
The Impact of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine on the Global Strategic Environment and Latin America

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Introduction

Modern history is punctuated by decisive events that both directly impact the strategic environment and change the calculations of global actors. Russia's February 2022 invasion of the Ukraine is arguably one such event. The impact of the invasion on the global strategic environment, including Latin America and the Caribbean will be profound and principally negative for Western democracies and the global institutional order that has prevailed since World War II. The interacting political, economic and other dynamics set into motion by Russia's action may lead to a number of distinct paths, yet the implications of the likely outcome of events are disturbing.

In geopolitical terms, the People's Republic of China (PRC) is likely to emerge as the biggest winner from the conflict. At the same time, the military and political dynamics unleashed by Russia's invasion will highlight and deepen the emerging struggle between the states adhering to the legacy "liberal world order" and an emerging,² if diffuse "illiberal counterorder." The champions of the liberal world order include the United States, the European Union, the United Kingdom, and democratic states in Asia such as Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand. The illiberal counterorder is constituted by the dynamic between the PRC and a disparate group of actors, including Russia, Iran, and lesser players such as North Korea, Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua, the interests of whose regimes are served by a combination of Chinese money and the weakening of legacy international oversight institutions, transparency, and the rule of law.

By contrast to the contest between two competing political, economic and value systems represented by the Soviet Union and the United States during the Cold War, the principal character of the emerging struggle is that the illiberal counter-order does not pose a single alternative political or economic model or value proposition, but rather, the seductive lure of short-term financial benefits and liberation from structures and constraints perceived by many countries not to serve them well. The February 4, 2022 joint statement from Beijing by Russian leader Vladimir Putin and his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping against the imposition of any standards for "democracy" or "human rights,"³ thus undermining the ability to legally or morally question the political system and actions of those with the power, is at the core of the challenge by the illiberal counter-order. Russia's blatant invasion of the Ukraine, from which China strategically benefits, even while diplomatically maneuvering not to directly associate itself with Russian aggression,⁴ is emblematic of the dynamics of the illiberal counterorder, and the enormous strategic dangers it poses.

Russia's Strategic Miscalculation in Ukraine

In the country emblematic for chess, Russia's Vladimir Putin has shown himself to be a mediocre chess player at best. As is already occurring, Russia's invasion of the Ukraine is isolating Russia politically and economically from an increasingly unified West.⁵ Putin has arguably been far less successful in advancing the Russian narrative and dividing US and European opponents than when Russia conducted a thinly veiled invasion of the Donbass in 2014.⁶ Some of the reasons for the different outcome were fortuitous, including the achievements of the Biden administration in coordinating with Europe and NATO, and the successes of Western intelligence in substantially exposing the Russian playbook in advance,⁷ thus highlighting for Western audiences the cynicism of Russian aggression. Vladimir Putin likely calculated correctly that the PRC could help his regime to weather Western sanctions. Those sanctions, which already include commercial goods with sensitive technologies,⁸ restrictions on Russian banks, and Vladimir Putin and the oligarchs tied to him, as the Russian invasion continues and the US and Europe build consensus, are likely to eventually include the West (and particularly Europe) ceasing the purchase of Russian petroleum⁹ and excluding it from the Western financial system by cutting off its access to the SWIFT interbank clearing system.¹⁰ Putin likely calculated correctly, probably with reassurance from China's President Xi Jinping,¹¹ and even explicit plans for the PRC to import part of the oil and foodstuffs that Russia could no longer sell to the West,¹² and help it to engage financially through China.

The combination of those dynamics, however, makes Russia economically far more dependent on the PRC than before. Indeed, the PRC even benefitted from being able to purchase Russian oil at a steep discount as markets reacted to news of the invasion.

In addition, the invasion itself, with 190,000 Russian troops,¹³ will be enormously expensive for Russia,¹⁴ particularly if Ukrainians succeed in mounting a sustained resistance, and Russia is forced to occupy the country for a protracted period of time.¹⁵ The implied combination of economic and fiscal pressures on Russia will substantially increase PRC political leverage over the Putin government, through ongoing Chinese decisions about how much Russian oil and other goods to buy, the loans to be extended to Russia by Chinese banks, and the potential investments in Russia by Chinese companies. Indeed, PRC use of its trade and investment as instruments of coercion is already seen elsewhere in the world.¹⁶ PRC leverage will become even more acute if the prolongation of the war increases domestic political pressure on Putin, by a Russia no longer assuaged by oil prosperity to accept the authoritarianism of the Putin regime.

In the short term, the war is likely to increase the sense of solidarity between NATO states, some NATO aspirants, and democratic states in Asia such as Japan, South Korea and Australia. As a caveat, if Russia pauses after Ukraine and seeks the West's acceptance a fait accompli, perhaps negotiating an agreement with a besieged Ukrainian President Vladimir Zelensky,¹⁷ it could produce fissures in that emerging alliance. Yet if the war continues with Russian aggression in other areas, even after a pause, it will further cement that alliance even as it creates far deeper economic havoc and accelerates Russia's dependence on the PRC.

While in the opening stage of the conflict, both NATO and Russia appeared to take care to avoid the risk of escalation, options for escalation that could profoundly expand the conflict, and with it, the cost for Russia and the solidarity of the West are multiple. These include the possibility that Russian cyberattacks¹⁸ have profound spillover effects into Western infrastructures,¹⁹ economies and defense systems, or that Western resupply of Ukrainian forces prompt Russia to launch punitive military attacks against resupplying countries.²⁰

Globally, the war is likely to deepen economic malaise,²¹ fiscal crises, and pressures on political systems already stressed to their breaking point by the still unfolding Covid-19 pandemic. These will include sustained record high petroleum prices affecting everything from transportation to manufacturing to home heating costs, record agricultural prices as the disruption in the Ukraine compounds the effects of record droughts in South America,²² and the effect of the conflict in compounding still unresolved supply chain disruptions.²³

Russian cyber-attacks, either as spillover from the Ukraine conflict, or deliberately focused on the West as the conflict escalates, could also compound the aforementioned economic crisis and political discontent through disruption of Western financial systems, logistics and commercial operation, or other infrastructure. As occurred during Covid-19, but now to an even greater extent, those pressures will

likely contribute to crime and insecurity²⁴ and social mobilization,²⁵ deepening citizen faith in the ability of democracies and market economies to deliver results, even as the PRC touts ever more aggressively its development model.²⁶

If the conflict escalates in Ukraine, it is possible that the PRC will take advantage of the military engagement of the West with Russia to forcibly incorporate Taiwan,²⁷ fulfilling the aspiration of Xi Jinping to complete the incorporation before the end of his third term in 2027. If Russia is able, however, to achieve its goals in the Ukraine without escalation and oblige the West to accept the new status quo, its success is likely to similarly encourage the PRC to move against Taiwan when an appropriate circumstance presents itself in the months or first years following Russia's success.²⁸

Dynamics and Impacts in Latin America

In Latin America, in the short term, the impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the resulting conflict, and associated Russian geopolitical maneuvering is likely to be limited. On balance, however, it will also be substantially negative. In the economic realm, as in other parts of the world, significantly increased oil and food prices are likely to impact Central American and Caribbean countries already hard hit by Covid-19, although oil exporters such as Venezuela,²⁹ Brazil, Guyana, Ecuador and Peru, and grains exporters such as Brazil and Argentina, could partly benefit from higher international prices. On the other hand, South American agricultural producers, already hurt by record droughts, will also likely face limited access to fertilizer from Russia as a result of sanctions.

In the security realm, Russian diplomacy in the region in the run-up to the invasion was substantially consistent with its actions in the previous Russian-manufactured crises in its near abroad in the 2008 conflict in Georgia,³⁰ and the 2013-2014 Ukraine conflict. In those conflicts, like the present one, Russia engaged in actions leveraging its friendships with anti-US regimes to show the United States that it could project a military threat into the US near abroad. In 2008, this involved the sending of two nuclear-capable Tu-160 Backfire bomber to Venezuela and Nicaragua,³¹ followed by a small flotilla of four warships.³² In November 2013, Russia again sent two Tu-160s.³³ In the present crisis, a similar Russian gambit included remarks in January 2022 by Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov on the possibility of deploying Russian military assets to Venezuela or Cuba,³⁴ and the visit of Deputy Prime Minister Yuri Borisov to Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Cuba,³⁵ including agreements regarding military cooperation.

It is likely that, as before, Russia could engage in some low-cost, limited deployment to one of the region's anti-US populist regimes to give more substance to its threats, Russia neither has the military logistics, nor the resources to spare project and sustain significant forces to the Western Hemisphere while, as noted previously, it is waging

an expensive war in Ukraine with 190,000 troops and impaired by broad Western economic and financial sanctions. Given Russia's past history of seeking to control escalation risks even while projecting a threat, it is also unlikely that the Russians would deploy nuclear weapons or put destabilizing systems such as offensive missiles into the hands of unpredictable actors as the Ortega regime in Nicaragua or the Maduro regime in Venezuela, when they sought to control the escalatory potential of the conflict in their own near abroad.

In the political realm, Russia's actions will likely further polarize a region already moving toward a combination of authoritarian populist and leftist governments. In a style paralleling the trip by former Russian President Dmitri Medvedev's to the region in November 2008 during the Georgia crisis,³⁶ Russia's current round of diplomacy appears improvised to show that the country not isolated and set the stage for later transactions to help Russia avoid Western sanctions. For the amount of fanfare given to its diplomatic initiatives, however, they contained notably few specifics, and fewer credible prospects for Russian funding of any projects that could materialize from them in the short term.

The trips to Russia of both Argentine President Alberto Fernandez³⁷ and Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro to Moscow were likely orchestrated in the early months of the crisis, in late 2021. Aside from Fernandez' strong proclamations of interest in working with Putin, and Bolsonaro's declaration in Moscow that he was "in solidarity" with Russia,³⁸ the visits of both leaders yielded few concrete results beyond talk of agricultural cooperation,³⁹ building on current Russian fertilizer exports and food purchases from the countries. In the short term, however, western sanctions will significantly impair access by those countries to Russian fertilizers, a key input for products such as soybeans.

Even the impact of the Bolsonaro-Putin summit on the BRICS alliance in the long-term is questionable, given the likely victory of Bolsonaro's rival Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in Brazil's October 2022 elections,⁴⁰ and likely resistance by the BRICS democratic members India and South Africa to the use of BRICS to promote Russian aggression or other elements of an illiberal agenda.⁴¹

The Borisov visit to Venezuela, Cuba and Nicaragua similarly yielded little of substance. The refusal of Brazil's otherwise pro-US President Jair Bolsonaro to explicitly condemn the Russian invasion,⁴² overriding his own military Vice President Hamilton Mourao,⁴³ similar failure to condemn⁴⁴ the invasion by Bolivia,⁴⁵ Argentina⁴⁶ and Panama, and the statements of support for Russia's action by Venezuela,⁴⁷ Cuba and Nicaragua, including its recognition of regions carved out of Ukraine by Russian backed separatists,⁴⁸ illustrate how Latin America is likely to divide between actors on both the left and right truly committed to democratic principles and the rule of law, and those aligned with the new illiberal order. They also highlight how the

advance of the left across the region, particularly authoritarian populist regimes, complicates Washington's coordination with the region on key national security and foreign policy,⁴⁹ as well as economic issues.

Beyond the current responses among Latin American states to Russia's invasion and associated outreach, in the coming months, it is possible that other Latin American and Caribbean governments may opportunistically sign defense, political, and other cooperation agreements as implicit proclamations of their alignment, and with the expectation of mutual material benefits. Nonetheless, the likely exclusion of Russia from SWIFT and the difficulty of obtaining Russian fertilizer will complicate such transactions. Moreover, broad sanctions on Russia by the US and EU will have a strong deterrent effect for Latin American countries whose economies are substantially based on doing business with the West and the international financial system. Nonetheless, regimes already under heavy Western sanctions such as Venezuela,⁵⁰ Nicaragua⁵¹ and Cuba,⁵² and possibly others such as Bolivia and Argentina, may engage in clandestine or barter deals to help Russia circumvent sanctions, as Iran and Venezuela collaborate today.⁵³

Long-Run Impacts on the Global Strategic Environment

Beyond Russia, in the long run, the Ukraine conflict is likely to have profound effects on other global political and institutional dynamics. Particularly if Russian aggression goes beyond the Ukraine, it will fundamentally change the calculus of many of the world's states, decreasing the faith of many in inherent inviolability of their sovereignty against threat actors, leading some to seek to join or strengthen formal alliances for their defense. Nations such as Finland or Sweden may find in the lessons from the invasion additional incentives to join NATO to protect themselves against a Russia demonstrated to be willing to act on its territorial ambitions.⁵⁴ Others, not willing or able to join NATO, may decide that increased alignment or deference to Russia (or other illiberal actors such as Iran) is the only way to protect their sovereignty in the new security environment in which stronger states such as Russia can invade weaker neighbors without unacceptable military consequences.

Over the long-run, with respect to the world order more broadly, the Ukraine conflict highlights that the strength of the illiberal challengers to the post-World War II order have arrived at a new, and very dangerous level. It highlights the synergy between the growing wealth and power of the PRC and the resources that it can channel to enable illiberal actors on one hand, and the degree to which that constellation of mid-level predatory powers enabled by China such as Russia and Iran, feel a liberty to act in aggressive ways toward their neighbors, in a fashion that goes beyond simply using Chinese money and technology to survive politically as they consolidate power and undermine democracy in their own countries.⁵⁵

To be clear, the PRC is not seeking to overtly “lead” a coherent movement challenging the established liberal order. Indeed, the growing array of China-dependent illiberal states is a notably ideologically and politically incoherent lot, including not only declining regional powers such as Russia, rogue Islamic actor Iran, and isolated nuclear threat North Korea, but a range of lesser states each pursuing their own interests, from Venezuela, Cuba, Nicaragua and to an extent Argentina and Bolivia in Latin America, to the Erdogan regime of NATO member Turkey, the new Taliban regime in Afghanistan, and the nationalist Aleksandar Vučić regime in Serbia and the Viktor Orbán government in Hungary, to name just a few.

In indirectly “leading” the illiberal counter-order, the PRC has discovered a formula in which illiberal actors such as Russia and Iran are useful tools in launching political, institutional, and now military attacks on that order, and China's geopolitical rivals, while the PRC itself both avoids direct association with such attacks, and benefits while both sides exhaust themselves through the effort. In this dynamic, consistent with the maxims of the classic Chinese strategist Sun Tzu,⁵⁶ the PRC's chief geopolitical rivals, the US and the EU and the liberal order they support, become ever weaker, while the illiberal states backed by Chinese money also become weaker and ever more dependent on the PRC, even as China and its companies benefit financially and politically from the dynamic.

In this dynamic, illiberal actor such as Russia and Iran may not pursue a single coherent path, nor together offer a single coherent political, economic or values model as an alternative to the West. Nor, in the illiberal counter-order, will such regimes necessarily ally themselves formally with the PRC, or align their foreign and other policies completely with that of the PRC. They may, however, align themselves on some issues where their interests coincide, or out of deference to their more wealthy and powerful patron, where such alignment does not conflict with their immediate interests. Importantly, however, they generally will scrupulously avoid challenging the PRC on its core interests, which currently include Taiwan, PRC maritime expansion in the South and East China seas (including associated Chinese militarization of the area through turning reefs and shoals into island bases⁵⁷ or deploying the China Coast Guard⁵⁸ and maritime militia⁵⁹ into contested waters). China-affiliated illiberal states will also studiously avoid overtly working against China's commercial interests in ways that could put their own receipt of Chinese loans, investments, and purchases of their exports at risk. They will similarly avoid speaking out regarding its internment of its Uighur Moslem population,⁶⁰ or its repression of democracy⁶¹ and violation of its treaty obligations in Hong Kong.⁶²

Conclusion

In short, Russia's invasion of the Ukraine has fundamentally changed the calculations and dynamics that underpin the contemporary international system, and the institutional logic that has underpinned it since the end of the Cold War. Ukraine is an inflection point for the world, including Latin America and the Caribbean. Leaders and other strategic thinkers must look profoundly at the assumptions and expectations that have changed for the world's state and non-state actors, and how that will change the behavior for all.

Endnotes

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