

Russia's Goals, Strategy and Tactics in Latin America

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Although world attention is focused on Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Moscow is simultaneously expanding its presence in Latin America. Since this process has received little scrutiny, this paper attempts to provide an assessment of Moscow's goals, strategies, tactics, and, policy instruments. It then concludes with recommendations for the U.S. Government and armed forces.

Russia's Objectives

Although Russia aspires to improve relations with every Latin American state, it has no consuming interest in or vision for Latin America other than it be anti-American. Latin America supposedly is an increasingly important region in global politics, indeed one of the poles of the multipolar order.ⁱ Thus Prime Minister Medvedev called Latin America an area of Russia's strategic partner interests.ⁱⁱ Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has said that Latin America and Russia are natural partners, not because of Latin America's economic growth but because of the congruence between Latin governments' foreign policies and Russia's attempt to bring them into its concept of a multipolar world.ⁱⁱⁱ Similarly earlier as Prime Minister, Vladimir Putin said that "Latin America is becoming a noticeable link in the chain of the multipolar world that is forming — we will pay more and more attention to this vector of our economic and foreign policy."^{iv} Moscow has neither a vision for Latin America nor any means to or interest in developing or implementing one beyond fostering its distancing from U.S. influence.

Then President Medvedev in 2008 wanted the BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) to promote a genuine multipolarity and weaken U.S. hegemony in international financial institutions and the global economic order.^v He and Argentina's President Cristina Kirchner advocated reforming international financial institutions, a major thrust of recent Russian foreign policy, and Russia has pursued arms sales and convergence of diplomatic positions against Washington.^{vi} Medvedev and subordinate officials have also urged Brazil to coordinate foreign policy with Russia to foster the multipolar world.^{vii} Medvedev conceded that his 2008 trip to Latin America was prompted by serious geopolitical reasons.^{viii} Other subsequent high-ranking trips may be presumed to have a similar orientation.

Consequently Russia's involvement with Latin America is essentially irrelevant to any of Latin America's profound security challenges. This striking omission provides a key to Moscow's policies. Although Russian analysts depict Russia as a global power; Andrei Tsygankov more accurately described Russia as a regional power masquerading as a global one.^{ix} Applied to Latin America this means that Russia's primary objectives there apply to the U.S. not Latin America. Therefore we can attribute two primary goals to Russian policy here beyond the obvious one of profiting from energy deals, trade, and arms sales. First, Russia seeks an enduring presence in Latin America to persuade its governments and itself that it truly is a global power whose views must be taken into account by Washington. Russia's obsession with status emerges in the repeated statements that Russia is a true global power with global interests.^x Essentially, here as elsewhere, a primary goal is to persuade local governments and Washington to accept

Russia's status as a global player whose views must be reckoned with as a factor that either restrains or constrains Washington's global actions.

Pursuing this multipolar order Russia endeavors to identify Latin American foreign policy with its preference for restraining U.S. power in the following ways:

- Latin America should be impervious to outside (i.e. American) efforts to violently challenge security and respect the principles of international law as established in the charters of the Organization of American States (OAS) and the UN, i.e. U.S. efforts at regime change should be curtailed
- Therefore any initiative to employ armed forces abroad must comply with the United Nations. Integration initiatives must also be based on shared multilateral aims s, e.g. opposition to unilateral U.S. operations involving the use of force.^{xi}

This means frustrating any U.S. initiatives concerning Latin America or beyond it.

Beyond those objectives:

- Russia seeks to convince itself, foreign governments, and international public opinion, that it is a great international military power that can produce the entire range of competitive military systems for domestic use and foreign exports.
- Its defense firms still need foreign income to sustain them, since many evidently still depend on arms sales to survive
- It seeks lasting influence upon its customers' and partners' foreign and defense policies and on the policies of third parties with a vital interest in those customers' policies, e.g. the U.S. regarding Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua
- It uses arms sales and energy as a policy instrument to challenge U.S. interests and policies in key regions and prevent the consolidation of a U.S.-led order in them, e.g. Latin America, the Balkans, the CIS, and the Middle East. Indeed in 2006 then-Prime Minister Mikhail Fradkov admitted that successful business contacts are crucial to Russia's geopolitical cooperation with other governments when he said, "I would not set higher targets for geopolitical relations without making a success in the economy first."^{xii}
- Russia also seeks permanent bases or at least ports of call for its navy and air force from which it can threaten the U.S. or its allies and demonstrate its power projection capabilities.
- All of its efforts and instruments of power to include covert operations culminate in the attempt either to destabilize the U.S. or its regional allies and to create conditions of internal or regional conflict within Latin America that will allow for the development of friendly governments that will cooperate with Russia in

internationally and check assertions of U.S. power and values. Thus Russia and its partners' individual and collective goals entail the deliberate and substantial worsening of East-West relations and of Latin America's pre-existing acute problems.^{xiii}

- By presenting a supposedly credible and vigorous alternative to Washington Moscow aims to create a bloc of states around it that opposes U.S. policies globally.

This approach is part of a global strategy that Russia also applies to other regions where Moscow discerns possibilities for exploiting regional disturbances in order to leverage itself as both a global and regional power in that region, e.g. the CIS, the Balkans and the Middle East.^{xiv} Foreign observers have confirmed these conclusions e.g. Thomas Gomart's observations about arms sales

The lack of interests in the operational dimension of events in Chechnya is often accompanied by a reading of Russian arms sales that is often incomplete. Russia has three main clients, which cannot but be of interest to the [NATO} Alliance: India, China, and Iran, with which it officially maintains civilian nuclear cooperation. Furthermore, Russia also sells weapons systems to Syria, Venezuela, and Algeria. With these sales Russia is looking for foreign earnings and to keep its defense industry afloat, while at the same time exercising a global influence. Russia is thus cultivating an intermediate international position between the Western powers and those countries that are overtly seeking to challenge the established order. Moscow considers that its diplomatic room for maneuver lies in a continuous alternation between inclusion and exclusion with respect to Western standards, while at the same time being fundamentally wary of any excessively rapid rise to power by countries like China, India, or Iran. The result is a paradoxical situation in which short-term interests (earnings from arms sales and immediate political influence) run up against long-term ones (military balance and demographical balance) with respect to rising future powers. This raises the issue of whether Russians and Westerners intend to meet the rise of these nations by neutralizing each other or by working together. This in turn raises the question of whether their main security interests lie inside or outside the U.S./Europe/Russian triangle.^{xv}

Therefore Russia seeks to weaken American influence, allies, and partners throughout this area, using both overt and covert methods and tactics. The overt ones are diplomatic, trade and commercial ties with Latin American states, and the vigorous promotion of Russian arms sales and now space cooperation with many governments. The covert ones are clandestine arms sales, e.g. through Venezuela to the FARC and other similar movements and support for Venezuelan, Cuban, and Nicaraguan drug running under the guise of counter-narcotics operations.^{xvi} These instruments of policy go along with increasingly overt efforts to gain naval, air and satellite bases in Latin America to threaten the U.S. and our allies.

Energy deals complement Russian arms sales and its quest for foreign bases. Energy deals figure prominently in Russian foreign policy. They provide excellent cover

for covert activities by virtue of their inherent opacity. They provide an enduring “legal” basis for a long-time Russian intelligence and other presences, and they tie partners to Russia in a relation of economic dependence as is surely the case with Venezuela and probably now with Nicaragua.^{xvii} However, it increasingly seems that Nicaragua, whose government is stronger, more stable, and more likely to endure, is supplanting Venezuela as Moscow’s main partner in the region. Recent energy discoveries and military sales, including an agreement to get a satellite base in Nicaragua point to this trend as large-scale unrest continues in Venezuela.^{xviii} More recently we see signs of a growing closeness with Argentina.^{xix} Russia is also constantly pushing arms sales to virtually every Latin American state. In order to gain an entrée from which it can then exert influence. In all cases Russia seeks lasting bases of influence, military power projection, and creation of a network of partnerships to thwart U.S. policies using overt diplomatic and covert means listed above. Moscow also uses its supporters to help it gain membership in regional security organizations.^{xx}

These policies are directed from the very top of the Russian state. Igor Sechin, the second most powerful member of the government and a long-time Putin crony, probably oversees Latin American policy and his objectives are openly anti-American. In 2008, Putin sent Sechin and Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev to Cuba to discuss resuming bilateral cooperation. Given Patrushev’s position, this could only mean defense cooperation. The fact that Russia’s public pronouncements were made without consulting Cuba serves as evidence of Russian state policy being subordinate to Russian leaders’ interests.^{xxi} Cuba’s Foreign Minister even denied any knowledge of the Russian plan for deploying military sites there and Fidel Castro publicly praised Raul Castro’s restraint in refusing to be provoked by Moscow or by the U.S. Air Force Chief of Staff, General Norton Schwartz who said that such a base would be crossing the red line.^{xxii} But further developments along that line cannot be definitively ruled out. Indeed, the Russian press reported that not only did Sechin further economic deals and arms sales to Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua; he also discussed with them the formation of an anti-American alliance. “Moscow considers the formation of such a union a worthy response to U.S. activity in the former Soviet Union and the placement of missile defenses in Poland and the Czech Republic.”^{xxiii} Not surprisingly Sechin reported to Putin that Moscow should upgrade its relations with these countries in particular and Latin America in general.^{xxiv} Since then Moscow has clearly announced its search for naval bases in Cuba and may be talking to Argentina and Nicaragua as well.^{xxv}

These deals and probes were clearly part of a major Russian initiative in Latin America in 2008-09 but it was based on long-standing and ongoing policy developments. The dominance of geopolitics also emerges quite strongly in Russian foreign policy towards its main partners in Latin America, Venezuela and Cuba. Russia’s interests are fundamentally geostrategic, not economic, and no Latin economy save perhaps Brazil can offer much tangible benefit to Russia. Therefore geopolitical and strategic aims outweigh economic interaction with these states. And their importance for Moscow rises as its ties with Washington deteriorate. For example, Patrushev told Ecuador’s government that Russia wanted to collaborate with its intelligence agency, “to expand Moscow’s influence in Latin America.”^{xxvi} Moscow also signed an agreement to sell it weapons.^{xxvii} Most

probably Russia wanted to link Ecuador and Venezuela with Russian weapons and intelligence support against Colombia, support the FARC, threaten a U.S. ally, and pin Washington down in another dirty war.^{xxviii} Chavez's open support of the FARC with Russian weapons strongly suggests that Moscow knew of and approved his efforts. The subsequent expansion of arms and economic deals with Venezuela, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Argentina, and others underscore the ongoing nature of this policy, especially as relations with the U.S. continue to deteriorate

Viktor Bout's case reinforces this analysis. Bout's 2008 arrest for running guns to the FARC coincided with Russia's overt effort to inflame Latin America in a further internal and external conflict involving Venezuelan and Ecuadorian support for the FARC against Colombia.^{xxix} Since Bout's arrest, Moscow has lobbied intensely to get him back. Neither is Bout the only international arms broker involved in running weapons to the FARC or other Latin American criminal, insurgent, and terrorist groups.^{xxx}

Undoubtedly Moscow also fully recognized President Hugo Chavez's conversion of Venezuela into a critical transshipment center for narcotics from both Latin America and West Africa along with his support for insurgencies and terrorists throughout Latin America, and his expansionist and revolutionary dreams about Colombia and seeks to exploit those factors for its own anti-American purposes.^{xxxi} Indeed, reports since 2003 point to Russian criminal penetration of Mexico's narcotics gangs.^{xxxii} More recently, in early 2009 a Russian and a Cuban citizen were both arrested for drug smuggling in Yucatan.^{xxxiii} Thus claims that Moscow is aiding Nicaragua and other states combat drug trafficking cannot be taken at face value.^{xxxiv} This relationship exemplifies the commingling of terrorism, insurgency, criminality, and foreign sponsorship to undermine existing governments and U.S. partners and allies.^{xxxv}

Simultaneously Russia openly advocated increased cooperation among the BRIC members' intelligence services and Latin America in general. Clearly Moscow wants to use those contacts as bases for political influence to support those states and potential insurgent movements against the U.S.^{xxxvi} These are only some of the reasons why Moscow's arms sales to Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua are perhaps the most dangerous aspects of its policies in Latin America. These sales gave Chavez and Venezuela much of what it needed to foment Chavez's Bolivarian Revolution throughout Latin America. Indeed, the scope of the arms sales made and makes no sense unless Moscow seeks an arms race in Latin America. Chilean, Colombian, and especially Brazilian reports have long since raised the specter of Venezuela "detonating" a continental arms race, acquiring the largest Latin American fleet due to its purchase of submarines, the comprehensive arming of Venezuela's army, fleet, air forces with huge arms purchases and the acquisition of hundreds of thousands of Kalashnikovs, and an ammunition factory. These reports also point out that since 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 armed insurgencies and drug running (submarines being excellently equipped for that purpose) as well as to defend Venezuela's coastline from nonexistent threats.^{xxxvii}

The sheer scale of ongoing Russian arms sales to Venezuela since 2004 made no strategic sense given the absence of any U.S. or other military threat. Therefore, there are purposes beyond the legitimate defense of Venezuela for these weapons. Since 2004, Moscow has sold Venezuela 24 Su-30 fighters, 100,000 Kalashnikov AK-47 rifles, Ak-103 assault rifles, BMP-3 infantry fighting vehicles, and T-72 Main Battle Tanks were bought in 2009. Venezuela also bought 53 Mig-35 helicopters, (Mi-17V-s and Mi-35M helicopters). Russia also has helped develop factories in Venezuela that can make parts for the rifles, their ammunition and the fighters with an announced goal of producing 50,000 rifles a year. As of 2008-09 Venezuela planned to buy 12 Il-76 and Il-78 tankers and cargo aircraft, or possibly 96-300 military transport planes, Tor-M1 anti-air missiles, a fifth generation anti-air system equally effective against planes, helicopters, UAVs, cruise missiles, and high precision missiles, and Igla-S portable SAM systems. Venezuela also sought Mi-28n Hunter high-attack helicopters and is discussing the possible purchase of submarines.^{xxxviii} There were also earlier discussions about selling project 636 submarines (among the quietest subs in the world) to Venezuela during 2011-13 along with torpedo and missile ordnance for Venezuela's navy. As part of his anti-Colombian campaign Chavez also solicited a new loan of \$2.2 Billion from Moscow with which to buy more weapons despite the depressed oil market. In return he had to recognize the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia and give Moscow more access to oil projects in the Orinoco River basin, thus showing again the link between Russian arms sales, bases, the Caucasus, and energy policies. The \$2.2 Billion loan in 2009 will go for 92 T-70 and T-72 tanks, BMP-3 Infantry Fighting Vehicles, Smerch anti-tank missiles, multiple rocket launchers, S-300, Buk M-2, and Pechora anti-aircraft missiles, all systems usable against Colombia. In return Russia got access to join Venezuela's oil company, PDVSA, in exploring oil fields in the Orinoco River basin.^{xxxix} And arms sales have continued since then.^{xl}

These purchases make no sense unless they are intended for purposes of helping the FARC and other, similar groups, fighting Colombia, power projection throughout Latin America, drug running with subs and protection of them against air attacks, or providing a temporary base for Russian naval and air forces where they can be sheltered from attacks but threaten North or South America.^{xli} As Prime Minister Putin said that permanent bases in Cuba and Venezuela are unnecessary, leaving the door open to temporary bases, including submarine bases as needed.^{xlii} But now the Russian Navy has openly announced its quest for permanent bases in Latin America.^{xliii} Much of what Russia sells to Venezuela is compatible with that idea as is Putin's call for restoring Russia's position in Cuba and ongoing talks between Russian and Cuban military officials, e.g. Sechin's trips in 2008.^{xliv}

Furthermore, Chavez, emulating Sechin, importuned Moscow not just for a formal alliance, which it has so far resisted, but also to participate in the Bolivarian Alternative for Latin America and the Caribbean (ALBA). President Medvedev 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.^{xlv} This move not only adds a seeming legitimacy to Moscow's presence in Latin America, it accords

with past policy aiming to be a member of any multilateral association that would welcome it, Thus Russia expressed to Argentina 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 participate as an observer in the Latin American Association of Training Centers for Peace Operations (Alcopaz).^{xlvi} This craving for status lies at the heart of Russian foreign policy.^{xlvii} Neither has Moscow forgotten its military partnership with Cuba. Russia has pledged to continue military-technological cooperation (arms sales) with Cuba.^{xlviii} Russian officials continue to assign Cuba a key role in Russian foreign policy and consider it a permanent partner in Latin America.^{xlix}

Finally Moscow also uses its ability to lend money and sell arms to countries like Bolivia and Ecuador who are ruled by pro-Chavez type regimes to gain their assent to its political agenda. Moscow may also be looking for a base in Bolivia, which has apparently offered one for use by Russia's Air Force.¹ Here too we see the predominance of the geopolitical factor whereby arms sales are an instrument to achieve positive political gains in an unrelated sector. On the other hand, there are serious problems (as is frequently the case) with the quality of Russian weapons and Venezuelan maintenance of them.^{li}

Apart from the obvious geopolitical objectives that Moscow seeks the issues raised by Russian arms sales to Latin America in some respects resemble those generated by its arms sales elsewhere and comprise issues of corruption and covert or black arms sales, possible implication in criminal activities like drug running, support for political factions and states against Western and American interests, linkages with efforts to gain access to lucrative or potentially lucrative energy assets, and finally also problems with upholding the quality of both the weapons shipped and their subsequent maintenance. Many of these issues also appear in connection with Russian arms sales to the Middle East and key actors there like Iran, Syria, China, and India. Given new initiatives towards Nicaragua, and Argentina, continuing arms sales across the continent, revived participation with Nicaragua in alleged anti-drug operations, we can plausibly surmise that all these initiatives are moving forward even if covertly and at different rates.

Latin American Receptivity

Latin American states are in varying degrees receptive to Russian offers of development of energy holdings, loans, arms sales, and covert support. The most supportive are Nicaragua, Cuba, Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Argentina are also increasingly receptive to Russian blandishments. Other states are less receptive to these offers and efforts to undermine ties with Washington or local stability but states like Chile, Peru, and Brazil all are interested in Russian arms sales and Moscow makes, a special effort to cultivate Brazil as a member of the BRICs. Russia has signed agreements with Brazil to upgrade trade across many economic sectors, including agricultural products, defense cooperation, and space projects and seeks cooperation with Brazil in all areas.^{liii} Since 2006 Moscow has been pursuing what it calls a "technological alliance" with Brazil, allegedly because together they can initiate world-class technological projects.^{liiii} Russia also wants to take part in a projected gas pipeline from Argentina to

Bolivia, as well as other key energy projects with Venezuela and other states.^{liv} One key reason why Moscow included Brazil and Peru is 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.^{lv} On the other hand we see expressions of concern even in Nicaragua lest its turn to Moscow trigger a strong U.S. backlash against Nicaragua.^{lvi}

At the same time Latin American countries also benefit thereby. Not only do they gain exposure to a large and growing market they also achieve their own economic and geostrategic aims. For example, Argentina reportedly wishes to escape from excessive reliance upon Venezuela for energy and financial aid by turning to Russia to conduct hydrocarbon explorations in Argentina and offshore. But since no formal agreement between Argentina and Russia has been reached, it remains to be seen to what degree, if any, these reports are true. Meanwhile Lukoil may provide fuel oil and diesel fuel for thermal power plants in the winter when there tend to be gas shortages. Likewise, Russia will also help construct the Northeast pipeline to Bolivia.^{lvii}

Similar thinking exists regarding arms sales. Russian exporters have long seen Latin America as an expanding or potentially expanding market for their wares beginning with the modernization of existing weapons but moving more recently to offering new products to all governments.^{lviii} Indeed, these exporters publicly claimed that the Bush Administration’s policies had “created a situation that Russian arms manufacturers see as a kind of present.” Potential customers became alarmed that their own position had become unreliable therefore they sought more and newer weapons.^{lix} These efforts apparently have benefited Russia politically Brazil has been visibly unwilling to condemn Moscow’s policies in Ukraine.^{lx} This outcome will reinforce Russia’s conviction that it has further room for maneuver with Brazil against U.S. interests and that Brazil can become an international political partner as well as a significant trading partner and thus an example to other Latin American countries.

Recommendations for the U.S.

First the U.S. cannot take Latin America for granted. It must reverse the perception of disengagement and engage key members, especially Brazil, if it wants support or to lead multilateral coalitions on issues of regional significance. This means repairing the damage done by the Snowden affair. Second, it must upgrade its level of economic investment and trade with Latin American countries to compete more effectively with Russia and China. This would also enhance opportunities to improve overall economic conditions and mitigate the inequalities that continue to lie behind socio-political unrest in many countries. Third, like it or not, we must continue to sell affordable but competitive weapons systems suited to the needs of Latin American countries and increase our military cooperation and advisor-training programs with these governments. This also applies to cooperation on police issues like counter-narcotics. This also means upgraded intelligence cooperation among the U.S. and Latin American governments on matters of current concern.

In the political sphere this means also preparing to engage the next generation of Cuban leaders to prevent Cuba from again becoming a Russian base for hemispheric subversion. Despite the political obstacles on both sides we have much more to offer future Cuban rulers if not the present government than Moscow ever can and we should not be shy about doing so to sever Cuba's connections with Venezuela and Russia over time. Likewise, in the negotiations with Iran we must make the cessation of Iranian efforts to forge networks with Latin American insurgents and terrorists as a precondition for improved relations. Finally, while we should not intervene in Venezuela's unrest, if it leads to a new government including opposition members, we should find ways to cooperate with it to break up the Chavista intelligence, military and other networks that are funding continent-wide unrest and subversion, and place Venezuela on a surer path to democratic liberalism.

Notes

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