



SMART NEWS & RESEARCH
FOR LATIN AMERICA'S CHANGEMAKERS



Report
Countering the New Autocrat's Manual

Amb. (Ret.) John Feeley, Scott Hamilton, and Douglas Farah

January 2023

This report represents the opinions and analysis of the authors, but does not represent the institutional position of any of their respective organizations nor of Global Americans.



Table of Contents

<i>Executive Summary</i>	1
Context.....	3
Assumptions and Way Forward.....	3
How to Identify Incipient Backsliders	5
Marginalizing the New Authoritarians – Choosing the Future.....	7
U.S. Interests Require State-to-State Relations, Even with Authoritarian Regimes.....	8
Working Intelligently in the Western Hemisphere	9
U.S. Interests Require Recognition that Sustainable Change Cannot be Imposed	10
Always be on the Side of Ordinary People	11
Conclusion	12

Executive Summary

President Biden’s senior foreign policy leaders have recently made statements attesting to their pragmatic ambivalence regarding the ideological orientation of Latin American governments. In practice, however, U.S. policy still reflects a politicized, outdated left vs. right emphasis derived from the polarized nature of U.S. domestic politics. Instead, we suggest a depoliticized lens would afford the United States more room to be consistent, nuanced, and effective in its foreign policy with the region, supporting struggling democracies and seeking the sustainable democratic evolution of incipient criminalized states.

The regional situation continues to deteriorate because democratically elected governments strain to deliver basic services to their peoples. Complicating this in many cases is direct state participation with Transnational Criminal Organizations (TCOs) that have moved beyond the radical, populist Bolivarian movement to governments *across the political spectrum*. This metastasized movement generates billions of dollars in corrupt proceeds and has spawned a continent-wide authoritarian tendency that entrenches itself while corroding democratic competitors.

A viable U.S. strategy in Latin America and the Caribbean, encompassing governments ranging from struggling democracies to fully-fledged autocracies, should involve the following elements:

- An overarching goal to strengthen or reestablish rule of law and independent democratic institutions in all countries in the region.
- Clear, achievable state-to-state national security objectives on at least three topics: migration, crime, and public health.
- Strong U.S. diplomatic presence from all relevant U.S. agencies, but with a renewed, Presidential-level emphasis on the Chief of Mission Authority to minimize intelligence agencies or Justice Department freelancing.
- Credible assessments of in-country agencies and officials with whom the United States can constructively engage.
- Targeting criminal networks with coordinated RICO-like judicial action.
- Collaboration with like-minded country partners.
- Implementing a “people-centric” approach that aims to provide information, education, and relevant training to government officials and civil society actors in ways that are consistent with either (1) specific U.S. national security goals and/or (2) U.S. rule of law/democratic institutions strategic goals.

The following categories of people-centric engagement would be relevant:

Diplomatic: The United States should be present everywhere in the region and offer unyielding public support for liberty, even at the expense of awkward relations with the host government.

Information: The United States should facilitate the regular provision of unrestricted internet access and reinvigorate its use of cultural diplomacy.

Military: The United States makes many mistakes when deploying the military as an instrument of power; this tool of state-state engagement should therefore be largely humanitarian (such as hospital ships) or reflect other soft power approaches.

Economic: The United States should bypass the often-stultified local elite business cartels and instead seek to train and empower a new young business class that would agitate for economic liberalization and other necessary change.

It is long past time that U.S. policy ceases to be performative, valuing public denunciations and serial, selective individual sanctions over a strategy that fortifies elected democracies and employs organized, coordinated steps to bring down criminal networks. We offer this assessment to spark what we hope will be a spirited exchange that clarifies constructive options for U.S. policy in the region.

Context

President Biden’s senior foreign policy leaders have recently made statements attesting to their pragmatic ambivalence regarding the ideological orientation of Latin American governments.¹ In practice, however, the administration’s policy toward Latin America is largely passive, reactive, and ineffective. This reflects an outdated left vs. right emphasis derived from the polarized and increasingly toxic nature of U.S. domestic politics.² The more accurate paradigm by which U.S. policy should analyze and engage governments in the Western Hemisphere is a depoliticized one that places democracy and autocracy at two ends of the governance spectrum. In our judgment, this lens would afford the United States more room to be consistent, nuanced, and effective in its foreign policy with the region, supporting struggling democracies and seeking the sustainable democratic evolution of incipient criminalized states.

The democracy-autocracy continuum contains a variety of states in the region, from functional democracies to wholly criminal regimes. Among the criminalized states, some are wholly captured—where the state acts as a partner of Transnational Criminal Organizations (TCOs) or use TCOs as an instrument of state policy. While Venezuela and Nicaragua fall into this category, El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala are steadily inching toward it.³ At the other end are elected democracies, mostly straining to deliver services for their people. Many are weak states, where certain nodes of governmental authority—whether local or central—have been seized by TCOs and are, in turn, the primary beneficiaries of the proceeds from illicit activity, but where the state as an entity is not integrated into the enterprise. U.S. policy should reflect engagement with struggling democracies as much as with the varieties of criminalized states.

Assumptions and Way Forward

All strategy must start with some assumptions. We assume that, while ideology will remain an important rhetorical device for politicians, it plays a far less influential role in how they govern. Rather, politicians seek to address their electorates’ frustrations with the basic deliverables demanded of any government, such as housing, education, health, jobs, upward mobility, justice, and social equality. These tasks remain glaringly incomplete in most countries in the region. Governments’ successes or failures in delivering on these issues are the greatest predictors of the emergence of authoritarian populists and, hence, an appropriate focus for U.S. national security policy.

¹ Ignatius, David. 2023. “Biden’s unsentimental foreign policy strategy.” *Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/01/04/biden-foreign-policy-ignatius-icy-strategy-realism/>; Blinken, Anthony. 2022. “Secretary Anthony J. Blinken at OAS General Assembly First Plenary Session.” Lima, Peru: U.S. Department of State. <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-at-oas-general-assembly-first-plenary-session/>

² Burns, William. 2020. “Polarized Politics has Infected American Diplomacy.” *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/06/polarized-politics-has-infected-american-diplomacy/612778/>

³ Farah, Douglas and Marianne Richardson. 2022. *Gangs No Longer: Reassessing Transnational Armed Groups in the Western Hemisphere*. *National Defense University Strategic Perspectives*, No. 38. <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/Article/3041245/gangs-no-longer-reassessing-transnational-armed-groups-in-the-western-hemisphere/>

Secondly, we assume that Russia and China will remain worrisome players in the region, largely as transactional actors driven by their own national interests. In the case of China, these include access to raw materials and resources and strategic lines of communication while Russia desires to use Latin America and the Caribbean to defy perceived U.S. global hegemony and power.

The third assumption we make is that U.S. domestic politics will continue to be a significant drag on foreign policy in the Western Hemisphere. Despite longstanding calls to reform the ambassadorial confirmation process, for ideological reasons policy implementation will remain adrift during the first 12-18 months of any new administration.

Fourth, we assume that a combination of struggling democracies and eager authoritarian leaders will generate increasing doubts among their own citizens about the value and effectiveness of democratic governance in the region, intensifying the attraction of authoritarian solutions.

Finally, we assume that the health and longevity of democratic governments in Latin America and the Caribbean is in the national security interests of the United States. Such governments may be far from perfect, but their democratic values mean that arrangements they make with the United States are more likely to be stable and effective. Authoritarian regimes can also strike such deals—usually at the price of U.S. inattention to their domestic repression. However, we believe such short-term tradeoffs are inherently unstable for the United States because they are an acceptance of both the apparatus of repression and the erosion of democratic values.

The United States should find ways to defend vital U.S. national interests in an environment increasingly characterized by authoritarian tendencies.⁴ Why? Because populism and populist leaders and regimes have evolved as the most inimical threats to U.S. interests. The most anti-American governments, with the worst human rights records, and the most complicity with organized crime tend to move with deliberate momentum toward the autocratic or dictatorial end of the governance spectrum. The United States cannot afford to ignore those governments or merely pontificate against them on social media. Instead, the United States must decide how to engage these governments, while building new relationships that may assist in a return to the rule of law.

The intention of this paper is not to issue report cards or determine where a government may be placed on that spectrum. Instead, it will attempt to construct a taxonomy of behaviors and indicators by which the United States might assess such a dynamic. Moreover, and more importantly, it will seek to propose various tools and levers of power that the United States might employ to engage with those governments to advance

⁴ Ellis, Evan. 2022. "Preparing for Deterioration of the Latin American Strategic Environment." Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/preparing-deterioration-latin-america-and-caribbean-strategic-environment>

discrete U.S. interests and offer societies in the region genuinely democratic models that address the challenges that lead to the emergence of populist movements and leaders.

How to Identify Incipient Backsliders

The regional situation continues to deteriorate. This is largely because direct state participation with and protection of Transnational Criminal Organizations (TCOs) has moved beyond the radical, populist Bolivarian movement to governments *across the political spectrum*, generating billions of dollars in corrupt proceeds and spawning a continent-wide authoritarian movement.⁵

The fact that the criminalized state model has metastasized to a broader, ideologically agnostic group of governments across the continent has significant consequences, relating to democratic governance, rule of law, stability in the hemisphere, and to core U.S. strategic interests. Increasing authoritarianism dependent on TCOs for economic viability will continue to drive issues of corruption, human rights violations, instability, and migration while providing a growing gateway for illicit activities that impact the United States directly.⁶ This includes a broad array of illicit drugs—including cocaine, heroin, methamphetamines, fentanyl, and others—as well as massive money laundering, illicit gold mining, and massive environmental harm—all of which spills across U.S. borders. In addition, these governments often open the door or partner with hostile extra-regional actors—such as Iran, China, and Russia—further weakening the U.S. position in the region.

How does criminalization occur? The first step in the New Authoritarians’ playbook is to bring back the Cold War construct of the internal enemy who must be vanquished. Instead of communists, now it is almost anything that can be criminalized and punished—these include El Salvador President Nayib Bukele’s *los mismos de siempre* (the same old crowd) and Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador’s *las mafias del poder* (the mafias of power). Once tagged as one of these pejorative sound bites that identifies the person or institution as an enemy, one becomes fair game for social, legal, and economic harassment.⁷

Second, the autocratic model requires creating a dominant media narrative through the establishment of multiple state-owned outlets that repeat the president’s position via traditional and social media and exert pressure on the independent press. In Latin

⁵ Farah, Douglas. 2020. “The Maduro Regime’s Illicit Activities: A Threat to Democracy in Venezuela and Security in Latin America.” *The Atlantic Council*. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/The-Maduro-Regime-Illicit-Activities-A-Threat-to-Democracy-in-Venezuela-and-Security-in-Latin-America-Final.pdf>

⁶ Human Rights Watch. 2022. “Latin America: Alarming Reversal of Basic Freedoms.” <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/01/13/latin-america-alarming-reversal-basic-freedoms>

⁷ Arauz, Sergio. 2019. “En que se parece Nayib Bukele a los mismos de siempre?” *El Faro*. <https://elfaro.net/es/201901/columnas/22856/¿En-qué-se-parece-Nayib-Bukele-a-los-mismos-de-siempre.htm>; Infobae. 2020. “La mafia del poder’: Lopez Obrador exhibe presunta corrupcion de sus antecesores, de cara a unas elecciones clave.” *Infobae*. <https://www.infobae.com/america/mexico/2020/08/28/la-mafia-del-poder-lopez-obrador-exhibe-presunta-corrupcion-de-sus-antecesores-de-cara-a-unas-elecciones-clave/>

America, much of the legacy media revenue comes from state advertising or placing of official announcements, so when the autocratic government threatens to cut off revenue sources—an action that would likely kill the traditional media—they silence most criticism.⁸

Once the enemy is defined and justified, the criminalization of any type of opposition or dissent makes its way into hastily written laws and independent judicial figures—like attorneys general, judges, and Supreme Court justices—are removed.⁹ Independent media and civil society activists seeking to document human rights abuses and hold the government accountable eventually come under assault, along with church leaders, NGOs and academics.¹⁰ Since leaders like Bukele, Brazil’s Jair Bolsonaro, and Donald Trump mastered digital media, social platforms such as Twitter and Facebook have become the preferred message delivery mechanism, often relying on large troll farms to amplify the messages far beyond their normal audience.¹¹

The third step in the New Autocrats’ Manual is to make any funding of dissent illegal. This makes shutting down external sources of financing, from USAID to NED to George Soros’ Open Society Foundation, both legal and desirable.¹² To consolidate and sustain the ideologically agnostic authoritarian model, a next crucial step is to court the military with larger budgets to ensure the loyalty of the leadership to the president and to attack and control the internal enemy.¹³ In return the military receives increased funding, often extra-constitutional authorities, and immunity for current and past abuses. In a region like Central America—that has only known fragile democratic governance for 30 years out of some 180 years of independence—returning to the military-political-economic alliance of past generations is generally seamless despite decades of U.S. training in civilian control of the military.

⁸ Aruth Strum, Heloisa and Paola Nalvarte. 2016. “Latin American public media search for successful funding models.” *Knight Center, Latin American Journalism Review*. <https://latamjournalismreview.org/articles/latin-american-public-media-search-for-successful-funding-models-second-article-of-the-series/>

⁹ Papadovassilakis, Alex and Seth Robbins. 2021. “Ousting of El Salvador’s Top Prosecutor Imperils Rule of Law.” *InSight Crime*. <https://insightcrime.org/news/ousting-el-salvador-top-prosecutor-imperils-rule-of-law/>

¹⁰ Washington Office for Latin America. 2022. “El Salvador: State of Exception and Attacks against Human Rights Defenders and Organizations Facilitate State Abuses.” <https://www.wola.org/2022/03/el-salvador-state-of-exception-and-attacks-against-human-rights-defenders-and-organizations-facilitate-state-abuses/>

¹¹ Kinoshian, Sarah. 2022. “Trolls, propaganda and fear stoke Bukele’s media machine in El Salvador.” *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/el-salvador-politics-media/>

¹² Human Rights Watch, 2021. “El Salvador: Shelve ‘Foreign Agents’ Bill. Bukele Promotes Bill to Suffocate Civil Society Groups.” *Human Rights Watch*. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/11/12/el-salvador-shelve-foreign-agents-bill>

¹³ “Corruption under the State of Emergency in El Salvador: a democracy without oxygen.” WOLA, 27 September 2022. <https://www.wola.org/2022/09/corruption-state-of-emergency-el-salvador/>; and “GameChangers 2022: Maduro Seeks to Be Venezuela’s Criminal Kingmaker,” *InSight Crime*, 27 December 2022. <https://insightcrime.org/news/gamechangers-2022-maduro-seeks-venezuela-criminal-kingmaker/>

Waning U.S. influence opened the door for hostile extra-regional actors such as Russia, China, and Iran to gain worrisome footholds in the hemisphere.¹⁴ These actors' advances are facilitated by the fact that they are fundamentally authoritarian and embrace or ignore criminal activities. Some examples of these new activities include the production of methamphetamines and fentanyl with more readily available precursor chemicals from China, illegally mined gold and timber from protected Amazon basin reserves moved through Turkey, expanded human smuggling and human trafficking operations, illegal and unregulated fishing, and the acquisition of advanced Russian and Chinese surveillance technologies by state and non-state actors.¹⁵

In the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, it became a common Department of Defense mantra that "it takes a network to fight a network."¹⁶ Today that mantra is largely forgotten. As a result, the United States lacks both the coordinated strategies and the interagency resources to forge its own network that might push back against the incipient and actual criminalized state architecture. Until it does, it is unlikely that the consolidation of the ideologically agnostic, authoritarian criminalized state model will weaken of its own volition. After all, political survival and the retention of state power are strong motivators.

Marginalizing the New Authoritarians – Choosing the Future

How should the United States and like-minded democratic countries respond to the challenge of the New Authoritarians, including their criminalized state variants? First, it is useful to assess the various ways in which the United States has tried thus far to manage authoritarian backsliding in Latin America:

- Unilateral U.S. country-wide economic sanctions that have the effect of increasing the economic misery of the largely blameless general populace (Venezuela, Cuba)

¹⁴ Farah, Douglas and Marianne Richardson. 2022. "Dangerous Alliances: Russia's Strategic Inroads in Latin America." *Institute for National And Strategic Studies, National Defense University Strategic Perspectives*, No. 41. <https://inss.ndu.edu/Media/News/Article/3252519/dangerous-alliances-russias-strategic-inroads-in-latin-america/>; Farah, Douglas and Marianne Richardson. 2021. "The PRC's Changing Strategic Priorities in Latin America: from Soft Power to Sharp Power Competition." *Institute for National and Strategic Studies, National Defense University, Strategic Perspectives*, No. 37. <https://www.ndu.edu/News/Article-View/Article/2814471/the-prcs-changing-strategic-priorities-in-latin-america-from-soft-power-to-shar/>

¹⁵ Farah, Douglas and Marianne Richardson. 2021. "The PRC's Changing Strategic Priorities in Latin America: from Soft Power to Sharp Power Competition." *Institute for National and Strategic Studies, National Defense University, Strategic Perspectives*, No. 37. <https://www.ndu.edu/News/Article-View/Article/2814471/the-prcs-changing-strategic-priorities-in-latin-america-from-soft-power-to-shar/>; Melendez, Lorena and Lisseth Boon. 2019. "How Venezuela's Stolen Gold Ended Up in Turkey, Uganda and Beyond." *InSight Crime*. <https://insightcrime.org/news/analysis/venezuelas-stolen-gold-ended-turkey-uganda-beyond/>; Mistler-Ferguson, Scott. 2022. "How Latin America's Synthetic Drug Traffickers Launder Dirty Cash." *InSight Crime*. <https://insightcrime.org/news/how-latin-americas-synthetic-drug-traffickers-launder-dirty-cash/>

¹⁶ Ferguson, Niall. 2016. "It takes a network to defeat a network." *Harvard Kennedy School Belfar Center for Science and International Affairs*. <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/it-takes-network-defeat-network>

- Targeted personal visa and other sanctions, untethered to a coherent policy framework that seeks to wrap up networks (Venezuela, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala)
- Unilateral U.S. efforts to diplomatically isolate regimes (Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua—U.S. enemies or spoilers always pick up the slack)
- Selective denunciations of human rights violations as a substitute for a policy (not credible or effective in improving human rights)
- Schemes to instigate “Color Revolutions” (no successes and have foreign taint)

Individually and collectively, such U.S. policies have been ineffective in that there have been no constructive outcomes and U.S. approaches instead tend to cement the New Authoritarian regimes in place by allowing them to blame the United States for their problems. The U.S. approaches are also arguably immoral—at times putting the United States on the side of causing intentional harm to ordinary people—and anti-strategic—leaving the United States worse off than before.

The principal reason for the persistence of failed approaches, despite their lack of utility, is the outdated thinking that dominates U.S. domestic politics. This thinking is mottled with ideological nostalgia such as the old left-right distinctions that we assess as analytically irrelevant. Ossified U.S. domestic ideological constructs are imposed on a region that faces different challenges. Following the November midterm elections and the appointment of Presidential Envoy to the Western Hemisphere Christopher Dodd, the Biden Administration should undertake the task of modernizing its Latin America and Caribbean strategy to reflect new regional realities.

U.S. Interests Require State-to-State Relations, Even with Authoritarian Regimes

The ideologically cramped state of U.S. domestic politics makes this sound like a controversial point, but it would be diplomatic negligence to avoid it. Republicans are most frequently the culprits on this score with their cries about “legitimizing dictators by talking to them.”¹⁷ However, there are at least three major U.S. interests that must be pursued with all authoritarian regimes because they have a direct impact on the United States: illegal migration, organized crime and drug trafficking, and public health.

Such objectives *can be pursued simultaneously* while the United States works to interdict criminal networks and invests in parallel “people-centric” policies that emphasize young people and leadership training. This means that an anti-authoritarian strategy must include a U.S. diplomatic presence everywhere in the region to mitigate the negative impact for the United States of key national security issues like migration, crime, and public health—even (and especially) in regimes considered hostile to the United States.

¹⁷ Brown, Spencer. 2021. “Flashback: Democrat Praise for Cuba’s Communist Regime.” *Townhall*. <https://townhall.com/tipsheet/spencerbrown/2021/07/13/democrats-past-praise-cubas-communist-regime-n2592409>; Molina, Daniel. 2021. “Steube Slams Democrats for ‘Staying Silent’ on Cuba.” *Floridian Press*. <https://floridianpress.com/2021/07/steube-slams-democrats-for-staying-silent-on-cuba/>

This is not a U.S. recognition of the regime’s formal “legitimacy” or an endorsement of its policies, but rather reflects the necessary U.S. realism of the new authoritarian era.

Working Intelligently in the Western Hemisphere

A viable U.S. strategy in Latin America and the Caribbean, from struggling democracies to fully-fledged autocracies, should involve the following elements:

- An overarching goal to strengthen or reestablish rule of law and independent democratic institutions in all countries in the region.
- Clear, achievable state-to-state national security objectives on at least three topics: migration, crime, and public health.
- Strong U.S. diplomatic presence from all relevant U.S. agencies, but with a renewed, Presidential-level emphasis on the principle of Chief of Mission Authority to minimize intelligence agencies or Justice Department freelancing.
- Assessment of in-country agencies and officials with whom the United States can constructively engage.
- Targeting criminal networks with coordinated RICO-like judicial action.
- Collaboration with like-minded country partners.
- Implementing a “people-centric” approach that aims to provide information, education, and relevant training to government officials and civil society actors in ways that are consistent with (1) specific U.S. national security goals and/or (2) U.S. rule of law/democratic institutions strategic goals.

It is important to be clear about the overarching U.S. strategic goal for all countries, including authoritarian regimes—establishment of the rule of law and democratic institutions. It is also critical to ensure that it is not traded off for another short-term policy objective, whatever is the fleeting Washington “shiny object” of the moment. This is because the strategic goal is foundational in nature. Without it, any policy “success” would only be short-lived, and short-term tradeoffs in pursuit of a limited political objective only embolden the New Authoritarians, making the achievement of the foundational strategic objective less likely. This practice encourages autocrats to engage in transactional politics with Washington, using U.S. domestic conditions and electoral cycles to deflect U.S. strategic goals. Mexican President Lopez Obrador accomplished this masterfully, playing the Trump and Biden Administrations’ desperate search for immigration solutions in exchange for near total silence regarding his creeping authoritarianism, attacks on the press, and open antipathy to U.S. diplomatic leadership. For his efforts he is consistently rewarded by praise from a sycophantic U.S. ambassador and a White House bilateral meeting just weeks after he ran a regional campaign to enjoin leaders to boycott Biden’s Summit of the Americas.¹⁸

¹⁸ Sarukhan, Arturo. 2022. “Why is Mexico’s president snubbing Biden’s invitation to the Summit of the Americas?” *Brookings Institute*. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2022/05/24/why-is-mexicos-president-snubbing-bidens-invitation-to-the-summit-of-the-americas/>; Salavar, Kenneth. 2022. “Statement from Ambassador Salazar – Summit of the Americas.” U.S Embassy & Consulates in Mexico. <https://mx.usembassy.gov/statement-from-ambassador-salazar-summit-of-the-americas/>; White House. 2022. “Remarks by President Biden and President Lopez Obrador of Mexico Before Bilateral Meeting.” Washington, DC: The White House.

Moreover, an approach that fails to relate ends and means will fail. This suggests that the United States should decide which countries should be priorities for a modernized anti-authoritarian strategy. U.S. resources are limited and treating every incipient or established autocracy as an equal priority is unlikely to succeed. Criteria for choosing priority countries could include the negative impact they have on their regional environment, the scale of human rights abuses, or compelling U.S. domestic policy considerations. To be clear, the anti-authoritarian strategies in all countries will be similar, but U.S. diplomatic, informational, military, and economic resources may be applied disproportionately in one or more. Equally important, the chances of U.S. strategic success are higher if like-minded countries are involved in the policy's elaboration and implementation.

U.S. Interests Require Recognition that Sustainable Change Cannot be Imposed

U.S. policy in Latin America has long been associated with “regime change” approaches that range from military invasion, through fomenting coups, to encouraging “color revolutions.”¹⁹ However, with the exception of the 1989 invasion of Panama, none of them has had lasting success. Most have failed, often in embarrassing ways.²⁰ U.S. policy should recognize that sustainable change comes only from within societies, even if it takes longer than the U.S. electoral cycle would prefer. This suggests that certain preferred U.S. approaches need to be reconsidered, especially countrywide and individual sanctions untethered to a broader strategic framework. This is not to suggest that sanctions policy is always ineffective. However, sanctions policy is more likely to produce changes in behavior if it is coordinated across government departments and with allies.²¹ For example, instead of announcing individual or company sanctions and waiting to see what happens next, with another slate of persons slated for a second or subsequent round, the United States should build overwhelming sanctions cases against networks that identify primary actors and their known *testaferros* and companies through which they operate. This is much harder, but if done well and implemented in one move—like a RICO prosecution that wraps up an entire mafia organization—it has a greater prospect of changing behavior. In this context, it is obviously preferable if operational security allows the United States to collaborate in the sanctions plan with jurisdictions where the criminal networks hide their money.

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/07/12/remarks-by-president-biden-and-president-lopez-obraador-of-mexico-before-bilateral-meeting-2/>

¹⁹ Davies, Nicolas. 2014. “35 countries where the U.S. has supported fascists, drug lords and terrorists.” *Salon*.

https://www.salon.com/2014/03/08/35_countries_the_us_has_backed_international_crime_partner/

²⁰ Petras, James. 2019. “US ‘Regime Changes’: The Historical Record.” *Global Research Centre for Research on Globalization*. <https://www.globalresearch.ca/us-regime-changes-historical-record/5667692>;

²¹ Gill, Aneil. 2018. “Are Sanctions Effective?” *Roosevelt Institute*. <https://www.cornellrooseveltinstitute.org/intl/are-sanctions-effective>

Always be on the Side of Ordinary People

This may sound like a trite political sound bite, but U.S. policy towards authoritarian regimes has often intentionally or inadvertently put the United States on the side of imposing hardships on ordinary people—the very people in whose name Washington claims to be acting. Sometimes this involves the United States supporting already discredited political systems in the name of “restoring” a democracy that had long rotted from within—in part due to extensive corruption tolerated by successive U.S. administrations. Such a policy undermines U.S. credibility and usually places the United States on the side of corrupt actors. Sometimes U.S. policy is more explicit, as in Cuba and Venezuela, seeking to impose economic hardship in the vain hope that citizens will revolt against the regime. Either way, the United States is identified with hardship and pain, while engaging in unpersuasive doublespeak about freedom and liberty. This is counterproductive. Instead, Washington should be prepared to seek common ground in New Authoritarian countries on matters such as public health, using world-class U.S. expertise in a genuine long-term effort to improve the life prospects of ordinary people.

The following categories of people-centric engagement would be relevant in this proposed new approach:

Diplomatic: The United States should offer unyielding public support for liberty, even at the expense of awkward relations with the host government. The United States should also be unapologetic in its public statements that modern *realpolitik* requires both state-to-state relations and extensive civil society goals. Moreover, U.S. officials should emphasize the importance of a rule of law culture whenever possible. This will mean indictments when criminal activity can be plausibly related to narcotics trafficking, money laundering, or other harm to the United States. We explicitly recommend using the full scope of U.S. law enforcement authorities when warranted to indict and, if possible, try individuals and networks whose activities facilitate the longevity of the New Authoritarians. **Importantly, this is not a regime change approach, since we understand that sustainable change must come from within and not be imposed by outsiders.** We expect that local leaders in government and civil society will make decisions that are appropriate for their countries and that do not necessarily respond to U.S. electoral dynamics. However, over time we believe this approach is best suited to both protect immediate U.S. interests and offer the best prospects for democratic renewal.

Information: In appropriate cases, the United States should facilitate the regular provision of unrestricted internet access—the way Starlink has facilitated access in Ukraine.²² Additionally, the United States should reinvigorate its use of cultural diplomacy, with U.S. speakers and artists employed to maximize the advantages of an

²² Collier, Kevin. 2022. “Elon Musk’s Starlink internet becomes a lifeline for Ukrainians.” *NBC News*. https://news.yahoo.com/elon-musks-starlink-internet-becomes-124836810.html?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLmNvbS8&guce_refer_sig=AQAAAD_I_kLJaz8oCH6tXHHuaecoJaMQX-Tqz9PLHKrcGOo3lK6bLVoqqTXtG5PMmPA265n6Hx8qUflnXJqY3xuULR4AVdO7MW2lUFlxegrU-tsDhHPvhSdDJg9FajedQkL_4u9ARDjHfbPcT1SARX8lovx9FnwlrArVjWE5e44Lk4vQ

attractive U.S. culture. It should also promote English language learning and rapid response public affairs programming that emphasizes modern communications platforms and memes. This requires, however, more, and better training of U.S. government practitioners.

Military: We believe the United States makes many mistakes when deploying the military as an instrument of power. Most often this involves U.S. officials assuming that host country counterparts are dedicated patriots whose Colonel or General designations convey similar prestige and meaning as they do in the United States. U.S. relationships with often corrupt military actors—widely known to be corrupt in their own countries—engenders cynicism among local populations and creates a sense of impunity for corrupt local political elites. In this context, we recommend that any U.S. strategy in a New Authoritarian country should ensure that military engagement is consistent with the Administration’s political assessments. Therefore, this aspect of diplomacy should be largely humanitarian (such as hospital ships) or other soft power approaches such as emphasizing civilian control of the military, if used at all.

Economic: In addition to traditional economic and financial tools—which are mostly state-to-state and perhaps not immediately applicable to the New Authoritarian environments—the United States should by-pass the often-stultified local elite business cartels. These firms are usually tied to the New Authoritarians. Instead, the United States should seek to train and empower a new young business class that would agitate for economic liberalization and other necessary change. For example, U.S. business schools could organize a four-week business education seminars in-country for 50,000 young people per year in key countries. In its economic activities and its public diplomacy, the United States should always be on the side of the people and especially of young people. The United States must always choose the future.

Conclusion

It is easier to describe an environment than to change it.

We consider our analysis of the struggling democracies and the emergence of the New Authoritarians and the criminal networks that sustain them to be an accurate description of the challenges facing U.S. policy in Latin America and the Caribbean. We also regard this analysis as negating efforts by some in the United States to purport to distinguish between leftist and rightist authoritarians and implement different policies for each. Such efforts are futile and undermine U.S. national security. We also believe that it is long past time that U.S. policy cease to be largely performative, valuing public denunciations and serial selective individual sanctions over organized, coordinated steps to bring down criminal networks. Moreover, when the United States is absent from the diplomatic field through policy neglect or because embassies are closed, we should not expect favorable outcomes.

Implementing the kind of approach that we recommend in even one country would require the United States to display a far greater degree of organization and coordination than we have seen to date. For a region or sub-region, we should multiply that effort many

times over. The White House, through the National Security Council, is realistically the only entity with the convening and disciplinary authorities to make this happen. We should also remember that the New Authoritarians get to vote. It is possible that some leaders would prefer to break diplomatic relations with the United States in response to some of the suggestions we offer here. Yet even in that case, would the United States really be worse off than today—with an unfortunate record of policy failure in New Authoritarian countries in the region that has served to entrench anti-democratic regimes, facilitate criminal activities that harm U.S. citizens, offer beachheads to extra-regional actors, showcase nefarious models for would-be authoritarians, and stifle the democratic hopes of the next generation of leaders? We think not. Instead, we believe the United States could work productively in all countries in the region to shore up democratic governments that genuinely aim to deliver for their citizens, and stanch, and eventually reverse, the New Authoritarian criminalization of the state in countries whose leaders follow a different model.

Amb. (Ret.) John Feeley is the Executive Director of the Center for Media Integrity of the Americas. He is a former career U.S. diplomat who served as Ambassador to Panama, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary in the Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, Charge d'Affaires and Deputy Chief of Mission in Mexico, in addition to other postings in Latin America and the Caribbean. He is a former Marine Corps Officer.

Scott Hamilton is a former career U.S. diplomat. His most recent assignments were Consul General in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, Chargé d'Affaires at the U.S. Embassy in Havana, Cuba, Deputy Chief of Mission at the U.S. Embassy in Gaborone, Botswana, and as Director for Central American Affairs in Washington, DC. He also served at the U.S. Mission to the Organization of American States, and in Colombia, Ecuador, and South Africa, among other assignments. He holds degrees from Oxford University (PPE), Harvard Law School (JD), and the National Defense University (Masters, National Security Strategy).

Douglas Farah is the Founder and President of IBI Consultants, LLC (www.ibiconsultants.net), a security consulting firm specialized in security challenges and transnational organized crime in Latin America. From September 2013 to September 2022 Farah was a visiting senior fellow at the Center for Strategic Research at National Defense University leading the Western Hemisphere Illicit Network Review project under the auspices of the Deputy Secretary of Defense for Counternarcotics and Global Threats. Farah frequently guest lectures at universities and has testified before Congress more than a dozen times. For the two decades before founding IBI Consultants in 2005, Farah worked as a foreign correspondent and investigative reporter for *The Washington Post* covering civil wars in Central America, conflict and organized crime in South America, blood diamond and gold wars in West Africa, and radical Islamic finances. He is the author of dozens of peer reviewed studies and is the author of two books: *Blood From Stones: The Secret Financial Network of Terror* and *Merchant of Death: Money, Guns, Planes and the Man Who Makes War Possible* (With Stephen Braun).

This report represents the opinions and analysis of the authors, but does not represent the institutional position of any of their respective organizations nor of Global Americans.