

Sino-Russian Competition/Cooperation in Latin America

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Introduction

Amid the recent developments in Syria, the continuous Western sanctions against Moscow for the annexation of Crimea, and naval movements by China in the East China Sea and the South China Sea, the international community wonders whether a renewed era of Washington antagonism toward Beijing and Moscow is in the making. While Eurasia has been the main arena for such contention, Latin America, a region with strong links with both Russia and China since before the Second World War, is nonetheless another arena where the U.S. has recently seen those countries' advances in the political and economic fronts. After the end of the Cold War, there was a decade of U.S. global leadership as a hyper power, while both China and Russia detached relatively from Latin America, only to return in the 2000s. During the last fifteen years, the Russian and Chinese presence in Latin America can be understood as a reaction to U.S. relative lack of interest and U.S. inactivity in the hemisphere, in clear contrast with the Cold War era. Both the 9-11 terrorist attacks and more recently the "pivot to Asia" has resulted in a significant U.S. lack of interest in Latin America[1], probably taking for granted the stability of the region.

Both Moscow and Beijing have actively promoted multi-polarity in the global scene, and having selective partnerships in Latin America serve ultimately to that purpose for both. Russia is interested in building geopolitical alliances in the American hemisphere, with selected Latin American partners, to confront U.S. hegemony and combat unilateralism in the international order[2]. Russian ambassador to Mexico, Eduard R. Mayalan, said in 2015 that such interest stem from the fact that the region is one of the centers of the multipolar world and a center of world development[3].

For Russia, the 1990s was a decade of withdrawal from the American hemisphere, as the Cuban population felt during the "special period" during the mid-1990s, but since then the first presidency of Vladimir Putin has somehow reversed such policy. Russia's current intention to upgrade its relations with Latin America is manifest in its Foreign Policy Strategy Concept for 2013, in which Russia declared that its aim is to "...consolidate its ties with Latin American partners at international and regional forums, expand cooperation with multilateral organizations in Latin America and the Caribbean, in particular with the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States and the Southern Common Market[4]."

China, meanwhile, has maintained a long tradition of friendship with the people of Latin America, even though most of its official relationships dated back to the 1970s when Taipei exited the U.N. and Beijing was recognized by most countries as the legitimate China. However, the Republic of China in Taiwan still maintains some leverage in Central America and the Caribbean as some countries recognize the regime, posing a problem for Beijing in its quest of diplomatic recognition, albeit relatively small though. Therefore, the One-China Policy has since the 1970s been the basis for its interactions with Latin American states overall. China's current involvement in the Latin American region is framed through its recent 2016 Policy Paper on Latin America and the Caribbean[5], its second white paper after the first came to the public in 2008. While recognizing that "as important members of emerging economies

and the developing world, Latin American and Caribbean countries play a major role in safeguarding world peace and development,” the current policy for the hemisphere recognizes that “the development of China cannot be possible without the development of other developing countries, including countries in Latin America and the Caribbean.” To achieve this goal, China has backed the establishment of the Forum of China and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (China-CELAC Forum) since 2015, which approved a Cooperation Plan 2015–2019, a 500 billion USD trade fund for the region, and 250 USD billion in Foreign Direct Investment for the next ten years.

The questions probed in the following involve the present and future of Chinese and Russian involvement in Latin America, an involvement that seems to develop along parallel lines as their interests seem not to collide beyond their desire to fill a vacuum left by Washington. What is the nature of their presence in the hemisphere and how it has responded to U.S. hemispheric policy? How complementary or competitive are Beijing and Moscow interactions with countries in the region? The present essay identifies relevant features of China’s involvement in the region, highlighting the economic nature of such presence, contrasting it with Russia’s main objectives and performance in the region. Next, an analysis on the cooperative nature of the Russia-China presence in Latin America and its limits is offered, as well as how and to what extent they compete in the region, mainly at the economic level. Final considerations are offered to identify the limits of their overall presence in Latin America as well as pointing out the propensity of political changes in Latin America that might affect future Chinese and Russian engagement.

Chinese interests in Latin America

Compared with Russia, China’s overall interest in Latin America covers a wide range of areas, from economic, social, and cultural, to political and diplomatic ones. As eleven countries still maintain diplomatic relations with the Republic of China (Taiwan) (namely, Belize, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines), the One China Policy has been the driving force in its relations with Latin American and the Caribbean countries, as the recent swift of diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing by Panama in June 2017 highlights. Recent Chinese interest in Latin America is manifest in former Chinese President Xi Jinping’s three visits. The first was held in 2013 by his visits to Mexico, Costa Rica, Trinidad y Tobago, one in July 2014 amid the BRICS Summit in Fortaleza, Brazil, which also included visits to Argentina, Venezuela and Cuba, and in late 2016 when he visited Ecuador and Chile, and participated in the APEC Summit in Lima, Peru.

For Latin America, where the average GDP for 2014 reached only 1.3 per cent, China represents an attractive partner in search of markets for raw materials and other commercial goods, and Beijing sees the region as a continuous partner amid its next-generation economic structural reforms. It is known that bilateral trade between China and Latin America and the Caribbean region amounted to 260 billion USD in 2013[6]. Between 2005 and 2014, China has approved a total of 119 million USD in loans to Latin American countries and has pledge investments totaling 250 billion USD over the next ten years[7]. Moreover, China has started what has been called the “yuan diplomacy” in the region, manifest in the 2012 agreement reached among BRICS countries to foster agreements in local currencies, which in turn led to the 2013 yuan-denominated swap deal between China and Brazil (previously in 2009 China and Argentina reached a similar 11-billion-USD agreement)[8].

At the multilateral level, China is already involved with Latin America in two mechanisms, the Forum for East Asia-Latin American Cooperation (FEALAC) and more recently the Forum of China and Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (China CELAC). While the former is a formal dialogue forum leading to co-projects among both regions, the latter has been a platform between China and the region devised to foster cooperation and promote the development of cooperative partnerships since 2015[9].

Since the end of the Cold War, basic guidelines for China-Latin America relations, and the basis for the China-CELAC cooperation since 2015, are framed in two white papers. The first, dated 2008, set up guidelines for bilateral cooperation in several fields, taking the One China Policy as the base for developing state-to-state relations in the hemisphere. As the 2008 White Paper is more general and rather aspirational in nature, a more complete, updated document was issued eight years later. Since the issuing of the 2016 White Paper, China has been promoting multilateral contacts with Latin America within the frame of the China CELAC mechanism and through bilateral relationships at different levels of partnerships. The white paper currently offers the most comprehensive plan to engage the region through the models “1+3+6” and “3x3”. The model is defined as follows:

“China is ready to work with Latin American and Caribbean countries to build the new “1+3+6” framework for pragmatic cooperation (i.e. guided by the China-Latin American and Caribbean Countries Cooperation Plan (2015–2019), utilizing trade, investment and financial cooperation as driving forces, and identifying energy and resources, infrastructure construction, agriculture, manufacturing, scientific and technological innovation and information technology as cooperation priorities), actively explore the new “3x3” model for capacity cooperation (which refers to jointly building the three major passages of logistics, electricity and information in Latin America, enabling healthy interactions among the enterprise, society and government, and expanding the three financing channels of funds, credit loans and insurance)...”[10].

At the level of regional mechanisms, China has been an observer of the Inter American Bank (IAB) since 2009, the Latin American Association of Integration (ALADI) since 1994, and the Organization of American States (OEA) since 2004, as well as a permanent dialogue partner in the Caribbean Community (CARICOM). China is also one of the 52 observers of the Pacific Alliance (PA), one of the most promising models of cooperation in Latin America nowadays. In the multilateral agenda, China has deepened cooperation with Latin America in several areas such as the UN Climate Summit since 2014, as well as a modest coordination in the reform of the UN organisms with selected countries[11].

Within China’s own economic strategy, individual partners have been prioritized. On an individual basis, China’s engagement with selected countries is more visible in Mexico, Costa Rica, Venezuela, Peru, Cuba, Argentina, Brazil, and Chile, where Chinese companies have set up activities in a wide range of sectors, including mining, oil industry, agriculture, construction, manufacture, services, telecommunications, logistic services and the bank sector. In each sector, Chinese companies, ranging from State Owned Enterprises (SOE) to private firms and private investors, work in close contacts with local companies (such as in the oil sector in several South American countries) taking advantage of the local sales infrastructure[12]. In general, it is known that Chinese companies focus their activities in big Latin American economies, profitable markets such as Brazil, or strategic markets such as Mexico, where the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) remains in force and reforms in the energy sector continues. Taking a holistic approach in their economic activities, Chinese companies,

backed by their government, fund most of their activities through financial services, some of them offered by Chinese banks such as the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China and the China Construction Bank.

Since 2008 (with the end of a Taiwan-China diplomatic truce for diplomatic recognition), Beijing has started to detonate many projects in the region and with countries that do not even maintain diplomatic relations. Attention has been paid to partnerships with ALBA nations and Caribbean states, huge infrastructure projects (such as a hydroelectric dam in Ecuador, port and a train line in Venezuela, or roads and bridges in Guyana, Jamaica and Surinam) [13]. More ambitious projects include the tourist resort Baha Mar and Blackwood Point in Bahamas, Bachelet Bay in Granada, and Cabo Dorado in Mexico. Above all, is the 50 billion USD Nicaragua Inter-Oceanic Canal funded by the Chinese and is scheduled to start operating in 2020, even though the recent Panama diplomatic shift in favor of Beijing has highlighted the possible redundancy of such a project in Nicaragua once China has better leverage over the improved canal.

With Latin America as a region, China has shown a more systematic approach as a partner in its efforts to detonate economic growth in the Asia Pacific region. During the November 2016 APEC Lima Summit, President Xi Jinping invited Latin American countries to join China's initiative for a long-projected Asia Pacific Free Trade Area, an APEC long-awaited aspiration since its inception during the early-1990. Here, China has started to fill the shoes of the U.S. in the trade negotiations arena. Beijing currently maintains Free Trade Agreements (FTA) with Chile, Costa Rica and Peru, and is interested in signing with more Latin American states, including Mexico, Colombia and Mercosur. Now that U.S. President Trump has withdrawn from the Trans-Pacific Partnership and shows less interests in free trade under the WTO rules, China's economic advances in Latin America, including more trade and investment in the region, as well as forging more FTAs with regional partners, remain a strong force vis-à-vis a general lack of U.S. interest in the hemisphere.

Russian Interests in Latin America

The Cold War, mainly the political developments in Central America, shaped Russia's political strategy for Latin America following the Second World War. Once it ended in 1989, the region briefly ceased being a political priority for Moscow, but ten years later the Russian presence started to become increasingly manifest. Current Russian interest in the hemisphere under the presidency of Vladimir Putin started in the 2000s. Russia has been an observer of the Organization of American States (OAS) and has expressed interest in working with the Rio Group, the Southern Common Market (Mercosur), the Central American Integration System (SICA), and the Andean Community. It is known that while in 2001 total trade amounted 3 billion, by 2013 that amount skyrocketed to 24 billion USD.

While it is believed that after 2008-9 the Russian presence in Latin America started to grow (both as a new period of global economic rebound since the financial crisis and also as a result of searching for new markets after the Russian-Georgian conflict) (Ellis, 2015, p. v), a more focused interest in Latin America started with the July 2014 visit of President Vladimir Putin, only four months after the annexation of Crimea. Russia is particularly interested in deals with Latin American governments to provide agricultural products to compensate for U.S. and European Union sanctions against Moscow. Among those deals, Mercosur proposed to increase food exports to Russia in 2016. And yet, the extent of Russian interactions with the region

in general is far more modest than the expanding activities of China, and have been focused mainly in arms sales, the energy sector and mining[14].

In the political arena, an important objective for Moscow's approach to the region is breaking the diplomatic isolation resulting from the Ukraine conflict and the annexation of Crimea and to compensate for sanctions through an active diplomacy in the region with its partners. Such partners are those who have been critical to the U.S. and its policies perceived as hegemonic in the hemisphere, and to that extent Russian diplomacy has worked relatively well. Some Latin American countries abstained from condemning the Crimean referendum in 2014, including the Bolivarian Alliance (ALBA) group that supported Russia's actions, and some members of Mercosur abstained in a UN vote over the fate of Crimea[15]. Interesting to note is that most of Moscow's key partners in the region have received similar criticisms over how they managed their own political and social issues. Critics of Russia's presence in the region quickly point out that Moscow's key allies in Latin America profited from the absence of mutually uncomfortable political questions, namely human rights violations in Cuba, prosecution of political activists in Venezuela, abuse of power in Nicaragua, or "the way politics are conducted in Russia[16]."

With individual Latin America countries, Russia has strengthened bilateral economic ties, most prominently with Cuba, Colombia, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Bolivia and Peru. Important areas include agriculture, arms trade and military cooperation, both in Central America and South America. Nicaragua, for instance, has benefitted from a growing bilateral trade (totaling USD 110 million in 2012), an economic partnership based mainly on agricultural products, and political cooperation in their fight against illegal drug trafficking coming through Central America to Russia. Moscow's main interests in Nicaragua include a proposal for the Trans-Oceanic Canal (providing security officers for its construction), as well as the sale of frigates to Managua and patrolling Nicaraguan Caribbean and Pacific littorals[17]. Among other Russian interests are securing naval stations in the hemisphere in general and upgrading air traffic infrastructure in Nicaragua in particular. In early-2017, a bilateral agreement was signed to procure the Glonass system (the Russian version of the GPS system) to Managua and to fund the expansion of the national airport[18].

In the southern hemisphere, Moscow's engagement has been particularly active with governments rather critical of the U.S.. Russian economic interests cover the SOE Rosneft deals with Argentina and Brazil, while Rostec (another SOE for high-tech industrial products) covers the sales of aircraft, helicopters, and anti-aircraft defense systems to several governments[19]. With Argentina in particular another important objective is improving its civilian nuclear capability. However, the bulk of Russian cooperation with South American countries has been in the primary sector. A representative case is Brazil, where Moscow hammered out in 2017 a fishery deal for Russian firms based in there as well as Russian exports of wheat to the country.

A similar pattern has been identified with Venezuela, where economic engagement also covers the oil and arms trade industries. Venezuela has been in fact the largest export market for Russian weapons after India, even though it is possible that the Venezuelan market will shrink considerably amid Caracas' severe economic situation; Russia is also a large partner in the Venezuelan oil industry, including alliances in petroleum and gas production between national companies and Rosneft. To finance their activities, Venezuelan banks, since 2013, have owned 49 percent of both Russian Evrofinance Mosnarbank S.A. and VTB Group and Gazprombank.

Cuba, a historic Russian partner sharing similar perceptions of the U.S. in the

hemisphere, places prominently in Moscow's diplomatic and economic agendas. After 2000, bilateral relations have greatly improved, including guarantees for Cuban airline system modernization to make Havana a tourist hub for Russian nationals visiting the Caribbean region. Bilateral agreements were further inked in 2008 during the Dimitri Medveyev presidency in the fields of health, education, space exploration and military cooperation. Later, a 2010–2013 oil exploration project was jointly conducted between JSC Zarubezhneft and CUPET, the Cuban SOE oil company. Partly as a measure to counter the U.S. embargo to the island, it is known that during Putin's 2014 trip to the region, Russia forgave 90 percent of Havana's 35.2 billion outstanding debt, renegotiating the remaining 10 percent for economic investment[20]. More recently, in March 2016 an oil agreement secured Russian energy supply to the island after a ten-year halt[21]; diplomatically, it is widely known that Moscow has denounced Trump's recent decision to roll back from U.S.-Cuba agreements inked during the last year of the Obama administration.

As for the political interest of Moscow in the hemisphere, it is necessary to put Russian advances in a global perspective. Until the election of U.S. President Trump, observers noted that Russian interests lie basically in Eurasia, not in the Americas. Former Organization of American States (OAS), Jose Insulza, recognized in 2015 that Russia's intention to influence Latin America was practically impossible as most problems in the world would occur in the Eurasian region[22]. However, as information emerges on the suspected Russian involvement in the U.S. election, Moscow has renewed its commitment with traditional allies in the region, such as Cuba. Yet, so far Russia's economic stakes in the region, its military cooperation with selected countries, and the Russian diaspora, remain relatively low as compared with those in Eurasia.

Signals of Sino-Russian Cooperation in the Region

Both Russia and China, as mentioned above, propose a more multipolar international society that reflects a more diversified world view, and refuse to accept a U.S. liberal world order in areas of universal human rights, democracy, a U.S.-led financial international system and institutions, and the war on terror and humanitarian intervention, to name a few areas. Here convergence of interests between Beijing and Moscow is manifest in several areas of the international agenda. However, Sino-Russian cooperation in the world stage is clearly more manifest in the security realm in Eurasia, and in geographical areas of paramount importance for both countries. For instance, in September 2016 both navies held joint naval maneuvers in the South China Sea and days later China joined Russia in a veto on new Western resolutions on Syria. Both moves can be defined as part of a "strategic convergence", even though they are far from being considered a manifestation of an alliance between Moscow and Beijing[23]. From the geographical perspective, cooperation in Latin America seems of a secondary importance as compared with Europe, the Middle East of the Asian maritime realm. Latin America is a relative peaceful region where borders have been basically demarcated and respected and where Beijing and Moscow's geo-strategic stakes are virtually non-existent, at least now.

For Moscow, Russia rapprochement with China has been driven by Western sanctions, in particular since 2008 amid the conflict with Georgia and more recently after the annexation of Crimea in 2014[24]. And yet, cooperative relations between them are still deeply rooted in their own policy strategies. For Russia, cooperation with China on an equal basis is enshrined in its February 2013 Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation: 80. Russia will

further build up a comprehensive, equal and trustful partnership and strategic collaboration with China and actively develop cooperation in all the spheres. Russia regards the fact that the two countries share the same fundamental positions on key global issues as one of the core elements of regional and global stability.

In Latin America, Russia intends with China to forge solid partnerships with emerging powers, mainly Brazil, amid the BRICS initiative, to foster South-South cooperation. The visits of both Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin to the region came during the July 2014 Fortaleza BRICS Summit hosted by Brazil. During the event, Brazil, China, Russia, South Africa and India inaugurated the 100 billion New Development Bank (NDB) for economic stabilization, and advanced plans to establish the Contingent Reserve Agreement in 2015. Recently in April 2016 the Development Bank of Latin America (CAF) established a strategic alliance with the CEO of the NDB, K. V. Kamath, to explore new avenues of cooperation in the region[25].

With Latin American countries on an individual basis, it is highly improbable to see Russian-Chinese cooperation beyond statements of South-South cooperation in international fora: economically, each nation pursues its own objectives in Latin America; politically, China has kept a more moderated attitude towards the political processes in the region, abstaining in general to pronounce preference for regimes as that would undermine trade and investment opportunities. One exception is possible: Venezuela. A plausible pattern of cooperation between Moscow and Beijing may be limited to trying to save Venezuela, which currently has fallen behind on shipments of crude and oil under the oil-for-loans deals with both countries. As Chinese and Russian oil companies might try to recover debt from the oil giant PDVSA through projects or assets outside the oil sector[26], it is most probable that a coordinated political decision from both Moscow and Beijing might be reached.

Overall, it is improbable to see in the near future a cooperative Sino-Russian mechanism in Latin America such as the Central Asian Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), as both countries understand that, first, the level of terror activities in the hemisphere is minimal compared with Eurasia; second, U.S. political influence in the hemisphere can't still be easily confronted as it has been protected in a region involving former Soviet republics and the border with China; and third, there are no direct national security imperatives to deal with in Latin America for both countries so far.

Sino-Russian Competition in the Hemisphere

The level of Russian economic engagement in Latin America is still minor in comparison with that of China, and for Moscow the region is less crucial for its economic development as it is for China. Politically, Russian interest in cultivating strong links with an “anti-U.S. axis” in Latin America is not shared by China, which is more dedicated to promoting the 1954 five principles of peaceful coexistence in its official discourse for the region.

And yet, there are some areas where both countries interests meet, mainly economic but also military, that in turn reveals some degree of competition amid its overall interest to provide Latin American countries with alternative partners to a hesitant U.S. more interested in other regions of the world. Such competition between Moscow and Beijing for partners is quite peculiar because their own objectives in the region tend not to be identical. Particularly after the 2014 annexation of Crimea and since more U.S. sanctions have been imposed to Moscow, and after the 2016 U.S. election in which Russian interference has been documented, Russia is looking to maintain partners in the hemisphere eager to make economic deals. Therefore, good

relations with countries such as Venezuela, Ecuador, Nicaragua and Bolivia are paramount for Russia; also, Moscow's interests in anti-American candidates for future presidential elections (such as Mexico in 2018) are likely to emerge soon.

China, on the other side, pursues clearer economic objectives in the region rather than trying to shape the political landscape in Latin America to counter U.S. influence. Trade and investment are the priorities in the hemisphere; therefore, possible conflict of interest, however low, are likely to develop between China and Russia. Here, compared with their bilateral cooperation in Latin America amid the BRICS framework, Sino-Russian competition is more likely to develop in the race for economic partners.

The nature of the competition is shaped by both the size of their economies and their level of development, as well as by the international economic conditions. For instance, during the last decade, Russian traditional exports to Latin America, including agricultural machinery and fertilizers, has been facing strong Chinese competition that offers lower prices[27]. On the other side, however, Russia has been since 2014 trying to attract more Latin American firms eager to do business in those agricultural products whose demand has been in decline in China since the contraction of its economy. In fact, it is believed that Chinese current decline in imports of fossil fuels and raw materials still presents an opportunity for Russia.

Some Latin American countries are already in the arena for such economic competition between Chinese and Russian companies. For instance, in Argentina, the SOE Rosatom has been competing with both Chinese and U.S. firms in the tender for nuclear plants; it is known that Rosatom lost the tender to provide steam turbines for the Embalse nuclear power station, one of the three operational nuclear power plants in the country, and lost another bid to the China National Nuclear Corporation (CNNC) for the construction of the Atucha III Plant, a project in which CNNC financed a 2 billion USD long-term financing agreement[28]. Other relevant projects that involved China and Russia's interest include the Vaca Muerta shale gas reservoir in the Neuquen Basin.

Another relevant area of competition between China and Russia is the arms market. During the years of Venezuela's Hugo Chavez regime, Caracas became the leading purchaser in the hemisphere of offensive Russian weapons, including Su-30 jet fighters, multiple rocket launcher systems, artillery systems and air defense systems. China also concentrates the bulk of its arms deals with Latin America in Venezuela, followed by ALBA (between 2011 and 2015, China sold 373 million in weaponry to Caracas)[29]. Other South American countries, such as Argentina and Brazil, are also regular customers of both China and Russia weaponry.

However, in general the Latin American arms market is not big (from 2011 to 2015, it represented only six percent of the global market); moreover, political decisions might change with new governments coming to power with implications for their weapons procurement programs (as in the case of Argentina under President Mauricio Macri); also, it seems that the Venezuelan arms market is weakening, and with that the interests of Russian and Chinese arms suppliers. Currently, as the Venezuelan economy deteriorates, Russia is finding a more diversified arms market, including partners for defensive hardware such as helicopters for Mexico, Bolivia, Chile, and Paraguay, besides Argentina and Brazil as regular customers[30].

The remaining cases of perceived Sino-Russian competition in the hemisphere is Cuba, a country that has enjoyed preferential treatment from both Beijing and Moscow for their own motives (the former looking to provide Central America and the Caribbean with the most reliable interlocutor and promoter of the One China Policy; the latter wishing to regain

its former Soviet status and influence in the sub-region against the U.S.). With the reversal of Cuba's Obama policy under President Trump, Havana is likely to get closer to Moscow and Beijing, even though that doesn't necessarily mean cooperation. Havana is most happy to both receive in June 2017 its biggest Russian oil shipment of the century and the pledged of two billion FDI for its railroad, while receiving from China computers[31]. However, even as U.S. policy hardens against Havana, it seems less a Sino-Russian competition there in the making than both countries' attempts to consolidate their respective areas of trade and cooperation with the island.

Conclusions

As the above outlines, while Russian interest in Latin America has largely increased since 2014, which in turn brings serious doubts over long-term commitment to the region, China's presence has shown a more consistent, long-term strategy policy for the years to come, as evident in its 2016 White Paper. Yes, both countries are in the region, but their objectives are not identical, their commitments have a different history, and their own projection of hard and soft power is unique.

Russian trade and other economic deals in the hemisphere reflects the urgency of Moscow to make friends and allies amid Western sanctions. With the reported Russian involvement in the U.S. 2016 presidential election, a cloud of tension might be forming in the forthcoming presidential elections in Latin America (in Chile and Honduras in 2017, Costa Rica, Paraguay, Colombia, Mexico, Brazil and Venezuela in 2018) and other low-level elections, whereby Moscow might try to consolidate its presence through legal or illegal means. As countries that maintain strong trade and cooperation agreements with Russia have denounced Western sanctions against Moscow, an important political aspect of Russia's advance in the hemisphere has become clearly manifest.

China, while profiting from the current U.S. administration isolationism to advance a close partnership with the region in general, has shown, nonetheless, that the economic and commercial aspect of its presence in Latin America, amid its One China Policy, is of paramount importance. China's engagement with Latin America, as framed in the 2016 White Paper, must nonetheless be further materialized through concrete measures to push forward new projects, including a new working-level timetable for the China-Latin American cooperation in the future[32] (Granados, 2016).

It has also become manifest that room for Sino-Russian cooperation is extremely limited and most of the cooperation is framed in the BRICS model, which in turn should be streamlined in the years to come as only China and India represents the current engines of the group. Whether China and Russia can jointly offer Venezuela an exit to its financial problems or to Cuba an alternative to engage the international community once the Trump administration has backpaddled recent U.S. overtures toward the island remain to be seen. Probably a pattern of commercial competition between Beijing and Moscow will continue in big infrastructure projects and arms sales in the region, with China most likely having the upper hand in bidding due to its huge capacity, capital and manpower. In sum, it is possible to rather characterize the Sino-Russian presence in Latin America as coexistence rather than cooperation/competition.

As a concluding note, it should be noted that politics in the whole hemisphere are in constant flux, and both China and Russia will have to confront changing realities. The opportunities posed by both China and Russia in the American hemisphere at the expenses

of the U.S. shouldn't be taken for granted. With more centrist governments emerging in Latin America, the years of leftist militancy against Washington are slowly fading in Argentina, Brazil and Chile. Such changes have a direct impact in deals with both Beijing and Moscow. The same can be said for the future of member countries of ALBA or even the prospects of survival of President Maduro's regime in Venezuela. To what extent it will have influence in economic and military deals with both Beijing and Moscow is a pending question.

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***This article is a revised version of a paper prepared for the Slavic-Eurasian Research Center 2017 Summer International Symposium.**



Ulises Granados at the SRC Summer Symposium, 2017