

## **Russia in Latin America**

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## **Introduction: What Does Russia Want?**

The crisis in Ukraine has recast Russia's international image. Since the end of the Cold War, the world has viewed Russia as a has-been, a former superpower fallen on hard times, trying to keep up the old pretenses, but destined to continue its decline at home and abroad indefinitely. Russia's bold move in Ukraine, which followed on the heels of a diplomatic coup in Syria in 2013, has sent a powerful signal to the world that the old image of Russia no longer applies and the country is no longer content being relegated to the margins in the international arena. Russia is prepared to upset the post-Cold War order in Europe if that is what it takes to reclaim its seat at the table of major powers. Being treated as an equal by the U.S.—as a major power—has been one of the primary goals of Russian foreign policy for the quarter century since the Cold War ended and the Soviet Union broke apart. One Russian analyst has described Russia as having “an insatiable thirst for status and recognition.”

The quest for status and recognition remains one of major elements of Moscow's foreign policy, despite its recently regained prominence in the Middle East, in the states of the former Soviet Union, as well as in Europe, where Russia has successfully challenged the entire post-Cold War security arrangement and thrown into disarray long-standing policies of the U.S., NATO and the EU, which were built around gradual expansion of the Euro-Atlantic community, NATO and the EU. It remains an open question where the limits of Russian ambitions lie and whether this string of accomplishments will be sufficient to quench Russian thirst for recognition. What is not an open question is that Russian elites—and foreign policy remains largely an elite issue in Russia—view their country as one of the major centers of power and influence on the world stage.

However, while Russia's appetite for global influence may at times appear to exceed its reach, it seems to be based on a careful calculation of risks and benefits. Despite its improved circumstances at home and enhanced standing abroad, Russia's reach seems limited largely to its periphery and a handful of issues chosen to further enhance Russia's claim as a major power. This leaves little room on Russia's agenda for Latin America, where its pursuits appear to result from taking advantage of opportunities as they arise, rather than a defined strategic vision.

## **Balance of Power over Shared Values**

Russia's great ambition is a product of its long history, intellectual tradition, and geography. They are also a product of the country's more recent past, when following the break-up of the USSR, Russia fell on hard times and for a period of 10-15 years was focused on its own domestic troubles, lacking the will and the capabilities to play an active role in the international arena. During that period, Russia massively scaled back its military, economic, and political presence throughout the world, with the sole exception of the territories of the former Soviet Union where it remained a presence to be reckoned with by virtue of its long-standing ties to the old empire and geographic position. Ultimately, however, Russia has had no choice but to accept others' active and highly

visible presence, for example, NATO in former Soviet states, U.S. military bases, and political and economic EU engagement.

These U.S., NATO, and EU activities, conducted in the name of shared values, common security interests, and mutual trade and economic benefits have long been perceived by Russia as the collective West's geopolitical expansion at the expense of Russia. This deeply held view was and is a product of several factors:

- The nature of Russian post-Soviet, but still largely Soviet-educated and -trained elite;
- The impact of several major Western works on Russian foreign policy in the 1990s—most notably Brzezinski and Huntington—that underscored the importance of geopolitics and realist thinking in foreign policy, concurrent with Russia's own search for its intellectual roots and rediscovery of some long-banned works on Eurasianism;
- Western disregard of Russian objections to several rounds of NATO enlargement—and plans for more—to include Georgia and Ukraine;
- NATO's military campaign in the Balkans (also despite Russian objections), resentment of Western criticism of the war in Chechnya on humanitarian grounds, and Russian fears that the West might intervene even in Russia in the name of democratic norms and/or on humanitarian grounds should Russia become weaker;
- Fears that Western activities to promote democracy and support for “color” revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine represented further efforts to isolate Russia and even undermine its own fragile domestic stability.

As a result, since the mid-1990s, Moscow has embraced the idea of a multi-polar world. Articulated first by then-Foreign Minister Yevgeniy Primakov, the vision of a multi-polar world was intended to counter, and wherever possible undermine the post-Cold War “unipolar” world dominated economically, militarily, and ideologically by the U.S. Frustrated with the perceived U.S. monopoly on imposing and occasionally enforcing rules for the international community, and unable to directly challenge Washington on its own, Moscow sought to form a series of alternative groupings and partnerships to offset or dilute U.S. dominance. These included an increasingly close partnership with China; the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)—initially founded by China, Russia, and five Central Asian States; the Russia-China-India geopolitical triangle; and the Brazil-Russia-India-China, and more recently, South Africa (BRICS) forum.

In addition to this web of relationships intended to enhance its standing vis-a-vis the United States, Moscow has relied on its legacy status as a permanent member of the Security Council to block or delay and dilute U.S. initiatives. This practice has continued, as evidenced by Russian policy toward the crises in Syria and Ukraine. In both crises, Russia has successfully thwarted U.S.-led initiatives.

The two crises have shed light with unprecedented clarity on Russia's vision of its place in the world. Russia has used the Syrian crisis to assert itself as an indispensable player whose consent is necessary (albeit not necessarily sufficient) to resolve major

international problems, especially in the Middle East, with its reputation as being at the intersection of world politics. Russia's central role in the Middle East reaffirms its status as a major global power. It has insisted on playing similarly important roles in other issues of global significance—Iran's WMD program, the 6+1 talks about North Korea's nuclear program and security on the Korean peninsula, and almost certainly, the future of Afghanistan post-2014.

The crisis in Ukraine, in contrast, underscores Russia's regional aspirations and its insistence on acting, whenever it so chooses, as the security manager of the space of the former Soviet Union, to the exclusion of other major powers. Russian annexation of Crimea and the threat of military intervention represent the culmination of Moscow's twin policies—pursuit of a sphere of privileged interests throughout the former Soviet lands, and opposition to the expansion of NATO and the European Union, or their influence, in that sphere.

### **Calculated Risk-Taking**

Russia has demonstrated that it means what it says when it comes to enforcing its sphere of privileged interests. In 2008, it shocked Europe and the rest of the world by launching a military incursion into Georgia. Aside from the wars in the Balkans, it was the first such use of military force by one European state against another since the end of the Cold War. In 2014, in Crimea, Russia went further, and annexed a major portion of a neighboring state's territory as a means of securing its hold on Ukraine and preventing it from slipping from Russia's orbit and moving closer to the EU and NATO. The annexation of Crimea was a first in Europe since the end of World War II.

Despite the shocking nature of both episodes which shattered the vision of Europe as whole, free, and at peace with itself and its neighbors, Russian actions in both have been far from reckless. They appear to be based on a careful calculation of risks and benefits. In both instances, the risk of a NATO or U.S. military response was negligible. With neither Ukraine nor Georgia being a member of NATO, the Alliance had/has no obligation to intervene. Moreover, Moscow must have calculated that neither the United States nor its European allies have significant enough interests in Georgia or Ukraine to compel them to intervene militarily. As to the political costs of their actions, Russia paid virtually none for the war with Georgia, since the United States moved to repair the relationship just months after the war. The costs of the Ukrainian crisis are likely to be greater, but the lack of a consensus between Europe and the United States regarding the scale and scope of sanctions to punish Russia for the annexation of Crimea, suggests that the price for Russia may be well worth the geopolitical gain in the eyes of Putin and his advisors.

Militarily, the risks associated with both the war in Georgia and the annexation of Crimea were minimal. While no longer possessing the Soviet Union's military capabilities, Russia is by far the preeminent military power in the former Soviet Union. Five years into an extensive military reform and with a \$700 billion defense modernization program underway, the Russian military is almost certainly not all it

aspires to be, but it is a far cry from the 1990s when it was written off as a military organization.

At the same time, Russia appears to be reluctant to undertake a full-scale military invasion of Ukraine. While the Ukrainian military is no match for the Russian military, the risks associated with a campaign to occupy and hold other major portions of Ukraine are certain to be much greater than in the case of Crimea. Russia's apparent reluctance to invade Ukraine so far suggests a careful cost-benefit calculation on the part of its leaders. Ukraine and Georgia are not the only examples of Russian risk-aversion. In 2010, interethnic strife in Kyrgyzstan resulted in hundreds of lost lives and threatened to escalate into a regional conflict involving Uzbekistan and possibly Tajikistan. Yet, despite its claim to regional leadership throughout the entire former Soviet Union, Russia did not intervene militarily, almost certainly calculating that the risks of getting bogged down in a prolonged ethnic conflict were too great.

### **Russia – Less than Meets the Eye**

Russian restraint is understandable and well justified. It is not a global power. Its ability to act as an overlord of its smaller neighbors—who have never recovered from the trauma of the Soviet break-up—should not be confused with possessing the capabilities of a true global power. Russia has lost approximately 10 million people since the break-up of the USSR. Its population is about 142 million and falling. Its GDP is about \$2.5 trillion, or about 3 percent of the world's GDP. The United States' GDP is \$16 trillion or about 18 percent of the world's GDP; Brazil's is \$2.4 billion.

The economic outlook for Russia is not encouraging. The high growth rate of Putin's first two terms is by all accounts a thing of the past. The 2013 growth rate is estimated at less than 1.5 percent. The outlook for 2014 is even bleaker, with the economy possibly sliding into recession. The crisis in Ukraine has triggered a massive outflow of funds from Russia with estimates in the first quarter running at some \$60-70 billion. Even in the absence of comprehensive economic sanctions agreed upon by the United States and the EU, the economic effects of the political crisis are likely to be significant, and economic growth will probably be sluggish at best.

Russian military expenditures are approximately \$110 billion. Its Armed Forces' stated strength is about 1 million, but because of the insufficient and ever-shrinking pool of recruits, it is really only about 800,000 strong. The Armed Forces have long pursued an ambitious program to transition to an all-volunteer professional military organization, but they cannot afford it. The term of service for recruits has been reduced from twenty-four to twelve months, and thus, a reliable pool of qualified reservists available to respond in case of an emergency is not in place. Any discussion of the Russian Navy is almost certain to get bogged down by arguments about how many ships are operational, etc., but suffice it to say that with a single aircraft carrier, one heavy missile cruiser, and a handful of smaller ships of which the newest was commissioned in 1993 according to published unclassified data, Russia is not well positioned for long-range power projection.

## **What about Latin America?**

Latin America does not occupy a prominent place in Russia's foreign- or security-policy agenda. On the list of regional issues to be addressed by Russian diplomacy—published as part of the official Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation issued in 2013—Latin America is next to last, followed only by Africa. The document states, in general terms, that Russia will pursue strategic cooperation with Brazil, within the framework of the BRICS, as well as partnerships with a host of other Latin American and Caribbean Basin states. The Russian military doctrine adopted in 2010 contains no references to Latin America. The section of the doctrine dealing with military-political cooperation with other countries clearly reflects Russia's emphasis on cooperation with neighbors only.

A 2012 overview of Russian foreign policy priorities by the non-governmental, but officially sanctioned, Russian Council for International Affairs is more candid in its assessment of Russian policy toward Latin America: “Because of limited resources, some regions of the world (Africa, Latin America) will be on the periphery of Russian foreign policy interests. Nonetheless, it is important to preserve positions for future engagement in the future—“entry points”—in these regions. In each region [we] should focus on a small group of reliable partners, [while in the meantime] implementing a low-cost, but potentially effective strategy of applying “soft power” in relations with other countries of the region.”

A similar academic overview of Russian foreign policy from 2012 concluded that “in the foreseeable future, Russia will not be able to compete with the United States in [Latin America], or even with China. Limited resources will make it necessary to concentrate efforts on key countries. A strategic partnership with Brazil would be the most far-sighted option.”

Indeed, if the former Soviet states constitute Russia's “near abroad,” then Latin America is its very far abroad. Despite the apparent effort by Russia to court Latin American partners, its ties to the continent remain thin. Whereas U.S. trade with Latin America exceeds \$300 billion, the entire Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) trade with Latin America is less than \$10 billion.

The idea of a strategic partnership with Brazil may seem attractive in the abstract, but in reality the two countries appear to have different priorities, very little in common, and probably are even competitors in some markets. The two may occasionally find common cause in criticizing the United States, as was the case with the Snowden affair, but it is hardly the basis of a lasting, let alone strategic partnership in the true sense of the word. Elsewhere on the continent, Moscow's pursuit of markets for its armaments appears to be as much an opportunistic pursuit of markets for Russia's struggling defense industries as it is a matter of a long-term strategy designed to position Russia as an active player in Latin American economic, political, and security affairs.

Russian military forays into the Western Hemisphere, as well as its diplomatic and political-military visits, suggest that aside from commercial considerations, their real target is not Latin America, but the United States. They appear designed to show that the United States is no longer the only power with global reach capable of waving its flag on the continent. Accordingly, Russian efforts have targeted countries that have had complicated or outright bad relations with the United States—Nicaragua, Venezuela, and of course, Cuba. Elsewhere in Latin America, Moscow seems to follow the logic noted in the aforementioned academic paper: “the continent’s share in the world economy is growing, while relations with the United States are becoming more complicated.” Russian policy in Central America is consistent with its posture around the world with the exception of those regions deemed as being of truly strategic importance for Moscow: the states of the former Soviet Union; Europe; and the Middle East.

To summarize, Russian pursuit of Latin America appears to have little to do with the continent or Russian interests there. Rather, it represents an opportunistic attempt to demonstrate Russia’s global reach without expending considerable resources and to assert Russian status as a major power at the expense of the United States.

### **Conclusions and Implications for U.S. Interests**

The single most important conclusion from this discussion is that Russia is not a major challenge to U.S. interests in Latin America. It is merely an opportunistic actor taking advantage of opportunities as they present themselves. The main challenge for U.S. interests in Latin America is Latin America itself, or the problems that are indigenous to the region and its bilateral or multilateral ties with the United States.

This is not to say that Russian policy in Latin America is not a source of concern for the United States. Russian actions in the region could prove detrimental, even damaging to the region’s security and welfare. Russian arms sales or opportunistic political patronage towards irresponsible or unsavory regimes could have a negative effect on Latin America and its ties with the United States. Russian presence in the region is a source of concern and should not be ignored.