

# Radical Leftist Latin American Regimes in Joe Biden's Foreign Policy

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**Abstract**—This article is devoted to the attempts of the administration of Joe Biden to normalize relations with radical leftist regimes (Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua). At the same time, the negotiation process is complicated by bureaucratic and ideological difficulties. The purpose of this study is to identify key obstacles to improving interactions between Washington and the antagonist countries. The main trends in the foreign policy of the United States in the region, as well as the behavior of the governments of Latin American countries, will be analyzed. The results of this investigation will contribute to a better understanding of inter-American relations and will determine the trajectory of the transformation of the White House's course in the Western Hemisphere.

**Keywords:** United States, Venezuela, Cuba, Nicaragua, sanctions, international relations, Joe Biden, leftist regimes

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## INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences, as well as the shift of the political pendulum in Latin America to the left, have significantly changed the context of inter-American relations. This was fully reflected in the interaction of the United States with antagonist countries in the Western Hemisphere—Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua. Against the backdrop of the socio-economic problems of these states, signs of their interest in resolving contradictions with Washington have appeared.

In particular, Cuba is in dire need of financial assistance and investment after a significant reduction in oil supplies from Venezuela.<sup>1</sup> Cooperation with the United States could offset the decline in these revenues. Difficult negotiations are underway between the countries, in which Washington has managed to make a number of conciliatory gestures. There has been an easing of the restrictions imposed under President Donald Trump. First of all, they concerned the implementation of money transfers and

business trips to the island.<sup>2</sup> A demonstrative step on the part of the White House was the allocation of \$2 million to Havana to deal with the consequences of a natural disaster—Hurricane Ian.<sup>3</sup>

The government of Cuban leader Miguel Diaz-Canel, in turn, has sought not to provoke Washington, but to reduce the degree of anti-American rhetoric. Nevertheless, Havana has urged the administration of J. Biden to cancel the remaining restrictions.<sup>4</sup>

For Venezuela, rapprochement with the United States is a step towards getting out of the severe economic and political crisis in which the country has been existing since 2013. Caracas needs financial assistance from Washington to restore oil production (in October 2022, its level fell to 534 000 barrels

<sup>2</sup> Biden Administration Measures to Support the Cuban People, May 16, 2022. <https://www.state.gov/biden-administration-measures-to-support-the-cuban-people/n3924796>. Cited November 19, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> “EE. uu. ayudará a Cuba con dos millones de dólares tras huracán Ian,” November 19, 2022. <https://www.dw.com/es/ee-uu-ayudar%C3%A1-a-cuba-con-dos-millones-de-d%C3%B3lares-tras-hurac%C3%A1n-ian/a-63484558#:~:text=La%20Casa%20Blanca%20anunci%C3%B3%20este,que%20La%20Habana%20ha%20agradecido>. Cited November 2, 2022.

<sup>4</sup> “Cuba pide a Biden levantar sanciones de EE. uu. que sean de su facultad,” October 19, 2022. <https://www.france24.com/es/minuto-a-minuto/20221019-cuba-pide-a-biden-levantar-sanciones-de-eeuu-que-sean-de-su-facultad>. Cited November 9, 2022.

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<sup>1</sup> “Venezuela reduce un 40% el envío de barriles de petróleo a Cuba,” August 7, 2016. <http://www.diariolasamericas.com/venezuela-reduce-un-40-elenviobarriles-petroleo-cuba-n3924796>. Cited December 10, 2022.

per day,<sup>5</sup> while in 2013 this figure was 2.9 million<sup>6</sup>), as well as calming of relations with the opposition.

Since March 2022, negotiations have been underway between Washington and Caracas to resume energy supplies.<sup>7</sup> For example, Chevron (*Chevron*) received permission to extract oil in the Bolivarian Republic.<sup>8</sup> The parties also made a number of friendly steps. The American justice system released the nephews of the wife of Nicolas Maduro, who were detained on charges of drug smuggling. A conciliatory measure was the release of seven US citizens from prison in Venezuela.<sup>9</sup> These consultations also meant a de facto recognition by the White House of the political reality in which the Chavista government controls the decision-making process in the country.

Restoring good relations with Washington is of particular importance to the Nicaraguan government. Its economic well-being is largely based on interaction with American financial institutions,<sup>10</sup> and between the countries there is a free trade agreement. For a long time, they also managed to maintain constructive political contacts. Thus, in the Latin American state, the US Agency for International Development functioned (*United States Agency for International Development, USAID*) and the National Endowment for Democracy (*National Endowment for Democracy, NED*).

The disagreement between Managua and Washington came against the backdrop of the 2021 presidential election. The winner, the long-term president of this Latin American country, Daniel Ortega, was accused of putting pressure on political opponents,<sup>11</sup> while the White House expressed readiness to reduce the inten-

sity of economic interaction.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, there was information in the press that the Nicaraguan side was probing the soil with a view to improving relations with the United States.<sup>13</sup>

In turn, the readiness of the administration of J. Biden to build constructive relations with the radical leftist regimes of Latin America is explained by Washington's desire to strengthen its position in the region, as well as to deprive the major subjects of world politics (Russia and China) of a springboard for penetrating into its near abroad. However, despite the mutual interest in normalization, the process of resolving contradictions includes many difficulties and problems. These countries continue to use confrontational rhetoric.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, the purpose of this article is to identify the specifics of the negotiation process between the parties. Understanding the main trends in interaction between Washington and radical leftist regimes will make it possible to understand better the present-day inter-American relations, as well as to determine the features of the transformation of the White House policy in the Western Hemisphere under President Biden.

## OUTLINES OF US POLICY IN THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE

The specifics of US relations with radical left regimes cannot be understood outside the context of Washington's foreign policy in the Western Hemisphere. It is defined by two guides that complement each other. First of all, we are talking about the constancy of tasks in the region, the most important of which is the displacement of major subjects of world politics from it. To this end, the White House pays special attention to the antagonist countries (Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua), which could become a springboard for the penetration of China, Russia, Iran, and Turkey into Latin America.

This concern is largely about the implementation of the principles of the Monroe Doctrine. Despite the fact that high-ranking politicians in the United States have repeatedly declared their readiness to abandon it,<sup>15</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Parraga, M., and Guanipa, M., "Venezuela's October oil exports tumble on weaker production," *Reuters*, November 2, 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/venezuelas-october-oil-exports-tumble-weaker-production-2022-11-02/>. Cited November 9, 2022.

<sup>6</sup> "Vladimir's Venezuela." Reuters Graphics, August 11, 2017. <http://fingfx.thomsonreuters.com/gfx/rngs/VENEZUELA-RUS-SIA-OIL/010050DS0W3/index.html>. Cited November 9, 2022.

<sup>7</sup> Spetalnick, M., "US officials travel to Venezuela, a Russian ally, for talks—source," *Reuters*, March 6, 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/us-officials-travel-venezuela-russian-ally-talks-source-2022-03-06/>. Cited November 11, 2022.

<sup>8</sup> Fossum, S., "US provides Chevron limited authorization to pump oil in Venezuela after reaching a humanitarian agreement," November 26, 2022. <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/11/26/politics/us-chevron-venezuela-oil-agreement/index.html>. Cited November 29, 2022.

<sup>9</sup> Venezuela frees seven Americans as part of the largest prisoner swap under Biden. October 1, 2022. <https://www.npr.org/2022/10/01/1126410228/america-venezuela-biden-maduro-prisoner-swap>. Accessed November 21, 2022.

<sup>10</sup> Nikolaeva, L.B., Morozov, D.V., and Kalashnikov, N.V., Nicaragua: Elections in Crisis, *Latin America*, 2021, no. 8, pp. 22–37. DOI: 10.31857/S0044748X0015377-3.

<sup>11</sup> "EE.UU. critica "control total" de Daniel Ortega sobre Nicaragua," April 13, 2022. <https://www.dw.com/es/eeuu-critica-control-total-de-daniel-ortega-sobre-nicaragua/a-61457529>. Cited November 3, 2022.

<sup>12</sup> Psaledakis, D., and Spetalnick, M., "US vows to review trade cooperation with Nicaragua if elections unfair," *Reuters*, June 10, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/us-vows-review-trade-cooperation-with-nicaragua-if-elections-unfair-2021-06-10/>. Cited October 21, 2022.

<sup>13</sup> Spetalnick, M., "Nicaragua quietly seeks to re-engage with US—sources," *Reuters*, May 6, 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/nicaragua-quietly-seeks-re-engage-with-us-sources-2022-05-05/>. Cited October 24, 2022.

<sup>14</sup> Andreev, A.S., and Rosental, D.M., Left regionalism in Latin America: Traditions and modernity, *Politbook*, 2021, no. 1, pp. 25–47.

<sup>15</sup> Johnson, K., "Kerry Makes It Official: 'Era of Monroe Doctrine Is Over'," *Wall Street Journal*, November 18, 2013. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/BL-WB-41869>. Cited November 2, 2021.

practice testifies to the reverse process. Since the administration of Barack Obama, the White House has methodically regained its positions in the region lost under President George W. Bush.<sup>16</sup> Under Donald Trump, the relevance of the 1823 document was raised with renewed vigor. Among those who advocated a return to his principles were then–Secretary of State Rex Tillerson<sup>17</sup> and US national security adviser John Bolton.<sup>18</sup>

The second guideline is determined by the internal political situation. The geographical proximity of Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua to the United States sharpens the perception of their social processes in American society. Under these conditions, the White House's approach to the region depends on the balance of power in Congress, the mood of citizens, and economic well-being in the country.

Thus, the normalization of relations with Havana under Barack Obama began when 60% of Americans supported this idea in the United States.<sup>19</sup> During the same period, attempts were made to improve relations with Caracas. Programs of economic and political cooperation were initiated in the Western Hemisphere. In turn, with D. Trump, the White House put pressure on the radical left regimes, trying to get the support of the “hawks” in the establishment and the influential Cuban diaspora (among its representatives is the well-known senator Marco Rubio and member of the House of Representatives Mario Diaz-Balart). In addition, pressure on Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua allowed the Republicans to secure the votes of a large part of the Hispanic electorate, including in the swing state of Florida.<sup>20</sup>

US foreign policy is largely inert. The principles that guided one president are often passed on (albeit in a slightly modified form) to the team of the next head of state. At the same time, a number of state and non-state players influence the formation of its course. This complex system of interaction in the development of decisions determines the continuity of the

approaches of different administrations. It has been fully manifested under J. Biden.

### FEATURES OF THE APPROACH OF JOSEPH BIDEN

The accession to power in the United States of a candidate from the Democratic Party was generally positively received in Latin America.<sup>21</sup> The prospects for Washington's return to the course of B. Obama have clearly emerged. This development of events did not rule out reaching a compromise with the radical leftist regimes in the region.

The reality turned out to be more complicated than optimistic expectations. The team of J. Biden has faced a number of political, legal, and ideological obstacles that complicate the normalization of relations with Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua. Republicans retained substantial representation in Congress, and in the 2022 midterm elections they won a majority in the House of Representatives, which allowed them to exert significant influence on the politics of the White House.

Under these conditions, the president had to take into account the mood of the Republicans and often adopt their rhetoric. In particular, he criticized the government of N. Maduro and recognized Juan Guaido as interim president of Venezuela.<sup>22</sup> This action did not equate with the logic of the political process in the Bolivarian Republic; the oppositionist lost legal grounds to claim the post of head of state after refusing to take part in the 2020 parliamentary elections. There has been a significant drop in his popularity.<sup>23</sup> Apparently, the White House's decision was made to please the US domestic audience and was part of a deal with the “hawks” in the establishment.

Sharp rhetoric towards the government of N. Maduro was passed on to top officials in Washington. Thus, US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, known for his moderate approach to left-wing radical regimes, was also forced to take an uncompromising position against the government of Venezuela when he was approved in Congress.<sup>24</sup>

An obstacle to establishing a dialogue is the great attention that the administration of J. Biden has

<sup>16</sup>Kheifets, V.L., and Kheifets, L.S., Latin American strategy of the USA at the present stage, *Actual Problems of Economics and Management*, 2014, no. 4, pp. 150–160.

<sup>17</sup>Friedman, M.P., Rex Tillerson en Texas, el retorno de la Doctrina Monroe. <https://www.nodal.am/2018/02/rex-tillerson-texas-retorno-la-doctrina-monroe-max-paul-friedman/>. Cited October 31, 2022.

<sup>18</sup>“John Bolton and the Monroe Doctrine,” *Economist*, May 9, 2019. <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2019/05/09/john-bolton-and-the-monroe-doctrine>. Cited November 1, 2022.

<sup>19</sup>Sudarev, V.P., Opportunities and limits of US hegemony in Latin America, *Latin America*, 2019, no. 11, pp. 6–14. DOI: 10.31857/S0044748X0006894-2.

<sup>20</sup>Kodzoev, M.A.-M., and Kalashnikov, N.V., Cuba–USA: Zigzag of normalization of relations, *Latin America*, 2018, no. 7, pp. 5–19. DOI: 10.31857/S0044748X0000020-1.

<sup>21</sup>Kodzoev, M.A.-M., The Latin American policy of the administration of J. Biden: First steps, *USA & Canada: Economy, politics, culture*, 2021, no. 7, pp. 63–69. DOI: 10.31857/S268667300015574-1.

<sup>22</sup>“Biden reconoce a Guaidó como presidente interino de Venezuela,” January 20, 2021. <https://www.lavanguardia.com/internacional/20210120/6185730/eeuu-venezuela-biden-blinken-trump-guaido-maduro-chavismo.html>. Cited November 1, 2022.

<sup>23</sup>“Delphos. Estudio nacional, mayo 2022,” April 7, 2022. <https://caigaquiencaiga.net/encuesta-delphos-2022-sobre-la-coyuntura-politica-venezolana-que-no-quieren-que-tu-conozcas-veala-aqui/>. Cited October 21, 2022.

devoted to the observance of democratic norms in the region. The discrepancy in their assessments with the leadership of Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua led to Washington's decision not to invite representatives of left-wing radical regimes to the Summit of the Americas, held in June 2022 in Los Angeles.<sup>25</sup> This gesture, which complicated the negotiation process, was also addressed to an internal audience and did not reflect the position of the White House.

An important factor determining the relationship between the United States and radical left governments is *the image of the enemy*, which is used to mobilize the electorate and increase public support. This technique is practiced by both the American establishment (authority and opposition) and Havana, Caracas, and Managua. The attempts of the administration of J. Biden to achieve normalization of relations were criticized by the influential Senator Marco Rubio.<sup>26</sup> Support for Democrats has also fallen among Latin Americans living in Florida (a state with a large Cuban diaspora).<sup>27</sup>

The radical left regimes themselves traditionally play the anti-American card. This tool is used not only by the authorities of Venezuela and Nicaragua, who are faced with pressure from the opposition. The government of Cuba, where the stability of the regime is quite high, also accuses the United States of trying to destabilize the country. Thus, in 2021, Havana announced Washington's involvement in

mass protests and riots in the largest cities of the island.<sup>28</sup>

Finally, the most important reason for the still stalled negotiations is *the lack of trust of the parties*. Stopping the influence of left-wing radical regimes in Latin America remains an important task for Washington. Under these conditions, the authorities of Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua are forced to fear renewed pressure from the United States. The possible return of the Republicans to the White House will make this scenario more likely. Thus, security guarantees from the US authorities are of particular importance.

## CONCLUSIONS

Negotiations between Washington and the radical left regimes are taking place in conditions of distrust of the parties, internal instability in Latin American countries, and mutual unwillingness to converge positions. The political costs may become an insurmountable obstacle to the restoration of normal relations. Ideological contradictions make climate warming solutions even less likely.

Under these conditions, it should be possible to allow the achievement of tactical agreements between the parties. They would allow all participants in the negotiation process to solve short-term problems. Nevertheless, differences in values and a change in political cycles (the likely coming to power in the US of representatives of the Republican Party) do not allow us to hope for a long-term and qualitative improvement in relations.

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<sup>24</sup>"3 cambios que el gobierno de Joe Biden ya introdujo en las relaciones de EE.UU. con América Latina," *BBC*, February 15, 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-56050026>. Cited November 4, 2022.

<sup>25</sup>"US Excludes Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua from Regional Summit," *Bloomberg*, May 6, 2022. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-06-06/us-excludes-cuba-venezuela-nicaragua-from-regional-summit>. Cited November 4, 2022.

<sup>26</sup>"Marco Rubio critica diálogo entre Biden y el chavismo," April 7, 2022. <https://www.diariolasamericas.com/eeuu/marco-rubio-critica-dialogo-biden-y-el-chavismo>. Cited November 5, 2022.

<sup>27</sup>"Biden makes changes to Cuba and Venezuela policy: What impact could it have on the Florida vote?" June 1, 2022. <https://www.univision.com/univision-news/latin-america/biden-democrats-florida-cuba-venezuela-policy-elections>. Cited October 6, 2022.

<sup>28</sup>Lissardy, G., "Estados Unidos no va a levantar el embargo sin que Cuba ceda o venga a la mesa a negociar en buena fe," *BBC*, June 13, 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-57815541>. Cited December 11, 2022.