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## Russian Influence in Latin America: a Response to NATO

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## **Russian Influence in Latin America: a Response to NATO**

### **Abstract**

Since facing international backlash from the West over the situation in Ukraine, Russia has had to focus on new international agreements. In retaliation for NATO expansion towards the east, Russia has sought to create these agreements in Latin America. Russia has specifically sought greater ties with Cuba, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Brazil, and Mexico. Currently, these countries maintain close economic ties with the United States. However, new military agreements are giving Russia greater military access to the region and access to locations that would facilitate greater ease in conducting military and espionage operations against the United States.

## Introduction

Since the Russian annexation of Crimea and fomentation of war in southeastern Ukraine in 2014, the United States and their allies in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) have sanctioned and isolated Russia on the international stage.<sup>1</sup> The international backlash against the Russian Federation's projection of hard power in neighboring Ukraine has left the Russian Federation to foster or reinvigorate relationships with countries elsewhere around the world. This power projection has been perceived differently in the West and in Russia. In the West, Russia's recent geopolitical moves have been seen as acts of aggression.<sup>2</sup> Russia sees the moves as a reaction to the decline of the United States as the global hegemon and a natural return to multipolarity, or "*polycentrism*" by Russian experts in international relations.<sup>3</sup> Kortunov argues that Russia should continue on its path to reasserting itself as a global leader and decision maker, but argues that Russia should do so via the further development of soft power and fomenting better international diplomacy.<sup>4</sup> Kortunov also mentions Moscow's presence in Latin America and questions whether Russia should focus on the leftist regimes that are hostile to the West there or focus on repairing its own relationship with the West.

Kortunov's mention of the Russian presence in Latin America is key as this could be a flashpoint between Russia and the United States just as the Eastern expansion of NATO has been. The focus of international interaction between Russia and Latin America since 2000 has been on energy ventures and arms sales. However, the international backlash over Russian intervention in Ukraine led Russian President Putin to schedule an international tour in Latin American countries in the summer of 2014.<sup>5</sup> The countries where this is demonstrated the clearest are Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, which admittedly have long standing ties with Moscow, but President Putin's 2014 tour also included Mexico and Brazil, which have not historically has been as close to Russia as the other states.<sup>6</sup> With mention of Russia in Latin America, what are the possible effects of this presence? Through a country case approach, this article seeks to analyze Russia's presence in Latin America since 2000 to answer this question. Before beginning the country case approach, historical context is needed to better understand the American and Russian spheres of influence, Russia's kinetic presence in Ukraine and now even Syria, as well as the

threat of a regional flashpoint in Latin American between the United States and Russia. It is the conclusion of this article that the current geopolitical standoff between Russia and the United States is witnessing a revisionist Russia attempting to undermine U.S. global hegemonic power, which also includes the attempt of undermining U.S. influence in Latin America.

During the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union established territorial zones of states geographically close to them and worked to expand their influence from these zones to each other's zones or establishing this idea of conflicting spheres of influence. During that conflict, these zones were Western Europe and Eastern Europe, loyal to the United States and the Soviet Union respectively. These two superpowers had additional zones in close geographic proximity: Latin America to the United States and Central Asia to the Soviet Union. These latter zones are the result of centuries of conquest and political dominance by the bigger powers. While Central Asia and Russia have been entwined much longer, the case of Latin America, the establishment of this American sphere of influence dates back to the fifth American President: James Monroe. President James Monroe established the Monroe Doctrine, which outlined American intent that Europe would stay out of the Western Hemisphere.<sup>7</sup> Since then, the main incursions have been from the Soviet Union: The predecessor state to the Russian Federation. That was the Cold War: however, there are arguments that the United States and its allies are once again engaged in a Cold War with the Russian Federation.<sup>8</sup> If the United States and its allies are to prevail in this new conflict, it will have to maintain its longstanding Monroe Doctrine and entice its partners in Latin America to continue looking towards Washington and not Moscow.

Though it appears that Russia is infringing upon the U.S. sphere of influence, this may not be unprecedented as the United States did the same at the end of the Cold War. To conclude the Cold War, U.S. Secretary of State James Baker declared to Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev, "If we maintain a presence in a Germany that is a part of NATO, there would be no extension of NATO's jurisdiction for forces of NATO one inch to the east."<sup>9</sup> However, since that conversation (February 1990), NATO has grown to include the former Warsaw Pact (Eastern European) countries of Hungary, the Czech Republic, Poland, Bulgaria, Romania, Albania,

Slovakia, Slovenia, Croatia, and Montenegro while also including the former Soviet satellite nations of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.<sup>10</sup> The significance of this enlargement is that NATO now encroaches on the Russian border. This also means that repeated claims from Russian President Vladimir Putin that the United States and its Western allies have broken their promise of non-expansion are valid. With NATO encroachment on the Russian border, it makes sense then that Russia would look to reciprocate actions in the U.S. sphere of influence by undermining confidence in relations with the United States on the part of countries in Latin America.

## Literature Review

### *Breakup of the Soviet Union and Degradation of Russia*

On December 25, 1991, the Flag of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (Soviet Union) descended from its position at the Kremlin for the final time.<sup>11</sup> The Cold War had finally ended and the struggle between the world's two largest superpowers was finally over. The question of what was to come in the post-Cold War world was now arising. While this date meant the end of the Soviet Union, it also marked the first time that Russians did not have to fear an attack emanating from the West, a stark contrast to what the previous century had just threatened Russians. Yet, with time, these fears would once again rematerialize.

A year prior, Soviet Premier Gorbachev and U.S. Secretary of State Baker were negotiating on the idea of German reunification. In the West, the idea was for the stability of Europe and reunification of German families with one another and the peaceful reintegration of Germany into Europe. The Soviet perspective was to ensure that a reunified Germany would not mean a renewed threat to the Russian people, as it had it with World War I and World War II. Yet this fear of an invasion from the West was warranted from merely observing the German invasions in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Russia has experienced invasions for the last thousand years.<sup>12</sup> That is why so many would have been interested in the negotiations between the United States and the Soviet Union over this reunification.

Secretary Baker seemed to understand this as well. In that telegram to Premier Gorbachev, he also reiterated, “would you prefer a united

Germany outside of NATO that is independent and has no US forces or would you prefer a united Germany with ties to NATO and assurances that there would be no extension of NATO's current jurisdiction eastward?"<sup>13</sup> Germany would eventually reunite by the end of 1990.<sup>14</sup> The 1990's would come to a close and see countries formerly loyal to Moscow join both the European Community and NATO as the military alliance slowly moved east while Russia fell into ruin and would have to rebuild itself once more.

## Country Cases

### *Ukraine*

The origin of this new standoff between Russia and the West has to do with the annexation of Crimea and the fomentation of war in and invasion of South Eastern Ukraine, in the provinces of Donetsk and Luhansk, known as the Donbass. In late 2013 and early 2014, protests erupted in the Ukrainian capital as then President Viktor Yanukovich refused to sign international accords that would have moved Ukraine closer to Western Europe and away from Russia. The protests eventually saw Yanukovich ousted, but the Ukrainian territory of Crimea invaded and annexed by Russia through an illegitimate parliamentary referendum on annexation.<sup>15</sup> Following this illegitimate annexation, war broke out in another region of Ukraine, the Donbass, which has been another point of contention between the United States and the Russian Federation. The Western view is that the faction fighting the Ukrainian government, styled as "separatists" are actually Russian forces. These Russian forces, specifically Special Forces, are being deployed in unmarked uniforms and using other means to conceal their Russian identity. When Ukraine capture a small contingent of these soldiers in the southeastern part of the country, the soldiers stated that they were on holiday, but that refusal to fight meant prison terms for disobeying orders.<sup>16</sup> In a joint press conference with U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk stated,

"It seems to me that the only country who strongly deny clear military Russian boots on the ground is Russian Federation and personally President Putin. If they need, I can give them my glasses. While crystal clear that Russian military is on the ground, crystal clear that it was Russia who invaded Crimea, Russia invaded the

east of Ukraine, because frankly, it's a little bit difficult to buy SA-11 and SA-22 and Russian tanks and Russian Howitzers and Russian artillery at the marketplace in Donetsk or Lugansk. We have strong evidences and grounds that Russian Federation violated an international law and Russian president ordered Russian troops to invade both Crimea and the east of Ukraine. We are not fighting with so-called rebels or guerillas. We are fighting with the Russian regular army.”<sup>17</sup>

Secretary of State Kerry, for his part seemed to support Prime Minister Yatsenyuk's statement with,

“Let me add to that that social media is filled with comment – and on occasion, photos – of Russian soldiers being returned to Russia dead, and parents in Russia being told a lie that their children, their sons, died in an accident somewhere. And there are other stories. I won't go into them at great length now except to say to you that there are intercepts of conversations of orders being given by people who are discernibly Russian. There are references – there's a person in captivity today who has recently given evidence of his own role with respect to these kinds of decisions. So enough is enough.”<sup>18</sup>

Russia still denies any involvement in sponsoring the war in southeastern Ukraine. In April of 2016, President Putin stated that Russia was intent on restoring peace in Ukraine, but that it was facing sanctions and international backlash from the West, that it was, in fact, the victim of Western aggression.<sup>19</sup> This is in stark contrast to President Barack Obama's statement that, “Russia encourages the violence, trains, and arms the separatists. They are funded by Russia.”<sup>20</sup> In 2018, following in the footsteps of President Obama, the Trump White House released its position that Russia “invaded Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014” and continued by announcing further support for the Ukrainian government's armed forces.<sup>21</sup>

In November of 2018, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko signed, “On the Introduction of Martial Law in Ukraine” in retaliation for “wide-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian armed forces” and an attack on Ukrainian naval vessels in the Kerch Strait.<sup>22</sup> In February of 2019,

President Poroshenko also publicly announced his desires for Ukraine to join both NATO and the EU. He explicitly stated, “We know that only membership in NATO and the EU, which will ensure a strong development of democracy and the rule of law, economy, and living standards of Ukraine, can guarantee peace and freedom to Ukraine, as well as to all the neighbors of Russia.”<sup>23</sup> To date, the conflict has seen over 10,000 deaths and over 1.3 million people displaced from their homes.

### *Syria*

The United States has been in Syria since the start of the conflict. The most drastic event involving U.S. forces was the 2018 airstrike on Syrian military assets. President Trump declared, “My fellow Americans, a short time ago, I ordered the United States Armed Forces to launch precision strikes on targets associated with the chemical weapons capabilities of Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad.”<sup>24</sup> Russia entered the Syrian Civil War, in 2015, in defense of the Bashar Al-Assad Regime, albeit if officially to “fight international terrorism.”<sup>25</sup> Russia’s military presence in Syria was designated as limited to air operations (with no mention of the exclusion of Special Forces).<sup>26</sup> In 2016, Reuters reported that Russian forces were exceeding their declared presence in Syria by using private military contractors.<sup>27</sup> The presence of these military contractors, or “mercenaries” in common usage, would also become important when kinetically engaging U.S. forces.

The direct contact between Russian and American forces came in the form of a firefight when Russia’s “little green men” aided pro-Assad forces contact the Syrian Democratic Forces, who happened to be assisted by U.S. Special Forces.<sup>28</sup> The Pentagon did not state the presence of the Russian forces in the pro-Assad attack in an immediate release, but in a New York Times article two months later, it appears that the Pentagon did admit to this.<sup>29</sup> The New York Times article claims that the pro-Assad and Russian force sustained 200-300 casualties while the United States backed Syrian Democratic Forces sustained no casualties. Additionally, in 2018, the White House released a briefing, which stated that Russia was continuing to exacerbate the Syrian Civil War in support of Assad.<sup>30</sup>



## *Cuba*

Russia and Cuba have maintained close relations since Fidel Castro's turn toward the Soviet Union in 1960. This relationship would witness the Cuban Missile Crisis where the Soviet Union placed missiles in Cuba and played host to the event marking the closest direct confrontation between the Soviet Union and the United States. However, the official Russian presence in Cuba ended in 2002 when the Russian Federation closed its Signals Intelligence (SIGINT) base at Lourdes.<sup>31</sup> This was due to budgetary concerns and the belief that overseas bases would be too expensive for the Russian military. In 2012, President Putin decided that Russia needed to refocus on its military capabilities and capacity to project power.<sup>32</sup> President Putin specifically stated,

“Our goal is to expand Russia's presence on the global arms and military equipment market. This means expanding the number of countries we sell to, and expanding the range of goods and services we offer.”

In 2015, General John Kelly of U.S. Southern Command stated that:

“Periodically since 2008, Russia has pursued an increased presence in Latin America through propaganda, military arms and equipment sales, counterdrug agreements, and trade. Under President Putin, however, we have seen a clear return to Cold War-tactics as part of its global strategy. Russia is using power projection in an attempt to erode U.S. leadership and challenge U.S. influence in the Western Hemisphere. Last year and again this year, a Russian intelligence ship docked in Havana multiple times while conducting operations in the Gulf of Mexico and along the east coast of the United States. Russia has courted Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua to gain access to air bases and ports for resupply of Russian naval assets and strategic bombers operating in the Western Hemisphere.”<sup>33</sup>

Part of what General Kelly's reference of the Russian naval vessel docking in the port of Havana was a culmination of top-state officials, including the President and Minister of Defense, to Cuba, searching for agreements that would enhance bilateral relations. President Vladimir Putin visited Cuba

in July of 2014, where he told reporters that renewing Russia's presence and commitment to Latin America was a top foreign policy initiative.<sup>34</sup> Russian Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu also visited Cuba, but earlier that year.<sup>35</sup> The official story from the Russian Ministry of Defense was that Shoigu's visit was to negotiate issues of security with Cuban leader Raul Castro. Julia Gurganus, of the Carnegie Endowment Center, posited that this visit was more so about establishing Russian access to ports and airfields of nations within Latin America.<sup>36</sup> While not immediately likely, there also remains the possibility that this cooperation will one day culminate in the re-opening of the SIGINT base at Lourdes.

### *Nicaragua*

The Russian government has also successfully curbed its influence in Nicaragua. In 2014, on the same tour as the meeting with Cuba (as well as Argentina and Brazil), President Putin and Nicaraguan President Ortega discussed agriculture related trade, expansion of Russian oil projects into Nicaragua, and a security agreement that would allow for Russian intelligence equipment to be stationed in Nicaragua.<sup>37</sup> In the official remarks following that meeting, President Ortega referenced already benefiting from the fruits of Russian investment into his country and even told President Putin, "This is the first time a Russian President visits Nicaragua. We are happy to welcome you in our country. Please consider it your country."<sup>38</sup> In that same statement, President Ortega also declared that there were fraternal relations between Russia and Nicaragua. A further security agreement between the two countries was announced in 2018.<sup>39</sup> Sergey Sukhankin of the Jamestown Foundation assessed this agreement to be grounded in military assistance, para-military assistance, cooperation with information warfare, and interest in a canal that would mirror the Panama Canal, connecting the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.<sup>40</sup> The military assistance to Nicaragua has included supply of tanks, light fighter jets, helicopters, and boats and is said to supply 90 percent of Nicaragua's arms' needs. Data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) indicates that Russia has provided Nicaragua with 128 million units worth of arms since the year 2000 and supports the statistic on arms' needs.<sup>41</sup> This assistance in Nicaragua from Russia is vehemently welcomed as the United States is condemning and sanctioning the country for abuses against students, journalists, and clergy members.<sup>42</sup>

## *Venezuela*

Russia's interest in Venezuela lies with the opportunity of investment that Venezuela has provided in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Under the leadership of Hugo Chavez, Venezuela was an Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) powerhouse.<sup>43</sup> Venezuela also began purchasing large amounts of arms from Russia as well as working out lucrative energy contracts with Russian firms. In 2006, Gazprom won a bid to explore oil deposits within Venezuelan waters while \$4 billion arms' deal was successfully negotiated between the two countries.<sup>44</sup> The transition of power from Chavez to his successor, Nicolas Maduro, would not reflect the prestige of this oil rich nation. Under Maduro, Venezuela would further tie itself to Russia by receiving loans from Rosneft, Russia's largest oil company, which is also used to leverage soft power with Russian foreign policy.<sup>45</sup> The massive debts that Venezuela owes are increasing, and political stability of the country is in jeopardy. The year 2019 has proven to be the most dangerous year in recent memory regarding Venezuela.

In January of 2019, Venezuelan Congressional leader Juan Guaidó declared himself President, refusing to acknowledge the legitimacy of Nicolas Maduro's victory in the election.<sup>46</sup> In early February, the United States State Department, under the lead of Secretary of State Pompeo, backed Guaidó's claim and recognized him as the legitimate President of Venezuela.<sup>47</sup> The United States also formed a coalition of countries recognizing Guaidó, including the European Union, but not the Russian Federation. Russia decided to back Maduro and violence has since broken out in reaction to the split in government. In February, President Maduro closed the borders of Venezuela with Brazil and Colombia, attempting to stop international aid from entering the country.<sup>48</sup> The response has been injuries and deaths of citizens along both borders as well as the defection of hundreds of Venezuelan troops to the opposition government, operating out of Colombia.<sup>49</sup> The United States has shown interest in deploying troops to Colombia, near the border.<sup>50</sup> Russia has sent private military contractors to shore up the Maduro regime in the case of civil war.<sup>51</sup>

## *Brazil*

In economic terms, Brazil is one of the two major Latin American countries for Russian trade (the other being Mexico) and engages in

discussion with Russia via the BRICS forum (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa).<sup>52</sup> Bilateral relations between Russia and Brazil have been strong since 2000, beginning with “the Basic Agreement on Partnership Relations”, visits from President Vladimir Putin to Brazil in 2004 and President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva visiting Russia in 2005 in efforts to sign the "Strategic Partnership Action Plan", and a visa waiver agreement in 2008.<sup>53</sup> In the 2010's, both Russia and Brazil have stressed the importance of future development of cooperation.<sup>54</sup> In 2014, President Vladimir Putin traveled to Brazil once more for the official BRICS summit, in which the “Fortaleza Declaration and Action Plan” had been signed.<sup>55</sup> President Putin specifically mentioned that a series of commercial agreements in a variety of sectors had been agreed, and that economic development had consistently increased between the two countries.<sup>56</sup> In 2017, Brazilian President Michel Temer visited Russia to negotiate a series of acts including: International dialogue between their respective foreign ministries, an agreement between these two ministries from 2018-2021, a memorandum of understanding between respective ministries regarding trade, and regarding tariffs between Brazil and the Eurasian Economic Union.<sup>57</sup> Russian-Brazilian relations have focused on economics and finance, energy, defense, science and technology, agriculture, culture, education and sports.

Bilateral trade between Russia and Brazil was worth \$6.8 billion in 2014, following the BRICS summit, while trade between Russia and the United States was worth \$62.5 billion for the same year.<sup>58</sup> Bilateral trade between Russia and Brazil amounted to \$5.4 billion in 2017 while bilateral trade between the United States and Brazil was 10 times that amount at \$52.3 billion.<sup>59</sup> Russia also has tried to flaunt its defense agreements with Brazil, but arms trade between the two countries have only amounted to 4.1 percent of all arms imports to Brazil since 2000.<sup>60</sup> During this same period, the United States has supplied 18.13 percent of arms to Brazil, falling behind Russia only twice during that period: 2010 and 2015. The other major target for Russia in Latin America is Mexico.

### *Mexico*

Perhaps the biggest worry for the Russian advances of influence to Latin America should be the United States' southern neighbor: Mexico. During his tenure, President Putin has met with two of his Mexican counterparts:

Vicente Fox and Enrique Peña Nieto. In 2004, the Kremlin released President Putin's view that Russia, at that time, did not have the resources to give Latin America the same attention that its predecessor, the Soviet Union, had been able to during the Cold War. The press release specifically mentioned Mexico as a possible starting point, following a phone conversation between Presidents Vicente Fox and Vladimir Putin.<sup>61</sup> In 2005, before Russia's inclusion in the World Trade Organization, Presidents Putin and Fox met to discuss signing bilateral agreements on suitability between their respective aviation ministries, energy sector cooperation between their respective energy ministries, agreements between their respective health ministries, and collaboration on mutual legal assistance to criminal cases.<sup>62</sup> The Russian Embassy to Mexico has also maintained an extensive history of the bilateral relationship between the two countries. According to their records, 2008 saw increased cooperation between the two countries in combatting organized crime, terrorism, and struggles against climate change.<sup>63</sup> Their records also indicate that an agreement of bilateral cooperation between the Russian Federation Council and the Mexican Senate was formalized in 2013.<sup>64</sup> Four years later, in 2017, Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto met with President Vladimir Putin and the two discussed the increase in trade between the two countries, and the potential for much more.<sup>65</sup>

Although this rhetoric and sets of exchanges would indicate a great deal of collaboration, Richard Miles of the Center for Strategic International Studies (CSIS) indicates the opposite. Miles actually argues that data shows that total trade between Mexico and the Russian Federation totaled \$1.7 billion in 2016, or the equivalency of 39 hours of trade between the United States and Mexico.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, while Russia mainly sees opportunities for trading with Mexico via arms, data is also not in their favor. The data from SIPRI's register shows that total Mexican imports of arms since 2000 have been 2,656 million pieces of equipment, with Russia totaling 5 percent at 132 million and the United States accounting for 50.9 percent at 1,353 million pieces.<sup>67</sup> The biggest questions that arise are what will happen with Mexico's newest President: Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador (AMLO). AMLO is more of a nationalist figure and the first to be elected outside the two main parties in over half a century. AMLO has also decided to focus the country on projects of infrastructure, including a new oil refinery.<sup>68</sup> While AMLO has voiced wariness towards the United States, his administration did take part in the renegotiation of the North

American Free Trade agreement and helped come up with its successor: The United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA), effectively continuing the tradition of binding Mexico's economy to that of the United States.<sup>69</sup>

### *Other Russian Commitments to the Region*

In 2014, the Minister for Defense of Russia, Sergei Shoigu, announced commitment to monitoring the Gulf of Mexico with permanent nuclear bomber aerial runs and the possibility of establishing military bases in Latin America and the Western Hemisphere.<sup>70</sup> The type of aircraft capable of these missions had not been observed in the area since 2008. However, in 2018, the Russian Ministry of Defense announced that long-range strategic bombers had flown from Russia to airfields in Venezuela.<sup>71</sup> It was the third noted time since 2008 that these aircraft had landed in Venezuela, according to William Courtney at the RAND Corporation.<sup>72</sup> This has also accompanied Russian naval movement in the region. A Russian SIGINT ship has been frequently spotted in the area. The Viktor Leonov, a Russian Meridian Project 864 reconnaissance vessel, was spotted off the coast of the Atlantic Seaboard in 2017.<sup>73</sup> The Viktor Leonov has patrolled the Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico since at least 2015, when it sailed from Venezuela to Cuba for training.<sup>74</sup> One of the ship's visits to Cuba also coincided with United States-Cuba talks aimed at restoring diplomatic relations to those similar to the pre-Cuban Missile Crisis era.<sup>75</sup> This intelligence gathering ship also had been spotted off American coasts numerous times in 2017 and 2018, near Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, and Virginia.<sup>76</sup> The presence of this ship has been more concrete than that of others, including submarines, but the threat of submarines remains.

Since Defense Minister Shoigu's announcement, Russian Admiral Viktor Chirkov stated that Russian submarine patrols were up about 50 percent from 2013.<sup>77</sup> Supporting this claim, General Curtis Scaparrotti of United States European Command testified to Congress that Russian naval activity, particularly in the submarine environment, is the highest it has been since the 1980's.<sup>78</sup> In 2015, the U.S. Navy tracked a Russian submarine, the Yantar, down the Atlantic seaboard to Cuba, noticing that it was following a path of communications cables and displaying the capability of deploying small vessels for cutting such communications, if

the need ever arose for that.<sup>79</sup> This foreshadowing of Russian national defense that magazine editor Igor Korotchenko revealed in 2018: “Our submarines, too, might have surfaced suddenly some place in the Gulf of Mexico to shock America. We have the corresponding forces of our submarine fleet there.”<sup>80</sup> This should not be taken lightly, as Russian President Vladimir Putin also revealed in February of 2019 that, “I would like to make an important statement. We did not announce it before, but today we can say that as soon as this spring the first nuclear-powered submarine carrying this unmanned vehicle will be launched.”<sup>81</sup> The announcement was a confirmation of what U.S. Intelligence had reported on in 2016: Russia has been working on developing unmanned submarines, capable of being deployed thousands of miles from base.<sup>82</sup> These announcements and developments of newer technology are attempts at outright hard power projection intended to convey a message of parity or near parity to military strength globally.

## Analysis

Russia’s presence in Latin America indicates that that they are willing to expand their reach in order to form new agreements. International economic sanctions have left Russia no choice. The conflict in Ukraine, under Russia’s direction, has left them in hostile conflict with the West and liberal democracies. Their moves into Syria also indicate a desire to establish himself or herself as an important global actor that should be consulted, not ignored as they claim that the West has done since the end of the Cold War. The conflict in Syria also provides the Russian military battlefield experience for its soldiers and the ability to confront American soldiers, who have been fighting in the region since 2001. While Russia decided to make the move into Syria during the Obama administration, they have encountered American forces refusing to back down during the Trump administration.

President Trump’s ordering of airstrikes against the Assad regime sent a clear message that the United States would no longer allow war crimes against civilian populations in the name of the regime. The skirmish between Assad and Russian mercenaries with American backed forces and American Special Forces also reinforced a refusal to back down to Russia. Further encounters between the two militaries might prove to be even more dangerous and escalate. Since 2014, President Putin has heightened

his rhetoric as to what is considered a threat, and direct confrontation between the two countries' military forces might threaten to work in President Putin's favor should he seek justification for war.

Regarding NATO, President Putin is essentially correct: The promise not to expand was broken. This is only at face value, however due to the fact that Articles 51 and 52 of the United Nations Charter can be interpreted to allow such membership.<sup>83</sup> Article 51 does not state anything about agencies, but is the article that discusses a nation's right to self-defense. The article does stress the event of armed attack. Article 52, however, discusses a nation's right to enter into regional agencies for protection. This article then, in essence, justifies the positions of former Warsaw Pact countries wary of Russia turning to NATO membership. Beyond just the legal framework, it is important to remember that once the Soviet Union fell, the former Soviet Union and its partner states in Eastern Europe underwent a period of chaos. For many of the countries who eventually went on to join NATO, the structure provided by Western institutions, such as security with NATO and economic reform with the European Union, was a way to get back on track and reassert some sort of national identity. This unexpected expansion of NATO towards the territories that President Bush had once promised would not happen came unexpectedly and not without repercussions.

What should be extremely alarming about this increase in Russian influence across Latin America is Russia's ability to export advanced weaponry on as wide a scale as the United States. Latin America specifically has had a violent history in the past century, fueled with weaponry provided by both the United States and the Soviet Union (now Russia). SIPRI lists the United States and Russia as the world's two leading exporters of arms (in that order).<sup>84</sup> The new security agreement with Nicaragua would also imply a further reliance on Russian weaponry. Allowing Russian SIGINT equipment into Nicaragua, as well as discussing the possibilities of a new trans-ocean canal, would mean further dependence on Russia. This also might cause problems for U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) operating in Central America knowing that a contingent of Russians based in the area is constantly monitoring them. Venezuela is also creating cause for concern.



The government of Nicolas Maduro is already heavily in debt to Russian companies and the Russian state itself. The instability that has occurred in early 2019 is increasing the possibilities for violence daily. Should civil war officially break out in Venezuela, it remains to be seen whether the United States and Russia will be willing to back opposing sides, as has been the case in Syria. Possibly, the difference would be that Russia would have had a presence in the country since the beginning of the conflict, not years into as was the case in Syria. This possibly indicates a greater willingness to protect the Maduro regime and the current government of Venezuela. Should this be the case, it will also depend on whether U.S. President Donald Trump and his administration are prepared for such an event. In 2017, President Trump had stated “I’m not going to rule out a military option. We have many options for Venezuela.”<sup>85</sup> This issue was brought up again in January 2019 (following the beginning of the unrest) at a White House Press Conference. Acting Chief of Staff, Mick Mulvaney, told journalists that the President is looking at all options, and that “I don’t think any president of any party who is doing his or her job would be doing the job properly if they took anything off the table.”<sup>86</sup> The possibilities of such escalations have only increased after the Maduro regime ordered U.S. diplomats to leave Venezuela, following accusations that the U.S. government was responsible for a power blackout that has left the country’s infrastructure vulnerable.<sup>87</sup> This order, from Caracas, came a day following Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s announcement that the State Department was withdrawing all personnel from the U.S. Embassy in Caracas.<sup>88</sup>

Focusing on the region at large, the Russian government stated in its 2016 Foreign Policy Concept that it was intent on increasing bilateral cooperation with Latin American states by targeting regional economic associations and projects.<sup>89</sup> The multiple cooperation agreements signed between Russia and these countries since 2000 would support this claim. However, trade data from the United Nations shows that these countries maintain much stronger economic ties with the United States than with the Russian Federation. In some instances, this trade is valued at 10 times the value than that between these countries and the Russian Federation. This analysis also states that these Latin American countries find it more profitable to deal with the American government than the Russian government. United Nations trade data actually shows that, even with Russia’s three main partners in the region (Cuba, Nicaragua, and

Venezuela), trade between these countries and the United States was much larger, at times more than double that of the trade between these countries and Russia. This also reveals that Russian attempts at increasing their foreign influence in the region are not reflected in economic data. The empirical data favoring United States trade also provides opportunity.

When asked by a U.S. Senator what he thought of the foreign development budget before becoming Secretary of Defense, General James Mattis once stated,

“If you don't fund the State Department fully, then I need to buy more ammunition ultimately. So, I think –it's a cost benefit ratio. The more that we put into the state department's diplomacy, hopefully the less we have to put into a military budget.”<sup>90</sup>

Ultimately, General Mattis' recommendation of foreign development seems logical in this instance. If the United States can work to increase infrastructure and economies in the region, just as it has under its counter insurgency doctrine, then it is much more plausible that these governments would see the United States in a more favorable outlook than they previously had.<sup>91</sup> This would also possible mean less inclination for these countries to look to outside influence, such as that of Russia, for economic and political support to achieve national goals. Military actions and maneuvers, however, would indicate a slight increase in influence, or causes of concern for the United States.

The increase in military co-operation between Russia and Latin American countries means that Russia is once again trying to establish a permanent military presence in the Western Hemisphere. The use of airfields in Venezuela, and the negotiations of airfields elsewhere in the region, is allowing Russia to place greater air assets in the region. These negotiations are allowing Russia to fulfill its promise of monitoring the Gulf of Mexico and Caribbean, as promised by Sergei Shoigu, through the housing of assets, which means that fuel and other logistical support would accompany these planes to support these missions. The negotiations also focused on naval port access for Russian ships. Testimony from Russian and American military commanders indicates that Russian naval activity has greatly increased. Strategic access to ports in Cuba and Nicaragua would also mean shorter trips for reconnaissance missions of American

coastlines in intelligence gathering operations. Cuba provides easy access, but Nicaragua would be attractive due to the positioning of other SIGINT assets. The presence of the Viktor Leonov might also indicate a willingness to make visits to Nicaragua and corroborate other intelligence gathered from inside the country or collaborate on targeting of American military and intelligence resources in the Western Hemisphere.

The Russian submarine drones could also possibly raise the likelihood of these types of operations. This is because of the existence of narco-submarines, or low-profile vessels, that have been used by Latin American Transnational Criminal Organizations (TCOs) since the 1990's.<sup>92</sup> These narco-submarines have been a nuisance to the U.S. Coast Guard as their smaller size allows greater stealth in transporting illicit narcotics and other contraband to American coastal waters. The Russian submarine drones sound similar to these narco-submarines, but with far more advanced technology and capabilities than those used by TCOs. It is also possible that the countries of Latin America are just as aware of their presence as the U.S. government. It is also quite possible that these countries may suggest similar use of the Russian submarine drones as the narco-submarines, sending them along similar paths to conduct intelligence missions and surveil U.S. military and intelligence capabilities, such as the naval base at King's Bay in Georgia (as the Viktor Leonov has in the past).

## Implications

The expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization towards Russian borders has been perceived by Russia as a violation of trust that was agreed upon in the dying days of the Cold War. This has also led to a state where countries that once favored Russia have turned to the West and the United States. Russia's actions in Ukraine, in 2014, were intended to send a message to these countries to comply with Russian influence as the status quo. The backlash of these actions has been the international isolation of Russia and set the stage for what appears to be a new Cold War between Russia and the West. In retaliation for seemingly undermining Russian influence in Europe, Russia has turned to countries of Central and South America to foment new relationships, in an attempt to do the same in countries that have traditionally fallen under American influence.

This has been especially evident in Cuba, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Brazil, and Mexico, where Russia has shown intent on re-establishing a Russian presence since 2000. The establishment of bilateral agreements, ranging from economic agreements and defense agreements to scientific and healthcare collaboration agreements, has set a precedent that Russia is trying to influence these nations under the guise of assistance covertly. Announcements from the Russian government would indicate the success of these agreements, yet trade data from the United Nations does not support this idea. Russia has been much more successful in terms of defense co-operation with these countries, having negotiated access to naval ports, airfields, and placing intelligence resources within strategic locations. This has also left a wide range of implications regarding Russia's presence in the region.

The first implication would be that Russia is looking to take advantage of historical distrust of the United States in the region. American condemnation and sanctioning of specific governments in the area, coupled with the recent issues in Venezuela, threaten to bring memories of U.S. support for coups and regime changes in Latin America back to life. With Venezuela, American and Russian support for opposing factions threatens to divide the country violently along similar lines to that of Syria in the Middle East, where both countries are also involved in supporting opposing factions. The expulsion of American diplomats from the region, and the Maduro regime's historic dependence on Russia, could also lead to further calls of support from Russia, including delivery of more arms and weapons of war. The handling of this conflict will also inevitably shape how other countries in the region view both the United States and Russia and will shape their decision of which country to support in the coming decades.

The second implication has been addressing the influx of migrants from the region to the United States and underlying issues. Nicaragua is one of the leading points of origin for these migrants, and President Ortega enthusiastically acknowledged Russian investment in infrastructure in the country. Venezuela, like Nicaragua, is also heavily dependent on Russia for investment of infrastructure. The idea of a new trans-ocean canal in the country could lead to other issues as well. Additionally, the growing crisis in Venezuela is also, in part, due to this reliance on Russia and increasing further public debt. What is being demonstrated is that widespread

poverty in the region, related to poor physical and fiscal infrastructure, is leading to violent clashes and a mass movement of people towards opportunity. If General James Mattis is to be believed, regarding funding, then American assistance and stimulation to the region could alleviate this motivation for migration as well as lead to better relations in the area, incentivizing these traditional American partners to remain partners and turn their course of focusing on new relations with Russia or other outside actors.

The final implication has to do with Russia's attempts at establishing a permanent military presence in the region. At the beginning of the period, President Vladimir Putin acknowledged that Russia did not have the resources or capabilities of maintaining military bases in the area any longer. Following Russia's isolation in 2014, Russia seems to have reversed that course and is intent on projecting capabilities. Their announcement of permanent nuclear bombing missions, increase in naval activities, and declaration of intent to return to Latin America supports these intents. Negotiations for access to strategic ports, airfields, and placement of equipment also indicate how serious Russia is at this goal. Technology has also increased, allowing Russia new opportunities for its military assets and possible missions of spying on the United States. These maneuvers and negotiations also work to project power in the American sphere of influence, just as the United States does in Russia's sphere of influence, to state that, as United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres stated, "The Cold War is back — with a vengeance."<sup>93</sup>

## Conclusion

Why should the United States be concerned about a greater Russian presence in Latin America? The data shows that bilateral trade with countries in the region is still in American favor. However, these countries also have a historic distrust of the United States and "Yankee imperialism". This culminated in a series of violent conflicts that acted as flashpoints in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century when the Soviet Union was supporting these countries. Today, there are different circumstances. While the United States and Russia appears to square off once again in a Cold War, the United States is also facing an immigration issue from Latin America. President Trump has declared a national emergency at the U.S.' southern border and the influx of illegal immigration (particularly from Central and

South America) have spurred this declaration.<sup>94</sup> This additional facet threatens to deteriorate American relations with Latin America further. The President's rhetoric during his tenure has not been favorable towards the region. The additional crisis in Venezuela is also causing a stir in the region, with these countries divided on supporting Guaido (whom the United States supports) and Maduro (whom Russia supports). It also threatens to reanimate a history of American led coups in Central and South America during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century when the Soviet Union was looking to spread Communism in the Western Hemisphere.

These fears would be substantiated for the governments of these countries, but also may lead them to reconsider their current trade stances, which still favor the United States. There is also the question of Mexico, which would also act as a flashpoint. Russian meddling on the southern border of the United States may have affects that spill over directly into the American economy as it the Mexican economy has been intertwined with that of the United States since 1994. Finally, the issue of port access and positioning of intelligence assets closer to American borders should be a matter of concern. If done correctly, then Kortunov may be onto something with Russian improvements in soft power to accompany its hard power projection, which may once again prove a grave threat to the United States in its traditional sphere of influence.

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