



**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:

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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.<sup>1</sup> 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,<sup>2</sup> Deputy Prime Minister Yuri Borisov's February 2022 signing of a pact to increase military cooperation with Venezuela,<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup> As part of

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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/>.

<sup>3</sup> 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>.

<sup>4</sup> "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/>.

<sup>5</sup> 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/](https://english.pravda.ru/world/152858-sniper_games_venezuela/).

<sup>6</sup> "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=El%20ministro%20de%20Defensa%20de%20Colombia%2C%20Diego%20Molano%2C,despliegue%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,<sup>7</sup> at least 100 military trainers and technicians,<sup>8</sup> and Wagner group mercenaries to the country.<sup>9</sup>

Russia has sent its nuclear-capable Tu-160 backfire bombers to Venezuela on multiple occasions: in September 2008,<sup>10</sup> October 2013,<sup>11</sup> and December 2018.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> It has threatened to establish a military base on tiny La Orchila island,<sup>14</sup> off of Venezuela's coast, and has sold \$11.4 billion in military goods to Venezuela's authoritarian populist regime since 2006,<sup>15</sup> 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,

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<sup>7</sup> "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=El%20sistema%20antimisiles%20de%20fabricaci%C3%B3n%20rusa%20S-300VM%20illeg%C3%B3,Pechora-2M%2C%20en%20un%20sistema%20escalonado%20de%20defensa%20antia%C3%A9rea..>

<sup>8</sup> "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>.

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

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

<sup>11</sup> "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](https://defense-update.com/20131030_russian-tu-160-strategic-bombers-land-venezuela.html).

<sup>12</sup> 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>.

<sup>13</sup> "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>.

<sup>14</sup> "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>.

<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup>

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.<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup> Russia has further deployed two of its warships to Nicaragua in August 2013,<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup>

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,<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup> The facility began operating in 2017,<sup>24</sup> and reportedly trained 236 personnel from around the region in 12 courses

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<sup>16</sup> 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%20C3%A9rea%20y%20Fuerza%20Naval%20del%20Ej%C3%A9rcito%20de%20Nicaragua%E2%80%9D>.

<sup>17</sup> “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/>.

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

<sup>19</sup> 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/>.

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

<sup>21</sup> “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/>.

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

<sup>23</sup> 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/>.

<sup>24</sup> 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.<sup>25</sup>

Beyond Nicaragua, there is also credible evidence<sup>26</sup> that Russia is conducting information warfare activities in the region in the region, possibly in conjunction with Cuba and Venezuela, leveraging leverage social media platforms<sup>27</sup> such as Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and WhatsApp,<sup>28</sup> 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. Colombia<sup>29</sup> 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.<sup>30</sup>

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.<sup>31</sup>

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 Brazil<sup>32</sup> 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.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>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>.

<sup>26</sup> 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>.

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

<sup>28</sup> “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/>.

<sup>29</sup> 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/>.

<sup>30</sup> 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>.

<sup>31</sup> 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/>.

<sup>32</sup> “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>.

<sup>33</sup> “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."<sup>34</sup>

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.<sup>35</sup> 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 Ukraine<sup>36</sup> and its likely human rights violations against the Ukrainian people.<sup>37</sup>

While Russia's reach in Latin America may be limited and its actions episodic,<sup>38</sup> 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.<sup>39</sup> It has an anti-U.S. leader of questionable mental stability,<sup>40</sup> 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.

<sup>34</sup> "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>.

<sup>35</sup> 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>.

<sup>36</sup> 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>.

<sup>37</sup> "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>.

<sup>38</sup> 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/>.

<sup>39</sup> 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>.

<sup>40</sup> 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 corrupt<sup>41</sup> 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.<sup>42</sup>

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.<sup>43</sup> Nonetheless, the Diaz Canel regime is also arguably distrustful of Russia since its financial abandonment of Cuba at the end of the Cold War.<sup>44</sup> 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,<sup>45</sup> as well as its silence when, in January 2022, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Ryabkov suggested Russia could deploy military forces to Cuba.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> 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.>

<sup>42</sup> 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/>.

<sup>43</sup> 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/>.

<sup>44</sup> "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.](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.)

<sup>45</sup> "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/>.

<sup>46</sup> 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.<sup>47</sup> Virtually every country in Latin America is in crisis. Its populations have been made more economically vulnerable by Covid-19.<sup>48</sup> Governments have been left with profound fiscal dilemmas after pandemic spending.<sup>49</sup> The inflationary effects of Russia’s Ukraine invasion<sup>50</sup> 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,<sup>51</sup> Panama,<sup>52</sup> Peru,<sup>53</sup> and previously those in Colombia, Chile, and elsewhere in the region highlight the gravity of the situation.<sup>54</sup> 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

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<sup>47</sup> 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](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).

<sup>48</sup> “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>.

<sup>49</sup> 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>.

<sup>50</sup> 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/>.

<sup>51</sup> 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>.

<sup>52</sup> “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>.

<sup>53</sup> 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/>.

<sup>54</sup> 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,<sup>55</sup> Iran<sup>56</sup> others U.S. rivals<sup>57</sup> contribute to the solvency of the malign actors that serve as Russia's gateway to the region, in support of their own interests.<sup>58</sup> 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,<sup>59</sup> without their own relationships there being substantially tarnished by Russian actions.<sup>60</sup>

### ***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,<sup>61</sup> 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.<sup>62</sup> Compounding that deficiency, Russia's military is currently tied down in the Ukraine.<sup>63</sup> 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.<sup>64</sup> 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

<sup>55</sup> 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>.

<sup>56</sup> "Iran agrees to overhaul Venezuelan oil, gas refineries," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, February 22, 2022, <https://en.irna.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>.

<sup>57</sup> 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>.

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

<sup>59</sup> 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/>.

<sup>60</sup> 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>.

<sup>61</sup> Ellis, "Russia's Latest Return..." 2022.

<sup>62</sup> 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/>.

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

<sup>64</sup> "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,<sup>65</sup> or expelling Russia from the United Nations Human Rights Council.<sup>66</sup>

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.<sup>67</sup> 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.<sup>68</sup>

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,<sup>69</sup> commercial sectors and economic relationships, by contrast to the People's Republic of China,<sup>70</sup> which I view as the greater long-term threat to U.S. interests.<sup>71</sup> 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.<sup>72</sup> 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.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> 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/>.

<sup>66</sup> 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>.

<sup>67</sup> 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-/>.

<sup>68</sup> 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>.

<sup>69</sup> Ellis, "Russia's Latest Return...", 2022.

<sup>70</sup> 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>.

<sup>71</sup> 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](https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/033122_Ellis_Testimony1.pdf).

<sup>72</sup> "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>.

<sup>73</sup> "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,<sup>74</sup> and a purchaser of its agricultural goods.<sup>75</sup>

Russia's Atomic energy company Rosatom is building a small water-cooled nuclear facility in El Alto Bolivia.<sup>76</sup> 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.<sup>77</sup>

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,<sup>78</sup> The Russian petroleum operations in Venezuela, previously under Rosneft,<sup>79</sup> now controlled by Roszarubezhneft due to a Russian maneuver to avoid U.S. sanctions,<sup>80</sup> 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.<sup>81</sup>

### ***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.<sup>82</sup> These include equipment in the arsenals of some of the U.S.' closest partners in the region. Indeed, as an example, there are still

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<sup>74</sup> "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>.

<sup>75</sup> 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>.

<sup>76</sup> "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>.

<sup>77</sup> "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/>.

<sup>78</sup> Ellis, "Russian Military and Commercial Activities..." 2022.

<sup>79</sup> 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/>.

<sup>80</sup> 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/>.

<sup>81</sup> 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/>.

<sup>82</sup> R. Evan Ellis, "Russian Military and Commercial Activities..." 2022.

approximately 400 Russian helicopters in the region,<sup>83</sup> 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.<sup>84</sup> 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,<sup>85</sup> BMP-3 and BTR-80 armored vehicles, TiGR armored cars,<sup>86</sup> Mi-17 helicopters, Yak-130 fighter trainers,<sup>87</sup> An-26 military transport aircraft,<sup>88</sup> Zu-23 antiaircraft guns,<sup>89</sup> Mizrah patrol craft,<sup>90</sup> and Molina missile boats.<sup>91</sup>

### *Cuba*

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

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<sup>83</sup> "Russian Helicopters in Latin America and Caribbean," *Helis*, November 2, 2015, [https://www.helis.com/database/news/rushelico\\_latam/](https://www.helis.com/database/news/rushelico_latam/).

<sup>84</sup> "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/>.

<sup>85</sup> "Nicaragua shows off Russian T72 tank," *Associated Press*, August 16, 2016, <https://apnews.com/article/e7ac9d8e16974d0b8321b438a3541033>.

<sup>86</sup> "Todo lo que querías saber sobre las armas rusas en Nicaragua," *Russia Beyond the Headlines*, March 19, 2019, <https://es.rbth.com/tecnologias/82775-armas-rusas-nicaragua>.

<sup>87</sup> "Todo lo que querías saber..." 2019.

<sup>88</sup> 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/>.

<sup>89</sup> Ellis, "Russian Engagement in Latin America..." 2017.

<sup>90</sup> "Todo lo que querías saber..." 2019.

<sup>91</sup> Ellis, "Russian Engagement in Latin America..." 2017.

<sup>92</sup> "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,<sup>93</sup> which the country later used against Ecuador during the Cenepa War of 1995.<sup>94</sup>

The military relationship between Peru and Russia continued under conservative Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori with the purchase of Mig-29 aircraft.<sup>95</sup> In 2013, Peru purchased 24 Mi-17 military helicopters,<sup>96</sup> as well as two Mi-35 attack helicopters.<sup>97</sup> 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.<sup>98</sup> To this day, Russia's institutional relationships through such channels give it some influence within the Peruvian Army.<sup>99</sup>

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.

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<sup>93</sup> Alexándrova, "Todo lo que querías saber..." 2019.

<sup>94</sup> Ellis, "Russia's Latest Return..." 2022.

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

<sup>96</sup> "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>.

<sup>97</sup> 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](https://es.rbth.com/articles/2012/07/18/peru_moderniza_su_flota_de_aviones_18053).

<sup>98</sup> Ellis, "Russia's Latest Return..." 2022.

<sup>99</sup> 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,<sup>100</sup> and is part of today's legacy Colombian Armed Forces.<sup>101</sup> 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.<sup>102</sup> 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.<sup>103</sup> 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.<sup>104</sup>

### 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.<sup>105</sup> 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,<sup>106</sup> IGLA-S air defense missiles,<sup>107</sup> and pursued acquiring a \$1 billion Russian Pantsir S-1 air defense system.<sup>108</sup> It also considered Russia's Su-35 fighter for its fighter modernization

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

<sup>101</sup> 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>.

<sup>102</sup> Ellis, "The New Russian Engagement..." 2015.

<sup>103</sup> 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>.

<sup>104</sup> "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-idUSKBN20105O>.

<sup>105</sup> Ellis, "The New Russian Engagement..." 2015.

<sup>106</sup> "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/>.

<sup>107</sup> "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>.

<sup>108</sup> "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.<sup>109</sup> the latter two acquisitions, however, never came to fruition, yet the likely return to power of Lula in Brazil's October 2022 elections<sup>110</sup> 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

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<sup>109</sup> "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/>.

<sup>110</sup> "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,<sup>111</sup> as well as by the deployment of Russian forces in the country.<sup>112</sup>

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

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

<sup>112</sup> "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 provided 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.