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Partnering for economic security

A comprehensive strategy for greater
United States–Dominican Republic integration

By the DR-US Economic Strategy Advisory Group
Rapporteurs: Marino Auffant, Enrique Millan-Mejia



The Atlantic Council's nonpartisan Adrienne Arsht Latin America Center (AALAC) broadens understanding of regional transformations while demonstrating why Latin America and the Caribbean matter for the world. The center focuses on pressing political, economic, and social issues that will define the region's trajectory, proposing constructive, results-oriented solutions to inform public sector, business, and multilateral action based on a shared vision for a more prosperous, inclusive, and sustainable future

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“The relationship between the United States and the Dominican Republic is rich with history and underpinned by our shared tenets of democracy, trade, and security. Here in New York’s Hudson Valley, I am proud to represent a large Dominican population, whose contributions to our economy, culture, and communities are felt every single day. We are proud to join the Atlantic Council’s Adrienne Arsht Latin America Center to announce the release of this comprehensive strategy for greater United States–Dominican Republic integration. This new, imaginative framework will ensure that our bilateral cooperation continues for decades to come—and will lead to the mutual expansion of our economic partnership, shared security efforts, and celebration of each other’s cultures.”

Representative Mike Lawler (R-NY)

“The partnership between the United States and the Dominican Republic is a cornerstone of stability, prosperity, and security in the Caribbean. The Atlantic Council’s Adrienne Arsht Latin America Center has provided a timely report offering strategic recommendations to leaders in both nations as we work collaboratively to deepen economic cooperation, enhance technological integration, and strengthen our shared security. I am honored to join the Council and sector leaders in recognizing this important contribution to advancing the United States–Dominican Republic relationship.”

Representative Adriano Espaillat (D-NY)

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Letter from the vice president and senior director

The Dominican Republic and the United States share a partnership built on decades of trade, investment, and people-to-people ties. Today, that relationship is entering a new phase. At a time of rapid global economic transformation, the Dominican Republic is emerging as a strategic hub in the Caribbean and an increasingly significant partner for the United States.

It is with this vision that the Atlantic Council established the Dominican Republic-US Economic Strategy Advisory Group. Bringing together leaders from business, civil society and former government officials of both countries, the group has identified policies and opportunities that can foster inclusive growth while bolstering the bilateral economic relationship and broader partnership between the Dominican Republic and the United States.

This report reflects the outcomes of that process. It highlights the opportunities to deepen economic cooperation between the United States and the Dominican Republic and lays out concrete steps that can be taken to advance said cooperation. The insights gathered here, through rigorous analysis and the contributions of advisory group members, provide a roadmap for deepening US-DR cooperation at a pivotal moment for the region and the world community.

It is our hope that this report will serve not only as a reflection of shared progress but also as a catalyst for the continued strengthening of one of the United States' most important economic and strategic partnerships in the Western Hemisphere.

Jason Marczak, vice president and senior director, Adrienne Arsht Latin America Center, Atlantic Council

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The report would not have been possible without the support of the nongovernmental business association ASIEX (Asociación de Empresas de Inversión Extranjera), through a grant from the Ministry of Industry and Trade of the Dominican Republic.

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Overview of strategic payoffs

	UNITED STATES	DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
Industrial supply chain security	Secure critical supply chains; reduce dependence on China; preserve high-value domestic production; expand exports through integrated co-production.	Shift from low-cost assembly to higher-value manufacturing; attract long-term investment; integrate into strategic US supply chains; develop a skilled, specialized workforce. Our estimate, based on International Monetary Fund data, is that Dominican Republic export volumes could grow by 32 percent by 2030, presenting an incentive to strengthen integration with US industries and help secure critical supply chains against reliance on foreign adversaries.
Strategic infrastructure and regional logistics	Gain a logistics diversification partner in the Caribbean; enhance US Southern Command disaster and counter-narcotics capacity; enable neighbor's exit from Belt and Road-aligned infrastructure; leverage the Dominican Republic for regional warehousing, transshipment, and space infrastructure.	Modernize strategic infrastructure; become a regional logistics and disaster response hub; attract investment in cutting-edge sectors such as space; deepen security and counter-narcotics cooperation with the United States. World Bank comparative logistical data show that the Dominican Republic still has some road to cover in catching up with regional peers such as Panama and Costa Rica.
Digital infrastructure and cybersecurity	Establish a secure regional digital hub for the Caribbean; reduce Chinese tech penetration; expand secure cloud and intelligence networks; strengthen cybersecurity coordination.	Lead Caribbean digital transformation; attract international tech and data firms; evolve into a regional cybersecurity operations hub; diversify into high-value digital services.
Energy security and critical minerals	Secure regional critical minerals; secure foreign markets for US liquefied natural gas (LNG); diversify rare earth supply away from China; support Puerto Rico's energy needs; create a regional partnership model.	Monetize mineral resources; modernize grid and export electricity; gain greater energy sovereignty; become a regional resource development hub.
Homeland and regional security	Lock in a security partner in the Caribbean; prevent regional instability, narcotics flows, and migration crises; reinforce counterterrorism and sanctions enforcement against hostile regimes; enhance resilience against cyber and hybrid threats.	Strengthen border and national security; secure structured US support against spillovers from Haiti and regional shocks; institutionalize anti-corruption and rule of law gains across political cycles; bolster international standing as a hemispheric security partner.
Institutional alignment and bilateral mechanisms	Build a resilient alliance with a regional partner; improve policy coordination; enhance diaspora engagement; model whole-of-government cooperation.	Institutionalize US-Dominican ties beyond political cycles; grow influence in Washington; engage diaspora capital and talent; articulate long-term priorities with strategic continuity.

Introduction

As the United States reassesses its foreign economic and security partnerships through the lens of national interest and global competition, there is a growing need to identify reliable, proximate allies that can contribute to US strategic priorities. This report, the result of a yearlong, multisectoral analysis by the Atlantic Council's DR-US Economic Strategy Advisory Group, finds that there are multiple opportunities for greater cooperation between the United States and the Dominican Republic, from pursuing closer industrial integration to expanding digital and logistical infrastructure to advancing shared interests in regional security and stability.

Over the past several decades, bilateral ties have quietly deepened, particularly on trade, co-production, and counter-narcotics cooperation. More than 60 percent of Dominican Free Zone manufacturing inputs are imported from the United States, and a significant portion of Dominican Republic (DR) exports—especially in sectors such as medical devices, electronics, and pharmaceuticals—serve US markets.¹ The country also maintains advanced port and airport infrastructure and has taken steps to increase its role in regional digital connectivity and cybersecurity, areas of growing strategic concern for Washington.

At the same time, important challenges persist. Infrastructure bottlenecks, regulatory fragmentation, workforce limitations, and gaps in bilateral coordination have prevented the US-Dominican relationship from reaching its full potential. In the current geopolitical context, where onshoring and nearshoring are often presented as competing models, the Dominican Republic risks being sidelined despite its structural alignment with US goals.

This report argues that the United States and the Dominican Republic stand to benefit from a more deliberate and mutually reinforcing partnership—one that strengthens US supply chain resilience, advances shared security interests, and supports targeted economic upgrading in the Dominican Republic. A deliberate investment upgrading strategy is needed and must focus on six key pillars of engagement: supply chains, infrastructure, digital security, energy and critical minerals, regional security, and bilateral mechanisms. The pages that follow provide both business leaders and policymakers with specific tools and policy options to address existing obstacles and foster a more strategic alignment.

These findings are the product of a yearlong consultative process with Dominican and US experts, business leaders, and former government officials—members of the Atlantic Council's DR-US Economic Strategy Advisory Group. The results presented have been reviewed with group members and with observers of the group's proceedings.

Rather than proposing a one-size-fits-all model, the report focuses on realistic, sector-specific pathways that respond to US domestic imperatives while building on areas of complementarity. The aim is not to overstate the potential of the relationship, but to assess where and how cooperation can produce measurable results for both countries.

Pillars of engagement

I. Industrial supply chain security: A “twinshoring” opportunity

Reinforcing US manufacturing through regional co-production

As the United States seeks to reduce its reliance on geopolitical rivals and secure critical supply chains, the solution might not lie in reshoring alone. Another strategy involves *twinshoring*: pairing high-value US manufacturing with complementary, cost-effective production steps in nearby partners. This opportunity is particularly promising in the Dominican Republic.

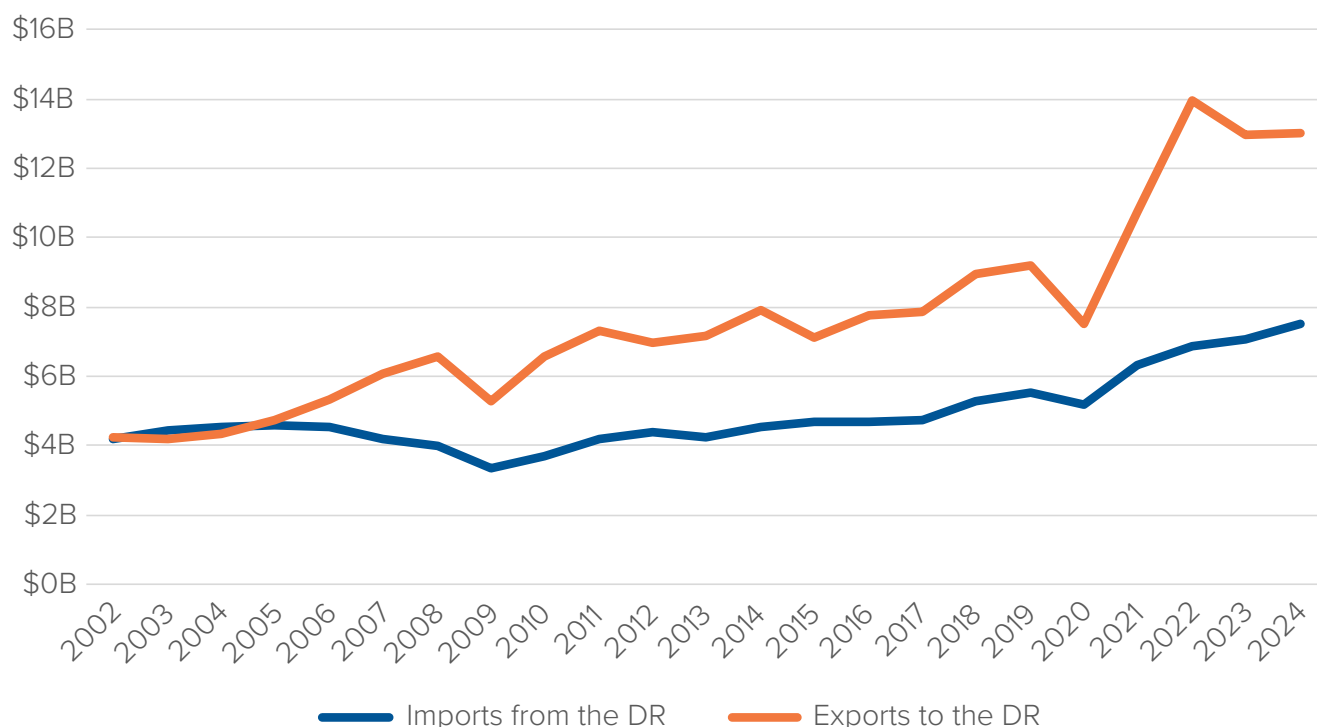
Just a few hours from the US mainland, the Dominican Republic has mature industrial zones, a history of co-production with US firms, and a growing footprint in strategic sectors such as medical devices, electronics, and pharmaceuticals. This harkens back to the 1980s, when Puerto Rico established a “twin plant” program with its Caribbean and Central American neighbors, of which the Dominican Republic’s recently established Free Zones—special industrial parks where manufacturers export tax and duty free—were among the main beneficiaries. The first DR Free Zone medical device and electrical equipment operations date to this twin plant program. This integrated manufacturing continues to this day, boosting US competitiveness by preserving domestic value add on US shores while lowering costs and mitigating risk with regional partners.

By leveraging the Dominican Republic’s manufacturing precision and flexibility, US companies can strengthen their resilience in sectors where proximity, security, and customization matter most. With the right policy alignment, this twinshoring can become a cornerstone of US industrial strategy—enhancing national security, expanding export capacity, and supporting allied economic development in the Western Hemisphere.

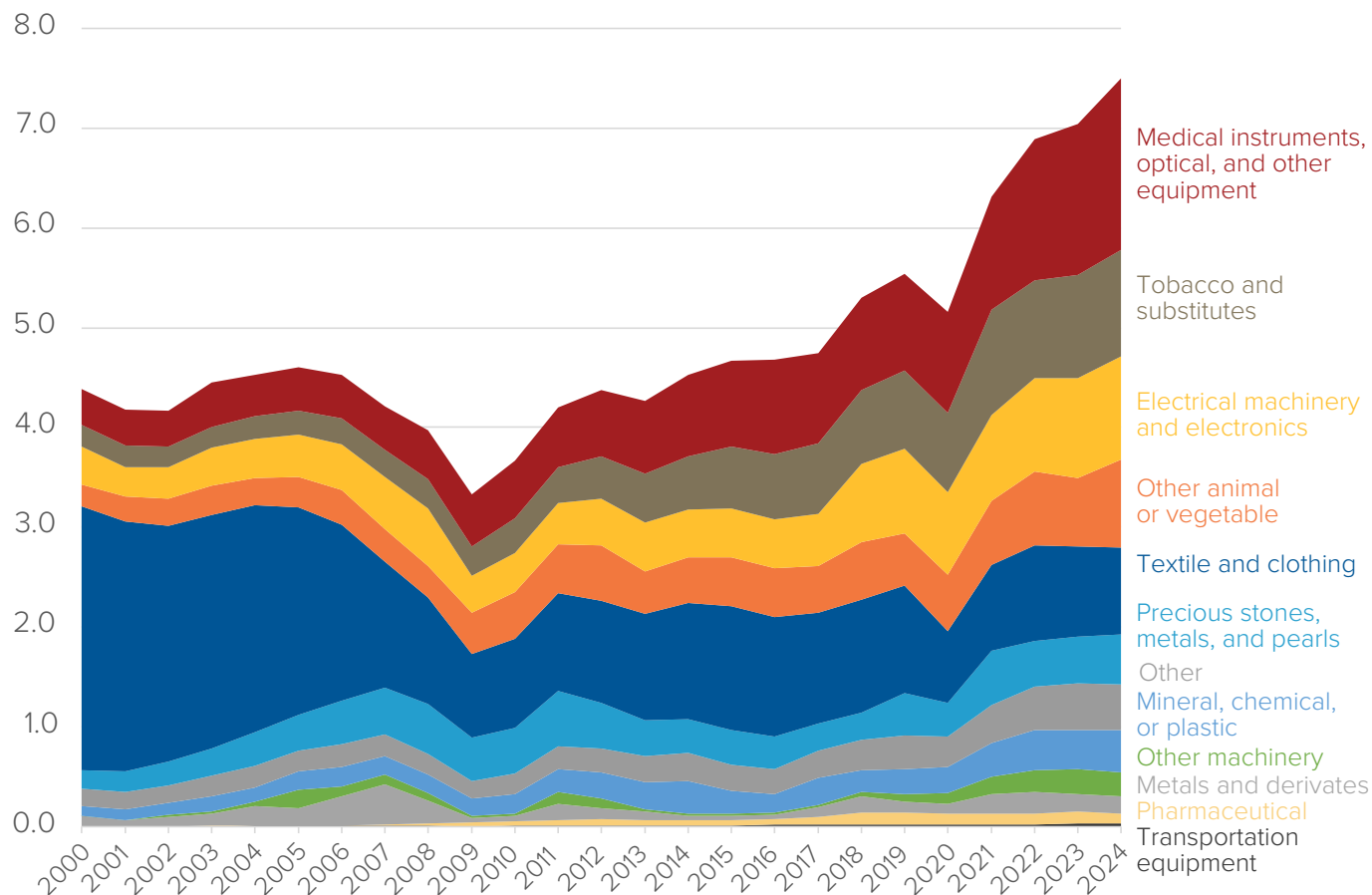
A manufacturing boom built on deepening US integration

Over the past decade, this foundation has supported remarkable growth. Free Zone exports have expanded by more than 50 percent since 2018. Medical products and pharmaceuticals have emerged as the Dominican Republic’s leading export at \$2.9 billion in 2024, followed by gold and precious metals (\$2.3 billion), tobacco products (\$1.3 billion), and electrical machinery and electronics (\$1.2 billion).² Moreover, the United States is, by far, the Dominican Republic’s top Free Zone export destination. For example, 98 percent of Free Zone electrical and electronic exports and 79 percent of medical devices and pharmaceuticals go to the United States, reflecting the Dominican Republic’s deep integration with US industrial networks.³

Figure 1: US trade in goods with the Dominican Republic (2000–2024)



Source: “US Trade in Goods by Country,” US Census Bureau, last visited September 12, 2025, <https://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/>.

Figure 2: US imports from the Dominican Republic by commodity group (2000–2024)

Source: Calculated with data from the US Census Bureau's USA Trade Online platform. <https://usatrade.census.gov/>.

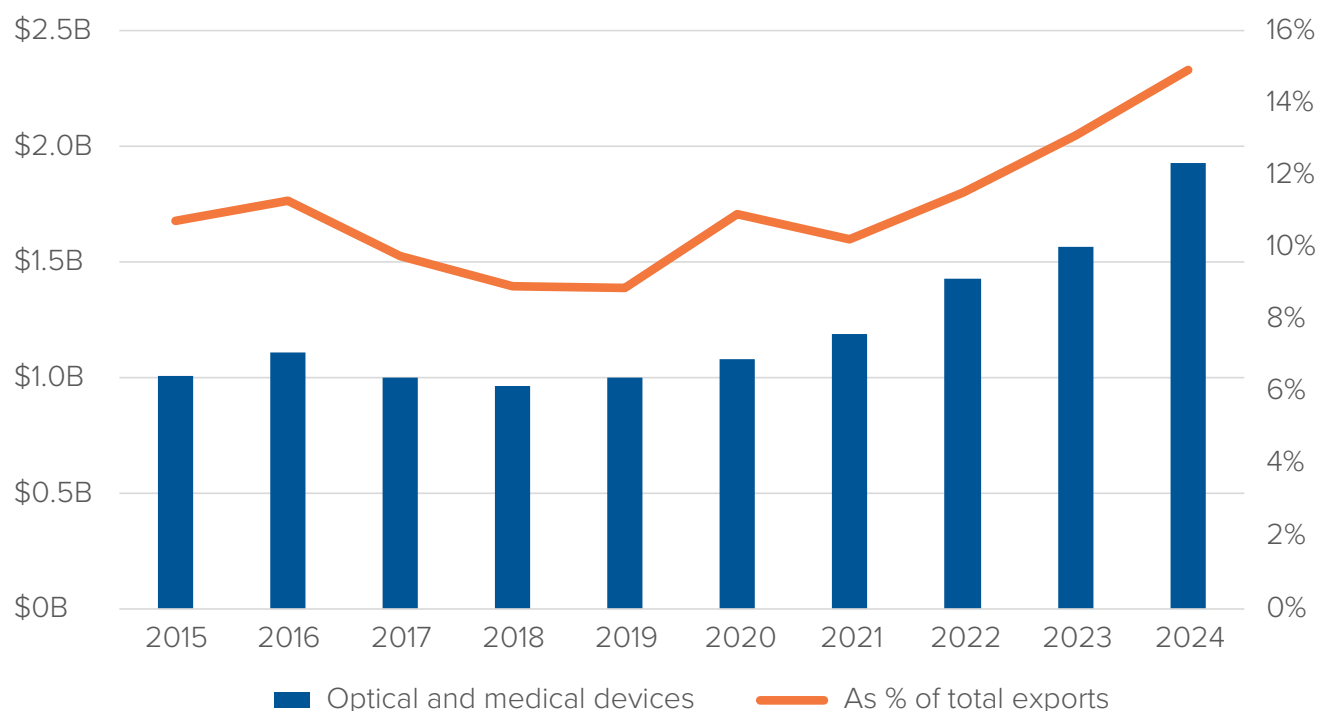
DR manufacturing has experienced a rapid evolution: Medical device production has moved from basic suture (16.6 percent of medical product exports in 2023) and intravenous kits (14 percent) into increasingly sophisticated ultrasound equipment and neurosurgical instruments (with complex or electronic medical devices at 23 percent of medical product exports).⁴ Today thirty-eight medical device companies operate in Dominican Free Zones, including six of the top fifteen leaders in the sector—namely, Medtronic, Fresenius Kabi, Becton Dickinson, Cardinal Health, Baxter, and B. Braun.⁵ Electrical and electronic manufacturing has also expanded from residential circuit breakers to passive electronic components and smartphones, although switches and circuit breakers still dominate electrical and electronic exports at 74 percent of the total.⁶

New sectors such as auto parts and aerospace and defense components are also emerging, with an electric vehicle (EV) system plant and an aerospace facility along with US defense suppliers operating in Santiago de los Caballeros.⁷ Meanwhile, legacy sectors like textiles continue expanding.⁸

While DR Free Zones can produce at scale in some niche sectors, such as circuit breakers and medical supplies, the Dominican Republic cannot compete with mass producers like Chi-

na, Mexico, or—for that matter—the United States. However, its key differentiator is its command of high-variety, low-volume production that requires flexibility, precision, and skilled manual labor. Some Dominican factories produce more than five thousand different individual components for US clients—a specialization that positions the Dominican Republic as particularly valuable for legacy components, end-of-life products, and customized manufacturing that cannot be automated, which is especially useful for some sensitive US supply chains.⁹

Critically, more than 60 percent of Free Zone inputs are imported from the United States (compared to 10 percent from China).¹⁰ Moreover, twin plant arrangements continue to this day, not only with Puerto Rico but with Southern US states including Mississippi and Alabama—making US industrial production more efficient while the US trade surplus with the Dominican Republic continues to grow. This integrated co-production strengthens US manufacturing competitiveness by enabling cost-effective scaling, while keeping high-value operations in the United States.

Figure 3: Total medical device exports (2015–2024)

Source: “Comercio Exterior,” Oficina Nacional de Estadísticas de la República Dominicana, last visited September 12, 2025, www.one.gob.do/datos-y-estadisticas/temas/estadisticas-economicas/comercio-exterior-y-balanza-de-pagos/comercio-exterior/.

Crisis resilience and strategic alignment

The COVID-19 pandemic validated this model’s strategic value. When global supply chains collapsed, DR operations pivoted rapidly to produce medical products for the US market, with DR medical and pharmaceutical exports to the United States ramping up by 43 percent between 2019 and 2022.¹¹ In 2024, the United States sourced roughly 5.5 percent of its medical and scientific instruments imports and 28 percent of its circuit breakers (less than 1,000 volts) from the Dominican Republic, which signals the latter as a potential supply chain diversification partner.¹²

More recently, the Dominican Republic has aligned its industrial strategy with two critical US national security sectors for which the Donald Trump administration has launched Section 232 investigations: semiconductors and pharmaceuticals.

- In semiconductors, the Dominican Republic seeks to position itself as an alternative to Asia for lower-value products and processes in which the United States faces dangerous dependencies.¹³ This includes discrete semiconductor fabrication (in which China holds majority global market share), semiconductor assembly testing and packaging (concentrated in Southeast Asia), and printed circuit board assembly, along with US collaboration on workforce upgrading.¹⁴

- In pharmaceuticals, the Dominican Republic already manufactures more than a dozen generic drugs classified by the United States as critical for national security, and it supplies one-quarter of the Central American and Caribbean market. Yet exports to the United States remain modest—less than \$300 million in 2024. Efforts are under way to align production with US regulatory standards, diversify active pharmaceutical ingredient (API) sourcing away from China, and assess opportunities for domestic API manufacturing.

The challenges

Despite this track record of integrated co-production with the United States, the Dominican Republic remains largely invisible in US industrial policy discussions. While mainstream narratives present onshoring and nearshoring as competing processes, the history of Caribbean twin plants can serve as a reminder that these processes can—and should—be complementarily embedded in regional co-production ecosystems to optimize cost-efficiency while maximizing value add on US soil.

The Dominican Republic’s own industrial development model compounds these challenges. The current 0-percent-tax Free Zone approach, while relatively successful, is at risk of falling into a low-value trap. The country still markets itself primarily on low costs rather than industrial engineering capabilities, resulting in a manufacturing footprint that remains shallow and

fragmented, with limited supplier networks and minimal ecosystem integration within and among Free Zones. The Dominican Republic also lacks a territorial industrial strategy to foster geographic clustering, which has been proven to increase manufacturing efficiency.¹⁵ Additionally, there is insufficient public support for research and development, with no clear national strategy to attract higher-value operations into the country beyond low-value, labor-intensive final assembly.¹⁶

Human capital bottlenecks further constrain upgrading potential, including a shortage of quality engineers and technicians, particularly those with two-year technical degrees that align with modern manufacturing requirements.¹⁷ This is compounded by a highly deficient K–12 system, which ranks last among thirteen Latin American countries surveyed in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) scores.¹⁸ Hence, ramping up export-oriented production will require deep and structural educational reforms, prioritizing associate degrees, technical education, short-term STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) certifications, and international partnerships to effectively and quickly ramp up the workforce to meet growing demand.¹⁹

The opportunity

These challenges point toward a transformative opportunity to evolve from the 1980s twin plant model to a twenty-first century twinshoring compact that aligns DR industrial policy with US national security priorities in strategic supply chains, and which could serve as a replicable model for the broader Dominican Republic-Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR) region.

Unlike traditional nearshoring, twinshoring would create deliberate complementarity—pairing high-value onshoring in the United States with strategic nearshoring of specific production steps in the Dominican Republic in a synergistic, integrated co-production framework. This approach could help US manufacturers respond to onshoring pressures while maintaining cost competitiveness, particularly in sectors in which security, proximity, and traceability matter most, addressing current limitations through coordinated policy action.

Strategic sectoral mapping for a twinshoring program

The Dominican Republic and the United States should implement a joint industrial mapping exercise to categorize sectors by strategic priority and development potential, taking into consideration the following criteria: **Mature sectors to expand:** medical devices, electrical equipment, agro-exports, and textiles.

- **Constrained sectors to unlock:** generic pharmaceuticals, hindered by regulatory barriers.
- **Early-stage sectors to foster:** aerospace, defense, automotive/EV, and electronics.

- **Strategic sectors to build:** semiconductors, batteries, and frontier defense technologies.

This framework, in turn, should outline where policy and technical gaps exist, and propose a joint twinshoring program to overcome them via targeted policy support—including workforce development, financing, regulation, and supplier growth—anchored in US national security priorities, DR development goals, and comparative advantages.

Supplier ecosystem development

To ensure true supply chain resiliency, the Dominican Republic should work with US anchor firms already present there to attract their Tier 1 and Tier 2 suppliers to co-locate or contract domestically—especially for parts, components, and subassemblies sourced from China and the Indo-Pacific. The Dominican Republic's investment attraction strategy should shift from attracting big brands for final assembly operations and toward targeting global industrial suppliers and contract manufacturers in key processes (such as metalforming, casting, and printed circuit board assembly). To this end, DR stakeholders should actively engage with US industrial associations such as the National Electrical Manufacturers' Association (NEMA), the American Medical Manufacturers Association (AMMA), the Semiconductor Industry Association (SIA), and Semiconductor Equipment and Materials International (SEMI).

Educational integration and workforce alignment

As part of a strategic twinshoring program, the Dominican Republic and the United States should launch a bilateral workforce development plan creating technical pipelines in US national security-relevant sectors. This would include credentialed programs in electronics, pharmaceuticals, and mechatronics, with certification standards recognized across both countries. Critical elements include engaging DR diaspora engineers, facilitating educational exchanges, and aligning DR technical education with US community college standards. The Dominican Republic should build active partnerships with US higher education institutions (such as building on its memorandum of understanding with Purdue) and analyze successful US case studies in ramping up K–12 STEM-oriented education (such as magnet and charter schools).

Trade and regulatory reform

The Dominican Republic and the United States should address structural disadvantages that limit twinshoring co-production potential.

- Advance bilateral negotiations to eliminate mutual tariff and non-tariff trade barriers and create more integrated trade ecosystems, including non-tariff barriers such as DR import licenses on agricultural product imports.
- Align DR standards with US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and Department of Defense (DoD) procurement criteria to unlock constrained or nascent

sectors such as generic pharmaceuticals and defense components.

- Update CAFTA-DR provisions, where necessary, to facilitate modern co-production models.

A regional supply chain coalition

The Dominican Republic has shown regional leadership via initiatives like the Alliance for Development in Democracy (ADD) with Costa Rica, Panama, and Ecuador. These efforts can be built upon and expanded through an explicit alignment with US industrial and national security goals.

- Assess how the proposed US-DR twinshoring program can grow into a new regional framework for US-Latin American supply chain integration.
- Consolidate a regional supply chain coalition with like-minded Latin American countries to support US economic security and resiliency in specific strategic sectors.

The strategic payoff

This twinshoring approach would offer compelling benefits for both countries.

- **For the United States:** securing strategic supply chains while generating upstream demand for US components and services; enhancing US export competitiveness through efficient twinshored co-production; reducing reliance on Chinese inputs; and preserving high-value production domestically while lowering costs through nearshore integration.
- **For the Dominican Republic:** transitioning from low-cost final assembly to higher-value, strategically relevant manufacturing; attracting long-term investment in future-facing sectors; embedding manufacturers within US-protected supply networks; and building specialized workforce capabilities for secure global value chains.

II. Strategic infrastructure and regional logistics: An underutilized regional hub with compelling positioning

Enhancing US logistics partners in the Caribbean

The Dominican Republic has built some of the Caribbean and Central America's most sophisticated maritime and air infrastructure while strategically resisting Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) financial offers to modernize key infrastructure, creating opportunities for enhanced US partnership in logistics, warehousing, and even emerging sectors like space infrastructure.

Competitive ports and airports

The Dominican Republic's logistics capabilities are anchored by two facilities, embedded in a network of nine international airports and sixteen ports, that position the country for expanded regional hub operations: the multimodal Caucedo Port and Punta Cana International Airport. The Dominican Re-

public's maritime connectivity advantages include three-day shipping to Miami and five-day transit to New York, compared to 3–6 weeks from Asian manufacturing hubs, enabling substantial inventory cost savings for regional distribution and warehousing operations.²⁰

Caucedo Port, operated by Dubai's DP World, can handle up to 2.5 million twenty-foot equivalent units (TEUs) annually. It ranks as the fifth-largest port in the Caribbean and among the ten largest in Latin America.²¹ Unlike other top Caribbean ports that focus primarily on transshipment, Caucedo combines 50-percent transshipment with 50-percent market access, serving both regional distribution and trade.²²

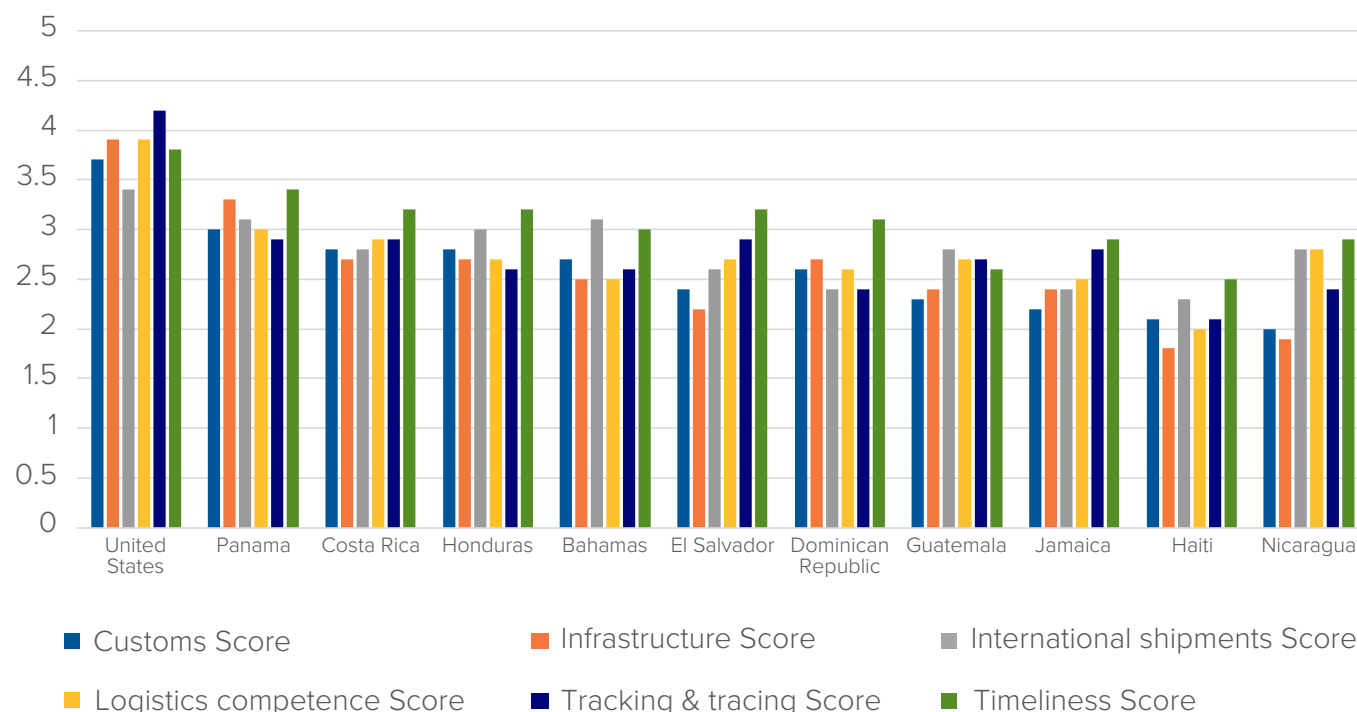
Meanwhile, Punta Cana International Airport complements the country's maritime capacity with a new \$200-million cargo hub. Processing 9.5 million passengers in 2024, the airport deploys its tourism infrastructure for air cargo operations, featuring 430-ton air cargo capacity and connections to more than ninety airports in twenty-six countries, developing into an integrated multimodal logistics hub.²³ As the second-largest private airport in the region after Cancun's, and the third-largest in the Caribbean and Central America overall, Punta Cana represents a successful private airport operation, affording the Dominican Republic strong potential for warehousing, logistics, and regional distribution.

Chinese infrastructure exclusion and strategic openings for the United States

On the north coast, the Port of Manzanillo represents the Dominican Republic's most significant untapped logistics asset. Strategically positioned closest to Florida along the DR-Haiti border, it can provide rapid US market access with savings of one day in maritime travel time compared to Santo Domingo's commercial ports. China had historically eyed Manzanillo in the context of the BRI, with Chinese officials viewing Manzanillo as a compelling location and an easy potential win for Chinese-funded infrastructure development in the Dominican Republic.²⁴

However, the Luis Abinader administration's 2020 decision to exclude China from DR transportation infrastructure kept Manzanillo outside Chinese influence. Today, an Inter-American Development Bank (IDB)-approved \$100-million modernization targeting 13 million tons and 1.5 million TEU capacity development via a public-private partnership (PPP) provides an alternative Western-aligned development pathway. While the northern region's current trade volumes might not justify a container mega-port, the Port of Manzanillo is embedded in a larger development plan that seeks to attract private capital into gas-to-power combined cycle facilities, agro-industry, and Free Zone manufacturing, all while remaining a potential dual-use strategic asset for Caribbean security.²⁵

The Dominican Republic is also exploring partnerships beyond traditional infrastructure. Having joined the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) Artemis Accords in 2024, the country is now examining innovative space infrastructure opportunities, including satellite launch facility development.

Figure 4: The Dominican Republic compared to regional peers in the World Bank's Logistics Performance Index (2023)

Source: "Logistics Performance Index," World Bank, 2023, <https://lpi.worldbank.org/international/global>.

This leverages the country's equatorial proximity advantages amid rapid expansion of commercial space operations and saturation of Cape Canaveral. In the context of growing Chinese presence in Latin America's space sector, this represents another potential piece of strategic infrastructure aligned with US regional interests.²⁶

Enhanced US-DR security cooperation

Security cooperation has also intensified dramatically in the last six years, with record drug seizures of more than 44 tons in 2024 representing a fivefold increase since 2019. The largest single seizure of 9.5 tons at Caucedo Port, valued at \$250 million, demonstrates the effectiveness of enhanced partnership with the US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) and underscores the strategic importance of port security cooperation. This has been facilitated by the Port of Caucedo's inclusion in the US Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) Container Security Initiative (CSI), which grants it a permanent US CBP presence in its facilities.²⁷

The challenges

And yet—despite port and airport infrastructure—internal bottlenecks, security vulnerabilities, and financing gaps prevent the Dominican Republic from realizing its full potential as a regional logistics hub.

Internal transportation bottlenecks

Greater Santo Domingo faces severe urban congestion, with 1.4 million vehicles during working hours across only 92 square kilometers, creating systematic bottlenecks and generating significant economic losses from traffic affecting cargo movement. The Dominican Republic also lacks freight rail infrastructure connecting ports and airports to inland markets, leaving trucking as the sole option for inland cargo transport. Road infrastructure quality falls below regional standards, with 78 percent of main Santo Domingo corridors considered unsafe due to inadequate maintenance and a nationwide road accident mortality rate of thirty-five deaths per one hundred thousand inhabitants—a rate twice the regional average and among the highest in the world.²⁸ This represents an economic impact equivalent of at least 2.2 percent of annual gross domestic product (GDP).²⁹ Given that most of the country's maritime traffic goes through Santo Domingo's ports, the capital's urban congestion directly hinders the country's logistical performance.

Declining investment and infrastructure financing gaps

Moreover, public infrastructure investment has declined from 1.5 percent to 0.7 percent of GDP over the past decade, far below the World Bank's recommended 3.12 percent.³⁰ PPP dysfunctions remain obstacles toward leveraging private capital for infrastructure upgrades—despite the movement of \$6 billion in domestic private capital investment per year.

Meanwhile, US financing constraints for upper-middle-income countries create competitive disadvantages, including higher commercial International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) interest rates, eligibility restrictions, and tied procurement requirements. This is compounded by a 1962 bilateral agreement requiring DR government approval for US government investments—including DFC projects.³¹ Additionally, despite having its only regional office in Santo Domingo (opened in October 2024), the DFC has not engaged in any infrastructure financing in the Dominican Republic and its local projects have only targeted financial institutions.

This has left regional multilateral development banks like the IDB and the Central American Bank for Economic Integration as the most significant sources of foreign public infrastructure financing. For instance, they committed more than \$550 million toward improving road circulation, maintenance, and connectivity between 2022 and 2024.³²

Transnational criminal organization infiltration

Transnational criminal organization (TCO) infiltration also threatens port and logistical security. As the flipside of its strong global connectivity, the Dominican Republic has become a critical transshipment hub in the global cocaine trade, with maritime trafficking routes from Venezuela delivering an estimated 115 tons annually, representing about 15 percent of global cocaine production. Weak institutions and corruption compromise logistical security at multiple levels; police, military officials, and airport security officials have been persecuted due to TCO infiltration. Given its global ties, DR infrastructure is eyed not only by Mexican, Venezuelan, and Colombian drug cartels, but also by European mafias including Italy's Ndrangheta and Albanian, Turkish, and Russian crime syndicates. Meanwhile, container security relies primarily on visual inspections, with screening machines capable of inspecting only fifty containers per hour. CSI certification covers only Caucedo Port, leaving Santo Domingo's second main Port of Haina without CSI certification, despite its handling a significant number of US-bound containers. Meanwhile, the Port of Haina's requests for inclusion in US CBP's Remote Targeting Program as an alternative to CSI have also not materialized.³³

Bilateral implementation barriers

Finally, implementation barriers persist despite strong bilateral relations. US CBP pre-clearance efforts at Punta Cana International Airport have remained stalled since 2017 due to unresolved technical and procedural disagreements that have persisted for eight years.

The opportunity

Realizing the Dominican Republic's logistics potential requires coordinated US investment to address internal constraints, while leveraging the country's strategic positioning and Chinese BRI resistance for enhanced regional partnerships.

Infrastructure modernization compact and financing innovation

The United States and the Dominican Republic should work together to address core transportation bottlenecks through coordinated financing, including

- leveraging the DFC's regional office presence in Santo Domingo with innovative financing mechanisms for upper-middle-income strategic partners that overcome current competitive disadvantages versus Chinese alternatives;
- supporting Manzanillo Port strategic development through US partnerships beyond the IDB-approved \$100-million modernization, positioning the port and its surroundings as an ambitious strategic nexus for LNG trade, power generation, Free Zone manufacturing, and agro-industries via deployments of US and DR private capital;
- expanding Manzanillo as a dual-use facility in collaboration with US Southern Command (SOUTHCOM), while maintaining Dominican sovereign control; and
- prioritizing multimodal freight rail development and congestion alleviation in greater Santo Domingo, while reforming the dysfunctional PPP framework to enable private capital mobilization for infrastructure upgrades that could help bridge financing gaps.

Enhanced security cooperation and trade facilitation

Both countries should expand their security cooperation to prevent the Dominican Republic's high global connectivity from turning from an asset into a liability, by

- expanding CSI certification to Haina Port—or, alternatively, integrating it in US CBP's Remote Targeting Program—and deploying advanced scanning technology beyond the current capacity of fifty containers per hour, to address transnational organized crime infiltration while facilitating legitimate trade;
- resolving the eight-year procedural barriers preventing Punta Cana International Airport's US CBP pre-clearance implementation; and
- intensifying coordination targeting the estimated 115–120 tons of cocaine transit through an enhanced DEA partnership, while addressing corruption vulnerabilities that have historically compromised port and airport security operations.

Regional disaster preparedness and strategic hub development

Both countries should jointly leverage the Dominican Republic's high connectivity to turn it into a strategic hub for US regional security priorities, not just a commercial hub. This could include

- establishing the Dominican Republic as a SOUTHCOM Western Hemisphere disaster response coordination center with prepositioned US emergency supplies, leveraging the country's nine international airports and thirteen ports as levers of redundancy; and
- ensuring collaboration between DR authorities, NASA, and private US space corporations like SpaceX or Blue Origin to take advantage of the Dominican Republic's equatorial proximity advantages for satellite launches, in alignment with NASA and US Space Force priorities.

A BRI exit strategy setting a regional precedent?

Despite being a signatory to China's BRI, the Dominican Republic has not benefited from any Chinese financing or infrastructure investment. This provides a window of opportunity for

- facilitating explicit Dominican withdrawal from the BRI in exchange for a comprehensive US infrastructure partnership mixing public and private capital, capitalizing on the complete failure of Chinese promises (such as a \$600-million China Export-Import Bank electricity loan that was never disbursed and a \$300-million biomass power plant that remains stalled); and
- via this strategic pivot, setting a powerful regional precedent for other Latin American and Caribbean countries to follow suit, all while positioning the Dominican Republic as a key Western Hemisphere logistics diversification partner for the United States and free from Chinese influence.

This would require in-depth, high-level bilateral discussions between Santo Domingo and Washington to assess what incentives and guarantees the DR government would need to publicly withdraw from BRI.

The strategic payoff

This comprehensive infrastructure and security strategy offers compelling advantages for both countries.

- **For the United States:** a secure, neighboring logistics diversification partner; enhanced SOUTHCOM disaster response capabilities for regional emergencies; a successful counter-narcotics partnership; a precedent for BRI withdrawal that other Latin American countries could follow; supply chain diversification through reliable Caribbean transshipment and warehousing; and strategic positioning in regional space infrastructure.
- **For the Dominican Republic:** infrastructure modernization addressing critical transportation bottlenecks; transformation into a Caribbean logistics and distribution hub leveraging port and airport facilities; elevation to strategic security partner status; positioning as a SOUTHCOM top regional partner and disaster preparedness center; development of innovative space in-

frastructure opportunities; and economic benefits from serving as a logistics diversification alternative for US regional supply chains.

III. Digital infrastructure and cybersecurity

Advancing US security interests in digital networks

As the United States confronts increasing digital threats from a range of actors and Chinese technological inroads across Latin America and the Caribbean, securing reliable partners for regional cybersecurity coordination and resilient digital infrastructure has become a strategic imperative. With its robust digital infrastructure, central geographic location, and direct and secure links to US government networks, the Dominican Republic is positioned to serve as the Caribbean's hub for secure digital connectivity and cybersecurity coordination.

With 88.6-percent internet penetration reaching 10.2 million users and 97.6-percent mobile coverage through fourth-generation (4G) long-term evolution (LTE) networks, the Dominican Republic outperforms Caribbean averages while maintaining comprehensive connectivity through submarine cables (AR-COS-1, ANTILLAS I, and Fibralink), satellite integration including significant SpaceX presence for regional satellite services, and extensive last-mile coverage.³⁴

The Dominican Republic's NAP del Caribe operates as the only network access point in the Caribbean and Central America. It features 99.99-percent service-level agreement (SLA) guarantees and more than 800 kilometers of fiber-optic infrastructure, and connects at least fourteen local and international telecommunications providers to global networks.³⁵ This hub-versus-spoke model gives the Dominican Republic unique leverage. While other Central American and Caribbean countries depend on direct connections to Miami or Mexico for regional traffic, NAP del Caribe functions as a regional hub that routes Caribbean communications locally, capturing economic value and providing redundancy.

NAP del Caribe demonstrates secure infrastructure capabilities through security operations centers monitoring DR government, banking, and critical sectors using US technology (Dark Trace, Agate), with existing direct connections to US network access points serving federal government facilities in Florida and Washington, DC. NAP del Caribe's ability to provide redundant secure networks is evidenced by secure US embassy connections operating independently from general telecommunications infrastructure.

Cybersecurity capabilities with regional reach

This infrastructure foundation supports cybersecurity leadership through the Santo Domingo-based Latin American and Caribbean Cyber Competence Centre (LAC4), the region's only international cybersecurity organization, with state-of-the-art training facilities. This European Union (EU)-funded project includes fourteen partners, with Latin American government

participants including Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Uruguay. Additionally, the Dominican Republic ranks thirty-third globally on the National Cyber Security Index (71.67) and first in Latin America (tied with Brazil), with a score comparable to those of Switzerland and the United Kingdom.³⁶ Meanwhile, the Dominican Republic's Computer Security Incident Response Team (CSIRT-RD) provides regional coordination for more than two hundred incident response centers across Latin America and the Caribbean.

The challenges

Despite these digital infrastructure advancements, the Dominican Republic faces significant obstacles rooted in geopolitical pressures, economic constraints, and institutional coordination gaps that limit a more thorough and decisive strategic alignment with US security objectives.

Chinese hardware integration

Despite initially joining the US Clean Network Initiative in October 2020 and publicly committing to exclude “high-risk” fifth-generation (5G) suppliers such as Huawei, the Abinader administration reversed course following China's March 2021 delivery of vaccine doses during the COVID-19 pandemic. This reversal extended beyond 5G networks to encompass broader telecommunications infrastructure, with the Dominican Republic's 2021 5G spectrum auctions explicitly permitting Chinese suppliers to participate. By September 2021, the DR government had abandoned Huawei exclusion policies entirely, establishing a timeline for national 5G coverage extending through 2027 with mixed-vendor approaches that include Chinese suppliers alongside existing 4G infrastructure where Huawei already maintains significant presence.³⁷

The US government warns that this approach produces security vulnerabilities, especially given that China's National Intelligence Law legally compels Chinese companies—including Huawei—to assist state intelligence gathering regardless of usage patterns, creating potential for espionage through network access, data collection from government, and possible service disruption during geopolitical tensions. This concern is not specific to the Dominican Republic, given that Huawei currently supports approximately 70 percent of 4G-LTE connections across Latin America.

High technological transition costs and the lack of US alternatives

Huawei's expansion in Latin America—and the Dominican Republic—is not just a reflection of Chinese economic leverage, but also of the absence of competitively priced US-approved alternatives. Western telecommunications alternatives such as Ericsson, Nokia, and Samsung typically cost 15–30 percent more than Chinese equipment, which often comes together with Chinese state-backed infrastructure financing.³⁸ To complicate matters further, if the Dominican Republic were to transition away from Chinese hardware, previous international experiences suggest it would face substantial economic barriers and service disruptions. The United Kingdom's 5G transition

experience reveals the scale of these challenges: £2 billion in total removal costs, with individual operators facing £200–500 million expenditures and 2–3 year delays that left London with Europe's worst 5G performance post-transition.³⁹ Costa Rica's complete Chinese technology prohibition has created legal conflicts over spectrum auctions and infrastructure gaps that demonstrate the real costs of immediate US compliance without adequate financial and technical support.⁴⁰

DR institutional fragmentation and stalled legislation

Furthermore, the Dominican Republic's institutional fragmentation undermines coordinated digital policy implementation and creates critical uncertainty for potential strategic partners, particularly cloud service providers and major technology companies seeking regional partnerships. Multiple government agencies—including Dominican Institute of Telecommunications (INDOTEL), the Government Office for Information Technology and Telecommunications (OGTIC), the Digital Transformation Cabinet, and the National Intelligence Directorate (DNI)—compete for digital policy leadership without clear coordination mechanisms or empowered decision-making authority, while the government has not appointed a single interlocutor with the power to make binding decisions on digital infrastructure partnerships. This leaves external companies without a clear point of contact for major investment decisions.

The Dominican Republic's regulatory framework also suffers from significant modernization gaps, relying on outdated foundations including Law 53-07 (2007) for cybercrime and Law 172-13 (2013) for data protection. Most critically, it lacks comprehensive data sovereignty legislation, a key requirement for attracting cloud service providers who need clear policies defining where government and regulated sector data must be stored. Implementation of the National Cybersecurity Strategy 2030 has stalled despite its alignment with international frameworks like the US National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) Cybersecurity Framework, with missing elements including structured implementation tiers, formal cybersecurity profiles, and systematic maturity assessment processes. These gaps between strategic objectives and operational reality complicate long-term partnership planning with US agencies and technology companies.

Human capital and innovation ecosystem limitations

Finally, human capital and innovation ecosystem limitations constrain the Dominican Republic's ability to fully leverage its infrastructural advantages for regional digital leadership. Despite growing numbers of STEM graduates, the country still faces significant workforce development challenges, as the OECD identifies major deficiencies in the education sector at all levels.⁴¹ With the notable exception of NAP del Caribe, the digital services sector remains primarily focused on business process outsourcing for foreign companies rather than developing sophisticated domestic capabilities, with limited digital services exports. This gap between high-quality infrastructure and limited human capital hampers the country's ability to scale up to competitively serve regional digital markets.

The opportunity

The Dominican Republic is well-positioned to become a digital hub in Central America and the Caribbean through strategic realignment with US technology partnerships. Despite the 2021 policy reversal that allowed Chinese technology integration, the Dominican Republic retains considerable digital infrastructure assets—including the Caribbean and Central America’s only major network access point and proven cybersecurity capabilities—that create an opportunity for renewed US partnership. With proper financing and phased implementation, the Dominican Republic can transition from Chinese technology dependence while establishing itself as a regional cybersecurity coordination center and cloud services hub, serving both US strategic interests and Dominican development goals.

Strategic clean network re-engagement with transition planning

Return to Clean Network Initiative principles through a realistic, well-financed approach that avoids the disruptions experienced by other countries. This would include

- a phased transition plan with clear milestones to gradually replace Chinese telecommunications equipment with Western alternatives;
- a US-DR digital infrastructure fund supported by DFC and other development finance institutions to cover the 15–30-percent cost premium of non-Chinese equipment; and
- appointed bilateral leadership to coordinate between US agencies and Dominican institutions (INDOTEL, OG-TIC, DNI) and make binding decisions.

Regional cybersecurity hub development

Leverage existing Dominican cybersecurity capabilities to establish a comprehensive regional cybersecurity center serving Central American and Caribbean allies. Key elements include

- expanded Security Operations Centers using existing US technology partnerships (Dark Trace, Agate) through NAP del Caribe to monitor threats across the region;
- regional training and coordination building on the Dominican Republic’s role hosting the LAC4 cybersecurity center and its annual regional cybersecurity events;
- direct secure connectivity utilizing NAP del Caribe’s existing direct connections to US government facilities in Florida and Washington, DC, to serve as a secure regional hub; and
- enhanced SOUTHCOM partnership positioning the Dominican Republic as the primary cybersecurity coordination point for US military cooperation in the Caribbean.

Technology governance alignment and legislative framework

Support Dominican passage of pending cybersecurity legislation with US technical assistance to ensure international standards compatibility. Priority areas include

- accelerating the Dominican Republic’s legislative approval of the three cybersecurity bills currently in Congress (cybercrime law update, cybersecurity management law, and personal data protection law) with US technical support;
- a data sovereignty framework establishing clear government policies on where sensitive data must be stored—a critical requirement for attracting major cloud providers;
- government technology standards defining explicit policies for e-government systems, which is particularly important given extensive US-Dominican information sharing on security matters (DEA, transnational organized crime, the Haitian crisis); and
- institutional coordination reform creating clear leadership and decision-making authority among the multiple agencies involved in DR digital policy.

Data region partnership initiative

Establish formal partnerships with major US cloud providers to make the Dominican Republic the Caribbean and Central America’s first cloud services hub. This could include

- direct provider partnerships opening formal conversations with cloud companies to understand their specific requirements for establishing a data region in the Caribbean and Central America;
- an infrastructure assessment and development plan building on existing certifications and connectivity to meet cloud provider technical requirements; and
- comprehensive capability building addressing energy infrastructure, technical certifications, human capital development, and any needed infrastructure expansion under a bilateral cooperation framework.

The strategic payoff

This comprehensive digital infrastructure partnership delivers substantial strategic advantages for both countries.

- **For the United States:** a secure, strategically located digital hub in the Caribbean; enhanced regional cybersecurity coordination reducing threats to US interests; significant reduction in Chinese technology penetration across Central America and the Caribbean; strengthened intelligence sharing and regional security cooperation through secure connectivity; and establishment of US-aligned cloud services infrastructure serving regional markets.

- **For the Dominican Republic:** transformation into a Caribbean digital hub generating substantial revenue and investment flows; access to cutting-edge Western technology and cybersecurity training; enhanced protection against cyber threats through partnership with US agencies; economic diversification into high-value digital services; and regional digital leadership positioning attracting international technology companies and data centers.

IV. Energy security and critical minerals: Strategic resources and institutional constraints

Strategic assets in the US neighborhood

The Dominican Republic possesses strategic resources that could support US security, including critical minerals underground and renewable energy potential above ground.

The Dominican Republic's mining potential: From gold to rare earths

The Dominican Republic is among the Caribbean's most mineral-rich nations, with gold dominating its mining sector. Pueblo Viejo—jointly operated by Barrick (60 percent) and Newmont (40 percent)—is the largest gold mine in Latin America and ranks among the top five globally in terms of production.⁴² During the COVID-19 crisis, gold from Pueblo Viejo became the Dominican Republic's top export, rising 22 percent to \$1.69

billion in 2020.⁴³ The country also has significant deposits of silver, copper, ferronickel, and bauxite. In 2022, Falconbridge announced a \$200-million plan to produce battery-grade nickel salts to supply the EV market.⁴⁴

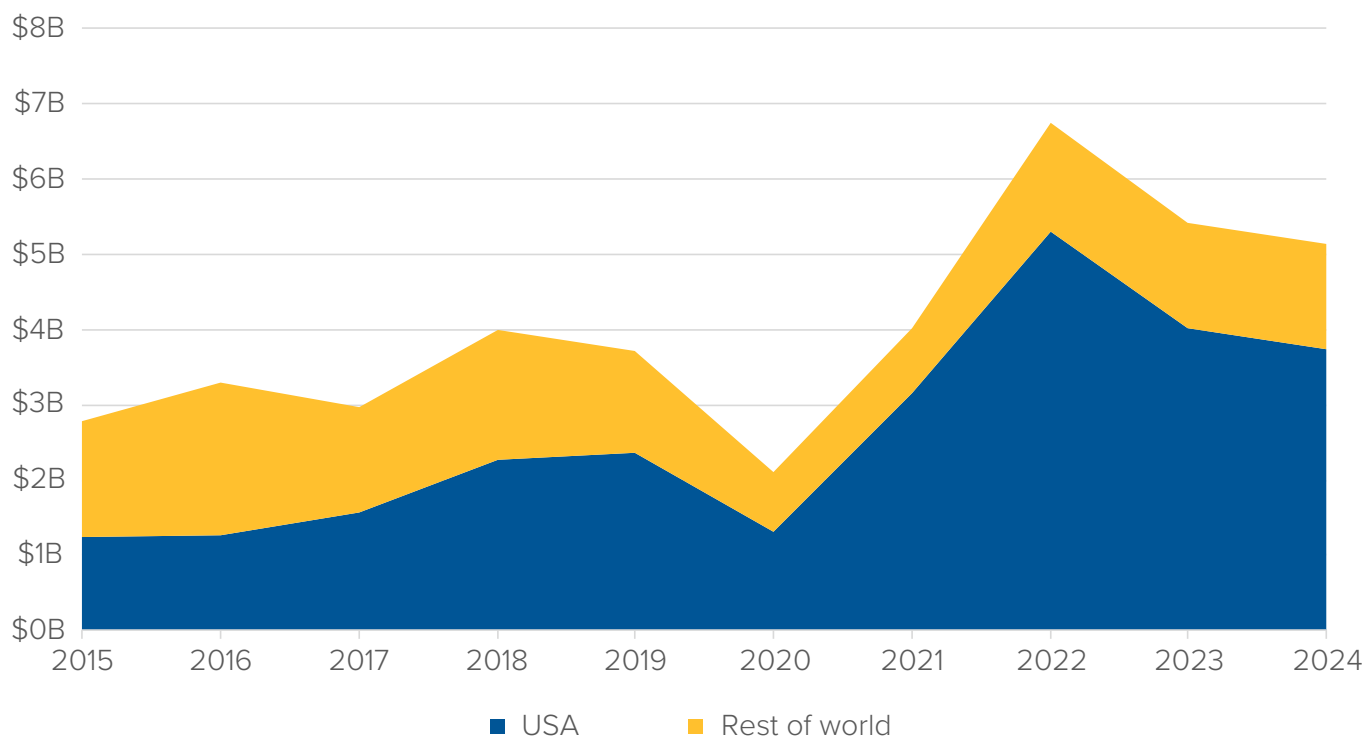
Most notably, rare earth elements (REEs) discovered in Pedernales are under joint exploration by the US Army Corps of Engineers and the Dominican Ministry of Energy and Mining. Early surveys by the University of Barcelona suggest the presence of the full spectrum of REEs essential for defense, clean energy, and microtechnology. If these supplies are confirmed, the Dominican Republic could offer the United States a new diversification partner vis-à-vis Chinese critical minerals.⁴⁵

DR-US energy potential: LNG, renewables, and grid integration

The Dominican Republic is also emerging as a US energy partner through oil and LNG imports, a rapid expansion of renewables, and advancing regional grid integration. Without proven oil and gas reserves—despite some offshore potential—the Dominican Republic historically depended on imported fuel from Venezuela. Over the past five years, however, it has pivoted decisively toward the United States. Nearly all oil imports now come from US suppliers, and LNG is replacing coal in the country's energy mix.⁴⁶

In September 2024, the Dominican Republic was the third-largest LNG importer in Latin America, importing 8.90 billion cu-

Figure 5: DR fuel imports by country of origin (billion USD)



Source: Dirección General de Aduanas, Dominican Republic.
Note: Fuel includes all hydrocarbon imports, including natural gas.

bic feet (Bcf)—behind only Brazil and Colombia—mostly from the United States.⁴⁷ Major gas-fired power projects are under way near the strategic Port of Manzanillo, including three new plants totaling more than 1.2 gigawatts (GW) in combined capacity. These developments are strengthening US-DR energy alignment, especially as contracts are increasingly indexed to US Henry Hub prices.⁴⁸

Renewables have also become a pillar of energy security, with solar and wind offering abundant domestic supply. From 17 percent in 2021, renewables rose to 23.3 percent of installed capacity by the end of 2024 (1.4 GW), with a target of 30 percent by 2030.⁴⁹ This has been driven by a boom in renewable energy investment, which tripled from \$138 million in 2019 to \$402 million in 2023.⁵⁰

Looking ahead, a proposed undersea electricity cable to Puerto Rico—now nearing completion of US permitting—would deliver more reliable, cost-effective power to the US territory while creating new revenue for Dominican generators. Since the 2017 grid collapse caused by Hurricane Maria, Puerto Rico has faced chronic energy insecurity. The cable project could help stabilize the island's energy supply while strengthening US-DR energy interdependence.⁵¹

The challenges

Despite these opportunities, both the mining and energy sectors face institutional bottlenecks that severely limit their strategic value to the United States.

Mining sector paralysis

The Dominican Republic's mining sector reflects a paradox, with vast geological potential constrained by political inertia. Pueblo Viejo, one of the world's largest gold mines, is also among the most underutilized—and a flashpoint for environmental protest.⁵²

Facing environmentalist backlash, no new large-scale gold exploitation licenses have been granted in more than a decade. Projects such as Unigold's Candelones have remained stalled at the presidential level for more than two years.⁵³ Amid this paralysis, gold exports have declined by 33 percent—from \$1.69 billion in 2020 to \$1.13 billion in 2023—which is significant because gold prices rose significantly during that period. Meanwhile, Falconbridge's proposed EV-grade nickel project remains frozen.⁵⁴ Moreover, a new mining bill mandates impact studies before concessions, but critics warn it raises upfront costs without guaranteeing access—freezing investment as political caution overrides strategic goals.⁵⁵

This paralysis also reflects deeper structural trends. Over the past decade, US engagement in Latin American mining has been limited. Most gold extracted in the region is exported to Switzerland, Dubai, or China—not the United States. And the dominant firms operating in the Americas are Canadian, Australian, or Chinese—not US. Yet, as BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) nations eye gold-backed currencies, US alignment with gold-rich democracies is becoming core to geoeconomic strategy.⁵⁶

Energy distribution dysfunction

Despite gains in generation and renewables, the Dominican Republic's electricity sector remains hobbled by distribution dysfunction. In 2023, technical and commercial losses reached 39.2 percent—among the world's highest—compared to a global average of just 8 percent. These inefficiencies drive up costs, erode service reliability, and constrain the country's economic competitiveness.⁵⁷

Distribution companies, which are mostly state owned, operate with persistent deficits. In 2023, they required more than \$1.2 billion in government support—a tremendous fiscal burden amounting to 8.8 percent of the budget.⁵⁸ Service remains unreliable; average consumers endured more than two hundred hours of blackouts in 2022, compared to fewer than ten in Costa Rica.⁵⁹ As a result, more than 70 percent of DR businesses rely on private generators, spending an estimated \$500 million annually on backup systems. This redundancy imposes significant costs on firms and deters investment in energy-intensive sectors.

Equally damaging is the legacy of failed public-private partnerships. Distribution privatization efforts in the early 2000s collapsed due to poor contracts and political interference, leading to renationalization by 2003. Since then, investor skepticism has discouraged new private capital in distribution—leaving the system both fiscally unsustainable and structurally fragile. Without reform to improve efficiency, attract capital, and rebuild trust, energy distribution will remain a drag on growth—regardless of how much generation expands.

The opportunity

The convergence of DR resource potential, US strategic needs, and Chinese dominance in critical minerals creates an opportunity for a comprehensive partnership.

Critical minerals partnership

A US-Dominican critical minerals partnership should be structured around several core elements, including

- conducting joint assessments of regulatory barriers and comprehensive resource mapping to clarify which DR reserves align with US strategic priorities, which do not, and what policy steps would be required to unlock stalled projects;
- establishing long-term offtake agreements for REEs, high-purity nickel, and other strategic reserves—including gold—from DR mines to US firms in defense, renewable energy, and EV sectors;
- enabling US equity participation in strategic mining projects through DFC and Export-Import Bank (EXIM) financing, with embedded environmental and labor safeguards that address local community concerns while maintaining international competitiveness;
- direct coordination with the Department of Defense—particularly the Office of Industrial Base Policy (IBP) and

the Office of Strategic Capital (OSC)—to ensure that defense-sensitive resources such as rare earths are integrated into US supply chain security planning and benefit from innovative US financing mechanisms;

- fostering collaboration on mining law reform that balances environmental protection with investment attractiveness in line with US standards; and
- if the Dominican Republic's rare earth reserves justify it, enabling the development of refining and processing capabilities in the Dominican Republic—potentially making it one of the Western Hemisphere's first rare earth processing centers outside Chinese control.

Energy integration and grid modernization

Energy cooperation should focus on immediate opportunities that link DR energy sector reform to broader US regional security interests. This could include

- accelerating the completion of the DR-Puerto Rico undersea cable project while developing grid integration initiatives that position the Dominican Republic as a reliable electricity supplier to the struggling US territory;
- expanding US-Dominican LNG cooperation through long-term purchase agreements and strategic terminals positioned to serve regional distribution, including but not limited to Manzanillo;
- addressing the fundamental constraint on DR energy development through comprehensive distribution reform tied to measurable performance improvements, using results-based financing that ties US support to specific improvements in collection rates, service reliability, and system efficiency; and
- leveraging the Dominican Republic's abundant solar and wind potential through partnerships that prioritize US equipment suppliers and engineering firms over Chinese alternatives.

The strategic payoff

This dual energy-minerals strategy offers compelling advantages for both countries.

- **For the United States:** a secure, neighboring source of critical minerals essential for defense and renewable energy; reliable electricity supply options for Puerto Rico; expanded LNG export markets; reduced reliance on Chinese-controlled mineral supply chains; and a model for resource partnerships with other Latin American allies.
- **For the Dominican Republic:** monetization of mineral wealth through guaranteed US market access and equity partnerships; modern, efficient electricity service that supports economic and industrial development; revenue from electricity exports; energy independence from hostile regional suppliers; and a new positioning as a hemispheric hub for strategic resource development.

V. Homeland and regional security

From ambivalence to strategic convergence

In recent years, the Dominican Republic has undergone a quiet but consequential security transformation that goes in the direction of allying with US economic security interests in the region. The approach to homeland and regional security challenges was once viewed in Washington with ambivalence—relatively stable, but still associated with narcotics flows, irregular migration, contraband, corruption, and spillover from Haiti—the country has repositioned itself in the Greater Caribbean, opening the way for a broader US–DR strategic partnership in homeland and regional security.

Rule of law improvements supporting US homeland security

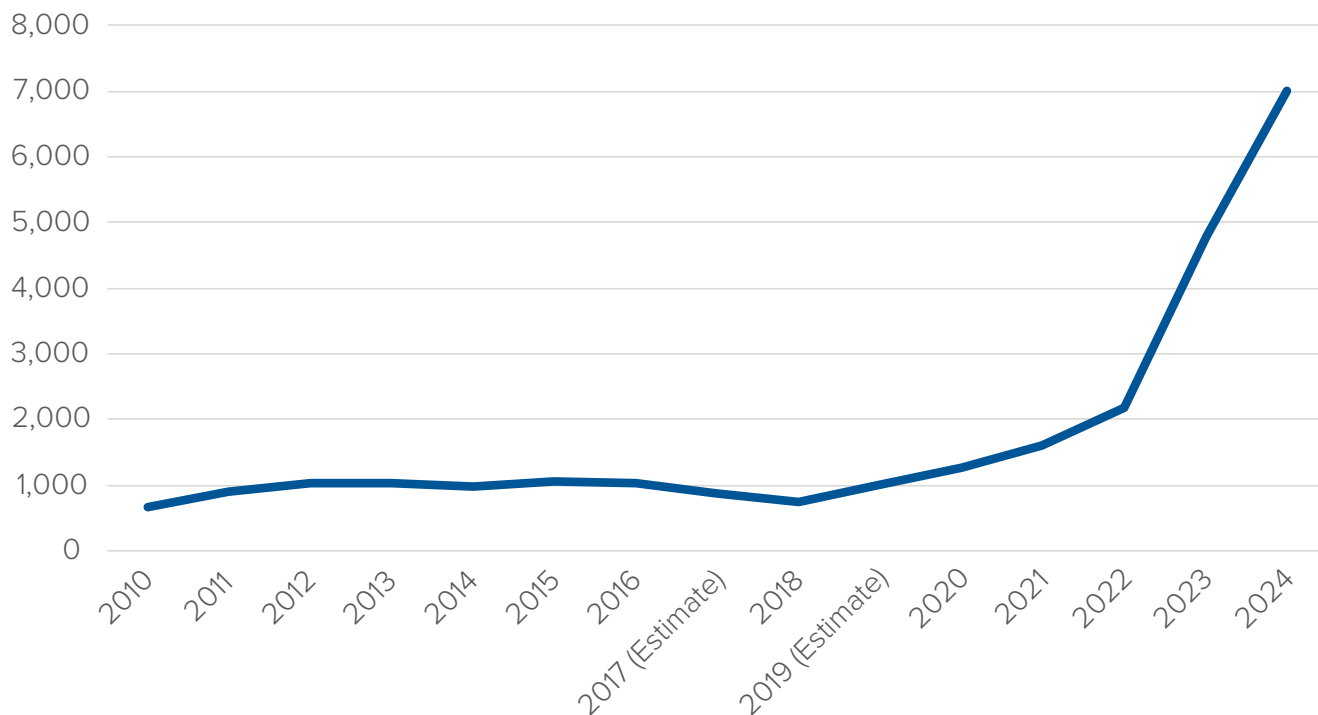
The Dominican Republic has also made notable institutional gains. On Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), it improved thirty-three spots from 137th place in 2020 to 104th in 2024, one of the biggest improvements of any country in the ranking.⁶⁰ In April 2024, the US Trade Representative (USTR) removed the country from its Special 301 Watch List for the first time in nearly three decades, citing coordinated reforms through the Interministerial Council on Intellectual Property (CIPI), the seizure of more than 4 million counterfeit medicines, and the appointment of specialized prosecutors.⁶¹

Strengthened institutions have translated into more effective law enforcement. Between 2019 and 2024, DR authorities seized more than 220 tons of narcotics, compared to less than 10 tons annually in the years prior.⁶² In 2024 alone, they confiscated 44–47 tons, including the largest single cocaine seizure in Caribbean history (9.5 tons). In fact, the Dominican Republic ranked first in cocaine interdictions in the CAFTA-DR region in 2024 at 37.7 tons.⁶³ Violence has also fallen. The homicide rate dropped to 9.6 per 100,000 in 2025, the lowest in the Caribbean and among the lowest in Latin America—and below regional peers such as Costa Rica, Panama, and Puerto Rico.⁶⁴

Moreover, Dominican migration to the United States—once a major flow from the 1970s to the 1990s—has largely been stemmed. Unlike Central America, Haiti, Cuba, or Venezuela, the Dominican Republic today generates minimal irregular migration toward US shores, a reflection of improved stability and security. The Dominican diaspora in the United States overwhelmingly resides with legal status, with more than half naturalized as US citizens and the vast majority obtaining status through family reunification rather than irregular entry.⁶⁵ Hence, in 2024, the Dominican Republic became the sixteenth country admitted to the United States' Global Entry program.⁶⁶

A more assertive regional posture aligned with US interests

Institutional gains at home have been matched by a more assertive posture abroad, as the Dominican Republic has aligned more closely with US priorities across the Greater Caribbean—tightening border and maritime controls, strengthening law-enforcement cooperation, and confronting hostile networks that

Figure 6: DR cocaine interdictions, 2018–2024 (ton equivalents)

Source: dataUNODC and InSight Crime.⁸³

threaten regional stability. For example, the Dominican Republic has been one of the principal beneficiaries of the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative (CBSI) since its launch in 2010, receiving US-funded training, interdiction assets, and support to expand the national 911 emergency system to 90 percent of the population—laying a foundation for a deeper bilateral security compact.⁶⁷

On the island of Hispaniola, the country has expanded its border wall with Haiti, reinforced patrols by the Specialized Corps for Border Land Security (CESFRONT), and imposed harsher penalties on human traffickers and arms smugglers.⁶⁸ These measures have been paired with US Coast Guard patrols in the Mona Passage—the maritime border between the DR and the US—which has long been a corridor for drug trafficking and illegal migration toward Puerto Rico.⁶⁹ And since the modernization of the US-DR Extradition Treaty in 2015, Dominican authorities have collaborated closely in extraditing fugitives to the United States.⁷⁰

The country has also moved against transnational criminal organizations. In 2025, the Dominican Republic and the United States jointly designated Haitian gangs such as *Viv Ansanm* and *Gran Grif* as terrorist organizations, elevating counter-gang enforcement to a national security priority.⁷¹ In September 2025, Santo Domingo also declared Venezuela's *Cartel de los Soles* a terrorist organization, coordinating with Washington against narco-terrorist networks tied to Nicolás Maduro's regime.⁷² This stance builds on the Santo Domingo

Joint Declaration on Venezuela, issued at Abinader's 2024 inauguration, which explicitly singled out the Maduro regime as a threat to hemispheric democracy.⁷³ Since then, Dominican authorities have actively enforced US sanctions, including the seizure of Venezuelan aircraft and assets linked to Maduro and *Petróleos de Venezuela*.⁷⁴ Together, these steps open the way for expanded intelligence sharing, targeted anti-trafficking operations, and the application of counterterrorism and sanctions tools within a more assertive legal framework.

The challenges

Despite recent gains, the Dominican Republic's emergence as a regional security anchor remains fragile. The country faces mounting pressures from three directions: , Haiti's intense migration inflows and reputational backlash, persistent corruption amid organized crime, and the growing sophistication of hybrid threats linked to authoritarian regimes.

Migration pressures and human rights backlash

Haiti's economic and democratic collapse has left the Dominican Republic hosting an estimated seven hundred thousand Haitians, most without legal status—straining schools, hospitals, and labor markets.⁷⁵ In 2024 alone, authorities carried out more than 276,000 deportations, easing domestic pressures but drawing international criticism, with groups such as Amnesty International warning that lawful residents and vulnerable populations were sometimes swept up.⁷⁶ The DR

government insists it cannot bear Haiti's burden alone, yet the reputational costs risk eroding its global standing.

These pressures extend beyond Haiti. The Dominican Republic also hosts more than 114,000 Venezuelans and has served as a transit corridor for Cubans, Haitians, and others attempting to reach Puerto Rico across the Mona Passage, where the US Coast Guard has interdicted thousands.⁷⁷ Together, these dynamics make the Dominican Republic both the Caribbean's largest host country for migrants and a critical choke point for migration routes into the United States.

Persistent corruption amid organized crime pressures

Despite recent gains, corruption continues to permeate government institutions, as reflected in the Dominican Republic's 2024 CPI ranking of 104th out of 180 countries.⁷⁸ Organized crime has adapted to tougher counternarcotics enforcement by probing new smuggling routes and seeking to infiltrate ports and logistics hubs.⁷⁹ The deeper vulnerability, however, is political. Today's reform drive is rooted largely in the Abinader administration's prioritization of these issues—its response to massive anti-corruption protests in 2017–2019—rather than in fully institutionalized change.⁸⁰ Unless these gains are locked in through stronger oversight bodies, an independent judiciary, and durable professional standards, future political cycles could undo years of progress—leaving the state once again exposed to criminal capture and jeopardizing its emerging role as a regional security anchor.

Hybrid threats and geopolitical retaliation

Closer alignment with US security priorities enhances the Dominican Republic's value as a partner but also exposes it to retaliation. Neighboring authoritarian regimes and extra-hemispheric actors now have incentives to apply pressure through hybrid means: cyberattacks, disinformation, covert political operations, weaponized migration, organized crime proxies, and other destabilization tools. These threats are growing in sophistication and scope, blurring the line between criminal and geopolitical risk. Therefore, sustaining the Dominican Republic's role as a regional security anchor will require not only political will at home, but also close US coordination to prevent these threats from materializing and robust bilateral support to withstand them if they do.

The opportunity

A new DR-US security partnership

- Elevate the relationship into a structured, long-term security compact that institutionalizes strategic coordination across counternarcotics, counterterrorism, migration management, cybersecurity, hybrid threats, and regional stability.
- Build on the CBSI foundation but create a dedicated bilateral track reflecting Santo Domingo's role as Washington's partner in the Caribbean.

- Establish standing joint mechanisms for planning, intelligence sharing, and crisis response, with measurable targets in maritime interdiction, port security, cyber resilience, and sanctions enforcement.
- Create an intelligence and threat fusion center that integrates maritime and air sensors, financial intelligence, and sanctioned entity data to protect critical nodes, such as airports, the energy grid, and telecommunications backbones.
- Ensure continuity beyond political cycles through multi-year memoranda of understanding with metrics and funding pathways, direct interagency links, and institutional training pipelines that ensure the partnership endures regardless of electoral cycles.

Institutionalized anti-corruption and rule of law

- Embed reforms in law and institutions, not personalities, making bodies like the CIPI statutory, and giving permanence to special anti-corruption prosecutors and task forces that have driven recent gains.
- Ensure continuity across administrations, supporting DR judicial independence, case digitalization, and oversight mechanisms that are harder to reverse after elections.
- Strengthen bilateral legal frameworks, complementing the 2015 extradition treaty with a Mutual Legal Assistance Treaty (MLAT) to streamline evidence sharing, asset recovery, and joint prosecutions.
- Align US support with institutional resilience, with technical and financial assistance aiming less at one-off operations and more at building the professional corps and checks that will keep the Dominican Republic aligned with US security interests over time.

The strategic payoff

A proactive, coordinated approach to Haiti offers high-return security and geopolitical dividends for both countries.

For the United States: an anchor partner in the Greater Caribbean; strengthened coordination against narcotics and transnational crime; reduced risk of maritime migration emergencies; greater resilience against cyber and hybrid threats, and a democratic ally in confronting authoritarian regimes.

For the Dominican Republic: reinforced national security through sustained US cooperation; protection against spillovers from Haiti's collapse and other regional shocks; insulation of anti-corruption gains from political cycles; and recognition as an important stakeholder in hemispheric security.

VI. Institutional alignment and bilateral mechanisms

The United States and the Dominican Republic stand at a rare moment of strategic convergence. From the need for regional stabilization and security to nearshoring, clean energy, and critical minerals, the two countries increasingly share priorities, assessments, and policy outlooks. What's missing is not alignment; it's institutional frameworks. The opportunity now is to convert shared purpose into lasting frameworks.

The challenge

At a moment of growing strategic alignment between the Dominican Republic and the United States, the two countries remain hampered by a shallow institutional relationship. There is no permanent architecture to manage the bilateral agenda, no structured mechanism to survive political transitions, and no coordinated strategy to unlock the full value of this alignment. The fact that the Dominican Republic has only had a US ambassador for three of the past eight years (2018–2020) compounds this administrative and institutional inertia.

The absence of permanent bilateral mechanisms has allowed issues—such as Haiti's collapse, manufacturing reconfiguration, and mineral partnerships—to be managed through ad hoc, decentralized, or inconstant channels. The bilateral relationship therefore suffers from reactivity on both sides. Outdated narratives also persist, including that the Dominican Republic is a tourism economy, a minor trade partner, or a peripheral regional player. There is little institutional incentive in Washington to grapple with the Dominican Republic as a strategic actor—its rising manufacturing capabilities, its proactive security posture, or its role in regional stabilization. Consequently, there have been a number of missed opportunities for strategic cooperation.

Diaspora engagement

Perhaps the most significant strategic blind spot is the absence of a coherent diaspora engagement strategy. More than 2 million people of Dominican descent now reside in the United States—roughly equivalent to 18 percent of the Dominican Republic's current population—with rising political power in key districts and growing interest in long-term re-engagement. The vast majority—more than 90 percent—reside lawfully in the United States and represent a durable, upwardly mobile constituency with strong cultural ties and economic potential. Yet the Dominican Republic continues to frame the diaspora through narrow lenses of remittances and participation in DR elections as overseas voters.

The emotional and financial capital of the diaspora remains largely untapped. Worse, it is increasingly at risk. Diaspora leaders contacted for this study reveal deepening alienation, especially among third- and fourth-generation Dominican Americans. Many no longer speak Spanish fluently, feel disconnected from DR institutions, and find their attempts to re-engage—through investment, philanthropy, or professional collaboration—frustrated by bureaucracy, distrust, or lack of

recognition. There is demand for serious institutional vehicles: transparent investment platforms, dual-degree and credential recognition, youth leadership exchanges, and meaningful ways to contribute beyond real estate or elections. But the scaffolding to support this engagement is still lacking. If current trends continue, the Dominican Republic risks losing a powerful long-term asset: a US-based constituency with capital, voice, and a stake in the country's future.⁸¹

Narrow engagement

The DR private sector remains underrepresented in the bilateral relationship. Aside from the annual *Semana Dominicana*, there is no permanent business presence in Washington. Efforts to establish a DR-US Business Council have previously failed due to fragmentation, competition, and a lack of sustained strategic focus. In practice, DR firms and associations often operate in silos—each hiring their own consultants, pursuing narrow interests, and competing for visibility in uncoordinated ways. This not only limits impact but dilutes the country's broader message at a time when trade, industrial policy, and nearshoring are rising on the US agenda.

At the US congressional level, engagement has largely remained confined to diaspora-heavy districts in New York, New Jersey, Florida, and Massachusetts. While these constituencies are vital, they do not substitute for systematic relationships with key committees, caucuses, and leadership figures shaping policy on trade, foreign affairs, and development finance. Nor has there been sufficient outreach to sub-federal actors—state governments, university systems, and development agencies—that could become natural partners in energy, education, or workforce development.

The opportunity

The upcoming Summit of the Americas, in December 2025, provides an exceptional platform. The summit can catalyze institutional innovation, elevate bilateral cooperation to a new tier, and draw sustained US attention to DR priorities beyond crisis moments. This moment also coincides with growing momentum inside the DR private sector to establish a permanent, unified presence in Washington—one capable of shaping policy, attracting investment, and reinforcing bilateral trust.

The diaspora itself represents perhaps the most compelling and underleveraged asset. With an estimated \$6–7 billion in investment capital, the diaspora is no longer just a source of remittances. It is a strategic constituency with rising influence, intergenerational resources, and a desire for institutionalized re-engagement: from annual youth programs and degree recognition to credible investment platforms and career mobility pathways.⁸²

In parallel, state-level opportunities are expanding. Governors, universities, and economic development agencies in states such as New York, New Jersey, Florida, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island are natural allies in building energy, manufacturing, and educational cooperation grounded in diaspora and demographic ties.

In addition, DR culture remains one of the country's greatest assets in the United States—a well of goodwill that extends from baseball fields and music festivals to shared neighborhoods and family ties. While often confined to tourism or nostalgia, this soft power can be mobilized more deliberately to build coalitions, shift perceptions, and frame the Dominican Republic not as a peripheral actor but as a partner in an evolving hemisphere.

The US-DR relationship is entering a phase of unprecedented strategic alignment. But without the institutional frameworks to anchor cooperation, even the most promising agendas risk fragmentation, drift, or erosion.

These recommendations aim to construct a permanent bilateral scaffolding—one that transcends electoral cycles, integrates the diaspora, and gives shape to the shared ambitions now emerging across sectors.

Establish a permanent US-DR High-Level Economic and Security Dialogue

- Launch a structured high-level dialogue between the US and DR governments with annual ministerial meetings and working sessions.
- Organize the dialogue into thematic workstreams aligned with the six pillars of this report—covering twinshoring, trade, logistics, cyber, energy, critical minerals, regional security, the crisis in Haiti, the diaspora, and institutional modernization.
- Ensure the mechanism includes robust follow-up capacity, professional staffing, and flexibility to engage private-sector and diaspora stakeholders in a formalized way.

Create a new formal US-DR Security Partnership

- The Dominican Republic could propose ramping up intelligence cooperation to crack down on Haitian gang activity and on transnational organized crime, all while expanding collaboration on DoD supply chains and defense production (including manufacturing and rare earths), counter-narcotics (with DEA and CBP), cybersecurity (via NAP del Caribe), and regional disaster preparedness (with SOUTHCOM).

Align institutional mechanisms with the Summit of the Americas

- Use the DR hosting of the Summit of the Americas as a launchpad for these mechanisms, engaging the US private sector in concrete investment partnerships.
- Coordinate closely with US agencies to align summit deliverables with the institutional goals above—ensuring the summit generates durable outcomes, not just symbolic visibility.

Formalize state-level strategic partnerships

- Develop formal cooperation agreements between the Dominican Republic and US states with large Dominican populations focused on trade, education, cultural exchange, and economic development.
- Encourage joint initiatives such as sister-city programs, dual-degree university partnerships, bilateral trade missions, and DR participation in state economic development forums.

Relaunch a DR-US business council with a permanent presence in Washington

- Establish a permanent DR business representation in Washington, incorporating DR firms, US companies operating in the Dominican Republic, and binational chambers.
- Focus the council on trade modernization (e.g., CFTA-DR), industrial policy, and investment promotion, while avoiding duplication and fragmentation across sectors.
- Foster a new style of DR private-sector engagement with US counterparts showing that the Dominican Republic is open for business as a joint venture and co-investment partner, and as a recipient of US private capital.

Launch a comprehensive diaspora engagement program

- Map DR diaspora talent across US leadership sectors to inform public diplomacy, recruitment, and development strategies.
- Create diaspora investment funds with transparent governance, liquidity guarantees, and US-compliant structures.
- Organize bilingual homecoming programs for young Dominican Americans (especially of second, third, and fourth generations).
- Establish mutual recognition frameworks for degrees and professional credentials to support career mobility.
- Convene annual diaspora investor conferences and fund diaspora-led innovation, education, and public service initiatives.

Leverage cultural soft power as a strategic asset

- Develop a Dominican Soft Power Initiative that mobilizes athletes, artists, and influencers as goodwill ambassadors to expand awareness of DR economic, cultural, and diplomatic priorities.
- Partner with Major League Baseball franchises, cultural institutions, and diaspora-led organizations to amplify credible and compelling narratives beyond traditional channels.

The strategic payoff

This institutional modernization agenda provides both countries with lasting strategic dividends.

For the United States: a structured, resilient partnership with a stable and aligned Caribbean ally; enhanced visibility into DR policy priorities; stronger engagement channels with diaspora communities; and a model for integrating economic, security, and diplomatic tools across levels of government and society.

For the Dominican Republic: sustained US attention beyond electoral cycles; a more comprehensive and structured presence in Washington; new platforms for diaspora capital, talent, and advocacy; greater influence in US trade and foreign policy debates; and a deeper foundation for projecting national priorities with coherence and continuity.

The road ahead

The United States and the Dominican Republic face a timely opportunity to build a more strategic, balanced, and results-driven partnership. As the United States seeks to reduce extraregional dependencies, strengthen regional supply chains, and respond to growing geopolitical competition, there are tangible ways for it to partner with the Dominican Republic—particularly in sectors where proximity, security, and reliability are paramount.

This report has outlined a pragmatic agenda across six pillars—supply chain integration, infrastructure and logistics, digital infrastructure, energy and critical minerals, and regional security—highlighting both the opportunities and constraints that define the current state of engagement. Unlocking the full potential of this relationship will require a shift from ad hoc cooperation to coordinated action grounded in mutual interest.

Moving forward, we distinguish four immediate priorities for the next phase in the bilateral relationship.

- Anchor the agenda in a permanent bilateral framework that can survive political cycles and sustain progress across the six pillars.

- Launch targeted, high-visibility initiatives in strategic sectors such as medical devices, semiconductors, logistical infrastructure, cybersecurity, and critical minerals to demonstrate early, measurable wins.
- Mobilize the private sector and diaspora as strategic partners, creating channels for investment, innovation, and workforce development aligned with joint US and DR priorities.
- Integrate regional security considerations into economic cooperation, recognizing the Dominican Republic's interest in a secure, stable neighbor and its role as a stakeholder in international strategies to address the impact of Haiti's crisis.

The path ahead is not without challenges. But with deliberate, sustained cooperation, both countries can move beyond transactional engagement toward a stable, strategic compact that strengthens resilience, promotes shared prosperity, and offers a replicable model for regional cooperation in the Western Hemisphere.

Methodology

The report is the result of one year of work by members of the DR-US Economic Strategy Advisory Group and its rapporteurs. The identification of pillars, the analysis, and the recommendations are the result of more than fifty individual consultations with experts across sectors and industries—from business leaders and academics to former diplomats and multilateral representatives. Members further discussed each pillar in four private working sessions that occurred throughout the year.

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