

**RUSSIA IN THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE:
ASSESSING PUTIN'S MALIGN INFLUENCE IN LATIN
AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN**

HEARING
BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON
WESTERN HEMISPHERE, CIVILIAN SECURITY,
MIGRATION AND INTERNATIONAL ECONOMIC
POLICY
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RUSSIA IN THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE: ASSESSING PUTIN'S MALIGN INFLUENCE IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

Wednesday, July 20, 2022

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON WESTERN HEMISPHERE,
CIVILIAN SECURITY, MIGRATION AND
INTERNATIONAL ECONOMIC POLICY
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS,
Washington, DC.

The Subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 2:36 p.m., via Webex, Hon. Albio Sires (chairman of the subcommittee) presiding.

Mr. SIRES [presiding]. Good afternoon, everyone.

Thank you to our witnesses for being here today and for your patience.

This hearing entitled, "Russia in the Western Hemisphere: Assessing Putin's Malign Influence in Latin America and in the Caribbean" will come to order.

Without objection, the chair is authorized to declare a recess of the committee at any point.

And all members will have 5 days to submit statements, extraneous material, and questions for the record subject to the length limitations in the rules. To insert something into the record, please have your staff email the previously mentioned address of contact for Subcommittee staff.

As a reminder to members joining remotely, please keep your video function on at all times, even when you are not recognized by the chair. Members are responsible for muting and unmuting themselves, and please remember to mute yourself after you finish speaking.

Consistent with H.Res. 8, and the accompanying regulation, staff will only mute members and witnesses, as appropriate, when they are not under recognition, to eliminate background noise.

I see that we have a quorum, and I now recognize myself for opening remarks.

Good afternoon, everyone, and thank you to our witnesses for testifying before our committee today.

The world has watched in horror as Putin's war rages on in the Ukraine. His willingness to sacrifice countless lives, in his selfish pursuit of regional dominance, has caused a humanitarian crisis that will long outline the conflict.

Nonetheless, several Latin American governments have expressed apathy or even explicit support for the Russian invasion. Even as the shocking images of civilian graves and flattened cities

capture our attention and animosity, we must pay attention to Putin's influence in our own backyard.

Russia has steadily shored up its presence in Latin America and the Caribbean, threatening democratic aspirations and developing goals. Putin has found close friends in the region's most cruel dictatorships, including the leaders of Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Cuba, and has made overtures to U.S. allies, such as Brazil and Argentina.

As I have said many times before during my tenure in Congress, the United States must not pivot away from Latin America, because Putin is eager to step in. We must also be careful not to conflate Russia and China's actions or share of influence in the region. While China funds infrastructure and creates financial ties with our neighbors, Russia has to use more creative methods to garner influence.

One strategy been to spread misinformation by broadcasting Spanish language Kremlin propaganda through R-T and Sputnik. Russia also sells arms and artillery that only its engineers can maintain and provides critical intelligence support, fostering security interdependence that is difficult to unravel.

Finally, Russia has painstakingly constructed a global sanctions evasion network, undermining the coercive power of the U.S. financial restrictions intended to modify the behavior of human rights abusers around the world.

The Russian government's actions are supported by other non-State actors, including cyber operatives. In the wake of Putin's attack on Ukraine, the Russian-based hackers group Conti announced full support for the Kremlin's actions and that they would attack those who responded to the invasion.

The results of Putin's project have been outstanding. Venezuelan dictator Nicolás Maduro, Nicaragua's Daniel Ortega, and Miguel Diaz-Canel of Cuba have amplified Russian talking points on the invasion of Ukraine. All three have welcomed Russian security personnel to train their own forces and engage in military exercises and granted Russian access to cybersecurity and intelligence networks, and prioritized their bilateral relationship with the Kremlin, at the expense of regional institutions like the Organization of American States.

Russia's support has empowered client regimes to step up surveillance, election rigging, and political persecution, dealing a blow to the efforts of pro-democracy actors. This trend of Russian interference cannot be expected to diminish in the coming years. Putin will continue to seek and support like-minded authoritarian partners who maintain power by suppressing opposition. Russian disinformation will continue to inflame political polarization and civil disorder. Countless regional objectives from climate change mitigation to anti-corruption will be obstructed in favor of Russian priorities.

Today's hearing will allow us to come together to examine these steps we can and must take to combat Russian malign influence in the Western Hemisphere. We are presented with an opportunity to have an in-depth, constructive conversation on the impact of Russian overtures to our neighbors in the Caribbean and in Latin America.

It is my sincere hope that all members here today will engage in a good-faith effort to further our policy response in a way that best serves U.S. interests and the principles of our Nation that we stand for.

Our witnesses have prepared detailed testimony that I believe will be very valuable to this Subcommittee work.

Once again, I thank you all for being here today, and I look forward to a productive hearing.

I will now recognize Ranking Member Green for his opening remarks.

Mr. GREEN. Thank you, Chairman Sires, my friend from New Jersey, for holding this important hearing.

And thank you to our witnesses for being with us today.

Today's hearing on Russia's malign influence in the Western Hemisphere is increasingly pertinent, in light of Putin's invasion of Ukraine. Since the beginning of the invasion, Putin's influence has only grown in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Many governments on all sides of the ideologic spectrum have failed to address Russia's invasion of Ukraine, for instance, El Salvador was one of the countries that abstained from a U.N. vote condemning Russia's invasion, and Mexico's President has consistently telegraphed his neutrality. Worse, Nicaragua, Cuba, and Venezuela shamelessly supported Putin ahead of the invasion. Even more concerning today, no country has implemented sanctions against Putin, his cronies, or Russia's war machine. This is truly disappointing.

One of the ways in which Russia exercises its malign influence in the region is through its Spanish language version of Russia Today, also known as RT. This propaganda outlet operates in almost every Latin American and Caribbean country. In addition to Moscow-controlled Sputnik News, RT spreads anti-American disinformation and false flag narratives to justify Putin's invasion of Ukraine.

Russia has also turned to the region in an effort to dodge Western sanctions. The U.S. intelligence community's 2022 Annual Threat Assessment States that Russia has, quote, "Expanded its engagement with Venezuela, supported Cuba, and used arms sales and energy agreements to try to expand access to markets and natural resources in Latin America, in part, to offset some of the effects of sanctions." End quote.

Russia has even gone so far as to threaten the possibility of sending military assets to Latin America, if the United States and our allies do not halt our assistance to Ukraine. This is unacceptable.

In its 2022 Posture Statement, SOUTHCOM asserts that Russia is among the secondary external threats in the Western Hemisphere, with China being the primary threat. SOUTHCOM States that Russia, and I quote, "intensifies this instability through its ties with Venezuela, entrenchment in Cuba and Nicaragua, and extensive disinformation operations." End quote.

The oppressive regimes of Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua are, without doubt, the largest sources of instability in the region, and they all have Russian and Chinese ties. In fact, the U.S. Commander of NORTHCOM recently revealed that our neighbor Mexico has the largest number of Russian intelligence officers.

Meanwhile, our southern border remains wide open. Congress cannot stand idly by while the Russian and the Chinese regimes ramp up their malign activities in the region. For too long, the Western Hemisphere has taken a back seat in U.S. foreign policy. We have seen the disastrous consequences of this—from China’s debt-trap diplomacy to Taiwan’s growing diplomatic isolation, to Russia’s arms sales and military engagement, to rising instability and surging migration.

The absence of American leadership in our hemisphere has created a vacuum, and this vacuum has been filled by Russia and China. Congress must act. The Administration must act.

As a House Armed Services Committee member, I am proud of securing several of my key priorities in the House-passed Fiscal Year 2023 NDAA. One of these priorities includes my amendment requiring a Department of Defense report addressing Russia’s malign activity in Latin America and the Caribbean. Uncovering these activities will help policymakers better address them and will shed light on Russia’s hostile actions.

As ranking member of the Western Hemisphere Subcommittee, I introduced a bipartisan piece of legislation, the Western Hemisphere Nearshoring Act, with the assistance of Chairman Sires and his staff. This legislation would offer Latin America and Caribbean countries an alternative to China’s debt-trap diplomacy and Russia’s backhanded deals.

By nearshoring manufacturing jobs from China to our hemisphere, we can reduce our region’s dependence on China and increase economic opportunity. It is a big step toward re-engaging with our southern neighbors economically, politically, and diplomatically.

And I want to take a moment and thank the State Department for their bipartisan assistance in writing this legislation. I ask all of my colleagues to cosponsor this common-sense legislation and would respectfully urge Chairman Meeks to schedule the bill for markup soon.

In closing, Mr. Chairman, it is unthinkable that in a region where nearly every single country was a signator in the Inter-American Democratic Charter, we are witnessing so many democratic partners ignoring Russia’s human rights violations. The charter solidified the region’s commitment to democratic norms and principles. Our partners cannot continue to ignore Putin’s malign and destabilizing behavior.

Again, I want to deeply thank Chairman Sires for holding this important hearing, and I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today.

Thank you and I yield.

Mr. SIRES. Dr. Vladimir Rouvinski? Have I got that right?

STATEMENT OF DR. VLADIMIR ROUVINSKI, PROFESSOR AND DIRECTOR, INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH CENTER, ICESI UNIVERSITY, CALI, COLOMBIA

Dr. ROUVINSKI. Good afternoon, Chairman.

Mr. SIRES. Dr. Rouvinski, you have got a lot of stuff here that is all good. Let me read it here.

Dr. ROUVINSKI. Thank you. Thank you very much.

Mr. SIREs. Dr. Rouvinski is a professor at the Department of Political Studies and Director of the Laboratory for Politics and International Relations at Icesi University in Cali, Colombia, in addition to coordinating the Pacific Alliance Studies Program.

He graduated from Irkutsk State University in Russia and earned his PhD from Hiroshima University in Japan. His primary area of expertise is Russian relations with the nations of Latin America and the Caribbean. In addition to several publications on the topic, Dr. Rouvinski has also held research positions at the Wilson Center, Florida International University, and Georg Eckert Institute in Germany.

Dr. Rouvinski, we welcome you to the hearing. I ask the witness to please limit your testimony to five minutes.

You are recognized for 5 minutes. Without objection, your prepared written Statement will be made a part of the record.

Dr. Rouvinski, you are recognized for your testimony [audio malfunction]. Can you hear me?

Dr. ROUVINSKI. Yes.

Mr. SIREs. Dr. Rouvinski, can you hear me?

Dr. ROUVINSKI. Yes, I can. Thank you so much.

Mr. SIREs. We have a problem with your audio. Can you turn it on? Is it on? There you go.

Dr. ROUVINSKI. Yes. Can you hear me?

Mr. SIREs. Yes.

Dr. ROUVINSKI. Thank you so much for this opportunity, Chairman Sires, Ranking Member Green, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee. It is truly a privilege for me to address you today on the issues related to Russia's engagement in the Western Hemisphere.

And in today's testimony, I would like to summarize the key points of my written Statement, and I will focus on the long-term objectives of Russia in this part of the world, Moscow's preferred *modus operandi*, in addition to evaluating the impact of the war in Ukraine on Russia's relationship with Latin America. And I will offer some policy recommendations on mitigating Russia's malign influence in the region.

Let me begin by explaining why Latin America matters to Russia. Putin's war in Ukraine reconfirmed that Russia's ruling elites consider the territory of the former Soviet Union as the most important geographical area for Moscow outside Russia's borders. At the same time, Moscow views the entire Western Hemisphere as the U.S. crucial area of security, political, economic, and social concern. And from this perspective, Putin's strategy toward Latin America and the Caribbean is guided mostly by the logic of reciprocity, which has multiple manifestations in Russia's foreign policy.

First, it is an opportunity for Putin's government to show that Russia can respond reciprocally to the U.S. support to the governments that have decided to advance their independent domestic and foreign policy agenda in Russia's neighboring countries. That is why, in Latin America, under the rule of Vladimir Putin, Russia prioritized strengthening political relations with the former Soviet allies, like Cuba and Nicaragua, in addition to those regimes in the Western Hemisphere in which narratives have been openly anti-

American, like Venezuela. For the last 20 years, Russia has been using various means to support its allies in Latin America—arms trade; limited, but timely financial assistance; diplomatic backing in the United Nations and other multilateral forums, and facilitating sanctions evasion.

Second, another pillar of Russia's Latin American policy is strategic communication via an extensive network of government-controlled media outlets, such as RT in Spanish, RT Actualidad, and Sputnik news agency, Sputnik Mundo, as were mentioned today already. RT Actualidad and Sputnik Mundo's narratives not only emphasize the role of Russia as a global player, but they also always stress that the United States resists the process of Russia regaining so-called "due place" in the international arena and opposes building a new multipolar order with the participation of Latin American partners. Moreover, most of the programs aired by RT misinform viewers regarding the policies of the United States in Latin America on such sensitive issues as migration, liberal democracy, and economic and social issues.

As a result of the implementation of Putin's strategy, as the war in Ukraine was unfolding, many Latin American leaders experienced difficulties finding a way to distance themselves from Russia. The lack of consensus among important Latin American nations on the Russian war in Ukraine benefited Moscow by offering the Kremlin an opportunity to claim that the United States and the Western powers failed to achieve isolation of Russia in the international arena.

However, at the same time, in many other aspects, I believe that the continuation of Russia's strategy toward the region is facing today severe challenges. One of them is the significantly reduced capacity of Moscow to offer attractive incentives for foreign trade and economic cooperation for Latin American countries, including Putin's traditional allies, like Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, because of the war-related costs and the impact of the economic sanctions on Russia.

The other is the decreasing capacity to continue providing political backing in the international arena to some Latin American nations, as well as to engage them in diplomatic activities, since the government of Vladimir Putin has to cope with the growing international isolation of Russia itself.

Against this background, I think that the Russian war in Ukraine's impact on Latin America offers the United States opportunities. One of them is to review the previous approaches to deal with the political regimes that serve as Russia's gateway to the region.

Since Moscow's capacity to provide economic and political support to Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Cuba has significantly diminished, they may be willing to adopt new strategies in their bilateral relations with the United States. This is particularly evident, I believe, in the case of Venezuela, where a limited U.S. engagement in the energy sector could become a game-changer and eventually reduce other threats to security in the region, including illegal drug trafficking and the refugee crisis.

Besides, the reactivation of the oil sector will likely alleviate the living conditions of ordinary Venezuelans and pave the way for a

possible power transition in Venezuela. Similarly, this step would improve U.S. energy security and directly benefit U.S. companies.

In the case of other Latin American nations, it is essential to keep in mind that one of the factors that allowed Russia to advance its Latin American policy is the use of the narrative of building a new world order, which allegedly could benefit Latin America, combined with the perception held by many Latin Americans that the region is no more a priority for the United States.

In this context, I think that introducing a coordinated U.S.-Latin American communication strategy emphasizing the value of shared U.S.-Latin American interests, combined with, for example, high-level public events, will make it more difficult for Russia to continue exploiting anti-American sentiments here.

On top of that, broad information coverage of U.S.-Latin American cooperation in cybersecurity, countering transnational organized crime, and offsetting, for example, illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing, would help stress the value of “having Americans as friends” for Latin America, for both elites and ordinary Latin Americans.

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize that the war in Ukraine showed that the regime of Vladimir Putin seeks not to help build new world order, but to carry out an expansionist agenda of Russian contemporary political elites. That is why an information strategy that aims to challenge the Russian narrative, combined with public diplomacy and strengthened civil society, could seize opportunities for successful disinformation campaigns regularly conducted by Moscow through their government-controlled media outlets and Russian embassies.

I thank the Subcommittee for this opportunity to share my views, and I look forward to the questions.

[The prepared statement of dr. Rouvinski follows:]

“Russia in the Western Hemisphere: Assessing Putin's Malign Influence in Latin America and the Caribbean”

Testimony by Vladimir Rouvinski, Ph.D.

Professor and Director, Laboratory for Politics and International Relations, Icesi University,
Colombia

Before the House Foreign Affairs Committee | Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere, Civilian
Security, Migration, and International Economic Policy

July 20, 2022

Chairman Sires, Ranking Member Green, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee. It is my privilege to address you today on the issues related to Russia's engagement in the Western Hemisphere by paying particular attention to the malign influence of the government of Vladimir Putin in Latin America and the Caribbean.

The brutal invasion by Putin's Russia of sovereign Ukraine on February 24 has already resulted in the loss of thousands of innocent lives, millions of refugees, and disruption of global supply chains. Although Latin America and the Caribbean are located geographically far away from the war theater in Europe, the impact of the war is felt by Latin American economies: the growing consumer prices and higher volatility of local currencies are just a few of the evidence. At the same time, many Latin American governments hesitated to take an affirmative stand against the government of Vladimir Putin and, while condemning the cruelty of the war in Ukraine, allowed Russia to continue operating in the region via its diplomatic posts, state-sponsored media, economic ties and by promoting narratives of constructing a new world order alternative to the one led by the Western powers.

Against the above background, in today's testimony, I will focus on the long-term objectives of Russia in this part of the world and Moscow's preferred modus operandi. Next, I will evaluate the impact of the war in Ukraine on Russia's relationships with authoritarian governments in the region, such as Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua, as well as its burgeoning partnerships with nations like Argentina. Additionally, I will offer some policy recommendations on mitigating Russia's malign influence in the region.

Why does Latin America matter to Russia?

Putin's war in Ukraine reconfirmed that Russia's ruling elites consider the territory of the former Soviet Union as the most important geographical area for Moscow outside Russia's borders: Russian leaders insist that all governments outside the region must recognize Russia's special interests before advancing their relations with the countries of the former USSR.¹ At the same time, Moscow

¹ Gerard Toal, “Near Abroad. Putin, the West and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus,” *Oxford Scholarship Online*, November 2020, <https://oxford.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.1093/oso/9780190253301.001.0001/isbn-9780190253301>

views the entire Western Hemisphere as the US priority area of security, political, economic, and social concerns. From this perspective, Putin's strategy toward Latin America and the Caribbean is guided by the logic of reciprocity, which has multiple manifestations in Russian foreign policy.²

First, it is an opportunity for Putin's government to show that Russia can respond reciprocally to the US support to the governments that have decided to advance their independent domestic and foreign policy agenda in Russia's neighboring countries without previous approval by the Kremlin. That is why, under the rule of Vladimir Putin, Russia prioritized strengthening political relations with the former Soviet allies like Cuba and Nicaragua, in addition to those regimes in the Western Hemisphere that emerged from the end of the 1990s to the beginning of the 2000th as part of the Latin American "pink tide"³ and which narrative had been openly anti-American, like Venezuela. For the last twenty years, Russia has been using various means to support its allies in Latin America: arms sales, limited but timely financial aid, diplomatic backing in the United Nations and other multilateral forums, and facilitating sanctions evasion.⁴

Another pillar of Russia's Latin American strategy is strategic communication via an extensive network of government-controlled media outlets such as RT in Spanish (*RT Actualidad*) and Sputnik news agency (*Sputnik Mundo*). Before the war in Ukraine started, *RT Actualidad* was readily available everywhere in the region. In some cases, the channel was made available as part of public TV broadcasting systems (Argentina, Venezuela, and Cuba) or as part of the state satellite system in Bolivia. These media outlets had millions of followers on social networks and YouTube.⁵ *RT Actualidad* and *Sputnik Mundo*'s narratives not only emphasize the role of Russia as a global player but also stress that the United States resists the process of Russia regaining its "due place" in the international arena and opposes building a new multipolar order with the participation of Latin American partners. Moreover, most of the programs aired by RT misinform viewers regarding the policies of the United States in Latin America on such sensitive issues as migration, liberal democracy, and economic and social issues.

Following the closure of RT's presence on YouTube and the cancelation of some of the contracts to broadcast RT's signal on private cable networks in the wake of the invasion of Ukraine, Moscow used newly created alternative accounts and intensified its strategic communication via diplomatic outposts taking advantage of the scenario that Russia has diplomatic relations with all Latin American and Caribbean nations, with Embassies and Consulates located throughout the entire region. Russian diplomats seek to actively engage Latin American political leaders and civil societies by offering "alternative" explanations for the war in Ukraine and presenting Russia as a legitimate

² Vladimir Rouvinski, "Russia in Latin America: A Framework of Analysis" in Vladimir Rouvinski and Victor Jeifets (eds.) "Rethinking Post-Cold War Russian-Latin American Relations." Routledge, July 2022, <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781003183372-3/russia-latin-america-framework-analysis-vladimir-rouvinski>

³ "Pink tide" refer to the arrival of left-wing governments in many Latin American countries in the 2000th.

⁴ For the case of Venezuela, see Vladimir Rouvinski, "Venezuela: Russia's Gordian Knot in Latin America" in Cynthia Arnson (eds.) "Venezuela's Authoritarian Allies: The Ties that Bind?", Woodrow Wilson Center, 2021, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/uploads/documents/LAP_210510-Venezuelas%20Authoritarian%20Allies-V5.pdf

⁵ Vladimir Rouvinski, "Russia's Strategic Communication in Latin America and the Caribbean", Jack D. Gordon Institute for Public Policy, Florida International University, October 2021, https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/igi_research/42/

international actor, despite the government of Vladimir Putin violating fundamental principles of international law and committing severe human rights violations.

Last but not least, Russia has been using other tools to advance its strategy in Latin America, including support to the Russian Diaspora's associations affiliated with Russian embassies, cultural and educational exchanges, and other forms of public diplomacy. Here, seemingly benign cultural events still carry an important anti-US narrative. For example, recently, Russian Embassies promoted in Latin America a showing of the "Salyut 7" movie, which tells the story of a rescue mission by the Soviet cosmonauts to save the Soviet space station which, supposedly, was to be captured by the United States.⁶ Other cultural activities pursue similar aims: to foment a positive image of contemporary Russia while criticizing the United States and diminishing the impact of the news reports regarding the authoritarian nature of Putin's political regime and his disrespect for the established international norms.

The impact of the war in Ukraine on Russia's engagement in Latin America

By 2022, the Latin American strategy of the government of Vladimir Putin mostly brought about desired results. Today, Russia possesses stable diplomatic relations with all the nations of Latin America and the Caribbean, and the holders of Russian passports can travel freely anywhere in the region. Moscow constantly engages Latin American political leaders in highly-publicized public activities through regular high-level visits, strategic communication, selling arms to many Latin American armies, and creating links of economic interdependence by, for example, supplying fertilizers to some of the countries in the region.⁷ It is in this context that the Russian war in Ukraine took by surprise many decision-makers in Latin America and the Caribbean. Despite the growing concentration of Russian troops on the border before the attack and the public warnings by the U.S. government on the war's inevitability, the leaders of Argentina and Brazil went to Russia shortly before the war began. They expressed their support for Putin's foreign policy. At the same time, then Russia's First Prime Minister, Yuri Borisov, visited Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Cuba just days before the war started and promised to broaden military cooperation with vital Russian allies in the Western Hemisphere.

As a result, as the war in Ukraine was unfolding, the leaders of Brazil and Argentina experienced difficulties finding a way to distance themselves from Russia. In fact, only a handful of nations, like Colombia's government of Ivan Duque, reconfirmed their commitment to the established world order and offered unconditional approval of the U.S. and European position about the conflict. This was met by fury in Moscow, and the Russian envoy to the United Nations (UN) used the presentation by the Colombian president at the UN Security Council (UNSC) to attack Colombia directly.⁸ Yet, Colombia—and all other countries in the region—continued to maintain its full-scale diplomatic and trade relations with Russia.

⁶ Klim Shipenko, "Salyut 7", STV Film Company, October 2017, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt6537238/>

⁷ Roberto Samora, "South American nations push to exclude fertilizer from Russia sanctions", Reuters, March 10, 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/south-american-nations-push-exclude-fertilizer-russia-sanctions-2022-03-10/>

⁸ Colum Lynch, "Moscow Strikes Back at Countries That Cross It", *Foreignpolicy.com*, April 18, 2022. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/04/18/russia-war-united-nations-threat-colombia-genocide-security-council/>

The lack of consensus among important Latin American nations on the Russian war in Ukraine benefited Moscow by offering the Kremlin an opportunity to claim that the United States and the Western powers failed to achieve isolation of Russia in the international arena. However, in many other aspects, the continuation of Russia's strategy toward the region is facing several challenges. One of them is the significantly reduced capacity of Moscow to offer attractive incentives for foreign trade and economic cooperation for Latin American countries, including Putin's traditional allies, because of the war-related costs and the impact of economic sanctions. The other is the decreasing capacity to continue providing political backing in the international arena to Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua, as well as to engage other Latin American nations in diplomatic activities since the government of Vladimir Putin has to cope with the growing international isolation of Russia itself. This new scenario could open the doors to diminish the malign influence of Putin's Russia in the region, as can be seen by taking a closer look at some of the bilateral relations.

Venezuela

One of the opportunities is Moscow's alliance with Venezuela, Russia's gateway to Latin America. When Russia invaded Ukraine, Caracas approved the Russian standing in the war. At the same time, the evidence suggests that Kremlin may be losing its former attractiveness to the Maduro regime as a middleman who helped smuggle Venezuelan oil and provided other material support. Russian appeal as a powerful nation that could back Venezuela in the international arena has also diminished following the exclusion of Moscow from many important international structures, including the UN Human Rights Council.⁹ If the US policy toward Venezuela changes, Vladimir Putin's government would need to make an extra effort to keep the alliance strong. However, considering the impact of the Western sanctions and the costs associated with the war in Ukraine, Russian material capacities are more limited now than ever. Therefore, it would be difficult for Moscow to allocate new tangible resources that Nicolas Maduro wishes for –including expanding military cooperation– while other states may be willing to restart their economic relations with Caracas, even if only partially.

Nicaragua

In the case of Nicaragua, in the recent past, the government of Daniel Ortega has developed a great degree of dependence on Russian political support, and there are Russian military training installations on Nicaraguan soil. The government of Ortega became accustomed to being rewarded by the Kremlin, politically and economically, for small but symbolically significant –for Russia– gestures like diplomatic recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Georgia's separatist regions, in 2008, for which Russia provided economic aid and backed Nicaragua in the international arena. Yet, recently, Moscow did not offer any new incentives, and in 2022, Managua did not recognize Donetsk and Lugansk, Ukraine's separatist regions. Moreover, Daniel Ortega refused to meet the Speaker of the Russian Duma, Vyacheslav Volodin, who arrived in Nicaragua with an official visit in early 2022. From this perspective, Ortega expects Putin to prove that Russia continues to be useful for Managua in the changing regional and global political and economic arrangements. Yet, Russian relations with Nicaragua are suffering from the limitation of tangible resources, similar to the case of Venezuela.

⁹ "UN General Assembly votes to suspend Russia from the Human Rights Council", *News.un.org*, April 7, 2022. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/04/1115782>

Cuba

In the case of Cuba, while several joint projects had been announced,¹⁰ there are reasonable doubts that they will be implemented under the current circumstances. In addition, highly publicized Russian aid to Cuba¹¹ had no real impact on the improvement of living conditions of ordinary Cubans in the long term, and, like Venezuela and Nicaragua, Havana is aware of the limitations in obtaining aid from Russia, which is desperately needed to keep the troubled Cuban economy afloat. That is why, from the beginning of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the position of Havana has been purposively unclear. Although Cuba avoids openly criticizing Russia and maintains an ambiguous political narrative, the current Cuban government does not want to become fully associated with Russian policy elsewhere because of the unpredictability of Vladimir Putin's actions, as demonstrated by the war in Ukraine, and since Cuba wishes to keep the maneuvering space open to adjusting its foreign policy should opportunities arise.

Argentina

In many aspects, the current government of Argentina shares Russia's position on the need for power rearrangements on the global stage. In this context, although Argentinian President Fernandez eventually condemned the Russian aggression in Ukraine, he nevertheless allowed the Russian Embassy in Argentina and Russian media outlets to continue disseminating Moscow's official discourse freely to Argentinians. Moreover, Argentina sustained plans for economic collaboration with Russia, and many other contacts, such as cultural and education cooperation, continue. Overall, the government of Argentina tilted the balance more towards the acquittal of the actions of the Russian government than towards defending the rights of Ukrainians, which are universal human rights openly violated by Moscow. In this respect, Alberto Fernández's position, supported by his vice president Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, differs sharply from the US and other Western countries and allows Russia to play its political spectacle in Argentina, misleading ordinary Argentinians as to the genuine Russian goals in the region. At the same time, Argentina benefits from a robust civil society and free press that have been very active in denouncing Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the dangers of allying with Putin's current international standing.

As for other Latin American nations, many of them -like Chile and Colombia- have been experiencing historical changes in their domestic political realms. These governments do not perceive Russia's influence as their priority at the moment. Besides, the governments of Chile and Colombia seek to pursue an "active non-alliance" strategy,¹² which Putin's Russia has started to interpret as the support of its "multipolar world order" narrative. Another key nation of the region, Brazil, is in the midst of an electoral campaign, and the current President, Jair Bolsonaro, aspires for a new term. At the same time, his country depends on the Russian critical supply of fertilizers. This is one of the reasons why Brasilia evaded providing full support to the United States and their Western allies and

¹⁰ "Yury Borisov meets with Deputy Prime Minister of Cuba Ricardo Cabrisas", The Russian Government Official Website, <http://government.ru/en/news/45802/>

¹¹ "Llega a Cuba un nuevo cargamento de ayuda humanitaria enviada por Rusia", *RT Actualidad*, January 25, 2022. <https://actualidad.rt.com/actualidad/417918-cuba-cargamento-ayuda-humanitaria-rusia>

¹² The concept of "active non-alliance" suggests that "rather than letting themselves be pressured to side either with Washington or with Beijing in a nascent Second Cold War, Latin American countries should focus on their own interests", See "Book Launch: Active Non-Alignment by Ambassador Jorge Heine", *The University of British Columbia website*, February 28, 2022. <https://sppga.ubc.ca/events/event/book-launch-active-non-alignment-by-ambassador-jorge-heine/>

did not impose any sanctions on Russia. Moscow is carefully observing the unfolding new scenarios in the region and will attempt to expand its political contacts with Santiago, Bogota, and Brasilia as part of Putin's reciprocity strategy.

Policy recommendations

The Russian war in Ukraine's impact on Latin America offers the United States new opportunities. One of them is to review the previous approaches to cope with the political regimes that served as Russia's gateways to the region. Since Moscow's capacities to provide economic and political support to Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Cuba have significantly diminished, they may be willing to adopt new strategies in their bilateral relations with the United States. This is particularly evident in the case of Venezuela, where limited US engagement in the energy sector could become a game-changer and, eventually, reduce other threats to security in the region, including illegal drug trafficking and the refugee crisis. Besides, the reactivation of the oil sector will likely alleviate the living conditions of ordinary Venezuelans and pave the way for a possible power transition in Venezuela. Similarly, this step would improve US energy security and directly benefit US companies.

In the case of other Latin American nations, it is essential to keep in mind that one of the factors that allowed Russia to advance its Latin American policy is the use of the narrative of building a new world order, which allegedly could benefit Latin America, combined with the perception held by many Latin Americans that the region is no more a priority to the United States.¹³ In this context, introducing a coordinated US-Latin American communication strategy emphasizing the value of shared US-Latin American interests combined with high-level public events will make it more difficult for Russia to continue exploiting anti-American sentiments. On top of that, broad information coverage of US-Latin American cooperation in cybersecurity, countering transnational organized crime, and offsetting illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing, among others, would help stress the value of "having Americans as friends" for both elites and ordinary Latin Americans.

Lastly, increasing support for civil society and investigative journalism is also necessary. Both are critical allies in combating Russia's incidence in the region. On the one hand, the role of civil society is vital in promoting democratic values and democratic political culture. On the other hand, investigative journalism has proven effective in exposing the true nature of pro-Russia authoritarian regimes in Europe, Asia, and Africa by revealing the corruption and wrongdoings linked to many of Russia's bilateral relations. In Latin America, we have yet to see such reports, although the existence of such ties has been demonstrated by academic research.¹⁴ In this regard, I would like to emphasize that the war in Ukraine showed that the regime of Vladimir Putin seeks not to help build new world order but to carry out an expansionist agenda of Russian contemporary political elites. That is why an information strategy that aims to challenge the Russian narrative combined with public diplomacy and strengthened civil society could seize opportunities for successful disinformation

¹³ Scott Morgenstern & Asbel Bohigues, "Battling for the Hearts and Minds of Latin Americans: Covariance of Attitudes toward the United States and China", *Latin American Research Review*, June 2021, 56(2), pp. 280–299. <http://doi.org/10.25222/larr.656>

¹⁴ Alejandro Cardozo Uzcátegui & Víctor Mijares, "The versatile amalgam: Interests and corruption in Russia-Venezuela relations," *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies*, May 2020, 109, pp. 181–202. <http://doi.org/10.32992/erlacs.10557>

campaigns regularly conducted by Moscow through government-controlled media outlets and Russian embassies.

In conclusion, I thank the Subcommittee for this opportunity to share my views, and I look forward to your questions.

Mr. SIREs. Thank you very much.

I will now introduce Dr. Kimberly Marten. Dr. Marten is a professor of political science at Barnard College, specializing in international relations, international security, and Russia. She is on the faculty and executive committee member of Columbia's Harriman Institute for Russian, Eurasian, and East European Studies, and Saltzman Institute of War and Peace Studies.

She holds a degree from Harvard and Stanford and earned the Marshall Shulman Prize for her 1993 book *Engaging the Enemy: Organization Theory and Soviet Military Innovation*. Her many publications have analyzed Russia's private military activities in Africa, Russia-NATO relations, and Russian intelligence operations under Putin. She is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations, and the International Institute for Strategic Studies, and is a founding member of PONARS-Eurasia.

Dr. Marten, we welcome you to the hearing.

I ask the witness to please limit your testimony to 5 minutes, and without objection, your prepared written statements will be made part of the record.

Dr. Marten, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

**STATEMENT OF DR. KIMBERLY MARTEN, PROFESSOR OF
POLITICAL SCIENCE, BARNARD COLLEGE**

Dr. MARTEN. Thank you so much, Chairman Sires.

Chairman Sires, Ranking Member Green, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for this opportunity to testify and to share my analysis of Russia's military and economic interest and influence in Latin America and the Caribbean.

My written testimony includes a lot more detailed information and examples. In the 5 minutes I have here, I will summarize my overall conclusions and provide my policy recommendations.

Since 2014, Russia has explicitly tried to undermine U.S. interest and influence among its Latin American and Caribbean neighbors in direct payback for Washington's support of Ukraine. President Putin tries to attract any country that feels slighted by the United States, while taking advantage of lingering historical fears about U.S. and Western imperialism. He also seeks to entangle Russian State security interests with private commercial deals for us network cronies and cooperates with global organized crime in doing so.

Yet, Russian efforts in the Western Hemisphere have faced real limits, including growing competition from China. Russia's malign activities near U.S. borders and along the sea lanes that support U.S. defense and commerce must be closely monitored, but we must not overreact to what is often more rhetoric than reality. Russia's presence lacks the deep ideological roots of the cold war Era. Russia has also faced reputational concerns about its reliability as a partner, aggravated by its COVID vaccine diplomacy mistakes. Russian weaknesses provide an opportunity for U.S. diplomacy to chip away at Russian influence.

Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela have airports and seaports that are reliable transit hubs for the Russian military in Latin America, but their distance from Russia and proximity to the overwhelming military and intelligence presence of USSOUTHCOM forces leaves

any Russian forces in the region vulnerable to eavesdropping and harassment.

Despite recent Russian statements promising significant security cooperation with countries in the region, Moscow's achievements are limited. It has no permanent military bases there. It does have two small facilities in Nicaragua, a counternarcotics training center operated by the Russian Interior Ministry and a civilian satellite communications tracking base that may also gather local intelligence against the United States and its allies. There is also a helicopter training center that uses flight simulators in Venezuela.

Russia often sends military personnel to the region, including to support its long-term weapons contracts, leaving hundreds of Russian military specialists on the ground. Their presence in Venezuela in 2019 may have helped deter U.S. intervention against Nicolas Maduro.

Despite a major push to sell new weapons in the region, Russia has struggled to find buyers. The U.S. and Europe remain the dominant regional weapons suppliers, and in 2018 the United States warned its clients they would be cut out of future deals if they bought weapons from Russia. Only four countries in the region have received weapons from Russia since 2014 and none since 2017.

Russia regularly carries out small-scale military and naval exercises in the region, and Nicaragua's renewal this year of its annual training plan with Russia raised concerns. But this has been going on for 10 years; it is not new, and does not involve any increased Russian presence in the country.

We do know that Russia's military intelligence agency, the GRU, has a large presence in Mexico, as Chairman Sires mentioned. This is disturbing because the GRU has led many malign operations in recent years, including election interference and assassination campaigns.

Overall, U.S. forces have to prepare for worst-case scenarios, including some kind of Russian military distraction campaign in the Western Hemisphere, as the Ukraine war continues. Putin has certainly surprised the world elsewhere, but it seems unlikely that he would risk violent escalation near U.S. borders unless he believed that his regime faced an immediate existential threat from Washington.

Leaders with authoritarian or leftist populist leanings who are suspicious of the United States have won democratic elections, sparking concerns about possible avenues for Russian influence. Russia has recently gained diplomatic and rhetorical support from Brazil, Argentina, and Mexico, but support for Russia in each of these countries is shallow and politically contested. Their economic ties to Moscow are relatively small and are becoming increasingly inconvenient because of U.S. and global SWIFT banking sanctions on Russia which have forced them to find more expensive workarounds.

Given these Russian efforts and their limits, here are my policy recommendations:

The United States must carefully observe Russian military activities in the Western Hemisphere and be prepared to react in the event of escalation.

The United States must stay diplomatically engaged. As of last week, there are 13 U.S. Ambassadorial posts vacant in the region.

We can offer democratic States trade and investment alternatives to Russia, such as encouraging Brazil's adoption of high-tech alternatives to its fertilizer imports from Russia.

We can also offer trade and investment incentives to encourage human rights and democratization efforts among the region's autocratic regimes, while wooing them away from Russia, such as recent initiatives to gradually reduce sanctions on the Venezuelan oil sector.

In the end, the United States must avoid overreacting to Russian rhetoric and recognize that it may be China, not Russia, that most threatens U.S. leadership in the region in coming years.

Thank you for your time.

[The prepared statement of Dr. Marten follows:]

**Russian Military and Economic Interests and Influence
in Latin America and the Caribbean:
Threats, Limits, and U.S. Policy Recommendations**

Kimberly Marten
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Barnard College, Columbia University

Testimony before the Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, Civilian Security,
Migration, and International Economic Policy
United States House of Representatives

Hearing on Russia in the Western Hemisphere:
Assessing Putin's Malign Influence in Latin America and the Caribbean
Prepared for presentation on July 20, 2022

Chairman Sires, Ranking Member Green, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify, and to share my analysis with you concerning Russia's interests and influence in Latin America and the Caribbean. Because others providing testimony today are experts on Russia's media and social media campaigns in the region, I will concentrate on the material levers of Russian influence, including military and economic ties.

Summary

While Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine dominates the news, in recent years Moscow has also expanded its security and economic footprint far beyond its borders. Alongside its direct military intervention in Syria and its despicable use of Wagner Group paramilitary forces in

Libya, Sudan, the Central African Republic, Mozambique and Mali,¹ Russia has attempted to restore its military and economic influence in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). Yet its efforts in the Western Hemisphere, while of vital concern to the United States, have faced real limits, including growing competition from China. Kremlin endeavors in the Americas have often fallen flat. Russia's malign activities near U.S. borders and along the sea lanes that protect and support U.S. defense and commerce must be closely monitored. But it is important not to overreact, so that key U.S. resources remain focused on the central Russian threat in Europe and Eurasia. Indeed, Russia's weaknesses provide an opportunity for well-reasoned diplomatic outreach by the U.S. to chip away at Russian influence in the LAC region.

Russia's Global Goals and Latin America and the Caribbean

President Vladimir Putin views Moscow's gambits abroad as a way to restore a sense of Russian power and glory, after what he sees as the humiliation of the Soviet Union's collapse and the decline of Russia's global influence in the 1990s. He uses foreign adventures to boost his popularity at home and enshrine his place in Russian history. Rather than attempting to restore the precise geography of former Soviet influence, Putin is opportunistic. The Kremlin tries to attract any country that the U.S. and its allies have neglected or snubbed, while taking advantage of lingering historical fears in the global South about U.S. and western imperialism.

The Kremlin seeks permanent new air and naval bases abroad that can interfere with the military and commercial freedom of movement of the U.S. and its allies. It sells advanced weaponry widely and without much oversight, contributing to a global glut of armaments while creating long-term relationships of dependency. It also attempts to gain leverage through energy and other commercial deals. Russia threatens the democratic and human rights values of the U.S. and its allies, shoring up brutal dictators and authoritarian politicians through patronage relationships based on personal loyalty and the trading of security and business favors. Russian support worsens humanitarian tragedies, sometimes threatening our allies with destabilizing mass migration and refugee flows, as with those fleeing Nicolás Maduro's Venezuela. Putin's standard

¹ Kimberly Marten, "The GRU, Yevgeny Prigozhin, and Russia's Wagner Group: Malign Russian Actors and Possible U.S. Responses," testimony before the Committee on Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia, Energy, and the Environment, United States House of Representatives, July 7, 2020.

toolkit of deception and ambiguity has left the U.S. and its allies frequently surprised, creating confusion, sowing doubt, and hindering our ability to react cohesively and quickly.

Putin meanwhile seeks to entangle Russian state security interests with private commercial deals for his close network cronies. The Russian state regularly cooperates with global organized crime rings in these efforts.² This bolsters support among his key supporters for Russia's foreign adventures and may be helping to pay for them, as the boundaries between state and private interests and funding erode. It simultaneously entrenches corruption and authoritarianism abroad. Russia leaves vulnerable populations subject to what amounts to a new form of imperialism, where individual leaders in impoverished countries are kept in place by Moscow.

Limits to Russia's Global Actions

Yet Russia today lacks the Soviet Union's resources and global sway. Recent years have seen a major shift in Russian strategic thinking: toward the adoption of a low-cost, opportunistic "information warfare" mindset (often referred to as the "Gerasimov Doctrine" or "hybrid warfare"), associated with the activities of intelligence agencies and special forces rather than regular military forces. With the important exception of its current war in Ukraine, most of Russia's recent operations abroad have been relatively limited and low-risk endeavors—even its direct military intervention to support Bashar Assad in Syria involved few regular Russian military boots on the ground.³ Now that Russia is under heavy international financial and trade sanctions, with its military and economic resources and Putin's domestic reputation tied up in the Ukraine war, Moscow is unlikely to be able to afford significant intervention in faraway locales.

The limits of Russia's international trajectory contrast with the successes of China. Beijing has achieved global impact through establishing trade and investment relationships with foreign countries through its Belt and Road Initiative, including throughout the LAC region. Chinese deals are often accompanied by joint police and military training activities and arms sales,

² Mark Galeotti, "Crimintern: How the Kremlin Uses Russia's Criminal Networks in Europe," European Council on Foreign Affairs, Apr. 18, 2017; Sebastian Rotella, "Gangsters of the Mediterranean," *The Atlantic*, Nov. 10, 2017; Catherine Belton, *Putin's People: How the KGB Took Back Russia and Then Took on the West* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020).

³ Anna Borshchevskaya, "Russia's Strategic Success in Syria and the Future of Moscow's Middle East Policy," *Lawfare*, Jan. 23, 2022; Andrew S. Weiss and Nicole Ng, *Collision Avoidance: The Lessons of U.S. and Russian Operations in Syria*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 20, 2019.

providing China with security opportunities alongside its economic influence. Russia fears being left behind as China's global status grows, and this, too, impels Moscow's foreign actions.

Putin has found common cause with right-wing authoritarian regimes around the globe that fear democracy, and also with more traditional left-wing populist leaders who are suspicious of U.S. global leadership, including in Latin America.⁴ Yet Russia faces ideological limits compared to the Cold War Soviet Union. Soviet Moscow could attract the populations of poorer, post-colonial countries because Communism seemed to offer an alternative model for quick economic growth to new states emerging from old western empires.⁵ Putin has attempted to create a new ideological identity for Russia, largely focused on a homophobic, anti-feminist version of nationalist Orthodox Christianity that portrays Western liberal values as degenerate.⁶ Ideologues associated with his regime have gained leverage with far right authoritarian nationalist movements abroad.⁷ Yet the hypocrisy of the lavish and louche lifestyles of Putin and his billionaire cronies, along with Russia's complete disregard for the sanctity of human life in its military interventions, undercuts any claim by Putin's regime to be truly Christian—or to having much in common with genuine socialist populism.

Russian Goals and Successes in Latin America and the Caribbean

Following its seizure of Crimea and initiation of warfare in the Donbas in 2014, Russia has explicitly tried to undermine U.S. interests and influence among its Latin American and Caribbean neighbors, in direct payback for Washington's support of Ukraine.⁸ In March 2022, General Glen D. VanHerck, commander of USNORTHCOM and NORAD, testified before the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee that the largest foreign contingent of Russian military intelligence (GRU) officers is currently stationed in Mexico; General Laura Richardson,

⁴ Andrea Moncada, "Will Russian Influence in Latin America Grow in 2022?" *Americas Quarterly*, March 30, 2022.

⁵ Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Westad, *The Cold War: A World History* (New York: Basic Books, 2017).

⁶ Alexander Lukin, "Eurasian Integration and the Clash of Values," *Survival* 56, no. 3 (June-July 2014): 43-60; Dmitry Adamsky, "Christ-loving Diplomats: Russian Ecclesiastical Diplomacy in Syria," *Survival* 61, no. 6 (2019): 49-68; Valerie Sperling, Alexandra Novitskaya, Janet Elise Johnson, and Lisa McIntosh Sundstrom, "Vladimir Putin, the czar of macho politics, is threatened by gender and sexuality rights," *The Conversation*, Apr. 11, 2022.

⁷ Marlene Laruelle, *Eurasianism and the European Far Right: Reshaping the Europe-Russia Relationship* (New York: Lexington Books, 2017).

⁸ Douglas Farah and Liana Eustacia Reyes, "Russia in Latin America: A Strategic Analysis," *PRISM* 5, no. 4 (2015): 101-117; Farah and Kathryn Babineau, "Extra-regional Actors in Latin America," *PRISM* 8, no. 1 (2019): 96-113; Stanislav Secieru, "The Comeback Kid: Russia in Latin America," *European Union Institute for Security Studies Brief* 24 (Nov. 2021).

USSOUTHCOM commander, agreed.⁹ GRU officers globally have been responsible for malign actions including election interference in the U.S. and other democracies, an attempted coup to try to prevent Montenegro from joining NATO, and assassination plots using radiological and chemical weapons. Their presence in Mexico is disturbing.

Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela are ruled by longstanding authoritarian regimes that have cooperated deeply with Russia over many years. In other LAC countries, leaders with authoritarian or leftist populist leanings who are suspicious of the United States have won democratic elections, sparking concerns about possible avenues for Russian influence. Russia has recently succeeded in gaining diplomatic and rhetorical support from some LAC countries, although this has been uneven. For example, Bolivia, Cuba, and Nicaragua each voted against the UN General Assembly resolution expelling Russia from the Human Rights Council in April 2022, and a number of other LAC countries either abstained or failed to vote, creating a regional split. These actions are at least in part reciprocal, since Russia has repeatedly supported authoritarian LAC leaders facing democratic and human rights protests and termed them U.S. “regime change” efforts.¹⁰

Presidents Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil and Alberto Fernandez of Argentina earlier bucked U.S. criticism and met with Putin in Moscow in February 2022, just before Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Their foreign ministers chose to meet with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov at the G-20 gathering in July 2022, even as many other countries shunned him. Meanwhile Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador has expressed his “respect” for Putin and declared his neutrality on the Ukraine war, and members of his MORENA political party even established a Russian friendship society in March.¹¹ Yet in Brazil, Argentina, and Mexico, support for Russia is both shallow and domestically contested. In each case their shared economic interests with Moscow are real, but relatively small.

⁹ Stenographic Transcript before the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee, Mar. 24, 2022, p. 53.

¹⁰ Samuel Ramani, “Russia Returns to Latin America,” *Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) Commentary*, Aug. 19, 2021.

¹¹ Arturo Sarukhan, “López Obrador’s flirtation with Russia risks worsening US-Mexican relations,” *Brookings Order from Chaos Blog*, Apr. 11, 2022.

Limits to Russian Influence in Latin America and the Caribbean

With the exception of the Bahamas (which on March 12 ordered its financial institutions not to cooperate with any Russian entities under western sanctions¹²), no LAC countries have yet declared their own Russian sanctions. It should be noted, however, that any country with financial interests in the U.S. is unlikely to violate the terms of American sanctions against Russia, given the clout of the U.S. banking system and the power of the U.S. Treasury Department to impose secondary sanctions on violators. This has forced LAC countries dealing with Russian businesses to find payment workarounds in the face of SWIFT banking system restrictions, and may discourage future deals. Juan Sebastian González, U.S. National Security Council senior director for the Western Hemisphere, believes this will negatively affect the regimes in Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, in particular, and even impede Russian money laundering schemes there.¹³

Well before 2022, though, the Russian playbook in the LAC region had been limited by material constraints. Russia has also faced reputational concerns in the region about its reliability as a partner. Cuba suffered greatly from the collapse of the Soviet Union and the withdrawal of Moscow's economic support in the 1990s, providing an inroad for new Chinese influence amidst lingering distrust of Russia.¹⁴ Russia's reputational problems were exacerbated when its highly-touted Sputnik-V COVID vaccine, imported by a number of LAC countries, faced delivery delays and then failed to gain World Health Organization approval, leaving those inoculated with it unable to travel internationally.¹⁵ The next sections review some of what Russia has tried to do in the LAC region in recent years, and what it has actually accomplished.

PERMANENT MILITARY AND SECURITY BASES

Russia lacks the military presence in Latin America enjoyed earlier by the Soviet Union. Despite a raft of Russian statements in recent years promising renewed security cooperation with a

¹² Minami Funakoshi, Hugh Lawson and Kannaki Deka, "Tracking sanctions against Russia," Reuters, July 7, 2022 update.

¹³ Jorge Agobian, "Sanciones de EE.UU. a Rusia impactarán a Venezuela, Nicaragua y Cuba, estima la Casa Blanca," *VOA News Latin America*, Feb. 25, 2022.

¹⁴ R. Evan Ellis, *The New Russian Engagement with Latin America: Strategic Position, Commerce, and Dreams of the Past*, U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, June 2015, pp. 39-40.

¹⁵ Chase Harrison, "In Vaccine Race, Russia Trips in Latin America," Americas Society/Council of the Americas (AS/COA), Aug. 12, 2021; Beatriz Garcia Nice, "Latin America's Stranded Sputniks," Wilson Center *Weekly Asado* Blog, Nov. 19, 2021; Paul Stronski, "In Mexico, the Window on Russia's Vaccine Diplomacy Is Closing," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Apr. 28, 2022.

number of LAC countries, Moscow has not achieved much on the ground. In January 2022 Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov warned that Russia might deploy some kind of “new military infrastructure” in Cuba and Venezuela, and in February Maduro announced plans for “powerful military cooperation” between Venezuela and Russia. While this situation is worth watching, recent history suggests it may be more rhetoric than reality.

In 1991 Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev began withdrawing what had been 11,000 Soviet military forces based in Cuba,¹⁶ including a 2,600-strong Ground Forces brigade.¹⁷ Putin himself closed the remaining Soviet signals intelligence base in Lourdes, Cuba (where up to 1,500 civilian and military personnel worked at the peak of the Cold War¹⁸) in 2002, ostensibly in a gesture of goodwill to the U.S. after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, but more likely because it had lost much of its technological value and Russia could not afford to keep it open. There were widespread reports starting in 2014 that Moscow would reopen the Lourdes base, and Google satellite images indicate that structural changes were made by someone there in recent years.¹⁹ But there is no evidence (at least in open sources) indicating that Russia ever returned. A sophisticated new radar dome appeared at the Cuban signals intelligence base in Bejucal in 2018, but again there is no open source evidence linking it to Russia, and some believe it was built by China.²⁰

Russia has constructed GLONASS (akin to the U.S. GPS system) civilian navigation satellite tracking bases in Latin America, with four in Brazil (a fifth has been planned for many years but has not yet opened) and another in Nicaragua. There were reports in 2015 that Russia had also negotiated a station in Cuba,²¹ but again no open-source evidence that it was built. The Nicaraguan GLONASS base, opened in 2017, may have additional intelligence purposes: it is located adjacent to the U.S. embassy in Managua, employs Russians on a permanent basis, and

¹⁶ Doyle McManus, “Soviet Troops to Leave Cuba, Gorbachev Says,” *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 12, 1991.

¹⁷ US Department of State Bureau of Public Affairs, *Cuban Armed Forces and the Soviet Military Presence*, Special Report 103 (Aug. 1982), p. 5.

¹⁸ “Lourdes [Cuba] Signals Intelligence (SIGINT) Facility,” *GlobalSecurity.org*, July 17, 2014.

¹⁹ Lukas Andriukaitis, “#PutinAtWar: Russians Back to Cuba,” *Atlantic Council Digital Forensic Research Lab*, Nov. 21, 2017.

²⁰ Victor Robert Lee, “Satellite Images: A (Worrying) Cuban Mystery,” *The Diplomat*, June 8, 2018.

²¹ John R. Haines, “Everything Old Is New Again: Russia Returns to Nicaragua,” *Foreign Policy Research Institute Eurasia Program E-Notes*, July 22, 2016.

(unlike the Brazilian facilities, which are open to scientists for research) is closed to outsiders.²² Nicaragua may have received a discount on 50 surplus Russian tanks in return for agreeing to host the facility.²³ There is also a Russian counter-narcotics training center in Nicaragua, inaugurated in 2013, that employed 130 Russians by 2016.²⁴ Yet whatever their real purposes are, these installations are small, and a far cry from the Soviet military presence in the region.

ROTATIONAL RUSSIAN SECURITY FORCES AND MILITARY EXERCISES

Russia often sends military trainers and technicians abroad, including to support long-term arms sales contracts, and as a result hundreds of rotating Russian military specialists have been scattered on the ground in recent years (including in Nicaragua²⁵ and Peru²⁶). In Venezuela Russian military specialists have supported Buk surface-to-air missile systems and S-300 missile defense systems, as well as Su-30 fighter jets, T-72 tanks, and a helicopter training facility.²⁷ The presence of this relatively small Russian contingent could not directly threaten the United States, but may have helped deter direct U.S. intervention against Maduro following the 2019 presidential crisis in Venezuela, when the country's national assembly and the Organization of American States recognized challenger Juan Gaidó as the rightful acting president. Yet even then, the Russian defense industrial conglomerate Rostec withdrew most of its personnel from Venezuela in 2019, cutting its civilian and military staff of 1,000 to a few dozen, when Venezuela's economic crisis left Maduro unable to pay for Rostec's services.²⁸

Russia's Wagner Group was said to have provided protection in 2019 for Maduro against opposition forces,²⁹ although this claim has been contested by investigative journalists on the

²² Haines, "Everything Old Is New Again;" Joshua Partlow, "The Soviet Union Fought the Cold War in Nicaragua. Now Putin's Russia Is Back," *Washington Post*, Apr. 8, 2017.

²³ Haines, "Everything Old Is New Again."

²⁴ Farah and Reyes, "Russia in Latin America," p. 105.

²⁵ Alejandro Sanchez, "Nicaragua Acquires Russian T-72 Tanks," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, May 4, 2016; Sanchez, "Russian Military Delegation Visits Nicaragua, Plans Exercises," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, Apr. 13, 2017; Sanchez, "Russia Donates Two Antonov Aircraft to Nicaragua," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, Feb. 27, 2018.

²⁶ Beth Stevenson, "Russian Helicopters Opens Peruvian Facility for Mi-17 Helicopters," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, Dec. 11, 2018.

²⁷ Dmitry Fediushko, "Rosoboronexport Opens Helicopter Training Facility in Venezuela," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, Apr. 1, 2019; Interfax, "Arms Trade: Russia Helps Venezuela Restore Combat Capacity," as reported in *Russia and CIS Defense Industry Weekly*, Apr. 26, 2019; Martin Arostegui, "Russia Missiles in Venezuela Heighten US Tensions," *Voice of America*, Apr. 29, 2019.

²⁸ Thomas Grove, "In a Blow to Maduro, Russia Withdraws Key Defense Support to Venezuela," *Wall Street Journal*, June 2, 2019.

²⁹ Maria Tsvetkova and Anton Zverev, "Exclusive: Kremlin-linked Contractors Help Guard Venezuela's Maduro," Reuters, Jan. 25, 2019.

ground.³⁰ It is not clear that Maduro would actually have needed Russian support given the large number of experienced Venezuelan and Cuban troops already guarding his regime.³¹ Further, the Wagner Group's contractor, Putin crony Yevgeny Prigozhin, does not appear to have any commercial interests in Venezuela, and his business ties have accompanied every other Wagner Group deployment outside Ukraine. While Russian security contractors were flying in and out of Venezuela at the time, including individuals who may earlier have been on Wagner Group contracts, their purpose in Venezuela may instead have been to defend Russian-operated oil fields from sabotage at a time of political unrest, or to maintain order at gold mines on the Colombian border.³²

In December 2018 two nuclear-capable TU-160 bomber aircraft landed temporarily in Venezuela, for the third time in a decade (the first visit coincided with Russia's war against Georgia in 2008).³³ These visits were likely intended to remind the U.S. of Russian strategic nuclear deterrence capabilities at times of high tension, but do not appear to have posed any new threats to U.S. defenses. Russia has meanwhile carried out a variety of small-scale military and naval exercises in the LAC region for many years.³⁴ Nicaragua's renewal in March 2022 of its decade-long annual joint training plan with Russian forces, involving the visit of 230 Russian soldiers for six months, was criticized by the United States for proceeding despite Russia's invasion of Ukraine.³⁵ But this was not a novel occurrence and did not involve any increased Russian presence in the country.

Visiting Russian military forces in recent years have also docked at seaports and airports in Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, and Moscow signed an access agreement for the use of two ports in Nicaragua.³⁶ Those countries can each be considered reliable transit nodes for a Russian

³⁰ Anna Varfolomeeva, "Are Russian 'Mercenaries' in Venezuela? What We Know," *The Defense Post*, Jan. 25, 2019; Lilya Yapparova, "Geopolitical debts: Why Russia is really sending military advisers and other specialists to Venezuela," *Meduza*, July 29, 2019.

³¹ Adam Taylor, "How Many Cuban Troops Are There in Venezuela? The U.S. Says over 20,000. Cuba Says Zero," *Washington Post*, May 2, 2019.

³² Emma Graham-Harrison and Clavel Rangel, "Venezuela's Gold Fever Fuels Gangs and Insecurity," *The Guardian*, June 8, 2019.

³³ Andrew Osborn, "Russian nuclear-capable bomber aircraft fly to Venezuela, angering U.S.," Reuters, Dec. 11, 2018.

³⁴ Augusto César Dall'Agnol, Boris Perius Zabolotsky, and Fabiano Mielniczuk, "The Return of the Bear? Russian Military Engagement in Latin America, the Case of Brazil," *Military Review*, Mar.-Apr. 2019: 128-139.

³⁵ Ismael Lopez, "Nicaragua Congress renews Russian training exercise approval," Reuters, June 14, 2022.

³⁶ Dall'Agnol, Zabolotsky, and Mielniczuk, "The Return of the Bear?"

presence in Latin America. Theoretically Russia could send anti-ship cruise missiles and surface-to-air missiles through those ports without requiring a major naval deployment to support them, potentially threatening U.S. control of key sea lanes and even targeting Florida.³⁷ But the distance of those ports from Russia, and their proximity to the overwhelming military and intelligence presence of US SOUTHCOM forces, leaves any Russian forces in the region subject to eavesdropping, and vulnerable to harassment, blockade, or attack in the event of conflict.

U.S. forces must of course prepare for worst-case scenarios, including some kind of Russian military distraction campaign in the LAC region as the Ukraine war continues. Military conflict there is possible, and Putin has surprised the world elsewhere. But it seems unlikely that even Putin would risk violent escalation near U.S. borders, unless he believed that Russian territory or his own regime faced an immediate existential threat from Washington.

ARMS SALES

Despite a major push to secure new weapons contracts in the LAC region, Russia has struggled to find willing buyers.³⁸ Russian arms sales pitches have been thwarted by local budgetary shortfalls,³⁹ by Moscow's unwillingness to share advanced technology,⁴⁰ and by better offers from Russian competitors.⁴¹ In 2018 the U.S. warned its own clients in the region that they would be locked out of future deals if they turned to buying arms from Russia.⁴² The U.S. and Europe today remain the dominant weapons providers in the region.

Between 2000 and 2016 Latin America accounted for less than 5% of Russia's global arms sales (with a sharp decline after 2012), and 80% of its Latin American market has been dominated by Venezuela.⁴³ Yet by 2015 even Venezuela was buying 90% of its weapons from China.⁴⁴ According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), a highly reliable

³⁷ James Holmes, "Will Russia Send Missiles to Cuba?" *National Interest*, Feb. 7, 2022.

³⁸ Ramani, "Russia Returns to Latin America."

³⁹ Charles Forrester, "Russia Continues to Push Sales to South America," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, Feb. 9, 2016.

⁴⁰ Dall'Agnol, Zabolotsky, and Mielniczuk, "The Return of the Bear?"

⁴¹ Jonathan R. Olguin, "Russia, Bolivia Renew Military-Technical Cooperation Agreement," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, Sept. 8, 2016.

⁴² Lara Seligman, "U.S. Military Targets Growing Russian and Chinese Influence in Latin America," *ForeignPolicy.com*, Nov. 19, 2018.

⁴³ Richard Connolly and Cecilie Sendstad, "Russia's Role as an Arms Exporter," Chatham House Research Paper, Mar. 20, 2017.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

source of global arms sales data, only four LAC countries have received weapons transfers from Russia since 2014—Brazil, Nicaragua, Peru, and Venezuela—with none after 2017.⁴⁵ Cuba received a \$50 million loan for Russian weapons purchases in 2019, but there is no publicly available evidence that any arms deliveries occurred. Russian personnel still service existing arms contracts in the LAC region, but Moscow’s recent marketing efforts have fizzled.

TRADE AND INVESTMENT

After the Cold War Russia’s economic presence in the LAC region collapsed, and Moscow has never again become a major player there. Its business dealings in the region have markedly increased since the 1990s, but remain comparatively small. By 2019 (the last year for which records are easily available, and a useful indicator since it predates the global COVID trade slump) Russia’s overall trade with Latin America was only \$12.4 billion.⁴⁶ That is an order of magnitude lower than totals for the region’s two dominant foreign economic powers, the U.S. and China. It is also less than the LAC regional trade of Canada, many European countries, Japan, South Korea, India—and even Vietnam. Around 80% of Russian exports to the LAC region are raw materials, including fertilizer, petroleum products, and iron and steel.⁴⁷

Brazil is Russia’s largest LAC trading partner, accounting for around a third of the regional total,⁴⁸ although Russia provides only a tiny fraction of Brazil’s overall exports and imports. One key import from Russia (and from Russia’s sanctioned ally Belarus) is a quarter of the fertilizer used by Brazil’s agricultural industry.⁴⁹ The U.S. has not sanctioned fertilizer, in order to avoid further contributing to the global food crisis caused by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Even then, avoiding SWIFT banking sanctions has created extra headaches for Brazil, and may lead it to look for alternatives.

⁴⁵ Data compiled from the online SIPRI Importer/Exporter Trend-Indicator Value tables, last updated Mar. 14, 2022.

⁴⁶ Unless otherwise noted, the data here was compiled from the online World Integrated Trade Solution (WITS) tracker of the World Bank, 2019.

⁴⁷ Aleksandra G. Koval and Vladimir Rouvinski, “Russia in Latin America: Beyond Economic Opportunities,” in *Forward to the Past? New/Old Theatres of Russia’s International Projection*, ed. Aldo Ferrari and Elconora Tafuro Ambrosetti (Milano, IT: Institute for International Political Studies, 2020), p. 122.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

⁴⁹ Jack Nicas and André Spigariol, “Good News for Food, Bad News for War: Brazil Buys Russian Fertilizer,” *New York Times*, May 8, 2022.

Brasília and Moscow also maintain an economic relationship through their joint membership in the BRICS organization (whose other members are India, China, and South Africa). While often dismissed as a talk shop whose members share few interests, the BRICS have sometimes coordinated their efforts with significant political impact, for example in pushing for rule changes in the International Monetary Fund and World Bank.⁵⁰ Argentina (which like Brazil conducts a very small fraction of its trade with Russia) has recently expressed an interest in joining the BRICS, too. But while Russia initiated the idea of forming a BRICS organization in 2004 to compete against U.S. and Western economic influence globally,⁵¹ China's economy now dominates 70% of the BRICS total, leaving the organization more a Chinese than Russian tool. The June 2022 BRICS summit gave Putin a symbolic platform to complain about sanctions, but led to no concrete policy changes.

Russian direct investments in the LAC region are also relatively small, measuring less than \$180 million in 2018⁵² (around 12% of total foreign investment there).⁵³ Most of the Russian presence is concentrated in the oil and gas sectors in Bolivia, Brazil, Mexico, and Venezuela. Despite talk of building Russian nuclear energy plants in the region and a series of memorandums of understanding, the only apparent current Rosatom investment is a research facility in Bolivia.⁵⁴

Russia's support for Venezuela's oil sector in particular has been political rather than profit-driven. State oil company Petroleos de Venezuela SA (PdVSA) became reliant on Russian investment after China withdrew amid the economic chaos created by Maduro. Joint ventures with Russia today produce around 15% of Venezuela's highly reduced crude oil output.⁵⁵ A Reuters investigation showed that Russia's state-controlled Rosneft oil company was pressured by the Putin regime to support PdVSA for political reasons, despite experiencing huge losses.⁵⁶ When Rosneft was forced to withdraw in 2020 because of U.S. sanctions on its subsidiaries, a

⁵⁰ Cynthia Roberts, Leslie Armijo, and Saori Katada, *The BRICS and Collective Financial Statecraft* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

⁵¹ Rachel S. Salzman, *Russia, BRICS, and the Disruption of Global Order* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2019).

⁵² Koval and Rouvinski, "Russia in Latin America," p. 124.

⁵³ UNCTAD World Investment Report 2022, *Fact Sheet: Latin America and the Caribbean*, FDI Flows 2018.

⁵⁴ Ramani, "Russia Returns to Latin America."

⁵⁵ Fabiola Zerpa and Ezra Fieser, "Russian Oil Rigs in Venezuela Complicate U.S. Talks with Maduro," Bloomberg.com, Mar. 11, 2022.

⁵⁶ Christian Lowe and Rinat Sagdiev, "Orinoco Swamp: How Russia sank billions of dollars into Venezuelan quicksand," Reuters, Mar. 14, 2019.

Russian sovereign enterprise bought its Venezuelan assets. Yet new sanctions against Russia have complicated this relationship, forcing the company to pay its workers in rubles.⁵⁷ Meanwhile the redirection of Russian oil sales to Asia from Europe because of sanctions has created new market competition between Russia and Venezuela there, creating a potential opening for the U.S.⁵⁸

Russia is also alleged to have helped Venezuela evade export controls. In 2019 Russia was accused of helping Maduro launder Venezuelan gold in Dubai, after the U.S. imposed strong sanctions against Caracas and urged its allies to block Venezuela from accessing its foreign-held assets.⁵⁹ Both Venezuela and Russia denied this report. But if laundering did in fact occur, Russia might have swapped “dirty” Venezuelan gold for “clean” gold with Russian certificates of origin, investing it in a seemingly legitimate offshore account that Moscow could allow Maduro to access surreptitiously. Now new Russian-origin gold has itself become untradeable in the U.S., UK, Canada, and Japan (the London Bullion Market Association had already suspended the accreditation of Russian gold refiners),⁶⁰ making it much more difficult for Russia to take similar actions today. Indeed western financial sanctions against Moscow have made it difficult for Maduro to access any assets he may have stored on Russian territory.⁶¹

Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

The Kremlin would like to expand its sway in Latin America and the Caribbean, and makes frequent statements about doing so. The U.S. must carefully observe Russian military activities in the Western Hemisphere, and be prepared to react in the event of escalation. Some regional diplomatic and rhetorical cooperation has also raised U.S. hackles, although its substantive effects seem minimal thus far.

Yet Russia’s material influence in the Latin American and Caribbean region is limited. It lacks the deep ideological roots of the Cold War era, and Putin’s relationships with most individual

⁵⁷ Alexandra Ulmer and Marianna Parraga, “Russian oil firm shuffles Venezuela assets as sanctions bite,” Reuters, Mar. 29, 2022.

⁵⁸ Anatoly Kurmanaev and Farnaz Fassihi, “Jockeying in oil markets may strain Russia’s relations with Venezuela — and Iran,” *New York Times*, July 12, 2022.

⁵⁹ See the summary by Jamie Dettmer, “Mystery Deepens over Venezuela’s Gold,” *VOA News*, Feb. 1, 2019.

⁶⁰ “UK, U.S, Japan and Canada to ban Russian gold imports,” Reuters, June 26, 2022.

⁶¹ Clare Ribando Seelke, “Venezuela: Overview of U.S. Sanctions,” Congressional Research Service report, May 23, 2022.

leaders are based on relatively weak ties of political convenience. China has already made significant inroads against Russia in the region, even in Cuba and Venezuela. Russia's influence is likely to shrink as global financial sanctions against Moscow increase the cost of doing business, and the Kremlin will be further constrained by the expenses it faces in financing its war in Ukraine.

This provides opportunities for the U.S. and its allies to counter Russian influence in the region:

- By staying diplomatically engaged, including through ensuring that ambassadorial posts are filled.⁶² Russia moves in when U.S. attention wanes.
- By exposing the truth about the corrupt and violent actions of the Putin regime, including through Spanish- and Portuguese-language broadcasts and social media.
- By offering trade and investment alternatives to democratic states, such as encouraging Brazil's adoption of high-tech alternatives to traditional fertilizer use,⁶³ to further reduce Russia's fading economic grasp in the face of sanctions.
- By using trade and investment incentives, such as the administration's recent initiatives toward gradual reduction of sanctions on the Venezuelan oil sector, to encourage progress on human rights and democratization efforts among the region's autocratic regimes.

The U.S. must also avoid overreacting to Russian rhetoric. Washington should recognize that much Latin American and Caribbean unhappiness with the U.S. is longstanding and organic, not fabricated by Russia, and that a long-term decline of relative U.S. influence in the region has not led to a burgeoning Russian replacement presence. Indeed it may be China, not Russia, that most threatens U.S. leadership in the region in coming years.

⁶² Christopher Sabatini, "Biden Is Setting Himself Up for Embarrassment in Los Angeles," *ForeignPolicy.com*, May 4, 2022.

⁶³ Vinod Sreeharsha and Samantha Pearson, "Fertilizer Price Surge Drives Brazil to High-Tech Alternatives," *Wall Street Journal*, June 8, 2022.

Mr. SIREs. Thank you very much, Dr. Marten.

I will now introduce Ms. Candace Rondeaux. Ms. Rondeaux is the director of the Future Frontlines program at the New America Foundation. She is also a Professor of Practice at the Center on the Future of War in the School of Politics and Global Studies at Arizona State University.

Additionally, she lectures on conflict studies at Elliott School of International Affairs at George Washington University and serves on Tulane University's Emergency and Security Studies Advisory Board. She writes regularly for World Politics Review and the Daily Beast on the intersection of emerging tech, political violence, and geopolitical competition.

Her previous experience includes working at the U.S. Institute of Peace, the Office of the U.S. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, and The Washington Post. She also holds a degree from Sarah Lawrence College, New York University, and Princeton.

Ms. Rondeaux, we welcome you to the hearing.

I ask the witness, please limit your testimony to 5 minutes, and without objection, your prepared written statements will be made part of the record.

Ms. Rondeaux, you are recognized for your testimony.

**STATEMENT OF MS. CANDACE RONDEAUX, DIRECTOR,
FUTURE FRONTLINES, NEW AMERICA**

Ms. RONDEAUX. Thank you, Chair Sires, Ranking Member Green, and members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for opportunity to submit my testimony and appear before you today.

A year ago, if you had asked most Americans what they knew about the Wagner Group and how Russian mercenaries fit into Russia's military strategy, I think many would probably say they have no idea. The fact that Russia has deployed mercenaries to fight its battles abroad is now almost common knowledge. The Wagner Group's reported involvement in atrocities in Ukraine, and in recent months elsewhere, has understandably brought newfound attention to atrocities linked to Russian mercenaries and operatives in other parts of the world, where Russia has sought to exert influence in places like Africa and the Middle East.

However, what is less well-known is that Russian mercenaries operate much closer to home in Latin America. Strategically speaking, covert Russian mercenary operations, real and imagined, are critical for Russia's strategy for sanctions evasion and for managing the risks of conflict escalation in places where Russian forces and entities engage in clear violations of international law.

Their area of operations encompasses any part of the world where Kremlin-controlled State companies in the fossil fuel, mining, and arms industries have struck deals with local governments and warlords. Tactically speaking, Russian mercenaries run reconnaissance operations; they provide targeting intelligence, military training, logistical support, backstop proxy militias, and Russian military missions in key global hotspots.

In the Western Hemisphere, one of those hotspots is Venezuela. In 2019, some 400 Russian mercenaries were deployed to Caracas to provide training and support for the Venezuelan military.

Not coincidentally, it is also one of the biggest areas of investment in the world for Rosneft, Russia's leading State-owned oil company. Rosneft—and by association, the Russian government—have for years also been one of the largest guarantors of Venezuelan debt. From 2014 to 2019, Rosneft was among the biggest stakeholders in joint oil production projects run by the PDVSA, Venezuela's national oil company.

That changed, however, in April 2020, when Rosneft abruptly cut its longstanding ties with PDVSA and sold its stake in Venezuelan oil ventures, due to U.S. sanctions against the Venezuelan government. At the time, Rosneft announced that it would be transferring its entire stake to PDVSA, to another largely unknown Russian State-backed firm known as Roszarubezhneft.

The new manager manages Russia's distressed Venezuelan energy assets, Nikolai Rybchuk, happened to be a former Spetsnaz special forces officer with next to no experience in the energy industry, but plenty of experience fighting alongside paramilitaries in places like Angola.

Fast forward to March of this year, a month after Russia's invasion of Ukraine and only days after the United States and EU imposed sanctions on Russian oil, it appears Russia's stake in Venezuelan oil has once again changed hands to another Russian company called Petromost. Just a quick check of the information about Petromost company records and archived web pages reveals that Petromost is actually a front company for the security arm of Rosneft.

This shell game business is business as usual for Rosneft and for Russia. Russia has consistently denied that it has hired guns working in Venezuela and other places in Latin America and the Western Hemisphere, but deniability is rather the point of the mythology surrounding the Wagner Group and Russian mercenaries.

On paper, many of the deals Russia makes with strongmen like Venezuela's Nicolas Maduro can be traced back to the owners of Russian front companies who have ties to the Kremlin. But, in practice, it is Russia's present Vladimir Putin and the Presidentially appointed heads of State-owned companies like Rosneft, Rostec, Russia's State arms company, and others, who reap the benefits of Russian mercenary operations.

The Wagner Group is not a private military security company in the classic sense, and comparisons with U.S. firms like Blackwater are a complete misnomer. In fact, the most apt comparison to the Wagner Group and Russian military networks is not Blackwater, but Mexico's Sinaloa Cartel.

For decades, the Sinaloa Cartel has operated like a hybrid terrorist organization—setting up front companies, evading law enforcement, and killing anyone who is perceived as getting in the way of the cartel's illicit trade. Like the Sinaloa Cartel, Russian mercenaries rely on a web of legal and black market relationships to traffic in illicit goods and trade with sanctioned companies and individuals, while their chief financiers in Russia launder the money on those deals.

The only difference between the Sinaloa Cartel and Russian military contractors is that, while the businesses involved in Sinaloa are all ostensibly private, in the Russian case they are nominally

private on paper. In the Russian case, security agencies such as the FSB and GRU, and other organs of the Russian State, are involved in every aspect of the military cartels' operations—from recruitment to deployment to the battlefield.

The United States and EU have sanctioned the Wagner Group and individuals suspected of being involved in Russian mercenary operations, but it is not entirely clear what effect those moves have had on constraining Russia's deployments of mercenary contingents. More recently, some experts have called for the United States to designate the Wagner Group as a foreign terrorist organization, a move that would prohibit provision of material support to Russian mercenaries going forward.

Given the lack of substantive and effective policy action on the problem dealing with Russian mercenaries to date, designating the Wagner Group a terrorist organization sounds like a great idea, but one problem is that the Wagner Group doesn't exist, and that to do so, the United States is going to need to change its approach and understanding of the threat posed by Russian mercenary operations.

If the United States wants to get a better handle on this challenge, it is going to need to do two things: learn the problem set and right-size the strategy for managing it.

The first step on that path to learning the problem set is to treat it for what it is: a Russian State-backed, organized crime cartel that often operates like a terrorist group.

The second step is not that different from the measures we have seen the U.S. intelligence and law enforcement agencies take in the past when dealing with organizations like Al-Qaeda and ISIS, or like the Sinaloa Cartel. With concerted effort, the shell companies that make up this covert network of Russian mercenaries and their operatives and clients can also be traced through bills of lading, customs and trade data, and other open sources that are publicly available to anyone who cares to explore them.

To do that, however, the United States will need to establish the institutional architecture needed for the United States and its allies to share continual streams of real-time intelligence on the movements of Russian mercenary operations and contingents around the world, but particularly in the Western Hemisphere. It will also mean the U.S. national security agencies involved in this effort need to be thinking creatively about broadening information-sharing beyond the traditional intelligence agency and law enforcement routes.

In the longer term, it will also require high-level diplomatic efforts to persuade U.S. partners around the world that Russia's continued ability to evade sanctions and profit from the illicit provision of embargoed goods and services will only aid Putin's regime.

To make progress on all of the above, you are going to need to work hard. And this may seem like a tall order from a Washington point of view, but it is the only way to get grips on the problem of Russia's aggression.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Rondeaux follows:]

**Russia in the Western Hemisphere: Assessing Putin's Malign Influence in Latin America
and the Caribbean**

Written Testimony of:

Candace Rondeaux

Director, Future Frontlines Program, New America Foundation

Professor of Practice, School of Politics and Global Studies, Arizona State University

**Before the U.S. House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, Civilian
Security, Migration and International Economic Policy**

July 15, 2022

**Chair Sires, Ranking Member Green and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the
opportunity to submit my testimony and to appear before you today.**

A year ago, if you'd asked most Americans what they knew about the Wagner Group and how Russian mercenaries fit into Russia's military strategy, many would probably say they have no idea. The fact that Russia has deployed mercenaries to fight its battles abroad is now almost common knowledge. The Wagner Group's reported involvement in atrocities in Ukraine in recent months has understandably brought new found attention to atrocities linked to Russian mercenaries in other parts of the world where Russia has sought to exert influence like Africa and the Middle East. But despite the Wagner Group's new found notoriety with the general public what is less well known in the U.S. is that Russian mercenaries operate much closer to home in Latin America.

Strategically speaking, covert Russian mercenary operations—real and imagined—are critical for Russia's strategy for sanctions evasion and for managing the risks of conflict escalation in places where Russian forces and entities are engaged in clear violations of international law. Their area of operations encompasses any part of the world where Kremlin controlled state companies in the fossil fuel, mining and arms industries have struck deals with local governments and warlords. Tactically, speaking Russian mercenaries run reconnaissance operations; they provide targeting intelligence, military training, logistical support, infrastructure protection, and backstop proxy militias and Russian military missions in key global hotspots.

In the Western Hemisphere, Venezuela is just one of those hotspots. In 2019, some 400 Russian mercenaries were deployed to Caracas to provide training and support for the Venezuelan military.¹ Not coincidentally, it is also one of the biggest areas of investment in the world for Rosneft, Russia's leading state owned oil company. Rosneft and by association the Russian government has for years also been one of the largest guarantors of Venezuelan debt. From 2014 to 2019, Rosneft was among the biggest stakeholders in joint oil production projects run by PDVSA, Venezuela's national oil company. That changed, however, in April 2020 when Rosneft abruptly cut its longstanding ties with PDVSA and sold its stake in Venezuelan oil ventures. At the time, Rosneft announced that it would be transferring its entire stake in PDVSA to another, largely unknown Russian state-backed firm, Roszarubezhneft. The new man in charge of managing Russia's distressed Venezuelan energy assets, Nikolai Rybchuk, happened to be a former Spetsnaz or special forces officer with next to no experience in the energy business but lots of experience fighting alongside paramilitaries in Angola. Fast forward to March of this year, a month after the Russia's invasion of Ukraine and only days after the U.S and EU imposed sanctions on Russian oil it appears Russia's stake in Venezuelan oil has once again changed hands to another Russian company called Petromost, in an effort to circumvent potential seizure of Russian state assets. A quick check of Petromost's company records and archived web pages reveals that Petromost is really just a front company for the security arm of Rosneft.²

This shell game is business as usual for Russia and Rosneft. Russia has consistently denied that Russian hired guns for work in Venezuela. But deniability is rather the point of the mythology surrounding the Wagner Group and Russian mercenaries. On paper, many of the deals Russia makes with strongmen like Venezuela's Nicolas Maduro can be traced back to the owners of Russian front companies who have ties to the Kremlin. But in practice it is Russia's President Vladimir Putin and the presidentially appointed heads of state owned companies like Rosneft, and Rostec, Russia's state arms company, who reap the profits from Russian mercenary operations. The Wagner Group is not a private military security company in the classic sense and

¹Maria Tsvetkova, Anton Zverev, "Exclusive: Kremlin-linked contractors help guard Venezuela's Maduro - sources," *Reuters*, January 25, 2019; Deutsche Welle, "СМИ: В Венесуэлу прибыли российские военные" ("In Venezuela, the presence of the Russian military is explained"), March 24, 2019.

² Archived webpage for ChoP RN-Ryazan-Okhrana: <http://web.archive.org/web/20161024075450/http://rubezh.rzn.ru/contacts.html>

comparisons with U.S. firms like Blackwater are a misnomer.³ Technically, under Russian law, Russian citizens are prohibited from fighting as soldiers in foreign armies. Instead, the Russian military operatives who are training, equipping and fighting alongside local forces in places like Venezuela are part of a network of military contingents contracted through intermediary front companies that provide services to the Russian Ministry of Defense via its primary logistics and procurement arm the Russian Joint Stock Company (JSC) Garnizon.

Garnizon is a holding company that is directly subordinate to the ministry of defense and its subsidiaries are variously responsible for everything from repairing Russian made military planes and tanks to supplying Russian troops with MRE's and bedsheets. So what we are talking about when we refer to the Wagner Group and Russian mercenaries is really the brokerage firms that organize the shipping charter companies, customs and warehousing traders, wet lease air transport firms, travel and accounting agencies that pay contract soldiers' salaries and service the logistical needs of Russia's military-industrial complex, which is deeply intertwined with Russian state energy, mining and arms companies.

In fact, the most apt comparison for the Wagner Group and Russian mercenary networks is not Blackwater but Mexico's Sinaloa Cartel. For decades, the Sinaloa Cartel has operated like a hybrid terrorist organization, setting up front companies, evading law enforcement and killing anyone who is perceived as getting in the way of the cartel's illicit trade. Like the Sinaloa Cartel, Russian mercenaries rely on a web of legal and black market relationships to traffic in illicit goods and trade with sanctioned companies and individuals while their chief financiers in Russia launder the money made on those deals. The only difference between the Sinaloa Cartel and Russian military contractor contingents is that while the businesses involved in Sinaloa are all ostensibly private in the Russian case they are only nominally private on paper. In the Russian case, security agencies such as the FSB and GRU and other organs of the Russian state are involved in every aspect of the mercenary cartel's operations from recruitment to deployment to the battlefield.

³ See: Candace Rondeaux, "[Decoding the Wagner Group: Analyzing the Role of Private Military Security Contractors in Russian Proxy Warfare](#)," *New America*, Nov.7, 2019; Candace Rondeaux, "[Inquiry into the Murder of Hamdi Bouta and Wagner Group Operations at the al-Shaer Gas Plant, Homs, Syria 2017](#)," *New America*, June 8, 2020; Candace Rondeaux, Oliver Imhof and Jack Margolin, "[The Abu Dhabi Express: Analyzing the Wagner Group's Logistics Pipeline and Operations](#)," *New America*, Nov.3, 2021.

The U.S. and EU have sanctioned the Wagner Group and individuals suspected of being involved in Russian mercenary operations. But it is not entirely clear what effect those moves have had on constraining Russia's deployments of mercenary contingents. More recently, some experts have [called](#) for the U.S. to designate the Wagner Group a foreign terrorist organization, or FTO, a move that would prohibit the provision of material support to Russian mercenaries going forward. Given the lack of substantive and effective policy action on the problem of dealing with Russian mercenaries to date, designating the Wagner Group a terrorist organization sounds like a great idea. But to do that the U.S. is going to need to change its approach to confronting the threat posed by Russian mercenary operations.

If the U.S. wants to get a better handle on this challenge, it is going to need to do two things: learn the problem set and right-size the strategy for managing it. The first step on that path to learning the problem set is to treat it for what it is: a Russian state backed organized crime cartel that often operates like a terrorist group. The second step is not that different from the measures we've seen U.S. intelligence and law enforcement agencies take when dealing with other networks of covert combatants like al-Qaeda, ISIS or organizations like the Sinaloa Cartel. With concerted effort the shell companies that make up this covert network can often be traced through bills of lading, customs and trade data, and other related open sources that are publicly available to anyone who cares to explore them. To do that, however, the U.S. will need to establish the institutional architecture needed for the U.S. and its allies to share a continual stream of real-time intelligence on the movements of Russian mercenary contingents, which in turn will require coordination with U.S. and its allies around the world. It will also mean U.S. national security agencies thinking creatively about broadening information sharing beyond the traditional intelligence agency and law enforcement routes. In the longer term, it will also require high-level diplomatic efforts to persuade U.S. partners around the world that Russia's continued ability to evade sanctions and profit from the illicit provision of embargoed goods and services will only aid Putin's regime.

To make progress on all of the above the U.S. government should consider creating a special interagency task force dedicated to generating a whole of government plan for generating actionable intelligence that will lead to sustained efforts to disrupt and degrade the networks that support Russian mercenary contingents. This all may seem like a tall order from a

Washington point of view but steps short of these risks prolonging the Kremlin's ability to evade sanctions and to Russia's ability to profit from its aggression.

Thank you again for the opportunity to share my views. I look forward to your questions.

Mr. SIREs. Thank you, Ms. Rondeaux. Thank you very much.

I will now introduce our final witness, Dr. Evan Ellis. Dr. Ellis is a research professor of Latin American Studies at the U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, with a focus on the region's relationships with China and other non-Western Hemisphere actors, as well as transnational organized crime and populism in the region.

He has published over 360 works, including five books, and previously served on the Secretary of State's Policy Planning Staff, with the responsibility for Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as the International Narcotics and Law Enforcement issues.

Dr. Ellis is a senior associate in the Americas Program at the Center for Strategic & International Studies and has been awarded the Order of Military Merit José Mariá Córdova by the government of Colombia.

Dr. Ellis, we welcome you to the hearing.

And I ask witnesses to please limit your testimony to 5 minutes. Without objection, your prepared written statements will be made part of the record.

Dr. Ellis, you are recognized.

**STATEMENT OF MR. R. EVAN ELLIS, RESEARCH PROFESSOR,
LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES, U.S. ARMY WAR COLLEGE STRA-
TEGIC STUDIES INSTITUTE**

Mr. ELLIS. Chairman Sires, Ranking Member Green, distinguished Subcommittee members, I am honored to share my analysis with you today. I will summarize my written testimony.

To begin, Russia has demonstrated its intent and its capability, although limited, to conduct military activities oriented against the United States and our partners in the Western Hemisphere. Its key vehicle for doing so has been anti-U.S. authoritarian regimes; specifically, Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Cuba.

Recent examples of such Russian threat projection include a pact to increase military cooperation with Venezuela and sending a Russian team of snipers to an upcoming military competition in Venezuela in August. Russia has also supported Venezuelan forces headed to the State of Apure; provided and maintained S-300 air defense systems in Venezuela, and sent at least 100 military trainers and technicians, as well as the just-mentioned Wagner Group mercenaries to Venezuela.

Russia has also sent its nuclear-capable Tu-160 Backfire bombers to Venezuela on multiple occasions—in September 2008, October 2013, and December 2018. It has deployed warships to Venezuela in 2008, and it has threatened to establish a military base on La Orchila Island off the coast of Venezuela. Since 2006, Russia has sold Venezuela \$11.4 billion in military goods.

In Nicaragua, the Ortega regime authorized 230 Russian troops, as previously mentioned, plus aircraft, ships, and weapons to operate in the country. As with Venezuela, Russia has deployed its nuclear-capable Tu-160 bombers to Nicaragua on multiple occasions.

Russian military aircraft has also repeatedly violated Colombian airspace from Nicaragua, as well as from Venezuela, including incursions in October-November 2013, in August 2019, in April 2020, in July 2020, and again, in April 2021.

Russia has also provided the Ortega dictatorship with an array of military equipment, including tanks, armored vehicles, helicopters, fighters, transport aircraft, anti-aircraft guns, patrol craft, and missile boats, among others.

Russia has set up ground stations for its GLONASS satellite system in Nicaragua's Nejapa Lagoon. It has established a training facility, as noted, in Managua, which in its first year alone conducted 12 courses, giving Russia access to 236 security personnel from Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, the Dominican Republic, as well as Nicaragua.

Russia is conducting information warfare activities, as noted, oriented toward increasing polarization and decreasing confidence in democratic institutions in the Western Hemisphere. It is leveraging social media, as noted, such as Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp, complementing activities by its State disinformation platforms, Russia Today and Sputnik. Colombia has accused Russia of attempting to interfere in its own elections.

Support for Russia by other regimes has also been troubling. This includes, as is noted, Argentina's Alberto Fernandez, who offered his country as Putin's gateway into Latin America, as well as Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, who called NATO's military aid to Ukraine immoral.

Brazil's attempt, recently announced, to purchase, quote, "as much Russia oil as possible" undermines United States and allied efforts to resist Russia's aggression in the Ukraine.

Russia's activities in the region also highlight the dangers to U.S. strategic interests posed by anti-U.S. authoritarian regimes close to our homeland. These regimes—specifically, Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Cuba—have served as Russia's principal enablers for projecting their threats into the region.

The good news is also noted by my colleagues. It is in the short term Russia's ability to operate in the hemisphere is limited by a narrow set of friends and sectors, as well as the resources Russia is spending in the Ukraine, Western sanctions, and the damage of Russian behavior, not only to its political reputation, but also to the appeal of Russia as an arms provider. Yet, it is important to recall that these limits are temporary.

Russia's commercial interaction, of course, with the region is minimal. These focus on its agricultural purchases and sales of nitrate-based fertilizer, as well as petroleum activities, although Russia also has some activities in mining, nuclear construction, and space sectors.

Military sales and interactions remain Russia's most important engagement tool, including with U.S. partners such as Peru, Brazil, and Mexico. These partners have Russian equipment in inventory, institutional relationships, and may, frankly, be open to deepening those relationships with possible near-term changes to our partners' political direction.

The detailed recommendations that I provide in my written testimony I would summarize as follows:

No. 1, heightened intelligence to identify and preempt near-term Russian moves in the region. Importantly, SOUTHCOM is often the last in line in the allocation of such resources.

Two, enhanced containment of entrenched anti-U.S. regimes through, first of all, sustained sanctions and, second, enhanced security support to the neighbors threatened by them; specifically, Colombia, Guyana, and Costa Rica, among others.

Third, helping democrats within at-risk regimes across the hemisphere to succeed in order to avoid the occurrence of more anti-U.S. regimes which would host Russian aggression. Doing so requires resources, in which I would call out the possibility of nearshoring and Representative Green's nearshoring bill, as well as attention and better fact-based messaging on the perils, not only of engaging with Russia, but as well as authoritarian populism.

Additional resources, regulatory flexibility for U.S. defense engagement in the region, and finally, a public strategy for responding to Russia, as well as other challenges in the hemisphere.

Thank you and the committee for your time today.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Ellis follows:]



**Statement before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee
on Western Hemisphere, Civilian Security, Migration, and
International Economic Policy**

***“Russia in the Western Hemisphere:
Assessing Putin's Malign Influence in Latin
America and the Caribbean.”***

A Testimony by:

Evan Ellis

Research Professor of Latin American Studies, U.S. Army War College
Strategic Studies Institute
Senior Associate (Non-resident), Americas Program, CSIS

**July 20, 2022
2172 Rayburn House Office Building**

Chairman Sires, Ranking Member Green, distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, I am honored to share my analysis and perspective with you today on Russian activities in the Western Hemisphere. I respectfully note that my views are my own, and do not necessarily represent the U.S. Army War College, CSIS, or the U.S. government.

Russian Military and Strategic Engagement in Latin America and the Caribbean

During the period from the lead-up to Russia's unprovoked invasion of the Ukraine through the present, as in previous episodes of conflict with the West in the past 15 years, Russia has demonstrated its intent and capability, however limited, to conduct military and other strategic activities oriented against the U.S. and our partners in the Western Hemisphere.¹ Its key vehicle for doing so has been collusion with anti-U.S. authoritarian regimes in the region, including Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Cuba.

Recent demonstrations of Russia's hostile intent toward the U.S. and our partners in the Western Hemisphere include Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov's January 2022 suggestion that Russia might deploy military forces to Venezuela or Cuba,² Deputy Prime Minister Yuri Borisov's February 2022 signing of a pact to increase military cooperation with Venezuela,³ and Nicaragua's June 2022 re-authorization for limited numbers of Russian troops and equipment to enter the country for training missions and other forms of support.⁴ Most recently, Russian actions also include an announcement of participation by a team of snipers, along with teams from China, Iran, and seven other countries, in an upcoming military sniper competition in Venezuela, the first time the competition has been held in the country.⁵

In recent months, Russia has also deployed military equipment, troops, and mercenaries to Venezuela, and provided technical assistance to the Maduro regime.

Russian support to Venezuela has included support to Venezuelan forces headed to the state of Apure, bordering Colombia, in a fashion that caused our Colombian partners enough concern that their Defense Minister Diego Molano was compelled to denounce Russia's actions.⁶ As part of

¹ R. Evan Ellis, "Russian Military and Commercial Activities in Latin America and the Caribbean," in *Back to the Future?: Rethinking Russian-Latin American Relations After the End of the Cold War*, Vladimir Rouvinski and Victor Kheyfets, Eds. (New York: Routledge, 2022), pp. 178-190.

² Rafael Bernal, "Russia suggests military deployments to Cuba, Venezuela an option," *The Hill*, January 13, 2022, <https://thehill.com/policy/defense/589595-russia-suggests-military-deployments-to-cuba-venezuela-an-option/>.

³ Regina Garcia Cano, "Venezuela's leader pledges military cooperation with Russia," *Associated Press*, February 16, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/europe-russia-venezuela-vladimir-putin-south-america-fc9e01895f52f8d9f52e501a93b2f089>.

⁴ "Nicaragua gives permission for Russian troops to enter country," *CBS News*, June 11, 2022, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/nicaragua-gives-permission-for-russian-troops-to-enter-country/>.

⁵ Lyuba Lulko, "Russia-led sniper games in Venezuela raise eyebrows in Washington," *Pravda*, July 7, 2022, See more at https://english.pravda.ru/world/152858-sniper_games_venezuela/.

⁶ "Colombia asegura que Rusia coopera con las fuerzas militares de Venezuela 'desde hace meses'," *InfoBAE*, January 14, 2022, <https://www.infobae.com/america/america-latina/2022/01/14/colombia-asegura-que-rusia-coopera-con-las-fuerzas-militares-de-venezuela-desde-hace-meses/#:~:text=EI%20ministro%20de%20Defensa%20de%20Colombia%2C%20Diego%20Molano%2C,despliega%20militar%20en%20el%20pa%C3%ADs%20caribe%C3%B1o%20y%20Cuba>.

this support, Russians may have provided Venezuela a radio-electronic capability for intercepting communications that could be used to intercept communications from Colombia and Brazil.

Russia's military activities in Venezuela come in addition to its deployment of S-300 Air Defense Systems,⁷ at least 100 military trainers and technicians,⁸ and Wagner group mercenaries to the country.⁹

Russia has sent its nuclear-capable Tu-160 backfire bombers to Venezuela on multiple occasions: in September 2008,¹⁰ October 2013,¹¹ and December 2018.¹² It has also deployed a flotilla of four warships to Venezuela in 2008, led by the nuclear-powered cruiser Peter the Great, in order to conduct exercises there.¹³ It has threatened to establish a military base on tiny La Orchila island,¹⁴ off of Venezuela's coast, and has sold \$11.4 billion in military goods to Venezuela's authoritarian populist regime since 2006,¹⁵ as I will discuss in more detail later.

In Nicaragua, the Ortega regime and its rubber-stamp Congress recently authorized 180-230 Russian troops, aircraft, ships and weapons to operate on Nicaraguan soil from July to December 2022, under Decree 10-1022, to include support to counterdrug, military communications, training,

⁷ "Qué es y cómo funciona el sistema antiaéreo ruso S-300 desplegado por el régimen de Nicolás Maduro alrededor de Caracas," *Infobae*, March 25, 2019, <https://www.infobae.com/america/venezuela/2019/03/25/que-es-y-como-funciona-el-sistema-antiaereo-ruso-s-300-desplegado-por-el-regimen-de-nicolas-maduro-alrededor-de-caracas/#:~:text=EI%20sistema%20antimisiles%20de%20fabricaci%C3%B3n%20rusa%20S-300VM%20ileg%C3%B3,Pechora-2M%2C%20en%20un%20sistema%20escalonado%20de%20defensa%20antia%C3%A9rea.>

⁸ "Russia to withdraw military 'technicians' from Venezuela on Wednesday: embassy," *Yahoo News*, June 26, 2019, <https://news.yahoo.com/russia-withdraw-military-technicians-venezuela-wednesday-embassy-184916199.html>.

⁹ "Wagner, el oscuro grupo de mercenarios rusos que estaría en Venezuela," *El Espectador*, April 2, 2019, <https://www.elspectador.com/mundo/america/wagner-el-oscuro-grupo-de-mercenarios-rusos-que-estaria-en-venezuela-article-848331/>.

¹⁰ "Russia sends warplanes on Venezuela training mission," *The Guardian*, September 10, 2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/sep/10/russia.venezuela>.

¹¹ "Russian Tu-160 Strategic Bombers Land in Venezuela," *Defense Update*, October 30, 2013, https://defense-update.com/20131030_russian-tu-160-strategic-bombers-land-venezuela.html.

¹² Tom Demerly, "Russian Air Force Tu-160 Bombers Deploy To Venezuela," *The Aviationist*, December 11, 2018, <https://theaviationist.com/2018/12/11/russian-air-force-tu-160-bombers-deploy-to-venezuela/#:~:text=Two%20Russian%20Tupolev%2F%20United%20Aircraft%20Corporation%20%28UAC%29%20Tu-160M1,continued%20questions%20about%20the%20status%20of%20Venezuela%E2%80%99s%20government.>

¹³ "Nuclear powered 'Peter the Great' en route to Venezuela," *MercoPress*, September 22, 2008, <https://en.mercoPress.com/2008/09/22/nuclear-powered-peter-the-great-en-route-to-venezuela>.

¹⁴ "Rusia instalará una base militar en la isla venezolana de La Orchila," *NTN24*, December 17, 2018, <https://www.ntn24.com/america-latina/venezuela/rusia-instalara-una-base-militar-en-la-isla-venezolana-de-la-orchila-101945>.

¹⁵ Martin Arostegui, "Russian Missiles in Venezuela Heighten US Tensions," *VOA News*, April 29, 2019, <https://www.voanews.com/a/russian-missiles-in-venezuela-heighten-us-tensions/4896279.html>.

and other operations.¹⁶ This authorization was not entirely new, but rather, a renewal and expansion of the November 2021 authorization for Russian forces to operate in the country.¹⁷

As in Venezuela, Russia has deployed its nuclear-capable Tu-160 Backfire Bombers and other military aircraft to Nicaragua on multiple occasions and used those deployments to intimidate U.S. partners in the region. Specifically, Russian military aircraft have repeatedly violated Colombian airspace. This includes an incursion by its Tu-160s on October 31 and again on November 1, 2013.¹⁸ It also includes overflights of Colombia without permission by Russian Il-96 military transport aircraft in August 2019, April 2020, July 2020, and again in April 2021.¹⁹ Russia has further deployed two of its warships to Nicaragua in August 2013,²⁰ in conjunction with their previously noted mission to Venezuela for the conduct military exercises with forces of the anti-U.S. Maduro regime. Since 2013, Russia has also made commitments to use its warships to patrol in Nicaraguan waters.²¹

Beyond such deployments, as with Venezuela, in recent years Russia has provided the anti-U.S. Ortega dictatorship in Nicaragua with an array of military equipment including tanks, armored vehicles military helicopters and aircraft, and missile boats, as I will detail later.

Russia has also set up a ground station for its global positioning satellite system GLONASS in the Nejapa lagoon area of Nicaragua,²² inaugurated in April 2017. It has also established a facility in the Las Colinas neighborhood of Managua where it conducts interactions with law enforcement officials from not only Nicaragua, but a number of other states in the region.²³ The facility began operating in 2017,²⁴ and reportedly trained 236 personnel from around the region in 12 courses

¹⁶ Ivan Olivares, "Aumento de presencia militar rusa en Nicaragua provoca a Estados Unidos," *Confidencial*, June 11, 2022, <https://www.confidencial.digital/politica/aumento-de-presencia-militar-rusa-en-nicaragua-provoca-a-estados-unidos/#:~:text=El%20decreto%20especifica%20una%20ampliaci%C3%B3n%20en%20la%20participaci%C3%B3n,A%20rea%20y%20Fuerza%20Naval%20del%20Ej%C3%A9rcito%20de%20Nicaragua%E2%80%9D>.

¹⁷ "Parlamento de Nicaragua autoriza ingreso de fuerzas de Rusia y EEUU con fines humanitarios," *El País*, November 24, 2021, <https://www.elpais.cr/2021/11/24/parlamento-de-nicaragua-autoriza-ingreso-de-fuerzas-de-rusia-y-eeuu-con-fines-humanitarios/>.

¹⁸ "Colombia says Russian bombers violated its airspace," *Reuters*, November 5, 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-colombia-russia-airspace-idUSBRE9A504020131106>.

¹⁹ Pablo Diaz, "Colombian Air Force intercept a Russian Ilyushin Il-96 flying on its continental airspace," *Aviacion Online*, April 19, 2021, <https://www.aviacionline.com/2021/04/colombian-air-force-intercept-a-russian-ilyushin-il-96-flying-on-its-continental-airspace/>.

²⁰ "Dos buques de guerra rusos llegaron a Nicaragua," *RCN*, August 12, 2013, <https://www.noticiasrcn.com/internacional-america/dos-buques-guerra-rusos-llegaron-nicaragua>.

²¹ "Russia To Patrol Nicaraguan Waters As Part Of Anti-Drug Campaign," *Today Nicaragua*, December 2, 2013, <https://todaynicaragua.com/russia-to-patrol-nicaraguan-waters-as-part-of-anti-drug-campaign/>.

²² "Russia commissions GLONASS station in Nicaragua," *GPS World*, April 7, 2017, <https://www.gpsworld.com/russia-commissions-glonass-station-in-nicaragua/>.

²³ John R. Haines, "Everything old is new again: Russia returns to Nicaragua," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, July 22, 2016, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2016/07/everything-old-new-russia-returns-nicaragua/>.

²⁴ Wilfredo Miranda Aburto, "Russia Opens Police Training Center in Nicaragua," *Confidencial*, October 25, 2017, <https://www.confidencial.digital/english/russia-opens-police-training-center-in-nicaragua/>.

that year, including students from Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, the Dominican Republic, and Nicaragua.²⁵

Beyond Nicaragua, there is also credible evidence²⁶ that Russia is conducting information warfare activities in the region in the region, possibly in conjunction with Cuba and Venezuela, leveraging leverage social media platforms²⁷ such as Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and WhatsApp,²⁸ with effects amplified by Russian technologies involving internet “bots,” and farms of “trolls.”

Russian activities appear oriented toward increasing polarization and decreasing confidence in democratic institutions in pro-U.S. countries in the region. Colombia²⁹ has accused Russia of attempting to interfere in their elections in this fashion. Credible evidence suggests that Russia may have interfered in the political dynamics of and social protests in at least Chile and Mexico as well.³⁰

Such Russian activities compliment Russian State disinformation platforms Russia Today and Sputnik, which had a significant influence in Latin America in disseminating Russian propaganda regarding its invasion of the Ukraine.³¹

Finally, while the hosting of Russian military activities has been exclusive to anti-U.S. authoritarian regimes, the willingness of some others to support and engage with Russia has been troubling. The primary examples include the symbolic and rhetorical support that the governments of Alberto Fernandez in Argentina and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil³² gave to Vladimir Putin, each while visiting him as his military stood poised to invade the Ukraine. Alberto Fernandez went so far as to offer his Argentine government as the “gateway” for Russia’s entry into Latin America.³³

²⁵ “Centro de capacitación de Rusia empieza año lectivo 2020,” National Police of Nicaragua, official website, February 3, 2020, <https://www.policia.gob.ni/?p=46111>.

²⁶ Gustavo A. Rivera, “¿Operaciones de influencia rusa en América Latina?” *Ultimo Hora*, January 2, 2022, <https://www.ultimohora.com/operaciones-influencia-rusa-america-latina-n2979602.html>.

²⁷ Jean Carlos Baéz Rosario and Richard Miles, “Virtual Russian Influence in Latin America,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, May 9, 2018.

²⁸ “Measuring the Impact of Misinformation, Disinformation, and Propaganda in Latin America,” *Global Americans*, Accessed July 13, 2022, <https://theglobalamericans.org/monitoring-foreign-disinformation-in-latin-america/>.

²⁹ Adriaan Alsema, “‘Russia’ and ‘international network’ behind Colombia’s anti-government protests: VP,” *Colombia Reports*, December 12, 2019, <https://colombiareports.com/russia-and-international-network-behind-colombias-anti-government-protests-vp/>.

³⁰ Gustavo A. Rivera, “¿Operaciones de influencia rusa en América Latina?” *Ultimo Hora*, January 2, 2022, <https://www.ultimohora.com/operaciones-influencia-rusa-america-latina-n2979602.html>.

³¹ Jack Detch, “Russia Has Taken Over Spanish-Language Airwaves on Ukraine,” *Foreign Policy*, February 9, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/02/09/russia-spanish-ukraine-media/>.

³² “President Jair Bolsonaro and President Vladimir Putin meet in Moscow,” Brazil Foreign Ministry, official website, February 16, 2022, <https://www.gov.br/en/government-of-brazil/latest-news/2022/president-jair-bolsonaro-and-president-vladimir-putin-met-in-moscow>.

³³ “El presidente de Argentina ofreció su país a Putin como ‘puerta de entrada a América Latina,’” *Infobae*, February 2, 2022, <https://www.infobae.com/america/america-latina/2022/02/03/el-presidente-de-argentina-ofrecio-su-pais-a-putin-como-puerta-de-entrada-a-america-latina/>.

Mexico's Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador (AMLO) has called NATO's military aid to help Ukraine fight Russian aggression "immoral."³⁴

It is notable that to date, despite Latin America's longstanding tradition of valuing its sovereignty, virtually no government in the region has provided military support to Ukrainians resisting Russia's invasion of their country.

Interpretation of Russia's Presence in the Region

In the near term, Russia's actions in the Western Hemisphere, in collusion with anti-U.S. authoritarian states, while serious and dangerous, also are limited in scope. They appear primarily designed to intimidate the U.S.³⁵ and to offset Russia's international political and economic isolation brought about by its unprovoked invasion of the Ukraine, including reactions to its associated brutality in Russia's targeting of civilian populations in the Ukraine³⁶ and its likely human rights violations against the Ukrainian people.³⁷

While Russia's reach in Latin America may be limited and its actions episodic,³⁸ in evaluating the risks posed by Russia's actions and intent in the region, it is important to recognize that Russia is a nuclear armed power that has demonstrated its willingness to invade and deliberately destroy a democratic country.³⁹ It has an anti-U.S. leader of questionable mental stability,⁴⁰ who as we have seen, is deploying military forces near our shores and conducting information operations and other engagements to destabilize US-friendly democracies in the region.

³⁴ "Mexican president slams NATO policy in Ukraine," *ABC News*, June 13, 2022,

<https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/mexican-president-slams-nato-policy-ukraine-85359386>.

³⁵ For support to this assessment, see Julia Garganus, "Russia: Playing a Geopolitical Game in Latin America," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, May 3, 2018, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/05/03/russia-playing-geopolitical-game-in-latin-america-pub-76228#:~:text=Russia%20is%20active%20in%20Latin%20America%20primarily%20through,Russia%E2%80%99s%20profile%20is%20also%20firmly%20rooted%20in%20geopolitics>.

³⁶ Keith Collins, Danielle Ivory, Jon Huang, Cierra S. Queen, Lauryn Higgins, Jess Ruderman, Kristine White and Bonnie G. Wong, "Russia's Attacks on Civilian Targets Have Obliterated Everyday Life in Ukraine," *The New York Times*, March 23, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/03/23/world/europe/ukraine-civilian-attacks.html>.

³⁷ "Ukraine dispatch: new Ukrainian ECHR application details Russian violations of European rights convention," *Jurist*, July 6, 2022, <https://www.jurist.org/news/2022/07/ukraine-dispatch-new-ukrainian-echr-application-details-russian-violations-of-european-rights-convention/#:~:text=The%20Ukrainian%20government%20claims%20the%20Russian%20Federation%20is,remedy%20%28Article%2013%29%2C%20prohibition%20of%20discrimination%20%28Article%2014%29>.

³⁸ R. Evan Ellis, "Russian Engagement in Latin America and the Caribbean: An Update," *Global Americans*, December 5, 2017, <https://theglobalamericans.org/2017/12/russian-engagement-latin-america-update/>.

³⁹ Pamela Falk, "Zelenskyy tells U.N. Russia is 'deliberately destroying Ukrainian cities,'" *CBS News*, April 5, 2022, <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/zelenskyy-tells-un-russia-is-deliberately-destroying-ukrainian-cities/ar-AAVTiIG>.

⁴⁰ Zachary B. Wolf, "There is plenty of speculation about Putin's state of mind," *CNN*, March 2, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/03/02/politics/putin-mental-state-what-matters/index.html>.

Risks from Anti-U.S. Authoritarian Regimes in Latin America

Beyond the direct implications of its actions in the short term, Russian military activities, information operations and other engagement in the Western Hemisphere highlight the dangers to U.S. strategic interests from anti-U.S. authoritarian regimes dangerously close to our homeland, particularly regimes currently in power in Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Cuba. The examples that I have just provided show how Russia's projection of threats leverage these regimes. They thus highlight how malign actors such as Nicholas Maduro, the Ortegas, and Miguel Diaz-Canel do not simply deprive their own people of democracy, prosperity, and basic individual freedoms and protections. Rather, their efforts to spread their authoritarian, often corrupt⁴¹ form of government and work against U.S. interests, pose a risk that is magnified exponentially by their willingness to serve as a port of entry for Russia, a nuclear armed U.S. rival, actively engaged in threatening the U.S. in its own near abroad.⁴²

As a caveat, there are subtle differences in the positions of various anti-U.S. authoritarian states in acting as a gateway for Russia's threats against the U.S. The Cuban regime of Miguel Diaz Canel, for example, like his predecessors the Castro brothers, is arguably committed to aligning with Russia in its opposition to the United States and broader geopolitical project, including selectively cooperating with it in the Western Hemisphere.⁴³ Nonetheless, the Diaz Canel regime is also arguably distrustful of Russia since its financial abandonment of Cuba at the end of the Cold War.⁴⁴ Correspondingly, it is cautious about being exploited by Russia to project a threat against the United States from the island in a way that could provoke a reaction that might prejudice Cuba's interests without yielding the Cuban government clear benefits. Indeed, such Cuban caution was illustrated by its abstention in the March 2022 United Nations General Assembly vote condemning Russia's invasion,⁴⁵ as well as its silence when, in January 2022, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Ryabkov suggested Russia could deploy military forces to Cuba.⁴⁶

⁴¹ See, for example, "\$350 Billion Lost to Corruption in Venezuela: Expert," *Insight Crime*, March 22, 2016, <https://insightcrime.org/news/brief/350-billion-lost-to-corruption-venezuela-official/#:~:text=One%20of%20the%20main%20sources%20of%20corruption%20in,currency%20exchange%20rates%20and%20the%20black%20market%20rate>.

⁴² Evan Ellis and Ryan Berg, "Lessons from Russia's Latin America engagement over Ukraine," *The Hill*, March 1, 2022, <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/596392-lessons-from-russias-latin-america-engagement-over-ukraine/>.

⁴³ See, for example, Dave Sherwood, "Cuba to deepen ties with Russia as Ukraine tensions mount," *Reuters*, February 19, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/cuba-deepen-ties-with-russia-ukraine-tensions-mount-2022-02-19/>.

⁴⁴ "Russia and Cuba Rebuild Ties That Frayed After Cold War," *Voice of America*, October 29, 2019, https://www.voanews.com/a/americas_russia-and-cuba-rebuild-ties-frayed-after-cold-war/6178441.html#:~:text=Russian-Cuban%20ties%20are%20far%20from%20the%20Cold%20War,Americas%20then%20largely%20abandoned%20it%20in%20the%201990s.

⁴⁵ "Cuba & the UN Resolution on Russia's Invasion of Ukraine," *Havana Times*, March 6, 2022, <https://havanatimes.org/opinion/cuba-the-un-resolution-on-russias-invasion-of-ukraine/>.

⁴⁶ Bernal, "Russia suggests military deployments....," 2022.

Such nuances notwithstanding, the “enabling role” of anti-U.S. authoritarian states increases the stakes for the U.S. of the delicate political transitions currently playing out in the region.⁴⁷ Virtually every country in Latin America is in crisis. Its populations have been made more economically vulnerable by Covid-19.⁴⁸ Governments have been left with profound fiscal dilemmas after pandemic spending.⁴⁹ The inflationary effects of Russia’s Ukraine invasion⁵⁰ has hit at risk populations with steep increases in costs for food and fuel for transport, heating and cooking. New governments are facing the grave fiscal and policy dilemmas of these challenges without legislative majorities. The current political crisis and protests in Ecuador,⁵¹ Panama,⁵² Peru,⁵³ and previously those in Colombia, Chile, and elsewhere in the region highlight the gravity of the situation.⁵⁴ If even a portion of the region’s at-risk governments are captured by anti-democratic, anti-U.S. malign leaders, such as those presently in Venezuela, Nicaragua and Cuba, Russia’s options to undermine and threaten the U.S. in the hemisphere, along with U.S. rivals Iran and China, will expand dangerously.

Enabling Effect of Other Extra-Hemispheric Actors

Looking at the prospects for the proliferation and survival of populist regimes that open doors to Russia in the long term, the risks are also magnified by the financial and technical support that

⁴⁷ R. Evan Ellis, “The Struggle for the Soul of the Latin American Left,” *Center for a Secure, Free Society*, April 19, 2022, https://www.securefreesociety.org/research/the-struggle-for-the-soul-of-the-latin-american-left/?utm_source=The+Struggle+for+the+Soul+of+the+Latin+American+Left&utm_medium=info@securefreesociety.org&utm_campaign=Issue+08.

⁴⁸ “Why Latin America’s economy has been so badly hurt by covid-19,” *The Economist*, May 13, 2021, <https://www.economist.com/the-americas/2021/05/13/why-latin-americas-economy-has-been-so-badly-hurt-by-covid-19>.

⁴⁹ Mauricio Cardenas, Luca A Ricci, Jorge Roldos, and Alejandro M. Werner, “Fiscal Policy Challenges for Latin America during the Next Stages of the Pandemic: The Need for a Fiscal Pact,” *International Monetary Fund*, March 18, 2021, <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WP/Issues/2021/03/17/Fiscal-Policy-Challenges-for-Latin-America-during-the-Next-Stages-of-the-Pandemic-The-Need-50263>.

⁵⁰ Anthony Esposito, Isabel Woodford and Miguel Lo Bianco, “Latin America’s leaders are waging ‘war’ on inflation; so far they’re losing,” *Reuters*, June 24, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/latin-americas-leaders-are-waging-war-inflation-so-far-theyre-losing-2022-06-24/>.

⁵¹ Nora Brito, “Ecuador’s Protests Leave Lasso in a Catch-22,” *World Politics Review*, July 11, 2022, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/30668/for-lasso-ecuador-protests-create-a-catch-22>.

⁵² “Panama protests continue despite fuel and food price cuts,” *Yahoo News*, July 13, 2022, <https://news.yahoo.com/panama-protests-continue-despite-fuel-045242182.html>.

⁵³ R. Evan Ellis, “The Evolution of Peru’s Multidimensional Challenges, Part I: The Political Crisis,” *Global Americans*, July 13, 2022, <https://theglobalamericans.org/2022/07/the-evolution-of-perus-multidimensional-challenges-part-i-the-political-crisis/>.

⁵⁴ Catherine Osborn, “Ecuador’s Uprising Is Only the Beginning,” *Foreign Policy*, July 1, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/07/01/ecuador-protests-indigenous-conaie-lasso-fuel-subsidies-inflation-latin-america/>.

China,⁵⁵ Iran⁵⁶ others U.S. rivals⁵⁷ contribute to the solvency of the malign actors that serve as Russia's gateway to the region, in support of their own interests.⁵⁸ Reciprocally, those other extra-hemispheric U.S. rivals, particularly the PRC benefit strategically from the obligation of the U.S. to respond to Russia's aggression in the hemisphere,⁵⁹ without their own relationships there being substantially tarnished by Russian actions.⁶⁰

Near Term Weaknesses in Russia's Position in the Region

Despite such reasons for concern, in the short term, it is also important to recognize the near-term weaknesses in Russia's position in the region,⁶¹ and the opportunities for the U.S. that arise from them.

First, Russia's infrastructure for projecting a sustained military threat into the Western Hemisphere is limited. The military component of that infrastructure withered significantly after the Collapse of the Soviet Union at the end of the Cold War.⁶² Compounding that deficiency, Russia's military is currently tied down in the Ukraine.⁶³ Russia's economic resources for expensive operations or propping up its friends in the hemisphere are depleted by its ongoing campaign in that country. Its financial tools for engaging Western Hemisphere countries that participate in the global economy is limited by Western sanctions.⁶⁴ For many democratic governments in the region, even those not well aligned with the US, Russia's actions in the Ukraine have made it toxic to publicly engage

⁵⁵ Mayela Armas and Corina Pons, "Exclusive: Venezuela wins grace period on China oil-for-loan deals, sources say," *Reuters*, August 12, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-venezuela-china-exclusive-idUSKCN2581UN>.

⁵⁶ "Iran agrees to overhaul Venezuelan oil, gas refineries," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, February 22, 2022, <https://en.ima.ir/news/84659542/Iran-agrees-to-overhaul-Venezuelan-oil-gas-refineries#:~:text=Tehran%2C%20IRNA%20%E2%80%93%20Iranian%20Minister%20of%20Petroleum%20Javad,Gas%20Exporting%20Countries%20Forum%20%28GECF%29%20in%20Doha%2C%20Qatar>.

⁵⁷ R. Evan Ellis, "Venezuela: Pandemic and Foreign Intervention in a Collapsing Narcostate," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, August 5, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/venezuela-pandemic-and-foreign-intervention-collapsing-narcostate>.

⁵⁸ R. Evan Ellis, "Russia's Latest Return to Latin America," *Global Americans*, January 19, 2022, <https://theglobalamericans.org/2022/01/russia-return-latin-america/>.

⁵⁹ R. Evan Ellis, "The Transitional World Order: Implications for Latin America and the Caribbean," *Global Americans*, March 29, 2022, <https://theglobalamericans.org/2022/03/the-transitional-world-order-implications-for-latin-america-and-the-caribbean/>.

⁶⁰ Daniel Ten Kate, "China Distances Itself From Russia, Calls for Halt to Violence," *Bloomberg*, February 26, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-02-26/china-distances-itself-from-russia-calls-for-halt-to-violence#xj4y7vzkg>.

⁶¹ Ellis, "Russia's Latest Return..." 2022.

⁶² Ivelisse Gonzalez, "An assessment of Russia's military presence in Latin America," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, June 18, 2019, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2019/06/an-assessment-of-russias-military-presence-in-latin-america/>.

⁶³ James Beardsworth, "Russia Battered Down in Ukraine Amid 'Long War' Warnings," *Moscow Times*, May 12, 2022, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/05/12/russia-battered-down-in-ukraine-amid-long-war-warnings-a77654>.

⁶⁴ "What are the sanctions on Russia and are they hurting its economy?" *BBC*, June 27, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60125659>.

with it as a partner, even if some countries in the region avoided condemning its invasion of the Ukraine,⁶⁵ or expelling Russia from the United Nations Human Rights Council.⁶⁶

Beyond official positions and rhetoric by Latin American governments, Russia's poor performance on the battlefield in the conflict has badly damaged the reputation of Russia's military goods and doctrine.⁶⁷ For pragmatic, cash poor Latin American governments, Russia's continuing military shortcomings in Ukraine thus diminished its options for defense sales and training in Latin America and elsewhere in the near future.⁶⁸

Even before the effects of Russia's Ukraine invasion on its resources and brand, its position in the region has been based on a limited set of partners,⁶⁹ commercial sectors and economic relationships, by contrast to the People's Republic of China,⁷⁰ which I view as the greater long-term threat to U.S. interests.⁷¹ According to the International Monetary Fund, in 2021 Russian bilateral trade with Latin America and the Caribbean was \$10.8 billion, compared to \$350.9 billion in PRC trade with the region and \$796.6 billion in U.S. trade with the region.⁷² When Latin America considers its important markets, it is notable that in 2021, Russia purchased only \$5.6 billion of goods and services from the region, whereas the PRC purchased \$170.7 billion, and the United States purchased \$513.1 billion.⁷³

⁶⁵ Mateus Bilhar, "Five Latin American States Abstained at UN's Ukraine Resolution and Here is Why," *Modern Diplomacy*, March 10, 2022, <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2022/03/10/five-latin-american-states-abstained-at-uns-ukraine-resolution-and-here-is-why/>.

⁶⁶ Nora Gamez Torres, "LatAm and Caribbean Nations Divided in Vote to Expel Russia from Human Rights Council," *Americas Society / Council of the Americas*, April 7, 2022, <https://www.as-coa.org/articles/latam-and-caribbean-nations-divided-vote-expel-russia-human-rights-council>.

⁶⁷ Ben Wolfgang, "Rethinking Russia: Failures in Ukraine dent military's reputation but stoke fears of escalation," *The Washington Times*, April 10, 2022, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/apr/10/rethinking-russia-failures-ukraine-dent-militarys-/>.

⁶⁸ Amy Chew, "Russian military hardware getting wrecked in Ukraine could hurt its appeal to some of Moscow's best customers," *South China Morning Post*, May 22, 2022, <https://www.businessinsider.com/poor-russian-performance-in-ukraine-may-hurt-its-arms-sales-2022-5>.

⁶⁹ Ellis, "Russia's Latest Return..." 2022.

⁷⁰ General Laura Richardson, "2022 Posture Statement to Congress," U.S. Southern Command, March 24, 2022, <https://www.southcom.mil/Media/Special-Coverage/SOUTHCOMs-2022-Posture-Statement-to-Congress/#:~:text=Army%20Gen.%20Laura%20Richardson%2C%20commander%20of%20U.S.%20Southern,before%20the%20House%20Armed%20Services%20Committee%20March%208>.

⁷¹ R. Evan Ellis, "China's Role in Latin America and the Caribbean," Statement before the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere, Transnational Crime, Civilian Security, Democracy, Human Rights, and Global Women's Issues, March 31, 2022,

https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/033122_Ellis_Testimony1.pdf.

⁷² "Exports and Imports by Areas and Countries," *Direction of Trade Statistics*, International Monetary Fund, Accessed July 12, 2022, <https://data.imf.org/regular.aspx?key=61013712>.

⁷³ "Exports and Imports..." 2022.

Russia's Commercial Profile in the Region

Despite the limited scale of Russia's economic engagement with Latin America and the Caribbean overall, it is important as a provider of nitrate-based fertilizers to select South American countries including Argentina and Brazil,⁷⁴ and a purchaser of its agricultural goods.⁷⁵

Russia's Atomic energy company Rosatom is building a small water-cooled nuclear facility in El Alto Bolivia.⁷⁶ Russia's space industry, as seen previously, plays a minor role through GLONASS as illustrated by the example of Nicaragua, as well as in the seven Russian GLONASS ground stations built in Brazil.⁷⁷

Beyond such strategic sectors, Russian companies such as Rosneft, Gazprom, Lukoil, and TNK in the petroleum sector, Rusal and Rusoro in the mining sector, InterRao and Power Machines in the construction sector have a limited presence in the region.⁷⁸ The Russian petroleum operations in Venezuela, previously under Rosneft,⁷⁹ now controlled by Roszarubezhneft due to a Russian maneuver to avoid U.S. sanctions,⁸⁰ is by far the most significant of these. It is also the most tied to politics, through the longstanding intelligence community connection between Russian oil tycoon Igor Sechin and Vladimir Putin.⁸¹

Military Relationships as a Russia's Principal Vehicle

While agriculture may give Russia some leverage in the Southern Cone, and Roszarubezhneft plays a non-trivial role in Russia's relationship with Venezuela, Russia's core vehicle for relating to the region is arguably its military equipment sales, training, education and other support relationships. One legacy of Russia's Cold War-era interactions with the region is a substantial base of Russian Arms, institutional and personal bonds in the region that, although not what they once were, it still can leverage for ongoing engagements.⁸² These include equipment in the arsenals of some of the U.S.' closest partners in the region. Indeed, as an example, there are still

⁷⁴ "Brazil continues to receive Russian fertilizers although in erratic shipments," *Mercopress*, April 20, 2022, <https://en.mercopress.com/2022/04/20/brazil-continues-to-receive-russian-fertilizers-although-in-erratic-shipments>.

⁷⁵ Richard M. Sanders, "Why Brazil and Argentina Chose Russia Over Ukraine," *The National Interest*, March 20, 2022, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/why-brazil-and-argentina-chose-russia-over-ukraine-201244>.

⁷⁶ "Rosatom resumes construction of nuclear reactor in Bolivia," *Mercopress*, July 27, 2021, <https://en.mercopress.com/2021/07/27/rosatom-resumes-construction-of-nuclear-reactor-in-bolivia>.

⁷⁷ "Russia to place seventh Glonass ground station in Brazil," *Space Watch*, August 2020, <https://spacewatch.global/2020/08/russia-to-place-7th-ground-station-of-glonass-satellite-navigation-system-in-brazil/>.

⁷⁸ Ellis, "Russian Military and Commercial Activities..." 2022.

⁷⁹ Pritish Gupta, "Rosneft's exit and Russia's continued role in Venezuela," *Observer Research Foundation*, June 15, 2020, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/rosneft-exit-russia-continued-role-venezuela-67834/>.

⁸⁰ Alexandra Ulmer and Marianna Parraga, "Russian oil firm shuffles Venezuela assets as sanctions bite," *Reuters*, March 29, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/exclusive-russian-oil-firm-shuffles-venezuela-assets-sanctions-bite-2022-03-29/>.

⁸¹ Christian Lowe and Rinat Sagdiev, "How Russia sank billions of dollars into Venezuelan quicksand," *Reuters*, March 14, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/venezuela-russia-rosneft/>.

⁸² R. Evan Ellis, "Russian Military and Commercial Activities..." 2022.

approximately 400 Russian helicopters in the region,⁸³ including approximately 25% of the military fleet of Latin America.

Venezuela

Russia's best known, and by far largest military sales relationship in the region, as noted previously, is that with Venezuela. From 2006 through 2015 when Venezuela's financial collapse began to accelerate, the Venezuelan regime purchased over \$11.4 billion in Russian arms.⁸⁴ These included Sukhoi-30 fighters, Mi-35 attack helicopters, Mi-17 transports, and an array of armored vehicles, air defense and missile systems, which today are a core element of the serious military threat that the authoritarian populist Maduro regime in Venezuela presents to its neighbors Colombia and Guyana.

Nicaragua

By contrast to Venezuela, whose military relationship with Russia substantially began under the Presidency of Hugo Chavez, Russia's military relationship with Nicaragua dates to its Cold War-era role as the key supplier of military equipment to the Communist Sandinista government of Daniel Ortega from 1979 through 1990. It built on that base of Soviet-era equipment in the Nicaraguan military inventory, and the associated institutional and military relationships, to continue and to some degree deepen that relationship in the current era.

Russian equipment provided to Nicaragua includes 50 T-72 tanks,⁸⁵ BMP-3 and BTR-80 armored vehicles, TiGR armored cars,⁸⁶ Mi-17 helicopters, Yak-130 fighter trainers,⁸⁷ An-26 military transport aircraft,⁸⁸ Zu-23 anti-aircraft guns,⁸⁹ Mizrah patrol craft,⁹⁰ and Molina missile boats.⁹¹

Cuba

With respect to Cuba, the vast majority of the Communist Regime's military inventory is Russian, from the Soviet Era, although to date,⁹² its government has lacked the capital to replace most of its

⁸³ "Russian Helicopters in Latin America and Caribbean," *Helis*, November 2, 2015,

https://www.helis.com/database/news/rushelico_latam/.

⁸⁴ "Examining Russian and Chinese military operations in Venezuela," *La Patilla*, January 24, 2022,

<https://www.lapatilla.com/2022/01/24/examining-russian-and-chinese-military-operations-in-venezuela/>.

⁸⁵ "Nicaragua shows off Russian T72 tank," *Associated Press*, August 16, 2016,

<https://apnews.com/article/e7ac9d8e16974d0b8321b438a3541033>.

⁸⁶ "Todo lo que querias saber sobre las armas rusas en Nicaragua," *Russia Beyond the Headlines*, March 19, 2019,

<https://es.rbth.com/tecnologias/82775-armas-rusas-nicaragua>.

⁸⁷ "Todo lo que querias saber..." 2019.

⁸⁸ Erwan de Chereisey, "Russia donates An-26 transport aircraft to Nicaragua," *Shephard Media*, February 28, 2018,

<https://www.shephardmedia.com/news/mil-log/nicaragua-receives-26s-transport-aircraft/>.

⁸⁹ Ellis, "Russian Engagement in Latin America..." 2017.

⁹⁰ "Todo lo que querias saber..." 2019.

⁹¹ Ellis, "Russian Engagement in Latin America..." 2017.

⁹² "Cuba-Russia Military Cooperation Never Completely Ended," *Havana Times*, February 15, 2022,

<https://havanatimes.org/features/cuba-russia-military-cooperation-never-completely-ended/>.

older generation equipment with newer items, nor has Russia been willing to extend it the credit to do so.

Beyond anti-U.S. authoritarian clients for Russian military goods, Rosboronexport and Rostec have sold arms, and maintained military relationships with U.S. partners including Peru, Colombia, Mexico, and Brazil, among others.

Peru

Peru's purchases of Russian arms and associated institutional exchanges and training and military education relationships begun in the early 1970s under the regime of Peruvian General Velasco Alvarado, starting with the delivery to Peru of weapons initially destined for socialist Salvador Allende in Chile. Peru also purchased Su-22 fighter bombers and Su-25 fixed-wing aircraft from the Soviet Union in the late 1970s and early 1980s,⁹³ which the country later used against Ecuador during the Cenepa War of 1995.⁹⁴

The military relationship between Peru and Russia continued under conservative Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori with the purchase of Mig-29 aircraft.⁹⁵ In 2013, Peru purchased 24 Mi-17 military helicopters,⁹⁶ as well as two Mi-35 attack helicopters.⁹⁷ These aircraft, and other Russian equipment support the Peruvian military's mobility and other operational requirements in the country's narco-trafficking and terrorism hotspot, the Apurimac, Ene and Mantaro river valley (VRAEM). They also support its operational needs elsewhere in the Peruvian Andes, and in the Amazon, including Peru's new emerging criminal threat areas along the borders with Ecuador and Colombia, and in the triple frontier area where the borders of Peru, Colombia and Brazil intersect.

With respect to military training and other forms of interaction, in 2008, the center-right Peruvian government of Alan Garcia signed a military cooperation agreement with Russia. Peru then renewed a commitment for military training with Russia in 2011.⁹⁸ To this day, Russia's institutional relationships through such channels give it some influence within the Peruvian Army.⁹⁹

With respect to Peru's Russian arms, however, Western sanctions against Russia are presently causing difficulty for the Peruvian military in paying the Russians for the maintenance that keeps their equipment in operationally ready status.

⁹³ Alexándrova, "Todo lo que querías saber..." 2019.

⁹⁴ Ellis, "Russia's Latest Return..." 2022.

⁹⁵ "Fujimori traidor por comprar MiG-29," *La Republica*, May 28, 2003, <https://larepublica.pe/politica/357187-fujimori-traidor-por-comprar-mig-29/>.

⁹⁶ "Perú compró 24 helicópteros rusos Mi-171Sh para operaciones en el Vraem," *La Prensa*, December 19, 2013, <https://laprensa.peru.com/actualidad/noticia-mi-171sh-peru-narcotrafico-vraem-17541>.

⁹⁷ Tatiana Rusakova, "Perú moderniza su flota de aviones," *Russia Beyond the Headlines*, July 18, 2012, https://es.rbth.com/articles/2012/07/18/peru_moderniza_su_flota_de_aviones_18053.

⁹⁸ Ellis, "Russia's Latest Return..." 2022.

⁹⁹ Ellis, "Russia's Latest Return..." 2022.

Colombia

Colombia, one of the U.S.' closest partners in the region, acquired Russian equipment during the period 1994-1996 under President Ernesto Samper,¹⁰⁰ and is part of today's legacy Colombian Armed Forces.¹⁰¹ Russian equipment in Colombia is, however, generally maintained by private contractors.

Mexico

Mexico has acquired limited amounts of Russian equipment, which creates a basis for the continuing low level, but nonetheless important, defense relationship with those countries.¹⁰² Under the Mexican administrations of Felipe Calderon and Enrique Peña Nieto, Mexico became the most significant purchaser of U.S. military equipment in the hemisphere, acquiring \$1.5 billion in U.S. military goods by 2017.¹⁰³ It was thus particularly striking that, as recently as 2020, the leftist populist Mexican government of Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador (AMLO) was reportedly considering purchasing Russian helicopters.¹⁰⁴

Brazil

Brazil, during the left-of-center governments of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Lula) and his handpicked successor Dilma Rousseff, flirted with the acquisition of Russian military hardware.¹⁰⁵ It did so against the current of the generally conservative Brazilian Armed Forces, and the nation's orientation to favor its own substantial and sophisticated domestic arms industry wherever possible. During the Lula and Dilma governments, Brazil purchased 12 Russian Mi-35 attack helicopters,¹⁰⁶ IGLA-S air defense missiles,¹⁰⁷ and pursued acquiring a \$1 billion Russian Pantsir S-1 air defense system.¹⁰⁸ It also considered Russia's Su-35 fighter for its fighter modernization

¹⁰⁰ "Llegaron Los Helicópteros Rusos MI-17," *El Tiempo*, April 17, 1997, <https://www.eltiempo.com/archivo/documento/MAM-509405>.

¹⁰¹ R. Evan Ellis, "The New Russian Engagement With Latin America: Strategic Engagement, Commerce, and Dreams of the Past," Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, June 2015, <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/display.cfm?pubID=1275>.

¹⁰² Ellis, "The New Russian Engagement..." 2015.

¹⁰³ Tim Marcin, "Mexico Military Spending: Peña Nieto Spent \$1 Billion On US Military Equipment To Fight Drug Cartels," *International Business Times*, June 16, 2015, <https://www.ibtimes.com/mexico-military-spending-pena-nieto-spent-1-billion-us-military-equipment-fight-drug-1969802>.

¹⁰⁴ "Mexico in talks with Russia to buy new batch of military helicopters: foreign minister," *Reuters*, February 6, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mexico-russia-military-idUSKBN201050>.

¹⁰⁵ Ellis, "The New Russian Engagement..." 2015.

¹⁰⁶ "Brazil decommissions its Mi-35M combat helicopters," *Rio Times Online*, February 15, 2022, <https://www.riotimesonline.com/brazil-news/brazil/brazil-decommissions-its-mi-35m-combat-helicopters/>.

¹⁰⁷ "Mass media: Russian Igla-S MANPADS delivered to Brazil," *Top War*, February 4, 2016, <https://en.topwar.ru/90308-smi-v-braziliyu-postavleny-rossiyskie-pzrk-igla-s.html>.

¹⁰⁸ "Brazil Proceeding On \$1 Bln Russian Missile Purchase," *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty*, October 17, 2013, <https://www.rferl.org/a/brazil-russia-missiles-antiaircraft/25139301.html#:~:text=Brazilian%20officials%20said%20they%20hope%20to%20sign%20a,a%20possible%20joint%20development%20of%20a%20combat%20aircraft>.

program.¹⁰⁹ the latter two acquisitions, however, never came to fruition, yet the likely return to power of Lula in Brazil's October 2022 elections¹¹⁰ could re-open possibilities for defense engagement pursued during the prior Workers Party (PT) governments.

While militaries in the region not hostile to the U.S. generally prefer U.S. equipment and working with the United States, the significantly greater cost of that equipment, the multiple constraints on U.S. military interactions in the region, and a new crop of leaders across the region more open than their predecessors to working with the Russians, could expand already substantial Russian military engagement in the region beyond that with the current crop of anti-U.S. authoritarian regimes.

Policy Recommendations

To succeed, the U.S. approach to contain Russia's activities in the hemisphere must be rooted in addressing not only its current initiatives there, but also the spreading economic-political crisis in the hemisphere, as well as the activities of China, Iran and other malign actors there which enable them. A successful U.S. approach must also empower appropriate U.S. organizations to have the resources and agility to provide attractive alternatives to partnering with Russia, particularly in the defense sector. I thus recommend that such a strategy address at least the following four areas:

- Heightened intelligence to identify and preempt near-term Russian moves, in collusion with anti-U.S. authoritarian regimes, to project serious military threats against the U.S. or U.S. partners in the region;
- Enhanced containment of entrenched anti-U.S. regimes;
- Help for regimes in transition avoid anti-democratic paths and collusion with actors hostile to the US;
- Additional resources and regulatory flexibility for U.S. defense engagement in the region.

Intelligence

Through human and technical intelligence and other means, U.S. organizations and collaborating partners in the region should be particularly attentive to indicators that Russia is planning to present a major threat in the region. Its move to do so would likely be in collusion with anti-U.S. authoritarian regimes there. Those regimes should thus be a central focus of intelligence collection and analysis efforts. Such a threat might include offensive missiles, nuclear-capable strategic aircraft, or enduring deployment of warships or other assets in the territory of anti-U.S. regimes.

While such actions would likely be limited in scope due to Russian logistics and resource constraints, the foreseeable end to, or dissipation of, the current conflict in the Ukraine will potentially increase Russian resources, while increasing the likelihood that Russia could attempt

¹⁰⁹ "Russian Su-35 fighter will be a part of Brazilian tender again," *Russian Aviation*, April 22, 2011, <https://www.ruaviation.com/news/2011/4/22/273/>.

¹¹⁰ "Lula retains lead over Bolsonaro in Brazil opinion poll ahead of election," Reuters, June 23, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/lulas-lead-over-bolsonaro-brazil-nearly-unchanged-ahead-elections-poll-2022-06-23/>.

such a provocation, either as a form of escalation to threaten the United States, or to facilitate negotiation of an end to the conflict on terms more favorable to it.

Containment of anti-U.S. authoritarian regimes

Per this analysis, Russia currently has a limited base of anti-U.S. regimes in the hemisphere willing to host its military threats and other strategic initiatives. Empirically, although democratic regimes (including those less than aligned with the US) have maintained economic, political and military relationships with Russia, they generally have not hosted anti-U.S. Russian military provocations or its other U.S.-directed strategic initiatives. The most effective single way for the United States to insulate against Russia's ability to project a threat in the region is thus to limit the ability of anti-U.S. authoritarian regimes to host such actions, and to constrain their ability to spread anti-democratic projects and instability to other countries in the region, which would then become candidates for hosting Russian aggression from their territory.

Containing anti-U.S. authoritarian regimes as a vehicle to limit Russia's options has multiple dimensions, focused both on the Russia-hosting regimes themselves, and those beyond it.

First, the U.S. must consistently maintain clear sanctions against leaders working with Russia, sanctions on transactions involving Russia, and more indirectly, sanctions on sectors that sustain anti-democratic regimes in power, even if these are insufficient in themselves to produce a transition to a democratic regime.

A key example of the latter are sanctions on the Maduro regime in Venezuela. Even if such sanctions do not produce a transition to democracy in Venezuela, their continuation is vital to deterring the regime and its elites from hosting Russian aggression or conducting other malign action.

The continuation of U.S. sanctions on Venezuela and other anti-U.S. authoritarian regimes should also continue to coordinate closely with our like-minded democratic allies, and leverage multilateral forums such as the Organization of American States to sustain maximum pressure. The focus should be not just on the states and individuals directly engaged in bad behavior, but to discourage other governments and individuals from supporting them, thus containing their ability to host Russia's actions.

In order to give particular focus to the containment of Russia-colluding anti-U.S. populist regimes, I further recommend that the State Department re-establish its Special Representative for Venezuela, and a Deputy Assistant Secretary focused on malign actors in the hemisphere, with initial responsibility for Cuba and Nicaragua as well as Venezuela.

Beyond such punitive and isolating measures, the U.S. should also strengthen security assistance, security guarantees, messaging, and other support for neighbors of Russia-colluding regimes. This includes Colombia, which as we have seen, is threatened by Russia's presence in both the Venezuelan border state of Apure, as well as by Russia's maritime support to Nicaragua

threatening the waters around Colombia's San Andres Island, to the extent that the new Colombian regime of Gustavo Petro accepts such support.

Expanded U.S. support should similarly extend to Costa Rica, which is threatened by Nicaragua's position on the San Juan River,¹¹¹ as well as by the deployment of Russian forces in the country.¹¹²

Such support sends a strong message to both these democratic partners of the US, and others, that the United States stands with them, and with other democracies against Russian-backed initiatives that threaten the region.

Help for regimes in transition

As discussed previously, the greatest risk for the proliferation of hosts for Russian malign action in the hemisphere is the mutually reinforcing economic and political crises currently playing out in the region. It is vital for the United States to help democratic forces succeed over anti-U.S. authoritarians who would hijack at-risk regimes undergoing political and economic crises, since such elites, as we have seen, are who open doors to Russia's threats.

Doing so will require far more generous and agile U.S. economic and technical support than we have seen to date. Still, such expenses, incurred in order to ensure the U.S. homeland is surrounded by healthy democracies disposed to cooperate on security issues, rather than being surrounded by anti-U.S. authoritarian regimes which open doors to Russia, would be more than worth the money spent.

Such expanded and more agile U.S. support to regimes in transition should leverage the private sector in rational ways, and be conditioned on adherence to principles of transparency, democracy, and free markets among the recipient countries.

Part of U.S. work with regimes in transition must also be more effectively articulating the reasons for not working with the Russians in inappropriate ways. As part of this messaging, the U.S. needs to do more to highlight the egregious behavior of Russia in Ukraine and elsewhere in the world through data-based public diplomacy involving not just the State Department, but the Defense Department, and other U.S. government organizations. Such messaging should leverage concrete examples and data. It should include exposition of Russia's manipulation of democracy through information operations in the Western Hemisphere, and its failure to provide substantial benefits to the regimes that ally with it.

In its messaging to regimes in transition, the U.S. should also go beyond exposition of bad Russian behavior, to respectfully articulate the costs of the populist authoritarian paths such as those taken by Venezuela, Nicaragua and Cuba. Using these and other current empirical examples, U.S. messaging should highlight how departures from principles of democracy, the free market and the

¹¹¹ "Nicaraguan soldiers back on Isla Calero," *Tico Times*, February 11, 2011, <https://ticotimes.net/2011/02/11/nicaraguan-soldiers-back-on-isla-calero>.

¹¹² "Costa Rica 'toma nota' sobre entrada de tropas rusas a Nicaragua," *Deutsche Welle*, June 13, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/es/costa-rica-toma-nota-sobre-entrada-de-tropas-rusas-a-nicaragua/a-62109098>.

rule of law ultimately prejudices populations, and does not represent a viable alternative to their frustrations with the often inadequate performance of democratic leaders in their countries. By better making the case for democracy, markets and the rule of law, the U.S. will thus help to head-off transitions to new populist authoritarian regimes that further open the door to Russia.

Expanded Resources and Agility for Defense Engagement

In the upcoming National Defense Authorization Act, Congress needs to not only significantly increase resources for military education and training and other forms of defense engagement in the Western Hemisphere, but also seriously examine reducing the detailed specifications for how that money is spent and reported. This applies particularly to Section 333 funds and the DoD Foreign Military Sales and Foreign Military Finance program. In my personal opinion from my observation of the work of our military country teams over the two decades I have worked Latin America issues, such stipulations regarding spending and reporting, while well intentioned, significantly hamper the agility and effectiveness of the U.S. military to compete with the Russians and others to provide needed equipment and services, and thus to maintain the U.S. status as partner of choice.

I offer one last observation regarding recommendations to conclude: Each of the complex considerations that I have described today in these recommendations would be furthered by a public Western Hemisphere strategy from the administration, with inputs from the National Security Council, Treasury, the Defense Department and other parts of the interagency, as well as the State Department, and delivered to Congress for its review. Such a plan would ideally outline and stimulate more transparency and debate on the Administration's strategic concept regarding pushback against Russia, as well as on a range of other matters.

Thank you for your time today, and interest in my analysis and perspective.

Mr. SIRES. Thank you very much, Dr. Ellis.

I will now recognize myself for 5 minutes to begin asking questions.

Dr. Rouvinski, you outlined the growth of Russian influence across the region, but I would like to discuss Nicaragua first. I was proud to sponsor the RENACER Act, which requires a public report on purchases and agreements entered into by the Nicaraguan government related to the military and intelligence sector. Unfortunately, this report has not been released, despite Daniel Ortega demonstrated openness to military cooperation with Russia.

In each of your views, are we doing enough? Are we prioritizing enough what is going with Russia in some of these countries? Is there more that the U.S. Government can do? Can anybody talk a little about that. Dr. Rouvinski, what else can we do to stop this?

Dr. ROUVINSKI. Thank you very much, Chairman, for your comments and for sharing your view.

I think the United States has a window of opportunities now, precisely because of some of the factors that we have been discussing with my colleagues because of the limited capacity that Russia has now.

And I believe, in the case of Nicaragua, Daniel Ortega did not recognize these two separate republics in Ukraine, Donetsk and Luhansk, and this is very different from what he did back in 2008, when he was the first one to recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia, two separate republics in Georgia, and did actually a great help to Vladimir Putin because nobody supported Russia back then.

He did not do this at this time, and I think one of the reasons is because Daniel Ortega became accustomed to be rewarded by Russia for doing such kind of things. And Russia has very limited capacities now. From this perspective, I think the renewable of the permission for the Russian groups to arrive in Nicaragua is actually a signal that Daniel Ortega is sending to Moscow, expecting that he might be rewarded for doing this.

So, once again, I think there is a window of opportunity for the United States perhaps to see if these diminishing capacities of Russia will provide new opportunities to review the policy toward these allies of Vladimir Putin. Because they definitely are well aware that Russia has very, very diminished opportunities now.

Mr. SIRES. Thank you.

Can anyone else answer that? Dr. Ellis?

Mr. ELLIS. Yes, Mr. Chairman. So, for me, three key points.

No. 1, I think Nicaragua and the RENACER Act, as well as our response to Venezuela, emphasizes the value of containment. I think there are situations in which we may not be able to introduce near-term change to authoritarian regimes. However, there is still a value in containing them because that restricts their ability to engage with Russia and other threat actors.

I think No. 2 is recognizing the importance of supporting the neighbors that are threatened—again, in the case of Nicaragua, realizing the burden that Costa Rica is bearing.

And I think No. 3 is just recognizing the very dire straits that a number of countries in the region are in, doubling down to provide democratic solutions to allow regimes in the region to avoid radicalization and authoritarian paths which would proliferate the

types of regimes that we do not like to see in Nicaragua, in Venezuela, and elsewhere.

Mr. SIRE. Anyone else?

[No response.]

One of the things that really burns me up about Nicaragua is the IMF, the International Monetary Fund, the amount of money that they gave Nicaragua just over the

[inaudible] after in Nicaragua where all those people have been in jail, and we are

[audio malfunction] against them. And yet, the IMF gave them something like \$340 million just before the election. Obviously, I do not know if they keep track of the money, but I wish they would say where the money went to, because that is just not acceptable, since we are one of the biggest contributors to the IMF in terms of money that we give the IMF.

Now, Ranking Member Green is recognized for questions. Congressman Green, you are recognized.

Mr. GREEN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I really want to say, first off, to all of our witnesses today, this has just been fantastic testimony, and I thank each of you for what you shared. I looked at your written statements prior. They are detailed. I just am very grateful for your efforts today.

In March 2022, General Glen VanHerck, the Commander of NORTHCOM, testified before the Senate that Mexico is among the top countries worldwide with regard to the number of Russian intel guys—basically, spies—operating in its territory. How should the United States view these activities in respect to our relationship with Mexico and Russia's relationship with Mexico? And I throw that out there to anyone. Perhaps, Mr. Ellis, yes, please.

Mr. ELLIS. Yes, Ranking Member Green, thank you very much.

I think, first of all, of course, this is something that has historically been the case all the way back to the cold war, the presence of Russian intelligence operatives, Soviet operatives, in Mexico, but it certainly illustrates Russia's recognition of the strategic value of Mexico that close to the U.S. border.

I think it also illustrates, you know, without implicating any Mexican knowledge or collusion in this, first, the difficult foreign policy, and we have seen an increasing turn to the left, not only with AMLO, but also before Mr. Obrador, as well as some of the very real concerns of activity by a variety of different groups, especially the expanding power of Sinaloa and Jalisco Nueva Generacion and other cartels.

There is really just a sea of opportunity for Russian illicit actors, as well as others, to swim in desperately close to our U.S. shore. And I certainly welcome more attention to where things are at with the governability of the Mexican regime and its relationship and the posture of AMLO toward the United States, and the importance of our cooperation on security affairs that directly affect the United States through ties of economic, migration, family, and security.

Mr. GREEN. Yes, sir, go ahead.

Dr. ROUVINSKI. I agree with Dr. Evan Ellis about the importance of paying closer attention to this kind of activities. I am afraid many Latin Americans, Latin American governments, have been

reluctant to pay sufficient attention to what Russia's intelligence services have been doing this part of the world.

For example, in Colombia, they eventually managed to identify some of these activities, intelligence activities, but until then, Russian diplomats—better to say Russian intelligence officials—were using the cover of diplomatic posts while almost openly doing such kind of activities everywhere.

And it is also very important to take into consideration the difference, for example, to European countries in Latin America Russian diplomatic posts, and Russia has stable diplomatic relations with all Latin American and Caribbean countries and they have embassies and consulates throughout the entire region. So, these diplomatic posts have been, actually, doing a lot of things that do not exactly correspond to what the diplomatic activities are. They have been involved in intelligence. They have been involved in disinformation, especially taking into account the fact that in some of the countries the access to RT Actualidad and Sputnik News had been reduced. So, they now reinforce their diplomatic posts to continue this disinformation campaign. So, I think it is important to pay attention to this.

Thank you.

Mr. GREEN. So, maybe perhaps in writing, if the two of you would send what you think our recommended actions should be, that would be helpful. And I will let you respond in writing to my office, and we will get that into the record.

Real quickly, because I am almost out of time—anyone can take this question on—I am a little concerned about Russia is doing in Nicaragua with the global positioning system, the observation satellite. Can someone address that briefly? Perhaps Dr. Ellis?

Mr. ELLIS. Well, while it is a legitimate facility to relate to GLONASS, it also creates other electronic capture opportunities and opportunities for Russian space personnel with Nicaraguans to operate in the region for other purposes. And so, even though it is legitimate, it does open up the door for certain risks, especially ELINT type of risks.

Mr. GREEN. It is an ISR platform, is basically what you are saying?

Mr. ELLIS. For capture, as well as for the personnel that allows it to work in the region under the cover of that facility.

Mr. GREEN. Mr. Chairman, I am out of time, but I know Ms. Marten wanted to answer that. Is it OK if she does?

You are muted, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. SIRES. How is that?

You are recognized.

Mr. GREEN. Go ahead, Ms. Marten

Dr. MARTEN. Thank you.

I would just agree with what the previous speaker said and add that the Nicaraguan facility is different from the Brazilian facilities, which are open to use by scientists. The one in Nicaragua is closed. It probably is engaged in local spying activity from the installation, as well as things that are related to space-based intelligence collection, just because it is dominated by Russia in an area that is very close to the U.S. embassy.

Mr. SIRES. Thank you, Ranking Member.

Now, I recognize Congressman Levin.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you so much, Mr. Chairman. I really appreciate it.

And I want to echo Congressman Green's comments about the terrific testimony here, and I want to thank everybody for participating, and you and Ranking Member Green for holding the hearing in the first place.

It is critical that we better understand how Russia is influencing countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, as we seek to pursue policies that enable democratization, equity, stability, and justice globally.

Dr. Rouvinski, your testimony suggested that Russia's war in Ukraine and its aftermath provides strategic openings to limit Russian influence in several Latin American countries that have historically close ties with Russia.

In 2019, the Government Accountability Office issued a report on the impacts of sanctions in Venezuela in a response to a request by the House Foreign Affairs Committee and me. The report found that, among other things, Venezuela's economy deteriorated steadily for nearly a decade and that decline worsened after the United States levied new sanctions in 2015.

In what ways would increased diplomacy with Venezuela and easing sanctions drive a wedge between Russia and Venezuela?

Dr. ROUVINSKI. Thank you very much for the question.

I think, first of all, it is important to take into consideration that Venezuela has been Russia's most important gateway to Latin America. The Chavista regime provided Russia with plenty of opportunities to engage all other nations as well here in this part of the world.

But I think, for the regime of Nicolas Maduro now, the opportunities that were provided by Russia, first of all, back in Venezuela and international organizations; second, to help to avoid the U.S. sanctions and, basically, acting as a middleman. They now cease to exist because of the difficulties experienced by Russia itself.

So, I think, from this perspective, there is an opportunity that the adjusted policy that may allow, of course, not to recognize Nicolas Maduro as a legitimate president because he doesn't have any legitimacy; this is the authoritarian regime, but it may help to make the conditions for ordinary Venezuelans a little bit easier and, also, perhaps also to stop any possibilities for Russia to further engagement, which, again, are quite limited.

And the last, but not least important, I think it is necessary to take into account the changes in many other Latin American nations. We have a new government here in Colombia that is most likely to change its policy toward Venezuela. So, I think the United States has to take into account these changes and elaborate a new approach to the——

Mr. LEVIN. Good. Yes, sounds so wise.

Dr. Marten, your testimony notes that Russia's influence in the region exists, but is limited, and that there are steps the United States can and should take to further counter Russian influence, such as increasing diplomatic ties and filling Ambassadorial posts.

When the United States hosted the Summit of the Americas, I joined my colleagues in writing a letter to the Biden Administra-

tion urging that the summit be inclusive of countries like Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua, noting that the summit was a moment for the region to come together to address Russia's war in Ukraine, among other global challenges.

Do you think our continued isolation of these countries helps to maintain Russia's influence over them, and how might lifting the embargo or restaffing the embassy in Cuba, for example, benefit the U.S. interests of keeping Russian influence at bay?

Dr. MARTEN. Thank you very much for that question.

I think it is not only Russian influence that we have to be concerned about, but Chinese influence.

Mr. LEVIN. Right.

Dr. MARTEN. And the evidence is, in recent years, China is gaining more influence in both Cuba and Venezuela, for example. And so, it is both that we have to worry about.

Just on the question of Venezuela, in particular, Venezuela, now its assets that are located in Russia it cannot access. And so, that means that it has lost things there. And there is evidence that Venezuelan oil is now a competitor against Russian oil in Asia, as Russian oil has turned away from the European market. And so, those are just some ways where economics matters in terms of what is happening.

But I would just point out that, in each of these cases, the real personal ties between these leaders and Putin are relatively weak. They are really for political motives and for economic motives, not for deep ideological motives. And that means that, if we have the opportunity to exchange economic benefits for movement toward democratization and away from human rights problems in these countries, we should seize the moment when Russia is so disabled to have an effort to really win back some of the influence that we had in the region before Russia became so involved in past years, especially around 5 to 10 years ago.

Mr. LEVIN. And that would help with China, too.

OK, my time has expired, Mr. Chairman. Again, thanks to the witnesses very, very much. I yield back.

Mr. SIRES. Congressman Pfluger, you are recognized.

Mr. PFLUGER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for recognizing me and for holding this hearing.

In recent years, we have seen China and Russia rapidly expand their influence throughout Latin America. Russia has propped up authoritarian regimes both in Venezuela and Cuba, and obviously, the PRC has been discussed on this particular hearing. The Belt and Road Initiative has been used to expand their aspirations, the Chinese aspirations, of undercutting our own national security initiatives and economic interests in this region.

And I completely agree with Ranking Member Green and appreciate the bipartisan nature of the nearshoring efforts. But when you look at the brazen display of soft power by both countries, I think it should alarm every single member of this committee and should be the sense of Congress that we do take every action possible.

The steps I have taken recently to address the malign influence of Russia is working with Representative Panetta on introducing legislation that would require the DOD to examine in great detail

how Russia is using PMCs across the globe to achieve their strategic objectives, and the direct or indirect threats that Russian PMCs present to our interest in identifying whether or not sanctions on these groups are actually impeding or having a positive effect on deterring their behavior.

I am proud to see that this legislation has made its way through the NDAA and was passed in the House version. I hope it is included in the Conference Report this year. But this information is going to be vital to understanding these emerging threats.

I will start with Dr. Ellis. Thank you for your service and thank you to all the witnesses today.

Dr. Ellis, how would you characterize the Russian PMC activities and their objectives in Latin America and the Caribbean?

Mr. ELLIS. Sir, first of all, thank you for the question. I am a U.S. Army civilian.

But, across the board, I see a variety of different companies. When we talk about the Wagner Group companies, obviously, I think there is a mixture of support for private interest to oligarchs that my colleague had mentioned, as well as support to strategic objectives, oftentimes, when Russia wants to avoid directly committing military forces, and yet, at the same time, we see that Russia has also directly committed military forces in places like Venezuela.

So, you know, the thing that I think is also important to recognize is there is a synergy that was alluded to between Chinese activity and Russian that I think it is important for the committee to recognize. Specifically, that China oftentimes does not want to be tainted with anti-U.S. activities or the anti-U.S. work of the regimes. And yet, Chinese money, in pursuit of its own interests, enables those regimes to survive. It lent over \$64 billion to Venezuela, over \$13 billion to Ecuador under Rafael Correa, et cetera, et cetera.

But then, in turn, that has given those regimes the open door to engage with Russia in ways directly threatening the United States. China, then, benefits from those threats without being tainted by that. So, I think it is important to understand the synergies between the Chinese and the Russian threats, as well as the direct Russian activities, both directly military and through Wagner Group and other companies such as that.

Mr. PFLUGER. Well, thank you for that. And that is very disturbing, as we look at those synergies, to see this axis forming where it is right at our doorstep, and we have to compete with it.

Let me just open it up here, because I know that you all have kind of talked about some of the military activities. And my question was originally going to be focused on Russia, but because of this synergy discussion here, which I think is great, I will open it up to anybody. But do you guys see an escalation of sorts happening in Latin America because of the involvement of the United States and our allies with Ukraine? And specifically, with regards to military activity or more equipment, just more activity in general?

Yes, go ahead.

Ms. RONDEAUX. Thank you, Representative Pfluger.

I wanted to comment on your question earlier as well regarding PMCs and their activity in Latin America. It is encouraging to hear that there is legislation pending calling for the DOD to do more research, do more work, to understand how these networks operate.

I just would also add, it would be probably pretty useful for other civilian agencies to engage, simply because they have a set of capacities that may not be available to the DOD, or there may be some limitations in terms of the kinds of research that can be done openly on certain DOD systems. So, I just want to put that out there.

There has been a lot of discussion today in this conversation, and in conversations that we have recently had in other contexts in Congress, about what to do about Russia's malign influence vis-a-vis PMCs generally. And I would say one thing that I think is overlooked, when we talk about more need for more intelligence, is the fact that today we have a real deficit in our intelligence agencies in terms of the Russia specialists. People who speak Russian, who understand the region, who understand the military-industrial complex are dwindling. And that capability, the anemia within the interagency vis-a-vis our understanding of Russia generally has been one reason why we find ourselves now, 8 years on, in a situation where there is a serious crisis in terms of containing the threat from Russia in not just Ukraine, but other parts of the world. So, I just wanted to make that comment.

Mr. PFLUGER. Thank you so much.

Unfortunately, my round has expired on this round of questioning, but I do represent Goodfellow Air Force Base, which is the DOD's largest intelligence training base. So, I am going to take this back directly to the base as an opportunity.

And I appreciate all the witnesses.

I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. SIRES. Congressman Castro, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. CASTRO. Thank you, Chairman.

And thank you to all the witnesses for your testimony today.

And before I begin with my questions, I want to emphasize that, as we discuss Russia, and to a larger extent, China's influence in Latin America and the Caribbean, that we also keep in mind the role the United States should play in strengthening our relationships, our own relationship, with countries in the region. And our engagement cannot and should not be solely reactive. In fact, if you look back on history, when we have been only reactive, usually, we have made poor decisions.

And so, our engagement has to be sustained. It has to be cooperative and collaborative. Countries in Latin America and the Caribbean will continue partner with Russia and China if there is no better alternative that the United States is offering to them. The United States must work to become the better partner, the better choice, for assistance and support, especially during these difficult times.

And with that context in mind, I want to direct my first question to two witnesses, Dr. Marten and Dr. Rouvinski. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has led to unprecedented inflation around the world—with rising food and energy prices particularly impacting

Latin America, as seen by recent protests. In response to the economic recession of COVID-19 and the invasion of Ukraine, recent elections in the region point to increasing frustration and anti-incumbency sentiments, as demonstrated by Chile, Colombia, and Honduras.

So, my question is, my first question, how can the United States engage with these countries, particularly new Administrations, to make us a preferred partner in recovery from economic fallout from the war and COVID-19?

Dr. MARTEN. Thank you so much for the question. Oh, sorry.

Mr. CASTRO. Please, please.

Dr. MARTEN. Oh, OK. Thank you so much for the question.

One thing that I would say that we could do that is different from what Russia is able to do, and from what China is able to do, is to focus on high-tech questions that will simultaneously serve our objections in trying to limit climate change or to mitigate climate change. And one of those examples we are seeing in Brazil right now, which is very much dependent on Russian fertilizer, is an effort to get away from traditional fertilizer use by thinking of high-tech alternatives. And that is something where Silicon Valley would really have an advantage over both Russia and China.

And so, I think the more that we can be creative in our thinking and look to our own strengths, the more possibilities that we might have.

Mr. CASTRO. All right. Please.

Dr. ROUVINSKI. Thank you so much for this question.

I think in Latin America, if we see the numbers, still, there is a lot of people who like to see the United States engage with Latin America. The numbers, actually, that Russia and China operate, or we see the support for Russia and China in Latin America, are much smaller.

And I think the United States has all the opportunities, first of all, to show that actually Latin America and the United States have many, many common interests. I think the United States somewhat fails in comparison with the strategic communication advanced by Russia because there are many things happening. There is a lot of good stuff happening between the United States and Latin America, but, simply, this kind of information does not reach many Latin Americans. It is absent in the media.

So, I think if the United States, in cooperation with Latin American partners, can design, or at least to strengthen, the existing opportunities, it will help a lot to show that, actually, there is much more that unites Latin America and the Caribbean and the United States than divides them. I think this is the most important.

Thank you.

Mr. CASTRO. Well, thank you. And as a followup to that—

Dr. ROUVINSKI. Yes?

Mr. CASTRO [continuing]. I would love to know your thoughts as well on role of vaccine diplomacy, or so-called vaccine diplomacy, given that a large number of countries in Latin America have been mainly distributing Russia's Sputnik V and Sputnik Light vaccines.

Please, I have only got about 35 seconds left. Please.

Dr. MARTEN. Yes. Russia really failed in the opportunity it had with the Sputnik V vaccine because it, first, had delivery delays,

and then, it failed to get World Health Organization approval for its vaccine because it was not able to provide the scientific backup concerning its safety and effectiveness.

And so, I think that that was a real opportunity that the United States maybe could have done more on, and that we certainly can do more on now, by working on our own strengths in international health issues and international vaccine issues, to show that we are a good partner.

Mr. CASTRO. Well, thank you.

With that, my time is up, and, Chairman, I yield back.

Mr. SIRES. Thank you, Congressman.

Congressman Vargas, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. VARGAS. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate the opportunity to speak here. I hope you can hear me and see me.

One of the things that I found interesting—first of all, I want to thank all the witnesses. I, too, was very impressed with their testimony today, both written and oral.

One of the things I learned is the limited capacity of Russia in the area. So, I went ahead and took a look, as you were speaking, to the GDP of these countries. So, the USA, according to the World Bank, in 2022, our GDP will be about \$20.94 trillion. Russia's GDP will be \$1.483 trillion. China's will be \$14.72 trillion. Now, obviously, we have a lot of capacity. We have a lot of ability because of the size of our economy and the influence that we do have and should have.

Now, with us trying to contain Russia, as I think we should, there is a lot more that we can do in Latin America, and that we should be doing. So, I will ask, again, following what Mr. Castro said, I agree with him that there is so much more.

Dr. Marten, what else can we do? I mean, one of the things that did annoy me, just to be frank, every vaccine that we had for COVID should have had the American flag on it. We should have had the American flag, and everyone should have known, you know, when we send a vaccine out, that that is coming from the United States of America; we are your friends. I think we blew it in that. I think we were right, you know, to be generous in it, but I think we blew it in not putting our flag on it. But what else can we do?

Dr. MARTEN. Thank you for the question.

I think it would be important to make sure that all of our leading diplomatic roles in the region are filled, because I think Ambassadors have a unique role in being able to help business people from the United States in their efforts to make inroads in new places and new sectors. And I think it sends a message that the United States cares about those countries and is making them a priority. And so, I think the more that our diplomatic representatives can work with U.S. businesses to create new opportunities, the more chance we will have of replacing the Russian influence.

Mr. VARGAS. I have to say, one of the things that I think that we do do well is we send our young people. My 18-year-old daughter just graduated from high school, and she is with Amigos de las Americas. She is in Latin America right now. It is her second year doing this. My older daughter did it for 5 years all throughout Latin America, and they love us. I mean, they cannot get enough

of these young kids and, you know, the spirit that they bring of America.

And I think that there is so much more that we can do, and we should do. I mean, I think that most countries are anxious.

But, yes, go ahead, Dr. Marten. Your hand was up.

Dr. MARTEN. Just really quickly, Russia has really failed in that because it has been withdrawing its young people from the West. And so, I think you are absolutely right that the presence of our young people in different countries is something that is really an unofficial Ambassador role that is important.

Mr. VARGAS. Yes, I think we should encourage that and do more of that.

You know, again, one of the things that concerns me is China. I do see—and I travel around Latin America quite a bit myself—China is very involved in Latin America, and they do have resources. As I noted, their economy is big and they are investing. I mean, obviously, they create the debt trap and they do all sorts of other nefarious things, but they do have the capacity to be there.

I have to say, too, it seems from this Ukrainian war, which is such a criminal act, that the Russians are also very incompetent. I mean, they are showing their incompetence here and their backwardness, even in the way they fight.

So, obviously, I think it is a good idea that we focus on them, but not to lose the focus on China, because I think China is doing even more nefarious things.

I do not know; does anyone have a comment on that?

Yes, Doctor, I see your hand up. Mr. Ellis, I believe. Dr. Ellis?

Mr. ELLIS. Yes, sir. Thank you. And I think I want to pull together some very important threads that you brought up.

No. 1, that Russia, because of its lack of resources, really is not going to be able to come substantially to the aid of its close partners that are looking to it—Venezuela, Cuba, Nicaragua. As a matter of fact, Latin America only exported about \$6 billion to Russia last year by comparison to over \$140 billion to China. So, Latin America will, clearly, look much more to China as a market and for resources.

What that means is that Russia only has two options. One is that its ability to act in the region will probably center more around threats, which is why I focused on the intelligence to projecting short-term, limited threats designed against the United States.

But, No. 2, those, basically, anti-U.S. regimes will be driven to focus more on China for those resources, and we have to give them options against doing that.

And then, finally, there is a whole basket of regimes because of COVID-19, as well as the inflationary effects of Russia's Ukrainian invasion, that are facing severe fiscal constraints and the inability to cover at-risk populations. And so, my big concern is that many of those States which may be left or right, but are still, basically, democratic, that we help to ensure that those struggles that are going on in places like Peru, or where things are going with Chile, potentially, later in the year with the Boric Administration, et cetera, or where things could go with Colombia—to make sure that those States, that we help them to succeed economically through

things like investment, through things like nearshoring, through things like fiscal support, to help them avoid that anti-U.S. path that comes from radicalization, which will proliferate the problems that we face. And to me, in that way, our economic engagement helps keep China at bay, as well as keeping Russia at bay.

Mr. VARGAS. Thank you.

My time has expired, and I appreciate you very much. I yield back, sir.

Mr. SIRES. Thank you very much, Congressman Vargas.

I have a question before I do the closing. And if any other members wish to ask a second question, please feel free to do so.

My question is this: I would love to hear a comment [audio malfunction].

Mr. VARGAS. We lost the chairman for a second here.

Mr. SIRES. Well——

Mr. VARGAS. OK, I wanted to make sure.

Mr. SIRES. Well, wait a second.

It is notable that countries where Russia has the most influence have the worst human rights records, from political imprisonments to attacks on independent journalists to shutting down humanitarian NGOs.

I look at, specifically, with respect to Cuba, the

[inaudible] Administration

[inaudible]. The Cuban government is

[audio malfunction].

Excuse me? Oh, my video is

[inaudible]. Did you hear the question? Can you just nod if you heard the question? I guess not. Hello? Can you just raise your hand if you can hear me? Can you hear me? Oh, I do not like this. Can anybody hear me? Can you hear me?

Mr. PRICE. Congressman, can you repeat the question, potentially, for the witnesses?

Mr. SIRES. Well, how do we get it back?

Mr. PRICE. Sorry for the delay, everyone, to check issues.

Mr. SIRES. Can you hear me?

Mr. VARGAS. Mr. Chairman, we hear you seldomly. You break up almost all the time. It is very, very difficult to hear. Ever so often, a word or two, but not strung together in any sort of syntax that think anybody can understand.

Mr. SIRES. Well, I can hear clearly. Can you hear me clearly now? Yes. All right. We will try this again.

It is notable to me that the countries where Russia has the most influence have the worst human rights records—from political imprisonment to attacks on independent journalists, to shutting down humanitarian NGO's. Just recently, Cuba had a demonstration where people went to the streets. They are giving kids 10 years' prison for demonstrating.

How do we inform other countries that this is what Russia really offers? How do we do that? I mean, you have got to be blind not to see what Russia offers. They have really nothing but, you know, devastation to offer.

Can each of you in order just say a little bit of something about it before we close? Candace——

Ms. RONDEAUX. Thank you, Chair Sires. I will just briefly comment.

All of this testimony today has, I think, provoked a lot of thinking about what is needed to resource the effort to combat Russia's influence in Latin America and other parts of the world. And I think, again, I would just repeat that investment in the architecture, the institutional architecture, in order to support that effort is going to be very key, not just the engagement piece and all the kind of tactical and strategic things that have been described by my colleagues here.

Clearly, during the cold war, there was an enormous amount of investment in education of specialists in Russian affairs, as well as specialists who could be sort of a bridge between specialists in the area of military security affairs and, also, diplomacy in all kinds of regions of the world, including in Latin America.

I would note that, also, during the cold war, Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty were extremely important in influencing outcomes in Eastern Europe and Europe writ large for sure. We do not see anything comparable to that today in terms of investment in the infrastructure needed to actually have influence over these outcomes. Particularly in the Western Hemisphere, there is no comparable body like RFE or RL. And I think that that certainly is a deficit that probably should be addressed relatively soon, if you want to get to grips with the disinformation campaign and the ways in which RT and Sputnik are managing to influence opinion in the area.

But I would just repeat again, it is all nice and well and good to name all the different things that need to be done, but you have to have the people and the resources to do it. And right now it is not there.

Mr. SIRE. Thank you.

Dr. Marten, can you comment on that?

Dr. MARTEN. I agree with Candace Rondeaux completely. I have noticed the deficit of funding for people who specialize in Russian studies. And also, what we really need to do is tell people in Spanish and Portuguese language broadcasts exactly what Putin and his regime have done in terms of their corruption and their violence. And so, I agree completely that what we need to do is answer back.

And let me just add one more thing from a previous question, the question about whether sanctions against the Wagner Group work. I think they do. I think they limit the geographic regions where Wagner can be deployed. And as Candace Rondeaux has noted in her previous work, there are people who are employed by Wagner who are also employed by Rosneft, the oil industry, but they are different people. They are doing different things, and Wagner is much worse than Rosneft. And so, I think by having sanctions against Wagner, we are limiting the really nefarious actions of Russia. I am more familiar with Africa, obviously, than Latin America, but I think it applies there as well.

Mr. SIRE. Thank you.

Dr. Ellis?

Mr. ELLIS. Yes. So, first of all, I think, in general, most of the States that are siding strongly with Russia—Venezuela, Nicaragua, et cetera—as you pointed out, themselves do not have free presses

and are notable violators. I think the States that we find in the middle—Brazil, Argentina—we have options to encourage more the thinking about democracy.

But, in addition to the fact that I think we need more forceful not only resources, but a communications strategy that would come from the State Department and public diplomacy from GFC and other entities like that.

But I think, in addition to that, we need to rebuild the messaging: you know, what is the value of a democracy? What is the value of free markets? And to get our own partners in the region to be repeating it. I mean, to me, it was a shame that at the Summit of the Americas this idea of, you know, we are no longer just a—we started out as a club of democracies, but we lost the idea. It is a club; you get to show up just because you are in the hemisphere. And so, we need to get our partners to be willing to stand up for democracy because they believe that there is value in it for them, as a way to develop and have benefit for their societies. And we need to seek people in Latin America to seek that clear benefit as well.

Mr. SIRE. Thank you.

Dr. Rouvinski?

Dr. ROUVINSKI. Thank you very much.

We completely agree with my colleagues today, but I would like to add just two specific points.

I think one of the ways to expose the nature of Russia's authoritarian regime, and severe violation of human rights committed by Russia, not only in Ukraine, but also in Russia itself, is through investigative journalism. The investigative journalism has been very effective in Europe, for example, to exposing the corruption, the other wrongdoings by those regimes that are friendly to Russia. And we do know there has been very important academic research on this topic in Latin America, but there has been no investigative journalists' reports on that kind of relations between Russia and those regimes.

And last, but not least, civil society. This is very important, the support of the civil society in democratic countries of Latin America that actually are the key allies for the democratic forces in this part of the world.

Thank you.

Mr. SIRE. This has been a very informative hearing, and I thank the witnesses for your comments. I really enjoyed this hearing.

And I want to thank my colleagues that joined us for this important hearing.

And now, we will go to closing, and thank you again to our witnesses and the members for joining us on this important hearing.

Over the last decade, Putin has sought to increase his influence in the Western Hemisphere through a variety of techniques, including arms sales, trade, and propaganda. By remaining engaged with our neighbors in the region, we can counter that influence.

Today's hearing should be just one part of a comprehensive strategy to protect U.S. interests and support principles that now we all value. I look forward to working with my colleagues to build on the discussion that we had today with

[audio malfunction].

The committee is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 4:05 p.m., the Subcommittee was adjourned.]

APPENDIX

**SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING NOTICE
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6128**

**Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, Civilian Security,
Migration and International Economic Policy**

Albio Sires (D-NJ), Chair

July 13, 2022

TO: MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

You are respectfully requested to attend an OPEN hearing of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, to be held virtually by the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, Civilian Security, Migration and International Economic Policy via Cisco WebEx (and available by live webcast on the Committee website at <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/>):

DATE: Wednesday, July 20, 2022

TIME: 2:00 p.m., EDT

SUBJECT: Russia in the Western Hemisphere: Assessing Putin's Malign Influence in Latin America and the Caribbean

WITNESSES: R. Evan Ellis, Ph.D.
Research Professor, Latin American Studies
U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute

Kimberly Marten, Ph.D.
Professor of Political Science
Barnard College

Ms. Candace Rondeaux
Director, Future Frontlines
New America

Vladimir Rouvinski, Ph.D.
Professor & Director, Interdisciplinary Research Center
Icesi University

*NOTE: Witnesses may be added.

By Direction of the Chair

The Committee on Foreign Affairs seeks to make its facilities accessible to persons with disabilities. If you are in need of special accommodations, please call 202/225-5021 at least four business days in advance of the event, whenever practicable. Questions with regard to special accommodations in general (including availability of Committee materials in alternative formats and assistive listening devices) may be directed to the Committee.

To fill out this form online: Either use the tab key to travel through each field or mouse click each line or within blue box. Type in information.

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Note: Red boxes with red type will NOT print.

MINUTES OF SUBCOMMITTEE ON Western Hemisphere, Civilian Security, Migration and International Economic Policy HEARING

Day Thursday Date July 20, 2022 Room 2172 Rayburn HOB

Starting Time 2:37 p.m. Ending Time 4:07 p.m.

Recesses 0 (to to) (to to) (to to) (to to) (to to) (to to)

Presiding Member(s)

Chair Albio Sires

Check all of the following that apply:

Open Session ☒

Executive (closed) Session ☐

Televised ☒

Electronically Recorded (taped) ☒

Stenographic Record ☒

To select a box, mouse click it, or tab to it and use the enter key to select. Another click on the same box will deselect it.

TITLE OF HEARING:

Russia in the Western Hemisphere: Assessing Putin's Malign Influence in Latin America and the Caribbean

SUBCOMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT:

See attached hearing attendance form.

NON-SUBCOMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT: (Mark with an * if they are not members of full committee.)

None

HEARING WITNESSES: Same as meeting notice attached? Yes ☒ No ☐

(If "no", please list below and include title, agency, department, or organization.)

STATEMENTS FOR THE RECORD: (List any statements submitted for the record.)

TIME SCHEDULED TO RECONVENE _____

or

TIME ADJOURNED 4:11 pm

Clear Form

Note: If listing additional witnesses not included on hearing notice, be sure to include title, agency, etc.

Mr. K
Subcommittee Staff Associate

WHEN COMPLETED: Please print for subcommittee staff director's signature and make at least one copy of the signed form. A signed copy is to be included with the hearing/markup transcript when ready for printing along with a copy of the final meeting notice (both will go into the appendix). The signed original, with a copy of the final meeting notice attached, goes to full committee. An electronic copy of this PDF file may be saved to your hearing folder, if desired.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
WHEN SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING

<i>PRESENT</i>	<i>MEMBER</i>
X	Albio Sires, NJ
X	Joaquin Castro, TX
X	Andy Levin, MI
	Vicente González, TX
X	Juan Vargas, CA

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OPENING STATEMENT FROM CHAIRMAN SIRES

Chairman Sires' Opening Statement: WHEM Russia Hearing 7.20.2022

The world has watched in horror as Putin's war rages on in Ukraine. His willingness to sacrifice countless lives in his selfish pursuit of regional dominance has caused a humanitarian crisis that will long outlive the conflict. Nonetheless, several Latin American governments have expressed apathy, or even explicit support, for the Russian invasion. Even as the shocking images of civilian graves and flattened cities capture our attention and animosity, we must pay attention to Putin's influence in our own backyard.

Russia has steadily shored up its presence in Latin America and the Caribbean, threatening democratic aspirations and development goals. Putin has found close friends in the region's most brutal dictatorships, including the leaders of Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Cuba, and has made overtures to U.S. allies such as Brazil and Argentina. As I have said many times before during my tenure in Congress, the United States must not pivot away from Latin America, because Putin is eager to step in.

We must also be careful not to conflate Russian and Chinese actions or share of influence in the region. While China funds infrastructure and creates financial ties with our neighbors, Russia has to use more creative methods to garner influence. One strategy has been to spread misinformation by broadcasting Spanish-language Kremlin propaganda through RT and Sputnik. Russia also sells arms and artillery that only its engineers can maintain and provides critical intelligence support, fostering security interdependence that is difficult to unravel.

Finally, Russia has painstakingly constructed a global sanctions evasion network, undermining the coercive power of U.S. financial restrictions intended to modify the behavior of human rights abusers around the world.

The Russian government's actions are supported by other non-state actors including cyber operatives. In the wake of Putin's attack on Ukraine, the Russian based hacker group Conti announced full support for the Kremlin's actions and that they would attack those who responded to the invasion.

The results of Putin's project have been astounding. Venezuelan dictator Nicolás Maduro, Nicaragua's Daniel Ortega, and Miguel Díaz-Canel of Cuba have amplified Russian talking points on the invasion of Ukraine.

All three have welcomed Russian security personnel to train their own forces and engage in military exercises, granted Russia access to cybersecurity and intelligence networks, and prioritized their bilateral relationships with the Kremlin at the expense of regional institutions like the Organization of American States. Russia's support has empowered client regimes to step up surveillance, election rigging, and political persecution, dealing a blow to the efforts of pro-democracy activists.

This trend of Russian interference cannot be expected to diminish in the coming years. Putin will continue to seek and support like-minded authoritarian partners who maintain power by suppressing opposition. Russian disinformation will continue to inflame political polarization and civil disorder. Countless regional objectives, from climate change mitigation to anti-corruption, will be obstructed in favor of Russian priorities.

Today's hearing will allow us to come together to examine these steps we can and must take to combat Russia's malign influence in the Western Hemisphere. We are presented with an

opportunity to have an in depth, constructive conversation on the impact of Russian overtures to our neighbors in the Caribbean and Latin America.

It is my sincere hope that all members here today will engage in a good faith effort to further our policy response in a way that best serves U.S. interests and the principles that our nation stands for. Our witnesses have prepared detailed testimony that I believe will be very valuable to this Subcommittee's work.

Once again, I thank you all for being here today and I look forward to a productive hearing.

