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Anne Applebaum's 'Autocracy, Inc.' Unpacks How the World's 'Bad Guys' Learn from Each Other

By Pippa Crawford

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Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping during a welcoming ceremony. **kremlin.ru**

"All of us have in our minds a cartoon image of an autocratic state. There is a bad man at the top. He controls the army and the police. There are evil collaborators, and maybe some brave dissidents. But in the 21st century, that cartoon bears little resemblance to reality."

These are the opening lines of "Autocracy, Inc.," the latest book by the acclaimed journalist Anne Applebaum.

It's a slim polemic, which the author quips "is perfect for reading on the flight between New York and DC." Instead of focusing on one country, "Autocracy, Inc." hops around the globe, illuminating the networks of kleptocracy, cronyism and surveillance that allow different autocratic regimes to sustain each other and evade Western retribution.

Applebaum's recentring of sidelined players like Venezuela and Zimbabwe is refreshing. She tells the story of Evan Mawarire, an evangelical pastor who found himself at the mercy of the state when a video of him using the Zimbabwean flag to highlight corruption went viral. The discussion of the smear campaign against Mawarire and his subsequent torture and banishment are linked skilfully to events in Belarus and Iran.

There is, however, a certain reticence to critique the post-1945 U.S. foreign policy interventionism and economic dominance to which modern autocracies are reacting.

Applebaum points out that Putin and his imitators abuse the foreign policy buzzwords "multi-polar" and "sovereignty" within their official rhetoric in order to flout international law and strengthen economic and security alliances that cut out America like BRICS and CSTO. Putin even manages to present his behavior in Africa as "anti-colonial" while simultaneously waging a colonial war in Ukraine.

A good point — but as multi-polarity is emphasized in the context of propaganda, Applebaum dismisses the more serious problem: "multi-polar alliances" can genuinely appeal to countries in Africa, Asia and even Europe, particularly those with reason to be wary of America and its allies.

States like Serbia, with its bad memories of NATO, or Mali, which is still trying to push out the French, are vulnerable to ideological seduction by foreign autocrats because the ground is already prepared. In parallel, rising powers like India may hold neutral-to-favorable views of the U.S., but they are keen to trade and do not take kindly to having their allies chosen for them.

Such tensions are more damaging than propaganda for Western policymakers as they attempt to draw non-aligned countries closer to their orbit — which is, arguably, one of the goals of this book.

Applebaum is excellent at explaining how — and why — dictators lie to people. She recalls the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17, when Putin deliberately released multiple contradictory stories rather than denying the act. The author argues that turning on the "firehose of falsehoods" produces not outrage, but nihilism — a departure from 20th-century dictators who used ideology to convince people they were telling the truth.

"Sometimes the point isn't to make people believe a lie; it's to make people fear the liar," Applebaum writes.

At other times, dictators prefer to disguise their influence, often at great expense. Like RT, the Chinese network CGTV runs other international stations whose links to the parent company aren't immediately obvious, such as StarTimes, which plays positive China content like kung fu movies in different African languages.

Not that China is always so subtle — in 2017, Beijing sold anti-riot gear and surveillance cameras to Venezuela, later using similar equipment to choke domestic dissent in Hong Kong.

Despite these warnings, Applebaum opts for a pragmatic line on future U.S.-China trade. Echoing Biden advisor Jake Sullivan, who recommended "de-risking" rather than

“decoupling” from China, she favors reducing dependence on Chinese minerals, semiconductors and energy supplies — anything that can be weaponized in a crisis.

While the author and her camp are clearly worried about Xi, I got the sense that her target audience is the next (Democratic?) U.S. administration, which is unlikely to take on Moscow and Beijing at once.

Which leads us to Trump. It won’t come as a surprise to anybody that the presidential hopeful used autocratic tactics in his attempt to overturn the 2020 election results, but it is sobering to see the argument made so plainly in a book about dictatorships.

“If he ever succeeds in directing federal courts and law enforcement at his enemies, in combination with a mass trolling campaign, then the blending of the autocratic and democratic worlds will be complete,” Applebaum writes.

The final chapter, Democrats United, offers strategies for change. These ideas — lightly sketched — would require a lot of coordinated activity from governments and banks, but it’s still a hopeful read. Applebaum wants to tackle kleptocracy by forcing companies in Europe and the U.S. to register under the names of their true owners, and cracking down on loopholes in the private equity sector; a plan Oliver Bullough has been patiently pushing for in London.

Filled with engaging examples, “Autocracy, Inc.” unpacks the fallacy that autocracies need to be ideologically aligned to help each other. And if someone powerful picks up this book at the airport, so much the better.

“Autocracy, Inc.: The Dictators Who Want to Run the World” by Anne Applebaum is published by Allen Lane.

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