
Russia in Latin America: Geopolitical Games in the US's Neighborhood



Stephen Blank

April 2009

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ISBN: 978-2-86592-519-3

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Summary

Russia's involvement in Latin America is not a new policy but reflects long-term aspirations to assert itself as a global power and advance the idea of a multipolar world. It is a fundamentally geopolitical approach directed against the US with an economic component, rather than an economic approach to foreign policy with strategic objectives. Moscow's 2008 initiatives in the region reflected enhanced capabilities which are now in decline due to the global economic crisis. The real threat that Moscow poses to the region stems from its weapons sales to Venezuela, which the latter is already using in support of insurgency in Colombia if not elsewhere.

Introduction

In 2008, Russia, like Columbus, discovered Latin America. Or so Western and Russian media would have us believe. Leading commentators speculated about the motives behind presidential and ministerial visits to and from Russia; major arms, trade and energy deals; visits by Russian long-range bombers, and joint naval exercises with Venezuela, and fleet calls to Nicaragua and Cuba occurred. Although the Pentagon professes no alarm, Washington sent Thomas Shannon, the Assistant Secretary of State for Latin America, to Moscow to ascertain Russia's precise aims. Having expressed US concerns regarding the destabilizing effects of Russian arms sales to Venezuela, Shannon's visit undoubtedly proved that Russia could get Washington's attention.¹ Moreover, for the first time in years, the Pentagon in 2008 stood up the Fourth Fleet in the South Atlantic. Its formal missions are to safeguard maritime routes, conduct disaster relief, engage in humanitarian operations, and conduct multilateral operations with Latin American navies.² Nevertheless, observers naturally see it as a response to heightened risk perception.

However, Russia's quest for influence in Latin America began in 1997 and its goals have been remarkably consistent. Russia started seeing Latin America as an area of increasing global economic importance in 2003 and began selling weapons there in 2004 so current policy represents the continuation and expansion of an earlier base, not a new initiative.³ What had changed, at least until the current global economic crisis beginning in 2008, was Moscow's capability to implement its policies and its steadily growing anti-Americanism. Because the economic crisis has reduced Russia's and Latin American states' capabilities for joint action, most notably in Venezuela's case, the vigor of Russia's thrust into Latin America will probably diminish accordingly. Russia's ability to obtain meaningful influence and a truly strategic position in Latin America stems from its capacity for large-scale foreign policy initiatives. Therefore, 2009 should see a retrenchment from 2008's more grandiose perspectives, but clearly those perspectives remain in place and will return if Russian capacities for action recover.

¹ C. Sweeney, "Russia's Latin American Aims Still Unclear: US Official," *Reuters*, 22 December 2008.

² Open Source Committee, Foreign Broadcast Information Service Central Eurasia (Henceforth FBIS SOV): V. Litovkin, "Syndrome of 1962 Caribbean Crisis: Yet Another Hotbed of Tension May Appear Off the Coast of the New World," *Nezavisimoye Voyennoye Obozreniye*, 12 September 2008; M. Day, "Fourth Dimension—US Revives its Latin American Fleet," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, 14 July 2008.

³ FBIS SOV: ITAR-TASS, in English, 1 April 2004, 15 December 2003.

The Russian president, Dmitry Medvedev, implicitly acknowledged this when he said that in 2009, it will be necessary “to ensure a worthy place for Russia in international relations,” followed by arguing that, “today there is no more important task than to overcome the consequences of the global financial crisis.”⁴ Nonetheless, during his tour of the region in late 2008, he said that Russia was only *beginning* to upgrade its ties with Latin America, which he and other officials recognize as a growing international actor.⁵ Medvedev even called relations with Latin American countries privileged relations just like Russia’s relations with the countries of the Community of Independent States (CIS).⁶

Still, while Russia will continue expanding ties with Latin America, its capacity for deep involvement is lower than it wants as is the ability of Latin American states to support Russian goals. This is especially true for countries like Venezuela that depend on energy or commodities revenues, their capabilities have also declined due to the global economic crisis. Thus Russia will only partially meet Latin American expectations for support, even in stricken economies like Cuba.⁷ For example, Russia’s upcoming loan of 20 million US dollars to Cuba and a possible future credit of 335 million US dollars will enable it to buy Russian products, providing only a minimal, short-term boost to Cuba’s economy⁸—export subsidies hardly offering mutual benefit.

Likewise, Russian companies charged with developing relations with Latin America recently acknowledged that little or no economic expansion will occur anytime soon. For example, even though Russia and Venezuela ostentatiously agreed to establish oil and gas companies together, Russian companies have no liquid assets to invest in Latin America. Not surprisingly, even Venezuela displays skepticism about Russia’s ability to transform its ties—which consist mainly of arms sales—into a relationship based on large-scale investment and diplomatic coordination.⁹

Similarly Latin American countries that have entered into trade deals or a major strategic relationship with Russia have sought material benefits from Moscow. Nicaragua recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia to obtain Russian military and economic assistance to replace its aging arsenal of Soviet-era weapons.¹⁰ Cuba’s continuing interest in strengthened ties with Russia stems from its continuing need for assistance. Havana has been motivated, at least partly, by its prior path dependence upon Moscow and Russia’s economic largesse. It undoubtedly welcomes Russia’s support for the lifting of US sanctions. Venezuela has reopened its oil fields to Western

⁴ FBIS SOV: M. Zygar, “Success From Dizziness. What Good the Crisis Has Brought World Politics,” *Kommersant*, in Russian, 26 December 2008.

⁵ M. Smith, *A Russian Chronology, October-December 2008*, Advanced Research Assessments Group, Defence Academy of the United Kingdom, 2009, p. 102-103, 106.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ FBIS SOV: ITAR-TASS, in English, 20 January 2009.

⁸ FBIS SOV: Interfax, in English, 19 January 2009.

⁹ S. Romero, M. Schwirtz, and A. Barrionuevo, “Flux In Latin America Affects Russia’s Diplomacy,” *New York Times*, 22 November 2008.

¹⁰ FBIS SOV: *La Prensa Internet Version*, in Spanish, 12 January 2009; “Russia To Help Nicaragua Fix, Update Arsenal,” *Defensenews.com*, 25 September 2008.

bids to compensate for plunging energy prices compounded by large-scale mismanagement and corruption.¹¹ Likewise, the crisis has curtailed Caracas' military aspirations, a trend that should soon have a visible impact on arms deals with Russia.¹² These trends help explain why U.S. defense officials do not profess undue alarm about Venezuela's activities and ties to Russia.¹³

¹¹ S. Romero, "Chavez Lets West Make Oil Bids as Prices Plunge," *New York Times*, 15 January 2009; FBIS SOV: Open Source Committee, "Analysis: Venezuelan, Cuban Leaders Set Low Expectations for improved US Ties," *OSC Analysis*, 15 January 2009.

¹² C. Harrington, "Venezuela Stalls Plans for Military Aircraft Production," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 13 January 2009.

¹³ *Ibid.*

Russia's Policies and Objectives in Latin America

Nevertheless, Russia's activities in the region cannot be ignored. Prime Minister Putin and Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov have said that "Latin America is becoming a noticeable link in the chain of the multipolar world that is forming."¹⁴ And while neither Russia nor Venezuela will challenge the US militarily, e.g. with Russian bases in Cuba, their individual and collective goals entail the substantial worsening of East-West relations and of the acute instabilities already existing on the continent.¹⁵

Moscow's purposes in engaging Latin America economically and diplomatically have developed from the concept formulated by Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov in 1997 when he visited Argentina, Brazil, Colombia and Costa Rica. At that time, Primakov stated that as a great power Russia should naturally have ties with all continents and all regions in the world.¹⁶ Continuing this policy, then President Putin wrote in a 2001 telegram to participants in a conference on Latin America that political dialogue and economic links with the region were important and would be mutually beneficial. He cited the establishment of links in science, education, and culture as particular areas of focus.¹⁷

Finally in 2006 Lavrov wrote that: "In recent years the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean Basin (LACB) occupy an increasingly noticeable place in the system of contemporary international relations. Our contacts with them [...] are an important component of the international efforts of Russia in tackling the problems common to the entire world community."¹⁸

Thus the quest for great power status vis-à-vis Washington and for a multipolar world that constrains American ability to upset Moscow's concept of global and regional strategic stability drives Russian policy. To

¹⁴ FBIS SOV: *Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, in English, November 17, 2008; S. Gutterman, "Putin Says Latin America Ties to Be a Top Priority," *Boston Globe*, 26 September 2008.

¹⁵ L. Harding, "Russia 'May Use Cuba to Refuel Nuclear Bombers,'" *Guardian*, 25 July 2008; "Russia Could Place bombers in Latin America, N. Africa-Paper," RIA Novosti, 25 July 2008; "Moscow Must Answer US Shield with Cuban 'Spy' Site-Analyst," RIA Novosti, 23 July 2008; "Russia Denies Planning to Base Bombers in Cuba," Agence France-Presse (AFP), 24 July 2008.

¹⁶ M. Bain, *Russian-Cuban Relations Since 1992: Continuing Camaraderie in a Post-Soviet World*, Lanham, Md. Lexington Books, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2008, p. 129-130.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

those ends Russia uses areas of comparative economic advantage (energy, arms sales, space launches, sales of nuclear reactors) to leverage political support for Russian positions against American interests. Russian interest in recovering or gaining positions in Latin America preceded the more recent notion that it will show the US that if it intervenes in the CIS Moscow can reciprocate in Latin America. That idea has only become possible by virtue of Russia's recovery in 2000-08 and the corresponding and coinciding decline of US power and prestige due to the Bush Administration's disastrous policies. The current economic crisis plus new policies from the Obama Administration should lead to less public emphasis on that particular rationale for Russian policy in Latin America.

Instead Moscow may attempt to identify its foreign policy with the clear preference of Latin American security elites for the following principles:

– Latin America should be impervious to challenges to security outside the region and should respect the principles of international law as established in the charters of the Organization of American States (OAS) and the United Nations (UN).

– Any initiative for the employment of joint forces (with the US or other states) must comply with decisions of the UN. Integration initiatives must similarly be based on shared multilateral objectives, e.g. opposition to unilateral operations involving the use of force.¹⁹

While these points accord with Russian rhetoric, Latin American elites overwhelmingly prefer cooperation with the US based on its acceptance of their needs and interests, as well as genuine appreciation of their views. They do not want to be pawns in a new version of the cold war.²⁰ Indeed, Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva recently expressed his hope that President Obama will implement a “preferential” relationship with Latin America.²¹

A multipolar world with two main players

Unfortunately Moscow's current foreign policy—and that of supporters like president of Venezuela Hugo Chavez, albeit for different reasons—aims to embroil the continent in a contest with Washington. Russia still covets a global or even superpower status equal to that of the United States. Thus it wants to be a member of every international organization that exists whether it has any real interests in the area. Accordingly Russia expressed

¹⁹ See for example the views of Latin American naval leaders collected in P.D. Taylor (ed.), *Perspectives on Maritime Strategy: Essays from the Americas*, Newport, RI, Naval War College Press, Newport Papers, NO. 31, 2008.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ FBIS SOV: L. Seizas, “Coffee with the President,” *Agencia Brasil Internet Version*, in Portuguese, 19 January 2009.

its interest in becoming an observer at the South American Defense Council that is part of the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR). Russia also wants to be an observer in the Latin American Association of Peace Operations Training Centres (ALCOPAZ).²² This craving for status lies at the heart of Russian foreign policy.²³ In 1997 at the nadir of Russian fortunes, Sergey Rogov, Director of the Institute for US and Canadian Studies at the Russian Academy of Sciences and an advisor to the government, wrote that: "Moscow should seek to preserve the special character of Russian-American relations. Washington should recognize the exceptional status of the Russian Federation in the formation of a new system of international relations, a role different from that which [...] any other center of power plays in the global arena."²⁴

Consequently Russian policy in Latin America is ultimately an American policy. It aims to instrumentalize the region as a series of countries or even a weak but still discernible political bloc to support Russian positions against US dominance in world affairs. Therefore Latin American states that wish to challenge America need to rely on Moscow. Thus President Daniel Ortega pledged Nicaragua's opposition to a "unipolar" world and welcomed Russia's presence in Latin America.²⁵

Moscow's policy is part of its larger effort, to realize this so-called multipolar world. Thus in November 2008 Lavrov stated that: "We welcome Latin America's role in the efforts to democratize international relations in the context of the objectively growing multipolarity in the world. We believe that these processes are in the interests of the whole [of] mankind. Russia is interested in the closest cooperation with our Latin American partners in reply to the reciprocal interest they are showing."²⁶

Other Latin American countries oppose being dragged into the Russo-American rivalry and becoming a battleground like the CIS. Enhanced trade and relations with Russia are one thing, becoming objects of a new quasi-cold war is another thing entirely. Aside from Venezuela, Nicaragua, Cuba and Bolivia, Latin American countries clearly value not just the opportunity to enter into the Russian market or buy arms but also to further their campaign to induce the United States to return to a policy of multilateralism and concern for their security interests.²⁷ But they are hardly interested in returning Latin America to the forefront of East-West confrontation, especially as Russia clearly tries to utilize leftist anti-American states like Venezuela for its own purposes. Instead, most states prefer that Latin America be "impervious" to global threats.²⁸ As Roberto Mangabeira Unger, Brazil's Minister of Strategic Affairs, has said his

²² M. Smith, *op. cit.* [5], p. 80.

²³ W.C. Wohlforth, "The Transatlantic Dimension," in R. Dannreuther (ed.), *European Union Foreign and Security Policy: Towards a Neighborhood Strategy*, London, Routledge, 2004, p. 190-192.

²⁴ S.M. Rogov, *Russia and NATO's Enlargement: The Search for a Compromise at the Helsinki Summit*, Center for Naval Analyses, May 1997, p. 10.

²⁵ AFP, 18 December 2009.

²⁶ M. Smith, *op. cit.* [5], p. 91.

²⁷ P.D. Taylor (ed.), *op. cit.* [19], *passim*.

²⁸ A.J. Martinez, "A Maritime Strategy for the South Atlantic," in P.D. Taylor (ed.), *op. cit.* [19], p. 5-6.

country has no interest in buying defense systems: “Unlike other South American countries we don’t go around buying [such] things and we are not interested in some kind of balance of power politics to contain the United States [...] We have friendly relations with the United States, and with the incoming administration intend to make them even more friendly.”²⁹

So even if Brazil increases its military-technical cooperation with Russia, that cooperation will not affect its foreign policy significantly. Multipolarity, both under Primakov and today, remains a policy to enhance Russian standing as a global power, and by these means to counter the US in regions of interest to Russia.³⁰ Yet it is not a policy that has any consuming interest in or vision for Latin America. Despite professed interest in integrationist organizations like MERCOSUR,³¹ Moscow’s relationship with Latin America is primarily bilateral—potential support for Venezuela’s efforts to launch a “Bolivarian Revolution” aside—and focuses on mutual economic gains and attempts to identify shared political positions.³²

In this respect it resembles Russia’s China policy, which similarly conceived of China as an instrument of policy vis-à-vis the US, not as a major power in its own right. Russia has often been altogether too open and clear that it regarded relations with China as an instrument with which to bring Washington closer to it. This achieved, it would move back towards priority engagement with the US.³³ Consequently Russia’s involvement with Latin America is unrelated to the resolution of any of Latin America’s profound security challenges. Moscow has no vision for the continent, and its policies could easily aggravate problems which are profound and deeply entrenched.³⁴

Meanwhile some aspects of Russian policy relate to the domestic political struggles between President Medvedev and Putin for primacy in policy. In 2008 the war with Georgia reconfirmed Putin’s predominance in Russian politics.³⁵ Indeed, that primacy is being made ever more manifest to the point where Medvedev had to say that, in accordance with the Constitution, ultimate responsibility for Russian policy rests “on [his] shoulders alone and [he] would not be able to share this responsibility with anyone.”³⁶

²⁹ S. Romero, M. Schwirtz, and A. Barrionuevo, *op. cit.* [9].

³⁰ S. Blank, “The Spirit of Eternal Negation: Russia’s Hour in the Middle East,” in S. Blank (ed.), *Mediterranean Security Into the coming Millennium*, Carlisle Barracks PA, Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 1999, p. 447-467.

³¹ Editor’s note: *Mercado Común del Sur* [Southern Common Market] promotes free movement of goods, services and people between the participating countries, at present: Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay. Venezuela has been in the process of adhesion since 2006. Many other Latin American states have Associate status, including Colombia.

³² J. Barylai, “Russia’s Latin American Tango,” *International Affairs*, No. 3, 2007, p. 50-54.

³³ *Ibid.*; R.C. Nation, “Beyond the Cold War: Change and Continuity in U.S.-Russian Relations,” in R.C. Nation and M. McFaul, *The United States and Russia into the 21st Century*, Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 1997, p. 17-25.

³⁴ G. Marcella, *American Grand Strategy for Latin America in the Age of Resentment*, Carlisle Barracks, PA, Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2007.

³⁵ S. Blank, “Russia’s War on Georgia: The Domestic Conflict,” *Perspective*, Vol. XVII, No. 4, October 2008.

³⁶ “Medvedev’s Assertiveness Troubles Putin,” *Financial Times*, 30 December 2008.

Medvedev's efforts to pursue his own initiatives have been thwarted, namely his anti-corruption plan and initiative to appoint independent judges.³⁷ More recently Putin and Medvedev have publicly disputed the government's handling of the economic crisis.³⁸ This rivalry is corroding Russian politics since Putin is able to block any of Medvedev's policies but is increasingly reclusive and not working full-time as Prime Minister even as the country remains gripped for the foreseeable future by a profound economic crisis.³⁹ In these circumstances it is hardly surprising that we find calls by both Medvedev and Putin for unity and assertions of such unity in an attempt to conceal the growing divisions on policy and power.⁴⁰ Clearly both men understand that even if they contend for power, their political fates are closely tied together. However, it is equally clear that such appeals are of no avail to their factions given the stakes involved and the nature of the Russian political process. So it is quite likely that much of Russian foreign policy, and not just policy towards Latin America, will be affected by internecine domestic political rivalries.

Even before the Georgian campaign, Putin seemed to be trying to conduct his own security and foreign policy by planting hints among military men that Russia should restore its relations with Cuba and establish an air base there. He even sent Deputy Prime Minister Igor Sechin and Security Council Secretary Nikolay Patrushev to Cuba to discuss the resumption of cooperation between the two states. Given Patrushev's position, this could only mean defense cooperation. Such moves clearly aimed to irritate the US. Cuba refused to commit because these plans were publicly announced without consulting it in advance, further evidence that they served interests other than that of the Russian state policy.⁴¹ Bruno Rodríguez Parrilla, Cuba's Foreign Minister, even denied all knowledge of the Russian plan for military sites there and Fidel Castro publicly praised Raul Castro's restraint in refusing to be provoked by Moscow or by the US Air Force Chief of Staff, General Norton Schwartz, who said that such a base would be crossing the line.⁴²

Nevertheless, further developments along that line cannot be definitively ruled out. Indeed, the Russian press has reported that not only did Sechin further economic deals and arms sales to Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua, he also discussed the formation of an alliance with them. Moscow considers the formation of such a union a worthy response to US

³⁷ *Idem.*

³⁸ FBIS SOV: ITAR-TASS, in Russian, 29 December 2008; "Medvedev Criticizes Putin's Cabinet on Economy," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 11 January 2009; I. Gorst, "Medvedev Aims a Swipe at Putin over Economy," *Financial Times*, 12 January 2009

³⁹ *Johnson's Russia List*: K. Gaaze and M. Fishman, with D. Guseva, "There Were Two comrades Serving Together," *Russkiy Newsweek*, 23 December 2008.

⁴⁰ FBIS SOV: Interfax, in English, 29 December 2008.

⁴¹ FBIS SOV: "Igor Sechin Tested a New Approach to Cuba," *Kommersant.com*, in English, 4 August 2008; FBIS SOV: Interfax, in Russian, 4 August 2008; FBIS SOV: Y. Trifonov, "Friendship Out of Spite," *Gazeta.ru*, in English, 7 August 2008; FBIS SOV: R. Dobrokhotov, "No Ships to Call in Havana: Cuba Refuses Russian Military Aid," *Novye Izvestiya*, in Russian, 8 August 2008; FBIS SOV: Open Source Committee, *OSC Analysis*, "Sechin Trip to Cuba, Putin Statements Boost Rumors of Russian Base," 13 August 2008.

⁴² FBIS SOV: *Gramma Internet Version*, in Spanish, 24 July 2008; FBIS SOV: Interfax-AVN Online, in English, 11 November 2008.

activity in the former Soviet Union and the placement of missile defenses in Poland and the Czech Republic.⁴³ Unsurprisingly, Sechin reported to Putin that Moscow should upgrade its relations with these countries in particular and Latin America in general.⁴⁴ If such an alliance does actually materialize, given its visible military component and arms sales, it would represent a serious threat to Latin America and to US interests.

⁴³ FBIS SOV: Open Source Center, Open Source Committee, "Hard-Liner Sechin Spearheads Aggressive Russian Foreign Policy," OSC Analysis, 24 September 2008.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

Tactics and Instruments of Russian Foreign Policy

Nonetheless, Russia does have genuine interests in Latin America. Those interests are commercial and political: the former being a means to secure the latter. In regard to Venezuela, Cuba and Nicaragua those interests are more strategic and overtly aimed at countering US influence in Latin America. Whether visiting the region or hosting Latin American officials in Moscow, Russian officials take every opportunity to make rhetorical declarations on a congruence or identity of interests with their interlocutors on current issues in world politics, including construction of a multipolar world order.⁴⁵ In all cases discussion revolves around the following issues: trade, mainly in commodities but in high-tech and industrial products where possible; energy, whereby Russia either invests in the other state's energy firms or explores for resources there; attempts to gain leverage for each sides' investment in the other's country; Russian offers of arms sales and space launch services (particularly to Brazil and Venezuela).

Russia's anti-American campaign appeared to conform with Latin American interests, as a result of the turn to leftism in several Latin American states beginning around 2006, combined with growing awareness of China's penetration of the region and Latin American economic opportunities.⁴⁶ Latin American economic integration through MERCOSUR allegedly appeals to Russia, but mainly because it implies support for a multipolar world.⁴⁷ This dichotomy between a professed economic agenda with serious efforts to sign deals with Latin American states and the increasingly transparent strategic objectives was equally visible during Medvedev's 2008 trip. Medvedev's private talks appear to have emphasized trade opportunities, but his public rhetoric expressed hopes for Latin American support for a multipolar world.⁴⁸

To support this economic and strategic agenda Moscow has made extensive economic overtures to Latin American governments. Russia has

⁴⁵ J. Barylai, *op. cit.* [32]; M. Troyansky, "A Close Country in the Far Away Andes," *International Affairs*, No. 1, 2008, p. 156-159.

⁴⁶ FBIS SOV: ITAR-TASS, in English, 16 November 2007; *FBIS SOV*: Interfax, in English, 8 November 2007; A. Sizonenko, "Latin America: A Fixture In Russian Diplomacy," *International Affairs* (Moscow), Vol. 53, No. 1, 2007, p. 129; D. Belov and E. Starostina, "Integration in Latin America," *International Affairs* (Moscow), Vol. 52, No. 3, 2006, p. 66-67; FBIS SOV: ITAR-TASS, in English, 20 February 2006; *FBIS SOV*: Interfax, in English, 20 February 2006; M. Smith, *op. cit.* [5], p. 99.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ FBIS SOV: Open Source Center, "Analysis: Russian President's Latin American Tour Aimed at Economics," *OSC Analysis*, 30 December 2008.

offered them all deals with respect to oil, gas, nuclear energy, uranium mining, electricity generation, weapons sales, high-tech defense technology, agriculture and cooperation with regard to space. The geographical scope of these offers covers the whole Latin American world from Mexico, Cuba, and Trinidad in the Caribbean to Argentina and Chile in the South although the mixture of goods and services under consideration naturally varies from state to state.

Nonetheless certain patterns are clear. For example, Russia fully understands Brazil's importance as South America's largest economy and a regional power and seeks much closer economic ties with it. Since at least 2006, Moscow has been pursuing what it calls a "technological alliance" with Brazil, allegedly because together they can initiate world-class technological projects.⁴⁹ Similarly Russia wants to take part in a projected gas pipeline from Argentina to Bolivia, as well as key energy projects with Venezuela.⁵⁰ An important reason why Moscow included countries like Brazil and Peru was to allow Russia to expand its "commercial beachhead" in South America beyond traditionally anti-American governments and compete more vigorously with the United States both commercially and politically.⁵¹

Similar thinking exists regarding arms sales. For years Russian weapons exporters have seen Latin America as a potential market for their wares, at first through the modernization of existing weapons but moving more recently to offering new products to all governments.⁵² Indeed, these exporters publicly claimed that the Bush Administration's policies had been a gift to Russian arms manufacturers. Potential customers became alarmed that their own position had become precarious therefore they sought increasing numbers of modern weapons.⁵³

Of course, Latin American countries also benefit. Not only do they gain exposure to a large and growing market—at least before the economic crisis, a market which may return after it ends—they also achieve their own economic and geostrategic aims. For example, by turning to Russia to conduct hydrocarbon exploration on its territory, Argentina reportedly wishes to escape from excessive reliance upon Venezuela for energy and financial aid. LUKOIL may provide fuel oil and diesel fuel for thermal power plants in the winter when there tend to be gas shortages, Russia will also help construct the Northeast pipeline to Bolivia.⁵⁴

However, the expanding economic ties should not disguise Moscow's fundamentally geostrategic concerns. Thus Medvedev wants the

⁴⁹ FBIS SOV: *Rossiia TV*, in Russian, 7 April 2006; FBIS SOV: ITAR-TASS, in English, 26 November 2008.

⁵⁰ FBIS SOV: ITAR-TASS, in English, December 10, 2008.

⁵¹ R. Weitz: "Global Insights: Medvedev Tour Shows Moscow's Latin American Limits," *World Politics Review*, 2 December 2008.

⁵² FBIS SOV: *Agentstvo Voyennykh Novostey*, in English, 27 April 2005; FBIS SOV: Interfax-AVN Online, in English, 28 October 2008.

⁵³ "Russia Expanding the Geography of its Military Deliveries," *Voice of Russia*, 23 September 2006.

⁵⁴ FBIS SOV: L. di Matteo, "With Venezuela in Problems, Russia Approaches as the Country's New Energy Partner," *El Cronista Internet Version*, in Spanish, 10 December.

BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) to collaborate on policies to promote multipolarity.⁵⁵ He and Argentinean President Cristina Kirchner called for the reform of international financial institutions, one of Russia's major foreign policy aims recently and Medvedev urged Argentina to recognize Russia as a market economy.⁵⁶ Russian officials, including the president, have also urged Brazil to coordinate foreign policy with Russia to foster the multipolar world.⁵⁷ Comments highlighting an identity of views on key elements of this vaunted multipolarity routinely appear in joint communiqués of Foreign Ministers and Presidents.⁵⁸ Indeed, in 2006 Prime Minister Mikhail Fradkov openly admitted that successful business contacts are crucial to Russia's geopolitical cooperation with other governments, saying: "I would not set higher targets for geopolitical relations without making a success in the economy first."⁵⁹ Similarly Medvedev conceded that his trip to Latin America was motivated by serious geopolitical reasons.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ FBIS SOV: ITAR-TASS in English, 5 December 2008.

⁵⁶ FBIS SOV: Interfax, in Russian, 10 December 2008; FBIS SOV: ITAR-TASS, in English, 5 November 2008.

⁵⁷ FBIS SOV: ITAR-TASS, in English, 26 November 2008; FBIS SOV: ITAR-TASS in English, 21 October 2008.

⁵⁸ E.g. The Joint Statement signed by the Russian and Paraguayan Ministries of Foreign Affairs, FBIS SOV: *Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, in English, 16 September 2007.

⁵⁹ FBIS SOV: Interfax, in English, 7 April 2006.

⁶⁰ FBIS SOV: Interfax, in English, 28 November 2008.

Venezuela and Cuba, the Lynchpin of Russia's South America Policy

The dominance of geopolitics is clearly seen in Russian foreign policy towards its main partners in Latin America: Venezuela and Cuba. The Cuban and Venezuelan economies, especially in the present crisis, cannot offer much tangible benefit to Russia. Therefore geopolitical and strategic considerations outweigh the relatively large economic interaction with these states. For example, Patrushev told Ecuador's government that Russia wanted to collaborate with its intelligence agency, "to expand Moscow's influence in Latin America."⁶¹ Russia also signed an agreement to sell Ecuador weapons.⁶² Most probably Russia wants to link Ecuador and Venezuela with Russian weapons and intelligence support against Colombia. Since both of them are antagonistic to Colombia they can then support the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) *narco-traffickers*—as Chavez has been—threaten a U.S. ally, and seek to pin Washington down in another dirty war.⁶³

Undoubtedly Moscow fully recognizes that Chavez has converted Venezuela into a critical transshipment center for narcotics from both Latin America and West Africa, that he supports insurgencies and terrorists throughout Latin America, and that he has expansionist and revolutionary designs on Colombia; the Kremlin seeks to exploit those factors for Russia's own anti-American purposes.⁶⁴ Therefore one must treat reports of actual or forthcoming Russian agreements with Nicaragua and Venezuela on counter-drug cooperation with great wariness as they are likely to be smokescreens to obscure Moscow's apparently conscious support for drug running into America, Europe, and Latin America.⁶⁵ Indeed, reports from 2003 point to penetration of Mexico's narcotics gangs

⁶¹ J. Brinkley, "Relations with Russia a Priority for U.S.," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 2 November 2008.

⁶² FBIS SOV: ITAR-TASS, in English, 27 November 2008.

⁶³ "Russia: Patrushev's Visit to Latin America," *Stratfor.com*, 16 October 2008; FBIS SOV: *El Comercio Internet Version*, in Spanish, 20 October 2008; G. Marcella, *War Without Borders: The Colombia-Ecuador Crisis of 2008*, Carlisle Barracks PA, Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2008; S.A. Carter and C. Gentile, "Chavez Agreed to Arm Rebels, Files Indicate," *Washington Times*, 10 May 2008.

⁶⁴ FBIS SOV: *Kommersant.com*, in English, 5 December 2006; A. Webb-Vidal, "Cocaine Coasts-Venezuela and West Africa's Drugs Axis," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, 14 January 2009; C. Kraul and S. Rotella, "Venezuela Worries U.S. Counter-Narcotics Officials," *Los Angeles Times*, 21 March 2007; N. Kralev, "Chavez Accused of Ties to Terrorists," *Washington Times*, 17 May 2006.

⁶⁵ FBIS SOV: J.M. Bianco Diaz, "Venezuela to Establish Naval Base on Margarita Island," *Ministry of Communications and Information Internet Version*, in Spanish, 20 October 2008; FBIS SOV: ITAR-TASS, in Russian, 17 December 2008.

by Russian criminals.⁶⁶ More recently, in early 2009 a Russian and a Cuban were arrested for drug smuggling in Yucatan.⁶⁷

Ironically there is a need for such cooperation between Latin American states and Russia. Viktor Ivanov, the director of the Russian Federal Service for Control over Narcotics Trafficking, recently said that, “information indicates that South American drug cartels view Russia, Ukraine, and Poland as the countries with the most conducive conditions for distributing narcotics and sending them on to Western Europe.”⁶⁸ Simultaneously Russia wants to increase cooperation among the BRIC members’ intelligence services and Latin American agencies in general. Clearly Moscow wants to establish permanent roots in Latin America and use those contacts as bases for political influence to support those states and potential insurgent movements against the US.⁶⁹ These are only some of the reasons why Moscow’s arms sales to Venezuela, and projected sales to Cuba are perhaps the only dangerous aspects of its policies in Latin America. They clearly aim to give Chavez the means to foment his “Bolivarian Revolution” throughout Latin America. Chavez is running or selling weapons to insurgents and left-wing regimes all over the continent. Chilean, Colombian, and especially Brazilian reports all voice alarm about the 5.4 billion US dollars in Russian arms sales to Venezuela.

These reports raise the specter of Venezuela “detonating” a continental arms race, acquiring the largest Latin American naval fleet due to its purchase of submarines, the comprehensive equipping of Venezuela’s armed, naval, and air forces with huge (by regional standards) arms purchases. In 2008, Reports confirmed that starting in 2003, if not earlier, these weapons (automatic rifles, ammunition, etc.) have migrated from Venezuela to the FARC. This causes great fear that Russian arms will underwrite insurgencies and drug running (submarines being excellently equipped for that purpose) rather than defend Venezuela’s security.⁷⁰

In addition, the sheer scale of ongoing Russian arms sales to Venezuela since 2004 justifies alarm as they make no strategic sense—unless Chavez is actually planning an arms race in Latin America—given the absence of any US or other military threat. Chavez knows this, claiming that he has ordered air defense missiles to protect oil derricks.⁷¹ Therefore there are purposes beyond the legitimate defense of Venezuela for these weapons. Those systems include 24 Su-30 fighters, 100,000 Kalashnikov AK-47 rifles, Ak-103 assault rifles, BMP-3 infantry fighting vehicles, and T-

⁶⁶ Johnson’s *Russia List*: S. Hayward, “Russian Mafia Worms Way into Mexican Drug Cartels,” *Miami Herald*, 11 August 2003.

⁶⁷ FBIS SOV: Open Source Center, *OSC Summary*, in Spanish, 28 January 2009.

⁶⁸ FBIS SOV: ITAR-TASS, in Russian, 17 December 2008.

⁶⁹ Interfax-AVN Online, in English, 29 January 2009

⁷⁰ FBIS SOV: *O Globo Internet Version*, in Portuguese, 9 February 2007; FBIS SOV: R. Godoy, “Venezuela Expands its Military Power,” *O Estado de Sao Paulo Internet Version*, in Portuguese, 5 February 2007; FBIS SOV: *El Universal Internet Version*, in English, 9 June 2006; FBIS SOV: *Correio Brailleense Internet Version*, in Portuguese, 29 July 2006; M. Schroeder, “Venezuela’s Military Build-Up: Who’s Watching the Guns?”; FBIS SOV: *El Colombiano Internet Version*, in Spanish, 8 August 2006; FBIS SOV: *La Tercera de la Hora Internet Version*, in Spanish, 8 December 2008.

⁷¹ FBIS SOV: Agentstvo Voyennykh Novostey Internet Version, in English, 2 February 2007.

72 Main Battle Tanks are also expected to be bought later in 2009. Venezuela also bought 53 Mig-35 helicopters, (Mi-17V-s and Mi-35M helicopters). Russia will help develop factories in Venezuela that can make parts and ammunition for the rifles with a declared goal of producing 50,000 rifles a year. Venezuela plans to buy 12 Il-76 and Il-78 tankers and cargo aircraft, or possibly Il-96-300 military transport planes, Tor-M1 anti-air missiles (a fifth generation anti-aircraft system equally effective against planes, helicopters, Unmanned Aerial Vehicles, cruise missiles, and high precision missiles), and Igla-S portable Surface to Air Missile (SAM) systems. Venezuela also seeks Mi-28n Hunter high-attack helicopters and is discussing the possible purchase of submarines.⁷² Earlier discussions concerned the sale of Project 636 submarines (among the quietest in the world) to Venezuela during 2011-13 along with torpedo and missile ordnance for its Navy.

These purchases make no sense unless they are intended for purposes of power projection throughout Latin America; drug running with submarines and their protection against air attacks; or to provide a temporary base for Russian naval and air forces where they can be sheltered from attacks but threaten either North or South America.⁷³ Putin may have said that permanent bases in Cuba and Venezuela are unnecessary, but this leaves the door open to temporary bases, including submarine bases.⁷⁴ Much of what Russia sells to Venezuela is compatible with this possibility, as are Putin's call for restoring Russia's position in Cuba, ongoing talks between Russian and Cuban military officials, and Sechin's aforementioned trips in 2008.⁷⁵

⁷² M.K. Bhadrakumar, "Venezuela, Russia: Comrades in Arms," *Asia Times Online*, 2 August 2006; FBIS SOV: R. Godoy, "Venezuela Buys 50 Fighters from Russia," *O Estado de Sao Paulo Internet Version*, in Portuguese, 12 December 2004; M. Schwirtz, "Russia Offers Chavez \$1 Billion for Weapons," *New York Times*, 27 September 2008; FBIS SOV: J.L. Carrillo, "\$300 Million to Make Rifles," *Ultimas Noticias Internet Version*, 20 June 2006, "Venezuela to Purchase Military Transport, Refueling Planes from Russia," *Associated Press*, 5 December 2007; C.E. Hernandez, "Antiaircraft Missiles Bought in Russia Arrive in Venezuela," *Notilarde Internet Version*, in Spanish, 3 October 2007; ITAR-TASS, in English, 27 November 2008; M. Sieff, "Russia Sells Arms to Chavez for Power, Not Profit," <www.upi.com>, 19 November 2008; M. Sieff, "Russia Invests \$5.4B in Venezuelan Arms Buildup," <www.upi.com>, 12 November 2008; "Venezuela to Buy Russian Tanks, Armored Vehicles," <www.Miamiherald.com>, 16 October 2008; "Venezuela, Russia: Noteworthy New Armor for South America," <www.stratfor.com>, 16 October 2008.

⁷³ FBIS SOV: P. Sergeev, "Latin American Maneuvers: Russian Ships Hasten to Visit the Caribbean Region Right after the White Swans," <www.Lenta.ru>, in Russian, 23 September 2008.

⁷⁴ O. Pavlikov, "There Will be No Permanent Bases in Venezuela or Cuba," *Gazeta*, in Russian, 5 December 2008.

⁷⁵ FBIS SOV: *Agentstvo Voyennykh Novostey*, in English, 30 December 2005; *Agentstvo Voyennykh Novostey Internet Version*, in English, 4 August 2008; L. Biryukova and D. Telmanov, "Far-off Air Defenses nearby Missile Defenses: Russian Military Officers are Studying the Possibility of Cuban Air Defenses," *Gazeta*, in Russian, 28 October 2008; "Russia What about Subs Instead of Planes in Cuba?" <www.stratfor.com>, 24 July 2008.

My enemy's enemy is my friend

The following facts are particularly noteworthy: Venezuela aided Iranian missile sales to Syria, Chavez told Iranian leaders of his desire to introduce “nuclear elements into Venezuela” (i.e. nuclear weapons), and Russia supports Venezuela’s allegedly peaceful development of nuclear energy and prospecting for uranium and thorium.⁷⁶ These developments suggest the possibility of Venezuela functioning as a kind of swing man or pivot for a Russo-Venezuelan-Iranian alliance against the United States. Certainly, elements in the Iranian press and government believe that Tehran should intensify its already extensive efforts here to create a “second front” in political or even in military terms against the US. Hizbollah already raises money and runs drugs in Latin America and many have noted the growing network of ties between Iran and Latin American insurgents and terrorists possibly facilitated by Chavez.⁷⁷ Furthermore, Caracas has importuned Moscow not just for a formal alliance, which it has so far resisted, but also for participation in the Bolivarian Alternative for Latin America and the Caribbean (ALBA).⁷⁸ Medvedev has indicated Russia’s willingness to discuss participation in this organization since it accords with Russia’s ideas about a multipolar world and international division of labor.⁷⁹

In a similar vein, Moscow has not forgotten about its military partnership with Cuba. Russia has pledged to continue military-technological cooperation (arms sales) with Cuba.⁸⁰ Russian officials continue to say Cuba holds a key role in Russian foreign policy and that Russia considers it a permanent partner in Latin America.⁸¹

Neither has Moscow neglected its attempts to gain lasting positions of economic influence in Latin America and ties of mutual or at least professed mutual economic advantage. Many of these discussions and agreements to date revolve around either exploring for oil and/or gas in and around Cuba and Venezuela, or constructing Chavez’s Pan-American pipeline from Venezuela to Argentina. Russia and Venezuela are also discussing participation in a gas cartel, another cherished Russian project. Russia will also mine bauxite and produce aluminum in Venezuela. These

⁷⁶ D. MacKinnon, “Is Venezuela Going Nuclear?” *Houston Chronicle*, 27 May 2005; “Venezuela Aids Iranian Missile Sales to Syria, Intelligence Agencies Say,” *Global Security Newswire*, <www.nti.org>, 22 December 2008; FBIS SOV: ITAR-TASS, in English, 17 November 2008; “Chavez Secures nuclear, Arms Promises During Russia Visit,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 26 September 2008.

⁷⁷ FBIS SOV: S. Javadi, “From Backyard to Frontline,” *Khorshid*, in Persian, 15 December 2008; “Increasing Iranian Presence in Latin America Underlines Weakening U.S. Position,” *Strategic Warning Issues Review*, No. 7, April 2007.

⁷⁸ ALBA is an international organization that aims to foster political, social and economic cooperation between its member states: Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Bolivia, Honduras and Dominica.

⁷⁹ FBIS SOV: ITAR-TASS, in English, 27 November 2008.

⁸⁰ FBIS SOV: Interfax-AVN Online, in English, 26 January 2009.

⁸¹ FBIS SOV: ITAR-TASS, in English, 29 January 2009; “Cuba Holds Key Role in Russian Foreign Policy-Envoy in Havana,” RIA Novosti, 26 January 2009.

states are also creating or discussing the creation of a binational bank. Venezuela and Cuba are also discussing space projects with Russia.⁸²

However, the economic crisis will undoubtedly make itself felt here too. Cuba may want restoration of former economic cooperation with Russia, but today's Russia cannot afford it. Nor is large-scale Russian investment in Venezuela possible. Accordingly projects like the plan to carry gas from Venezuela to Argentina across the Amazon basin which was under-financed to begin with, and economically questionable as well, will probably not proceed.⁸³ In fact few projects have actually been signed or carried out, or will be. Medvedev sidestepped Chavez's call for a real alliance and no major agreements were signed during his trip.⁸⁴ Indeed, Cuba may be turning back to Moscow because it cannot depend any longer on Venezuela's energy supplies due to the crisis.⁸⁵ Similarly although Nicaragua seeks larger trade links between Russia, China, and Latin American members of ALBA, the difficulties are immense. While Ortega acknowledges the presence of a crisis, it is unlikely that Moscow and Beijing will create an ALBA monetary zone based on a regional currency as he wishes.⁸⁶ For the same reason the agreement between Moscow and Caracas to trade in their national currencies may not go far.⁸⁷

⁸² FBIS SOV: ; Interfax, in English, 27 July 2006, 22 September 2008, 6 November 2008; *Vzglyad*, in Russian, 23 September 2008; *Agencia Bolivariana de noticias Internet Version*, in Spanish, 20 November 2008; "Russia to Help Cuba Build a Space Center," Reuters, 17 September 2008; "Oil to Play for—Could Cuba's Oil End the Embargo?" *Jane's Intelligence Review*, 11 December 2008; ITAR-TASS, in English, 16 September 2008, 17 September 2008, 26 September 2008, 9 November 2008, 23 November 2008, 23 December 2008, 26 January 2009; Vesti TV, in Russian, 7 November 2008.

⁸³ FBIS SOV: G. Coronel, "The Trans-Amazonian Gas Line: Project or Deal?" *Venezuela Today Internet Version*, in English, 19 February 2006.

⁸⁴ FBIS SOV: A. Gabuyev, "A Paperwork Visit: The Crisis and the Opposition are Reducing Dmitry Medvedev's Efforts in Venezuela to Naught," *Kommersant*, in Russian, 26 November 2008.

⁸⁵ FBIS SOV: *CubaNet News*, in Spanish, 17 November 2008.

⁸⁶ FBIS SOV: *La Prensa Internet Version*, in Spanish, 12 January 2009.

⁸⁷ N. Vardul, "Two Astride the Bolivar," *Gazeta*, in Russian, 28 November 2008; FBIS SOV: ITAR-TASS, in English, 27 November 2008.

Conclusions

In analyzing the nature of Russia's relations with Latin America, a few conclusions can be drawn. First, Moscow's main motives in Latin America are clearly geopolitical and tied to its self-presentation as a global superpower and rival of the US. Second, its capabilities for achieving decisive strategic influence are limited to a few struggling, leftist Latin American states. Third, the current economic crisis has constricted those capabilities still further. Fourth, most Latin American states will not follow Russian policies against their own interests simply to improve trade or let Russia hijack them for its purposes—unless the Obama Administration utterly neglects or disregards them, which is unlikely. Even Russian commentators and some military officers recognize and publicly admit that the posturing seen in exercises in Venezuela and the Caribbean is just that, a display with little or no strategic benefit.⁸⁸

The only way in which Russian policy truly threatens the US and Latin America is its military and intelligence support for Chavez and similar leaders. This support is passed on to insurgents and *narco-traffickers* in order to destabilize pro-American regimes while strengthening Chavez and his allies. Adequate responses to such threats are inherently economic and political, and only military as a last resort.

Washington can do much to facilitate security in Latin America: regenerating its own economy; simultaneously opening up trade markets and eliminating barriers to Latin American exports; enhancing multilateralism and interoperability among defense forces as requested by Latin American militaries; and beginning the normalization of Cuba.

Havana is no longer the threat it was, Venezuela has claimed that dubious honor. Rehabilitating Cuba, given that Castro's days are clearly numbered, would take the air out of Chavez's balloon; it is quite clear that Havana would probably welcome a path towards better relations with the US, especially the economic benefits they would inevitably bring. A policy with a more symbolically important impact upon Latin America is currently difficult to imagine.

Nonetheless, there should be no illusion that the security problems that plague this region are easily overcome, quite the opposite. But that is all the more reason why the US cannot ignore the area and let it drift to Moscow, Tehran, and Beijing for want of a better alternative. That outcome would only confirm once again that in world politics, there is no such thing as benign neglect. Instead neglect is malign and engenders negative

⁸⁸ FBIS SOV: *Ekho Moskvyy Radio*, in Russian, 15 December 2008; FBIS SOV: *Kommersant Daily*, in Russian, 3 December 2008.

results for the negligent state along with those neglected. The policies of the Bush administration allowed Russia to gain a foothold in Latin American politics, a result of Washington's negligence; under President Obama, the US should reverse those outcomes and demonstrate what liberal democracy in action can truly accomplish.