



## Chapter 5

# Russia and Latin America: Flexible, Pragmatic, and Close

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### ***Introduction: Why is the Bear in Latin America?***

Unlike other U.S. competitors, Russia has a long history of engagement with Latin America. Russia first opened an embassy in Brazil in 1828 and in Mexico in 1890, just sixty-five years after the U.S. sent its first envoy to that country. Throughout the Cold War, the U.S. remained concerned that the USSR would gain ground in Latin America leading to U.S. policy responses ranging from President Kennedy's Alliance for Progress to the invasion of Grenada under President Reagan.

Following the end of the Cold War, Russia largely withdrew from the western hemisphere. In the early 1990s, the Russian Federation established diplomatic relations with most countries in Latin America. At the time, Russian foreign policy was weak and trending towards realignment with Washington.<sup>1</sup> Boris Yeltsin, for example, did not visit any Latin American countries in his eight years as president, but he did visit the U.S. four times.

Under the leadership of Vladimir Putin, Russia has shown a desire to build on that long history to strengthen relations with Latin American and Caribbean states. After a decade of underinvestment in the region, Russia reemerged recently in Latin America. The twin goals of the reengagement are first, to boost its credentials as a global power, and second, to maintain a presence close to the U.S. to counter the American presence close to Russia. The National Security Concept of the Russian Federation is clear in stating that “upholding its sovereignty and strengthening its position as a Great Power and as one of the influential centers of a multipolar world” is a chief national interest of Russia,<sup>2</sup> which is consistent with its first goal in Latin America. The same document makes ample references to protection of Russia's border space mentioning “possible appearance of foreign military bases and large troop contingents in direct proximity to Russia's borders,” as a main threat to national security. This concern about border areas maps cleanly on to Russia's second goal in Latin America: countering U.S. presence in Ukraine.

The country's Foreign Policy Concept states Russia's intentions to “consolidate ties with its Latin American partners by working within international and regional forums, expanding cooperation with multilateral associations and Latin American and Caribbean integration structures,” mentioning the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States, MERCOSUR,

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<sup>1</sup> Nikolai Dobronravin and Victor Jeifetz, “Beyond the BRICS: Russian-Brazilian Relations since the collapse of the USSR,” *Pensamiento Propio*, no. 49-50 (2019): 199-228, <http://www.cries.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/013-Jeifetz.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, *National Security Concept of the Russian Federation*, last modified January 10, 2000, (Moscow: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2000), [https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/official\\_documents/-/asset\\_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/589768](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/589768).

and UNASUR specifically.<sup>3</sup> In addition to these, Russia is an active participant in BRICS, an organization where Brazil is also a member. In 2015, Putin visited Latin America to participate in the BRICS summit in Fortaleza, Brazil. As part of that trip, Putin also visited Argentina, Cuba, and Nicaragua.<sup>4</sup>

The centerpiece of Putin's six-day trip was his participation in the July 15-17 BRICS summit in Fortaleza, Brazil, but the president also made a special effort to warm up relations with Argentina, Cuba, and Nicaragua, the three countries he visited on his way to the summit. Putin's participation in BRICS often highlighted the importance of the organization for the Russian Federation's goal of projecting a global power identity. At the 2014 summit, Putin remarked that contacts with other South American nations "helped increase the prestige" of the organization.<sup>5</sup> A few years later, Putin used the forum to ask for the support of the other member countries in Russia's bid to host EXPO 2025 in Yekaterinburg.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to its activities to bolster its Great Power credentials, Russia engages with Latin America to counter U.S. presence close to its own borders. Though this goal is not as overtly stated as Russia's Great Power ambitions, there is ample evidence that at least Latin American countries have stood with Russia when it has been in perceived confrontation with the United States. Unlike other extra-hemispheric actors involved in the region, Russia appears non-ideological and pragmatic in its dealings with Latin American countries. This practical approach has been effective: not a single Latin American country adopted sanctions against Russia in response to the annexation of Crimea in 2014, even though all of Europe and some Asian countries did. For its part, the U.S. certainly perceives Russian activities in the region as a challenge to its long-standing hegemony in Latin America. Then-Commander of U.S. Southern Command Admiral Kurt Tidd articulated this clearly in 2016 when he conveyed to Congress that "Russian officials' rhetoric, high-level political visits, and military-security engagements are designed to displace the U.S. as the partner of choice in the region."<sup>7</sup> The preceding Commander, Admiral Kelly, had also expressed concern that Russia was "using power projection in an attempt to erode U.S. leadership and challenge U.S. influence in the Western Hemisphere."<sup>8</sup> Mentions of Russia as a challenger to the U.S. occur almost exclusively after the Crimea crisis. Prior to that, Russia was mentioned only as a purveyor of arms.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, *Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation*, last modified December 1, 2016, (Moscow: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016), [https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/official\\_documents/-/asset\\_publisher/CptICk6BZ29/content/id/2542248](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptICk6BZ29/content/id/2542248).

<sup>4</sup> Diana Villiers Negroponce, "What's Putin's Game in the Western Hemisphere?" *Americas Quarterly*, February 3, 2015, <https://www.americasquarterly.org/fulltextarticle/whats-putins-game-in-the-western-hemisphere/>.

<sup>5</sup> Vladimir Putin, "Speech at BRICS Summit plenary session," July 15, 2014, Presidential Executive Office, transcript, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/46229>.

<sup>6</sup> Vladimir Putin, "Remarks at an expanded BRICS Summit meeting," July 26, 2018, Presidential Executive Office, transcript, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/58105>.

<sup>7</sup> Admiral Kurt W. Tidd, "Posture Statement of Admiral Kurt W. Tidd, Commander, United States Southern Command," before the 114th Congress, Senate Armed Services Committee (March 10, 2016), [https://www.southcom.mil/Portals/7/Documents/Posture%20Statements/SOUTHCOM\\_POSTURE\\_STATEMENT\\_FINAL\\_2016.pdf?ver=2017-01-04-094258-267](https://www.southcom.mil/Portals/7/Documents/Posture%20Statements/SOUTHCOM_POSTURE_STATEMENT_FINAL_2016.pdf?ver=2017-01-04-094258-267).

<sup>8</sup> General John F. Kelly, "Posture Statement of General John F. Kelly, Commander, United States Southern Command," before the 114th Congress, Senate Armed Services Committee (March 12, 2015), [https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Kelly\\_03-12-15.pdf](https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Kelly_03-12-15.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> General Douglas M. Fraser, "Posture Statement of General Douglas M. Fraser, Southern Command," before the 112th Congress, Senate Armed Services Committee (March 6, 2012), <https://www.airforcemag.com/PDF/testimony/Documents/2012/March%202012/031312fraser.pdf>.

## ***Russia is Reaching for its Goals***

Russia has a long history of arms sales to the region. In addition to this role, in Latin America, Russia pursues its goals through a combination of active participation in shared governance issues, gray zone tactics, and economic participation in the energy sector.

Russia has a long record of using arms sales as a tool to achieve its goals in Latin America. Arms sales from the Soviet Union to Latin America occurred only to Cuba, Nicaragua, and Grenada, countries that were denied access to Western materiel.<sup>10</sup> Peru also purchased arms from the USSR because at the time the country had charted a policy of non-alignment that resulted in U.S. refusal to sell arms to Peru, though other Western nations continued to offer armament.<sup>11</sup> Since the fall of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation has expanded arms sales to the region. In addition to the four countries mentioned above, Russia has sold arms to Mexico and Brazil (both since 1994), Venezuela (since 1996), Colombia and Ecuador (both since 1997), and Uruguay (since 2006).

Despite the growth in markets for Russian arms, sales remain highly concentrated. In the past twenty years Russia has sold \$5.3 billion U.S. dollars' worth of arms to Latin America. Of these, \$3.9 billion (72 percent) were to Venezuela. Venezuela's realignment to Russia was in part a consequence of the 2006 U.S. ban on arms exports to the South American country after democracy deteriorated there.<sup>12</sup> Russia's arms sales to the region and to Venezuela especially help to advance its goals of countering U.S. presence close to its own borders. The U.S. attempted to curb Russian arms sales to its partners through the Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) passed in 2017 as a response to the crisis in Ukraine. Yet, in spite of this legislation, as recently as 2020 Russia announced plans to sell eight Sikorsky MH-60R Seahawk helicopters to Mexico. Upon learning of this, the U.S. threatened sanctions under CAATSA. "Have we made our position clear to our Mexican friends?" asked a Congressman when announcing the potential actions.<sup>13</sup>

Russia is at a natural disadvantage as pertains to regional organizations in Latin America, as it's excluded by definition and its closest historic partner, Cuba, is at best sidelined from participation. In addition, power differentials between Russia and most countries in the region preclude Russia from participating as a peer in other institutions with Latin American members.

Nonetheless, Russia has pursued an aggressive agenda for engaging in multilateral fora that include Latin American nations. Less than two years after the breakup of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation became a permanent observer of the Organization of American States, the premier political forum of the region. As part of this role, the Russian Federation appoints a permanent ambassador to the organization in Washington, DC. As a permanent observer, Russia can attend OAS meetings but cannot vote in proceedings.

To counter perceived U.S. influence in the OAS, a group of twelve left-leaning Latin American governments created the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) through a treaty signed in 2008. Though Russia was again not able to fully participate in the organization

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<sup>10</sup> Nicola Miller, *Soviet Relations with Latin America, 1959-1987* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 21.

<sup>11</sup> Rubén Berrios and Cole Blasier, "Peru and the Soviet Union (1969-1989): distant partners," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 23, no. 2 (1991): 365-384.

<sup>12</sup> "U.S. Bars Future Arms Sales to Venezuela," Arms Control Association, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2006-06/us-bars-future-arms-sales-venezuela>; Diana Negroponte; "Russo-Latin American Arms Sales." *Americas Quarterly*; New York Vol. 9, Iss. 1, (Winter 2015): 73.

<sup>13</sup> "The US could sanction Mexico if it buys helicopters from Russia, US official says," *Business Insider*, February 17, 2020, <https://www.businessinsider.com/us-could-sanction-mexico-if-it-buys-russian-helicopters-2020-2?r=UK>.

because of its status as an extra-regional state, Russian officials did attend at least some meetings of the organization.<sup>14</sup> In recent years a number of countries have suspended their participation in UNASUR after changes in government brought about a shift from the left-leaning positions that dominated Latin America in the early 2000's. With the decline of UNASUR, the status of OAS as the premier organization in the region is cemented. Interestingly Russia is not a member of the regional development institution, the Inter-American Development Bank, though China, Korea, and sixteen European nations are.<sup>15</sup>

Russia also engages with countries in the Americas in larger international institutions though in these the combination of distance and differences in power and size preclude meaningful collaboration. In the United Nations, for example, Brazil has been seeking a reform that would allow it a permanent seat in the Security Council. Russia, a permanent Security Council member itself, has not endorsed the Brazilian proposal. Russia did, however, support Brazil's bid to serve a term in the Council in 2004. In the International Monetary Fund, Russia has 2.59 percent of the vote. Its executive director also casts the votes of the Syrian Arab Republic but not of any Latin American countries, which are mostly represented by the Brazilian and Spanish executive directors.<sup>16</sup> Russia also participates in the World Bank but declined to participate in the capital increase proposed in 2018, which will erode its voting share.

In the whole region, only Brazil and Mexico are near-peers to Russia in economic size; indeed Brazil's \$1.9 trillion GDP eclipses Russia's \$1.7 trillion, whereas Mexico's \$1.2 trillion economy is smaller than these two but still much closer to Russia's size than Russia is to the U.S. or China. Indeed, Brazil and Russia are both members of BRICS. Although BRIC began as an eye-catching acronym coined by a banker to describe these emerging markets, Russia capitalized on the grouping to start an international organization. Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, the president of Brazil, was invited to the first summit in Yekaterinburg along with leaders of the two other countries. The loose grouping of countries has since evolved into an institution that holds regular meetings and seeks to collaborate on issues mostly relating to the economy and energy. BRICS has also given Russia leverage in other international organizations. In 2011, for example, all BRICS countries occupied a seat in the UN Security Council. At the time, the UNSC was debating resolution 1973, which invoked the doctrine of Responsibility to Protect (R2P) to justify military intervention in Libya. Russia did not support the measure, citing a fear that military intervention was becoming a feature of U.S. foreign policy. Putin added that "[the decision to intervene in Libya] confirmed our decisions on strengthening Russia's defense capabilities were correct."<sup>17</sup> Ultimately, Russia abstained from voting on UNSC Resolution 1973 and so did Brazil, China and India. The BRICS came to be united in their opposition to the intervention in Libya in what was perhaps the first major challenge to unipolarity up to that time.<sup>18</sup>

Russia has routinely engaged in operations in the gray zone to advance its goal of establishing itself as a Great Power. While most of these operations are aimed at Russia's immediate surroundings, Latin America has also seen the use of gray zone tactics, and

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<sup>14</sup> "Russian diplomat to sit in on South American summit," *Russkiy Mir Foundation Information Service*, December 5, 2014, <https://ruskiymir.ru/en/news/158390/>.

<sup>15</sup> "Países miembros no prestatarios," Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo, 2020, <https://www.iadb.org/es/acerca-del-bid/paises-miembros-no-prestatarios>.

<sup>16</sup> "IMF Members' Quotas and Voting Power, and IMF Board of Governors," International Monetary Fund, accessed December 8, 2020, <https://www.imf.org/external/np/sec/memdir/members.aspx>.

<sup>17</sup> Gleb Bryanski, "Putin likens U.N. resolution to crusades," *Reuters*, March 21, 2011, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-russia/putin-likens-u-n-libya-resolution-to-crusades-idUSTRE72K3JR20110321>.

<sup>18</sup> Oliver Stuenkel, *The BRICS and the Future of Global Order* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2015).



information operations specifically, to advance its goals in the region. Three clear examples illustrate Russia's use of these tactics in the region: interference in the Mexican presidential election of 2018, the Colombian peace process, and in support of the Maduro regime in Venezuela. In Latin America, Russia faces challenges when attempting to deploy these tactics. First, while English is the third most widely spoken language in the region (after Spanish and Portuguese), there are barely any Russian speakers. Indeed, more people speak Ukrainian in South America than speak Russian.<sup>19</sup> Second, despite high degrees of urbanization, internet penetration rates in the region are lower than in Russia's near-abroad and other parts of the world. About seventy percent of people living in Latin America have access to internet, compared to close to ninety percent in Europe. Seeking to overcome the language and cultural barriers, Russia has embarked on a massive social media campaign such that Spanish is second only to Russian as the largest campaign by volume.<sup>20</sup>

Mexico's 2018 presidential election pitted Andrés Manuel López Obrador (known as "AMLO"), a left-leaning candidate, against Ricardo Anaya, the candidate of the center-right PAN party. In the presidential race, Russia favored AMLO while John Kelly, then U.S. Secretary of Homeland Security, expressed his view that an AMLO victory "would not be good for America or for Mexico."<sup>21</sup> In the run-up to the election, bots and trolls circulated disinformation on social media, including the rumor that Mexican citizens would have to reregister to vote in the elections. In addition, RT, which is available in Mexico, provided extensive coverage to AMLO's English language spokesman.<sup>22</sup>

In Colombia, Russia has engaged through arms sales to its insurgent group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC).<sup>23</sup> In addition to using this tool, Russia has recently also turned to gray zone tactics in pursuit of its goals. The peace process in Colombia made this tool obsolete in the new context; however, the divisive nature of the peace process afforded it opportunities to exert leverage. Russia did so by supporting the FARC's political ambitions, providing favorable coverage of FARC candidates in RT and Sputnik, and providing support to remaining subversive groups.<sup>24</sup>

Mexico and Colombia are cases in which Russia has sought to exert influence in the domestic political life of a committed U.S. partner. In addition to this, Russia has also pursued similar tactics in Venezuela, the only other autocracy besides Cuba and decidedly not a U.S. ally. In Venezuela, Russia has engaged in information operations in support of the idea that the U.S. government is actively working to overthrow Nicolás Maduro.<sup>25</sup> Russia also sent military

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<sup>19</sup> Dylan Lyons, "The 10 Most Spoken Languages in South America," *Babbel Magazine*, February 6, 2019, <https://www.babbel.com/en/magazine/languages-in-south-america>; "Internet Usage in Asia," Internet World Stats, accessed 8 December 2020, <https://www.internetworldstats.com/stats3.htm>.

<sup>20</sup> "2020 Posture Statement to Congress," U.S. Southern Command, March 11, 2020, video, <https://www.southcom.mil/Media/Special-Coverage/SOUTHCOMs-2020-Posture-Statement-to-Congress/>.

<sup>21</sup> "Mexico urges respect from U.S. for 2018 presidential election," *Reuters*, April 6, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-mexico-election/mexico-urges-respect-from-u-s-for-2018-presidential-election-idUSKBN1782O1>.

<sup>22</sup> Frida Ghitis, "A Mexican presidential candidate is getting an unexpected boost from Trump – and Putin," *Washington Post*, January 11, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/democracy-post/wp/2018/01/11/a-mexican-presidential-candidate-is-getting-an-unexpected-boost-from-trump-and-putin/>.

<sup>23</sup> Barnett S. Koven and Abigail C. Kamp, "Divergent Axes of Russian Influence in Colombia and Latin America," in *Age of Disruption: How Power Shifts Create More Conflict*, eds. Gina Ligon and Robert Jones (Arlington, VA: Department of Defense Strategic Multi-layer Assessment Branch, 2019).

<sup>24</sup> Koven and Kamp, "Weaponizing Peace."

<sup>25</sup> Grzegorz Kuczyński, "Kremlin's Bluff or Russian Military Presence in Venezuela," Warsaw Institute, April 15, 2019, <https://warsawinstitute.org/kremlins-bluff-russian-military-presence-venezuela/>.

specialists to Venezuela, ostensibly to service equipment.<sup>26</sup> This form of support was almost outside the murky boundaries of the gray zone. In response to these actions, Elliot Abrams, U.S. Special Envoy for Venezuela, asserted that the U.S. is “closely studying Russia’s role, and we will not allow the level of support we have seen in recent months without responding.”<sup>27</sup>

### ***Challenges and Opportunities***

Russia’s engagement with Latin America creates at least two challenges for the United States, which are derived directly from Russia’s goals in the region. First, Russia’s Great Power ambitions challenge the cost for the U.S. of maintaining its hegemonic position in the region. Second, Russia’s pursuit of a foothold close to the United States to counter its presence in Europe creates challenges for U.S. policy in the western hemisphere at large.

For decades, the U.S. has sought to position itself as the “partner of choice” for Latin American countries. Russia’s recent overtures to the region, unconstrained as they are by democratic norms, challenge the United States’ relationship with the region. While it’s very unlikely that Russia can replace the United States as the hegemon of this part of the western hemisphere, it is certainly true that increasing Russian engagement in Latin America increases the cost to the U.S. of maintaining that position. Navy Adm. Kurt W. Tidd, then Commander of U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM), specifically expressed his concern that Russia is “attempting to displace the United States as the partner of choice.”<sup>28</sup>

The United States’ attention is often occupied elsewhere. In his first visit to a foreign country after being elected President of the United States, George W. Bush declared that the “century of the Americas” was beginning.<sup>29</sup> This new century ended seven months later when the U.S. was attacked on September 11, 2001. Since then, the U.S. has been able to maintain its position as the partner of choice in Latin America at a relatively low cost because there were no challengers to its position. SOUTHCOM’s budget for 2019, for example, was just 1/14 of what was spent in Afghanistan, leading a lawmaker to comment that the command responsible for Latin America gets what’s “left over” after other needs have been met.<sup>30</sup> Despite these unfulfilled promises and low investment, the U.S. has been able to maintain its position in the region. The 2019 U.S. SOUTHCOM Strategy is clear in that “without action, the United States will continue to cede influence to Russia and China in the region.”<sup>31</sup>

In contrast, Russia’s presence and investment in the region is growing. Russia’s increased interest in Latin America presents a direct challenge to the United States. Russia has a diplomatic mission in nearly every country in the region except for Belize, El Salvador, Honduras,

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<sup>26</sup> “Russian military specialists arrive in Venezuela to service equipment: Interfax,” *Reuters*, September 25, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-venezuela-specialists/russian-military-specialists-arrive-in-venezuela-to-service-equipment-interfax-idUSKBN1WA2FJ>.

<sup>27</sup> Nora Gámez Torres and Alex Daugherty, “Abrams: U.S. will respond to Russia’s support of Maduro in Venezuela,” *Miami Herald*, January 6, 2020, <https://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/venezuela/article239014483.html>.

<sup>28</sup> Lisa Ferdinando, “U.S. Wants to Remain ‘Partner of Choice in Latin America,’” *DoD News*, April 6, 2017, <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/1144536/us-wants-to-remain-partner-of-choice-in-latin-america/>.

<sup>29</sup> “Bush pledges ‘century of the Americas,’” *BBC News*, February 15, 2001, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/1172505.stm>.

<sup>30</sup> “Carla Babb, “Pentagon Deploying More Ships, Forces to Latin America,” *Voice of America*, March 11, 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/usa/pentagon-deploying-more-ships-forces-latin-america>.

<sup>31</sup> United States Southern Command, *United States Southern Command Strategy* (Doral, Florida: U.S. Southern Command, 2019), [https://www.southcom.mil/Portals/7/Documents/SOUTHCOM\\_Strategy\\_2019.pdf?ver=2019-05-15-131647-353](https://www.southcom.mil/Portals/7/Documents/SOUTHCOM_Strategy_2019.pdf?ver=2019-05-15-131647-353).

Dominican Republic, and Haiti. In a further sign that ties are increasing, Putin has visited eight countries in the region, including the longest foreign tour during his third term.<sup>32</sup> This use of soft power combined with the deployment of the tactics outlined in the previous section present a clear, if so far unsuccessful, challenge to the status of the U.S. as a partner of choice in the region: in spite of its efforts, Russia lags behind the U.S. in favorability with only about fifty percent of people in the region having a “good” or “very good” opinion of it, compared to sixty-two percent expressing the same about the United States.<sup>33</sup>

Russia’s goal of countering U.S. presence in Ukraine by establishing a greater presence in Latin America creates the second challenge for the United States. Russian presence close to U.S. borders complicates policy towards Russia. Russian presence in Latin America should not be interpreted to mean that the days of the Cuban missile crisis are returning, but rather that it presents a test to U.S. resolve to support its partners and its commitment to democratic values abroad. In response to the Russian deployment of two military aircraft to Venezuela, U.S. national security adviser John Bolton released a statement that echoed the 1823 Monroe Doctrine as the U.S. “caution[s] actors external to the Western Hemisphere against deploying military assets to Venezuela, or elsewhere in the Hemisphere, with the intent of establishing or expanding military operations,” adding that the United States “will consider such provocative actions as a direct threat to international peace and security in the region.”<sup>34</sup> While the statement clearly expressed commitment to its partners in Latin America, possible future Russian incursions into the region could test U.S. commitment to Latin America and ultimately its resolve. Fiona Hill, Senior Director of the U.S. National Security Council specializing in Russian and European affairs, made a similar point in testimony before Congress in 2019 asserting

the Russians [...] were signaling very strongly that they wanted to somehow make some very strange swap arrangement between Venezuela and Ukraine: [...] You want us out of your backyard [...] We have our own version of this. You're in our backyard in Ukraine. And we were getting that sent to us, kind of informally through channels. It was in the Russian press, various commentators.<sup>35</sup>

The 2018 National Defense Strategy was clear in saying that “inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary security concern in U.S. national security.”<sup>36</sup> While this has been the experience so far, it is clear that Russian involvement in the region presents a growing challenge to the United States. The opportunities for the United States are also clear: by energetically reengaging with partners in the region, the U.S. can successfully counter Russia and other competitors.

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<sup>32</sup> “Vladimir Putin’s visit to Latin America,” TASS, July 16, 2014, <https://tass.com/world/740909>.

<sup>33</sup> “Latinobarómetro Análisis de datos,” Latinobarómetro Corporation, <http://www.latinobarometro.org/latOnline.jsp>.

<sup>34</sup> “Statement by National Security Advisor Ambassador John Bolton on Venezuela,” Statements & Releases, The White House, March 29, 2019, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-national-security-advisor-ambassador-john-bolton-venezuela-2/>.

<sup>35</sup> Jacob Schultz, “Summary of Fiona Hill’s Deposition Testimony,” *Lawfare*, November 11, 2019, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/summary-fiona-hills-deposition-testimony>.

<sup>36</sup> Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2018), <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

Its long history of engagement with the region and shared democratic values provide the U.S. with an unmistakable advantage in the battle for the hearts and minds of people living in Latin America. U.S. SOUTHCOM Strategy clearly identifies this in asserting that “the strength of U.S. alliances and partnerships provides us with an edge that no competitor can match.”<sup>37</sup>

### ***Implications for the U.S. and its Partners***

Insofar as Russia’s goal in engaging with Latin America is to build an identity as a Great Power and challenge U.S. hegemony in the region and in international institutions, Russia’s engagement directly affects the U.S. and its partners and allies. President Joseph R. Biden has already expressed “concern” about Russia’s behavior, though so far has made no explicit reference to their behavior in Latin America specifically. The implications of this concerning engagement should be analyzed with a consideration for time horizons. In the short term, Russian engagement in Latin America has the potential to create a test of the U.S. government’s credibility. A lack of leadership in a situation, such as the Russian incursion to Venezuela, can create space for U.S. partners and allies to be concerned, as well as potentially create a domestic political crisis if the Commander in Chief miscalculates and escalates the situation or, conversely, underplays it.<sup>38</sup> Gray zone tactics also have short-term implications for the U.S. and its partners. Russian support for non-democratic regimes in the region such as those in power in Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, pursued at least in part through gray zone tactics, undermines U.S. efforts to promote democracy in Latin America.

In the long term, Russian engagement in Latin America dilutes U.S. power in the region and potentially in the multilateral organizations that the region is involved in. A diluted U.S. presence in Latin America could create room for a different, stronger competitor such as China to advance more quickly than Russia has been able to. China is certainly in a stronger position to be able to finance investments in the region: its \$13 trillion economy dwarfs Russia’s \$1.7 trillion. Additionally, Russia’s economy, like that of many Latin American countries, is heavily reliant on the export of natural resources, especially energy resources. China, in contrast, lacks these resources, which creates an opportunity for trade with the energy-rich countries of South America specifically. Russia, an oil-exporter, has instead looked at using its expertise in the sector to invest in oil and gas in Latin America. While pragmatic and ingenious, this potentially exacerbates Russia’s exposure to fluctuations in energy prices, highlighting the political nature of the investment. In March 2020, *Rosneft* sold its stake in the Venezuelan state-owned oil company, PDVSA, to *Roszarubezhneft*, a state-owned Russian company. With this move, PDVSA and its deteriorated infrastructure moved from having the financial support of one of the world’s largest oil companies, to being essentially directly under the control of Putin.<sup>39</sup> With this, Russia increased its exposure to the boom-and-bust cycles of oil prices. In the context of the current pandemic, as an oil-exporter Russia is hurt by the bust, whereas China, a net importer, might stand to win.

In addition to creating openings for other competitors, a weakened presence in Latin America could potentially lead to a more vulnerable U.S. at home. It is not a coincidence that until 2014 the Latin American portfolio at the Pentagon was under the Assistant Secretary of

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<sup>37</sup> U.S. Southern Command, *United States Southern Command Strategy*.

<sup>38</sup> Frederick Kempe, “Russia’s Venezuela challenge,” Atlantic Council, April 7, 2019, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/inflection-points/russia-s-venezuela-challenge/>.

<sup>39</sup> Antonio De Le Cruz, “Rosneft’s Withdrawal amid U.S. Sanctions Contributes to Venezuela’s Isolation,” Center for Strategic & International Studies, April 10, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/rosnefts-withdrawal-amid-us-sanctions-contributes-venezuelas-isolation>.



Defense for Homeland Defense and Global Security, and not under the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs like that of most other regions.

Russia's engagement in Latin America has implications outside of the region too. Russian efforts to leverage new relationships with Latin American countries to its advantage in multilateral organizations and debates about existing norms could have an impact in other countries. Specifically, Russia's campaign to dilute R2P doctrine and the Law of the Sea Convention could potentially find sympathetic ears in Latin America, where Brazil has already expressed opposition to R2P, and Venezuela is concerned about U.S. vessels in the Caribbean. Lastly, if Russia's campaign to be seen as a Great Power is successful, its nondemocratic institutions could be seen by lower income countries as an example of an alternative path to development. Ultimately, Russia's success as an economically successful authoritarian capitalist state could challenge liberal democracy elsewhere.<sup>40</sup>

### ***Recommendations***

The U.S. has a long history of engagement in Latin America. The countries in the Americas achieved independence around the same time, and in most cases have had diplomatic relationships for over 200 years. For all its energy in engaging with the region now and in spite of exchanges as the USSR, Russia is a relative newcomer to the region. The U.S. can succeed in maintaining its position as the partner of choice in the region but to do so it must recognize that its position is being challenged by other countries looking to rise in prominence and gain a strategic advantage by positioning themselves closer to the United States.

In engaging with countries in the region, Russia is unconstrained by democratic norms and processes that would preclude it from dealing with less than perfect institutions and leaders. The United States, on the other hand, abides by processes that limit the types of actors it can engage with and delay or prohibit dealing with some of them, such as in the case of vetting required by Leahy Law.<sup>41</sup> While there might be a temptation to argue against some of these checkpoints so that the U.S. can compete on more equal footing against Russia and other authoritarian rising powers, it is important to remember that the universality of values and norms enshrined in laws like Leahy are what the U.S. is looking to achieve at home and abroad. Abandoning these principles to be able to be more efficient would be misguided.

Russia's engagement with Latin America has been made possible by space created in the region by U.S. disengagement. Conflicts elsewhere have turned U.S. attention away from Latin America. Two countries in the region – Cuba and Venezuela – don't have a diplomatic mission at all and many more are missing an ambassador. Still, for every Latin American person named Vladimir, or Carlos Marx Carrasco as was the case of a recent Minister of Labor in Ecuador, or Stalin González, a Venezuelan opposition leader, there are many more named Nixon Moreno (another Venezuelan opposition leader), or Usnavy (after U.S. Navy). This is to say that the U.S. has a long trajectory of peaceful and productive relationships with the region and a shared cultural capital that it can leverage. In other words, the linkage between the U.S. and Latin

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<sup>40</sup> Azar Gat, "The Return of Authoritarian Great Powers," *Foreign Affairs* 86, no. 4 (July/August 2007).

<sup>41</sup> "Leahy Law Fact Sheet," U.S. Department of State Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, January 22, 2019, <https://www.state.gov/key-topics-bureau-of-democracy-human-rights-and-labor/human-rights/leahy-law-fact-sheet/>.

America is stronger than that between any other country and Latin America save, perhaps, Spain. Recognizing the importance of these links and continuing to build on them through rhetoric and actions will be crucial in maintaining the U.S. position in the region.

Russia has shown true commitment to the twin goals of its engagement in Latin America. It has also shown a willingness to be flexible and pragmatic about the means it pursues to achieve these goals. If the United States shows commitment to its democratic values and a recognition of the value of its partners in the region, it can maintain its position in the region and impede a Russian challenge. To do so, the U.S. must not abandon its democratic norms in pursuit of the use of tactics like those employed by Russia, and must give democratic Latin American partners at least the same attention that is afforded to them by Russia. The U.S. cannot be everything to everybody, but it is important that it be a good neighbor to the countries in its own region, and that it view them as neighbors with whom to pursue collaboration, rather than as a backyard to defend.

### ***About The Author***

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