

Russia and Iran in Latin America

Same Outlook, Similar Playbooks

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In January 2023, Venezuelan authorities inaugurated a **mural** in the capital, Caracas, in honor of Qasem Soleimani, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force leader who was killed by a U.S. drone attack in 2020. Soleimani, a prominent figure of the Islamic Revolution and Tehran's ultraconservative, theocratic regime, is depicted standing alongside former Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez, leader of the country's Bolivarian Revolution—a movement that has been deemed socially progressive and vigorously secular. Given these contradictions, what are the ties that bind these two figures?



A motorcyclist passes in front of the mural of Soleimani and Chávez in Caracas, Venezuela.

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The cement of the relationship between Venezuela and Iran is perhaps best described by the adage “the enemy of my enemy is my friend.” Their shared priority is to ensure their respective regimes’ survival in the face of perceived threats, with the United States as the primary foe. Ayatollah Khomeini, the first leader of the Islamic republic, dubbed the United States the “**Great Satan**,” while Chávez referred to former U.S. president George W. Bush as “**the devil**.” This rhetoric and outlook matches that of Russia and other active rejecters of the U.S.-led international order; indeed, Russian president Vladimir Putin has spoken out against the “**collective West**” in Ukraine.

While Western observers have focused their attention on **joint connivances** of Russia and Iran in Eastern Europe, Eurasia, and the Middle East, where Russo-Iranian military-security operations directly affect U.S. and European interests, the Western Hemisphere is not isolated from the two countries' quests for global influence. In fact, in many ways it is an essential piece of the puzzle. First, both Iran and Russia perceive Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) as a fertile ground for exploiting popular resentment vis-à-vis the United States and the "collective West," which they—rather successfully—harness to advance their view of a multipolar world. Second, LAC partners could prove instrumental in offsetting the impacts of Western sanctions against Moscow and Tehran by mitigating their diplomatic and economic isolation. Finally, certain LAC countries could also serve as less scrutinized partners for further developing Russo-Iranian warfare capabilities or cooperation, sheltering mercenaries or militias—such as Hezbollah—and acting as vectors for "**horizontal escalation**" of conflicts in which Russia and Iran are currently involved.

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This paper examines Russia's and Iran's creeping influence over the Western Hemisphere, assessing the historic legacy as well as the current diplomatic, economic, informational, and military-security links that contribute to the region's continued willingness to engage with these two countries. It then offers analysis and recommendations to Western policymakers, outlining new approaches the transatlantic community should adopt to contain potential Russo-Iranian coordination in LAC.

Anti-Western Sentiments as Historical Entry Points for Russia and Iran in LAC

Russia has a long history of engagement with LAC countries, dating back to the nineteenth century, when the Russian Empire **opened embassies** in Brazil and Mexico in 1828 and 1890, respectively. Moscow's presence on the continent only grew under the Soviet Union, and especially during the Cold War era. The Soviet leadership focused on countries where it could capitalize on existing anti-U.S. sentiment and interstate and intrastate rivalries. For instance, the Kremlin **provided** extensive military-security and economic assistance to Argentina, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Peru to support revolutionary movements. By doing so, the Soviet Union aimed to undermine U.S. standing and strengthen its footprint on the continent.

However, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the newly established Russian Federation was unable to provide financial or security aid to LAC countries and was forced to disengage. Furthermore, in the 1990s, as Russia sought **rapprochement** with the United States under President Boris Yeltsin, the strategic significance of LAC in the eyes of Moscow diminished. While Yeltsin visited the United States four times during his eight years of presidency, he did not make any trips to LAC.

An attempt to establish and maintain amicable relations with the United States did not mean, however, that the Russian political elite had fully disregarded the geopolitical importance of LAC countries. The Primakov doctrine—named for Yevgeny Primakov, a foreign minister and prime minister under Yeltsin—famously **posited** that, as the West was meddling and exerting influence in Russia’s “backyard” through NATO expansion and the imposition of the U.S.-dominated world order, Russia’s presence in its opponent’s “near abroad” was crucial to level the playing field. Consequently, as U.S.-Russian bilateral relations became more tense starting in the mid-2000s, Moscow began **resuscitating** diplomatic, economic, and security ties with its former Cold War allies Cuba and Nicaragua and built new relationships with other regional powers antagonistic toward the United States, such as Venezuela.

Similar to Russia, albeit comparatively limited in scale, Iran’s entry into LAC was preceded by revolutionary regime change and the anti-U.S. sentiments it unleashed. In 1979, the Sandinista National Liberation Front, a leftist insurgency spearheaded by Daniel Ortega, deposed the dictator Anastasio Somoza in Nicaragua. That same year, the shah fled Iran, ushering in the modern Iranian theocratic state with Ayatollah Khomeini at its head. While the two movements had starkly different ideological origins, they shared a **common opposition** to the United States, rooted in Washington’s support for the regimes they had ousted. By the early 1980s, Nicaraguan and Iranian leaders were **discussing** cooperation and efforts to balance vis-à-vis both the United States and the Soviet Union.

With the close of the Cold War, Iran found its appeals to anti-U.S. sentiment losing saliency in the hemisphere as many of the militant leftist groups in the region laid down their arms or negotiated peace. In their place, Iranian proxy Hezbollah established a beachhead in the region. Its affiliate, Islamic Jihad, **claimed responsibility** for the suicide bombing of the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires in 1992, while Hezbollah allegedly masterminded the devastating 1994 **bombing** of the Argentinian Israelite Mutual Association.

However, it was not until the mid-2000s and the height of LAC’s “pink tide,” which carried a series of socialist and otherwise U.S.-skeptical governments into power, that Iran’s engagement with the hemisphere took on a **more robust, institutional character**. The Chávez government in Venezuela was especially **important** in opening the door for Iran. In addition to their shared derision of the United States as a geopolitical demon, Chávez and former Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad actively worked to cultivate like-minded LAC governments. Venezuela’s oil wealth and diplomatic clout gave it a powerful platform to advocate for an expanded role for Iran in the hemisphere, and between 2005 and 2009, Iran opened embassies in **six new countries** in the region: Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Uruguay. This policy has continued for the most part, especially as the Trump administration’s pursuit of a maximum-pressure sanctions campaign against both Venezuela and Iran caused these two governments to double down on their bilateral ties.

Today, as Russia and Iran continue to face mounting political and economic pressure from the United States and its Western allies, expanded ties to countries in LAC, rooted in history, can serve as an important release valve for both Moscow and Tehran. Strengthened relations, not only with staunch anti-U.S. governments like those in Cuba and Venezuela but also with regional powers such as Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico, could help Russia and Iran mitigate the impact of sanctions and offer them much-needed legitimacy on the world stage. Regular visits by high-ranking **Russian** and

Iranian officials to the region have proven a comparatively low-cost means of challenging Washington's preeminence in LAC. While these visits often tend to focus on the hemisphere's three consolidated dictatorships—Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela—Russia and Iran continue to seek political, economic, and military-security relations with a broad array of LAC countries.

Converging Patterns of Russian and Iranian Engagement in LAC

A growing consensus among policymakers in the United States acknowledges the Western Hemisphere as a new frontier in **geopolitical competition**, especially following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, which has emboldened authoritarian regimes to more directly challenge the U.S.-led international order. However, most analyses of great power competition in the region have focused their attention on **China** as the U.S. rival with both the desire and resources at its disposal to challenge Washington in its neighborhood. By contrast, neither Russia nor Iran (commonly considered “junior partners” to China in the region) possess the economic heft to comprehensively engage all countries in LAC. Instead, both have relied on asymmetrical strategies to undermine U.S. objectives and support a small set of regional allies who serve as springboards for further influence.

Yet a lack of economic clout may in fact make Russia and Iran more threatening actors in the short term. Unencumbered by China's need to manage perceptions and diplomatic relations across more than two dozen countries, Russia and Iran can double down on disruptive and destabilizing practices. More troubling still, there is mounting evidence that, in some sectors at least, Russia and Iran may not merely be pursuing parallel strategies but could be moving toward a more coordinated approach to engagement with the hemisphere.



Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov and Venezuelan president Nicolas Maduro meet at the Miraflores Presidential Palace in Caracas in April 2023. Lavrov called for like-minded countries to “join forces” against Western sanctions “blackmail” as the longtime diplomat continued his tour of Latin America.

Photo: YURI CORTEZ/AFP via Getty Images

DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS

Russia's post-invasion diplomatic approach to Latin America has been guided by its updated **foreign policy concept**, which posits an imminent decline of Western hegemony and the emergence of a multipolar world order. For instance, during his tour of the region in April 2023, Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov emphasized Russia's respect for the sovereignty of Latin American nations, referring to the region as one of the emergent centers of the multipolar world despite U.S. “**bullying and imperialism.**”

While a majority of the region **has voted** in favor of UN resolutions decrying Russia's war on Ukraine, Moscow has managed to secure sympathy and tacit support from regional powers. For instance, Brazil, under the presidency of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Lula), has repeatedly championed peace proposals for the Ukraine war, most recently with the **release** of a set

of “common understandings” between Brazil and China on the contours of a possible settlement. However, Lula has faced criticism for his perceived bias toward Russia in these negotiations. Indeed, following a 2023 tour in which he claimed that both Kyiv and Moscow shared the blame for the conflict, White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby **accused** the Brazilian president of “parroting Russian and Chinese propaganda.”

Lula is joined in the bid to forge peace in Ukraine by outgoing Mexican president Andrés Manuel López Obrador (colloquially known as AMLO), who put forth his own **peace plan** in the summer of 2022. AMLO, who has previously rejected U.S. intelligence **claims** that Mexico City is the world’s biggest Russian espionage hub, proposed a plan calling for an immediate ceasefire and the launch of a dialogue to address the war’s underlying causes. Ukrainian diplomats rejected this option as a de facto freezing of the front lines that would allow Russia to maintain its military presence in occupied territories.

Tellingly, neither Brazil nor Mexico **signed on** to the final communiqué issued at the June 2024 summit on peace in Ukraine. Regional dissonance over the correct path to a negotiated settlement in Ukraine helps muddy the waters on peace and indirectly allows Russia to undermine efforts to build a truly broad-based international coalition dedicated to a just settlement to the war.

Similarly, Iran’s diplomatic approach toward Latin America is built on its **claims to be** “a nation unjustly harassed by the West,” which help it gain sympathy and secure political and economic support from the states that are either antagonistic or ambivalent at best toward the United States. For instance, in June 2023, when now-deceased Iranian president Ebrahim Raisi visited Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela for the first time since taking office, he **highlighted** the need for the revolutionary movements in both Iran and LAC to reassert their independence and sovereignty. “The Americans have always considered you, Latin America, as their backyard. But thank God, now you have sovereignty,” the Iranian president remarked. Raisi left the region having secured **dozens of agreements** with his LAC counterparts in the energy, agriculture, healthcare, education, information technology, and maritime transportation sectors.

In addition to Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, Iran has maintained close diplomatic relations with Bolivia. The two nations have signed defense and security agreements that **might have included** the delivery of Bolivian passports to Iranian citizens. As Argentina’s minister of security, Patricia Bullrich, **pointed out**, such an agreement, if confirmed, would open a door to Iranian citizens with Bolivian passports across the hemisphere—a strategy that Tehran has **already used** in Venezuela to infiltrate the region.

Israel’s ongoing war in Gaza has also severely damaged its relations with LAC, presenting another opportunity for Iran to make inroads in the region. Keystone countries including Brazil, Chile, Colombia, and Mexico have condemned the Israeli government’s prosecution of the war. The broad support among LAC governments for the Palestinian cause is primarily driven by **domestic** political dynamics, not foreign influence. However, as the rift between Israel and the region grows, Tehran could seize on these new openings to advance its diplomatic rhetoric as the self-proclaimed leader of the “**axis of resistance**.” The recent election of a more reform-minded candidate, Masoud Pezeshkian, as the country’s new president is also unlikely to significantly change Tehran’s engagement with LAC as, in

his own words, “[t]here is significantly more potential for cooperation between Iran and the countries of Latin America than what is currently being realized.”

Javier Milei’s Argentina is nevertheless a major outlier, being one of the **most outspoken supporters** of Israel and of Benjamin Netanyahu in particular, the first leader whom the Argentinian president visited after his election. Argentina was the **sole LAC country** to vote against the UN General Assembly’s motion to recognize Palestine as a full member of the body, and it has **designated** Hamas as a terrorist organization. This political dissonance with the rest of the continent is a source of tension, with Argentina’s security minister Patricia Bullrich **accusing** Bolivia and Chile of being hotbeds for Islamist groups and ordering reinforcements to the borders with these two countries, prompting them to pull their ambassadors from Buenos Aires. It also created a major spat between Argentina and Iran, with the latter’s integration into the BRICS in January 2024 having been a key factor in Milei’s decision to walk back his predecessor’s decision to join BRICS+. Following Buenos Aires’ designation of Hamas as a terrorist group, Tehran issued a stark warning that it “will make [Argentina] regret its enmity.”

Overall, Russia’s and Iran’s diplomatic engagement with LAC, especially following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, has in large part been based on presenting the West as an oppressor, which LAC countries could counter by exercising their right to sovereignty and supporting the establishment of a new, multipolar world order.

INFLUENCE OPERATIONS

The media environment in LAC presents the lowest barriers to entry and consequentially has been a sector where both Iran and Russia have made significant strides separately and, at times, in coordination. The Kremlin has been **relying on** the Spanish-language affiliates of state-backed outlets, such as RT Spanish (television and online) and Sputnik Mundo (radio and online), to spread Russian propaganda and disinformation on the continent for more than a decade. With **Mexico** often serving as a hub for Russian disinformation operations, these outlets overwhelmingly **focus on** the United States, questioning its domestic and foreign policies. According to U.S. intelligence **reporting**, following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Moscow has used media contacts in 13 countries across the continent, including Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, Mexico, and Venezuela, to **weaken international support** for Ukraine. RT, Sputnik, and their regional affiliates have disseminated **conspiracy theories** about “denazifying Ukraine,” alleged Ukrainian aggression against Russia, NATO expansionism, and “staged recording” of civilian deaths in Ukraine. They have also **depicted** ongoing sanctions against Russia as beneficial for the West but harmful for the global economy and food security. In December 2023, RT Spanish even **won** four prestigious awards from the Mexican Press Club for its coverage of the war in Ukraine, illustrating a stark disconnect in regional perceptions of Russian news sources.

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Russian influence operations are not only concerned with shaping attitudes toward foreign policy. In Colombia and Mexico, Russia has reportedly sought to sway the results of key elections in favor of Moscow's preferred candidates, through its official media platforms as well as through networks of trolls, bots, and regional pro-Kremlin affiliates. In Mexico, RT Spanish **broadcast** a long-running video series entitled "The Battle for Mexico," which cast then-candidate López Obrador in a favorable light as the only leader willing to confront the United States and preserve Mexican sovereignty. In Colombia, Russia-linked bots on Twitter (now known as X) were found to have **promoted** Gustavo Petro's candidacy in 2022. The extent to which such efforts swayed the final result should be treated with a degree of caution, as both Petro and López Obrador won due to a confluence of factors. Nevertheless, election interference efforts remain among Moscow's most corrosive tools to undermine democracy and sovereignty worldwide.

Iran's Spanish-language media agency **HispanTV** has made similar strides in the region. In doing so, it has benefitted from partnerships with fellow authoritarian-leaning media outlets, which help amplify and advance its messages. National security analysts Douglas Farah and Alexa Tavaréz have **demonstrated**, for instance, how Venezuelan outlet teleSUR, RT, and HispanTV often cite and recite one another's work and rely on similar sets of pro-authoritarian journalists based in the region to convey their messages. These so-called "super spreaders" advance **common messages** critiquing U.S. policy toward the region as imperialist and uplifting the approaches of Iran, Russia, and China as seeking to challenge malign U.S. hegemony while encouraging economic development among LAC countries.

The convergence between Russian and Iranian influence operations could be observed less than a month before the onset of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. On January 28, 2022, an article by Pablo Jofré Leal appeared in HispanTV **calling** for an "alliance against [U.S.] hegemony" to be spearheaded by Russia, China, and Iran. Leal, a Chilean journalist and frequent contributor to HispanTV, RT Spanish, teleSUR, and many affiliated websites, has acted as a **key node** for translating messages from Moscow and Tehran for a regional audience.

Beyond the traditional media space, organizations like Nova Resistência, a neofascist organization and part of the broader New Resistance organization inspired by the ideas of Kremlin-backed philosopher Aleksandr Dugin, have worked not only to advance pro-Russian messages but also to **praise** the actions of Iran and Hezbollah. A 2023 U.S. Department of State report **found** that the Brazilian Nova Resistência chapter was "particularly active" in convening events, writing articles, and disseminating physical pamphlets and posters advancing pro-Kremlin narratives.

Even absent formal coordination between Iran and Russia in the information space, their methods and objectives for fomenting anti-U.S. sentiment enjoy strong complementarity. As the cases of Pablo Jofré Leal and Nova Resistência also demonstrate, the audience for such messaging within LAC enjoys a high degree of overlap.

ENERGY AND ECONOMICS

Russia's economic clout in LAC is marginal, especially when compared to that of the United States and the European Union, which remain the key investors in the hemisphere, **comprising** 38 percent and 17 percent of Latin America's foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows in 2022, respectively. The **major recipients** of Russian FDI in the region include Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru, and these investments tend to focus on the extractive sectors, including minerals, oil, and gas. **Bilateral trade**

between Russia and LAC countries stands at around \$12 billion, with Russia mainly exporting fertilizers, mineral fuels, iron, and steel to the region (primarily to Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico).

Despite Russia's small economic footprint in LAC, the Kremlin has expressed strengthened interest in the region's energy sector in recent years and, in certain cases, has even managed to challenge the Western companies operating on the ground. Brazil presents a noteworthy example in this regard, **replacing** Turkey as the largest purchaser of Russian diesel in October 2023. Overall in 2023, Brazil **imported** 6.1 million tons of diesel with a value of \$4.5 billion from Russia—a 6,000 percent increase from the 101,000 tons of Russian diesel worth \$95 million that it imported in 2022. Such a sharp rise in **Russian diesel market share** in Brazil, from virtually zero in 2022 to 50 percent in 2023 and 70 percent in 2024, has in large part resulted from its competitive pricing—one of the effects of the ongoing war in Ukraine. Highly reliant on cheap diesel to keep its economy moving, Brazil's decision to pivot away from the United States in favor of Russia can further increase Moscow's diplomatic and economic ties with Brasília, securing support from the largest country in the region.

Besides Brazil, Cuba and Venezuela also represent interesting case studies for Russia's renewed focus on making inroads into the Western Hemisphere's energy sector. In March 2023, Igor Sechin, the head of Russia's state oil company Rosneft, visited Havana and Caracas to discuss energy cooperation with the two countries. A year later, **90,000 metric tons of Russian oil** arrived in Cuba to offer some relief to an island mired in power outages and gasoline shortages. Sanctioned by the United States, Cuba's communist government has once again found itself **beholden to the Kremlin**, bringing additional revenue and economic and political opportunities to Russia. In the case of Venezuela, while Rosneft was **pressured to cease its operations** in Venezuela in 2020, Sechin's visit amid the war in Ukraine and international sanctions imposed against Russia might **imply and lead to** renewed energy cooperation between the two countries. (In the past, Moscow **relied on Rosneft** to both expand the company's portfolio and advance the country's geopolitical interests vis-à-vis Caracas.) These intentions were reiterated during Lavrov's **visit** to Venezuela in February 2024, with the Russian foreign minister promising to boost joint oil and gas production and foster "peaceful use of nuclear energy" in the country.

In some instances, however, Moscow's efforts **have gone nowhere**. In **Argentina**, Novatek—Russia's largest producer of liquefied natural gas (LNG)—reportedly offered the Argentinian government the technology to build an LNG plant, but talks between the two parties broke off without a deal. **In Bolivia**, Gazprom—a Russian state-owned oil and gas company that has been present in the country for more than a decade—has failed to drill and develop any natural gas or oil fields during this period, prompting criticism from local experts.

Russia has nevertheless made some advances in the clean energy and mining space, with state-owned firm Rosatom signing a **\$450 million** deal in 2023 as part of a bid with China to develop Bolivia's lithium reserves, estimated as the largest in the hemisphere. Overall, while Latin America's energy sector is promising for Russia—especially following its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which has forced Russian companies to look elsewhere for energy deals and investments—it is still rife with risks, limitations, and competition.

Like Russia, Iran's economic influence in the hemisphere has been limited and primarily focused on energy cooperation. In Venezuela, Iran's presence has had an outsized impact on the ability of the government of Chavez's successor, Nicolás Maduro, to remain in power. Iran's expertise navigating

mass international pressure was invaluable for the Maduro regime to retain oil revenues in the face of U.S. sectoral sanctions on the energy sector after the 2019 Venezuelan presidential crisis. Venezuela shipped crude oil to Iran, Russia, and China in return for financial assistance and cheap **gasoline** to maintain fuel subsidies in a time of economic turmoil. Venezuela has also relied upon Iranian technical assistance, inking a deal with Tehran in 2022 to help repair Venezuela's El Palito refinery to the tune of some **€110 million** (up to \$120 million). Iranian technical support has been essential as Venezuela struggles to bring its hollowed-out oil sector back to life in anticipation of the lifting of sanctions. Tehran also significantly benefits from this arrangement, having leveraged its partnership with the Maduro regime to **build and sell** Iranian cars and reportedly acquire over a **million hectares** of farmland in Venezuela to support Iran's agricultural sector.

The cases discussed above show that the energy sector could be another area ripe for cooperation between Iran, Russia, and their allies in the Western Hemisphere, especially Venezuela. While all three countries are ostensibly competitors in the global oil market, the layers of sanctions they face have engendered a peculiar form of covert camaraderie. Russian joint oil ventures with Venezuela produced an estimated **120,000 barrels per day** in 2022, or more than one-sixth of the country's total oil production. Venezuela, in turn, has relied heavily on **Iranian tankers** to launder its oil and deliver it to buyers—most often to China. Each country has therefore seemingly intuited that they have more to gain from attempting to subvert U.S.-led sanctions together than by forging their own path.

This arrangement appears to have frayed in the months following the October 2023 Barbados Accords, when the United States began issuing licenses to companies to resume oil production in Venezuela. Now able to trade oil with U.S. firms for cash in hand rather than fuel, Venezuela's trade with Iran **plummeted** from 2022 to 2023, leading to a diplomatic scramble by the two countries to restore their alliance. However, with the **reimposition** of U.S. oil sanctions on Venezuela in April 2024, energy cooperation between Venezuela, Iran, and Russia may be set to increase once more.

MILITARY-SECURITY COOPERATION

Russia's engagement with LAC countries has been guided by the aforementioned Primakov doctrine—the idea that Russia should engage with the “near abroad” of the United States in response to Washington's meddling in internal affairs of the countries Moscow views as its “near abroad.” This is particularly true against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine. For instance, in June 2022, Nicaraguan president Ortega **authorized** the entry of Russian troops, military ships, and aircraft into Nicaragua to assist with military training, law enforcement, and humanitarian aid. Russian state media has linked the Russian military deployment in the country to U.S. engagement with Ukraine, with one television host **stating**, “If American missile systems can nearly reach Moscow from Ukrainian territory, it is time for Russia to roll out something powerful closer to the American city upon a hill.” According to some estimates, up to **3,700** Russian troops have participated in different military trainings and exchanges with the Nicaraguan army between 2014 and 2024. Russia has also operated a Global Navigation Satellite System (GLONASS) satellite **ground station** in Nicaragua since 2017 (Moscow also operates **four** other ground stations further south in Brazil). Located just outside of the capital, Managua, the facility has raised concerns that it could be used to intercept satellite communications close to the equator, where many of the U.S. critical assets are located in geostationary orbits. Finally, Moscow has helped train the Nicaraguan National Police, implicated in serious human rights abuses, from its **U.S.-sanctioned** counternarcotics center, also in Managua.

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In another especially symbolic display, a contingent of Russian soldiers **took part** in Mexico's Independence Day parade in 2023. Meanwhile, Russian military exercises in the Caribbean, which included port calls in **Cuba and Venezuela**, have been **framed** by some analysts as a direct response to the Biden administration's decision allowing Ukraine to strike targets inside Russia with U.S. weapons systems. While the detachment posed little practical threat to U.S. national security, similar deployments may become more frequent as Russia looks to convey power and prestige on the world stage and continue to **apply pressure** to the United States within its neighborhood.

In addition to military deployments and joint training exercises with its partner countries, Russia has been supplying Latin America with arms. From 2000 to 2023, Russia was the **number three** supplier of weapons in the hemisphere, according to data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), behind only the United States and United Kingdom in sales. However, since 2019, **according to SIPRI data**, Russia has not made any major sales in the region, and with the Russian defense industrial base **geared** primarily toward its own war effort, it **seems unlikely** that Moscow will be able to reenter the market in a meaningful way anytime soon. Still, Russian arms provide continued influence over Latin American states. Countries such as Brazil, Ecuador, and Peru, which



A woman and a girl wave as frigate Admiral Gorshkov, part of the Russian naval detachment visiting Cuba, leaves Havana Harbor. The detachment visited Cuba in June 2024 amid major tensions over the war in Ukraine.

Photo: YAMIL LAGE/AFP via Getty Images

operate stocks of Russian-supplied weapons, still rely on Moscow for maintenance and upkeep. Colombia, for instance, is struggling to maintain its fleet of Soviet-designed Mi-17 military helicopters, which the local authorities **have said** is the direct result of the war in Ukraine. The region has also rebuked efforts by U.S. and European leaders to sell their legacy Russian and Soviet arms to Ukraine, even with assurances of replacements. Ecuador came closest in February 2024, offering to sell \$200 million worth of outmoded Russian and Soviet equipment to the United States (which could presumably pass this along to Ukraine), only to **backpedal** in the face of Russian economic pressure.

While joint trainings, dual-use facilities, and the deployment of military assets have all featured prominently in Russia's playbook in

the region, these tactics have also increasingly become part of Iran's tool kit for engagement in the Western Hemisphere. For instance, the drop in Russian arms sales has been accompanied by a spike in Iranian weapons to the hemisphere. This has been driven by one country, Venezuela, which in 2023 **acquired** at least six Peykaap-III fast attack boats, along with an estimated 25 anti-ship missiles. In April 2024, reports also surfaced that Venezuela's National Bolivarian Armed Forces were **developing** a loitering munition dubbed the "Zamora V-1" based on Iranian Shahed 131/136 drones. These drones have been **widely used** by the Russian Armed Forces in Ukraine, thus enabling Tehran to combat test, improve, and promote Iranian-made weapons and technology globally. Details at the time of this writing are scarce, but Venezuela has demonstrated a capability to replicate Iranian designs, with an undisclosed number of **Mohajer drones** having previously been produced under license in Venezuela. Cooperation on drone production and local upgrades to Iranian drone models has helped Venezuela build technical expertise and capacity within the country's arms industry, helping state aerospace company EANSA to become a capable manufacturer of combat drones in its own right. The Maduro regime's growing partnership with Tehran in the defense space is especially troubling in light of Venezuela's escalating rhetoric toward its neighbor Guyana over the disputed Essequibo territory. Cruise missile-toting fast attack craft and loitering munitions could allow the regime to menace shipping and oil platforms off the coast of Guyana, **mimicking** the tactics of the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels in the Red Sea and imperiling Guyana's burgeoning offshore oil industry.

Beyond arms sales, Iran's security cooperation with the hemisphere has been far less mature, often relying on non-state proxies. In 2022, for instance, a Venezuelan 747 cargo plane with both Venezuelan and Iranian nationals aboard was **detained** in Argentina over suspicions of conducting espionage and smuggling on behalf of Iran's Quds Force, a branch of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps sanctioned and designated as a terrorist entity by the United States. Iran's 2023 **naval world tour**, which included stops in Brazil and transit through the Panama Canal, also illustrates how the rotation of military assets through LAC provides a means of asymmetric escalation against the United States.

PROXIES AND PARTNERS

Moscow and Tehran are both proficient in the use of non-state proxies to advance their interests, and the Western Hemisphere is no exception to this. The Iranian-backed militia group Hezbollah embodies this dynamic. The group's successes at orchestrating large-scale terror attacks in the 1990s continue to shape regional perceptions today. With a **decades-long presence** in the region, Hezbollah **continues to operate** in the so-called Triple Frontier region between Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay.

Today, Hezbollah's operations have shifted northward to Venezuela, where it has allegedly embedded itself in criminal networks to facilitate money laundering and illicit financial activity. Former Venezuelan vice president Tareck El Aissami **reportedly** served as the intermediary between the Maduro government and Hezbollah, helping launder money for the group through contacts in the Colombian company **Importadora Silvania**. Furthermore, during his tenure, El Aissami was said to have arranged for members of Hezbollah to train on Margarita Island with members of the colectivos, Venezuela's pro-regime paramilitary, thus maintaining a level of distance from formal state-to-state relations. A string of other high-profile money laundering cases

over the past 20 years, from Paraguay to Colombia, has led one analyst to **remark** that Hezbollah “has achieved what other large terrorist groups could not, entrenching itself within the complex web of TCOs [transnational criminal organizations] and substate actors in a region far removed from its founding territory and spiritual heartland.”

LAC’s varied reactions to the war in Gaza will likely shift these dynamics in unpredictable ways. Brazil and Colombia have both taken steps to curtail their relations with Israel over its conduct of the war, with the latter going so far as to sever relations entirely. Both countries had long-standing security cooperation with Israel, including a joint **operation** between the Mossad and Brazilian police in November 2023 that resulted in the arrest of two alleged Hezbollah operatives planning a series of attacks. However, **strained relations** with Israel may complicate future cooperation and intelligence sharing on Hezbollah activities in the Western Hemisphere.

Russia, by contrast, is a comparatively recent entrant in its use of armed proxy groups within LAC. Perhaps the most notable episode occurred in 2019 when, amid mass unrest and fears of a potential coup against Maduro, some 400 Russian mercenaries, allegedly from the Wagner Group, **arrived** in Caracas to provide security for the embattled president. Similar to Wagner’s activities on the **African continent**, the private military contractors reportedly remain active, training the Venezuelan armed forces and protecting mining operations in the country’s Orinoco region. In May 2023, leaked U.S. national security documents showed that Wagner may have attempted to reprise this role, this time leading a scouting visit to **Haiti**.

As LAC continues to grapple with resurgent transnational criminal organizations, there may be opportunities for Russia or even Iran to provide further security assistance. China has already exploited a perceived gap in U.S. security sector support to stand up at least **11 private security firms** in the region. Meanwhile, Russia has proven adept at leveraging security challenges in Africa to expand its influence and fill its coffers. Russian private military contractors like the Wagner Group and its successor, the Africa Corps, are by now **infamous** for their ruthless counterinsurgency deployments in the Central African Republic, Mali, and Sudan. As electorates throughout the Western Hemisphere **call** for forceful action to be taken in the face of worsening criminal violence, the “brutal but effective” methods employed by authoritarian proxies may take on heightened appeal.

Conclusion

Russia and Iran are selective in their engagement with countries in LAC. While they cultivate close ties with the hemisphere’s three anti-U.S. dictatorships—Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela—they simultaneously work to gain ground in more neutral or U.S.-skeptical countries, such as Brazil and Mexico. Furthermore, as this paper has argued, Moscow and Tehran do not act in isolation from one another and are in fact increasingly pursuing convergent and coordinated goals in the region.

The United States should strive to do the same in its response by partnering with like-minded allies both within LAC and across the Atlantic. In doing so, Washington should seek to strengthen its relationships with friendly nations, disrupt the ability of its foes to coordinate, and devise a resource-backed counteroffer for those countries within LAC that currently prefer to sit on the fence between the United States, Iran, and Russia.

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- **Strengthen partnerships with friends.** Building partner capabilities in the media and cybersecurity space are essential elements to helping countries in LAC better insulate themselves from malign influence operations. These sectors present the lowest barriers to entry and are the areas where Russia and Iran are most clearly coordinating. To counter Moscow's and Tehran's inroads in the media space, the United States should look to expand scholarship programs for journalists based in LAC to help cultivate a new generation of reporters. By investing in young reporters from a diversity of backgrounds, the United States can help shape a media environment that is more discerning, critical, and capable of counteracting authoritarian political narratives organically.

LAC's cyber defenses face a shortage of resources and strategy across the board. However, there are promising signs that like-minded countries are beginning to take concrete steps to shore up these vulnerabilities. Costa Rica may be an especially key ally: it was the only LAC country to sign on to U.S. sanctions against Russia in 2022, and it was the victim of a devastating **ransomware attack** by the Russia-affiliated Conti hacker collective. U.S. Southern Command has already allocated nearly **\$10 million** to assist Costa Rica in building up its cybersecurity capabilities. Broadening these efforts to bring in additional interested parties by establishing a cybersecurity center of excellence within the hemisphere, among other measures, could help elevate the conversation and further insulate allies from malign interference.

- **Disrupt and deter coordination among authoritarian adversaries.** It has become increasingly evident that dictatorial regimes across the world pursue a common "**playbook**" to stifle domestic opposition and resist international pressure. Countering this requires the democratic powers of the world to devise and articulate their own playbook.

Curbing illicit financial flows is one especially important effort in the Western Hemisphere, as governments like Venezuela and Nicaragua rely on their international connections to keep their hands on the reins of power. A new **investigation** by the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Asset Control into the universe of trade ties from Russia and Iran in LAC could provide novel insights and help better calibrate sanctions efforts against these regimes as well as the hemisphere's dictatorships.

The United States should also pay close attention to **military-technical cooperation** between autocratic regimes. Chinese, Iranian, and Russian arms have all been used as part of Venezuela's effort to intimidate and coerce Guyana, while Venezuela's interest in coproducing loitering munitions with Iran would provide Caracas with a worrying new capability if carried

to fruition. Limiting the extent to which hemispheric adversaries can benefit from this cooperation will be crucial to managing interstate tensions and escalation dynamics in the Western Hemisphere.

- **Articulate a counteroffer for fence-sitters.** The United States, for its part, should continue to emphasize and draw attention to Russian war crimes and abuses in Ukraine. But messaging will not be enough on its own, and a more fulsome, resource-backed effort is sorely needed.

While Russia and Iran lack the economic dynamism of China, they remain capable of applying significant pressure to regional governments unprepared for it. The case of **Ecuador's about-face** on delivering arms to Ukraine following Russian sanctions on its banana industry is particularly illustrative. Russia also remains a key supplier of fertilizer to Brazil's all-important agricultural sector. The United States, in partnership with the European Union, should look to map potential vectors for Russian and Iranian economic pressure and seek to strengthen U.S. and EU cooperation to minimize these.

The United States should also seek to compete more effectively in the energy and minerals sectors. Like its engagement on the **African continent**, Russia has used targeted overtures in nuclear power and conventional fuel sales to expand its leverage even as a web of international sanctions encircles Moscow. **Bolivia** and **Brazil**, for instance, have both cooperated with Russia on nuclear power projects in the past two years. Meeting regional demand for power and clean energy investment will be crucial to weakening this hold, and in doing so will clearly demonstrate that the United States and its allies can deliver on the economic front for their partners in LAC.

Because the perception of the United States can sometimes be negative across the continent, Washington could also benefit from cooperating with other non-LAC like-minded partners that do not face similar levels of public wariness. Chief among them is the European Union, which is showing **increasing interest** in the region, as displayed during the **Spanish presidency** of the EU Council in the second half of 2023 (despite the irritant of **stalled free-trade agreement negotiations** between the European Union and Mercosur—the trade bloc consisting of Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay). This could also be the case with some of the closest U.S. Indo-Pacific partners who have a history or expressed interest in closer ties with the continent, such as **Australia, Japan, and South Korea**. Although all these countries are trade competitors, they share similar strategic objectives, and while their focus has been on the threats and challenges posed by China, Iran, and Russia in Eurasia, they should consider LAC a full-fledged—not marginal—theater of strategic competition. They should harness their respective competitive advantages to build offers catering to LAC's most urgent needs in terms of infrastructure, energy, security, and defense, as well as in the informational space. ■

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