



In 2012, Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff and Russian President Vladimir Putin shake hands in Mexico.

Extra-regional Actors in Latin America: The United States is not the Only Game in Town

By Douglas Farah and Kathryn Babineau

During the past two centuries, the United States has enjoyed a largely unchallenged geopolitical, economic, and social influence in Latin America. However, in an increasingly multipolar world, Russia and China—and Iran to a lesser extent—have emerged to fill the vacuum left by diminished U.S. engagement in the region. Each with different interests, these three foreign actors exploit a growing, widespread disillusionment towards the United States. This regional disillusionment coupled with endemic corruption, violence, and erosion of the rule of law marks the conditions under which the extra-regional actors are engaging Latin America. All three actors have made significant gains—and suffered important setbacks—as they move aggressively to position themselves as alternatives to traditional U.S. hegemony in Latin America. Their success has not been total, nor has it gone completely unchallenged. However, their efforts are a new constant in the Western Hemisphere, as the United States increasingly pursues an agenda that is sharply divorced from the once-shared interests of the majority of the region’s governments.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has made no effort to hide his desire to reestablish his country as a viable power player and competitor to U.S. influence in the region. Viewed through the lens of the Gerasimov Doctrine, this engagement is both rational from the Russian perspective and dangerous to the United States. So far, Russia has primarily focused its outreach efforts on allies in the Bolivarian Alliance, led by Venezuela and including Cuba, Nicaragua, Bolivia, El Salvador, and Suriname, all of whom share a strong anti-U.S. ideology with each possessing deeply criminalized governments.¹ Often operating as a sort of “parasite state,” the public outreach of the Putin regime in Latin America is designed to maximize impact at low cost. To date, this approach consists largely of weapons sales and donations, high level state-to-state visits, military and police training in areas of U.S. specialization such as counternarcotics, and financial assistance in avoiding the U.S.-based banking system. Within international forums, Russia has used its seat on the UN Security Council to protect Venezuela and Nicaragua from international sanctions, and has aggressively moved to open up financial operations—including banks and a crypto currency—to help its allies blunt the impact of U.S. and EU sanctions. The Russian presence, increasingly accompanied by Russian organized crime groups operating under the protection of the Russian state, is viewed by most

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U.S. stakeholders as presenting the biggest strategic challenge of the three countries discussed.

In comparison to Russia, China is primarily an economic competitor, actively seeking to expand its areas of influence globally. China's outreach has been much broader across Latin America where it has sought to build long-term economic relationships with any willing partner in the region. China's growing regional presence is focusing on trade and on increasing diplomatic ties at the expense of the Republic of China (Taiwan), while presenting itself as a global superpower capable of providing military training, business opportunities and unconditional foreign assistance in a more reliable, long-term way than the United States. Rather than wooing only the Bolivarian bloc and ideological allies, China engages across the region, recently convincing Panama and the Dominican Republic, key U.S. allies, and El Salvador to drop their diplomatic recognition of Taiwan. In exchange, both received large amounts of aid and promises of investment from the People's Republic of China (PRC).

Of the three external actors, Iran's revolutionary government has the smallest footprint in Latin America of the three countries and the most opaque agenda. Unlike Russia and China, Iran offers neither economic nor military support, but instead focuses on a narrower set of state and non-state actors through limited political outreach and illicit activities meant to further Iran's national interest and nuclear program. That influence diminished with the death of former Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez and the end of the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in Iran, but may increase again contingent upon current developments.

Prior to the January 2016 implementation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) agreed to by Iran and the West, the Iranian government maintained an active network in Latin America to purchase dual use equipment for its nuclear program, and sought to build close partnerships with

the Bolivarian bloc of nations that were belligerently anti-U.S. in tone and focus.² Iran used the Bolivarian banking structures to evade sanctions, along with its primary allies: Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Nicaragua. Attempts at a rapprochement with Argentina ended in 2016 with the end of the Kirchner government, and ties to Brazil in the past decade have fizzled.

Upon the initial implementation of the JCPOA, the visible Iranian presence in Latin America dropped significantly, although the infrastructure of the clandestine network remained in place. That network appears to be reactivating again in possible anticipation of the likely collapse of the JCPOA in the wake of the U.S. withdrawal from the pact. Closely tied to the Iranian government's formal structures are the Hezbollah-linked networks that engage in widespread criminal activities, such as contraband, money laundering, and drug trafficking needed to finance the Iranian proxy force.

Impact of Changing Regional Dynamics

Because Russia and Iran tied their Latin American agendas to the nations of the Bolivarian Alliance, the state of their relationships and relative importance in the region have mirrored that of their allies. During the ascendancy of the Alliance in the early years of the 21st century, Chávez, Putin, and Iran's president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad made several joint appearances to celebrate regional electoral victories. The three nations announced grand plans and joint projects that would cost billions of dollars and herald the dawn of the Alliance's motto: "Socialism for the 21st Century." The strategic alliance produced an alternative to the United States on every front including economic aid, military training, equipping and doctrine, large-scale investment, and geopolitical orientation. The years since 2016, however, have seen a dramatic weakening of the Bolivarian Alliance. Powerful



Port of Spain National Academy for the Performing Arts in Trinidad and Tobago, built by the Shanghai Construction Group. (Wikipedia/Belchman9006)

Alliance members—including Ecuador, Argentina, and Brazil—left the alliance, while other members—including Nicaragua and El Salvador—continue to experience major domestic challenges. As a result, Russia and in particular Iran, have far fewer willing partners in Latin America than even a few years ago.

China, playing a long game founded on pragmatism rather than ideology, has not seen the same downturn in influence and relationships as have Russia and Iran. By decoupling its economic and outreach agenda from an explicitly anti-U.S. message, China has been able to work across the region without significant opposition. While China has bailed out the Maduro government in Venezuela to keep it from default and has allowed Ecuador to accrue a massive debt, it has also maintained cordial ties with Colombia, Peru, and other U.S. allies. As noted above, since March 2017 Panama, El Salvador, and Dominican Republic dropped their historic recognition of Taiwan and recognized the PRC, leaving only 18 countries in the world that recognize Taiwan.³

The constant in the new regional dynamic is that the United States, less engaged in the region and no longer the sole external influence, is not driving ebbs and flows of the influence of the extra-regional actors in Latin America. Rather, it is a dynamic largely driven by the Latin American nations' perceived self-interests at any given time. The permanent presence of Russia, China, Iran, and others who are setting a proactive rather than reactive agenda means a new normal in Latin America.

Growing Russian Influence in Latin America

As Russia seeks to both expand and deepen its regional ties, the seminal Gerasimov Doctrine provides the framework for understanding the Russian strategy and tactics aimed at weakening U.S. influence, challenging U.S. dominance—military, economic, and political—and establishing a multipolar world order. As Commander of U.S. Southern Command, Admiral Kurt W. Tidd outlined in his

February 2018 Posture Statement to the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee:

Russia's increased role in our hemisphere is particularly concerning, given its intelligence and cyber capabilities, intent to upend international stability and order, and discredit democratic institutions . . . Left unchecked, Russian access and placement could eventually transition from a regional spoiler to a critical threat to the U.S. homeland.⁴

This Russo–Bolivarian partnership has opened the door not only for political and economic influence but also for; the expansion of Russia's state-linked media to blanket the continent with an anti-U.S., pro-Russia propaganda via Sputnik News, Russia Today (RT TV), and other outlets; the installation of intelligence gathering platforms in close proximity to the United States, including numerous satellite tracking stations; and multiple commitments to nuclear expansion in the Hemisphere. In addition to the shared desire to minimize U.S. influence in the region, Russia's expanded outreach to the Bolivarian bloc provides a powerful friend on the UN Security Council capable of vetoing any efforts to hold them accountable for human rights violations or electoral fraud.

In addition to establishing strong traditional diplomatic relations, Russia is also now deeply engaged in activities helping its allies to; develop new cyber capabilities, including cyber-attacks and hacking; expand the sophistication and reach of surveillance equipment, mostly used against political enemies and journalists; participate in joint maneuvers and multiple military exercises; and purchase more sophisticated weapons systems that generate revenue and enhance Russian influence while diminishing that of the United States.

As part of this partnership, Russia has worked closely to prop up the Maduro regime in Venezuela both financially—through the advance purchase

of increasingly scarce oil, coupled with debt forgiveness—and politically, by blocking sanctions and punitive measures in the United Nations and other international forums. The Putin government also enjoys a special rapport with its former revolutionary allies in the region, particularly those in Nicaragua and El Salvador. These nations have only grown in importance to Russia in recent years, particularly as the security and economic situation in Venezuela deteriorates and compromises its status as a reliable ally. In Nicaragua, President Daniel Ortega's long-standing ties with the former Soviet Union, forged during his days as the leader of the Marxist Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), have allowed Russia to easily rekindle a relationship with his friendly government. In El Salvador, the governing Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) is the most recent reliable Russian partner in the region, based on the former Soviet Union's support for the FMLN's guerilla army during El Salvador's civil war.⁵

The Gerasimov Doctrine in Latin America

The strategic underpinning of the multi-faceted Russian activities in Latin America is the 2013 “Gerasimov Doctrine,” put forward by General Valery Gerasimov, the Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces of Russia, a position that gives him operational control of Russian military intelligence (GRU).⁶ Gerasimov posited that Russia is in a state of permanent warfare, rather than facing a choice of war or peace. Within the continuum of blurred lines between war and peace is a new form of non-linear, or hybrid, warfare, in which all elements of the state are continually engaged, with greater or lesser emphasis.⁷

A recent NATO report unpacked this doctrine and the implications for Russia's new approach to warfare, and in particular hybrid warfare, noting:

Such a war, they argue, goes way beyond the frames of the traditional understanding of

*these wars. They include political intrigues, fights over resources and financial flows, and irreconcilable civilizational conflicts. On the battlefield in these wars, regular forces act alongside a number of new actors—irregular forces of rebels and fighters, criminal gangs, international terrorist networks, private military companies, and legions of foreign mercenaries, units of spetsnaz and intelligence formations from different countries, military contingents of peacekeepers from international organizations, and even non-governmental and humanitarian organizations and structures, representatives from printed and electronic mass media, volunteers, and activists from civil society.*⁸

Viewed through the prism of this doctrine, Russia's activities in Latin America come into clearer focus. While the U.S. position remains preeminent—due to geographic proximity, cultural ties, and trade ties—Russia has advanced further and faster as a competitive adversary than is often understood.

A review of Russia's activities in the region shows that, despite limited resources, the Gerasimov Doctrine is being implemented through a policy that incorporates multiple elements of soft power, coupled with military training and hardware, to directly displace U.S. influence. This includes counternarcotics and disaster relief, as well as engagement in regional Latin American forums created by the Bolivarian Alliance for the express purpose of excluding the United States and Canada.

Diverse Forms of Engagement

Russia's desire to establish a stronger foothold in Latin America is evidenced by the constant high-level government visits with its Latin American allies. In addition to more recent visits by senior officials—including to Ecuador and Suriname—an analysis of visits by senior Russians to Latin American countries from 2015 to 2017, (including a visit from president Putin in November 2016 to attend the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Peru), demonstrates a far greater level of engagement between high-level (the equivalent of an assistant secretary or above) officials of Latin American and Russian governments than that of the United States.⁹ As demonstrated in news articles and official government statements, Latin American officials from an estimated 20 countries visited Russia 44 times during those three years.¹⁰ Additionally, high-ranking Russian officials visited six Latin American countries on 11

occasions. This high-level presence decreased after 2017, with president Putin only visiting Latin America once in 2018, and even then only because the G20 summit was held in Argentina.¹¹

Admittedly, U.S. engagement with the region extends far beyond high-level or state visits, so this record does not suggest that Russian influence now exceeds that of the United States, but it does provide a useful point of reference.

Equally important, experts

widely agree that Russia's domestic political and economic troubles will likely prevent it from fully displacing the preeminent position that U.S. economic, security, and aid partnerships currently hold

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in the region. Nevertheless, these visits indicate that Russia is actively seeking partners in Latin America and is finding many countries in the region that are willing to consider such overtures.

Although still dwarfed by weapons sales from the United States and elsewhere, Russia has made significant inroads in recent years throughout Latin America, primarily with friendly countries, to expand its arms sales in the region. A recent NATO report noted the significant military purchases of Russian equipment by the Maduro regime, as well as President Ortega in Nicaragua:

Since 2005, Venezuela has purchased \$11 billion worth of equipment from Russia, including fighter jets, helicopters and rifles. Moscow provided loans to Caracas to help purchase the S-300VM anti-ballistic missile system to protect Venezuelan waters in 2013. The recent acquisition made Venezuela the second biggest importer of Russian arms between 2012 and 2015, after India. Lately, Russia also sent warships to the Caribbean to perform drug patrols. Colombians were outraged in October 2013, when two Russian supersonic bombers, capable of carrying nuclear warheads, flew from Venezuela to Nicaragua over San Andres, disputed territory between Colombia and Nicaragua. In March 2015, Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro ordered the major military exercise “Bolivarian shield,” with Russian participation, as a response to U.S. sanctions against seven Venezuelan officials.¹²

The Russian news agency TASS recently reported that since 2000, the Russian arms exporter *Rosoboronexport* has sold \$10 billion in weaponry and military equipment to Latin American nations.¹³ The company is working with Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, and Peru to broker deals for both ground and air equipment, in particular Ural trucks

and motor vehicles. In addition to *Rosoboronexport*, the Russian companies *Rostec* and *Irkut Aircraft Corporation* are also known to be operating in the region, including attending military expositions in Latin America.

Although producing few tangible results, Russia has also publicly expressed its willingness to partner on nuclear projects in Latin America. In October 2016, Russia and Paraguay announced a new Pacific nuclear energy partnership, which begins a new wave of investments and technology sharing between the two countries.¹⁴ Similarly, in January 2018 Argentina announced a recent memorandum of understanding with Russia’s state nuclear corporation *Rosatom*, which covered uranium exploration in Argentina as well as assistance in the construction of nuclear power plants.¹⁵

Russia has also made a concerted effort to deepen its partnerships with Bolivia, recently announcing that it would assist Bolivia in building a “nuclear center to research radiation technologies applied in agriculture, medicine and various industries.”¹⁶ After announcing that he had met with a number of Russian officials, and was considering additional partnerships in a number of other areas—including lithium production—Bolivian President Evo Morales, who recently visited Russia, commented warmly on the growing Russian presence in the region.¹⁷

Organized Crime and Money Laundering Structures

In his discussion of Russian foreign policy in June 2018, Admiral Tidd noted that the arrival of a Russian diplomatic presence anywhere in the world is almost immediately followed by the presence of Russian organized crime, which often allies itself with existing transnational criminal networks.¹⁸ These criminal activities are often sanctioned by the Russian government and are considered among the tools of statecraft under the Gerasimov Doctrine.

There have been several cases in Latin America recently where the Russian state and transnational criminal networks have merged to the mutual benefit and profit of both.

Perhaps the most notorious case of such collaboration came to light in February 2018, when Argentine authorities seized approximately 400 kilograms of cocaine destined for Russia, which they discovered housed in an annex of the Russian embassy. Former Russian diplomatic officials, as well as Argentine police, were among those arrested as part of the operation, which aimed to move the cocaine in diplomatic luggage to Moscow.¹⁹ The head of the criminal network identified as “Mr. K,” Andrey Kovalchuck, was reported to have a relationship with the Russian ambassador in Argentina.²⁰ He was arrested in Germany in March 2018.²¹ Testimony from one of the men arrested in the case, Ali Abyanov, indicated that the Russian embassy in Uruguay was heavily involved in the drug smuggling operation, which Abyanov said has been running for years.²²

Propping up Venezuela

Russia has continued to serve as a staunch supporter of the Venezuelan regime, even announcing before the completion of vote counting that the May 2018 presidential elections—widely considered to be fraudulent and undemocratic by most of the international community—were valid.²³ Experts note that the Maduro government, alienated from much of the regional and international community, views its relationship with Russia as symbiotic, as it reaches out to autocratic partners for survival.

As oil rich nations that currently have great difficulty accessing global financial systems, primarily as the result of effective sanction regimes in the West, Russia and Venezuela have grown their partnership in recent years. And while other nations and multinational companies look to cut their losses in Venezuela, Russian oil giant *Rosneft* continues to invest heavily. According to recent reporting, Rosneft is swapping debt for 100 percent control of the largest Venezuelan gas reserves; furthermore, as Russia bails out the struggling Venezuelan state-owned oil and natural gas company, *Petróleos de Venezuela, S.A.* (PDVSA), Rosneft’s agreements allow them to export 100 percent of what they produce.

According to oil industry expert Francisco Monaldi, Rosneft produces around 140,000 barrels per day and is one of the three largest oil companies in the country. Russia has loaned Venezuela an additional \$5 billion and as part of these deals, Rosneft received nearly 50 percent ownership of the U.S. CITGO refinery as collateral for further debt refinancing.²⁴

Additionally, President Maduro received Russian assistance in the development of an official Venezuelan cryptocurrency—known as the petro—to avoid the financial constraints of U.S. sanctions.²⁵ Venezuela followed the late 2017 creation of the petro with a January 2018 announcement by Maduro that 100 million “tokens” would be released in the initial sale of the petro for which—given the oil backing of the currency—analysts calculated the total value to be about \$6 billion.²⁶ And yet, while it relies on the value of Venezuelan oil, the Venezuelan government has indicated that the petro cannot actually be

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exchanged for barrels. The petro, designed with the help of a Russian cyber expert Fedor Bogorodsky (living in Uruguay), was officially offered for pre-sale beginning in February 2018. Between February 15th and March 15th, 38 million of 100 million tokens were auctioned with financial analysts estimating the total sale at \$1.3 billion.²⁷

In response to the petro, in March the United States officially banned:

*all transactions related to, provision of financing for, and other dealings in, by a United States person or within the United States, any digital currency, digital coin, or digital token [issued by the Venezuelan government since January 9].*²⁸

Only one little-known Russian bank, Evrofinance Mosnarbank, handles the currency. Evrofinance is comprised of a consortium of sanctioned Russian banks (50.1 percent) and a sanctioned Venezuelan state entity (49.9 percent).²⁹

Russian Media Influence

During the past three years, Russia has moved aggressively to expand its state media presence in Latin America and has, with each passing year, grown more sophisticated in the Spanish-language services it offers on multi-media platforms. These networks have quickly expanded their reach across the Hemisphere. A recent report succinctly outlined the overall aim of these efforts, which is to encourage pro-Russian sentiment throughout the region:

Moscow uses RT, other official media, social networks, and culture to change the perception that the region, including Argentina, has of Russia. Currently its image is of a country that is a continuation of the Soviet Union, which was the embodiment of hard, militarized power. Looking to the future, Moscow's goal is to promote a more culturally and

*technologically inclusive image, which is seen as key to being perceived as a modern, preeminent power, not just a strategic one.*³⁰

The two primary vehicles are *RT Español* and *Sputnik Mundo*, both closely tied to the Russian state and both carrying exclusively pro-Russia, and anti-U.S. messages. Much of the news on the websites of both outlets relates to Latin America through the lens of Russian “value-added,” including the aid and assistance the Putin regime can offer in the region, primarily to the nations comprising the *Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América* (ALBA).³¹ These Russian state media outlets are reproduced and linked back and forth to a large network of websites and programming run by the Bolivarian Alliance and their proxies across the Hemisphere, greatly amplifying the Russian media reach in Latin America.

China's Long-Term, Economics-First Approach

China's growing influence in Latin America looms large, second only to its influence and commercial exchanges with the United States. Primarily, although not exclusively economic in nature, China's activities in the region have been extensively documented in other academic and policy analysis.³² While China has certainly not yet replaced the United States in the Western Hemisphere, the gap continues to close at a significant pace. The United States has far larger foreign direct investment in Latin America than does China, although exact comparisons are not possible given that most of the Chinese enterprises are tied to the state. In addition, according to one analysis, Latin America constitutes almost 25 percent of total U.S. trade; and its producers export three times more to Latin America than to China.³³

Chinese influence is perhaps best demonstrated by official high-level Chinese visits to Latin American countries. The PRC's top three officials dealing with

foreign relations—President Xi Jinping, Foreign Minister Wang Yi, and Prime Minister Li Keqiang—made a combined 29 visits to Latin America between 2015–18. Moreover, almost half of these visits occurred in 2018, indicating an accelerating pace of Chinese interest and engagement in the Hemisphere. In the last two months of 2018 the presidents of El Salvador, Panama, the Dominican Republic, and Cuba all visited China as well. There were dozens of other visits by senior Chinese officials (the equivalent of an assistant secretary or above) to Latin America and Latin American officials to China.³⁴ Thus while Russian presence—at least high-level, public visits—has decreased during the past two years, Chinese visits are increasingly common.

As Chinese President Xi said when welcoming Argentine President Mauricio Macri to Beijing in May 2017, “Latin America is the natural extension of the 21st century Maritime Silk Road.”³⁵ While seeking to extend the new Silk Road China, like Russia in recent years, has been attempting to replicate programs that have long propagated American influence, such as military-to-military training programs where the United States has long-held sway. Indeed, China now offers similar programs, and often outperforms what the United States can offer. According to U.S. military officials in 2015, China for the first time trained more Latin American military officers than the United States, and the difference has grown every year since. Participants in Chinese military exchanges said that in addition to more opportunities in Chinese programs than U.S. programs, China offers several other advantages. Participants travel business class, stay in 5-star hotels, and often all expenses are paid during their time in China. In contrast, the United States generally offers economy class travel, non-luxury accommodations, and non-paid tourism excursions.³⁶

Another key priority for China is to consolidate its position as the sole legitimate Chinese government in the Hemisphere. As a result, China has made significant efforts to woo Taiwan’s long-time allies in

the region to recognize the Beijing government. The efforts have yielded results, with Panama switching its recognition in June 2017 and becoming the first country in Latin America to join China’s much-touted One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative.³⁷ The Dominican Republic shifted recognition in May 2018 and El Salvador followed suit in August, leaving only nine nations in the Hemisphere—mostly Caribbean islands—that still recognize Taiwan.³⁸

As R. Evan Ellis noted in June 2017, China’s policy toward Latin America is unique in its opaqueness; in contrast to Russia (and the Soviet Union before that), China’s discussion of engagement abroad solely on the basis of mutually beneficial investment opportunities belies hidden strategic goals:

In contrast to the Cold War struggle between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, the PRC does not explicitly seek to impose a particular model of governance or economic organization on the world. Yet that does not mean that China’s engagement is benign or without significant adverse consequences. With self-interest that is understandable but stunning in its global implications, the PRC is seeking to leverage its growing economic weight and capabilities, through a combination of statecraft, trade, loans, investment, and other forms of engagement, to structure a world order in which global commercial flows, political relationships, and institutions support expanding China’s wealth and power.³⁹

China is also moving aggressively to use its growing economic clout to shape hemispheric events. Last year, for the first time ever, China was granted observer status at the Summit of the Americas held in Lima, Peru in April. It was also the first summit the U.S. President did not attend, offering a stark reminder of the shifting regional priorities for both nations. As one observer noted,

“This is particularly significant at a time when China–LAC trade has reached almost historic heights—in 2017 it totaled \$266 billion—and China has become the top trading partner for a number of countries in the region, including some of the biggest economies, like Brazil, Chile, and Peru, as well as smaller ones like Uruguay.”⁴⁰ In addition, according to the Brookings Institution, by 2017 China had invested almost \$250 billion in Latin America during the previous decade, making it a critical player in the region’s economic outlook.⁴¹ As the Chinese investments, trade, and training grow, according to fiscal year (FY) 2018 budget requests, the Trump Administration requested \$1.1 billion for Latin America and the Caribbean in foreign assistance, an estimated \$600 million decrease from FY 2017 aid numbers.⁴² This includes both economic assistance and a number of security assistance programs managed by the U.S. State Department.⁴³

Furthermore, in his discussion of Beijing’s foreign policy, Ellis argues that, given how China does not ascribe to the key tenants of the liberal world order, a world in which Chinese influence is on the rise likely represents a threat to “the rights and liberties of the rest of the world,” goals that the United States has actively sought to further through its foreign policy.⁴⁴ This pragmatic approach, consistent with the pledge of non-interference in the affairs of other countries and the desire to gain hemispheric leverage, is largely devoid of considerations for issues such as environmental degradation, rule of law, functioning democratic institutions, and internal repression. This helps explain China’s willingness to lend massive amounts of money to the Maduro regime in Venezuela. The debt stood at \$62 billion in mid-2017 and grew by at least \$5 billion more in early 2018 despite the deteriorating economic, political and human rights situation.⁴⁵ Much of the debt is to be repaid with oil, and the infusions of Chinese cash, despite Venezuela falling continually far behind on its oil shipments, has been a key factor in keeping

the Maduro regime from debt default and complete collapse. It is worth noting that the price of trying to exchange debt for energy security could be very high, given that the opposition in Venezuela has promised to tear up the contracts with the Chinese. In this scenario, China could end up with all debt and no oil.

Chinese Media: Reinforcing the Long Game

Like its Russian counterpart, in Latin America the Chinese leadership spends a great deal of effort and resources on shaping the narrative of China’s expanding presence through state-controlled media. Unlike the Russians, and increasingly less like the United States, the Chinese government hosts annual meetings between Latin America media leaders and Chinese leaders, usually with expense paid trips to Beijing. A recent report noted:

*In true digital age fashion, Chinese outlets in Latin America have skipped over traditional print media in favor of virtual platforms, which host content tailored to local audiences. Though slightly less up-to-date than their Chinese-language versions, newspapers Xinhua and People’s Daily produce daily Spanish and Portuguese-language content, as does China Radio International (CRI). China Central Television (CCTV), meanwhile, boasts a 24-hour channel, CGTN Spanish, which is available online, free of charge. Even the magazine China Today, which remains one of the few examples of Chinese print media in Latin America, maintains not one, but two Spanish-language websites, in addition to its two print publications in Mexico and Peru. Nearly all of these outlets have Spanish-language accounts on social media that are banned in China, including Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.*⁴⁶

Xinhua, the official state-run press agency of China, has 21 bureaus in 19 Latin American countries, along

with 200 media subscribers (who get the new feed for free or at greatly discounted prices) and 200 non-media subscribers, including government ministries across the region. The purpose of the expansion, according to Cai Mingzhao, the director of *Xinhua*, is to use the agency's 50 years' experience in the region to "play a larger role in shaping a China, Latin America and Caribbean community of common destiny."⁴⁷

That destiny may ultimately prove not as rosy as it currently appears to many in Latin America. A recent analysis by the C4ADS research group indicates that in the case of the Indo-Pacific, China's OBOR initiative may provide the perfect cover for China's strategic expansion of the international security infrastructure. They argue:

The BRI [Belt and Road Initiative], China's guiding foreign policy doctrine and one of the most ambitious economic initiatives in modern history, is portrayed by Chinese leaders as creating win-win economic development for all nations. Yet, some states question whether China's infrastructure investments are driven by strategic interests. . . . The authors find that Chinese analysts unofficially discussing port investments routinely prioritize China's national security interests over the objective of mutually beneficial economic development, contradicting the position of official policy documents. Chinese analysts argue that the BRI's Maritime Silk Road component can help ensure Beijing's access to vital sea lines of communication. Port investments are viewed as vehicles with which China can cultivate political influence to constrain recipient countries and build dual-use infrastructure to facilitate Beijing's long-range naval operations.⁴⁸

Studies like this one help to show the true nature of Chinese investment, and time will only tell how this model will also be applied to Latin America. As

engagement with the region deepens, it is undoubtedly possible that China's economic program gives way to a more overt national security agenda, as appears to be the case in other areas of the world.

Iran in Latin America: A Plan of Proximity

Since the triumph of the Iranian Revolution in 1979, the Islamic republic has viewed Latin America as a fertile field for expansion, both in political and religious influence and in building a nuclear arsenal. Its first primary theater of expansion was Argentina, and included signing a nuclear agreement that, when abrogated by Argentina at the request of the United States, led to the 1994 Iranian-sponsored attack on a Jewish AMIA center in Buenos Aires. The attack left 85 people dead and more than 100 wounded.⁴⁹ In 2015, on the eve of prosecutor Alberto Nisman's presentation of an indictment against Argentina's then President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner—on charges of secretly reopening talks with Iran regarding a nuclear program—he was murdered inside his apartment. There are serious indicators that the murderers were directly tied to the Iranian state.⁵⁰ In other countries throughout the region, Iran has made use of Latin America's proximity to the United States as a staging ground for attacks. For example, public trial records show that Iran, operating through Guyana, was behind the 2007 attempted attack on JFK airport in New York City.⁵¹ Furthermore, the U.S. Government officially blamed senior Iranian government officials, operating in Mexico of funding a failed 2011 attempt to assassinate the Saudi ambassador in Washington, D.C.⁵²

Iran has relied on the Bolivarian Alliance and its staunchest allies to make inroads across the region, largely focused on the expansion of its diplomatic presence and Shi'a Islamist cultural centers within the safe confines of the Bolivarian Alliance member countries. By 2015, Iran or its proxy Hezbollah controlled some 80 cultural centers

across the hemisphere, many of them carrying out activities with radical populist groups that share the same anti-American agenda. Radical imams such as Abdul Karim Paz, Suhail Assad and others traveled the region visiting the cultural centers, particularly those in San Salvador, El Salvador and Iquique, Chile. Oscar Rodriguez, a Salvadoran Islamic convert who changed his name to Mustafa al Salvatori, spent nine years studying in Iran and returned to the region in 2016 as a representative of Iran in Central America.

These cultural activities, however, have recently diminished significantly. With the Bolivarian Alliance in retreat and Iran under intense internal and international pressure because of its involvement in hot wars in Syria and Afghanistan, Iran's standing in the region has weakened. As a result, visits by Iranian public officials to the region have all but ended.

At its height in 2011, the embrace of the Iranian and the Bolivarian revolutions demonstrated striking similarities in the language and strategic framework used to define themselves. Both revolutions, the Iranian and the Bolivarian, used identical words to describe their struggle in favor of the "oppressed" and against "oppressor states," and both defined the United States as the fulcrum of oppression. Not only were the words similar, but the two revolutions found a common point of departure for their visions of the need to attack the United States, based on their individual interpretations of the 1979 Iranian revolution. For the Iranians, the revolution was an act of Allah striking the infidel the United States; for the Bolivarian Alliance, the revolution was a lesson in successful asymmetrical warfare. This analysis by the Bolivarian leaders led to the adoption of a doctrine of asymmetrical warfare, which embraces the use of weapons of mass destruction against the United States and the belief that both revolutions face a common enemy in the United States.⁵³

As their relationship grew, the Iranians and the Bolivarians turned their shared ideology into

partnership. Desperate for access to the U.S. banking structure as international sanctions kicked in, in 2012 the Iranian government successfully negotiated with then Ecuadoran President Rafael Correa to establish a clandestine banking relationship between an Ecuadoran dollarized bank and a consortium of sanctioned Iranian financial institutions. The plan called for encrypted communications between the banking structures in both nations, with the decryption key to be held by the Iranian ambassador in Quito, Ecuador.⁵⁴ Given that the highest priority of the Iranian government in rebuilding its Latin American network was primarily focused on acquiring dual-use technology, access to the Western banking system and revenue streams from illicit state-to-state activities, it was narrowly focused both conceptually and geographically.

When the JCPOA was adopted, the need for most of the services acquired from the Bolivarian Alliance diminished. Iran once again had access to the global banking structure, the acquisition of most technology on the open market, and oil sales to generate revenue.

This is the most likely explanation for the rapid disappearance of the visible activity of the Iranian network in most of Latin America. Once vibrant cultural centers, like that in San Salvador, have gone quiet and are no longer hosting the large pro-Iranian events that once filled their calendars. The recruitment of dozens of students from each country in the Hemisphere to attend seminars and training in Iran, begun around 2009, has largely ceased. Visits by senior Iranian officials to the hemisphere, frequent under then Iranian president Ahmadinejad, are now few and far between, and almost none of the joint projects announced (a bicycle factory in Venezuela, a dairy processing plant in Nicaragua, and dozens of others) have come to fruition.

Given the decision of the Trump Administration to withdraw from the JCPOA in May 2018, it is likely that the Iranian network and the networks of its proxies like Hezbollah will again

become more active, as some of the same necessities for the survival of the Iranian regime will reappear. What is unclear is how much support the Iranian government can still garner from what is left of the Bolivarian Alliance. With Ecuador having withdrawn its banking support and unlikely to reinstate it, Venezuela and Nicaragua in existential crisis and El Salvador weakened, there are few allies left to come to the rescue. Nevertheless, Iran began building its clandestine network in the early 1980s and it has proved resilient and durable in less fertile terrain than currently exists. This suggests that Iran will remain active around the margins where necessary and in a more active and visible form where possible.

Conclusion

As Admiral Tidd noted in June, the United States “is no longer the only game in town” in Latin America, and its adversaries are engaged in “indirect assaults” on U.S. interests to broaden the competitive spaces in the hemisphere.⁵⁵ While USSOUTHCOM views threat networks as the biggest strategic challenge in its AOR, these threat networks are growing with the expanding influence of the three extra regional actors.

In a multipolar world, jockeying for a geopolitical edge is not uncommon nor necessarily a threat. However, in the case of Latin America, none of the primary competitors with the U.S. shares any of its fundamental values of fostering democracy and rule of law, nor strategic objectives such as drug interdiction, halting migrant flows, or building a mutually beneficial regional security structure. In fact, each of the three extra-regional actors discussed sees the United States as an enemy and views diminishing U.S. influence and weakening its standing as strategic imperatives. In the cases of Russia and Iran, friendships with the Bolivarian Alliance are built on a foundation of hatred toward the United States and the fusion of highly criminalized states with transnational organized crime groups, often wielded as

instruments of statecraft. China’s interests are primarily pragmatic economic and geopolitical strategic concerns. While none of the three currently represent a clear strategic military challenge to the United States, all have positioned themselves to be able to grow beyond economic and political competition to something much more dangerous if left unchecked. This is particularly true for Russia, which is quietly building cyber and military capacities with the intention of targeting the United States when possible.

As the Bolivarian Alliance is weakened, the United States has yet to successfully put together an active coalition to reclaim the space seized by Russia, nor has it succeeded in creating a community of interest to keep Iran from reactivating its clandestine networks in the hemisphere. Given the current economic and budgetary realities in the United States, there will be little effort to challenge China’s expanding economic reach in the Hemisphere.

Most countries outside the Bolivarian Alliance would prefer to deal with the United States rather than its adversaries. Furthermore, most of the Bolivarian Alliance nations are in crisis and offer relatively few competitive advantages to the United States’ extra-regional adversaries at this time. But U.S. disengagement in the region, coupled with the emergence of well-funded alternatives, has given many potential allies a reason to hedge their bets. The growing anti-U.S. narrative, fed by Russian disinformation, Chinese state media, and Iranian websites and outreach linked to a vast network of cyber allies is also taking its toll on how the United States is perceived.

The current trajectory in the Hemisphere cannot be altered solely with displays of military power or occasional threats and sanctions against bad actors. A genuine whole-of-government strategic approach, including diplomatic, economic, intelligence, and military components, is the only option to shrink the operational space of adversaries intent on diminishing the influence and effectiveness of the United States in Latin America. **PRISM**

Notes

¹ The Bolivarian Alliance, officially *La Alianza Bolivariana Para los Pueblos de Nuestra América* (Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America) was created in 2004 by Venezuela and Cuba, and has grown to include Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Suriname and several small Caribbean island nations. For a closer look at criminalized states in the Bolivarian Alliance see: Douglas Farah, “Transnational Organized Crime, Terrorism and Criminalized States: An Emerging Tier-One Security Challenge,” U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, Carlisle, PA, August 2012.

² The JCPOA, negotiated by Iran with the United States, Russia, China, United Kingdom, Germany, France, and the European Union, committed Iran to stop development of its nuclear weapons program in exchange for a lifting of international economic sanctions. The United States unilaterally withdrew from the agreement in May 2018.

³ Austin Ramzy, “Taiwan’s Diplomatic Isolation Increases as Dominican Republic Recognizes China,” *The New York Times*, May 1, 2018.

⁴ *Hearing to Receive Testimony on the United States Northern Command and Southern Command in Review of the Defense Authorization Request for 2019 and the Future Years Defense Program Before the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee*, 115th Congress (2018), February 15, 2018 (Statement of Admiral Kurt W. Tidd, Commander, United States Southern Command), 6-7.

⁵ The FSLN was first a Marxist guerilla army responsible for the overthrow of the Somoza dictatorship. President Ortega’s FSLN first governed Nicaragua from 1979–90, and then again from 2007–present.

⁶ For a look at the significance and power of the Russian chief of staff see: Charles K. Bartles, “Getting Gerasimov Right,” *Military Review*, January-February 2016, available at <http://usacac.army.mil/CAC2/MilitaryReview/Archives/English/MilitaryReview_20160228_art009.pdf>.

⁷ Full English translation of General Gerasimov’s article is available at <<https://inmoscowshadows.wordpress.com/2014/07/06/the-gerasimov-doctrine-and-russian-non-linear-war/>>.

⁸ Gudrun Persson, “The War of the Future: A Conceptual Framework and Practical Conclusions Essay on Strategic Thought,” NATO Defense College Russian Studies Series 3/17 (July 2017), 3, available at <<http://www.ndc.nato.int/news/news.php?icode=1078>>. There is not universal agreement that that Gerasimov was expressing a formal military doctrine, as in his initial work he was discussing how Russia viewed the Arab Spring and other “color” movements. However,

Gerasimov, who has visited Latin America, offers a useful prism through which to view Russian behavior in the hemisphere. See: Mark Galeotti, “I’m Sorry for Creating the ‘Gerasimov Doctrine,’” *Foreign Policy*, March 5, 2018, available at <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/03/05/im-sorry-for-creating-the-gerasimov-doctrine/>>.

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¹² Robert Helbig and Guillaume Lasconjarias, “Winning Peace and Exporting Stability: Colombia as NATO’s next Global Partner?” NATO Defense College Research Paper no. 138 (May 2017), 13.

¹³ “Russia Delivers Modern Weaponry Worth Over \$10 Billion to Latin America,” *Russia Beyond the Headlines*, April 28, 2017, available at <https://www.rbth.com/news/2017/04/28/russia-delivers-modern-weaponry-worth-over-10-billion-to-latin-america_752344>.

¹⁴ “Rusia y Paraguay Cooperarán en el uso pacífico de la energía nuclear [Russia and Paraguay Cooperate in the Peaceful use of Nuclear Energy],” *TRT*, October 8, 2016, available at <<http://www.trt.net.tr/espanol/ciencia-y-tecnologia/2016/10/18/rusia-y-paraguay-cooperaran-en-el-uso-pacifico-de-la-energia-nuclear-592135>>.

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²⁰ Mariano Gaik Aldrovandi, “Narcovalijas Rusas: en las Escuchas los Traficantes Mencionan al Embajador.” *Clarín*, February 24, 2018, available at <https://www.clarin.com/policiales/narcovalijas-rusas-escuchas-traficantes-mencionan-embajador_0_S1DzcOkuf.html>.

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