



A Post-America South America

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Last fall, in a speech before the Organization of American States, Secretary of State John Kerry announced with great fanfare that the "era of the Monroe Doctrine is over." Kerry's pronouncement was a distinctly political one, intended to reassure regional powers that the heavy-handed interventionism that at times had characterized America's approach to Latin America was a thing of the past. But it was also very much a sign of the times, because the United States is in strategic retreat in its own hemisphere.

Since taking office, the Obama administration has systematically disengaged from the Americas, scaling back funding for key initiatives (like the longstanding and highly-successful "Plan Colombia"), failing to bolster important military partnerships and arrangements, and equivocating over political developments in vulnerable regional states. At the same time, budgetary cutbacks and fiscal austerity have resulted in a significant paring back of the U.S. military's presence and activities throughout the region.

America's retraction from the region, however, has not taken place in isolation. It has been mirrored by the advance of three other strategic actors, each of which is significantly expanding its political and strategic presence in our geopolitical backyard.

Russia's Return

In recent months, international attention has been riveted to Russia's neo-imperial efforts vis-à-vis Ukraine, and to the growing specter of a new Cold War between Moscow and the West. In the process, another alarming facet of the Kremlin's contemporary foreign policy—its growing military presence in, and strategic designs on, the Western Hemisphere—has gone largely unnoticed.

On February 26, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu formally announced his government's plan to expand its overseas military presence. Russia, Mr. Shoigu outlined, intends to establish new military bases in eight foreign countries. The candidates include five Asian nations and three Latin American ones: Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua. A day later, in a throwback to Cold War military cooperation between the Soviet Union and client state Cuba, a Russian warship docked in Havana.

These developments are only the latest signs of a growing Russian strategic footprint in the Americas. Over the past several years, Moscow has devoted considerable diplomatic and political attention to the region, focusing in particular on building bonds with ideological regimes that share a common anti-American worldview and similarly seek to dilute and counteract U.S. influence in the region.

In Cuba, Russia has worked diligently over the past half-decade to rebuild its once-robust Cold War-era ties. This has entailed top-level diplomatic visits by Russian officials to Havana (most prominent among them a November 2008 visit to the Cuban capital by then-Russian president Dmitry Medvedev), as well as new military agreements and revived cooperation on topics such as energy and nuclear cooperation.

With Venezuela, Russia has succeeded in forging a robust military partnership, exploiting the radical ideology and expansionist tendencies of the Chavez/Maduro regime in Caracas. Between 2001 and 2013, Venezuela is estimated to have purchased more than three-quarters of the \$14.5 billion in arms sales carried out by Russia in the region.

More recently, the Kremlin also has made concerted efforts to strengthen its relations with the Sandinista government of Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua. Since Ortega's return to power in 2007, Russia has emerged as a major investor in Nicaragua's military modernization, erecting a new military training facility in Managua and a munitions disposal plant outside of the Nicaraguan capital. Russia has also thrown open its warfare schools to the Ortega regime, with 25 Nicaraguan officers now reportedly being trained annually in Moscow.

Russia's activities with these countries, and elsewhere in the region, are strategic—and opportunistic. Although in practice Latin America remains far outside Russia's areas of core interest, the Russian government has clearly taken advantage of America's retraction from the region to improve its own position there in both economic and strategic terms.

Set against the backdrop of deteriorating U.S.-Russian bilateral relations writ large, this expanded presence should be cause for concern, in no small measure because of its overt military dimensions. Indeed, in his February 26th announcement, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu indicated that Moscow desires Latin American basing capabilities because of a need for refueling facilities near the equator. This suggests that the Kremlin is now actively contemplating an expansion of its military activities in the Western Hemisphere, to include long-range missions by its combat aircraft.

Iran's Intrusion

The Islamic Republic of Iran has exhibited some level of activity in the Americas since the 1980s, when its chief terrorist proxy, Hezbollah, became entrenched in the so-called "Triple Frontier" where Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay intersect. But the Iranian regime's formal outreach to the region is considerably more recent, and largely an outgrowth of the warm personal relations between former Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and late Venezuelan leader Hugo Chavez. These bonds—rooted in a shared revolutionary worldview—positioned the Chavez regime as a "gateway" into the region for the Islamic Republic and facilitated Iran's efforts to build ties to other sympathetic regimes, most prominently those of Evo Morales in Bolivia and Rafael Correa in Ecuador.

Over the past decade, Iran's presence in Latin America has evolved along three main lines. First, Iran is engaging in outreach designed to build regional support for its nuclear effort and lessen the economic isolation it felt—at least until recently—as a result of U.S. and European sanctions. Second, Iran has sought to exploit Latin America as a hub for strategic resources, including—but not limited to—uranium ore for its nuclear program. Third, Latin America has become an arena for Iranian asymmetric activity, with the Iranian regime erecting (and maintaining) a continent-wide network of intelligence bases and logistical support centers spanning no fewer than eight countries.

Iran's influence is being felt in the region in other ways as well. The Islamic Republic, for example, has launched notable grassroots proselytization efforts in a number of Latin American countries as part of its attempt to shore up support in the Americas. Iran's domestic control methods, meanwhile, have become an export commodity. The pro-government militias used by the Maduro regime in Caracas in recent months to quell domestic opposition bear more than a passing resemblance to Iran's feared Basij domestic control units.

In hindsight, 2012 can be said to have been the "high water" mark for Iran's presence in Latin America, and the Islamic Republic's activities have since become more modest in both scope and pace. This, however, does not mean Iran's regional footprint is receding. Objectively, the Iranian regime is maintaining, if not expanding, its level of activity along every prong of its outreach to the Americas. Moreover, a number of political scenarios—among them Bolivia's recently-announced quest for a nuclear capability, Ecuador's attempts to ascend to the leadership of the ALBA bloc, and the controversial peace process now underway in Colombia—provide opportunities for Iran to preserve, and perhaps even expand, its regional influence in the years ahead.

China's Entrenchment

In contrast to that of both Russia and Iran, China's footprint in the Americas is primarily economic in nature. Over the past several years, Chinese firms have established a significant "on the ground" presence in various economic sectors throughout Central and South America, including energy, mining, construction, and telecommunications. In tandem, China's trade with countries of the region has increased exponentially, rising from \$49 billion annually in 2004 to \$260 billion a year in 2012. This tracks with China's perception of the Americas as an attractive supply source for foodstuffs, as well as a lucrative destination for Chinese goods and a significant market for Chinese labor.

Expanding political outreach has mirrored this deepening economic activity. Then-Chinese President Hu Jintao's 2004 tour of the region launched an active schedule of official visits by top Chinese officials and policymakers to Latin American states (Cuba, Venezuela, Brazil, Mexico, and Peru prominent among them). The number of concrete cooperation initiatives has ballooned as well: between the years 2000 and 2011, an estimated 121 bilateral agreements were signed between China and various countries in the region. China has also increased its participation in assorted Latin American regional organizations, joining the Organization of American States as a "permanent observer" in 2004 and becoming a "donor member" of the Inter-American Development Bank in 2008.

Militarily, meanwhile, China has pursued a multi-faceted strategy designed to maximize its contacts with, and influence among, Latin American states. Experts have identified five distinct dimensions of this outreach: humanitarian assistance, peacekeeping, military exchanges, arms sales, and technology transfer. Through its efforts on these fronts, Beijing has secured Bolivia, Venezuela, and Ecuador as arms clients, and significantly bolstered its interaction with regional militaries through personnel exchanges, joint maneuvers, and cooperative trainings.

These public activities have been matched by more quiet—and questionable—ones. For example, China has become a contributor to Argentina's nuclear program, despite the growing insolvency of the government of Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner in Buenos Aires. It has assisted both Venezuela and Bolivia in the development and launch of surveillance satellites. And it has committed, by proxy, to the construction of a massive 50-mile passageway for maritime transit between the Pacific and Atlantic in Nicaragua, despite the astronomical projected price-tag (an estimated \$40 billion). These initiatives, and others, suggest that Beijing sees the region, at least in part, as an arena for strategic competition, and one where the PRC has the ability to significantly improve its geopolitical position.

A Dangerous Vacuum

Against this backdrop, Kerry's Fall 2013 address declaring an end to the Monroe Doctrine provided confirmation to foreign powers that the United States has no plans to contest or compete with their growing influence south of our border.

This represents a dangerous signal. Through their engagement in Latin America, Russia, Iran, and China are already having a profound effect upon the complexion of the region. Absent a serious U.S. strategy toward the Americas, they will continue to do so, with negative effects for America's own security and for our long-term interests south of the border.