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February 26, 2024 |

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# The Case for Containing, Not Coddling, Maduro

**The inability of the U.S. to facilitate a return to democracy in Venezuela does not justify accommodating dictatorship in the name of engagement.**



**Evan Ellis**

**Image Credit:**



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From 2019 to 2020, I had the honor of serving on Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's policy planning staff (S/P). One of my priority focus areas was the dictatorship of Nicholas Maduro and the dangers it posed to the Venezuelan people and to the region. The Maduro regime's expulsion of the office of [United Nations High Commission for Human Rights](#) from the country, and the [arrest and forced disappearance of activist Rocio San Miguel](#) on charges of supposed conspiracy against the regime made me reflect on the objectives, and perils of U.S. policy toward Venezuela. Maduro's latest demonstration of disrespect for democracy and human rights in the country came on top of news of the [resignation of National Security Council Senior Director for the Western Hemisphere Juan Gonzalez](#), who played a key role in the Biden Administration's Venezuela policy, suggesting the possibility for a re-orientation of the U.S. approach toward Maduro as well.

**Evan Ellis**

While, for me, during my tenure at S/P, the restoration of democracy in Venezuela was a key goal, it was not the only one. I increasingly saw that complicity in criminal activities by the [Venezuelan military](#) and [other Maduro-affiliated elites](#), and their [penetration by Cuban intelligence](#) made regime change from within and the restoration of Venezuela democracy [virtually impossible](#) on our watch, but that it was better to contain a malevolent actor than to be seduced by confidence in our own abilities, that we could fruitfully negotiate with it.

In this work, I seek to make the case for a shift in U.S. policy toward Venezuela from futile attempts to negotiate regime transition with an entrenched dictator, towards a policy of "compassionate containment."

From my time in the private sector in the early 2000s working on Venezuela-related contracts, through my time in academia and government, I watched indignant friends and colleagues of the Venezuelan opposition be repeatedly outplayed by Chavismo, based largely on erroneous presumptions that laws, the Constitution, or elections would constrain its malevolence. In 2015, the opposition won a resounding [2/3 majority](#) in Congress, only to have Chavista-controlled courts [disqualify those elected](#). In 2017, the Maduro regime created an [unconstitutional parallel body](#) filled with its loyalists, while its judges progressively [stripped the elected Congress of its powers](#), then deployed the military to brutally [repress those who protested](#).



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of the [Barbados Accords](#). In them, the Biden Administration agreed to lift a broad array of oil and other sanctions, giving Maduro a near-immediate expansion of oil and other revenues, in exchange for ambiguous future commitments to [elections following meaningful democratic processes](#).

## The Case for Containing, Not Coddling, Maduro

The mostly six-month ["special licenses"](#) that the Biden Administration conferred to the Maduro regime in October 2023 built on the easing of other sanctions, allowing [Chevron, Repsol and Eni](#) to resume oil operations in Venezuela, just to get Maduro to agree to [non-committal talks with the opposition in Mexico City](#) about democracy. [The inability of the U.S. to facilitate a return to democracy in Venezuela does not justify accommodating dictatorship in the name of engagement.](#) Maduro's hand and confidence was also arguably strengthened as Juan Guaido was stripped of his position as de jure president [by his own opposition](#), and [flee to exile in the U.S.](#), with a [subsequent Maduro arrest warrant](#) for him adding insult to injury.

The October 2023 Biden concessions thus reinforced other dynamics, sending [signals to Maduro and prejudicial to the U.S.](#) International brokers immediately began buying up Venezuelan oil, while a range of companies and state actors began [exploring future business in Venezuela](#), producing an immediate windfall to the Maduro dictatorship, and the prospect of [even greater oil production](#) and related income in the future, complimenting income to the regime from [narco-trafficking](#), and other [illicit activities](#).

**Evan Ellis**

Predictably, once the oil was flowing, the Maduro regime showed only superficial interest in its Barbados commitments. When voters turned out in unexpectedly high numbers to elect the charismatic Maria Corina Machado [by a 90% margin](#), the regime [launched an investigation](#), then [annulled the results](#). It then [refused to lift](#) Machado's "political inhabilitation" based on charges invented by the regime itself. Under U.S. pressure, the regime "allowed" Machado to "appeal" her case, with [numerous delays, including a holiday recess](#). A [November 30, 2023 White House deadline](#) for Maduro to comply with his Barbados commitments came and went. December brought only a prisoner swap in which Maduro [released 10 Americans](#) in exchange for the U.S. freeing Tarek William Saab, [one of the masterminds](#) of the Maduro Administration illicit financial activities. In January, the Maduro-controlled Supreme Court [formalized its predictable disqualification](#) of Machado, with little concrete U.S. action. By the end of January, Maduro was threatening to [abandon his commitment to 2024 elections entirely](#), due to supposed "plots" against him. The Biden Administration has now reimposed a [limited number of sanctions](#), and has given Maduro [until April](#) to abandon its errant ways, "or else" it will [allow the sanctions relief to expire](#).

The Maduro regime, having effectively called the U.S bluff, and holding all levers of power in Venezuela, is simply "toying" with the Venezuelan opposition, like a cat plays with a trapped mouse before finally eating its prey. Farcically, the Biden



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Maduro’s demonstrated success in defying the United States makes the powers that count – its security issues and critical corporations – more loyal, despite their own doubts and agendas. It reassures leftist populists across the region, from Miguel Diaz-Canel in Cuba to the Ortegas in Nicaragua, that repression, rather than concession, ultimately pays. The restrained U.S. response to Maduro’s transgressions undermines the perception of Administration resolve globally. The perception of U.S. acquiescence and Maduro’s enhanced domestic control encourages U.S. adversaries China, Russia and Iran to expand their commercial, political, and defense engagement with Venezuela at a time in which the growing risk of U.S.-Iran confrontation in the Middle East increases the incentives of Iran and Hezbollah to expand their use of Venezuela as their principal base of operations in the region, and while U.S. and European dithering over support for the Ukraine emboldens Putin to similarly expand his longstanding military activities with Maduro to telegraph his ability to threaten the U.S. in its own near abroad. Maduro’s aggressive claims over the oil and mineral rich Guyanese territory of Essequibo may also be encouraged by his perception of U.S. timidity on sanctions. Finally, Maduro’s expanded oil income from sanctions relief may enhance its ability to support leftist populist movements and destabilize democratic regimes, at a time when the region is under unprecedented socioeconomic stresses.

**The inability of the U.S. to facilitate a return to democracy in Venezuela does not justify accommodating dictatorship in the name of engagement.**

**Evan Ellis**

The inability of the U.S. to facilitate a return to democracy in Venezuela does not justify accommodating dictatorship in the name of engagement. As with the Soviet Union during the Cold War, when regime change is unrealistic and military action undesirable, the next best option is *containment*, to limit the damage Venezuela can do as a hotbed of criminality, a promoter of populist authoritarianism, and a host of extra-hemispheric threats.

*The author is research professor at the U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute. The views expressed herein are strictly his own.*



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**Evan Ellis**

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