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The Bear Bites Back:
Understanding Russia's Strategic Engagement in Latin America

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The Blazing Continent is not only a description of a certain period in Latin America's past. It is a symbol of striving for a better life, prosperity, progress and social justice. - Vladimir Putin, President of the Russian Federation, 2014

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines Russia's foreign policy in Latin America following the end of the Cold War, especially focusing on the developments happening after the adoption of a more assertive Russian global stance in the 2000s. Drawing on a combination of primary sources, academic literature, and qualitative analysis, this study seeks to elucidate Russia's evolving role in Latin America and its strategic objectives in the region. By employing a neorealist framework, the research aims to provide insights into the motivations behind Russia's engagement in Latin America, including its efforts to counter hegemonic influences, establish strategic partnerships, and expand its sphere of influence. This thesis aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the interplay between great power politics, regional dynamics, and foreign policy decision-making in Russia.

Key words: Russia, Latin America, International Relations

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ALBA - *Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América* ('Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America')

BRICS - Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa

CELAC - *Comunidad de Estados Latinoamericanos y Caribeños* (Community of Latin American & Caribbean States)

EU - European Union

FARC - *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* ('Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia')

GLONASS - *Global'naya Navigatsionnaya Sputnikovaya Sistema* ('Global Navigation Satellite System')

IMF - International Monetary Fund

KGB - *Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti* ('Committee for State Security')

NAFTA - North American Free Trade Agreement

NATO - North Atlantic Treaty Organisation

NK SESLA - *Natsional'nyy Komitet Sodeystviya Ekonomicheskomu Sotrudnichestvu So Stranami Latinskoy Ameriki* ('Russian National Committee for the Promotion of Economic Trade with Countries of Latin America')

UN - United Nations

UNSC - United Nations Security Council

US - United States of America

USSR - Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

UK - United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

INTRODUCTION

Russia's resurgence as an independent nation after the disintegration of the USSR in 1991 gave rise to an internal crisis regarding its foreign policy discourse. Suddenly, Moscow not only had to reformulate some of the core tenets of its citizens' national consciousness but also reevaluate its role in the world following its apparent defeat at the hands of the West. For the first time in three hundred years, Russia found itself back on the periphery of international politics (Borozna, 2022). Consequently, Russian elites were again facing a persistent dilemma in the country's history: Should Russia acquiesce and merge with the Western political *zeitgeist* or should it resist and resort to its singular political tradition?

The three leaders that followed Mikhail Gorbachev as the head of the Russian state - Boris Yeltsin, Dmitry Medvedev and Vladimir Putin - believed that Russia could stand in the middle ground between being subordinate to the US-led liberal order and completely renouncing it. The Kremlin could help build a new international system, free of the ideological and institutional barriers of the Cold War, and consequently transform the Western paradigm into a more plural political community. In this sense, Russian authorities pursued a solution within the framework of its own cultural tradition instead of simply adapting to models conceived elsewhere (Sakwa, 2020).

However, a compromise between Moscow and the West could not be so easily established. On many occasions, Russian interests were not compatible with Western priorities, and in some cases, they were completely opposed. Most notably the continuous expansion of NATO into Eastern Europe and former Soviet states, which in time became a major point of contention in the relations between Russia and the Atlantic system. To the Kremlin, the presence of a US-led military alliance so close to its borders further diminished Russia's status as a global power. Therefore, distancing themselves from Cold War dynamics has not been easy for Russian leaders, as the US constantly spreads its influence across Russia's near abroad (Tsygankov, 2018). In his speech during the 43rd Munich Conference on

Security Policy in 2007, President Putin openly criticised the perceived US monopoly on global issues and accused Washington of violating international law to impose its legal system on other states (Putin, 2007, as cited in Borozna, 2022). Ever since then, Moscow's foreign policy agenda became increasingly confrontational, reflecting Russian polity ideals of a strong sovereign state with minimum foreign interference.

Disenchanted by the lack of compatibility between Russian and Western worldviews, the Kremlin actively sought to recruit allies who, like Russia, were unsatisfied with North American dominance in international affairs. In this scenario, Latin American countries are perceived as optimal choices for the development of a counter-hegemonic coalition against the United States. Not only could Russia exploit the region's distrust of Western foreign policies due to hundreds of years of colonisation and interference, but also gave Moscow the opportunity to reciprocate US influence in Russia's near abroad. As Latin America has been for years considered North America's "backyard", a potential Russian presence in the region would surely compel the United States to act and divert its attention away from Russia's borders (Ellis, 2015).

Besides the geostrategic implications that such an alliance would entail, Russia and Latin America share common opinions about the international system and its shortcomings. Both regions advocate for the construction of a multipolar world, renouncing North American unilateralism, to solve global issues. The concept of a multipolar order, as perceived by them, presupposes a more equal balance of forces between states, enabling emerging powers to further participate in economic and political matters on the world stage. In the context of challenging conditions imposed by the established world order such as economic crises, acute social inequality, and climate change, Latin America has emerged as a major player in the search for a new global economic framework to address the realities of developing countries in these troubling issues. Moreover, Russia and Latin America are also natural allies on topics such as the supremacy of international law, the central role of the

UN and the importance of respecting cultural and civilisational diversity over liberal ideals (Serbin et al., 2019).

In seeking to elucidate the intricacies and dynamics in the relationship between nation-states in the context of global shifts of power, this thesis aims to delve into Russia's evolving role in Latin America and its strategic objectives in the region. Through the use of a Neorealist framework, this research unravels the motivations behind Russia's engagement in Latin America, including its efforts to expand its sphere of influence, establish strategic partnerships with like-minded countries and counter the US' perceived hegemony in international relations. This study is significant to better understand states' behaviour and their tendencies to form coalitions when faced with a hegemonic power and also to assess the effects and shortcomings of the established liberal world order in peripheral countries.

This thesis is divided into three chapters. The first focuses on Russia's foreign policy towards the Western powers and the reasoning behind the distancing between the two, as well as the geographical and historical causes that shaped Moscow's actions since the establishment of the Russian Empire in the 18th century. The second chapter presents the methodological framework used for the analysis, the research question and the rationale behind the formulation of the two hypotheses. In the third chapter, the proposed methodology is employed to analyse the data gathered about the subject, delving firstly into the evolution of Russia's foreign policy towards Latin America and the overall political context of the region during the rapprochement. Then, the chapter transits to military-technical cooperation and the significance that Russia has to the region's security framework, exploring some examples of defence partnerships between Moscow and selected Latin American countries. Lastly, the analysis extends to the political and ideological aspects of Russia's engagement in the region, exploring Moscow's use of soft power to further endorse its worldviews and Latin America's position as a potential ally against North American liberalism. Finally, the conclusion summarises the findings and indicates the key

takeaways from this study, as well as recommendations for future research about the subject.

CHAPTER I: LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 Background and Contextual Information

Thirty years after the fall of the USSR and the establishment of a new world order, Russia is still perceived by many nations as one of the biggest threats to the peace and stability of the post-Cold War era. While some emphasise its arbitrary aggressiveness and autocratic tendencies, others paint Russia in a more sympathetic light as a vulnerable outsider fighting for its security in an unfair system (Donaldson & Noguee, 1998). Moralistic interpretations aside, Moscow is clearly making a stand against the status quo through its revived assertiveness.

Russia's actions in the international scenario are distinctly revisionist, a shared feature among other countries dissatisfied with their position in the hierarchy of states. This contesting attitude derives mainly from its former role as a great power, the subsequent turmoil and repositioning during the 1990s and the economic and political revival since the early 2000s. While the Soviet Union was always considered an uncontested ideological adversary to the liberal order, Russia's place in the post-Cold War context was uncertain. Initially eager to take part in the liberal framework and reform itself to fit in, Russia started to increasingly rely on its singular features and interests, demanding a more diversified world order (Hosli & Selleslaghs, 2020).

The Kremlin speaks of Russia needing to adapt to a world in transition, one that is increasingly globalised and interdependent. However, its instinctive response to the pressures Russia faces in a postmodern century is to fall back on what it knows - conservative political and social values at home and classical interpretations of great power diplomacy abroad. (Lo, 2015, p. 38)

As the legal successor of the USSR, Russia was granted its abundant resources, institutions, and a key membership in the United Nations Security Council. Russia's Soviet legacy is also perceived in its chokehold over its near abroad (especially in the post-Soviet space), leading to interventionist

leanings, and a contemptuous relationship with the West (Chenoy & Upadhyay, 2021). Moreover, Russia's strategic thinking has been moulded by its imperial past as well, mainly regarding the role of its geography, the aspiration to become a great power, the importance of sovereignty and the focus on building military power. Finally, some elements of its strategic culture were developed during the Cold War, such as the recognition of NATO as a threat to Russian security, the importance of the United Nations as the supreme arbiter in international conflicts, and the role of the United States as the most significant actor at the world stage (Borozna, 2022).

Russia's strategic evolution is evident in its adoption of new concepts like multipolarity and the use of geoeconomics as a tool of foreign policy. Adapting to the ever-changing international system, Russia has been gradually increasing its influence in comparison with the West, actively attempting to shape the global order in alignment with its national interests. Rejecting the need for a liberal international order, one of the core tenets of Western rationale, Russia emerges as a multifaceted actor that is able to play different roles depending on the circumstances and international dynamics (Parlar Dal & Erşen, 2020). Together with emerging countries, it aspires to bring about a more inclusive and pluralistic global society away from the nuanced unilateralism of the US-led system. At the same time, Russia still clings to its former global power glory and military strength as a crumbling empire in decay, having no other weapons outside of its past laurels and brute force.

The resurgence of the Russian state has not been a steady ride for any of the actors involved, periods of partnership and mutual understanding were soon followed by antagonism and resentment. In order to better understand such a phenomenon, it is important to identify the common root of this estrangement, especially in regard to what is at stake for Russia in the post-Cold War system and what historical and geopolitical constraints gave rise to its behaviour. Consequently, it will be easier to understand why Russian

authorities are so committed to delivering an appropriate answer to Western hegemony.

1.2 Challenges of Renewal: Yeltsin's Dilemmas in the Post-Soviet Era

On the 26th of December of 1991, the Soviet Union was formally dissolved through the issue of declaration n° 142-H, putting an end to almost 70 years of communist rule in its dominion. Facing political and economic stagnation for years, not even former General Secretary Gorbachev's attempts at reforms, commonly known as *Glasnost* (openness) and *Perestroika* (restructuring) could remedy the deep faults within the Soviet system. On the eve of the dissolution, he presented a short statement on television:

I leave my post with trepidation. But also with hope, with faith in you, in your wisdom and force of spirit. We are the inheritors of a great civilisation, and now the burden falls on each and every one that it may be resurrected to a new, modern and worthy life. (Service, 2015, p. 539)

After the inevitable demise of the USSR, Russia was still the biggest country in the world, despite its territory being reduced to the 17th century borders. Along with the most significant part of the Soviet landmass, Russia was perceived as the natural successor to the USSR (and, consequently, the Russian Empire), inheriting its geographical advantages and shortcomings, as well as its permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council. To the elite, the new Russian state should still be seen as a 'great power' in the international scenario, an aspiration that still influences Russia's foreign policy to this day (Borozna, 2022). Led by the democratically elected Boris Yeltsin, one of the main detractors of the old regime, the country faced the pivotal challenge of reasserting itself in the international sphere while restructuring its economy and society.

Throughout most of his first term as president in the 1990s, Yeltsin had a clear vision of completely breaking away from the Soviet past and embracing liberal principles such as democracy and a market economy. Communist ideology was deemed as repressive and economically unsustainable, the root

of all Russia's hardships at that time. In order to foster development and keep up with its European neighbours, the country had to adopt the Western model of civilisation. Old socialist structures were completely dismantled, reforms were launched at surprising speed and the Communist Party was utterly discredited. Yeltsin and his team were enthusiastic about turning Russia into an economic powerhouse worthy of its size, however, their shock therapy economics left the country's population in a delicate position, as most faced acute impoverishment. This social unrest limited Yeltsin's support and, consequently, his democratic aspirations, forcing the Russian leader to resort to authoritarian measures during periods of his government (Chenoy & Upadhyay, 2021).

On foreign matters, Yeltsin followed his Soviet predecessor's strategy of maintaining a non-aggressive external environment to better conduct internal affairs. Given the economic and social difficulties faced by his administration, especially in the early 1990s, Yeltsin foreign policy was characterised as accommodating and risk-avoidant when dealing with countries outside the former USSR territory (Donaldson & Noguee, 1998). At that time, the international sphere was being dominated by an overpowered United States and its European allies, creating a unified 'West' that was far superior militarily and economically to the newly reformed Russian state. Likewise, Yeltsin's domestic reforms were closely aligned with neoliberal models of socioeconomic development, leading a clear path to a pro-Western foreign policy (Hosli & Selleslaghs, 2020).

With the intent to turn old foes into friends, President Yeltsin expressed his wish to join the 'world community' after years of ideological isolationism in his speech during the 1992 special summit meeting of the United Nations Security Council:

Russia regards the United States and the West not as mere partners but rather as allies. This is a basic prerequisite for, I would say, a revolution in peaceful cooperation between progressive nations. We reject any subordination of foreign policy to pure ideology or ideological

doctrines. Our principles are clear and simple: primacy of democracy, human rights and freedoms, legal and moral standards. (Yeltsin, January, 1992)

In more practical terms, Russia pushed for an expressive cut in arms production, especially nuclear weapons, which caused considerable budget strains during the Cold War. According to Yeltsin, these resources were better suited towards civilian objectives instead of military ones. Jointly with the United States, Russia signed treaties to significantly reduce both countries' nuclear arsenal (Borozna, 2022). This agreement hallmarks the first time since the beginning of the nuclear arms race that Russia forsake its military parity strategy with North America. Yeltsin also sought partnerships with other major Western powers, including Germany, France, and the United Kingdom, stressing his aspiration to help build a pan-European security framework. These conciliatory movements helped Russia rise as a member of many prestigious international organisations, such as the Council of Europe (1996), the Paris Club (1997) and the G7 (1998), which was duly renamed to G8 (Donaldson & Noguee, 1998).

Although the relationship between the reformed Russian state and the Western world had a promising start, the second half of the 1990s saw the resurgence of points of contention between Moscow and the West, especially regarding the purpose of NATO after the end of the Cold War (Borozna, 2022). Created as a military alliance to better coordinate war efforts against the Soviet-led Eastern Bloc, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation was a victim of its success and outlived the enemy it was conceived to oppose. The demise of the USSR made the likelihood of a large-scale confrontation in Eastern Europe quite low. Therefore, NATO had to reevaluate its ethos and encompass new endeavours, such as counter-terrorism, peacekeeping, and humanitarian aid (Hosli & Selleslaghs, 2020). Despite constant reassurances made by US officials that the alliance would not expand further East, an enlargement plan was revealed in 1995 causing an uproar in Moscow. The enlargement plan was then solidified by the accession of Hungary, Poland, and Czechia to NATO

membership in 1999, reviving Russia's fears of a hostile military power in its near abroad (Borozna, 2022).

NATO's incursions in the Balkans during the 1990s were viewed by Moscow as a denial of the legitimacy of Russian interests in the former Eastern sphere. Moscow naturally favoured the Serbians as they shared a common Orthodox religion and a common Slavic heritage, while the US (and, consequently, NATO) sympathised with the Croats and Bosnians due to the ethnic cleansing performed on them by the Serbians (Tsygankov, 2018). The escalation of the hostilities forced NATO officials to revise its Strategic Concept, empowering the alliance to intervene in territories beyond its immediate zone of interest in situations of ethnic conflicts. This open intervention in an area of traditional Russian influence worried Moscow, as this could potentially establish a precedent to invade other Eastern countries and even Russia, given the dissidence in Chechnya at that time (Borozna, 2022). Yeltsin stood in the delicate position of supporting a traditional ally while appeasing a powerful US-led coalition. He carefully avoided a complete rupture with the Western countries, sending Russian troops to participate in NATO peacekeeping operations and not using Moscow's power to veto sanctions against Yugoslavia. However, the resolution of the conflict left a bitter taste in sections of Russian society, as Western powers actively shaped the geopolitical landscape of an area of traditional Russian influence (Donaldson & Noguee, 1998).

Ultimately, the Yeltsin regime was characterised by political uncertainty, economic disarray and an aura of demoralisation after the fall of the USSR. By the end of the 1990s, reforms in Russia had created a "proto capitalist" structure that led to massive social gaps, limiting the effective establishment of democratic principles in Russian society. Authoritarian ideas from the Soviet system soon reappeared, this time without the previous Soviet ideological content (Bernsand & Törnquist Plewa, 2019). As a result, Moscow's foreign policy approach lacked focus and clear strategic goals, erratically alternating between pursuing Western support and trying to

reassert Russia as a major player in a multipolar order. Despite the initial support of Western partners, Russia was constantly criticised for its dysfunctional governance and economic laggardness. Former allies and client-states seized this once in a lifetime opportunity to integrate with the West, which left Russia in an even more vulnerable position. Considering this delicate situation, Moscow could not help but feel apprehensive about what was to come (Lo, 2015).

1.3 The Putin Era: Consolidation, Conflict, and Resurgence

Winning his first presidential bid in the first round in March 2000, the former KGB agent Vladimir Putin was barely known to most Russian citizens before being appointed as prime minister in 1999. Putin's political platform was based on reasserting Russia's place in the world and promoting nationalist pride, especially regarding the Soviet time in which he had lived most of his life. In domestic affairs, Putin's government was successful in consolidating political power and sustaining accelerated economic growth, restoring the morale of the country's population after years of political and financial upheavals (Service, 2015).

Putin inherited from his predecessor an ambivalent foreign policy that tried to balance the transformation of the European security framework after the Cold War and the enlargement of the Atlantic system. As it became evident that adjusting to Western interests demanded yielding to the paradigm of expansion, Russian polity became increasingly averse to further cooperation (Sakwa, 2020). Luckily for Putin, his effectiveness in handling internal matters gave him the opportunity to better focus on the international scenario, enabling Moscow to pursue a more concise foreign policy agenda. Russia's international objectives, especially regarding NATO and other Western actors remain unchanged to this day.

With a rehabilitated Russian state, Putin had a much stronger hand to assert the country's interests at the world stage. The first opportunity to exert Russian influence in the global sphere came right after the terrorist attack in

September 2001 in the United States. Sharing a common interest in fighting global terrorism, Washington and Moscow started cooperating to undermine extremist Islamic groups that posed a security threat to both countries (Tsygankov, 2018). This arrangement greatly benefitted Putin, as Chechen rebels in Southern Russia were being supplied by Islamic terrorists from Afghanistan through Georgia and Turkey. He was seen both as an effective leader to the Russian public for being able to counteract a regional insurgency and as a reliable partner to the Western countries for being at the frontline fighting against global terrorism (Service, 2015). In the framework of this strategic alliance, Russia provided information through its intelligence agencies, allowed the use of its airspace for humanitarian missions, and gave tactical support for the transportation of military supplies in Central Asia (Borozna, 2022).

The successful collaboration against a common enemy helped to amend Russia's relationship with the West, especially after NATO's expansion and unilateral intervention in the Balkans. As a result, a NATO-Russia council was established in 2002 as a stepping stone to a possible equal partnership in the future (Loftus, 2023). However, these initiatives to further include Russia in the Atlantic security framework were regarded as tokenism, mainly because the proposals did not provide Russia with much leeway to actively participate in the decision-making process (Tsygankov, 2018). Western leaders and military planners were not comfortable with the prospect of (in their perspective) jeopardising the alliance with an unreliable Russia by offering a full membership (Sakwa, 2020).

Soon after the establishment of the NATO-Russia partnership, Moscow had to cope with further NATO expansion in former Soviet territory with the accession of the Baltic states in 2004. Not only did these countries border Russia, but they also inherited a part of the Soviet military infrastructure. The joining of Romania and Bulgaria in the same period also posed a threat to Moscow, as the Black Sea is regarded as a crucial territory for Russian national security (Borozna, 2022).

The perception in Russia was that NATO enlargement brought formerly Soviet countries into the West's orbit, sought to deny Russia its sphere of influence, and made possible the deployment of missile defence systems closer to Russia (Bush officials had discussed placing missile radar systems and interceptors in the Czech Republic and Poland). This served as a reminder to Russians that, not only had they lost the Cold War, but their influence did not hold the currency it once had. (Tsygankov, 2018, p. 244)

Russia's trust in the United States as a strategic partner took a major blow when Washington changed its national security doctrine from containment of terrorist groups to offensive warfare against 'rogue states'. In practice, any perceived threat identified by North American intelligence justified a potential attack to neutralise it, disregarding established treaties and multilateral institutions. This preventive warfare precept, known as the Bush Doctrine, initiated a new period of unilateralism and reliance on force on the world stage, as the most powerful state could take unrestrained action. Putin was willing to collaborate with the United States in the war against terrorist groups, but not against other states that could possibly be harbouring terrorists (Borozna, 2022). The establishment of the Bush Doctrine ultimately led to the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, despite the open opposition of Russia and other states included in the UN Security Council such as France and Germany. Moscow saw Washington's push for a war with another state as a disregard for international law and the UN's role as the highest mediator of war and peace. Not only did this conflict marginalise a key institution for Russia's power projection in international affairs, but also interfered with the country's economic interests in the Middle East, as Iraq was one of Russia's few business partners in the region (Loftus, 2023).

Putin attempted to use this dissent between the Western countries over the War in Iraq to diminish Washington's influence in Europe and build a closer relationship with the European Union. Nevertheless, the EU's role in the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004 seriously damaged Moscow's

prospects. The Ukrainian popular uprising, caused by a claimed electoral fraud during the presidential elections, was backed by EU institutions that demanded a more accountable electoral process (Tsygankov, 2018). Russia soon condemned Western actors' interference in post-Soviet countries as a ploy to disunite the region and replace unfavourable regimes, especially due to the role performed by pro-Western NGOs in the demonstrations. In this context, the insurgencies that were happening not only in Ukraine, but also in Georgia (2003) and Kyrgyzstan (2005), were not perceived by Moscow as an authentic civic reaction against corrupt leaders, but as a Western pretext to further interfere in Russia's near abroad (Borozna, 2022). Consequently, Russia became much more assertive regarding the post-Soviet space in the following years, resulting in military conflicts in Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014).

Although tensions were high between Moscow and the West, many Western leaders were optimistic about the election of Dmitry Medvedev as president in 2008. Known for being more liberal than his predecessor, it was expected that he would enact a more pro-Western foreign policy in Russia. However, the appointment of Putin as prime minister during Medvedev's government signalled that the former president would still be a key decision-maker in international affairs (Service, 2015). The first year of Medvedev's presidency was marked by the Russo-Georgian War, caused mainly by Georgia's ongoing negotiations to become a NATO member and an inner conflict between the country and two pro-Russian separatist regions - Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The conflict began when Georgia, emboldened by NATO's discourse, attempted to reintegrate the two separatist territories after a series of violent clashes. Russia soon militarily intervened and backed the rebel regions, labelling it as a "peace enforcement operation" and officially recognised the independence of both territories (Loftus, 2023). These actions were interpreted as a way to mirror the Western precedent of humanitarian intervention in the Balkans and the recent recognition of Kosovo as an independent state in that same year, to which Russia vehemently objected (Borozna, 2022).

Russia argues that it is American actions and double standards that have eroded global rules. Their thinking follows the logic that if the United States can act unilaterally, then Russia can too. As of this moment, Russia had discontinued following international law when its national interests were at stake and wanted to “break the American monopoly on breaking the law”. (Loftus, 2023, p. 73)

Ultimately, Georgia stood defeated in less than a month, stalling indefinitely the negotiations for a possible NATO membership. Moscow was successful in sending a clear message to the Atlantic system - Russia was willing and able to use force against NATO expansion into former Soviet territory.

Putin’s return as the Russian president in 2012 sparked the most assertive period of Russian foreign policy since the fall of the USSR. Openly opposing the US on many critical issues and aligning itself with non-Western countries, Russia was determined to counterbalance US dominance in international affairs (Borozna, 2022). Putin sought to build strong partnerships with Asian countries (especially China) in hopes of creating a greater Eurasian economic framework and, at least initially, using Russia as a bridge between the EU and Asia. Instead of having to choose between being a marginalised partner in Europe and playing second fiddle to an overpowered China in Asia, Moscow was committed to taking centre stage in uniting the two (Sakwa, 2020).

Russia’s strategic partnerships with Asian countries have intensified significantly after the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the subsequent invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Legitimising the military incursions as a way to protect the Russian population living in the Crimean peninsula and Eastern Ukraine from Russophobic policies in Kyiv, Russia faced a series of sanctions from Western countries due to its increasingly aggressive actions (Loftus, 2023). As a result, one of Putin’s main strategic objectives on the world stage became building an anti-hegemonic alliance with like-minded nations to reshape the global order to a more pluralistic system. It is

important to note that the goal of this strategy is not to renounce globalisation and multilateral institutions of international society, but to turn them less West-centric (Sakwa, 2020).

The aspiration to reform global governance is better exemplified in Russia's role as the founding member of BRICS, an intergovernmental organisation comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. At first conceptualised as a purely economic partnership, the group has evolved to become a cohesive geopolitical bloc that promotes a more favourable international environment for developing economies. Consisting of nations with diverse populations, geographies and socioeconomic development, the BRICS countries also advocate for a different approach to international relations, a model based on principles such as the peaceful coexistence between diverse civilisations, the sovereign equality of states and non-interference in states' internal affairs (Parlar Dal & Erşen, 2020).

This is a non-West that remains part of the global economy but seeks to ensure that universal rules became impartial and less embedded in a particular power system. In other words, a pluralistic multi-order world would remain based on the UN system and the internationalisation of economies but would move away from the narrow perspectives of the historical West. If Russia could not join a new West, then it would become a founding member of a post-Atlantic international community. (Sakwa, 2020, p. 184)

In contrast to Yeltsin's, Putin's leadership is largely uncontested, legitimate and decisive. His government also greatly benefited from external factors such as the rise in energy prices (one of Russia's main exports), which allowed Moscow to settle its international debt and accumulate a considerable financial reserve. In the US, the triumphant outlook after the end of the Cold War was short-lived due to the terrorist attacks on 9/11 and the seemingly inconclusiveness of the wars in the Middle East that it decided to start. The global financial crisis in 2008 helped demoralise Western governance worldwide, causing a deep crisis of confidence that resulted in increased

Euroscepticism and hindered European integration (Hosli & Selleslaghs, 2020). In this context of Western decay, Russia turned its attention elsewhere, constantly looking for allies to rise again as a global power to be reckoned with.

1.4 Russian Geopolitics: The Driving Forces Behind its Foreign Policy

Russian foreign policy has always been shaped by its relatively fixed geopolitical reality, regardless of the type of government and ideological discourse (tsarist, Soviet, or democratic). Ever since the early Russian state started overstressing the boundaries of the principality of Muscovy, Russian expansionism has made it possible to consolidate sovereignty over approximately 11% of Earth's landmass (Donaldson & Noguee, 1998). One of Russia's most significant geographical features is its lack of natural defences, establishing in Russian authorities a deep sense of vulnerability, especially on the country's Western borders (Borozna, 2022).

The easy access to Russia's territory has led to successive invasions, most notably the three centuries of Mongol occupation starting in the 13th century, Napoleon's incursion in 1812, and Nazi Germany's onslaught during World War II. Indeed, Russia never had a comfortable relationship with most of its neighbours or the wider world, having also been attacked by Poland, Sweden, and the Ottoman and Persian Empires. The 20th century was particularly trying for Russians, having faced two world wars and the disintegration of two regimes, causing incommensurable material and human losses (Lo, 2015). Consequently, Russian rulers have always had a nearly obsessive focus on protecting the country's territorial integrity, creating buffer zones and spheres of influence near Russia's borders to better protect it from intrusion (Tsygankov, 2018).

When Putin reiterates Stalin's slogan that the 'weak get beaten', he is tapping into the view of many that Russia cannot trust in the good intentions of others, but must concentrate on building up its own strength. This includes consolidating political authority, tightening

state control over the 'commanding heights of the economy', maintaining social order, and enhancing its military capabilities. (Lo, 2015, p. 20)

Russia's continental dimensions have also provided it with many advantages, allowing the country to exert substantial geostrategic, political, religious, economic and cultural influence over the world (Oualaalou, 2021). Russia maintains a quasi-omnipresence due only to its size, stimulating a globalist perspective and an entitlement to engage in various interest zones, including Europe, Asia, the Arctic, and the Middle East. In fact, few countries have such a strong necessity to actively participate in international affairs, having the largest number of direct neighbours in the world. Nevertheless, Russia's suspicion and introspection regarding foreigners are hardly matched by any other country (Lo, 2015).

Stemming from its vast physical size and multicultural landscape, Russian identity is characterised by multiplicity, ubiquity, and exceptionalism. With over a hundred distinct nationalities and multiple civilisational traditions straddling Europe and Asia, Christianity and Islam, Russia transcends simplistic classifications and embodies a singular civilisation in its own right. This multifaceted identity has been strategically used by successive rulers throughout history, from Tsarist to post-Soviet times, to pursue diverse geopolitical objectives. Putin's adept navigation of Russia's identity is evident in his diplomatic manoeuvres, where he alternately presents Russia as European when engaging with the EU, emphasises its Eurasian and Asian identity amidst global power shifts, underscores its Muslim community for influence in the Middle East and Central Asia, and positions Russia as North America's transatlantic partner. This sense of exceptionalism operates both defensively, guarding against foreign ideological intrusion, and offensively, justifying Russia's participation in global affairs. By drawing upon its diverse cultural heritage, Russia asserts its independence and flexibility, allowing it to navigate the geopolitical landscape while preserving its identity (Lo, 2015).

The Russian people is not purely European and it is not purely Asiatic. Russia is a complete section of the world - a colossal East-West. It unites two worlds, and within the Russian soul two principles are always engaged in strife - the Eastern and the Western. (Berdyayev, 1948, p.2)

The evolution of Russian foreign policy discourse since the early 1990s reflects Russia's fluctuating identity to attain geopolitical goals. Initially, the pro-Western stance of President Yeltsin epitomised Atlanticism, prioritising ties with the West over regional partnerships. Conversely, Eurasianism emphasised Russia's distinct civilisation and advocated for a balance between East and West, prioritising relations within the former Soviet Union (Hosli & Selleslaghs, 2020). Over two decades, Atlanticism has waned, while Eurasianism has surged, becoming a cornerstone of Putin's foreign policy strategy. This ideological shift is multifaceted, portraying Eurasianism as a form of Russian nationalism, a critique of European liberal values, and a modernist/anti-colonial movement (Bernsand & Törnquist Plewa, 2019). The collapse of the Soviet Union catalysed Eurasianism's resurgence, providing a renewed sense of identity amidst geopolitical upheaval. Russia's exclusion from post-Cold War Europe and the crisis in liberalism further established Eurasian conservatism within Russian polity.

The rise of Asia has played a pivotal role as well, offering Russia an alternative path to development within the Greater Eurasian framework. "The rise of Asia, which ends 500 years of Western dominance, contributes to mitigating the Eurasian schism as Russia no longer needs to look to Europe for modernity" (Diesen & Lukin, 2021, p. 100). Nevertheless, the irregular distribution of Russia's population, with less than 30% of its inhabitants living East of the Urals has preserved a Western-centric perspective. Despite the discourse for the strengthening of Eurasian partnerships, Russian society is still deeply intertwined with the West (Lo, 2015).

The erosion of Russia's relationship with the West in the last decade caused a revival of realist interpretations of Russian foreign policy, especially

due to its more conflictive and less predictable behaviour. Regarded as one of the oldest approaches to analysing international relations, realism places a significant focus on the exogenous factors to understand an actor's motivations, that is, a state's place in the international system in relation to other states and the structures of that system itself. Consequently, states are perceived as competitors for power and resources guided by rational self-interest to ensure their survival (Tsygankov, 2018). In this context, Russia's recent assertiveness can be understood as an expected outcome of Western/US increasing interventionism and unilateralism (Hosli & Selleslaghs, 2020). Neglecting Russia's concerns regarding NATO expansion and delegitimising its role as a great power, the West pushed Russia to take action to restore its regional influence and elevate its status.

Russian polity usually views the world as an inhospitable place dominated by the major powers and their interests, better exemplified by Washington's actions after the fall of the Soviet Union. Even if open military intervention is now disguised as humanitarian and promoting democratic values, hard power projection is still a valuable tool to insidiously impose a geopolitical agenda. Russia's vulnerable position in the 1990s gave the US the opportunity to spread its influence over the Post-Communist space and dominate the European security framework (Lo, 2015).

[...] Everything we do will be based on our own interests and goals, not on decisions other countries impose on us. Russia is only treated with respect when it is strong and stands firm on its own two feet. Russia has practically always had the privilege of pursuing an independent foreign policy and this is how it will be in the future. Furthermore, I strongly believe that the only way to ensure global security is by doing it together with Russia, not by trying to "demote" it, weaken it geopolitically or undermine its defensive potential. (Putin, February 2012)

Russia's self-reliance does not indicate that it cannot cooperate with other countries, but it does imply that such a relationship is influenced by

the involved nations' strengths and weaknesses. Only a strong state can effectively defend its interests and promote a favourable international scenario (Lo, 2015). This foreign policy precept is easily observable in Russia's attempts to leverage the USSR's former global power status to reach its goals. The traumatic collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 symbolised not only the failure of the Communist regime but also the perceived "demotion" of Russia to a peripheral position in the international society. Consequently, one of Moscow's primary objectives ever since the conception of the new Russian state is reestablishing/maintaining the country as a central actor on the world stage (Borozna, 2022).

1.5 An Empire in Decline: Russia's Role in the New World Order

Ever since Peter the Great established the Russian Empire in the 18th century, the country's ruling elite regarded the status of global power as an inherent entitlement, irrespective of the country's circumstances. However, in today's changing international landscape, characterised by shifting power dynamics and evolving criteria of influence, the notion of inalienable great power rights is no longer sustainable (Lo, 2015). Although international relations literature traditionally considers Russia as a great power due to its large geographical size, abundant resources, nuclear capabilities and a permanent seat at the UNSC, only claiming respect does not simply translate to demonstrating relevance (Parlar Dal & Erşen, 2020).

Despite facing domestic challenges since the early 1990s, Russia has sought to maintain its great power status through assertive foreign policies, as evidenced by its military involvement in conflicts such as those in Georgia and Ukraine. Moscow's aspirations to substantially affect global governance are important because of its global interests, spanning areas such as world economy, trade, security, resource allocation and the establishment of international norms. Even if Western countries constantly sideline Russia's importance, it still cannot limit itself to a regional role (Lo, 2015).

At the same time, Russia also works alongside rising powers like China, India, and Brazil to raise its prominence in the international hierarchy, even though its classification as an emerging economy is controversial. In fact, Russia can be classified as a declining power instead due to its unremarkable and erratic economic performance compared to other emerging countries (Parlar Dal & Erşen, 2020). In this context, Russia's affiliation with developing countries has more to do with political potential than economic capabilities, providing it with a platform to expose its proposal for global reform. "Russia, as a declining power, has incentives to settle scores and create political and institutional structures that serve its interests, while it still has sufficient capabilities to do so" (Götz e MacFarlane, 2023, p. 3).

It seems unusual that a former major power such as Russia would align with emerging economies from the Global South in a counter-hegemonic project such as the BRICS, especially given the USSR's role in the Cold War as a hegemon itself. However, there are some similarities between BRICS countries' positions in the global system of production that provide a consistent argument for such pairing. From a historical materialist approach, Russia is regarded as a peripheral country with an uneven pattern of development, leaving a distinct mark in the evolution of its economy, governance and civil society (Tsygankov, 2018).

The three centuries of Mongol rule left Russia isolated from the rest of Europe during the Renaissance, affecting the spread of technological and cultural ideas in a pivotal moment in Western society. Left at its own devices, Russia found itself lagging behind other European powers when it finally reconquered its political independence. Russian humiliating defeat in the Crimean War (1853-1856) due to logistical and tactical failures exposed a need to modernise the country to keep up with the French and British Empires. As other latecomers to the Eurocentric model of civilisation would sooner or later find out, eventually it became evident that Russia was still considered a marginal member of European society. Its efforts to "Westernise" were always unsatisfactory as European ideals such as indirect governance

were not a good fit for the intricacies of resource-oriented capitalism. As a result, Russia was (and still is) constantly patronised for being a semi-civilised peripheral country that still had much to improve before acquiring its “European pedigree” (Tsygankov, 2018).

Russia can be characterised as a “subaltern empire” situated between two dominant hegemonic powers, underscoring its role as both exploiter and colonised periphery for the benefit of global elites. As a sovereign actor, Russia is bound to confront the Western hegemony to demand changes, but its chances of success are unlikely, not only because of technological shortcomings but also due to its mentality being deeply ingrained in the global order it is meant to oppose. Russian imperialism lacks an autonomous discourse, echoing Western frameworks, even in its resistance to unilateralism. Russia's historical trajectory reflects a struggle between assimilating into the hegemonic order and harbouring counter-hegemonic resentments, yet such opposition often merely reshapes the global landscape within existing paradigms (Tsygankov, 2018).

The resurgence of Russia as a confrontational actor does not stem from an ideological schism anymore, but from an ideational divergence concerning the end of the Cold War and what it meant for both parties. Russian authorities claimed that it was a common achievement, a negotiated end to a strenuous conflict that would never have a clear winner. In this sense, the Atlantic system could acquire a new ally to transform the historic West into a more pluralist order committed to peace and stability (Sakwa, 2020). However, the economic and social turmoil of the 1990s generated a deep sense of humiliation since Russian leaders were seen as supplicants for foreign aid and too eager to abide by Western interests. Joining the West seemed like an unprofitable compromise to Russia, who could at best aspire to become an unimportant associate. (Donaldson & Noguee, 1998).

Post-communist Russia refused to dissolve itself into the existing Atlantic community. It was not a defeated power like post-war Germany or Japan or an ex-imperial like France and Britain ready to accept its

reduced status and power by associating its fortunes with the dominant power of the age. (Sakwa, 2020, p. 147)

In this scenario, Russia's staunch support for a multipolar world comes as a no-brainer. A global system consisting of different poles jointly working for peace and stability is Russia's best chance to play a significant role in international politics nowadays. The concept of multipolarity has appeared in some form in most foreign policy documents ever since the Cold War, serving as a response to the post-Cold War US supremacy and occasional unilateralism - the latter being considered a major threat to global peace and Russia's security (Hosli & Selleslaghs, 2020). Moreover, the existence of several global power nodes would position Moscow above other emerging states in the international system hierarchy (Parlar Dal & Erşen, 2020).

Russia's stance on multipolarity has undergone some modifications over time. At first, during Yeltsin's leadership, the strength of the United States and Russia's aspirations to join the West hindered further consideration of using it as a feasible foreign policy approach. Nevertheless, this perspective shifted in the latter half of the 1990s due to dissatisfaction with Washington's ongoing unilateral policies and the limited benefits derived from Russia's compliant and pro-Western attitude. Putin's administration also fluctuated between opposing and embracing the West throughout his first term, but since then the relationship between Moscow and the Atlantic system returned to Cold War standards. This distancing allowed Russia's polity to once again view multipolarity as a strategy to reach its geopolitical goals (Hosli & Selleslaghs, 2020).

Throughout the post-Cold War era, Russia's fundamental beliefs about global politics have largely remained consistent, while its foreign policies have shifted considerably over time. This evolution stems partly from factors beyond Russia's control and partly from internal political and economic changes. As a result, Russia's foreign policies have become more confrontational, assertive, and aggressive, initially focusing on its immediate sphere of influence but later extending beyond it. Despite these changes,

Russia's long-term goals and ambitions in foreign policy have remained the same, as have its notable contradictions. Russia aims to challenge the liberal global order while also seeking a prominent role within it, embodying a revisionist stance with strong conservative tendencies. It desires inclusion in the international community while simultaneously asserting its distinctiveness. Russia advocates for multilateralism but primarily for a select few, including major powers like itself (Hosli & Selleslaghs, 2020).

CHAPTER II: METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Research Question

While analysing a state's behaviour, researchers have at their disposal several theoretical tools to help unravel the convoluted and often unpredictable realm of international politics. The consolidation of a presumably stable system of integrated states gave rise to a range of theories that attempted to elucidate interstate relations, especially due to the increased mutual dependence among actors caused by industrialisation (Osiander, 1996, as cited in Spindler, 2013). Conventionally, these theoretical reflections of states' interactions focussed on historical patterns, that is, political, economic, conflictual and conciliatory macro patterns that shaped significant events in world history. Theories of international relations can assist in identifying these trends and allow the researcher to discover broader and more inclusive contexts of the human condition as a social being (Puchala, 2003). As an example, one may analyse the Cuban Revolution narrowly as just a manifestation of global communism, which often leads to unsatisfactory conclusions, or apply a more comprehensive approach of relating this event to similar insurgencies happening in the Global South and the intricacies of the Cuba-US relations in the 20th century (Barraclough, 1987, as cited in Vasconcellos, 2016).

Stemming from this reasoning of identifying historical patterns to help understand current issues in international politics, this study will try to answer the following research question "*How do Russia's evolving diplomatic, economic and strategic interests influence its relationship with Latin American countries and what factors shape these geopolitical engagements?*" By answering this question, one can put into perspective Russia's actions and frame them on a wider scope of global shifts of power and the structural constraints in the international system that compel states to take action. This analysis is also helpful in critically assessing the established liberal world order and its effects on peripheral countries.

One of the dominant paradigms to understand international dynamics is neorealism (also called structural realism), initially developed by Kenneth Waltz in the late 1970s. This theory is centred on the material structure of the international system, namely, military resources and how they are allocated among sovereign states. According to neorealists, the amount of material resources a state controls in comparison to other states will condition its international behaviour (Morin & Paquin, 2018). Consequently, there is an innate feeling of insecurity among sovereign actors, which constrains them to build their military strength in order to ensure survival in an anarchic system.

Among states, the state of nature is a state of war. This is meant not in the sense that war constantly occurs but in the sense that, with each state deciding for itself whether or not to use force, war may at any time break out. Whether in the family, the community, or the world at large, contact without at least occasional conflict is inconceivable; and the hope that in the absence of an agent to manage or to manipulate conflicting parties the use of force will always be avoided cannot be realistically entertained. Among men as among states, anarchy, or the absence of government, is associated with the occurrence of violence. (Waltz, 1979, p. 55)

As exposed in the previous section, Russia's current foreign policy focussed on great power projection and military strength, as well as its past conflicts and geographical constraints have favoured realist interpretations of its behaviour. Hence, this research aims to contribute to this debate and test the validity of the neorealist theory applied to the Russian case. More specifically, one of the focal points of this study will be to analyse Russian engagements in Latin America using Waltz's concept of balance of power in a neorealist framework. This precept claims that major powers are strongly inclined to balance against states perceived to be establishing a hegemonic position in the international system. This balancing can happen in many ways such as military cooperation and coordinated policies with potential adversaries of the hegemon, the undermining of alliance structures that

support the hegemon's power, and the attempt to reduce other nations' economic dependence on the hegemon (Kapstein & Mastanduno, 1999). In the context of Russia-Latin America relations, the hegemonic alliance trying to monopolise the international system can be easily identified as the United States (and, more broadly, its Western European allies). Indeed, the overall Western policy of spreading the liberal democratic model across the world after the triumph of the Cold War was one of the main reasons that predisposed Russia's mistrust in the so-called humanitarian endeavour to bring Western ideals to former communist states. Following this rationale, the first hypothesis of this research is:

H1: Russia is balancing against the established Western hegemony by creating security alliances with Latin American countries with the intent to contain the hegemon's reach in the region.

Another IR paradigm that will be used to further analyse Russia-Latin America relations is the concept of identity realism, which originated from a conjoined approach of realism and constructivism, as well as theories from social psychology addressing group identity formation and intergroup conflict (Kapstein & Mastanduno, 1999). Even though realism and constructivism are often presented by IR scholars as two contrasting perspectives to approach the international system, Canadian political scientist J. Samuel Barkin proposed a theoretical framework in which both worldviews coexist. The constructivist rationale is centred around the social construction of interstate relations, that is, not based specifically on a material reality but a product of an intersubjective conception of reality. Consequently, the actions and interests of international actors are determined more by social ideas and norms instead of an objective condition (Onuf, 1989, as cited in Barkin, 2003).

Claims by constructivists that realist theory is incompatible with intersubjective epistemologies and methodologies are based on either caricatures or very narrow understandings of realism. And realist critics of constructivism are similarly guilty of inferring from the worldviews of some (perhaps many) practising constructivists that the methodology is

inherently biased toward liberalism. An examination of constructivist epistemology and classical realist theory suggests that they are, in fact, compatible; not, of course, that good constructivism is necessarily realist, but that constructivist research is as compatible with a realist worldview as with any other. (Barkin, 2003, p. 326)

Identity realism is therefore concerned with the establishment of in-group identities that directly generate a devaluation of outsiders, leading to competitive implications between both groups. As seen in the previous chapter, Russia has been increasingly emphasising its non-Western identity and seeking partnerships with countries outside of the scope of the historical Global North. In this context, Russia could see most of Latin America as an ally that shares common values of resistance to Western dominance, especially due to the region's complex relationship with the United States. Therefore, the second hypothesis of this research is:

H2: Russia is prioritising strategic alliances with Latin American states because it regards the region as an ensemble of actors sharing a similar discourse of anti-Western sentiment.

2.2 Research Methodology

To answer this study's research question, a qualitative approach was chosen as a methodological guideline due to its holistic perspective. Analysing social phenomena using a global outlook instead of a collection of numerical values can lead to more conclusive and elucidating results, as human behaviour cannot simply be broken down into variables (Corbetta, 2003). This non-numerical perspective will allow to better understand Russia's motivations and the interplay behind the various factors that drive its actions on the global stage.

As a state's action does not take place in a vacuum, the use of historical analysis is crucial to test this study's hypotheses and find the main causes of the addressed issue. In other words, the presentation and discussion of historical evidence is a paramount feature in assessing societal change and

political behaviour (Williams et al., 2012). Consequently, this research employs the analysis of a variety of documentary resources produced by individuals and institutions, namely those directly linked to Russian-Latin America relations such as foreign policy concepts, national security documents, and official statements to the media by policymakers. To better understand the context in which this interstate interaction occurs, secondary sources are eventually consulted as official government statements do not always reflect reality and tend to be politically biased (Borozna, 2022).

Concerning the time frame taken into consideration to perform this study, the analysis starts right at the beginning of the 21st due to the perceived shift in Russian foreign policy after the election of Vladimir Putin, as seen in the previous section. From this point on, Russian polity became increasingly more confrontational with Western liberal ideology and actively sought to undermine its influence, first in its near abroad (as in the colour revolutions and the conflicts in Georgia and Ukraine) and then as a global strategy to endorse multipolarity in the international system (mainly through partnerships with Asian countries and the establishment of BRICS). Moreover, the Latin American context at the beginning of the 2000s was highly susceptible to non-Western cooperation given the political trend known as pink tide. As most countries in the region were being ruled by left-leaning governments, a rejection of North American liberal rhetoric could greatly benefit Moscow (Soliz, 2023).

CHAPTER III: EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

3.1 Russian Foreign Policy Evolution Towards Latin America

During most part of the 1990s, Russia-Latin America relations were not a priority to Russian leaders, mainly due to President Yeltsin's pro-Western stance and Russia's limited financial resources to sustain strategic operations in such a distant location, especially considering the country's delicate economic position after the erosion of the Soviet system. Consequently, the last decade of the 20th century can be perceived as a "lost decade" for the establishment of meaningful exchange between the two regions (Pyatakov, 2020).

Russia's quest to build partnerships with Latin American and Caribbean nations is attributed to the development of the "Primakov Doctrine" in 1996, formulated by the then-Russian Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov. This foreign policy precept postulates that Russia, as a great power in the hierarchy of states, should naturally spread its influence worldwide instead of being confined only to its regional scope (Blank, 2009). Primakov argued that Moscow had been too lenient to Western interests, causing an increase in foreign interference in Russia's near abroad, namely NATO's incursions in the Balkans and its continuous expansion to former Soviet-aligned countries. In this context, the Primakov Doctrine can be understood as a form of necessary retaliation to level the playing field in the US' near abroad (Farah & Richardson, 2022). Hence, one interpretation of Russian policy in Latin America is assessing it as essentially a North American policy to support Moscow's crusade against US dominance in world affairs (Blank, 2009).

His arrival at the Russian Foreign Ministry brought about a U-turn in the nation's foreign policy: it got out of the rut into which its Western partners had tried to push it after the disintegration of the USSR, and embarked on an independent course. This is the main thing, but certainly not the only thing that Yevgeny Primakov accomplished. He is also the author of our foreign policy principle, which had been followed

in the Russian Empire and in the USSR, but disappeared in the post-Soviet era (in the first half of the 1990s), namely, the multi-vector principle, in particular, the striving to develop mutually beneficial relations with all countries that are interested in this, and abandoning the approach where the Eastern and Southern vectors of Russia's foreign policy were undervalued. (Lavrov¹, October, 2014)

The first step to significantly establish stronger ties with the region came about when Primakov visited several Latin American countries during 1996 and 1997. Despite being far from achieving its goals at the time, as many of the signed agreements did not have any material implementation (Jeifets, 2015), Primakov's visit was instrumental for Russia to notice that some countries in the region were interested in engaging with Moscow, particularly those that were not agreeing with Washington on certain issues. Moreover, Primakov's visit left an important legacy for current Russian policy towards the region, as the Russian authorities' visits to Latin American countries have intensified since then, as shown in Table 3.1.

¹ Sergey Viktorovich Lavrov is the acting foreign minister of the Russian Federation since 2004

Table 3.1

Presidential (P), Prime Minister (PM) and Foreign Minister (M) visits of Russia to Latin America and the Caribbean from 1996 to 2020

Year	Russian Authority	Countries Visited
1996	Yevgeny Primakov (M)	Mexico, Cuba, Venezuela
1997	Yevgeny Primakov (M)	Colombia, Argentina, Costa Rica, Brazil
1999	Igor Ivanov (M)	Cuba
2000	Vladimir Putin (P)	Cuba
2003	Igor Ivanov (M)	Chile, Uruguay, Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, Venezuela
2004	Vladimir Putin (P)	Mexico, Chile
2004	Sergey Lavrov (M)	Chile, Cuba
2005	Sergey Lavrov (M)	Mexico
2007	Vladimir Putin (P)	Guatemala
2008	Dmitry Medvedev (P)	Peru, Brazil, Venezuela, Cuba
2008	Sergey Lavrov (M)	Colombia, Peru
2010	Dmitry Medvedev (P)	Argentina, Brazil
2010	Vladimir Putin (PM)	Venezuela
2010	Sergey Lavrov (M)	Mexico, Nicaragua, Cuba, Guatemala
2011	Sergey Lavrov (M)	Venezuela
2012	Vladimir Putin (P)	Mexico
2013	Sergey Lavrov (M)	Venezuela
2014	Vladimir Putin (P)	Cuba, Nicaragua, Argentina, Brazil
2014	Sergey Lavrov (M)	Cuba, Nicaragua, Chile, Peru
2015	Sergey Lavrov (M)	Cuba, Colombia, Nicaragua, Guatemala
2016	Vladimir Putin (P)	Peru
2018	Vladimir Putin (P)	Argentina
2019	Vladimir Putin (P)	Brazil
2019	Sergey Lavrov (M)	Cuba, Brazil, Suriname

2019	Dmitry Medvedev (PM)	Cuba
2020 (May)	Sergey Lavrov (M)	Cuba, Mexico, Venezuela

Note. From “*El ‘retorno’ ruso: cinco claves para entender las relaciones de la Rusia postsoviética con América Latina y el Caribe*”, by V. Rouvinski, 2020, *Documentos de Trabajo* n° 36, p. 6 (<https://doi.org/10.33960/issn-e.1885-9119.DT36>). CC BY-NC

During Putin’s first term as president of the Russian Federation, although foreign policy did not undergo major changes compared to the period between 1996 and 1999, the Latin American region regained importance for Moscow and diplomatic interactions were raised to the highest level (Davydov, 2010, as cited in Serbin et al., 2019). In fact, the Russian leader has been responsible for implementing key principles ever since assuming office, including the use of international circumstances to bolster the image of a strong Russian State and ensure the regime’s continuity, as well as recruiting like-minded countries to help build a multipolar international order. Following this rationale, Latin America is a promising region for Putin to achieve his goals, as Russia has managed to be recognised inside and outside the region as one of the main players in its political life (Rouvinski, 2020).

The official Russian Foreign Policy Concept² of the year 2000 encompasses both Putin’s and Primakov’s visions for Russia at the dawn of the 21st century. The document addresses the need to significantly change the approach taken by the Yeltsin administration due to the perceived threat that a US-led international order posed to the Kremlin’s national interests. Citing the bypassing of international legal mechanisms as an unsatisfactory and destabilising strategy that only exacerbates interstate disputes instead of settling them, Russia firmly committed to the establishment of a multipolar system that can better represent the varied interests of diverse international actors (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2000).

² The Russian Foreign Policy Concept is an official government document that serves as a main reference to the country’s foreign policy formulation

The need to foster regional and sub-regional integration policies in all continents was stressed as crucial to achieving a more balanced world stage in areas such as security, economy and peacemaking. In this context, Russia stated its intention to seek deeper cooperation with Latin American countries in areas such as political and economic development, relying on the progress made with the region in the late 1990s. The document also mentions Moscow's aspiration to further interact with these states in strategic themes, namely scientific research and military-technical partnerships (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2000).

Latin America was by no means uncharted territory for Russian diplomacy, even though the sustenance of an engaging relationship was not prioritised for some time. Moscow was able to leverage its former presence in the region to reboot its relationship with Latin America, allowing Russia to gain an important advantage over other extra-regional actors such as China and Iran. The USSR's role in supporting insurgencies such as the Cuban revolution, the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua, as well as several other armed uprisings in the region were instrumental in solidifying Russia as a significant player in the history of many Latin American nations (Farah & Richardson, 2022). Moreover, some key leaders in the region had already closely cooperated with Moscow as leftist guerrilla members or were educated in the Soviet Union. Daniel Ortega, José Luis Merino and Sanchez Ceren were all prominent government figures during certain periods and acted as a link between Russian, Nicaraguan and El Salvadoran politics (Secieru, 2021).

Despite Latin America's political turn at the beginning of the 2000s with the rise of left-wing leaders such as Chavez in Venezuela, Lula in Brazil and Kirchner in Argentina, the interactions between Russia and the region were not based on ideological principles as they had been in the Soviet period. Instead, the strategic rapprochement was (at least initially) grounded on pragmatism and the promise of mutual political and economic gains for the involved parties (Rouvinski, 2017). Assuming the leadership of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2004, Sergey Lavrov is regarded as one of the

key figures in following Primakov's precept and firmly establishing a foreign policy based on the quest for geopolitical benefits and diversifying foreign ties. As relations between the Kremlin and the White House turned sour, especially after the US unilateral decision to invade Iraq in 2003, Lavrov sought to build a network with countries that demonstrated some degree of anti-North Americanism, without aligning to a fixed ideology (Pyatakov, 2020).

The importance of this region [Latin America] is increasing for us, because we perceive a lot of opportunities for mutually beneficial ties here, trade and economic as well as political, considering the coinciding views of Russia and the countries of the region on many global processes. (Lavrov, September, 2004)

Russian interest in Latin America can also be interpreted in the context of a perceived independent stance adopted by many Latin American countries at the turn of the millennium. As a way to assert their foreign policy autonomy, several nations in the region have opposed Washington on critical issues such as the Rio Group's³ condemnation of NATO's actions in Yugoslavia in 1999 and Chile and Mexico's intention to vote against the UN resolution for military action in Iraq in 2003 (Gurganus, 2018). Indeed, there is some degree of convergence between Russia's and many Latin American countries' foreign policies, especially after the democratisation, regional integration and economic development of both regions during the 1990s and 2000s. The establishment of a multipolar world order, enforcing the role of diplomacy in tackling international issues and strengthening the UN framework are cornerstone goals of Russian and Latin American leaders alike (Krzywicka, 2013).

For Latin American countries, the establishment of a multipolar system of states means the possibility to choose alternative models of socioeconomic development and transform the current international order into a more

³ The Rio Group was a Latin American states association created in 1986 to better coordinate integration policies in the region. It was replaced by CELAC - the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States in 2011.

representative mechanism for solving international problems. Both Russia and Latin America recognise the need to reform and better regulate the global financial system, which they see as the main source of inequality between countries (Serbin et al., 2019).

The 21st century world is globalised and interdependent. Therefore, no state or group of countries can unilaterally tackle major international problems and any attempts to build a separate ‘oasis of stability and security’ are doomed to failure. In order to meet numerous challenges and threats we have to stop trying to impose development models on other countries. This approach has repeatedly proven its ineffectiveness. It does not just fail to facilitate conflict resolution, but leads to instability and chaos in international affairs. (Putin, July, 2014)

Although no Latin American state can be considered a great power, the region as a whole plays a significant influence on global politics and economy due to its abundant natural resources, economic potential and sizable population (Serbin et al., 2019). The prominence of the region in international affairs can be seen in the accession of Argentina, Mexico and Brazil as members of the G20 in 1999, an intergovernmental group of the world's largest economies. The largest country in the region, Brazil, also claims a permanent seat at the UN Security Council (a bid Russia supports), further demonstrating Latin America’s ambition to play a more active role on the world stage (Jeifets, 2015).

The more pronounced autonomy of Latin American states starting from the late 1990s is closely related to the reduced attention of the US towards the region after the end of the Cold War, as the probability of a Communist takeover was much less likely after the demise of the USSR. For the first time in almost five decades, Latin America was free to explore different approaches to tackle its structural problems such as pronounced social inequalities, widespread poverty and overall dissatisfaction with the neoliberal framework of development. As a result, the phenomenon known as the “pink tide” gained traction and became one of the main political trends starting from this period,

finally reaching the US' physical borders with the election of Andrés Manuel Lopez Obrador in Mexico, the country's first left-wing president (Szente-Varga, 2022).

[...] I think the world has indeed changed. The confrontation between East and West that characterised the second half of the twentieth century is over now. I think that, as the Russian President [Medvedev] said, there really are new global players today, and not only new players but also new leaders, including in South America, and they have a different vision of relations in the world. This new multilateral world is a banner that our administration [Argentina] too has raised, as have other South American governments, it seems to me. The world has changed and our region has changed too. We are no longer any country's backyard. We want to develop normal and serious relations with all countries around the world, because this new world also comes with new challenges that we did not face last century. (Kirchner, April, 2010)

After the demise of its biggest ideological rival, the US did not place many strategic foreign policy goals for Latin America except in areas such as illegal migration and drug trafficking. With the rise of international terrorism that culminated with 9/11, Washington's focus was directed towards the Middle East and combating states perceived to be collaborating with the spread of Islamic extremism. Following the Russian incursion in Georgia and then in Ukraine, US attention turned towards Europe. More recently, the rise of China as an economic rival has begun to capture Washington's strategic interests, placing the Indo-Pacific region as an important zone for North American foreign policy. Consequently, Latin America was regarded as a secondary or even tertiary priority to the US, mainly due to the absence of a major competitor in the region and the lack of open military conflicts in the territory (Chindea et al., 2023).

As a result of Washington's oversight, Moscow has tried to exploit shifts in US policy that have strained relationships with some Latin American

countries. In 2018, the Trump administration's criticism of Mexico over the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and its strict immigration policies, along with threats of military action against Venezuela and severe financial sanctions, have created opportunities for Russia to intervene and manipulate the situation to its advantage (Gurganus, 2018). In fact, Trump's foreign policy towards Latin America lacked a constructive agenda that provided mutual benefits for Washington and its closest neighbours. Conversely, Russia has been able to present itself in a much more favourable light, highlighting multilateralism and beneficial cooperation without resorting to threats (Serbin et al., 2019).

Following this framework, Russia sees Latin American states as allies in countering the US' unilateral actions on international issues and promoting the UN as the primary platform for multilateral agreements by assigning the responsibility for international peace to the Security Council (Krzywicka, 2013). Ever since the mid-2000s, Moscow's increasing anti-North American stance and its push for a multipolar world order have resonated mainly with leaders of countries belonging to the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA, in Spanish) such as Venezuela's Chavez, Cuba's Castro and Nicaragua's Ortega as they felt the Russia they knew had returned (Rouvinski, 2017).

Although not limiting its scope of partnerships by ideological standards anymore, it has been difficult for Russia to disassociate its image as a supporter of left-wing regimes in Latin America. This association of Russia as a "left-friendly" country has proven detrimental in recent years, as it constrains Moscow's ability to develop ties with right-wing governments and countries perceived as traditional US allies such as Chile and Colombia. For example, Russia's staunch support for the Maduro regime in Venezuela was a point of contention between Putin and Bolsonaro in Brazil, as anti-Venezuelan discourse played a central role in the latter's electoral campaign (Pyatakov, 2020).

Essentially, Russian geopolitical interests in Latin America are mainly focused on three main spheres of action (Rikles & Castellano, 2022):

- a) Expanding its foreign ties to demonstrate that the Kremlin is not internationally isolated after the economic sanctions adopted by the US and the EU as a consequence of the military operations in Georgia and Ukraine. By venturing into alternative markets, Russia guarantees a continuous flow of its products and maintains a significant presence in key economic institutions;
- b) Advocating for a post-Western multipolar order that counterbalances the one currently established. Following the precepts of Primakov's doctrine, Moscow strives to reduce the influence of the US and Europe in global affairs to better accommodate Russian interests abroad;
- c) Projecting Russia as a great power with global presence and interests, recovering the USSR's role as a major player on the international stage. No longer bound by ideological paradigms, the Kremlin has more leeway to cooperate both with former allies and non-partisan states in the continent, underpinning Russia's pragmatic approach to foreign policy strategy.

Russia's influence in Latin America is by no means uniform across every single state. Although it has a noticeable presence in countries such as Venezuela, Nicaragua and Cuba its activities are not as relevant in other nations, being relegated to a supporting role. Moscow's areas of interest are also adapted to the sociopolitical reality of its Latin American partners, ranging from purely commercial ties to more strategic ventures in military-technical cooperation and the exploration of key natural resources. Moreover, besides its strategic significance, re-establishing ties with Latin American states has been advantageous for Russia's internal political landscape. The Kremlin's high-profile diplomatic engagements with Latin American leaders, the military partnership initiatives in the region, and the economic profit gained through all these activities signal to the Russian public that their

country is moving past the setbacks of its retreat from global prominence following the USSR's dissolution (Ellis, 2015).

3.2 Russia's Military Presence in Latin America: A response to NATO

Latin America is considered by Russia as a highly strategic location due to its geographical vicinity to the United States. The region constitutes Washington's near abroad in the same way that former USSR states and Eastern Europe form Russia's own near abroad. As a response to Washington's meddling close to Russian borders, the Kremlin believes that it must be able to reciprocate by projecting its interests in Latin America (Rouvinski, 2017). By being able to deploy military resources in a key territory for North American defence, Moscow aims to pressure Washington and divert its attention away from the proximity of Russian borders.

Russian military engagement in Latin America, while characteristically more subtle compared with Cold War times, covers a wide range of activities, comprising high-level authority visits, weapons sales, investments in education and training, and strategic deployments around the region (Ellis, 2015). Between 2000 and 2009, Russia signed around 200 cooperation agreements with Latin American and Caribbean countries on various topics, including military-technical issues. These agreements were signed with nations such as Brazil, Peru, Argentina, and Chile in 2004, and with Venezuela and Bolivia in 2009. Additionally, Moscow has maintained a longstanding agreement with Cuba focussed on providing spare parts for the Cuban Army's Soviet-made weapons (Serbin, 2019).

Grosso modo, the strength of Russian-Latin American relations can serve as an indicator of the overall state of Russia's relationship with the US or the West as a whole (Szente-Varga, 2022). For example, in the course of the Russo-Georgian War in 2008, as a retaliation to the North American presence in the Black Sea, Russia deployed two supersonic and nuclear-capable Tu-160 bombers to a naval base in Venezuela, one of the fiercest opposers to Washington's foreign policy in the region. From there, the

bombers performed a series of exercises over the Caribbean (Ellis, 2015). Later in that year, the Kremlin dispatched a naval flotilla of 4 military ships led by the nuclear missile cruiser Peter the Great and also containing the destroyer Admiral Chabanenko. The squadron visited once again Venezuela for coordinated exercises but also made port calls in Cuba and Nicaragua (Jeifets, 2015).

The Tu-160 bombers later returned to Latin America in 2013 shortly before Russia's annexation of Crimea in early 2014, visiting once more Venezuela and Nicaragua (Szente-Varga, 2022). Diplomatic efforts in the region also were increased during the 2014 Ukraine crisis, with Foreign Minister Lavrov and President Putin discussing the establishment and reactivation of bases in Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua (Ellis, 2015). Similarly, amid rising tensions between Russia and Ukraine following the Kerch Strait incident⁴ in 2018, two Tu-160 planes again arrived in Venezuela in the same year, soon after Putin attended the first G20 Summit in South America. These displays of naval and air power in the region are strongly connected to Russian foreign policy objectives, which go beyond the scope of regional military cooperation (Szente-Varga, 2022).

Besides traditional military cooperation, Russia has also been involved in the development of its Latin American partners' cyber capabilities such as cyber-attacks, hacking, and expanding the reach of surveillance equipment. These sophisticated tactics are mostly used to support friendly governments in the region, allowing authoritarian Latin American leaders to suppress political opponents and journalists, seriously undermining the democratic process (Farah & Babineau, 2019). Moscow's cyber engagements in the territory can grant Russian intelligence services access to strategic military and infrastructure systems, which in turn can be used to disrupt communication and power delivery in potential adversary countries to friendly regimes (Morgus et al., 2019).

⁴ The Kerch Strait incident is regarded as the first time that Russian and Ukrainian forces clashed during the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War

In recent years, Russian intelligence services have been expanding their access to Latin American data through several simultaneous cyber developments. A key player in this effort is the unofficial association of intelligence and surveillance providers operating under the Russian National Committee for the Promotion of Economic Trade with Countries of Latin America (NK SESLA), headquartered in Santiago, Chile. The organisation's leadership comprises senior figures from various Russian state cyber warfare entities, suggesting that the network's primary mission lies in electronic intelligence, cryptology, and surveillance rather than regional trade. Moreover, Moscow is actively promoting the installation of Russia's own GLONASS tracking systems in Latin America as an alternative to US global positioning systems. Notably, the Central Institute for Information and Communications (TsITiS), a member of the NK SESLA network, was tasked by President Putin to build a secure communications network for the Russian military and now plays a critical role in detecting and deterring cyber attacks (Farah & Richardson, 2022).

Russia's hybrid approach to warfare is attributed to the adoption of the "Gerasimov Doctrine", postulated by the Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, Valery Gerasimov. In an article published in 2013, Gerasimov analysed Western use of non-conventional military means such as economic blockades, funding of internal opposition and the spread of information campaigns to discredit the opponent. Consequently, Gerasimov argued that Russia is in a state of permanent warfare, instead of choosing between war and peace, as its adversaries are constantly using insidious forms of non-linear warfare (Farah & Babineau, 2019). To be able to face the West, Russia must also employ an aggressive and multidimensional effort mixing hard and soft power across as many means as possible, as shown in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2*Changes in the Character of Warfare According to Gen. Gerasimov*

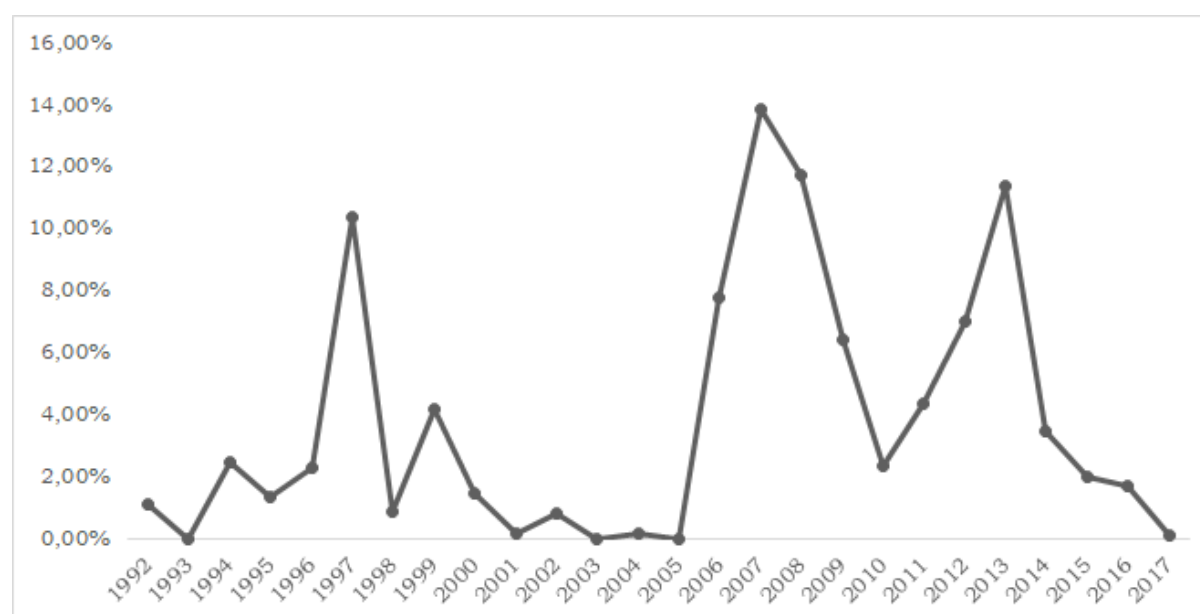
The use of military forces	The use of political, diplomatic, economic and other nonmilitary measures in combination with the use of military forces
Traditional forms and methods	New forms and methods
Initiation of military operations after strategic deployment	Initiations of military operations by groupings of line-units (forces) in peacetime
Frontal clash of large groupings of line-units, the basis of which consists of ground troops	Highly manoeuvrable, noncontact combat operations of interbranch groupings of line-units
The destruction of personnel and weaponry, and the consequent possession of lines and areas with the goal of the seizure of territories	Reduction of the military-economic potential of the state by the destruction of critically important facilities of his military and civilian infrastructure in a short time
Destruction of the enemy, destruction of the economic potential and possession of its territories	The mass use of high-precision weaponry, the large-scale use of special operations forces, as well as robotic systems and weapons based on new physical principles and the participation of a civil-military component in combat operations
The conduct of combat operations on the ground, in the air and at sea	Simultaneous effects on line-units and enemy facilities throughout the entire depth of his territories
The command-and-control of groupings of line units (forces) within a framework of a strictly organised hierarchical structure of command-and-control agencies	Warfare simultaneously in all physical environments and the information space
	The use of asymmetric and indirect operations
	Command-and-control of forces and assets in a unified information space

Note. From *The value of science is in the foresight: New challenges demand rethinking the forms and methods of carrying out combat operations*, by V. Gerasimov, 2016, *US Army military review*, p. 25. CC BY-NC

Geopolitically speaking, military-technical cooperation is undoubtedly one of the main priorities for Russia in Latin America and one of the most successful areas of the renewed engagement between the two regions. For instance, Moscow has been able to become the second biggest supplier of weapons to Latin American countries, coming after only the US. Although arms sales are sometimes linked to economic cooperation, their ends are definitely political, as the possession of weapons is directly related to the capacity of every state to protect its sovereignty (Pyatakov, 2020). As shown in Figure 3.1, Russian arms trade with Latin America has improved considerably since the late 1990s.

Figure 3.1

Russian Arms Sales to Latin America Compared to Its Total Arms Sales



Note. Source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). *Arms Transfers Database* © SIPRI.

Russian weapons sales in Latin America have had considerable implications for both regional military cooperation and Russia's economic interests. Between 2005 and 2014, Russia experienced a peak in arms sales to the region, with Venezuela being a major buyer, spending over \$5.4 billion on Russian weaponry (Jeifets, 2015). These arms deliveries enhanced the

military strength of Russia's clients, especially Venezuela, where the military's role has been decisive in sustaining Maduro's regime (Secieru, 2021). Furthermore, Russian arms, including helicopters, have found their way into the inventories of major Latin American countries such as Brazil, Peru, Ecuador, Argentina, and Mexico, helping Russia secure maintenance and repair contracts (Ellis, 2015). However, Russia's reliance on Venezuela, which accounted for 80% of its arms exports to the region, meant that the political and economic instability in Caracas significantly impacted Russian arms sales, indicating a challenge for Russia in maintaining a substantial consumer base in the future (Secieru, 2021).

We regard MTC [military technical cooperation] with the countries of Latin America as one of the important elements of our multifaceted cooperation. Russia is a recognised producer of arms, which are in demand on world markets, including in this region. We presume that MTC in accordance with international norms is a sovereign right of each state. Our stand is that maintaining the proper level of defence capability is an objective necessity of any country, and that the development of international ties in the military technological sphere is normal commercial practice. In our policy in the field of MTC with Latin American countries Russia proceeds from the principle of preventing any buildup through Russian exports of any destabilising arms stockpiles that could lead to an upsetting of the balance of forces in the region. (Yakovenko⁵, November, 2004)

The Chavez administration in Venezuela greatly benefitted from weapons deals with Moscow. Between 1999 and 2013, the Venezuelan armed forces extensively renovated and modernised its arsenal. Russian arms supplies enabled both the ground and air forces to meet their need for military equipment. The substantial purchase of sophisticated Russian air defence systems has turned Venezuela into the most well-defended Latin American

⁵ Alexander Yakovenko was the spokesman of Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs at that time

country against potential air strikes (Pyatakov, 2020). North American sanctions over arms sales to Venezuela during Chavez's presidency were one of the main drivers for Russian success in the country's market. These sales were crucial to establishing strategic relations between Russia and Venezuela, enabling Chavez to challenge US interference and maintain support within the Venezuelan army at the same time (Ellis, 2015). Apart from weapon sales, the deployment of Russia's regular armed forces to Venezuela, simply referred to as "technical specialists", marked the first presence of non-Western Hemisphere foreign troops since the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. This move compelled Trump's administration to revise its initial strategy towards Caracas, acknowledging Moscow as a significant player in the Venezuelan context (Serbin, 2019).

After Venezuela, Nicaragua is the most promising country for Russia's weapons market, mainly due to the fact that almost the entirety of Managua's military equipment was made by the USSR (Pyatakov, 2020). Like in Venezuela, Russia has provided modern equipment to the Nicaraguan army ground force and renovated its Soviet-era artillery and armoured vehicles (Cox, 2016). Military cooperation between the two countries also comprises educational programmes such as the inauguration of a training facility for law enforcement officials in Managua in 2017 built upon a counternarcotics cooperation agreement signed between Russia and Nicaragua in 2013 (Farah & Richardson, 2022). Nicaraguan army officials are also sent to Russian institutions for training and cooperate with their Russian counterparts in anti-narcotics operations on Nicaraguan territory (Ellis, 2015). Furthermore, Russia has maintained a continuous presence of around 230 troops in Nicaragua since 2017 at least. Even though the personnel rotate every two months, the total number remains fairly constant each month (Farah & Richardson, 2022).

As another close Russian ally in Latin America, Cuba's engagements with Moscow have been mainly on the military-technical aspect. Both countries signed a military agreement in 2007, which was put into practice in

2009. Consequently, Russia has endowed Cuba with significant amounts of state credit to finance the country's defence industry. Since then, Havana has been using these funds to purchase armoured vehicles, naval equipment, air defence systems and also modernise its armed forces (Pyatakov, 2020). Although Russo-Cuban relations are generally friendly, the two countries have already disagreed on critical defence issues, namely over the Russian radiolocation facility located in Lourdes, Cuba. The station was used by the Russians to monitor North American territory during the Cold War, hence, once the conflict was settled, it remained mostly inactive during the 1990s. In 2001, Russia decided to close down the facility, a move perceived by Cuba as detrimental to its national security. Tensions escalated in 2008 when President Putin suggested resuming military ties with the island without prior consultation, a proposal Havana rejected (Krzywicka, 2013).

Peru has emerged as one of the main markets for Russia's military industry, as well as one of the most important defence partners in Latin America. Although Russo-Peruvian engagements are not as discussed as Russia's relations with ALBA countries, the two states have sustained a remarkable political association over the recent years. Many senior staff officers of the Peruvian Army have studied in the Soviet Union through military exchange programmes and, consequently, have an overall positive opinion on cooperating with Moscow on defence matters. Russia also has in its favour in the country a plethora of Soviet military equipment in the Peruvian army inventory, guaranteeing an advantage in winning over maintenance contracts. In 2013, Peru ratified a \$528 million contract to purchase a fleet of 24 helicopters. The agreement also included \$180 million in offsets to bolster Peru's economy and defence sector and the construction of a maintenance base near the Peruvian Air Force Base in the Arequipa region. Besides weapons sales, Moscow has also sponsored Peruvian military officers' studies in Russian universities since 2012 (Ellis, 2015).

Although Brazil is perhaps Russia's most important partner in Latin America, both economically (as the largest economy in the region) and

politically (as part of BRICS along with Russia), military cooperation between the two continental heavyweights has not grown substantially as their potential indicates. A military-technical partnership agreement was ratified in 2008, yet, actual defence engagements were based mainly on military equipment purchases such as helicopters and missile system batteries (Pyatakov, 2020). In total, from 2000 to 2020, Russian arms supply to Brazil accounted for less than 5% of all arms imports to the Latin American country. One of the biggest hindrances to further cooperation is Brazil's own military-technical industry, which is a competitor to Russia's manufacturers in certain sectors (Ellis, 2015).

Lastly, Russia has occasionally served as a means for Colombia to reduce its reliance on Washington, particularly illustrated in 1996 when Colombia, under President Ernesto Samper, purchased military transport helicopters from Russia following a fallout with the U.S. over counterdrug cooperation issues. This move marked Colombia's first major military acquisition from Russia, leading to the purchase of a total of 24 helicopters and transport aircraft, which in turn led to Colombia sending personnel to train for the use of the new systems in Russia. However, Colombia still views Moscow's presence in Latin America with concern due to its associations with authoritarian and volatile neighbours such as Venezuela and Nicaragua. Moreover, the Soviet Union's presumed role in supporting the leftist guerilla FARC in Colombia during the Cold War is another point of contention between the two countries (Ellis, 2015).

Ultimately, Russia has resumed and improved its military ties with former allies of the Soviet Union such as Cuba and Nicaragua, and took advantage of its previous arms deals in the region with non-aligned countries during the Cold War. New-found allies such as Venezuela are eager to openly collaborate with Moscow to oppose the United States in defence matters, contrasting with Cuba's more reserved approach towards antagonising Washington too much. This divergence mostly stems from Cuban leadership's own experience in dealing with the constant threat of a potential North

American intervention caused by a Russian military presence in its territory (Ellis, 2015).

Overall, Russian involvement in Latin America has been characterised by its geographical selectivity, limited scope and varying intensity over time, often becoming more vigorous during periods of confrontational Russian foreign policy elsewhere. This pattern is particularly evident when examining Moscow's power displays and high-level visits in the region, which are concentrated around events where Russian authorities sought to directly interfere in neighbouring countries such as Ukraine and Georgia (Szente-Varga, 2022). Many of these efforts of power projection in Latin America during the last decades have been conceived to impact Russian and international spectators by presenting an inflated figure of the Kremlin's actual military potential. Indeed, Russia's quest to become a major foreign player in Latin America, as well as in other regions, favours military and defence aspects due to its limited resources to influence other areas (Chindea et al., 2023).

3.4 Russian Soft Power Tactics and the Limits of Liberalism

The collaboration between Russia and Latin American countries has been instrumental for Moscow to substantially avoid the effects of coercive international measures such as Western-imposed sanctions and UN resolutions. For instance, during the 2014 Crimean annexation, Russia was able to defy economic blockades by using Latin America as a food supplier (Harris, 2018). Russia's political ties in the region, particularly with the ALBA axis, which has supported it against economic blockades and refrained from joining US criticism of Russia's military incursions, highlights the shared views of Russian and Latin American leaders on the importance of abiding by international law and non-interventionism in international relations. These principles are closely related to the sovereignty of Latin American states, especially those that do not possess many means to defend their territory, and were instrumental in guaranteeing their survival during two centuries of independence. Consequently, many countries in the region feel threatened by

a hegemonic order controlled by the US, their most powerful neighbour (Serbin et al., 2019).

This visit means a lot to us. First, it takes place at a time when both Russia and Cuba have been subjected to unfair unilateral sanctions and have a common enemy, a common source which is the Yankee empire, which manipulates a large part of humankind [...] We constantly condemn the sanctions imposed on the Russian Federation and the sources of the ongoing conflict so that people are not misled and do not blame Russia for this, and we also condemn what Europe is doing, being completely subordinate to US interests. (Bermudez⁶, November, 2022)

Russia exploits historical distrust of the United States in Latin America, where North American disapproval and sanctions against certain governments recall memories of past US support for coups and regime changes (Shuya, 2019). By bolstering its diplomatic presence, Russia presents itself as a viable alternative to US imperialism and its perceived goals of overthrowing revolutionary nationalist governments and seizing the region's natural resources (Farah & Reyes, 2017). In this context, the rivalry between the United States and Russia in their respective areas of influence is characterised by both powers deploying strategies of "resilience support" to maintain and expand their geopolitical reach. Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has focused on supporting the sovereignty and independence of countries in the post-Soviet space, countering Russian influence. Conversely, Russia has sought to enhance its influence among historical allies like Cuba and Nicaragua, becoming a crucial supporter of leaders such as Maduro and Ortega (Rikles & Castellano, 2022). Besides, Russia's condemnation of US interventionism and the endorsement of regionalist ideals have strengthened its dialogue with many other Latin

⁶ Miguel Díaz-Canel Bermudez is the current President of the Cuban Republic, as well as First Secretary of the Cuban Communist Party

American countries, positioning itself as a counterbalance to the alienation caused by liberal globalisation (Soliz, 2023).

[...] It is the President of Russia who leads the efforts to protect international order, prevent the use of force in international affairs and interference in the internal life of other countries, and to uphold the sovereignty of states. We are acting shoulder to shoulder with other states on these issues. We campaign for common rights, the dignity of each country and each nation because in the final count we want not only our state [Bolivia] but the entire world to be plurinational. (Morales, July, 2019)

The concept of an alternative democracy, distinct from liberal democracy and established in populist and nationalist models, facilitates the interaction between Moscow and authoritarian governments in the region, promoting autocratic dissemination. This convergence is further reinforced by a conjunction of anti-liberalism and anti-imperialism, fostering a favourable portrayal of autocracies and advancing the interests of non-democratic regimes in achieving economic and political goals as well as sustaining social control through fabricated consent (Marrero & Chaguaceda, 2022).

The affinity for embracing authoritarian measures is clearly seen in the similarities between Putin's and Chávez's internal policies, for instance. Both leaders favoured concentrating power in the executive branch, greatly diminishing political advocacy for the opposition, and maintaining state control over key economic sectors, rejecting the model of political organisation based on democratic principles (Serbin et al., 2019). In addition, the control of civil spaces and citizen participation in many Latin American countries, akin to Russian and Chinese practices, include persecuting activists, independent journalists, and autonomous organisations through legal actions, particularly those funded abroad (Marrero & Chaguaceda, 2022).

This rejection of liberal ideals stems mainly from the frustrating experience of both regions with social and economic reforms during the 1990s

that were conceived from the same liberal intellectual root and were prone to the same guidelines. These reforms were perceived as responsible for increasing structural inequalities and creating a corrupt elite that governed blindly following a liberal doctrine, disregarding the political reality of peripheral countries. The failure to deliver the promised prosperity led to a strong opposition to liberalism and a drive to reclaim political control (Soliz, 2023).

In Latin America, many pink tide politicians criticised the Western-imposed liberal framework and denounced it as a new form of colonisation, appealing to the glorious past of the wars of independence to set the region free from North American imperialism. This discourse gained traction due to the recent memory of past US interferences in the region supporting civilian and military dictatorships during the Cold War. Especially regarding ALBA countries, the narrative of an impending US invasion is a common topic of its members' foreign policy, being stressed by its leaders during the crises in Venezuela (2018), Bolivia (2019), and Nicaragua (2020) (Soliz, 2023).

Russian diplomacy has successfully leveraged this counter-hegemonic discourse to join or be an observer in several Latin American coalitions that purposely exclude North America and its Western allies, such as CELAC (The Community of Latin American and Caribbean States) and ALBA (Farah & Reyes, 2017). Russia's participation in these organisations frequently hinders the effectiveness of US-led forums for regional cooperation, namely the Inter-American System for the Protection of Human Rights and the Organisation of American States (OAS).

Russia remains committed to the comprehensive strengthening of relations with the Latin American and Caribbean States taking into account the growing role of this region in global affairs. Russia will seek to consolidate ties with its Latin American partners by working within international and regional forums, expanding cooperation with multilateral associations and Latin American and Caribbean integration structures, including the Community of Latin American and

Caribbean States, the Southern Common Market, the Union of South American Nations, the Central American Integration System, the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America, the Pacific Alliance and the Caribbean Community. (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2016)

Moscow's ties with interregional organisations outside of its traditional scope of influence such as CELAC serve as a strategic move to gain more global visibility. At the same time, this relationship helps CELAC countries gain more independence from Washington (Rikles & Castellano, 2022). Furthermore, the ALBA countries also provide Russia with significant support in the UN, as members of this coalition usually oppose or abstain from voting in resolutions that might chastise Russia (Harris, 2018). Notably, Venezuela and Nicaragua were the only two Latin American UN member states that formally recognised the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Georgia's Russian-sponsored breakaway regions (Cox, 2016). The Kremlin readily reciprocates its Latin American allies' support by vetoing attempts to denounce alleged human rights violations and electoral frauds using its power as a permanent member of the UNSC (Farah & Richardson, 2022).

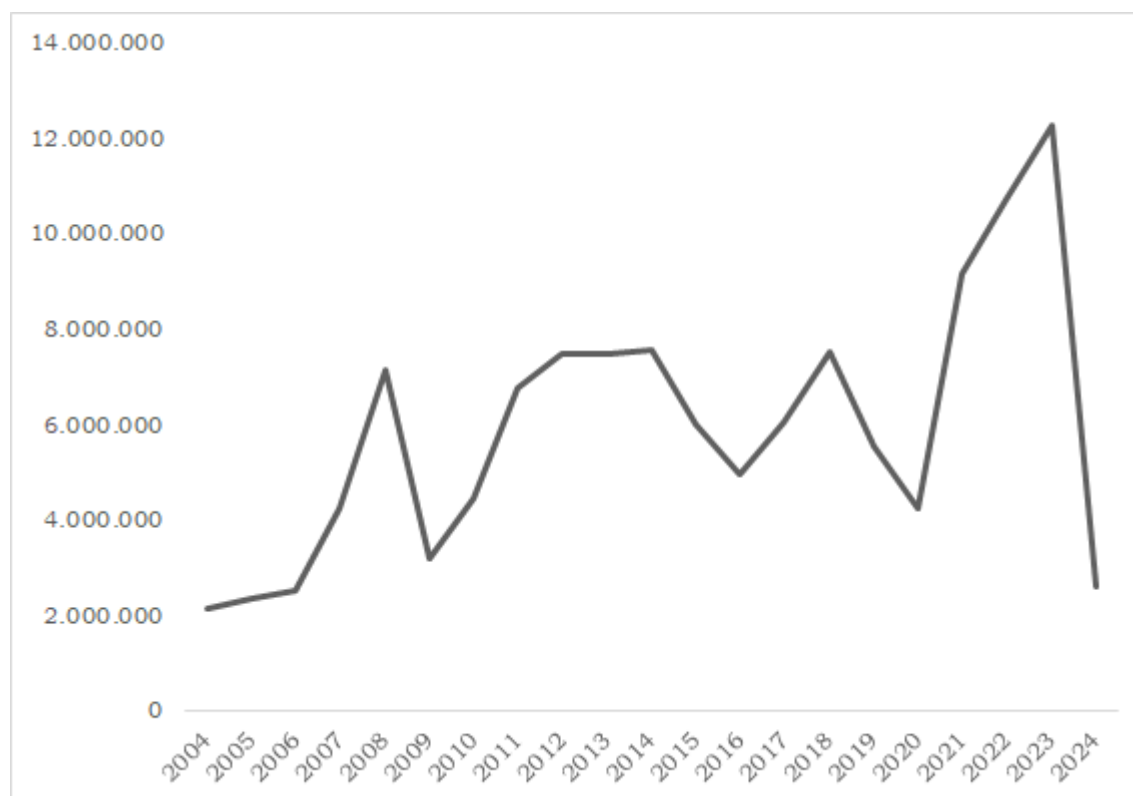
Russia's diplomatic outreach in Latin America is also strengthened by major investments and strategic partnerships in the energy sector, providing Moscow with another significant tool to exert its influence in the region. The Kremlin has sought to capitalise on opportunities where Latin American states have been disadvantaged, or even outright rejected by private international institutions, positioning itself as an alternative and reliable partner by offering more attractive and flexible terms than lenders who follow Western business standards (Gurganus, 2018). For instance, Russian financing in Venezuela's energy sector reduced some of the effects of North American sanctions on Maduro's government, with state-controlled oil firm Rosneft investing approximately \$9 billion in Venezuela between 2010 and 2019 (Brandt, 2023). Taking advantage of the political isolation of the country that possesses the world's largest oil reserves, Russia has been able to amass

great profit from the brokerage, transportation and financial management of the crude oil business. Moreover, Moscow was able to improve its position as a crude oil supplier to Washington in 2020 (Freitas et al., 2022).

Apart from its significant role in Venezuela, Russia is also involved in the energy sector of many other Latin American countries, including Cuba, Bolivia, Brazil and Mexico. Since the late 1990s, Russian companies from the energy sector sought new markets in Latin America, applying their expertise to recover from the setbacks of the collapse of the Soviet system. Many of these companies perceived the region as more accessible than the markets of other countries, resulting in an increase of 44% in Russian imports to Latin America between 2006 and 2018 (see Figure 3.2), mainly driven by energy-related investments (Serbin et al., 2019; Harris, 2018; Rouvinski, 2017).

Figure 3.2

Total Imports of Russia to Latin American Countries



Note. Values expressed in thousands of dollars. Source: *Asociación Latinoamericana de Integración (ALADI). Foreign trade database* © ALADI

The Kremlin has intensified its cooperation in electricity generation most notably with Argentina, Cuba and Ecuador. In Quito, Russian companies have supplied gas and steam turbines for new thermal power plants. Concerning Havana, Russia extended a 1.2 billion euro loan in 2015 to build four 200-megawatt power units, signed agreements to modernise the Cienfuegos oil refinery and continues to donate oil to the island. Lastly, Buenos Aires has a longstanding energy relationship with Moscow, with Russian equipment supplying 30% of Argentina's energy needs. Russia and Argentina signed a strategic energy partnership in 2015, involving oil and gas deals, and plans for a nuclear power plant. Russian private companies also provided hydro-power turbines and generators for the Punta Negra Hydro Power Plant in 2011 (Pyatakov, 2020; Harris, 2018; Gurganus, 2018).

If we speak about the economic side of our cooperation, we try to expand trade and economic interaction, above all its investment constituent. We are interested in building fully functional projects, industrial, technological alliances with the participation of the region's [Latin American] countries, in using the potential of the complementary economies to the full extent, in cooperation on such relevant fields as oil and gas, hydro and nuclear power engineering, aeroplane and helicopter construction, infrastructure, and recently – biopharmaceuticals and information technologies. (Putin, July, 2014)

Russia has also sought to share its expertise in nuclear energy with interested Latin American countries. In 2016, Russia and Paraguay announced an atomic energy partnership between the two countries. Likewise, in 2018 Argentina announced the ratification of a memorandum of understanding with state-owned Russian company Rosatom, covering uranium exploration and support in constructing nuclear power plants (Farah & Babineau, 2019). Bolivia also has expressed interest in developing its own nuclear industry. La Paz has been negotiating with Russia for the creation of a nuclear research centre in the city of El Alto since 2016. With prospects of being finalised in 2024, the research reactor will be Russia's first exported nuclear reactor (Szente-Varga, 2022).

Moscow's ventures in Latin American energy infrastructure highlight Putin's vision of maintaining and expanding Russia's role as a global energy supplier. Despite resistance from the United States and European countries' criticism following the launch of new oil pipelines in Europe and Asia, the Kremlin is on the verge of modernising its hydrocarbon supply infrastructure, moving away from the outdated systems inherited from the USSR. However, experts warn that Russia's domestic oil production may decline in the medium term, prompting Moscow to seek control over more foreign oil and gas fields through state-owned mega-companies such as Rosneft and Gazprom. Latin America and the Caribbean, in particular Venezuela, with its vast oil reserve, are crucial to this strategy (Rouvinski, 2020).

Another Russian tactic to spread its influence and anti-North American views in the region is through a state-controlled network of media outlets specifically targeted at the Latin American audience, particularly RT en Español and Sputnik Mundo. Launched in 2009, RT *en Español* quickly gained a substantial following, rivalling even prominent North American media channels in Latin America (Pyatakov, 2020). These networks work conjointly on popular online social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Whatsapp and X/Twitter, enabling a quick spread of their content to mainstream media (Farah & Richardson, 2022).

This strategic media presence aims to challenge the dominance of the United States by portraying Russia as a superior alternative to Western democracy. RT *en Español* often criticises Washington's policies and Latin American liberal democracies, depicting Russia and its allies positively and glorifying counter-hegemonic insurgencies such as the Bolivarian and Iranian Revolutions. For example, the Russian media's extensive coverage of the Venezuelan crisis in 2019 emphasised narratives blaming the US for the state's difficulties, not the shortcomings of Maduro's controversial policies, reinforcing anti-North American rhetoric (Steiner & Oates, 2019, as cited in Rouvinski, 2020).

Russia has consistently expanded its media platforms throughout nearly every Latin American and Caribbean country. Despite being based in Moscow, RT Spanish has offices in Buenos Aires, Caracas, Havana, Los Angeles, Madrid, Managua and Miami (Gurganus, 2018). RT and Sputnik have extended its reach further through strategic collaborations with like-minded media channels such as Venezuelan-based TeleSur (originally founded by Hugo Chávez), and HispanTV, the Iranian Spanish-language satellite network. These media outlets also capitalise on international issues that usually antagonise Latin America and Western countries to foster goodwill in the region. For instance, in Argentina, the message includes denouncing British possession of the Falkland Islands (*Islas Malvinas*) and

stating the hypocrisy of the West in demanding that Russia leave Ukraine while the UK still controls the Argentinian archipelago (Farah & Ortiz, 2023).

RT and Sputnik Mundo quickly became two of the most influential media outlets in Latin America, jointly amassing a total of around 30 million followers on social media platforms, an amount far superior to their total following in English (26 million), but still inferior to their reach in Arabic (39 million). These outlets are regarded as one of the main sources for content related to the Russo-Ukrainian War in Spanish, expectedly expressing an antagonising view of Ukraine and Western countries in the conflict. Conversely, Russia's actions are portrayed as necessary to "de-Nazify" Ukraine and liberate its population from a corrupt and immoral West-backed government (Farah & Richardson, 2022).

Apart from extensive media coverage that portrays Russia as a reliable ally against Western Imperialism. Russia also actively seeks circumstances to improve its image in the region, as it was the case during the COVID-19 pandemic. With the goal of boosting its soft power in Latin America, Moscow offered shipments of the Russian-developed vaccine, Sputnik V, to countries in the region, stressing the selfish behaviour of wealthy states that monopolised the acquisition of other vaccines (Secrieru, 2021). Despite not being recognised by the World Health Organisation at the time of the pandemic, Sputnik V was successfully applied in countries such as Argentina, Bolivia, Mexico, Paraguay and Venezuela (Rikles & Castellano, 2022).

Recently, the Russian government has promoted its narratives on global issues also through the establishment of state-sponsored academic and cultural institutions such as the Pushkin Institute and the *Russkiy Mir* (Russian World) Foundation, modelled after Western countries initiatives like the British Council (UK) and the *Alliance Française* (France). However, unlike their counterparts, which often include pluralistic views and open criticism of their own governments, Russian agencies tend to support and disseminate uniform and favourable worldviews about Moscow. This approach is particularly evident in the *Russkiy Mir* Foundation, created by presidential

decree in 2007 under Putin's administration. The foundation's main objective is to foster a global appreciation of Russian culture and language, reflecting the Russian authority's vision to spread a positive perception of Russia worldwide. The Kremlin has since then established over 200 institutes across 70 countries, including Cuba, Ecuador, Mexico and Venezuela (Marrero & Chaguaceda, 2022).

Unlike the American model of soft power, which relies on the allure of liberal democracy, English language proficiency to access a globalised world, and the emancipation of the middle classes through consumer culture, Russian state diplomacy is centred on national and regional sovereignty without imposing adherence to any universal value. By opposing the perceived enforcement of a globalised liberal order, Russia offers an alternative narrative that resonates with leaders hoping to establish local autonomy against external influences (Soliz, 2023).

Russian soft power has been notably supported by many Latin American intellectuals, artists and academics who broke away with liberal ideals, denouncing it as a ploy established by the West to exert cultural, economic and political control over the Global South. Although it seems contradictory that the Latin American left found a common discourse with Russian civilisational conservatism, their counter-hegemonic discourse is not based on political principles, but in a rather flexible ideology constructed through adversities. The use of this adaptable discourse to foster constructive dialogue between both regions is better exemplified by Putin hosting, on separate occasions, Brazil's Bolsonaro and Argentina's Fernández in Moscow shortly after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Despite belonging to starkly different political affiliations, Russian rhetoric was capable of fostering a common dialogue based on the criticism of liberal ideology, stressing the importance of state sovereignty in Bolsonaro's case, and the need to contain US influence over the region with Fernández (Soliz, 2023).

Since the 1990s, Argentina has been strongly oriented towards the United States. Argentina and its economy are largely dependent on the

US and our relations with it. In fact, our debt to the IMF also emerged because of this relationship [...] I am consistently working to rid Argentina of this dependence on the IMF and the US. I want Argentina to open up new opportunities. Cooperation with Russia is vital for us. I would like to assure you, and I hope that you will accept my assurances that we do want to develop cooperation with Russia. (Fernández, February, 2022)

As a peripheral region of the historic West, Latin America perceives the nuances of democracy and authoritarianism in a different way than Global North countries do. The region has suffered the inconsistencies of those nations currently championing international liberalism, such as supporting authoritarian regimes and destabilising democratic ones. As a result, even Latin American democratic governments view the United States' commitment to these values with scepticism. For that reason, the majority of countries in the region show limited support to Western attempts to isolate Russia for its actions in Ukraine, adopting a neutral or even favourable stance that frustrates many Western leaders (Saltalamacchia & Castañeda, 2023).

To the developed world, Moscow's defeat in the Ukraine war should be a common interest to all nations, especially those who are not powerful enough to defend their borders against a foreign aggressor. However, the West cannot ask for Latin America to defend the established world order with the same intensity as they do, as the biggest threat to the region's security has always been the United States and its imperialistic and patronising discourse towards its southern neighbours. In this specific case, Russia poses a threat to Western Europe in the same way that the US represents a threat to Latin America. Consequently, the erosion of the Washington-led international system caused by a potential Russian victory in the conflict is not generally perceived as necessarily detrimental to the region's future outlook (Saltalamacchia & Castañeda, 2023).

Ultimately, the political relationship between Russia and Latin America is based on the legacy of a complex and often confrontational relationship

between the southern and northern vectors in the Americas, mainly during the Cold War. The interplay between liberal impositions, foreign interference and a colonial past gave rise to counter-hegemonic movements such as the pink tide, which explicitly criticised Western institutions and their advocates and favoured an alternative approach to hamper the US' historical monopoly of the American continent. Russia's past struggles with adapting to the Atlantic system after the fall of the USSR have produced similar effects, creating a shared worldview that epitomises the shortcomings of liberalism as an ideal model of global governance. Consequently, both regions aim at overcoming the liberal world order and re-establishing the primacy of sovereignty at the centre of the international system of states, hoping to achieve more representative global mechanisms (Soliz, 2023).

CONCLUSION

The main goal of this study was to examine Russia's evolving role in Latin America and how its diplomatic, economic and strategic interests shaped such a relationship, as well as what other geopolitical factors could be helpful to better understand this engagement. In order to analyse the proposed issue, a neorealist framework was used based on two branches of its theoretical spectrum: balance of power realism and identity realism. After the analysis of the data gathered to thoroughly investigate the issue, it can be asserted that both hypotheses cannot be rejected.

Concerning the first proposed hypothesis "Russia is balancing against the established Western hegemony by creating security alliances with Latin American countries with the intent to contain the hegemon's reach in the region", the empirical analysis confirmed this statement.

Firstly, Russia has demonstrated a much more antagonistic and non-cooperative behaviour towards the perceived US-led hegemony since the second half of the 2000s, asserting its strategic interests instead of yielding to Western rhetoric of expansion. This is better exemplified in Russia's military incursions in Georgia and Ukraine in order to halt NATO's enlargement and, consequently, limit foreign interference in its near abroad. Moreover, Russia has actively sought to diversify its international ties, preferring to cooperate with non-Western partners such as BRICS countries, hoping to achieve a more just world order where different civilisational models coexist. Hence, these facts corroborate Russia's identification of the US as a hegemonic power trying to dominate the international system.

Secondly, there has been a notable increase in Russia's military cooperation with Latin American countries since the adoption of the Primakov doctrine, resulting in Moscow becoming the 2nd biggest supplier of weapons and military equipment in the region, significantly impacting the region's security framework. It is important to mention that the biggest customers of Russian arms were countries that fiercely opposed US interference in Latin

America, such as Venezuela, Nicaragua and Cuba. These countries' regimes are considered by the US as authoritarian and anti-democratic, being constantly the target of North American sanctions to affect their economic performance and destabilise their governments.

There have also been some strategic Russian military power displays involving mainly ALBA countries, which can be attributed to an attempt to intimidate the US and divert its attention away from Russia's near abroad. The timing of these conjoined military exercises suggests a correlation between Russian aggressive foreign policy towards its near abroad and the strengthening of ties with its Latin American allies, illustrated by the deployment of Tu-160 bombers in Latin American territory during the Russo-Georgian War and the annexation of Crimea.

Finally, Moscow has been helping Latin American countries develop their cyber capabilities and upgrade their surveillance methods, which can be used in Russia's favour in case of a hot conflict in the region. The use of cyber warfare is an example of Russia's evolving military tactics envisioned by Gen. Valery Gerasimov, which stemmed from his observations of Western countries' multidimensional approach to gain a considerable advantage in international conflicts. Thus, Russia must use the same methods and be in a permanent state of war even in times of apparent peace. Furthermore, Russian military cooperation in the region also encompasses training of the Latin American army's staff and conjoined military operations against illegal drug smuggling, further establishing Russia as a key security partner in the region.

Regarding the second proposed hypothesis "Russia is prioritising strategic alliances with Latin American states because it regards the region as an ensemble of actors sharing a similar discourse of anti-Western sentiment", once again the analysed empirical evidence validates this statement.

Firstly, Russia has capitalised on Latin America's distrust of the US to advocate for the establishment of a counter-hegemonic alliance based on the principles of state sovereignty, non-interference and the primacy of multilateral institutions. These precepts are crucial to Latin America's foreign policy discourse, as the region has been the subject of Western interference for hundreds of years. Notably, North America's role in promoting coups and dictatorships throughout Latin America during the Cold War established a certain scepticism in the region over the US' unrelenting support of liberal ideals. Consequently, Russia sought to take part in interregional Latin American organisations to foster the regional independence of Washington's monopoly over the continent. Regional blocs such as CELAC and ALBA purposely exclude the US and advocate for deeper political and economic integration in Latin America.

Secondly, Moscow has expanded its soft power reach over the region by launching state-sponsored media outlets and cultural institutions that further spread Russia's worldviews in Latin America. Russian media platforms like RT *en español* and Sputnik Mundo serve as disseminators of anti-Western discourse and quickly became influential in Latin America's media landscape, surpassing traditional North American outlets in total number of online followers. The discourse these networks disseminate is specifically tailored to exploit points of contention between Latin American countries and the US-led Western coalition, such as the Argentinian and British disagreement over the Falkland Islands.

Lastly, Russia adapts its conservative civilisational rhetoric to gather support from Latin American leaders belonging to a wide variety of political families. To left-wing politicians, Moscow stresses the need to emancipate the region of Western liberalism, denouncing the US as an imperialist power seeking to destabilise Latin American leaders that oppose Washington's impositions. In the case of right-wing authorities, the discourse changes to the advocacy of states' sovereignty against foreign interference, underlying

Russia's role as a global actor that supports nations without enforcing progressive ideals such as human rights.

Therefore, this study can conclude that Russia's engagements in Latin America are based not only on a strategic move to reciprocate the US military presence in former Soviet countries but also on advocating for a more equitable and less West-centric approach to international relations. For decades, Latin American countries have been relegated to mere supporting characters in the political and economic matters of the Western Hemisphere, being considered a traditional zone of North American influence during the Cold War. A political and military association with Russia allows the region to counterbalance US power and gain more influence in shaping the continent's political landscape. Although some of the more pro-Russian countries in Latin America usually tend towards authoritarian and undemocratic methods, it is important to expose the shortcomings of the established world order, especially in peripheral countries that are most vulnerable to the volatility of the liberal model of development. After all, economic and political liberalism does not mean the same thing, nor has it worked the same for every nation.

Russia considers its relationship with Latin America as a way to project its influence over its immediate surroundings, mirroring the Soviet Union's political and economic reach as a global power. Being able to promote its interests in another geographical vector has been crucial to the Russian state maintaining its population's political support, because it signals to them that Russia has moved past its setbacks and returned to being a major power in world politics. This power projection is also used to demonstrate that Moscow is not as isolated as the West would like it to be, giving Russia the opportunity to evade sanctions over its military incursions in its near abroad.

Ultimately, The Russian state's resurgence as a prominent and often confrontational global power is a product of its revised foreign policy and defence principles, as postulated by the Primakov and Gerasimov doctrine. The first emphasised the role of multipolarity to contain the US's expanding influence in international affairs and, consequently, better accommodate

Moscow's interests worldwide. The second advocates for a mixed approach of hard and soft power and the state of permanent war to counter Western influence in several strategic regions.

As a recommendation for future studies about the subject, the same analysis could be performed regarding other non-Western players currently acting in Latin America, such as China, India, Turkey and Iran. All of these countries present unique perspectives and can help elucidate the current global trend towards multipolarity and the role of emerging economies in restructuring the international system. It is also highly advisable for future research to delve deep into specific Latin American and Caribbean countries, stressing their singular histories and past interactions with both Russia and the United States, providing more detailed and enriching contexts.

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