

# Opinion: Cuba's authoritarian alliances are a threat to democracy

COMMENTARY

13 JULY 2022

Alliances between authoritarian regimes are one of the greatest global threats facing democracy today. Collaboration between autocrats makes them stronger, and more effective at surveilling, isolating,

MICHAEL LIMA & SARAH TEICH

[VIEW BIO](#)

Recommended for You

and persecuting human rights defenders. Two such alliances are between Cuba and China, and Cuba and Russia. And the effects of these alliances on the pro-democratic Cuban movement are stark.

China dominates the telecommunications sector in Cuba, including the expansion of internet access on the island that has been done with Chinese technology



COMMENTARY

Harrison Lowman: By putting words in Poilievre's mouth, CTV put its foot in theirs

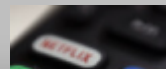
HARRISON LOWMAN



NEWS

University of Toronto ranked fourth best in the world for scientific research as Chinese universities make major gains

KIERNAN GREEN



COMMENTARY

Robert C.

NEWS **More Signal. Less Noise.** COMMENTARY

JOIN PODCASTS

SIGN IN

freedom in Cuba. China's Great Firewall has managed to erase critical historical events, including the Tiananmen Square massacre,

tech companies hurts both our countries while helping China

ROBERT C. O'BRIEN

from the memory of new generations. China has 900 million internet users<sup>1</sup> and only between 3 to 15 percent manage to circumvent the Great Firewall through use of virtual private networks (VPNs).<sup>2</sup>

The Cuban regime similarly censors internet access, and it likely sees the most repressive aspects of the Chinese system of internet control as a model worth emulating. Through the use of Chinese technology, censorship of websites, social media, application of internet outages, and blocking of VPN access, the Cuban



## NEWS

The Week in Polling: Canadians think foreign interference has likely happened, historic byelection results, and Conservative policies are resonating with voters

AIDEN MUSCOVITCH



## NEWS

'Canada needs to be present again in the councils of the Western world': David Frum discusses foreign affairs and the American presidential election at Hub event in Ottawa

THE HUB STAFF

## Popular Articles

regime is significantly reducing free spaces in Cuba for civil society to coordinate actions and organize mobilization for democratic change.

For its part, the Cuban regime supports China at international fora, including by actively supporting Beijing's claims on Taiwan. The Cuban Foreign Ministry as well as its press agencies on the island and abroad actively defend and promote the so-called "one China" principle that establishes that the entire Asian giant, including the democratic island-nation of Taiwan, is one country with a government that has

1 Paul W. Bennett: Inclusive education is an illusion in post-pandemic schools. Too often, it's simply giving up on kids

2 Matt Spoke: The Trudeau government is asking first-time home buyers to shoulder more debt to kickstart Canada's housing industry

3 DeepDive: The capital gains tax increase on Canada's economy was far from trivial

4 Another massive blow for Prime Minister Trudeau: Five Tweets on the Montreal and Winnipeg byelections

5 The Weekly Wrap: Pierre Poilievre's challenge to Canadians

its capital in Beijing. They also actively condemn the U.S.'s position with respect to Taiwan. China may be motivated, at least in part, to use Cuba's diplomatic influence in the region to influence the four Caribbean nations that still recognize Taiwan to switch to non-recognition.

On October 21, 2021, the Cuban regime delivered a statement<sup>3</sup> in the United Nations General Assembly on behalf of 62 countries praising China's human rights record in Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and Tibet, despite vast evidence of gross human rights

violations and atrocity crimes, including genocide, perpetrated by the Chinese Communist Party. In this way, this alliance between Cuba and China reveals the global implications of mutual complicity and how this contributes to forging a global culture of impunity for atrocity crimes.

Cuba is also allied with Russia. Just as the Cuban media repeats Chinese propaganda points on Taiwan, Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and Tibet, the Cuban media also reproduces disinformation disseminated by the Kremlin to justify its invasion of Ukraine. For example, Cuban

state media refuses to recognize that there was even an invasion of Ukraine; it is instead described as “a special operation.” They also parrot Russian propaganda narratives about the need for Russia to “denazify” Ukraine, and blame criticisms of Vladimir Putin on “Russophobia,” ignoring the Russian regime’s responsibility for the brutal attacks against civilian populations.

This disinformation is broadcasted internationally by the Cuban regime through the Cubavision International signal via five satellites to more than 60

million people in America, Europe, Asia, and North Africa. Despite Canada's condemnation of the dissemination of disinformation about the war in Ukraine, the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) continues to authorize Cubavision International to be distributed in Canada.<sup>4</sup>

Canada has been vocal against authoritarianism in Russia and, to a lesser extent, China. However, Canada has been relatively silent against authoritarianism in Cuba. This does not



represent a principled human rights policy.

Besides Cuba's key authoritarian alliances with Russia and China, the Cuban regime has a disastrous record of human rights abuses. Cuba is one of the oldest dictatorships in the world, and the regime has increasingly cracked down on human rights defenders. Following the July 2021 pro-democratic protests, the Cuban regime jailed so many political prisoners that it now has more arbitrarily detained than Venezuela and Nicaragua combined.

The alliances between Cuba, China, and Russia are a threat to democracy. They facilitate digital authoritarianism, the global expansion of authoritarian norms, disinformation, and impunity for atrocity crimes and human rights abuses. It is time for Canada to rethink its foreign policy towards Cuba, in the spirit of standing up against human rights violations—wherever they occur.

---

MICHAEL LIMA &  
SARAH TEICH

*Sarah Teich is an international human rights lawyer and a senior fellow at the Macdonald-Laurier Institute. Michael Lima is a researcher and director of Democratic*

*Spaces, an NGO seeking solidarity in Canada with human rights defenders and civil society in Cuba. He holds an MA in Latin American history from.....*  
[Read more](#)

YOU'VE REACHED THE NEXT ARTICLE

# Steve Lafleur: There is no obvious scapegoat for Canada's air travel woes

COMMENTARY

12 JULY 2022

There's no  
sugarcoating it:

STEVE LAFLEUR  
[VIEW BIO](#)

air travel is terrible right now. It's expensive, grueling, and uncertain. I've been lucky so far in my travels. The last time I landed at Pearson the flight attendant announced that we were going to be held on the plane for at least a half-hour, though mercifully she announced minutes later that we were free to go. In that moment, I was furious. I had to pay a premium for a flight that wound up being delayed at LaGuardia, so I was already

## Recommended for You

COMMENTARY

Joanna Baron:  
Enough already. It's time to amend the Canada Health Act

JOANNA BARON

COMMENTARY

Benjamin Dachis and Adam Sweet:  
It's time for Conservatives to lead on climate policy—here's why

BENJAMIN DACHIS AND ADAM SWEET

COMMENTARY

Donald Wright:  
When it comes to where people want to live, Canada is a very small country

DONALD WRIGHT

frustrated. But I also know it could have been worse.

My partner sat in a security line at Pearson for two hours a few weeks ago. My parents had to sit on the tarmac for 45 minutes not long ago. I get it. It sucks. This is why, for the most part, I'm opting out of air travel this summer.

Instead, I'm spending time driving to places like Detroit and Buffalo. I'll leave London and Paris for the rest of you.

Here's the thing, though: I'm not sure there's

## COMMENTARY

Peter Menzies:  
Note to the Liberals: you don't have to be authoritarian to protect against online harms

PETER  
MENZIES

## COMMENTARY

Levi Minderhoud:  
Canada's provinces should follow peer countries in Europe and ban medical transitions for minors

LEVI  
MINDERHOUD

## Popular Articles

1

Paul W. Bennett:  
Inclusive education is an illusion in post-pandemic schools. Too often, it's simply giving up on kids

really anyone to blame. Pausing and unpausing an economy is not something we've ever done before. If you put the economy in an induced coma, there's going to be some grogginess. Even though airlines across the world were kept afloat by governments, you don't just dust off a 737 and go. There was—and is—a tremendous amount of uncertainty surrounding global air travel. While we can argue that mistakes were made, I think we're being too quick to rush to

2 Matt Spoke: The Trudeau government is asking first-time home buyers to shoulder more debt to kickstart Canada's housing industry

3 DeepDive: The capital gains tax increase on Canada's economy was far from trivial

4 Another massive blow for Prime Minister Trudeau: Five Tweets on the Montreal and Winnipeg byelections

5 The Weekly Wrap: Pierre Poilievre's challenge to Canadians

judgement. It's possible that we made some unforced errors in Canada, though I'm skeptical that we've completely dropped the ball. After all, the rest of the world is facing many of the same challenges we are.

Air travel is a particularly difficult industry to ramp up. It's a heavily regulated industry, and for good reason. There's been some debate lately about whether pilots in the United States require too much training in order to fly. Is 1500 hours the right

number? 750? I can't tell you what the right answer is. But even since before COVID, some have complained that the 1500-hour rule was causing a pilot shortage. It's also incredibly complex. There are a lot of logistics involved in flying 200-ton tubes around the world at 800 kilometers an hour. It takes a lot of skilled workers on the ground and some very patient people in the cabin and cockpit to make things work.

It also takes time to train and



recruit flight attendants and ground crew. And there can be frictions. My partner and I travelled to Newfoundland last year, knowing it would be a place that almost certainly wasn't going to shut down. I watched as one of the recently hired flight attendants fumbled with the intercom for several minutes before giving up and just starting the in-flight service unannounced. Upon arrival at the terminal, I watched as the ground crew struggled to

work the bridge,  
to the  
amusement of  
the flight  
attendants. The  
flight attendants,  
in turn, had a bit  
of trouble  
opening the  
door. In short,  
there were a lot  
of tiny little  
frictions that  
added a few  
minutes here  
and a few  
minutes there.

Worse still, the  
industry isn't  
going back to a  
normal  
environment—at  
least not yet.  
We're still  
dealing with  
COVID, and  
plenty of  
passengers have  
been cranky  
about it. So a lot  
of people who

enjoyed—or  
tolerated—the  
job before COVID  
have simply  
decided that  
they were born  
for better things  
than being yelled  
at by people who  
are mad about  
COVID  
restrictions.

The reopening of  
global air travel  
has been  
plagued with  
uncertainty. Last  
year we all  
hoped that  
COVID would be  
behind us.

Instead, we got  
the Delta wave.  
Then for  
Christmas, we  
got Omicron. It  
wasn't that long  
ago we were  
back to shutting  
down  
restaurants and

sitting at home. No one had a clear idea of what this year would look like even a few months ago. So airlines around the world were caught flat-footed by the strong travel demand. As were airports and governments. Decisions made months ago are coming back to haunt us. But given that outcomes seemed to range from another lost travel season to everyone booking as much travel as they could afford, it's no surprise that governments and industry missed

the mark. This  
stuff is hard.  
When  
governments  
make mistakes  
they take heat.  
When businesses  
make mistakes  
they lose money.  
So it's not  
surprising there  
was some  
excessive  
prudence.

The highly  
globalized nature  
of the airline  
industry makes it  
even more  
challenging.  
Problems in one  
country or one  
airport can  
cascade around  
the world. A  
thunderstorm in  
New York can  
mean missed  
connections at  
Heathrow or  
Pearson.

Similarly, [strikes in Europe](#) can cause delays and cancellations across the board. Sometimes annoying things happen and there's nothing we can do about it. Unless we want to wall off the country and spend all of our vacations in Banff and Whistler, there will always be factors beyond our control.

A lot of people were blaming [vaccine mandates and random COVID testing](#) for travel delays at the start of the summer. The mandate for domestic travel

and random testing is [gone](#), but the delays are still here. Others have blamed the government for continuing to use the [ArriveCan](#) app to log travelers. While I don't have a firm opinion on whether there is a case for using the app now, I'm skeptical that it is a major source of delays.<sup>1</sup>

Anecdotally, I can't even remember showing the app upon my last return to Canada by air. An American friend who recently visited also can't recall using the

app. I'm sure that some people who are less technologically savvy might have problems, but it hasn't been pervasive enough for me to notice.

I'm not here to apologize for all of the decisions that have been made along the way. I would love to be able to comfortably travel across the continent right now (or, heaven forbid, take that European trip we were supposed to take in 2020). But I think we need to appreciate that this was never going to be easy.



It's understandable that people are looking for someone to blame. But I'm just not sure who that is.

Insofar as there is a uniquely Canadian problem on top of the global airline challenges, it's an issue with our major airports—Pearson most notably, but also Montreal. A recent report ranked Pearson the second-worst airport on earth for on-time departures, followed by Montreal at sixth.<sup>2</sup> As a medium-sized

country with only a few major metropolitans, it's easy to forget that national problems can have hyper-local causes. Pearson and Montreal accounted for nearly 40 percent of Canadian passenger traffic in 2020.<sup>3</sup> Throw in Vancouver and the three largest airports account for over 55 percent of passengers. Problems in Toronto, Montreal, or Vancouver cascade throughout the country. A flight crew stuck in Toronto means no flight to

Calgary. It's no surprise to me that the airline whose major hubs are Pearson, Montreal, and Vancouver had the worst on-time performance in the world.

When you cut through the noise about COVID policy and grievances with specific airlines, there's an obvious problem: insufficient staff. This isn't really a controversial point. The Minister of Transportation has acknowledged the staffing challenges at Pearson. Circling

back to my point about staffing, it takes time to hire and train people. And those decisions had to be made months ago when it wasn't clear how many people would be comfortable crammed into a plane with a hundred and seventy-three other peoples' germs.

There's also another problem: the [red-hot labour market](#). Unemployment rates in North America are [extremely low](#) right now and finding people to work is hard. And if you have a lot of choices,

having to drive  
out to Pearson to  
do airport  
screening for  
[twenty-four](#)  
[bucks](#) an hour  
might not be  
your top choice.  
This may well be  
an area where  
the Federal  
government and  
airport  
authorities  
dropped the ball.  
<sup>4</sup> There is surely  
a dollar amount  
that would have  
brought more  
applications in  
the door. The  
consequences of  
over-hiring  
would have been  
trivial compared  
to under-hiring.  
Besides, if we  
were losing  
another travel  
season to COVID,  
we'd have much

bigger things to worry about than the federal government overspending on airports.

While governments, airlines, and airport authorities could have made different choices that might have had better results, it's important to recognize that there's another party involved in travel: customers. We are all dying to travel, and those of us who can are doing so all at once. The world changed in March of 2020. So people's habits rapidly

changed. Travel was out, and home improvements were in. Unsurprisingly, that meant the cost of [durable goods](#) shot up and there were widespread shortages. Markets are good at accommodating changing consumer demand. But not right away. So we all bid up the [price of lumber](#) for home renos and spent months waiting for new [home appliances](#). That isn't much different from what's happening right now but in

reverse. People are prioritizing travel over household goods. This is understandable—they're probably sick of sitting at home.

The world has been an unpredictable place since March of 2020. No one could have imagined that we'd lock people at home and put the economy into an induced coma. Within a few months, it seemed like normal travel patterns would never come back. [Airport authorities](#), [airlines](#), governments, us



—none of us could have predicted such a rapid snapback in travel demand with any accuracy. The uncertainties weren't just epidemiological. They were also psychological. Would people be permanently scarred, forever disgusted by the idea of rubbing elbows with strangers for three hours? Or would we rapidly develop miraculous vaccines that would allow an enthusiastic public to get back to normal life and then some?

In hindsight, we

have answers to these questions. Most of us got vaccinated and want to get back to something like normal. After two years of pestilence and restrictions, it's no surprise that people are looking for some human connection or some adventure. And right now, people are willing to put up with almost anything for those experiences. It's not Air Canada's fault if someone is willing to pay over \$800 to fly economy to Los Angeles from Toronto any more than it's

Choice Hotels' fault that people are willing to pay three hundred Canadian Dollars for a night at a Comfort Inn in Detroit some weekends. That's just supply and demand at work.

So for now, we have delays, cancellations, and high prices. Hopefully, people will get the travel bug out of their systems soon and we will return to something like normal, with air travel a mundane affair once again. Until then, I'll be (mostly) opting out. If anyone needs me, I'll be driving through

# Upstate New York.

STEVE LAFLEUR

*Steve Lafleur is a public policy analyst and columnist based in Toronto.*

The Hub is a project of Hub Canada Media, a federally incorporated not-for-profit.

JOIN THE HUB

- NEWS
- JOIN
- COMMENTARY
- HUNTER PRIZE
- CONTRIBUTORS
- ABOUT
- ONE-TIME CONTRIBUTION
- ADVERTISE WITH THE HUB
- MANAGE YOUR SUBSCRIPTION
- JOURNALISTIC STANDARDS AND PRACTICES
- CONTACT

© The Hub 2024

Terms of use

Cookies Policy

Privacy Notice