“The Democracy Imperative”

The Importance of Democracy Promotion to Great Power Competition in Latin America and the Caribbean

By Ryan C. Berg

Background

There are many reasons to believe democracy and democracy promotion are imperative in the great power competition with China, which is occurring with ever-greater intensity in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). LAC has played host to great power competition in previous eras, but in grand strategic terms, competition with China in the twenty-first century is fundamentally different than the rivalry of the Cold War against Soviet Russia. Whereas during the Cold War the United States supported friendly, anti-communist military regimes in LAC, success against China in the twenty-first century will necessitate robust support for democracy, liberal institutions, and democracy promotion. The Kirkpatrick Doctrine—which advocated for supporting “friendly authoritarian” regimes that went along with Washington’s aims—applied so deliberately to LAC during the Cold War, is outmoded and likely to be highly counterproductive today. On the contrary, there are many reasons to believe that successfully countering China in great power competition will be intimately linked to the democratic health of LAC as a region. This is the democracy imperative.

This paper begins with background on U.S. policy toward LAC during the Cold War. Then, it places the question of a Kirkpatrick Doctrine for the twenty-first century within the context of great power competition with China and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, which has prompted the Biden administration to consider re-engaging pariah regimes such as the Maduro dictatorship in Venezuela. The paper will then adumbrate reasons why great power competition with China is fundamentally different than previous iterations of competition against Soviet Russia, which saw U.S. support for anti-communist military regimes.
Cold War Policy toward LAC

During the Cold War, U.S. foreign policy in LAC followed the logic of strategic denial, seeking to repress the threat of socialist and communist movements as part of a global containment strategy. The United States’ national interest in LAC was laser-focused on thwarting subversive communist influence in the region. To prevent the diffusion of communism, the United States found it easiest to support repressive anti-communist military regimes. While democracy and human rights did not recede from U.S. rhetoric, such as in the Alliance for Progress, democracy promotion often took a backseat in LAC. Almost immediately after the Cold War began, the United States pursued a policy of containment, best instantiated in what came to be known as the Truman Doctrine, by providing support to beleaguered governments at risk of falling to communism. Following Cuba’s dramatic communist revolution in 1959, Henry Kissinger stated that the United States could not countenance the development of “a second communist state in the Western Hemisphere.” Indeed, for the United States, preventing the spread of communism by defeating guerrilla movements and insurgents across the region seemed such an imperative that democracy promotion became a secondary goal.

Through several critical decisions, the United States supported anti-communist military regimes across LAC during the Cold War, in some cases helping these regimes consolidate power and maintain their leadership against social movements and political opposition. At times, the United States supported these regimes with military assistance and provided tacit support to overthrow democratically elected governments, as was the case with support for General Hugo Banzer in 1971 to overthrow President Juan José Torres in Bolivia; backing the 1964 coup that overthrew President João Goulart in Brazil; and supporting the move to overthrow the socialist government of President Salvador Allende in Chile and replace it with the military regime of Augusto Pinochet. Each of these cases involved varying levels of intelligence and support. While the United States backed military regimes across LAC, some of its preferred governments succumbed to socialist and communist revolutions, such as Fidel Castro in Cuba and, 20 years later, the Sandinista Revolution that toppled the Somoza dynasty in Nicaragua.

Beyond intelligence and military support, the United States also provided official diplomatic endorsements for military regimes in the region and assisted these regimes by supporting their operations against so-called “subversive” elements within society. This entailed sidelining democratic values and supporting regimes that committed shocking human rights abuses, such as in Argentina under General Jorge Rafael Videla, who overthrew democratically elected Isabel Perón in 1976, as well as the nearly 35-year military regime of Alfredo Stroessner in Paraguay. Through Operation Condor, the United States provided intelligence and logistics to assist several countries in LAC—Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, and Paraguay—in their campaigns of political repression.

The strategic importance of LAC to the United States, in conjunction with the enduring attraction of communist ideology in an underdeveloped region close to home, led the United States in part to support an unsavory set of military regimes that committed grave human rights abuses. As Kissinger noted, the primary goal, especially after the Cuban Revolution, was to avoid the development of another communist state in the Western Hemisphere where a “domino effect” could sweep the region. After the Cold War and the withering of the Soviet threat, U.S. policymakers pivoted and began to understand the importance, once again, of democracy promotion in LAC. Meanwhile, the region blossomed into one of mostly thriving democracies, riding Samuel Huntington’s “third wave” of democracy in the aftermath of the Soviet Union’s collapse and the related shifts in international order. Seen through this lens, democracy promotion in LAC is both a moral and strategic imperative.
A Twenty-First-Century Kirkpatrick Doctrine?

The strategic imperatives of the Cold War and the necessity of competition with the Soviet Union forced all manner of uncomfortable compromises on U.S. foreign policy. The idea that U.S. policies aimed at democracy promotion should be deprioritized in the face of Soviet threats to the United States’ near abroad was perhaps best articulated and justified by Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, U.S. ambassador to the United Nations during the Reagan administration. In her famous essay “Dictatorships and Double Standards,” Kirkpatrick argued that rapid liberalization in certain countries, especially in the LAC region, had delivered them to anti-American political figures who consolidated authoritarian regimes of their own. It was better to deal with the devils that we knew as opposed to pushing democracy and assuming the United States could mitigate the uncertainties.

Furthermore, those anti-American political figures, such as Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua, tended to provide beachheads for the Soviet Union to project power in the United States’ near abroad. The need to promote democracy and liberalism would have to be moderated when other strategic imperatives took precedence, such as regional stability, staving off the Soviet Union, and broader geopolitical competition. Kirkpatrick writes that the United States needed a “morally and strategically acceptable, and politically realistic, program for dealing with non-democratic governments.” The distinction, in her mind, was between authoritarians open to U.S. influence (and perhaps democracies one day) and communist states in lockstep with Moscow, unable to countenance internal change.

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Over the past 15 years, U.S. foreign policy has had to contend with new challenges in LAC, first among them China’s burgeoning influence. Without a broader strategic vision, lacking resources, and often consumed by events around the world, U.S. policy in LAC has on occasion contemplated a twenty-first-century Kirkpatrick Doctrine. The Biden administration’s decision to engage the Nicolás Maduro regime in Venezuela reveals its belief that the age of great power competition, facing two near-peer competitors in China and Russia, will require similar types of policy trade-offs. It seems Putin’s imperialistic ambitions in Ukraine have altered the Biden administration’s calculus in LAC; namely, it is willing to depart from the Trump administration’s “maximum pressure” campaigns against LAC’s dictatorships. Indeed, recent outreach to Maduro, a dictator indicted by the U.S. Department of Justice for his alleged role in drug trafficking, has been justified in terms of global energy security, jumpstarting long-stalled negotiations between the opposition and Maduro, and cleaving the Maduro regime from its Russian patrons. This has meant sidelining the previous approach that leveraged U.S. sanctions architecture to insist on the centrality of democracy promotion and the democratically elected interim president, Juan Guaidó.

A criminal regime such as Maduro’s is a poor candidate for a twenty-first-century Kirkpatrick Doctrine. His regime has forced 6.8 million refugees to migrate—on par with the numbers coming out of Ukraine. The Maduro regime is also under active investigation at the International Criminal Court for committing “crimes against humanity.” In general, the Maduro regime engages in widespread corruption and negatively impacts regional instability. Nearly two decades of security ties with Putin’s Russia makes the idea of cleaving Maduro from Putin chimerical at best.
Russia’s war in Ukraine, combined with China’s growing global strength, has sent shockwaves around the world. It has also catalyzed thinking on U.S. grand strategy and axioms previously taken for granted. Yet, a twenty-first-century Kirkpatrick Doctrine in LAC makes little sense—if for no other reason than because the global corruption networks between authoritarians, stemming from their vast kleptocratic structures, prevent regimes such as Maduro’s and Ortega’s from playing any sort of reliable and constructive pro-U.S. role. It is impossible to envisage them playing the constructive role other undemocratic regimes in the Middle East or South Asia currently play for the United States.

In sum, a more competitive strategy for dealing with dictators and great power competition with China in the region is to insist on the centrality of democracy promotion to U.S. foreign policy.

**A Different Type of Competition**

U.S. foreign policy choices in LAC during the twentieth century were direct responses to the circumstances of the Cold War and the necessities of competition with the Soviet Union. However, great power competition with China in the twenty-first century presents a fundamentally different set of challenges and overall strategic environment. The Cold War was a highly unidimensional, unidirectional conflict pitting the West, led by the United States, against the Soviet Union and its communist allies. During this period, great power competition primarily focused on whether the United States, or the Soviet Union, would become the sole superpower and shaper of global norms.

Unlike the Soviet Union confronting the United States during the Cold War, China presents a more comprehensive challenge that cuts across variegated domains. First, China is both deeply authoritarian and deeply woven into the world’s economic fabric. Economic interconnectedness and dependence are the main foci of competition, as opposed to military competition, especially in regions of the world far from China, such as LAC. Second, despite its outsized influence on the security and prosperity of the United States, LAC often finds itself a low-priority region for U.S. policymakers. Democracy promotion can serve as an insurance premium of sorts in low-resource contexts—a price worth paying to receive the benefits of greater democracy worldwide. Third, China’s efforts to win hearts and minds around the world, combined with the Chinese Communist Party’s continued existence as a Leninist political party, have seen it deploy devastating “discursive” critiques of democratic values, such as human rights. Only open democratic societies with robust media and tools to combat disinformation can push back against China’s efforts to win allies by winning the discursive narrative. Fourth, successful competition with China will inevitably involve the reconstruction of at least a partial liberal international order—under severe strain in the wake of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine—making a robustly democratic LAC a prime contender to join such an effort.

Admittedly, democracy and democracy promotion may not be the crux of successful competition with China in other regions of the world. Indeed, in the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa, the United States should pursue a realistic view hyper-focused on other metrics of success, not starry-eyed, idealistic promotion of democracy. In the Indo-Pacific, for instance, the United States has no choice but to engage India, Indonesia, Singapore, and the Philippines to contain China in its own neighborhood—even if those countries fall demonstrably short of democratic ideals. By contrast, the same urgency to engage undemocratic, autocratic, or authoritarian regimes in LAC does not exist. Besides, nearly all have made common cause with U.S. adversaries. As per the Inter-American Democratic Charter, signed in 2001 by every country in LAC except Cuba, representative democracy is the only form of government acceptable to the peoples of the Americas. In other words, democracy is the stated value and democracy promotion the stated goal of the LAC region itself. In the Biden administration’s “democracy versus autocracy” rhetoric, LAC provides low-hanging fruit for values-based diplomatic approaches that can offset the occasional
(and necessary) hypocrisies of great power competition in other regions (witness recent meetings with Mohammed bin Salman in Saudi Arabia).

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**ECONOMIC COMPETITION**
From an economic standpoint, the United States and China are the world’s two largest global economies and are largely interdependent. At least since the Trump administration, however, the United States and China have begun competing vigorously with one another, discarded the concept of “engagement,” and levied tariffs and trade-related measures with global impacts. The United States and China are more interconnected economically than any two countries in great power competition have ever been before. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union and the United States operated under two radically different economic systems and, with few exceptions, attempted to distance themselves as much as possible. The size of China's economy dwarfs that of the Soviet Union.

Great power competition in the twenty-first century is not just more economic but also more technocratic. It is a competition over standards setting, rulemaking, and who influences multilateral bodies with important roles in global governance, especially global economic governance. Democracies, including in LAC, can act in concert to protect shared values and promote joint standards.

As China continues to increase its economic ties with countries around the world, it threatens to overtake the United States’ economic partnerships with many nations. China has become the top trading partner for many countries in South America and the second-largest trading partner for nearly all of LAC. China may eventually overtake the United States as the world’s largest economy in terms of GDP by the mid-2030s. China's Belt and Road Initiative continues to invest in massive infrastructure projects, including in 21 countries in LAC. Economically, the United States accounted for nearly 50 percent of the global economic market after World War II. The emergence of China as an economic giant that could soon surpass the United States as the world’s largest economy presents an entirely new dilemma in the twenty-first century. Without LAC countries onboard, the United States has little chance of retaining its ability to shape global economic governance, standards setting, and rulemaking by working with a large number of countries through multilateral bodies and international treaties.

**RESOURCE SCARCITY**
Despite its important role in U.S. prosperity and security, LAC is rarely a priority for U.S. policymakers. Consequently, it is often a region defined by scarcity in terms of resource allocation. In 2019, for instance, the United States allocated about $3 billion of its aid budget to LAC, compared to over $7 billion per year to LAC during the 1960s and early 1970s. Furthermore, LAC is unlikely to receive more of these scarce resources in the future. In fact, it is possible that LAC would suffer a diminution of resources in the event of a crisis with China (and to a lesser extent, with Russia) in another part of the world. As one well-known defense analyst put it, the strategy to be pursued is “more Asia, less elsewhere.” From this standpoint, supporting democracy and democracy promotion represents a kind of insurance premium in the great power competition with China—democratic states are less likely to seek authoritarian extra-hemispheric allies, less likely to start wars with one another, and more likely to contribute to overall political and economic stability.
LAC’s once-robust consensus on democracy led to the signing of historic documents, such as the Inter-American Democratic Charter. Signed in 2001, the charter serves as an important tool of inter-regional democracy promotion and policing for wayward democracies. However, the region’s overall economic turn toward China—and the corresponding diminution in importance in inter-regional economic and political links—has frayed the democratic bonds formed by the charter. The death of LAC regionalism heralds an important development because it means that the bilateral relationship many countries have with China is far more important than their regional role and multilateral organizations, effectively defanging the collective policing function inherent in the Inter-American Democratic Charter. The tools for democracy promotion in the charter, it would seem, are outmoded given regional shifts brought on by China’s presence.

**THE LIBERAL INTERNATIONAL ORDER**
Success in great power competition will require shoring up and upholding at least a partial liberal international order or “two-world” model. Democracies in LAC must be an important part of this effort. Authoritarian states, especially those in LAC, tend to engage in balancing behavior against the United States, offsetting pressure campaigns by leveraging anti-imperialist rhetoric to sustain their regimes. In practice, this manifests in invitations for extra-hemispheric adversaries, such as fellow authoritarians in China, Russia, Iran, and Turkey, to enter the United States’ near abroad. For instance, an unsavory set of authoritarian regimes prop up the Maduro regime in Venezuela, while the Ortega regime in Nicaragua provides power-projection capabilities to Russia, Iran, and possibly China.

U.S. efforts to shore up a partial liberal international order should prioritize its shared neighborhood and focus on democracy and democracy promotion in LAC. Rebuilding and ensuring a partial liberal international order that starts with LAC is not only more strategic but far more defensible because of the region’s proximity and importance to U.S. security and prosperity.

**NARRATIVE CONTROL, DISINFORMATION, AND DISCURSIVE COMPETITION**
As China expands its footprint in global media and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) proves ever-capable of influencing and even controlling important global narratives, it has become more apparent that great power competition is also a discursive (and ideological) competition. This is in line with the CCP’s origin as a Leninist political party, where winning the narrative battle is of the utmost importance. Simply, China’s penetration of LAC’s media space and Spanish-language news outlets is a major vulnerability for both the region and the United States. Throughout LAC, China (in conjunction with other illiberal powers) has successfully undermined the attractiveness of human rights language as the promotion of alien concepts undermining national self-determination. One example of this is China’s increasingly successful global campaign to instantiate a so-called “right to development,” which deprioritizes individual rights and the role of private enterprise and elevates the role of the state and “collective rights” in lifting the masses out of poverty. The CCP’s campaign to critique the “universal values” of liberal democracies has met with partial success in LAC, as seen in the region’s somewhat tepid response to Russia’s illegal and unprovoked invasion of Ukraine. The partial success of these efforts is especially frustrating given the prominence of LAC countries in the campaign for individual civil and political rights.

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Other projects pushed by China include “safe cities” and promotion of a “China model” based on what the CCP calls the “Chinese miracle” of development. These efforts are aimed squarely at the developing world. While many LAC countries are apt to resist the China model, in a region with ample corruption and where democracy is sometimes unconsolidated, many are impressed with the ability of the CCP to organize and undertake large projects of national scope. Greater democracy and democracy promotion could further insulate countries in LAC from the CCP’s use of Leninist tactics focused on dominating the discursive competition, which seeks to weaken and divide states from within. With the United States increasingly incapable of shaping the foreign policy decisions of developing countries to be conducive to its interests, liberal democracies sporting free and independent media could provide the insulation needed to compete with Beijing’s strategy of dominating the leading narratives in developing countries.

ELITE CAPTURE, TRANSPARENCY, AND CORRUPTION
Beijing’s economic strategy in LAC, as elsewhere, has relied heavily on “elite capture.” In other words, China makes inroads with elites and brings massive political benefits to entire ruling parties or engages in outright corruption in securing its economic deals. The CCP is adept at leveraging political necessity in LAC, weak transparency and rule of law, and other elements of elite capture to maneuver deals in its favor. Furthermore, many of LAC’s democracies have been weakened by decades of transnational organized crime groups penetrating the highest echelons of political leadership. Criminal organizations can open the door for corruption that China then exploits. Liberal democracy remains crucial to enforcing transparency standards and independent judiciaries capable of bringing systemic graft to justice. Elite capture is much harder in a broad-based, competitive political system where parties rotate regularly in office. Indeed, LAC’s dictatorships are characterized by deep-seated impunity and widespread kleptocracy.

A CROSS-CUTTING, MULTIPOLAR CONFLICT
While great power competition in LAC during the Cold War was based primarily on preventing the spread of communism, today’s conflict cuts across various domains and affects nearly every global industry and region of the world. China’s potentially adverse impacts on democracy—both willful and indirect—in the pursuit of its economic interests and other objectives are relevant for the whole world, including distant countries in LAC. In comparison to the Cold War, today’s competition is a more multipolar conflict with a variety of countries, even those in LAC, which can influence global outcomes. Twenty-first-century great power competition possesses unique characteristics because neither the United States nor China can succeed alone, and each must depend on a group of like-minded states. The United States would face dire consequences in a competition with such characteristics if it loses its shared neighborhood to China.

Keeping LAC a Strategic Asset in Great Power Competition
Just as LAC largely democratized as part of Huntington’s “third wave” at the close of the Cold War, the region is once again at a major inflection point. Perilously, the current democratic recession in LAC could have disastrous consequences for great power competition with China (with China’s presence itself exacerbating the region’s democratic deficits). According to noted democracy expert Larry Diamond, a “third reverse wave” in LAC threatens permanent erosion of critical gains made in earlier decades. While democracy has been a key pillar for governance across the region, democratic regression is possible due to economic stagnation, disastrous pandemic management, popular discontent with leadership, and the growing presence of anti-U.S. authoritarian regimes, not to mention the United States’ relative absence in recent years.

According to International IDEA, LAC stands out for the profundity of its democratic regression. It is home to the only two countries in the world—Venezuela and Nicaragua—which, over the past two
decades, have moved from being functional representative democracies, through all stages of democratic backsliding and regime hybridity, to consolidated dictatorship. The United States’ decision to exclude these dictatorships from the recent Summit of the Americas—the correct and principled decision, based on the clear ruptures of constitutional order—was met with widespread criticism from LAC countries, including Bolivia, Mexico, and Honduras, all of which boycotted the summit. The boycott was yet another display of the state of democracy in LAC, which is closer to “limping than sprinting.” Together, these developments risk transforming LAC from a potential asset in great power competition with China into a potential liability. Further, the very trends that could turn LAC into a liability in an era of great power competition—nationalist populism and democratic regression—might themselves be exacerbated by closer ties with China as it pursues its economic and geopolitical objectives in the context of the region’s fragile democracies. In this context, democracy and democracy promotion efforts have become a greater strategic imperative for the United States in LAC.

Without a shared commitment to democracy, the United States risks losing the foundational values through which it cooperates with its regional partners. Democratic governments in the region have historically been easier to work with in shaping global norms and institutions. The Summit of the Americas fiasco and the ambivalence of many governments in LAC in response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine provide the most recent evidence that the United States is indeed losing influence and power in the region. While the United States may be able to work with so-called “friendly authoritarians” in other parts of the world, great power competition in LAC today possesses different characteristics that mean democracy and democracy promotion are strategic imperatives. For the United States, the idea of turning Cuba, Nicaragua, or Venezuela into a sort of Saudi Arabia of LAC seems not only far-fetched but empowering those regimes to the point of strategic danger.

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To be sure, the United States also needs to have enough flexibility in its definition of what constitutes democracy and an understanding that not all democracies will function well or look like the United States. The goal should be to not only work productively with other democracies but also to build a coalition of countries to compete against China. To accomplish this, the United States must work on occasion with governments that fall short of robust democracy while working to ensure that democracy promotion efforts constantly improve these governments.

Today’s authoritarian governments in the region appear to be acting in a more concerted, “club-like” manner, supporting one another’s transnational repression, and bringing new authoritarian governments into the club. Further, recent analysis has noted that there appears to be a rising degree of cooperation between autocrats and prospective autocrats around the world. Chinese economic investment and an alignment of values with the CCP make “friendly authoritarian” governments in LAC very unlikely to materialize. Coordinated action among authoritarians and would-be authoritarians has increased the need to ensure a club of democracies equal to the task, especially in the United States’ strategically important shared neighborhood. While China may not support authoritarian governments in LAC through active military force as the Soviet Union once did, its economic and political backing for authoritarian leadership has allowed the CCP to promote “authoritarianism as a superior governance model” in LAC and other parts of the world.
Economically, LAC’s democracies are also crucial for creating a level playing field for U.S. investment throughout the region. Democracies tend to create more amenable conditions for fair competition and investment through transparency, rule of law, and strong institutional frameworks that are in line with Western standards of economic development. “Friendly authoritarian” governments are unlikely to create such an investment environment and may actively work against U.S. firms. From infrastructure building to the energy transition to critical minerals, democratic countries create the necessary conditions for strong, competitive investment and economic development. Democracies are also more likely to insist on environmental, social, and governance standards that the United States seeks in its development agreements. From an economic perspective, it is also vital for the United States to support democratic governments in LAC as part of its efforts to shape and influence global economic governance.

While democracy should be a key source of strength for LAC, it is also its greatest vulnerability in today’s environment. Weak and inefficient governments across the region suffer from poor performance, and China’s economic engagement and lending programs ultimately have the potential to exacerbate the situation. Recently, leaders from the political left have assumed power in six of the seven largest countries in LAC through a series of “change elections” but at the same time are failing to make progress. Many of these political outsiders are reflexively skeptical of the United States and its interests in the region. This will make it even more difficult for the United States to exert its influence in a LAC that is suffering from poor governance and a lack of consensus on its main challenges.

If LAC continues to experience democratic backsliding, the United States could face devastating consequences in great power competition with China. Since Huntington’s “third wave” of democracy, the Western Hemisphere has served as the United States’ stronghold, with partnerships and shared values across the region—even as the United States strategically undervalued those partnerships and shared interests. There is good reason to believe, therefore, that the vitality and health of democracy in LAC will be integrally linked to the United States’ prospects in great power competition with China. Given this importance, and in the wake of recent democratic regression in LAC, democracy and democracy promotion efforts should become strategic imperatives once again—both for U.S. defense against China and morally for the region itself.

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