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Examining U.S. Relations With Authoritarian Countries

Thomas Carothers and Benjamin Feldman

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Summary

Although U.S. President Joe Biden and his senior advisers have cast their foreign policy in terms of a global struggle between democracies and autocracies, they have pursued close relations with various authoritarian regimes in different parts of the world, including recent efforts to strengthen ties with Saudi Arabia and Vietnam. Many people in U.S. policy circles debate the wisdom of the administration's trade-offs between its stated interest in supporting democracy globally versus countervailing interests that lead it to maintain close ties with some autocrats. But these debates are often confined to a few high-profile cases and rarely draw from a broader understanding of the overall landscape of U.S. relations with authoritarian regimes and the trajectory of such relations across recent decades.

This paper seeks to provide such an understanding. Instead of justifying or vilifying U.S. efforts to get along with many authoritarian countries, this paper aims to anchor these debates in a stronger understanding of the ongoing realities of U.S. relations with these countries. It begins with an overview of U.S. relations with authoritarian countries from the presidency of Jimmy Carter through that of Donald Trump. This overview highlights the long pattern of a U.S. approach that is sharply divided between antagonistic relations with some autocratic regimes and a warm embrace of others, while noting some changes across administrations caused by evolving geopolitical paradigms and presidents' differing personal predilections.

The paper then draws on in-depth case research of U.S. relations with nearly sixty undemocratic countries—including their bilateral security ties, economic relations, and diplomatic contacts—to classify the relationships into four categories: 1) close partnerships,

2) adversarial relationships, 3) cooperative relations, and 4) cold, though not actively adversarial, relations. Through the analysis of these categories, the paper highlights the drivers and factors that shape the relationships in question.

The United States funds democracy-related assistance programs directed at most undemocratic countries, and the paper analyzes the overall patterns of this aid. It examines both official U.S. democracy assistance and assistance from the National Endowment for Democracy, focusing on the differing amounts and types of aid directed toward countries in the four different categories.

The paper reaches three overarching conclusions. First, Biden's policy with regard to authoritarian countries represents, on the whole, more continuity with than change from most previous U.S. presidents, reflecting deep structures of interest that have shaped U.S. relations with these countries for decades. While the number of friendly and cooperative ties the United States maintains with undemocratic countries has remained relatively constant in recent years, the number and intensity of adversarial and cold relations are growing, primarily as a result of the heightened geopolitical competition between the United States and its allies on the one hand and China and Russia and their allies on the other.

Second, security issues are the dominant driver of U.S. relations with authoritarian countries—for both positive and negative relations—and span a wide range of security concerns, including competition with China and Russia, terrorism, and regional instability. Economic interests—such as energy investments, critical minerals, arms sales, or ensuring U.S. market access—do play a role in spurring positive U.S. relations with some authoritarian states, but overall are far less important than security concerns. Democracy and human rights, or more specifically, problems with democracy and human rights, also shape U.S. relations with authoritarian countries but in complex and highly varied ways; they are a backburner issue in some cases, while they loom large in others.

Third, the trends going forward appear to be mixed. With U.S.-China and U.S.-Russia tensions continuing to escalate, the United States will have more reasons to put aside its concerns about democracy and human rights in some authoritarian countries as it tries to convince them to move closer to its camp. It will also be motivated to turn a cold shoulder to other countries that align themselves with its rivals. Certain economic imperatives, such as the push to de-risk global supply chains and ensure access to critical minerals, will also create new incentives for friendlier ties with some authoritarian countries.

Introduction

When U.S. President Joe Biden bumped fists with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in Riyadh in July 2022—marking an end to the cold shoulder he had turned toward the Saudi leader as a result of the 2018 murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi—some observers and commentators in Washington and other capitals were quick to express surprise and irritation. The U.S. president says he supports democracy and human rights globally, but what about this? Comments in a similar vein have continued as Biden and his senior team have not only engaged actively with the Saudi government, but also maintained or pursued closer ties with other democratically deficient leaders or governments in India, Vietnam, and elsewhere.

These actions highlight fundamental tensions in Biden’s foreign policy between a broad goal of trying to support democracy globally—especially by contesting the widening transnational influence of two major autocratic powers, China and Russia—and many specific instances of making nice with undemocratic governments that can be helpful to Washington in that geopolitical contest. They raise important questions about whether the Biden administration is striking the right balance between the competing interests it faces in this domain. But any element of surprise at Biden’s actions—embodied in the “gotcha” tone that laces some of the commentary—is misplaced. Every U.S. administration in living memory has made numerous compromises between a stated ambition to support democracy globally and accommodation of autocrats for the sake of various security and economic interests. Expectations that the Biden administration would be greatly different in this regard reflect a lack of appreciation for the depth of this pattern in U.S. foreign policy and the configuration of interests that underlies it.

It is true that Biden’s early rhetoric on democracy and its place in his foreign policy was vivid and soaring. But he is hardly alone among presidents of the last forty years in this regard. Ronald Reagan was strikingly eloquent and expansive in framing the United States as the leader of a global struggle between democracy and tyranny. Yet during his presidency, the United States remained firm friends with numerous hard-line dictators in the developing world, including Mobutu Sese Seko in Zaire and Suharto in Indonesia. In 2005, then U.S. president George W. Bush set out a stirring “freedom agenda” in his second inaugural address, limning a vision of the United States as a principled and tireless friend of democracy everywhere. Yet he maintained close ties with autocratic security partners in the Middle East and beyond.

The ahistorical, and often somewhat ritualistic, critical commentary on U.S. policy relating to autocracies points to the need for a broad stocktaking of U.S. relations with authoritarian countries—not to justify or vilify these relations, but instead to help anchor debates in a stronger understanding of the ongoing realities of U.S. relations with these countries and create firmer empirical ground for analyses of which trade-offs make sense and which are a step too far.¹

This paper pursues such a stocktaking. It begins by tracing the evolution of U.S. relations with authoritarian countries from the late Cold War up to the Biden presidency, highlighting the major lines of continuity that have prevailed while also taking note of variations along the way. It then turns to the current landscape and presents an overview of U.S. relations with the close to sixty countries Freedom House labeled as “not free” in its 2023 *Freedom in the World* report, breaking them down into major categories along a spectrum from positive to negative relations.² It starts with a focus on the two far ends of the spectrum, examining the United States’ close ties with a number of major autocratic security partners and its conflictual relations with a similar number of countries it considers strategic adversaries. It then looks at the approximately forty countries in between, dividing them between those with which United States maintains at least some cooperative engagement and others where a deep chill defines the relationship. It explores both the diverse drivers of cooperative engagement and the factors that led to frosty relations.

Throughout the analysis of these four categories, we look at the role that democracy and human rights concerns play in these many relationships, noting the startlingly wide range—from little concern at all to significant concern—and seeking some explanations for the high degree of variation. We also fill out the picture relating to the role of democracy and human rights in these relationships by taking a brief look at U.S. democracy aid directed at authoritarian countries, probing where this tool is actively employed and where it is not.

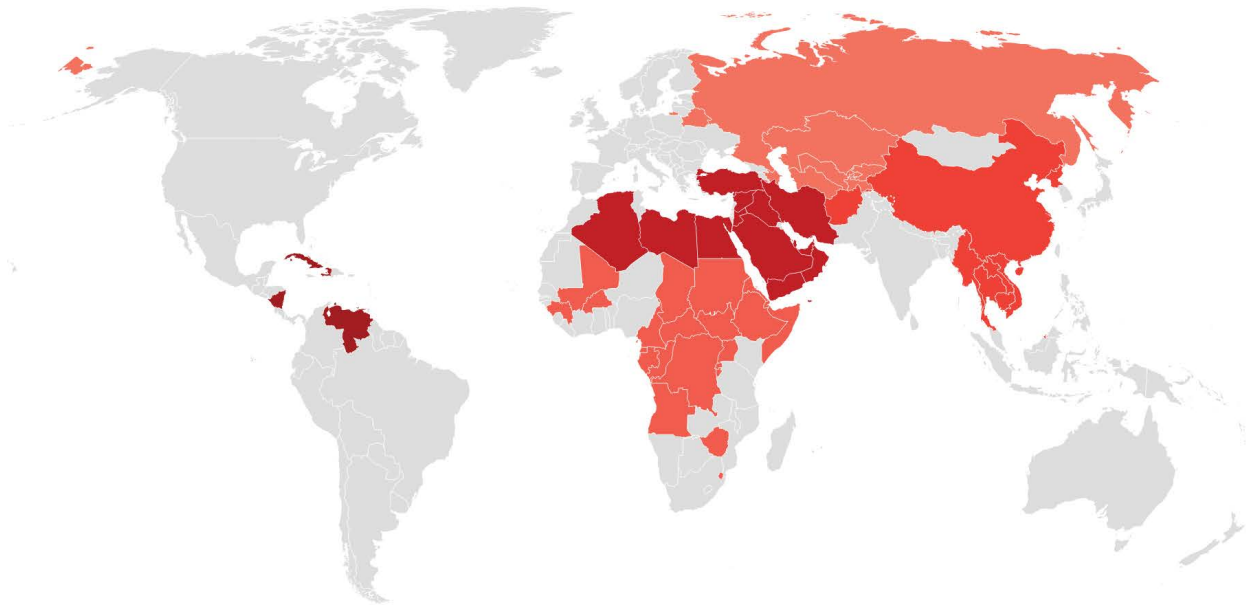
We conclude by extracting from this wide tour of the authoritarian relations landscape answers to three broad questions:

1. Does Biden’s foreign policy represent continuity or change with regard to U.S. relations with authoritarian countries?
2. What are the main factors shaping these relations?
3. What are the trend lines for the future?

A short note on definitions and terminology: There are many ways one could define which countries in the world are authoritarian. This paper focuses on countries designated as not free in the 2023 Freedom House *Freedom in the World* report and uses the labels not free and “authoritarian” interchangeably. We recognize that some countries that Freedom House designated as “partly free” may be considered by some observers to be authoritarian, such as Kuwait or Pakistan. And some countries that Freedom House designated as not free are in that category because of extreme state weakness rather than autocratic governance, such as Haiti and Somalia. Nevertheless, for the most part, the countries Freedom House designated as not free have authoritarian political systems, and this categorization has the significant benefits of definitional clarity and simplicity.

The 2023 Freedom House report designates fifty-seven countries as not free. These countries are primarily in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and the former Soviet Union. Figure 1 organizes these countries by region. The number of not free countries has grown in the past twenty years, from forty-eight in 2003 to fifty-four in 2013 to fifty-seven in 2023.

Figure 1. Not Free Countries, 2023



Asia

- Afghanistan
- Brunei
- Cambodia
- China
- Laos
- Myanmar
- North Korea
- Thailand
- Vietnam

Former Soviet Union

- Azerbaijan
- Belarus
- Kazakhstan
- Kyrgyzstan
- Russia
- Tajikistan
- Turkmenistan
- Uzbekistan

Greater Middle East

- Algeria
- Bahrain
- Egypt
- Jordan
- Iran
- Iraq
- Libya
- Oman
- Qatar
- Saudi Arabia
- Syria
- United Arab Emirates
- Türkiye
- Yemen

Latin America and the Caribbean

- Cuba
- Haiti
- Nicaragua
- Venezuela

Sub-Saharan Africa

- Angola
- Burkina Faso
- Burundi
- Cameroon
- Central African Republic
- Chad
- Democratic Republic of the Congo
- Djibouti
- Equatorial Guinea
- Eritrea
- Eswatini
- Ethiopia
- Gabon
- Guinea
- Mali
- Republic of the Congo
- Rwanda
- Somalia
- South Sudan
- Sudan
- Uganda
- Zimbabwe

Source: Source: Freedom in the World 2023, Freedom House, March 2023, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/FIW_World_2023_DigitalPDF.pdf.

The Arc of Authoritarian Relations

U.S. relations with authoritarian countries have passed through many stages over the years, shaped by the evolving global security landscape and changing political currents relating to the advance or retreat of democracy in the world. In addition, each U.S. president has put their own imprint on such relations, reflecting their personal style and foreign policy outlook. Yet significant continuity has prevailed at a deeper level, especially in the form of a constant bifurcation of relations between a warm embrace for some autocrats and a harsh adversarial stance toward others, with only slow changes in which countries fall on each side of that divide.

The Cold War Years

Throughout the Cold War, U.S. relations with authoritarian governments were sharply divided between antagonistic relations with one set of such governments—the Soviet Union and its allies and friends—and positive relations with other authoritarian governments that were allies and friends in the anti-communist cause.

The negative stance toward the Soviet Union and its allies and friends comprised many elements: military and diplomatic rivalry and sometimes confrontation, intelligence surveillance, economic sanctions, support for regime dissidents and opponents, and active efforts in a few cases to subvert or overthrow a government. The positive stance toward authoritarian countries that the United States favored for its anti-communist outlook included military assistance and partnership, intelligence cooperation, diplomatic praise and support, economic assistance, preferential trade arrangements, and frequent visits by senior officials in both directions.

Only in the late Cold War period, during Jimmy Carter's presidency, did the United States begin to question and back away from some friendships with nondemocratic governments because of discomfort with their violations of rights and lack of adherence to democratic norms and practices. The Carter administration's efforts in this regard toward several Latin American authoritarians, such as Argentina's ruling generals, prompted a heated debate in U.S. foreign policy circles over the wisdom and risks of such an approach. This debate continued in the Reagan years, focusing especially on U.S. relations with repressive, right-wing Central American military governments in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. During the later Reagan years, the United States started to show a willingness to back away from some authoritarian friends—such as Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines, the generals leading South Korea, and Augusto Pinochet in Chile—when those leaders came under serious pressure from their citizens pushing for democratic change. But this policy shift was limited to leaders roiled by popular pressure. The United States continued under Reagan to maintain close relations with many dictatorial leaders who were relatively secure in their power, such as Mobutu, Suharto, and Egypt's Hosni Mubarak.

The Post-Cold War Years

The end of the Cold War brought major changes in this domain. Antagonistic U.S. relations with many nondemocratic countries were transformed by the collapse of the Soviet Union and democratic transitions in Eastern Europe. Almost overnight, the decades of hostility and competition toward former Soviet bloc countries melted away and the United States found itself scrambling to support many of the countries' democratic transitions. Equally transformed were supportive U.S. relations with nondemocratic governments; with anti-communism no longer a driving imperative of U.S. policy, the United States felt little need to support authoritarian governments that had previously appealed to it as partners in the anti-communist struggle. Moreover, the overall number of nondemocratic governments in the developing world was shrinking rapidly in these years. This was especially true in Latin America, which in a relatively short amount of time went from being a region dominated by right-wing dictators to one populated almost entirely by democratic governments. Africa witnessed the exit of many authoritarian leaders and the rise of dozens of governments attempting democratic transitions. A smaller number of nondemocratic governments left the scene in Asia, but there was still a marked shift in that direction. It began to appear that nondemocratic governments were on the way out in the world, possibly becoming a rare species in the century ahead.

In response to this global democratic trend, the United States expanded a set of policy mechanisms and assistance programs that it had established in the 1980s to support democratic change abroad. These included efforts to support human rights and democratic activists, free and fair elections, political party development, independent media, and civil society generally. In some places, especially in Africa where donor dependency was often high, the United States imposed democratic conditionality on recipients of U.S. economic assistance, withholding assistance when strongman leaders refused to hold open elections.

Despite this expansion of prodemocratic policies, various enduring security and economic interests led the United States to continue supporting or seeking cooperative engagement with some authoritarians. In the Middle East, for example, the United States maintained its active friendships with most of the region's authoritarian governments, finding them useful as advocates of a relatively moderate line vis-à-vis Israel, bulwarks of stability against Islamists, and valuable suppliers of oil and natural gas. A similar mix of needs and concerns over energy, investment opportunities, stability, and military cooperation animated continuing positive U.S. relations with various nondemocratic governments in Africa and Asia. For example, the United States maintained friendly ties with Indonesia's autocratic leader, Suharto, throughout most of the 1990s, valuing the stability he provided to a country beset with centrifugal internal divisions. As new authoritarian governments emerged in the former Soviet republics in Central Asia and the Caucasus, Washington found a mix of reasons for developing friendly relations with most of them, such as gaining investor access to Kazakhstan's rich oil fields or Azerbaijan's natural gas. And U.S. policy toward China

throughout the 1990s was one of cooperative engagement, rooted in the idea that a positive relationship would encourage China to integrate into the liberal international order and potentially embrace political liberalization over time.

The War on Terrorism

The abrupt shift in U.S. foreign policy caused by the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, toward a relentless global focus on counterterrorism brought the long-standing tensions between prodemocratic ambitions and authoritarian friendships sharply to the fore. On the one hand, Bush asserted that promoting democratic pluralism in Muslim-majority countries was critical to undercutting the roots of Islamist extremism, described the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq as endeavors to promote democracy, and cast his counterterrorism policy as a sweeping “freedom agenda.”³ The Bush administration made some minor efforts to nudge the leaders of Egypt and a few other autocratic Arab countries to accept the need for democracy. But these efforts accomplished little and were largely dropped after Hamas’ victory in the 2006 Palestinian elections raised the alarm of potential electoral gains by Islamists in other Arab elections. Yet on the other hand, the administration’s heightened counterterrorism focus created a strong drive for closer U.S. cooperation with the military and intelligence services of many nondemocratic governments in South and Southeast Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East. In particular, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq created new needs for military basing, overflight rights, logistical support, and other forms of military cooperation with numerous nondemocratic governments. Moreover, the U.S. abridgement of some civil liberties at home in the pursuit of counterterrorism set a powerful negative political example for other governments, one welcomed by many nondemocratic actors.

An additional factor of change in those years was a rapid rise in energy prices, with the price of oil going from \$34.32 per barrel in December 2001 to a peak of \$195.58 in June 2008. High energy prices fueled U.S. efforts to maintain or develop friendly relations with energy-exporting countries—many of which were nondemocratic—in the Gulf, Africa, and elsewhere. China’s efforts to do the same—the early phase of what would become the country’s wide-reaching drive for economic and political influence in many parts of the world—heightened the sense of pressure on the United States to cultivate these relationships.

The Obama and Trump Years

As president, Barack Obama’s broad inclination was to move beyond the war on terrorism and the divisions it had created between the United States and other countries. He pursued a new framework of global cooperation that included efforts to defuse antagonistic U.S. relations with some authoritarian countries. Most prominent among these were efforts to reset relations with Russia onto a more positive track and to engage with Iran, which ultimately

led to the signing of the Iran nuclear deal in 2015. During his second term, Obama also sought an opening of relations with Cuba, hoping that positive engagement might encourage political liberalization there.

At the same time, significant continuity prevailed with other authoritarians. When the Arab Spring demonstrations and uprisings of 2010–2011 unsettled some of the United States' autocratic friends in the Middle East, the Obama administration showed some support for democratic change in parts of the region. At the same time, it held fast to most of the decades-old close U.S. security partnerships with the region's autocratic governments. The administration's continued execution of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq meant that the U.S. need for security cooperation with a range of authoritarian countries in the wider Middle East region remained high. In the last years of the Obama presidency, the worsening of relations with Russia stemming from the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the increasingly clear signs that China was emerging as a major strategic challenger defined two hard limiting edges to the president's early optimistic vision of an emerging cooperative global order.

The presidency of Donald Trump saw a complex and at times confusing intensification of U.S. relations with authoritarian countries, on both the friendly and antagonistic sides of the ledger. On the soft side, Trump made an unexpected and dramatic overture to North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. He also showed a notable sympathy toward Russian President Vladimir Putin, though a bipartisan consensus in the U.S. Congress kept sanctions in place against Russia. Trump frequently displayed personal affection for other autocratic leaders, such as Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Although these presidential bromances only partially translated into policy shifts toward these countries, they broadcast to the world a negative tilt in U.S. attitudes toward dictators. At the same time, the Trump years saw a distinct shift in U.S. policy toward China, away from the cooperative, integrationist line that had dominated U.S. policy since the 1980s toward an antagonistic and at times confrontational approach, both in the economic and security domains. Reflecting the influence of some of his hawkish senior foreign policy team, such as secretary of state Mike Pompeo and national security adviser John Bolton, Trump also took a hard line toward Iran and the leftist autocratic Latin American trio of Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela. In short, the Trump years found the United States standing alongside some autocrats more visibly, while pressuring others more strenuously, reflecting a greater degree of overall inconsistency.

Enter Biden

The arrival of the Biden administration in 2021 appeared to portend significant changes in U.S. relations with authoritarian countries, at least with regard to Trump's affection for some strongman leaders globally and overall indifference to the global state of democracy. At the Munich Security Conference in February 2021, President Biden spoke of the world being

at an inflection point, defined by a fundamental clash between democracies and autocracies globally, and he committed the United States to standing up for democracy.⁴ In that same month, Secretary of State Antony Blinken stated that Biden's foreign policy would be "centered on the defense of democracy and the protection of human rights."⁵ Biden and his top advisers sent some early signals that they would take a tougher approach toward autocrats who had found favor with Trump, such as bin Salman in Saudi Arabia, Erdoğan in Türkiye, and Sisi in Egypt.

As detailed below, however, by the end of the Biden administration's third year, in 2023, the overall pattern of U.S. relations with authoritarian countries had changed less than some observers expected, both compared to the Trump years and compared to the longer pattern of U.S. cooperation with autocrats. Biden and his team have dispensed with Trump's forgiving line toward Putin, Erdoğan, and other illiberal strongmen who curried personal favor with Trump. But, overall, U.S. policy continues to reflect a division between a sizeable number of close, or at least cooperative, U.S. relationships with autocratic countries and a number of cold or adversarial relations with others.

The intensification of the overarching geostrategic clash between the United States and allies on one side and China and Russia and their allies on the other has sharpened and given new urgency to this division. As during the Cold War, a U.S. geostrategy centered around competition with major autocratic rivals puts Washington in the position of simultaneously defending democracy globally (by laboring to limit the reach and influence of major undemocratic powers) while tightening ties with various democratically challenged leaders and governments who are willing to side with the United States. This was highlighted when Biden traveled to Vietnam in September 2023 to elevate U.S.-Vietnam relations to a comprehensive strategic partnership—a step the White House described as an "unprecedented and momentous elevation of ties between the two countries."⁶

Four Categories Defining the Current Landscape

To present a fuller picture of the current landscape of U.S. relations with authoritarian countries, this paper employs an analytical framework based on four categories along the positive-negative spectrum: close, cooperative, cold, and adversarial.

The essential attributes of each of these categories are defined in the four sections below, but it is important to note that assigning countries to these categories is far from a precise science. The line between any two categories on the spectrum is not defined in a single-factor way that allows for simple decisions. The difference between a close relationship and a

cooperative one, for example, can involve multiple nuanced factors and judgment calls. The same is true between a cold relationship and an adversarial one. Moreover, relations between the United States and these countries are not static, and countries may be on trajectories taking them from one category to another. Venezuela, for example, was firmly in the adversarial category during the Trump years. Yet recent diplomatic outreach by the Biden administration has reduced the level of mutual antagonism somewhat, and relations between the two countries may be resetting to what would be better described as cold rather than adversarial relations.

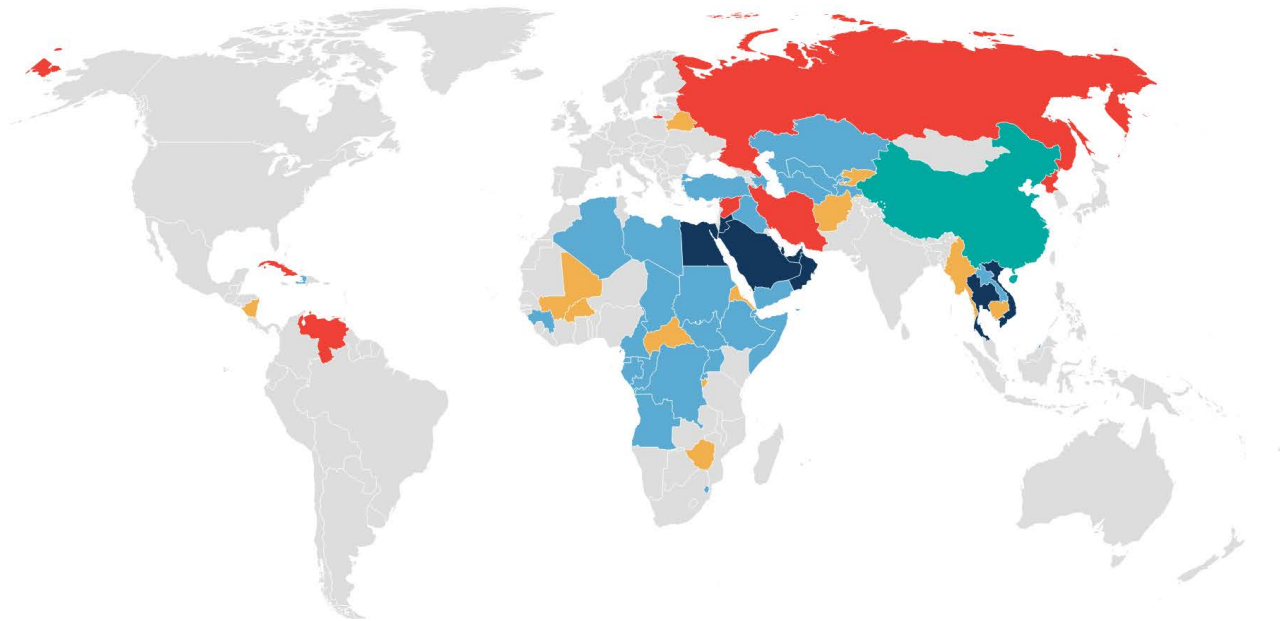
In addition, there are some countries with which the United States has especially complex relations that involve some significant elements from contrasting categories and make categorization a challenge. China is the most important such example. Because China is both the United States' most significant strategic challenger and one of its leading trade partners, the countries' relationship includes an unusually complex mix of adversarial and cooperative elements. For this reason, China is in a category of its own, one that defies simple labeling. Türkiye is another example of a mix of highly contrasting elements; its relationship with the United States includes both important areas of cooperative engagement, like its membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and points of deep strategic antagonism (relating to its Russia policy, for example). Türkiye is placed in the cooperative category, though it is an uneasy fit. Despite these analytic conundrums and complexities, these four categories are an analytically informative way of parsing and presenting the overall landscape of U.S. relations with authoritarian countries.

In assessing U.S. relations with these countries, this paper utilizes information on multiple fronts, with special emphasis on:

- the types and extent of U.S. security cooperation with the country;
- other forms of bilateral cooperation, such as on law enforcement, counternarcotics, anti-corruption, migration, and climate stewardship;
- U.S. economic policies toward the country, including carrots (such as trade preferences and economic assistance) and sticks (such as sanctions); and
- the diplomatic relationship between the United States and the country, including the frequency of leadership-level and ministerial visits and the content and tone of U.S. official statements about the country and its government.

Figure 2 shows which countries fall into each of these four categories.

Figure 2. Not Free Countries by Category of Relations With the United States



Close

- Bahrain
- Egypt
- Jordan
- Oman
- Qatar
- Saudi Arabia
- Thailand
- United Arab Emirates
- Vietnam

Cooperative

- Algeria
- Angola
- Azerbaijan
- Brunei
- Cameroon
- Chad
- Democratic Republic of the Congo
- Djibouti
- Equatorial Guinea
- Eswatini
- Ethiopia
- Gabon
- Guinea
- Haiti

- Iraq
- Kazakhstan
- Laos
- Libya
- Republic of the Congo
- Rwanda
- Somalia
- South Sudan
- Sudan
- Tajikistan
- Türkiye
- Turkmenistan
- Uganda
- Uzbekistan
- Yemen

Cold

- Afghanistan
- Belarus
- Burkina Faso
- Burundi
- Cambodia
- Central African Republic
- Eritrea
- Kyrgyzstan
- Mali
- Myanmar
- Nicaragua
- Zimbabwe

Adversarial

- Cuba
- Iran
- North Korea
- Russia
- Syria
- Venezuela

Unique

- China

Source: Authors' research.

Close

The United States currently has close relations with nine authoritarian countries. These close partnerships are marked by extensive U.S. military cooperation with the country, usually including military training, joint exercises, arms sales, and security assistance. In some cases, the United States has a formal security pact with the country; in a small number of cases the U.S. government designates the country a major non-NATO ally. The partners have active, and in some case strategically important, economic relations with the United States. In addition, there are frequent senior-level diplomatic and military contacts, with U.S. officials speaking publicly in glowing, appreciative terms about the U.S. relationship with the country.

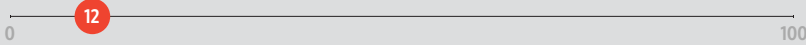
Central Driver

The central driver of these relationships on the U.S. side is the perception that these countries are vital security partners. The largest share of authoritarian countries with close U.S. relations are Arab countries that the United States considers critical partners on Middle East regional security issues, such as dealing with Iran, combating violent Islamist extremists, and ensuring Israel's security. They are Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). In addition, the United States has two close authoritarian partners in Asia—Thailand and Vietnam—both of which Washington sees as integral to its efforts to build an Indo-Pacific security network that can constrain China.

The U.S. security partnerships with Arab autocrats are deep and extensive. They involve substantial amounts of arms sales, joint military exercises, participation in U.S.-led regional security structures, basing rights, intelligence-sharing, and frequent senior-level official visits. Among them, Bahrain, Egypt, and Qatar are major non-NATO allies. As detailed in box 1, the case of Bahrain highlights many of the characteristic features of such relationships. The close U.S. relationships with Thailand and Vietnam share many of the same features as the Middle East partnerships, though Vietnam has less extensive security ties with the United States than the Middle East partners do.

Box 1. U.S.-Bahrain: Long-Standing Partnership

Freedom House Score



The United States and Bahrain have long maintained a close partnership based on common interests in Middle East regional security. In 2002, Bush designated the country a major non-NATO ally.⁷ Bahrain has for decades served as the base of U.S. naval operations in the region. It hosts more than ten U.S. military bases that house several thousand U.S. troops,⁸ most notably the Naval Support Activity Bahrain (NSA Bahrain), which is home to the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet and U.S. Naval Forces Central Command. NSA Bahrain is the central base for U.S. naval operations in the Persian Gulf, Red Sea, Arabian Sea, and parts of the Indian Ocean. Bahrain has supported U.S. counter-piracy missions in the region and is the first Arab state to lead a coalition task force patrolling the Gulf region.⁹

The United States and Bahrain routinely undertake joint military operations. Bahrain hosts exercise Neon Defender, an annual bilateral training event to enhance collaboration and interoperability of both countries' militaries.¹⁰ The United States provides Bahrain with military education, funding Bahraini nationals to study at U.S. military bases through the State Department's International Military Education and Training program.¹¹

The close security ties are reflected in regular high-level diplomatic contacts between the two countries. Over the past forty years, the U.S. government has hosted a leader of Bahrain on a state visit on average every four years. The only significant chilly period in the bilateral relationship came after the government of Bahrain harshly suppressed a massive domestic protest movement in 2011. The Obama administration paused arms sales and criticized the government's actions, but the relationship eventually returned to business as usual.

The countries also enjoy significant economic ties. In fiscal year 2021, the United States provided \$452 million in arms and security equipment to Bahrain through foreign military sales.¹² In 2021, U.S.-Bahrain trade was estimated to total \$4 billion, with the United States exporting \$1.4 billion of goods and services to Bahrain and importing \$2.6 billion from Bahrain.¹³

The Biden administration has worked to further strengthen U.S.-Bahrain relations. In 2021, it designated Bahrain as a major security partner, and in 2023, during a visit to Washington by the crown prince and prime minister of Bahrain, Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa, it announced the Comprehensive Security Integration and Prosperity Agreement (C-SIPA) with Bahrain.¹⁴ C-SIPA seeks to promote enhanced bilateral cooperation across multiple areas, including defense, security, science, technology, and trade. According to the White House, the agreement also encourages investments in "global supply chain resilience and infrastructure" and promotes "the development and deployment of trusted technologies"

to support resilient global telecommunications. C-SIPA was the first U.S. international agreement of its kind to promote cooperation in developing and deploying trusted technologies. When announcing C-SIPA, the Biden administration noted that the two countries have engaged in conversations on the importance of universal values and fundamental freedoms and that promoting human rights was a “an important topic of discussion” during Al Khalifa’s Washington visit.

Economic Side

Although security issues are paramount in these relationships, economic factors play a significant role in some of them. The weighty effects that Saudi decisions about oil production levels have on the global oil market (and, by extension, U.S. gasoline prices) is a powerful incentive for Washington to stay on good terms with Riyadh. The Biden administration felt this especially strongly after Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022 and global oil prices spiked. Similarly, Vietnam’s potential contribution to U.S. supply chain diversification and de-risking and as an alternative low-cost manufacturing hub (to China) has figured in the Biden administration’s calculations about the value of closer U.S.-Vietnam ties. Some of these close autocratic friends are large markets for U.S. arms sales; Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE were second, third, and tenth respectively on the list of total value of U.S. arms exports in 2022.¹⁵

At the same time, some economic factors have receded rather than grown in importance in recent years. Gulf oil exports have become much less important for the United States in the past ten years because of increased U.S. domestic production of oil and gas and the continuing availability of large amounts of Canadian and Mexican oil. In 2022, imports from Saudi Arabia represented only about 7 percent of all U.S. crude oil imports. Even broadening to the larger region, total crude oil imports from the Gulf in 2022 represented just 12 percent of all U.S. crude oil imports and less than 6 percent of total U.S. oil use.¹⁶ And while some of the larger economies in this set of countries represent medium-sized export markets for the United States, even the UAE, the largest export market among them, was only the United States’ twentieth-largest export market in 2022, smaller than Belgium or Chile. Total U.S. exports to Saudi Arabia in 2022 were less than U.S. exports to the Dominican Republic.¹⁷

Flux

Almost all these close relationships are long-standing, reflecting deep security linkages that have endured for decades. The only one that has changed markedly in the past ten years is the U.S. relationship with Vietnam, which has blossomed in close parallel with rising U.S.

concerns about China. Yet though these close relationships have been enduring, they are in a state of increasing flux due to the changing geopolitical situation. In the context of a rising China and an aggressive Russia, these countries are all engaging in a growing number of hedging actions, making overtures and forging new connections with China, Russia, and, in some cases, other strategic adversaries of the United States, like Iran. Saudi Arabia and the UAE, for example, have been diversifying their security postures in recent years, seeking closer ties with China and moving to ease tensions with Iran.¹⁸ Egypt has taken some steps in recent years to improve relations with Russia. Thailand has grown much friendlier to China, and around the time of Biden's September 2023 visit to Vietnam, a Vietnamese Ministry of Finance document detailing a new secret arms deal with Russia came to light.¹⁹ Of course, these were never exclusive relationships on the part of the autocratic partners, but the degree of hedging and diversification of ties is clearly growing in the current climate of heightened geopolitical competition.

Democratic Shortcomings

The shortcomings of these various countries on democracy and human rights are severe but for the most part do not get in the way of close security and diplomatic ties with the United States. U.S. officials occasionally register mild notes of concern about these issues but much more frequently dispense lavish praise and gratitude for the cooperation provided. Egypt is a partial exception—its harsh repressive slide over the last ten years regularly surfaces as an issue in the U.S.-Egypt relationship, with U.S. officials often expressing concern over the Egyptian government's relentless repression. In 2022, the Biden administration withheld \$130 million of U.S. military aid, approximately 10 percent of the overall amount of such aid to Egypt annually, on the grounds that Egypt had failed to fulfill the human rights conditions for such aid. Yet the main substantive elements of U.S.-Egypt relations have remained in place, and in 2023 the Biden administration approved the transfer of most of the military aid it had earlier withheld, despite no significant improvement in Egypt's human rights practices. With Saudi Arabia, the 2018 murder of Khashoggi had a temporary chilling effect on U.S.-Saudi Arabia relations. As a presidential candidate, Biden talked of treating Saudi Arabia as a "pariah state," and during his first eighteen months in office, he avoided meeting with the Saudi crown prince. But in the face of pressure on U.S. gas prices and a new push on engagement in Middle East security issues, Biden came around to re-embracing the U.S.-Saudi Arabia partnership—capped by his 2022 visit to Riyadh—and has sought to expand it in important new ways, such as through a potential three-way security deal with Israel.²⁰ This ongoing push to further bind the United States and Saudi Arabia on the security front has come despite revelations in 2023 that Saudi Arabia has reportedly committed atrocities against African migrants who were trying to enter the country from Yemen.²¹

In the case of Thailand, the military coups of 2006 and 2014 both temporarily set back the security assistance relationship with Washington. The United States stopped providing security assistance after each of the coups. But over time (two years in the case of the first coup and five years in the case of the second) the United States resumed the assistance relationship despite the continued autocratic rule. A communiqué signed by Blinken and the Thai foreign minister during a visit by Blinken to Bangkok in July 2022 noted that the United States and Thailand “intend to strengthen our shared values and ideals, including the rule of law; protecting human rights and human security; adhering to humanitarian principles, including non-refoulement; promoting sustainable development; and upholding resilient democracies.”²²

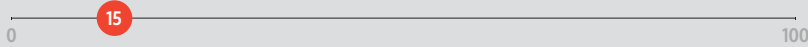
Adversarial

On the other end of the spectrum are authoritarian countries with which the United States has adversarial relations. These are countries that the United States views as direct threats to U.S. national security either because they seek to challenge the U.S. militarily or, in the words of the 2022 U.S. National Security Strategy, act in “aggressive and destabilizing ways.”²³ A core element of such relationships on the U.S. side is a U.S. security posture focused on responding to military or terrorism threats from that country. These usually include far-reaching economic sanctions, both against selected senior officials and the country generally. Diplomatic relations tend to be very constrained or entirely absent, and U.S. official communications about the country are highly critical both of its domestic and foreign policy actions.

The United States currently has adversarial relations with six countries: Cuba, Iran, North Korea, Russia, Syria, and Venezuela. In the cases of Iran, North Korea, and Russia, the security threats are manifest. In the case of Syria, the drivers are a mix of the government’s long hostility to U.S. security interests in the Middle East, including its support for terrorist actors in the region, as well as its savage war against the democratic uprising that began in the early 2010s. In the case of Cuba—a small, militarily weak country—the high level of U.S. hostility has a less clear relationship to any tangible threat. The roots of U.S. antagonism lie in Cuba’s history as a challenger to U.S. regional hegemony, its alignment with the Soviet Union and then Russia, its pattern of repressive rule, and the continuing influence of the Cuban American community on U.S. policy toward the country. The long-standing antagonistic relationship between the United States and Venezuela is rooted in U.S. criticism of Venezuela’s highly repressive governance, its support over the years for far-left governments and parties in the region, its close ties with China and Russia, and its active anti-American initiatives in regional diplomatic institutions. As noted in box 2, which presents a short overview of U.S.-Venezuelan relations, growing diplomatic negotiations and understandings between Washington and Caracas may be moving Venezuela out of the adversarial category, though the situation is still in flux.

Box 2. U.S.-Venezuela: Long-Standing Antagonism

Freedom House Score



Following decades of warm ties, U.S.-Venezuela relations deteriorated after Hugo Chávez became president in 1999. Strident anti-Americanism was central to Chávez's ruling ideology, and the United States disliked major elements of his governance, including his nationalization of major industries, growing political repression, close ties with Cuba, and support for far-left candidates and parties throughout Latin America. Chávez accused the Bush administration of supporting a coup attempt against him in 2002,²⁴ and relations were frosty for the rest of the Bush presidency.

After initial speculation that Obama's arrival to power in 2009 might put relations on a more positive track, mutual enmity between Washington and Caracas soon reasserted itself. Relations worsened further after Chávez's successor, Nicolás Maduro, came to power in 2013 and stepped up repression against opposition forces and moved to improve ties with China, Iran, and Russia.

Under Trump, U.S.-Venezuela relations grew openly hostile. When the Venezuelan Supreme Justice Tribunal dissolved the opposition-controlled National Assembly in 2017, Trump stated publicly that the United States was considering military intervention.²⁵ Diplomatic relations came to a functional halt in 2018 after Maduro won a second term in an election boycotted by the opposition and viewed by the United States and multiple international observers as fraudulent.²⁶ The Trump administration recognized Juan Guaidó, leader of the 2015 National Assembly, as president of Venezuela and the National Assembly and the "only legitimate branch of government," declaring Maduro's claim to the presidency illegitimate.²⁷ The Trump administration implemented a range of additional sanctions against Maduro and his allies.

The Biden administration has sought to encourage the negotiations between Maduro's government and the opposition that began in 2021 and create incentives, like the potential lifting of sanctions, for free and fair elections in 2024.²⁸ When the Venezuelan negotiating parties agreed to create a UN-managed fund to disperse humanitarian assistance in November 2022, the U.S. Treasury Department issued a license for Chevron to resume operations in the country.²⁹ Yet negotiations between Maduro and the opposition stalled in early 2023, and leading candidates challenging Maduro were banned from participating in the 2024 presidential election.³⁰

The Biden administration has continued to look for diplomatic inroads. In October 2023, the White House reached a deal with Maduro to resume deportations to Venezuela, which had been paused since Trump's last day in office.³¹ Later that month, Maduro's government signed a deal with the opposition to

allow international observers to monitor the 2024 presidential election.³² In a joint statement with the European Union, the United Kingdom, and Canada, the United States welcomed this “necessary step in the continuation of an inclusive dialogue process and the restoration of democracy in Venezuela.”³³

U.S. officials regularly make critical, sometimes excoriating statements about these countries’ undemocratic practices and impose some sanctions against them specifically relating to rights violations. These countries’ atrocious records on democracy and rights clearly contribute to the bad blood between them and Washington, although the security challenges they present are the determining foundations on which the negative relationships rest and to which the democracy and rights concerns are then added.

Cooperative

Between the two ends of the positive-negative spectrum of relations are approximately forty countries. These fall into two groups: countries where relations with the United States are marked by at least some forms of active cooperation and countries where relations are defined by a cold standoff.

The cooperative relationships involve some U.S. engagement or partnership on one or more important areas of mutual interest, but they do not include the extensive, deep security cooperation that anchors Washington’s close partnerships. They usually involve some regular senior diplomatic contacts and exchanges, but with less of the top-level leadership attention on both sides that is devoted to the close relationships. Public statements by the U.S. government about the relationships are generally positive, even if they lack the glowing praise often lavished on close partners. Overall, they are less multidimensional than the close partnerships, often revolving around one or two bounded areas of cooperation.

This is the largest category of U.S. relations with authoritarian countries. It comprises thirty countries, primarily in Africa, Central Asia, and the Middle East. Unlike U.S. relations with authoritarian countries at either of the far ends of the positive-negative relations spectrum, most of these cooperative relations fly under the radar and attract relatively little attention in U.S. policy and media circles. Thus, while the cooperative nature of U.S. partnerships with, for example, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Thailand is well known, as are the antagonistic U.S. relationships with North Korea and Syria, fewer observers and analysts are well informed about the nature and substance of U.S. ties with countries such as Algeria, Brunei, Gabon, and Uzbekistan.

This category is also the most diverse of the four, spanning cases of cooperative ties that are quite significant to ones where there exists only a feeble heartbeat of mutual engagement. On the former side are some countries, such as Djibouti, Iraq, and Kazakhstan, with which Washington maintains very significant elements of cooperation, including active security ties. On the latter side are some countries, such as Equatorial Guinea, Laos, Uganda, and Yemen, with only modest cooperative ties. Most of the countries in this cooperative category fall between these two poles. Box 3, a snapshot of U.S.-Angolan relations, gives some details about an important cooperative relationship the United States maintains with one African autocracy. A range of issues drive the cooperative thrust of these relationships.

Box 3. U.S.-Angola: Evolving Cooperation

Freedom House Score



After decades of absent or chilly diplomatic relations between Angola and the United States, relations began to warm up when João Lourenço assumed the Angolan presidency in 2017 following the death of the country's longtime autocratic president. Lourenço has moved gradually to carry out some domestic political reforms, primarily in the domain of anti-corruption, and rebalance the country's diplomatic orientation away from its traditional close friendship with Russia. The United States has welcomed these developments and worked to foster cooperative economic and security ties.

In 2019, the United States and Angola signed a memorandum of understanding on security and public order that has facilitated law enforcement cooperation, opened new avenues for training, and accelerated information-sharing between the two countries.³⁴ Diplomatic cooperation on international matters has strengthened notably since the Russian invasion of Ukraine. While Angola abstained from the initial UN resolution deploring the invasion of Ukraine, Angola voted against Russia on the later UN resolution condemning the annexation of four Ukrainian provinces and called for an "immediate and unconditional ceasefire" in Ukraine.³⁵ Although Russia remains Angola's top supplier of arms, in late 2022, Lourenço announced his intention to increase arms purchases from the United States and other NATO countries. That year, Angola took part in two U.S.- or French-led international maritime exercises, and Lourenço attended the U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit.

Angola is the United States' third-largest trading partner in sub-Saharan Africa, though overall trade remains modest, totaling \$2.3 billion in two-way trade in 2022.³⁶ Angola is the fourteenth-largest supplier of crude oil to the United States; however, the overall amount in 2022 represented less than 1 percent of total U.S. oil imports.³⁷ Angola received \$78 million worth of U.S. economic assistance in 2022, primarily targeted at the health sector.³⁸ Angola is a partner in the U.S. government-led Power Africa program,

which aims to increase energy access for Africans;³⁹ it is also a recipient of infrastructure investments funded by the G7's Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment.⁴⁰

At the 2022 U.S. Africa Leaders Summit, Blinken underscored increased cooperation between the United States and Angola, noting the bilateral “partnership has grown . . . even stronger, the trade and investment ties even deeper . . . and of course, we’re also deepening our security ties.”⁴¹ During Lourenço’s visit to the White House in November 2023, Biden announced major new U.S. investments in Angola and praised the partnership between the two countries as “important” and “impactful.”⁴²

Security

The strongest of these relationships are anchored by shared security interests. Djibouti has been a useful security partner for Washington ever since Camp Lemonnier, a major U.S. military base, was established there in 2003. Camp Lemonnier serves among other things as the headquarters for the Combined Joint Task Force–Horn of Africa, a joint task force of U.S. Africa Command. In Central Asia, Washington found common security cause for years with various governments, including those of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, relating to concerns about security spillover problems emanating from Afghanistan.

Counterterrorism, usually relating to Islamist extremists, though sometimes other violent groups, underlies U.S. cooperative ties with various autocratic countries. The United States provides considerable assistance to the government of Somalia, for example, to help counter Islamist rebels operating in the country. The United States has maintained active security cooperation with Ethiopia on the basis of shared counterterrorism concerns relating to Somalia and other nearby states; these ties have continued despite the abuses carried out by the Ethiopian government in its own civic conflict against rebels in northern Ethiopia. Shared counterterrorism interests are enough to ensure positive cooperation between the United States and Algeria, despite Algeria’s close military ties with Russia. (Russia is Algeria’s top military supplier, and Algeria was the third largest purchaser of Russian arms from 2016 to 2020). A U.S. desire to help various governments in the Sahel combat Islamist jihadists has fostered U.S. engagement with and assistance to multiple governments there of varying political character, including Burkina Faso, Chad, and Guinea. (More on the Sahel cases below.)

Geostrategic Alignment

Some cooperative relationships with autocratic countries are animated by Washington’s desire to encourage the government in question to lean away from China or Russia, or to reward it for having done so. The Biden administration has carried out a minor diplomatic

charm offensive to warm up what have traditionally been very sparse relations with the government of Equatorial Guinea in the hopes of persuading it not to follow through on its plans for offering China permission to build and use a naval base on its territory. In 2016, Obama made the first-ever visit by a U.S. president to Laos and signed a comprehensive partnership agreement with the government. The U.S. push to warm up relations with a country that had long been chilly toward the United States (and which the United States bombed during the Vietnam War) was rooted in the hope of encouraging the Laotian government not to move even closer to China. At least prior to the coup in Gabon in August 2023, U.S. officials saw several reasons to pursue cooperative relations with the government there, including to access the country's vast reserves of the critical mineral manganese, but also to counterbalance China's pointed economic and diplomatic push there.

Russia's war against Ukraine has opened opportunities in some places for the United States to encourage a weakening of ties with Russia. In Central Asia, the war has quickened the longtime U.S. interest in encouraging the region's various autocrats to lean away from Russia. Competition with Russia extends to Africa as well. In 2022, the Biden administration reportedly offered the government of the Central African Republic assistance to help it fight rebels waging war against it if it would agree to expel the Wagner Group, which has provided military support since 2018.⁴³

Fragility and Humanitarian Concerns

The United States also engages and cooperates with various not free countries out of concerns relating to state fragility and humanitarian hardship. The United States actively works with the government of Haiti, for example, to help it restore order in the face of armed gangs that have gained considerable power. The United States is the largest donor to South Sudan, primarily focusing on humanitarian aid, out of an interest in helping the country avoid even greater suffering and instability than it has already experienced. In the conflicts in both Libya and Yemen, the United States directly or indirectly supports the governments in some limited ways, out of an interest in preventing rebel forces from gaining control and reducing the humanitarian suffering, albeit without much enthusiasm for the political actors in charge.

Economic Interests

With most of the cases of cooperative relations, economic issues do not play a major role. Most of these countries have small economies that do not figure heavily in U.S. calculations of reasons to engage or not. But in a few cases, a U.S. interest in access to resources—oil, natural gas, and, increasingly, critical minerals like lithium—motivates Washington to pursue or maintain cooperative relations with the authoritarian country. In the case of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the country's vast supplies of cobalt and copper help

incline the United States toward positive engagement. As mentioned earlier, with Gabon, manganese has been a significant factor in the United States' calculus. Long-term access of U.S. oil companies to Equatorial Guinea's oil fields has contributed to a surprisingly tolerant U.S. stance toward a highly undemocratic government. Angola's status as Africa's second-largest oil exporter is a factor behind the friendly U.S. ties with the country.

Climate Concerns

Climate issues—especially the desire to prod or assist governments to be responsible stewards of their rainforests, biodiversity, or other climate resources—are emerging as a positive driver of U.S. engagement with some authoritarian countries. For example, Washington seeks both the Democratic Republic of the Congo's and Gabon's help in protecting the Congo Basin's rainforest and peatlands. U.S. officials are in talks with the government of Turkmenistan over plans to finance repairs to the country's severely leaky gas pipeline infrastructure. More generally, the Biden administration's efforts to persuade governments around the world that preside over large extractive industries to start moving on a path of economic diversification for the sake of better climate outcomes inevitably includes engagement with numerous undemocratic governments.

Democratic Shortcomings

As in the close partnerships described earlier, shortcomings on democracy and rights do not impede cooperative U.S. relations with many not free countries. This is especially true when there are strong mutual security interests anchoring the relationship. The fact that Djibouti has been ruled by an unbending authoritarian president, Ismail Omar Guelleh, since 1999 and continues to show no serious interest in political liberalization has not stood in the way of the productive partnership around the U.S. military base there. In such cases, while U.S. officials may occasionally quietly urge the leaders of such countries to do a bit better on human rights, in public they usually avoid saying much about the countries' democracy and rights problems. Official U.S. statements generally emphasize the positive elements of cooperation that exist between the two countries. In the case of Algeria, for example, the most recent U.S. State Department bilateral relations fact sheet states that “U.S. engagement in Algeria has three primary objectives: expanding our security and military cooperation, growing economic and commercial links, and building educational and cultural ties between Algerians and Americans” and makes no mention of rights or democracy issues in the country.⁴⁴ Similarly, the fact sheet on the Republic of the Congo describes U.S. relations with the country as “positive and cooperative,” noting that “[t]he two countries have worked together on issues of common interest such as strengthening regional security, improving the living standards of Congolese citizens, and safeguarding the environment,” while saying nothing about the lack of basic freedoms there.⁴⁵

On the other hand, democracy and rights problems do sometimes affect at least some of these cooperative relationships. A major slide toward full-blown autocracy can reduce the U.S. appetite for cooperation. In the case of Ethiopia, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's abrupt turn away several years ago from his initial democratic promises, along with his role overseeing the country's armed forces as they engaged in alleged war crimes against the Tigrayan rebels, cooled Washington's early strong impulse to work closely with him. (However, the United States' overall relationship with Ethiopia was not ruptured, and the U.S. government remains cooperatively engaged in some ways with Abiy's government). In Türkiye, Erdoğan's relentless undermining of democracy over the past ten years (along with his turn away from a pro-Western foreign policy outlook) has contributed to a shriveling of cooperative ties between the two countries. As discussed in the next section, an especially sharp and deep negative turn politically, like a military coup, can sometimes lead to a full rupture of a cooperative relationship and drive relations into a deep freeze.

Conversely, when there is some sign of democratic progress, even if only faint, U.S. officials tend to embrace change in such countries as a reason to expand cooperation. U.S. enthusiasm for engaging with Angola increased significantly after the country's longtime dictatorial president, José Eduardo dos Santos, was replaced in 2017 by Lourenço and the new president showed at least some interest in political reforms. Such is the eagerness to see signs of democratic progress with politically troubled partner governments that U.S. officials sometimes make a lot out of very incipient signs of change—embracing a leader even before they do much more than signal intentions of reform.⁴⁶ For example, when a new president in Uzbekistan took over in 2016 and evidenced some initial inclination toward political liberalization, the United States enthusiastically welcomed what turned out to be very modest progress. U.S. assistance to Uzbekistan grew to nearly \$100 million in 2019, a tenfold increase from 2016, and U.S. State Department officials publicly praised President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's vision for “Uzbekistan [to be] transformed into a thriving, modern state—an example for the region—with a government accountable to its citizens and respectful of their rights, with constructive relationships with its neighbors, and with an open economy that welcomes and protects foreign investment.”⁴⁷

Cold

The remaining countries that lie closer to the center of the spectrum are those with which the United States has cold rather than cooperative relations. With these twelve countries, the United States has little to no security cooperation and usually few if any partnerships or cooperative engagements in other domains like law enforcement or intelligence-sharing. Economic ties are generally minimal; however, in some of these cases, especially for poorer countries such as Cambodia, the Central African Republic, and Zimbabwe, the United States provides significant economic assistance aimed at issues including health, food, education, and humanitarian relief. In most of these cases, the United States has imposed targeted sanctions against select government officials for rights violations or corruption and, in some cases, has also imposed broader economic sanctions against the country. Diplomatic

relations in both directions with these countries are mostly cold and minimalistic. In most cases, U.S. officials regularly issue critical statements about the country's domestic political situation, especially around flawed elections, coups, or other major democratic or rights shortcomings. Yet diplomatic relations are not always entirely absent; the United States and the country in question sometimes maintain some diplomatic contacts. Box 4 presents a brief portrait of U.S. relations with Cambodia, an important case in this category.

Box 4. U.S.-Cambodia: Downhill Path

Freedom House Score



U.S.-Cambodia relations began deteriorating in the late 2010s in the context of Cambodia's authoritarian hardening (led by the country's longtime prime minister Hun Sen) and its growing military and economic ties with China. The Cambodian Supreme Court, packed with justices loyal to Hun Sen, outlawed the main opposition party ahead of the 2018 elections, allowing Hun Sen's party to win all seats in the National Assembly and cementing Cambodia as a de facto one-party state.⁴⁸ In response, the Trump administration imposed sanctions on top Cambodian officials, leading Cambodia to pivot further toward China.⁴⁹

Cambodia announced in 2017 that an annual joint U.S.-Cambodia military exercise running since 2009, Angkor Sentinel, would be postponed for two years.⁵⁰ The exercise has not occurred since. In the months prior to the postponement of Angkor Sentinel, Cambodia launched a new annual military exercise with China.⁵¹ The following year, the United States scaled back its assistance to the Cambodian military and once-active security training partnerships—including the Cambodian military's participation in the U.S. National Guard's State Partnership Program—became dormant. No U.S. foreign military financing has been disbursed to Cambodia since 2015, and Cambodia has neither purchased any U.S. defense articles since 2018 nor received any excess defense articles from the U.S. Defense Department since 2011.⁵² Instead, Cambodia has turned to China to finance its military infrastructure. Most notably, China financed the renovation of Ream Naval Base, which once hosted Angkor Sentinel, in exchange for exclusive Chinese rights to its use.⁵³

The United States and Cambodia still maintain active trade relations, with a trade and investment framework agreement in effect since 2006. Cambodia was the thirty-seventh-largest supplier of goods to the United States in 2020, and the country's nominal exports to the United States rose over 200 percent between 2018 and 2022,⁵⁴ as it increasingly exported low-cost clothing and accessories.⁵⁵ Cambodia continues to receive economic assistance from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), with \$129.6 million disbursed to the country in 2022, largely focused on health; economic development; and democracy, human rights, and governance.⁵⁶

As Cambodia has aligned more closely with China and hardened its authoritarian system, U.S. diplomats have condemned the country's democratic backsliding, arrests of opposition and civil society leaders, and various human rights abuses. After Cambodia's deeply flawed July 2023 elections, the State Department announced visa restrictions on individuals it said had undermined democracy and paused certain foreign assistance programs.⁵⁷ According to the current State Department fact sheet on Cambodia, improvement in the bilateral relationship is contingent "upon Cambodian leadership taking meaningful steps to address concerns about the PRC's military presence at Ream Naval Base, democratic backsliding, and respect for human rights and labor rights."⁵⁸

In some of these cases, the main cause of the United States' cold shoulder toward the country is a harshly undemocratic political situation combined with no strong security or economic reasons to try to engage. Eritrea is one such case: the country's unrelenting despotism and its lack of any strategic or economic interest to Washington has produced years of cold relations. Similarly, with Zimbabwe, decades of harsh political repression alongside no strong positive reasons for the United States to engage have produced a long stretch of extremely cold relations between Harare and Washington. In such cases, the cold shoulder from Washington tends to cause the leaders in question to look for powerful friends elsewhere, with China and Russia being the two likeliest candidates. As these leaders develop such ties, their alignment with China and/or Russia only hardens the cold shoulder from Washington.

In other cases, the drivers of cold relations are a spiral of democratic deterioration together with increasing inclination toward China and/or Russia by the government in question. Cambodia is an example of this two-sided path toward cold relations. The United States and Cambodia maintained relatively cooperative relations until the late 2010s, when the Hun Sen government dropped all pretenses of pluralism and consolidated into a one-party state. In parallel, the government tightened Cambodia's security ties with China. Nicaragua is another example. Over the past ten years, President Daniel Ortega's descent into hard-edged authoritarianism has gone hand in hand with an increased diplomatic orientation toward China and Russia, resulting in a deep chill between Washington and Managua. Similarly, the United States and Kyrgyzstan used to cooperate actively on some security issues, including military base usage, yet in the past several years a turn by the Kyrgyz government toward closer ties with Russia, combined with a worsening of the already troubled state of political pluralism in the country, has led to frosty relations with Washington.

It can be difficult in some cases to judge whether it is democratic backsliding or changed external alignment that is the main factor in the descent from cooperative to cold relations. This is especially the case because the two trends are often intrinsically related—democratic deterioration engenders an ideological outlook that is more sympathetic to major autocratic

partners than democratic ones. Belarus is such a case. President Aleksandr Lukashenko's descent over the past ten years from soft autocrat to full-bore dictator has gone hand in hand with his ever-tightening alignment with Moscow.

It can be puzzling why democratic backsliding or democratic absence in some countries is a real factor pushing Washington to become less friendly toward them when the United States maintains close relations with some other countries that have long had equally undemocratic systems, including those in the Gulf. A simple answer is that U.S. diplomacy is a broad canvas and is not consistent when it comes to the application of principles. But a more nuanced answer reflects the fact that moving backward on democracy is more visible than being stably undemocratic, and the United States tends to react to backsliding more than to undemocratic stability. The U.S. stance also depends, of course, on the overall balance of interests: if Washington has major security interests in a country, it is more likely to be willing to put rising democracy concerns on the back burner. In neither Cambodia, Kyrgyzstan, nor Nicaragua, for example, are there crucial U.S. security interests (though Washington does care a significant amount about the naval base in Cambodia that China is seeking to use).

Countries where military coups occur highlight the complex interplay of the different factors and interests that shape whether U.S. relations with some backsliding countries deteriorate from cooperative to cold. Burkina Faso, Gabon, Mali, and Myanmar, which have all had coups since 2020, are pertinent examples. Although a coup is often preceded by a sustained downward slide in the condition of democracy in a country, coups are nevertheless abrupt, highly visible events—a relatively bright political line in some cases between democracy and nondemocracy—and as such they oblige the U.S. government to confront whether it is going to continue cooperative relations that may have existed prior to the coup. One element of U.S. legislation, Section 7008 of the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act, specifically pushes the government in the direction of reducing ties with a country that experiences a coup.⁵⁹ It mandates that if the State Department finds that a coup has occurred in a country, the United States must terminate security and economic assistance to the country's government unless the State Department issues a national security waiver allowing aid to continue because of pressing security interests in doing so. But the waiver escape provision, together with the fact that in some cases the State Department avoids making a determination that a coup occurred (as it did to some criticism after the Egyptian military coup that brought Sisi to power in 2013), renders this legislative provision relatively bendable in actual application.

Some of these recent coups led to a sudden chilling of relations between the country and the United States. Myanmar is one important such case. The January 2021 military coup there precipitated a harsh rupture in Washington's relations with Nay Pyi Taw. The Biden administration excoriated the country's military leaders for their power grab, imposed extensive sanctions on the country, and cut off aid to the government. Mali is another country that experienced a major turnaround in relations. Years of substantial U.S. counterterrorism support to Mali to aid its fight with Islamist rebels ended after the country experienced two successive coups, in 2020 and 2021. After the first coup, cooperative ties with Mali were

on pause rather than fully ruptured. But the government's increasingly friendly relations with Russia, including inviting the Wagner Group to the country, have driven Mali and the United States far apart. Burkina Faso is another relevant case. Prior to two coups there in 2022, the United States and Burkina Faso enjoyed active relations, including U.S. security support for the government's fight against Islamist rebels and various forms of economic assistance. Since the two coups, the U.S. government has suspended military aid and reduced economic aid. Yet the rupture in relations has only been partial. Concerned about the government's ability to fight the Islamist insurgents in the country and loath to push the Burkinabè government into a Russian security embrace, the State Department and the Pentagon have reportedly proposed resuming at least nonlethal assistance to the country's military.⁶⁰

With some of the other coups, however, the balance between the interest in continued security cooperation and the democracy issue works out differently. With Chad, for example, Washington has maintained cooperative security ties with the government despite the extra-constitutional power grab there in 2021 and continued delay of a promised path to elections. The United States is highly reluctant to give up its partnership with Chad's military, an effective military partner in the region and what the *Wall Street Journal* has described as Washington's "go-to army" for fighting jihadists in the Sahel.⁶¹ After Guinea experienced a coup in 2021, the United States suspended aid to the country's military but continued to provide economic aid. While Guinea was not invited to participate in the U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit in December 2022, in January 2023, a letter to the coup leader from the U.S. ambassador to Guinea remarked that in the past year the United States had expanded bilateral cooperation with Guinea and strengthened the bilateral relationship.⁶² The relatively soft approach to the military takeover in Guinea primarily reflects the United States' interest in not pushing the government closer to Russia, which has been working assiduously to strengthen its security ties there.

One major country in the cold category with some special dynamics of its own is Afghanistan. After the Taliban took over the country in 2021, the almost twenty years of close partnership between Washington and Kabul abruptly ended and were replaced by frosty ties, reflecting a series of interconnected concerns the United States has about the Taliban government relating to security, strategic alignment, and lack of respect for human rights, especially for women. At the same time, the Biden administration has not pursued a full adversarial stance, signaling that it is not trying to overthrow the government and is open to better relations if the government addresses a variety of U.S. security and political concerns.

The Place of Democracy Aid

The analysis across the four categories analyzed above underlines the fact that the U.S. government often pushes on issues of democracy and human rights in authoritarian countries with which it has adversarial or cold relations—whether by issuing critical statements or imposing sanctions tied to these problems—but it does so less often in countries with which it has close or cooperative relations. This raises two questions about democracy aid, which is another important part of U.S. efforts to support democracy globally: how much democracy aid does the United States direct toward authoritarian countries, and how does such aid vary in amount among the different categories of relationships?

Although democracy aid is a vital element of U.S. democracy support, it is often less visible than other aspects like economic sanctions or critical statements by the U.S. president. Democracy aid usually operates quietly; decisions about where and how to pursue it generally do not attract much attention in U.S. foreign policy discussions. Most U.S. democracy aid is funded by USAID and the State Department, totaling a little over \$3 billion annually under the Biden administration.⁶³ It is an integral part of U.S. foreign policy, even though the private U.S. for-profit and nonprofit organizations that receive much of this public aid and implement democracy programs abroad do not necessarily think of themselves as agents of U.S. foreign policy. A smaller but still sizeable share of U.S. democracy aid comes from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED): around \$283 million in grants in fiscal year 2023.⁶⁴ The NED is one step removed from U.S. foreign policy—it receives a line-item appropriation in the international affairs budget each year and operates as a private organization with an independent board of directors that oversees its operations. The NED makes its own decisions about what to fund and where to provide funding, and it does not take direction from the State Department or other parts of the U.S. government. At the same time, almost all the NED's funds come from the U.S. Congress, and the government is informed about what it is doing and where it is working. Thus, the NED's activities can be considered to represent a part of U.S. foreign policy in a broad sense.

Democracy aid varies significantly in type. Some of it challenges autocratic governments, such as aid that supports human rights defenders, independent media outlets, or investigative journalists who are fully independent of the government and willing to run some risks in carrying out their work. Other types of democracy aid tend not to challenge host governments, such as governance programs that involve capacity-building for parliamentarians or legal personnel; support for civil society groups that cooperate with the government; or help for human rights groups that take a soft approach to their work, for example by focusing on technocratic civic education. An important indicator of how challenging a democracy aid program or set of programs is in an autocratic setting is how much role the government has

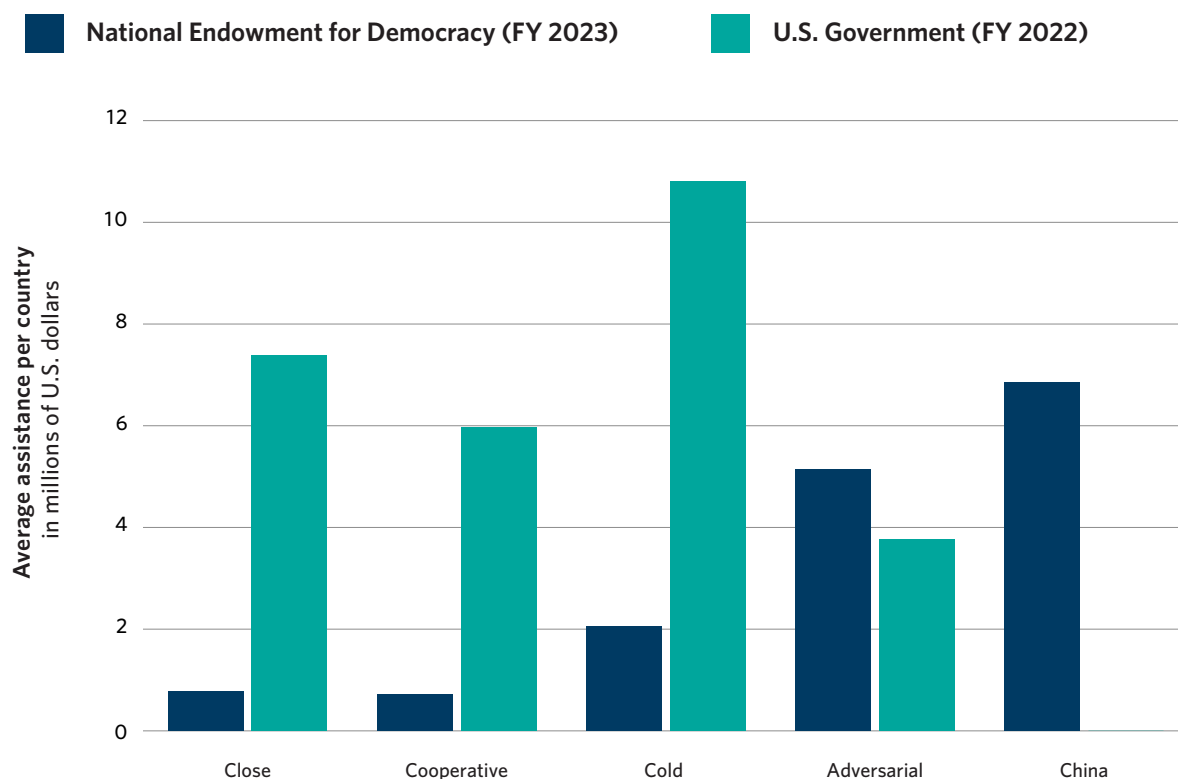
in approving local grantees or approving program activities. It can often be difficult to tell by reading the description of an aid program or project whether it is challenging or cooperative vis-à-vis the government of the country to which it is directed. For example, a program billed as an effort to enhance citizen participation in local governance may be a politically mushy set of activities carried out in close cooperation with and effectively for the benefit of local officials who are integral parts of an authoritarian system. Or such a program may involve a politically pointed endeavor that gives crucial organizational and advocacy skills to politically marginalized groups that are willing to push hard against repressive local government practices.

Annex 1 presents the amounts of official U.S. democracy aid and NED programs directed toward the countries analyzed in this paper (using the latest data available, which is for fiscal year 2022 for official aid and 2023 for NED grants). It reveals several overall patterns. First, the United States directs some democracy aid toward countries with which it has close or cooperative relations. Sizeable amounts of such aid go to about half the countries with which the United States has close relations; Egypt, Jordan, Thailand, and Vietnam, the less wealthy countries in this category, also receive sizeable amounts of other types of U.S. economic aid. Analysts have critiqued U.S. democracy aid in Egypt and Jordan for being largely unchallenging of the autocratic governments in question.⁶⁵ Given the high degree of animosity on the part of the Thai and Vietnamese governments toward independent human rights actors in their countries, it seems likely that the U.S. democracy aid directed toward them is not very pointed either. As shown in figure 3, for countries in the cooperative relations category, the average U.S. democracy aid total averages around \$6 million per country. Although aid in such amounts can be meaningful, it is a relatively low figure and appears to reflect a relatively low priority given to directing democracy assistance to such countries.

Second, official democracy aid to countries with which the United States has cold relations is on average almost twice as much per country as for countries in the cooperative category, reflecting the higher degree of U.S. attention overall to the democratic deficiencies of such countries.

Third, regarding NED funding: NED grants to authoritarian countries represent around 32 percent of total NED grants globally, whereas for official U.S. democracy aid, the percentage is closer to 10 percent, reflecting a greater NED focus (relative to USAID and State Department) on getting democracy aid to authoritarian contexts. And NED funding tends to be more politically challenging of authoritarian governments than official U.S. democracy aid. The amounts of NED funding on average per country are highest in the adversarial group, next highest in the cold group, and significantly lower in the cooperative and close relations groups. Countries in the adversarial group saw on average \$5.13 million in NED funding directed toward them whereas countries in the close relations group saw \$790,000. Thus, while NED does operate at arm's length from U.S. foreign policy, its funding directed toward authoritarian countries largely tracks the overall degree of closeness of official U.S. relations to those countries—the less close, the more democracy funding.

Figure 3. U.S. Democracy Aid to Not Free Countries



Sources: “Foreign Assistance,” U.S. Agency for International Development, accessed October 8, 2023, <https://www.foreignassistance.gov>; and data provided to the authors by the National Endowment for Democracy.

Note: In this chart, the total aid obligation for each country by the U.S. government in the 2022 fiscal year is the sum of the aid in the following USAID categories: anti-corruption organizations and institutions, decentralization and support to subnational government, democratic participation and civil society, elections, human rights, legal and judicial development, legislatures and political parties, media and the free flow of information, women’s rights organizations and movements, and government institutions.

Conclusions

The Biden administration grounds its foreign policy in the idea that today’s world is defined by an overarching struggle between democracies and autocracies. It positions its major foreign policy engagements within this framework—supporting democracy in Ukraine against autocratic encroachment from Russia, working to limit China’s growing transnational reach and influence, and supporting Israel against Hamas and other violent actors who deny Israel’s right to exist.⁶⁶ At the same time, this paper provides a reminder that in the midst of this global positioning, the Biden administration maintains close or cooperative relations

with approximately two-thirds of the authoritarian countries in the world. This does not mean that the administration is unserious about or doing nothing to support democracy in the world. There are many elements of U.S. support for democracy that are separate from the friendly relations that the Washington maintains with many autocracies, including support for countries engaged in democratic reforms and actions in multilateral forums to bolster democracy and pressure some democratically backsliding countries to reverse course. But while the United States is indeed embroiled in a geopolitical contest against two major autocratic powers, China and Russia, and some of their closest friends, it is not laboring to combat autocracy per se. Dozens of autocracies are useful to U.S. security and economic interests. Washington maintains friendly relations with them and for the most part does not push them hard on their democratic shortcomings.

This complex reality reflects a long line of continuity in U.S. foreign policy. During the Cold War, the United States did much to advance democracy's global fortunes but maintained numerous antidemocratic friends and allies. While president Bill Clinton and his foreign policy team spoke often about supporting democracy globally and established many programs and policies to do so, they made few pointed efforts to revise the United States' close partnerships with autocratic regimes in the Middle East and parts of Asia and Africa. During the peak years of the U.S. war on terrorism, the Bush administration pursued a "freedom agenda" globally, yet it did so while maintaining, and in some cases strengthening, partnerships with dictatorial regimes in multiple regions. Notable continuity exists at the specific country level as well: with the exception of Vietnam, all the close autocratic partners that the United States currently has have been in such a relationship with Washington for decades. In addition, most of the countries in the cooperative category have been in that category for a similarly long time.

The most significant change of recent years in U.S. relations with authoritarian countries has come on the negative side. U.S. relations with China and Russia today are much more adversarial than they were twenty years ago, as a result of those countries' hardening authoritarian politics and rising geopolitical ambitions. Additionally, the number of countries with which the United States has cold relations has grown significantly because of democratic decline in those countries and/or their closer ties with China and Russia. In the past ten years, Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Cambodia, Mali, Myanmar, and Nicaragua have all moved from at least somewhat cooperative to fairly cold relationships with the United States. And relations with some countries that were already cold ten years ago have gotten even colder, such as with Belarus.

Core Drivers

While a wide range of factors shapes U.S. relations with authoritarian countries, security issues are far and away the dominant driver. This is overwhelmingly the case regarding close partnerships; all the close U.S. partnerships with autocrats are rooted in shared security interests and ties. This is also true with respect to most of the countries in the category of

cooperative relationships. In those cases, security interests—such as countering China and Russia, fighting terrorism, or pursuing regional stability in places such as East Africa and the Sahel—are the glue that ensures most of the cooperative ties. The strategic dimension dominates on the negative side of the spectrum as well. The adversarial relations Washington has with some authoritarian countries are rooted in strategic threats they present to the United States. Cold relations are often about countries' decisions to embrace ties with the United States' main strategic adversaries. Economic interests—such as energy investments or supplies, critical minerals, arms sales, or U.S. market access—play a role in spurring positive U.S. relations with some authoritarian states. But overall, the role of economic factors is far less important than that of security interests.

Problems with democracy and rights also shape U.S. relations with authoritarian countries, albeit less clearly in many cases. One might conclude from the fact that Washington maintains enduring, productive relationships with many undemocratic countries that democracy and rights are simply not a significant factor in determining the warmth of U.S. relations with autocrats. But the reality is more complex and varies considerably across different types of cases.

When the United States has a clear security interest in maintaining friendly relations with an authoritarian country, concerns about democracy are usually on the back burner, if not absent entirely. Such relationships are sometimes damaged by negative developments relating to democracy and human rights. When Bahrain brutally suppressed popular protests in 2011, the United States halted arms sales to the country for a time. After Thailand experienced a military coup in 2014, the United States suspended military assistance for five years. The Saudi government's assassination of Khashoggi in 2018 did not constrain U.S.-Saudi ties much during the remaining years of the Trump administration but did lead to an initial cold shoulder from the Biden team. In all these cases, however, the relationships' main structures survived the bad patch and returned to form after a cooling-off period. Similarly, Egypt's record of repression ever since Sisi took power in 2013 has created considerable noise and friction in the U.S.-Egypt relationship, but it has not led Washington to back away from the core pillars of the long-standing security partnership.

In contrast, when the United States has only very weak or no identifiable security or economic motivations for pursuing friendly ties with an authoritarian country, that country's shortcomings on democracy and rights can loom large in the relationship. This is true when the shortcomings are chronic, such as in Zimbabwe over the last twenty or more years and in Eritrea since it gained independence from Ethiopia in 1993. In such cases, the grievous democracy and rights shortcomings are a primary factor shaping the U.S. approach to the country. Democracy and rights also often play a role when the political shortcomings represent a distinct turn for the worse. Myanmar's 2021 military coup provoked a sharp reversal of U.S. efforts to cooperate with the government there. Similarly, for Cambodia and Nicaragua, backsliding from soft to hard authoritarianism and greater diplomatic friendliness toward China and Russia have been significant factors in the growing frostiness from Washington.

The most complex cases are those in the middle, where the United States has some countervailing interests pointing it toward cooperation (but not a deep, enduring security partnership) and confronts a situation where democracy and rights in the country suddenly go downhill. In such cases, the United States works through an awkward balancing act, leaning toward either cooperation or coldness based on its weighing of the interests at play. The various cases of military coups in Africa in recent years embody this pattern vividly. Although U.S. officials would at some level like to have a consistent anti-coup policy, the U.S. interest in continuing security cooperation with some of these countries, such as Chad, is strong enough that the United States alternately adheres to and bends its policy principles—including employing the tactic of avoiding calling a coup a coup—to reach different outcomes in different cases.

The high degree of variability in the role that democracy and rights issues play in U.S. relations with authoritarian countries stands in sharp contrast to the notion often advanced in U.S. policy rhetoric that standing up for democracy and rights is a moral principle rather than another pragmatic interest and therefore, by implication, should not be subject to compromise and balancing. This variability produces continuous frustration among those members of the U.S. policy community who believe that supporting democracy and rights internationally should be a consistent, major concern for the United States. And it produces justifiable charges of hypocrisy among observers around the world who see a U.S. administration apply the principle and deliver generous doses of self-righteous rhetoric in one country and then completely ignore democracy and rights issues in another.

Trend Lines

This paper has highlighted significant lines of continuity as well as some areas of change in recent years in U.S. relations toward authoritarian countries. Going forward, the picture is mixed. It seems probable that geostrategic tensions between the United States and its allies on the one hand and China, Russia, and their allies on the other will continue to intensify. Part of this will likely entail continued Chinese and Russian gains in pulling some nondemocratic countries (and possibly some democratic countries) closer to them. This battle for influence means that the United States will have more reasons to put aside its concerns about democracy and rights in some authoritarian countries to try to woo them diplomatically closer to the Western camp. Yet it also means that if China and Russia make progress in pulling some countries closer to them, the United States will likely turn a cold shoulder to at least some of them. In short, the context of geostrategic competition pushes the United States to give ever greater attention to authoritarian countries, seeking friendlier ties with some, while freezing others out.

While these security factors will primarily drive U.S. policy stances, economic and other factors will continue playing a role and fuel a greater perceived U.S. need to cooperate with authoritarians. For example, the push for de-risking global supply chains leads the United States to augment economic partnerships across many countries, including some not free

ones. The surging importance of certain critical minerals, such as lithium, is propelling Washington to ensure it has friendly ties with some undemocratic countries that are rich in such minerals. Of less importance but still relevant is the effect of pressing concerns over climate change. In several cases, such concerns are driving the United States to maintain or strengthen cooperative ties with some authoritarian countries that have important climate resources such as rainforests or that have potentially remediable climate policy challenges, such as leaky natural gas infrastructure.

Future U.S. administrations will put their own distinctive mark on U.S. relations with authoritarian countries beyond these underlying relationship drivers. Every president has their own inclinations and attitudes in this domain, with some evincing a greater reluctance than others to embrace strongman leaders and some believing that their personal charm or cleverness can forge productive ties even with the most despotic leaders. And as the relative global power and persuasiveness of the United States evolves in the years ahead, countries of all types, not free and free alike, will accordingly adjust their calculations on the utility of friendly relations with the United States.

Annex 1

The table shows the amounts of official U.S. government democracy aid and NED programs directed toward the countries analyzed in this paper (using the latest data available, which is for fiscal year 2022 for official aid and 2023 for NED grants).

Annex 1. U.S. Democracy Aid to Not Free Countries

	U.S. Government Aid (U.S. dollars, FY 2022)	National Endowment for Democracy Funding (U.S. dollars, FY 2023)
Close		
Bahrain	0	0
Egypt	17,200,000	2,147,206
Jordan	29,200,000	590,284
Oman	0	0
Qatar	0	0
Saudi Arabia	0	0
Thailand	11,000,000	3,719,347
United Arab Emirates	0	0
Vietnam	9,100,000	606,500

	U.S. Government Aid	National Endowment for Democracy Funding
	(U.S. dollars, FY 2022)	(U.S. dollars, FY 2023)
Cooperative		
Algeria	0	492,000
Angola	0	423,153
Azerbaijan	4,210,000	1,193,134
Brunei	0	0
Cameroon	4,600,000	486,500
Chad	0	390,000
Democratic Republic of the Congo	14,000,000	0
Djibouti	4,000,000	120,000
Equatorial Guinea	0	95,251
Eswatini	0	0
Ethiopia	6,100,000	2,539,915
Gabon	0	0
Guinea	250,000	197,500
Haiti	6,300,000	900,000
Iraq	26,000,000	2,683,172
Kazakhstan	5,100,000	1,819,389
Laos	12,000,000	0
Libya	12,100,000	270,000
Republic of the Congo	0	0
Rwanda	750,000	347,500
Somalia	14,700,000	397,547
South Sudan	11,660,000	199,544
Sudan	26,650,000	2,256,258
Tajikistan	3,230,000	531,250
Türkiye	0	2,784,263
Turkmenistan	770,000	346,820
Uganda	3,280,000	916,500
Uzbekistan	12,130,000	347,100
Yemen	5,000,000	1,128,900

	U.S. Government Aid	National Endowment for Democracy Funding
	(U.S. dollars, FY 2022)	(U.S. dollars, FY 2023)
Cold		
Afghanistan	28,000,000	3,688,800
Belarus	7,060,000	4,129,316
Burkina Faso	200,000	178,250
Burundi	750,000	415,427
Cambodia	22,700,000	1,677,298
Central African Republic	300,000	200,500
Eritrea	0	176,605
Kyrgyzstan	13,190,000	2,120,215
Mali	13,500,000	365,000
Myanmar	28,100,000	6,778,383
Nicaragua	6,300,000	2,904,200
Zimbabwe	10,000,000	2,105,200

	U.S. Government Aid	National Endowment for Democracy Funding
	(U.S. dollars, FY 2022)	(U.S. dollars, FY 2023)
Adversarial		
Cuba	5,600,000	5,812,185
Iran	0	2,013,600
North Korea	0	4,888,149
Russia	0	12,790,456
Syria	1,500,000	1,271,100
Venezuela	15,500,000	4,037,174

	U.S. Government Aid	National Endowment for Democracy Funding
	(U.S. dollars, FY 2022)	(U.S. dollars, FY 2023)
Unique		
China	0	6,856,637

Note: In this chart, the total aid obligation for each country by the U.S. government in the 2022 fiscal year is the sum of the aid in the following USAID categories: anti-corruption organizations and institutions, decentralization and support to subnational government, democratic participation and civil society, elections, human rights, legal and judicial development, legislatures and political parties, media and the free flow of information, women's rights organizations and movements, and government institutions.

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