

Eurasia Rising

COVID-19 in Latin America

By Ariel González Levaggi and Vicente Ventura Barreiro

Latin America is slowly becoming a venue for the United States' strategic competition with Russia and China. Despite the regional illusions during the early 21st century, the Brazilian leadership of Latin America has disappeared, regional integration has lost its climax and external state actors have increasing geoeconomic interests throughout the Western Hemisphere from the Rio Grande to Antarctica. To complicate matters further, COVID-19 has impacted Latin America more deeply than other regions, thus expanding the range of health, economic, and security needs in the continent. China and Russia have appeared as alternative providers of medical equipment, humanitarian aid, and vaccines, thus trying to replace the traditional role of Western developed nations, especially the United States, on the continent.

COVID-19 is aggravating the structural economic and social burdens on Latin American countries. Higher unemployment and the increase in poverty may lead to turbulent political times and have serious implications for regional security. Do poverty, violence and corruption open the door for extra-regional great powers in Latin America? If former U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) Commander Admiral Craig Faller is right,¹ Latin America will fail to follow an "active non-alignment"² and will be increasingly caught between hard external choices and facing a wide range of domestic emergencies. Venezuela is a leading case. As populists' failed reforms and Maduro's authoritarian path, even the Caracas' golden apple—its oil industry—imploded, while China and Russia rushed not only to support their distant partner, but also to collect debts. Valuable commodities are being exchanged for debt and the Venezuelan people have become poorer and hopeless. More than five million have decided to leave the country and Maduro's Venezuela has become both a pariah state in Latin America and an attractive spot for non-regional great powers' projection. This article provides an analysis of the multidimensional interaction among local, regional and geo-political impacts of COVID-19, paying specific attention to the Argentine case and the increasing role of China and Russia in the Western Hemisphere.

Dr. Ariel Gonzalez Levaggi is Executive Secretary of the Center for International Affairs at the Pontifical Catholic University of Argentina. He is also Senior Researcher at the Center for Research and Strategic Studies of the Argentine Navy, Argentina. Dr. Vicente Ventura Barreiro is a Professor at Universidad del Salvador, Argentina.

Regional Impact of COVID-19

Latin America is experiencing increasing strategic irrelevance.³ As a heterogenous, fragmented region, it has lost positions in all relevant indicators of strategic significance, including trade volume, military power projection, and diplomatic capacity. As the world’s most affected region, the impact of COVID-19 has been felt more here than in other regions of the Global South.⁴

As of May 2021, there have been more than 1 million deaths, with Mexico, Peru, Panama, and Brazil being the most affected countries in the region, according to per capita mortality rates (at the time of writing, Latin America accounts for some 31 percent of global COVID-19-related deaths).⁵ Cities in Brazil, Peru, and Ecuador have suffered the most dramatic collapses of their health care systems, but none of the countries in the region could avoid the global consequences of the pandemic: health system stress, higher mortality rates, ad hoc governmental decisions, and growing popular discontent.

COVID-19 has altered most of the political, economic, social, and security variables.

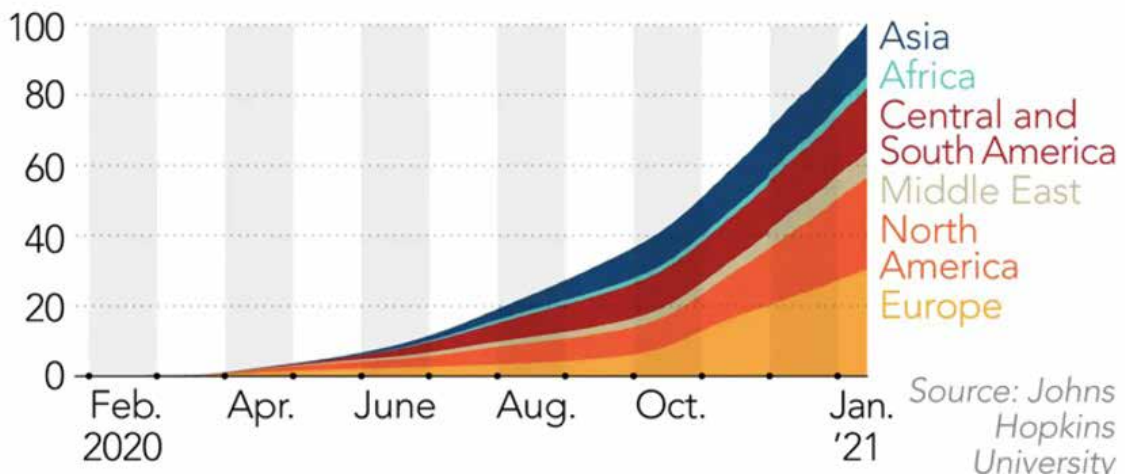
Compared to the rest of the world, the economic performance of Latin America has not been very encouraging. The regional economy shrunk by 7 percent (more than 3.5 percent more than the global economy), informal employment suffered a lot due to constraints on labor mobility, and the debt burden grew from 68.9 to 79.3 percent of the regional GDP.⁶ Though governments have taken on increasing debt, budget constraints and insufficient state capabilities have limited the amount of aid to different sectors in emergency.

Capacity

Among various factors, two elements stand out when evaluating the response of Latin American countries to COVID-19: state capacities and government decisions. No country was prepared to deal with this challenge according to the 2019 Global Health Security (GHS) Index, but those countries

Cumulative number of global coronavirus infections

(In millions)



Source: <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Coronavirus/Global-COVID-19-cases-top-100m-as-mutations-multiply>

| | |
|--|-------|
| World | -3.2% |
| Advanced Economies | -4.7% |
| Euro Area | -6.5% |
| Major Advanced Economies (G7) | -5.0% |
| Other Advanced Economies (Advanced economies excluding G7 and Euro area) | -2.1% |
| European Union | -6.1% |
| Emerging Market and Developing Economies | -2.2% |
| Emerging and Developing Asia | -1% |
| Emerging and Developing Europe | -2% |
| ASEAN-5 | -3.4% |
| Latin America and the Caribbean | -7% |
| Middle East and Central Asia | -2.8% |
| Sub-Saharan Africa | -1.9% |

Source: World Economic Outlook database: April 2021. Gross domestic product, constant prices.

experiencing political and economic crises have been clearly more vulnerable to the pandemic.⁷ Countries at a more advanced developmental level were able to respond more effectively to the pandemic. Higher rates of development usually reflect more advanced state capabilities and more resources available for dealing with a pandemic. However, this is not universally true as the Dominican Republic, Paraguay, and Guatemala have managed relatively well in comparison with Argentina and Chile, two of the more economically advanced countries in the region. Even if state capacity is a strong predictor, successful (or unsuccessful) management of the crisis depends on a government's approach, which, in general, must balance between health and other socio-economic priorities.

Decisions

COVID-19 responses in Latin America have recently cycled back to confinement policies (from sectorized to national ones) and restrictive measures. In addition, national decisions have diverged in different areas such as on school openings, public meetings, and testing. The most effective responses to COVID-19—mixing restriction, flexibility, and mass testing—were those science-based with broader political support, while countries, like Brazil, which fell into the “polarization trap,” experienced additional obstacles to effective preventive measures.

In addition to limited state capacity and structural, social, and economic problems, there has not been a joint, regional response to the global crisis.⁸ When the pandemic began, frontiers were closed,

and each nation was on its own. There was no single or regional model for dealing with the pandemic, even though governments had some time to prepare for the arrival of the pandemic.⁹

Regional Security Implications

Besides the political implications, restrictive measures have impacted four national security-related issues: the reduction of public freedoms, the closure of borders, the adaptation of local/transnational criminal organizations, and the militarization of state responses.

Restrictions on Public Freedom

Limitations to individual rights present challenges in the context of an ongoing regional democratic recession, especially in Central America.¹⁰ Public health requirements can be abused as a pretext, a source of “authoritarian temptation” for populist leaders, and a potential opportunity to seek political and economic support from non-democratic extra-regional actors.¹¹ Mandatory confinement—as imposed in Peru, Argentina, Ecuador, and Chile—decreased public freedoms, especially freedom of movement and assembly, which impacted both social protests and crime patterns. These unpopular policies have catalyzed open defiance.

Border Closures

Increasing economic interdependence and integration throughout Latin America in recent decades have usually involved the easing of border transit. However, one of the first measures governments took at the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic was to close borders, both terrestrial and aerial. Border closures have gone hand in hand with restrictions on personal and the deployment of troops in border areas. This shock forced Latin American national security agencies (from intelligence to military) to reorient their priorities towards the global and regional impact of the pandemic, in addition to

evaluating the change in transnational organized crime patterns and the geographic patterns of internal criminal flows.

Criminal Adaptation

As urban mobility was limited to essential personnel, transborder movements were interrupted, and internal cargo and passenger transport decreased considerably, criminal enterprises also adapted in ways impacting illegal markets.¹² The interruption of transit along frontiers has reinforced a long regional tradition, smuggling through informal border crossings. In countries such as Mexico or Colombia in which criminal organizations have a large footprint, COVID-19 is redefining and reinforcing their role as important non-state actors. Transnational criminal organizations are expanding their activities to new sectors, providing alternative governance in areas under their control, trafficking medical supplies, and offering new opportunities for a growing unemployed youth population.¹³

Militarized Response

Armed and security forces have played a prominent role in enforcing restrictive policies. The militarization of the public space is not a novelty. Even before the pandemic, Cepik and Rodriguez argue,

“not only has the military slowly returned to a prominent role in the public arena, but the scope of its tasks has expanded with the pandemic. However, in recent years, the involvement of the military in public order missions, responding to natural disasters and for the development of critical infrastructure had more diverse results than expected. It increased the confidence of the populations, but reinforced undemocratic temptations in several countries of the region. In addition, and more worrying, in recent years the participation of

the military directly in civil and political functions in the states of the region has grown.”¹⁴

The Venezuelan military is an example of this new trend, but there are worrying developments in Brazil as well. COVID-19 government responses strengthened this non-military role of the military, while expanding the institutional weight *vis-à-vis* the other state bureaucracies, especially in those countries in which the military has robust institutional power.

Some state responses have included draconian decisions, including nationwide preventive security monitoring, prohibition of mobility, and mandatory confinement, in addition to imposing judicial penalties on citizens contravening the requirements.

Some states have deployed all available tools in trying to enforce these unpopular measures. The armed forces have been required to serve as a back-up for insufficient civil state capabilities regarding public security, logistics, crisis management, and medical care. During the first year of the pandemic, Honduras, Brazil, Perú, and Colombia mobilized the military the most, while Uruguay and Argentina¹⁵ the least.¹⁶ While this may not have resulted in significant changes in civil-military relations, it did strengthen the role of the military in non-military duties.

Before and After COVID-19: China and Russia are (Slowly) Coming

The Biden Administration’s 2021 Interim National



Army military carried out action of the First Biological Chemical Defense Radiological and Nuclear Battalion for disinfection against covid-19. (Photo by: Photocarioca on Shutterstock ID: 1708342945. April 14, 2020)

Security Strategic Guidance acknowledged a “growing rivalry with China, Russia and other authoritarian states,” thus sustaining Washington’s strategic competition narrative which identified both Eurasian great powers as revisionist adversaries. The Western Hemisphere is one of the venues in which this strategic struggle is taking place. However, Latin America is still a secondary geo-strategic priority for Washington compared with regional hot-spots in Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and the Indo-Pacific.

The roles of China and Russia in the Latin America region have been the subject of some discussion over the past decade. The main query is whether there is a hegemonic challenge from these great powers. It might appear that Latin America is transitioning in that direction, but it seems that the intensity may remain low. The challenge does not seem frontal or military, however, China’s increasing geoeconomic presence throughout the continent, in addition to Russia’s strategic investments in Venezuela and its traditional ties with Cuba and Nicaragua, can be seen as the extension of the global strategic competition to the Western Hemisphere.

China’s Advances in the Region

Beijing is not just an Asian regional power; it is also a global power with growing overseas maritime and other interests. China has developed a multidimensional agenda in Latin America, from infrastructure investments to military cooperation—for example selling military hardware, providing training to military personnel, and developing institutional engagements with Venezuela, Ecuador, and Argentina, among others.¹⁷ The growth in economic ties between Latin America and China has been exponential. Trade grew from \$16 billion in 2001 to more than \$300 billion in 2018. The Asian giant is today the second largest trading partner in Latin America after the United States, thus surpassing the European Union. In

South America alone China is today the largest trade partner, and investment has been growing significantly, especially in the Southern Cone (Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay). In 2019, during the annual BRICS meeting, Xi Jinping announced one of the most important port investments in the history of Brazil, the modernization of the Port of São Luís in Maranhão by China Communications Construction Company and the Brazilian WPR—São Luís Gestão de Portos e Terminais—for a total of \$1 billion. In addition China plans to invest in the modernization of Argentina’s southernmost port of Umuahia and a large port near Uruguay’s capital, Montevideo.

Economic ties are reflected in political ties. High-level visits have flourished. Chinese leaders including Chinese Presidents Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and more recently Xi Jinping have visited Latin America meeting with the main Latin American political leaders. As an example of the growing relationship, the China-CELAC Ministerial Forum (Community of Latin American and Caribbean States) was established, while several countries in the region participated in a 2017 forum on the “Belt and Road Initiative.” Some are non-regional members or candidates for the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. In the case of Argentina, more than 30 high-level visits reflect a sustained political Argentina-China dialogue and alignment that is expressed in China’s diplomatic support for Argentina’s claim on the Malvinas/Falklands Islands and the resumption of negotiations between Great Britain and Argentina.

Strategic and defense ties between China and Latin American countries are still minor but growing.¹⁸ Brazil carried out 29 high-level meetings with defense officials and the Chinese military and conducted three joint exercises receiving three visits by the Chinese Navy. Argentina had 21 high-level meetings between 2003 and 2016.¹⁹ Lately, there have been concerns about Chinese support for the modernization of the Antarctic Logistic Hub in

Ushuaia—the world’s southernmost city—which may involve the renewal of the Argentine naval base there.²⁰

Russia Returns to the Region

Russia may be an economic dwarf compared to its great power counterparts, but it is a strategic giant. Russia’s President Vladimir Putin sees Latin America as a venue to retaliate against U.S. and NATO policies in Russia’s so-called “near-Abroad.” He seeks to develop a “normal” foreign policy looking for trade and investment opportunities as well as diplomatic support in the multilateral arena. For Russian decisionmakers, the region is an important partner in a multipolar world as well as an indicator its degree of influence as a global actor. However, Latin America’s position on Russia’s international agenda is still marginal compared to its higher priorities in the post-Soviet space.

Russia’s regional influence peaked during the political “left-turn” in Latin America of the early 2000s, but its influence has declined since then due to three factors.

First, much of Latin America took a political turn to the right and aligned with the interests of the United States. Second, Venezuela—Russia’s key regional partner next to Cuba—sunk into socio-economic collapse and authoritarian drift, while popular expectations of economic and political benefits were bitterly disappointed. Venezuela’s recent institutional crisis shows both the strengths and limitations of Russia’s regional policy. Faced with the Donald Trump Administration’s surprise recognition of Juan Guaidó as President of Venezuela, Russia continued to support the government of Nicolás Maduro. Putin not only directly dismissed Guaidó’s claim but also supported Russian energy companies doing business in Venezuela, sent military advisers to put the S-300 missile system into operation, and encouraged Russian private military contractors like the Wagner group to engage, among

other actions.²¹ Third, the countries of the region limited their interactions with Russia in order not to compromise their relations with the United States.

COVID-19 imposed a short pause on external state actors like China and Russia, but as they recover from their own internal pandemic turmoil, a new wave of activism has been emerging through an active policy of health diplomacy. No sooner had COVID-19 shocked the world in early 2020, than countries from every region rushed to get needed medical equipment, some even cheating and disrupting agreed upon contracts. When needed medical supplies became scarce, extra-regional powers such as Turkey and China began to engage in “mask diplomacy.”²²

The year 2020 was the first 2006 in which China did not provide new loans or credit lines in Latin America, while foreign investment originating from China declined by 80 percent (to \$2.5 billion).²³ Beijing’s motivation for mask diplomacy was political favoring both regional allies such as Venezuela and Cuba and reflecting relationships with strategic partners such as Chile, Brazil, and Argentina.²⁴ Throughout the first COVID-19 year donations surpassed \$200 million, including ventilators, test kits, thermometers, and millions of masks and medical suits. Venezuela received almost half of the regional package. The United States was not too far in mask diplomacy allocating by August 2020 over \$140 million in a regional relief package, involving “\$69.5 million of International Disaster Assistance, \$33.8 million of Migration and Refugee Assistance, \$27.6 million of health assistance, and \$10.5 million of Economic Support Funds.”²⁵

American companies Moderna, Pfizer/BioNTech, and J&J/Janssen, as well as British Oxford-AstraZeneca, Russian Sputnik, and China’s Sinopharm and Sinovac were the first to develop vaccines. Through 2021 countries competed to obtain supplies to immunize their citizens and return to normalcy. Till now no Latin American

country has developed a local vaccine. Most Latin American were unable to easily acquire the American vaccines in large numbers and British Oxford-AstraZeneca failed to deliver on time; countries such as Argentina, Venezuela, and Chile therefore turned to China and Russia. Both saw an opportunity both to develop their medical business and to increase their regional influence and political support. Through the COVAX Advance Market Commitment Initiative the Biden Administration contributed \$4 billion for 2021 to underwrite the distribution of 1.8 billion doses, with a portion destined for Latin America. However, in the pandemic context, Latin American countries are increasingly reaching out to those who offer effective alternatives, even if this involves long-term political and

economic compromises with non-Western nations. We are living in turbulent times and urgency is often at odds with the virtue of prudence.

COVID-19 Hits Argentina

Public Health Impact

By June 2021 Argentina reached the tragic 85,000 COVID-19 death threshold with total cases near 4.2 million. No country considers it good news to be in the top 20 countries category of deaths per million inhabitants. Even though the first official COVID-19 case in Argentina was reported in early March 2020, the consequences were not too different from the rest of the region. On March 19th, Alberto Fernandez's government²⁶—with broad



Santa Fe police blocking the access to Ceres during the lockdown of the city during the COVID-19 pandemic in Argentina. (Photo by: Gobierno de Santa Fe. March 19, 2020)

support including Buenos Aires' Government Head Horacio Rodriguez Larreta and the Province governors—announced a strict national quarantine. Fostering “social, preventive and compulsory isolation,” Argentina entered phase in which many public freedoms were reduced for public health reasons. According to Resico, these stringent measures “were initially received with high levels of adherence by the population, which served to buy vital time to prepare the healthcare system and prevent its collapse”.²⁷

Economic impact

In comparative terms, only Venezuela, Peru, and Panama suffered more economically than Argentina. The strict confinement had significant impact on Argentina's hurting economy. For the third year in a row GDP declined, this time only by 9.9 percent, the worst performance since the 2001/2002 financial crisis. The impact was particularly harsh in the large informal sectors of suburban areas like greater Buenos Aires, Rosario, and Córdoba. Poverty and unemployment skyrocketed. According to the Observatorio de la Deuda Social Argentina (Observatory of Argentine Social Debt) of the Pontifical Catholic University of Argentina, citizens living below the official poverty line reached 44.2 percent, while unemployment exceeded 14 percent.²⁸

Military Mobilization

To enforce public safety measures, armed and security forces were brought in with diverse responsibilities determined by local laws and their institutional legacy. National, provincial and local police focused on enforcing the quarantine and monitoring mobility across jurisdictions, while the armed forces—especially the Army—deployed in its largest operation since the Malvinas/Falklands War.²⁹

The deployment provided logistical support and infrastructure improvement in addition to health and social distribution tasks, thus initially earning public support within the democratic consensus on the role of civil-military relations. As the year of restrictive measures advanced however the national government began to lose that popular support due to increasing unemployment and inflation, in addition to such failed populist initiatives as “statization” of companies which led to demonstrations encouraged by the center-right opposition. After the short initial honeymoon, the government and the opposition took different paths, thus returning to the old politics of polarization. In this critical context, the Police of the Buenos Aires Province—Argentina's largest—rebelled against the authorities demanding for a salary increase and improved working conditions. In response the national government reassigned the Buenos Aires City's public security budget to the Buenos Aires Provincial Government, a loyal bastion of Kirchnerism. Subsequently any political bridges between the national government and the opposition started to fall.

Russian, Chinese, and U.S. Response to COVID-19 in Argentina

The Fernandez Administration effort to get vaccines opened the door to Russia and China. Logistics and production problems with Oxford-AstraZeneca resulting in delays of an agreement whereby Argentine and Mexican companies would co-manufacture the doses left Argentina desperately in need of a solution. Negotiations with Pfizer failed due to an “incompatible legal framework,” and other options neither had sufficient supply nor gave priority to markets such as Argentina, which had to turn to Eurasian sources.

Was this the first time that Argentina turned to China or Russia in an emergency? During the 2014 economic crisis Argentina agreed that China would build a deep space ground station in Neuquén

Province as part of a broader agreement granting China access to infrastructure and strategic projects in exchange for financial support. The United States was not pleased with this agreement. In testimony before the U.S. Congress, then-U.S. SOUTHCOM Commander Admiral Faller warned that “Beijing could be in violation of the terms of its agreement with Argentina to only conduct civilian activities and may have the ability to monitor and potentially target U.S., allied, and partner space activities.”³⁰ The Brazilian military was also concerned. In one scenario presented in the prospective document—Defense Scenarios 2040—there appears a potential bilateral conflict with Argentina due to the installation of a Chinese full-scale military base.³¹

According to Telias and Urdinez, in the first half of the 2020s Argentina received donations of \$5.62 million, sixth in the region after Venezuela, Brazil, Chile, Cuba, and Peru.³² Encouraged by governmental officials, social and syndicate leaders, and the pro-government press, a narrative emphasizing Argentine-Chinese solidarity began to emerge. This narrative reflects a decade-long Chinese effort to win the hearts and minds of key individuals and influential groups in Argentina.

As the aid flowed high-ranking officials praised the Chinese collaboration. For example, then-Minister of Foreign Affairs Felipe Sola affirmed that “we are very grateful for the solidarity of China towards Argentina regarding the provision of medical supplies.” Multiple communications occurred between Presidents Xi Jinping and Alberto Fernandez. Fernandez was invited as a “guest of honor” and the only South American high-level representative to speak (virtually) at the 100th Anniversary of the Foundation of the Chinese Communist Party. Since March 2020, different Chinese organizations—national and provincial governments as well as private companies—have donated supplies including ventilators, protective suits, and field hospitals, including the provision of Huawei technology.³³ As

an example of subnational and NGO cooperation, the Chinese province of Guizhou donated 9,000 medical masks to the Jujuy Province, while the All-China Journalists Association (ACJA) contributed more than 200,000 chinstraps to its Argentinean counterpart.

As elsewhere in the world the immunization campaign in Argentina has been problematic. On the one hand, the Oxford-AstraZeneca project failed to meet expectations. On the other hand, other Western options did not materialize. Facing the urgency and both political and public pressure to obtain vaccines Argentina’s leadership, with the subtle but effective role of Vice-President, Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner, followed a familiar path turning to China and Russia for solutions to Argentina’s problems. Following a series of political setbacks including the dismissal of the Argentine Ambassador in Beijing—Luis María Kreckler—in late 2020, the Beijing Institute of Biological Products and Argentine authorities reached an initial deal for the provision of 4 million vaccine doses. A new chapter of health diplomacy cooperation, in February 2021 the first Chinese-based Sinopharm shipment of 900,000 vaccines arrived. Later, an agreement was reached with the Chinese laboratory CanSino Biologics for the provision of more than 5 million vaccines, while different provinces such as Buenos Aires, Santa Fe, Cordoba, and Jujuy also reached specific agreements with Chinese pharmaceutical companies.

Argentina also became the beachhead of Russia’s Sputnik V vaccine developed by the Gamaleya Research Institute of Epidemiology and Microbiology with the support of the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF). In November 2020, after a conversation with Putin, President Fernandez announced an agreement for the delivery of 10 million vaccine doses which would be later increased to 30 million. Even if until early May 2020 the total cargo only reached around 20 percent of the



Arrival of the first batch of Sputnik V vaccines to Argentina. (Photo by: Casa Rosada. December 24, 2020)

promised doses, Russia became Argentina's main supplier, thus delivering political oxygen to a weak government. The accompanying public diplomacy campaign—both from Russia and Argentina—was quite successful. According to several public polls, the Sputnik V is first in level of preference and confidence in Argentina.³⁴ It seems that for the time Russia not only took advantage of the geoeconomic opportunity, but is also winning the hearts and minds of the Argentine people.

The consequences of Sputnik V's Argentine proxy are going regional. Argentine company Richmond Labs reached an agreement with RDIF to produce the Sputnik V, the first agreement of its kind in Latin America. As a first test 21,000 doses were dispatched to Russia in late April and the companies expect to reach 500 million doses

annually in the next few years. If that scenario materializes, Argentina may become the regional hub for the Russian vaccine. This was not the first time that Argentina relied on Eurasian medicines to accomplish regional political goals. In January 2021, Casa Rosada delivered 20,000 Russian vaccines to Bolivia's new center-left government and promised vaccines to Ecuador's center-left candidate Andrés Arauz Galarza. Since early 2000s, Argentina's foreign policy has been erratic and short-sighted due to the endless economic crises and increasing internal polarization. The COVID-19 crisis is just another challenge that involves resource constraints, an economic crisis, and a desperate search for solutions.

New Directions in Security Policy in the Western Hemisphere

Regional Fragmentation

The Argentine case shows that the Western Hemisphere has no cohesive plan or planning for collective action in times of crisis. The Latin American regionalism crisis—with the demise of the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) and the South American Defense Council—has provided an opening for Eurasian great powers to expand bilateral contacts for both economic and political ends. The multilateral hemispheric architecture (led by the Organization of American States and the Inter-American Development Bank) still lacks the legitimacy and support from the state-members to move members toward unified action.

At the Crossroad of Great Power Competition

Regional hotspots such as Venezuela and Nicaragua have become less relevant and more a symptom of broader geopolitical and geoeconomic trends, while the growing Chinese and Russian regional presence has moved to the center of regional security concerns. A key finding of the COVID-19 experience in Latin America is that health diplomacy, particularly the vaccine provision whose penetration is much higher in countries with limited access to Western vaccines, is an enabler for extra-regional great powers. A hemispheric challenge is maturing, not only due to Moscow's and Beijing's assertive policies, but because of the vacuum left by the developed West. Still the lowest-hanging fruit in U.S. foreign policy,³⁵ the new hemispheric scenario demands more effective U.S. soft power and inspired actions to deal with the new regional challenges.

Militarization Under Civil Guidance

Throughout the Cold War Latin America militaries often interrupted democratic institutional

processes in the name of national security and the fight against communism. Though the most recent wave of democratization moved the military outside the political center in most countries they retained institutional power. In most of the countries in the region the COVID-19 response was led and coordinated by civil authorities; but the challenge of the pandemic provides risks and opportunities for a new wave of civilian-led militarization. On the one hand, the military can supplement civilian authorities' capacity deficits with technical knowledge, national territorial deployment, and experience dealing with emergencies. On the other hand, prolonged military management of an enduring public health crisis like COVID-19 could reinforce an "authoritarian temptation" to deploy the military in pursuit of political goals. Or worse, emboldened and empowered military leaders may find themselves comfortable (again) with the control of public freedoms and social spaces. Restoring the right balance between freedom and rights within a democratic framework and the exigencies of public health and security will be the challenge for civilian authorities once the COVID-19 pandemic has subsided. **PRISM**

Notes

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¹⁵ These two countries possess relatively robust state capabilities to face the pandemic *vis-à-vis* the rest of the region, in addition to have a strict civilian control over the non-military functions of the Armed Forces.

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