

The Kremlin's Intensified Military and Information Expansion in Latin América

Treadstone 71



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Analytic Brief

Russia conducts a sustained, hybrid warfare campaign in Latin América, combining disinformation, economic dependencies, covert military support, and strategic infrastructure agreements to challenge U.S. influence and entrench a multipolar global order. The team assesses with high confidence that Russia's presence in Latin América reflects a deliberate, long-term plan to project asymmetric influence, destabilize democratic institutions, and use low-cost, high-impact engagements to secure geopolitical advantages in the Western Hemisphere.

The Russian Federation, acting through state institutions including the Ministry of Defense, Rosoboronexport, Rosneft, Rosatom, RT, and Sputnik, with support from proxy actors such as private military companies and information operatives, targets countries across Latin América—especially Venezuela, Nicaragua, Bolivia, Brazil, Mexico, and Argentina.

The Kremlin employs a hybrid warfare model that integrates hard power (arms production, radar installations, GLONASS infrastructure, and covert military personnel) with soft power (state media manipulation, intellectual elite co-optation, and asymmetric trade dependencies). Key vectors include social media-led information operations, local military industrial facilities, economic investment in extractives and agriculture, and ideological alignment with left-leaning or anti-U.S. governments.

Russia's approach undermines U.S. strategic primacy in its traditional sphere of influence. The operations fuel democratic erosion through elite capture, amplify societal divisions using disinformation, and utilize economic choke points, such as fertilizer and energy exports, to secure political compliance. These engagements, although less visible than China's Belt and Road Initiative, erode regional trust in democratic norms and generate dependencies that are difficult to unwind.

The 2023 Foreign Policy Concept codified Latin América as a priority theater following Russia's declining influence in Europe, Africa, and parts of Asia. Sanctions from the Ukraine invasion catalyzed a pivot toward “non-aligned” regions offering easier access and fewer barriers. Rising U.S.-China tensions, growing anti-American sentiment, and weakened Western unity in the region present Moscow with a rare opportunity to gain leverage with minimal expenditure and maximum plausible deniability.

Russian media outpaces U.S. counterparts in Spanish-language social media engagement. Military-industrial presence now includes a functioning Kalashnikov ammunition plant in Venezuela and GLONASS-linked infrastructure in Nicaragua. Fertilizer exports to Brazil and Mexico have a direct influence on foreign policy stances. In protests across Colombia and

Chile, Russian narratives displaced Western framing. Public opinion in Mexico and Brazil has shifted incrementally toward Putin. Long-term investments in lithium, nuclear infrastructure, and drone cooperation deepen Russia's embeddedness.

Russia will intensify its hybrid footprint across Latin America over the next five years by embedding itself more deeply in sectors critical to sovereign autonomy, including energy, food production, defense industrialization, and higher education. Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Bolivia will serve as operational hubs for kinetic and informational vectors, while Brazil and Mexico will be influenced through economic pressure and media saturation. A strategic convergence with Iran and China, particularly through the expansion of BRICS, will enhance Moscow's credibility and shield its operations from diplomatic reprisals. The Western Hemisphere's geopolitical architecture will grow more fragmented, with "neutral" states providing cover for Moscow's strategic gains. Without coordinated counteraction, Russia's hybrid model will erode democratic resilience and reshape the balance of hemispheric power.

Russia's social media dominance shapes regional perception in favor of Moscow's narratives.

Russian state outlets command significant influence across Latin América, especially RT en Español with 18 million Facebook followers and 4.5 billion YouTube views. The outlet surpasses CNN en Español, Univision, and Telemundo in online reach. RT's Actualidad platform averages 21.5 million monthly visits, with Mexico, Argentina, and Venezuela accounting for over 40% of the traffic. Russian media platforms embed pro-Kremlin content with local staff, creating organic-seeming narratives that conceal the origins of propaganda. Russia prioritizes social media for influence due to its viral nature, limited editorial gatekeeping, and ability to circumvent formal regulatory mechanisms. Social media manipulation represents Moscow's most cost-effective vector for ideological influence and the erosion of Western credibility across Latin América.

Russia shifts from direct arms sales to local production and embedded military partnerships.

Russia abandoned its historical reliance on arms exports to Latin América following sanctions and repayment failures, shifting instead toward in-region manufacturing. In Venezuela, Russia established a Kalashnikov ammunition plant projected to produce 70 million rounds annually. Russian advisors and radar installations support Venezuelan intelligence operations. Nicaragua hosts 250 Russian military personnel, GLONASS stations, and cyber warfare training centers. Private Military Companies operate as non-attributable instruments of influence. The structural embedding of Russian defense production fosters long-term military-technical reliance, allowing Moscow to circumvent

arms embargoes while maintaining plausible deniability. This model deepens regional dependency on Russian support while minimizing visible political risk.

Economic ties in fertilizers, energy, and mining produce asymmetric dependencies. Brazil and Mexico rely on Russia for over 20% of their fertilizer imports, prompting Brazil to lobby against sanctions on Russian fertilizers. Russia's oil exports to Latin America surged after the Ukraine invasion, generating over \$13.5 billion in revenue. Russian companies, including Rosatom and Uranium One, have entered into long-term contracts for nuclear and lithium extraction in Bolivia, raising concerns about questionable transparency. These projects create durable economic leverage that exceeds traditional trade metrics. Russia's strategy exploits essential resource gaps in targeted countries to produce disproportionate influence, effectively converting commercial supply chains into political tools, enabling Moscow to extract diplomatic neutrality or support on geopolitical issues in exchange for access to fertilizers, diesel, or critical minerals.

Latin América, once a primary theater for geopolitical competition during the Cold War, experienced a period of diminished strategic focus from major global powers following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The dynamic has shifted, however, as Russia, China, and other international actors intensify efforts to expand their influence across the region. Russia's 2023 Foreign Policy Concept explicitly identifies Latin América and the Caribbean (LAC) as a crucial area for constructing a new, multipolar world order. The strategic objective involves directly countering the United States' presence in its traditional sphere of influence and ensuring the geopolitical neutrality of LAC nations. The region's abundant natural resources and its increasing openness to diversified international relations further amplify its strategic appeal to external powers.

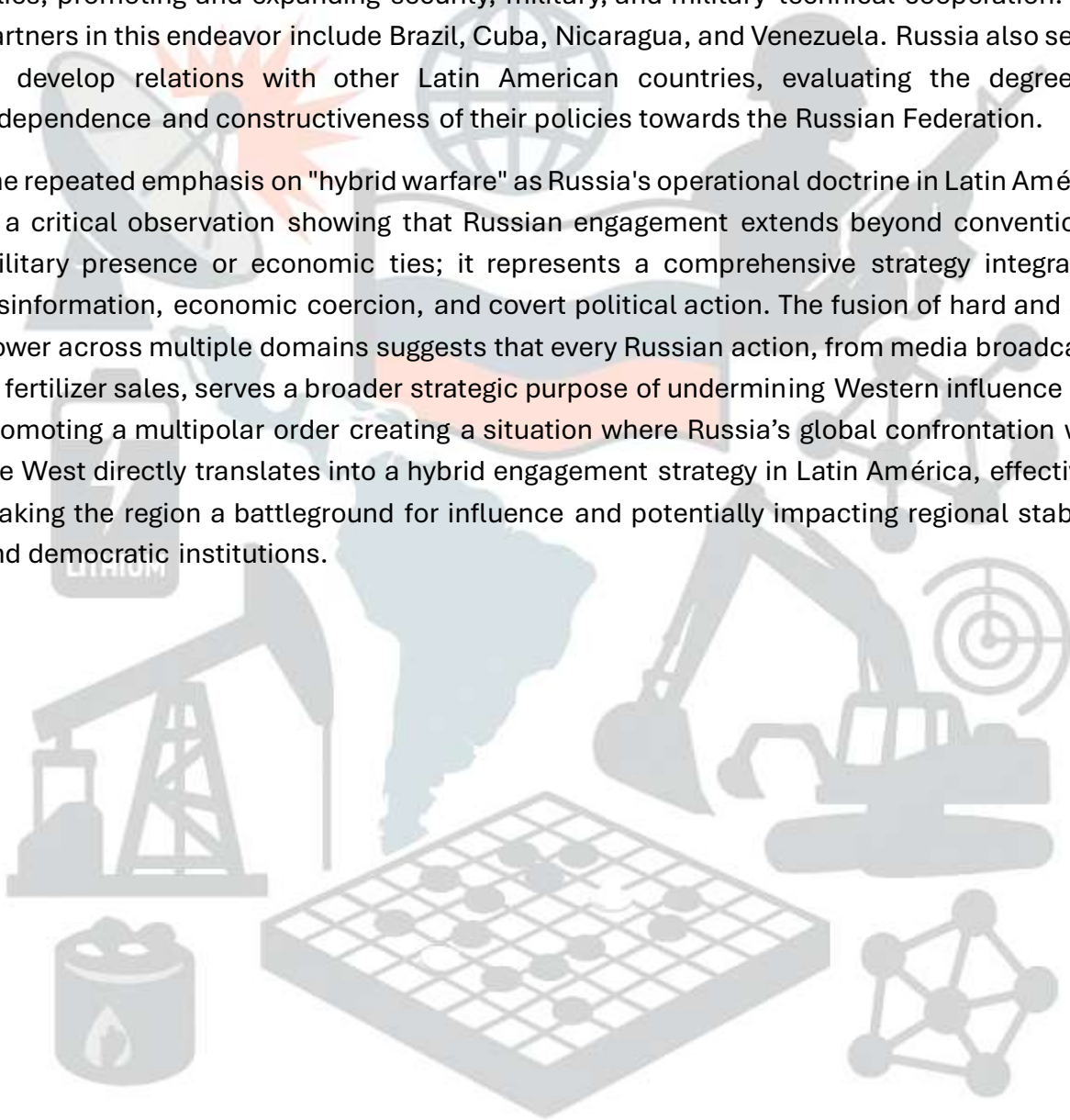
Analysis

The evolving geopolitical landscape indicates a deliberate strategic pivot by Russia. The Kremlin aims to exploit a perceived power vacuum or reduced Western engagement, positioning Latin América not as an end in itself, but as a means to achieve broader global strategic objectives, including fostering military-technical cooperation and expanding trade relations. The underlying trend reveals a re-globalization of great power competition, with Latin América emerging as a crucial theater for projecting influence and undermining established hegemonies.

Russia's strategic interests in Latin América center on establishing a persistent, multisector presence in the Western Hemisphere, serving as a counterweight to United States and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) influence in former Soviet Union states and bordering

regions. The engagement is characterized by the aggressive implementation of "hybrid warfare," a doctrine that fuses hard and soft power across multiple domains. The approach recognizes a continuous state of confrontation with the West and undergirds the rationalization and operationalization of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Russia aims to support Latin American countries perceived to be under pressure from the United States and its allies, promoting and expanding security, military, and military-technical cooperation. Key partners in this endeavor include Brazil, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela. Russia also seeks to develop relations with other Latin American countries, evaluating the degree of independence and constructiveness of their policies towards the Russian Federation.

The repeated emphasis on "hybrid warfare" as Russia's operational doctrine in Latin América is a critical observation showing that Russian engagement extends beyond conventional military presence or economic ties; it represents a comprehensive strategy integrating disinformation, economic coercion, and covert political action. The fusion of hard and soft power across multiple domains suggests that every Russian action, from media broadcasts to fertilizer sales, serves a broader strategic purpose of undermining Western influence and promoting a multipolar order creating a situation where Russia's global confrontation with the West directly translates into a hybrid engagement strategy in Latin América, effectively making the region a battleground for influence and potentially impacting regional stability and democratic institutions.



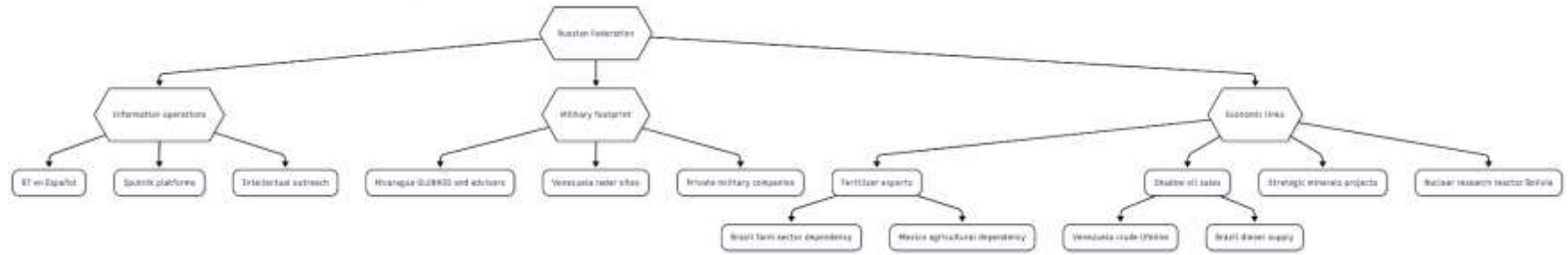


Figure 1: The hybrid influence architecture appears first and illustrates the entire campaign.



Russia's Information Expansion- Media Strategies and Influence

Sputnik Brasil and RT- Programming, Audiences, and Thematic Narratives

Russia's state-funded media outlets, RT (formerly Russia Today) and Sputnik, play a central role in the Kremlin's information warfare strategy in Latin América. These platforms actively disseminate Kremlin-approved narratives, discredit Western values, and promote anti-American rhetoric. Content themes frequently portray Russia's actions, such as the war against Ukraine, as justified, advocating for unity with Russia against perceived neocolonialism.

RT en Español demonstrates substantial reach, particularly on social media platforms. Its Facebook page boasts 18 million followers, surpassing major U.S.-based Spanish-language news outlets, including CNN en Español (13.6 million), Univision Noticias (9.6 million), and Noticias Telemundo (7.8 million). The RT en Español YouTube channel has nearly 6 million subscribers and approximately 4.5 billion views across over 80,000 videos. Actualidad RT, the primary Spanish-language news site, received an average of 21.5 million total visits per month in the two months prior to February 2025. Argentina, Venezuela, and Mexico collectively account for 42% of the site's traffic, reflecting the closer ties or declared neutrality of these countries' leaders with Moscow. Sputnik's Twitter/X follower count represents 14% of the total for Russian and Chinese state media, while RT accounts for 67%. Despite this strong social media presence, website and mobile application data from the quarter preceding the Ukraine invasion indicate that neither RT nor Sputnik reached more than 5% of the digital populations in any of the 21 surveyed countries on a monthly basis. RT's average website/app reach was 1.05%, and Sputnik's was 0.79%. The reach was notably higher among male internet users and older age groups.

The disparity between modest website and app engagement and an exceptionally high social media following for RT en Español reveals a deliberate strategy showing that the Kremlin's information strategy prioritizes social media platforms as the most effective channels for mass dissemination and engagement in Latin América. The "information laundering" process, where pro-Kremlin content is localized by curated Latin American staff to appear organic, further enhances this. Traditional metrics of media reach, such as website visits, may significantly underestimate the true penetration and influence of Russian narratives, as social media provides a more direct, viral, and less scrutinizable pathway to audiences, particularly those who may not actively seek out state-sponsored news sites.

Expanding its media footprint, Sputnik Brazil will launch 24/7 radio broadcasts in Portuguese for Rio de Janeiro, targeting 13.5 million residents, starting from August 1, 2025. The initiative holds symbolic significance given Brazil's BRICS chairmanship. Similarly, RT en Español commenced over-the-air broadcasts in Chile on June 16, 2025, via Telecanal, a move that immediately generated controversy. Canal 13, a Chilean television channel, formally accused Telecanal of ceding its signal without authorization or editorial participation. Russian officials, however, defended this expansion, asserting that RT already enjoys popularity and maintains objectivity.

Russian news outlets, including RT, explicitly capitalize on anti-American sentiment and strategically focus on producing content that aims to increase tension between Latin American publics and the United States. This is a deliberate strategy to weaken the United States' influence by promoting narratives of neocolonialism and discrediting Western values. The success of this approach is evident in high engagement with provocative headlines and the alignment of content with the rhetoric of past leftist leaders, such as Hugo Chávez and Evo Morales demonstrating Russia's opportunistic exploitation of existing political and historical grievances to foster an environment receptive to its narratives, thereby contributing to the destabilization of democratic institutions and challenging Western alliances in the region.

Cyber Warfare and Digital Influence

Another underdeveloped area in prior assessments is Russia's expansive campaign of cyber warfare and digital influence across Latin America. The Kremlin has invested heavily in Spanish-language media and online operations to shape narratives and sow discord, treating the information domain as a frontline in its effort to challenge Western interests. One major vector is state-sponsored media: RT en Español and Sputnik Mundo broadcast Kremlin-friendly content that resonates with audiences skeptical of U.S. policies. During the lead-up to critical elections (such as Mexico and Colombia in 2018), RT's coverage consistently amplified anti-American sentiments and boosted candidates seen as sympathetic to Moscow. In Mexico, for example, RT Español produced a weekly video blog, "La Batalla por México," that framed the United States as an existential threat and lionized the nationalist candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador, encouraging voters to rally behind his anti-U.S. rhetoric. This messaging strategy aligns with Russia's broader goal of weakening pro-U.S. factions and fostering leaders who might adopt more neutral or pro-Russian stances.

Beyond propaganda networks, Russia has very likely engaged in covert cyber operations targeting Latin American governments and institutions. U.S. security officials have warned that Moscow set its sights on breaching or manipulating electoral systems in the region.

Notably, Mexico's National Electoral Institute reported suspicious anomalies during its 2018 election: an unusual surge of web traffic from St. Petersburg (home of Russia's Internet Research Agency) accounted for over half of all foreign visits to Mexico's voter registration portal gmfus.org. Such activity raised fears that Russian hackers were probing the system for weaknesses or attempting to compromise online voting by expatriates. In Colombia, intelligence authorities similarly suspect that Russian operatives mounted disinformation campaigns and cyberattacks around the 2018 elections, using trolls and fake social media accounts to inflame divisions (Koven, 2019). While definitive attribution is challenging, Colombian defense officials even alleged that Russia conducted these operations remotely via Venezuela as a staging ground (Alsema, 2018). These incidents underscore the new front of cyber aggression: rather than traditional espionage alone, Russia mixes hacking with psychological warfare to disrupt Latin American democracies from within.

Disinformation on social media is another prong of Russia's digital offensive. Coordinated networks of bots and inauthentic accounts have been detected amplifying pro-Russian or anti-U.S. narratives in Spanish online spaces. During Colombia's 2022 presidential race, observers noted a surge of Twitter bots promoting the leftist candidate Gustavo Petro, echoing Kremlin talking points that aligned with Petro's anti-NATO and anti-neoliberal views (Rivero, 2023). Similar allegations have surfaced regarding Russian meddling in social unrest across the region – for instance, during Chile's 2019 protests and Catalonia's separatist crisis, investigators found evidence of social media agitation linked to Russia or its allies in Venezuela (Salvo & De Leon, 2018). It appears Russia does not necessarily aim to convince Latin Americans that Moscow is virtuous, but rather to deepen cynicism toward democratic institutions and U.S. influence. As one USIP report notes, these influence campaigns have “found fertile ground in Latin America,” exploiting historic grievances and echoing the narrative that Washington is a hypocritical hegemon while Russia presents a benign alternative (Farah & Ortiz, 2023). The impact is tangible: public opinion in many Latin countries has shifted toward ambivalence or even receptivity to Russia's view of global events, evidenced by the region's tepid response to the Ukraine invasion. No Latin American government joined sanctions against Moscow in 2022, and online discourse in countries like Mexico and Brazil revealed a significant echo of Russian narratives blaming NATO expansion or Western aggression for the conflict (Americas Quarterly, 2023).

In addition to disinformation, Russia's cyber toolkit likely includes direct network intrusions and espionage. Cybersecurity analysts have identified Russian-linked hacker groups targeting Latin American companies and ministries, seeking sensitive data and footholds in critical infrastructure (OAS, 2020). Moreover, Moscow has been exporting its electronic surveillance systems to friendly regimes in the region. Venezuela and Nicaragua now employ

advanced Russian-made monitoring technology that can be used to hack opposition communications or censor the internet (Farah & Richardson, 2022). By supplying these digital weapons, Russia not only earns revenue but also potentially gains backdoor access to Latin American telecommunications and government networks. The net effect of Russia's cyber and digital influence operations is an erosion of the Western hemisphere's information security. Democratic societies from the Rio Grande to Patagonia face a barrage of fake news, phishing attacks, and propaganda memes emanating from the Kremlin's playbook. Any comprehensive analysis of Russia's presence in Latin America must therefore grapple with this virtual battleground – a realm where Moscow's hackers and spin-doctors may prove as disruptive as its soldiers and spies.

Case Studies of Influence Effects and Local Sentiment

Russia actively influences intellectual elites in Latin América, using media outlets, educational institutions, and think tanks to shape public opinion and policy. The strategy, reminiscent of Soviet-era tactics, often blurs the lines between genuine intellectual diversity and the co-optation of elites. Examples include the portrayal of Russia's 2022 withdrawal from parts of Ukrainian territory as a "gesture of goodwill" or the justification of the invasion as a defense of the Russian population in Donbas. A Mexican textbook, authored by a graduate of Russia's Friendship University, asserts direct U.S. intervention in Ukraine in 2014 and attributes the conflict's escalation to U.S. and European Union weapon shipments, notably avoiding terms such as "war". The University Program for Studies on Democracy, Justice, and Society (PUEDJS) at UNAM witnessed increased Russian influence following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, with its program head echoing Moscow's narrative regarding Western censorship of RT.

The evidence of "intellectual elite capture" and the integration of Kremlin narratives into academic materials demonstrates a sophisticated, long-term strategy. The transcends simple propaganda; it aims to embed pro-Kremlin perspectives within the very fabric of intellectual and educational discourse, cultivating a new generation of thought leaders receptive to Russian viewpoints. By influencing elites, Russia can indirectly shape broader public opinion and policy, creating a more enduring and self-sustaining influence mechanism. The outcome is a subtle but pervasive shift in national narratives that aligns with Moscow's strategic objectives.

During social protests in Colombia and Chile in late 2019, *Actualidad RT* ranked second in Colombia and ninth in Chile among top X (formerly Twitter) influencers. Russian media disseminated information emphasizing the negative role of security forces in managing protests, highlighting police unpopularity, and negatively portraying human rights. The narrative gained significant traction. In contrast, Western broadcasters, such as German

Deutsche Welle in Spanish, ranked significantly lower. Conversely, in countries with close ties to Russia, such as Nicaragua, coverage of social protests, including the deaths of 351 students during the 2018 demonstrations, remained minimal, illustrating a selective amplification or suppression of information aligned with Russian interests.

The case studies of Russian media involvement in social protests in Colombia and Chile highlight a critical dimension of Russia's information warfare- its ability to exploit existing societal tensions and amplify divisive narratives to destabilize target countries from within. By focusing on issues such as police unpopularity and human rights abuses, Russian media does not necessarily seek to promote Russia directly but rather to "repel [audiences] from the West" and erode trust in democratic institutions suggesting that Russia's information expansion is not solely about external geopolitical positioning but also about creating internal chaos that weakens pro-Western governments or shifts national alignments, thereby facilitating Russian strategic objectives.

Public opinion regarding Russia in Latin América remains complex and varied. A January 2025 Pew Research Center survey across 25 countries indicated a median of 19% favorable views of Russia and 79% unfavorable views globally. However, views of President Putin have become more favorable in a handful of countries since 2024, including Mexico (+11 points) and Brazil (+9 points), among those on the ideological right. Adults in Mexico, Indonesia, and Turkey express more favorable views of Russia than of the United States. Confidence in Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy is mixed, with majorities in the Latin American countries surveyed expressing little to no confidence. A 2022 global Gallup poll, conducted after Russia's full-scale invasion, showed Latin América trailing only Europe and North América in average disapproval of Russia.

Table 1 Estimated Audience Reach of Russian State Media in Latin América (Sputnik and RT)

Media Outlet	Platform	Reach/Engagement Metric	Details/Context	Source Snippets
RT en Español	Facebook	18 million followers	Outperforms CNN en Español (13.6M), Univision Noticias (9.6M), Noticias Telemundo (7.8M).	
RT en Español	YouTube	~6 million subscribers, ~4.5 billion views	Across over 80,000 videos.	
Actualidad RT	Website	21.5 million monthly average visits	Argentina, Venezuela, and Mexico account for 42% of traffic.	

Media Outlet	Platform	Reach/Engagement Metric	Details/Context	Source Snippets
RT (overall)	Twitter/X	67% of total Russian/Chinese state media followers	The highest share among Russian and Chinese state media.	
Sputnik (overall)	Twitter/X	14% of total Russian/Chinese state media followers	Significant share among Russian and Chinese state media.	
RT (website/app)	Digital Population	1.05% average monthly reach (pre-invasion)	Across 21 surveyed countries, the prevalence was higher among men and in older age groups.	
Sputnik (website/app)	Digital Population	0.79% average monthly reach (pre-invasion)	Across 21 surveyed countries, the prevalence was higher among men and in older age groups.	
Sputnik Brazil	Radio	24/7 broadcasts for 13.5 million residents	Launching August 1, 2025, in Rio de Janeiro.	
RT en Español	Television	Over-the-air broadcast via Telecanal	Launched on June 16, 2025, in Chile, the initiative sparked controversy.	

Russia's Military and Security Footprint

Military Presence and Bases

Russia's strategic interests in Latin América involve establishing a persistent, multisectoral presence in the Western Hemisphere to counterbalance U.S. and NATO influence. The objective is pursued through an aggressive implementation of hybrid warfare, which integrates hard and soft power capabilities. While Russia does not maintain overt military bases or official troops in Venezuela, Moscow has deployed military advisors and specialists to support the maintenance of Russian military equipment.

Nicaragua serves as a key hub for Russian activity, permitting a permanent presence of approximately 250 Russian military personnel. The nation also hosts a Russian GLONASS (Global'naya Navigatsionnaya Sputnikovaya Sistema) navigation system base, with Brazil also hosting several GLONASS ground stations. Nicaragua's infrastructure also includes a multi-million-dollar vaccination plant, which, despite its cost, produces no vaccines; a

police academy; a cyber warfare and training center; and a Russian Ministry of Interior building with diplomatic embassy status. In Venezuela, Russia operates six radar installations, which enhance surveillance capabilities over opposition movements and Colombian military activities.

The absence of traditional, overt military bases in Latin América does not signify an absence of a Russian military footprint. Instead, Russia employs a strategy of persistent presence through less conventional means, including military advisors, Private Military Company (PMC) activities, GLONASS stations, and radar installations, suggesting a deliberate choice for a less visible, more deniable, yet strategically impactful presence. The shadowy realm of non-state actors and dual-use infrastructure allows Russia to project power and gather intelligence while minimizing direct accountability and avoiding the political optics associated with overt military bases. The broader implication is a challenge to traditional notions of military presence and a heightened risk of instability due to covert influence operations.

The presence of Russian Private Military Companies (PMCs) introduces new complexities to regional stability, allowing for covert influence without official state involvement. The activities of these PMCs not only threaten U.S. national security interests but also impact the socio-political landscapes of several Latin American countries, potentially leading to increased instability and human rights concerns. Furthermore, reports indicate Russia is recruiting young women from Latin América, South Asia, and former Soviet Union countries to construct Shahed strike drones in the Alabuga Special Economic Zone in Tatarstan.

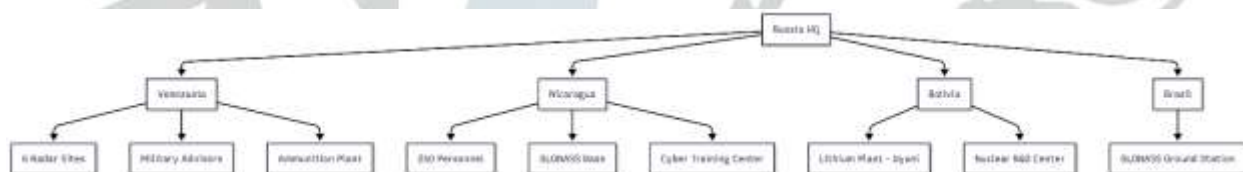


Figure 2 Depicts the geographical spread of Russian defense, intelligence, and paramilitary support installations.

Broadening the Analysis of Russia's Influence in Latin America

Engagement with Non-Governmental and Paramilitary Actors

One critical blind spot in earlier analyses is Russia's covert engagement with non-state armed groups and militias in Latin America. The Kremlin has a track record of using proxy fighters to extend its reach while maintaining plausible deniability, as seen in Eastern Ukraine and Syria. Evidence suggests that similar tactics are being employed in the Western Hemisphere. For instance, in early 2019, a contingent of Russian private military contractors – linked to the Wagner Group – secretly deployed to Venezuela to bolster President Nicolás

Maduro's security during a period of civil unrest. These mercenaries reportedly arrived via Cuba and were tasked with protecting Maduro from any internal coup attempts. Moscow officially denied its presence, yet up to 400 personnel were allegedly on the ground in Caracas, mirroring Russia's "hybrid warfare" approach: employing deniable paramilitary forces to prop up allied regimes without direct military intervention.

Beyond Venezuela, Russia has quietly cultivated ties with militant groups elsewhere in the region. During Colombia's long civil conflict, Russian actors covertly aided guerrillas such as the FARC and ELN. A 2014 joint investigation by U.S. and Colombian authorities revealed that corrupt Russian military officers and criminal networks had been exchanging weapons for cocaine with these insurgents. In earlier decades, the Soviet KGB and Cuban intelligence also supported Latin American leftist guerrilla movements, providing arms and training under the guise of ideological solidarity. The legacy of those Cold War networks endures. Even after the FARC signed a peace deal and entered politics, Russian media actively promoted ex-guerrilla figures. RT en Español gave sympathetic coverage to FARC leader Rodrigo Londoño (alias "Timochenko") during his 2018 presidential campaign, portraying him as a legitimate political voice for peace. Such outreach suggests the Kremlin's willingness to back non-traditional allies – whether armed rebels or their political successors – to gain influence in Colombia's internal affairs.

Russia's engagement with paramilitary actors extends to bolstering the security apparatus of allied authoritarian regimes. In Nicaragua, President Daniel Ortega's government has forged a particularly close security partnership with Moscow. Open-source reports indicate that approximately 250 Russian military advisers are stationed in Nicaragua, and Russia has established training facilities, including a mysterious "police training" academy that likely serves as an intelligence hub (Farah & Richardson, 2022). These arrangements blur the line between official military cooperation and shadowy support for regime enforcers. They afford Russia a foothold to project power regionally under the cover of assisting local security forces. The pattern is clear: from clandestine contractors in Venezuela to arms deals with guerrillas and embedded advisers in Central America, Russia is leveraging non-governmental fighters and proxies as force multipliers. This strategy enables the Kremlin to pursue its objectives – protecting friendly regimes, undermining U.S. partners, and securing access to resources – without the tripwire of overt military aggression. By empowering militias and clandestine actors aligned with pro-Russian interests, Moscow can destabilize adversaries and entrench its influence while officially denying involvement. Such "gray zone" activity demands closer scrutiny, as it represents a significant element of Russia's playbook in Latin America that traditional state-to-state analyses often overlook.

Military Equipment Sales and Acquisitions

Rosoboronexport, Russia's state arms exporter, has completed the first phase of a 7.62 mm Kalashnikov cartridge plant in Venezuela. The facility is projected to produce up to 70 million rounds annually, significantly strengthening Venezuela's defense capabilities by reducing reliance on imported ammunition. The second phase of the plant is anticipated to be commissioned soon, enabling full-cycle production, including the manufacturing of Kalashnikov rifles. The project faced considerable logistical and technical challenges due to international sanctions imposed on both Russia and Venezuela. Venezuela already stands as one of South America's largest operators of Russian-made small arms and military hardware.

Despite these developments, a significant trend indicates a decline in direct Russian arms sales to Latin America. Since 2017, no country in the region has purchased Russian arms, with only Nicaragua making a purchase that year, already below its previous purchasing volumes. Venezuela's last significant acquisitions occurred in 2014, and Mexico's in 2012. Overall, Latin America's military purchases decreased by 40% between the 2010-2014 and 2015-2019 periods. Russian sales to Latin American countries accounted for only 0.8% of total Russian military exports between 2015 and 2019.

The decline in direct Russian arms sales to Latin America since 2014 is a notable trend. This, however, is counterbalanced by the establishment of local production facilities, exemplified by the ammunition plant in Venezuela, which shows a strategic shift from a direct export model to one of licensed production and local manufacturing. International sanctions pressure and the inability of traditional customers, such as Venezuela, to repay substantial loans compel Russia to adapt its arms transfer model. The implication is a long-term embedding of Russian military technology and influence within the region, reducing reliance on direct shipments and fostering deeper, more self-sustaining military-industrial dependencies.

Historically, Venezuela has been Russia's largest customer in the Western Hemisphere, having purchased nearly \$20 billion in military equipment since the mid-2000s. These acquisitions included 24 Sukhoi Su-30MK2 fighters, the S-300 surface-to-air missile system, various combat and transport helicopters (Mi-35M and Mi-26 models), and 92 T-72M1 tanks. Nicaragua has received 90% of its military imports from Russia since 2007, including 50 T-72B1 tanks in 2016 and two Antonov An-26 military transport aircraft in 2017. While the Nicaraguan government justified these purchases as efforts to combat drug trafficking, the nature of some equipment raised concerns about military imbalance. Peru acquired 24 Mi-8MT and Mi-17 transport helicopters between 2014 and 2016. Mexico has conducted six arms deals with Russia since 2000, with the most recent one occurring in 2011 for three Mi-

17 military helicopters. Brazil engaged in several deals with Russia during the presidencies of Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff, but shifted to a more pro-United States stance under Jair Bolsonaro.

No information suggests Latin American countries are currently selling military equipment to Russia. The available data exclusively indicates Russia as the supplier in these transactions.

Table 2 Key Russian Military Equipment Sales to Latin American Countries (2000-Present)

Country	Key Equipment Acquired	Period of Major Acquisitions	Estimated Value (USD)	Notes	Source Snippets
Venezuela	24 Sukhoi Su-30MK2 fighters, S-300 SAM system, Mi-35M/Mi-26 helicopters, 92 T-72M1 tanks, 7.62mm ammunition plant (70M rounds/yr)	Mid-2000s to 2014 (sales); Ammunition plant Phase 1 completed July 2025	~\$20 billion (historical arms sales); Ammunition plant cost not specified	Largest customer, plant to enable local Kalashnikov production; faced sanctions challenges.	
Nicaragua	50 T-72B1 tanks, 2 Antonov An-26 transport aircraft	Since 2007 (90% of military imports)	~\$80 million (2016 tank deal)	Justified as anti-drug trafficking, raised concerns about military imbalance.	
Peru	24 Mi-8MT/Mi-17 transport helicopters	2014-2016	~\$0.5 billion	Diversified arms imports.	
Mexico	3 Mil Mi-17 Military helicopters	Since 2000 (6 deals), last in 2011	Not specified for individual deals	Russia is not a main supplier; there are limited deals.	
Brazil	Air defense systems, 12 Mi-24/Mi-35 combat helicopters	During Lula/Rousseff presidencies, shifted post-2018	~\$45 million (2014-2017)	Shifted to pro-USA stance under Bolsonaro.	
Overall Trend		2010-2014 vs. 2015-2019	40% decrease in LAC imports	Russian sales only 0.8% of total Russian military exports (2015-2019).	

Russian Economic Engagement- Investments and Projects

Energy Sector Investments

Russia's economic footprint in Latin América, while limited to approximately 2% of its global trade, provides significant political leverage, particularly due to the key countries' reliance on Russian fertilizers and diesel. Investments in the energy sector constitute a primary focus of Russia's economic engagement.

In Venezuela, Russia's interest in the oil sector is long-standing. Russian state-owned Rosneft has served as a crucial commercial intermediary, facilitating the export of crude oil from Venezuelan state-owned PDVSA through its subsidiaries, thereby helping to circumvent international sanctions. Rosneft also operates five oilfields in Venezuela through joint ventures with PDVSA, producing approximately 100,000 barrels per day. Between 2004 and 2023, approximately 23% of bilateral agreements between Caracas and Moscow were related to the oil and gas sector, encompassing joint ventures, acquisitions, investments, loans, and crude oil trade.

In Mexico, other Russian oil companies, including Gazprom and LUKOIL, have increased their investments. In 2022, LUKOIL acquired a 50% stake in Area 4, an offshore oil company in the Gulf of Mexico's Bay of Campeche. Additionally, in April 2023, Wintershall Dea, an oil and gas company linked to Russian oligarch Mikhail Fridman, discovered oil in the Gulf of Mexico, with estimated reserves of around 200 million barrels.

In Bolivia, Gazprom committed to investing approximately \$1.2 billion in exploration and production at the Vitiacua onshore field in 2018. Russian energy companies also maintain oil and gas investments in Brazil, Ecuador, Colombia, and Cuba. Notably, Russian oil sales to Latin América have surged sevenfold since the onset of the war in Ukraine, reaching a peak of between 300,000 and 330,000 barrels per day, representing about 5% of total daily Russian oil sales abroad. The has generated at least \$13.5 billion in revenues since 2022.

The significant increase in Russian oil sales to Latin América following the Ukraine invasion and Rosneft's documented role in assisting Venezuela circumvent sanctions reveal a deliberate strategy to use economic ties for sanctions evasion and political influence. The use of "shadow" tankers registered in Latin American offshore centers further illustrates this approach. Western sanctions compel Russia to seek new markets and partners, and Latin American countries, often fiscally constrained, become receptive to low-cost, long-term deals. These create mutual dependencies that Russia can exploit for political influence, potentially undermining global sanctions regimes and reinforcing corruption within the region.

Nuclear Energy Initiatives

Russia has also pursued nuclear energy projects in Latin América. In Bolivia, Russia's state-owned Rosatom is involved in a \$300 million Center for Research and Development in Nuclear Technology in El Alto. The first batch of nuclear fuel for the reactor being built there was completed in late October 2024. Rosatom's strategy in Bolivia is perceived as an effort to lock countries into long-term nuclear energy infrastructure deals, often with questionable economic feasibility, by exploiting market deficits and regulatory weaknesses, thereby increasing political influence. Argentina and Russia have discussed collaboration in developing Argentina's nuclear industry, with Russia aiming to construct a new nuclear power plant for the past 15 years. However, these talks have not yet resulted in concrete projects, partly due to competition from China. Rosatom has also expressed direct interest in the 16 research reactors operating across the region.

Mining Projects

Russia has actively sought to tap into Latin América's vast lithium reserves. In Bolivia, Rosatom's Uranium One subsidiary signed a \$450 million agreement with Bolivia's Yacimientos de Litio Bolivianos (YLB) in 2023 to construct a lithium extraction plant in the Uyuni salt flats, with production projected to commence by 2025 and reach 25,000 tons by 2027. The agreement, along with a similar deal involving a Chinese firm, has faced scrutiny due to a lack of transparency in the selection process.

Regarding gold mining, Russian investments in Venezuela are mentioned. Rusoro Mining Ltd., a Canadian company, previously owned and operated the Choco 10 and Isidora gold mines in Venezuela, which were nationalized by the Venezuelan government in 2011. While Rusoro is not a Russian company, its experience highlights the complexities and risks associated with gold mining investments in Venezuela, a context that Russia would likely navigate. Rusoro is currently pursuing legal enforcement for over \$1.87 billion in compensation from Venezuela following the nationalization.

In Guyana and Jamaica, Russian companies have investments in bauxite mining operations. RUSAL, a Russian aluminum company, established the Bauxite Company of Guyana Inc. (BCGI) in 2004, holding a 90% ownership stake. BCGI develops large deposits of high-quality bauxite in the Linden, Kwakwani, and Ituni groups. However, the facility's operations are presently frozen.

Russia's strategic focus on critical minerals, such as lithium, and its broader involvement in energy and other mining sectors signify a deliberate strategy to gain control over strategically vital resources. The consistent pattern of lacking transparency in deals, such as Bolivia's lithium contracts, suggests an intent to secure access and influence rather than purely

commercial returns implying that Russia is not solely pursuing economic profit but also aiming to disrupt global supply chains, reduce Western access to critical materials, and create dependencies that can be used for political ends, particularly in the context of the global energy transition.

Agricultural and Other Infrastructure

Russia expresses commitment to fostering investment cooperation and offering technological solutions in the agri-food sector, including the provision of effective and environmentally safe fertilizers. Russia also contributes to logistics and localized agricultural production in Latin América. Brazil accounts for 25% of Russia's global fertilizer sales, underscoring a significant dependency on Russia's fertilizer exports. Brazil notably lobbied to exclude fertilizers from sanctions against Russia, due to concerns about food security and the potential impacts on its agricultural industry. Russian diesel imports also support Brazil's agricultural sector. In terms of trade, Latin American countries export coffee beans, cocoa, and dairy products to Russia, which is a significant consumer of dairy products and a key source for these products from Brazil, Uruguay, and Argentina.

The consistent focus on fertilizers and diesel as key Russian exports to Latin América, and the high dependency of agricultural powerhouses like Brazil and Mexico on these imports, indicates a deliberate strategy to create economic leverage. By becoming an indispensable supplier of critical inputs to Latin American economies, Russia can gain political influence and ensure non-alignment, or even support, for its geopolitical agenda, as exemplified by Brazil's lobbying against fertilizer sanctions. The broader implication is that Russia strategically uses economic vulnerabilities to foster "asymmetric dependencies," transforming commercial ties into tools for geopolitical maneuvering.

Russian companies have actively participated in major infrastructure projects for railways, ports, and other strategic transport and energy infrastructure in Argentina, Brazil, and Bolivia. However, many of these bilateral economic ties with Russia have remained at the stage of announced intentions or strategic agreements, rarely materializing into actual investments on the ground. The Kremlin has utilized these preliminary agreements to position itself as a key economic player and condition the actual implementation based on the geopolitical orientation of the respective governments. Transport and infrastructure projects in Cuba are also mentioned as areas of Russian investment, though specific details remain undisclosed.

Trade Relations and Economic Dependencies

Russia's total trade with Latin América and the Caribbean amounted to \$20.6 billion in 2021, representing 2.6% of Russia's global trade. For most LAC countries, trade with Russia

accounted for less than 1% of their total global trade. Primary Russian exports to the region in 2021, valued at almost \$12 billion, included fertilizers (38%), iron and steel (27%), and petroleum and coal (19%). Russian imports from the region, valued at \$8.6 billion, primarily consisted of fruit (20%), soybeans and peanuts (16%), and meat (10%). Approximately three-quarters of Russia's regional trade in 2021 was concentrated with Brazil, Mexico, Ecuador, and Argentina. Brazil and Mexico depend on Russia for over 20% of their fertilizer imports.

Russian economic interests are particularly significant in Argentina and Paraguay, providing Moscow with a significant access point. Argentina imported over \$6 billion in goods from Russia and exported over \$3 billion between January 2020 and March 2022. Argentina's main imports from Russia included plastic goods, automobile parts, phosphates, rubber, and iron and steel. Its exports to Russia were diverse, encompassing agricultural categories such as beef, grains, beans, frozen fish, dairy products, and some industrial products.

Table 3 Major Russian Economic Investments in Latin América by Sector and Country

Sector	Country	Specific Investments/Projects	Notes/Scale	Source Snippets
Overall Trade (2021)	LAC Region	Total trade value- \$20.6 billion (2.6% of Russia's global trade)	Main exports- Fertilizers (38%), Iron/Steel (27%), Petroleum/Coal (19%). Main imports- Fruit (20%), Soybeans/Peanuts (16%), Meat (10%).	
	Brazil, Mexico, Ecuador, Argentina	Account for ~75% of Russia's regional trade.	Brazil and Mexico depend on Russia for more than 20% of their fertilizer imports.	
Energy (Oil & Gas)	Venezuela	Rosneft oilfield operations (100k bpd); intermediary for PDVSA exports.	~23% of bilateral agreements (2004-2023) focused on oil/gas.	
	Mexico	LUKOIL 50% stake in Area 4 offshore oil company (2022); Wintershall Dea oil discovery (2023).	Wintershall Dea discovery is estimated at ~200 million barrels.	
	Bolivia	Gazprom \$1.2 billion investment in Vitiacua onshore field (2018).	Focus on exploration and production.	
	Brazil, Ecuador, Colombia, Cuba	General oil and gas investments.	Specific project details not provided.	

Sector	Country	Specific Investments/Projects	Notes/Scale	Source Snippets
	LAC Region	Russian oil sales increased sevenfold since the Ukraine war.	Reached 300k-330k bpd, generating \$13.5 billion in revenues since 2022.	
Energy (Nuclear)	Bolivia	Rosatom's \$300 million Nuclear Research and Technology Center (NRTC) in El Alto.	First batch of nuclear fuel completed Oct 2024.	
	Argentina	Discussions with Russia for nuclear industry collaboration.	Russia aims to build a new nuclear power plant.	
Mining	Bolivia	Rosatom/Uranium One \$450 million lithium extraction plant in Uyuni (2023).	Projected 25,000 tons by 2027; lacked transparency.	
	Venezuela	Gold mining investments are mentioned.	Specific company names and project scale are not detailed.	
	Guyana & Jamaica	Bauxite mining operations by RUSAL (BCGI in Guyana, 90% RUSAL owned).	BCGI operations are currently frozen.	
Agriculture	Brazil	Accounts for 25% of Russia's global fertilizer sales.	Russian diesel imports support Brazilian agriculture.	
	Bolivia	Over half of the fertilizer imports are from Russia.	Acron agreements with local gas companies.	
	Argentina, Uruguay	Russia seeks dairy products from these countries.	Russia is a high consumer of dairy.	
Other Infrastructure	Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia	Railways, ports, transport, and energy infrastructure projects.	Many are announced intentions, not fully realized investments.	
	Cuba	Transport and infrastructure projects.	Specific details not provided.	

Greater Examination of Long-Term Socioeconomic Impact

Russia's economic forays into Latin America – in energy, mining, agriculture, and infrastructure – have immediate benefits for the region, but their long-term socioeconomic impacts remain unclear and warrant further investigation. The document under review rightly noted how dependence on Russian fertilizer or fuel can create leverage for Moscow; however, it stopped short of analyzing how these dependencies play out over the years among local populations. A key question is how reliance on Russian commodities might

impact public opinion and domestic politics over time. In the short run, importing discounted diesel, natural gas, or fertilizer from Russia can help alleviate inflation and win favor with consumers, as seen when Brazil ramped up Russian diesel purchases in 2023 to offset fuel shortages (ukrainian-studies.caukrainian-studies.ca). However, such dependence could become a double-edged sword. If geopolitical tensions escalate, Russia could squeeze these vital supplies, putting Latin American economies at risk. Even in the absence of deliberate cut-offs, the lack of diversification leaves countries vulnerable to price volatility – for example, sudden sanctions on Russia sent fertilizer costs soaring in 2022, hurting farmers in Brazil and Argentina. Over the long haul, this dynamic may shape popular attitudes: rural communities and agribusiness elites might view Russia as an indispensable partner for their livelihood, while opposition voices warn that these ties amount to external control over national food security. The potential for social cleavages is real, as segments of society either become comfortable with the status quo or resent the vulnerabilities that accompany it.

Crucially, one must ask: who truly benefits from Russian-backed projects, and who bears the costs? In many cases, deals struck at the government-to-government level bring in Russian capital and expertise but offer limited transparency into revenue sharing or local labor conditions. This opacity can breed public suspicion. A vivid example unfolded in Bolivia in 2023–2024 when La Paz signed lucrative contracts with Russia’s state nuclear firm Rosatom (via its subsidiary Uranium One) to develop the country’s vast lithium reserves. The Bolivian government touted the \$2 billion agreement as a game-changer for industrializing lithium, yet it faced immediate backlash from local communities and opposition leaders. Residents of Potosí – the region containing the Salar de Uyuni salt flats – staged protests and court challenges, accusing officials of “selling out” Bolivia’s patrimony to foreign corporations without proper consultation. Tensions ran so high that a parliamentary debate in mid-2025 degenerated into chaos: lawmakers hurled insults, trash, and even fists, decrying the lack of guarantees that Bolivians would benefit from the lithium projects. This episode highlights a broader pattern. While Russian (and Chinese) investment promises jobs and infrastructure, communities often fear that they will reap few benefits and bear all the risks, including environmental damage, loss of sovereignty, and long-term reliance on foreign powers. Grassroots movements in Latin America are increasingly vigilant about resource nationalism, pushing back against agreements perceived as neocolonial. The Bolivian lithium saga shows that Moscow’s involvement can become a lightning rod for domestic unrest if it is viewed as undermining national interests.

Another aspect is how these economic ties shape internal political alignments. Governments that grow dependent on Russian loans, arms, or energy might tilt their policies to please Moscow, even if voters are ambivalent. For instance, Venezuela’s economy has

been propped up by Russian financing and oilfield partnerships for over a decade. This reliance arguably locked Caracas into unwavering loyalty to the Kremlin—a stance not universally supported by the beleaguered Venezuelan populace, who were suffering under economic collapse. In more democratic contexts, however, such alignment could become a campaign issue. Opponents may accuse incumbents of mortgaging the country’s future to Putin’s agenda, especially if projects fail to deliver broad-based prosperity. Already in countries like Argentina, there is debate over agreements such as Rosatom’s bid to build nuclear reactors; critics worry about unsustainable debts and question whether secretive contracts with Russia serve the public good. Conversely, if Russian ventures do create jobs or infrastructure, local stakeholders (labor unions, business groups, provincial governors) may lobby to maintain good relations with Moscow, even when it clashes with U.S. preferences. In sum, Russia’s economic footprint in Latin America is not just a matter of trade statistics – it reverberates through the social fabric and political evolution of these nations. A deeper examination would weigh scenarios like: Could heavy fertilizer imports from Russia dampen a Latin country’s support for sanctions in a future crisis? Does the populace view Russian investments as welcome development or as Faustian bargains? Are there emerging voices in civil society pushing for disentanglement from Russia, despite the short-term costs?

Deepening Analysis of Latin American Political Shifts

The original report noted growing sympathy toward Russia in places like Brazil and Mexico, but a more nuanced analysis is warranted to examine how Latin America’s shifting political landscape is interacting with Moscow’s influence. The region is in flux, with a wave of diverse ideological movements altering foreign policy orientations. Rather than a uniform trend, Latin America presents a mosaic of approaches to Russia, often corresponding to domestic political currents. On one end, a cohort of leftist, nationalist governments has risen to power, exemplified by Mexico’s Andrés Manuel López Obrador, Brazil’s Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, and Colombia’s Gustavo Petro, among others. These leaders generally share a skepticism of U.S. hegemony born of historical grievances, and this can translate into openness toward Russia as a counterbalancing force. For example, Mexico under President López Obrador maintained a position of “active non-alignment” during the Ukraine war, condemning the invasion rhetorically but pointedly refusing to join Western sanctions or supply arms to Kyiv. López Obrador’s discourse often emphasizes respect for national sovereignty and critiques U.S. interventionism, themes that dovetail with Russian talking points. Similarly, Brazil’s President Lula has attempted a delicate balancing act. While acknowledging that Russia’s actions in Ukraine violate international law, he has also criticized NATO expansion and positioned Brazil as a potential mediator rather than a side-taking ally of the West. Lula’s government restored ties with Venezuela and pursued energy deals with Russia, reflecting

an ideological leaning that prioritizes Latin American autonomy and multipolar engagement. Moscow undoubtedly welcomes these tendencies. It sees opportunity in Latin leaders who view the world through a Global South prism and are unwilling to isolate Russia. Through diplomatic courtship and offers of trade, the Kremlin nurtures relationships with such administrations, hoping to entrench their inclination to resist U.S. pressures.

On the other end of the spectrum, Latin America is not devoid of pro-Western or even right-leaning nationalist forces that are less amenable to Russia. A prominent recent example is the election of Javier Milei in Argentina (late 2023), a firebrand libertarian-conservative who campaigned on vehemently anti-socialist and anti-communist rhetoric, signaling a desire to align closely with the United States. Milei has explicitly denounced authoritarian regimes like China and Venezuela; although he has been less vocal on Russia, his ideological camp is inherently wary of Putin's alignment with Latin America's leftists. Indeed, one of Milei's first foreign policy moves was to distance Argentina from the Buenos Aires-Caracas-Moscow axis: he scrapped Argentina's participation in China's Belt and Road Initiative and hinted at recognizing Taiwan. Under his administration, Argentina quickly shifted from a neutral stance to a pro-Ukraine stance, even joining the U.S.-led Ukraine Defense Contact Group and offering support for Ukrainian causes (Korzeniowski, 2024), representing a remarkable pivot away from the prior government's ambivalence toward Russia's war. The Argentine case illustrates how a change in leadership can swing a country's orientation on the Russia question virtually overnight. It raises the point that Russia's influence in Latin America is far from guaranteed; it can be hastily rolled back if regimes change. Thus, the Kremlin must play a long game, fostering ties across the political spectrum and perhaps even hedging by quietly building connections with opposition figures. For instance, while Moscow was friendly with former Argentine President Cristina Kirchner (a leftist), it also maintained dialogue with figures in Argentina's military and business community who might carry weight under a different government.

Another dynamic worth exploring is how populist and nationalist sentiments in the region can both aid and hinder Russia's agenda. Many Latin American voters are frustrated with traditional elites and U.S.-backed economic models. This discontent has fueled the rise of populist leaders who promise to put national interests first – a stance that often includes rejecting “Yankee” interference. Russia benefits when Latin American nationalism defines itself in opposition to the United States, because Moscow can then present itself as a partner in sovereignty. We have seen this in the rhetoric of Venezuela's Maduro, Nicaragua's Ortega, Bolivia's former President Evo Morales, and others who portray alignment with Russia (and China) as part of an “anti-imperialist” stance. However, nationalism can cut both ways. A fervent nationalist will jealously guard his country's independence not only from Washington but from any great power, potentially including Russia. For example, some Brazilian military

nationalists, while wary of U.S. domination, are equally suspicious of becoming overly reliant on Russian or Chinese military hardware, preferring domestic defense capabilities. In Mexico, President López Obrador's nationalism leads him to reject foreign military or security assistance across the board – he notably rebuffed Russian offers of help during the COVID-19 pandemic, just as he rejects U.S. interference. Therefore, Moscow must navigate complex political undercurrents.

In some cases, it aligns with far-left movements (which are anti-U.S. and see Russia as a fellow traveler against neoliberalism). In others, it might seek rapport with far-right elements if they are anti-Washington (as Putin has done in Europe with parties like France's National Rally or Italy's League). Latin America has a few analogous cases: Brazil's ex-president Jair Bolsonaro, a right-wing nationalist, initially seemed an unlikely friend of Putin. However, despite his pro-Trump leanings, Bolsonaro cultivated a pragmatic relationship with Russia – even visiting Moscow on the eve of the Ukraine war and later refusing to sanction Russia, because Russian fertilizers were crucial to his agribusiness base. This indicates that, beyond ideology, pragmatic interests (like agricultural lobbies or energy needs) can shape a country's stance toward Russia.

In summary, Latin America's political shifts necessitate a granular examination of how Russia calibrates its influence. The Kremlin likely tailors its outreach – via arms deals, propaganda, or diplomatic support – to resonate with the ruling coalition's ideology and interests. Where anti-American sentiment runs high, Russia fans the flames and ingratiates itself as a supporter against Yankee meddling. Where a government is neutral or divided, Moscow might use economic incentives (such as oil, loans, or vaccines) to sway opinions or at least buy silence on contentious issues. Moreover, when a strongly pro-U.S. government takes office, Russia must decide whether to adopt a lower profile and wait for the pendulum to swing, or attempt to undermine that government through covert means (information warfare, for instance, aimed at stoking domestic opposition). The interplay between Latin American domestic politics and Russian influence is thus a rich field of study. It underscores that Russia's gains in the region are not linear or irreversible; they ebb and flow with electoral cycles and social movements. Anticipating how upcoming political shifts, such as a Colombian election and a constitutional referendum, might alter the balance of influence is key to forecasting Russia's future role in the Western Hemisphere.

Humanitarian and Environmental Implications of Russian Projects

A final gap in the initial analysis is a thorough examination of the humanitarian and environmental consequences tied to Russian-backed projects in Latin America. Russia's involvement often centers on extraction industries (oil, gas, and mining) and large-scale infrastructure, sectors that can have significant impacts on local ecosystems and

communities. Nevertheless, discussions tend to focus on geopolitics or economics, overlooking how these ventures affect everyday lives and human rights on the ground. Take Venezuela's Orinoco Mining Arc as a cautionary example. This vast region, rich in gold and minerals, has been opened up for exploitation partly to provide revenue for the Moscow-aligned Maduro regime. In practice, it has unleashed a "gold rush" of illegal mining that is laying waste to portions of the Amazon rainforest and fueling brutal abuses. Reports by Human Rights Watch and others describe an epidemic of violence in the mining zones of Bolívar state: armed gangs and Colombian guerrilla elements (some tolerated or even abetted by Venezuelan authorities) impose their rule over mine workers, subjecting them to horrific punishments including amputations and massacres. These groups enforce order so that gold keeps flowing – much of it smuggled abroad to prop up the regime's finances. The environmental toll is equally alarming: pristine forests are being destroyed, rivers are contaminated with mercury, and indigenous communities are being displaced or coerced into dangerous labor. While Russia is not the on-the-ground perpetrator of these specific crimes, its strategic partnership and investment in Venezuela's extractive sector enable and legitimize the Maduro government's decision to prioritize mining over conservation. Russian companies have at times held concessions in the Mining Arc (for example, one firm was involved in a gold joint venture before U.S. sanctions were imposed), thereby indirectly tying Moscow to this "resource chaos." The humanitarian fallout – from rising malaria cases due to stagnant mine waters, to indigenous Yanomami suffering violence – is a hidden cost of Russia's support for unsustainable resource exploitation in Latin America.

Elsewhere, Russia-linked projects raise concerns about transparency, labor rights, and environmental safety. In Bolivia, as discussed, the joint lithium development deal with Russia's Uranium One has sparked questions not only about fair revenue sharing but also about the environmental impact on the Uyuni salt flats ecosystem. Lithium extraction, particularly using Direct Lithium Extraction (DLE) technology, is water-intensive and could disrupt the fragile hydrology of salt flats. Local activists worry that without stringent oversight, foreign companies might cause lasting damage to a unique landscape and deprive indigenous communities of water resources, all for a minimal share of profits. The Bolivian case also highlights a lack of transparency: critics noted that the agreement with the Russian firm was negotiated behind closed doors, with key details (such as environmental safeguards and community consultation commitments) being murky at best. This secrecy can breed substandard practices. Latin America has painful memories of foreign corporations (occasionally backed by great powers) engaging in extractive operations that left pollution and social disruption in their wake, such as oil contamination in the Ecuadorian Amazon or toxic runoff from mining in Peru. If Russian projects follow that old playbook of extract-and-export without accountability, the region could see a repeat of these disasters.

Additionally, consider Russia's involvement in energy projects. In countries from Argentina to Nicaragua, Russia (often through state companies like Rosatom or Gazprom) has offered to build nuclear plants, hydroelectric dams, or gas pipelines. While such projects can address genuine needs – for example, Bolivia's planned nuclear research reactor, developed by Rosatom, aims to provide medical isotopes and offer scientific training – they also raise legitimate concerns about safety and governance. Nuclear technology transfer, for instance, demands a strong safety culture and independent regulation. Observers have questioned whether smaller Latin states possess the institutional capacity to ensure Rosatom's activities meet the highest safety standards, or whether political pressure for quick results might lead to corner-cutting. An accident or mismanagement of nuclear material would have severe humanitarian consequences. Moreover, large infrastructure projects can have significant social implications: dams might flood villages or disrupt fisheries, while pipelines could traverse indigenous lands. Russian companies are relatively new players in Latin America's development scene compared to Western firms, and some worry that they operate with even less community engagement or environmental due diligence, given Russia's domestic record on environmental issues.

The human rights aspect also extends to how these projects might empower authoritarian tendencies. Russian surveillance and cybersecurity aid, as noted earlier, boosts regimes' capacity to monitor and repress dissent. In Nicaragua, the Russian-installed electronic monitoring system has reportedly been used by Ortega's government to track journalists and opposition figures, facilitating crackdowns that Amnesty International has labeled crimes against humanity. Thus, the "projects" in question are not only mines and plants but also security and policing initiatives. A Russian-built police training center in Managua, for example, ostensibly serves to improve law enforcement; in reality, it may be enabling techniques that violate protesters' rights and undermine civil liberties (Farah & Richardson, 2022). The long-term implication is a region where certain governments feel emboldened to silence critics, confident in the technical support of an illiberal superpower.

In sum, a deeper dive into the humanitarian and environmental dimension reveals a sobering picture: resource deals that enrich elites while local populations face polluted water and violence; infrastructure projects with opaque terms that could saddle countries with debt and ecological harm; security cooperation that tightens authoritarian control. These outcomes are often closely linked to Russia's strategic goals. The Kremlin is less concerned with environmental and social standards and more focused on loyalty and access. That means its partnerships sometimes shore up regimes that allow unsustainable exploitation in exchange for immediate gains. For Latin Americans living near a mega-mining site or under a repressive surveillance gaze, Russia's involvement is not an abstract geopolitical chess move – it is felt in their daily struggle for clean water, a safe workplace, or the freedom to

speak out. Any comprehensive assessment of Russia in Latin America should thus account for these human-level impacts. It adds moral weight to policy discussions: the contest over influence is not just about spheres of power, but about the well-being of communities and the stewardship of some of the planet's most precious environments, from the Amazon to the Andes. Highlighting these issues could galvanize greater domestic opposition to exploitative projects and push Latin American governments to demand better terms or reconsider some engagements entirely. In the long run, respect for human rights and the environment might become another arena where the West differentiates itself from Russia, supporting Latin activists and communities in insisting that development need not come at the cost of their health and heritage.

Comparative Influence- China and Iran in Latin América

Chinese Influence Efforts

China has emerged as a dominant external actor in Latin América, primarily through extensive economic engagement. It stands as the top trading partner for much of the region and a major source of both foreign direct investment (FDI) and lending, largely facilitated by its massive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Twenty-two Latin American countries participate in the BRI, with \$4.2 billion invested in diverse projects including a nuclear plant in Argentina, infrastructure around the Panama Canal, and hydroelectric dams in Ecuador. China plans to invest an additional \$250 billion in the region over the next decade under the BRI. Bilateral trade between China and Latin América surged from \$12 billion in 1999 to \$306 billion in 2018, and further to \$480 billion in 2022, establishing China as Latin América's second-largest trade partner. Chinese policy banks have provided over \$141 billion in loan commitments since 2005, with Venezuela, Brazil, and Ecuador being the largest recipients.

China's media influence intensifies through sophisticated strategies, including journalist training programs that bring hundreds of Latin American journalists to China, resulting in favorable coverage. Media partnerships, such as those between Peruvian outlets América TV and El Comercio and the China Media Group, facilitate content cooperation. Covert networks, like the "Paperwall" campaign, operate fake local newspaper websites to promote pro-Beijing narratives and suppress criticism. Chinese state media outlets, including CGTN and Xinhua, broadcast globally, often in partnership with local broadcasters. China also employs soft power through approximately 44 Confucius Institutes, offering language instruction and cultural initiatives, and by awarding thousands of scholarships to academics and students. Militarily, China has increased interactions with Latin American military personnel, conducted joint exercises (e.g., with Peru in 2010 and Argentina in 2013), and expanded arms sales to countries such as Venezuela, Ecuador, Argentina, and Mexico.

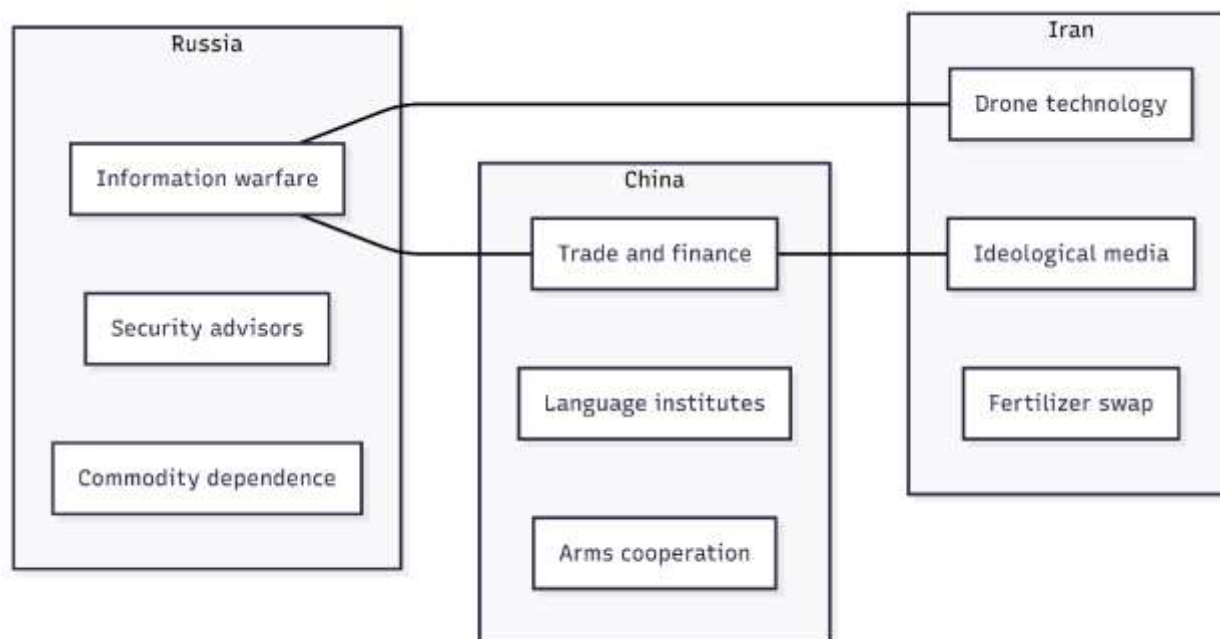


Figure 3: The comparative posture of Moscow, Beijing, and Tehran follows distinct lines of effort, with occasional convergence.

Compared to Russia, China's engagement is predominantly economic, aiming to deepen political and strategic ties through trade, investment, and infrastructure projects. While Russia seeks a more strategic and hybrid warfare approach, China focuses on economic dominance and diplomatic separation of Taiwan from the region. China's efforts are characterized by substantial financial commitments and a focus on long-term economic dependencies, whereas Russia often uses existing vulnerabilities with lower-cost, high-impact investments.

Iranian Influence Efforts

Iran maintains a notable, albeit uneven, footprint in Latin América, primarily through diplomatic, trade, and security cooperation, often driven by shared ideological opposition to the United States. Iran has embassies in 11 Latin American countries, many of which were established during a 2007 diplomatic push spearheaded by Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez. The Iranian government also operates HispanTV, a Spanish-language media company that has been producing content for broadcast and social media since 2011.

While not a major economic player, Iran maintains trade ties with most of Latin América, with Brazil being its largest regional trade partner. Trade between Brazil and Iran totaled \$3 billion in 2024, representing a 31% increase from the previous year. This growth was primarily driven by Brazilian agricultural exports to Iran and Iranian fertilizer exports to Brazil. Iran joined BRICS in 2023, further integrating it with key regional economies. Iran has also partnered

with Venezuela to help the Maduro regime evade U.S. sanctions on oil, accepting crude shipments in exchange for gasoline and financial assistance, and assisting with refinery repairs.

In terms of security, Iran's military has conducted naval tours in the region, including a 2023 voyage where warships docked in Brazil and traversed the Panama Canal. The relationship between Caracas and Tehran is particularly robust, with Iran maintaining a drone manufacturing facility on a Venezuelan air base, selling weapons systems, and collaborating on uranium exploration. Bolivia signed an agreement with Iran in 2023 to receive reconnaissance drones and riverboats, as well as to cooperate in cybersecurity and military training. Hezbollah, an Iranian-backed group, is believed to have a presence in the region, linked to illicit activities and alleged terrorism plots, with several Latin American governments designating it as a terrorist group.

Iran's influence, unlike Russia's, is heavily rooted in ideological affinity with anti-U.S. governments and a focus on security cooperation, particularly with the ALBA bloc countries (Venezuela, Cuba, Nicaragua, Bolivia). While Russia uses hybrid warfare to destabilize, Iran uses shared anti-Western sentiment and provides direct support to regimes facing sanctions, including military and intelligence cooperation, creating a distinct, ideologically driven axis of influence in the region.

Russia's intensified military and information expansion in Latin América represents a strategic, multifaceted effort to challenge the established international order and undermine Western influence. The Kremlin's approach is characterized by a "hybrid warfare" doctrine, seamlessly integrating overt and covert operations across information, military, and economic domains.

In the information sphere, Russia uses its state-funded media, RT and Sputnik, to disseminate narratives that exploit existing anti-American sentiment and political polarization. While traditional digital platforms show limited reach, the substantial social media following of RT en Español indicates a highly effective strategy for viral dissemination and engagement, particularly among male and older demographics. The strategic co-optation of intellectual elites and the selective amplification or suppression of information, as seen in social protests in Colombia, Chile, and Nicaragua, demonstrate a sophisticated effort to shape public opinion and destabilize democratic institutions from within. The upcoming 24/7 Sputnik Brasil radio broadcasts in Rio de Janeiro and RT en Español's over-the-air launch in Chile further underscore this aggressive media expansion.

Militarily, Russia has shifted from a primary focus on direct arms sales, which have declined significantly since 2014, to a model of licensed production and local manufacturing,

exemplified by the new ammunition plant in Venezuela. The adaptation, driven by international sanctions and financial constraints, aims to embed Russian military technology and foster long-term dependencies. The presence of military advisors, Private Military Companies, and dual-use infrastructure, such as GLONASS stations in Nicaragua and radar installations in Venezuela, highlights an asymmetric military footprint designed for persistent presence, intelligence gathering, and deniable influence.

Economically, Russia's limited overall trade with Latin América belies its strategic use in specific sectors. Increased oil sales to the region, particularly since the Ukraine conflict, and Rosneft's role in helping Venezuela circumvent sanctions, demonstrate Russia's use of economic ties for sanctions evasion and political influence. Investments in critical minerals, such as lithium in Bolivia, along with nuclear energy projects, illustrate a deliberate strategy to control vital resources and create dependencies that can be leveraged for geopolitical purposes. Similarly, the reliance of key agricultural producers, such as Brazil and Mexico, on Russian fertilizers creates an economic vulnerability that Moscow can exploit for political gain.

In comparison to Russia, China's influence in Latin América is overwhelmingly economic, driven by massive trade, foreign direct investment, and the Belt and Road Initiative. China seeks long-term economic dominance and diplomatic shifts, whereas Russia focuses on strategic disruption and the use of hybrid warfare. Iran's influence, while smaller, is rooted in ideological opposition to the United States, manifesting in diplomatic, trade, and security cooperation primarily with anti-U.S. regimes like Venezuela, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Bolivia, including military assistance and drone technology.

Overall, Russia's strategy in Latin América is not merely about economic gain or traditional military presence; it is a calculated, low-cost, high-impact geopolitical game designed to undermine U.S. hegemony, foster a multipolar world order, and secure strategic advantages in the Western Hemisphere. The effectiveness of this approach lies in its adaptability, its exploitation of existing regional grievances, and its capacity to operate through subtle, deniable means that often escape immediate scrutiny.

Hybrid Warfare— a doctrine fusing hard and soft power across multiple domains. The approach recognizes a continuous state of confrontation with the West and undergirds the rationalization and operationalization of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Russia supports Latin American countries perceived as being under pressure from the United States and its allies, promoting and expanding security, military, and military-technical cooperation. Key partners in this endeavor include Brazil, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela. Russia also develops relations with other Latin American countries, evaluating the degree of independence and constructiveness of their policies towards the Russian Federation.

Russia's explicit identification of Latin América in its 2023 Foreign Policy Concept and its pursuit of a "multipolar world order" signals a proactive geopolitical strategy. A statement moves beyond general diplomatic engagement—it formalizes Latin América's role within Russia's grand strategy. The "multipolar world order" rhetoric directly challenges existing unipolar or bipolar frameworks dominated by Western powers. The full-scale invasion of Ukraine prompted Moscow to seek new allies among "countries in the Global South that are not firmly aligned with the Western world". A strategic necessity, driven by waning partnerships elsewhere, motivates this. Russia perceives a strategic vacuum or reduced Western engagement in Latin América, which it actively seeks to fill. The region transforms from a peripheral interest to a central component of Russia's global counter-hegemonic strategy. Russia views Latin América not just for its resources or individual partnerships, but as a strategic battleground for influencing the global power balance, directly impacting the United States' influence in its traditional sphere.

The consistent emphasis on "hybrid warfare" as Russia's operational doctrine in Latin América reveals a comprehensive, integrated strategy rather than disparate actions. The definition of Russia's approach is holistic. Every action, from media broadcasts to fertilizer sales, serves a broader strategic purpose. It stands not as a collection of independent initiatives but as a coordinated campaign. Hybrid warfare recognizes a "continuous state of confrontation with the West". Confrontation directly translates into the operationalization of

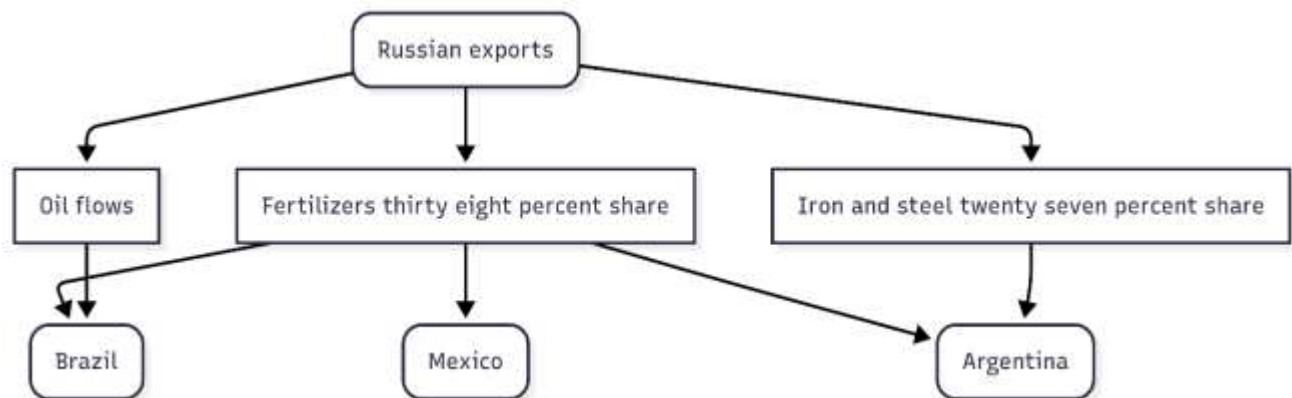


Figure 4 The economic dependency flow comes next, focusing on fertilizer, iron, and energy exchanges that generate disproportionate influence.

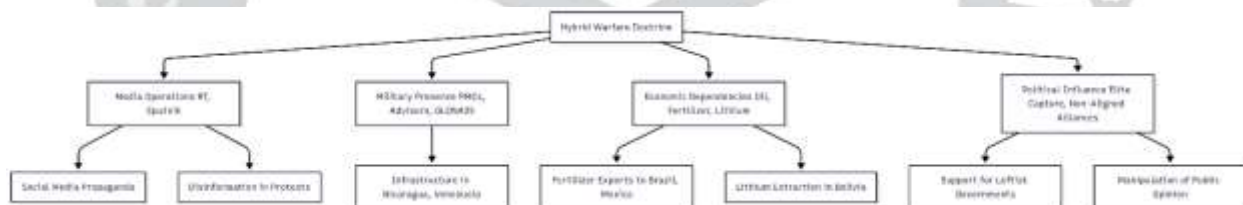


Figure 5 Illustrates the interconnected strategy of Russia's hybrid warfare model, tying together media, military, economic, and political vectors.

Russia's strategy in Latin América. The fusion of hard and soft power across military, economic, and information domains means Russia's influence operations are deeply interconnected. A military agreement supports an economic dependency, which in turn provides a platform for disinformation. A complex web of influence emerges, making it harder for external actors to counter specific Russian activities without addressing the underlying hybrid warfare doctrine. Approach significantly impacts regional stability and democratic institutions by fostering internal divisions and eroding trust.

Russia's Strategic Framework—Hybrid and Cognitive Warfare

Russia's engagement in Latin América unfolds as a sophisticated, multi-layered strategic game. It combines immediate, targeted actions designed for tactical gains with patient, long-term positioning to shape the geopolitical environment. The approach reflects a deep understanding of influence operations, where every move contributes to a broader, enduring objective.

Tactical Maneuvers—Immediate Gains and Disruption. Russia executes precise, often rapid actions to achieve specific, short-term objectives or to disrupt an opponent's current standing. These maneuvers exploit existing vulnerabilities and create immediate effects.

Strategic Positioning—Long-Term Influence and Environmental Shaping. Russia also engages in patient, incremental efforts to establish a durable presence, cultivate dependencies, and subtly alter the regional landscape over extended periods. These actions lay the groundwork for future influence, often without immediate, overt confrontation.

The interplay between these tactical and strategic elements defines Russia's hybrid and cognitive warfare model in Latin América. Immediate actions create openings, while long-term investments solidify gains and expand Moscow's sphere of influence.

Cognitive Encirclement: Strategic Logic through Go

Russia's behavior in Latin America aligns with a strategic grammar far deeper than traditional geopolitical maneuvering. Every move across the information, military, and economic domains reflects a pattern of gradual positional encroachment, psychological dislocation, and cognitive saturation. The hybrid warfare doctrine Moscow applies in the Western Hemisphere draws heavily from conceptual blueprints found in the game of Go—a structure based not on immediate conquest but on incremental control of space, time, and perception. Each placement of influence—whether through a fertilizer contract in Brazil, a GLONASS station in Nicaragua, or a media node in Mexico—reconstructs the information environment and political space without triggering open confrontation. The United States

finds itself constrained not because of overwhelming kinetic force, but because Russia sets the tempo.

Go teaches that direct assault creates resistance, while encirclement erodes coherence. Russia exploits that lesson with precision. The report outlines RT's penetration into Chilean media and Sputnik Brasil's rollout across Portuguese radio. These are not propaganda victories measured in persuasion metrics. They are encirclement stones. They do not challenge U.S. influence outright. They surround it. Once surrounded, influence becomes fragile. Trust in Western narratives deteriorates not through counter-ideology but through accumulated doubt. Publics does not embrace Moscow. They grow tired of Washington. Go strategy rewards patience, not conversion. Russia wins position, not affection.

In cyber operations, Moscow probes systems in Mexico and Colombia not for immediate sabotage but for psychological control. Voter rolls become battlegrounds for legitimacy. Anomalous traffic spikes, bot floods, and cloned narratives fragment public confidence. Go offers no queen's gambit. There is no decisive strike. There is erosion. Cyber warfare here behaves less like a sword and more like a stone—static, present, occupying space that once belonged to the opponent. The psychological effect matters more than the technical impact. Democracies begin to second-guess their infrastructure. Trust withers before data fails.

Hybrid warfare in the Western Hemisphere has adopted Go's principle of "moyo"—framework building. Russia builds influence in disaggregated sectors that appear unrelated—mining, media, education, and agriculture. Analysts who are too focused on tactical events often miss the strategic shape that is forming beneath. An oil deal in Bolivia does not pose a threat to U.S. interests in isolation. Paired with lithium extraction, media co-optation, and elite engagement, it constructs a cognitive enclosure. Once the structure forms, the cost of reversal multiplies. Russia commits to asymmetric dependencies precisely because they are sticky. A single sanction or speech cannot undo them. They require slow dismantling, which Russia bets will never happen. That bet pays off because U.S. policymakers continue playing chess in a Go environment.

Go also teaches that initiative control—sente—is everything. Moscow has sent troops across Latin America. Washington responds to Brazil's dependence on fertilizers. Washington reacts to Sputnik's expansion. Washington pushes back against Russian loans, military advisors, and vote-tampering disinformation. In every case, the Kremlin takes the initiative. In Go, the player who maintains sente dictates tempo, positioning, and shape. The opponent falls behind not because of inferior tactics, but due to a temporal lag. The report correctly catalogs Moscow's moves. The structure, however, lacks explicit recognition that these moves are sequenced to preserve initiative. Each Russian project occupies not just space but time.

Sacrifice is another Go principle that Russia applies. Moscow accepts short-term exposure for long-term positional advantage. It accepts reputational damage in exchange for economic permanence. It discounts oil to gain access. It loses market share in one domain to gain loyalty in another. The West expects cost-benefit symmetry. Russia ignores symmetry. It trades small positions to enclose larger ones. Go players understand that stone loss is meaningless if board shape improves. The Kremlin builds board shape. The report captures the pieces. It now requires contour recognition.

Russia's Information Expansion—Media Strategies and Influence Operations

Russia's state-funded media outlets, RT—formerly Russia Today—and Sputnik, play a central role in the Kremlin's information warfare strategy in Latin América. These platforms actively disseminate Kremlin-approved narratives, discredit Western values, and promote anti-American rhetoric. Content themes frequently portray Russia's actions—such as the war against Ukraine—as justified, advocating for unity with Russia against perceived neocolonialism. RT en Español demonstrates substantial reach, particularly on social media platforms. Its Facebook page boasts 18 million followers, surpassing major United States-based Spanish-language news outlets, including CNN en Español, Univision Noticias, and Noticias Telemundo. The RT en Español YouTube channel has nearly 6 million subscribers and approximately 4.5 billion views across over 80,000 videos. Actualidad RT, the primary Spanish-language news site, received an average of 21.5 million total visits per month in the two months prior to February 2025. Argentina, Venezuela, and Mexico collectively account for 42% of the site's traffic, reflecting the closer ties or declared neutrality of these countries' leaders with Moscow. Sputnik's Twitter/X follower count represents 14% of the total for Russian and Chinese state media, while RT accounts for 67%. Despite a strong social media presence, website, and mobile application, data from the quarter preceding the Ukraine invasion indicate that neither RT nor Sputnik reached more than 5% of the digital populations in any of the 21 surveyed countries on a monthly basis. RT's average website/app reach was 1.05%, and Sputnik's was 0.79%. Reach was notably higher among male internet users and older age groups.

The significant disparity between RT en Español's high social media following and its modest website and app reach reveals a deliberate and effective strategy for information dissemination. Russia prioritizes social media platforms as the most effective channels for mass dissemination and engagement. Social media offers a direct, viral, and less scrutinizable pathway to audiences compared to traditional website visits, which require active user seeking. The "information laundering" process, where pro-Kremlin content is localized by Latin American staff to appear organic, further enhances social media engagement, making the content more palatable and less overtly state-sponsored.

Traditional metrics of media reach significantly underestimate the true penetration and influence of Russian narratives. Russia adapts its information strategy to modern consumption habits, effectively bypassing traditional media gatekeepers and directly influencing public opinion through platforms where content spreads rapidly and can be harder to attribute to state propaganda. A sophisticated adaptation to the information environment, particularly in regions with high social media penetration, represents this.

Expanding its media footprint, Sputnik Brazil launches 24/7 radio broadcasts in Portuguese for Rio de Janeiro from August 1, 2025, targeting 13.5 million residents. The initiative holds symbolic significance, given Brazil's BRICS chairmanship. Similarly, RT en Español commenced over-the-air broadcasts in Chile on June 16, 2025, via Telecanal, a move that immediately generated controversy. Canal 13, a Chilean television channel, formally accused Telecanal of ceding its signal without authorization or editorial participation. Russian officials, however, defended this expansion, asserting RT already enjoys popularity and maintains objectivity. Russian news outlets, including RT, explicitly capitalize on anti-American sentiment and strategically focus on producing content that increases tension between Latin American publics and the United States. A deliberate strategy to weaken the United States' influence by promoting narratives of neocolonialism and discrediting Western values drives this. The success of this approach is evident in high engagement with provocative headlines and the alignment of content with the rhetoric of past leftist leaders, such as Hugo Chávez and Evo Morales.

Table 4 Russian State Media Reach and Engagement in Latin América

Media Outlet	Platform	Reach/Engagement Metric	Details/Context
RT en Español	Facebook	18 million followers	Outperforms CNN en Español (13.6M), Univision Noticias (9.6M), Noticias Telemundo (7.8M).
RT en Español	YouTube	~6 million subscribers, ~4.5 billion views	Across over 80,000 videos.
Actualidad RT	Website	21.5 million monthly average visits	Argentina, Venezuela, and Mexico account for 42% of traffic.
RT (overall)	Twitter/X	67% of total Russian/Chinese state media followers	Highest share among Russian/Chinese state media.
Sputnik (overall)	Twitter/X	14% of total Russian/Chinese state media followers	Significant share among Russian/Chinese state media.
RT (website/app)	Digital Population	1.05% average monthly reach (pre-invasion)	Across 21 surveyed countries— higher among men and older age groups.

Media Outlet	Platform	Reach/Engagement Metric	Details/Context
Sputnik (website/app)	Digital Population	0.79% average monthly reach (pre-invasion)	Across 21 surveyed countries— higher among men and older age groups.
Sputnik Brazil	Radio	24/7 broadcasts for 13.5 million residents	Launching August 1, 2025, in Rio de Janeiro.
RT en Español	Television	Over-the-air broadcast via Telecanal	Launched June 16, 2025, in Chile— sparked controversy.

Russia actively influences intellectual elites in Latin América, using media outlets, educational institutions, and think tanks to shape public opinion and policy. Strategy, reminiscent of Soviet-era tactics, often blurs the lines between genuine intellectual diversity and the co-optation of elites. Examples include the portrayal of Russia's 2022 withdrawal from parts of Ukrainian territory as a "gesture of goodwill" or the justification of the invasion as a defense of the Russian population in Donbas. A Mexican textbook, authored by a graduate of Russia's Friendship University, asserts direct United States intervention in Ukraine in 2014 and attributes the conflict's escalation to United States and European Union weapon shipments, notably avoiding terms such as "war". The University Program for Studies on Democracy, Justice, and Society— PUEDJS— at UNAM witnessed increased Russian influence following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, with its program head echoing Moscow's narrative regarding Western censorship of RT.

The influence on intellectual elites and integration of Kremlin narratives into academic materials signifies a sophisticated, long-term strategy for embedding pro-Kremlin perspectives. The goes beyond simple propaganda. Russia cultivates a new generation of thought leaders and academics receptive to its viewpoints, embedding its narratives within the educational and intellectual fabric of these societies. Influencing elites indirectly shapes broader public opinion and policy over time, as academics and intellectuals often influence public discourse and inform policy decisions. Strategy creates a more enduring and self-sustaining influence mechanism. As these narratives become part of academic discourse, they gain legitimacy and persist beyond immediate media campaigns, leading to a subtle but pervasive shift in national narratives that aligns with Moscow's strategic objectives. A deep, generational investment in shaping perceptions is evident in this.

During social protests in Colombia and Chile in late 2019, Actualidad RT ranked second in Colombia and ninth in Chile among the top X—formerly Twitter—influencers. Russian media disseminated information emphasizing the negative role of security forces in managing protests, highlighting police unpopularity, and negatively portraying human rights. Narrative

gained significant traction. In contrast, Western broadcasters, such as the German Deutsche Welle, ranked significantly lower in Spanish. Conversely, in countries with close ties to Russia, such as Nicaragua, coverage of social protests—including the deaths of 351 students during the 2018 demonstrations—remained minimal. A selective amplification or suppression of information aligned with Russian interests is evident in this.

Russian media strategically exploits existing societal tensions and amplifies divisive narratives in Latin American countries to destabilize from within. Russia's media operations do not always directly promote Russia. They often focus on discrediting Western values and eroding trust in democratic institutions by amplifying existing societal grievances. Russian news outlets explicitly "capitalize on anti-American sentiment" and "strategically focus on producing content that increases tension between Latin American publics and the United States". This aligns with the "hybrid warfare" doctrine of creating internal chaos. Strategy creates internal chaos that weakens pro-Western governments or shifts national alignments, thereby facilitating Russian strategic objectives. The goal extends beyond external geopolitical positioning to internal destabilization, making nations more susceptible to Russian influence or less capable of aligning with Western interests.

Public opinion regarding Russia in Latin América remains complex and varied. A January 2025 Pew Research Center survey across 25 countries indicated a median of 19% favorable views of Russia and 79% unfavorable views globally. However, views of President Putin became more favorable in a handful of countries since 2024, including Mexico—an increase of 11 points—and Brazil—an increase of 9 points—among those on the ideological right. Adults in Mexico, Indonesia, and Turkey express more favorable views of Russia than of the United States. Confidence in Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy is mixed, with majorities in the Latin American countries surveyed expressing little to no confidence. A 2022 global Gallup poll, conducted after Russia's full-scale invasion, showed Latin América trailing only Europe and North América in average disapproval of Russia.

Russia's Military and Security Footprint in the Western Hemisphere

Russia's strategic interests in Latin América involve establishing a persistent, multisectoral presence in the Western Hemisphere to counterbalance U.S. and NATO influence. The objective pursues an aggressive implementation of hybrid warfare, which integrates both hard and soft power capabilities. While Russia does not maintain overt military bases or official troops in Venezuela, Moscow has deployed military advisors and specialists to support the maintenance of Russian military equipment. Nicaragua serves as a hub for Russian activity, permitting a permanent presence of approximately 250 Russian military personnel. Nicaragua also hosts a Russian GLONASS—Global'naya Navigatsionnaya Sputnikovaya Sistema—navigation system base, with Brazil also hosting several GLONASS

ground stations. Nicaragua's infrastructure further includes a multi-million-dollar vaccination plant that produces no vaccines despite its cost, a police academy, a cyber warfare and training center, and a Russian Ministry of Interior building with diplomatic embassy status. In Venezuela, Russia operates six radar installations, which enhance surveillance capabilities over opposition movements and Colombian military activities.

Russia's absence of traditional, overt military bases in Latin America does not signify an absence of a military footprint. Instead, Russia employs a strategy of persistent presence through less conventional, more deniable means. A deliberate choice for a less visible, yet more deniable and strategically impactful presence is represented by this. It avoids the political optics and direct accountability associated with overt military bases. The "hybrid warfare" doctrine explicitly integrates hard and soft power capabilities, favoring covert influence and operations that are deniable and can be concealed. Private Military Companies—PMCs—further exemplify this approach, allowing for influence without official state involvement. A shadowy realm of non-state actors, dual-use infrastructure, and specialized personnel allows Russia to project power and gather intelligence while minimizing direct accountability. The challenges to traditional notions of military presence heighten the risk of instability due to covert influence operations, making detection and response more complex for regional and Western actors.

The presence of Russian Private Military Companies introduces new complexities to regional stability, allowing for covert influence without official state involvement. The activities of these PMCs not only threaten the United States' national security interests but also impact the socio-political landscapes of several Latin American countries, potentially leading to increased instability and human rights concerns. Furthermore, reports indicate Russia recruits young women from Latin America, South Asia, and former Soviet Union countries to construct Shahed strike drones in the Alabuga Special Economic Zone in Tatarstan.

Rosoboronexport, Russia's state arms exporter, completed the first phase of a 7.62 mm Kalashnikov cartridge plant in Venezuela. Facility projects to produce up to 70 million rounds annually, significantly strengthening Venezuela's defense capabilities by reducing reliance on imported ammunition. The second phase of the plant is anticipated to be commissioned soon, enabling full-cycle production, including the manufacturing of Kalashnikov rifles. The project faced considerable logistical and technical challenges due to international sanctions imposed on Russia and Venezuela. Venezuela already stands as one of South America's largest operators of Russian-made small arms and military hardware. Despite these developments, a significant trend indicates a decline in direct Russian arms sales to Latin America. Since 2017, no country in the region has purchased Russian arms, with only Nicaragua making an acquisition that year, already below its previous purchasing volumes.

Venezuela's last significant acquisitions occurred in 2014, and Mexico's in 2012. Overall, Latin America's military purchases decreased by 40% between the 2010-2014 and 2015-2019 periods. Russian sales to Latin American countries accounted for only 0.8% of total Russian military exports between 2015 and 2019.

The decline in direct Russian arms sales since 2014, counterbalanced by the establishment of local production facilities, indicates a strategic shift from direct export to licensed production and local manufacturing. This is not a withdrawal from the arms market but an adaptation of the transfer model. International sanctions and the inability of traditional customers, such as Venezuela, to repay substantial loans compel Russia to innovate its approach. Sanctions imposed on Russia and Venezuela create logistical and financial challenges for direct arms imports. Local production circumvents some of these barriers and provides a more resilient supply chain for the recipient nation. Strategy results in a long-term embedding of Russian military technology and influence within the region. It fosters deeper, more self-sustaining military-industrial dependencies, reducing reliance on direct shipments and making the influence harder to dismantle. It positions Russia as a partner in defense industrialization, appealing to nations seeking greater self-sufficiency and resilience against external pressures.

Historically, Venezuela has been Russia's largest customer in the Western Hemisphere, having purchased nearly \$20 billion in military equipment since the mid-2000s. Acquisitions included 24 Sukhoi Su-30MK2 fighters, the S-300 surface-to-air missile system, various combat and transport helicopters— Mi-35M and Mi-26 models— and 92 T-72M1 tanks. Nicaragua received 90% of its military imports from Russia since 2007, including 50 T-72B1 tanks in 2016 and two Antonov An-26 military transport aircraft in 2017. While the Nicaraguan government justified these purchases as efforts to combat drug trafficking, the nature of some equipment raised concerns about military imbalance. Peru acquired 24 Mi-8MT and Mi-17 transport helicopters between 2014 and 2016. Mexico has conducted six arms deals with Russia since 2000, with the most recent one occurring in 2011 for three Mi-17 military helicopters. Brazil engaged in several deals with Russia during the presidencies of Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff, but shifted to a more pro-United States stance under Jair Bolsonaro. No information suggests Latin American countries currently sell military equipment to Russia. The available data exclusively indicates Russia as the supplier in these transactions.

Table 5 Key Russian Military Equipment and Cooperation in Latin América

Country	Key Equipment Acquired	Period of Major Acquisitions	Estimated Value (USD)	Notes
Venezuela	24 Sukhoi Su-30MK2 fighters, S-300 SAM system, Mi-35M/Mi-26 helicopters, 92 T-72M1 tanks, 7.62mm ammunition plant (70M rounds/yr)	Mid-2000s to 2014 (sales)— Ammunition plant Phase 1 completed July 2025	~\$20 billion (historical arms sales)— Ammunition plant cost not specified	The largest customer, a plant to enable local Kalashnikov production, faced sanctions challenges.
Nicaragua	50 T-72B1 tanks, 2 Antonov An-26 transport aircraft	Since 2007 (90% of military imports)	~\$80 million (2016 tank deal)	Justified as anti-drug trafficking— raised concerns about military imbalance.
Peru	24 Mi-8MT/Mi-17 transport helicopters	2014-2016	~\$0.5 billion	Diversified arms imports.
Mexico	3 Mil Mi-17 Military helicopters	Since 2000 (6 deals)— last in 2011	Not specified for individual deals	Russia not a main supplier— limited deals.
Brazil	Air defense systems, 12 Mi-24/Mi-35 combat helicopters	During Lula/Rousseff presidencies— shifted post-2018	~\$45 million (2014-2017)	Shifted to pro-USA stance under Bolsonaro.
Overall Trend	—	2010-2014 vs. 2015-2019	40% decrease in LAC imports	Russian sales only 0.8% of total Russian military exports (2015-2019).

Outcome- Asymmetric Power Projection & Intelligence Gathering

Russia's Economic Engagement— Strategic Investments and Dependencies

Russia's economic footprint in Latin América, while limited to approximately 2% of its global trade, provides significant political leverage, particularly due to the key countries' reliance on Russian fertilizers and diesel. Investments in the energy sector constitute a primary focus of Russia's economic engagement. In Venezuela, Russia's interest in the oil sector is long-standing. Russian state-owned Rosneft served as a crucial commercial intermediary, facilitating the export of crude oil from Venezuelan state-owned PDVSA through its subsidiaries, helping to circumvent international sanctions. Rosneft also operates five oilfields in Venezuela through joint ventures with PDVSA, producing approximately 100,000 barrels per day. Between 2004 and 2023, approximately 23% of bilateral agreements between Caracas and Moscow related to the oil and gas sector, encompassing joint ventures, acquisitions, investments, loans, and crude oil trade.

In Mexico, other Russian oil companies— including Gazprom and LUKOIL— increased their investments. In 2022, LUKOIL acquired a 50% stake in Area 4, an offshore oil company in the Gulf of Mexico’s Bay of Campeche. Additionally, in April 2023, Wintershall Dea, an oil and gas company linked to Russian oligarch Mikhail Fridman, discovered oil in the Gulf of Mexico, with estimated reserves of around 200 million barrels. In Bolivia, Gazprom committed to investing approximately \$1.2 billion in exploration and production at the Vitiacua onshore field in 2018. Russian energy companies also maintain oil and gas investments in Brazil, Ecuador, Colombia, and Cuba. Notably, Russian oil sales to Latin América surged sevenfold since the onset of the war in Ukraine, reaching a peak of between 300,000 and 330,000 barrels per day, representing about 5% of total daily Russian oil sales abroad. They generated at least \$13.5 billion in revenues since 2022.

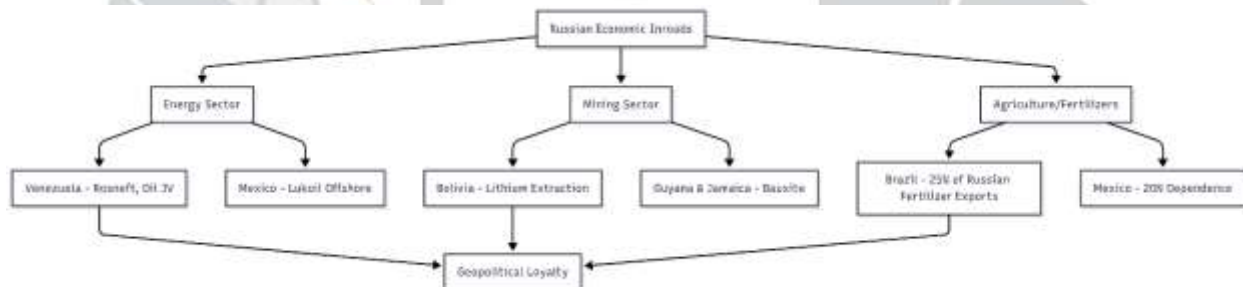


Figure 6 Visualizes how strategic sectors like energy and mining become pathways to long-term geopolitical pressure.

The surge in Russian oil sales to Latin América since the Ukraine invasion, coupled with Rosneft’s role in sanctions circumvention, indicates a deliberate strategy to adapt to global pressures and generate revenue. Russia actively seeks new markets and partners to offset the impact of Western sanctions. Latin American countries, often fiscally constrained, become receptive to low-cost or long-term deals. The use of "shadow" tankers registered in Latin American offshore centers further illustrates this approach to sanctions evasion. An adaptive and illicit component of Russia’s economic strategy demonstrates this. Mutual dependencies emerge that Russia exploits for political influence, potentially undermining global sanctions regimes and reinforcing corruption within the region. Russia’s willingness to operate in a grey area of international finance to maintain its economic lifelines and geopolitical reach shows.

Russia has also pursued nuclear energy projects in Latin América. In Bolivia, Russia’s state-owned Rosatom is involved in a \$300 million Center for Research and Development in Nuclear Technology in El Alto. The first batch of nuclear fuel for the reactor being built there was completed in late October 2024. Rosatom’s strategy in Bolivia is perceived as an effort to lock countries into long-term nuclear energy infrastructure deals, often with questionable economic feasibility, by exploiting market deficits and regulatory weaknesses, increasing

political influence. In Argentina, Russia and Argentina discussed collaboration in developing Argentina's nuclear industry, with Russia aiming to construct a new nuclear power plant for the past 15 years. However, these talks have not yet yielded concrete projects, partly due to competition from China. Rosatom also expressed direct interest in the 16 research reactors operating across the region.

Russia actively sought to tap into Latin America's vast lithium reserves. In Bolivia, Rosatom's Uranium One subsidiary signed a \$450 million agreement with Bolivia's Yacimientos de Litio Bolivianos in 2023 to construct a lithium extraction plant in the Uyuni salt flats, with production projected to commence by 2025 and reach 25,000 tons by 2027. The agreement, along with a similar deal involving a Chinese firm, faced scrutiny due to a lack of transparency in the selection process. Regarding gold mining, Russian investments in Venezuela are mentioned. Rusoro Mining Ltd., a Canadian company, previously owned and operated gold mines in Venezuela, which were nationalized by the Venezuelan government in 2011. While Rusoro is not a Russian company, its experience highlights the complexities and risks associated with gold mining investments in Venezuela, a context in which Russia also navigates. Rusoro currently pursues legal enforcement for over \$1.87 billion in compensation from Venezuela following the nationalization. In Guyana and Jamaica, Russian companies have investments in bauxite mining operations. RUSAL, a Russian aluminum company, established the Bauxite Company of Guyana Inc. in 2004, holding a 90% ownership stake. BCGI develops large deposits of high-quality bauxite. However, the facility's operations are presently frozen.

Russia's focus on critical minerals, such as lithium, and its pursuit of nuclear energy projects signify a deliberate strategy to gain control over strategically vital resources and secure long-term infrastructure deals with countries. Russia is not solely pursuing commercial returns. The lack of transparency in deals and the nature of nuclear energy projects—long-term, high-dependency infrastructure—suggest an intent to secure access and influence over vital resources. Controlling critical minerals, such as lithium, impacts global supply chains, particularly those vital for the energy transition. Locking countries into nuclear energy infrastructure creates decades-long dependencies on Russian technology, fuel, and expertise. Russia aims to disrupt Western access to critical materials and create dependencies that can be used for political ends. The positions Russia as a strategic player in future global resource markets, extending its geopolitical influence beyond traditional military and information domains.

Russia expresses commitment to fostering investment cooperation and offering technological solutions in the agri-food sector, including the provision of effective and environmentally safe fertilizers. Russia also contributes to logistics and localized

agricultural production in Latin América. Brazil accounts for 25% of Russia's global fertilizer sales, underscoring a significant dependency on Russia's fertilizer exports. Brazil notably lobbied to exclude fertilizers from sanctions against Russia, due to concerns about food security and the potential impacts on its agricultural industry. Russian diesel imports also support Brazil's agricultural sector. Latin American countries export coffee beans, cocoa, and dairy products to Russia, which is a significant consumer of dairy products and a key source for these products from Brazil, Uruguay, and Argentina.

Russia's limited overall trade volume with Latin América belies its significant political use derived from strategic dependencies in specific sectors. Russia's total trade with Latin América is only 2.6% of its global trade, and for most Latin American countries, trade with Russia is less than 1% of their global trade. Despite low overall trade, Brazil accounts for 25% of Russia's global fertilizer sales, and Brazil and Mexico depend on Russia for over 20% of their fertilizer imports. Russian diesel imports also support Brazil's agricultural sector. Russia does not seek broad economic dominance. Instead, it identifies and exploits specific vulnerabilities in key countries, thereby creating "asymmetric dependencies." A small trade volume in a critical input generates disproportionate political influence. Brazil lobbying to exclude fertilizers from sanctions against Russia exemplifies how this dependency translates into political alignment, driven by concerns about food security. Russia strategically transforms commercial ties into tools for geopolitical maneuvering. The approach is cost-effective and allows Russia to gain influence without needing to match the large-scale economic engagement of competitors like China. A subtle but potent form of economic coercion or persuasion emerges.

Russian companies actively participated in major infrastructure projects for railways, ports, and other strategic transport and energy infrastructure in Argentina, Brazil, and Bolivia. However, many bilateral economic ties with Russia have remained at the stage of announced intentions or strategic agreements, rarely materializing into actual investments on the ground. The Kremlin utilized these preliminary agreements to position itself as a key economic player and condition the actual implementation based on the geopolitical orientation of the respective governments. Transport and infrastructure projects in Cuba are also mentioned as areas of Russian investment, though specific details remain undisclosed.

Russia's total trade with Latin América and the Caribbean amounted to \$20.6 billion in 2021, representing 2.6% of Russia's global trade. For most Latin American and Caribbean countries, trade with Russia accounted for less than 1% of their total global trade. Primary Russian exports to the region in 2021, valued at almost \$12 billion, included fertilizers (38%), iron and steel (27%), and petroleum and coal (19%). Russian imports from the region, valued

at \$8.6 billion, primarily consisted of fruit (20%), soybeans and peanuts (16%), and meat (10%). Approximately three-quarters of Russia's regional trade in 2021 concentrated on Brazil, Mexico, Ecuador, and Argentina. Brazil and Mexico depend on Russia for over 20% of their fertilizer imports. Russian economic interests are particularly significant in Argentina and Paraguay, providing Moscow with a significant access point. Argentina imported over \$6 billion in goods from Russia and exported over \$3 billion between January 2020 and March 2022. Argentina's main imports from Russia included plastic goods, automobile parts, phosphates, rubber, and iron and steel. Its exports to Russia were diverse, encompassing agricultural categories such as beef, grains, beans, frozen fish, dairy products, and some industrial products.

Table 6 Major Russian Economic Investments and Trade Dependencies in Latin América

Sector	Country	Specific Investments/Projects	Notes/Scale
Overall Trade (2021)	LAC Region	Total trade value- \$20.6 billion (2.6% of Russia's global trade)	Main exports- Fertilizers (38%), Iron/Steel (27%), Petroleum/Coal (19%). Main imports- Fruit (20%), Soybeans/Peanuts (16%), Meat (10%).
	Brazil, Mexico, Ecuador, Argentina	Account for ~75% of Russia's regional trade.	Brazil and Mexico depend on Russia for more than 20% of their fertilizer imports.
Energy (Oil & Gas)	Venezuela	Rosneft oilfield operations (100k bpd)— intermediary for PDVSA exports.	~23% of bilateral agreements (2004-2023) focused on oil/gas.
	Mexico	LUKOIL 50% stake in Area 4 offshore oil company (2022)— Wintershall Dea oil discovery (2023).	Wintershall Dea discovery is estimated at ~200 million barrels.
	Bolivia	Gazprom \$1.2 billion investment in Vitiacua onshore field (2018).	Focus on exploration and production.
	Brazil, Ecuador, Colombia, Cuba	General oil and gas investments.	Specific project details not provided.
	LAC Region	Russian oil sales increased sevenfold since the Ukraine war.	Reached 300k-330k bpd, generating \$13.5 billion in revenues since 2022.
Energy (Nuclear)	Bolivia	Rosatom's \$300 million Nuclear Research and Technology Center (NRTC) in El Alto.	First batch of nuclear fuel completed Oct 2024.

Sector	Country	Specific Investments/Projects	Notes/Scale
	Argentina	Discussions with Russia for nuclear industry collaboration.	Russia aims to build a new nuclear power plant.
Mining	Bolivia	Rosatom/Uranium One \$450 million lithium extraction plant in Uyuni (2023).	Projected 25,000 tons by 2027—lacked transparency.
	Venezuela	Gold mining investments are mentioned.	Specific company names and project scale are not detailed.
	Guyana & Jamaica	Bauxite mining operations by RUSAL (BCGI in Guyana, 90% RUSAL owned).	BCGI operations are currently frozen.
Agriculture	Brazil	Accounts for 25% of Russia's global fertilizer sales.	Russian diesel imports support Brazilian agriculture.
	Bolivia	Over half of the fertilizer imports from Russia.	Acron agreements with local gas companies.
	Argentina, Uruguay	Russia seeks dairy products from these countries.	Russia is a high consumer of dairy.
Other Infrastructure	Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia	Railways, ports, transport, and energy infrastructure projects.	Many are announced intentions, not fully realized investments.
	Cuba	Transport and infrastructure projects.	Specific details not provided.



Figure 7: Timeline that tracks major milestones across information, military, and economic domains.

Counter-Strategies and Western Responses

While examining Russia's inroads, it is equally important to evaluate how the United States and its allies are responding, or could respond, to this expanding influence. The original

document's discussion of the international reaction was limited; however, any strategic analysis should consider the countermeasures being employed to contest Russia's advances in Latin America. Historically, the U.S. regarded external meddling in the hemisphere as unacceptable (the Monroe Doctrine ethos). In the post-Cold War era, that vigilance waned, yet Russia's recent activism has prompted Washington to refocus attention on its "backyard." High-level officials and security experts have been sounding alarms. Back in 2015, the head of U.S. Southern Command, Gen. John Kelly, warned that Moscow was "using power projection in an attempt to erode U.S. leadership and challenge U.S. influence in the Western Hemisphere," pointing to Russian propaganda, arms sales, and trade with U.S. adversaries (Salvo & De Leon, 2018). By 2018, National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster openly accused Russia of meddling in the Mexican and Colombian elections, bringing rare public scrutiny to the issue. These early warnings set the stage for a more concerted U.S. approach to push back.

One prong of the Western response has been diplomatic exposure and isolation of Russian activities. The U.S. State Department and intelligence community have started to "name and shame" Kremlin influence campaigns in the region. For example, in late 2023, the State Department declassified information accusing Russia of funding Spanish-language disinformation operations in Latin America to shape perceptions of the Ukraine war (Korzeniowski, 2024). U.S. embassies in countries such as Honduras and Colombia have actively briefed host governments on the nature of Russian malign influence, ranging from cyber threats to corrupt deals, in an effort to raise vigilance (U.S. Embassy Honduras, 2022). The goal is to inoculate Latin American officials and the public against Moscow's manipulations by increasing awareness and transparency. Western media and NGOs are also involved: investigations by outlets such as Reuters, Bellingcat, and local Latin American journalists have shed light on Wagner Group deployments and clandestine Russian deals, putting pressure on regional governments not to acquiesce. This information warfare by the West counters Russia's by ensuring that Moscow's covert actions do not remain hidden.

Another key element is offering credible alternatives to Moscow's enticements. Latin American nations often engage with Russia (and China) because they perceive gaps in what the U.S. and Europe offer – whether it is financing for infrastructure, affordable military hardware, or markets for commodities. Western strategy is evolving to fill these gaps. On the economic front, the United States has launched initiatives such as the "Americas Partnership for Economic Prosperity" and worked through the Development Finance Corporation to fund projects in energy and technology, aiming to provide an alternative to Russian or Chinese capital for cash-strapped countries. In the security realm, Washington has been bolstering defense cooperation with partners to negate Russia's appeal as an arms supplier. For instance, the U.S. has discussed replacement programs to help countries

reliant on aging Russian military equipment transition to Western systems – a case in point being offers made to Peru and others to trade in their Soviet-era hardware.

Additionally, NATO and the European Union have increased their engagement with Latin America. Colombia has become a NATO Global Partner and has received support to strengthen its cyber defenses, partly to guard against interference by actors such as Russia. The EU, for its part, convened a high-profile summit with CELAC (Community of Latin American and Caribbean States) in 2023, where European leaders emphasized investments in clean energy, digital infrastructure, and sustainability. Such outreach is intended to demonstrate to Latin American nations that partnership with democracies can meet their needs without the strings often attached to Russian deals.

Intelligence and law enforcement cooperation is another quiet but significant counter-strategy. The United States and allied services (such as the UK's MI6 or Israel's Mossad, which has a stake in curbing Hezbollah and other Iran/Russia proxies in Latin America) are reportedly sharing more information on Russian espionage and illicit networks operating in the region. Joint counterintelligence efforts have foiled or closely monitored suspected Russian activities – for example, in 2020, Argentine authorities, tipped by Western partners, disrupted a possible spy ring linked to Russian operatives that was surveilling expatriate communities. Moreover, U.S. Treasury sanctions have targeted individuals and entities facilitating Russia's influence schemes, such as bankrolling political interference. In 2022, the U.S. sanctioned a Russian-financed propaganda operation in Nicaragua and several Russian military officers based in Cuba and Venezuela involved in regional activities, thereby raising the financial and reputational cost of those operations.

Western powers are also utilizing multilateral forums to address these challenges collectively. The Organization of American States (OAS) has seen member states debate resolutions regarding external interference; although consensus is challenging given some members' pro-Moscow leanings, the topic remains on the agenda. Meanwhile, informal blocs like the Lima Group (focused on Venezuela's crisis) and ad hoc coalitions supporting Ukraine have included Latin American democracies working alongside the U.S., Canada, and European countries. Argentina's recent decision to join the "Ramstein" group, coordinating aid to Ukraine – a landmark move for a Latin nation – indicates a possible shift in regional calculus, where some countries are willing to side with the West in opposition to Russian aggression. If more countries follow the examples of Chile and Argentina in aligning with Western positions, Russia's diplomatic clout in the hemisphere could be curtailed.

It is worth noting, however, that Western responses face significant challenges. Latin American nations fiercely guard their sovereignty and bristle at heavy-handed U.S. instructions, given the bitter legacy of past interventions. Any counter-strategy thus must be

collaborative, not domineering, meaning the U.S. and its allies often take a supportive stance, strengthening local institutions —such as the free press, judiciary, and electoral systems —that can resist corruption and disinformation. By helping Latin American democracies deliver good governance and economic growth, the West can undercut the appeal of Russian (and Chinese) offerings, which often flourish in environments of instability and authoritarian drift. In essence, the most enduring answer to Russia's hybrid warfare in Latin America is to fortify the region's resilience – through civic education (so citizens can spot fake news), diversified trade (so economies are not beholden to any one partner), and robust democratic norms (so foreign autocrats find no easy proxies). The current fragmented international response, as highlighted in the document, can be improved through greater coordination; for example, a hemisphere-wide initiative on cybersecurity training or a joint U.S.-EU fund for infrastructure that explicitly competes with investments from authoritarian powers. All these measures represent the budding framework of a counter-strategy that future analysis should flesh out. Without addressing how Latin America can push back against or diminish Russia's grip, any assessment of the situation remains incomplete. The region is not merely a passive chessboard for great powers – it has agency and allies to draw upon in navigating the dangerous currents of renewed superpower rivalry.

Regional Responses and Implications for Stability

Latin American governments and the United States are aware of these Russian efforts. Most regional states have not openly aligned with Kyiv in international forums; several have abstained or voted against sanctions, reflecting their desire to remain neutral. Still, officials in Brasília, Washington, and elsewhere voiced concern. United States diplomats warned Latin American nations not to "choose the side" in global conflicts between Russia and its allies. Some governments react quietly— Chile's regulators probe Telecanal's licensing, while Brazilian media debate Sputnik's reach. In contrast, Havana and Managua continue to welcome Moscow's partnership, seeing it as a mutual support against U.S. sanctions.

The prevalent neutrality among Latin American states regarding the Ukraine conflict does not signify disinterest but rather a calculated strategy to maximize benefits from multiple global powers while avoiding confrontation. Neutrality is not a passive stance. It represents an active geopolitical calculation aimed at avoiding alienation of major trading partners or security providers. Nations seek to preserve their economic and diplomatic flexibility. Russia's strategy of offering "alternatives to Western dominance" and appealing to "sovereign, independent policy" directly caters to this desire for neutrality and non-alignment. Economic dependencies, such as Brazil's reliance on Russian fertilizers, reinforce this stance. Strategic neutrality allows Russia to expand its influence without direct opposition from a unified regional bloc. It complicates the United States' efforts to rally

support against Russia, as Latin American nations prioritize their perceived national interests over global ideological alignment. Dynamic contributes to a fragmented international response to Russia's actions, validating Moscow's "multipolar world" rhetoric.

Russia's information campaigns, particularly those exploiting societal tensions and influencing intellectual elites, pose a direct threat to the integrity of democratic institutions in Latin América. Russia "employs disinformation campaigns to undermine liberal democracies" and "weaken confidence in democratic institutions across the Americas". Russian media amplified divisive narratives during social protests, focusing on police unpopularity and human rights issues. The goal extends beyond shifting geopolitical alignment. Russia actively seeks to sow discord and erode public trust in government, media, and democratic processes themselves. Fostering internal chaos and discrediting democratic institutions weakens the capacity of pro-Western governments to govern effectively and resist external influence. The co-optation of intellectual elites further embeds these narratives within societal discourse, making them harder to counter. A long-term vulnerability exists for Latin American democracies. Erosion of trust in institutions makes societies more susceptible to external manipulation, leading to political instability and potentially paving the way for regimes more amenable to Russian influence. The "hybrid warfare" doctrine directly manifests in this internal destabilization.

Russia's Strategic Calculus and Future Outlook

Russia's intensified military and information expansion in Latin América represents a strategic, multifaceted effort to challenge the established international order and undermine Western influence. The Kremlin's approach is characterized by a "hybrid warfare" doctrine, seamlessly integrating overt and covert operations across information, military, and economic domains. In the information sphere, Russia uses its state-funded media— RT and Sputnik— to disseminate narratives that exploit existing anti-American sentiment and political polarization. While traditional digital platforms show limited reach, the substantial social media following of RT en Español indicates a highly effective strategy for viral dissemination and engagement, particularly among male and older demographics. The strategic co-optation of intellectual elites and the selective amplification or suppression of information, as seen in social protests in Colombia, Chile, and Nicaragua, demonstrate a sophisticated effort to shape public opinion and destabilize democratic institutions from within. The upcoming 24/7 Sputnik Brasil radio broadcasts in Rio de Janeiro and RT en Español's over-the-air launch in Chile further underscore this aggressive media expansion.

Militarily, Russia has shifted from a primary focus on direct arms sales, which declined significantly since 2014, to a model of licensed production and local manufacturing,

exemplified by the new ammunition plant in Venezuela. Adaptation, driven by international sanctions and financial constraints, embeds Russian military technology and fosters long-term dependencies. The presence of military advisors, Private Military Companies, and dual-use infrastructure, such as GLONASS stations in Nicaragua and radar installations in Venezuela, highlights an asymmetric military footprint designed for persistent presence, intelligence gathering, and deniable influence.

Economically, Russia's limited overall trade with Latin América belies its strategic use in specific sectors. Increased oil sales to the region, particularly since the Ukraine conflict, and Rosneft's role in helping Venezuela circumvent sanctions, demonstrate Russia's use of economic ties for sanctions evasion and political influence. Investments in critical minerals, such as lithium in Bolivia, along with nuclear energy projects, illustrate a deliberate strategy to control vital resources and create dependencies that can be leveraged for geopolitical purposes. Similarly, the reliance of agricultural producers, such as those in Brazil and Mexico, on Russian fertilizers creates an economic vulnerability that Moscow exploits for its political gain.



Figure 8 illustrates the chronological escalation of Russian influence efforts and the corresponding shifts in Latin American politics.

Russia's engagement in Latin América represents a highly efficient "low-cost, high-impact" geopolitical strategy, maximizing influence despite limited traditional power projection capabilities. Russia's trade volume with Latin América is negligible—2% of its global trade—and direct arms sales have declined significantly. However, Russia achieves significant political leverage through targeted economic ties—such as fertilizers, diesel, and critical minerals—and military-industrial embedding, including local production. Russia avoids large-scale, expensive commitments typical of traditional great power competition, such as China's massive infrastructure investments. Instead, it identifies and exploits specific vulnerabilities and strategic choke points. The "hybrid warfare" doctrine emphasizes asymmetric approaches, where information operations and covert military presence yield disproportionate returns for minimal direct investment, allowing Russia to project power globally without overextending its strained resources, particularly after the invasion of

Ukraine. Strategy poses a persistent, adaptable challenge to Western influence. Its cost-effectiveness means Russia can sustain these efforts over long periods, even under sanctions, making it a resilient and enduring threat to regional stability and U.S. interests. A sophisticated understanding of geopolitical use points beyond raw economic or military might demonstrates this.

In comparison to Russia, China's influence in Latin América is overwhelmingly economic, driven by massive trade, foreign direct investment, and the Belt and Road Initiative. China seeks long-term economic dominance and diplomatic shifts, whereas Russia focuses on strategic disruption and the use of hybrid warfare. Iran's influence, while smaller, roots itself in ideological opposition to the United States, manifesting in diplomatic, trade, and security cooperation primarily with anti-United States regimes like Venezuela, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Bolivia, including military assistance and drone technology.

Russia's multifaceted campaign in Latin América represents a concerted and evolving challenge to U.S. leadership and Western democratic norms in the Western Hemisphere. Russia explicitly seeks to "counter United States influence" and "build an anti-United States bloc". Its activities span disinformation campaigns to "undermine liberal democracies" and military cooperation designed to "counterbalance United States and NATO influence". Russia's actions are not merely opportunistic—they constitute a deliberate, long-term strategic effort to diminish Western, particularly the United States', hegemony in a region historically considered within its sphere of influence. The exploitation of existing anti-United States sentiment, the promotion of "multipolar world" rhetoric, and the support for ideologically aligned governments directly contribute to this challenge. The strategic neutrality adopted by some Latin American states further complicates Western efforts to counter Russian influence. Sustained pressure on Western influence in Latin América has significant implications for global stability. It forces the United States to divert attention and resources to its traditional backyard, potentially diluting its focus on other geopolitical priorities. It also risks fostering a more fragmented and less predictable international order, where traditional alliances and norms are increasingly questioned or eroded.

Strategic Foresight: 2025–2035

Russia's trajectory in Latin America will deepen over the next decade through slow, resilient encroachment using cognitive, economic, and hybrid tactics modeled on Go's positional strategy. The Kremlin will continue to apply pressure through indirect, distributed influence, denying the United States' decision superiority across strategic sectors. Russia is likely to avoid conventional escalation in favor of an encirclement strategy, expanding its presence without triggering confrontation.

Moscow will reinforce anchor states—Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Bolivia—as logistical and political hubs for forward influence. Russian-backed infrastructure, such as lithium processing and GLONASS stations, will harden into permanent fixtures. New bilateral defense agreements, often disguised as “technical cooperation,” will emerge under different governments, regardless of political ideology, thereby cementing Russia’s ability to reposition its assets and personnel while maintaining deniability.

In Brazil and Mexico, economic dependency will evolve into political asymmetry. Russia will exploit chokepoints in fertilizers, diesel, and logistics to insert incentives into electoral cycles and shape party-level loyalties. Should nationalist leaders reassert economic independence from the United States, Moscow will fill the vacuum by offering trade reliability in exchange for foreign policy ambiguity. The strategic outcome will not be outright allegiance, but rather neutral inertia—a psychological decoupling from U.S.-led positions in international institutions.

Information warfare will escalate in sophistication and saturation. RT and Sputnik will pivot from content dissemination to content laundering. Local influencers, artificial amplification, and synthetic personas will carry Kremlin narratives without attribution. Latin American digital spaces will fracture along cognitive lines seeded by Russian disinformation. Voters will absorb narratives grounded in national sovereignty, anti-colonial memory, and multipolar dignity. Russia will frame its presence as restorative rather than extractive, deepening its discursive advantage.

Cyber capabilities will expand from election interference and disinformation to the exploitation of systemic vulnerabilities. Moscow’s cyber operators will target electoral commissions, finance ministries, and critical infrastructure—not for immediate disruption but to erode confidence in governance and generate systemic stress. Cyberattacks will blend with narrative warfare to question the legitimacy of pro-U.S. administrations. In weak democracies, this combination will accelerate authoritarian drift under the guise of national stability.

By 2035, Russia will likely possess a deeply embedded, decentralized influence architecture. Its tactics will adapt to resistance, reconfigure based on local feedback, and recalibrate to changes in global polarity. The United States will no longer face Russia in Latin America as a diplomatic adversary—it will encounter Russia as a background condition embedded in infrastructure, thought, and institutional logic. Dislodging that presence will demand systemic countermeasures that exceed military, economic, or diplomatic boundaries.

Indicators and Signposts

The most salient indicators of continued Russian strategic encirclement in Latin America include:

- Expansion of bilateral defense agreements labeled under “technical cooperation” or “security modernization”
- Increase in Spanish and Portuguese AI-generated content mimicking local news outlets with pro-Russian framing
- Growth in fertilizer-related trade corridors tied to Kremlin-backed firms with state capture traits
- National polling data reflecting increasing neutrality or approval toward Russian foreign policy in Mexico, Brazil, and Argentina
- New lithium, uranium, or rare earth contracts awarded to Russian or Russian-Chinese joint ventures in Andean states

Tracking these indicators over time will allow analysts to assess whether Russia’s Go-like encirclement strategy is progressing from structural influence to doctrinal capture. Their movement will also signal where U.S. pressure is effective or irrelevant.

Cone of Plausibility

Within the ten-year horizon, three plausible futures emerge:

Baseline (Most Plausible) – Russia entrenches its influence through distributed media, energy, and paramilitary nodes across Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Bolivia while deepening trade dependencies with Mexico and Brazil. The United States struggles to maintain a coherent counterstrategy, reacting piecemeal to Russian moves.

Optimistic – Latin American publics grow resistant to Russian influence through media literacy, regional watchdog networks, and enhanced U.S. economic alternatives. New democratic coalitions limit Russia’s asymmetric contracts and expose cyber activity, forcing Russia into a defensive posture.

Pessimistic – Russia co-opts elite networks across Brazil, Argentina, and Mexico, expanding its economic footprint into sectors once aligned with the West. Information and cyber operations destabilize moderate governments, while authoritarian regimes fully integrate with Russian doctrine. Russia becomes the de facto strategic guarantor for illiberal actors across Latin America.

The cone illustrates that Russia’s strategy is not deterministic—it is contingent on response, perception, and institutional agility. Ignoring Go’s logic and delaying counter-

influence architecture will shift the future from baseline to pessimistic with irreversible outcomes.

Russian operations in Latin America reflect a cognitive strategy grounded in cumulative pressure, adaptive encirclement, and perception management. Strategic foresight, built on structured analytical techniques, must shift from reactive assessment to predictive monitoring. The board is already seeded. Only initiative, discipline, and pattern recognition will prevent checkmate.

Wrap Up

Russia's hybrid warfare campaign across Latin América marks a deliberate shift from episodic engagement to sustained influence through asymmetric tools. The Kremlin combines low-cost, high-impact tactics with long-term investments that reach beyond traditional indicators of state power. Military advisors, radar stations, and private military companies operate in tandem with economic projects tied to oil, lithium, and fertilizer. Russian media saturates social channels with anti-American narratives that feed off historical resentment and contemporary grievances. State-funded information platforms bypass conventional gatekeepers and seed narratives that erode confidence in democratic institutions. Academic partnerships and the co-optation of elites embed pro-Kremlin views into the intellectual foundations of regional discourse.

Every element of Russia's campaign in Latin América serves a broader objective—to displace the United States without confrontation. The tools differ from China's massive capital injections or Iran's ideological alignment, but the goal aligns: fracture Western influence, neutralize opposition, and create pliable partners. Russia's approach thrives in the gray zone, where attribution remains murky and consequences are often delayed or absent. Latin American governments, largely silent or neutral in international forums, allow Moscow to maneuver without unified resistance.

Absent a coherent response from the United States and its allies, Russian influence will deepen across strategic sectors. The Kremlin will continue to entrench hybrid control points that convert economic vulnerabilities and political ambiguity into leverage. The campaign, adaptive by design, will capitalize on each opportunity to expand control without triggering an alarm. Influence achieved without overt force, achieved incrementally, will prove more durable than kinetic advances. The Western Hemisphere stands at risk of becoming an operational theater where Moscow's strategy flourishes—not with tanks or treaties, but with trust subversion, dependency manipulation, and systemic distortion from within.

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