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“U.S. Disengagement from Latin America: Compromised Security and Economic Interests”

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member and Members of the Committee.

It's truly a privilege to join you here today to discuss this important and consequential issue regarding Latin America, which directly affects the national interests of the United States.

My name is Mauricio Claver-Carone and I'm the Executive Director of Cuba Democracy Advocates, a non-profit, non-partisan organization dedicated to the promotion of human rights, democracy and the rule of law in Cuba.

My testimony can be summarized as follows:

The Cuban dictatorship is working systematically against democratic institutions in Latin America.

Autocracies, such as Cuba's, work systematically using subterfuge, coercion, censorship and state-sponsored violence, including lethal force and terrorism.

Thus, the region's democrats -- led by the United States -- must also work systematically to protect and promote its democratic institutions.

Democracies work systematically by holding human rights violators accountable; giving voice, legal assistance and protection to the victims; economic sanctions and diplomatic pressure; and by promoting successful evidence-based aid programs to break the cycle of poverty and instability.

Allow me to elaborate:

In the 1980s, it was commonly stated that: "*The road to freedom in Havana runs through Managua*," alluding to a cause-effect from an end to the Cuban-backed Sandinista dictatorship of Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua.

In the last decade, this statement morphed into: "*The road to freedom in Havana runs through Caracas*," referring to the Cuban-backed Bolivarian governments of the late Hugo Chavez and Nicolas Maduro in Venezuela.

Undoubtedly, both roads represent noble and important goals, albeit temporary, short-term solutions. The reason being that the Sandinista government of the 1980s and the Bolivarian governments of today are symptoms -- not remedies -- of a greater illness.

The fact remains that no nation in Latin America will enjoy the long-term benefits of freedom, democracy and security, so long as the dictatorship of the Castro brothers remains in power in Havana.

As such, a more accurate statement would be: "*The road to long-term freedom, democracy and security in Latin America runs through Havana.*"

The Castro regime remains as resolute today to subvert democratic institutions, direct and sponsor violent agitators and support autocrats throughout the region -- and the world -- as it did in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Granted, its tactics and scope have been diminished, mostly due to the economic realities stemming from the end of massive Soviet subsidies through 1991, but its antagonistic aims are unwavering.

No wishful thinking or accommodation policy -- both interchangeable -- will make this go away. Moreover, to underestimate the skill, diligence and effectiveness of Cuba's intelligence and security forces is a grave mistake -- the proportions of which we are witnessing today in Venezuela.

After all, the erosion of Venezuela's democratic institutions and its government's repressive practices, are the result of a protracted, systematic effort -- spanning over a decade -- of penetration and control by the Cuban dictatorship.

As Luis Miquilena, former Venezuelan Minister of the Interior, head of its National Assembly and mentor to Hugo Chavez, recently repented in an interview:

"Venezuela today is a country that is practically occupied by the henchmen of two international criminals, Cuba's Castro brothers. They have introduced in Venezuela a true army of occupation. The Cubans run the maritime ports, airports, communications, the most essential issues in Venezuela. We are in the hands of a foreign country."

Thus, it should be a priority for all democrats in Latin America -- led by the United States -- to support the democratic forces in Cuba working to end the dictatorship of the Castro brothers. That is the remedy.

Unfortunately, that has not been the case.

Last month, Latin America's democratically elected leaders paraded through Havana for a summit of the Community of Latin American States ("CELAC," in Spanish), an anti-U.S. concoction of Hugo Chavez. Currently, the organization's rotating presidency is held by General Raul Castro.

Seemingly these elected leaders were neither interested nor concerned that Cuba's regime had threatened, beaten and arrested hundreds of the island's democracy advocates who had tried to plan and hold a parallel summit to discuss the lack of freedom and human rights in Cuba.

Why would Latin America's democratically elected leaders willingly participate in such a hypocritical charade? What does Cuba's regime offer them that they would stake the loss of credibility by attending?

Some take part in these charades because they fear radical agitators back home. That is the case of Mexico's President Enrique Peña Nieto. Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Andres Oppenheimer was recently in Mexico, where he interviewed various well-placed insiders, and wrote: "*President Enrique Peña Nieto's disregard for the defense of universal rights and basic freedoms in Cuba and Venezuela is partly due to fear that these two countries could use their clout with Mexico's leftist movements to stir up trouble at home.*"

Others attend to pursue business deals without transparency. Such is the case of Brazil's President Dilma Rousseff. During the CELAC summit, Rousseff joined Castro for the official inauguration of the newly-expanded Port of Mariel, a collaboration of the Brazilian conglomerate Odebrecht Group and the Cuban military. This was the same facility from which Cuba's recent smuggling of illegal weapons to North Korea originated. In an unprecedented move, the Brazilian government has now "classified" all documents related to the Odebrecht-Cuban military venture.

Lastly, others lack democratic zeal and conviction. These are the leaders who harbor authoritarian ambitions that the Cuban regime is helping them achieve. We'll return to them at the conclusion.

This trend is reversible -- but the leadership of the United States is vital.

Undoubtedly, the democrats of Latin America need to step up to their own responsibilities, but in the cost-benefit analysis that all political leaders make, they need to be left with no doubt that the benefits of standing up for freedom and democracy in Cuba outweigh the costs. Whether we like it or not, only the United States can tip that balance.

Hence the title of today's hearing, "U.S. Disengagement from Latin America: Compromised Security and Economic Interests."

To be clear, the United States is not the cause of Latin America's problems. To the contrary, it represents the solution. U.S. leadership in the region should be public, unquestionable and unwavering, particularly as regards the shared values of freedom, democracy and security.

Our democratic allies in the region should know and anticipate the benefits derived from embracing and promoting democratic practices. Likewise, autocrats should know and anticipate the consequences of undemocratic practices and illegal acts.

Currently, neither is the case.

We are witnessing the first with Venezuela. The silence of Latin America's leaders amid the violent suppression of dissent by the government of Nicolas Maduro is scandalous.

The reasons for their silence, amid the arrest, torture and murder of Venezuelan students, is similar to their rationale for embracing the Castro dictatorship at the CELAC summit in Havana, while Cuban democracy activists were being beaten and arrested there.

However, instead of leading and encouraging the region's democrats in holding Maduro's government accountable, the United States is -- unwittingly -- contributing to their silence.

For example, this past Friday, the Panamanian government ceded its seat at the Organization of American States ("OAS") to Venezuelan legislator Maria Corina Machado, a leading opposition figure, to denounce the human rights abuses of the Maduro government.

In 1988-1989, Venezuela's democratic government had supported Panama's democratic opposition against the repression of Manuel Noriega's regime, including their right to be heard at the OAS. Thus, Panama's democrats remain grateful.

The U.S. should have applauded this gesture by Panama. Yet, unfortunately, the United States initially sought to dissuade the Panamanian government from accrediting Maria Corina Machado to speak at the OAS.

That is a lamentable fact. I would urge the Committee to ask the U.S. Department of State for its rationale.

A democratic nation in Latin America gives a voice, a platform, to one of the leading democratic figures that Nicolas Maduro is forcefully trying to silence -- even threatening her with imprisonment -- and the U.S. grimaces.

What message does that send to the rest of Latin America's democrats? Why should they then speak out? Who's going to support them when Cuba's regime and its agitators take reprisals? What message does this send to Venezuela's courageous democracy activists?

The U.S. should be making the benefits of supporting Venezuela's democratic institutions absolutely clear -- not muddying the message.

In the same vein, the consequences for undemocratic practices and illegal acts should be absolutely clear.

There is no better opportunity to do so than regarding the Castro regime's recent smuggling of weapons to North Korea, in blatant violation of international law.

In July 2013, a North Korean flagged vessel, Chong Chon Gang, was intercepted by Panama carrying weaponry from Cuba hidden under 200,000 bags of sugar.

This month, the U.N.'s Panel of Experts ("Panel") released its official report on North Korea's illegal trafficking of weapons, in conjunction with Cuba's Castro regime.

The Panel concluded that both the shipment itself and the transaction between Cuba and North Korea were international sanctions violations.

This shipment constituted the largest amount of arms and related materiel interdicted to or from North Korea since the adoption of U.N. Security Council Resolution 1718 (2006).

As for Cuba, it's the first time a nation in the Western Hemisphere is found in violation of U.N. sanctions.

The report noted similar Cuba trafficking patterns by other North Korean ships in the recent past. In other words, it's believed similar shipments have gotten away.

To understand the magnitude of this shipment, Scott Snyder, a Korea expert at the Council of Foreign Relations, explained:

"If the North Korean-flagged Chong Chon Gang had been successful in bringing its MiG-21 cargo to North Korea, the transaction with Cuba might have been the biggest sale of fighter plane related equipment since a MiG sale from Kazakhstan in 1999. The Chong Chon Gang cargo included mint-condition rocket propelled grenades (RPGs) that are essential to North Korea's efforts to extend its conventional reach on the peninsula as USFK (United States Forces Korea) command elements transition south from Seoul to Pyeongtaek."

Such egregious practices should not be inconsequential.

Otherwise, it would send a demoralizing message to our democratic ally, Panama, which put its resources and reputation on the line to intercept the vessel. Other democratic nations wouldn't find it worth the cost and energy of pursuing similar violations in the future.

Moreover, inaction breeds impunity. If Cuba's regime does not face any consequences, it would embolden non-democratic actors in Venezuela and other nations to do the same. There has long been suspicion that Venezuela and Ecuador have been helping Iran and Syria skirt the U.S.'s financial sanctions. Russia is currently seeking to establish military bases in the region. They would surely interpret any inaction as a green-light.

One immediate consequence the United States should adopt is to prohibit transactions with Cuba's military conglomerate, GAESA, run by Raul Castro's son-in-law, General Luis Alberto Rodriguez Lopez-Callejas. GAESA, which controls over 80% of Cuba's economy, was at the center of the transactions linked to the North Korea arms smuggling operation.

Currently, every single U.S. "people-to-people" traveler that visits Cuba stays at one of GAESA's 4 and 5 star hotels and resorts. Tourism represents GAESA's most lucrative enterprise. Such transactions should be prohibited.

Finally, it's essential that the United States lead the region's defense, promotion and application of the Inter-American Democratic Charter ("Charter"). Otherwise, it will become irrelevant.

The authoritarian ambitions of Venezuela's Nicolas Maduro, Ecuador's Rafael Correa, Bolivia's Evo Morales, Argentina's Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner and Nicaragua's Daniel Ortega are no secret.

What has inhibited them -- thus far -- is the institutionalization of representative democracy as the backbone of hemispheric relations, as was agreed upon in the 2001 Inter-American Democratic Charter signed by 34 of the 35 countries of the Western Hemisphere. To skirt the Charter, they try to manipulate laws and institutions and exert greater executive control while maintaining a facade of democracy.

The biggest deterrent to breaking their public commitments to representative democracy has been the omnipresent economic isolation of Cuba as the result of U.S. sanctions. These leaders are keenly aware that they need the United States to survive economically. For example, Venezuela is entirely dependent on exporting oil to -- and importing gas from -- the United States. Thus U.S. sanctions on Cuba serve as “the stick” to “the carrot” of the Inter-American Democratic Charter and obeisance, if not enforcement, of its principles.

It's precisely the authoritarian underbelly of these Latin American leaders that makes them such zealous lobbyists for the end of U.S. sanctions on Cuba. It's for this reason that they want to see the Castro regime embraced despite its blatant disregard for representative democracy. Such a U.S. policy change would allow them to accelerate their own authoritarian tendencies and free their zeal for absolute power.

If U.S. sanctions toward Cuba are lifted and Castro's dictatorship is embraced -- what's to keep a return to the Latin American dictatorships of the 20th Century?

The people of the Americas can't afford a return to the dictatorships -- whether of the left or the right -- that once ruled Latin America. It would severely damage the 21st century national interests of the United States.

Sadly, plenty of Latin American “leaders” would gladly seize the opportunity to permanently close the door on democracy.

Let's not hand them the opportunity.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony. Again, I truly appreciate the invitation and the opportunity to speak before you and the Committee. I will be pleased to respond to any questions.