While Venezuela sinks as the oil market bottoms out, infrastructure crumbles, food shortages abound, the murder rate soars and civil unrest simmers, Ecuador is quietly rising to lead the charge against U.S. interests in Latin America. It's no secret that Nicolas Maduro, the track suit-wearing, former bus driver and Hugo Chavez protégé is failing to fill El Comandante's shoes since he died of cancer in 2013. Complicating his grip on Caracas, according to Citi Research, Venezuela needs oil at least $151 a barrel to balance their budget. Unless oil prices dramatically rebound, his regime won't last much longer. Meanwhile, as rumors swirl around the Internet that Fidel Castro has died, in reality, ever since 1962 when the Soviets pulled out its nukes to end the Cuban Missile Crisis, his power was mostly ideological in nature, without the economic or military clout to back it up. The same cannot be said for Venezuela and now Ecuador, which are both members of OPEC. So with Latin American autocrats reeling under today's oil market, Maduro and Ecuador's Rafael Correa headlined a delegation to Beijing this month for the First Forum of China and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC). Correa lavished his hosts with praise, noting the forum and deeper ties with China could help fix an "unfair world order." Quito then got the best deal, securing $7 billion in cash and lines of credit, while Caracas and others received less tangible pledges for investment projects. Correa's favorable treatment by the Chinese isn't the only way he's surpassing Maduro as Latin America's anti-U.S. pack leader. So what else is he doing at Uncle Sam's expense? First, he's putting his money where his mouth is. Though Latin American populists regularly bash Washington – including Correa, who has compared "American Exceptionalism" to "Nazi's rhetoric before and during World War II" – last year his government spent $6.4 million on a public relations contract with New York-based McSquared. Even getting past the fact that McSquared didn't register under the Foreign Agent Registration Act (FARA) until caught by the Justice Department, perhaps more importantly, where's all that money going? One chunk went to actress Mia Farrow and another to actor Danny Glover, totaling over $500,000 in exchange for their visits to Ecuador and support of re-opening decades-long litigation against American oil giant Chevron. Former Congressman Bill Delahunt (D-MA) is now Correa's top new lobbyist. When Chavez was alive, left-wing celebrities like Sean Penn, Oliver Stone, Harry Belafonte, Glover and more visited Caracas. These days, Quito is where the cool kids hang out. Second, Ecuador is aiding America's enemies like Iran. While Iran has stealthily increased its influence in several Latin American nations, Ecuador's key role is assisting Tehran skirt international sanctions over its nuclear program. Ecuador tops the Paris-based inter-governmental Financial Action Task Force (FATF) annual global list for money laundering — along with Iran. In 2013 Tehran's Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi said that "relations between Iran and Ecuador are at their highest level ever." So will Correa help Vladimir Putin skirt international sanctions as well? Third, Correa has methodically cut ties with Washington. In 2009, he shuttered the U.S. Air Force Forward

Operating Location at Manta — despite its counter-narcotics operations are responsible for 60 percent of drug seizures in the Eastern Pacific. Correa then expelled all Defense Department and U.S. Agency for International Development staff from the American Embassy. Even though Correa benefited from his PhD in Economics from the University of Illinois, he now resents "U.S. imperialism." And while Correa is an economist, his multi-year deficits and record levels of debt have hurt Ecuador's economy, now unsustainable, given falling oil prices. China's generosity may just provide enough breathing room for Correa to continue spearheading anti-U.S. efforts. So the next time Correa and his lobbyists bash American influence, it may be worth digging a little deeper under the surface to get the real story. And while Chavez is dead, the Castro brothers at or near their end, it's Correa who is the natural successor as the top anti-Yankee antagonist.