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Latin America and the Caribbean: U.S. Policy and Key Issues in the 117th Congress

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SUMMARY

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Mark P. Sullivan, Coordinator
Specialist in Latin American Affairs

June S. Beittel
Analyst in Latin American Affairs

Peter J. Meyer
Specialist in Latin American and Canadian Affairs

Clare Ribando Seelke
Specialist in Latin American Affairs

Maureen Taft-Morales
Specialist in Latin American Affairs

M. Angeles Villarreal
Specialist in International Trade and Finance

Carla Y. Davis-Castro
Research Librarian

Latin America and the Caribbean: U.S. Policy and Key Issues in the 117th Congress

The United States maintains strong linkages with neighboring Latin America and the Caribbean based on geographic proximity and diverse U.S. interests, including economic, political, and security concerns. The United States is a major trading partner and source of foreign investment for many of the 33 countries in the region, with free-trade agreements enhancing economic linkages with 11 countries. The region is a large source of U.S. immigration, both authorized and irregular; major factors driving migration include proximity and economic and security conditions. Curbing the flow of illicit drugs has been a long-standing component of relations with the region, involving close cooperation with Mexico, Colombia, and countries throughout Central America and the Caribbean. U.S. Administrations have long supported democracy and human rights in the region, with a current focus on authoritarian governments in Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, as well as democratic backsliding and corruption in other countries. In the past two years, support to help the region respond to the public health and economic impacts of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has become as a major U.S. policy component.

The Biden Administration focused extensively on addressing the root causes of Central American migration during its initial months but has since fleshed out its broader approach toward Latin America and the Caribbean. The Administration's other priorities include efforts to promote public health and economic recovery from the pandemic; to work with partners to promote inclusive democracy throughout the region; to provide support to address Haiti's difficult humanitarian, security, and political challenges; and to engage more broadly with the region to address migration challenges. To advance those and other initiatives, the Administration requested nearly $2.1 billion in foreign aid for Latin America and the Caribbean in FY2022, nearly 16% higher than estimated FY2021 appropriations. The Administration also is providing significant supplemental pandemic-related assistance to the region, including, as of late January 2022, the donation of over 60 million vaccine doses. The upcoming ninth Summit of the Americas, scheduled to be hosted by the United States on June 6-10, 2022, in Los Angeles, CA, provides a significant opportunity to deepen U.S. diplomatic engagement with hemispheric leaders.

117th Congress Action. Congress traditionally has played an active role in U.S. policy toward Latin America and the Caribbean through legislation and oversight. In March 2021, Congress appropriated $10.8 billion (P.L. 117-2, American Rescue Plan Act of 2021) to respond to COVID-19 worldwide, including in Latin America and the Caribbean. In November 2021, Congress approved the RENACER Act (P.L. 117-54), which directs the use of diplomatic tools and targeted sanctions against antidemocratic actions and corruption in Nicaragua. In December 2021, Congress approved the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2022 (P.L. 117-81), which includes provisions on Colombia, Central America, and China's presence and influence in the region. Both houses approved several resolutions on the region, including H.Res. 760, S.Res. 37, S.Res. 81, S.Res. 310, and S.Res. 489 on the human rights situation in Cuba; S.Res. 22 on Ecuador; and S.Res. 120 on the forthcoming Summit of the Americas.

In pending legislation, Congress has not completed an FY2022 foreign aid appropriations bill. The House approved its version, H.R. 4373 (H.Rept. 117-84), in July 2021, and the Senate Appropriations Committee introduced its version, S. 3075, in October 2021. The House bill would provide assistance to several key countries and programs in the region at levels matching or exceeding the Administration's budget request, including assistance to Central America, Colombia, Mexico, and regional assistance to the Caribbean; the Senate committee version would provide slightly more assistance than requested for Colombia and the Caribbean and less than requested for Central America. Both houses have approved broad bills aimed at positioning the United States to better compete with China; these bills include numerous provisions on Latin America and the Caribbean. S. 1260, passed by the Senate in June 2021, and H.R. 4521, passed by the House on February 4, 2022, would require the Administration to develop strategies to increase exports of U.S. goods and services to the region and to strengthen U.S. economic competitiveness and promote good governance, human rights, and the rule of law in the region. On Haiti, the House passed H.R. 2471 in June 2021, which would promote the sustainable rebuilding and development of the country and

would prioritize U.S. support for anti-corruption efforts and human rights; the Senate passed an amended version in January 2022. To date, 28 congressional hearings have focused on U.S. policy challenges in the region (see **Appendix**).

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Regional Political and Economic Environment

The Latin American and Caribbean region consists of 33 countries, ranging from the Caribbean nation of St. Kitts and Nevis, one of the world's smallest states, to the South American nation of Brazil, the world's fifth-largest country. (See **Figure 1** and **Table A-1** for a map and basic facts on the region's independent countries.) Over the past four decades, the region has made significant advances in political and economic development. Notable political and economic challenges remain, however, and some countries have experienced major setbacks.

Figure 1. Map of Latin America and the Caribbean

Source: Congressional Research Service (CRS) Graphics.

Notes: Caribbean countries are in purple, Central American countries are in gold, and South American countries are in green. Geographically, Belize is located in Central America and Guyana and Suriname are located on the northern coast of South America, but all three are members of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM).

Since its beginning in 2020, the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has had widespread public health, economic, social, and political effects throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) reports that, because of the pandemic, the region registered an economic contraction of 6.9% in 2020, with almost every country in recession. As a result, poverty and inequality have increased. Although regional economic growth returned in 2021, many countries may struggle with protracted economic recoveries, given that they rely on global investment, trade, and tourism, all of which have been affected by the pandemic (see "Economic Situation," below). The economic setback associated with the COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to a resurgence of social unrest in some countries similar to that experienced in 2019. Human rights groups also have expressed concerns about some leaders in the region taking advantage of the pandemic to advance their own agendas and limit civil liberties for political gain (see "Political Situation," below).

COVID-19 in Latin America and the Caribbean[1]

As of February 6, 2022, Latin America and the Caribbean had almost 60.2 million confirmed COVID-19 cases and more than 1.6 million COVID-19 deaths (almost 28% of deaths worldwide), according to data from Johns Hopkins University, despite the region accounting for only about 8.4% of the world's population. Brazil, Mexico, Peru, Colombia, and Argentina had the highest numbers of COVID-19 deaths in the region; Brazil had the second-highest COVID-19 death toll globally, after the United States. The regional rankings change when examining mortality (death) rates per 100,000 population; using this metric, Peru had the highest recorded COVID-19 mortality rate in the region (and globally), followed by Brazil, Argentina, Colombia, Paraguay, and Mexico. Some Caribbean countries that have had fewer deaths compared with other countries in the region have had high mortality rates (see **Table 1**).[2] Experts have expressed concerns that some countries could be significantly undercounting deaths for various reasons, including Mexico, where COVID-19 deaths could be more than double those reported.[3]

On February 2, 2022, during its weekly press briefing on the pandemic, the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), which serves as regional office for the Americas of the World Health Organization, reported that new COVID-19 cases were surging across Central and South America. As the Omicron variant spread throughout Latin America and the Caribbean, PAHO reported that deaths increased for the fourth consecutive week, with deaths more than doubling in several Caribbean countries.[4]

Since the pandemic first surged in the region in 2020, PAHO Director Dr. Carissa Etienne has repeatedly expressed concern about the poor and other vulnerable groups at greatest risk. These groups included those living in the Amazon Basin, particularly Indigenous communities; women, who make up 70% of the health workforce in the Americas; people of African descent; migrants

[1] For further information, see CRS In Focus IF11581, *Latin America and the Caribbean: Impact of COVID-19*, by Mark P. Sullivan and Peter J. Meyer.

[2] Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, Coronavirus Resource Center, "Mortality Analyses," February 6, 2022, at https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/data/mortality (hereinafter, Johns Hopkins, "Mortality Analyses," February 6, 2022). Data presented by Johns Hopkins reflect COVID-19 cases and deaths as reported by countries worldwide.

[3] "Tracking COVID-19 Excess Deaths Across Countries," *Economist*, February 3, 2022; "Omicron Comes to Mexico, a Place That Never Really Shut Down," *Economist*, January 22, 2022.

[4] Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), "Weekly Press Briefing on COVID-19, Director's Opening Remarks," February 2, 2022. For the most current PAHO weekly press briefing on COVID-19, see https://www.paho.org/en/media/weekly-press-briefing-covid-19-situation-americas.

in temporary settlements; and prisoners in crowded jails.[5] The PAHO director maintains that the virus has deepened inequities that have long divided the region and exposed vulnerabilities in the region's health, economic, and social sectors.[6]

Vaccination Progress. The rollout of vaccines in Latin America and the Caribbean has varied considerably. According to PAHO, 63% of the population of Latin America and the Caribbean was fully vaccinated as of February 2, 2022. At the same time, PAHO's director noted that despite such progress, vaccination remains uneven in the region, with more than one in four people across the Americas having yet to receive a single dose.[7]

As of February 6, 2022, according to data from Johns Hopkins University, Chile, Cuba, Argentina, Uruguay, Ecuador, Costa Rica, Brazil, and Peru were leaders in the region, with 70%-89% of their populations fully vaccinated. In contrast, seven countries in the region had less than 40% of their populations fully vaccinated. The countries with the lowest vaccination rates were Haiti (less than 1%), Jamaica (21%), St. Vincent and the Grenadines (25%), and St. Lucia (28%) (see **Table 1**).[8]

PAHO has helped countries prepare for vaccine rollout and has facilitated access to vaccines through the COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX) Facility, a mechanism developed by global health organizations to facilitate equitable distribution of COVID-19 vaccines; 22 countries in the region have signed agreements to access vaccines through the facility. In addition, 10 countries in the region—Bolivia, Dominica, El Salvador, Grenada, Guyana, Haiti, Honduras, Nicaragua, St. Lucia, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines—benefit from the COVID-19 Vaccines Advance Market Commitment (COVAX AMC) launched by Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, to provide donor-funded vaccines for low- and middle-income economies.[9]

Latin American and Caribbean countries have been acquiring COVID-19 vaccines from various sources. As of early February 2022, PAHO reported that over 100 million doses had been delivered or were in transit to the region through COVAX, with almost 28 million provided through country donations, including from the United States, Spain, Canada, France, Germany, Japan, Sweden, Norway, and Denmark.[10] Many countries in the region also have signed commercial agreements with pharmaceutical companies. Both China and Russia have sold, and in some cases donated, COVID-19 vaccines to countries throughout the region. Before infections began to surge in India in March 2021, the Indian government donated thousands of doses to Caribbean countries. The United States significantly ramped up its donation of vaccines to the region beginning in June 2021 (see "Biden Administration Policy," below).[11]

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[5] PAHO, "PAHO Director Calls to Protect Vulnerable Groups from Effects of COVID-19 Pandemic," press release, May 19, 2020; PAHO, "PAHO Calls on Countries to Intensify Efforts to Prevent Further Spread of COVID-19 Among Indigenous Peoples in the Americas," press release, July 20, 2020; and PAHO, "Countries Urged to Face Challenge of Better Access to Health for Populations of African Descent in COVID-19 Pandemic," press release, December 2, 2020.

[6] PAHO, "Weekly Press Briefing on COVID-19, Director's Remarks," April 7, 2021; and PAHO, "Annual Report of the Director of the Pan American Sanitary Bureau, 2020, Director's Remarks," July 21, 2021.

[7] PAHO, "Weekly Press Briefing on COVID-19, Director's Opening Remarks," February 2, 2022.

[8] Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, Coronavirus Resource Center, "Vaccination Progress Across the World," February 6, 2022, at https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/vaccines/international (hereinafter, Johns Hopkins, "Vaccination Progress Across the World," February 6, 2022).

[9] The COVAX Facility, "Committee Agreements; Confirmations of Intent to Participate, and AMC-Eligible Countries," December 15, 2020.

[10] PAHO, "Tracker COVAX Initiative—COVID-19 Deliveries in the Region," February 6, 2022.

[11] U.S. Department of State, "COVID-19 Vaccine Donations, Western Hemisphere," accessed September 1, 2021, at https://www.state.gov/covid-19-recovery/vaccine-deliveries/#wha.

Table 1. COVID-19 Deaths, Mortality Rates, and Vaccinations in Latin America and the Caribbean (as of February 6, 2022)

Country	Deaths	Deaths per 100,000	Population Fully Vaccinated (%)
Brazil	632,095	299.50	71.44
Mexico	309,417	242.54	60.73
Peru	206,891	636.38	70.61
Colombia	135,518	269.21	63.72
Argentina	122,584	272.78	78.04
Chile	39,930	210.69	89.65
Ecuador	34,533	198.77	76.73
Bolivia	21,129	183.52	46.34
Paraguay	17,558	249.24	44.26
Guatemala	16,495	99.34	32.26
Honduras	10,512	107.86	44.96
Cuba	8,431	74.39	86.85
Panama	7,813	183.99	59.09
Costa Rica	7,641	151.38	72.84
Uruguay	6,625	191.38	77.84
Venezuela	5,481	19.22	47.94
Dominican Republic	4,322	40.25	54.17
El Salvador	3,933	60.94	65.19
Trinidad and Tobago	3,454	247.60	49.79
Jamaica	2,691	91.27	21.31
Suriname	1,279	220.00	40.12
Guyana	1,180	150.75	40.24
Haiti	804	7.14	0.71
Bahamas	749	192.31	38.90
Belize	629	161.14	52.06
Saint Lucia	341	186.55	28.04
Barbados	286	99.64	51.18
Nicaragua	221	3.38	55.03
Grenada	211	188.39	32.84
Antigua and Barbuda	127	130.77	62.15
St. Vincent and the Grenadines	99	89.52	25.29
Dominica	51	71.02	40.60
Saint Kitts and Nevis	37	70.03	48.65
Total LAC*	1,603,067	—	—

Sources: Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, Coronavirus Resource Center, "Mortality Analyses," February 6, 2022, at https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/data/mortality; and "Vaccination Progress Across the World,"

February 6, 2022, at https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/vaccines/international. For St. Kitts and Nevis, the source for vaccinations is Our World in Data, "Coronavirus (COVID-19) Vaccinations," as of February 2, 2022, at https://ourworldindata.org/covid-vaccinations.
Notes: *Total LAC* includes all independent countries in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) but not overseas territories. Peru revised its official COVID-19 death toll in May 2021 to account for excess deaths attributed to COVID-19 not previously counted, which tripled the country's reported death toll.

In terms of COVID-19 vaccine manufacturing in Latin America, Cuba's biotech sector has developed and manufactured three vaccines, two Brazilian companies and a partnership between Argentine and Mexican companies have manufactured some vaccines, and two companies from Brazil and Chile announced plans to manufacture vaccines in 2022.[12] In August 2021, PAHO announced a program to boost COVID-19 vaccine manufacturing in the region and subsequently selected biomedical centers in Argentina and Brazil to produce the vaccines.[13]

Political Situation

Electoral Practices

In the early 1980s, authoritarian regimes (ideologically on both the left and the right) governed 16 Latin American and Caribbean countries. Today, observers consider four countries in the region—Cuba, Nicaragua, Venezuela, and most recently Haiti—to be ruled by authoritarian governments.[14] Most governments in the region are elected democracies.

Nevertheless, although free and fair elections have become the norm in Latin America and the Caribbean, elections for head of government at times have been controversial and contested, including in Honduras (2017) and Venezuela (2018). In 2019, Guatemala held two presidential election rounds that international observers judged successful, but several popular candidates were disqualified from the race for reasons many observers considered dubious.[15] In Bolivia, severe irregularities in October 2019 presidential elections ignited protests and violence that led to the resignation of incumbent President Evo Morales, who was seeking a fourth term. New presidential elections in Bolivia were postponed twice in 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic but ultimately were held in October.[16]

Eight Caribbean countries held general elections in 2020. In Jamaica, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and Trinidad and Tobago, incumbent governments were returned to power in free and fair elections. In Belize, the Dominican Republic, and Suriname, opposition

[12] Dave Graham, "Mexico to Get First Local COVID-19 Vaccines, Share with Argentina," Reuters News, May 25, 2021; Ludwig Burger and Manas Mishra, "Brazil's Eurofarma to Make Pfizer COVID-19 Shots for Latin America," Reuters News, August 26, 2021; Reuters News, "Brazil Vaccination Pace Slows as Production Issues Halt Second Doses," June 1, 2021; and "China's Sinovac to Bottle COVID-19 Vaccine in Chile," *La Prensa*, August 4, 2021.

[13] PAHO, "PAHO Launches New Collaborative Platform to Produce COVID-19 Vaccines in Latin America and the Caribbean," press release, September 1, 2021; and PAHO, "PAHO Selects Centers in Argentina, Brazil to Develop COVID-19 MRNA Vaccines," September 21, 2021.

[14] See Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), *Democracy Index 2021*, February 2022 (hereinafter, EIU, *Democracy Index 2021*), which classifies all four governments as *authoritarian* based on some 60 indicators; and Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2021*, March 2021, which classifies Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela as *not free* based on their poor records on political rights and civil liberties. Freedom House's report covering developments in 2021 has not yet been released.

[15] Sonia Pérez D. and Peter Orsi, "Court Ruling Puts Guatemala Vote, Anti-Graft Fight in Doubt," AP News, May 16, 2019.

[16] See CRS Insight IN11198, *Bolivia's October 2020 General Elections*, by Clare Ribando Seelke; and CRS In Focus IF11325, *Bolivia: An Overview*, by Clare Ribando Seelke.

parties came to power through similarly peaceful democratic means. In contrast, Guyana's March 2020 elections were marred by allegations of fraud; after a recount and multiple legal challenges, final results were announced in August 2020 and an opposition government took power.[17]

In 2021, six Latin American and Caribbean countries held successful free and fair elections for head of government. **Ecuador** held two presidential rounds in February and April, electing center-right candidate Guillermo Lasso, inaugurated in May.[18] **Peru** held two president rounds in April and June; in a close election, Peru's national electoral court ultimately declared far-left candidate Pedro Castillo the winner in July. **St. Lucia** held parliamentary elections in July in which Philip Pierre of the opposition St. Lucia Labour Party became prime minister in a landslide election, ousting the conservative United Workers Party of Allen Chastanet from power after one term. The **Bahamas** held parliamentary elections in September in which the opposition center-left Progressive Liberal Party, led by Philip Davis, ousted the ruling center-right Free National Movement of the outgoing prime minister in a landslide. In **Honduras**, Xiomara Castro of the leftist Liberty and Re-foundation Party won a decisive victory in presidential elections in November, alleviating concerns expressed prior to the election that a close race could be marred by a lack of transparency or fraud allegations, as occurred in 2017. In **Chile**, leftist and former student leader Gabriel Boric won a decisive victory in a second presidential round held in December; Boric is to be inaugurated on March 11, 2022.

The November 2021 presidential race in **Nicaragua** was the regional exception to free and fair elections for head of state in 2021. Ahead of the election, the government of President Daniel Ortega escalated repression by arresting opposition figures and banning major opposition parties from participating in the race, in which Ortega claimed victory for a fifth (and fourth consecutive) term.

So far in 2022, **Barbados** held successful elections for head of government in which Prime Minister Mia Mottley won a second term in another landslide victory, with her Barbados Labour Party winning all 30 seats in the House of Assembly. Costa Rica held a first presidential round on February 6 and is scheduled to hold a second in April. In upcoming months, Colombia and Brazil are scheduled to hold elections. The date of Haiti's elections have yet to be determined (see text box).

Latin America and the Caribbean: 2022 Elections

Barbados	January 19
Costa Rica	February 6 / April 3
Colombia	May 29 / June 19
Brazil	Oct. 2/ Oct. 30
Haiti	TBD

Notes: Elections for head of government. Includes first and potential second rounds for presidential elections.

Candidates and parties from the political left won most elections held in the region in 2021, a trend that could be repeated in elections in Colombia and Brazil in 2022. This leftward political shift in the region may be less about ideology than about the unpopularity of incumbent leaders and parties seeking reelection amid tough economic conditions as countries struggle to recover from the pandemic.

Decline in Democratic Practices

Despite significant improvements in political rights and civil liberties since the 1980s, many countries in Latin America and the Caribbean still face considerable challenges. In a number of countries, weaknesses remain in the state's abilities to deliver public services, ensure

[17] For background, see CRS In Focus IF11381, *Guyana: An Overview*, by Mark P. Sullivan.

[18] For background, see CRS In Focus IF11218, *Ecuador: An Overview*, by June S. Beittel and Rachel L. Martin.

accountability and transparency, advance the rule of law, and ensure citizen safety and security. Numerous elected presidents in the region have left office early amid severe social turmoil, economic crises, or high-profile corruption; in several cases, the presidents' own autocratic actions contributed to their ousters. Corruption scandals either caused or contributed to several presidents' resignations or removals—Guatemala in 2015, Brazil in 2016, and Peru in 2018. As noted, severe irregularities in the conduct of Bolivia's October 2019 elections ignited protests that led to the president's resignation. Although the threat of direct military rule has dissipated, civilian governments in several countries have turned to their militaries or retired officers for support or during crises, raising concerns among some observers.[19] For example, in February 2020 in El Salvador, President Nayib Bukele used the military in what many observers saw as an effort to intimidate the country's legislature into approving an anti-crime bill; the action elicited strong criticism in El Salvador and abroad.[20]

EIU Democracy Index. The Economist Intelligence Unit's (EIU's) 2021 democracy index, issued in February 2022, showed a continuous decline in democratic practices in Latin America since 2017.[21] Prior to 2017, the EIU viewed Cuba as the only authoritarian regime in the region. Venezuela joined Cuba's authoritarian ranks in 2017, as President Nicolás Maduro's government violently repressed the political opposition. Nicaragua escalated authoritarian practices in 2018 under longtime President Ortega, as the government violently repressed protests. The EIU added Haiti to the list of authoritarian governments in the aftermath of the 2021 assassination of President Jovenel Moïse, which left the country virtually bereft of elected officials functioning at any level.

The downward trend in democratic practices accelerated in 2021, according to the EIU, with a particularly sharp decline in the region's commitment to democratic political culture. This reflects widespread dissatisfaction with governments' handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, growing skepticism about democratic governments' ability to address the region's challenges, and increasing tolerance of authoritarian practices. According to the EIU, the region's weak commitment to democratic political culture has enabled illiberal populists to thrive, including Presidents Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Andrés Manuel López Obrador in Mexico, and Nayib Bukele in El Salvador. Despite these and other notable challenges, the EIU noted that 80% of the region's population lived under democratic regimes, scoring below only Western Europe and North America.[22]

Freedom House. Freedom House cited Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela as *not free* in its annual report assessing political rights and civil liberties worldwide in 2020. The report expressed concerns about Cuba's wave of intimidation against independent journalists and dissident artists; Nicaragua's harsh cybercrime law, which mandated prison sentences for spreading "false information" online; and Venezuela's extrajudicial executions, enforced disappearances, and arbitrary detentions targeting the political opposition.[23]

Freedom House also spotlighted El Salvador and Peru for democratic backsliding. In Peru, Freedom House reported that many considered the grounds for the legislature's impeachment of a

[19] See AQ Editors, "Latin America's 21st-Century Militaries," *Americas Quarterly*, vol. 14, no. 1 (2020), pp. 12-72.

[20] See Brian Winter, "Latin America's Armed Forces, Q&A: Why El Salvador's Crisis Is Different—and Worrying," *Americas Quarterly*, February 13, 2020; and Christine Wade, "Bukele's Politicization of the Military Revives Old Fears in El Salvador," *World Politics Review*, February 12, 2020.

[21] EIU, *Democracy Index 2021*.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2021*, March 2021.

popular president to be dubious and saw the action as a blow to anti-corruption efforts. Developments in Peru resulted in Freedom House downgrading Peru from classification as a *free* country to a *partly free* one. Freedom House also classified 10 other countries in the region as *partly free*: Bolivia, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Mexico, and Paraguay. In addition, Freedom House reported that Mexico suffers from severe rule-of-law deficits that limit political rights and civil liberties; it cited organized-crime-related violence, public corruption, human rights abuses, and rampant impunity as the most visible of Mexico's governance challenges.[24]

Decline in the Quality of and Satisfaction with Democracy. Public satisfaction with how democracy is operating has declined along with the quality of democracy in Latin America and the Caribbean. According to the 2018/2019 AmericasBarometer public opinion survey, the percentage of individuals satisfied with how democracy was working in their countries averaged 39.6% among 18 countries in the region, the lowest level since the poll began in 2004.[25] In the 2021 AmericasBarometer Survey, satisfaction with democracy increased marginally to 43% among 20 countries in the region, still far lower than in 2012, when 57% of the region expressed satisfaction with democracy.[26]

Several broad political and economic factors appear to be driving the decline in satisfaction with democracy in the region. Political factors include an increase in authoritarian practices, weak democratic institutions and politicized judicial systems, corruption, high levels of crime and violence, and organized crime that can infiltrate or influence state institutions. Economic factors include declining or stagnant regional economic growth rates over the past several years; high levels of income inequality in many Latin American countries; increased poverty; and the inadequacy of public services, social safety net programs, and advancement opportunities, along with increased pressure on the region's previously expanding middle class. Given these trends, the eruption of social protests in many countries throughout the region in 2019 was unsurprising to many observers, even though in each country a unique set of circumstances sparked the unrest.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated many of these economic factors, contributing to increased protests in the region since late 2020. Pandemic-related protests erupted in several countries in 2021, notably in Colombia and Brazil. Regional economic decline, along with difficult security and political conditions, has helped fuel increased migration, especially from Central America, but also from other countries, including Haitians who had migrated to South America in the aftermath of the country's 2010 earthquake. Human rights groups and other observers have expressed concerns about leaders in the region taking advantage of the pandemic to advance their own agendas and limiting civil liberties for political gain.[27]

[24] Ibid.

[25] Elizabeth J. Zechmeister and Noam Lupu, eds., *LAPOP's AmericasBarometer Takes the Pulse of Democracy*, Vanderbilt University, Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP), 2019.

[26] Noam Lupu, Mariana Rodríguez, and Elizabeth J. Zechmeister, eds., *LAPOP's AmericasBarometer Takes the Pulse of Democracy*, Vanderbilt University, LAPOP, 2021.

[27] See, for example, Catharine Christe, Edison Lanza, and Michael Camilleri, *COVID-19 and Freedom of Expression in the Americas*, Inter-American Dialogue, August 2020; "COVID-19 Triggers Wave of Free Speech Abuse," Human Rights Watch, February 11, 2021; and "Press Freedom in Latin America Hurt by COVID-19 Response," Committee to Protect Journalists, June 30, 2021.

Economic Situation

The COVID-19 pandemic has taken a significant toll on Latin American and Caribbean economies. Even before the onset of the pandemic and its economic effects, the region had experienced several years of slow economic growth. The IMF reported a 6.9% economic contraction for the region in 2020.[28] Caribbean nations that depend on tourism had deep economic recessions, several with gross domestic product declines of more than 15% in 2020.[29]

Many of the region's countries began some economic recovery in 2021, with the IMF estimating a regional growth rate of 6.8% for the year, ahead of world economic output. Looking ahead, however, the IMF forecasts more modest growth rates of 2.4% in 2022, lower than originally forecast because of the impact of the COVID-19 Omicron variant, and 2.6% in 2023 (see **Table 2**), lower than projected world growth.[30]

Table 2. Latin America and Caribbean: Real GDP Growth, 2019-2023

(annual percentage change, constant prices)

Regional Average, Two Largest Economies, and World Output	2019	2020	2021 Estimate	2022 Projection	2023 Projection
Region: Latin America and the Caribbean	0.1	-6.9	6.8	2.4	2.6
Brazil	1.4	-3.9	4.7	0.3	1.6
Mexico	-0.2	-8.2	5.3	2.8	2.7
World Output	2.8	-3.1	5.9	4.4	3.8

Sources: International Monetary Fund, *World Economic Outlook Update*, January 2022, and *World Economic Outlook Database*, October 2021.

A number of Latin American and Caribbean countries have implemented stimulus programs to help protect their economies and vulnerable populations, and many countries have needed external financing to respond to the pandemic and associated economic downturn. In response, international financial institutions have increased lending to countries throughout the region. An important factor in the region's economic recovery is the course of the pandemic, including the availability and distribution of vaccines. Economic recovery may be a protracted process in countries that rely heavily on global trade and investment.

The decline in economic growth in 2020 exacerbated poverty and income inequality throughout Latin America, with concerns that the region's past development gains could be set back more than a decade. According to the U.N. Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), even before the pandemic, the poverty-reduction gains that the region made from 2002 through 2014 had begun to erode. Overall poverty in Latin America decreased from 45.4% of the region's population in 2002 to 27.8% in 2014 but crept up slowly to 30.5% in 2019, influenced by several years of slow growth.[31] With the pandemic-related economic recession

[28] International Monetary Fund (IMF), *World Economic Outlook Update*, January 2022.

[29] IMF, World Economic Outlook Database, October 2021.

[30] IMF, *World Economic Outlook Update*, January 2022.

[31] ECLAC, *Social Panorama of Latin America 2020*, March 2021; and Michael Stott, "Poverty Surge Set Latin America Back over a Decade, says UN," *Financial Times*, March 4, 2021. The ECLAC study examines poverty and extreme poverty in 18 Latin American countries. As noted in the study, poverty rates differ considerably by country,

experienced by most countries in the region in 2020, poverty increased to 33.0%. This accounted for an estimated 204 million people—an increase of 17 million people in poverty from 2019 to 2020. With economic growth rates increasing in 2021, poverty also declined slightly to 32.1%, with an estimated 201 million people in the region living in poverty.[32]

According to ECLAC, extreme poverty in Latin America increased from 11.3% of the population in 2019 to 13.1% in 2020 and 13.8% in 2021.[33] This increase reflected 16 million more people in extreme poverty in 2021 than in 2019, for a total of 86 million people. According to ECLAC, poverty and extreme poverty were estimated to be highest in rural areas as well as among working-age women, indigenous people, Afro-descendant populations, children and adolescents, people with less education, and single-parent and extended households. The sharp fall in labor income was the main factor in increasing poverty and extreme poverty in Latin America during the pandemic. ECLAC notes, however, that government programs of income transfers to vulnerable populations helped partially offset the fall in income in the region and that poverty figures would have reached higher levels without such transfers.[34]

U.S. Policy Toward Latin America and the Caribbean

U.S. interests in Latin America and the Caribbean are diverse and include economic, political, security, and humanitarian concerns. Geographic proximity has ensured strong economic linkages between the United States and the region, and the United States is a major trading partner and source of foreign investment for many Latin American and Caribbean countries. Free-trade agreements (FTAs) have augmented U.S. economic relations with 11 countries in the region. In addition, the Western Hemisphere is a large source of U.S. immigration, both authorized and irregular; geographic proximity and economic and security conditions are major factors driving migration trends.

Curbing the flow of illicit drugs from Latin America and the Caribbean has been a key component of U.S. relations with the region and a major interest of Congress for over 50 years. The flow of illicit drugs—including heroin, methamphetamine, and fentanyl from Mexico and cocaine from Colombia—poses risks to U.S. public health and safety, and the trafficking of such drugs has contributed to violent crime and gang activities in the United States. Since 2000, Colombia has received U.S. counternarcotics support through Plan Colombia and its successor programs. In addition, for over a decade, the United States has sought to forge close partnerships with other countries in the region to combat drug trafficking and related violence and to advance citizen security. These efforts include the Mérida Initiative, begun in 2007 to support Mexico; the Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI), begun in 2008; and the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative (CBSI), begun in 2009.

Another long-standing component of U.S. policy, particularly since the end of the Cold War, has been support for strengthened democratic governance and the rule of law. As described in the previous section, although many countries in the region have made enormous strides in terms of

with Uruguay having the lowest poverty rate in the region, just over 5%, and Honduras, the highest, over 58%.

[32] ECLAC, *Social Panorama of Latin America 2021*, January 2022.

[33] ECLAC, *Social Panorama of Latin America 2020*, March 2021. As noted, the ECLAC study examines extreme poverty in 18 Latin American countries. The United Nations defines extreme poverty as living on less than $1.90 day, struggling to fulfill basic needs such as health and education. See United Nations, Sustainable Development Goals, "Goal 1, End Poverty in all its forms everywhere," at https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/poverty/.

[34] ECLAC, *Social Panorama of Latin America 2021*, January 2022.

democratic political development, several face considerable challenges. Current U.S.-democracy promotion efforts include initiatives aimed at strengthening civil society and promoting the rule of law and human rights.

Trump Administration Policy

Under the Trump Administration, U.S. relations with Latin America and the Caribbean generally moved toward a more confrontational approach, especially regarding efforts to curb irregular immigration from the region, compared with past Administrations' emphasis on partnership. In 2018, the State Department set forth a framework for U.S. policy toward the region focused on three pillars for engagement—economic growth and prosperity, security, and democratic governance. The framework reflected continuity with long-standing regional U.S. policy priorities but at times appeared to be at odds with the Administration's occasionally antagonistic actions and statements on immigration, trade, and foreign aid. In 2020, the White House also set forth a strategic framework for the Western Hemisphere that included the prevention of illegal and uncontrolled human migration, smuggling, and trafficking as its first line of effort in the region.[35] According to Gallup and Pew Research Center polls, negative views of U.S. leadership in the region increased markedly during the Trump Administration.[36]

On trade issues, President Trump ordered U.S. withdrawal from the proposed Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) FTA in 2017. As negotiated in 2015 by 12 Asia-Pacific countries, the TPP would have increased U.S. economic linkages with Chile, Mexico, and Peru, which were parties to the agreement. The President also strongly criticized the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) with Mexico and Canada, threatened U.S. withdrawal, and initiated renegotiations. The three countries agreed in 2018 to the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA), which entered into force July 1, 2020; the agreement retained many of NAFTA's provisions but included modernizing updates and changes. Before approval, the agreement was amended to address congressional concerns regarding labor, the environment, dispute settlement, and intellectual property rights.

From FY2018 to FY2021, the Trump Administration's proposed foreign aid budgets for the region would have cut assistance considerably, but Congress rejected those proposals by providing significantly more assistance than requested. In 2019, the Trump Administration withheld some assistance to the "Northern Triangle" countries of Central America—El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras—in an attempt to compel their governments to curb the flow of migrants to the United States.

During the Trump Administration, vehement anti-immigrant rhetoric and immigration actions that shifted the burdens of interdicting migrants and offering asylum to Mexico tested U.S. relations with Mexico and Central America. In 2017, the Administration announced it would end Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), a program begun in 2012 that provides relief from deportation for certain immigrants who arrived as children; federal court challenges led to a June 2020 Supreme Court decision vacating the Administration's recession of DACA. The Administration also announced in 2017 that it would terminate temporary protected status (TPS) designations for Nicaragua, Haiti, El Salvador, and Honduras, but federal court challenges put the

[35] White House, National Security Council, "Overview of Western Hemisphere Strategic Framework," August 2020; and Nora Gámez Torres, "Trump Adviser to Unveil U.S. Strategy for the Americas in South Florida Event," *Miami Herald*, August 16, 2020.

[36] Gallup, *Rating World Leaders, 2018-2020, The U.S. vs. Germany, China, and Russia*; and Pew Research Center, "Trump Ratings Remain Low Around Globe, While Views of U.S. Stay Mostly Favorable," January 8, 2020.

terminations on hold. In 2018, Mexico's president agreed to allow the United States to return certain non-Mexican migrants to Mexico while awaiting U.S. immigration court decisions.

The Trump Administration used various policy tools to deter increased unauthorized migration from Central America. In addition to aid cuts and threats of increased U.S. tariffs and taxes on remittances, these tools included controversial asylum cooperative agreements with Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras to permit the United States to transfer asylum applicants from third countries to the Northern Triangle countries. At the end of 2020, Congress enacted the United States-Northern Triangle Enhanced Engagement Act (P.L. 116-260; Division FF, Title III, Subtitle F), requiring the State Department to develop a five-year strategy to advance economic prosperity, combat corruption, strengthen democratic governance, and improve civilian security conditions in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.

As the situation in Venezuela deteriorated under President Maduro, the Trump Administration imposed numerous broader financial sanctions, including sanctions against the state oil company, the country's main source of income. In January 2019, the Administration recognized the head of Venezuela's National Assembly, Juan Guaidó, as interim president. The Administration also provided humanitarian and development assistance for Venezuelans who fled to other countries, especially Colombia, and for Venezuelans inside Venezuela. Congress largely supported the Administration's policy approach toward Venezuela; in December 2019, it enacted the Venezuela Emergency Relief, Democracy Assistance, and Development Act of 2019 (P.L. 116-94, Division J), which, among its provisions, codified several sanctions and authorized humanitarian assistance.

On Cuba, the Trump Administration reversed the engagement policy advanced during the Obama Administration and imposed numerous economic sanctions on Cuba for its poor human rights record and its support for the Maduro government in Venezuela. In January 2021, the Secretary of State designated the Cuban government as a state sponsor of international terrorism.

On climate change issues, in June 2017, President Trump announced his intent to withdraw from the Paris Agreement, an international accord to address climate change. Withdrawal took effect in November 2020.[37] Securing a clean energy future had been a key priority in U.S. policy toward Latin America and the Caribbean under the Obama Administration.[38]

Biden Administration Policy

During the 2020 election campaign, then-candidate Biden indicated that his policy toward Latin America and the Caribbean would be very different from the Trump Administration's approach. He vowed "to rebuild strong hemispheric ties based on respect for democracy, human rights, and the rule of law" when the United States hosts the next Summit of the Americas (now scheduled for June 2022 in Los Angeles, CA).[39] He promised to "do away with the Trump Administration's draconian immigration policies and galvanize international action to address the poverty and insecurity driving migrants" from Central America's Northern Triangle, including by developing

[37] See CRS In Focus IF10668, *Potential Implications of U.S. Withdrawal from the Paris Agreement on Climate Change*, by Jane A. Leggett.

[38] For background on climate change issues in U.S. policy toward Latin America under the Obama Administration, see the section on "Climate Change and Clean Energy" in CRS Report R43882, *Latin America and the Caribbean: Key Issues and Actions in the 114th Congress*, coordinated by Mark P. Sullivan.

[39] Joe Biden for President: Official Campaign website, "The Biden Plan for Leading the Democratic World to Meet the Challenges of the 21st Century," at https://joebiden.com/americanleadership/.

an assistance strategy for the region.[40] On Venezuela, Biden said, "the overriding goal in Venezuela must be to press for a democratic outcome through free and fair elections, and to help the Venezuelan people rebuild their country."[41] On Cuba, Biden maintained that he would reverse the "failed Trump policies that have inflicted harm on the Cuban people and done nothing to advance democracy and human rights."[42]

The Biden Administration's early broad foreign policy objectives and outlook for U.S. policy toward Latin America and the Caribbean appeared in its *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*, issued by the White House in early March 2021, and in Secretary of State Antony Blinken's March 2021 address on U.S. foreign policy. President Biden's interim guidance, which provides broad foreign policy direction to U.S. agencies and departments, maintained that his Administration would expand engagement throughout the Western Hemisphere, especially with Canada and Mexico, "based on principles of mutual respect and equality and a commitment to economic prosperity, security, human rights, and dignity." This effort, according to the interim guidance, includes working with Congress to provide Central America with $4 billion in foreign assistance over four years, and taking other steps "to address the root causes of human insecurity and irregular migration, including poverty, criminal violence, and corruption." The guidance also maintained that the Administration would cooperate to confront the regional effects of climate change, and help support good governance and democratic institutions in the region.[43]

Many of the foreign policy priorities laid out in Secretary Blinken's March 2021 speech are relevant to areas of U.S. relations with the region. These priorities include stopping the COVID-19 pandemic and strengthening global health security; turning around the economic crisis and building a more stable, inclusive global economy; renewing democracy, to counter rising authoritarianism and nationalism around the world; creating a humane and effective immigration system and addressing the root causes of migration; revitalizing ties with allies and partners; and tackling the climate crisis and driving a green energy revolution.[44]

Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Brian Nichols echoed these priorities in November 2021 congressional testimony. He discussed the Administration's efforts to promote public health and economic recovery from the pandemic in the Americas; to bolster the hemisphere's commitment to inclusive democracy; to work with partners to promote democracy in Nicaragua, Cuba, and Venezuela; and to address irregular migration and its root causes. According to Nichols, the Administration "seeks to promote a more inclusive, green, secure, prosperous, and democratic hemisphere aligned with U.S. values and interests."[45]

The Administration's FY2022 budget request for foreign assistance to Latin America and the Caribbean amounts to almost $2.1 billion, nearly 16% over estimated FY2021 appropriations. The FY2022 request includes almost $861 million for Central America, funding the first year of

[40] Joe Biden for President: Official Campaign website, "The Biden Plan to Build Security and Prosperity with the People of Central America," at https://joebiden.com/centralamerica/.

[41] *Americas Quarterly*, "Joe Biden Answers 10 Questions on Latin America," March 2, 2020 (updated October 29, 2020), at https://www.americasquarterly.org/article/updated-2020-candidates-answer-10-questions-on-latin-america/.

[42] Ibid.

[43] White House, President Joseph R. Biden Jr, *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*, March 2021, at https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf.

[44] U.S. Department of States, Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken, "A Foreign Policy for the American People," speech, March 3, 2021, at https://www.state.gov/a-foreign-policy-for-the-american-people/.

[45] U.S. Department of State, Assistant Secretary for Western Hemisphere Affairs Brian A. Nichols, testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, November 16, 2021 (hereinafter, Nichols testimony, November 16, 2021).

the Administration's plans to address the root causes of irregular migration. (See "U.S. Foreign Aid.")

COVID-19 Pandemic. With regard to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Administration has committed to providing over 1.2 billion vaccines doses globally, including to Latin American and Caribbean countries, through multilateral mechanisms and bilaterally. As of late January 2022, the United States had delivered over 60 million vaccine doses to 29 Latin American and Caribbean countries, both bilaterally and through the COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX) Facility.[46] In addition to vaccine donations, the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), as of mid-November 2021, have provided more than $614 million in COVID-19 supplemental (P.L. 116-123 and P.L. 116-136) and American Rescue Plan Act (P.L. 117-2) funding to help countries respond to the pandemic, including technical assistance to support vaccine roll-out, case management, and oxygen access.[47]

Democracy. During an October 2021 visit to Ecuador, Secretary of State Blinken addressed concerns about the state of democracy in the Americas. Secretary Blinken noted how the pandemic has exacerbated economic inequities in the region and contributed to an increase in dissatisfaction with the way democracy works. Blinken focused his remarks on three major challenges and approaches to help make democracy work: (1) more effectively fight corruption by strengthening existing, and developing new, anti-corruption tools; (2) improve civilian security by taking a more holistic approach that deals with the root causes of crime and violence; and (3) tackle economic and social challenges such as bolstering labor standards, expanding access to adequate education and health, and providing more inclusive opportunities.[48] President Biden highlighted many of those same themes, as well as the need to defend against authoritarianism and respect human rights, during the December 2021 global Summit for Democracy, in which 25 governments from Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as various civil society activists, were invited to participate virtually.[49]

On the Venezuela policy challenge, the Biden Administration is continuing to pressure the Maduro government through economic sanctions and providing humanitarian support to Venezuelans both inside and outside the country. In a shift from the Trump Administration, in March 2021, the Secretary of Homeland Security granted TPS to Venezuelans already in the United States. The Administration maintains it is committed to robust multilateralism aimed at increasing pressure on Venezuela in a coordinated fashion to make clear that the only outcome is negotiation that leads to a democratic solution.[50] Assistant Secretary of State Nichols stated in congressional testimony in November 2021 that the Administration supported negotiations between the Venezuelan opposition and the Maduro regime but noted that it would review U.S. sanctions policies only if the parties make meaningful progress.[51] (See "Venezuela," below.)

[46] U.S. Department of State, "COVID-19 Vaccine Donations, Western Hemisphere," updated January 26, 2022, at https://www.state.gov/covid-19-recovery/vaccine-deliveries/ (this website does not note U.S. vaccine donations to the Bahamas, Nicaragua, and Trinidad and Tobago).

[47] Nichols testimony, November 16, 2021. Also see U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), "COVID-19 – Latin American and the Caribbean Response," Fact Sheet #2, FY2021, October 2021.

[48] U.S. Department of State, Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken, "Making Democracy Deliver for the Americas," speech, October 20, 2021.

[49] White House, "Summit for Democracy Summary of Proceedings," December 23, 2021.

[50] U.S. Department of State, "Background Press Call by Senior Administration Officials on Venezuela," press briefing, March 8, 2021.

[51] Nichols testimony, November 16, 2021.

On Nicaragua, the Administration has used targeted sanctions in response to the antidemocratic actions of the Ortega government and has worked multilaterally to increase international pressure against the Nicaraguan government, including at the Organization of American States (OAS) and the United Nations. (See "Nicaragua," below.)

On Cuba, the Biden Administration in its initial months announced it would review policy decisions made in the prior Administration, including the decision to designate Cuba as a state sponsor of terrorism.[52] As the human rights situation in Cuba has deteriorated, the Administration has not taken action to reverse policies from the Trump Administration, but has imposed targeted sanctions against Cubans officials involved in the government's repression against peaceful protesters.[53] (Also see "Cuba," below.)

Since mid-2021, the situation in Haiti—with a presidential assassination, a surge in gang violence, and an earthquake—has provided considerable challenges for the Biden Administration. The United States remains the single largest donor of humanitarian assistance to Haiti. Assistant Secretary of State Nichols testified to Congress in November that although the "Haitian people will determine a timeline for their election," the United States is working "to support conditions for free and fair elections," including by providing support to help restore security and address gang violence.[54] (Also see "Haiti," below.)

Migration. In the Biden Administration's initial months, much of its focus in the region was on immigration from Central America. President Biden took executive actions revising some of the Trump Administration's restrictive immigration policies, but maintained certain COVID-19-related immigration restrictions while contending with a large increase in the number of undocumented Central American and Mexican migrants seeking to enter the United States. Vice President Kamala Harris, whom President Biden tasked with overseeing diplomatic engagement with Central America and Mexico, visited Guatemala, Mexico, and the Southwest border in June. In July 2021, the Administration released two new strategies to address the underlying causes that push Central Americans to migrate and to collaboratively manage migration in the region.

The Administration subsequently broadened its engagement on migration issues as the pandemic-driven economic downturn contributed to large-scale migrant flows throughout the hemisphere. Secretary Blinken traveled to Colombia in October 2021 for a Migration Ministerial with the foreign ministers of 16 other Western Hemisphere countries to address regional cooperation regarding irregular migration. (Also see "Migration Issues" and "Central America's Northern Triangle" below.)

Climate Change. The Biden Administration has reincorporated climate change concerns into the U.S. policy approach toward Latin America and the Caribbean.[55] The Administration invited seven Latin American and Caribbean heads of government to attend the April 2021 Leaders' Summit on Climate.[56] The summit sought to build support among the world's leading economies to adopt more ambitious greenhouse gas emission reduction targets in advance of the U.N.

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[52] U.S. Department of State, "Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jen Psaki and Deputy Director of the National Economic Council Bharat Ramamurti," March 9, 2021.

[53] U.S. Department of State, Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken, "Announcement of Visa Restrictions Against Cuban Officials," press statement, November 30, 2021, and "Visa Restrictions Against Cuban Officials," press statement, January 6, 2022.

[54] Nichols testimony, November 16, 2021.

[55] Under the Biden Administration, the United States also rejoined the Paris Agreement in February 2021, reversing the Trump Administration's withdrawal of the United States from the agreement. See CRS In Focus IF11746, *United States Rejoins the Paris Agreement on Climate Change: Options for Congress*, by Jane A. Leggett.

[56] The seven leaders were from Antigua and Barbuda, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Jamaica, and Mexico.

Climate Change Conference (COP26) in November. In September 2021, Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry participated in a virtual High-Level Dialogue on Climate Action in the Americas hosted by Argentina designed to build momentum for climate action in the region ahead of COP26.

Legislative Action in the 117th Congress

Congress traditionally has played an active role in policy toward Latin America and the Caribbean in terms of both legislation and oversight. Given the region's geographic proximity to the United States, U.S. foreign policy toward the region and domestic policy often overlap, particularly in the areas of immigration and trade.

Enacted Measures and Approved Resolutions

Since 2020, Congress has appropriated some $17 billion in international affairs funding to respond to COVID-19 globally. In the 117th Congress, this funding included $10.8 billion appropriated in the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (P.L. 117-2), enacted in March 2021. The funding has supported contributions to multilateral efforts and health interventions, humanitarian assistance, and donation of COVID-19 vaccine doses worldwide, including to Latin America and the Caribbean.

In November 2021, Congress completed action on the Reinforcing Nicaragua's Adherence to Conditions for Electoral Reform Act of 2021, or the RENACER Act (S. 1064, P.L. 117-54). Among its provisions, the measure directed the U.S. government to use its diplomatic tools and targeted sanctions to advance democratic elections and combat corruption. Prior to the bill's passage, the House Committee on Foreign Affairs had ordered reported a similar, although not identical, measure (H.R. 2946) in July 2021, and the Senate had approved S. 1041, amended, in August 2021.

In December 2021, Congress completed action on the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2022 (P.L. 117-81), which includes several provisions on Latin America and the Caribbean.

- Section 1007 extended authority to support a unified counterdrug and counterterrorism campaign in Colombia.
- Section 1035 extended a prohibition on the use of funds to close or relinquish control of the U.S. Naval Station at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.
- Section 1205 provided temporary authority to obligate or expend not more than $2 million in FY2022 to pay for travel and subsistence expenses of foreign national security forces participating in the training program of the United Sates-Colombia Action Plan for Regional Security.
- Section 1206 required the Secretary of Defense to develop and implement a security cooperation strategy for certain combatant commands, including the U.S. Southern Command.
- Section 1336 extended a certification requirement for the transfer of vehicles by the Department of Defense (DOD) to Guatemala during FY2022 and required a series of reports (by the Secretary of Defense, Comptroller General, and a federally funded research and development center) on U.S. security cooperation with the Northern Triangle countries.

- Section 1337 required a report, within 180 days, from the Secretary of Defense, in coordination with the Secretary of State on the security cooperation relationship between the United States and Colombia and activities focused on human rights and the rule of law.
- Section 1338 required a report by June 30, 2022, from the Secretary of State, in coordination with the Secretary of Defense and in consultation with the heads of other appropriate federal departments and agencies, on efforts by China to expand its presence and influence in Latin America and the Caribbean.

To date, the House and Senate have approved several resolutions on U.S. relations with the region. On the human rights situation in **Cuba**, the House approved H.Res. 760 in November 2021 and the Senate approved S.Res. 310 in August 2021, both expressing solidarity with Cuban citizens demonstrating peacefully for fundamental freedoms, condemning the Cuban regime's acts of repression, and calling for the immediate release of arbitrarily detained Cuban citizens. Also on Cuba, the Senate approved S.Res. 37 in April 2021, expressing solidarity with the San Isidro Movement, a Cuban civil society protest group, S.Res. 81 in May 2021, honoring *Las Damas de Blanco*, a women-led nonviolent Cuban human rights group, and S.Res. 489 in January 2022, commending Cuban pro-democracy and human rights activists, including José Daniel Ferrer Garcia. Among other resolutions, the Senate passed S.Res. 22 in April 2021, reaffirming the U.S. partnership with **Ecuador**, and S.Res. 120 in May 2021, recognizing the forthcoming **Summit of the Americas** and reaffirming the U.S. commitment to a more prosperous, secure, and democratic Western Hemisphere.

Pending Congressional Action

FY2022 Foreign Aid Appropriations. Congress has not completed action on an FY2022 foreign aid appropriations measure. In July 2021, the House approved its version of the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act, 2022, H.R. 4373 (H.Rept. 117-84). As passed, the bill would provide assistance to several key countries and programs in the region for FY2022 at levels either matching or exceeding the Administration's budget request, including assistance to Central America, Colombia, Mexico, and regional assistance to the Caribbean. The Senate Appropriations Committee introduced its version (S. 3075) in October 2021. The Senate committee bill and its draft explanatory statement would provide slightly more assistance than requested for Colombia and the Caribbean but over $200 million less than that requested for Central America. Both the report to the House bill and the draft explanatory statement to the Senate committee bill include numerous directives, recommendations, and reporting requirements for the Administration regarding U.S. assistance to, and policy toward, Latin American and Caribbean countries.

Competition With China. Both houses have approved broad bills aimed at positioning the United States to better compete with China, both of which include numerous provisions on Latin America and the Caribbean. Both houses will be conferencing on the two bills. In June 2021, the Senate passed S. 1260, the United States Innovation and Competition Act of 2021, which seeks to improve the United States' ability to compete with China worldwide. Among its Latin America and Caribbean provisions, the bill would require strategies to increase exports of U.S. goods and services and to strengthen U.S. economic competitiveness and promote good governance, human rights, and the rule of law in the region. It also would require a report assessing China's engagement in international organizations and the defense sector in Latin America and the Caribbean; authorize a capital increase for the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB); support U.S. defense cooperation; and increase engagement with civil society regarding accountability, human rights, and the risks of pervasive surveillance technologies.

On February 4, 2022, the House approved H.R. 4521, the America Creating Opportunities for Manufacturing, Pre-Eminence in Technology, and Economic Strength Act of 2022 (America COMPETES Act of 2022).[57] The bill includes most of the Latin America and Caribbean provisions found in S. 1260, with the exceptions of the capital increase for the IDB and the requirement for a strategy to increase to increase exports of U.S. goods and services to the region, but includes two additional provisions to strengthen U.S. engagement with the Caribbean. One provision would require the Administration to submit to Congress a multiyear strategy to promote regional cooperation with the Caribbean on energy issues as an alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative. Another provision would authorize assistance for the U.S.-Caribbean Resilience Partnership from FY2022 to FY2024 and would require the Administration to submit to Congress a multiyear strategy aimed at helping Caribbean countries increase resilience and adapt to both natural disasters and the impacts of severe weather events and a changing environment. The bill also includes a section that would require the Secretary of State to devise a strategy to evaluate and expand U.S. educational and cultural diplomacy in Latin America and would require the Secretary of State, in coordination with the Director of National Intelligence, to submit a report assessing the nature and impact of China's educational and cultural sector activity in Latin America and the Caribbean. Finally, H.R. 4521 also includes two other reporting requirements: one on multilateral efforts to address Latin American fentanyl trafficking and efforts between China and Latin America to combat the production and flow of illicit fentanyl products and one on major Chinese infrastructure investments in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Haiti. In June 2021, the House passed H.R. 2471, the Haiti Development, Accountability, and Institutional Transparency Initiative Act, which would promote the sustainable rebuilding and development of Haiti and would prioritize U.S. support for anti-corruption efforts and human rights. The Senate approved the bill, amended, in January 2022.

Other Action. In other congressional action, the House approved H.R. 6 in March 2021, which would provide a pathway to citizenship for those brought to the United States as children and those from countries with TPS designations (currently including El Salvador, Haiti, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Venezuela). In July 2021, the Senate approved S. 2045, which would rename the street in front of the Cuban Embassy after a Cuban democracy activist.

Several other bills and resolutions on the region were reported out of committee. In March 2021, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee reported S.Res. 44, which would denounce fraudulent legislative elections in Venezuela. In May, the House Foreign Affairs Committee ordered reported H.Res. 408, which would urge the government of El Salvador to respect the country's democratic institutions. In July, the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee reported S. 688, which would prohibit federal agencies contracting with persons who have business operations with Venezuela's Maduro government, and the House Foreign Affairs Committee ordered reported H.Res. 549, which would condemn the assassination of the Haitian president and urge U.S. and global support of Haitian-led solutions. In September 2021, the House Foreign Affair Committee ordered reported H.R. 4133, which would authorize funding for the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative through FY2026 and establish monitoring and reporting requirements for the program.

[57] The text of the America COMPETES Act of 2022, as ordered reported by the House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology, with modifications, is available on House Committee on Rules website as Rules Committee Print 117-31 at https://rules.house.gov/sites/democrats.rules.house.gov/files/BILLS-117HR4521RH-RCP117-31.pdf. The act includes provisions from the Ensuring American Global Leadership and Engagement Act or the EAGLE Act, H.R. 3524, ordered reported by the House Foreign Affairs Committee in July 2021.

Regional U.S. Policy Issues

U.S. Foreign Aid

The United States provides foreign assistance to Latin American and Caribbean countries to support development and other U.S. objectives. In recent years, top U.S. funding priorities in the region have included addressing the underlying drivers of migration from Central America, combatting drug production and supporting peace accord implementation in Colombia, and strengthening security and the rule of law in Mexico. U.S. agencies also have dedicated significant resources to combatting HIV/AIDS and fostering long-term stability in Haiti; addressing security concerns in the Caribbean; and providing humanitarian assistance to the nearly 5 million Venezuelans who have fled to other Latin American and Caribbean countries, as well as to their host communities.[58]

Assistance needs in Latin America and the Caribbean have increased in conjunction with deteriorating conditions in 2020. As noted, the region's economy as a whole contracted by an estimated 6.9% in 2020, largely due to the COVID-19 pandemic.[59] The downturn pushed an additional 17 million people into poverty and 11 million into extreme poverty, increasing the regional poverty (33.0%) and extreme poverty (13.1%) rates to levels not seen for 10 and 20 years, respectively.[60] Economic recovery may be protracted, as many countries are facing high levels of debt and some may not achieve widespread vaccination until 2023.[61]

The Biden Administration has requested nearly $2.1 billion of foreign assistance for Latin America and the Caribbean in FY2022, which (in current dollars) would be the largest annual budget allocation for the region in more than a decade. If enacted, total State Department- and USAID-managed funding for the region would increase by $278.2 million (15.5%) compared with FY2021 estimated levels (see **Table 3**). The Administration's FY2022 budget request also would provide $38 million to the Inter-American Foundation—a small, independent U.S. foreign assistance agency that promotes grassroots development in Latin America and the Caribbean.

The Administration would use the vast majority of the increased funding to begin implementation of its four-year, $4 billion plan to foster systemic reform and address the root causes of irregular migration from Central America (see "Central America's Northern Triangle"). The FY2022 request includes $860.6 million for Central America—a $298.0 million (53.0%) increase compared with the FY2021 estimate.[62] With regard to other regional priorities, the Administration's FY2022 request would provide $453.9 million for Colombia, $187.9 million for Haiti, $116.6 million for Mexico, $66.0 million for the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative, and $55.0 million for Venezuela.

[58] R4V Platforma de Coordinación Interagencial para Refugiados y Migrantes de Venezuela, "Refugiados y Migrantes Venezolanos en la Región," January 11, 2022.

[59] IMF, *World Economic Outlook Update: Rising Caseloads, A Disrupted Recovery, and Higher Inflation, January 2022*, p. 5.

[60] ECLAC, *Social Panorama of Latin America 2021*, January 2022, p. 63.

[61] Economist Intelligence Unit, *How Much Will Vaccine Inequity Cost?*, August 2021.

[62] $27.2 million of the $860.6 million requested for Central America would be provided through global accounts that are not included in the regional total for Latin America and the Caribbean.

Table 3. U.S. Assistance to Latin America and the Caribbean: FY2016-FY2022

(billions of U.S. dollars)

2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021 (est.)	2022 (req.)
1.69	1.67	1.67[a]	1.69	1.72[b]	1.80[b]	2.07

Sources: U.S. Department of State, *Congressional Budget Justifications for Foreign Operations,* FY2018-FY2022; and U.S. Department of State, "FY2021 Estimate Data," June 2021.

Notes: These figures exclude Food for Peace Act (P.L. 480) food aid and assistance appropriated as voluntary contributions to the Organization of American States.

a. Final FY2018 allocations are unclear, because the Administration reprogrammed approximately $396 million of FY2018 aid that Congress appropriated for El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, reallocating some of those funds to countries outside of the Latin American and Caribbean region.

b. The FY2020 and FY2021 totals do not include supplemental COVID-19 assistance.

Congressional Action. In March 2021, Congress enacted the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (P.L. 117-2), which provided $10.8 billion to respond to COVID-19 globally, including through health interventions, humanitarian assistance, and contributions to multilateral response efforts. That funding builds on nearly $6.3 billion appropriated during the 116th Congress to support global vaccine procurement and delivery and other pandemic-related foreign assistance programs. The United States had provided Latin American and Caribbean countries with at least $614.0 million of pandemic response aid, as of November 2021, and 59.2 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines, as of January 26, 2021.[63]

Congress has not concluded action on FY2022 appropriations. The House passed the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act, 2022 (H.R. 4373/H.Rept. 117-84) in July 2021, and the Senate Appropriations Committee introduced its foreign aid appropriations bill (S. 3075) in October 2021. Congress has not taken further action on either bill. Instead, it has enacted two continuing resolutions (P.L. 117-43 and P.L. 117-70) that have funded foreign aid programs in the region at the FY2021 level since October 1, 2021. P.L. 117-70 extends appropriations through February 18, 2022.

Congress may draw from H.R. 4373 and S. 3075 as it considers appropriations for the remainder of the fiscal year. Neither measure specifies comprehensive appropriations levels for every Latin American and Caribbean country, but both measures provide funding directives for some U.S. initiatives in the region. The House-passed bill would designate funding levels for Central America, Colombia, Mexico, and the CBSI that match or exceed the Administration's request. The Senate bill, which includes fewer country and programmatic directives, would provide slightly more assistance than the Administration requested for Colombia and the CBSI and $206.7 million less than the Administration requested for Central America.

In addition to finalizing appropriations, Congress may consider various other legislative measures to guide and oversee U.S. foreign assistance policy in the region. These include measures to authorize certain foreign aid activities in the Caribbean (H.R. 4133) and Central America (H.R. 1177/S. 348 and H.R. 4017/S. 2003), and to evaluate the past decade of U.S. recovery and developments efforts in Haiti (H.R. 2471, passed by the House in June 2021 and by the Senate, with an amendment, in January 2022; S. 1104).

[63] Nichols testimony, November 16, 2021; and U.S. Department of State, "COVID-19 Vaccine Donations," https://www.state.gov/covid-19-recovery/vaccine-deliveries/#wha.

For additional information, see CRS Report R47028, *U.S. Foreign Assistance to Latin America and the Caribbean: FY2022 Appropriations*, by Peter J. Meyer; CRS Report R46935, *Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs: FY2022 Budget and Appropriations*, by Cory R. Gill, Marian L. Lawson, and Emily M. Morgenstern; and CRS In Focus IF11581, *Latin America and the Caribbean: Impact of COVID-19*, by Mark P. Sullivan and Peter J. Meyer.

Migration Issues

Latin America's status as a leading source of both legal and unauthorized migration to the United States means that U.S. immigration policies significantly affect countries in the region and U.S. relations with these countries' governments. Latin Americans comprise the vast majority of individuals who have received relief from removal (deportation) through the TPS program and the DACA initiative; they also comprise a large percentage of recent asylum-seekers.[64] As a result, immigration policy changes implemented by President Trump, many of which President Biden has sought to reverse, have affected countries in the Latin American and Caribbean region.

The Trump Administration's rhetoric, tariff threats, foreign aid cuts, and restrictive immigration policies tested relations with many countries in the region, and particularly with Mexico and the Northern Triangle countries. The Administration terminated TPS designations for Haiti, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Honduras (those terminations are facing legal challenges),[65] rescinded DACA through a process that the Supreme Court ruled in June 2020 did not follow proper procedures and had to be vacated,[66] and restricted access to asylum. In January 2019, the Trump Administration launched the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP), a program that required many migrants and asylum-seekers to await their U.S. immigration proceedings in Mexico. The Administration also signed what it termed *asylum cooperative agreements* (ACAs) with Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras; these agreements would allow the United States to transfer certain asylum-seekers who arrive at a U.S. border to Guatemala, El Salvador, or Honduras to apply for asylum in one of those countries. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) began to implement the agreement with Guatemala in November 2019 but suspended implementation in March 2020. DHS finalized ACAs with El Salvador and Honduras in late 2020, but never implemented them.

The factors that drive U.S.-bound migration from Latin America are multifaceted, and some have changed over time. These factors include poverty and unemployment; political and economic instability; crime and violence; natural disasters, climate change, and food insecurity; relatively close proximity to the United States; familial ties in the United States; and relatively attractive U.S. economic conditions. The economic and social effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, combined with ongoing turmoil in Venezuela and Haiti, have prompted increased migration from those and other countries in the region.

[64] Temporary protected status (TPS) is a discretionary, humanitarian benefit granted to eligible nationals after the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) determines that a country has been affected by armed conflict, natural disaster, or other extraordinary conditions that limit the country's ability to accept the return of its nationals from the United States. TPS designations began for Nicaragua and Honduras in 1999, for El Salvador in 2001, and for Haiti in 2010. The Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival (DACA) initiative is an initiative the Obama Administration implemented in 2012 to provide temporary relief from removal and work authorization to certain unlawfully present individuals who arrived in the United States as children.

[65] As legal challenges to the termination of TPS for these countries continue, DHS has extended the validity of TPS documents for current beneficiaries through December 31, 2022.

[66] U.S. Dep't of Homeland Sec. v. Regents of the Univ. of Cal.,—S. Ct.—, 2020 WL 3271746, at *3 (2020).

Migrant apprehensions at the Southwest border reached a 45-year low in 2017 but began to rise in FY2018, with unaccompanied children and families from the Northern Triangle, many of whom were seeking asylum, comprising a majority of apprehensions. In FY2020, apprehensions declined by more than half, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic began in March 2020.[67] In response to the pandemic, DHS largely suspended asylum processing at the U.S.-Mexico border in March 2020 under a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention public health order (Title 42); most migrants without valid travel documents were expelled into Mexico or returned to their home countries as quickly as possible.[68] In FY2021, border enforcement encounters (apprehensions and expulsions) reached a record 1.7 million, although that total includes individuals expelled into Mexico more than once.[69] In FY2021, migrant origins expanded beyond Mexico and Central America to include South American countries and the Caribbean. Sizeable migrant flows also originated from countries as distant as Romania, India, and Turkey.

In the Biden Administration's initial months, much of its focus in the region was on immigration from Central America, although DHS also designated Venezuela for TPS in March 2021. President Biden took executive actions revising some of the Trump Administration's restrictive immigration policies but maintained certain COVID-19-related immigration restrictions while contending with a large increase in the number of undocumented Central American and Mexican migrants seeking to enter the United States. Vice President Kamala Harris, whom President Biden tasked with overseeing diplomatic engagement with Central America and Mexico, visited Guatemala, Mexico, and the Southwest border in June. In July 2021, the Administration released two new strategies to address the underlying causes that push Central Americans to migrate and to collaboratively manage migration in the region. In accordance with the strategies, the Administration allocated $272.2 million of humanitarian assistance to alleviate conditions in Central America in FY2021 and requested $860.6 million to address the root causes of migration from the region in FY2022.[70] The Biden Administration sought to terminate the MPP program, but, after a lawsuit challenging the termination, a federal judge ordered DHS to reinstate the program. After losing a Supreme Court appeal, DHS announced the reimplementation of MPP on December 2, 2021.

The Administration has broadened its engagement on migration issues as the pandemic-driven economic downturn has contributed to large-scale migrant flows throughout the hemisphere. Secretary Blinken traveled to Colombia in October 2021 for a Migration Ministerial with the foreign ministers of 16 other Western Hemisphere countries to address regional cooperation on irregular migration. In his remarks, Secretary Blinken focused on the top U.S. priorities: (1) more effective management of the immediate situation through strengthened border enforcement, improved asylum processes, and expanded legal pathways and options for protection and resettlement; (2) protection for the most vulnerable migrants, including victims of human trafficking and smuggling; (3) regional cooperation to address the urgent situation with

[67] U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), "Southwest Border Migration FY2020." See explanation of the difference between a Title 8 apprehension under DHS authority and a Title 42 expulsion under Centers for Disease Control and Prevention authority in the notes.

[68] The Biden Administration has exempted unaccompanied children and some families from this policy. See CRS Legal Sidebar LSB10582, *Asylum Processing at the Border: Legal Basics*, by Ben Harrington.

[69] CRS Report R46999, *Immigration: Apprehensions and Expulsions at the Southwest Border*, by Audrey Singer and William A. Kandel.

[70] USAID, "El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras – Regional Response," Fact Sheet #1, FY2022, December 1, 2021.

Venezuelan and Haitian migrants, including directing resources to communities across the region hosting migrants from these countries; and (4) efforts to address the root causes of migration.[71]

Congressional Action. Congress may consider comprehensive immigration measures (S. 348/H.R. 1177) or piecemeal legislation to address specific issues, such as border security, immigration enforcement, legalization of unauthorized immigrants, temporary and permanent immigration, and humanitarian admissions. In March 2021, the House passed H.R. 6, which would modify the legal pathways available to those in the region and adjust the status of some Central American immigrants in the United States. Amid an increase in child and family arrivals at the Southwest border, Congress may consider legislation to address the sheltering of child migrants, as well as additional appropriations as needed to respond to families. Congress is likely to continue funding and overseeing U.S. assistance to respond to the Venezuela regional migration crisis, address the root causes of migration from Central America, and bolster Mexico's interdiction and humanitarian protection systems.

For additional information, see CRS Legal Sidebar LSB10574, *Recent White House Actions on Immigration*, by Hillel R. Smith and Kelsey Y. Santamaria; CRS Legal Sidebar LSB10617, *Asylum Eligibility for Applicants Fleeing Gang and Domestic Violence: Recent Developments*, by Hillel R. Smith; CRS Legal Sidebar LSB10582, *Asylum Processing at the Border: Legal Basics*, by Ben Harrington; CRS Insight IN11741, *U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) COVID-19 Policies and Protocols at the Southwest Border*, by Audrey Singer; CRS Report R46999, *Immigration: Apprehensions and Expulsions at the Southwest Border*, by Audrey Singer and William A. Kandel; CRS In Focus IF11151, *Central American Migration: Root Causes and U.S. Policy*, by Peter J. Meyer; CRS In Focus IF10215, *Mexico's Immigration Control Efforts*, by Clare Ribando Seelke; CRS Report R44849, *H-2A and H-2B Temporary Worker Visas: Policy and Related Issues*, by Andorra Bruno; CRS Report RS20844, *Temporary Protected Status and Deferred Enforced Departure*, by Jill H. Wilson; and CRS Report R46764, *Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA): By the Numbers*, by Andorra Bruno.

Drug Trafficking and Criminal Gangs

Latin America and the Caribbean feature prominently in U.S. counternarcotics policy due to the region's role as a source and/or transit zone for several illicit drugs destined for U.S. markets—cocaine, marijuana, methamphetamine, and opioids (plant-based and synthetic)—as well as for precursor chemicals used in the production of illicit drugs. Heroin abuse and synthetic opioid-related deaths in the United States have reached epidemic levels, raising questions about how to address foreign sources of opioids. Policymakers also are concerned that methamphetamine and cocaine overdoses in the United States are rising, with cocaine overdoses frequently linked to the presence of synthetic opioids, such as fentanyl.

Drug demand in the United States and changes in the international drug market continue to drive drug production in Bolivia, Colombia, Mexico, and Peru. Opium poppy cultivation and heroin production rose in Mexico from 2012 through 2017 but have since declined. However, the production of fentanyl (a synthetic opioid) and methamphetamine has surged. Over 90% of heroin seized and sampled in the United States comes from Mexico. Since the Chinese government implemented strict controls on all forms of fentanyl, including fentanyl analogues, in mid-2019, Mexico has become a more important source of fentanyl.[72] Despite restrictions on imports of

[71] U.S. Department of State, "Secretary Antony J. Blinken Remarks at the Regional Migration Ministerial," October 20, 2021.

[72] U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), *National Drug Threat Assessment, 2020*, February 2021. Hereinafter,

some precursor chemicals, Mexican transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) continue to be the primary producers and traffickers of low-cost, high-purity U.S.-bound methamphetamine. Coca cultivation and cocaine production in Colombia, which supplies roughly 89% of cocaine in the United States, reached record levels in 2020.[73] Coca cultivation and production in Peru also surged, while coca cultivation fell and potential production increased in Bolivia.[74]

Whereas Mexico, Colombia, Peru, and most other source and transit countries in the region work closely with the United States to combat drug production and interdict illicit flows, the Venezuelan and Bolivian governments do not. In March 2020, the Department of Justice (DOJ) indicted Venezuela's leader, Nicolás Maduro (whom the United States does not recognize as Venezuela's legitimate president), and other current and former high-ranking Venezuelan officials. As charged, Maduro allegedly participated in a drug trafficking organization that conspired with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) to traffic illicit drugs to the United States. Over the past several years, Maduro government officials have been identified as conspiring with FARC dissidents and National Liberation Army (ELN) guerrillas operating in Venezuela to smuggle cocaine and illicit gold.[75] U.S. antidrug cooperation with Bolivia decreased under former President Evo Morales (2006-2019) and remains limited under his successor, President Luis Arce.

Contemporary drug trafficking and transnational crime syndicates have contributed to degradations in citizen security and economic development in some countries, often resulting in high levels of violence. Despite efforts to combat the drug trade, many Latin American governments, particularly in Mexico and Central America—a region through which roughly 90% of cocaine bound for the United States from South America transited in 2019—continue to suffer from weak criminal justice systems and law enforcement agencies.[76] Public corruption, including high-level cooperation with criminal organizations, further frustrates efforts to interdict drugs, investigate and prosecute traffickers, and recover illicit proceeds. At the same time, there is a widespread perception—particularly in Latin America—that U.S. demand for illicit drugs is largely to blame for the region's crime problems. The COVID-19 pandemic has lowered violence in most countries, but drug trafficking-related violence remains elevated in Mexico.

Criminal gangs with origins in Southern California, principally the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and the 18th Street gang, continue to undermine citizen security and subvert government authority in Central America. Gang-related violence has been particularly acute in El Salvador, Honduras, and urban areas in Guatemala. Gangs have been involved in a range of criminal activities, including local drug distribution, extortion, money laundering, and weapons smuggling, and they have used violence to enforce COVID-19-related quarantines. Gang-related violence has fueled irregular migration to the United States.

U.S. Policy. For more than 50 years, U.S. policy toward Latin America and the Caribbean has focused on countering drug trafficking and reducing drug production in the region. The largest antidrug support program, Plan Colombia, provided more than $10 billion (current dollars) to help Colombia combat both drug trafficking and rebel groups financed by the drug trade from

DEA, *NDTA 2020*.

[73] Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP), "ONDCP Releases Data on Coca Cultivation and Production in the Andean Region," June 25, 2021.

[74] Ibid.

[75] Douglas Farah, *The Maduro Regime's Illicit Activities: A Threat to Democracy in Venezuela and Security in Latin America*, Atlantic Council, August 12, 2020.

[76] Drug transit data are from U.S. Government, Interagency Assessment of Cocaine Movement, based on 2019 data from the Consolidated Counterdrug Database as cited in DEA, *NDTA 2020*.

FY2000 to FY2016. After Colombia signed a historic peace accord with the country's largest leftist guerrilla group, the FARC, the United States provided assistance to help implement the agreement. In addition to concerns about cocaine production, some U.S. policymakers have expressed concern that parts of the peace accord remain unimplemented.

U.S. support to combat drug trafficking and reduce crime also has included partnerships with other countries in the region: the Mérida Initiative with Mexico, CARSI, and the CBSI. During the Obama Administration, those initiatives combined U.S. antidrug and rule-of-law assistance with economic development and violence prevention programs. The Trump Administration sought to focus on security and antidrug efforts while also attempting to reduce overall funding for each of the programs.

Through visa denials and revocations, targeted economic sanctions, and federal criminal investigations and prosecutions, U.S. Administrations also have sought to punish foreign officials and entities complicit with drugs traffickers, gangs, and other criminal groups. The State Department manages several deterrence tools, including multiple visa denial programs targeting foreign drug traffickers, as well programs to offer rewards for information related to significant foreign narcotics traffickers and transnational organized crime. In December 2021, the Department of the Treasury announced Global Magnitsky sanctions against two high-level Salvadoran officials for providing illicit favors to the MS-13 gang (a Treasury-designated TCO subject to sanctions) during covert negotiations.[77] In addition to DOJ's indictment of Maduro in Venezuela, cases in the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York have implicated high-level Honduran officials, including former President Juan Orlando Hernández (2014-January 2022).[78]

The Biden Administration's first-year drug policy priorities focused on domestic treatment and harm reduction but also focused on working with "key global partners such as China, Colombia, and Mexico to curb illicit drug production and trafficking."[79] Drug policy efforts complement broader efforts to combat corruption, a core component of the Administration's national security policy.[80] In October 2021, the Biden Administration launched a new bicentennial framework for U.S.-Mexican security cooperation that focuses on addressing drugs and violence from a public health perspective, combating transborder crime, and dismantling illicit financial networks.[81] The Administration's regional drug policy may be further informed by the findings of the congressionally mandated Western Hemisphere Drug Policy Commission, which recommended the State Department take the lead in regional drug policy and replace the annual drug certification process with compacts negotiated with countries to identify bilateral priorities.[82]

Congressional Action. Congress continues to consider the Biden Administration's FY2022 budget request. The House-passed version of the FY2022 foreign aid appropriations bill, H.R. 4373, would, among other provisions, require additional human rights conditions on International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement (INCLE) assistance to Colombia and cut INCLE

[77] U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Targets Corruption Networks Linked to Transnational Organized Crime," December 8, 2021.

[78] U.S. District Court, Southern District of New York, United States v. Juan Antonio Hernández Alvarado, S2 15 Cr. 379 (PKC), Government's Sentencing Submission, March 16, 2021.

[79] The White House, "Biden-Harris Administration Announces First-Year Drug Policy Priorities," April 1, 2021.

[80] The White House, "Memorandum on Establishing the Fight Against Corruption as a Core United States National Security Interest," June 3, 2021.

[81] The White House, "FACT SHEET: U.S.-Mexico High-Level Security Dialogue," October 8, 2021.

[82] Report of the Western Hemisphere Drug Policy Commission, *Charting a New Path Forward*, December 2020.

assistance to Mexico, while focusing that assistance on combating opioid production and trafficking. H.Rept. 117-84 accompanying H.R. 4373 would require a report on bilateral (with Mexico) and multilateral efforts to combat fentanyl trafficking into the United States, as well as several reports and evaluations on broader aspects of U.S. drug policy recommended by the WHDPC.[83] The draft explanatory statement accompanying the Senate Appropriation Committee's version of the FY2022 foreign aid bill (S. 3075) would require an evaluation of U.S. drug policies over the past several decades and how current efforts differ with those policies within 120 days of the bill's enactment.

The 117th Congress has convened oversight hearings that address drug trafficking and crime in the region, including a November 2021 Senate hearing on drugs and corruption (see **Appendix**). During its second session, Congress may convene additional hearings, request Government Accountability Office reports, and draft legislation to influence U.S. anti-crime and counterdrug programs in the Western Hemisphere. Issues of concern may include whether or not to support a resumption of aerial eradication in Colombia, how to address drug flows emanating from Venezuela, how to improve antidrug cooperation with Mexico after strains in bilateral relations, and how to improve anti-crime efforts as part of a broader strategy to address the root causes of unauthorized migration from Central America. Newer issues may focus on how to interdict precursor chemicals from China and India that are being used to produce fentanyl in Mexico, as well as how to combat the role of money launderers from China in supporting TCOs in the region.

For additional information, see CRS Insight IN11535, *Mexican Drug Trafficking and Cartel Operations amid COVID-19*, by June S. Beittel and Liana W. Rosen; CRS In Focus IF10578, *Mexico: Evolution of the Mérida Initiative, FY2008-FY2022*, by Clare Ribando Seelke; CRS In Focus IF10400, *Trends in Mexican Opioid Trafficking and Implications for U.S.-Mexico Security Cooperation*, by Liana W. Rosen and Clare Ribando Seelke; CRS Report R41576, *Mexico: Organized Crime and Drug Trafficking Organizations*, by June S. Beittel; CRS In Focus IF10371, *U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America: An Overview*, by Peter J. Meyer; CRS Report R43813, *Colombia: Background and U.S. Relations*, by June S. Beittel; CRS In Focus IF10789, *Caribbean Basin Security Initiative*, by Mark P. Sullivan; and CRS Report R46695, *The U.S. "Majors List" of Illicit Drug-Producing and Drug-Transit Countries*, by Liana W. Rosen.

Trade Policy

The Latin American and Caribbean region is among the United States' most important regional trading partners. Economic relations between the United States and most of its trading partners in the region remain strong, despite challenges, such as the downturn in economic growth and trade due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the high levels of violence in some countries. The United States accounted for roughly 31% of the region's merchandise imports and 45% of its merchandise exports in 2020. Most of this trade is with Mexico, which accounted for 78% of U.S. imports from the region and 62% of U.S. exports to the region in 2020. In 2020, total U.S. trade with the region declined 14%, with U.S. merchandise exports declining from $413.0 billion in 2019 to $336.7 billion in 2020 and U.S. merchandise imports declining from $464.7 billion to $416.0 billion (see **Table 4**).

[83] H.Rept. 117-84 also would require a report on whether relevant U.S. sanctions, such as the Foreign Narcotics Kingpin Designation Act of 1999, effectively target the most dangerous criminal organizations; an evaluation of the efficacy of the designation procedures on major illicit narcotics producing and transit countries; a strategy for working with international partners to develop new guidelines to reduce the manufacturing, trafficking, and use of illicit narcotics; and an assessment of alternative tools for drug trafficking control.

The United States has strengthened economic ties with Latin America and the Caribbean over the past 27 years through the negotiation and implementation of FTAs. Starting with NAFTA in 1994, which was replaced by the USMCA on July 1, 2020, the United States currently has six FTAs in force involving 11 Latin American countries: Mexico, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama, and Peru. NAFTA was the first U.S. FTA with a country in the Latin American and Caribbean region, establishing new rules and disciplines that influenced subsequent trade agreements on issues important to the United States, such as intellectual property rights protection, services trade, agriculture, dispute settlement, investment, labor, and the environment.

Table 4. U.S. Trade with Key Trading Partners in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2013-2020

(in billions of current U.S. dollars)

Partner Country	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
U.S. Exports								
Mexico	226.0	241.0	236.5	230.2	243.6	266.0	256.3	211.5
Brazil	44.1	42.4	31.6	30.2	37.3	39.4	42.9	34.6
Chile	17.5	16.5	15.4	12.9	13.6	15.3	15.7	12.5
Colombia	18.4	20.1	16.3	13.0	13.4	15.1	14.8	11.9
Total LAC	404.3	418.9	383.4	360.7	388.8	424.0	413.0	336.7
World	1,578.5	1,621.9	1,503.3	1,451.5	1,547.2	1,665.8	1,642.8	1,424.9
U.S. Imports								
Mexico	280.6	295.7	296.4	293.5	312.7	343.7	356.2	325.2
Brazil	27.5	30.0	27.5	26.0	29.5	31.2	30.9	23.4
Colombia	21.6	18.3	14.1	13.8	13.6	13.8	14.2	10.8
Chile	10.4	9.5	8.8	8.8	10.6	11.4	10.4	10.1
Total LAC	438.3	445.3	411.6	400.6	428.2	465.5	464.7	416.0
World	2,268.0	2,356.4	2,248.8	2,186.8	2,339.6	2,536.1	2,493.7	2,336.0

Source: CRS with data from the U.S. Department of Commerce provided by Trade Data Monitor.

Note: This table provides statistics on the top four countries followed by the total of U.S. trade with 33 countries of Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC).

The United States, Canada, and Mexico entered into NAFTA renegotiations in 2017 and concluded talks with the announcement of the USMCA on September 30, 2018. The agreement, which entered into force on July 1, 2020, continues most of NAFTA's market opening provisions but modernizes and revises NAFTA with new provisions on digital trade, state-owned enterprises, currency manipulation, anti-corruption, enforcement of workers' rights, and the environment. Certain revisions to USMCA, including tighter rules-of-origin requirements for the motor vehicle industry, removal of government-procurement provisions for Canada, and changes to investor-state dispute settlement provisions, are significant because they scale back previous Administrations' U.S. trade policy goals.

In addition to FTAs, the United States has extended unilateral trade preferences to some countries in the region through several trade-preference programs. The Caribbean Basin Economic Recovery Act (P.L. 98-67, subsequently amended, with no expiration), for example, provides

limited duty-free entry of selected Caribbean products as a core element of the U.S. foreign economic policy response to uncertain economic and political conditions in the region. Several preference programs for Haiti, which expire in 2025, provide generous and flexible unilateral preferences to the country's apparel sector. Two other preference programs include the Caribbean Basin Trade Partnership Act (CBTPA, P.L. 106-200, Title II), which has been extended through September 2030 (P.L. 116-164), and the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP), which expired on December 31, 2020. The CBTPA extends to eligible Caribbean countries preferences on apparel products, similar to those given to Mexico under NAFTA and USMCA. The GSP program, first authorized in the 1970s, provides duty-free tariff treatment to certain products imported from 120 designated developing countries throughout the world, including Argentina, Brazil, Ecuador, and other Latin American and Caribbean countries.

Numerous other bilateral and plurilateral trade agreements throughout the Western Hemisphere do not include the United States. For example, the Pacific Alliance, a trade arrangement composed of Mexico, Peru, Colombia, and Chile, has made efforts to negotiate a possible trade arrangement with Mercosur, composed of Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, and Paraguay. In June 2019, after 20 years of negotiations, the European Union and Mercosur reached a political agreement in principle for an ambitious and comprehensive trade agreement. In April 2020, Mexico and the European Union finalized negotiations to update their original FTA from 2000 and remove most of the remaining trade barriers between the two partners. Neither of the agreements with the European Union have yet entered into force.

Numerous observers have proposed that the United States strengthen trade relations with countries in Latin America and the Caribbean through regional trade agreements or other efforts.[84] Some policymakers also have expressed an interest in enhancing trade ties in the Western Hemisphere to enhance economic competitiveness. Although the United States remains the top trading partner with the region, numerous lawmakers point to the rising influence of China and the need to strengthen U.S. economic integration, reinforce regional supply chains, and promote economic growth.[85] Although some of the largest economies in South America, such as Argentina, Brazil, and Venezuela, resisted the idea of forming comprehensive FTAs with the United States in the first 15-20 years after NAFTA, such opposition has shifted in some countries. For example, Brazil and Ecuador, have taken steps to enhance their trade relationships with the United States through "mini" bilateral trade agreements on trade facilitation, regulatory cooperation, and anti-corruption. However, some Members of Congress have stated that FTAs with Brazil or Ecuador are not feasible in the short term, due to concerns regarding the environment, labor standards, and human rights.

The United States' January 2017 withdrawal from the proposed Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), an FTA that included Mexico, Peru, and Chile as signatories, signified a change to U.S. trade policy in the region. In March 2018, all remaining TPP parties signed the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP, or TPP-11), which essentially brought into effect a modified TPP. The TPP-11 has entered into force among eight countries—Australia, Canada, Japan, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, and Vietnam. The remaining signatories have not ratified the agreement. Chile expects to ratify the agreement eventually. Ecuador applied to enter into the agreement in 2021, and Colombia has expressed plans to request entry into the agreement after it enters into force among all partners. Some observers have noted

[84] Margaret Spiegelman, "Former Envoys: U.S. Must Seize Trade Opportunities in Latin America," *Inside U.S. Trade's World Trade Online*, January 11, 2022.

[85] See for example, Madeline Halpert, "GOP Lawmakers Urge Engagement in Latin America to Counter China," *Inside U.S. Trade's World Trade Online*, October 13, 2021.

that the Biden Administration could focus on a comprehensive, high-standard regional trade agreement in the Asia-Pacific region by applying to join the CPTPP. The Biden Administration, however, has stated it would not join the CPTPP in its current form. China's announcement that it had formally submitted a request to join the CPTPP may be an issue for Congress as it considers future of trade policy in the Asia-Pacific region.[86] The Administration announced a multifaceted Indo-Pacific Economic Framework in October 2021 but has not issued any details about the framework or whether it will have any future relationship with the Latin America and Caribbean region.

Key Policy Issues: Congress may examine how the United States could enhance trade relations with countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, whether through bilateral FTAs or a broader initiative such as the Free Trade Area of the Americas agreement, which was pursued in the mid-1990s but never concluded.[87] Congress also may examine whether the United States should consider partial trade agreements, such as the limited agreements reached with Brazil and Ecuador in the last quarter of 2020 on trade facilitation, anti-corruption, and good regulatory practices. Some Members of Congress favor these "mini" agreements, perceiving them as a mechanism to eventually develop and enter into a comprehensive FTA with those countries. Other lawmakers identify that such mini agreements provide less leverage for addressing concerns regarding the environment and workers' rights in these countries. President Biden has said he does not plan any new trade agreements at this time and has prioritized domestic economic recovery.[88]

The 117th Congress may take an interest in renewing Trade Promotion Authority (Bipartisan Congressional Trade Priorities and Accountability Act of 2015, or TPA; P.L. 114-26), which expired on July 1, 2021. Although the Biden Administration is not prioritizing trade agreements, lawmakers may consider whether to include new trade agreement negotiating objectives and priorities or other requirements in TPA renewal.

Policymakers also may consider how to use trade policy to boost regional economies, especially in Central America, to help address some of the root causes of migration. Some Members have expressed an interest in the possibility of modifying CAFTA-DR's rules of origin in the textiles and apparel industries to promote investment and create manufacturing jobs in the region. For example, the flexibilities in CAFTA-DR may allow cumulation of originating content with other U.S. trade agreement partners such as USMCA or the U.S.-Colombia free trade agreement, which could broaden and strengthen supply chains in the region.

In addition, policymakers may continue to monitor the effects of COVID-19 on U.S. supply chains with countries in the Latin American and Caribbean region, the entry into force of the U.S.-Brazil trade protocol, alleged forced labor conditions in the Dominican Republic, and a possible extension of apparel trade preferences for Haiti, which are set to expire in 2025.

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[86] CRS Insight IN11760, *China and Taiwan Both Seek to Join the CPTPP*, by Brock R. Williams and Michael D. Sutherland.

[87] In 1994, 34 Western Hemisphere nations met at the first Summit of the Americas, envisioning a plan to complete a Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) by January 1, 2005. Faced with deadlocked negotiations, the United States and Brazil, the FTAA co-chairs, brokered a compromise at the November 2003 Miami trade ministerial. The compromise moved the FTAA away from the comprehensive single-undertaking principle toward a two-tier framework comprising a set of "common rights and obligations" for all countries, combined with voluntary plurilateral arrangements with country benefits related to commitments. The FTAA talks stalled in 2004. At the fourth Summit of the Americas, held in November 2005, Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, and Venezuela blocked an effort to restart negotiations. Further action has not occurred.

[88] See Guy Erb and Scott Sommers, *Biden's Trade Policy and Free Trade Areas*, Washington International Trade Association, April 8, 2021.

Members also may consider how the USMCA is affecting U.S. industries, especially the motor vehicle industry. Mexico and Canada recently requested a USMCA panel to resolve a dispute over the U.S. interpretation the rules of origin.

For additional information, see CRS Report R44981, *The United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA)*, by M. Angeles Villarreal; CRS In Focus IF10997, *U.S.-Mexico-Canada (USMCA) Trade Agreement*, by M. Angeles Villarreal; and CRS In Focus IF10038, *Trade Promotion Authority (TPA)*, by Ian F. Fergusson.

Selected Country and Subregional Issues

The Caribbean

Caribbean Regional Issues

The Caribbean is a diverse region of 16 independent countries and 18 overseas territories, including some of the hemisphere's richest and poorest nations. Among the region's independent countries are 13 island nations stretching from the Bahamas in the north to Trinidad and Tobago in the south. In addition, geographically, Belize is located in Central America and Guyana and Suriname are located on the northern coast of South America, but all three are members of CARICOM (see **Figure 2**).

In recent years, U.S. policy toward the Caribbean often has been eclipsed by attention to foreign policy crises elsewhere in the Western Hemisphere. Nevertheless, U.S. interests in the Caribbean are diverse and include economic, political, and security concerns. The U.S.-Caribbean relationship is characterized by extensive economic linkages (involving trade, investment, tourism, and large Caribbean diaspora communities in the United States) and by significant cooperation on counternarcotics and other security efforts. Because most Caribbean countries, with the exception of Haiti, have relatively high per capita incomes (classified by the World Bank as *upper-middle-income* or *high-income* economies), the region has not received large amounts of U.S. development assistance.[89] However, the United States has responded with humanitarian assistance in the aftermath of hurricanes that have devastated several countries in recent years. Beginning in the early 2000s, the United States significantly expanded assistance to the region to combat HIV/AIDS, with both Guyana and Haiti designated as focus countries in the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief initiative.

In December 2016, Congress enacted the United States-Caribbean Strategic Enhancement Act of 2016 (P.L. 114-291), requiring the State Department to develop a multiyear strategy to support U.S. engagement in the Caribbean. Completed in 2017, the strategy established a framework to strengthen U.S.-Caribbean relations in six priority areas: (1) security, with the objectives of countering transnational crime and terrorist organizations and advancing citizen security; (2) diplomacy, with the goal of increasing institutionalized engagement to forge greater cooperation at the OAS and the U.N.; (3) prosperity, including the promotion of sustainable economic growth and private sector-led investment and development; (4) energy, with the goals of increasing U.S. exports of natural gas and the use of U.S. renewable energy technologies; (5) education, focusing on increased exchanges for students, teachers, and other professionals; and (6) health, including a focus on long-standing efforts to fight infectious diseases such as HIV/AIDS.

[89] World Bank, "World Bank Country and Lending Groups," at https://datahelpdesk.worldbank.org/knowledgebase/articles/906519-world-bank-country-and-lending-groups.

Figure 2. Map of the Caribbean Region: Independent Countries

Source: Prepared by Amber Hope Wilhelm, Visual Information Specialist, CRS Graphics.

Notes: With the exception of Cuba and the Dominican Republic, the remaining 14 independent countries of the Caribbean region are members of the Caribbean Community, or CARICOM, an organization established by English-speaking Caribbean nations in 1973 to spur regional integration. Six Eastern Caribbean nations—Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, Grenada, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines—are members of the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States, established in 1981 to promote economic integration, harmonization of foreign policy, and other forms of cooperation among member states.

In 2019, the State Department issued a report to Congress on the implementation of its multiyear strategy. The report maintained that limited budgets and human resources have constrained opportunities for deepening relations, but funding for the strategy's security pillar has supported meaningful engagement and produced tangible results for regional and U.S. security interests.[90]

Caribbean Basin Security Initiative. Because of their geographic location, many Caribbean nations are vulnerable to use as transit countries for illicit drugs from South America destined for the U.S. and European markets. Many Caribbean countries also have suffered high rates of violent crime, including murder, often associated with drug trafficking activities. In response, the United States launched the CBSI in 2009, a regional U.S. foreign assistance program seeking to reduce drug trafficking in the region and advance public safety and security. The program dovetails with the first pillar of the State Department's Caribbean multiyear strategy for U.S. engagement, security. From FY2010 through FY2021, Congress appropriated a total of $751 million (current dollars) for the CBSI. These funds benefitted 13 Caribbean countries.[91] The

[90] U.S. Department of State, *2019 Report to Congress on Progress of Public Law (P.L.) 114-291: Efforts to Implement the Strategy for U.S. Engagement with the Caribbean Region*, July 2019.

[91] The 13 countries benefiting from the CBSI are Antigua and Barbuda, the Bahamas, Barbados, Dominica, the Dominican Republic, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname, and Trinidad and Tobago.

program has targeted assistance in five areas: (1) maritime and aerial security cooperation, (2) law enforcement capacity building, (3) border/port security and firearms interdiction, (4) justice sector reform, and (5) crime prevention and at-risk youth. For FY2022, the Biden Administration is requesting $66 million for the CBSI.

Caribbean Energy Security Initiative. Many Caribbean nations depend on energy imports and once participated in Venezuela's PetroCaribe program, which supplied Venezuelan oil under preferential financing terms. The United States launched the Caribbean Energy Security Initiative (CESI) in 2014, with the goal of promoting a cleaner and more sustainable energy future in the Caribbean.[92] The CESI includes various initiatives to boost energy security and sustainable economic growth by attracting investment in a range of energy technologies through a focus on improved governance; increased access to finance; and enhanced coordination among energy donors, governments, and stakeholders.[93]

Disaster Resilience and Climate Change. Many Caribbean countries are susceptible to extreme weather events such as tropical storms and hurricanes, which can significantly affect their economies and infrastructure. Recent scientific studies suggest climate change may be increasing the intensity of such events.[94] In September 2019, Hurricane Dorian caused widespread damage to the northwestern Bahamian islands of Grand Bahama and Abaco, with 70 confirmed deaths and many missing.[95] The United States responded with nearly $34 million in humanitarian assistance, including almost $25 million provided through USAID. Prior to the hurricane, the State Department had launched a U.S.-Caribbean Resilience Partnership in April 2019, with the goal of increasing regional disaster response capacity and promoting resilience to natural disasters. In December 2019, USAID announced it was providing $10 million to improve local resilience to disasters in the Caribbean. In 2020, USAID joined with CARICOM's Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency to launch the Caribbean Climate Resilience Initiative. As noted, the leaders of both Antigua and Barbuda and Jamaica were invited to participate in President Biden's Leaders' Summit on Climate in April 2021.

Small Islands Initiative. In March 2021, the Biden Administration launched the Small and Less Populous Island Economies (SALPIE) Initiative, an economic cooperation framework to strengthen U.S. collaboration with island countries, including in the Caribbean. The initiative's goals are to counter COVID-19 economic challenges, promote economic recovery, respond to the climate crisis, and advance longer-term shared interests.[96]

Congressional Action. Over the past several years, Congress rejected budget requests that would have cut CBSI funding and appropriated foreign assistance to address other challenges in the Caribbean, including disaster resilience, energy security, and climate change. Such support for Caribbean regional programs is continuing in the 117th Congress during consideration of the Biden Administration's FY2022 foreign aid request.

The House-passed version of the FY2022 foreign aid appropriations measure, H.R. 4373 (H.Rept. 117-84), would provide not less than $80 million for the CBSI (about 21% more than requested),

[92] U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, "U.S.-Caribbean Resilience Partnership," at https://www.state.gov/u-s-caribbean-resilience-partnership/.

[93] For background, see U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, "Caribbean Energy Security Initiative (CESI)," at https://www.state.gov/caribbean-energy-security-initiative-cesi/.

[94] See, for example, Kieran T Bhatia et al., "Recent Increases in Tropical Cyclone Intensification Rates," *Nature Communications*, vol. 10, no. 635 (2019).

[95] The Government of the Bahamas, Cabinet & Disaster Management (NEMA), "Hurricane Dorian, NEMA Update," November 29, 2019.

[96] White House, "Fact Sheet: Small and Less Populous Island Economies (SALPIE) Initiative," March 22, 2021.

$3 million for the CESI, and $5 million for Barbados and the Eastern Caribbean. The report to the bill also recommended $15 million for strengthening resilience to natural disasters in the Caribbean and $10 million for inclusive economic growth in the region, with a primary focus on small grants that advance entrepreneurship efforts of women, youth, and other disadvantaged populations. The report also recommended that $2 million of increased funding for the Inter-American Foundation be targeted at building disaster resiliency in the Caribbean and that the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation prioritize investments in the Caribbean, especially investments that support minority- and women-owned businesses and promote women's economic empowerment.

The draft explanatory statement to the Senate Appropriations Committee version of the FY2022 foreign aid appropriations bill, S. 3075, introduced in October 2021, would recommend $74.5 million for the CBSI (almost 13% more than requested) and $6.5 million for the Caribbean Energy Initiative (as opposed to the CESI). According to the explanatory statement, the committee continues to support enhanced efforts to help Latin American and Caribbean countries achieve greater energy independence, including by improving governance, renewable energy development, energy efficiency, and electrical interconnectivity.

The 117th Congress has taken action on two other bills with provisions on the Caribbean. The House-passed America COMPETES Act of 2022, H.R. 4521, approved February 4, 2022, would, among its provisions, require a multiyear strategy to promote regional cooperation with the Caribbean on energy issues and would authorize assistance for the U.S.-Caribbean Resilience Partnership from FY2022 to FY2024 (such measures also were included in H.R. 3524, the EAGLE Act, ordered reported by the House Foreign Affairs Committee in July 2021). Another bill, H.R. 4133, ordered reported by the House Foreign Affairs Committee in September 2021, would authorize $74.8 million for the CBSI for each fiscal year from FY2022 to FY2026 and would establish monitoring and reporting requirements for the program.

For additional information, see CRS In Focus IF10789, *Caribbean Basin Security Initiative*, by Mark P. Sullivan; CRS In Focus IF10407, *Dominican Republic*, by Clare Ribando Seelke; CRS In Focus IF10912, *Jamaica*, by Mark P. Sullivan; and CRS In Focus IF10666, *The Bahamas: An Overview*, by Mark P. Sullivan.

Cuba

Political and economic developments in Cuba, a one-party authoritarian state with a poor human rights record, frequently have been the subject of intense congressional concern since the 1959 Cuban revolution. Miguel Díaz-Canel succeeded Raúl Castro as president in 2018 and as head of the Cuban Communist Party in April 2021. Cuba adopted a new constitution in 2019 that introduced some political and market-oriented reforms but continued the state's dominance over the economy and the Communist Party's predominant political role. A November 2020 government crackdown on the San Isidro Movement (MSI), a civil society group opposing restrictions on artistic expression, spurred a protest by several hundred Cubans. Motivated by the repression of the MSI, in February 2021, a group of Cuban recording artists released a song and music video, *Patria y Vida*, critical of the government; it became an instant hit.

On July 11, 2021, widespread anti-government demonstrations broke out in Havana and in cities and towns throughout the country, with thousands of Cubans protesting shortages of food and medicine, daily blackouts, slow progress on COVID-19 vaccinations, and long-standing concerns about the lack of freedom of expression and assembly. The government responded with harsh measures, including widespread detentions of hundreds of protesters, activists, and journalists, and Cuba human rights groups reported summary trials for some of those detained. The Cuban

government also denied permission and disrupted plans for a new dissident group, Archipiélago, to conduct a countrywide "civic march for change" on November 15, 2021. As of early February 2022, the human rights groups Cuban Prisoners Defenders reported 932 political prisoners (up from 152 on July 1, 2021), of which 626 were imprisoned and considered prisoners of conscience by CPD, 209 were under some form of conditional release, and 97 were imprisoned for other politically motivated acts.[97]

The Cuban economy is being hard-hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, reduced support from Venezuela, and U.S. economic sanctions. The Cuban government reports the country's economy contracted 11% in 2020, and the Economist Intelligence Unit estimated 0.1% growth in 2021.[98] Over the past decade, Cuba has implemented gradual market-oriented economic policy changes, but the slow pace of these reforms has not fostered sustainable growth and development. In January 2021, Cuba eliminated its dual currency system; the long-debated reform ignited inflation, with estimates ranging from 300% to over 700% by the end of 2021.[99]

Cuba's public health response to the pandemic initially kept cases and deaths low, but both began to increase in late 2020 and surged until August 2021; the country experienced another surge of cases in January 2022 due to the Omicron variant, but deaths remained low because of the country's high vaccination rate. As of early February 2022, the country had reported over 8,400 deaths, with a mortality rate of 74 per 100,000 people.[100] Cuba has developed and manufactured three COVID-19 vaccines and, as of early February 2022, had fully vaccinated 86% of its population, one of the highest rates in the region.[101]

Since the early 1960s, the centerpiece of U.S. policy toward Cuba has been economic sanctions aimed at isolating the Cuban government. Congress has played an active role in shaping policy toward Cuba, including by enacting legislation that strengthens—and at times eases—U.S. economic sanctions. In 2014, the Obama Administration initiated a policy shift away from sanctions and toward a policy of engagement. This shift included the restoration of diplomatic relations; the rescission of Cuba's designation as a state sponsor of international terrorism; and an increase in travel, commerce, and the flow of information to Cuba implemented through regulatory changes. President Trump unveiled his Administration's Cuba policy in 2017, issuing a national security presidential memorandum that introduced new sanctions, including restrictions on transactions with companies controlled by the Cuban military. By 2019, the Trump Administration had largely abandoned engagement and had significantly increased sanctions, particularly on travel and remittances, to pressure Cuba on human rights and for its support of the Maduro government in Venezuela government.

In its initial months, the Biden Administration announced it was conducting a review of policy toward Cuba. The White House press secretary said on March 9, 2021, that although a Cuba policy shift was not among the President's top priorities, the Administration was "committed to making human rights a core pillar" of policy and would review policy decisions made in the prior Administration, including the decision to designate Cuba as a state sponsor of terrorism.[102]

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[97] Cuban Prisoners Defenders, "Monthly Update of the Prisoners Defenders' List of Political Prisoners in Cuba," February 7, 2022.

[98] EIU, *Cuba Country Report*, 4th quarter 2021.

[99] Ibid, and Marc Frank, "Cuban Peso in Free Fall Against the Dollar," Reuters, January 26, 2022.

[100] Johns Hopkins, "Mortality Analyses," February 6, 2022.

[101] Johns Hopkins, "Vaccination Progress Across the World," February 6, 2022.

[102] U.S. Department of State, "Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jen Psaki and Deputy Director of the National Economic Council Bharat Ramamurti," March 9, 2021.

In the aftermath of the July 11 protests, the Biden Administration took several actions. President Biden and other Administration officials expressed solidarity with the protesters and strongly criticized the Cuban government for its repressive response. In July and August 2021, the Department of the Treasury imposed four rounds of targeted financial sanctions on several Cuban security entities and officials involved in actions to suppress peaceful, democratic protests in Cuba. In November 2021, the State Department imposed visa restrictions on Cuban officials implicated in suppressing a planned civic march; in January 2022, it imposed visa restrictions on Cuban officials connected to the detention, sentencing, and imprisonment of the July 11 protesters. Among other actions, the Administration established a working group to identify the most effective ways to get remittances directly to the Cuban people, held engagement sessions with members of the Cuban American community, began reviewing plans to increase staffing at the U.S. Embassy in Havana to facilitate consular services and engagement with civil society, and stated it was actively collaborating with the private sector to identify creative ways to ensure Cuban citizens have internet access.

In congressional testimony in early February 2022, Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affair Brian Nichols maintained that the State Department would soon be deploying temporary duty personnel offices to Havana to increase visa processing and is awaiting a White House decision on remittances. He noted that the remittances working group had provided recommendations to the White House on ways to permit the flow of remittances to Cuba without increasing funds that would go to the Cuban military.[103]

Congressional Action. Past Congresses supported U.S. funding for human rights and democracy programs in Cuba and for U.S.-government sponsored broadcasting to Cuba, as well as resolutions expressing concern about human rights, but views among Members often diverged regarding the best approach to influence the Cuban government's behavior.

The 117th Congress is considering the Administration's FY2022 foreign operations request of $20 million for Cuba democracy programs (same as appropriated annually since FY2014) and nearly $13 million for Cuba broadcasting (same as appropriated in FY2021). Both the House-approved and the Senate-introduced versions of the FY2022 foreign aid appropriations bill (H.R. 4373, H.Rept. 117-84; S. 3075) would fully fund both programs. Of the $20 million for Cuba democracy programs, the House bill would provide not less than $5 million to support free enterprise, private business organizations, and people-to-people and cultural activities. In contrast, the version in the Senate would provide $5 million for such activities in addition to the $20 million in democracy funding.

On human rights in Cuba, the House approved H.Res. 760 in early November 2021 and the Senate approved S.Res. 310 in August; both resolutions expressed solidarity with Cubans demonstrating peacefully, condemned Cuba's acts of repression, and called for the immediate release of arbitrarily detained Cuban citizens. In other action, the Senate passed: S.Res. 37 in April 2021, expressing solidarity with the MSI; S.Res. 81 in May, honoring *Las Damas de Blanco*, a woman-led human rights group; S. 2045 in July, which would rename the street in front of the Cuban Embassy after a democracy activist; and S.Res. 489 in January 2022, commending Cuban pro-democracy and human rights activists, including José Daniel Ferrer Garcia.

For additional information, see CRS In Focus IF10045, *Cuba: U.S. Policy Overview*, by Mark P. Sullivan; CRS Report R45657, *Cuba: U.S. Policy in the 116th Congress and Through the Trump Administration*, by Mark P. Sullivan; CRS Report RL31139, *Cuba: U.S. Restrictions on Travel*

[103] "House Foreign Affairs Committee Holds Hearing on Overview of U.S. Priorities in the Western Hemisphere," *CQ Congressional Transcripts*, February 3, 2022.

and Remittances, by Mark P. Sullivan; and CRS Report R43835, *State Sponsors of Acts of International Terrorism—Legislative Parameters: In Brief*, by Dianne E. Rennack.

Haiti

In July and August 2021, a presidential assassination, an earthquake, and a tropical storm exacerbated Haiti's political, social, and economic woes. The aftermath of these events, on top of several preexisting crises in Haiti, likely points to a period of major instability, presenting challenges for U.S. policymakers and for congressional oversight of the U.S. response and assistance, including to Haitian emigration and foreign assistance.

The assassination of President Jovenel Moïse in the capital, Port-au-Prince, on July 7, 2021, left a power vacuum without a clear path forward. Political gridlock between the executive and legislative branches during his tenure led to the government not organizing elections scheduled for 2019. The terms of the entire lower Chamber of Deputies and two-thirds of the Senate expired in January 2020, as did the terms of all local government posts, without newly elected officials to take their places. Moïse had been ruling by decree since then.

After his death, Haiti had no president or legislature and virtually no elected officials functioning at any level. The lack of elected officials makes the question of presidential succession and the organization of elections difficult, as officials are not in place to carry out the procedures outlined in various articles of the Haitian constitution. It also raises questions about the legitimacy of any interim governments. Gangs have been taking advantage of this power vacuum to expand their criminal activities; some observers estimate that gangs now control as much as 50%-60% of Haitian territory.[104]

On July 17, 2021, after a Haitian power struggle, U.S. and U.N. officials shifted support from the acting prime minister to prime minister-designate Ariel Henry, calling for the formation of a consensus government to hold credible elections as soon as possible and to ensure every citizen receives adequate public services. Some observers have questioned that support, both because Henry was not elected and because of alleged ties to the president's assassination.[105] Henry's term was due to expire on February 7, 2022, when Moïse's term would have ended, adding to the urgency of Haitians agreeing on some sort of interim government to follow his. Nonetheless, Henry will most likely stay in place for the time being.

Ten senators remain in office but do not constitute a quorum and so cannot act officially. Nonetheless, after the assassination, they voted for Senate leader Joseph Lambert to succeed Moïse. In October 2021, Lambert called for Henry to resign and be replaced by a new interim government, with himself as president.[106] The senators argue that their terms expire in January 2023; Henry argues they end in 2022.[107]

Various coalitions of civil society groups and political parties have proposed plans for an interim government to manage Haiti until conditions are suitable for holding elections, the major ones

[104] *New York Times*, "'It's Terror': In Haiti, Gangs Gain Power as Security Vacuum Grows," October 27, 2021; and *CANANews*, "Haiti-Crime-Former Government Official Says Kidnappers Are Better Equipped Than Police," December 6, 2021.

[105] See, for example, *Washington Post*, "Read: Resignation Letter from U.S. Special Envoy for Haiti, Daniel Foote," September 23, 2021; and U.S. Department of State, "Western Hemisphere Affairs Assistant Secretary Brian A. Nichols on the Recent International Partners Meeting on Haiti," special briefing, December 17, 2021.

[106] Matt Rivers, "Exclusive: Haiti's Senate Leader Calls on Prime Minister to Resign," CNN, October 27, 2021.

[107] Telesur, "Haiti: Duration of the Mandate of 10 Senators Prompts Conflicts," January 11, 2022.

being the so-called Montana Group, signers of the Louisiana Unitary Accord, and backers of de facto Prime Minister Ariel Henry's plan, which he presented in September 2021. Henry's plan includes holding a referendum on constitutional changes prior to elections, despite constitutional amendment by referendum being "strictly forbidden" by the current constitution (Article 284.3). Henry also dissolved the Provisional Electoral Council, which would have organized elections. At a meeting with donors on January 21, 2022, Henry reportedly said he expected to install a new provisional electoral council within days and pledged to hold elections in 2022.[108]

According to U.N. reports, gangs challenge the Haitian state's authority and are often better armed and better equipped than law-enforcement authorities.[109] According to the U.S. Department of the Treasury, gangs have operated with the support of some Haitian politicians, receiving money, political protection, and firearms in exchange for carrying out attacks designed to create instability and suppress protests over living conditions.[110] Some gangs have called for Henry to resign, violently preventing him from carrying out official functions and creating a nationwide fuel shortage in protest. Armed groups attacked Henry on January 1, 2022, in what his office said was an assassination attempt.

The Haitian National Police (HNP) force, which became increasingly professional with the support of U.N. peacekeeping forces (2004-2017) and U.S. and other international assistance, has been unable to maintain control in the face of increased violence, murders, and kidnapping (including that of 16 U.S. missionaries in October, who have since been released or escaped). The HNP is underfunded and is smaller than international standards for the country's population. According to the U.N., the HNP has committed human rights abuses, including 19 extrajudicial killings in fall 2019.[111]

Political instability and extreme vulnerability to natural disasters contribute to Haiti being the poorest and one of the most unequal countries in the Western Hemisphere. According to the World Bank, a weak economy, political turmoil, and the COVID-19 pandemic reversed modest reductions in poverty, leaving almost 60% of Haitians in poverty in 2020. Over 96% of the population is vulnerable to natural disasters.[112] In August 2021, a 7.2 magnitude earthquake struck Haiti, resulting in over 2,000 deaths and affecting about 1.2 million people, mostly in the southwestern peninsula.[113] The quake destroyed 84,000 homes and many hospitals, schools, and crops. Three days later, Tropical Storm Grace hit Haiti, causing mudslides and flooding. Haiti already had one of the highest levels of food insecurity in the world, with 42% of the population facing acute food insecurity in September 2020. In the areas hardest hit by the August earthquake, according to the World Food Programme, the number of people urgently needing food assistance increased by one-third.[114] Two more earthquakes hit the area on January 24, 2022.

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[108] Rob Gillies and Dánica Coto, "Canada, U.S. and Allies Talk Aid for Haiti at Meeting," Associated Press, January 21, 2022.

[109] U.N. Integrated Office in Haiti, "SRSG La Lime Statement to the Security Council," October 5, 2020; and U.N. Security Council, "The Question Concerning Haiti," S/PV.8729, February 20, 2020, p. 3.

[110] U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Sanctions Serious Human Rights Abusers on International Human Rights Day: Designations Target Human Rights Abusers in Haiti, Yemen, and Russia," press release, December 10, 2020.

[111] Marta Hurtado, "Press Briefing Note on Haiti Unrest," Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, November 1, 2019.

[112] "The World Bank in Haiti: Overview," November 8, 2021, at https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/haiti/overview.

[113] Amanda Coletta and Ellen Francis, "Stranded by Tropical Storm Grace, Haiti Earthquake Survivors Seek Shelter," *Washington Post*, August 19, 2021.

[114] Laura Gottesdiener, "Haiti's Hunger Crisis Bites Deeper After Devastating Quake," Reuters, August 30, 2021.

The Biden Administration requested $188 million in U.S. assistance for Haiti in FY2022, $51 million of which would be for development assistance. The United States donated 500,000 doses of COVID-19 vaccine doses in July 2021 through COVAX; Haiti returned more than half of the doses in October, since they were set to expire before Haiti could administer them. Haiti reportedly will receive future doses in exchange. From November through January 2022, the United States donated almost 248,000 additional vaccine doses through COVAX.[115] As of early February 2022, less than 1% of Haiti's 11 million people were fully vaccinated.[116]

In December 2021, Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Brian Nichols met with 14 partner countries, several international organizations, and the Haitian foreign minister to discuss challenges in Haiti. The group agreed that the HNP needs additional international support and that "political dialogue must continue among all sectors of Haitian society to build consensus on a political accord." The group also sought concrete pledges from participants for security, political, and economic assistance.[117] On January 21, 2022, two dozen senior international officials pledged to increase aid, including to the HNP, focusing on rule of law, justice, and human rights.[118]

Congressional Action. In March 2021, the House Committee on Foreign Affairs held a hearing on policy recommendations for the Biden Administration on Haiti (see **Appendix**). The House passed the Haiti Development, Accountability, and Institutional Transparency Initiative Act (H.R. 2471) in June 2021, and the Senate approved the bill, with an amendment, on January 13, 2022. The bill would measure the progress of post-disaster recovery and efforts to address corruption, governance, rule of law, and media freedoms in Haiti. In July 2021, the House Foreign Affairs Committee ordered reported H.Res. 549, which would condemn the assassination of the Haitian president and urge U.S. and global support of Haitian-led solutions. Measures to extend from 2025 to 2035 duty-free treatment with respect to imports from Haiti under the Caribbean Basin Economic Recovery Act have been introduced in both chambers as the Haiti Economic Lift Program Extension Act of 2021 (S. 3279 in November 2021; H.R. 6136 in December 2021).

See also CRS Insight IN11699, *Haiti: Concerns After the Presidential Assassination*, by Maureen Taft-Morales; and, for earlier background, CRS Report R45034, *Haiti's Political and Economic Conditions*, by Maureen Taft-Morales.

Mexico and Central America

Mexico

Congress has demonstrated sustained interest in Mexico, a neighboring country and top trading partner with which the United States has a close but complicated relationship. In recent decades, U.S.-Mexican relations have improved, as the countries have become close trade partners and have worked to address migration, crime, and other issues. Nevertheless, the history of U.S.

[115] PAHO, Tracker COVAX Initiative – COVID-19 Vaccine Deliveries in the Americas, February 3, 2022; *Haiti Libre*, "Haiti - Covid: Vaccination Failure, Haiti Will His [sic] Exchange Expired Vaccines," October 14, 2021; and *CE Noticias Financieras*, "Haiti to Return Thousands of COVID Vaccines to U.S.; They're Close to Expiring," October 13, 2021.

[116] Johns Hopkins, "Vaccination Progress Across the World," February 6, 2022.

[117] U.S. Department of State, "Western Hemisphere Affairs Assistant Secretary Brian A. Nichols on the Recent International Partners Meeting on Haiti," special briefing, December 17, 2021.

[118] Rob Gillies and Dánica Coto, "Canada, U.S., and Allies Talk Aid for Haiti at Meeting," Associated Press, January 21, 2022.

military and diplomatic intervention in Mexico and the asymmetrical power dynamics of the relationship provoke periodic tensions.

Mexico has undergone significant changes under the populist rule of Andrés Manuel López Obrador, leader of the National Regeneration Movement (MORENA) party, who took office for a six-year term in December 2018. López Obrador, who created MORENA in 2014, is the first Mexican president in over two decades to enjoy majority support in both legislative chambers, although the size of those majorities decreased following June 2021 midterm elections. In addition to combating corruption, he pledged to build infrastructure in southern Mexico, revive the poorly performing state oil company, address citizen security through social programs, and adopt a noninterventionist foreign policy.

López Obrador's approval ratings have remained high (65% in November 2021), even as his government has struggled to address organized crime-related violence and the health and economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, which had resulted in more than 309,000 deaths as of early February 2022.[119] Supporters have generally praised the government's social programs and minimum-wage increases, as well as López Obrador's ability to connect with average Mexicans through daily press conferences and frequent, countrywide travel. Many observers have criticized López Obrador's attacks on freedom of the press, independent government institutions, and judicial independence. His government has also received criticism for its austere fiscal policy, which has reduced government spending, especially for autonomous institutions, while sparing his priority infrastructure projects from cuts.[120] Since López Obrador took office, prosecutors have not pursued corruption allegations involving the president's allies.[121]

U.S.-Mexico relations have remained generally cordial under López Obrador. Nevertheless, tensions have emerged over issues including border security, U.S. investigations of Mexican officials, and policies Mexico has adopted that have negatively affected U.S. energy investors. The López Obrador government enacted labor reform measures (May 2019), which contributed to U.S. congressional approval of implementing legislation (P.L. 116-113) for the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA). The government accommodated the Trump Administration's restrictive border and asylum policy changes, which shifted more of the burden of interdicting migrants and offering asylum from the United States to Mexico. The October 2020 arrest of former Mexican Defense Minister Salvador Cienfuegos in the United States on drug trafficking charges deeply angered the Mexican government. Despite Cienfuegos's subsequent release, Mexico enacted legislation to limit U.S. law enforcement operations and U.S.-Mexican intelligence sharing in the country.[122] Security cooperation under the Mérida Initiative, a security and rule-of-law partnership for which Congress has appropriated more than $3.3 billion since FY2008, stalled at the federal level in Mexico, but state and local cooperation continued.

Despite some lingering tension in relations, Mexico is directly involved in addressing several challenges facing U.S. policymakers. A High-Level Economic Dialogue took place in September 2021, and a Cabinet-level security dialogue convened in October to launch a new bicentennial framework for security cooperation to replace the Mérida Initiative. The August 2021 Supreme

[119] Carrin Zissis, "Approval Tracker: Mexico's President AMLO," *Americas Society/Council of the Americas*, January 6, 2022; and Johns Hopkins, "Mortality Analyses," February 6, 2022.

[120] Zedryk Raziel, "Recorte de 75% Compromete Pagos de Servicios Básicos del Gobierno y Arriesga Inversiones en Salud y Ciencia," *Animal Político*, June 1, 2020.

[121] Americas Society/Council of the Americas and Control Risks, *The Capacity to Commit Corruption Index: 2021*.

[122] Vanda Felbab-Brown, "A Dangerous Backtrack on the US-Mexico Security Relationship," Brookings Institution, December 21, 2021.

Court ruling ordering the Biden Administration to reinstate the MPP policy prompted new discussions on how and under what conditions Mexico would agree to restart the program. MPP restarted in December 2021 under new guidance, providing more assistance with shelter and other services to migrants enrolled in the program and expanding the number of migrants who fall within its criteria. The Biden Administration had provided Mexico with some 11 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines as of December 2021, some of which Mexico had distributed in northern border states to help facilitate the border's reopening in November 2021.[123] The Administration has expressed increasing concerns about a López Obrador-backed electricity reform, now under consideration in the Mexican Congress, that would guarantee a majority of the electricity market to Mexico's state-owned electricity commission at the expense of private U.S. energy producers. Presidents Biden and López Obrador held bilateral and trilateral (with Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau) meetings during the North American Leaders summit in November 2021, the first since 2016.

Congressional Action. Congress is considering the Biden Administration's FY2022 foreign assistance request for Mexico of $116.5 million, which is nearly 27% lower than the estimated FY2021 appropriation of $158.9 million. The Administration's FY2022 request for INCLE aid for Mexico is $44 million less than the FY2021 estimated appropriation. The House-passed version of the FY2022 foreign aid appropriations bill (H.R. 4373, H.Rept. 117-84) would provide $158.9 million for assistance to Mexico. It would require a comprehensive review of funds provided through the Mérida Initiative and a report on any funds appropriated to Mexican agencies involved in migration management within 90 days of the bill's enactment. The measure also would require reports on plans to improve data collection on synthetic drug trafficking, crimes committed along Mexico's northern highways, combating fentanyl flows, and the efficacy of U.S. drug control tools such as sanctions. The Senate Appropriation Committee's version of the FY2022 foreign aid bill (S. 3075) does not stipulate a total funding level for Mexico but would specify $80 million in INCLE funds. The explanatory statement accompanying the bill would require a review of the Mérida Initiative and a report on Mexico's human rights efforts.

Other legislation would address U.S. relations with Mexico, including H.R. 3524, the EAGLE Act, reported by the House Committee on Foreign Affairs in July 2021, which would require a report on how the United States, Mexico, and Canada could work together to reduce methane and other emissions and implement Article 23.6 of the USMCA, which prohibits importation of goods produced by forced labor. S. 1201, the U.S. Climate Act, introduced in the Senate in April 2021, contains similar provisions. The bill would require the Secretary of State to produce a report including a strategy for reengaging with Mexico and Canada on methane reduction targets and would require the President to develop a strategy for enhancing trilateral cooperation on climate issues.

For additional information, see CRS Report R42917, *Mexico: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Clare Ribando Seelke; CRS Report RL32934, *U.S.-Mexico Economic Relations: Trends, Issues, and Implications*, by M. Angeles Villarreal; CRS Report R44981, *The United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA)*, by M. Angeles Villarreal; CRS In Focus IF10578, *Mexico: Evolution of the Mérida Initiative, FY2008-FY2022*, by Clare Ribando Seelke; CRS Report R41576, *Mexico: Organized Crime and Drug Trafficking Organizations*, by June S. Beittel; CRS In Focus IF10215, *Mexico's Immigration Control Efforts*, by Clare Ribando Seelke; CRS In Focus IF10400, *Trends in Mexican Opioid Trafficking and Implications for U.S.-Mexico Security Cooperation*, by Liana W. Rosen and Clare Ribando Seelke; and CRS In Focus IF11669, *Human*

[123] Chase Harrison, "Tracker: U.S. Vaccine Donations to Latin America," Americas Society/Council of the Americas, December 15, 2021.

Rights Challenges in Mexico: Addressing Enforced Disappearances, by Clare Ribando Seelke and Rachel L. Martin.

Central America's Northern Triangle

The Northern Triangle region of Central America (see **Figure 3**) has received considerable attention from U.S. policymakers over the past decade, as it has become a major transit corridor for illicit drugs and, in some years, has surpassed Mexico as the largest source of irregular migration to the United States. In FY2021, for example, U.S. authorities encountered approximately 319,000 Hondurans, 283,000 Guatemalans, and 99,000 Salvadorans at the Southwest border.[124]

These narcotics and migrant flows are the latest symptoms of deep-rooted challenges in the region, including widespread insecurity, fragile political and judicial systems, and high levels of poverty and unemployment. The COVID-19 pandemic and a series of tropical storms have exacerbated socio-economic difficulties in the region, contributing to a sharp increase in poverty and food insecurity since 2020. Political conditions also have deteriorated over the past two years, as government officials in all three Northern Triangle countries have taken steps to hinder anti-corruption efforts and Salvadoran officials have significantly eroded checks and balances and have restricted civil liberties.

U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America. In 2014, the Obama Administration determined it was in the national security interests of the United States to work with Central American governments to improve living conditions in the region. It drafted a new U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America and, with congressional support, significantly increased annual foreign assistance for the region. From FY2016 to FY2021, Congress appropriated a total of more than $3.7 billion to implement the strategy, allocating most of the funds to El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.

Figure 3. Map of Central America

Source: CRS Graphics.

Note: Geographically located in Central America, Belize is a member of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) as well as the Central American Integration System.

[124] It is unclear how many of these were unique individuals versus repeat encounters. CBP, "Southwest Land Border Encounters," January 24, 2022.

The Trump Administration initially maintained the U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America but effectively halted the initiative in March 2019, when it suspended aid to the Northern Triangle due to the continued northward flow of migrants and asylum-seekers from the region. The Administration reprogrammed $396.2 million to other foreign policy priorities and withheld the remaining assistance for the region for up to 14 months while it negotiated a series of border security and asylum agreements with the Northern Triangle governments. The aid suspension adversely affected nearly 39% of the State Department's assistance projects and 81% of USAID's assistance projects in the region.[125]

Biden Administration Policy. The Biden Administration has placed renewed emphasis on engagement with Central America. In July 2021, pursuant to the United States-Northern Triangle Enhanced Engagement Act (P.L. 116-260, Division FF, Subtitle F) and E.O. 14010, the Administration released a new U.S. Strategy for Addressing the Root Causes of Migration in Central America. The strategy seeks to foster systemic change in the region by (1) addressing economic insecurity and inequality; (2) combatting corruption, strengthening democratic governance, and advancing the rule of law; (3) promoting respect for human rights, labor rights, and a free press; (4) countering and preventing violence, extortion, and other crimes perpetrated by gangs, trafficking networks, and other criminal organizations; and (5) combatting sexual, gender-based, and domestic violence.[126]

Although the root causes strategy is similar to the prior U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America, Biden Administration officials assert they will improve the effectiveness of U.S. efforts by incorporating lessons learned over the past six years. They intend to use migration data to target programs, place greater emphasis on host country governance, enhance partnerships with local organizations, and increase the scale of U.S. efforts.[127] As part of its increased emphasis on governance concerns, the Administration has named and imposed visa sanctions on more than 60 current and former Salvadoran, Guatemalan, and Honduran officials allegedly involved in corruption or undemocratic actions, pursuant to the United States-Northern Triangle Enhanced Engagement Act (P.L. 116-260, Division FF, Subtitle F).[128] To increase the scale of U.S. efforts, the Administration has proposed allocating $4 billion to the region over four years, including $860.6 million in FY2022.

The Biden Administration also developed, pursuant to E.O. 14010, a new Collaborative Migration Management Strategy intended to build a regional framework for safe, orderly, and humane migration in North and Central America. Released in July 2021, the migration management strategy calls for a surge of humanitarian assistance to alleviate conditions in the region; messaging campaigns to deter irregular migration; support for partner governments' efforts to manage their borders, provide protection to vulnerable populations, and reintegrate returned migrants; and expanded access to legal migration and protection pathways in the United States

[125] U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Northern Triangle of Central America: The 2019 Suspension and Reprogramming of U.S. Funding Adversely Affected Assistance Projects*, GAO-21-104366, September 2021, at https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-21-104366.pdf.

[126] White House, U.S. *Strategy for Addressing the Root Causes of Migration in Central America*, July 2021, at https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Root-Causes-Strategy.pdf.

[127] U.S. Department of State, "On the Collaborative Migration Management Strategy and Root Causes Strategy Toward Migration," special briefing, July 29, 2021.

[128] U.S. Department of State, "Section 353 Corrupt and Undemocratic Actors Report," July 1, 2021; and Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken, "United States Announces Actions Against Seven Central American Officials for Undermining Democracy and Obstructing Investigations into Acts of Corruption," press statement, September 20, 2021.

and third countries.[129] In accordance with the strategy, the Administration allocated $272.2 million of humanitarian assistance to address the needs of vulnerable populations in Central America and Mexico in FY2021.[130] The Administration also has reestablished and expanded the Central American Minors program, which reunites eligible minors in the Northern Triangle with parents in the United States, and has made available 6,500 supplemental H-2B temporary nonagricultural worker visas for nationals of the Northern Triangle countries and Haiti in FY2022.[131]

Congressional Action. The Biden Administration's approach to Central America has been the subject of significant congressional debate and oversight, including several hearings (see **Appendix**). Some Members have demonstrated support for the Administration's funding priorities. For example, the House-passed foreign aid appropriations measure (H.R. 4373, H.Rept. 117-84) would fully fund the Administration's $860.6 million request for Central America. Likewise, the U.S. Citizenship Act of 2021 (S. 348/H.R. 1177) would authorize $4 billion over four years to combat corruption, strengthen the rule of law, and consolidate democratic governance; reduce criminal violence and improve citizen security; counter sexual, gender-based, and domestic violence; and address extreme poverty and economic development in the region.

Other legislative measures would provide more limited support for assistance efforts in Central America. The foreign aid appropriations bill introduced in the Senate (S. 3075) would provide $653.9 million for the region, which is 24% less than requested. The Central American Women and Children Protection Act of 2021 (S. 2003 /H.R. 4017) would authorize the Administration to enter into agreements with the Northern Triangle governments to prevent and deter violence against women and children, provide support to victims, and hold perpetrators accountable. Similar provisions were incorporated into the House-passed version of the FY2022 NDAA (H.R. 4350) but were not included in the final legislation (P.L. 117-81).

Many Members of Congress remain concerned about widespread corruption and impunity in Central America. H.R. 4373 and S. 3075, like previous foreign aid appropriations measures, would require the State Department to withhold a portion of the assistance appropriated for the Northern Triangle governments until it certifies those governments are combatting corruption, protecting human rights, and addressing other congressional concerns. H.R. 4373 would also provide $60 million for "entities and activities to combat corruption and impunity" in Central America and $500,000 to increase staff focused on Central America within the State Department's Office of Economic Sanctions Policy and Implementation. A provision of H.R. 4350 would have extended visa sanctions to cover the immediate families of individuals engaged in corruption, prohibited assistance for Northern Triangle security force units credibly alleged to have engaged in corruption, established a State Department fellowship program to support rule-of-law activities in Central America, and required an intelligence assessment of corrupt networks within Central American governments, among other measures.

The erosion of democracy and human rights in the region also remains a top concern for many in Congress. A provision of P.L. 117-81 requires a series of reports on U.S. security cooperation with the Northern Triangle countries. These include a DOD report on ongoing and planned activities in the region focused on human rights and the rule of law, a GAO evaluation of DOD's

[129] White House, *Collaborative Migration Management Strategy*, July 2021, at https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Collaborative-Migration-Management-Strategy.pdf.

[130] USAID, "El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras—Regional Response," Fact Sheet #12, FY2021, September 30, 2021.

[131] DHS, "For First Time, DHS to Supplement H-2B Cap with Additional Visas in First Half of Fiscal Year," press release, December 20, 2021.

end-use monitoring procedures in the Northern Triangle, and an evaluation to be conducted by a federally funded research and development center regarding how DOD's security cooperation programs promote the rule of law and human rights and advance other U.S. objectives in the region. Other bills would restrict U.S. security cooperation with Honduras (S. 388/H.R. 2716 and H.R. 1574) and urge the Salvadoran government to respect the country's democratic institutions (H.Res. 408).

For additional information, see CRS Insight IN11603, *Central America's Northern Triangle: Challenges for U.S. Policymakers in 2021*, by Peter J. Meyer; CRS In Focus IF11151, *Central American Migration: Root Causes and U.S. Policy*, by Peter J. Meyer; CRS In Focus IF10371, *U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America: An Overview*, by Peter J. Meyer; CRS Report R44812, *U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America: Policy Issues for Congress*, by Peter J. Meyer; CRS Report R43616, *El Salvador: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Clare Ribando Seelke; CRS Insight IN11658, *El Salvador: Authoritarian Actions and U.S. Response*, by Clare Ribando Seelke; and CRS Report RL34027, *Honduras: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Peter J. Meyer.

Nicaragua

President Daniel Ortega further solidified his control over Nicaraguan institutions and society in November 7, 2021, elections that eliminated all viable candidates and parties from participation. Presidential terms are normally for five years, and Ortega orchestrated the elimination of term limits in 2014. Ortega has been suppressing unrest in Nicaragua in a manner reminiscent of Anastasio Somoza, the dictator Ortega helped overthrow in 1979 as a leader of the leftist Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN). Ortega served as president from 1985 to 1990, during which time the United States backed right-wing insurgents (contras) in an attempt to overthrow the Sandinista government. In the early 1990s, Nicaragua began to establish democratic governance.

Nonetheless, the FSLN and Ortega gradually consolidated control over the country's institutions. Ortega reclaimed the presidency in 2007 and has served as president for the past 14 years, creating what the State Department calls "a highly centralized, authoritarian system."[132] According to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), this consolidation of power in the executive "has facilitated Nicaragua's transformation into a police state in which the executive branch has instituted a regime of terror and of suppression of all freedoms ... supported by the other branches of government."[133]

Until 2018, for many Nicaraguans, Ortega's populist social welfare programs, which had improved their standards of living, outweighed his authoritarian tendencies and self-enrichment; similarly, for many in the international community, the relative stability in Nicaragua outweighed Ortega's antidemocratic actions. Ortega's long-term strategy to retain government control began to unravel in 2018, when his proposal to reduce social security benefits triggered protests led by a wide range of Nicaraguans. The government's repressive response included extrajudicial killings, torture, political imprisonment, and suppression of the press and led to thousands of citizens going into exile.[134] The government says it was defending itself from coup attempts.

[132] U.S. Department of State, *Nicaragua 2020 Human Rights Report*, March 20, 2021.

[133] Inter-American Commission On Human Rights, *Nicaragua: Concentration of Power and the Undermining of the Rule of Law*, OEA/Ser.L/V/II, Doc. 288, October 25, 2021, p. 65.

[134] Organization of American States (OAS), *Report of the High-Level Commission on Nicaragua of the Organization of*

The 2018 crisis undermined economic growth in Nicaragua, the hemisphere's second-poorest country. Government repression has continued, and the COVID-19 pandemic and hurricane damage have worsened conditions in the country. Nicaragua's economy contracted by 3.7% in 2019 and 2.0% in 2020 but grew an estimated 5% in 2021, according to the IMF. Unemployment nearly doubled, from 6% in 2019 to an estimated 11% in 2021.[135]

Dialogue between the government and the opposition collapsed in 2019. Opposition elements tried unsuccessfully to unite behind a single candidate. In addition, the Sandinista-controlled legislature passed a series of repressive laws used to eliminate electoral competition, and the government launched a period of increased oppression. According to Amnesty International, "The enforced disappearance of people is the latest tactic that authorities in Nicaragua have adopted to silence any criticism or dissenting voices."[136] By July 2021, the government had arrested seven of the most likely presidential candidates.[137]

Ortega registered his candidacy for a fourth consecutive term, with his wife, Rosario Murillo, again running as his vice president. A CID Gallup survey published a week prior to the elections found that in a fair election, 65% of voters would vote for any opposition candidate and 17% would support Ortega and Murillo.[138] Nonetheless, Nicaragua's Supreme Electoral Council reportedly said that, with almost all ballots counted, Ortega and Murillo had won over 75% of the vote and voter turnout was 65%.[139] A Nicaraguan opposition group, Open Ballot Boxes, which had 1,450 monitors trying to observe the elections, estimated turnout was approximately 18%.[140]

The international community has sought to hold the Ortega government accountable for human rights abuses and to facilitate the reestablishment of democracy in Nicaragua. An IACHR team concluded in 2018 that the Nicaraguan security forces' actions could be considered crimes against humanity. The OAS has stated multiple times that the Ortega government has violated the rule of law, altered constitutional order, and violated human rights. It also has passed resolutions expressing alarm at Nicaragua's deteriorating human rights situation, "unequivocally condemn[ing]" the arrest and arbitrary restrictions on candidates and the press, and calling for the immediate release of all political prisoners and the implementation of measures for transparent and fair elections.[141] At a U.N. Human Rights Council meeting on June 22, 2021, 59 countries, including the United States, made a similar statement, also calling on Nicaragua "to re-establish dialogue and renew trust in democracy."[142] Following the November elections, the OAS passed resolutions declaring Nicaragua's elections "were not free, fair or transparent and have no

American States, November 19, 2019.

[135] International Monetary Fund, *World Economic Outlook Database*, October 2021.

[136] Amnesty International, "Nicaragua: Enforced Disappearance Is the New Tactic for Repression," August 25, 2021.

[137] Reuters, "Nicaragua's Ortega Arrests Another Rival, Says U.S. Aims to Undermine Vote," July 26, 2021.

[138] Federico Rivas Molina and Carlos Salinas Maldonado, "Latin America Prepares for Frantic Month of Elections in November," *El País*, Buenos Aires and Mexico, November 4, 2021.

[139] Associated Press, "Nicaragua's Daniel Ortega Decries Those Who Question his Reelection," November 8, 2021.

[140] Ibid.

[141] See, for example, OAS, "Statement from the General Secretariat on the Situation in Nicaragua," press release E-102/20, October 15, 2020; and OAS, "Resolution Restoring Democratic Institutions and Respect for Human Rights in Nicaragua Through Free and Fair Elections," press release S-019/20, October 22, 2020. OAS, "The Situation in Nicaragua," CP/RES. 1175/21, June 15, 2021.

[142] U.S. Mission to International Organizations in Geneva, "Joint Statement on the Human Rights Situation in Nicaragua: Joint Statement on Nicaragua at the Human Rights Council, Presented by the Nicaragua Core Group on Behalf of 59 Countries Including the United States," June 22, 2021.

democratic legitimacy"[143] and saying Nicaragua is not in compliance with its commitments under the Inter-American Democratic Charter.[144] Nicaragua then announced it was leaving the OAS. During the two-year withdrawal process, according to the OAS, Nicaragua's obligations to the OAS and its charters remain in force, as do its international human rights obligations.[145]

U.S. policy toward Nicaragua focuses on strengthening civil society and promoting respect for human rights and free and fair elections. The Biden Administration requested a total of $15 million for FY2022 assistance for Nicaragua, all for democracy, rights, and governance programs. It imposed financial sanctions on four more government officials, including one of the president's daughters, who support the Ortega regime.[146] In response to the Nicaraguan government's arrest of 32 political opponents in summer 2021, the State Department imposed visa restrictions on 100 members of the Nicaraguan legislature and judiciary who "helped to enable the Ortega-Murillo regime's attacks on democracy and human rights"[147] and on 50 immediate family members of "regime-affiliated officials" who contributed directly to government measures that "do not meet the conditions for transparent, free, and fair elections."[148] Following what the Administration called "sham elections," it imposed sanctions against the Nicaraguan Public Ministry and nine Nicaraguan government officials. It then imposed sanctions against members of the government of Nicaragua, their staff, and families.[149] On November 7, President Biden declared, "What Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega and his wife, Vice President Rosario Murillo, orchestrated today was a pantomime election that was neither free nor fair, and most certainly not democratic."[150]

When Nicaragua broke diplomatic ties with Taiwan and established them with China in December 2021, the State Department responded that the action "deprives Nicaragua's people of a steadfast partner in its democratic and economic growth."[151]

Congressional Action. In November 2021, Congress completed action on the Reinforcing Nicaragua's Adherence to Conditions for Electoral Reform Act of 2021 (RENACER Act), signed into law as P.L. 117-54, which includes measures to advance the strategic alignment of U.S. diplomatic tools and targeted sanctions to support the realization of free, fair, and transparent elections in Nicaragua. The House Appropriations Committee's report to the FY2022 foreign aid appropriations bill, H.R. 4373 (H.Rept. 117-84), recommends $15 million for programs in

[143] U.S. Mission to the OAS, "OAS General Assembly Condemns the Ortega-Murillo Regime in Nicaragua," November 12, 2021 (includes resolution text).

[144] OAS, "Resolution: Outcome of the Permanent Council's Deliberations of November 29, 2021, on the Situation in Nicaragua Pursuant to the Resolution Adopted at the Fifty-First Regular Session of the General Assembly," CP/RES. 1188 (2355/21), December 8, 2021.

[145] Ibid.

[146] U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Sanctions Nicaraguan Officials for Supporting Ortega's Efforts to Undermine Democracy, Human Rights, and the Economy," press release, June 9, 2021.

[147] U.S. Department of State, Antony J. Blinken, "The United States Restricts Visas of 100 Nicaraguans Affiliated with Ortega-Murillo Regime," press statement, July 12, 2021.

[148] U.S. Department of State, Ned Price, Department Spokesperson, "The United States Restricts Visas of 50 Additional Nicaraguan Individuals Affiliated With Ortega-Murillo Regime," August 6, 2021.

[149] U.S. Department of State, "New Sanctions Following Sham Elections in Nicaragua," press statement, Antony J. Blinken, Secretary Of State, November 15, 2021; and White House, "A Proclamation on Suspension of Entry as Immigrants and Nonimmigrants of Persons Responsible for Policies or Actions That Threaten Democracy in Nicaragua," November 16, 2021.

[150] The White House, "Statement by President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. on Nicaragua's Sham Elections," November 7, 2021.

[151] U.S. Department of State, Ned Price, Department Spokesperson, "Nicaragua's Breaking of Diplomatic Relations with Taiwan," press statement, December 9, 2021.

Nicaragua that promote democracy and the rule of law and would prohibit funding for the central government of Nicaragua or for security assistance. The Senate Appropriations Committee's FY2022 foreign aid appropriations bill (S. 3075) would appropriate "not less than" $10 million in Economic Support Funds for civil society programs for Nicaragua. The 117th Congress has held two hearings on Nicaragua, the first in July 2021 on the plight of political prisoners, and the second in September 2021on the international response to the destruction of democracy under President Ortega (see **Appendix**).

For additional information, see CRS Report R46860, *Nicaragua in Brief: Political Developments in 2021, U.S. Policy, and Issues for Congress*, by Maureen Taft-Morales.

South America

Brazil

Occupying almost half of South America, Brazil is the fifth-largest and sixth-most-populous country in the world. Given its size and tremendous natural resources, Brazil has long had the potential to become a world power and periodically has been the focal point of U.S. policy in Latin America. However, uneven economic performance and political instability have hindered Brazil's rise to international prominence. The country experienced a period of strong economic growth and increased international influence during the first decade of the 21st century, but it has struggled with a series of economic, political, security, and health crises since 2014. This domestic turbulence discredited much of Brazil's political class, paving the way for right-wing populist Jair Bolsonaro to win the presidency in 2018.

Since taking office in January 2019, President Bolsonaro has implemented some economic reforms favored by international investors and Brazilian businesses and has proposed measures to ease firearms regulations and promote development in the Brazilian Amazon. Rather than building a broad-based coalition to advance his agenda, Bolsonaro has sought to keep his political base mobilized by taking socially conservative stands on cultural issues and verbally attacking perceived enemies, such as the press, nongovernmental organizations, and other branches of government. This confrontational approach to governance has alienated potential allies within the conservative-leaning Brazilian congress and placed additional stress on the country's already-strained democratic institutions. It also has hindered Brazil's ability to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the Brazilian government has enacted significant economic support measures to help households, businesses, and state governments during the pandemic, Bolsonaro's resistance to public health restrictions and recommendations has undermined Brazil's efforts to slow the spread of the virus. As of early February 2022, Brazil had recorded more than 632,000 deaths, giving it the second-highest COVID-19 mortality rate in the Western Hemisphere.[152]

In international affairs, the Bolsonaro administration has moved away from Brazil's traditional commitment to autonomy and toward closer alignment with the United States. Bolsonaro coordinated closely with the Trump Administration on regional challenges, such as the crisis in Venezuela, and frequently supported the Trump Administration within multilateral organizations. The Trump Administration welcomed Bolsonaro's rapprochement and sought to strengthen U.S.-Brazilian relations. In 2019, for example, the Trump Administration designated Brazil as a major non-NATO ally for the purposes of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, as amended (22 U.S.C. 2321k), and the Arms Export Control Act (22 U.S.C. 2751 et seq.). The United States and Brazil also forged agreements on several trade and investment matters, including the Protocol on Trade

[152] Johns Hopkins, "Mortality Analyses," February 6, 2022.

Rules and Transparency, concluded in October 2020, which aims to foster cooperation on trade facilitation and customs administration, good regulatory practices, and anti-corruption measures.

The Biden Administration has sought to maintain a cooperative relationship with the Bolsonaro administration, recognizing Brazil's importance for addressing global challenges. President Biden invited Bolsonaro to attend the April 2021 Leaders Summit on Climate, during which Bolsonaro pledged to double funding for environmental enforcement efforts, reiterated Brazil's commitment to end illegal deforestation by 2030, and stated that Brazil would reduce its net greenhouse gas emissions to zero by 2050—10 years earlier than the country's previous goal.[153] The Biden Administration has requested $17 million to support conservation in the Brazilian Amazon in FY2022 but has stated more extensive financial support for Brazil would be contingent on the country making demonstrable progress toward its environmental commitments. There are few signs of such progress to date, with deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon reaching a 15-year high in the annual observation period that ended in July 2021.[154]

The Biden Administration also has continued to engage with Brazil on security matters. Administration officials have expressed support for expanded bilateral security cooperation and Brazil's participation as a NATO global partner while reiterating concerns about the potential use of Chinese equipment in Brazil's telecommunications infrastructure. They also have sought to coordinate with Brazil, which is serving on the U.N. Security Council for the 2022-2023 term, regarding the Russian military mobilization on Ukraine's borders.[155]

Congressional Action. U.S.-Brazilian cooperation on environmental issues has remained a subject of interest in the 117th Congress. Some Members have called on the Biden Administration to condition U.S. relations with Brazil, including U.S. assistance and bilateral economic and security cooperation, on the Brazilian government's efforts to reduce deforestation and combat environmental crimes.[156] The U.S. CLIMATE Act of 2021 (S. 1201), introduced in April 2021, would express the sense of Congress on the importance of conservation of the Amazon River Basin, including support for U.S. engagement with Brazil on efforts to reduce deforestation and greenhouse gas emissions. The draft explanatory statement accompanying the Senate Appropriations Committee's FY2022 foreign aid appropriations bill (S. 3075) would recommend $20 million for conservation programs in the Brazilian Amazon.[157]

Congress also has continued to express concerns about human rights in Brazil. The report accompanying the House-passed FY2022 foreign aid appropriations measure (H.Rept. 117-84 to H.R. 4373) states that any funding provided for programs in the Brazilian Amazon "should protect the rights of indigenous and Afro-Brazilian communities and support the prosecution of violations of such rights." The report would further direct the Secretary of State to work with the Brazilian government to ensure it consults with Indigenous and Afro-Brazilian communities

[153] "Confira Discurso do Presidente Bolsonaro na Cúpula do Clima," Agência Brasil, April 22, 2021.

[154] Instituto Nacional de Pesquisas Espaciais, "Monitoramento do Desmatamento da Floresta Amazônica Brasileira por Satélite," November 19, 2021.

[155] U.S. Embassy & Consulates in Brazil, "Statement by U.S. Embassy Spokesperson, Tobias Bradford, on Advisor Sullivan's Visit to Brazil," August 6, 2021; and U.S. Department of State, "Secretary Blinken's Call with Brazilian Foreign Minister França," January 10, 2022.

[156] Letter from U.S. Senators Patrick Leahy, Robert Menendez, and Chris Van Hollen, et al. to President Joseph Biden, April 16, 2021, https://www.leahy.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Letter%20to%20Biden%20re%20Amazon%204-15-21.pdf.

[157] The draft explanatory statement is available at https://www.appropriations.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/SFOPSREPT_FINAL.PDF.

regarding projects and policies that affect them and to prioritize preventative actions to protect threatened community leaders and environmental human rights defenders.

The draft explanatory statement accompanying S. 3075 expresses concerns about the potential relocation of *Quilombola* families to expand the Alcântara space launch center and would prohibit the provision of any State Department-managed security assistance to Brazilian security forces engaged in the forced resettlement of Indigenous or Quilombola communities.[158] The House-passed version of the FY2022 NDAA (H.R. 4350) also would have prohibited the use of any DOD-managed security assistance to support Brazilian security forces in the involuntary relocation of such communities. Although that provision was not included in the final FY2022 NDAA legislation (P.L. 117-81), the accompanying explanatory statement called on the Secretary of Defense to ensure any security assistance provided to Brazil is in compliance with U.S. laws and DOD policies regarding adherence to human rights and international law.[159]

For additional information, see CRS Report R46236, *Brazil: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Peter J. Meyer; CRS Report R46619, *U.S.-Brazil Economic Relations*, coordinated by M. Angeles Villarreal; CRS In Focus IF11306, *Fire and Deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon*, by Pervaze A. Sheikh et al.

Colombia

Colombia—a close U.S. ally in Latin America—endured more than half a century of internal armed conflict. To address the country's role in illegal drug production, which fueled the conflict, the United States and Colombia forged a close relationship. Plan Colombia, a program focused initially on counternarcotics and later on counterterrorism, laid the foundation for an enduring security partnership that has lasted more than two decades. The United States also has supported the implementation of a peace accord that President Juan Manuel Santos (2010-2018) concluded with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC)—the country's largest leftist guerrilla organization at the time. U.S. assistance over the past two decades has exceeded $12 billion to support Plan Colombia, its successor strategies, and peace accord implementation.

During a U.N.-monitored demobilization effort in 2017, some 13,300 FARC disarmed. The FARC later transformed from a leftist guerrilla army into a political party known as *Comunes*. Neither the government nor the rebels have upheld all their commitments under the agreement. Some guerrillas, known collectively as FARC dissidents, include rearmed FARC and others who never demobilized. In early December 2021, on the fifth anniversary of the peace accord's signing, the U.S. government removed the FARC from its list of foreign terrorist organizations (FTOs) and designated two FARC dissident groups, Segunda Marquetalia and FARC-People's Army (FARC-EP), as FTOs.

President Iván Duque from the conservative Democratic Center (CD) party came to office in 2018 as a peace accord critic. Some Colombians have protested what they view as the Duque government's lax peace accord compliance and inadequate efforts to protect human rights defenders and other social activists. Colombia's Human Rights Ombudsman reported more than 145 targeted assassinations in 2021.[160] Others blame ongoing violence on the FARC dissidents and on Colombia's current largest insurgent group, the National Liberation Army (ELN). Duque

[158] Quilombolas are inhabitants of communities founded by individuals who escaped or were freed from slavery.

[159] Explanatory Material Statement Submitted by Mr. Smith of Washington, Chair of the House Committee on Armed Services, On House Amendment to S. 1605, *Congressional Record*, vol. 167, No. 211 - Book II (December 7, 2021), p. H7335.

[160] BBC, "Colombia Saw 145 Activists Killed in 2021, Ombudsman Says," January 18, 2022.

has faced an enormous influx of Venezuelan refugees and migrants, with Colombia taking in a reported 40% of the Venezuelan exodus. The COVID-19 pandemic slowed economic recovery, further limited peace accord implementation, and was complicated by hosting impoverished Venezuelans.

Duque's popularity has declined over the past year as his government has struggled to address several challenges. In mid-2021, nationwide protests broke out over an unpopular government-proposed tax increase. A national strike lasted for nearly eight weeks as diverse sectors protested a host of grievances, including police brutality against demonstrators, economic inequality, crime, and unaddressed corruption. Although many protested peacefully, crippling blockades and vandalism resulted in an estimated $3 billion in damages. The shift in political sentiment could benefit leftist Senator Gustavo Petro, who lost to Duque in 2018 but is a presidential candidate in elections scheduled for May 2022. Petro is the highest polling of the likely candidates, and some maintain that he is well placed to compete in a presidential runoff in June. Duque is term limited from seeking reelection.

To date, more than 9 million Colombians, or roughly 17% of the population, have registered as conflict victims. Many await promised compensation, including land from which they were forcibly displaced or other reparations. More than 300 former FARC combatants who demobilized have been killed since 2016.[161] Delays in funding major peace accord commitments mean they are not on pace to reach their 15-year target.[162] A significant portion of the Colombian public is skeptical of the peace process and the FARC's role in Colombia's democracy—and most Colombians increasingly rank implementation of the peace agreement much lower as a concern than urban crime, corruption, and the disrupted economy. Other Colombians maintain that full implementation of the peace accord is vital. Some argue that more complete implementation of the agreement would bring unrealized benefits, such as less violence in the rural and remote zones facing armed groups that compete to inherit the former FARC's illicit businesses. This violence includes multiple "armed conflicts" that are ongoing inside Colombia; though regional, rather than national, in scope, these conflicts have sparked heightened violence, such as along with the border with Venezuela in the Colombian department (equivalent of a state) of Arauca.[163]

Colombia has set records in cocaine production in recent years, including an estimated 1,010 metric tons produced in 2020, according to the U.S. government.[164] In meetings between President Duque and then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in 2019, the governments reaffirmed a commitment to work together to lower coca crop levels and cocaine production by 50% by 2023.[165] The U.S. government depends on the Colombian government to interdict much of the cocaine leaving the country, as it is mainly destined for the United States.

President Duque campaigned on resuming forced aerial eradication (i.e., spraying) of coca crops with the herbicide glyphosate; in 2020, his government accelerated forced manual eradication. However, in January 2022, Colombia's Constitutional Court ruled that a halt of coca aerial

[161] United Nations Security Council, "Colombia: Quarterly Meeting," *What's in Blue*, Security Council Report, January 19, 2022.

[162] Adam Isacson, "A Long Way to Go: Implementing Colombia's Peace Accord after Five Years," Washington Office on Latin America, November 23, 2021.

[163] For more background, see Kyle Johnson, Ángela Olaya, Juanita Vélez, *Caras de las disidencias: cinco años de incertitude y evolución*, CORE, Foundation Conflict Responses; Juan Diego Posada, "Ex-FARC Mafia vs. ELN: A Fight Too Far at the Colombia-Venezuelan Border?," *InSight Crime*, January 11, 2022.

[164] Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP), "Updated: ONDCP Releases Data on Coca Cultivation and Potential Cocaine Production in the Andean Region," July 16, 2021.

[165] U.S. State Department, *International Drug Control Strategy Report*, March 2021, Volume 1.

spraying would remain until the consent of rural communities who are subject to spraying is obtained within one year, effectively ending the practice until a new government is in place.[166]

With close to 2 million Venezuelans residing in Colombia in February 2021, the Duque administration unveiled a program offering Venezuelans who entered before January 2021 a decade of temporary protected status (TPS). By January 2022, nearly 1.7 million Venezuelan refugees and migrants had begun the registration process for the TPS program, with nearly half a million fully enrolled, giving them access to health care, work permits, and other social services.[167] Many Members of the U.S. Congress have expressed support for Colombia's continued leadership role to assist in a democratic transition in Venezuela and to respond to the worsening humanitarian situation.

The United States remains Colombia's top trading partner. In April 2020, Colombia became the third Latin American country-member of the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), after a seven-year accession process. Furthermore, as near-shoring manufacturing becomes a relevant alternative to Asia in the wake of the pandemic, some Members see U.S.-Colombian trade as a potential opportunity.[168]

Congressional Action. The Biden Administration's FY2022 foreign aid budget request for Colombia is $453.9 million. The House-passed foreign aid appropriations measure, H.R. 4373, would provide $461.4 million and would stipulate 30% of funding under the International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement (INCLE) and Foreign Military Financing programs would be obligated only after the Secretary of State certifies that certain human rights conditions are met; this includes a provision that Colombian security forces involved in gross violations of human rights during the protests are held accountable for abuses. The proposed Senate bill for FY2022, S. 3075, would prohibit assistance to Colombian riot police and would withhold 5% of INCLE funding until the Secretary of State certifies the riot police are held to account.

The FY2022 NDDA, P.L. 117-81, enacted in December 2021 includes several provisions on Colombia. These include an extension of authority to support a unified counterdrug and counterterrorism campaign in Colombia; temporary authority to obligate or expand not more than $2 million in FY2022 for travel and subsistence expenses of foreign national security forces participating in the training program of the United Sates-Colombia Action Plan for Regional Security; and a reporting requirement on the security cooperation relationship between the United States and Colombia and activities focused on human rights and the rule of law.

For additional information, see CRS Insight IN11631, *Colombia: Challenges for U.S. Policymakers in 2021*, by June S. Beittel, and CRS Report R43813, *Colombia: Background and U.S. Relations*, by June S. Beittel.

Venezuela

Venezuela, under the authoritarian rule of Nicolás Maduro, is mired in a deep economic and humanitarian crisis worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic. Maduro has consolidated power over all of Venezuela's democratic institutions since his narrow 2013 election following the death of President Hugo Chávez (1999-2013). His United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) took

[166] Steven Grattan, "Colombia Can't Resume Coca Aerial Spraying for Now, Court Rules," *Al Jazeera*, January 20, 2022.

[167] Information provided by the Colombian Embassy to the United States, January 25, 2022. The TPS program also includes a path to Colombian citizenship.

[168] Senator Roy Blunt, "A Plan for Colombia's COVID-19 Recovery and Why It Matters for the United States," *Atlantic Council*, remote event, December 8, 2021.

control of the National Assembly, the last independent branch of government, in January 2021. The PSUV and its allies won 19 of 23 gubernatorial elections in flawed elections held in November 2021; however, the opposition won a gubernatorial election in Chávez's home state of Barinas that was rerun in January 2022.

Maduro has used repression to quash dissent; rewarded allies, particularly in the security forces, with income earned from illegal gold mining, drug trafficking, and other illicit activities; and relied on support from Russia, China, Iran, and others to subvert U.S. sanctions and resist international pressure to step down. Meanwhile, international support for opposition leader Juan Guaidó, the former National Assembly president once regarded as interim president by the United States and nearly 60 countries, has dissipated.

The COVID-19 pandemic, low oil prices, and years of economic mismanagement and corruption have taken a toll. Venezuela's economy has collapsed. The country is plagued by hyperinflation, severe shortages of food and medicine, and a dire humanitarian crisis that has worsened since 2020 due to gasoline shortages. Maduro has blamed U.S. sanctions for the economic crisis, but U.S. officials note that current sanctions include broad exemptions for the delivery of humanitarian goods. U.N. agencies estimate that 6 million Venezuelans had fled the country as of December 2021, primarily to neighboring countries in Latin America and the Caribbean.

In September 2021, seeking sanctions relief and international recognition of his government, Maduro resumed Norway-led negotiations—previously suspended in September 2019—with the opposition Unity Platform (a group that includes Guaidó supporters and other factions). Maduro once again suspended the negotiations, however, after the United States extradited a top ally, Alex Saab, from Cape Verde to stand trial for money laundering. Should the talks resume, the opposition may be in a weaker position than before, since rifts within the opposition hurt its performance in the November elections.

The U.S. government ceased recognizing Maduro as Venezuela's legitimate president in January 2019. Although the Trump Administration initially discussed the possibility of using military force in Venezuela, it ultimately sought to compel Maduro to leave office through diplomatic, economic, and legal pressure. Biden officials have sought to support the Venezuelan people while engaging in multilateral diplomacy to press for a return to democracy and hold corrupt and abusive Maduro officials accountable. As part of its efforts to support the Venezuelan people, on March 8, 2021, the Biden Administration designated Venezuela as a beneficiary country for TPS. The Administration also has reviewed and maintained U.S. targeted and sectoral sanctions on Venezuela. In June 2021, the State Department issued a joint statement with Canada and the European Union expressing support for "time-bound and comprehensive negotiation process."[169] Nevertheless, the Administration remains wary of Maduro's intentions and appears unlikely to lift U.S. sanctions in the short term. U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Brian Nichols repeated similar statements during a November 2021 Senate hearing in which he also reiterated U.S. support for Interim President Juan Guaidó.[170]

Congressional Action. The 117th Congress has continued close oversight of U.S. policy toward Venezuela, through hearings, legislation, and letters to the Administration. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee reported S.Res. 44 in March 2021, which would denounce fraudulent legislative elections in Venezuela. The Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee reported S. 688 in March, which would prohibit contracting with persons who engage in commerce with the Maduro government. In July 2021, the House passed its version of the

[169] U.S. Department of State, "U.S.-EU-Canada: Joint Statement on Venezuela," June 25, 2021.

[170] U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations Holds Hearing on Democracy in Latin America, *CQ Congressional Transcripts,* November 31, 2021.

FY2022 foreign aid appropriations bill, H.R. 4373; the bill would provide $50 million in Economic Support Funds (ESF) for democracy programs in Venezuela. H.Rept. 117-84 accompanying the bill recommends continued humanitarian and development aid to countries sheltering Venezuelan migrants and the provision of aid to support a democratic transition in Venezuela if conditions permit. The Senate Appropriations Committee's version of the bill, S. 3705, would provide the same level of ESF funding for Venezuela.

Congressional oversight has focused on the Biden Administration's actions to sanction human rights abuses, corruption, and antidemocratic actions by the Maduro government and its supporters. Congress is also overseeing the provision of democracy and development assistance to Venezuela, as well as the $1.65 billion in humanitarian aid provided since FY2017 for Venezuelans and countries sheltering them. Many Members of Congress praised the March 2021 designation of TPS for Venezuela. Although some in Congress support continued pressure on the Maduro government, others favor a more targeted approach, arguing that broad sanctions have not prompted political change but have hurt the Venezuelan people. Some Members have advocated for an end to any sanctions that have worsened the humanitarian crisis, whereas others have called for more targeted sanctions relief, such as ending an October 2020 ban on oil-for-diesel fuel swaps that likely have contributed to fuel shortages in the country.[171]

For additional information, see CRS Report R44841, *Venezuela: Background and U.S. Relations*, coordinated by Clare Ribando Seelke; CRS In Focus IF10230, *Venezuela: Political Crisis and U.S. Policy*, by Clare Ribando Seelke; CRS In Focus IF10715, *Venezuela: Overview of U.S. Sanctions*, by Clare Ribando Seelke; CRS In Focus IF11216, *Venezuela: International Efforts to Resolve the Political Crisis*; CRS Report R46213, *Oil Market Effects from U.S. Economic Sanctions: Iran, Russia, Venezuela*, by Phillip Brown; and CRS In Focus IF11029, *The Venezuela Regional Humanitarian Crisis and COVID-19*, by Rhoda Margesson and Clare Ribando Seelke.

Outlook

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the Latin American and Caribbean region was facing significant political and economic challenges—most prominently, Venezuela's ongoing political impasse and economic and humanitarian crisis, but also increasing public dissatisfaction with the state of democracy throughout the region. The pandemic has multiplied the region's challenges and negatively affected its future economic prospects. Instead of registering low economic growth rates, as originally forecast before the pandemic, the region experienced a deep recession in 2020, with millions of people impoverished. Although regional economic growth resumed in 2021, recovery in some countries may be slow, and could jeopardize the economic and social progress that the region has made over the past two decades. The course of the pandemic, including vaccination rates, likely will be key to the region's economic recovery.

In addition to the pandemic and its economic fallout, the Biden Administration and the 117th Congress are facing a variety of other policy challenges in the Latin American and Caribbean region. For example, as the Biden Administration has taken actions to revise the Trump Administration's more restrictive immigration policies, irregular migration from Central America, Mexico, and other countries has increased. The political, economic, and humanitarian crises in Venezuela remain a challenge not only for the United States but also for the entire Western Hemisphere and could be an important test for multilateral diplomacy. Similarly, in Nicaragua,

[171] U.S. Congressmen Jesús G. "Chuy" Garcia, "Grijalva, García, 17 Members of Congress call for Biden Administration to Change Failed Trump-Era Venezuela Policy," press release, August 13, 2021; Timothy Gardner, "Democratic Senator Urges Biden Admin to Allow Diesel Swap in Venezuela," Reuters, March 23, 2021.

the Administration has used targeted sanctions and is working multilaterally to increase international pressure against the antidemocratic actions of the Ortega government. With regard to Cuba, although the Administration continues to review U.S. policy, the Cuban government's violent suppression of anti-government protests makes it difficult for the Administration to take policy actions perceived as easing pressure on the Cuban government. In Haiti, the Administration continues to provide humanitarian aid and assistance to restore security while supporting Haitian efforts to achieve political consensus that will support the restoration of democratic institutions, including free and fair elections.

These and many other policy challenges discussed in this report may continue to be subjects of legislative initiatives, debate, and oversight in the 117th Congress. The ninth Summit of the Americas, originally to be hosted by the United States in 2021, is scheduled to take place in Los Angeles, CA, in June 2022, with the theme of "Building a Sustainable, Resilient, and Equitable Future." The summit could serve as an opportunity for the Biden Administration to further articulate its policy agenda for the region and deepen U.S. diplomatic engagement with hemispheric leaders on regional and global issues.

Appendix. Latin American and Caribbean Countries: Basic Data and Hearings

Table A-1. Latin American and Caribbean Countries: Basic Facts

Country	Area (square miles)	Population (2020 estimated, thousands)	GDP (2020 est., U.S. $ billions, current)	GDP per capita (2020 est., U.S. $, current)	Leader (elected/next election)
			Caribbean		
Antigua & Barbuda	171	98	1.4	13,967	Gaston Browne (Mar. 2018/by Mar. 2023)
Bahamas	5,359	385	9.9	25,734	Philip Davis (Sept. 16, 2021/by Sept, 2026)
Barbados	166	288	4.4	15,346	Mia Mottley (Jan. 19, 2022/ by Jan. 2027)
Belize[a]	8,867	419	1.7	4,077	Juan Antonio "Johnny" Briceño (Nov. 2020/by 2025)
Cuba	42,803	11,327 (2020)	107.4 (2020)	9,477.9 (2020)	Miguel Díaz-Canel (Apr. 2018/ Apr. 2023)[b]
Dominica	290	73	0.5	7,416	Roosevelt Skerrit (Dec. 2019/by Mar. 2025)
Dominican Republic	18,792	10,448	78.9	7,554	Luis Abinader (July 2020/May 2024)
Grenada	133	113	1.0	9,130	Keith Mitchell (Mar. 2018/by Mar. 2023)
Guyana[a]	83,000	787	5.5	6,953	Irfaan Ali (Mar. 2020/by 2025)
Haiti	10,714	11,743	14.5	1,235	Ariel Henry (Nov. 2016/postponed until 2022)[c]
Jamaica	4,244	2,737	14.0	5,103	Andrew Holness (Sept. 2020/by 2025)
St. Kitts & Nevis	101	57	1.0	17,173	Timothy Harris (June 2020/by 2025)
St. Lucia	238	181	1.6	8,934	Philip Pierre (July 2021/by 2026)
St. Vincent & the Grenadines	150	111	0.8	7,304	Ralph Gonsalves (Nov. 2020/by 2025)
Suriname[a]	63,251	603	2.9	4,787	Chandrikapersad "Chan" Santokhi (May 2020/2025)
Trinidad & Tobago	1,980	1,399	21.6	15,425	Keith Rowley (August 2020/by 2025)

Country	Area (square miles)	Population (2020 estimated, thousands)	GDP (2020 est., U.S. $ billions, current)	GDP per capita (2020 est., U.S. $, current)	Leader (elected/next election)
Mexico and Central America					
Mexico	758,449	127,792	1,073.9	8,404	Andrés Manuel López Obrador (July 2018/July 2024)
Costa Rica	19,730	5,128	61.8	12,057	Carlos Alvarado (Feb. & Apr. 2018/Feb. 6, 2022 & April 3, 2022)
El Salvador	8,124	6,486	24.6	3,799	Nayib Bukele (Feb. 2019/Feb. 2024)
Guatemala	42,042	17,974	77.6	4,318	Alejandro Giammattei (June & Aug. 2019/June 2023)
Honduras	43,278	9,942	23.8	2,397	Xiomara Castro (Nov. 28, 2021/Nov. 2025)
Nicaragua	50,336	6,496	12.6	1,943	Daniel Ortega (Nov. 7, 2021/Nov. 2025)
Panama	29,120	4,279	52.9	12,373	Laurentino Cortizo (May 2019/May 2024)
South America					
Argentina	1,073,518	45,388	389.1	8,572	Alberto Fernández (Oct. 2019/Oct. 2023)
Bolivia	424,164	11,630	36.8	3,168	Luis Arce (Oct. 2020/2025)
Brazil	3,287,957	211,756	1,444.7	6,823	Jair Bolsonaro (Oct. 7 & 28, 2018/Oct. 2 & 30, 2022)
Chile	291,932	19,458	252.8	12,993	Sebastián Piñera (Nov. 21 & Dec. 19, 2021/Nov. 2025) (Gabriel Boric to be inaugurated March 11, 2022)
Colombia	439,736	50,372	271.6	5,391	Iván Duque (May & June 2018/May 29, 2022 & June 19, 2022)
Ecuador	109,484	17,511	98.8	5,643	Guillermo Lasso (Feb. 7 & Apr. 11, 2021/Feb. 2025)
Paraguay	157,048	7,253	35.7	4,918	Mario Abdo Benítez (Apr. 2018/Apr. 2023)
Peru	496,225	33,494	205.5	6,134	Pedro Castillo (Apr. 11 & June 6, 2021/Apr. 2026)
Uruguay	68,037	3,531	56.6	16,023	Luis Lacalle Pou (Oct. & Nov. 2019/Oct. 2024)
Venezuela	352,144	27,951	47.3	1,691	Nicolás Maduro (May 2018/May 2024)[d]

Sources: Area statistics are from the Central Intelligence Agency's *World Factbook*, with square kilometers converted into square miles. Population and economic statistics are from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), *World Economic Outlook Database*, October 2021. Population and economic statistics for Cuba are from the World Bank's World Development Indicators databank.

Notes:

a. Geographically, Belize is located in Central America and Guyana and Suriname are located on the northern coast of South America, but all three are members of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) and therefore are listed under the Caribbean region.

b. Cuba does not have direct elections for its head of government. Instead, Cuba's legislature selects the president of the republic for a five-year term.

c. President Jovenel Moïse was assassinated on July 7, 2021. Ariel Henry was sworn in as prime minister on July 20, 2021. Under the Haitian Constitution, either the Council of Ministers under the Prime Minister should govern or, in the last year of a presidential term, the legislature should elect a provisional president. Currently, there is no functioning legislature, as most of the legislators' terms have expired. See CRS Insight IN11699, *Haiti: Concerns After the Presidential Assassination*, by Maureen Taft-Morales.

d. Venezuela's May 2018 elections were characterized by widespread fraud. The United States recognizes Juan Guaidó, president of Venezuela's National Assembly, as interim president of Venezuela. See CRS In Focus IF10230, *Venezuela: Political Crisis and U.S. Policy*, by Clare Ribando Seelke.

Table A-2. Congressional Hearings in the 117th Congress on Latin America and the Caribbean

Committee and Subcommittee	Date	Title
House Foreign Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere, Civilian Security, Migration, and International Economic Policy	March 3, 2021	A Way Forward for Venezuela: The Humanitarian, Diplomatic, and National Security Challenges Facing the Biden Administration
House Foreign Affairs Committee	March 12, 2021	Policy Recommendations on Haiti for the Biden Administration
Senate Armed Services Committee	March 16, 2021	United States Southern Command and United States Northern Command
Senate Foreign Relations Committee	March 24, 2021	The State of Democracy in Latin America and the Caribbean
House Foreign Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere, Civilian Security, Migration, and International Economic Policy	April 14, 2021	Renewing the United States' Commitment to Addressing the Root Causes of Migration from Central America
House Armed Services Committee	April 14, 2021	National Security Challenges and U.S. Military Activity in North and South America
House Committee on Appropriations, Subcommittee on Defense	April 15, 2021	United States Southern Command
House Committee on Homeland Security, Subcommittee on Border Security, Facilitation, and Operations	April 27, 2021	Unaccompanied Children at the Border: Stakeholder Perspectives on the Way Forward
House Committee on Homeland Security, Subcommittee on Government Operations and Border Management	April 28, 2021	The Non–Governmental Organization Perspective on the Southwest Border
House Committee on Homeland Security, Subcommittee on Oversight, Management and Accountability	May 6, 2021	Stakeholder Perspectives on Addressing Migration Push Factors

Committee and Subcommittee	Date	Title
House Foreign Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere, Civilian Security, Migration, and International Economic Policy	May 13, 2021	A Race Against Time: Deploying Vaccines and Addressing the Disproportionate Impacts of COVID-19 in Latin America and the Caribbean
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission	June 9, 2021	Judicial Independence in Central America
House Committee on Homeland Security, Subcommittee on Border Security, Facilitation, and Operations	June 10, 2021	Unaccompanied Children at the Border: Federal Response and the Way Forward
House Committee on Homeland Security, Subcommittee on Oversight, Management and Accountability	June 11, 2021	Enhancing Border Security: Addressing Corruption in Central America
House Foreign Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere, Civilian Security, Migration, and International Economic Policy	June 23, 2021	The Biden Administration's Efforts to Deepen U.S. Engagement in the Caribbean
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission	July 1, 2021	Protests in Colombia
House Foreign Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere, Civilian Security, Migration, and International Economic Policy	July 20, 2021	Historic Protests in Cuba and the Crackdown on Free Expression
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission	July 21, 2021	The Ortega Government and the Human Cost of Repression in Nicaragua: Political Prisoner
Senate Committee on Finance	July 27, 2021	Implementation and Enforcement of the United States – Mexico – Canada Agreement: One Year After Entry into Force
House Committee on Homeland Security	July 28, 2021	DHS's Efforts to Disrupt Transnational Criminal Organizations in Central America
House Foreign Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere, Civilian Security, Migration, and International Economic Policy	September 21, 2021	An International Response to Ortega's Destruction of Democracy in Nicaragua
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission	September 23, 2021	Root Causes of Migration: Food Insecurity and the Right to Food in Central America
House Foreign Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere, Civilian Security, Migration, and International Economic Policy	November 16, 2021	The Biden Administration's Policy Priorities for Latin America and the Caribbean
Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control	November 17, 2021	The Nexus between the Illicit Drug Trade and Corruption
Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere, Transnational Crime, Civilian Security, Democracy, Human Rights, and Global Women's Issues	November 18, 2021	Vaccine Diplomacy in Latin America and the Caribbean: The Importance of U.S. Engagement
Senate Foreign Relations Committee	November 30, 2021	U.S. Policy on Democracy in Latin America and the Caribbean

House Foreign Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere, Civilian Security, Migration, and International Economic Policy	January 20, 2022	Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, and Panama: A New Alliance for Promoting Democracy and Prosperity in the Americas
House Foreign Affairs Committee	February 3, 2022	Overview of U.S. Priorities in the Western Hemisphere: Opportunities, Challenges, and the Path Ahead

Source: CRS, prepared by Carla Davis-Castro, Research Librarian.

Notes: See also hearing information at House Foreign Affairs Committee at https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/hearings; Senate Foreign Relations Committee at http://www.foreign.senate.gov/hearings; Senate Armed Services Committee at https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/hearings; and House Armed Services Committee at https://armedservices.house.gov/hearings.

Author Information

Mark P. Sullivan, Coordinator
Specialist in Latin American Affairs

June S. Beittel
Analyst in Latin American Affairs

Peter J. Meyer
Specialist in Latin American and Canadian Affairs

Clare Ribando Seelke
Specialist in Latin American Affairs

Maureen Taft-Morales
Specialist in Latin American Affairs

M. Angeles Villarreal
Specialist in International Trade and Finance

Carla Y. Davis-Castro
Research Librarian

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