping, who returned to power relying on his “extensive network of personal ties to an influential group of senior party and military leaders” (Baum, 1994, p. 4; Meisner, 1999). In August 1977, a new Standing Committee of Politburo (PSC) of five members was elected, with Hua ranked first and Deng ranked third. The average age of this PSC was 67.6, already ten years older than their counterparts in the Soviet Union.

During the Hua Guofeng interregnum, while Hua tried to boost his credentials by imitating his predecessor, upholding Maoism through the two “whatevers,” revising the state constitution, and introducing an ambitious Ten-Year Plan of economic development, Deng and his supporters struck back by emphasizing “emancipating thinking” and “seeking truth from facts.” With Deng’s power and popularity growing throughout 1978, the Third Plenum at the end of that year ratified his triumph by adopting a number of changes, including shifts in the party line and economic orientation, restoration of various institutions, rehabilitation of the remaining Maoist purge victims, and appointment to key positions of several of Deng’s loyal followers (Baum, 1994; Meisner, 1999).

Although Deng had to constantly manage the potential rifts between different factions, his reform coalition finally gained the upper hand in the post-Mao succession crisis, and the loyalist faction was gradually eased out of power. After Hua Guofeng and his supporter Wang Dongxing were ousted from the PSC and replaced by Hu Yaobang and, later, Zhao Ziyang, the average age of the PSC rose to 73.8 in 1982, or 78.25 if the “potential successors” Zhao and Hu are excluded (Table 2). Being aware of the fact that the elders could not live forever, Deng embarked upon a search for successors and launched a large-scale campaign for rejuvenation of the party, which included mass retirement of the old cadres and replacement with young professionals, the enshrining of age limits for several posts in the Constitution, and the establishment of several

transitional arrangements on the transfer of power. Leadership rejuvenation proved to be successful in China and ostensibly helped regime survival until the present day (Zeng, 2014).

The contrasting patterns of China and Soviet Russia show how the likelihood of searching for successors grows with the age of the incumbents. This argument is supported by the fact that aging Brezhnevites started to think about power succession when they realized that their time was up. They chose a successor from the younger cohort—Gorbachev—after the departure of General Secretary Chernenko, who had been assigned to his post at the age of 73. While leadership incentives concerning institutionalization often intersect, the role of historical contingency is undeniable. Regardless of path dependency, following the departure of former strongmen and the rational calculations of authoritarian leaders, the age of the surviving cohorts in the USSR and China no doubt played a role during critical junctures as the political situation developed (Thelen, 1999), resulting in political elites perceiving different levels of urgency for setting up the rules of succession.

Autocrats' Capacity

The introduction of succession arrangements has largely depended on the capacity of the initiators of retirement. Kou (2006) explains why Deng managed to set limitations on elite politics, while neither of the Soviet leaders succeeded in doing so. He classifies leaders into two categories: leaders with personal authority and leaders with power given by their appointment. Leaders with personal authority are argued to possess sufficient informal power to create institutions so that their successors cannot roll back their initiatives. In contrast, leaders whose power is determined by their post depend mainly on the selectorate to establish institutions and need to rely upon a broad coalition of supporters.

Shirk (1993, p. 71) finds the elite politics in the USSR more standardized than that in China, arguing that compared to China, most of the decisions taken by the Soviet leadership were initiated by the Politburo and endorsed by the Central Committee. Thus, the scope for informal politics was narrower in the Soviet Union. Khrushchev had to rely on the selectorate while promoting his reforms. Even after the defeat of the so-called Anti-Party Group, which claimed Khrushchev's political victory, he still had to compromise to pursue his goals, because he did not have any given outstanding credentials to raise above the members of leading coalition. Thus, for him, it remained a gamble to defy the consensus of one or two dozen members of the ruling group. For instance, since Khrushchev's victory over the coup d'état, his leadership style had grown personalistic. He diminished the institutions of collective leadership, reshuffled leadership personnel, and acted on his own whim on principal policy issues.

His behavior fueled growing dissent among the oligarchs, and he gradually lost support among the allies in the Presidium and Secretariat (Gill, 2018, pp. 186–194) because the most critical concern among the Soviet elites had always been ruling by collective. Eventually, he was overthrown by yesterday's allies. Brezhnev rolled back Khrushchev's initiatives on leadership turnover, among other undertakings. He announced the

“stability of cadres,” providing the oligarchs with life tenures in their posts. While the oligarchs were allowed to hold power, few of them considered succession.

In China in the 1980s, power was shared among the revolutionary elders or “eight elders” (*ba da yuan lao*), who were the most prominent generals, each of whom had made a notable contribution in the foundation of the regime. Their role in the landmark events of the revolution helped determine their high positions in the CCP and provided them with unchallengeable authority (Manion, 1992). Their deep patron–client ties were ubiquitous and spread around the entire regime, and their power was not granted to them by their offices. Instead, the institutes were adapted to their power and will. The outstanding example was the Central Advisory Commission created in 1982 to accommodate long-serving Central Committee members as a forum for them to continuously influence politics after retirement. This situation laid the foundation for such a phenomenon as “old men politics” (*lao ren zheng zhi*), which usually means behind-the-scenes interventions by retired high-ranking officials in the ongoing political affairs of China. After the death of Mao Zedong, old men became a crucial element of informal leadership in the PRC.

Complementing Kou’s (2006) classification, a more pragmatic approach to measuring Deng’s power would be an analysis of his networks compared to the networks of the other elders. Deng’s work style always came from backstage, as he was maneuvering to pursue desired policies. Back in the times of the Great Leap Forward, he collectively worked on the major party and state affairs along with Liu Shaoqi, Zhou Enlai, Chen Yun, and others, while Mao was “on the second line.” Substantial influence in the Second Field Army (one of the places where Deng intersected with Hu Yaobang) granted him sufficient authority in the military. He also relied on powerful figures in the army such as Yang Shangkun and Yang Baibing, who were later responsible for the suppression of the Tiananmen movement. Some of the elders were indebted to Deng for their rehabilitation after the Cultural Revolution. Similar past revolutionary and political struggle experiences between Deng and the other elders made them share similar views and visions and earned Deng tremendous trust of the other elders (Wang, 2013).

Such informal power let Deng successfully set in motion leadership rejuvenation without significant dissent. As Deng put it, the selection of successors would be “a comparatively easy [question] to solve while veteran comrades [were] still around” (Teiwes, 2001, p. 75). The ongoing reform demanded rejuvenation of leadership; therefore, the leadership succession involved two tasks: the retirement of veterans and the recruitment of young specialists. Deng insisted on gradual transition: he urged the importance of attracting young cadres to leadership posts while veterans could supervise and guide the young if deemed necessary (Manion, 1992). He basically handpicked four consecutive successors for China. While Deng was the agenda setter, he was not an absolute one because he abhorred the personality cult and sought compromise among the elders (Shambaugh, 1993). His first appointed successors, General Secretary Hu Yaobang and Premier Zhao Ziyang, could never bypass the opinions of the elders (Shirk, 1993, p. 74). This resulted in acquiescence to purging his clients and acceptance of the bargained Jiang Zemin on the paramount leadership posts in 1989.

This comparison shows how different *capacity* of the authoritarian leaders affected the divergent approaches to institution building. In contrast to Deng who ruled by consensus, relying on his informal power and connections, Khrushchev, lacking adequate capacity, had to continually maneuver among the oligarchs to promote his policies because the success of his endeavors largely depended on the continually fluctuating support of oligarchs. Unlike Deng, Khrushchev stubbornly overlooked principles of collective leadership and his peers in the Politburo and Secretariat. Even though Khrushchev had some clients in the Presidium, they could not help because they did not constitute the majority, and the majority turned against him. One of his loyal clients finally succeeded him in the post of general secretary following a coup.

Retirement Plan

The USSR also failed to come up with a credible elite retirement system. In the Soviet Union, members of the Politburo and the Central Committee were placed in the upper echelon of the *nomenklatura*. They had access to exceptional wages and services inaccessible to average citizens: personal transportation, luxury flats, and *dachas* (country houses), discounts in official restaurants, quality food supply, a healthcare system, and other extras (Kryshtanovskaya & White, 1996).

However, this luxurious life was not guaranteed once a leader retired. Retirements in the top echelon of the Soviet power, to a certain degree, replaced bloody purges of Stalin's era. It had been done in mainly two ways: retirement from all party and state posts or removal from the Central Committee to less prominent offices, such as regional party secretaries and ambassadors in faraway countries (Gill, 2018, p. 233). Either way, the privileges enjoyed by the officials dropped off greatly after retirement, which was especially the case for the Politburo and Central Committee members of the Khrushchev era and onward. Moreover, leaders felt uncertain about their entitled privileges after retirement without a credible retirement package. The uncertainty intensified after the failure of the Anti-Party Group's coup. While in the past at least high-level retirees, who had been loyal to the general secretary, would be set up with pensions with decent coverage, after the Anti-Party Group's coup, the access to *nomenklatura* advantages could be almost entirely cut for the retirees. Historical accounts report tear-provoking miserable lives of retired then-prominent Politburo members, such as Malenkov and Tikhonov (Zhirnov, 2003).

Thus, the higher members of the CPSU would rather stay in their posts as long as they could to preserve the greatest amount of luxury in their lifestyles, along with access to the apex of power. As a result of failure to implement an efficient leadership rejuvenation system, oligarchs could outlive in power any of the general secretaries. The oligarchs' reluctance to retire explains the USSR's gerontocracy of the '70s-'80s and the succession crisis of 1982-85, which eventually forced the Soviet "old men" to seek a young successor to the post of the general secretary. When Gorbachev was elected, for the first time in history the Soviet Union experienced the situation of a young general secretary facing up to a Politburo full of veterans.

Instead, Deng's leadership of China resulted in a credible retirement policy for the old cadres. The stratified pension scheme, which had been introduced in 1978, facilitated the retirement of approximately 4.6 million revolution and post-revolution cadre members in favor of young professionals. The scheme considered the status of retirees and entitled them to pensions as high as 60–100% of their previous salaries, along with medical treatment and, in some cases, a means of personal transportation. On top of material welfare provisions, pensioners could still maintain considerable political entitlement, which the “old comrades” often cared about the most, such as the link with their work unit (*dan wei*) by visiting their former workplace, accessing party documents, and advising the young cadres. The aforementioned Central Advisory Committee also formally granted top elders the privilege of sitting in Politburo meetings and ruling above the frontline incumbents during political crises perceived by elders as detrimental to regime survival. In 1985, 131 old revolutionaries, including Ye Jianying, one of the top elders inside the Politburo, stepped down from the leadership of the CCP (Manion, 1992).

By having successfully retired most of the aging cadres, the CCP managed to avoid gerontocracy. Pension and ability to rule from behind the scenes created a clear commitment and better motivation for the Chinese leaders to leave their official posts and find successors. In contrast, the Soviet elites disregarded the issue of pensions for the oligarchs, leaving them in the position of having to hold on to their posts as long as they could.

Modern Regency vs. Parallel Succession

In sum, respective leadership configurations and historical contingencies affected whether the three prerequisites were present in the two countries. In China, with the three conditions present, Deng was able to lay the ground for crucial innovations, such as term limits and generational rejuvenation that replaced life tenures (Dittmer, 2003). Along with the implementation of the dual-generation designation of successors, leadership transition since Jiang's ascendancy has ceased to be an event threatening a dangerous split among the elites as it was under Mao's and even Deng's time. Establishment of term limits in post-Mao politics put an end to post-retirement punishments for any of the leaders, since term limits helped to strengthen the commitment between the incumbent and other political elites (Ma, 2016). Deng's arrangements institutionalized a modern regency under which the incoming leadership generation *coexisted* with the outgoing leaders. The retired leadership generation could gradually give up power but also interfere in governing the country, although not without internal tensions, through the informal realm of politics (e.g., the elders like Deng) in crises.

With the three conditions absent, elite power transition in the USSR did not have a plan for routinization. Crises during power transition have been an inborn feature of the Soviet system (Rush, 1965). Each nascent leader lacked legitimacy; he needed to accumulate the power and establish himself in the post of the senior secretary by outweighing his rivals. In the USSR, a leader would come to authority not based on appointment, but by appropriating power. The Soviet Union had not seen any instance of peaceful *antemortem* succession. All events of power transition, except for the anti-

Khrushchev coup, started after a terminal sickness or death of former paramount leaders. Therefore, clashes in the Soviet Union for the top leadership position were held among the regime's oligarchs, rather than between incumbent and successor as in China due to the formalized arrangements on power succession. We define the Soviet type of leadership transition as *parallel succession*, under which a nascent leader follows the outgoing dictator postmortem or after a coup.

ELDERS VS. THE YOUNG COHORT: DIFFERENT TRANSITION PARADIGMS AND REGIME CONSEQUENCES

The two distinct paradigms of leadership succession resulted in two types of relations between the party elders and the young cohort during leadership transitions. The modern regency features the coexistence of retired dictators and their successors, while the parallel successions gave little preparation for cohort intersection. In the late 1980s, the party-states of China and the USSR were both going through decisive moments in history: succession struggles on top of reforming economies. We interpret regime resilience during crises through the lens of relations between the old generation and the young cohort.

Modern Regency: Old Men as Gatekeepers

In China, while most old revolutionaries were gradually retired, the most potent veterans remained in power. Deng's protégés Hu and Zhao found themselves in a confrontation with the party elders, especially the conservative hard-liners, and in dispute with each other due to their different preferences regarding the approach to reform (Baum, 1994). After Hu's ascension to the post of the chairman of the Chinese Communist Party in 1981, the successor's dilemma got underway. Hu was a bold politician, invariably distressing party elders with his decisions. As the *de jure* first figure in the state, Hu embarked on the path of power consolidation, appointing his followers to essential posts of the CCP. He launched an anti-corruption campaign threatening the elders and their relatives who were involved in corruption. Hu echoed Deng and pledged that the old men must retire, even going so far as to suggest his only patron Deng step down (Lam, 1989). Ultimately, conservative party elders placed the blame for student demonstrations in 1986 and the increasing mass appeal for liberalization onto Hu, who they urged Deng to dismiss immediately. This accelerated Deng's original timetable to remove Hu Yaobang as the party head. In January 1987, at an informal meeting dominated by a group of party elders, Hu Yaobang was relieved of his duties as general secretary (Meisner, 1999). Notwithstanding Deng's promises of institutionalization, the decision on Hu's resignation bypassed the Politburo meeting and other formal norms of the CCP, instead being engineered by party veterans, such as Chen Yun, Peng Zhen, and Bo Yibo (Baum, 1994; Vogel, 2011).

Zhao learned from Hu's experience that it was too early to expect the elders to hang up their axes. Initially, he proceeded more cautiously than Hu in an attempt to make allies of such conservative planners as Chen Yun (Baum 1994). After succeeding Hu, he

chose to avoid political confrontations and focus on economic reform. However, when the economy overheated during the pursuit of major price reform, and people protested, Zhao was the first to be blamed by the veterans and Politburo members for the inflation and public unrest. Before the Tiananmen movement, his rivalry with Premier Li Peng escalated over the treatment of student protesters. According to Schell and Delury (2013), Zhao Ziyang attempted to side with the protesters to counter the conservatives. Eventually, his game ended when he refused to announce martial law in Beijing as was demanded by the elders and backed by conservative peers in the Politburo.

The elders handpicked Jiang Zemin, then mayor of Shanghai, as the third candidate on the post of the general secretary. Shirk (1993, p. 79) argues that the highest party, state, and military posts were given to Jiang because the cases of Hu and Zhao had shown that without institutional power, a designated top leader was merely a lame duck. The conservative elders were in favor of Jiang because of his competence in handling the 1989 protests in Shanghai (Baum, 1994). Deng announced his retirement in 1989 after Jiang ascended to power and quickly gained recognition in Beijing. However, by the time Jiang took the reins of the CCP, Deng's reputation and power were diminished after the downfall of his protégé Zhao Ziyang in the wake of the Tiananmen movement. The conservative coalition led by Chen Yun was stalling the economic reforms championed by Deng. As such, Jiang was reluctant to carry out reform in Deng's preferred manner (Fewsmith, 1997; Schell & Delury, 2013). Deng declared that if Jiang promoted the reform, he would back him; if not, he would support other leaders (Vogel, 2011). Facing the strong conservative tide of the hard-liners and seeking to regain influence in the CCP's proceedings, Deng undertook the renowned Southern Trip to the Special Economic Zones in 1992 as an important gesture to bolster his reform and open-door policy (Baum 1994). While meeting with the military in Zhuhai, Deng made it explicit that those who were against the reform would have to leave office. Now that the army had made a decisive shift in support from the conservatives to Deng (Fewsmith, 1997), local leaders shifted their stance accordingly (Schell and Delury, 2013). Jiang received the signal and pledged his loyalty by speeding up reforms (Vogel, 2011). His candidature was finally sealed in the 14th Party Congress. Before that he adopted a wait-and-see attitude and pursued only those policies that the elders approved.

From 1982 to 1989, Deng supported all of his putative successors, especially in their initial periods. Until Jiang established himself as the general secretary, the elders had never given their successors absolute power—they just stepped down to the second line and carefully supervised them. Elders may have been promoting retirement of the old but were still able to exercise informal power and did so not only to ensure that leadership transition went on well, but obviously also to guarantee that all their interests were respected. Through the 1980s, the retired leaders reshuffled three incumbents and did not pose a threat to the regime.

Parallel Succession: *Perestroika* of the Old Guard

At the moment of Brezhnev's death, the Soviet elites did not have any entrenched mechanism of leadership transition. When Brezhnev was already terminally ill, some

of the elites did not allow him to resign voluntarily. Since the power structure in the Soviet Union was built on loyalty to a paramount leader, leadership change threatened to put the oligarchs' interests in jeopardy. Other oligarchs were gradually moving away from Brezhnev, expecting a new leader to present their allegiance to him. When he died, they could hardly put trust in the younger generation. Nevertheless, having experienced Brezhnev's genuine collective leadership, they realized that such a model of leadership only accumulated challenges, but they hesitated to select a young successor, fearing yet another Khrushchev (Gill, 2018, pp. 222–253).

Two of Brezhnev's successors—Andropov and Chernenko—came from his generation, and coincidentally, they both died soon after ascending to the post of general secretary. Andropov's anti-corruption campaign denounced a lot of Brezhnev's younger cohort clients, whereas Chernenko's rule was marked by complete immobility in the top leadership. Only after Chernenko's demise did the elites decide to try a "new broom," Gorbachev. He was chosen in a narrow Politburo vote; nomination and validation of his candidature within the Politburo and Central Committee were well in line with the relatively institutional power struggles that awaited Gorbachev in the coming years, compared to ones in China, where the leaders could be reshuffled on a whim of the party elders.

From 1985 to 1991, Gorbachev was promoting his ever-radicalizing policies at the expense of infighting with rivals. None of the Soviet leaders had made as many reshuffles in such a short term before. Given the respected institutional power of general secretary, Gorbachev eliminated the Brezhnevites' influence by retiring most of them some three years into his rule (Gill, 2018, p. 260). The Central Committee plenum convened in April 1989 saw 98 people resigning from their positions. The party veterans ceased to resist following Gorbachev's persuasion. Thus, he rid the old guards of Brezhnev by clearly violating the party rules (Mawdsley & White, 2000, pp. 200–202). In contrast with China, where the elders supervised the incumbent after the succession, in the USSR, Gorbachev outweighed the party elders and sent them home.

Therefore, although the old generation met the young cohort in the Politburo and Secretariat in the Soviet Union, they did not have anyone powerful enough to claim the leadership position. Instead, the traditional method of power succession broke out with the power struggle around the policy of the new incumbent. The new power configuration did not have enough room to accommodate both the reformist young and the conservative old, and the latter were forced to resign. Though Gorbachev was chosen by the old men, they could not pose a threat to him.

However, Gorbachev still faced resistance. In March 1990, the newly elected Congress of People's Deputies (CPD) abolished the CPSU's leading role in society. That introduced the multiparty system in the USSR. In fear of being dethroned by the members of the Politburo, Gorbachev revamped the party institutions by creating the executive presidency election, which would be subject to the will of the CPD rather than the Politburo and Central Committee (Gill, 2018). Hence, significant threats to Gorbachev came from outside of the CPSU. Given the development of *glasnost*, more people favored more-democratic parties. As such, not only many members of the ruling coalition turned

against Gorbachev, but the public too. As a result of complex transformations, Gorbachev resigned from the post of general secretary of the CPSU in August 1991 following the failed State Committee on the State of Emergency coup and later left the Office of the President of the USSR, resulting in the collapse of the regime.

Compared to the backstage influence of the Chinese modern regents, the elite politics of the Soviet Union in the 1980s relied more on formal politics. After spending decades in the leadership bodies of the USSR, the old Brezhnevites were indeed very powerful and recognized oligarchs of the regime. However, even this fact did not give them enough authority to stop Gorbachev from radical changes. Instead, the general secretary, elected by the elders, effortlessly retired them in the pursuit of new blood for *perestroika*. At the end of the power succession crisis, the elites were severely divided, which accelerated the USSR's downfall (Lane, 1996).

CONCLUSION

Literature mainly suggests dynastic successions or voting bodies as the most durable methods of leadership transition in autocracies. This article conceptualizes an alternative mode of leadership transition—modern regency—that facilitates authoritarian resilience. In this paradigm, retired political patriarchs possess the ability to “mentor” potential successors and supervise the power transition after their retirement, which helps to ensure regime continuity across leadership cohorts. A modern regent is very likely to emerge when the retiring autocrats indicate a strong political will to leave their post, have enough capacity to initiate their decision and win support from the oligarchs to leave, and can provide a credible retirement plan to buy off the oligarchs and save a certain amount of political power to manipulate succession politics after retirement. After securing these three conditions, the modern regents may aid the preferred successor in gradually taking over their power, helping alleviate schisms over the “throne.” The absence of modern regents leaves the regime as a prize for the oligarch who wins the vicious fight for leadership that often breaks out following the retirement or death of the previous dictator.

Our theory is supported by tracing the institutionalization trajectories of the post-Stalin USSR and post-Mao China. The two cases exhibit structurally similar regimes with divergent approaches to leadership transition. The Chinese revolutionary elders navigated succession crises of the 1980s by rotating successors to the post of the general secretary until they found a tamed heir, Jiang Zemin, who could both be accepted by conservative veterans and reform China according to Deng's will. Reserving the right to influence politics and have access to rent-seeking solves the problem of the autocrat's removal. Having retired from top posts in previous years, the elders in China set a precedent of peaceful natural removal that institutionalized the way leaders left their offices yet retained the right to influence politics after themselves for a few decades ahead. In contrast, the outgoing Soviet leaders of Brezhnev's generation could not acquire the role of modern regents and were marginalized by Gorbachev and his “young” peers. The succession crisis was not resolved and fueled the fall of the USSR.

The theory of modern regency adds new understandings of power succession arrangements to existing prepositions. First, widespread assumptions suggest that methods of routinization of succession politics, such as term limits, age limits, and generational turnover, can increase stability in the process of leadership transition. Informal politics is often considered to produce risks and instability for elite politics. However, our research shows by taking a quasi-institutional standing, already informal leaders may positively influence regime resilience. Second, while most of the literature on leadership transition focuses on the actions of heirs, our theory sheds lights on the former leaders' exit by demonstrating how and why the dictators may retire voluntarily.

Moreover, our findings about the importance of retirement arrangements are relevant for increasing numbers of autocracies nowadays. Notable examples include Lee Kuan Yew in Singapore, who after retirement took the post of minister mentor, or Raúl Castro in Cuba, who left his presidency to Miguel Díaz-Canel while retaining the party leadership for himself. More recently, Nursultan Nazarbayev stepped down from the post of the president of Kazakhstan, where he had ruled for almost 30 years, yet remained in the office of the Chairman of the Security Council and named the capital after himself. Russia watchers increasingly see such an arrangement as an option for the coming succession to Vladimir Putin. Beyond these examples, the recent crisis following Lukashenka's presidential election to his sixth term in Belarus provides another case of a dictator's voluntary exit serving as an important prerequisite for power transition in authoritarian regimes. Of the possible mechanisms that have been suggested for Lukashenka's succession, two fit with our thesis: one is to proceed in hereditary fashion, handing over power to one of his sons (Usov, 2020); the other is to create a special council or to restructure the legislature in such a way that the longest-serving dictator in Eastern Europe can be the final arbiter of policy whatever the makeup of the executive (Tolkachëva, 2020). If either of these two routes is chosen, we will have one more case of modern regency to observe.

A number of additional questions also emerged from our research. First, the Chinese case studied in this article has focused on power transition during the Deng era. It is generally agreed that due to the relatively weaker power bases of Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao in comparison to Deng, both could only play consensus-building roles and largely follow the lines drawn by Deng. Accordingly, there has been an increasing institutionalization of power transition from Jiang to Hu and then to the current general secretary, Xi Jinping, since the 1990s (Kou & Zang, 2014). There are also signs of a decline in the influence of old men over new incumbents—for instance, neither Jiang nor Hu directly assigned their successor. Several recent changes under Xi, such as the constitutional amendments and the unprecedented large-scale corruption crackdown that purged associates of both Jiang and Hu (Shirk, 2018), might raise further questions over the continuing hold of party elders on their successors. However, as shown in the cases of Hu and Xi, the endorsement and support of elders remains crucial in a successful leadership succession, and predecessors are able to pack the PSC-elect with their followers to help maintain their influence in formal politics (Fewsmith, 2003). It has also been claimed that the purge of Zhou Yongkang, a former PSC member, as part of Xi's anti-

corruption campaign was accepted by Jiang and Hu, although both suggested reining in the measures (Anderlini & Robinovitch, 2014). Unfortunately, substantial behind-the-scenes information about the post-Deng era elite politics is not available currently to confidently establish the extent to which the model of modern regency proposed in this article fits the operation of power since the retirement of Jiang and into the Xi era.

Second, future research may further study the factors leading to the differences of the three prerequisites across countries and within each given regime. For instance, why did the old Soviet Brezhnevites not have substantial informal power as did the Chinese elders who enjoyed respect for their participation in the revolution? Also, while tracing the origins of the autocrats' political will, we found that behind the seniority of age of the Chinese elders, they demonstrated a motivation to shape institutions in a way to make sure that their legacies would be maintained after they retired. The legacies included reforms that the elders had initiated, the stability of the regime, maintaining the principle of one-party rule, and, importantly, proper placement for their relatives. The Chinese princelings benefited the most from leadership rejuvenation. Many of them became current political and business leaders during the reforms of the 1980s, since back then, they had higher chances for elite promotion (Shih et al., 2012). The welfare of the leaders' offspring actually appears as a strong motivation in the search for a successor who can commit to maintaining the elders' legacies. Comparison with the Soviet Union seems to support this observation. Offspring of the Soviet old-generation leaders were not involved in politics as commonly and deeply as their Chinese counterparts and were even less likely to be appointed to important political positions than the Chinese princelings. This begs the question as to whether long-term personal or family stake in the regime is another factor affecting autocrats' political will to institutionalize power transition. If yes, we would also ask why princelings' incorporation into the party-state system was different for similar regimes.

Finally, we believe that conditions of a dictator's retirement and the response of an ascending heir in different configurations can predict gradual power transitions in various autocracies and especially in communist and post-communist regimes. To do this, we propose an exploration of other stages of leadership succession that follow the exit of the dictator, such as the selection of the successor, the ability of the successor to outmaneuver the former dictator, and the establishment of the successor as an independent paramount leader. Examination of all four stages of leadership transition will help us understand and predict power succession in autocracies, including the instances of power succession that were not completed in an orderly manner. Thus, future research studying authoritarian leadership transition may include the new variable of the modern regent and consider building a formal model that speaks to the aforementioned stages. ■

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