VENEZUELA DESK

A FINAL COLLECTIVE PUSH FOR DEMOCRATIC CHANGE IN VENEZUELA

BY MICHAEL MCCARTHY

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Eager to strengthen collective international pressure that advances the goal of a negotiated democratic transition in Venezuela, the United States has tough choices to make between now and January 10, 2025, the day the new presidential period in Venezuela is slated to begin.

The central questions facing US policymakers concern strategic clarity and policy tool calibration. Should the United States double down on efforts to prevent Nicolás Maduro from being sworn into office for a third term by the regime-aligned Supreme Court and Congress or should it consider policy alternatives that pursue less ambitious objectives? In either case, what mix of carrots and sticks would advance an eventual negotiated democratic transition?

US Policy Confronts an Authoritarian Election Aftermath

Since the July 28 election, the conditions for democratization in Venezuela do not appear to have become more fertile. After more than a decade of crisis-ridden authoritarian rule, Maduro has unleashed a new hardline strategy for holding power after losing to opposition candidate Edmundo González Urrutia. His escalation of repression sextupled the number of political prisoners and drove González into exile in Spain.

Maduro has ignored widespread international criticism of the fraudulent vote count used to declare him the winner. Without providing a counterargument, he has dismissed internationally verified evidence that González won in a landslide. Following a cabinet shakeup that empowered hardline elements, Maduro is consolidating power through economic control and brutal repression that the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights characterized as state terrorism. In short, Maduro has no apparent plans of leaving power.

Despite Maduro's authoritarian resilience and, therefore, the difficulty of fully achieving a negotiated democratic transition, it is in the US interest to adopt a

strategy to prevent him from remaining in office beyond January, rather than preparing a long-term policy of denying his electoral legitimacy and checking his ability to consolidate power.

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Centering that objective would: 1) communicate how profoundly committed the United States is to restoring democracy in Venezuela, a signal that would help Washington deepen the international consensus around taking actions to respect the will of the people expressed at the polls on July 28; 2) ensure a strong degree of bipartisan support for a policy strategy to be implemented during the final months of President Biden's term; 3) send a strong message to the region that the United States disapproves of non-democratic regimes, and that it tried its hardest to prevent a deepening of the migration crisis taxing host countries; and, to maintain policy flexibility; 4) not rule out alternative policy options, such as denying Maduro's electoral legitimacy or checking his ability to consolidate power, if the effort to block his inauguration is not fruitful.

Furthermore, as a matter of strategic clarity, it is in the Biden administration's interest to communicate that preventing Maduro from starting a new term is the US strategy. So far, the United States, perhaps concerned about the risk of appearing weak if such a call to action falls short, has steered clear of such an explicit declaration. For example, Biden, in his speech at the United Nations General Assembly in September, observed that, "We saw it–that universal yearning for rights and freedom–in Venezuela, where millions cast their vote for change. It hasn't been recognized, but it can't be denied. The world knows the truth." Secretary of State Antony Blinken, in remarks at a US-Argentina Ministerial meeting on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly, noted, "the regime may try to obscure the results, but the Venezuelan people have spoken. Now, our job is to ensure their voices are heard."

So far, actions taken by the Biden administration suggest a plan to build a collective pressure coalition, but the broader aims of that pressure are unclear. On September 12, the Biden administration sought to hold 16 Maduro-aligned officials "accountable for conducting electoral fraud, falsifying election results,

and intensifying repression against the Venezuelan people in order to silence their voices and their vote and to illegitimately extend Maduro's rule" by imposing personal sanctions on these officials who hold senior posts in the military, the judiciary, the National Assembly, and the electoral authority.

This round of individual sanctions, coupled with visa restrictions on other Maduro-aligned officials, was widely expected. For now, the administration has not sought to modify the terms of the operating licenses of US oil companies operating in Venezuela, with Chevron receiving a six-month renewal of its General License 41 until April. However, Biden, no doubt taking into consideration global energy market turmoil and the importance of not ceding geoeconomic space to US adversaries, may simply be waiting to play the oil sector pressure card.

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The 2022 US Treasury General License 41 for Chevron served as a kick-starter for agreements signed by Maduro and the opposition Unitary Platform during Norwegian-mediated talks. Now, the Biden administration, amid bipartisan exhortations from Congress to cut oil commerce with Maduro, may well consider the withdrawal of the license as leverage to bring Maduro back to the table before January. Though the incentives for Maduro to negotiate are weaker today than they were in 2022, this strategy is worth pursuing, as it would show the Biden administration's commitment to a calibration, not castigation, approach to economic pressure.

Together, senior officials' statements and the associated policy measures beg two questions: will the United States commit to preventing Maduro from being sworn in and what mix of carrots and sticks could strengthen a final push to sustain collective pressure on Maduro? Arguing that pursuing an effort to prevent Maduro from starting a new presidential period is the best US policy option, this paper outlines the larger geopolitical context in which such a push can be made and assesses the pressure calibration options to leverage international support for González.

Domestic & International Consensus

Regardless of what goal collective pressure ultimately pursues, the Biden administration can and must continue to champion the cause of Venezuelan democracy. That necessary call to action can continue to be executed in a bipartisan fashion. Indeed, there is bipartisan agreement about the key facts. First, in the months leading up to the 2024 presidential election, María Corina Machado–the landslide winner of the 2023 opposition primaries and undisputed favorite to win the July election–was unfairly denied her right to register as a candidate. Second, on July 28, González, Machado's replacement, won the election in a landslide victory over Maduro. Third, with Maduro's crackdown weakening the opposition's mobilization capacity, international pressure on Maduro is required to advance a democratic transition, a point EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell underlined, noting, "the solution to the Venezuela crisis must be political; it must be generated by international pressure."

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Fortunately, in Latin America, a strong consensus, spanning left and right, backs the idea of pressuring Maduro to respect the will of the people. In their own tones, but in general moral consonance with Biden and Borrell, left-wing Presidents Luis Ignacio Lula da Silva of Brazil, Gustavo Petro of Colombia, and Gabriel Boric of Chile have expressed criticism of Maduro's fraud. That position has been strongly adopted by conservative leaders, including Javier Milei of Argentina.

To translate this consensus into diplomatic action, members of the Group of 7 issued a call for the "international community to keep Venezuela high on the diplomatic agenda and they expressed their support for efforts by regional partners to facilitate the Venezuelan-led democratic and peaceful transition that the people of Venezuela have clearly chosen in the polls." The United States and Argentina coordinated a joint statement, signed by 50 governments and the European Union and Organization of American States, strongly condemning Maduro for not permitting a transparent vote count, while holding him responsible for post-election repression. Beyond censuring

Maduro, the statement proposed "constructive and inclusive discussions on a transition with guarantees for both sides to resolve the country's political impasse and restore democratic institutions peacefully in accordance with Venezuelan law, as well as the will of the people as expressed through their votes on July 28."

Stepping Up Global Engagement

While the degree of agreement between the United States, the Latin American left, and the EU on the Venezuela crisis is arguably higher than ever before, it is also true that the global consensus about a transition roadmap is hardly universal. Following the announcement of the official vote results, Maduro's traditional extra-hemispheric allies China, Russia, and Turkey issued pro-status quo statements. Notably, in the case of Turkey, comments from President Tayyip Erdoğan were less than effusive, expressing his wish that the election generate "auspicious results" via a "dialogue process in Venezuela," and not congratulating Maduro in a post-election call. By contrast, immediately following the election, China and Russia sent strong messages of support to Maduro.

Though the United States is not likely to persuade these traditional Maduro supporters to become more critical of his regime, Biden administration senior officials ought to champion the cause of Venezuela's democracy in their global engagements with China, Russia, and Turkey. Analogous to the way Machado and González have argued that a democratic outcome can reset relations with Venezuela's creditors, by establishing a debt restructuring process within a democratic rule of law framework, and all of its diplomatic partners, Washington could also frame the post-election impasse as an opportunity to press Maduro's traditional supporters to reconsider their incentives. To do so, the United States would have to advertise an economic upside for Maduro's diplomatic partners, some of whom are also sovereign and commercial creditors. This would mean conveying to these governments they would have the right to compete for economic opportunities in a democratic Venezuela, rather than promoting a democratic transition as a twofer that would undermine US adversaries in both Caracas and in Moscow and Beijing.

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Even if those governments reject outreach from Washington and recommit support for Maduro, the United States would benefit from giving the crisis such high-level salience. By signaling it is strategically committed to finding a solution in Venezuela, the United States would convey its commitment to regional leadership. A failure to reach a negotiated democratic transition before January would not dent the credibility of US leadership. After all, expectations for such an outcome are low, while regional and global interest in Washington owning a large portion of the problem is high. Moreover, as indicated by Venezuela's failed bid to join the BRICS this year, by investing political capital on Venezuela in its regional and global engagements, the Biden adminitsration can maintain a degree of influence over Maduro's efforts to find new financial lifelines.

New Calls to Action

In parallel with those global engagements, the Biden administration can capitalize on recent revelations regarding hard copy versions of tally sheets showing González won, as well as EU interest in seeing Maduro leave office, to construct a collective strategy for preventing Maduro's swearing in. Establishing greater clarity that preventing Maduro's third term is what efforts to strengthen collective pressure are all about is a crucial first step. Otherwise, the coherence of policy efforts will be low, creating confusion about how diplomatic partners can meaningfully contribute and potentially leading to a situation in which diplomatic partners that were once aligned send inconsistent signals to Caracas.

It may not be necessary for the United States to create a formal coordinating bloc, such as a reboot of the Lima Group. Rather, what would make a difference is if the United States and EU can a) expand the number of countries that jointly make a new call for the immediate end to repression and national-level talks on a democratic transition with guarantees for both sides, beyond the 50 that signed the September statement, and b) regularly

convene the group to sustain the diplomatic pressure via new statements. Moreover, it would help if new statements were accompanied not only by new US sanctions on individual Maduro-aligned officials, but also by subtle diplomatic gestures that hint at the legitimacy losses Maduro would experience if he tried to be sworn in again. The key would be timing the release of such statements at critical moments in the run-up to January.

Following the strengthening of an international consensus, the United States, on its own and after its Nov. 5 presidential election, should, as it has done before on its own and with support from Qatar, consider opening a private channel to Maduro representatives to convey what economic pressure it will leverage to restart negotiations. That package of pressure should include winding down existing general and private licenses for US oil companies, measures that, if enacted, would generate secondary de-risking effects on multinational companies that use the US jurisdiction to conduct ordinary business.

Guarantees would also have to be tabled for Maduro and the upper echelon of the regime, as the September joint statement indicated. The United States should use such discussions to determine if that package is enough to pressure Maduro into exit negotiations. Otherwise, it should be open to upping its offer of guarantees and other inducements and, for credibility's sake, also be prepared to implement measures that ratchet up pressure.

It is of course important to stay grounded in the authoritarian resilience reality. The Maduro regime may not be enthusiastic about losing some of the international standing it regained via two years of Norwegian-mediated negotiations with the opposition and a new style of economic management. But holding power despite the costs is probably what Maduro deems his best alternative to negotiating an exit.

In short, preventing Maduro from being sworn in is a highly ambitious goal and even if the Biden administration successfully executes its strategy, Maduro may hold. This is why it is crucial to explain why calls to action by the United States and its diplomatic partners have intrinsic legitimacy. Even if a preventative strategy does not translate into the desired outcome, it will have been in the US interest to capitalize on this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity of

harnessing a strong international consensus about the need to help Venezuelans realize their goal of voting Maduro out of power. Moreover, Biden's Venezuela efforts may have salutary effects on the overall credibility of US policy efforts to defend democracy worldwide.

Policy Clarity Over Strategic Ambiguity

The counterargument, that strategic ambiguity is in Washington's interest, is not unreasonable. On the one hand, the US election creates uncertainty about the future of its Venezuela policy. On the other hand, leaving options open allows policymakers to rapidly adapt to a fluid situation.

However, now is not the moment for strategic ambiguity. The results of the July 28 election demand an international response commensurate with the Venezuelan people's strong expression of a desire for change. It is not simply moral satisfaction that can be gained from Biden administration officials stating that a coalition has been assembled to prevent Maduro's swearing in. Making that objective explicit would establish the strategic framework for individual countries' plans, as governments prepare their plans for January 10. Moreover, not trying to prevent a third term would inadvertently send the signal that the United States does not want to deal with the problem, even as the Venezuelan regimes becomes more aggressive and authoritarian.

Finally, changes could be made to a preventative policy strategy. The pursuit of a preventative plan would not be mutually exclusive from the alternatives of denying Maduro legitimacy and working to restrict his ability to consolidate power. In fact, if Maduro is sworn in, these alternative objectives would be logical outgrowths of a preventative strategy.

Michael McCarthy is the founder and CEO of Caracas Wire and Ceibo Growth Strategies. Since 2016, he has lectured at George Washington University's Elliott School of International Affairs on US foreign policy and Latin America. McCarthy lived in Caracas from 2008 to 2010, conducting research as a Fulbright and Inter-American Foundation Fellow. He has consulted for Freedom House, the Carter Center, and the Wilson Center. He earned his PhD and Master's in political science from Johns Hopkins University and his Bachelor's in history and political science from Bates College.

Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars
Latin America Program
One Woodrow Wilson Plaza
1300 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20004-3027

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