



# America's Newest Southern Neighbor?

*An Analysis of Russian Influence in Latin America*



American Security Project



Perspective

Kiersten Harris

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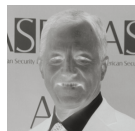
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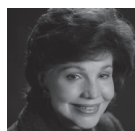
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Lee Cullum, at one time a commentator on the PBS NewsHour and "All Things Considered" on NPR, currently contributes to the Dallas Morning News and hosts "CEO."



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Nicholas Clark is the former CEO and Executive Director of Alexium International. He is also co-founder and Managing Partner at Viaticus Capital.



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Admiral Fallon has led U.S. and Allied forces and played a leadership role in military and diplomatic matters at the highest levels of the U.S. government.



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Raj Fernando is CEO and founder of Chopper Trading, a technology based trading firm headquartered in Chicago.



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Chuck Hagel served as the 24th U.S. Secretary of Defense and served two terms in the United States Senate (1997-2009). Hagel was a senior member of the Senate Foreign Relations; Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs; and Intelligence Committees.



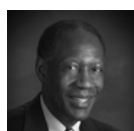
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Lieutenant General Kennedy was the first woman to achieve the rank of three-star general in the United States Army.



### **The Honorable John F. Kerry**

John Kerry is a distinguished fellow for global affairs at Yale University. In 2013, Kerry was sworn in as the 68th secretary of state of the United States. Kerry served for more than twenty-five years as a U.S. senator from Massachusetts.



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General Lyles retired from the United States Air Force after a distinguished 35 year career. He is presently Chairman of USAA, a member of the Defense Science Board, and a member of the President's Intelligence Advisory Board.



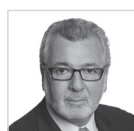
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Lieutenant General Norman R. Seip, USAF (Ret) served in the Air Force for 35 years. His last assignment was Commander of 12th Air Force.



### **David Wade**

David Wade is a consultant helping global corporations and organizations with strategic advice, public affairs and thought leadership, crisis communications, political intelligence gathering, and federal and legislative strategy.



# U.S.-Russia Relationship

## In this Report:

This report examines how and why Russia is involved in Latin America and the ways that its involvement affects US regional interests. It argues that Russia's primary intent is to amplify its presence in the US' "near abroad" and subsequently turn the region against the United States. It asserts that Russia's collaboration with and promotion of anti-US sentiment among key Latin American actors, its isolation of pro-US governments in the region, and its political empowerment and armament of anti-US governments are threatening US national security. Therefore, the US should consider strategies that can counter Russian actions in Latin America.

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## IN BRIEF

- Russia is expanding its political, military, and economic influence in Latin America in order to amplify its presence in the US' "near abroad" and subsequently turn the region against the United States.
- Russian influence in Latin America is a threat to US strategic interests.
- Russia is collaborating with and promoting anti-US sentiment among key Latin American actors in order to improve international opinion of Russia and avoid persecution for its wrongdoings.
- Russia is isolating pro-US governments in Latin America, threatening the ability of the US to maintain solid relationships in the region.
- Russia is politically empowering and arming anti-US governments in Latin America in order to exert control over the attention and resources of the US.
- The US should consider strategies that can counter Russian actions in Latin America, while being mindful of the potential future consequences of those actions.

## About the Author

*Kiersten Harris is an Adjunct Junior Fellow at the American Security Project. She is currently an undergraduate at the University of Delaware majoring in International Relations and Three Languages, with a minor in Latin American and Iberian Studies. She has concentrations in Diplomacy and Europe and is learning Spanish, Russian, and Portuguese. In addition to her studies at the University of Delaware, Kiersten studied at Middlebury College's Russian Summer Language Program for ten weeks last summer and has participated in study abroad programs in Madrid, Spain and Buenos Aires, Argentina.*

## Introduction

Since the height of the Cold War, Russia has expressed interest in Latin America. However, by the end of the 1980s, Soviet efforts to influence the region experienced a sharp decline. Involvement in Latin America required financial expenditures that Russia could not afford amidst the slew of economic problems that sprang up following the collapse of the Soviet Union; so, for the next decade, Russia had very minimal influence in the region. This began to change in the late 1990s, when Russia sought to rekindle old relationships and forge new friendships in Latin America, especially with countries that had troubled relations with the United States.<sup>1</sup>

Since the increase in diplomatic visits that occurred at the tail end of the 1990s, Russia has significantly increased its influence in Latin America. Russia has forged relations with almost every country in the region, and even with some countries in the Caribbean. It has used several strategies to capture the interest of Latin American societies and leaders, including settling government debts, providing military vehicles and equipment, and supporting energy-generation projects in the region. Russia also promotes the Orthodox Church's traditional values in order to capture the interest of the many conservative sectors of Latin American societies.<sup>2</sup>

There are several reasons for the growth of Russian interest in Latin America, but the primary intent is to amplify Russia's presence in the US' "near abroad" and subsequently turn the region against the United States. By expanding its political, military, and economic footprint in Latin America, Russia is unequivocally challenging the US.<sup>3</sup> This paper explains how and why Russia is interested in Latin America and argues that Russian influence in the region is threatening US national security in three ways: firstly, by strategically collaborating with and promoting anti-US rhetoric among key actors in the region that partner with the US on security, trade, and other initiatives; secondly, by isolating ardently pro-US governments in the region such as Honduras and Colombia; and finally, by politically empowering and arming anti-US governments such as Argentina and the ALBA states.<sup>4</sup>



Vladimir Putin and Brazilian President Michel Temer meet at the Kremlin in 2017. Kremlin photo.

## Assessing Russian Interest in Latin America

Since rekindling its relationship with Latin America in the late 1990s, Russia has become at least somewhat involved in almost every South American country, in addition to Cuba, Mexico, and several other countries in Central America. Russia mainly focuses its efforts on political, military, and economic expansion within the region.

Recently, Russia has tried to increase its political influence in Latin America. Its primary motivations seem to be to solidify its image as a world power and to establish institutions that contribute to its goal of creating a multipolar world.<sup>5</sup> One way that Russia has been forging political and diplomatic relationships in the region is by signing multiple bilateral agreements with key Latin American countries. For example, in 2017, Putin and Brazilian President Michel Temer signed a joint statement to promote bilateral strategic dialogue on different foreign policy and international agenda issues. This established Russia's and Brazil's commitment to fighting corruption and terrorism on a global scale, combatting climate change, and promoting cooperation between the two countries on issues such as oil and natural gas exploration.<sup>6</sup>

Moscow's interest in expanding its military influence within Latin America seems to stem from its belief that this will translate into physical access for Russian military and security activities in the US' backyard. Russia is looking for every opportunity for power projection in order to intimidate and pressure the US. Access to Latin American ports and airfields would allow Russia to deploy its military assets to the region, giving it ample opportunity to extend its reach while simultaneously sending a powerful message to the US.<sup>7</sup> Incidents such as Moscow sending war planes and navy ships to the Western Hemisphere following the Russian-Georgian war

in 2008, and increasing military cooperation with Nicaragua amidst the deterioration of the situation in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea show that Russia has already begun employing this strategy.<sup>8</sup>



Gazprom has been involved in Venezuela since 2005. Image credit: Thawt Hawthje / Flickr / Creative Commons.

In terms of economic expansion, Russia is primarily aiming to boost its economy by expanding its trade and investment relationships in Latin America. At this time, economic gains are crucial for Russia, which is suffering from an overall economic decline, partly due to US and European sanctions. Since 2006, total trade between Russia and the Latin American and Caribbean region has increased by 44 percent, about 50 percent of which is represented by Brazil and Mexico. During this period, the most significant investments have been made in the energy sector. Russia has negotiated oil and gas deals and funded a number of energy facilities in several Latin American countries, including Bolivia, Mexico, and Venezuela.<sup>9</sup>

## Strategic Collaboration & Promotion of Anti-US Rhetoric

Russia's strategic collaboration with key actors in Latin America that work with the US on security, trade, and other initiatives is a significant threat to US strategic interests. By collaborating with them on security and commercial endeavors, Russia gives actors such as Brazil and Peru options other than the US or EU in terms of partners for security, trade, and development.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, Latin American engagement by Russia often undermines US-led multilateral organizations in the region, such as the Inter-American system for the protection of human rights and the Organization of American States (OAS). Russia, while not explicitly promoting any one sub-regional organization, has been more receptive to engaging with organizations that exclude the US, such as UNASUR, CELAC, and ALBA.<sup>11</sup>

Russia's collaboration with Latin American actors makes it difficult for the US to successfully take action against the Kremlin. For example, in 2014, Russia was able to defy US and European sanctions over its actions in Ukraine by using Latin America as a food supplier.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, by forming alliances within the ALBA countries, Russia is able to protect itself from human rights condemnations due to the voting patterns within the UN Human Rights Council.<sup>13</sup> Within the ALBA countries, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela regularly oppose the condemnation of human rights violations in states with a difficult human rights record. The rest of the ALBA members usually tend to abstain.<sup>14</sup>



To continue, Russia has been suspected of meddling in Latin American elections, including the recent presidential election in Mexico, in order to further destabilize and promote anti-US sentiment throughout the region. Russia strongly supported presidential candidate Andres Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), a leftist candidate who appeals to Mexican nationalism and anti-Trump sentiment. In September 2016, RT en Español started broadcasting “La Batalla por Mexico,” a weekly video blog whose purpose seemed to be to frame the US as an existential threat to Mexico and to convince Mexican voters to support AMLO.<sup>15</sup> RT—one of Russia’s most prominent media sources—is specifically targeting Latin America by catering topics focused on its Latin American audience with its edition of RT en Español.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, the Mexican National Electoral Institute (INE) created an online portal that enabled Mexican citizens to vote from abroad. However, 65 percent of visits to the portal came from St. Petersburg, the location of the Internet Research Agency.<sup>17</sup> During the presidential election, almost 100,000 votes were cast from this portal.<sup>18</sup> With AMLO winning the Mexican election on July 1<sup>st</sup>, concerns are being raised about potential fraud in the voting process.<sup>19</sup>



Andres Manuel López Obrador. Image credit: Eneas de Troya / Flickr / Creative Commons.



RT’s Spanish language broadcasting.

Ukraine.<sup>21</sup> It also means that Russia has observer status at the Organization of American States and working contacts with several other regional blocks and organizations.<sup>22</sup>

Russia’s attempts to collaborate with and promote anti-US rhetoric among key Latin American actors not only damages international opinion of the US, but encourages Latin American countries to align themselves with Russia instead of the US in foreign policy.<sup>23</sup> Rio Group’s denouncement of NATO’s bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999, Chile and Mexico’s vote against the US resolution for military action in Iraq in 2003, and Bolivia, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela’s vote against a resolution condemning Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 all demonstrate Latin America’s growing tendency to act against the strategic interests of the US in foreign policy.<sup>24</sup>

Lastly, the Kremlin is currently promoting RT Spanish language broadcasting and internet expansion into Latin America in an effort to improve international opinion of Russia and gain the admiration and trust of key actors within the region. This allows the Russian media to portray the country as a rising world power that is capable of establishing its presence anywhere in the world, including in the US’ backyard.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, Russia’s connections within the region meant that none of the Latin American countries supported the US and Europe’s call to isolate Moscow in response to Putin’s actions in

## Isolation

The isolation of ardently pro-US governments in Latin America is another area of great concern to US national security. While most pro-US governments in the region, such as Colombia and Honduras, are not directly engaged with Russia, they are feeling increasingly threatened by Russian engagement in the surrounding states.<sup>25</sup> Russia's close ties to Venezuela, Ecuador, and Cuba as well as its historic ties to anti-government groups such as the FARC and the ELN give the Colombian government a sense of being encircled by hostile forces.<sup>26</sup> Russia heavily supported presidential candidate Rodrigo Londoño, the former leader of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), in the recent Colombian presidential election. In May 2017, RT en Español even hosted Londoño in an exclusive interview titled "Now FARC's Only Plan is Peace in Colombia."<sup>27</sup> This endorsement is suspicious because the FARC and Russia once had deep criminal ties. In 2014, it was discovered that the FARC and the National Liberation Army (ELN) were sending corrupt Russian military officers and criminal networks huge shipments of cocaine in exchange for sophisticated weaponry. Londoño himself studied at Patrice Lumumba University in Moscow and has the war alias "Timochenko," which alludes to the former Marshal of the Soviet Union and Red Army commander Semyonov Timoshenko. Luckily, Londoño did not win the election, despite suspected Russian meddling.<sup>28</sup> Russia's support of Londoño is particularly concerning for Colombia, which was finally able to negotiate a peace agreement with the FARC in 2016.<sup>29</sup> The Kremlin's interest in seeing a FARC leader in power confirms its desire to drive out Colombia's generally pro-US government.



**Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos worked on gathering support from Europe for Colombia's peace negotiations with the FARC. European Parliament photo.**

Honduras experiences very similar fears of encirclement due to Russia's strong political, military, and economic ties with Nicaragua and Cuba and the prospect of renewed engagement in El Salvador.<sup>30</sup> During his time as a guerilla leader in the Salvadoran Civil War, El Salvadorian President Salvador Sanchez Ceren worked closely with Russia to expand political, economic, and security cooperation between the two countries.<sup>31</sup> It is very likely that Ceren would further expand relations with Russia if the US either ends certain immigration programs that affect El Salvador,<sup>32</sup> or fails to fully fund regional aid programs.<sup>33</sup> For Honduras, this could lead to even further regional isolation and weaken its relationship with the US. A strained US-Honduras relationship could decrease the amount of support Honduras receives from US-sponsored regional aid programs, thereby weakening its economy and leaving it even more susceptible to Russian encirclement.

Russia's isolation of pro-US governments in Latin America threatens the ability of the US to maintain solid relationships with these countries. The greater the feeling of hostile encirclement among these governments, the more security guarantees they seek from the US.<sup>34</sup> Additionally, isolation sets these governments apart from their pro-Russia and/or anti-US neighbors, putting their national securities at risk.

## Political Empowerment & Armament

Russia's political empowerment and armament of anti-US governments such as Argentina and the ALBA states is also a risk to US national security. Several anti-US regimes such as Argentina and the ALBA states are enabled by loans from Russia as well as Russian projects in the arms and energy sectors.<sup>35</sup>

On the military side, Russia has sold an array of military equipment to Nicaragua, including BMP-3 and BTR-80 armored vehicles, Mirazh patrol craft, Molina missile boats, and T-72 tanks.<sup>36</sup> Russia has also sold military vehicles, such as Su-24 interceptor aircraft, to Argentina.<sup>37</sup> Additionally, Peru has continued to buy arms from Russia, even after the end of the regimes of Juan Velasco Alvarado and Alberto Fujimori, in order to support operations against terrorists and criminal groups in remote mountainous parts of the country's interior.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, during Hugo Chavez's regime, Venezuela became a major purchaser of Russian military hardware, such as fighter jets.<sup>39</sup> Lastly, the Russian manufacturer Kamov has sold Mexico ANSAT helicopters, while the Bolivian military has expressed interest in Russian transport helicopters and Yak-130 interceptors.<sup>40</sup>

On the energy side, the Kremlin has been heavily involved in Cuba, with the Russian and Cuban governments signing an agreement continuing Russian oil donations and expanding other petroleum sector cooperation in Cuba. Russia has also discussed modernizing the Cienfuegos oil refinery, and four power generation facilities have been built by Russian company Interra.<sup>41</sup> In addition, former President of Argentina Cristina Kirchner and Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a strategic partnership that included oil and gas deals, plans for Russian funding of a hydropower facility, and an agreement for Russia to help build an Argentinian nuclear power plant in 2015.<sup>42</sup> Following the end of Kirchner's presidency, new President Mauricio Macri stated, "There are Russian companies like Rosatom and Gazprom that want to participate in the energy sector of Argentina, and we are opening doors for them."<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, it is estimated that Rosneft, the Russian state oil company, resells 225,000 barrels of Venezuelan oil a day, with Venezuela often repaying Russia for its loans in oil.<sup>44</sup> Lastly, Gazprom continues to be an important player in the Bolivian petroleum sector, and Bolivia has contracted with Rosatom to build a nuclear research reactor in El Alto.<sup>45</sup>



An ANSAT helicopter. Image Credit: Pavel Vanka / Flickr / Creative Commons.

This political and economic support provides these countries with the means to fund anti-Western projects, making these governments more dangerous to their neighbors. The viability of these governments paired with their willingness to host Russian military activities gives Russia the opportunity to threaten the US in its own backyard. For instance, if Russia wanted to divert US attention and resources away from its activities in other parts of the world, it could resupply its nuclear-capable military assets in Cuba or cause a Nicaraguan incursion against Costa Rica.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, Russia is not only arming Latin America, but strategically using its military assets in Latin America to exert influence over the attention and resources of the US.



# Conclusion

Russian engagement in Latin America is a serious threat to the strategic interests of the United States. Engagement gives Russia the opportunity to exert significant influence in the US's near abroad, improve its international reputation, grow in power, and turn our neighbors against us. Russia's main goal is to agitate and weaken the US and it is definitely succeeding. Russia continues to increase its political, military, and economic influence in the region via collaboration with and promotion of anti-US rhetoric among key Latin American actors and US partners, the isolation of pro-US governments, and the empowerment of anti-US governments.

It is important that the US considers the potential for the situation in Latin America to morph into a major national security threat, but the relationships we have with these countries should run deeper. While individual challenges such as drugs, crime, and illegal immigration continue to strain resources, they should not define the entirety of the US approach to the region.<sup>47</sup> In the interest of countering Soviet and communist threats during the Cold War, the US undertook action which has contributed to the problems we see in the region today. In order to further its strategic interest and protect its national security, the US needs to consider strategies that can counter Russian actions in Latin America, while lending strong considerations to the long-term security ramifications of these actions.

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The American Security Project (ASP) is a nonpartisan organization created to educate the American public and the world about the changing nature of national security in the 21st Century.

Gone are the days when a nation's security could be measured by bombers and battleships. Security in this new era requires harnessing all of America's strengths: the force of our diplomacy; the might of our military; the vigor and competitiveness of our economy; and the power of our ideals.

We believe that America must lead in the pursuit of our common goals and shared security. We must confront international challenges with our partners and with all the tools at our disposal and address emerging problems before they become security crises. And to do this we must forge a bipartisan consensus here at home.

ASP brings together prominent American business leaders, former members of Congress, retired military flag officers, and prominent former government officials. ASP conducts research on a broad range of issues and engages and empowers the American public by taking its findings directly to them via events, traditional & new media, meetings, and publications.

We live in a time when the threats to our security are as complex and diverse as terrorism, nuclear proliferation, climate change, energy challenges, and our economic wellbeing. Partisan bickering and age old solutions simply won't solve our problems. America – and the world - needs an honest dialogue about security that is as robust as it is realistic.

ASP exists to promote that dialogue, to forge that consensus, and to spur constructive action so that America meets the challenges to its security while seizing the opportunities that abound.



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