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Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, Civilian Security, Migration, and
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On a Way Forward for Venezuela: The Humanitarian, Diplomatic, and National Security
Challenges Facing the Biden Administration

Shoring Up a Beleaguered Ally

The Role of China and Cuba in Maduro's Authoritarian
Resilience

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Chairman Sires, Ranking Member Green, and members of the subcommittee: Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this timely topic.

The political and economic devastation wrought by the Maduro regime in Venezuela, Latin America's erstwhile wealthiest country, is by now a well-known story. Never in its modern history has the region witnessed a disaster on this scale. Venezuela has lost nearly 20 percent of its precrisis population, with estimates of between five and six million Venezuelan refugees scattered across the globe.¹ Worse, the International Monetary Fund predicts that by the end of 2023, 10 million Venezuelans will have fled—one-third of the country's precrisis population.²

De facto President Nicolás Maduro has presided over the largest economic decline outside of war in world history.³ Analysts now refer to Venezuela as a "criminalized" or "mafia state," with institutions so thoroughly penetrated by corruption and criminal interests that senior leaders—up to and including Maduro himself—are ensconced in transnational criminal enterprises.⁴ The economic and political meltdown, together with the regime's prodigious involvement in transnational organized crime and the safe havens provided to designated terrorist groups, represent a combustible mix of national security threats to the US left metastasizing in the Western Hemisphere—an inviting scenario for the involvement of strategic rivals.

Indeed, in a geopolitical environment of intensifying rivalry, where Latin America has become an emerging flash point, extra-hemispheric actors and US strategic competitors have opportunistically leveraged the bedlam in Venezuela to enter the Western Hemisphere, sow chaos, destabilize the region, and augment their power projection capabilities. Quite simply, authoritarian regimes everywhere have a deep interest in constructing a world safe for their ilk, and in Venezuela, they have moved to shore up Maduro's flailing regime, including at several critical moments of considerable vulnerability.⁵

Perhaps the most concerning aspect of Venezuela's slide into chaos is the bond it has forged and solidified with Russia, China, and Cuba—in many cases, turning once transactional relationships into blossoming strategic partnerships and even outright dependencies. Venezuela has become a prime example of the phenomena known as "authoritarian export" and "authoritarian learning," whereby authoritarian leaders share best practices in repression and "adopt survival strategies based upon their prior successes and failures of other governments."⁶

Russia's support for the Maduro regime has provided Venezuela with a crucial, sanctions-busting lifeline and Russia with a foothold in a strategically important country in the Western Hemisphere. In Venezuela, Vladimir Putin has burnished his image as a defender of embattled regimes worldwide.⁷ Recent years have witnessed nuclear-capable Russian bombers fly 6,200 miles to land in Caracas and the signing of an agreement allowing Russian warships to use Venezuelan naval ports.⁸ Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu has mused openly about the placement of Russian cruise missiles on Venezuela's Caribbean shores.⁹ The echoes of the Cuban Missile Crisis are chilling. Already, Venezuela possesses Russia's advanced S-300 long-range surface-to-air missile system.¹⁰ Several hundred Russian soldiers have deployed to

Venezuela as “advisers” and subsequently donned the fatigues of the Venezuelan Army in an effort to blend in as they head to garrisons around the country.¹¹

China’s support for the Maduro regime has permitted it access to precious natural resources and Venezuelan crude. In its ambition to lock in this access, between 2007 and 2017, China extended more than \$60 billion in loans to Venezuela in exchange for future oil shipments.¹² Venezuela’s then-president, Hugo Chávez, was content to mortgage the country’s future if in the process it propelled his own rise and the fortunes of his political project, *Chavismo*. In addition to financial dependency on China, Venezuela has also served as another market for the export of China’s repressive surveillance technology, including tools from major state-owned enterprises, such as ZTE Corporation.

Cuba’s support for the Maduro regime also fits the model of “authoritarian export.” Cuba’s intelligence agents have insinuated themselves within Venezuela’s armed forces, helped Maduro (and Chávez before him) capture state institutions, and assisted in the construction of repressive organs of a police state capable of suppressing organized revolt and stymieing Washington. In return for Cuba’s tutelage and “solidarity,” Venezuela has shipped free oil to the cash-strapped island, a near daily tribute it has maintained even as its own domestic oil production has cratered due to incompetence, corruption, and inefficiencies at the state-owned oil company *Petróleos de Venezuela, SA (PDVSA)*. Indeed, Venezuelans have long lamented the outsourcing of Venezuela’s sovereignty as the “Cubanization” of the country.¹³

In sum, like a family recipe, authoritarians of all stripes have bequeathed to Caracas their best advice in regime survival. If not for Cuba, the Venezuelan regime would arguably not exist in its current iteration; if not for Russia and China, the Maduro regime specifically would have collapsed. In an era of great-power rivalry, the support provided by fellow authoritarians has additional significance when US strategic competitors can turn Venezuela into a nightmare and source of instability for the entire hemisphere.

China: From Largesse to Geopolitical Rivalry

After the election of Hugo Chávez in 1998, Venezuela sought to diversify its trading partners, especially in its oil exports, and Asia was a natural counter to the US. From Beijing’s perspective, Venezuela made an ideal partner—endowed with untold minerals and rich in raw materials, including the largest proven oil reserves in the world. As president, Chávez visited China more than any other Latin American leader.¹⁴

The decade between 2007 and 2017 saw an explosion of Chinese investment in Venezuela. Beijing furnished some \$64 billion in loans, investing in a range of projects, including housing, infrastructure, satellites, mining, and even a railway company.¹⁵ Often, these loans were collateralized with oil. Since 2005, Venezuela represents 45 percent of China’s total development lending to Latin America.¹⁶

Maduro, however, has not managed the success of his predecessor in attracting Chinese investment. In 2018, he traveled to Beijing to sign 28 bilateral agreements and received \$5 billion in loans to revive oil production.¹⁷ Throughout the crisis, Maduro has pleaded for favorable deals from great powers to help Venezuela recover previous levels of oil output. Yet, China has not opened any new lines of credit in the Maduro era, preferring to renew preexisting ones and grant extensions in repayment timelines. China has also been active in oil-processing joint ventures and the Belt and Road Initiative. Fearing sanctions, China has continued to import some Venezuelan oil, mostly using ship-to-ship transfers on the open sea.¹⁸

Maduro’s appalling economic management notwithstanding, Chinese support has also come in other crucial forms. Since the start of Venezuela’s crisis, China has supported the Maduro regime diplomatically, preventing it from sinking to “pariah” status. After Juan Guaidó’s rise to interim president, raising significant pressure on the Maduro regime as nearly 60 countries recognized his legitimacy, the Chinese Foreign Ministry reiterated its respect for Venezuela’s efforts “to uphold national sovereignty,

independence and stability.”¹⁹ Beijing has a strong interest in Venezuela, stemming from its fear of sovereignty violations in Taiwan and Hong Kong. With China’s backing, the Maduro regime even secured a seat on the United Nations Human Rights Council in 2019, joining a group that includes many of the main antagonists in Venezuela’s ruin: China, Russia, and Cuba.²⁰ Such a position not only ensures this rogues’ gallery the ability to stymie the Council’s work but also mitigates Maduro’s international isolation.

Perhaps most nefariously, China has exported a suite of repressive surveillance technology to Venezuela. In 2016, for instance, Maduro rolled out what has become a key tool in maintaining his social control—the so-called *Carnet de la Patria* (“fatherland card”), a social ID card developed and sold by ZTE Corporation.²¹ The card is intended to monitor citizens’ social, political, and economic behavior, patterned on China’s repressive social credit system, and is required to access social services and benefits. China’s track record in exporting technology-driven authoritarian tools makes it the supplier of choice for many authoritarian regimes, such as Maduro’s.²² In addition to technology, China has also sold military hardware to Venezuela, including armored personnel carriers used to suppress protests.²³

As long as a considerable portion of Venezuela’s debt remains in arrears, “China is carrying the burden of Venezuela’s collapse.”²⁴ Nevertheless, for China, Venezuela at a standstill, and therefore a major liability, is still better than Venezuela undergoing an uncertain political transition. In the context of the increasing US-China rivalry, China is unlikely to work productively toward a political transition that would strengthen Washington’s position in the region (and potentially compromise the repayment of its many loans).

Cuba: An Existential Dependence in a Flagging “Revolution”

Cuba is Venezuela’s most important ideological ally. After assuming the presidency in 1998, Chávez became Fidel Castro’s apprentice. This “*padre-hermano*” relationship blossomed beyond political ideology to encompass the implementation of medical missions, the construction of telecommunications systems, and the rollout of literacy programs. Ostensibly aiding the country’s development, the *Barrio Adentro* (“Into the Neighborhood”) program morphed into antennae for intelligence gathering and social and political control that Cuban doctors have called “blackmail.”²⁵ In turn, Venezuela sent thousands of barrels of oil, and by 2011, Cuba imported more than 60 percent of its total supply from Venezuela.²⁶ While estimates of the number of Cubans in the country vary, by 2004, approximately 20,000 Cubans were in Venezuela administering government programs. By 2015, this number burgeoned to 60,000 personnel.²⁷

An in-depth investigation of previously undisclosed documents explains exactly how the Cuban government directed the restructuring and rebuilding of Venezuela’s armed forces more than a decade ago. By monitoring domestic and internal military activities, the Cubans sought to “coup proof” the Venezuelan regime.²⁸ To do so, they erected an organization—the Directorate General of Military Counterintelligence (DGCIM)—that sits above the Venezuelan armed forces and neutralizes any whiff of defection within the ranks. Members of the DGCIM have been implicated in a plethora of human rights abuses, including the detention and torture of military personnel and their families.²⁹ Cuban intelligence personnel have trained Venezuelan soldiers, at times alongside Iranian officials, in interrogation techniques and torture methods. Testifying before the US Senate in 2017, Luis Almagro, secretary general of the Organization of American States, labeled Cuba’s presence in Venezuela “an occupation army.”³⁰

These moves in the security realm likely ensured greater loyalty to Venezuela’s Bolivarian project—a loyalty that explains much of Maduro’s resilience. Indeed, the Cuban regime’s deep entrenchment means that no nation looms larger over Venezuela today than Cuba. A democratic transition in Venezuela would cut the life support it provides to the Cuban regime and is therefore something the latter cannot countenance.

Beware the Maduro Regime’s False Narratives

Well before Venezuela's political and economic crisis, the country's prized industry—oil—began deteriorating due to incompetence, lack of investment in maintenance, and, relatedly, an unfathomable amount of theft at PDVSA. Independent audits in 2016 estimated that Venezuela had lost approximately \$350 billion to kleptocracy, making it the nation with the largest public losses owing to corruption in the world. (The next highest nation suffered \$100 million in losses.)³¹ As Maduro has pressed onward in his survival strategy, these kleptocracy figures have likely accelerated since 2016. A founding member of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) that boasts the largest proven oil reserves in the world and once pumped upward of 3.5 million barrels per day, Venezuela managed to produce, as of January 2021, a paltry 500,000 barrels per day.³²

As Venezuela's economy slips further into the abyss, the Maduro regime has doubled down on the narrative of a nation under siege and abdicated any responsibility for the country's collapse. Some analysts in the US who question the utility of sanctions on the regime have been drawn to the allure of this narrative, misconstruing the source of Venezuela's implosion. A recent report not only argued the illegality of US sanctions but also spuriously attributed thousands of premature deaths to US sanctions policy.³³

However, a Government Accountability Office (GAO) report from February 2021 found that while US sanctions contributed to Venezuela's economic malaise, "mismanagement of Venezuela's state oil company and decreasing oil prices are among other factors that have also affected the economy's performance during this period."³⁴ It could not be any clearer where to place the blame for Venezuela's catastrophic decline—with the unimaginable cruelty and moral bankruptcy of a regime that brutally represses its people while 94 percent of citizens suffer in poverty, a regime that faces desperate shortages of just about every essential item but torches aid convoys seeking to traverse its borders and bring relief, and a regime that commits thousands of extrajudicial killings and other human rights abuses that the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for human rights has found constitute "crimes against humanity."³⁵

Further, the US sanctions-as-the-cause-of-decline thesis fails to account for rudimentary facts and elides basic chronology. A month after US sanctions on Venezuela in 2017—and before 2019 sanctions on PDVSA itself—Maduro fired the head of PDVSA and his oil minister, installing a military general with no previous experience in oil.³⁶ A purge of over 60 senior managers and technicians ensued. The departure of talented engineers and technicians over the past two decades, including 20,000 professionals fired by Chávez in 2003, had gutted PDVSA's repository of competence.³⁷ Indeed, one of the most resilient areas of oil production remains Venezuela's heavy crude—run largely with foreign oil companies in joint ventures—while light and medium crudes, under direct PDVSA control, have collapsed disproportionately. Venezuela's oil production hewed closely to other OPEC nations' until 2000, when it commenced a long decline courtesy of repeated expropriations, corruption, and the use of rents for a slew of non-oil activities.³⁸

Venezuela's long decline as an oil producer meant that by 2019, when the US imposed direct sanctions on PDVSA, Maduro had already decided to slash imports of food and medicine by 80 percent. "Years before defaulting on bondholders," comments Harvard economist Ricardo Hausmann, "Maduro chose to default on Venezuelan stomachs."³⁹ Maduro and his cronies—and only they—have the power to reverse these reprehensible policies and open the doors to attend to Venezuela's worsening humanitarian crisis. Instead, the regime harasses NGOs at an alarming rate and seeks to control the distribution of humanitarian aid.⁴⁰

Policy Recommendations

Management, Not Solutionism.⁴¹ The Biden administration should recognize that it has inherited a position of significant leverage, but it should resist the temptation to "go big" and rush into negotiations with the Maduro regime. In the past, new administrations have succumbed to the desire to solve intractable foreign policy challenges or "get caught trying." However, a Hail Mary pass at this inauspicious moment

could actually entrench Maduro further and would likely frustrate already disillusioned Venezuelans key to a solution when the moment is riper. Indeed, Venezuela may call for a strategy of competent management and the maintenance of steady pressure rather than dangerous solutionism.

Attend to the Unfolding Humanitarian Disaster. It is difficult to find appropriate comparisons for the humanitarian disaster unfolding in Venezuela and the broader region. This is the most underfunded humanitarian crisis in modern history. For instance, while Syrian refugees have received the equivalent of \$3,150 per refugee, Venezuelans, by comparison, have received the equivalent of \$265 per refugee.⁴² The US is still the largest single provider of humanitarian aid to Venezuelan refugees. Recent donor conferences, however, have fallen short of expectations. If the United Nations appeal for 2021 is fully met, total aid, which currently stands around \$1.4 billion, will rise to \$3 billion. Compared to the \$20 billion of total aid allocated to the Syrian refugee crisis, Latin America and the Caribbean need a desperate infusion of cash. Aid should be targeted to encourage and defray the costs of further integration of Venezuelan refugees in host countries such as Brazil, Colombia, Peru, and others.

Monitor the Effects of Sanctions on Humanitarian Efforts. As the aforementioned GAO report notes, the US Department of Treasury should monitor for potentially negative humanitarian consequences of US sanctions. By systematically tracking inquiries made to the call center, rather than just responding to individual inquiries, Treasury can more easily identify trends and recurring issues. The US should seek to correct any de-risking and ensure the reliability of the humanitarian exceptions built into its sanctions architecture. Fine-tuning sanctions should be the first impulse, rather than simply lifting them.

Avoid the Siren Song of Negotiations Until an Identifiable Set of Minimum Conditions Are Met. There have been many attempts at negotiation and dialogue with the Maduro regime—by some accounts, nearly a dozen—with limited progress and significant opportunity costs to the Venezuelan people. The Biden administration is right to keep US sanctions in place until minimum conditions for some kind of negotiations are in place. However, little consensus exists on what the minimum conditions would be for a negotiation with the Maduro regime, let alone the concrete steps the regime would need to undertake to meet those conditions. In fact, there is little agreement on what it would even mean to “resolve” the crisis. Major questions persist regarding the objectives, timing, process, trust-building measures, and the desire for partial, incremental, or full agreements.

Focus on the European Union and Regional Groupings to Bring More Pressure. While awaiting a more fortuitous diplomatic moment, the Biden administration should encourage the European Union to adjust its policy in a nod to reality. The EU’s current approach is riddled with inconsistencies, and the pressure setting is insufficient to meaningfully contribute to a negotiated solution. The US should establish a Venezuela sanctions coordination mechanism to discuss strategic issues and questions of compliance with the EU, which would guarantee consistency in enforcement and obviate embarrassing moments such as “Delcygate,” when Venezuela’s sanctioned vice president, Delcy Rodríguez, was permitted to land at Barajas Airport in Madrid. Additionally, elections in several countries throughout Latin America could alter the regional political composition, reducing the desire to push for a solution and vitiating the role of the Organization of American States in highlighting the Maduro regime’s destabilizing impact on the region.

Broaden the Diplomatic Tool Kit to Complement Sanctions. The Biden administration should employ non-sanctions instruments concurrently with US sanctions to achieve effective pressure on the Maduro regime. These instruments include legal referrals to international tribunals, such as the current case pending against Venezuela before the International Criminal Court; further development of the Responsibility to Protect doctrine; and anti-money-laundering mechanisms and resource certification regimes to deter the Maduro regime’s participation in the lucrative illicit economy.

Bolster Intelligence Capabilities. The incoming director of the CIA must conduct a thorough investigation of intelligence failures related to the Maduro regime’s resilience and bolster US intelligence assets and capabilities in Venezuela. Two episodes best illustrate how untrustworthy US sources have become: the failed April 2019 uprising announced from La Carlota Air Base in Caracas and Operation Gideon, the failed 2020 amphibious invasion planned in neighboring Colombia by a sanctioned Venezuelan general.

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