

Chatham House Report

Jacob Parakilas

# Elite Perceptions of the United States in Latin America and the Post-Soviet States



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The Royal Institute of  
International Affairs

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US and the Americas Programme | September 2016

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Cover image: A US National Park employee cleans the floor of the Lincoln Memorial after a wreath-laying ceremony to honour Abraham Lincoln's 207th birthday on 12 February 2016 in Washington, DC.

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# About the Author

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# Preface

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In 2013, the US and the Americas Programme at Chatham House undertook a project to examine how elites in other regions perceive the United States. This was intentionally designed as a qualitative study, drawing upon narratives written by members of these elites rather than responses to survey questions. The purpose was to offer a complement to existing public polling data on views of the United States, by allowing those who have been closest to the foreign policy-making process in their own countries to express their views in detail.

The first report, published in 2014, examined the views of influential individuals in 13 countries across Europe and Asia.<sup>1</sup> This follow-on report looks at two distinct but complementary regions: Latin America, which has long been overlooked in US strategic thought but is geographically close to the United States and has strong cultural and economic links with its northern neighbour; and the post-Soviet states, which are strategically important to US foreign policy goals but lack close social, economic or political ties to America.

As a complement to this 2016 report, Chatham House has made available online a selection of the essays submitted by elite respondents during the research. See <http://eliteperceptions.chathamhouse.org>.

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<sup>1</sup> Dormandy, X. and Webb, J. (2014), *Elite Perceptions of the United States in Europe and Asia*, Chatham House Report, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/elite-perceptions-united-states-europe-and-asia>.

# Executive Summary

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Over the spring and summer of 2015, the US and the Americas Programme at Chatham House surveyed members of elite groups in 12 countries in Latin America and the former Soviet Union to ask for their personal views of the United States. Respondents were drawn from five sectors: the private sector, the public sector, the media, academia/think-tanks and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). This report brings together the opinions and perspectives provided in order to draw some conclusions about how the United States is seen today in these regions, as well as what factors influence these views. The report also makes recommendations as to how the United States could adjust its approaches and policies based on these perceptions.

The report's key findings are as follows:

- 1. Elites across both regions have a more favourable view of the American people and US non-governmental institutions (corporations and universities, in particular) than of the US government.** Interestingly, American *strength* as an abstract concept was widely praised, but there was very little positive reinforcement for specific contemporary American policies that might embody this quality. The positive impressions that we recorded correlate strongly with local elites' contact with non-governmental institutions. It follows that creating incentives for greater engagement abroad by American companies and NGOs – especially in regions where they have thus far been under-represented, such as Central Asia – would help improve the United States' image overall.
- 2. Latin American elites' views are shaped to a considerable degree by domestic US factors.** Inequality, police violence, gun crime and the tenor of the country's political discourse are the primary factors that drive negative perceptions of the United States.
- 3. Despite being categorized as a domestic issue in internal political discourse, US immigration policy is a significant foreign policy issue.** This is particularly true for Latin American elites, many of whose members have studied, worked or travelled extensively in the United States, and who accordingly demonstrate a more sophisticated understanding of American political and social structures than their counterparts from the former Soviet Union. Creating more opportunities for non-Americans to live, work and study temporarily in the United States; advertising those opportunities more proactively; and streamlining visa application procedures – all could ultimately support more positive and nuanced understandings of American policy and priorities abroad.
- 4. Elites in former Soviet states are not instinctively pro- or anti-American.** In Western-aligned countries, there are doubts regarding America's potential value as an ally, and **there is a divide between countries that see the United States in transactional terms and those that see it in aspirational terms.** Elites in Russia and Central Asia with exposure to the United States praise its entrepreneurial and individualistic qualities, but tend to have a cynical view of its government and policy priorities.
- 5. US policy-makers and their foreign counterparts from both regions have fundamentally different understandings of the history of US foreign policy.** Past US support for military governments in Latin America convinced many elites in that region that the US government is a fundamentally malign force. For elites in post-Soviet states, American promises made in the wake of the USSR's collapse contrast negatively with the reality of US policy in their region.
- 6. Elites in both regions perceive the US government as operating arrogantly and hypocritically on the basis of limited information about the world.** Broadly speaking, almost all respondents were critical of US foreign policy, regardless of their country, sector or political affiliation. Although the targets of their criticism varied, a common theme was that US policies were either arrogantly expounded or represented a fundamental hubris on the part of the American people regarding their position in the world. A more nuanced, self-aware presentation of the US role in international affairs, along with a renewed focus on communicating US policies and viewpoints in languages other than English, would help combat this perception.
- 7. The process by which US policies are made is widely misunderstood,** though Latin American elites are generally better informed about the American political system than are their former Soviet counterparts. The US president and secretary of state are widely recognized; beyond that, however, attention is paid to only a very small number of specific members of Congress and to local American ambassadors. This suggests that for US policies to have impact, announcements should be routed through the highest-ranking officials possible. In the longer term, the United States should seek to tailor its public diplomacy more closely to the local level of awareness of the US political system and policy-making process.

8. **Latin American elites believe that their countries are not priorities for US foreign policy.** This state of affairs is widely interpreted as neglect rather than malign intent, though respondents' references to past American engagements in Latin America were almost uniformly hostile. The opening of ties with Cuba presents an opportunity for the United States to remake its image in Latin America, but that window is limited in both scope and time frame.
9. **Russian elites particularly object to US dominance of the internet.** The issue of National Security Agency (NSA) surveillance is a concern, but it does not seem to drive negative views to the same extent as the overall perception that the US government and private sector dominate the infrastructure of the internet. Formally accepting the transition of internet governance to a multi-stakeholder model would be an excellent first step towards improving Russian elite perceptions of the United States.

# 1. Introduction

What does the United States stand for? The answer, as with many questions, depends a great deal on who is being asked. The first report in this series, in 2014, found that European elites looked to the United States for moral leadership (which they said was declining), whereas their Asian counterparts looked more to its hard power, its value as a security guarantor and its economic might. To add to and broaden those conclusions, in 2015 Chatham House launched a follow-up project asking members of elites from Latin America and the post-Soviet states for their views of the United States – and, crucially, how those views were formed. This report presents and interprets the findings.

While the fundamental foreign policy interests of the United States have remained largely stable in the post-Cold War era, the means by which it pursues them has gone through several transitions. The realism of the George H. W. Bush presidency gave way to the liberal internationalism of Bill Clinton. President George W. Bush might have been inclined towards a more inward-looking set of policies had it not been for 9/11, following which his administration

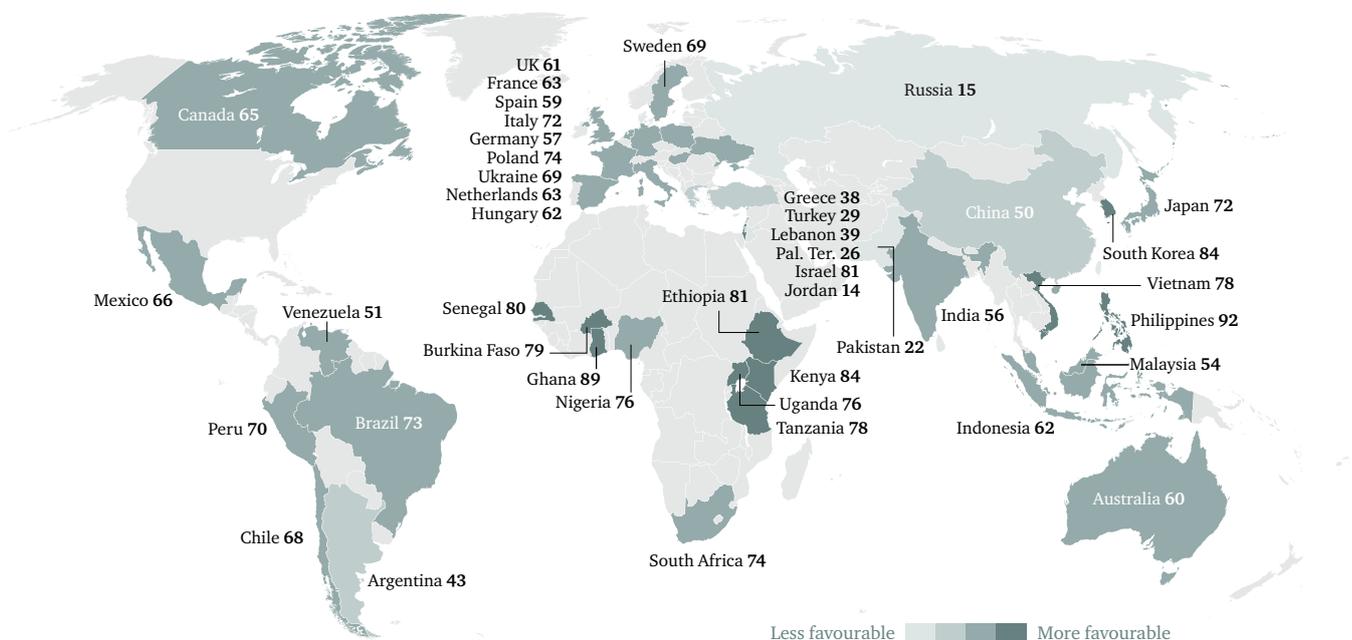
turned towards neoconservatism. Its embrace of wide-ranging counterterrorism and military actions in Iraq and Afghanistan set the stage for the administration of President Barack Obama, which has attempted to balance realism and liberal internationalism.

These swings – some more pronounced than others – have caused confusion abroad as to what US foreign policy has really stood for since the end of the Cold War. (In contrast, the Cold War provided consistency to the extent that the United States' underlying strategy of containment held for 40 years through Democratic and Republican administrations.)

As the United States moves towards the 2016 elections and the arrival of a new president who will again put his or her own imprint on foreign policy, it is important for US policy-makers to understand how their country is viewed – and thus how their messages and policies will likely resonate overseas.

The domestic and external contexts for US foreign policy continue to evolve. Our 2013–14 study of elites in Europe

**Figure 1: International image of the United States – percentage with favourable view of the US**



Note: Data are for 2015, except for the following countries, for which 2016 data are provided: Australia, Canada, China, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, India, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom.

Sources: Pew Research Center (2016), 'Global Indicators Database: Opinion of the United States', <http://www.pewglobal.org/database/indicator/1/> (accessed 26 Jul. 2016); Pew Research Center (2015), 'Global Attitudes & Trends: 1. America's Global Image', <http://www.pewglobal.org/2015/06/23/1-americas-global-image/> (accessed 25 Jul. 2016).

and Asia – which informed the earlier report – took into account the so-called US ‘rebalancing’ towards the Pacific region, a decade of close collaboration with European allies in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the effects of the Arab Spring.<sup>2</sup> Today the United States continues to craft policy in response to many of the same issues as then, but the tail-end of the Obama administration means that a potentially new direction in foreign policy is imminent. An array of external challenges – from Russia’s geopolitical confrontation with the West to political turbulence in Brazil and continued chaos in Syria – will demand the next US administration’s attention. It is with this evolving picture in mind that Chatham House’s latest study of elite perceptions seeks to understand America’s standing in Latin America<sup>3</sup> and the post-Soviet states.

Public polling is an important tool for US policy-makers in understanding how their country is viewed abroad, but it generally only provides a perspective from the general public. It also does not explain *why* people feel as they do, only the broad outlines of *what* they feel. This project seeks to bring additional perspective to those data by analysing how elites outside the United States view the country, what drives their views, and how their opinions are formed. The purpose here is deliberately qualitative rather than quantitative: to bring to life the perceptions of the United States held by senior members of elites across multiple sectors in two strategically important regions, and who have often differing experiences of the country.

This report largely follows the methodology established in its 2014 predecessor. Six countries in each region were selected, using the following criteria: the extent to which they were deemed representative of their region in terms of economic size, population and geography; the perceived accessibility of their elites; and their relevance to US foreign policy.<sup>4</sup> The research sought a balance in the choice of countries between those that have some degree of political

alignment with the United States (such as Georgia, Estonia and Guatemala), those that have remained generally non-aligned (such as Brazil), and those that are or have been adversaries of the United States (such as Russia and Cuba – notwithstanding the restoration of the latter’s diplomatic relations with the United States in mid-2015).

Desk research and consultations with relevant experts were then used to identify over 400 potential contributors, spread across the selected countries, in five sectors: the private sector, the public sector, the media, academia/think-tanks and NGOs.<sup>5</sup> Requests were sent to these individuals asking them to write essays of approximately 1,000 words on their perceptions of the United States. Fifty-seven complete responses were received (29 from Latin America and 28 from the post-Soviet states).<sup>6</sup>

A broad view was taken of what constitutes an ‘elite’ – a contentious term in many of the countries under examination here. The sample group comprised citizens of the countries in question who had had distinguished careers in their fields, but respondents did not have to meet a specific definition relating to age, position or amount of experience in order to qualify for inclusion in the report. Every respondent had some knowledge and experience of the United States.<sup>7</sup> While a few of the essays were submitted in Spanish or Russian, most were in English. This means that there was something of a self-selection bias, as certain segments of elites in our target countries will not have been represented.

The essays that form the core of the research material for this report were largely written in the spring and summer of 2015. As a result, developments since August 2015, such as the Russian intervention in Syria, were not addressed by the participants.

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<sup>2</sup> Dormandy and Webb (2014), *Elite Perceptions of the United States in Europe and Asia*.

<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of this report, ‘Latin America’ is defined as the region in the Western Hemisphere that is predominantly Spanish- or Portuguese-speaking, and includes Mexico, Central America, the Caribbean and South America.

<sup>4</sup> The Latin American countries selected were Brazil, Cuba, Guatemala, Mexico, Peru and Venezuela. In the post-Soviet space, the countries selected were Estonia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Ukraine.

<sup>5</sup> The exact prompts given to participants can be found in Appendix A.

<sup>6</sup> A selection of these essays is available at <http://eliteperceptions.chathamhouse.org>.

<sup>7</sup> As with any research into elites, the essays collected as part of this report will inevitably have missed influential portions of the populations of those countries, particularly those not conversant in English, those unfamiliar with the United States, and those not disposed to answering questions from a UK-based think-tank. As a result, the statements of the respondents quoted in this paper should be taken as illustrative rather than as representative of a particular cohort or country.

## 2. Background

Latin America and the post-Soviet states have little in common in their relationship with the United States. But the contrasts between the two regions, in terms of geographical proximity and political, cultural and economic interchange with the United States, are instructive.

Latin America is uniquely close to the United States. It includes Mexico, one of the two countries to share a land border with the United States (the border being a major issue in relations between the two countries, especially with respect to migration and the trade in drugs and guns). There are significant US cultural and economic linkages with the region: trade with the United States is a major driver of Latin American economies, and many Latin American countries have significant expatriate populations living in the United States. However, despite these factors, Latin American affairs have long been deprioritized in US foreign policy. Specific issues of relevance to the region – especially drug-trafficking and immigration – are politically important in the United States, but these are generally viewed as domestic in nature.<sup>8</sup>

The post-Soviet states occupy a geographic and cultural space much further away from the United States. Cultural links with the United States are limited; comparatively few immigrants from post-Soviet countries live in America. Trade with the United States is also much less important for post-Soviet economies than it is for Latin America.<sup>9</sup> With the exception of Russia, the post-Soviet space became less prominent in US political calculations and discourse after the end of the Cold War. However, US recognition of the strategic importance of the region has recently increased again. Russia's rising assertiveness – its military actions in Georgia and Ukraine, its rapid rearmament, and the more aggressive tone of its foreign policy – has led to a significant reappraisal of US foreign policy. It has also widened the divisions between those post-Soviet states aligned with Russia and those either aligned with the West or attempting to remain neutral.<sup>10</sup>

### US policy in Latin America

As with other regions, US policy in Latin America during the Cold War focused on containing perceived Soviet influence. But while the Soviet Union had some strategic relationships with specific Latin American countries, primarily Cuba, opposition to US policy in the region was in fact more frequently driven by domestic leftist traditions. That distinction often escaped US policy-makers, who saw the region as a potential strategic vulnerability and as a site of ideological struggle against the Soviet Union. The result was a series of interventions in Central and South America that were justified as proxy wars against the Soviet enemy. Often heavy-handed, these actions fuelled further Latin American opposition to US foreign policy goals.

After the Cold War, the United States took a less interventionist stance in Latin America, but the scars remained. Without a geopolitical rival in the region, Washington's focus shifted to economic issues, prioritizing trade agreements. This was epitomized by the coming into force of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) between the United States, Mexico and Canada in 1994, as well as the first moves towards creating a broader Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) that same year. More recent initiatives have included the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), which, if ratified by signatories, will create a free-trade area between the United States and various Pacific Rim countries, including Chile, Mexico and Peru. In contrast, security and geopolitics have taken a back seat. The only mentions of Latin America in the two most recent US National Security Strategies (in 2010 and 2015) have been in the context of supporting the region's emerging economies, not in terms of more traditional security challenges.<sup>11</sup>

While the United States has become politically less engaged in Latin America, it has continued intermittently to involve itself directly in the politics of various Latin American states, most significantly in Venezuela by failing to notify President Hugo Chávez of an imminent, and ultimately failed, coup attempt in 2002.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>8</sup> According to a Pew Research Center poll in January 2016, 51 per cent of the American public view immigration as a top priority for President Obama and Congress. See Pew Research Center (2016), 'Budget Deficit Slips as Public Priority', 22 January 2016, <http://www.people-press.org/2016/01/22/budget-deficit-slips-as-public-priority/> (accessed 15 Jun. 2016).

<sup>9</sup> The total value of US trade with South and Central America in 2015 was \$268 billion. US Census Bureau (2016), 'Trade in Goods with South and Central America', <https://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c0009.html#2015> (accessed 15 Jun. 2016). By contrast, the total value of trade between the United States and the post-Soviet states in 2015 was only \$34 billion. United Nations (2016), 'UN Comtrade Database', <http://comtrade.un.org/data/> (accessed 8 Jul. 2016).

<sup>10</sup> Giles, K., Hanson, P., Lyne, R., Nixey, J., Sherr, J. and Wood, A. (2015), *The Russian Challenge*, Chatham House Report, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/russian-challenge-authoritarian-nationalism> (accessed 20 May 2016).

<sup>11</sup> The White House (2015), *National Security Strategy*, [https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015\\_national\\_security\\_strategy.pdf](https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015_national_security_strategy.pdf) (accessed 20 May 2016); and The White House (2010), *National Security Strategy*, [https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/rss\\_viewer/national\\_security\\_strategy.pdf](https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/rss_viewer/national_security_strategy.pdf) (accessed 20 May 2016).

<sup>12</sup> Forero, J. (2004), 'Documents Show C.I.A. Knew of a Coup Plot in Venezuela', *New York Times*, 3 December 2004, <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/12/03/washington/world/documents-show-cia-knew-of-a-coup-plot-in-venezuela.html> (accessed 20 May 2016).

US security policy in Latin America has increasingly focused on countering drug-trafficking and transnational organized crime. In the 1980s, the primary targets were cartels in Colombia, and the United States poured resources into that country for counternarcotics and counter-insurgency operations. With the destruction of the Cali and Medellín cartels in the early 1990s, the centre of gravity of the drugs trade moved to Mexico. As drug-linked violence in Mexico skyrocketed between 2006 and 2012, the country's already complicated relationship with the United States moved into a new phase. Mexico has long been suspicious of cooperation with US security forces, partly due to differing priorities and partly due to the historical legacy of US military operations on Mexican soil (during the Mexican–American War in the 19th century, and during the Mexican revolution in the second decade of the 20th century). Mexican government officials frequently point out that domestic US drug and gun policies contribute to violence in their country; the response by the United States has been to offer security and military cooperation rather than to change its firearms and narcotics laws.

The same model holds for contemporary US policy in Colombia, particularly the 'Plan Colombia' counternarcotics agreement of 1999, which supplied various forms of military and law enforcement aid for counternarcotics and stability operations. US counternarcotics efforts also take place (though at varying degrees of intensity) throughout Central America, where rates of violent crime, often perpetrated by sophisticated criminal organizations, are among the highest in the world.<sup>13</sup>

On the whole, though, the United States has not pursued major military cooperation agreements with Latin American countries in the same way that it has with European and Asian allies. This is partly a reflection of the lack of a significant conventional military threat in the region. Argentina has been designated a major non-NATO ally, and most Latin American states use at least some American-sourced equipment for their military and security forces.<sup>14</sup> But the relative absence of major power rivalries in the region means that military spending by Latin American countries tends to be relatively low.<sup>15</sup> As a result, the discussion around US hard power in the region is quite different from the discussions on the same issue elsewhere in the world.

The United States' policy in the Western Hemisphere is also heavily driven by its domestic immigration policy. Until very recently, the majority of immigrants entering the United States were from Latin American countries – primarily Mexico and, in gradually decreasing numbers, countries further south. That distribution remains true for the numbers of immigrants living in the United States, though recent years have seen fewer arrivals from Latin America and more from South and East Asia. In the United States, immigration is seen as a domestic issue, tied in with economic security and national security. But that perception is not shared in Latin America: remittances from expatriate workers in the United States are an important source of income for Mexico and Central American states in particular, so the openness of the US immigration system and the availability of jobs in the country are important issues regionally.<sup>16</sup>

Historically, the United States has taken a highly interventionist approach in Latin America. The legacy of this informs regional perceptions of and responses to the United States. US foreign policy in the region has become less interventionist since 1991. However, the shadow of the 19th-century Monroe Doctrine<sup>17</sup> – long viewed with suspicion as an excuse for US meddling – has continued to loom over Washington's relations with Latin America, even though Secretary of State John Kerry expressly declared the doctrine defunct in 2013.

The search for an alternative to the US-dominated geopolitical order contributed in the early 2000s to the creation of a leftist coalition of Latin American states. Called ALBA (from the Spanish for 'Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America'), it centred on Cuba and Venezuela but also included Bolivia, Ecuador, Honduras and Nicaragua, along with several smaller Caribbean states. The strength of that coalition has faltered in recent years, as economic concerns and the death of Chávez have forced Venezuela's leaders to look mostly inwards, while the rapprochement between the United States and Cuba since 2014 has begun to mend what was the most contentious relationship in the region.

Since the late 1990s, the United States has actively pursued engagement with Colombia. As a result, the latter

<sup>13</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2016), *Global Study on Homicide 2013*, Vienna: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, <https://www.unodc.org/gsh/> (accessed 20 May 2016).

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, International Institute for Strategic Studies (2013), *The Military Balance 2013*, London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, Chapter 8.

<sup>15</sup> Average Latin American military expenditure in 2013 was 1.4 per cent of GDP, compared with 4.6 per cent in the Middle East. See Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (2016), 'Military versus social expenditure: the opportunity cost of world military spending', media backgrounder, 5 April 2016, [https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/Milex-Media-Backgrounder\(1\).pdf](https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/Milex-Media-Backgrounder(1).pdf) (accessed 20 May 2016).

<sup>16</sup> Cohn, D., Gonzalez-Barrera, A. and Cuddington, D. (2013), 'Remittances to Latin America Recover—but Not to Mexico', Pew Research Center, 15 November 2013, <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2013/11/15/remittances-to-latin-america-recover-but-not-to-mexico/> (accessed 20 May 2016).

<sup>17</sup> The Monroe Doctrine, as originally formulated, stipulated that no external power should be allowed to interfere in the affairs of the Western Hemisphere, and that the United States was the ultimate guarantor of that principle.

is largely seen as the most US-aligned country in South America, with closely joined security policies and leaders who look north for support. Meanwhile, US policy towards Mexico is complicated by the fact that Mexican governments historically have been wary of close cooperation. But shared geography and an increasingly joined-up security policy mean that in many instances Mexican policy-makers are now cooperating more closely with their US counterparts than at any point in history. Such close ties are not replicated in the largest Latin American country, though. Brazil has vacillated between left- and right-wing governments since military rule ended in 1985, though it has not been as aggressive in challenging US regional hegemony as Venezuela or Cuba. Despite its considerable size in population and economic terms, Brazil – like the region as a whole – remains relatively low on the list of US priorities.

### US policy in the post-Soviet states

The relationship between the United States and the post-Soviet states is complex, as might be expected given the post-Cold War political order. Broadly speaking, the United States has engaged with the post-Soviet states in Eastern Europe to a much greater degree than with those in the South Caucasus or Central Asia, while relations with Russia have recently fallen back to a level of hostility not seen since the Soviet era.

With the exception of Belarus, which has taken a generally (though by no means universally) pro-Russian tack in its foreign policy,<sup>18</sup> the European post-Soviet states have oriented themselves towards the West – something actively encouraged by Republican and Democratic US administrations. The Baltic states joined NATO and the European Union in 2004. Ukraine took more of a middle path, but since the Maidan revolution of 2014 the country has turned decisively towards the West. The United States has strongly supported the Baltic states, but it has approached Ukraine with more caution: for example, since the start of the conflict with Russia, it has supplied Ukraine with logistical aid but not weaponry.

In the South Caucasus, a similar dynamic has played out in Georgia. The United States supported the country's Western alignment in the wake of the 2003 Rose Revolution as part of its security and democracy promotion agendas. But when war with Russia broke out in South Ossetia and

Abkhazia in 2008, US support for Georgia was limited: it consisted of condemning Russian actions and flying Georgian troops who were fighting in Iraq back home on US Air Force transport planes, but not of providing more significant assistance. In Ukraine and Georgia the stated US goal of supporting friendly democratic states has run up against a colder calculation of interest. Neither country is a member of a formal defence pact with the United States, which leaves the latter trying to find a balance between its desire to support democratic transitions and its reluctance to risk strategic overreach on Russia's borders.

There has been limited engagement by the United States in Central Asia since the end of the Cold War; there are fewer US allies and fewer evident US interests in the region. Insofar as the United States has had a Central Asian strategy, it has focused broadly on supporting the consolidation of the Central Asian republics as independent from Russia. Since 2001, support for the war in Afghanistan via base-leasing arrangements has taken priority, with counterterrorism and counterproliferation activities as subsidiary goals.<sup>19</sup>

US policy towards Russia has been inconsistent since the end of the Cold War. In the immediate aftermath of the fall of the Soviet Union, the United States focused on stabilizing the Russian economy and securing the vast stocks of ex-Soviet military materiel, especially nuclear weapons and chemical/biological components. While the policy of securing the former Soviet arsenal was largely successful and relatively uncontroversial, it also went relatively unnoticed in the United States. Meanwhile, Russia underwent major economic shocks during the 1990s and ended up devaluing the rouble to keep its economy afloat, impoverishing millions of its citizens. The country's turbulent transition to a capitalist model inadequately supported by the rule of law provided fuel for domestic anti-Americanism.

At the same time, the United States supported efforts to expand European institutions and NATO – steps that were viewed with hostility by Russia. Between 1999 and 2004, former Soviet satellite states in Eastern Europe were admitted to NATO and the European Union, as were the former Soviet republics of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Russia had long perceived the Baltic states as part of its 'near abroad', along with the Balkans, the South Caucasus and Central Asia. Together, these regions provided an

<sup>18</sup> Belarus's lack of recognition of Russia's annexation of Crimea raised doubts over the strength of the two countries' relationship. However, their respective presidents reaffirmed the Russian–Belarus Union State in December 2015. Presidential Executive Office (2015), 'Press statements following Russian–Belarusian talks', 15 December 2015, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50960> (accessed 15 Jun. 2016). The Russian market accounts for nearly half of all Belarusian trade, and Belarus is heavily dependent on Russian energy. World Bank (2014), 'Belarus Trade Summary 2014 Data', <http://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/BLR/Year/2014/Summary> (accessed 15 Jun. 2016).

<sup>19</sup> Oliker, O. and Shlapak, D. (2005), *U.S. Interests in Central Asia: Policy Priorities and Military Roles*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, [http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2005/RAND\\_MG338.pdf](http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2005/RAND_MG338.pdf) (accessed 20 May 2016).

encircling ring of countries oriented towards Russia as their primary trade and political partner. Russia's inability to keep the European part of this ring within its political orbit has been a driving factor in increased tensions in the Baltic.

US Russia policy is to some extent stuck in a security-related feedback loop. Russia has watched US military operations since the end of the Cold War with dismay.<sup>20</sup> The poor performance of the Russian military in the 1990s and 2000s (ranging from the high rate of casualties in Chechnya to accidents such as the sinking of the nuclear submarine *Kursk*) drove Moscow to order an aggressive programme of rearmament and military modernization. This process, in turn, has led the United States to slow the post-1991 decline in the size of its forces stationed in Europe, though its available combat power in the region remains far below Cold War levels.

The George W. Bush administration took a number of steps that were particularly badly received in Russia, including withdrawing from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in 2002, invading Iraq without seeking a second UN Security Council resolution in 2003, and stationing missile-defence assets – ostensibly to protect Europe against the threat of a ballistic missile attack from Iran – in Eastern Europe in 2005. In 2008 came the Russian invasion of Georgia, which the United States loudly condemned. Between 2009 and 2013 there was a brief thaw (centred on the Obama administration's 'reset' policy) followed by a relative cooling of relations. In 2011 Russia acceded hesitantly (via abstention) to the UN Security Council vote authorizing a no-fly zone in Libya, but then it felt misled when, from its perspective, NATO's facilitation of the violent removal of Muammar Gaddafi went beyond its authorization to support opposition forces.

In late 2013 and early 2014, the US–Russian relationship went from uncertain to negative when protests in Ukraine against the government's suspension of a planned association agreement with the European Union culminated in the ousting of the country's pro-Russian president, Viktor Yanukovich. The United States broadly supported the protesters, and welcomed Yanukovich's departure while condemning Russia's subsequent seizure and annexation of Crimea. Once fighting broke out in parts of eastern Ukraine – and especially following the downing of Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 – the United States placed sanctions on Russian individuals and corporations. The intent was to force Russia to reconsider its strategy, though there is little sign of this having been effective despite the economic impact of the sanctions (alongside the greater impact of the simultaneous and sustained drop in world oil prices).

But even the stalemate over Ukraine and Russia's place in the world order has not completely severed the relationship; the United States and Russia continue to engage in some areas. They continue to discuss a political solution to the Syrian civil war, even as their militaries have conducted separate operations against different armed groups there, and despite what may very well be fundamentally opposed national interests in the conflict. Russia's diplomats were part of the group that agreed the 2015 Iran nuclear accord, and they continue to work with their US counterparts on its implementation. While a substantial warming of relations appears unlikely, any near-future US policy towards Russia will need to take into consideration the numerous issues on which the two countries have overlapping, if often competing, interests.

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<sup>20</sup> This was particularly clear in the case of the Gulf War in 1990–91, in which a numerically inferior American force, backed by its NATO and regional allies, destroyed the largely Soviet-equipped Iraqi army within days. The swiftness of that campaign was a wake-up call for Russian military strategists, who then saw their assumptions of rough overall parity further undermined by massive budget cuts in the 1990s and early 2000s. See Fuller, G. (1991), 'Moscow and the Gulf War', *Foreign Affairs*, 70:3, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/1991-06-01/moscow-and-gulf-war> (accessed 20 May 2016).

# 3. Common Elite Views of the United States Within Latin America and the Post-Soviet States

The United States elicits a complex and not always consistent range of responses from elites. This report does not record a single uniformly positive or negative response – even those who roundly criticize the country’s role in the world tend to have positive things to say about its people or culture, while those who broadly support it criticize specific policies or other aspects.

The elites surveyed here are not necessarily representative of majorities in their countries. Even in relatively egalitarian societies, individuals who are professionally engaged and have reached senior levels in their field – the group from which our respondents are drawn – will have different experiences and opinions from those of the bulk of the population.

The United States continues to enjoy relatively strong public opinion ratings worldwide, at least compared with its principal rivals for global leadership. A Gallup survey across 135 countries found a 45 per cent approval rating for US leadership in 2014 (compared with 39 per cent for the European Union, 29 per cent for China and 22 per cent for Russia).<sup>21</sup> While this was down from a high of 49 per cent in 2009, it nevertheless represented a significant improvement on 2008, when the United States (34 per cent) scored less than China (40 per cent).<sup>22</sup>

## The distance between the ideal and reality

Among the elite responses received for this report, the most obvious shared perception concerns the disparity between the United States’ self-image and the reality of its actions. Certain ideas – US strength, ingenuity, the notion of the country as a beacon – resonate abroad. These broad strokes – what might be called the ‘metaphor of the United States’ – are widely recognized by respondents, even by those who are generally not well disposed towards the country.

“ My first-hand experience of America immediately clashed with my immigrant parents’ initial expectations of America as a ‘land of opportunity’. A sense of disillusionment and disappointment were thus part of my earliest impressions of America as a child. Russia, media<sup>23</sup>

This is underlined by a widely shared sentiment that the United States acts in fundamentally self-interested ways. Whereas Americans frequently describe their country and its place in the world in terms of exceptionalism (the ‘shining city on a hill’ metaphor often associated with Ronald Reagan, for example), the actual means by which the United States operates in the world is seen as not living up to this self-description.

“ I tend to buy the narrative that depicts the United States as a self-interested country that is very often oblivious to the social, economic or political problems of its neighbours and partners, unless it is within America’s ambitions. Brazil, academia/think-tank

“ The United States’ rhetoric is so vested in exporting the idea that it is the caring, compassionate moral compass of the world, [that Americans are] the heirs to the democratic values of Western civilization and the ‘good’ military guardians to everyone else (very much in the guise of the iconic Star Wars image which was used to name one of their military space programmes), that whenever they fall short of the expectations they raise, we are all devastated by the loss, for none of us, I believe, are immune to the beguiling images they produce for internal [...] and external [...] consumption. Guatemala, academia/think-tank

This finding reinforces conclusions from Chatham House’s earlier study of Asian and European elites. European elites in particular focused on the gap between perceived American values and the means deployed by the United States in the service of its interests. In contrast, Asian elites were less vocal on questions of values.<sup>24</sup> The two regions surveyed in this latest study were closer to Asian elites on this question: there were relatively few mentions of values, either shared or divergent, in responses from Latin America and the post-Soviet states. Europe’s interest in shared values with the United States, in other words, might be unique.

## Distinguishing between the US government, its politics and its people

The divergence between the idea of the United States and its reality was echoed in the responses by the widely held view that the characteristics of the US government are

<sup>21</sup> Gallup (2015), ‘Rating World Leaders: What People Worldwide Think of the U.S., China, Russia, the EU and Germany’, <http://www.gallup.com/services/182510/rating-world-leaders-people-worldwide-think-china-russia-germany.aspx> (accessed 20 May 2016).

<sup>22</sup> It should be noted that both of our reports on elite perceptions have found a distinction similar to that identified in more traditional polling of the general public: a separation between perceptions of the United States in general and perceptions of more specific aspects of its policies or behaviour. Hence, Pew’s polls, which ask respondents whether their views of the United States are broadly positive or negative, tend to run 10–20 points higher than Gallup’s, which ask respondents about their views of US global leadership. A few notable exceptions to this pattern, such as Barack Obama’s enormous popularity in Cuba, are linked to specific policies.

<sup>23</sup> The quotations from our respondents have been lightly edited for conventions of style and grammar.

<sup>24</sup> Dormandy and Webb (2014), *Elite Perceptions of the United States in Europe and Asia*, p. vi.

fundamentally distinct from those of the American people. Whereas the government was widely seen as incompetent, self-interested, inconsistent or cynical, the American people were broadly viewed in positive and understanding terms. Specifically, the United States' perceived lack of trustworthiness was not generally equated with Americans themselves (including policy-makers) being untrustworthy. Rather, it reflected a view that the US system incentivizes selfish or self-defeating behaviour in the government's international dealings. A common theme was that Americans are arrayed against their government, rather than operating hand in hand with it.

“ As I learned then and kept telling friends or colleagues who had never set foot in the United States, it is hard to find more intense or radical criticism of the American establishment, power and society [than] from Americans themselves in their own country.

Brazil, media

“ The American government follows only pragmatic aims, whereas American society is much more idealistic and really believes in fundamental values like human freedom and human dignity.

Ukraine, media

“ That such a developed country with immense riches and natural resources, with the most sophisticated educational system and incredible opportunities for creativity, is mired in a swamp of extreme violence, racial prejudice, alienation and fear is indeed a pity.

Cuba, public sector

This sense of a corrupt system inhabited by basically reasonable and fair-minded Americans was not held universally, however. The most negative views of Americans (in line with negative views of the country) tended, unsurprisingly, to come from countries with generally bad relations with the United States, such as Russia and (until recently) Cuba. Nonetheless, in these responses the idea of Americans as complicit in the negative behaviour of their government was usually framed in terms of a simplistic people deceived by propaganda, rather than being malicious.

“ Although at a public level Americans are frequently viewed as smiley, gullible chumps, [...] they are rather deemed as friendly and easy-going.

Russia, academia/think-tank

US domestic politics was seen from Latin American and post-Soviet vantage points as a particularly negative area. Respondents highlighted domestic dysfunction and the ill-informed nature of much US public debate. These comments were often general rather than specific – few essays made reference to the specific workings of the US government, or to the division of power between federal and state governments in the US system.

## American hypocrisy is widely highlighted

One way in which respondents highlighted the distance between the American ideal and the more prosaic reality was by emphasizing issues in the US domestic sphere. This took a number of forms, but racial issues were prominent in many responses. This may reflect the fact that the essays were written in the spring and summer of 2015, at a time when there was significant international media coverage of racially charged police brutality in the United States. Views of American race relations were generally negative. Though some respondents praised the country for electing an African-American president, there was a general view across both regions that the United States had significant remaining issues surrounding racial bias, despite its rhetoric.

“ That being said, the symbol of having a black American president remains a great symbol of hope [...] even if this hope does not become a reality. For example, I still have Obama's picture on my refrigerator!

Brazil, academia/think-tank

“ Another thing is that we take a look at what is going on today in Maryland or Ferguson in the United States – we see that the racism problem still has a basis and that human rights are something controversial.

Kazakhstan, academia/think-tank

These findings reinforce a point made in the 2014 study, namely that domestic policy can be synonymous with foreign policy. While Asian respondents were less alert to US internal policy, Europeans were close observers of it. They noted a wide range of domestic issues (more, in fact, than those identified by the elites who contributed to this report), including abortion, gay rights and healthcare. The basic charge that American domestic policy highlighted flaws in its foreign policy and showed hypocrisy was substantially similar in both groups of responses, however.

## American internet dominance is viewed sceptically

The scope of internet surveillance by the US National Security Agency (NSA) provoked condemnation from respondents in both Latin America and the post-Soviet space. In contrast to the broader American reaction to revelations about government snooping, though, our respondents were decidedly unsurprised by them. Indeed, the revelations seemed to reinforce a general cynicism about the United States, especially with regard to its national security policies.

“ It would of course be an understatement to suggest that this image has not been recently damaged by the WikiLeaks issue and the revelations of NSA espionage, including on major Brazilian stakeholders, such as Petrobras and the Brazilian president [...] Even though this episode happened over a year ago, the United States has so far failed to reassure Brasilia about the aims of its surveillance programme and to give a proper explanation about this fact.

Brazil, academia/think-tank

The criticism of the NSA also points to a larger issue for the United States. The responses showed a strong undercurrent of mistrust of the perceived American dominance of internet governance. While respondents acknowledged the internet's benefits in providing information and services, they expressed dismay at the degree to which US firms, US-led institutions and US norms set the terms of online activity. Respondents largely conflated the interests of the US government and US firms such as Facebook, Twitter and Google. That is not to say that they fundamentally failed to recognize the distinction between the two sides – rather, that they saw them both as part of a broader issue of US dominance of the most modern and powerful means of international communication and networking.

“ WikiLeaks and then the Snowden revelations put [the] status quo under question. More and more thinkers and governments question the role of the United States on the internet.

Russia, media

“ The United States controls the internet, has the most global data banks, and rules with a firm hand ... [It] does not accept attempts to establish global governance, and has even, along with allies like Israel, used this to attack opponents or countries considered hostile; the case of the Stuxnet virus in Iran and its use is best known.

Cuba, academia/think-tank

Interestingly, this critique contrasted with the perception that one of the United States' great strengths is its entrepreneurial culture and businesses, a view also highlighted in the 2014 study, which found that respondents from both Europe and Asia respected innovators and entrepreneurs more than any other people in the United States.

“ Among the characteristics that strengthen America as a country are its innovation, creativity and entrepreneurship.

Mexico, public sector

## American culture: far-reaching, especially for youth

American cultural exports provoked mixed reactions in both regions. There was little doubt as to the ubiquity of American culture; members of the elites in both regions showed familiarity with everything from superhero movies to American food. Many of them expressed affection for American culture, or at least demonstrated an understanding of its appeal to younger generations.

“ What in general terms is called 'American culture' lives and thrives from Mexico to Argentina. And this expression should not signal negative connotations.

Guatemala, public sector

“ We don't call the Americans gringos or Yankees with a pejorative tone. We say 'Americanos', 'norteamericanos', 'estadounidenses' or the more superlative 'yumas', perhaps derived from the 1957 American Western film *3:10 to Yuma*. This is due to the long tradition of transcultural influences. In the famous 1950s US TV sitcom *I Love Lucy*, the husband of that beautifully crazy American lady is a Cuban.

Cuba, public sector

“ I know that for the younger generation, America is particularly appealing with its iconic business leaders, culture and comfort of life.

Kazakhstan, academia/think-tank

However, not all views of American culture were positive. Aside from the criticism that it reflects the most negative aspects of its place of origin, there was a sense that its all-encompassing nature is not a positive influence; that the very ubiquity of American culture drowns out voices from elsewhere in the world. Indeed there was some direct criticism of this.

“ There remains the influence of the American 'soft power', but even that is beginning to lose its lustre. American cars are replaced by more sophisticated European or Korean models. American airline companies are synonymous with shabbiness and lack of comfort in comparison with Arab or Asian competitors. Hollywood is seen as a mass culture industry where sound and special effects are more important than the substance of the script.

Brazil, public sector

# 4. Views From Latin American Elites and How They Were Formed

Latin American views of the United States appeared to be shaped by two overwhelming factors: personal exposure to the country and its people, and its predominant role in the politics of the Western Hemisphere.

## Personal experience drives perceptions

The members of Latin American elites who submitted responses for this report were very likely to have direct experience of the United States by way of travel, study or work. This is supported by immigration and tourism data: in 2014 Mexico sent the second-highest number (after Canada) of foreign visitors to the United States, and Brazil sent the fifth-highest number.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, Mexico and Brazil were the ninth- and tenth-largest sources of foreign students in the United States in 2014.<sup>26</sup>

As one Mexican respondent noted, the experiences of members of the elite – for example, with regard to travel being facilitated by the US government’s fast-track Global Entry programme and the availability of multiple-entry 10-year visas – set them apart from the vast majority of their countrymen.

“ This allows me hassle-free entry into the United States in less than 60 seconds, clicking in multiple-choice windows of basic information. At the other extreme, roughly 200,000 undocumented Mexican workers try to enter the United States every year, through the desert, across the river or along the coast, and one a day dies in the attempt.  
Mexico, academia/think-tank

“ My trips to the United States (at least once every two years) to visit family and friends nurture my perceptions. Conversations with US citizens, company visits and interactions with academia provide an effective way to refine and develop my views.  
Peru, academia/think-tank

However, while members of Latin American elites had significant personal experience of the United States, they said that the reverse was not true of their US interlocutors – who seemed to have little direct knowledge of Latin America. That perception seemed to reinforce the idea that the United States, at least at the level of official contacts, is generally uninterested in Latin America.

“ The White House, National Security Council and Economic Council, which, based on presidential rhetoric about Latin America as a priority, might have drafted a new foreign policy, remained too engaged with American problems elsewhere in the world to do so. Furthermore, those responsible for Latin America did not have the political weight to make a positive impact and even had to receive inadequate contributions and suggestions from other, less qualified sources.  
Brazil, public sector

## Cultural affinity

The essays by Latin American respondents often reflected a degree of cultural closeness to, and familiarity with, the United States that was lacking in the contributions by their counterparts in other regions. Latin America’s elites often saw the United States in familial terms, expressing affection for very specific aspects of US culture or national character, and disappointment at – rather than hatred of – aspects of which they were less fond. They tended to describe the United States in holistic terms – not only as a political and cultural influence, but as a personal one.

“ A simple example is the popularity of Mexican food in the United States in parallel with the popularity of American fast food in Mexico. Like this, there are many other examples in changes in idioms, phrases, fashion, movies, artists that very often blur both cultures.  
Mexico, academia/think-tank

“ American popular culture has influenced Latin American societies intensely, mainly since the Second World War, through films, music and television, to a point where people in the region became familiar with the values and aspirations of middle-class American families.  
Brazil, media

Responses from across Latin America framed the United States in terms of belonging to the same continental community. Within this set, those from Mexico showed the greatest affinity to the United States. This reflects the close geographic, economic and demographic links between the two countries, although the political ties between them have not been tight historically. In recent years, the United States has worked increasingly closely with Mexico on security and trade, but the views expressed by Mexican respondents did not support the conclusion that these areas of improved cooperation will lead to greater integration between the two countries. This scepticism was partly due to the perception of US immigration policy as having a disproportionately negative effect on bilateral relations (a problem discussed below).

## The United States’ regional political power

The kind of personal experience described above occurs within a unique political context. Latin American responses were suffused with the idea of the United States as a long-standing and overwhelming (in some cases, overbearing) regional political force. The influence of the United States in the Western Hemisphere is not only a topic of political comment; many respondents viewed the long history of US influence there as inseparable from the political evolution

<sup>25</sup> US Department of Commerce (2014), ‘Top 10 International Markets: 2014 Visitation and Spending’, <http://travel.trade.gov/pdf/2014-Top-10-Markets.pdf> (accessed 20 May 2016).

<sup>26</sup> US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (2014), ‘SEVIS by the Numbers’, <https://www.ice.gov/doclib/sevis/pdf/by-the-numbers1.pdf> (accessed 20 May 2016).

of their own countries and, accordingly, of their worldview (not necessarily in a positive fashion).

“ I was born in 1932, when the influence of the American way of life in this country was already in full development and the Spanish tradition was being changed by the impact of the American way of life.

Venezuela, academia/think-tank

Though members of different elites in our study criticized the United States for a disinterested stance towards the region, US influence in Latin America does not have a parallel elsewhere in the world. US interventions in Latin America date back to the beginning of the 19th century. In contrast, significant US involvement in Europe, Asia and Africa is a much more recent phenomenon (although not Europe’s influence in the United States), and has often been complicated by great-power rivalries.

But when it comes to shaping perceptions, the prominence of US political and cultural power in the Western Hemisphere is a mixed blessing. On the one hand, it generates considerable cynicism about the sincerity and feasibility of stated US policy goals. But on the other hand, it creates an unmistakable ‘draw’ for other countries, which reaches up into the highest echelons of political power in the region.

“ The United States plays a positive role in international affairs, but it has sometimes neglected the political dimension of its interventions. It is not enough to act correctly. It is essential to develop the necessary means to persuade all the relevant stakeholders of the ethical and respectful basis underlying its foreign policy.

Peru, academia/think-tank

“ No other invitation is more attractive to any Latin American leader than to be introduced to the American president.

Venezuela, academia/think-tank

## A negative historical legacy

The Latin American essays reflected the historical asymmetries in the relations between the United States and its southern neighbours. Even respondents relatively positively disposed towards the United States generally evoked the historical legacy of US influence in a negative light, often highlighting the role America had played in destabilizing governments in the name of anti-communism. This contributed to the largely cynical attitude towards contemporary US foreign policy in the region.

“ It is no exaggeration to claim that Brazil has been punished by the United States each and every time it took an independent path.

Brazil, academia/think-tank

“ Externally, the United States acts as an imperialist country and within this as the principal imperialist power.

Cuba, academia/think-tank

This chimes with the long history of US involvement in Latin America. Because the United States has been actively involved in hemispheric affairs for the majority of its history, Latin American elites not only tended to couch their responses in terms of recent history, but frequently reached back as far as the 19th century to explain US actions.

“ At the same time, we learned, it was the country that in its relentless territorial expansion took half of Mexico’s territory in the 19th century, turning Mexicans [who] lived there into foreigners in their own land.

Mexico, academia/think-tank

“ Brazil and the United States have a long history of mistrust and difficulties since the middle of the 19th century. This negative perception was aggravated in the last 10 years also by the way the Free Trade Area of the Americas has been conducted and the attack on Iraq and its consequences for the world.

Brazil, public sector

The long-term historical narrative was fundamental to the structure of many of the essays. Latin American elites clearly see the United States as inseparable from its history, in a way that other observers – and Americans themselves – do not.

“ Finally, for regional security reasons, the United States has shown on many occasions a high degree of influence. Because our country is one of the last [stopping] points [for] airplanes and cargo ships containing drugs that are going towards the United States, its president, senators, congressmen and even the army have regular meetings and give instructions [to our authorities] regarding development programmes to influence political decisions in Guatemala.

Guatemala, NGO

“ For most Cubans, the presence of the United States in our lives does not require actual contact with Americans. As Professor Lou Perez (University of North Carolina) has argued, Cuban national identity was formed over the 19th and 20th centuries in a country strongly interconnected with the US.

Cuba, public sector

That said, some respondents noted a relative decline in US influence, both in the region and more broadly. As one from Brazil noted, this decline is likely due in part to the proliferation of non-US news channels today competing in an area that used to be the purview of the United States and CNN.

“ I perceive the United States as having become less influential in Latin America, in particularly from a cultural perspective. As a teenager I grew up with CNN as the unique source of information on the outside world. Now we have, for example, Al Jazeera, and all the other sources of information the internet offers. There is now more narrative – and more in-depth narrative – from elsewhere. On the other hand, when something appears in the *New York Times*, it is still seen as gospel – so clearly there is still some influence in this regard.

Brazil, academia/think-tank

#### US regional policy drives strong views

As noted, Latin American elites seem acutely aware of the historical legacy of US behaviour in their region and how that legacy shapes contemporary US policy. As found in the earlier study, this is not always a strong driver of opinion elsewhere. European elites (except those from Poland and Turkey) paid relatively little attention to historical factors in their responses. It is noteworthy that in Latin America, as in these two European outliers, it is typically not the broad set of US policies that is of interest to elites, but one or two specific policies. In the case of Turkey, it was the United States' relationship with the Islamic world; in Poland, as in Latin America, it was issues principally related to immigration.

Immigration policy drives feelings both of continental solidarity and disappointment with the United States. While immigration is largely seen as a domestic issue in the United States, Latin American elites have strong views on it. Perhaps predictably, given their geographic location, their members are very likely to have personal experience of the US immigration system; they are also very likely to have travelled extensively within the United States, or to have studied or lived there for personal or professional reasons.

But concern expressed by respondents around the US immigration system was not simply reflective of their personal experiences. Latin American elites across the board saw immigration policy as an important aspect of their country's relationship with the United States. Beyond the level of personal ability to access the United States, respondents often couched their criticism of US immigration policy in political and moral terms, though some also acknowledged the importance of remittances from expatriates in the United States to the economies of their respective countries.

“ The other crucial impact will be the issue of immigration reform. If at some point in the next few years we advance in the regularization of the millions of illegal immigrants from Mexico in the United States, that fact could change positively, in a dramatic way, the opinion in our country towards the United States.

Mexico, media

“ I should mention that migration due to poverty and extortion on numerous sectors of the population is a common aspiration. The influence migrants have on their families is important, given that remittances generate better conditions of life, [and given] the incidence in communicating democratic values and the acknowledgment of human rights, which unfortunately are not always respected in the migrant population.

Guatemala, academia/think-tank

Reactions to US immigration policy roughly tracked broader trends in immigration to the United States. Respondents in Mexico, the country most directly affected by US immigration and border policy, noted it most widely. Guatemalan respondents, representing a country that has also sent large numbers of people to the United States, were also clearly aware of and interested in those issues. Among the Brazilian, Peruvian and Venezuelan elites, US immigration policy was a less prominent concern – possibly reflecting the lower numbers of their fellow citizens dealing with it and the lesser dependence of their economies on remittances from the United States.<sup>27</sup>

#### Perceptions of hypocrisy based on US domestic issues

Immigration was not the only policy area that crossed the boundary from being a US domestic issue to one that drew significant comment from Latin American elites. The prevalence of gun violence in the United States – particularly mass shootings – was largely a negative driver of perceptions. Mexican respondents placed particular emphasis on gun violence. They have a special interest in the topic, given that much of Mexico's drug violence since 2006 has been carried out with weapons sourced from the United States. The issue also resonated with respondents in Europe in the earlier study (but not with those in Asia).

“ As much as I admire the United States as a global superpower, I am puzzled by two characteristics of its society: the readiness to sacrifice human lives for religion, profit, and/or the sacred right to use weapons; and the racial and electoral divide that prevails 150 years after the Civil War ended.

Mexico, academia/think-tank

“ The frequent news about innocent lives taken away by troubled young men who carry a gun to school or to a shopping mall is particularly worrying. US gun policy is a matter of intense debate.

Mexico, public sector

Similarly, the drug policy of the United States was mostly criticized as hypocritical – a view reflecting the disparity between the country's high levels of domestic drug consumption and the violence caused by the drug trade in the region. However, some respondents seemed to view the US 'war on drugs' in opportunistic terms, arguing that the focus on counternarcotics gave their countries access to US aid and attention that would otherwise not be forthcoming.

<sup>27</sup> Cuba is a special case, given that it only restored diplomatic relations with the United States in 2015 and that US immigration policy towards it has long been defined by a blanket amnesty for Cuban citizens who manage to make the dangerous maritime crossing to Florida. However, none of the Cuban respondents mentioned this policy.

To some extent, these issues were characterized as examples of US hypocrisy; there was evident frustration that the United States, while trying to push its preferred solutions, was unable to deal with its own internal issues. To Mexican respondents in particular, the idea that their country's own struggle with drug violence has enabling factors within the United States that Americans have been unwilling or unable to address was a significant driver of negative views.

**f** The most important political and security problems in Mexico are the trafficking of illegal drugs, and the United States is [the] main consumer by far.

Mexico, media

### Elite responses vs public opinion

*This section examines publicly available opinion polls and compares the data with the findings of Chatham House's research.*

The views of members of the public in Latin America do not neatly match their governments' strategic alignment. Venezuelans, for example, have a government staunchly opposed to the United States, but polling by the Pew Research Center reveals that a majority of people approve of the country (See Table 1). Conversely, while Argentina is the only country in the region to have been granted the status of major non-NATO ally (in 1998), its population has not registered more than 43 per cent approval of the United States in over a decade of Pew surveys.

In Brazil, the United States seems to be more popular with the public than with the elites. While Brazilian respondents in this study did not have uniformly negative views of the United States, they were keenly aware of the historical and contemporary negative aspects of US policy towards their country, as well as of what they viewed as failings in US policy elsewhere in the world. Those issues are apparently not significant considerations for the Brazilian public, given its 73 per cent approval rating for the United States as measured by Pew in 2015. Brazilian respondents in our research also commented on the general popularity of the United States among the public, ascribing this to the latter's lack of interest in historical US behaviour in Brazil or Latin America.

On the whole, Mexican elite respondents were slightly more positive towards the United States – in terms of their broad view of the country and its particulars – than their Brazilian counterparts. The Mexican public, on the other hand, appears to be slightly less positive about the United States (though, at 66 per cent in the most recent Pew survey, opinion is still very positive on the whole). Mexican views of the United States have gone through various cycles, tracking the broader US–Mexican relationship. The lowest point of positive views in Pew's tracking (47 per cent) occurred in 2008, but this has been followed by a generally upwards trend.

**Table 1: Opinion of the United States in Latin America**

Country	Percentage of respondents with favourable view									
	2002	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Argentina	34	16	22	38	42			41	36	43
Bolivia								55		
Brazil					62	62	61	73	65	73
Colombia									64	
El Salvador								79	80	
Guatemala	82									
Honduras	81									
Mexico	64	56	47	69	56	52	56	66	63	66
Nicaragua									71	
Peru	67	61							65	70
Venezuela								53	62	51

Note: This table shows the countries in South and Central America that are available in Pew's database; the selection of countries is not identical to that in our study. Blank cells indicate years in which no survey was conducted.

Source: Pew Research Center (2016), 'Global Indicators Database: Opinion of the United States', <http://www.pewglobal.org/database/indicator/1/survey/all/> (accessed 25 Jul. 2016).

Given the importance of access to the United States both for members of the elites and the general public in Mexico, US immigration policy appears of primary importance in driving views. However, analysis is complicated by the fact that Mexican emigration to the United States is not constant: since the Great Recession, the number of Mexicans returning from the United States has outstripped the number moving to the country.<sup>28</sup> That trend has not prevented the enactment of more restrictive US immigration laws at the federal and state levels, which has increased negative Mexican opinions of the United States in the short term.<sup>29</sup> While individual US states cannot set their own immigration policies, they do have the right to increase law enforcement activity under the rubric of immigration control (and, to a lesser extent, counternarcotics activity) – and have done just that.<sup>30</sup> The result of these efforts is greater scrutiny of Mexican citizens entering the United States and of those residing there.

In broader terms, responses in this study and public polling show evidence of a ‘Cuba bounce’ in Latin American views of the United States, related to the surprise announcement in December 2014 that the United States and Cuba would restore full diplomatic ties. Implementation occurred throughout 2015, with well-publicized embassy openings and the roll-out of various policy changes. There have been expressions of support for this policy from political establishments throughout the Western Hemisphere, including at the Summit of the Americas in 2015. Those respondents who mentioned the restoration of US ties with Cuba had a uniformly positive view of this development.

It is difficult to reliably compare elite and public views in Cuba, given the dearth of high-quality polling of the latter.<sup>31</sup> In April 2015, one poll found near-unanimous support for the normalization of relations with the United States.<sup>32</sup> Barack Obama’s personal approval rating among Cubans was an astonishing 80 per cent, surpassing that of the Castro brothers by huge margins (Raúl had a 47 per cent rating and Fidel 44 per cent).<sup>33</sup> The view of the United States itself was more nuanced, with only 53 per cent of Cubans seeing the country as a friend – though only 10 per cent described it as ‘not a friend’, with the remainder of those polled either saying it was neither friend nor foe or declining to answer the question.<sup>34</sup> The gap between opinions of the United States and of Obama was also evident in the (relatively small) number of responses to this study from Cuba excoriating the past behaviour of the United States but also praising the reopening of the relationship and expressing optimism about its future.

In every country polled by Pew, with the exception of Venezuela, impressions of the United States improved between 2014 and 2015. Venezuela has long been Cuba’s staunchest ally in the region, but its population is also sharply divided into supporters of its pro-Cuban, anti-American government and a pro-American opposition. Furthermore, Venezuela saw significant public unrest (driven, at least in part, by the continuing collapse of global oil prices) over the course of 2015, which might account for some of the difference.

<sup>28</sup> Gonzalez-Barrera, A. (2015), ‘More Mexicans Leaving Than Coming to the U.S.’, Pew Research Center, 19 November 2015, <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2015/11/19/more-mexicans-leaving-than-coming-to-the-u-s/> (accessed 20 May 2016).

<sup>29</sup> Fisher, M. (2013), ‘Why Mexican opinion of the U.S. is at its most positive in years, in charts’, *Washington Post*, 30 April 2013, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2013/04/30/why-mexican-opinion-of-the-u-s-is-at-its-most-positive-in-years-in-charts/> (accessed 20 May 2016).

<sup>30</sup> See, for example, Alabama’s ‘self-deportation’ scheme. Sarlin, B. (2013), ‘How America’s harshest immigration law failed’, MSNBC, 16 December 2013, <http://www.msnbc.com/msnbc/undocumented-workers-immigration-alabama> (accessed 20 May 2016).

<sup>31</sup> Partlow, J. and Craighill, P. (2015), ‘Poll shows vast majority of Cubans welcome closer ties with U.S.’, *Washington Post*, 8 April 2015, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the\\_americas/poll-shows-vast-majority-of-cubans-welcome-closer-ties-with-us/2015/04/08/6285bfe4-d8c3-11e4-bf0b-f648b95a6488\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/poll-shows-vast-majority-of-cubans-welcome-closer-ties-with-us/2015/04/08/6285bfe4-d8c3-11e4-bf0b-f648b95a6488_story.html) (accessed 20 May 2016). As the *Post* notes: ‘With Cuba’s restricted news media and limited Internet and phone access, getting an accurate sense of public opinion in the country can be difficult. Public surveys are very rare; opinion research is strictly controlled by the Cuban government. Some, conducted surreptitiously, have been sponsored by anti-Castro organizations and have been viewed as biased. On the island, Cubans have an aversion to discussing politics: three-quarters of those surveyed in the Univision poll say they feel they need to be careful about expressing themselves. While some believe the Cuban government privately conducts focus groups and surveys, there are not regular public polls.’

<sup>32</sup> *Washington Post* (2015), ‘Cubans welcome warmer relations with the U.S.’, 8 April 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/world/cuba-poll-2015/> (accessed 20 May 2016).

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

# 5. Views From Elites in the Post-Soviet States and How They Were Formed

The different views of post-Soviet elites reflected the particular geopolitical experience that their countries had with respect to the United States. Compared to the other 14 former Soviet republics, Russia has a unique position relative to the United States as a major geopolitical rival. One bloc, consisting of the Central Asian states, Belarus and Armenia, remains largely aligned with Russia, prioritizing economic, strategic and political links with it. Another bloc, including the Baltic states and Georgia, turned unambiguously to the West at the end of the Cold War. Ukraine was a late entrant to this group, though since the Maidan revolution of late 2013 and early 2014 it has taken a decisive and potentially irreversible westward turn.

The majority of our respondents grew up under Soviet rule and experienced as adults the transition from the Soviet Union to its successor states. It is also worth mentioning that, to a large degree, elites from these countries view the United States from more of an outsider's perspective than do those from Latin America, Europe or Asia. Travel to the United States is expensive and difficult for post-Soviet elites, and the United States is not easy to navigate and understand for those who speak Russian rather than English. This is reflected in official statistics: no country in the former Soviet Union made the top 10 list of visitors to the United States in 2014,<sup>35</sup> or was represented in the top 10 sources of foreign students at American educational institutions.<sup>36</sup>

It is also worth highlighting that the sectoral representation of respondents in Russia and Central Asia reflected their countries' political divergence from the United States. Most of those responding from these countries were from academia, NGOs and the media, while relatively few were from the public sector or private sector.

## Before the fall, a hazy image of America

The Soviet Union placed significant restraints on external travel by its citizens and restricted their consumption of media originating from outside the country. After its collapse, those restrictions disappeared. As a result, the perceptions that post-Soviet elites have of the United States reflect that sudden shift in the availability of information about the country.

Those who grew up during the Soviet era had their views of the United States shaped by a mix of Soviet and American propaganda. Soviet efforts, unsurprisingly, painted the United States in the harshest possible light – as an aggressive, corrupt, hypocritical and imperialist

entity. Conversely, American propaganda carried the opposite message; it also served to convey information about expatriate communities living in the West to their compatriots still in the Soviet Union.

“Generations of those like me, born in the Soviet Union in the 1960s, 1970s or even 1980s, were brought up by our teachers with a single idea about the United States and its Western allies from the ‘aggressive imperialist block’ (NATO), [shown as] a black, wicked octopus on the world political map – a favourite character of Soviet propaganda posters.  
Ukraine, public sector

“Every night before going to sleep my father was listening to foreign ‘voices’, including the Voice of America. The whistling and noise that accompanied the programmes added to the sense of distance and almost ‘otherworldliness’ of the United States that the vast majority of Soviet people felt.  
Kazakhstan, academia/think-tank

The resulting image of the United States was hazy for members of the post-Soviet elites who grew up in the Soviet Union, in large part because American public diplomacy had to contend with a concerted Soviet propaganda effort. But US diplomacy did succeed in maintaining for Soviet dissidents the image of the United States as a distant beacon of freedom. That success was reinforced by the ability to bring seemingly mundane information to ethnic subgroups within the Soviet Union, which undermined the latter's attempt to build a single supranational identity.

“For people interested in the dissident movement, the Voice of America retained its leading position as a watchdog of human rights up to the collapse of the [...] Soviet Union. For many people it also served as a major source of information about the life of the Estonian community in America.  
Estonia, public sector

## Disappointment after the fall

After the fall of the Soviet Union, when travel restrictions were lifted, perceptions of the United States changed. Freedom of access to the country meant that members of post-Soviet national elites could increasingly test their views against reality.

“My first visit to the United States happened in 1995 when I realized that this is a country with very sophisticated political and economic systems, and with very open and sometimes naive people who really believe that their mission in the world is to spread democracy and to help other people in different parts of our planet to organize their life according to American standards.  
Russia, academia/think-tank

<sup>35</sup> US Department of Commerce (2014), ‘Top 10 International Markets’.

<sup>36</sup> US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (2014), ‘SEVIS by the Numbers’.

Consequently, there was a shared sense among many of those surveyed in the post-Soviet states of ‘discovering’ or ‘rediscovering’ the United States after 1991. This, it should be noted, was not necessarily a positive experience; some were disappointed that the United States did not live up to the idealized version that had shone through the gaps in the Soviet portrayal of its adversary.

“ I graduated from school in the time of perestroika, when Soviet–American relations were rapidly warming, and since this time the United States has changed in my perception, into a kind of dreamland.

Ukraine, media

“ Then disappointment came by the mid-1990s. People started to travel and found differences between their dreams and American realities. Yes, there were liberties, but not as much freedom [...] Then, it appeared that Americans considered the end of the Cold War their victory and were not ready to offer much help.

Russia, academia/think-tank

The comments of those in Western-aligned post-Soviet states largely reflected disappointment with the quality and quantity of US aid or support offered to their countries since 1991. There was a widely held view – particularly in Georgia and Ukraine, which have both had direct confrontations with Russia – that US policy was correct in general but off the mark in the particulars.

“ Because I do not expect a lot, I do not have the same level of disappointment.

Ukraine, academia/think-tank

## Regional policy is prioritized

For respondents outside Russia, the biggest stated determinant of views of the United States was its policy in their region. As the post-Soviet states have fewer cultural, political and economic links to America than any other region surveyed so far, it is perhaps unsurprising that their elites tend to look at the United States through a largely pragmatic, policy-driven lens.

“ Full-fledged American support of Kazakhstan’s independence and such practical steps as the promotion of alternative export routes for Kazakh oil to European markets have been highly appreciated by the national political and economic elites. At the same time, dynamism can mean an abrupt change of policy that can be disruptive for the region. The sudden reassignment of Central Asia from the European [bureau] to the South Asia bureau of the State Department in the service of the US Afghanistan policy is a case in point.

Kazakhstan, academia/think-tank

Post-Soviet elites were notably concerned with US foreign policy in their own countries. Respondents from countries that have moved towards the West since 1991 – Georgia, Ukraine and Estonia – expressed the most straightforwardly

positive views of the United States generally, but were frequently critical of specific policies, particularly where America had, in their view, failed to support their countries adequately in their stand against Russia.

“ Perhaps it is also worth noting that for Estonians US policy is, as a rule, defined as foreign policy.

Estonia, public sector

## Elites in Western-leaning countries do not necessarily trust the United States

Georgian and Ukrainian respondents were generally suspicious of the United States’ commitment to their countries’ independence from Russia. This was frequently framed in language accusing America of self-interest and hypocrisy; specifically, some respondents claimed that the United States had led their countries to believe that it would protect them, but had failed to follow up on these promises.

To some – particularly Ukrainians – this was tied specifically to the policies of the Obama administration. But that was not a universal view. Rather, to Georgian and Ukrainian respondents, the problem was simply the fundamental gap between American self-interest and their own national interest, papered over by what they perceived to be empty promises from American policy-makers.

“ The start in the decline of Obama’s image as a peacemaker was demonstrated by the ineffectiveness of his policy in addressing Russia’s invasion in Ukraine.

Ukraine, NGO

“ If we look at US foreign policy in light of today’s situation in our country – it is no other case – we are now allies, but the reason of the whole at the root is pursuit of the US’s own interests.

Ukraine, private sector

## Central Asians and Russians see the United States reverting to a Cold War mentality

Unsurprisingly, in Russia the current conflict with the West has a huge impact on perceptions of the United States. Russian respondents noted the collapse in US–Russian relations of the past few years. However, they remained fairly detached in observing this change and did not repeat the themes of contemporary Russian propaganda.

“ The big change came when the state propaganda decided to build internal support for the regime on anti-American feelings. The ‘use of the other’ is always a part of the home agenda; so the image of a hostile United States was needed to foul the Russian opposition.

Russia, academia/think-tank

“ In my country the perception of the United States is defined by a peculiar political culture we got in 2000. For years Russia saw the sharp decline of political culture [...] This resulted in the very simple picture [which] has Russia surrounded by enemies, led by the United States. Cold War stereotypes are back, but now they are reinforced by the 19th-century stereotypes [...] This construction is put in the new reality – in the reality of social media and political debates on Russian TV from which the opposition and expert community are mostly excluded.  
Russia, academia/think-tank

“ For older generations, who are influenced by old Soviet stereotypes, as well for those who did not have American exposure, America will remain a hostile and alien country.  
Kazakhstan, academia/think-tank

For Russian respondents, views of the United States were characterized by an undercurrent even stronger than disappointment – though describing this as a sense of betrayal is perhaps too strong. They watched the Soviet system collapse under internal rather than external pressures, heard the United States declare victory in the Cold War, and concluded that US policy in the 1990s reflected arrogance and unwillingness to treat Russia with a sufficient degree of deference and respect.

“ Russians, who fully deserved their defeat in the Cold War, have tried on the costume of a US ‘partner’. It did not work because the United States left them no stake in their would-be Pax Americana.  
Russia, academia/think-tank

“ At the same time there’s a growing ‘America fatigue’ in the Russian political elite. The biggest dream of several generations of Russian policy-makers – that the United States is going to treat Russia as an equal partner – now looks dashed.  
Russia, academia/think-tank

It must be noted that, as with those from Central Asia,<sup>37</sup> the respondents from Russia are part of a particular elite set: English-speaking, generally familiar with the West, and otherwise willing to take part in research carried out by a British policy institute.<sup>38</sup> As in Central Asia, though, a significant share of Russia’s elites consists of people who are not English-speaking and who may be generally hostile to this kind of enquiry from the United States or even Britain. For example, despite considerable effort, it was not possible to generate even one response from the Russian public sector.

There was a mirroring among elites in Russia and Central Asia of the Western perception that Russia has regressed to a Cold War mentality. In this view, the United States has

not abandoned its Cold War mentality or policies, and its behaviour towards the post-Soviet space flows from that.

“ The United States is specifically an anti-Russian power. It still lives in the Cold War era, and will never fall in love with Russia, as it did with Eastern Europe.  
Kyrgyzstan, academia/think-tank

### US policy-making is poorly understood and heavily personalized

Respondents largely viewed American policy as personality-driven, influenced in particular by the president and a few other leading figures; this perception possibly reflects the systems of governance to which respondents are accustomed at home. Central Asian and Russian elites focused on the president and secretary of state, whereas Ukrainian and Georgian elites also viewed their local US ambassador as a significant figure with a high degree of agency.

“ The United States is perceived as a single entity and often embodied in the figures of its key leaders – usually the president, the secretary of state and sometimes some senators (John McCain, for example).  
Kyrgyzstan, academia/think-tank

“ For me, as, I believe, for the majority of Russians, US policy is personified, above all, by the president and the secretary of state, plus some of the congressmen and senators most involved in foreign policy, such as Senator McCain.  
Russia, private sector

In the long term, this suggests that public information about the US system of governance needs to be made more accessible. In the shorter term, it suggests that new US policies or proclamations directed at the post-Soviet states need to be announced by the highest-ranking officials possible in order for the message to be received and taken seriously by the intended audience in these countries.

### Internet governance is a particular concern in Russia

While internet governance was raised as an issue by respondents from various countries, it was most important for those from Russia. Russian respondents demonstrated significant concern about the degree to which the United States controls the internet. To some

<sup>37</sup> Central Asia is commonly defined as consisting of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. In Central Asia, the outreach for this report included responses only from Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

<sup>38</sup> This point is broadly true of almost all the countries covered by this study and the previous one. However, there seems to be a particularly strong correlation in Central Asia. Hard data are difficult to come by, but one study estimates that in no Central Asian state is more than 2 per cent of the population proficient in English. Aminov, K., Jensen, V., Juraev, S., Overland, I., Tyan, D. and Uulu, Y. (2010), ‘Language Use and Language Policy in Central Asia’, *Central Asia Regional Data Review*, 2:1, [http://www.osce-academy.net/upload/file/language\\_use\\_and\\_language\\_policy\\_in\\_central\\_asia.pdf](http://www.osce-academy.net/upload/file/language_use_and_language_policy_in_central_asia.pdf) (accessed 20 May 2016).

degree this was framed in terms of a backlash against US mass surveillance, as exposed by Edward Snowden. But to a greater degree it was simply concern that the United States is too influential on the internet. None of the Russian respondents expressed any fear that they were personally being monitored by the NSA, but there was clear discomfort with the idea that the institutions that control the experience of internet users worldwide – from its hardware backbone to the most popular web services – are largely based in the United States.

This reflected one of the few indications in this study of discomfort with American institutions beyond the federal government. Whereas responders from other countries broadly praised internet companies in both general and specific terms, there was clearly great discomfort in Russia with American private-sector dominance of the internet.

“ At the same time, the role of the internet services in Russian politics turned the American internet leaders into almost political figures in Russia. The visits of representatives of Google, Twitter and Facebook are reported extensively in Russia. One of the most sensitive political issues of today’s Russia is whether American internet giants decide to comply with the Russian legislation to relocate their servers to Russia.

Russia, media

#### Elite responses vs public opinion

*This section examines publicly available opinion polls and compares the data with the findings of Chatham House’s research.*

Reliable polling data from the post-Soviet states are hard to come by, particularly for the Russia-aligned Central Asian states (though not for Russia itself). In 2014, nonetheless, Gallup found that only 9 per cent of people in Kazakhstan and 21 per cent of people in Kyrgyzstan approved of the United States; in both cases, these figures marked significant drops from 2013.<sup>39</sup>

Given the relatively low level of exchange between Central Asian and American institutions, limited economic interchange with the United States, and the overwhelming preponderance of Russian over

American hard and soft power in the region, this low level of public support for the United States is perhaps unsurprising. That said, respondents in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, unlike most of the other participants in this study, made a point of noting their own differences from prevailing public opinion.

Elites in Central Asia divide into two groups with respect to the United States. One, represented in this report, consists of those who are English-speaking and have some degree of personal experience with the West. This group is likely to have a nuanced opinion of the United States, but is not necessarily meaningfully ‘pro-American’. The other, larger, group consists of those who are Russian-speaking and broadly politically aligned with Russia.

In contrast with the situation in the Central Asian countries, the United States is popular in Ukraine – Pew found that 68 per cent of Ukrainians had a positive impression of it in 2014 and that 69 per cent did so in 2015 (see Table 2).<sup>40</sup> Ukrainian opinions of US leadership in the world, as tracked by Gallup, were less positive, with only 33 per cent approval in 2012. However, there had been a steady upwards trend from the 16 per cent recorded in 2007.<sup>41</sup> Meanwhile, positive Ukrainian views of Russia plummeted from 43 per cent in 2013 to 5 per cent in 2014.<sup>42</sup> To Ukrainians, the European Union was the most positively viewed of all world powers, registering a 46 per cent approval rating in 2014.<sup>43</sup> Interestingly, even as the Ukrainian public’s favourable opinion of the United States in general increased, its confidence in Barack Obama fell from 55 per cent in 2014 to 51 per cent in 2015.<sup>44</sup> This chimes with the sense of frustration Ukrainian respondents indicated with regard to Obama’s cautious approach to the war between Ukrainian government forces and Russian-backed separatists in the country’s east.

“ I am thankful [to the] United States for its support of Ukraine in the war against Russia, though I am discontented with the American president’s hesitation and decision not to deliver lethal weapons to Ukraine.

Ukraine, media

<sup>39</sup> Gallup (2014), *The U.S.-Global Leadership Project*, Washington, DC: Gallup, p. 20.

<sup>40</sup> Pew Research Center (2015), ‘Global Indicators Database: Opinion of the United States’, August 2015, <http://www.pewglobal.org/database/indicator/1/survey/all/> (accessed 20 May 2016).

<sup>41</sup> Gallup (2013), *The U.S.-Global Leadership Project*, Washington, DC: Gallup, [http://www.gallup.com/file/poll/161309/US\\_Global\\_Leadership\\_Report\\_03-13\\_mh2.pdf](http://www.gallup.com/file/poll/161309/US_Global_Leadership_Report_03-13_mh2.pdf), p. 21 (accessed 25 Jul. 2016).

<sup>42</sup> Ray, J. and Esipova, N. (2014), ‘Ukrainian Approval of Russia’s Leadership Dives Almost 90%’, Gallup, 15 December 2014, [http://www.gallup.com/poll/180110/ukrainian-approval-russia-leadership-dives-almost.aspx?g\\_source=russia&g\\_medium=search&g\\_campaign=tiles](http://www.gallup.com/poll/180110/ukrainian-approval-russia-leadership-dives-almost.aspx?g_source=russia&g_medium=search&g_campaign=tiles) (accessed 28 Jul. 2016).

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Simmons, K., Stokes, B. and Poushter, J. (2015), ‘3. Ukrainian Public Opinion: Dissatisfied with Current Conditions, Looking for an End to the Crisis’, Pew Research Center, 10 June 2015, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2015/06/10/3-ukrainian-public-opinion-dissatisfied-with-current-conditions-looking-for-an-end-to-the-crisis/> (accessed 15 Aug. 2016).

The elite responses from Ukraine demonstrated the distance between perceptions of specific American policies and perceptions of the United States overall. While Ukrainian respondents were frustrated with what they perceived as a lack of American support, they still saw their country's future as being with the United States and the West, not with Russia. Given that their government was notably Russian-aligned until the Maidan revolution, there are doubtless some remaining elites in Ukraine with pro-Russian viewpoints, but none were represented in the responses we gathered.

The United States is also relatively popular in Georgia, where a 2012 Gallup survey – the most recent available – found an approval rating of 51 per cent and a disapproval rating of 15 per cent. That same poll found steady growth in approval from 42 per cent in 2007.<sup>45</sup> The favourability figure was much lower in Estonia, at 31 per cent, though that also represented a rise from the 2008 low point of 18 per cent.<sup>46</sup> Compared with their Ukrainian counterparts, the Georgian and Estonian respondents in our study seemed to take a more realist, transactional view of the United States; to them the United States is a security guarantor, to be described in terms of its provision of a strategic bulwark against Russia rather than as a beacon of liberty.

“ Georgians like the United States because its involvement provides them with a chance to survive in their post-colonial struggle with Russia.

Georgia, media

“ America's efforts to assist Georgia in its attempts to develop and secure the country are directly reflected [in the] public's positive perception of it in the long run.

Georgia, NGO

Russian public and elite views of the United States have largely tracked the state of the political relationship between the two countries. In 2002, likely driven by sympathy over the terrorist attacks against the United States, 61 per cent of Russians surveyed by Pew expressed a positive view of the country. This percentage fell into the 40s for much of the remainder of the Bush administration, before recovering to the 50s in 2010–13.<sup>47</sup> But in 2014 it plunged by more than half, to 23 per cent, and it fell even further to 15 per cent in 2015 (see Table 2).<sup>48</sup>

Similarly, in 2014 the German Marshall Fund of the United States found a very high percentage of Russians objecting to the idea of ‘US leadership in world affairs’, with only 10 per cent agreeing that it would be ‘very’ or ‘somewhat’ desirable, compared with 81 per cent describing it as ‘very’ or ‘somewhat’ undesirable.<sup>49</sup>

**Table 2: Opinion of the United States in former Eastern Bloc states**

Percentage of respondents with favourable view, latest available year		
Country	Per cent	Year
Bulgaria	51	2007
Czech Republic	58	2013
Hungary	62	2016
Lithuania	73	2011
Poland	74	2016
Russia	15	2015
Slovakia	41	2007
Ukraine	69	2015

Source: Pew Research Center (2016), ‘Global Indicators Database: Opinion of the United States’, <http://www.pewglobal.org/database/indicator/1/survey/all/> (accessed 25 Jul. 2016).

The Russian elite respondents were clearly not in the pro-Putin camp, but their essays and the general context of Russian public opinion make it clear that views of the United States in Russia are not binary. Not adhering to the prevailing sentiment of nationalism in Russia did not make respondents necessarily more receptive to the American position or narrative; instead, the prevailing mood seemed to be one of general cynicism about great powers.

“ My generation of Russians was genuinely interested in integrating with the West 25 years ago. Their bitter disappointment with the United States since has reversed public opinion in favour of a confrontation, the outcome of which will probably benefit a third party.

Russia, academia/think-tank

<sup>45</sup> Gallup (2013), *The U.S.-Global Leadership Project*, pp. 10, 17.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>47</sup> Pew Research Center (2015), ‘Global Indicators Database: Opinion of the United States’.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> German Marshall Fund of the United States (2014), *Transatlantic Trends Key Findings 2014*, Washington DC: The German Marshall Fund of the United States, [http://trends.gmfus.org/files/2012/09/Trends\\_2014\\_complete.pdf](http://trends.gmfus.org/files/2012/09/Trends_2014_complete.pdf) (accessed 26 Jul. 2016).

# 6. Lessons for the US Government

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The US government puts considerable effort into public diplomacy, but effective public diplomacy is not simply a matter of putting out the right messages through the right channels. The results of this study confirmed that many other factors – some historical, some related to policy and the disparity between actual policy and political rhetoric, and some related to the identity and agenda of the ‘messenger’ – have significant influence.

## The role of the non-official

Among respondents, positive impressions of the United States were heavily influenced by those institutions and actors not operating in an official capacity on behalf of the US government. Representatives of American businesses, universities, NGOs and media organizations garnered praise, and were viewed as better informed and more in touch with the rest of the world than those in US government departments. This was in line with findings of the earlier study of European and Asian elites.

There are, of course, limits to what can be accomplished in public diplomacy with unofficial messengers. Representatives of universities, businesses and NGOs do not have to do the difficult work of advancing US foreign policy; nor do they have to take responsibility for or defend government decisions that are unpopular abroad. It is also incredibly important for the distinction between official and unofficial representatives of the United States to be maintained; respect for American non-governmental institutions is heavily contingent upon them not being proxies for the state.

Nevertheless, to the extent that the government can facilitate exchanges between representatives of US non-governmental institutions and their foreign counterparts, this will be a net benefit to the country’s image abroad – and, consequently, to US diplomacy and foreign policy goals.

## Decision-making in the government

As far as public diplomacy by official messengers is concerned, the relative lack of understanding abroad of the complexity of the US government should inform strategy. Better public education abroad about the roles and responsibilities of the different branches of the US government, of the differences between the various agencies and departments, and of the constitutional, legal and operational constraints under which the United States acts, would not go amiss. This is particularly important in the post-Soviet states, where US policy is widely seen as the preserve of the president, the secretary of state and the local ambassador, roughly in that order. In Latin America,

there is a greater appreciation for the role of Congress, the relationship between federal and state governments, and the differences between the various executive agencies. This suggests that the content and presentation of information about the US government and its decision-making processes should vary from region to region.

## America is judged ‘in the whole’

The government needs to keep in mind that the United States is viewed and judged on far more than just its current foreign policy and public diplomacy. Its actions are judged by elites in Latin America and the post-Soviet states against the longer history of US policy, against the narrative of its exceptionalism, and against various aspects of its domestic policy and life.

Taking these factors into account need not limit the effectiveness or scope of US public diplomacy. Rather, by understanding and acknowledging the gap between the image that America tries to project of itself and the complexities of its international history and its contemporary reality, the United States can communicate more effectively with informed observers abroad. Those charged with carrying official messages to foreign audiences should understand not only how current US policy compares to its immediate predecessor, but how it fits into a broader history of US action or engagement with that region.

## Language barriers

In terms of public diplomacy, the United States also faces a wide range of logistical and tactical challenges in getting its message through in specific regions. One important aspect is the linguistic barrier – respondents and other observers have pointed to the fact that many members of the pro-Putin elite in Russia and the pro-Russian elites elsewhere in the post-Soviet states simply do not speak English. Similarly, those affiliated with the ruling movements in Cuba and Venezuela generally do not speak English. English may be increasingly the lingua franca in large swathes of the world, but it is far from universal, and the US government needs to be more prepared to speak to suspicious audiences in their own tongues. Recapitalizing the Voice of America’s services in Russian, along with Central Asian and Caucasian languages, would be a good first step.

Messages disseminated only in English are also susceptible to reinterpretation in ways that intentionally and unintentionally undermine their meaning and aims. The global media environment in which the United States operates has changed and become exponentially more

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complex in recent years. Many members of elites in different countries are sophisticated enough to understand that the information provided by state media outlets such as RT<sup>50</sup> reflects a specific agenda or view of the world rather than an honest attempt to portray the truth – but they also tend to view American media with comparable cynicism.

The United States – as a democracy with a constitutional commitment to freedom of expression – cannot and should not follow Russia's example in creating and aggressively disseminating propaganda and misinformation. However, understanding the limitations of operating within a pluralistic liberal democracy does not mean that the United States cannot better tailor its messaging, taking into account not only linguistic barriers but also the regional level of familiarity with the US government's structure, policy and values.

### American exceptionalism

One theme that came through clearly in this research was the idea that the United States is judged by the standards that it has set for itself.<sup>51</sup> The discourse from American leaders – for internal and external consumption alike – uses the terminology of exceptionalism and creates the

expectation that the United States will behave in exceptional ways. When US policy fails to meet that expectation, thanks either to realpolitik or some other constraint, judgments from foreign observers are particularly harsh.

To address this disparity, US policy-makers have two options. They can, and should, take greater account of how their policies are perceived abroad and feed that back into the policy-making process. But many of the constraints around those policies are not within their short-term control, defined as they are by domestic policies, the limits of US hard power and an increasingly competitive international system.

More feasibly, therefore, they can try to adjust the means by which they describe the United States' role in the world. This adjustment cannot happen overnight – as respondents demonstrated, informed audiences have long memories – but to begin to realign the rhetoric of American exceptionalism with what is possible might help bring expectations in line with reality. This has to be done with care. The confident self-presentation of the United States no doubt contributes to its generally positive international image, and that should not be discarded. But a more nuanced approach would, over time, help mitigate the factors that drive or exacerbate many negative perceptions.

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<sup>50</sup> RT, formerly Russia Today, is a Russian state-run television network.

<sup>51</sup> Americans' stated belief in US exceptionalism, as measured by Pew, slipped from 38 per cent of respondents to 28 per cent between 2011 and 2014, before recovering to 32 per cent in 2015. See Pew Research Center (2015), *Beyond Distrust: How Americans View Their Government*, Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, p. 168, <http://www.people-press.org/files/2015/11/11-23-2015-Governance-release.pdf> (accessed 19 May 2016).

# 7. Policy Recommendations

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## General recommendations for the US government

- Build awareness abroad of the structures of the US political system and its limitations. This will help develop realistic expectations of what US policy can achieve, and mitigate disappointment when it does not live up to those expectations.
- Work towards a more nuanced presentation of the United States' role in the world. While it might be unwise to abandon the language of American exceptionalism entirely, since it does have some benefits, shifting to a discourse that de-emphasizes US military and geopolitical dominance – and that talks more in terms of partnership than of unilateralism – would insulate the United States in the long term against some of the most trenchant criticism of its actions.
- Create more opportunities for exchange between American institutions and their counterparts overseas. Streamlining the visa application process for short-term visitors to the United States would help on this front, as would helping American institutions identify partners abroad, centrally and through the relevant embassies.
- Consider historical parallels and precedents when announcing new policies, bearing in mind that foreign audiences will see the history of US policy in their region very differently from US officials – even those with an awareness of regional sensitivities. Recognize that others will be comparing US policy today with policy in the past, and that this will affect their responses.
- Recognize that views of the United States among elites in Latin American and post-Soviet states are never as simple or as static as the pro- or anti-American binary might suggest.

## Recommendations for US policy towards Latin America

- Capitalize on the goodwill created by the reopening of US–Cuban ties. This research lends further credence to the idea that the rapprochement between Washington and Havana is the most positive thing to happen to the image of the United States in the Western Hemisphere in a generation. It comes at a time when the axis of opposition to US hegemony built around Cuba, Venezuela and Bolivia is in disarray. The goodwill brought about by the

US–Cuban initiative will not last: so to the extent that the United States can build on it, it should do so in the near term.

- Push back visibly – at all levels of the US government – on anti-immigration sentiment in the United States. This is a powerful issue throughout Latin America, not only because of the economic impact of labour mobility and remittances, but also because of the way in which it plays into the broader narrative of the United States as an aspirational country. Making the United States' immigration system as open, fair and transparent as possible would pay dividends in terms of the country's image throughout the Western Hemisphere, which would in turn make broader US regional goals more achievable.
- Make sure that the significant role that state laws have on immigration in the United States, along with the resultant limitations on the federal government in this sphere, is well explained to Latin American audiences.

## Recommendations for US policy towards post-Soviet states

- Find new ways to reach Russian-speaking elites throughout the post-Soviet states. Russia has developed an effective mechanism for disseminating its preferred narrative – not only to Russian-speaking audiences, but also to English-speaking ones in Europe, North America and elsewhere. The United States has struggled to find a convincing counterbalance. Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has invested less in capabilities to communicate with the post-Soviet populations in their own languages. Reversing this would not only help to improve views of the United States in the region, it would also help to counteract increasingly sophisticated Russian propaganda efforts there.
- Deliver messages intended for post-Soviet audiences through the highest-level US officials possible. This will significantly enhance such messages' visibility and the extent to which they are taken seriously in these countries.
- Create greater incentives for US businesses and institutions to work in post-Soviet states. There is still a relatively limited understanding of the United States in the region, which contributes to negative perceptions and creates space for Russian counter-narratives to gain traction. Spreading these incentives equally across Russian- and Western-aligned post-Soviet states would help counteract these narratives, build positive views of the United States through direct contact, and contribute to meeting US strategic goals.

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- Increase multilateral participation in internet governance, and develop a public messaging strategy that emphasizes the degree to which the United States is willing to share the 'keys' to the internet. The primary impact would be to counter the perception

in Russia that the United States exercises unfair and undue control over the internet. However, the positive impact could potentially be much wider, given the importance that elites worldwide attach to internet-related issues.

## 8. Conclusions

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In keeping with their different characteristics in relation to the United States, the two regions studied in this report present disparate opportunities and risks for US policy. In Latin America, perceptions of the United States have become more positive as America's standing in the region has improved. The end of the decades-long diplomatic impasse with Cuba – long a source of disunity and anti-American sentiment – and the progress of the TPP have put the United States in an unusually strong position in the region, just as potential rivals such as Venezuela have turned inward to deal with economic and social upheaval.

Significant caveats remain in Latin American elites' perceptions of the United States, particularly around immigration policy and the US government's priorities in respect of the security and trade arrangements that govern the region. But the opportunity for the United States to build upon its current advantageous position in the region closest to home is real, though it will not necessarily last for long.

It will be more difficult for the United States to rebuild positive perceptions in Russia while maintaining its alliances with, and commitments to, those post-Soviet states that have

oriented themselves towards the West since 1991. Most of the policy choices America faces in this region are binary: offering a greater degree of support to Ukraine will reassure Ukrainian elites, but it is likely to antagonize Russia and its local allies further. Here, the United States is not fighting against two centuries' worth of historical expectations as in Latin America, but there is nevertheless a picture of the US government as untrustworthy – because of either self-interest or incompetence (or a combination both). That perception is a barrier to successful US policy-making.

This study suggests that many of the biggest obstacles to the United States being perceived as trustworthy are internal. Where respondents viewed the United States as hypocritical, dysfunctional or otherwise below its self-imposed standard, this was often due to domestic factors in politics and policy, or to related actions and rhetoric. These factors, theoretically at least, can be changed. This is a mixed blessing for US policy-makers. On the one hand, it indicates that addressing issues traditionally considered purely domestic will also benefit foreign policy. On the other hand, those issues and problems are deep-seated, and their solutions often complex and controversial.

# Appendix A: Prompt Questions

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This appendix reproduces the questionnaire, in slightly edited form, that we sent to over 400 individuals in the elites targeted by the study. Each respondent was asked to write an essay of about 1,000 words in length on his or her perceptions of the United States. The questionnaire was intended purely as a starting point to stimulate the flow of ideas, but respondents were free to write on any topic.

## Questions for elites

### **Editorial on Your Perceptions of the United States (approx. 1,000 words)**

The questions below are intended to help give you some sense of what issues we are hoping to explore with this study. Please answer any or all in the course of your essay, as you think appropriate and relevant from your perspective. The questions are intended purely as a guide.

Issues to address in your essay **could** include the following:

- How do you, personally, see the United States?
- Has this changed and what led to the change?
- What factors have the most impact on this perception?
- What is driving your perception (e.g. US policy towards your country or region; other US policy; the president; American culture; American media; people; perceptions of American decline or rise; US humanitarian, military or diplomatic actions etc.)?
- Is this a common view or are there distinct differences?
- Which groups or individuals have the greatest impact on perceptions of the United States (e.g. the president, the secretary of state, business leaders, political parties, diasporas, media, academics etc.)?
- How influential is the United States in your country?
- Can you give an example of when it has been influential?

## Appendix B: Respondents by Country and Sector

### Latin America

	Private sector	Public/Former public sector	Media	Academia/ Think-tank	NGO	Total
Brazil	1	3	1	3	0	8
Cuba	0	1	0	3	0	4
Guatemala	0	1	0	2	1	4
Mexico	1	4	1	2	0	8
Peru	0	1	1	1	1	4
Venezuela	0	0	0	1	0	1
Total	2	10	3	12	2	29

### Post-Soviet states

	Private sector	Public/Former public sector	Media	Academia/ Think-tank	NGO	Total
Estonia	0	1	0	0	0	1
Georgia	0	0	1	1	1	3
Kazakhstan	0	0	0	4	1	5
Kyrgyzstan	0	0	0	2	0	2
Russia	1	0	2	6	0	9
Ukraine	1	1	1	3	2	8
Total	2	2	4	16	4	28

### The Stavros Niarchos Foundation

The Stavros Niarchos Foundation ([www.SNF.org](http://www.SNF.org)) is one of the world's leading private international philanthropic organizations, making grants in the areas of arts and culture, education, health and sports, and social welfare. The Foundation funds organizations and projects that are expected to achieve a broad, lasting and positive impact for society at large, focusing on vulnerable groups such as children and the elderly, and also exhibit strong leadership and sound management. The Foundation also seeks actively to support projects that facilitate the formation of public-private partnerships as an effective means for serving public welfare.

2016 marks the twentieth year of the Stavros Niarchos Foundation's global philanthropic activity. Since 1996, the SNF has made grant commitments of \$1.8 billion/€1.5 billion, through 3,534 grants to nonprofit organizations in 111 nations around the world.

Beginning in 2012, in addition to its standard grant-making activities, the Foundation embarked on a \$378 million (€300 million) grant initiative in an effort to help address the severe effects of the deepening crisis in Greece. The initiative aims to provide immediate relief support to the most vulnerable members of the Greek society. In addition, as part of the initiative, grants will be provided towards addressing the high percentage of youth unemployment, seeking to create better employment prospects and new opportunities for the young.

The Foundation's largest single gift is the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center (SNFCC), in Athens. The project's total budget of \$854 million (€617 million) includes two grants of \$6 million (€5 million) each to the National Library of Greece and the Greek National Opera respectively, aiming to support the organizations' transition to their new facilities. The project, designed by the architectural firm Renzo Piano Building Workshop (RPBW), includes the new facilities of the National Library of Greece, and of the Greek National Opera, as well as the Stavros Niarchos Park. The SNFCC is a testament and a commitment to the country's future. It is also an engine of short- to mid-term economic stimulus.

### About the US and the Americas Programme

The US and the Americas Programme at Chatham House (London, UK) provides analysis on the changing role of the United States in the world. Building on the independent, international reputation of Chatham House, the programme provides a unique external perspective on US affairs.

The programme aims to:

- develop a contextual understanding of the transformations taking place within the United States and internationally, to analyse how they affect US foreign policy;
- offer predictions on America's likely future international direction;
- influence responses from allies and others towards the United States; and
- highlight to American policy-makers the intended, and unintended, impact of their policies overseas.

The programme comprises both in-house staff and an international network of associate fellows who together provide in-depth expertise in both geographical and thematic areas.

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