



# Lessons from Russia's Latin American engagement over Ukraine

BY EVAN ELLIS AND RYAN BERG, OPINION CONTRIBUTORS — 03/01/22 06:00 PM EST  
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Russia's engagement with Latin America after its unprovoked invasion of Ukraine, and the Latin American response to the invasion, illustrates the growing strategic challenge to the U.S. from the survival and proliferation of populist authoritarian regimes in the Western Hemisphere. It also hints at opportunities for Russian President Vladimir Putin to escalate pressure against the United States and its allies should he need to retaliate over Western sanctions in the long-term.

Russia's recent outreach to Latin America as it prepared to invade Ukraine followed a similar pattern to that it pursued in 2008, as it sought to create strategic space for its engineering of pro-Russian successionist movements in the South Ossetia and Abkhazia regions of Georgia, and in 2013, as it similarly engineered and provided forces to the successionist movement in the Donbass region of the Ukraine. Russian Deputy Prime Minister Yuri Borisov's visit to Venezuela, Nicaragua and Cuba, as well as Putin's meetings with Argentine President Alberto Fernández and Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro was reminiscent of the improvised visit to the region by then-Russian President Dmitri Medvedev during the 2008 crisis — all intended to demonstrate that Russia was not isolated after the inevitable international response.

In preparation for its current invasion of Ukraine, Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov linked his country's actions in the European theater to its geostrategic thinking in Latin America. He recently alluded to the possibility of deploying military forces to Venezuela and Cuba, and

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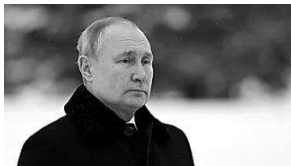
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doubled down on the threat with the recent signing of a [Russia-Venezuela agreement](#) for expanded security cooperation. This was reminiscent of when Russia sent nuclear-capable Tu-160 backfire bombers to the region in 2008, 2013 and 2018 during the previous crises, or its sending of [four warships to realize “naval exercises”](#) in the region in 2008. What is clear is that Russia sees Latin America through the lens of strategic leverage with respect to its actions in its near abroad.

Russia’s behavior in the current crisis illustrates a repeated pattern of leveraging authoritarian populist regimes and other willing actors to [deliberately pose strategic threats](#) against the U.S. in the Western Hemisphere, in order to create space for its aggression in Europe. It highlights that the unprecedented proliferation of anti-U.S. and other illiberal regimes [throughout the Western Hemisphere](#) goes beyond the abuse of their own people, their criminality and their corrupt networks.

In military affairs, the veiled threat by Ryabkov to deploy troops to Venezuela or Cuba, and the previously mentioned military cooperation agreement signed during Borisov’s visit to Venezuela, were notable for their lack of specifics. A Russian deployment of significant military forces to the region when it is bogged down in Ukraine and is facing [crippling Western sanctions](#) is also implausible.

Nonetheless, Russia has sold [over \\$11 billion in military hardware](#) to Venezuela, including [Su-30 fighters](#), [Mi-17 and Mi-35 helicopters](#), [T-72 tanks](#) and [BMP-3 and BTR-80 armored vehicles](#), and [S-300 air defenses](#). These military systems, including material assistance to its military forces moving toward the Venezuela-Colombia border, present a threat that [Colombian Defense Minister Diego Molano rightfully called out](#). Similarly, the military equipment Russia has provided to authoritarian Nicaragua includes [T-72 tanks](#), [Yak-130 fighter trainers](#), [An-26 transport aircraft](#), [TIGR armored vehicles](#), [ZU-23 anti-aircraft systems](#), [Mizrah patrol boats](#) and [Molina missile boats](#), among other systems.

As the U.S. worked with its European allies to rally international opinion against clear, unprovoked and ongoing Russian aggression, [Venezuela](#), [Cuba](#) and [Nicaragua](#) condemned the United States instead, while declaring their support for the work of [Russian backed separatists](#) who had carved regions out of Ukraine. [Bolivia](#), [Argentina](#), [Brazil](#) and even [Panama](#) refused to explicitly condemn [or sanction](#) Russia’s actions.

Indeed, on the eve of the invasion, Argentina’s president publicly offered Russia’s use of Argentina as a [“point of entry”](#) for Russia to expand its presence in the region, while Brazil’s president, arguably frustrated with the Biden administration’s cold shoulder from Washington over his environmental policies, had a friendly meeting with Putin, including a [dialogue between Brazil’s Defense and Foreign Ministers](#) and their Russian counterparts. When Russia did invade, [Bolsonaro publicly overruled his own Vice President](#), Hamilton Mourão, and [refused to condemn](#) Putin’s actions. Ironically, Brazil and Argentina, who rely heavily on imports of nitrate-based fertilizers from Russia, could be among those most prejudiced in the region by Putin’s actions and associated sanctions against him.

Meanwhile, Latin American publics, even those whose leaders condemned Russia’s war in Ukraine, have been inundated with propaganda from media outlet Russia Today and other channels, which have a [strong presence in Spanish-language media](#).

As the Russian invasion of Ukraine has faced stiff resistance, the **PRC** has prudently encouraged negotiations, even while avoiding condemnation of Russia, buying more of its grain at steeply discounted prices, as well as strategically benefitting as Russia becomes ever more politically and economically isolated from the West — thus ever more subordinate to the PRC in the strategic relationship the two have forged.

The PRC has remained notably silent on the war in Ukraine in its engagements with Latin America. Yet, the money maintaining the resilience and survival of the authoritarian populist regimes opening the door to Russia and Iran in the hemisphere increasingly comes from the PRC's economic engagement. Indeed, in the dynamics of the new "illiberal counter-order" emerging in Latin America, it is the PRC that underwrites the solvency of anti-U.S. regimes without bearing the consequences for their actions, ensuring those regimes remain a viable platform when Russia seeks to make military threats in the region.

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If the Ukrainians unexpectedly restored hope in those willing to fight for their own political liberty, the actions of anti-democratic regimes in Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Cuba, as well as the opportunistic heads of state in Argentina and Brazil embracing Russia's aggression, serve as a reminder of the importance of doing more to support those fighting for democratic governance in our own hemisphere. Indeed, in the long-term, the anti-U.S. authoritarian regimes in the Western Hemisphere look exposed and potentially at risk of re-galvanized opposition movements.

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