

MARZO 2022

Latin America Reacts to the Russian Invasion of Ukraine**Ariel González Levaggi
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The post-Cold War international order drastically changed after the Russian military intervention in Ukraine. Now Latin America must face an international order marked by competition between great powers, fragmentation, and crisis. Latin American countries' relationships with Russia will bear an additional cost. Although Moscow will lose political, economic, and diplomatic influence, observers should not overlook the Russian push to strengthen its military presence in the region.

Russia is at war. Putin is seeking a victory to strengthen his hegemony in the post-Soviet space and neutralize Western expansion. He is also using the situation to increase his approval rating –at a [historic low](#) before the crisis– to position himself for the 2024 presidential election.

Discussions in Washington have centered on a narrative of great-power competition in the past several years. Outside of a few capitals such as Moscow and Kyiv, the majority of actors on the international stage have aimed for a more cooperative world, or at least one with less emphasis on the threat or use of military force.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine changed several certainties of the post-Cold War era. This event brings us to a new period in international relations, one characterized by a renewed emphasis on military power, greater fragmentation, the establishment of *de facto spheres* of influence, and the erosion of international laws and norms. The invasion will not affect the core structures of

* Artículo publicado el 8 de marzo de 2022 en The Global Americans: <https://theglobalamericans.org/2022/03/latin-america-reacts-to-russian-invasion-of-ukraine/>

globalization and interdependence, but Russia will suffer as the country decouples from the system. [Western sanctions](#) fall along these lines.

For Latin America, this geopolitical destabilization does not promote economic development, let alone the prospect of implementing an international agenda based on pragmatism and diversification. Economically, rising prices for both [energy and agricultural commodities](#) will negatively impact local economies in the middle term. Countries like Brazil will have difficulties accessing certain goods such as [fertilizers](#). At the same time, despite a historical reluctance to apply sanctions, the region will start to receive recommendations and pressure from Western countries to adhere to the sanctions and take actions on their own accord. There are not many economic incentives for countries in the region to support Russian actions. As a regional partner, Russia is not a relevant actor in Latin America and the Caribbean; currently, Russia is not even among top 30 export destinations for the region.

On the other hand, it is impossible to ignore Russia's [persistent economic crisis](#) in recent years as a key variable in this conflict. The Russian economy suffered a contraction of around 4 percent of GDP in 2020 (down from a

gain of 1.3 percent in 2019) due to a drastic decrease in exports, investment, and consumer demand. In this context, global Russian influence will suffer a big blow after this war, and Latin America will feel it.

From a diplomatic point of view, Latin America will have to calibrate what type of message it wants to transmit in this critical context. The early reactions from some Latin American countries after Russia's recognition of Donetsk and Luhansk as independent republics were quite timid, for example, those of Brazil and Mexico. Nonetheless, after Russia's flagrant attack, Brazil and Mexico both voted to condemn Russia in the United Nations Security Council –where both countries are currently non-permanent members– and in the UN General Assembly. Relations with Russia will become a headache for those seeking a middle course between Moscow and the West.

Who is supporting Russia even in these circumstances? Its solid allies in the region: Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela. In past Eurasian crises such as the Russo-Georgian War of 2008 or the Ukrainian Crisis of 2014, Russia reacted assertively in Latin America, as they perceived political and diplomatic support. This allowed them to conduct “mirror

actions” in the face of perceived pressures from the West. Moscow’s shows of force included the Russian Navy’s 2008 participation in military exercises with the Venezuelan Navy, the 2008 dispatch of two Tu-160 long-range bombers to Venezuela, the 2017 opening of a counter-narcotics center in Nicaragua, and the 2019 announcement of the reopening of a communications facility in Cuba. In addition to renewing military cooperation with Cuba and Venezuela, they developed naval deployments in different ports in the Caribbean and the Atlantic Ocean. After the invasion of Ukraine, Washington seems to be ahead of the game; last week, it sent –for the first time– a nuclear submarine to conduct exercises with the Colombian Navy.

The return of the centrality of military power and the Eurasian powers’ search for zones of influence is altering Latin America’s modes of international engagement. Is it possible to have an active non-alignment strategy while global stability is at risk? What margin of action do the main regional countries have in the face of this new scenario of strategic competition? The outlook is not very encouraging.

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Para citar este artículo:

González Levaggi, Ariel y Albertoni, Nicolás (2022), “Latin America Reacts to the Russian Invasion of Ukraine” [disponible en línea desde marzo 2022], Serie de Artículos y Testimonios, N° 165. Consejo Argentino para las Relaciones Internacionales. Dirección URL: <http://www.cari.org.ar/pdf/at165.pdf>