



# DEFENSE DOSSIER

ISSUE 32

DECEMBER  
2021



U.S.- MEXICAN SECURITY COOPERATION FACES THE FUTURE

*Celina B. Realuyo*

THE CAUSES OF COLOMBIA'S CRISIS

*Christine Balling*

EXAMINING RUSSIAN AND CHINESE MILITARY OPERATIONS IN  
VENEZUELA

*Jose Gustavo Arocha*

IRAN'S LASTING AMBITIONS IN LATIN AMERICA

*Kylie Skorupa and Christina Armes Hunter*

LATIN AMERICA'S AUTHORITARIAN WAVE

*Joseph M. Humire*



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DECEMBER 2021 | ISSUE 32

- 1. From the Editors** 2  
Ilan Berman and Richard M. Harrison
- 2. U.S.- Mexican Security Cooperation Faces the Future** 3  
*Coordination between Mexico City and Washington has never been more vital.*  
Celina B. Realuyo
- 3. The Causes of Colombia's Crisis** 8  
*One of America's most vital allies now faces major turbulence. Here's why.*  
Christine Balling
- 4. Examining Russian and Chinese Military Operations in Venezuela** 12  
*Moscow and Beijing are working overtime to keep Maduro in power.*  
Jose Gustavo Arocha
- 5. Iran's Lasting Ambitions in Latin America** 16  
*Iran's partnership with Venezuela is thriving. So are its designs on the rest of the region.*  
Kylie Skorupa and Christina Armes Hunter
- 6. Latin America's Authoritarian Wave** 20  
*Democracy is in retreat in the Americas. That's bad news for the United States.*  
Joseph M. Humire



## LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

Welcome to the December 2021 edition of the American Foreign Policy Council's *Defense Dossier* e-journal. In this issue, we shift our attention to America's geopolitical "backyard" of Latin America, an often overlooked but strategically vital area.

We begin by examining the convergence of transnational threats affecting the U.S.-Mexico relations, namely migration and narcotrafficking. Then we focus on Colombia with its enduring violence, drug issues, and political unrest. Next, we assess how Russia and China are teaming to buttress the Maduro regime in neighboring Venezuela by providing military and strategic support. Then we explore how Iran has gained a foothold in Venezuela, and its contemporary ambitions for expanded influence throughout the Americas. We close by discussing a trend with profound implications for the United States: the decline of democracy and the resurgence of authoritarianism in contemporary Latin American politics.

As always, we hope you find the pages that follow interesting and insightful.

Sincerely,

Ilan Berman  
Chief Editor

Richard M. Harrison  
Managing Editor



# U.S.- Mexican Security Cooperation Faces the Future

*Celina B. Realuyo*

The U.S. and Mexico are facing a growing convergence of transnational threats from narcotics trafficking and irregular migration – threats which affect the security and prosperity of North America. U.S.-Mexican security cooperation under President Joe Biden and President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador (AMLO) remains difficult, due to competing priorities and significant levels of mistrust between Washington and Mexico City. These tensions, however, come at a critical time, as violence and homicide rates in Mexico remain close to historic highs. Unprecedented flows of narcotics and irregular migrants are expected to continue, if not intensify, as the border reopens to trade and travel and the U.S. economy recovers from the pandemic. Recent senior-level U.S.-Mexican engagements like the North American Leaders' Summit and the Bi-Centennial Framework for Security, Public Health, and Safe Communities could serve as opportunities to revitalize important collaboration between the U.S. and Mexico to confront these transnational security threats.

## THE COUNTERNARCOTICS CHALLENGE

Mexican cartels have remained active during the pandemic, trafficking dangerous drugs like fentanyl, heroin, meth and cocaine into the U.S. in spite of COVID-19 lockdowns, closed borders and paralyzed international trade. Transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) have adapted quickly to the new environment, capitalizing on the fact that governments and security forces have been focused on pandemic response rather than on fighting crime. These groups are expanding their control of trafficking routes and markets, and winning hearts and minds by providing COVID-related social services to marginalized com-

munities in Mexico. The cartels are similarly exploiting cyberspace, using online markets and cryptocurrencies to sell, finance and profit from the drug trade.<sup>1</sup> They are also populating social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram to glorify the “narco” lifestyle and recruit young people known as “ni-ni’s” (who neither study nor work) to their organizations. In a disturbing development, already well-armed Mexican cartels are increasingly employing emerging technologies like drones for surveillance, propaganda videos, night vision combat operations and kinetic attacks on adversaries.

Mexico continues to experience near record levels of homicides related to narcotics trafficking. The DEA 2020 National Drug Threat Assessment, published in March 2021, stated that Mexican drug trafficking organizations remain the greatest criminal drug threat to the United States and are increasingly responsible for producing and supplying deadly fentanyl to the U.S. market.

With pandemic lockdowns lifted and the U.S.-Mexican border reopened, drug trafficking destined for the U.S. is expected to surge amid rising American demand for synthetic drugs like fentanyl and meth. According to the CDC, the rate of overdose deaths mostly due to synthetic opioids has accelerated during the pandemic, with a record 100,306 overdose deaths in the 12 months ending in April 2021. The situation was exacerbated by the closure of substance abuse treatment centers due to COVID-19, and emergency room visits for mental health conditions, domestic violence, child abuse, and suicide attempts increased.<sup>2</sup> From October 2020 through September 2021, U.S. Customs and Border Protection seized 11,201 pounds of fentanyl. The U.S. government estimates that one kilogram of fentanyl is equivalent to 500,000 lethal doses, making last year's seizure equal to





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2.5 billion fatal doses blocked from making their way into the country.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, while Mexican criminal organizations are consolidating power and flooding the U.S. with narcotics, U.S.-Mexican bilateral relations have never been so strained in the security cooperation arena. On October 15, 2020, U.S. authorities, based on a ten-year DEA investigation, arrested former Mexican Minister of Defense General Salvador Cienfuegos at Los Angeles International Airport on drug trafficking and money laundering charges for aiding and abetting the violent H-2 cartel. One month later, however, the charges were unexpectedly dropped by the U.S. Department of Justice, due to sensitive and important foreign policy considerations that outweighed the U.S. government's interest in pursuing the prosecution of the Mexican general.<sup>4</sup> Cienfuegos was then returned to Mexico, where the Mexican government decided not to investigate him. Mexico accused the DEA of fabricating evidence against Cienfuegos, and the U.S. Justice Department accused Mexico of bad faith and threatened to stop sharing information crucial to effective operations against organized crime.<sup>5</sup> The Mexican decision not to pursue the investigation of the former Defense Minister reflects how powerful and influential the Mexican military is, and how dependent President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador is on the armed forces to govern his country through security operations, infrastructure construction and port management.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the return of General Cienfuegos, Mexico

enacted a new National Security Act in December 2020 that imposes serious restrictions on foreign agents conducting investigations in Mexico. Under this law, Mexican officials must request prior permission to meet with their foreign counterparts, and foreign agents must share all information gathered in Mexico with the government. This is hindering the counter-crime investigations and operations of U.S. law enforcement agencies, most notably the DEA, ATF, and CBP and ICE in Mexico. The change in law, requested by AMLO, was widely seen as retaliation against the U.S. arrest of Cienfuegos and an attempt to create leverage with the incoming Biden administration. This climate makes it difficult

to build trust and foster cooperation between the U.S. and Mexico in the face of transnational criminal organizations that represent a grave threat to the security of both countries.

### THE IRREGULAR MIGRATION CHALLENGE

President Biden has made immigration reform a top priority for his Administration. Since being inaugurated, he has reversed many of the migration and border security policies of the Trump administration, suspending the construction of the wall along the southern border of the U.S.; ending the Migrant Protection Protocols (Remain in Mexico), that returned certain asylum-seekers to Mexico to wait for adjudication of their cases in the U.S. immigration court system; canceling the agreements of safe third countries with El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, allowing unaccompanied minors to enter the U.S.; and introducing a comprehensive immigration reform bill that provides new pathways to citizenship. These actions have resulted in a perception that the Biden administration is more welcoming to migrants.

As a result of these new policies, irregular migration has dramatically increased at the U.S. southwest border. DHS Customs and Border Patrol reported 1,734,868 Southwest land border crossings in fiscal year 2021, more than quadruple the number of the prior fiscal year.<sup>7</sup> Those detained include known criminals, gang members and sex offenders. CBP agents caught people



from more than 160 countries in Asia, Africa, Europe and Latin America, with migrants from Mexico and Central America representing 78 percent of the total. The data released in October 2021 showed a sharp increase in the number of Haitian migrants who crossed in September with more than 17,000, or 38 percent of the total number of Haitians who were caught crossing illegally over the preceding 12 months. Border Patrol has carried out more than one million expulsions of migrants back to Mexico or to the migrants' home countries. Agents used the Title 42 public health rule to expel individual migrants they encountered 61% of the time, and to expel families 26% of the time.<sup>8</sup> DHS expects a record number of irregular migrants to arrive in the U.S. in calendar year 2021 due to the new policies and "push factors" that include the COVID-19 economic crisis, violence and the aftermath of two hurricanes that hit Central America last year.

Transnational criminal organizations are seizing on this opportunity to diversify their activities into human smuggling and trafficking, and encouraging migrants to make the dangerous journey to the U.S., from which they profit. Mexican intelligence shows smugglers' transit costs vary widely. One assessment said an unaccompanied Central American minor could secure passage to the U.S. border for about \$3,250. By contrast, for African travelers, the rate was \$20,000. Asians must also pay more.<sup>9</sup> The human smuggling and trafficking business that moves people as a commodity, meanwhile, is considered more lucrative and less risky than narcotics trafficking.

Perceptions that President Biden has eased immigration and border control policies have reached not only Central America but beyond, to the "extra-continentals" who originate from Africa, Asia, Europe and the Middle East and are trying to make their way to the U.S. Early on during the pandemic, COVID-19 border closures in various Latin American countries and the push-back policies of the Trump administration dissuaded expensive border-crossing attempts by migrants. The lifting of lockdowns and the reopening of borders has facilitated the resumption of these extra-continental migrations. Border security officials fear that some of these extra-continentals might

be on the INTERPOL or terror watch lists and present a threat to U.S. national security. On February 2, 2021, 11 Iranians were caught at the Arizona border trying to enter the U.S. In December 2020, Honduran authorities detained 187 from Somalia, 182 from Syria, and 63 from Tunisia.<sup>10</sup> Given the destabilization of Afghanistan and collapse of the Islamic State terrorist group, immigration agencies are on high alert to identify possible terrorists among these irregular migrants making their way toward the U.S.

For decades, migration has been a leading issue in the U.S.-Mexican bilateral relationship. It dominated the first virtual summit between Presidents Biden and Lopez Obrador held on March 1, 2021. The two leaders issued a joint declaration affirming their will to cooperate on migration issues, particularly the long-term goal of creating more jobs in southern Mexico and Central America. Mexican officials said they emphasized the importance of opening up more legal pathways for migrants. AMLO proposed that the U.S. set up a new temporary worker program that could bring 600,000 to 800,000 Mexican and Central American immigrants into the United States annually in a more orderly fashion. The White House indicated that such a program would require Congressio-

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nal action.<sup>11</sup> AMLO referred to Biden as the “Migration President,” and Mexican officials fear that these new U.S. policies will encourage mass migration and further enrich criminal groups increasingly involved in human smuggling and trafficking methods.<sup>12</sup>

Mexico has urged the U.S. to help stem the migration flows by providing development aid to Central America, where most of the migrants come from. The Biden Administration seeks to address the long-term “root causes” of irregular migration with a pledge to channel \$4 billion into socio-economic development and job creation programs for Central America’s Northern Triangle — El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. Mexico has also tried to mitigate “push factors” in Central America through AMLO’s 2019 initiative to donate \$30 million to implement job creation plans such as “Sembrando Vida” and “Jóvenes Construyendo el Futuro” in El Salvador through the Mexican Agency for International Development Cooperation.<sup>13</sup>

### THE WAY FORWARD

The U.S. and Mexico must cultivate closer collaboration to counter the convergence of transnational threats like drug trafficking and irregular migration to promote security and prosperity in North America. The following recommendations might serve toward this end:

- The U.S.-Mexico Bicentennial Framework for Security, Public Health, and Safe Communities announced on October 8, 2021 should revitalize bilateral cooperation to better protect citizens’ health and safety, promote the development of the most vulnerable communities in both countries, prevent criminal organizations from harming both countries, and pursue and bring criminals to justice.<sup>14</sup>

- The U.S., Canada and Mexico should pledge to work cooperatively toward ending the COVID-19 pandemic, fostering competitiveness and creating the conditions for equitable growth, and promoting orderly, safe, and regular migration. The North American Leaders’ Summit slated to take place on November 18, 2021 is an opportune moment

to encourage confidence-building measures among these partners.<sup>15</sup>

- The U.S. and Mexico must reduce drug demand, especially of synthetic opioids that are killing so many citizens and fueling the drug trade and violence, while addressing supply reduction.

- Both countries should improve their capacity to identify, prosecute and dismantle human trafficking and migrant smuggling networks through joint intelligence and law enforcement operations.

- The U.S. and Mexico should step up efforts to stem illegal arms flows from the U.S. that contributes to violence and homicides in Mexico. President Biden has pledged to take action to curb gun violence, and Democrats in Congress are reintroducing several gun control bills, including an expansion of background checks for purchasers. Mexican officials say a ban on assault weapons would be a crucial step.<sup>16</sup>

- Since both countries recognize that money serves as the oxygen for transnational criminal organizations, they should leverage more financial intelligence to detect and dismantle TCOs engaged in narcotics and human trafficking.

The Biden administration faces an uphill battle in reestablishing close bilateral relations with Mexico on the security and law enforcement front. While this is hardly the first instance of bilateral tensions on security issues, today’s security challenges are graver and more pressing than in the past. As a result, it is more imperative than ever before to find constructive ways forward to promote cooperative national and economic security between the U.S. and Mexico.





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# The Causes of Colombia's Crisis

*Christine Balling*

November 24th marked the fifth anniversary of the 2016 peace deal concluded in Havana between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). Official negotiations between the administration of Juan Manuel Santos and FARC leaders began in 2012, sparking intense domestic debate while garnering worldwide attention and strong support from the Obama administration. Critics warned Bogota against making too many concessions to a narco-terrorist organization whose sixty-year history of violence and crime made it unlikely for them to honor agreed-upon terms. Peace deal proponents, on the other hand, argued significant concessions were necessary to ensure that the world's longest running civil war would finally end. Once the deal was signed, however, Colombians across the political spectrum hoped for peace. Unfortunately, five years on, the country's security situation has deteriorated.

Colombia now faces challenges on multiple fronts: increased cocaine production, an uptick in attacks by multiple non-state actors in rural areas and politically motivated unrest in Colombia's major cities. Critics of current President Ivan Duque Marquez's administration have blamed some of the aforementioned on the administration's slow implementation of the peace deal. However, given the accord's 15-year timeline, significant progress has been made, as Colombian government representatives argued during a UN security council meeting in July.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, it's important to note that the peace accord, regardless of how it was sold politically, was not intended as a panacea to the country's security issues. As the Biden administration considers how best to support Colombia going forward, it must consider each issue pragmatically, and be prepared for opposition from the far left in both nations.

## A GROWING DRUG TRADE

Coca cultivation and cocaine production in Colombia is now at an all-time high.<sup>2</sup> In 2020, 245,000 hectares of coca were cultivated, as compared to 188,000 hectares in 2016. This translates into approximately 1010 tons of cocaine produced in 2020, as compared to 775 tons in 2016.

The reason has a great deal to do with the 2016 accord. As a concession to the FARC during the negotiations, then-President Santos stopped the government's aerial eradication program. While aerial eradication alone does not reduce overall coca cultivation, it is deemed to be more effective in the short term than manual eradication,<sup>3</sup> though neither form has proven effective in the long term. The issue is now under consideration by the country's Supreme Court. For its part, the Biden administration has yet to take a stance on the issue.<sup>4</sup> If the Colombian government receives legal permission to resume aerial eradication, the United States should support it.

Other policy options exist as well. Crop substitution programs have the potential to decrease coca cultivation, but the Colombian government does not have the budget to fund a potentially effective and sustainable program. Due to legal restrictions against funding programs that benefit terrorist organizations, the U.S. has not funded crop substitution efforts because beneficiaries would include former FARC members. To that end, on November 30th, the State Department removed the FARC from the State Department's list of terrorist groups while adding the dissident groups, the "FARC-EP" and the "Segunda Marquetalia."<sup>5</sup>

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## A RISE IN RURAL VIOLENCE

While 13,000 FARC fighters demobilized after the 2016 cease fire, thousands did not. Along with the National Liberation Army (ELN) and BACRIM gangs, the so-called “FARC dissidents” who refused to lay down arms quickly took over operations abandoned by the FARC. These groups are actively trafficking cocaine, running illegal mining operations and attacking Colombian security forces.

Former FARC commander and chief negotiator Ivan Marquez, who was a presidential candidate for the FARC political party in 2018, abandoned his civilian life in 2019 and subsequently formed a new far left militant group, the *Segunda Marquetalia*. Despite an Interpol red notice and multimillion dollar rewards offered for information leading to his capture, Marquez currently operates out of Venezuela with impunity. While it is unclear whether Marquez himself ordered the hit, FARC dissidents based in Venezuela fired upon President Duque’s helicopter in June.<sup>6</sup> Such an audacious attack suggests the safe harbor now being provided by the Maduro administration in Caracas continues embolden these militants.

Despite the peace agreement’s call for investment in long neglected rural communities, habitants of remote areas have yet to experience peace. As was the case before the 2016 cease fire, assassinations at the local level are commonplace,<sup>7</sup> while the victims disproportionally include human rights defenders, indigenous and Afro-Colombians. In addition to the FARC dissident groups, the ELN has been increasingly active in recent months. In September, the ELN killed five soldiers in the department of Arauca.<sup>8</sup> In November, the group killed three soldiers in the department of Norte de Santander.<sup>9</sup> Under these circumstances, it is impossible for a civilian state presence to protect Colombian citizens. The Colombian government will need to rely on the military to secure given regions and free them of militant actors as a prerequisite for civilian administration.

Yet increased funding for the Colombian military is not likely to receive backing from American progressives, who recently called for the defunding of the country’s military police.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, the Biden

administration should increase support for non-kinetic operations like those conducted by U.S. Army’s Civil Affairs teams and the Colombian army’s *accion integral* teams, which work for and with local communities. Their initiatives include relatively low-cost community engagement and infrastructure projects. In addition to fostering a relationship of trust between soldiers and the people they protect, successfully executed *accion integral* projects lessen the influence of bad actors who rely heavily on civilian cooperation in their day-to-day operations.

**Colombia now faces challenges on multiple fronts: increased cocaine production, an uptick in attacks by multiple non-state actors in rural areas and politically motivated unrest in Colombia’s major cities.**

## RETHINKING THE MISSION

The latter half of this year saw the worst urban violence in years, particularly in the cities of Bogota and Cali. On April 15th, the administration of President Ivan Duque Marquez announced a tax reform proposal which included income and sales tax hikes. The measures were intended to help alleviate the devastating economic effects of COVID-related lockdowns. In 2020, the Colombian economy suffered its greatest contraction in decades. Unemployment rates have increased significantly, and the government needs money. However, the timing of the proposal was politically tone deaf, and generated a groundswell of popular opposition. Just days after protests began, the administration withdrew its proposal and the country’s Minister of Finance resigned.<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless, the protests continued to spread and, in many cases, devolved into riots, vandalism and violent



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clashes with police. FARC dissidents publicly called for the protesters to take up arms. Likewise, foreign governments such as Venezuela and Cuba were vocal supporters of the unrest, and promoted narratives that helped to stoke the violence.<sup>12</sup> Groups set up roadblocks in major thoroughfares across the country, preventing the transport of food, fuel and other goods. Thousands of *campesino* farmers were unable to bring their goods to market. A strike commission composed of various unions and leftist groups held talks with the Duque administration and eventually called off the weekly protests, and lifted the blockades in June.<sup>13</sup>

Tragically, thousands of civilians and members of the military police were injured. Scores were killed. Statistics vary depending upon the source. In June, Human Rights Watch reported 31 civilian deaths related to the protests.<sup>14</sup> According to the Colombian government, however, 58 civilians died during the protests, some at the hands of authorities.<sup>15</sup> The military police, meanwhile, recently reported 1758 police casualties since the end of April.<sup>16</sup> Investigations into civilian casualties have begun, albeit slowly.<sup>17</sup> In response to calls for police reform, the Duque administration has also mandated the establishment of a human rights directorate within the military police, human rights training for officers and body cam requirements for all uniformed officers.

## TURBULENCE AHEAD

Regardless of its reform efforts, however, the Duque administration's lame duck status waters down any political win. The first round of the country's upcoming presidential elections will be held in March. Further political unrest is a near certainty, especially given that the leading candidate of this writing, Gustavo Petro, is a former member of the M19 terrorist organization and current leader of the far-left *Colombia Humana* party. Petro, who was a vocal supporter of the protests and has recently pledged to stop oil exploration on his first day in office, continues to inspire large crowds and garner press attention. As a result, the upcoming presidential election should prove to be one of the most divisive in recent Colombian

history.

Clearly, Colombia is in crisis. The deteriorating security situation bodes ill for the future. Though the results of the upcoming presidential election may affect a shift in relations, for now, Colombia remains one of America's strongest allies in the region. As such, the United States must make it a priority to assist Colombia with military, counter-narcotic and humanitarian aid. Doing so would help to place Bogota in a better security situation, and perhaps even on a firmer political path.

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# Examining Russian and Chinese Military Operations in Venezuela

*Jose Gustavo Arocha*

With inflation at a record high, millions of its citizens fleeing the country, and a political opposition recognized by most Western democracies as the legitimate government of Venezuela, the regime of Nicolás Maduro seemed to be on the brink of collapse in 2019.<sup>1</sup> But Maduro regime survived, thanks to a number of factors – among them the external support it received from malign state actors such as Russia and China.

Moscow and Beijing never wavered in their political support of the Venezuelan regime, or of Maduro himself, including by refusing to recognize the constitutionally mandated interim presidency of Juan Guaidó.<sup>2</sup> Most analysis of Russia and China's support has focused on the political and economic support provided to Venezuela, including close cooperation in energy, industry, health, finance, and trade. But the support of the two countries has gone far beyond the political and economic realms, and encompasses military and defense cooperation that has helped harden Maduro's dictatorship and enhanced its capabilities to cause chaos with its neighbors.

## A LONG-TERM DEFENSE ALLIANCE

When Hugo Chávez ascended to the Venezuelan presidency twenty-two years ago, Russia's Vladimir Putin and China's Hu Jintao immediately began building a defense relationship with his regime. Over his 14-year tenure, Chávez visited Russia nine times and China six, in the process establishing a security and defense alliance that the Maduro regime maintains to this day.

Russia has sold more than \$11.4 billion in military equipment and armament to Venezuela in the last twenty years, including fighter jets, attack and transport helicopters, air defense and naval platforms, tanks, armored personnel carriers (APC), self-propelled artillery, and various small arms to include surface-to-air-missiles.<sup>3</sup>

The booming arms trade is complemented by Russia's deployment of two nuclear-capable strategic bombers to Venezuela every five years since 2008. The Tu-160 bombers can carry conventional or nuclear-tipped cruise missiles and have been tested in combat in Syria, where they launched, for the first time, conventionally armed Kh-101 cruise missiles. The bombers last took the 6,200-mile flight to Venezuela in 2018,<sup>4</sup> making 2023 the next expected deployment if Russia keeps to its five-year rotation.

China, while selling significantly less arms to Venezuela than Russia, has a hand in shaping the next generation of Venezuelan military leaders through defense education and special operations training. Since 1999, the 76th Group Army of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) has been training jointly with Venezuelan Special Forces on language, diving, sniping, and helicopter landing operations.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, Venezuelan flag officers have steadily attended professional military courses and China's military war colleges and the PLA National Defense University.

In the last ten years, China has sold upward of \$615 million in weapons to Venezuela,<sup>6</sup> including K-8 trainer aircraft, VN-16 light tanks, anti-tank and anti-ship missiles, self-propelled mortars, and the infamous VN-4 light armored personnel carrier, nicknamed the "Rhino-ceros," which saw action on the streets of Venezuela when the Maduro regime quashed protests in 2014, 2017, and to this day.

Moreover, the three countries have been able to build interoperability and joint capabilities by regularly attending the International Army Games, an annual multinational military exercise organized by the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation. Their participation includes joint military training for Special Forces and Marine Infantry units from Russia, China, Iran, Venezuela, and Belarus. At the 2019 Russian Army Games,

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Venezuela's Defense Minister, General Vladimir Padrino López, signed a strategic naval agreement with his Russian counterpart, General Sergei Shoigu, governing future port visits by the countries' naval warships.<sup>7</sup>

### BUILDING VENEZUELA'S HYBRID WARFARE

Russia and China's military support to Venezuela blends the use of conventional military equipment with irregular armed non-state actors. This strategy of hybrid warfare is consistent with similar strategies employed in Syria, Ukraine, and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. And like in those other conflicts, the deployment of Russian and Chinese military contractors and companies is critical to augmenting the capabilities of the Maduro regime's military while maintaining plausible deniability.

In 2019, according to Reuters, Russian private military contractors (PMC) with reported ties to the Kremlin were used to beef up security for Nicolás Maduro and his regime. Russian PMCs have also been reported to use Venezuelan military uniforms in the capital, Caracas, in the country's mineral-dense eastern region, and along the Colombia-Venezuela border. These Russian PMCs arrived in Venezuela aboard an Ilyushin Il-62M long-range jetliner and an Antonov An-124 cargo aircraft, Russian Air Force transport planes which had built a strategic airlift from Moscow to Caracas.<sup>8</sup>

Meanwhile, Chinese security companies (CSC) are spearheading the development of unconventional combat capabilities in the Bolivarian Armed Forces of Venezuela (FANB) and the Maduro regime's repressive domestic apparatus. In November 2020, the U.S. Department of Treasury, through its Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), sanctioned China National Electronics Import & Export Corporation (CEIEC), a service provider of defense and social security systems, for helping the Maduro government undermine democracy, including via "efforts to restrict internet service and conduct digital surveillance and cyber operations against political opponents." According to OFAC, CEIEC provided Venezuela with the commercialized

version of China's "Great Firewall."<sup>9</sup>

The use of private contractors and private companies with ties to the military allows Russia and China to protect their oil, mining, and infrastructure investments while collecting tactical and strategic intelligence—and, most importantly, providing the Maduro regime with military logistical and intelligence support to manage the myriad irregular armed non-state actors operating on Venezuelan territory.

The paramilitary approach is augmented by high-level technical intelligence collection that allows the Maduro regime to improve its internal and external espionage. In 2018, China's ZTE Corporation, once sanctioned for its role in espionage and cybersecurity risks, built a Venezuelan surveillance system that monitors citizen behavior through the "fatherland card," a new Venezuelan national ID. China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) has close ties to two firms that partially own ZTE, which has become critical to the PLA's military industrial complex.<sup>10</sup> This includes a PLA offshoot at the Capitan Manuel Rios military airbase in the Guárico state of Venezuela that tracks military operated, Chinese built satellites in orbit.<sup>11</sup>

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The technical and paramilitary support from Russia and China has benefited many Venezuelan military commands, but none more than the Venezuelan Aerospace Defense Command (CODAI).<sup>12</sup> The CODAI has the mission of executing defensive aerospace operations, and Russia's P-18 mobile radar system and China's JY-11B 3D electronic radar have enhanced the Command, Control, Communications, Computers, and Intelligence (C4I) systems that are actively used to monitor and surveil Venezuela's borders.

### THREATENING VENEZUELA'S NEIGHBORS

Since 2018, Russian military aircraft have routinely arrived in Venezuela, while Russian military advisors regularly appear at military installations, carry out training exercises, and provide logistical support to the Maduro regime's military. China, for its part, has a less visible but equally impactful on-the-ground presence, training Venezuelan Special Operations Forces and managing military technology. Combined, these "global powers" are turning Venezuela into a serious front for gray zone conflict—one that provides a strategic and operational challenge to U.S. partners in the region, namely Colombia and Guyana.

In March 2021, the Maduro regime launched an offensive in the Apure state on the Colombia-Venezuela border. This offensive provoked a direct clash between the Venezuelan military and irregular armed actors (a faction of the FARC) operating on the border. The Maduro regime reacted by deploying a stronger military presence on the Venezuelan side of the border, complete with Chinese-made K-8 combat planes and Russian-made Orlan 10 unmanned aerial vehicles, which are reconnaissance drones used for electronic warfare.<sup>13</sup>

This was complemented by a robust disinformation campaign that sought to draw a moral equivalence between the democratically-elected government of Ivan Duque Marquez in Colombia and the undemocratic, authoritarian regime in Venezuela. Russia's Foreign Ministry chimed in by praising the Venezuelan military efforts to combat against drug trafficking and violence on the border, and urged the Colombian government to engage its Venezuelan counterparts to "solve the border conflict."<sup>14</sup>

Meanwhile, in offshore Guyana, ExxonMobil recently discovered massive oil deposits, reviving a historic border dispute that was supposedly settled in 1899.<sup>15</sup> Located west of the Essequibo River, the disputed region consists of 61,600 square miles, and although the Maduro regime previously did next to nothing to recover the disputed territory, it is now deploying Venezuelan warships to conduct naval exercises in the maritime border zone.<sup>16</sup> China is well-positioned to exploit this maritime border dispute, providing anti-ship missiles to the Venezuelan Navy. If a conflict erupts between Venezuela and Guyana, China will likely reap the benefits by leveraging its bilateral agreements with both countries to access the Essequibo's burgeoning oil and gas resources.

### MARRIAGE OF CONVENIENCE

This century has seen Russia and China create and exploit gray zone conflicts in Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. Venezuela represents an example of this same strategy in Latin America, a region with vast strategic natural resources that is increasingly vital for Russia and



China's global positioning.

While not a natural alliance, Russia and China have found common ground in Venezuela in partnering with the Maduro regime. Moscow provides the weapons and manpower, while Beijing provides the military technology, to the Maduro regime. This assistance helps Venezuela's strongman to persist, and to continue projecting power throughout Latin America and the Caribbean.

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## Iran's Lasting Ambitions in Latin America

*Kylie Skorupa and Christina Armes Hunter*

Iran has been a shadow actor in Latin America ever since the 1979 Islamic revolution. For more than forty years, the Islamic Republic has excelled at quietly setting up networks around the region, and in building an asymmetric presence south of the U.S. border. But Tehran's plan isn't to solely exist in the shadows.

In 2020, Iran publicly demonstrated its presence in Venezuela by sending multiple shipments of food and fuel to the embattled regime of Nicolás Maduro and opening its first Iranian supermarket in the South American nation. The Caracas branch of Megasis, the retail chain from Iran, was inaugurated by the Venezuelan vice president and the Iranian ambassador on July 29, 2020.<sup>1</sup> More importantly, the chain's owner, Issa Rezaei, who runs 700 Megasis stores in Iran, is also the Islamic Republic's deputy minister for industries and is closely tied to the country's Ministry of Defense.

Megasis's links to the military belie the nature of Iran's involvement in Venezuela, which includes the increased presence of its clerical army, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its elite paramilitary unit, the Qods Force. Today, with Venezuela as its home base, Iran's intrusion in Latin America is gaining momentum. Even in countries where Iran does not have a formal embassy, it has succeeded in expanding its influence in the region's modest Islamic communities through Shi'a cultural centers that promote regime ideology.

### WORDS AS A WEAPON

Major General Qasem Soleimani was arguably Iran's top military strategist, leading the feared Qods Force into conquest in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. This gave the

once shadowy commander a near mythical status before his death by U.S. drone strike in Baghdad on January 3, 2020. Two years on, the Iranian regime is working to rebrand the image of the slain military officer through an intensifying disinformation campaign in Latin America.<sup>2</sup>

Through Iran's Spanish language multimedia network, HispanTV, Soleimani is being promoted in Latin America as a hero, martyr, and fighter against terrorism and injustice worldwide. In December 2020, a new book called "Mi Tio Soleimani" ["My Uncle Soleimani"] was published in Spanish and launched alongside a new Iran-supported Shi'a cultural center in Colombia.<sup>3</sup> The ONG Shahid Soleimani, a nonprofit based in Bogota and ostensibly involved in civil society, actively celebrates his martyrdom.<sup>4</sup>

During the intense national protests last year in Colombia, the false Soleimani narrative was woven into the fabric of the fake news circulating around the protests, which began peacefully following a proposed tax reform but were subsequently co-opted by violent actors. The hashtag #Soleimani was intertwined with the popular hashtag #NosEstanMasacrando in Colombia, to portray Soleimani as a figure that fought against injustice. Significantly, these disinformation campaigns aren't intended solely to rebrand the image of a fallen soldier, but also to cloud Colombia's understanding of Iran.

### CONFUSION IN COLOMBIA

While on an official visit to Israel last November, Colombian Defense Minister Diego Molano said that Iran and Hezbollah are "common enemies" of Colombia and Israel.<sup>5</sup> A diplomatic spat back in Bogota ensued after





President Ivan Duque clarified that Colombia does not use the term “enemy” when referring to other nation states, and highlighted Colombia’s long standing diplomatic relationship with Iran, which dates back more than 45 years.<sup>6</sup> This mixed messaging from the Colombian government exemplifies the lack of knowledge about the Islamic Republic that prevails throughout the country.

While Colombia has indeed had diplomatic relations with Iran since 1975, ties were frozen shortly after Iran’s 1979 Islamic Revolution.<sup>7</sup> Colombia did not restart relations until 1992, and since then the relationship between Bogota and Tehran has been lukewarm at best. This context is lost by some Colombian pundits and politicians, who refer to Iran as a normal democratic nation seeking to engage in trade and diplomacy – instead of as an Islamist revolutionary regime that employs terrorism as an integral part of its foreign policy.<sup>8</sup>

### ENTRENCHED IN VENEZUELA

On December 7, 2021, the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) announced the successful outcome of the government’s largest-ever forfeitures of fuel and weapons shipments from Iran.<sup>9</sup> In late 2019 and early 2020, U.S. Naval Central Command (NAVCENT) seized two large caches of Iranian missiles aboard cargo vessels in the Arabian Sea, as well as 1.1 million barrels of petroleum products. According to the DOJ, the missiles were destined for the Houthi militants in Yemen and the petroleum products for Venezuela. Both were part of a maritime trafficking network run by Iran’s clerical army the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

Two days earlier, on December 5, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi called Venezuela’s Nicolás Maduro to urge an expansion of Iran-Venezuela oil cooperation and extended an invitation for Maduro to visit Tehran. Maduro has since stated his intention to visit Iran in early 2022.<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, Venezuela has long been preparing for Maduro’s next trip to Iran, which will be his third since taking office in 2013. In November 2020, Iranian Tourism Minister Ali-Asghar Mounesan and Venezuelan Am-

**Iran is thinking beyond Venezuela, and seeking to use the country as a springboard for a broader regional presence. Iran’s ambitions in Latin America have always been pegged to the rise of the 21st century socialist bloc, the Bolivarian Alliance of the Americas (ALBA). With Venezuela and Cuba as founding members, this political power project has had its ups and downs during the last fifteen years. But recent regional elections, namely in Peru, Chile, and Honduras, have revived the once fledgling ALBA project, and along with it Iran’s ambitions in the region.**

bassador to Tehran Carlos Antonio Alcalá discussed visa-free access and direct flights between the two countries.<sup>11</sup> Just a month earlier, in October, former Venezuelan Minister for Tourism and Foreign Trade Félix Plasencia highlighted deepening tourism relations by simplifying visa rules in a video conference with Mounesan. Félix Plasencia traveled once again to Iran in October 2021, as Venezuela’s foreign minister, to discuss a 20-year cooperation agreement between the two countries.<sup>12</sup> Around the same time, the current Minister of Tourism of Venezuela, Alí Padrón Paredes, traveled to Iran to participate in the opening ceremony of the Tehran International Tourism and Handicrafts Exhibition, where he said:

“We consider Iran as our home. Iran is our friend, fortunately, there are good relations between Iran and Venezuela.”<sup>13</sup>

Iran, however, is thinking beyond Venezuela, and seeking to use the country as a springboard for a broader regional presence. Through the guise of commercial



cooperation and cultural exchange, Iran is starting to expand its ambitions throughout Latin America.

### A REINVIGORATED PRESENCE

Iran's ambitions in Latin America have always been pegged to the rise of the 21st century socialist bloc known as the Bolivarian Alliance of the Americas (ALBA). In 2007, it officially requested an observer status to the group, which was granted, and which Iran has held ever since.<sup>14</sup> With Venezuela and Cuba as founding members, this political power project has had its ups and downs during the last fifteen years. But recent regional elections, namely in Peru, Chile, and Honduras, have revived the once fledgling ALBA project, and with it Iran's ambitions in the region.

In August 2021, the Secretary General of ALBA (and former Bolivian ambassador to the UN), Sacha Llorenti, visited Iran.<sup>15</sup> During a meeting, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi declared that the Islamic Republic and the member states of the ALBA have common values and emphasized the deepening political and economic ties between the two regions as a foreign policy priority for Iran.<sup>16</sup>

Besides Venezuela, ALBA member Bolivia is a country to watch as well, owing to its key role in triangulating Venezuela-Iran military cooperation. Immediately following President Luis Arce's inauguration in La Paz on November 8, 2020, Bolivia restored diplomatic

relations with both Iran and Venezuela.<sup>17</sup> Two weeks earlier, on October 23, the former Bolivian president, Evo Morales, took a last-minute trip to Venezuela.<sup>18</sup> That visit dovetailed with a three-country tour of Latin America being carried out by Iran's then-Foreign Minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, which began in Caracas on November 4.<sup>19</sup> Shortly before that, Maduro announced the creation of a new Scientific-Military Technical Commission within the Venezuelan Armed Forces that will look to modernize Venezuela's weapons systems with advisors from Cuba, China, Russia, and Iran.<sup>20</sup>

While Iran revives its previously stagnant relationship with Bolivia, elections last year have redrawn the political map to give the ALBA bloc a new life. And Iran is already making good on its objectives with new opportunities in the region.

Peru's newly elected president, Pedro Castillo, has already made waves realigning the country's foreign policy. For instance, it is widely known that Castillo's Peru Libre party has close connections to Morales' MAS party in Bolivia.<sup>21</sup> One of his first actions as the new president was to reverse 25 years of Peru's foreign policy in the Western Sahara and reestablish diplomatic relations with the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic.<sup>22</sup> Peru joins fellow ALBA nations, Bolivia, Venezuela, and Cuba, as well as Iran, Yemen, and Syria, in this regard.<sup>23</sup>

Chile has also emerged as a potential new ally for Iran, following runoff presidential elections last December. The new millennial President-elect (and former Marxist

leader) Gabriel Boric received high praise from one of Iran's cultural centers in Santiago, which congratulated him and sought to open doors for Iranian officials in Chile, according to analysts.<sup>24</sup>

### OPPORTUNITIES AHEAD

For the Islamic Republic, new opportunities for influence in Latin America are now on the horizon. This year, presidential elections will take place in two of the most important countries in the region: Colombia and Brazil.

In Colombia, a crowded field of 23 presidential candidates is still shaking out. Leading the current polls is Senator

**Today, with Venezuela as its home base, Iran's intrusion in Latin America is gaining momentum. Even in countries where Iran does not have a formal embassy, it has succeeded in expanding its influence in the region's modest Islamic communities through Shi'a cultural centers that spread disinformation and promote regime ideology.**



Gustavo Petro, a former member of the M19 terrorist movement and an ideological ally of the ALBA.<sup>25</sup> In Brazil, meanwhile, there is the prospect that former president Luis Ignacio “Lula” da Silva might regain the presidency this Fall, unseating incumbent President Jair Bolsonaro. An electoral victory by either Petro or Lula would equate to a victory for Iran in Latin America.<sup>26</sup>

Whatever the outcome of those contests, however, Iran has already established a good foothold in Latin America. Now, its rekindled relationship with Bolivia, budding relationships elsewhere in the region, and an impending trip by Venezuela’s Maduro to Tehran, could be the tipping point for Iran to come out of the shadows in the Western Hemisphere.

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## Latin America's Authoritarian Wave

*Joseph M. Humire*

Democracy is facing a dangerous decline. The pandemic has accelerated a democratic backslide in many countries worldwide. Authoritarians are emerging everywhere, and as society becomes more polarized, governments become more disconnected with the local grievances of its citizens. Latin America is no exception in this regard.

The last two years have seen authoritarian regimes regain lost ground in Bolivia, Argentina, Honduras, and elsewhere, even as new autocracies are erected in El Salvador and Peru. Meanwhile, the totalitarian regimes in Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua have become more entrenched than ever. This sad state of affairs comes as many Latin American nations celebrate their bicentennial of independence. Relatively young democracies, which just started to gain their democratic footing in the 20th century, are now contending with an authoritarian wave that is sweeping the region.

Respected democracy scholars have noted this troubling global trend, arguing that the “bad guys are winning” in the 21st century.<sup>1</sup> Using foreign disinformation, non-state networks, and extra-regional support, the “bad guys” are certainly winning in Latin America. The question is how the United States should challenge this rising authoritarianism in our neighborhood, and what implications this has for U.S. national security. That discussion, in turn, begins by understanding how democracy is being dismantled in Latin America.

### DEMOCRACY'S ACHILLES HEEL

In the fall of 2019, sweeping protests spiraled out of control in Ecuador, Chile, and Colombia in what Venezuelan strongman politician Diosdado Cabello called

a “Bolivarian breeze,” referring to the autocratic Bolivarian revolution.<sup>2</sup> Local grievances that had legitimate origins were co-opted and steered toward widespread violence and vandalism. Many regional intelligence officials missed the subtle signs of subversion, however, because they weren't happening on the streets of Santiago, Quito, or Bogota. Rather, they took place on the internet and social media.

For democracies, which respect the freedom of expression and free flow of information, disinformation and misinformation have become a glaring weakness. A properly executed disinformation campaign can do more damage to public institutions than a terrorist bombing. This proved to be the case for Chile and Colombia.

In Chile, according to one study, less than one percent of social media users generated almost one-third of all content related to the 2019 protests, thereby exacerbating the violence that resulted in businesses losing more than \$1.4 billion and the capitol city's metro suffering nearly \$400 million in damages.<sup>3</sup> Most of that one percent, moreover, wasn't from Chile. Rather, they were Venezuelan.<sup>4</sup>

A similar effort seemed to take place earlier this year during the national protests in Colombia, where private artificial intelligence firms discovered troll accounts managed by click farms located as far away as Bangladesh.<sup>5</sup> A Bangladeshi, for example, might earn as little as \$120 per year, making these disinformation campaigns cost-effective.<sup>6</sup>

These episodes highlight a new weapon that is increasingly being used by authoritarian leaders to destabilize the region and propel like-minded politicians to power. The effects are undeniable. Both Chile and





Colombia's state institutions are now experiencing a crisis of legitimacy, and their presidents are polling with the lowest approval rates in the region.

### THE YEAR OF ELECTIONS

2021 is considered an election super-cycle in Latin America, during which ten countries held general or local elections. Two were sham elections (in Venezuela and Nicaragua), where conditions do not exist for free and fair voting. And four out of the five presidential elections of the past year lacked an incumbent, so a new slate of leaders and parties emerged on the political scene.

Unfortunately, these new leftist Latin American leaders have a troubling past. The most recent, Chile's president-elect Gabriel Boric, who won that country's run-off in December, was a student leader in a group called the Autonomous Left, which espoused a mix of Marxism and Gramscism and was connected to Chile's communist party. Then there is the president-elect of Honduras, Xiomara Castro, who – while rightly celebrated as the country's first woman president – owes her rise to political prominence to her status as the wife of defamed former President Manuel Zelaya, who is close to the dictators in Venezuela and Cuba. Lastly, there is Peruvian President Pedro Castillo, whose first five months in office have been riddled with corruption allegations against members of his cabinet and political party.

While the State Department will surely do its best to maintain positive relations with the three new leftist leaders in Latin America, it is likely that each will maintain some deference to Washington at the onset – only to later pivot their foreign policy closer to Beijing, Moscow, and Tehran.

Not all is negative for pro-democracy forces in the region this year, however. Ecuador saw a market-friendly pro-U.S. banker, Guillermo Lasso, defy the odds to become president. Mid-term elections in Mexico stifled President Lopez Obrador and his political party's attempts to make radical changes to the country's constitution. Argentina's local elections, meanwhile, saw the opposition take control of the country's congress

and deal a blow to the ruling coalition of Peronists and Kirchneristas.

Nonetheless, on balance, authoritarians have gained the upper hand in Latin America's year of elections. This gives regional authoritarians momentum heading into the two vital elections next year.

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One will take place in Colombia. On May 29, 2022, Colombians will head to the polls to elect its new president. As of now, the crowded field of 23 candidates is led by Senator Gustavo Petro, a former member of the now defunct M-19 terrorist movement and an admirer of Venezuela's Bolivarian revolution.<sup>7</sup>

The other will transpire in Brazil. There, twice-convicted felon, and former president Luiz Inácio "Lula" da Silva is gearing up for a fierce electoral battle against sitting President Jair Bolsonaro on October 2, 2022. While some have accused Bolsonaro of being authoritarian, the Brazilian leader has not taken any authoritarian actions that fundamentally transform the democratic institutions in the country. The same cannot be said for Lula da Silva and his Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT), who steered Brazil into the largest political corruption scandal in Latin America's history.<sup>8</sup> The Lava Jato and associated Odebrecht case involved eleven countries and led to the arrests of more than one hundred high-ranking politicians, including Lula, for receiving bribes or laundering money.<sup>9</sup> It also ushered in the authoritarian wave we are experiencing today, as Latin Americans became progressively disenfranchised by failing and corrupt democratic institutions.





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#### GOING BEYOND DEMOCRACY

Latin America is no stranger to strongmen. The birth of democracy in the region two hundred years ago came with a wave of “caudillos” that dominated during the 19th century. Venezuela’s José Antonio Páez, Argentina’s Juan Manuel de Rosas, and Mexico’s Santa Anna conjure up enduring images of men on horseback ruling vast swaths of the Spanish American hinterlands. While this may still be attractive to some, this portrait of 19th century leaders is vastly different from what characterizes the 21st century caudillo in Latin America.

As opposed to fighting for liberation from colonial rule, the 21st century neo-authoritarians in Latin America have subjected their countries’ sovereignty to external state actors: Russia, China, and Iran. Venezuela’s Nicolás Maduro and Nicaragua’s Daniel Ortega may speak about U.S. imperialism, while Bolivia’s Evo Morales will talk about 500 years of indigenous struggle. In practice, however, these Latin American neo-authoritarians have hijacked the democratic process to install 21st century dictatorships, or “democraduras,” as it is colloquially called in Spanish. And they have a distinct authoritarian playbook.

The process usually begins with a populist message, but then quickly turns to radical changes to the constitution and the consolidation of power in the executive, dismantling the checks and balances necessary for a healthy democracy to function. Then typical authoritarian actions follow, such as political persecution,

silencing of the press, and massive public spending. El Salvador’s Nayib Bukele is the latest elected leader in Central America to erect an autocracy, capturing the judiciary, controlling the legislature, and criticizing anyone who stands in his way.<sup>10</sup>

The reality is that most Latin American countries have weak institutions and lack the rule of law, meaning that defending democracy becomes more a practice of passive acquiescence to authoritarian leaders for fear of “weakening democracy.” Meanwhile, in this century, the region’s neo-authoritarian leaders have all come to power through the ballot box, only to quickly reform the democratic system by rewriting the constitution.

The subtle but important differences between representative and participatory democracy are lost among many of Latin America’s elites, resulting in a bastardization of the term to simply mean majority rule. The ballot box is only the final representation of a healthy democracy, and for it to function the freedoms and natural rights of the people must be protected. For decades, most Latin American leaders have championed democracy but trampled on the individual liberty of their citizens while cozying up to the world’s most authoritarian regimes.

Winston Churchill famously said that “democracy is the worst form of government except for all the others that have been tried.” Latin America’s young democracies, if they are to prevail, need to begin to talk about the underpinnings of national sovereignty and individual liberty that are required for a democracy to evolve beyond election night.

#### NATIONAL SECURITY EMERGENCY

The Biden administration consequently has its hands full in Latin America. The rising wave of authoritarianism is challenging the status quo throughout the region and pushing Latin America further away from the United States.

In a recent interview by Axios, Ecuador’s ambassador to Washington stated that the “U.S. is losing Latin America to China without putting up a fight.”<sup>11</sup> Her words convey exasperation, rather than a true desire to move closer to China. But therein lies an even more



dangerous truth – namely, that U.S. allies are susceptible to Iran, Russia, and China even when they don't have intentions of shifting orbits.

If the U.S. is going to help regional allies at this critical time, we must work out single-issue differences on important topics, such as anti-corruption or climate change, to establish broader geopolitical alliances that credibly challenge the region's new colonial powers – Russia, China, and Iran.

Doing so requires competing, rather than chastising Latin American nations for its economic ties to China or military/energy deals with Russia. It requires America to start prioritizing the region and complementing our current, law enforcement-centric engagement with more multifaceted bilateral relations that helps our Latin American partners push past the pandemic, understand the geopolitical realities of great power competition, and better equip them for a digital battle against foreign disinformation.

For the United States, the cost of failing in Latin America is high. Unprecedented rates of mass migration at the U.S. southern border and a fentanyl and cocaine crisis throughout the country are just the beginning.<sup>12</sup> The region is in danger of falling to authoritarian rule for years to come. For far too long, U.S. policymakers have viewed Latin America as simply a region with which to trade and to drug flows. Most missed the larger geopolitical undercurrent that's been brewing underneath for decades. It's long past time to correct that mistake.

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**EDITOR'S NOTE:** The opinions expressed in the *Defense Dossier* (ISSN 2165-1841) are those of the author(s) alone and do not necessarily represent the opinions of the American Foreign Policy Council.

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