

GREAT-POWER COMPETITION AND CONFLICT IN LATIN AMERICA



IRINA A. CHINDEA ■ ELINA TREYGER ■ RAPHAEL S. COHEN ■ CHRISTIAN CURRIDEN
KURT KLEIN ■ CARLOS SANCHEZ ■ HOLLY GRAMKOW ■ KHRYSTYNA HOLYNSKA



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About This Report

Although much of the U.S. Department of Defense’s (DoD’s) attention is focused on two primary theaters of concern—the Indo-Pacific and, to a lesser extent, Europe—China and Russia are global powers, and the challenges they pose to international security are therefore global as well. This report is part of a series of reports that look at U.S.-China and U.S.-Russia competition outside those two primary theaters of concern; this report focuses on competition in Latin America. The other reports in this series are as follows:

- Raphael S. Cohen, Elina Treyger, Irina A. Chindea, Christian Curriden, Kristen Gunness, Khrystyna Holynska, Marta Kepe, Kurt Klein, Ashley L. Rhoades, and Nathan Vest, *Great-Power Competition and Conflict in the 21st Century Outside the Indo-Pacific and Europe*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A969-1, 2023
- Marta Kepe, Elina Treyger, Christian Curriden, Raphael S. Cohen, Kurt Klein, Ashley L. Rhoades, Erik Schuh, and Nathan Vest, *Great-Power Competition and Conflict in Africa*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A969-2, forthcoming
- Ashley L. Rhoades, Elina Treyger, Nathan Vest, Christian Curriden, Brad A. Bemish, Irina A. Chindea, Raphael S. Cohen, Jessica Giffin, and Kurt Klein, *Great-Power Competition and Conflict in the Middle East*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A969-3, 2023.

Note that these closely related volumes share some material, including descriptions, figures, and tables.

The authors of this report examine where and how the United States, China, and Russia are likely to be competing for influence; where and why competition might turn into conflict; what form conflict might take; and the implications for the U.S. government at large, DoD, and the Department of the Air Force in particular. This research was completed in September 2021, before the November 2021 presidential elections in Nicaragua; Russia’s February 2022 invasion of Ukraine; and the October 2022 release of the unclassified versions of the National Security Strategy, the National Defense Strategy, the Nuclear Posture Review, and the Missile Defense Review. The report has not been subsequently revised.

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Summary

Issue

Over the past three presidential administrations, the United States has made countering the rise of China in the Indo-Pacific and, to a lesser extent, checking Russian revanchism in Europe core priorities of its national security strategy. Historically, however, great-power competition and conflict have also taken place outside the theaters of core concern to the great powers. This report—part of a four-volume series—explores where and how the United States, China, and Russia are competing for influence in Latin America; what kinds of interests they have in the region; where and why competition might turn into conflict; what form that conflict might take; and what implications the findings have for the U.S. government at large, the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD), and the Department of the Air Force in particular.¹

Approach

The project team employed a multi-method approach. First, it developed a unique data set of 16 variables to measure diplomatic, informational, military, and economic potential for great-power competition in secondary theaters. Second, it combined the assessment of competition potential with measures of conflict potential to identify cases with the greatest theoretical chances for future great-power involvement in conflicts in Latin America. Finally, it used qualitative methods—including interviews with subject-matter experts and analysis of primary and secondary source materials—to explore the main drivers and nature of conflict in Latin America and the possible implications for the U.S. government, DoD, and the Department of the Air Force.

Key Findings

The analysis yielded the following findings about potential for competition and conflict in Latin America:

- The potential for great-power competition in Latin America converges on the most populous and economically developed countries in the region.
- Among the three competitors, the United States retains the lead in most domains of national power in the region, but China is making significant advances.

¹ Note that these closely related volumes share some material, including descriptions, figures, and tables.

- Although China's influence-seeking is growing most significantly, the most-plausible conflict scenarios with great-power involvement that we examined involve Russia more than China, at least in the near term.
- The potential for the three competitors' involvement in Latin American conflicts is driven primarily by geopolitical concerns rather than economic and security-related ones.
- A reduction in the level of U.S. engagement in Latin America could create conditions that intensify strategic competition.
- The United States, China, and Russia have limited appetites for conventional military engagement in the region, but the United States is the most likely competitor to become engaged and sustain support for proxies because it has higher stakes in Latin America than its rivals do.
- In the conflict scenarios that we examined, the United States and its competitors could plausibly back opposing sides, in dynamics reminiscent of the Cold War.

Recommendations

This analysis yields several recommendations for the U.S. government at large, DoD, and the Department of the Air Force in particular.

Recommendations for the U.S. Government

- Acknowledge the strategic importance of Latin America and design a strategy for the region based on a long-term vision that promotes sustained engagement with local partners and allies.
- Better resource DoD and U.S. Department of State offices, as well as other U.S. government agencies that work in Latin America, to sustain competitive efforts across diplomatic, informational, military, and economic activities.
- Increase engagement with countries throughout the entire region while prioritizing those with the highest competition potential.
- Closely monitor the region to identify and prepare to respond to a variety of potentially emerging threats, especially in countries that are traditionally hostile to the United States, such as Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela.

Recommendations for the U.S. Department of Defense

- Maintain cooperation and capabilities related to counternarcotics and migration while developing capabilities and security relations to support success in great-power competition.

- Strengthen security cooperation with existing key partners and allies in Latin America and try to engage with less friendly governments where possible to maintain access in the region and limit competitors' influence.
- Prepare to identify Chinese dual-use assets in the region and be ready to deter or deny their use for military purposes.

Recommendations for the Department of the Air Force

- Maintain and develop military access agreements and overflight rights with the countries in the region.
- Prepare for increased demand for U.S. Air Force assets in the theater and train and invest accordingly in developing the capabilities needed for victory.

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Introduction

Although Latin America has been a rather neglected area in U.S. foreign policy,¹ especially since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, when Washington's attention shifted toward the Middle East,² it is a region of geostrategic importance for the United States.³ Its geographic proximity to the United States means that its political stability, security, and economic success are related to and have an impact on the security, economic stability, and social stability of the United States. Increasingly, the region is also of interest to U.S. competitors. Both China and Russia have turned their attention toward Latin America in the past two decades, during which China has made primarily economic and diplomatic inroads while, to a lesser extent, Russia has increased its diplomatic and military presence.

In this report, we explore the potential areas of competition for influence in Latin America among the United States, China, and Russia across four domains of national power: diplomacy, information, military, and economics. After identifying the countries where the potential for competition is strongest across each of the four domains, as well as an aggregate measure of the influence-seeking activities across all four domains, we identify the countries with the highest potential for internal conflict to erupt. Subsequently, we aim to identify the countries where the competition for influence and the potential for internal conflict converge in order to pinpoint the countries with the highest potential for great-power involvement in such conflict. For these countries (Venezuela, Colombia, and Nicaragua), we consider a few plausible scenarios regarding the conditions under which a conflict could start.⁴ Using the

¹ Craig A. Deare, *Latin America 2020: Challenges to U.S. National Security Interests*, Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2020, p. 1.

² Peter Hakim, "Is Washington Losing Latin America?" *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 85, No. 1, January–February 2006.

³ Ryan C. Berg and Hal Brands, *The Return of Geopolitics: Latin America and the Caribbean in an Era of Strategic Competition*, Miami: Jack D. Gordon Institute for Public Policy, Florida International University, June 2021; and National Security Council, "Overview of Western Hemisphere Strategic Framework," White House, August 2020.

⁴ We took a higher-level, strategic perspective rather than an operational and tactical perspective in the scenarios: That is, we do not claim to predict precisely how conflicts will unfold or to cover the full spectrum of possible scenarios that might come to pass. Instead, we focus on those dynamics of discord that are evident at present and identified by regional experts as the most plausible sources of substantial violent conflict in the foreseeable future. See Raphael S. Cohen, Elina Treyger, Irina A. Chindea, Christian Cur-

scenarios, we identify implications for the U.S. government at large, the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD), and the Department of the Air Force in particular. The report is part of a four-volume series examining the potential for competition and conflict among three great powers—the United States, China, and Russia—in secondary theaters (sometimes referred to as *regions* in this report).⁵

For the purposes of this report, our definition of *Latin America* largely follows the boundaries of the U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) area of responsibility. We included in our assessment 23 countries: Argentina, Belize, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Guyana, Haiti, Honduras, Jamaica, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Suriname, Uruguay, and Venezuela. We excluded small island nations in the Caribbean that are part of SOUTHCOM's area of responsibility,⁶ because we assessed that they represent cases in which the United States can mount a response with relative ease and are less likely to stress the U.S. Air Force and other military assets. In addition, the limited data availability for these small island nations precludes meaningful comparisons across the four domains of national power (diplomacy, information, military, and economics). Mexico, traditionally considered part of Latin America, is excluded from our analysis for two reasons: (1) It belongs to U.S. Northern Command's area of responsibility, and (2) Mexico is not secondary to U.S. interests; any confrontation with China or Russia over Mexico is likely to be a priority for the United States.

This introductory chapter provides an overview of the United States', China's, and Russia's interests and objectives in Latin America; the past, present, and future prospects for great-power involvement in conflicts in the region; and the methodology and key concepts used in this research.

riden, Kristen Gunness, Khrystyna Holynska, Marta Kepe, Kurt Klein, Ashley L. Rhoades, and Nathan Vest, *Great-Power Competition and Conflict in the 21st Century Outside the Indo-Pacific and Europe*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A969-1, 2023, p. 21.

⁵ Note that these closely related volumes share some material, including descriptions, figures, and tables. See Cohen et al., 2023; Marta Kepe, Elina Treyger, Christian Curriden, Raphael S. Cohen, Kurt Klein, Ashley L. Rhoades, Erik Schuh, and Nathan Vest, *Great-Power Competition and Conflict in Africa*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A969-2, forthcoming; and Ashley L. Rhoades, Elina Treyger, Nathan Vest, Christian Curriden, Brad A. Bemish, Irina A. Chindea, Raphael S. Cohen, Jessica Giffin, and Kurt Klein, *Great-Power Competition and Conflict in the Middle East*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A969-3, 2023.

⁶ The countries that we excluded from our analysis are Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Dominica, Grenada, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and Trinidad and Tobago. The criteria for exclusion were as follows: (1) The country is an island nation, and (2) the country has a population under 2 million. In addition, except for Trinidad and Tobago, each of the excluded countries has a total gross domestic product (GDP) of less than US\$5 billion.

Overview of the United States', China's, and Russia's Interests and Objectives in Latin America

The United States, China, and Russia have overlapping geopolitical interests and objectives in Latin America that revolve around aspects of great-power competition, such as counterbalancing their rivals' influence and projecting power into the region. All three competitors also have economic interests, but their levels vary. The United States and China are the two most-prominent external economic actors in the region, and Russia lags far behind them. Of the three competitors, the United States is the only one that has interests related to protecting domestic security, because of its geographic proximity to Latin America. As a result, of the three competitors, the United States has the broadest set of interests in the region.

The United States' Interests and Objectives in Latin America

During the past two decades, the most-visible U.S. policies toward Latin America have focused on combating drug trafficking and reducing the flow of undocumented immigrants into the United States. Concerns over illegal migration became more prominent during the 2014 crisis on the U.S. southwest border, when an influx of families and unaccompanied children tried to cross illegally into the United States.⁷ Many of them were fleeing Central America because of gang violence, lack of economic opportunity, and human rights abuses.⁸

In this context, strengthening democratic governance and the rule of law has become a top U.S. priority for Latin America.⁹ When it comes to Central America specifically, the United States has three major areas of interest: (1) promoting prosperity, (2) enhancing security, and (3) improving governance.¹⁰ The 2018 U.S. strategy document for Central America emphasizes the main U.S. aims: “to protect American citizens by addressing the security, governance, and economic drivers of illegal immigration and illicit trafficking, while increasing opportunities for U.S. and other businesses.”¹¹

Drug trafficking and illegal migration are more-tactical-level issues, and they have distracted Washington from the strategic importance of Latin America. However, recent U.S. policy documents, such as the Trump administration's 2017 National Security Strategy,

⁷ Dara Lind, “The 2014 Central American Migrant Crisis,” Vox, October 10, 2014.

⁸ Charles T. Call, “The Imperative to Address the Root Causes of Migration from Central America,” Brookings Institution, January 29, 2021.

⁹ Mark P. Sullivan, “Latin America and the Caribbean: U.S. Policy Overview,” Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, last updated June 30, 2021.

¹⁰ U.S. Department of State, “U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America Results Architecture—Overall Summary,” April 2019.

¹¹ Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, “U.S. Programs and Engagement Promote a Prosperous, Secure, and Well-Governed Central America,” U.S. Strategy for Central America, U.S. Department of State, June 2018, p. 1.

acknowledge the geopolitical importance of the region in the context of the United States' broader strategic competition with China and Russia.¹² The August 2020 Western Hemisphere Strategic Framework,¹³ which is the only regionally focused strategy issued after the 2017 National Security Strategy,¹⁴ reiterates the point that the Western Hemisphere is a geopolitical priority for the United States. The 2020 framework is focused on promoting "engagement to ensure democracy, prosperity, and security in the Western Hemisphere" and identifies three main threats to regional security: "repressive dictatorial regimes," "transnational criminal organizations," and "adversarial countries exerting malign influence."¹⁵

Subsequently, the Biden administration's *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*, which was issued in March 2021, acknowledges the importance of the Western Hemisphere along with the importance of the Indo-Pacific region and Europe, stating that the United States' "vital national interests compel the deepest connection to the Indo-Pacific, Europe, and the Western Hemisphere."¹⁶ To advance U.S. vital national interests in the Western Hemisphere, the guidance focuses on expanding U.S. engagement and partnerships with countries in the region and highlights Canada and Mexico as the top two priorities. In addition, it mentions the collaboration between the White House and Congress "to provide Central America with \$4 billion in assistance over four years" and "other steps to address the root causes of human insecurity and irregular migration, including poverty, criminal violence, and corruption."¹⁷

As the above discussion shows, the U.S. government seems to be gradually coming to terms with Latin America's increasing geopolitical importance. Although the region is not experiencing any major inter-state conflict, it has witnessed decades of internal conflict. As a result, most of the world's most violent cities are located in Latin America,¹⁸ and this violence represents a "push" factor for migration north to the United States.¹⁹ The high levels of internal violence in Latin America could also offer a window of opportunity for China and Russia to foment more instability in the immediate vicinity of the United States and to

¹² Donald J. Trump, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, Washington, D.C.: White House, December 2017, p. 51.

¹³ National Security Council, 2020.

¹⁴ Andrés González Martín, "The New Strategic Framework of the United States for the Western Hemisphere," Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, IEEE Analysis Paper 33/2020, October 21, 2020.

¹⁵ National Security Council, 2020, p. 1.

¹⁶ Joseph R. Biden, Jr., *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*, Washington, D.C.: White House, March 3, 2021, p. 10.

¹⁷ Biden, 2021, p. 10.

¹⁸ Jose A. Ortega, "Por tercer año consecutivo, San Pedro Sula es la ciudad más violenta del mundo" ["For the Third Consecutive Year, San Pedro Sula Is the Most Violent City in the World"], *Seguridad, Justicia y Paz*, January 15, 2014.

¹⁹ National Immigration Forum, "Push or Pull Factors: What Drives Central American Migrants to the U.S.?" Washington, D.C., July 23, 2019.

weaken existing U.S. partners. There is an indirect link between the United States' ability to successfully compete with China and Russia in Latin America and the stability of the countries in the region, which can be affected by drug trafficking and the presence of non-state armed groups, including transnational criminal organizations.²⁰

Despite the limited U.S. approach to the region from a strategic perspective and the U.S. focus on immigration and counternarcotics issues,²¹ the United States has become increasingly sensitive to China's growing economic presence and Russia's military activities in Latin America. Realizing the potential security and economic risks of rising Chinese and Russian influence activities in an area that is so close geographically,²² the United States has started to gradually shift its geopolitical goals toward counterbalancing China's and Russia's rising presence and influence and preventing either competitor from establishing military bases or any meaningful operational military presence in the region.

China's Interests and Objectives in Latin America

When it comes to Latin America, China has both geopolitical and economic objectives, which most Chinese strategic and policy documents present as being closely interrelated. Beijing's geopolitical objectives are twofold: (1) to forge strategic partnerships in support of China's great-power ambitions and (2) to have the countries that recognize Taiwan withdraw their recognition of the government in Taipei. Beijing's economic objective is to expand "trade and investment opportunities to support China's economic growth."²³ China's economic interests

²⁰ Craig S. Faller, commander, U.S. Southern Command, statement before the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee, Washington, D.C., March 16, 2021, pp. 11, 21.

²¹ Although U.S. engagement with the region has been the most visible on issues related to counternarcotics and immigration, we acknowledge the variety of efforts that multiple administrations have pursued with Latin American countries to develop relationships and sustainable programs on governance, economics, and culture, as well as the differences in U.S. government engagement with Central America, the Andean nations, and the Southern Cone. We thank our reviewer Mary Quinn for this important point.

²² For details, see pp. 5–7 in Faller, 2021.

²³ R. Evan Ellis, *China in Latin America: The Whats & Wherefores*, Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2009, p. 9. As will be discussed in this section, China seeks to forge ties with Latin American countries that will support its own initiatives and preferred narratives at both the regional and international levels and oppose (or at least not provide any meaningful support for) U.S. efforts to "contain" China politically, economically, or diplomatically. (See R. Evan Ellis, *Chinese Security Engagement in Latin America*, Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, November 2020b; and Timothy R. Heath, Derek Grossman, and Asha Clark, *China's Quest for Global Primacy: An Analysis of Chinese International and Defense Strategies to Outcompete the United States*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A447-1, 2021, pp. 143–144. For Taiwan relations, see Andrew Scobell, Bonny Lin, Howard J. Shatz, Michael Johnson, Larry Hanauer, Michael S. Chase, Astrid Stuth Cevallos, Ivan W. Rasmussen, Arthur Chan, Aaron Strong, Eric Warner, and Logan Ma, *At the Dawn of Belt and Road: China in the Developing World*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2273-A, 2018, p. xxi; and Andres Aguilera-Castillo and Juan M. Gil-Barragan, "China's Policy Paper on Latin America and the Caribbean: Ten Years After," E-International Relations, November 5, 2018.)

are the most-visible interests and attract most of the public's attention, but traditional geopolitical considerations—including building support across the region for China's initiatives—are also present in Beijing's interactions with the countries of Latin America.²⁴

In 2008, Beijing published its first white paper on China's approach toward and priorities in Latin America and the Caribbean.²⁵ The white paper was updated in 2016.²⁶ In both documents, China recognizes “the strategic importance of Latin America and the Caribbean for the Chinese development process and the economic boost and aid that is necessary for most Latin American economies,” framing the cooperation as a win-win situation.²⁷ In the 2016 white paper, economic ties, cooperation, and collaboration with the countries in the region are highlighted as China's main tools to improve its power-projection capabilities in Latin America.²⁸

In terms of its geopolitical objective to establish strategic partnerships in the region and gain support for its regional and international initiatives, China initiated the China-CELAC (Community of Latin American and Caribbean States²⁹) Forum in 2014.³⁰ Created as an alternative to the Organization of American States, which some countries perceive as a tool for the United States to exercise hegemony in the region,³¹ the forum provides members with a venue to advance cooperation across several domains, including security, trade, and infrastructure investments.³² At the second China-CELAC meeting, in January 2018, China officially invited member countries to join the Belt and Road Initiative.³³

²⁴ Ellis, 2009, p. 16.

²⁵ The English version of the 2008 white paper is available at University of Southern California US-China Institute, “China's Policy Paper on Latin America and the Caribbean,” webpage, April 20, 2009.

²⁶ The English version of the updated white paper is available at State Council of the People's Republic of China, “Full Text of China's Policy Paper on Latin America and the Caribbean,” webpage, last updated November 24, 2016.

²⁷ Aguilera-Castillo and Gil-Barragan, 2018.

²⁸ State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2016.

²⁹ CELAC member countries are Antigua and Barbuda, Argentina, the Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Grenada, Guatemala, Guyana, Honduras, Jamaica, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, the Dominican Republic, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Trinidad and Tobago, Uruguay, and Venezuela. Canada and the United States are excluded (Community of Latin American and Caribbean States, “CELAC,” webpage, undated).

³⁰ Department of Latin American and Caribbean Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, *Basic Information About China-CELAC Forum*, China-CELAC Forum, April 2016.

³¹ “Under Fire for ‘Sham’ Vote, Nicaragua Begins Withdrawal from OAS,” Al Jazeera, November 19, 2021.

³² Mark P. Sullivan and Thomas Lum, “China's Engagement with Latin America and the Caribbean,” Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, IF10982, last updated July 1, 2021.

³³ Sullivan and Lum, 2021.

In its quest for regional partners who would support Chinese diplomatic and economic initiatives, and to counterbalance the United States at the regional and international levels, China—like Russia—has found a receptive audience among authoritarian regimes, such as Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, that actively work to erode U.S. influence in Latin America and beyond. These countries are more likely than others in the region to espouse anti-American rhetoric and lend their support to Chinese government positions in regional and international fora, such as the United Nations (UN).³⁴ In turn, Beijing turns a blind eye to these respective regimes' corruption, abuses of power, and human rights abuses for as long as they refrain from criticizing Beijing on issues related to Xinjiang, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Tibet.³⁵ As one Latin America subject-matter expert with whom we spoke mentioned, "You cannot talk about Tibet or the Uighurs if you want access to Chinese money. There is the silencing power of Chinese money."³⁶ To achieve its great-power ambitions and counterbalance the United States, China has also started to engage with Latin American countries with less anti-American stances, including such traditional U.S. partners as Colombia, in an attempt to subtly pull them into Beijing's orbit.

As mentioned earlier, China also aims to convince the countries in the region that still recognize Taiwan to withdraw their recognition of the government in Taipei. Latin America is the world region with the highest number of countries that recognize Taiwan: eight out of 14 countries worldwide.³⁷ Since 2016, China has gradually "flipped" some of the Central American governments (e.g., El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Panama) away from Taiwan and toward China.³⁸ It is likely that these successes have encouraged China to persevere in an attempt to flip the remaining governments and have them establish formal diplomatic relations with Beijing.

Trade relations and investments represent another major Chinese interest in Latin America. Although geographically distant from Latin America, China intensified economic ties to the region after joining the World Trade Organization in 2001.³⁹ In 2009, to further advance its economic interests, China participated in the first BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China,

³⁴ Roie Yellinek and Elizabeth Chen, "The '22 vs. 50' Diplomatic Split Between the West and China over Xinjiang and Human Rights," *China Brief*, Vol. 19, No. 22, December 31, 2019; Catherine Putz, "2020 Edition: Which Countries Are For or Against China's Xinjiang Policies?" *The Diplomat*, October 9, 2020; and Dave Lawler, "The 53 Countries Supporting China's Crackdown on Hong Kong," *Axios*, July 2, 2020.

³⁵ R. Evan Ellis, *Populism, China, and Covid-19: Latin America's New Perfect Storm*, Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2021.

³⁶ Latin America subject-matter expert, interview with the authors, July 22, 2021.

³⁷ Sullivan and Lum, 2021; and Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, "Australia-Taiwan Relationship," webpage, undated. Of the eight Latin American countries that recognize Taiwan, five were included in our analysis.

³⁸ Scott W. Harold, Lyle J. Morris, and Logan Ma, *Countering China's Efforts to Isolate Taiwan Diplomatically in Latin America and the Caribbean: The Role of Development Assistance and Disaster Relief*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2885-TECRO, 2019, p. 2; and Sullivan and Lum, 2021.

³⁹ Aguilera-Castillo and Gil-Barragan, 2018.

South Africa)⁴⁰ summit. BRICS was established as an informal association of what were at the time the world's five largest emerging economies. Alongside its participation in BRICS, China made aggressive economic inroads into the region. As a result, trade with the region increased from a mere US\$12 billion in 2000 to almost US\$315 billion in 2019, which represents slightly under 50 percent of the total value of U.S. trade with the region in 2019.⁴¹ It is forecast that, in the coming decade, Chinese total trade with Latin America will surpass the region's total trade with the United States.⁴²

As part of its trade relations with the countries in the region, China has shown a clear interest in gaining access to primary products, such as fish, meat, soybeans and other agricultural products, petroleum, metal ores, and minerals.⁴³ China's large population, leading manufacturing role, and need for additional raw materials drive Chinese demand for imports.⁴⁴ In turn, China exports nuclear materials, machinery, and manufactured goods, including electric and electronic equipment, to Latin America.⁴⁵ To gain and maintain access to energy supplies from the region, China has forged "oil-for-loans" agreements with several Latin American countries, such as Brazil, Ecuador, and Venezuela, since 2009.⁴⁶ Under these agreements, Beijing lent billions of dollars to oil-rich countries at below-market interest rates. In turn, the recipients agreed to sell oil to China at future fluctuating market prices instead of fixed ones.⁴⁷

In support of its political and economic objectives in the region, China has strengthened diplomatic ties with Latin America over the past two decades and has initiated several critical infrastructure projects, including making investments in expanding seaports, such as the

⁴⁰ When the first summit took place in 2009, South Africa had yet to join, so the first meeting was among Brazil, Russia, India, and China (BRIC). In 2010, when South Africa joined the group, the summit became known as *BRICS*. For a quick overview of BRICS history, see Goldman Sachs, "With GS Research Report, 'BRICS' Are Born," webpage, undated.

⁴¹ We made this estimate using 2000 and 2019 data on China's and the United States' volumes of exports to and imports from Latin America (World Integrated Trade Solution, "Latin America & Caribbean Trade Summary 2019 Data," webpage, undated-a). Mexico is included in these data.

⁴² Tatiana Prazeres, David Bohl, and Pepe Zhang, "China-LAC Trade: Four Scenarios in 2035," Washington, D.C.: Atlantic Council, April 2021. Mexico is included in the data used for this analysis.

⁴³ Ellis, 2009, p. 2; Sullivan and Lum, 2021.

⁴⁴ Ellis, 2009, pp. 10–11.

⁴⁵ Scobell et al., 2018, pp. xxi–xxii.

⁴⁶ Edmar de Almeida, "The Role of China in Brazilian Oil and Gas Industry," presentation slides, Energy Economics Group, Institute of Economics, Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, May 20, 2014; Patricia Garip, "Ecuador to Ink China Oil-Backed Loan in Nov: Minister," *Argus*, October 7, 2020; and Qiang Wang and Rongrong Li, "Sino-Venezuelan Oil-for-Loan Deal—The Chinese Strategic Gamble?" *Renewable and Sustainable Energy Reviews*, Vol. 64, October 2016.

⁴⁷ Eugene Gholz, Umul Awan, and Ehud Ronn, "Financial and Energy Security Analysis of China's Loan-for-Oil Deals," *Energy Research & Social Science*, Vol. 24, February 2017.

Buenaventura port in Colombia.⁴⁸ Although seaport operations are, at first glance, civilian activities conducted solely for economic purposes, analysts and U.S. government officials have voiced concerns that China's investments in port operations worldwide are meant to have a dual civilian-military use and, ultimately, to support China's increasing military ambitions by deliberately weakening and destabilizing some of the countries in close proximity to the United States.⁴⁹ The dual use of China's foreign investments has been officially included in the Military-Civil Fusion (MCF)⁵⁰ concept that Beijing has been promoting in recent years, including when it comes to Belt and Road Initiative projects.⁵¹ China extended the Belt and Road Initiative to Latin America only in 2018, and the region was one of the last in the world to which the initiative was made available,⁵² probably because of Beijing's concerns over the United States perceiving its involvement in the Western Hemisphere as a violation of U.S. preeminence in the region. But as Chinese ambitions have grown stronger under President Xi Jinping and China has become much more assertive internationally in the past few years,⁵³ China's presence has increased in Latin America. Although such countries as Argentina, Brazil, and Colombia have yet to become part of the Belt and Road Initiative,⁵⁴ all three

⁴⁸ Mariana Palau, "China Eyes Expansion of Colombia's Buenaventura Port," *Diálogo Chino*, November 9, 2017.

⁴⁹ Faller, 2021, pp. 5–7; Daniel R. Russel and Blake H. Berger, *Weaponizing the Belt and Road Initiative*, New York: Asia Society Policy Institute, September 2020; and Gustavo Arias Retana, "Latin America Allows China to Take Over Ports," *Diálogo Américas*, December 6, 2018. For instance, the standing up of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Logistics Support Base in Djibouti was preceded by several Belt and Road Initiative investments and other commercial developments, such as commercial ports, water pipelines, and railway lines. For additional examples, see Russel and Berger, 2020.

⁵⁰ The U.S. Department of State describes MCF as follows:

an aggressive, national strategy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Its goal is to enable the [People's Republic of China] to develop the most technologically advanced military in the world. As the name suggests, a key part of MCF is the elimination of barriers between China's civilian research and commercial sectors, and its military and defense industrial sectors. The CCP is implementing this strategy, not just through its own research and development efforts, but also by acquiring and diverting the world's cutting-edge technologies—including through theft—in order to achieve military dominance. (U.S. Department of State, "Military-Civil Fusion and the People's Republic of China," fact sheet, May 2020c)

⁵¹ Chad Peltier, *China's Logistics Capabilities for Expeditionary Operations*, Janes, April 15, 2020, p. 55.

⁵² Jorge Malena, "The Extension of the Digital Silk Road to Latin America: Advantages and Potential Risks," *Asia Unbound*, blog, January 19, 2021; and Pepe Zhang, "Belt and Road in Latin America: A Regional Game Changer?" Atlantic Council, October 8, 2019.

⁵³ "Xi Jinping Promises More Assertive Chinese Foreign Policy," *Financial Times*, March 20, 2018; and Christopher W. Bishop, "To Understand China's Aggressive Foreign Policy, Look at Its Domestic Politics," Council on Foreign Relations, October 8, 2020.

⁵⁴ For a list of countries that have signed memoranda of understanding with China (as of January 2021) to join the Belt and Road Initiative, see Christoph Nedopil, "Countries of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)," Green Belt and Road Initiative Center, International Institute of Green Finance, 2020.

have signed infrastructure deals with China.⁵⁵ Furthermore, Beijing uses Chinese investments in critical infrastructure sectors, such as telecommunications technology infrastructure, to achieve political goals, such as promoting and supporting authoritarian practices and strengthening collaboration with authoritarian governments.⁵⁶ In Venezuela, the regime of Nicolás Maduro used technology provided by the Chinese company CEIEC to track members of the opposition and use information acquired on their activities to keep its grip on power.⁵⁷

To conclude, most of China's interest in Latin America is based on geopolitical considerations, such as establishing strategic partnerships that could advance Beijing's great-power ambitions and having Latin American countries that currently recognize the government in Taipei withdraw their recognition of Taiwan. China is also interested in Latin America for economic reasons, but, given the relatively low percentage of total Chinese trade that is carried out with the region (7 percent⁵⁸), existing economic ties could easily become overshadowed by geopolitical considerations in a proxy confrontation with the United States.

Russia's Interests and Objectives in Latin America

Russia has few, if any, vital interests in Latin America, and the interests it does have are mainly concentrated in the political and military realms.⁵⁹ In its most recent Foreign Policy Concept, issued in 2016, Russia acknowledges the growing role of Latin America and the Caribbean in global affairs.⁶⁰ Russia also states its commitment to strengthening engage-

⁵⁵ Fermín Koop, "What Argentines Think of Chinese Investment," *Diálogo Chino*, July 26, 2019; Fitch Solutions, *Rising Potential for Major Argentine Midstream Infrastructure Investment*, May 26, 2021; Tulio Carillo, "Chinese Investments in Brazil Have Grown Rapidly and Are Long-Lasting," *Diálogo Chino*, September 6, 2021; Ricardo Brito and Lisandra Paraguassu, "Brazil Wants China to Invest in Its Infrastructure: Vice President," Reuters, June 13, 2019; Michael Stott, "Foreign Investment in Colombia Holds Firm, Says Trade Minister," *Financial Times*, October 7, 2020; and Steven Grattan, "China's Strong Push into Colombia," Al Jazeera, February 22, 2020a.

⁵⁶ For instance, as part of the "Safe City" program, Huawei surveillance equipment was installed in Republic Square in Belgrade, Serbia, in 2018 and 2019. Concerns over the program are that, on the one hand, it provides China with intelligence-collection capabilities, while, on the other hand, the comprehensive facial-recognition technologies deployed might deter street protests in the future, hardening authoritarian government practices. For details, see European Parliament, "Safe City Project in Serbia—China Penetrating into Europe," webpage, last updated October 18, 2019; and Bojan Stojkovski, "Big Brother Comes to Belgrade," *Foreign Policy*, June 18, 2019.

⁵⁷ Ellis, 2021.

⁵⁸ We calculated this percentage using 2019 total and regional trade data for China, available at World Integrated Trade Solution, undated-a. Mexico is included in these data.

⁵⁹ Nicole Peterson, ed., *Russian Strategic Intentions: A Strategic Multilayer Assessment (SMA) White Paper*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, Joint Chiefs of Staff, May 2019, p. 80; and Samuel Ramani, "Russia Returns to Latin America," RUSI, August 19, 2021.

⁶⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation (Approved by President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin on November 30, 2016)," webpage, December 1, 2016.

ment and cooperation with Latin American countries in international and regional fora and in other multilateral organizations. Overall, Russia's interests in Latin America are concentrated on geopolitical considerations, such as counterbalancing the United States and projecting power in close geographic proximity to the United States.⁶¹ Russia also has economic ties to the region, but they are not significant for either side.

In terms of geopolitical considerations, most of Russia's political and military interests in Latin America revolve around two former Soviet satellites, Cuba and Nicaragua, and other countries with strong anti-American stances, such as Venezuela and Bolivia. These stances are closely aligned with Moscow's own anti-Americanism and support for multipolarity, which has been on the rise since the late 2000s. According to Gen John Kelly, former head of SOUTHCOM, "As part of its global strategy, Russia is using power projection in an attempt to erode U.S. leadership and challenge U.S. influence in the Western Hemisphere."⁶²

In the post-Cold War period, Russia's great-power aspirations in Latin America were first noted in Russian Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov's 1996 tour of Mexico, Cuba, and Venezuela. Then, in 2014, President Vladimir Putin signed several economic and security agreements with Cuba, Argentina, Brazil, and Nicaragua. Putin's regional assertiveness during this time was related to attempts by the United States and the European Union to isolate Russia internationally because of its annexation of Crimea and activities in eastern Ukraine.⁶³

The geostrategic locations of such countries as Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua in proximity to the United States, together with the authoritarian and anti-American inclinations of their governments, make these countries convenient partners with whom Russia can work to advance its geopolitical interests in the Western Hemisphere.⁶⁴ Some of the Latin American leaders with whom Moscow has been cooperating over the past two decades—such as some of the leaders of countries in the Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América (ALBA)⁶⁵—were part of left-wing insurgencies that the Soviet Union supported in the Cold War, making their alignment with Russia much more natural than alignment with the United States. By emphasizing historical ties and common antidemocratic leanings, Russia—like the Soviet Union during the Cold War—aims to gain allies and maintain influence in a region

⁶¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2016; and Vladimir Rouvinski, *Understanding Russian Priorities in Latin America*, Washington, D.C.: Wilson Center, Kennan Cable No. 20, February 2017.

⁶² Julia Gurganus, *Russia: Playing a Geopolitical Game in Latin America*, Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 2018, p. 1. See also Rouvinski, 2017.

⁶³ Ramani, 2021; Gurganus, 2018.

⁶⁴ W. Alejandro Sanchez, "Forget Venezuela, Russia Is Looking to Nicaragua," *National Interest*, September 25, 2017; and Gurganus, 2018.

⁶⁵ ALBA (or the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America) is a regional intergovernmental organization founded by Cuba and Venezuela. Bolivia, Ecuador, and Nicaragua are among the member countries, and the organization seeks "to create economic alternatives to Western-dominated financial institutions, holds largely anti-U.S. views, and is led by populists seeking to retain power" (Gurganus, 2018, p. 5).

that is “too far away to defend militarily and too expensive to prop up economically.”⁶⁶ In addition, for some ALBA countries, interactions with Moscow have brought the promise of Russian financial aid and debt write-offs in exchange for their support of Russia’s positions at the UN and their willingness to welcome Russian military assets, such as ships and strategic bombers, deployed as a show of force. For instance, in 2008, Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua provided public support to Russian military activities in South Ossetia, and Nicaragua recognized South Ossetia and Abkhazia as part of Russia. In March 2014, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela voted against a UN resolution to support Ukraine’s territorial integrity and condemn Russia’s actions in Crimea. They also voted against imposing sanctions on Russia after its illegal annexation of Crimea. In 2015, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela held meetings with Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu about potentially giving Moscow access to ports and airfields. The Kremlin reciprocated the support, and Russian investments in Venezuela’s energy sector attenuated some of the impact of U.S. sanctions imposed on the Maduro regime. Russia also provided aid to Cuba to help alleviate its fuel crisis.⁶⁷

Russia’s ability to project power in close proximity to the United States should be viewed in the context of the Kremlin’s perceptions that the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization are encroaching on its sphere of influence in ex-Soviet Eastern Europe. Through intelligence and military cooperation with such partners as Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, Russia can try to project military power away from home in an attempt to increase pressure on the United States when the latter assesses how to respond to international crises, such as the 2008 Russo-Georgian war and the 2014 annexation of Crimea. These ties also serve domestic political purposes as Moscow crafts an image of Russia reclaiming its role as a world power.⁶⁸

Russia has limited economic interests in the region. Even if Russia’s trade with the region has increased in both absolute and relative terms since 2000, it represents only a fraction of the region’s trade with the United States and China, and, for Moscow, total trade with Latin America ranks only above its total trade with sub-Saharan Africa, representing only 2 percent of Russia’s total global trade.⁶⁹ The energy sector has played an important role in Russia’s economic links to the region; Russian energy company Rosneft secured deals in Venezuela and, as recently as 2019, Brazil.⁷⁰ Russia’s trade with Latin America has become somewhat more important since the imposition of European Union sanctions against Moscow in 2014, when Russia started to import from Latin America the fresh fruit and vegetables that

⁶⁶ Gurganus, 2018, p. 4.

⁶⁷ Rouvinski, 2017; Gurganus, 2018; Ramani, 2021.

⁶⁸ Rouvinski, 2017.

⁶⁹ We calculated this percentage using 2019 total and regional trade data for Russia from World Integrated Trade Solution, undated-a. Mexico is included in these data.

⁷⁰ Ramani, 2021.

it could no longer access from Europe.⁷¹ However, as of 2019, these imports represented only slightly more than 1 percent of total Russian imports, or 0.53 percent of Russia's total trade.⁷² Main Russian exports to Latin America consist of rubber, fertilizers, metals, and nuclear materials.⁷³

In recent years, Russia also signed a series of economic agreements and memoranda of understanding on economic issues with Brazil and Argentina. However, there has not been much follow-through on either front. In general, economic interests are not a top priority for Russia in the region. Were Russia to end up in a proxy confrontation with the United States in Latin America, it would likely be not over economic interests but over geopolitical considerations related to the ability to project power and influence in the region. However, given Russia's limited presence in Latin America, the Kremlin seems to be de facto assuming more of a "spoiler" role than that of a genuine strategic rival of the United States.⁷⁴

All three competitors have geopolitical interests in Latin America, and some aspects of China's and Russia's interests are in opposition to those of the United States. While China and Russia compete economically for access to the region's food products and oil fields, they have a common geopolitical interest to see the erosion of U.S. influence in Latin America.⁷⁵ With China and Russia interested in counterbalancing U.S. influence and projecting power in the region, and with the United States aiming to prevent and deter these two competitors from making military inroads in close proximity to its homeland, the potential for the United States to end up in a proxy confrontation in Latin America on a side opposing China and Russia might be underappreciated in U.S. policy circles, especially when compared with the conflict potential in other regions.

The Past, Present, and Future of Great-Power Involvement in Conflicts in Latin America: An Overview

Latin America has a long history of conflicts that have drawn in rival great powers, most notably during the later Cold War era. From the 1960s until the end of the Cold War, the

⁷¹ Alexey Chernyshev, "Russia and Latin America in the Context of Sanctions: From Ideology to Pragmatism," Russian International Affairs Council, September 29, 2014; and Carl Meacham, "What Does the Russian Food Import Ban Mean for Latin America?" Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 23, 2014.

⁷² We calculated this percentage using 2019 total and regional trade data for Russia from World Integrated Trade Solution, undated-a. Mexico is included in these data.

⁷³ R. Evan Ellis, *The New Russian Engagement with Latin America: Strategic Position, Commerce, and Dreams of the Past*, Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: U.S. Army War College Press, 2015. See also World Integrated Trade Solution, "Russian Federation Product Exports and Imports to Latin America & Caribbean 2019," webpage, undated-b.

⁷⁴ Ramani, 2021.

⁷⁵ Gurganus, 2018.

United States and the Soviet Union provided varying levels of support to local actors in the context of the civil wars in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua;⁷⁶ during the so-called Bolivia campaign; and to Cuba.⁷⁷ In all of these internal conflicts, the United States supported anti-communist forces while the Soviet Union—often together with Cuba—supported left-wing insurgents and governments and aimed to exploit existing regional rivalries and anti-U.S. sentiments.⁷⁸ In the internal conflict in Colombia, too, the United States and the Soviet Union backed opposing sides: The United States backed the Colombian government for several decades, and the Soviet Union (and its Cuban ally) supported the Marxist guerrilla groups (i.e., the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia [FARC] and the Ejército de Liberación Nacional [ELN]⁷⁹) that started to challenge the government in the early 1960s.⁸⁰

These conflicts lasted for several decades and imposed a very high toll on the countries and societies where they unfolded. The civil war in Guatemala started in 1960, when left-wing guerrillas aimed to overthrow the military regime that had come to power in 1954 with U.S. support.⁸¹ At several junctures throughout the civil war, the United States provided support to the Guatemalan government.⁸² In El Salvador, the civil war started in 1980 and had on opposing sides the U.S.-backed government and the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front, a left-wing guerrilla group backed by the Soviet Union, Cuba, and Nicaragua.⁸³ In Nicaragua, during the “Contra War,” which began in 1979 and was a continuation of previous bouts of internal violence in Nicaragua going back to 1960, the Soviet- and Cuba-

⁷⁶ Ana Arana, “The New Battle for Central America,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 80, No. 6, November–December 2001. For a visual account of the civil wars in Central America, see Scott Wallace and David Gonzalez, “In Today’s Headlines, Echoes of Central America’s Proxy Wars of the 1980s,” *New York Times*, February 27, 2019.

⁷⁷ The confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union in Latin America was much broader and more complex than the episodes listed here, but these are the main examples of proxy war confrontation in the region that involved the two competitors (and China, to a much lesser extent), as this section shows.

⁷⁸ Gurganus, 2018.

⁷⁹ In English, these groups are, respectively, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia and the National Liberation Army.

⁸⁰ Norman Offstein, and Carolina Aristizábal, “An Historical Review and Analysis of Colombian Guerrilla Movements: FARC, ELN and EPL,” *Revista Desarrollo y Sociedad*, No. 52, September 1, 2003.

⁸¹ Amy Bracken, “Why You Need to Know About Guatemala’s Civil War,” *The World*, December 29, 2016; and “Timeline: Guatemala’s Brutal Civil War,” *PBS NewsHour*, March 7, 2011.

⁸² Douglas Farah, “Papers Show U.S. Role in Guatemalan Abuses,” *Washington Post*, March 11, 1999; and Odd Arne Westad, *The Cold War: A World History*, New York: Basic Books, 2017, pp. 346–347.

⁸³ Raymond Bonner, “America’s Role in El Salvador’s Deterioration,” *The Atlantic*, January 20, 2018; and Mike Allison, “El Salvador’s Brutal Civil War: What We Still Don’t Know,” *Al Jazeera*, March 1, 2012.

backed Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN), or the Sandinista National Liberation Front,⁸⁴ opposed the U.S.-supported “Contras.”⁸⁵

In addition to its confrontations by proxy in Central America, Cuba itself was the object of a proxy confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union, although of a different kind. After the success of the Cuban revolution in 1959,⁸⁶ the 1961 Bay of Pigs failure,⁸⁷ and the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, the Soviet Union provided financial and political backing to the government in Havana, becoming “Cuba’s closest ally,”⁸⁸ and “Cuba became an outpost for Soviet intelligence gathering and a platform to support other revolutionary movements in Latin America,”⁸⁹ including the civil wars in Nicaragua and El Salvador, as discussed above.

Cuba was one of the main backers of the Bolivia campaign, which, in essence, was a Cuban attempt to make Bolivia “a test case for their doctrine of insurgency.”⁹⁰ In 1966, with the aid of Cuban intelligence, Ernesto “Che” Guevara began preparations for an armed rebellion in Bolivia, which he led. Bolivian President René Barrientos used Guevara’s campaign to make increasing claims for U.S. military and economic aid. By October 1967, Barrientos’s special forces captured Guevara and executed him.⁹¹

The internal conflict in Colombia was the longest conflict in the region, unfolding from around 1963 or 1964 to 2016, when the FARC signed the peace accord with the Colombian government in Havana.⁹² However, despite the peace accord, some former FARC elements recently took up arms again, vowing to continue their fight against the Colombian government.⁹³ The ELN guerrillas have yet to reach a peace agreement with the government in Bogotá.⁹⁴ Soviet support for the FARC came to an end around the time of the Soviet Union’s dissolution in December 1991, but by then the guerrillas had become involved in drug traf-

⁸⁴ Gurganus, 2018; and Office of the Historian, “Central America, 1981–1993,” webpage, U.S. Department of State, undated-c.

⁸⁵ Robert P. Hager, Jr., “The Origins of the ‘Contra War’ in Nicaragua: The Results of a Failed Development Model,” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 10, No. 1, Spring 1998.

⁸⁶ PBS, “Post-Revolution Cuba,” webpage, undated.

⁸⁷ John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, “The Bay of Pigs,” webpage, undated.

⁸⁸ Westad, 2017, p. 348.

⁸⁹ Gurganus, 2018, p. 4.

⁹⁰ Westad, 2017, p. 352.

⁹¹ Westad, 2017, pp. 352–353.

⁹² June S. Beittel, *Colombia’s Peace Process Through 2016*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, updated December 31, 2016.

⁹³ “Colombia Ex-Farc Rebel Iván Márquez Issues Call to Arms,” BBC News, August 29, 2019; and John Otis, “Colombia’s FARC Rebels Laid Down Their Weapons, but a Growing Number Are Being Killed,” NPR, February 6, 2020.

⁹⁴ Nelson Acosta, “Biden Could Help Unfreeze Colombian Peace Talks: ELN Rebel Leader,” Reuters, November 20, 2020.

ficking and were able to replace Soviet support with proceeds from the drug trade.⁹⁵ U.S. involvement was mainly focused on providing the Colombian military and police with counterinsurgency and counternarcotics training, as well as materiel, intelligence, and other forms of support that the Colombian government has leveraged against the guerrillas since at least the early 1960s.⁹⁶

In each of these Latin American countries, the internal conflicts discussed above were mainly rooted in left-wing ideology and economic inequality, often resulting from inequitable land distribution. Land was usually concentrated in the hands of conservative elites, who also controlled the levers of power, while rural and indigenous populations were left to confront economic destitution. In this context, left-wing insurgencies that challenged the status quo and demanded economic and political empowerment emerged.⁹⁷ In the cases presented in this section, the rebel forces aimed to remove the existing governments from power; in the case of Nicaragua, the Sandinistas were successful and came to power in 1979.⁹⁸ Although the internal conflicts in Colombia and Central America witnessed some form of resolution under the guise of peace accords, both the internal violence and the initial drivers of the conflicts—economic and social inequality—persist.⁹⁹

⁹⁵ Douglas Farah, “Colombian Guerrillas Lone Survivors of Cuba-Inspired Leftist Movements,” *Washington Post*, January 4, 1992; and Larry Doane, “Feeding Chaos: Why Air Campaigns Didn’t Defeat the FARC and Won’t Defeat ISIL,” *Infinity Journal*, Vol. 5, No. 2, Spring 2016.

⁹⁶ Charles H. Briscoe, “Plan Lazo: Evaluation and Execution,” *Veritas*, Vol. 2, No. 4, 2006; and June S. Beittel, *Colombia: Challenges for U.S. Policymakers in 2021*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, IN11631, March 9, 2021.

⁹⁷ For information on the causes of the Guatemalan civil war, see Patrick Costello, “Historical Background,” *Accord*, No. 2, November 1997. For information on El Salvador, see Carlos M. Vilas, *Between Earthquakes and Volcanoes: Market, State, and the Revolutions in Central America*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1995. For details on Nicaragua, see Anja Nygren, “Competing Claims on Disputed Lands: The Complexity of Resource Tenure in the Nicaraguan Interior,” *Latin American Research Review*, Vol. 39, No. 1, February 2004; and Susan Burgerman, “Making Peace Perform in War-Transition Countries: El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua,” in Nancy Birdsall, Milan Vaishnav, and Robert L. Ayres, eds., *Short of the Goal: U.S. Policy and Poorly Performing States*, Washington, D.C.: Center for Global Development, 2006. For more information on the Bolivia campaign, see Christopher Rodriguez, “The Bolivian Insurgency of 1966–1967: Che Guevara’s Final Failure,” *Small Wars Journal*, September 23, 2018. For information on the Colombian conflict, see Garry Leech, *The FARC: The Longest Insurgency*, Zed Books, 2011.

⁹⁸ Burgerman, 2006; and Office of the Historian, “Central America, 1977–1980,” webpage, U.S. Department of State, undated-b.

⁹⁹ For statistics on violence in the region, see Statista Research Department, “Homicide in Latin America and the Caribbean - Statistics & Facts,” Statista, last updated September 1, 2021. For an overview of violence in the region, see Robert Muggah and Katherine Aguirre Tobón, *Citizen Security in Latin America: Facts and Figures*, Rio de Janeiro: Igarapé Institute, Strategic Paper 33, April 2018. For an overview of violence in Central America, see [Name redacted], *Gangs in Central America*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, RL34112, August 29, 2016; and Amelia Cheatham and Diana Roy, “Central America’s Turbulent Northern Triangle,” Council on Foreign Relations, July 1, 2021.

For information on social and economic inequality in the region, see Leonardo Gasparini and Guillermo Cruces, *The Changing Picture of Inequality in Latin America: Evidence for Three Decades*, United

Chinese involvement in foreign conflicts has been much more limited than that of the United States and Russia or the former Soviet Union. However, during the so-called Central American crisis from the 1960s to 1990, China provided some support to the same actors supported by the Soviet Union in the civil wars in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua.¹⁰⁰ While the Cultural Revolution and domestic turmoil limited Beijing's ability to provide large-scale support, Latin American revolutionaries were given some training in China and were provided with some equipment with which to carry out the revolution back home.¹⁰¹ Perhaps even more importantly, Chinese leader Mao Zedong's theories of revolution helped guide the actions of many Latin American insurgents and gave them hopes of eventual success.¹⁰² Much of this support wound down after Mao's death in 1976 and Beijing's rejection of his more radical policies.¹⁰³

Great-power involvement in these conflicts during the Cold War era had a central distinguishing feature that was shared with other conflicts around the globe. As prominent political scientist Karl Deutsch explained, these were, in essence, "international conflict[s] between two foreign powers," but "fought out in the soil of a third country[:]; disguised as a conflict over an internal issue of that country; and using some of that country's manpower, resources and territory as a means for achieving preponderantly foreign goals and foreign strategies."¹⁰⁴ U.S. and Soviet involvement in third countries was largely driven by the imperative to prevail in the all-encompassing geopolitical and ideological struggle, as the two rivals sought to balance each other's influence across much of the world.¹⁰⁵ Because of the global and zero-sum nature of this struggle—that is, a communist government anywhere was viewed as a loss to

Nations Development Programme, UNDP LAC Working Paper 01, March 2021; and Christopher Woody, "400 Murders a Day: 10 Reasons Why Latin America Is the World's Most Violent Place," *Insider*, September 10, 2019; UN Development Programme, *Trapped: High Inequality and Low Growth in Latin America and the Caribbean*, New York, 2021; Burgerman, 2006; and Douglas Hertzler and Kathryn Ledebur, *Bolivia's Land Reform Legislation*, Cochabamba, Bolivia: Andean Information Network, January 2007.

¹⁰⁰ Lillian Craig Harris and Robert L. Worden, eds., *China and the Third World: Champion or Challenger?* Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1986.

¹⁰¹ Alberto Martín Álvarez and Eudald Cortina Orero, "The Genesis and Internal Dynamics of El Salvador's People's Revolutionary Army, 1970–1976," *Journal of Latin American Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 4, November 2014, p. 685; Thomas A. Marks, *Maoist Insurgency Since Vietnam*, Portland: Frank Cass, 1996, pp. 259–260; and David Scott Palmer, "Revolutionary Leadership as Necessary Element in People's War: Shining Path of Peru," *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, Vol. 28, No. 3, 2017, pp. 431–434.

¹⁰² Orin Starn, "Maoism in the Andes: The Communist Party of Peru-Shining Path and the Refusal of History," *Journal of Latin American Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 2, May 1995.

¹⁰³ Palmer, 2017, pp. 431–432.

¹⁰⁴ Karl W. Deutsch, "External Involvement in Internal Wars," in Harry Eckstein, ed., *Internal War: Problems and Approaches*, New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1964, p. 102.

¹⁰⁵ The causes and drivers of U.S. and Soviet involvement in the multitude of conflicts across the globe between the end of World War II and the end of the Cold War remain subject to debate among historians; however, there is little doubt that ideological and geopolitical aspects of the Cold War rivalries and the contest over newly independent countries were paramount. For a seminal historical treatment of the U.S. and

the United States, just as a “capitalist” one was viewed as a loss to the Soviets—great-power entanglements in conflicts all over the world were rather frequent.¹⁰⁶ The political fates of countries and regions that should have been secondary to core national security concerns acquired greater importance.

As of this writing, there are several factors internal and external to Latin America that make it a potential site for foreign involvement in its internal conflicts. As mentioned earlier, the causes of its internal wars have yet to be settled, and the decades-long history of guerrilla warfare, the high levels of internal violence associated with street gangs and drug trafficking across Central America and the Andean region,¹⁰⁷ the persistent economic and social inequality,¹⁰⁸ and the worsening economic situation resulting from the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic¹⁰⁹ are likely to further destabilize what are already fragile societies.¹¹⁰ For instance, the outbreak and intensification of street protests in Colombia,¹¹¹ Peru,¹¹² and Chile¹¹³ in 2020 and 2021 have shown how precarious the economic situations of even some of the wealthiest countries in Latin America have become during the COVID-19 pandemic and under how much economic pressure their populations have come.¹¹⁴ Next to Colombia, which still struggles to incorporate former FARC combatants into society and

Soviet interventions of the late Cold War, see Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

¹⁰⁶ We are indebted to our colleagues for tabulating the incidence of proxy wars over time; see Stephen Watts, Bryan Frederick, Nathan Chandler, Mark Toukan, Christian Curriden, Erik E. Mueller, Edward Geist, Ariane M. Tabatabai, Sara Plana, Brandon Corbin, and Jeffrey Martini, *Proxy Warfare in Strategic Competition: Overarching Findings and Recommendations*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A307-1, 2023.

¹⁰⁷ Benjamin Lessing, *Making Peace in Drug Wars: Crackdowns and Cartels in Latin America*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018; and Muggah and Tobón, 2018.

¹⁰⁸ Woody, 2019; UN Development Programme, 2021.

¹⁰⁹ UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, “Pandemic Prompts Rise in Poverty to Levels Unprecedented in Recent Decades and Sharply Affects Inequality and Employment,” press release, March 4, 2021; and Linnea Sandin, “Covid-19 Exposes Latin America’s Inequality,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, April 6, 2020.

¹¹⁰ Ethan Bronner, “Peru Signals Leftist Revival Will Spread Across Latin America,” Bloomberg, June 10, 2021.

¹¹¹ Julie Turkewitz, “Why Are Colombians Protesting?” *New York Times*, May 18, 2021.

¹¹² Marco Aquino, “Peruvians Take to the Streets as Election Result Hold-Up Stokes Tensions,” Reuters, June 27, 2021; and Bronner, 2021.

¹¹³ Christopher Sabatini and Lyndsey Jefferson, “‘The Truth Is, Chile Is Unequal’: What’s Behind Chile’s Protests,” Chatham House, December 18, 2019; and “An Electoral Surprise in Chile May Produce a Left-Wing Constitution,” *The Economist*, May 27, 2021.

¹¹⁴ Bronner, 2021.

faces the prospect of a renewed armed conflict,¹¹⁵ societies in several Central American countries have been experiencing very high levels of gang-related violence for over a decade and a half.¹¹⁶ Similarly, Brazil has been experiencing gang-related violence in its favelas,¹¹⁷ and the overall political, economic, and security situation in Venezuela, which has also witnessed increased levels of violence, has been very precarious since at least 2016.¹¹⁸ As a consequence of the deteriorating economic situation in Venezuela, Nicaragua—which was relying on financial aid from Caracas—also witnessed a worsening economic situation and a rise in internal instability.¹¹⁹

These internal sources of fragility are likely to present opportunities for competing great powers to become involved in conflicts in Latin America. In addition to the interests the three powers have in the region, competition between the United States, Russia, and now China is intensifying and could again, as it did in the Cold War, motivate support for parties in conflicts. With a more assertive China and a more adversarial Russia increasingly attempting to project power close to the U.S. homeland, the United States might be more determined to deter the two competitors and deny their efforts to establish facilities that would make it easier to carry out military operations in the Western Hemisphere.¹²⁰ In this context, it is conceivable that the United States and its competitors would once again back opposing parties in internal conflicts, harkening back to Cold War dynamics. However, it is also possible that great-power involvement in the region would not closely resemble Cold War conflicts.

Definitions of Key Concepts

We begin by defining the concepts that are key to this research. First, we adopt the definition of *competition* proposed by Michael Mazarr and his co-authors in a 2018 RAND study:

¹¹⁵ Steven Grattan, “Four Years After FARC Peace Deal, Colombia Grapples with Violence,” Al Jazeera, November 24, 2020b; “Colombia Ex-Farc Rebel Iván Márquez Issues Call to Arms,” 2019; and Otis, 2020.

¹¹⁶ For statistics on violence in Latin America, see Statista Research Department, 2021. See also [Name redacted], 2016; and Cheatham and Roy, 2021.

¹¹⁷ Flávia Milhorance, “Police Killing Hundreds in Rio de Janeiro Despite Court Ban on Favela Raids,” *The Guardian*, April 18, 2021; and Terrence McCoy, “Brazil Shocked by Warlike Police Raid That Leaves 25 Dead in Rio de Janeiro Favela,” *Washington Post*, May 6, 2021.

¹¹⁸ Keymer Ávila, “Violence, Patronage, and Criminal Governance in Venezuela,” openDemocracy, January 15, 2021; and Sarah Kinoshian and Vivian Sequera, “‘The Government Is Losing Ground’ Residents Say as Gangs Take Territory in Venezuela’s Capital,” Reuters, July 18, 2021.

¹¹⁹ Tim Rogers, “Venezuela’s Chávez Bankrolled Nicaragua with \$1.6 Billion Since 2007,” *Christian Science Monitor*, April 7, 2011; and Oswaldo Rivas, “Nicaraguans Take to Streets in Protest over Social Security Changes,” Reuters, April 19, 2018.

¹²⁰ Bonnie S. Glaser and Matthew P. Funairole, “The 19th Party Congress: A More Assertive Chinese Foreign Policy,” *The Interpreter*, October 26, 2017; and Eugene Rumer and Richard Sokolsky, *Grand Illusions: The Impact of Misperceptions About Russia on U.S. Policy*, Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2021.

Competition in the international realm involves the attempt to gain advantage, often relative to others believed to pose a challenge or threat, through the self-interested pursuit of contested goods such as power, security, wealth, influence, and status.¹²¹

Second, we define the set of relevant conflicts. Cold War-era conflicts noted earlier are often described as *proxy wars*. What precisely makes external powers' involvement in a foreign conflict a proxy war is a matter of some debate.¹²² For instance, some definitions of proxy wars limit them to cases in which external powers support non-state actors but not states.¹²³ However, most discussions of proxy wars distinguish this form of involvement from direct military interventions: In proxy warfare, the external power intervenes through only indirect support—such as with arms and other resources—and delegates the fighting to a local actor.¹²⁴

In practice, the line between indirect and direct military support might not be a firm one, as indirect support to proxies can subtly escalate to military action. Moreover, one power may intervene in a conflict solely through indirect support of a proxy actor, whereas its rival power might intervene more directly. For example, in Afghanistan in the 1980s, the Soviet intervention entailed a substantial deployment of Soviet troops, whereas the U.S. involvement was largely confined to supporting the *mujahedeen* (Islamic guerrilla fighters).¹²⁵ Then too, the risks that attend the spillover of competition into foreign conflicts—risks of escalation into direct conflict and mounting costs of involvement—may exist whether rival powers become involved directly or indirectly. Thus, in this series of reports, we investigate the prospects for great-power involvement in conflicts in secondary theaters, whatever form this involvement takes.

More specifically, we consider *whether and under what conditions the United States could expect to become involved in a secondary-theater conflict in which at least one of its two main competitors is also involved*. Great-power involvement in conflicts might take the shape of proxy warfare—that is, support for a state or a non-state actor by means short of direct military intervention. This might include covert or overt action. In particular, it might include purely indirect aid, such as training, equipping, advising, selling arms, and providing financial assistance, but it might also involve combat or military action—so long as that action is carried out by non-state groups, such as private military and security companies (PMSCs),

¹²¹ Michael J. Mazarr, Jonathan Blake, Abigail Casey, Tim McDonald, Stephanie Pezard, and Michael Spirtas, *Understanding the Emerging Era of International Competition: Theoretical and Historical Perspectives*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2726-AF, 2018, p. 5.

¹²² See, for example, Andrew Mumford, *Proxy Warfare*, Cambridge, United Kingdom: John Wiley & Sons, 2013, p. 1.

¹²³ See, for example, Dominic Tierney, “The Future of Sino-US Proxy War,” *Texas National Security Review*, Vol. 4, No. 2, Spring 2021; and Mumford, 2013, p. 1.

¹²⁴ See, for example, Tierney, 2021; and Mumford, 2013, p. 1.

¹²⁵ See, for example, Mumford, 2013, p. 14.

affiliated with and operating on behalf of the external power.¹²⁶ Great-power involvement in conflicts might also take the shape of direct military interventions—although we deemphasize the prospects of major military interventions.

Importantly, we do not limit our investigation to the potential involvement in third-party conflicts for “foreign goals,” as per Deutsch’s description of Cold War proxy wars noted earlier. In the future, great powers may become embroiled in conflicts in pursuit of a variety of goals, and we do not want to exclude any possibilities from consideration. Similarly, emphasizing the degree to which the proxy, or local actor, must be an agent that wholly does the external principal’s bidding, rather than pursuing its own agenda, would unduly narrow the scope on the basis of factors that are difficult to parse even in historical cases—and much more so in hypothetical future conflicts.¹²⁷

Methodology

To study great-power competition and potential conflict in Latin America (and the other two secondary theaters studied in this series), we devised a three-stage methodology. First, we relied on publicly available data to measure the relative potential for great-power competition across all the countries in the region included in our data set; second, we relied on conflict risk assessments to measure the relative risk of internal conflict across all the countries in the region that are part of our data set; and third, we combined the two measures to identify *competition flashpoints*—that is, countries where more than one of the three powers (the United States, China, or Russia) would most plausibly become involved in conflicts. We address the first stage here and the latter two in the subsequent subsections.

Measuring the Potential for Competition

In the first stage, we sought to measure the relative *potential for competition* among the United States, China, and Russia, across multiple domains, for all the countries in Latin America that are part of our data set. Because great-power competition takes place across multiple domains, measuring the potential for competition is a data-intensive task. Moreover, measuring competition itself is a difficult proposition; whether one state is in competition with another is as much a function of perceptions of a zero-sum game as it is of concrete, measurable factors. Our approach was therefore to rely on data that enabled us to measure the degree of great-power involvement in each state relative to other states in the region. That is,

¹²⁶ Some definitions of *proxy warfare* treat PMSCs and similar actors as the proxies that are being supported by the external powers, on par with local actors (see, for example, Mumford, 2013). We think that this lens is not helpful for the present context and consider such actors as Russia’s PMSCs to be a potential instrument of support to local actors rather than a party to the conflict in their own right.

¹²⁷ For an example of such an emphasis, see Douglas A. Ollivant and Erica Gaston, “The Problem with the Narrative of ‘Proxy War’ in Iraq,” *War on the Rocks*, May 31, 2019.

we identified states in the region in which the United States, China, and Russia have been most involved, using each of the four main tools of national power: diplomacy, information, military, and economics (often known by the acronym DIME). States that attract the greatest degree of involvement from all three powers are thus the sites of potentially acute great-power competition. Potential, of course, need not mean actual; it is possible that the objectives that underlie each great power's involvement do not clash. However, there is more opportunity for competition where great powers are most extensively involved.

Moreover, measuring involvement captures *influence-seeking* rather than influence itself. Although we measured how much time and resources the United States, China, and Russia have been investing in a location, we did not measure to what extent these investments have paid off in terms of each great power gaining influence on the ground.

In the appendix to this report, we provide more-detailed information about the definitions, sources, and data used to capture influence-seeking. Table 1.1 identifies the variables used to measure involvement or influence-seeking across the four domains of national power, as well as the time frame of the data used.

TABLE 1.1
Measuring Influence-Seeking and Potential for Competition: Variables

Domain	Variable	Time Frame of Data
Diplomacy	Foreign aid and assistance	Most recent year available
	High-level diplomatic visits	Between 2000 and 2020
	Presence of embassy	As of 2020
	Visa-free travel	As of 2020
Information	State-sponsored media	As of 2020
Military	Involvement in post–Cold War conflicts	Since 1991 (binary)
	Arms exports	2014–most recent year available
	Presence of military forces and bases	2014–2020
	Military agreements	As of 2020
	Military exercises	2014–2020
	PMSCs	Recent years
	Military access	As of 2020
Economics	Trade volume	2018
	Investment	Most recent year available
	Critical infrastructure	Russia only, as of 2020

To measure diplomatic involvement, we relied on some traditional indicators, such as the amount of foreign aid each great power directed toward countries in the region and the presence of an embassy.¹²⁸ We also captured whether states have reciprocal visa-free travel, on the assumption that the presence of such agreements indicates more people-to-people ties. In addition, we captured the number of high-level diplomatic visits by heads of state, top foreign policy officials, and (for the United States) top military officials, because one of the most valuable diplomatic commodities is senior leader time.

Of the four tools of state power, informational activities proved most challenging for us to measure. For Russia, we determined whether a state-sponsored media outlet (RT, Sputnik, or TASS) had a cooperation agreement with local media. For China, we determined whether China Central Television, China Radio International, or Xinhua was present in the country. And for the United States, we identified countries where Voice of America had a bureau, had transmitters, owned FM frequencies, or had contracts with local radio or television affiliates that retranslate. Although this measure of information does not capture many channels of informational influence and narrative dissemination, such as social media, it does provide a rough approximation of where great powers have chosen to devote their informational resources.

We collected multiple indicators for the potential for military competition. Given the military focus of this work and the aim of exploring the possibilities for conflict in Latin America, we relied on a larger number of metrics than for other domains of national power. Most of the indicators—notably, military agreements, arms exports, military access, exercises, and the presence of military forces and bases—bear a direct relationship to the state of military-to-military ties. We also included a variable for prior or ongoing great-power involvement in a conflict in each country after the Cold War. Lastly, given the importance of gray-zone tactics, we included the reported presence of U.S., Chinese, and Russian PMSCs.¹²⁹

Finally, on economic measures, we relied on bilateral merchandise trade volume and direct investment. On the latter, although direct investment position data were available for the United States, and partly available for Russia, this was not the case for China; thus, for China, we relied on the most comprehensive independent effort to catalog China's global investments, compiled by the American Enterprise Institute and the Heritage Foundation. Because Russia's direct investment position data are particularly patchy and likely do not adequately represent countries in which Russian entities have an economic stake, we supplemented the investment measure with another variable that captured an important aspect of economic involvement: the presence of Russian companies in critical infrastructure sectors

¹²⁸ Although we sought data for the most recent year, the most recent data for China were from 2014 at the latest. This means that our measures of China's diplomatic influence-seeking may be somewhat distorted, if the relative prioritization of its foreign aid recipients in the region shifted considerably since then.

¹²⁹ As noted earlier, see the appendix for sources and definitions for all the variables discussed in this section.

of each country.¹³⁰ For the United States and China, these investments generally are included in their respective investment data.

A few caveats about these data and our approach are in order. First, given the extensive geographic scope and differences between what data the United States, China, and Russia make public, not every variable was available for each of the three great powers, and not all the data were of equal quality or completeness.¹³¹ Second, even when the data were available and complete, many of the variables are not directly comparable across the competing powers. Unlike the trade volume metric, for instance, the presence of PMSCs does not represent the same kind of influence-seeking for each great power; whereas the United States and Russia might both have PMSCs in a given country, the former's may be performing a relatively benign task, such as embassy security, while the latter's may be doing something more offensive, such as training local military factions or participating in combat. Third, not all variables proved of equal utility by region. For example, if the United States has an embassy in every country in Latin America, the variable does not help identify where the United States focuses its efforts there.

Despite these limitations, these variables offer a reasonable approximation of where each power is focusing its efforts. To synthesize this broad set of variables, we constructed metrics, or indices, measuring great-power influence-seeking in each of four domains (diplomacy, information, military, and economics) and overall, and those indices capture where in the region each power focuses its activities. The *influence-seeking indices* (i.e., scores) for each of the three powers across the four domains provide a numeric indication of how involved a given great power is in a particular country relative to other countries in that region. The influence-seeking metrics for *all three* competing powers are then combined to produce *indices for competition potential* in each domain and overall for a given country.

In constructing the influence-seeking and competition-potential indices, we accorded each variable equal weight. Military access, for example, counts as much as the presence of PMSCs in the military influence-seeking index and the military competition-potential index, and direct investment counts as much as arms exports in the overall competition-potential index. The appendix describes our approach in greater detail.

To be sure, how much each activity should matter in determining a country's importance to competing powers is an open question. In the absence of a strong theoretical reason to value any one factor as significantly more important than others, we opted for equal weights. The resulting indices are just one way, and certainly not the only way, of capturing influence-

¹³⁰ As analysis from a Russian expert shows, Russian direct investment data are distorted by the magnitude of capital kept offshore, which inflates the significance of such places as Cyprus; this analysis also indicates that foreign investments by Russia's largest companies, such as Gazprom, Lukoil, and Rosneft, are underestimated, sometimes vastly (Alexey V. Kuznetsov, "Perspectives for Diversifying Russian Direct Investment Abroad" ["Перспективы диверсификации российских прямых инвестиций за рубежом"], *Problems in Forecasting* [Проблемы прогнозирования], No. 1, 2017).

¹³¹ For example, both the United States and Russia decline to publicly report foreign investments for certain countries because of confidentiality concerns.

seeking and potential for competition. Thus, our approach does not pursue a nuanced weighting of different activities. However, it does provide a succinct measure of where the three competitors are focusing their efforts, which accounts for different ways in which states build influence and relations. That is, we can identify the most likely competition flashpoints (i.e., the countries where all three powers have a relatively high level of involvement).

Measuring the Potential for Conflict

A high potential for competition among two or more great powers in a given country does not necessarily make that country a very likely location for a proxy war or military intervention. Great-power support for local actors in power struggles in secondary theaters requires both motive *and* opportunity. Opportunity, in this case, would stem from a high risk of conflict. External powers' support for proxies or more-direct interventions are predicated on an underlying internal conflict or civil war, or at least conditions where such a conflict might be plausibly catalyzed by external powers.¹³² External powers, then, can exploit these dynamics to their advantage; they might choose to back a party whose victory might confer benefits on the external power or a party that is in a position to inflict costs on a rival great power.¹³³

Thus, in the second stage of our methodology, we assessed the *potential for conflict* erupting in each of the countries relative to the rest of the theater, particularly where that might invite external intervention and produce proxy wars. To do so for countries in Latin America, we relied on a combination of two complimentary sources. The first is the Janes qualitative, intelligence-driven *internal conflict risk* measure, which is an assessment of the "likelihood . . . of intra-state military conflict (in the form of an organized insurgency, separatist conflict or full-blown civil war where rebels/insurgents are attempting to overthrow the government, achieve regional independence or at least heavily influence major government policies)."¹³⁴ The advantages of the Janes assessment are that it (1) takes into account expert judgment and qualitative factors that are difficult to quantify and (2) provides an up-to-date assessment of each country in each region. Real-time expert rankings, however, depend on subjective judgment and may be unduly influenced by recent events that may turn out to be fleeting.

To balance these potential biases, we combined the Janes rankings with ratings from the State Fragility Index, an older measure produced by the Center for Systemic Peace.¹³⁵ This

¹³² In theory, an inter-state war can also have elements of a proxy war; here, however, we focus largely on internal conflicts, although we do consider inter-state or cross-border dynamics in some of the scenarios examined.

¹³³ For example, see Idean Salehyan, Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, and David E. Cunningham, "Explaining External Support for Insurgent Groups," *International Organization*, Vol. 65, No. 4, Fall 2011.

¹³⁴ Janes Military and Security Assessments Intelligence Centre, "Global Country Risk Ratings," IHS Markit, April 6, 2020.

¹³⁵ Monty G. Marshall and Gabrielle Elzinga-Marshall, "State Fragility Index and Matrix 2018," Center for Systemic Peace, undated.

index does not produce real-time estimates of conflict risk but instead assesses state fragility based on durable factors that have been demonstrably related to conflict and do not change easily—such as history of prior conflict, discrimination against particular ethnic groups, and the Human Development Index.¹³⁶ Because we are mainly interested in identifying which countries are at *relatively greater risk* of conflict than others—rather than by *how much* one country's risk is greater than another's—we converted the numeric ratings into ordinal rankings and combined the two (the Janes internal conflict risk rankings and the state fragility rankings) for a single ranking of countries from most to least potential for conflict. The appendix describes our approach and the results in greater detail.

Choosing and Analyzing Countries and Conflict Scenarios

In the third stage, using the results from our analysis of the potential for competition and the potential for conflict, we selected three cases to present some of the more plausible conflict scenarios, where great powers might become involved. To do so, we first limited the potential set to the one-third of countries with the highest conflict potential. This helped ensure that the conflict scenarios we examine are sufficiently foreseeable and based on existing dynamics, so that we could identify the most likely causes of conflict; in other words, this subset of states is most likely to present actual, rather than merely speculative, opportunities for great powers to become involved in conflicts.

We then ranked this set of most-conflict-prone states in the region by competition potential, from highest to lowest. This enabled us to also identify which states have been the sites of the most extensive great-power influence-seeking and are therefore theoretically more likely to attract great-power attention if a conflict breaks out. A high potential for competition does not *ensure* that any of the three powers has sufficient motivation to become involved, but it should make it more likely, on average.¹³⁷

Rather than simply picking the states with the greatest competition potential among the most-conflict-prone states, we adopted a somewhat more qualitative approach. We consulted with regional subject-matter experts and our analyses of China's and Russia's approaches to supporting proxy actors (see the summary volume of this series¹³⁸) to select countries (1) where the likelihood of significant conflict, especially with some transborder or broader regional implications, is indeed present and (2) that present at least theoretically plausible contexts for great-power involvement in conflicts, in view of what we know about how great powers have approached faraway conflicts in recent times. From among countries that met

¹³⁶ For full detail, see Monty G. Marshall and Gabrielle Elzinga-Marshall, *Global Report 2017: Conflict, Governance, and State Fragility*, Vienna, Va.: Center for Systemic Peace, August 27, 2017.

¹³⁷ To be sure, in an atmosphere of acute rivalry resembling periods of the Cold War, it is possible that a great power would support local actors purely for competitive reasons in countries where it lacks any other interests. Where this might occur, however, is essentially unpredictable. Thus, we focus on identifying the more plausible cases based on factors (i.e., influence-seeking) that we can observe.

¹³⁸ Cohen et al., 2023, Appendixes B and C.

those general criteria, we further sought to select cases that were sufficiently different from each other to stress the Department of the Air Force in different ways.

After selecting the countries for analysis of potential great-power involvement in internal conflicts, we drew on a variety of sources to develop plausible scenarios for what these conflicts might look like. First, we explored local political dynamics and identified which local actors have ties to which great power, if any. We relied on expert analyses of each country's political dynamics and assessments of conflict risks. Our conflict scenarios are based on causes of conflict identified as salient or most likely in such analyses.¹³⁹ Sparks that start armed conflicts are not always predictable; for example, the outbreak of a series of uprisings of the Arab Spring in 2011 was largely unexpected to most analysts, including intelligence analysts.¹⁴⁰ Thus, we do not claim to predict precisely how conflicts will unfold or to cover the full spectrum of possible scenarios that might come to pass. Instead, we focus on the dynamics of discord that are evident at present and identified by regional experts as the most-plausible sources of substantial violent conflict in the foreseeable future.

Second, we assessed each great power's overarching interests in the country, which help inform what objectives, if any, each might have in a hypothetical conflict. We then explored what type of posture and access each great power might have and what types of capabilities it might be able to bring to bear on the given scenario. Next, we explored how such a conflict might unfold and what factors might affect its ultimate outcome. To focus analysis here, we accorded more attention to scenarios that we assessed were more likely to draw in the United States and at least one of its two key competitors. That is, even where multiple, equally plausible conflict scenarios existed, we focused on the scenario where the great powers were more likely to have sufficient motivation for involvement. To empirically ground these assessments, we drew on a variety of sources to better understand how China and Russia—as well as the United States—have approached conflicts in secondary theaters in the past. These analyses included research into how Chinese and Russian experts—as well as Western ones—write about the subject today, which is included in the summary volume in this series.¹⁴¹

Overview of Report Structure

The remainder of this report is structured as follows. In Chapter Two, we provide an overview of the regional flashpoints for competition, drawing on our analysis of the United States', China's, and Russia's interests and activities in Latin America across the four primary domains of

¹³⁹ In this, we drew on our interviews with regional experts, scholarly and policy research on each country, and the research that produced the assessments of political risk on which we relied to rank countries in each region.

¹⁴⁰ Jeff Goodwin, "Why We Were Surprised (Again) by the Arab Spring," *Swiss Political Science Review*, Vol. 17, No. 4, December 2011.

¹⁴¹ Cohen et al., 2023.

influence-seeking (diplomacy, information, military, and economics) and our assessment of the potential for conflict across the region. Using the results of this analysis, we identify two case studies for further examination: (1) Venezuela and Colombia, which we consider jointly, and (2) Nicaragua.

In Chapters Three and Four, we explore these case studies in depth, discussing key internal actors and local power dynamics; U.S., Chinese, and Russian interests in these countries; and the drivers associated with a potential proxy conflict in each country. We also discuss the likely forms of engagement and reactions of these three powers in each conflict scenario.

Finally, in Chapter Five, we synthesize the analysis from Chapters Two through Four and offer recommendations on how the U.S. government, DoD, and the Department of the Air Force could better prepare for potential future engagement in Latin America.

The central argument of this report is that China's and, to a lesser extent, Russia's increasing engagement in Latin America is likely to result in an intensification of great-power competition in some of the largest economies and most-populous countries in the region. Latin America offers several plausible scenarios for conflict in which the United States becomes involved on a side opposing Russia or China—scenarios for which the United States currently might not be fully prepared. In Latin American countries where there is an overlap between high competition potential and a high probability of internal conflict breaking out, it is possible that the United States and one or both of the other two powers would support opposing sides, reminiscent of the Cold War–style confrontations that the region experienced in the past. Although we assess that all three competitors have limited appetites for conventional military engagement in the region, the United States is more likely than the two other competitors to become engaged and sustain support for proxies because of its higher stakes in Latin American stability and need to maintain dominance in the region.

Identifying Regional Competition Flashpoints

The potential for great powers to become drawn into intense competition, as well as the potential for that competition to boil over into conflict, is not equal across Latin America. In this chapter, we first assess the potential for competition across the region. We find that the countries where the potential for competition is highest are Brazil, Chile, Peru, Colombia, Argentina, and Venezuela—some of Latin America’s largest economies and most populous countries. Then, we assess the countries’ risk of internal conflict. In this analysis, a different set of countries tops the list: Colombia, Haiti, Venezuela, and Bolivia. We rely on both competition potential and conflict potential to then identify regional competition flashpoints—that is, the countries with relatively higher chances of having conflicts that draw in competing great powers.

Through our analysis, we identified a narrow set of regional competition flashpoints to serve as cases for closer investigation of potential conflict scenarios: Venezuela, Colombia, and Nicaragua. As we discuss in this chapter, these three countries not only carry a high potential for internal conflict (all three have already witnessed varying levels of internal violence in recent years) but are also points of convergence of great-power competition.

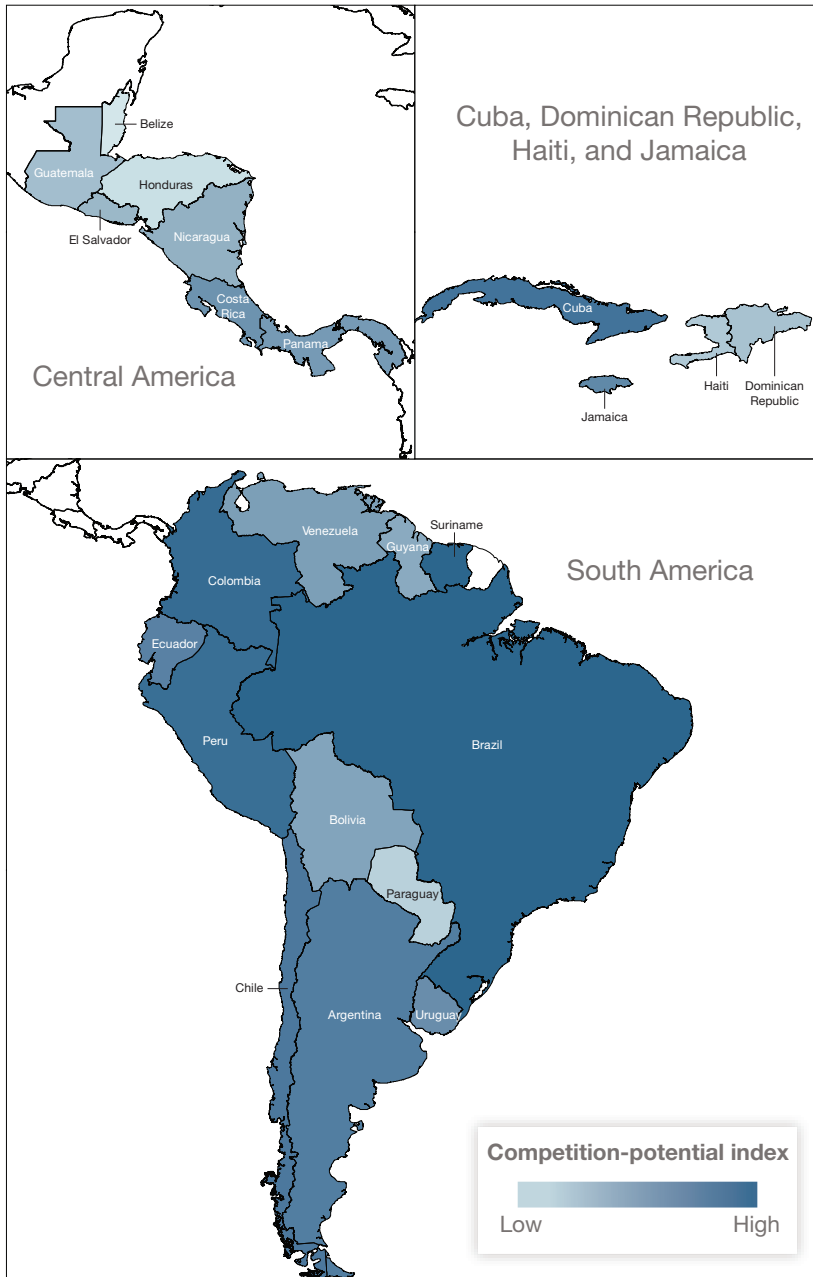
Regional Competition Landscape

To identify the countries in Latin America where the potential for competition is most intense, we focused on measures of influence across all four domains of national power: diplomacy, information, military, and economics. For these measures, we tried to identify—where possible—not only recent trends but also the current status of each great power’s efforts across each of the four domains. For each domain, we present a map that depicts the competition index (or score) for each country; describe trends we identified; and discuss the main features of the competition among the United States, China, and Russia.

Diplomacy

Figure 2.1 illustrates the potential for competition in the diplomatic domain for the United States, China, and Russia across Latin America; darker shades represent a higher potential for competition.

FIGURE 2.1
Diplomatic Competition Potential in Latin America



SOURCE: Authors' analysis of the influence-seeking measures described in this report; for data sources, see the appendix. Base map: Esri, Garmin International Inc., and U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (The World Factbook) (Esri, Garmin, and CIA), "World Countries," ArcGIS, map package, last updated 2019. Maps throughout this report were created using ArcGIS software by Esri. ArcGIS and ArcMap are the intellectual property of Esri and are used herein under license. © Esri. All rights reserved. For more information about Esri software, visit www.esri.com.

In the diplomatic domain, the potential for competition is strongest in Brazil, Colombia, Peru, Cuba, and Chile. Overall, influence-seeking in the diplomatic domain is more pronounced in South America than in Central America and the Caribbean.

Diplomatic measures of influence show that South America's potential for competition overlaps with that of all of Latin America and is strongest in Brazil, Colombia, Peru, Chile, and Argentina. In Central America and the Caribbean, Cuba is the locus of the most-intense competition, followed by Costa Rica and Panama. All five South American countries rank among the top seven countries in all of Latin America in terms of GDP and population size, and Brazil ranks at the top of the list for both criteria.¹ From 2000 to 2020, both China and Russia recorded their highest numbers of high-level diplomatic exchanges in Latin America with Brazil, which they consider a strategic ally or partner, further denoting the country's importance. All three countries—China, Russia, and Brazil—are also part of BRICS.² Their common participation in this forum helps explain the high number of diplomatic interactions in the past decade.

Whereas population, economy size, and regional political leverage likely explain the level of diplomatic competition in South American countries, including Brazil, in Central America and the Caribbean, geopolitical considerations likely justify the focus on Cuba, and economic and geographic considerations likely justify the interest in Costa Rica and Panama. In 2021, Costa Rica and Panama ranked 9th and 10th, respectively, in Latin America in terms of economy size, and both countries have rather small populations.³ The small population sizes of Central American countries and the fact that Central America has some of the poorest countries in the Western Hemisphere partly explain the overall neglect of this area by great powers in the past two decades.⁴

The convergence in a few countries of the three great powers' influence-seeking activities somewhat obscures a noteworthy fact: The three powers have rather dissimilar regional priorities when it comes to diplomatic effort. The United States' diplomatic influence-seeking activities have concentrated on Colombia, Peru, Chile, and Brazil, with Colombia receiving the most U.S. foreign aid in the region and attracting the highest number of high-level diplomatic visits.⁵ Colombia is one of the oldest democracies in Latin America and a strong U.S.

¹ Teresa Romero, "Latin America & Caribbean: GDP by Country 2020," Statista, webpage, last updated July 5, 2021a; and Teresa Romero, "Most Populated Countries in Latin America 2020," Statista, webpage, last updated July 22, 2021b.

² BRICS, "BRICS Information Portal," webpage, undated.

³ As of 2020, Costa Rica's population was 5.09 million inhabitants, while Panama's was 4.31 million (Romero, 2021b). For GDP data, see Romero, 2021a.

⁴ For 2021 data on GDP per capita, see Teresa Romero, "Latin America & Caribbean: GDP per Capita by Country 2021," Statista, webpage, last updated August 2, 2021c.

⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, homepage, undated-a; President of Russia, homepage, undated-b; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, homepage, undated-c; Office of the Historian, homepage, U.S. Department of State, undated-a; and Historical Office, Office of the Secretary of Defense, homepage, undated.

security partner in the region.⁶ The two countries cooperate on police, military, and human rights training throughout the region, as well as on counterinsurgency and counterterrorism operations. Plan Colombia, a U.S.-funded military and economic assistance package initially designed as a counternarcotics initiative and expanded after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks (9/11) to include counterinsurgency and counterterrorism operations, represents the flagship cooperation initiative between the two countries.⁷

For Russia, the main countries of diplomatic interest are Cuba, Brazil, Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Argentina. Russia's interest in these countries somewhat overlaps with the United States' and China's when it comes to some of the large economies in the region, as previously discussed. However, the Kremlin's diplomatic focus on Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua, which have enjoyed some of the most-numerous high-level diplomatic exchanges with Russia and have benefited from Russian financial aid (especially Cuba and Nicaragua),⁸ speaks to the importance that Russia places on cultivating geopolitical alliances with countries in close geographic proximity to the United States. Many of Russia's presidential visits to Latin American countries receive considerable domestic television coverage,⁹ ultimately serving a dual purpose by allowing the Kremlin to project power both internationally and domestically. Russia is supportive of Brazil's aspirations to become a permanent member of the UN Security Council,¹⁰ and, in 2005, the two countries agreed to become strategic allies.¹¹ Russia and Argentina have a strategic partnership that was renewed in January 2018 by Argentine President Mauricio Macri.¹² In sum, through its diplomatic influence-seeking, Moscow has been courting both some of the largest economies in Latin America and some of the less prosperous yet geopolitically significant ones, such as Cuba and Venezuela,¹³ both of which are founding members of ALBA.¹⁴

⁶ Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, "U.S. Relations with Colombia: Bilateral Relations Fact Sheet," U.S. Department of State, last updated July 19, 2021b.

⁷ June S. Beittel, *Colombia: Background and U.S. Relations*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, November 29, 2019.

⁸ Official Development Assistance (total net) for the latest year available for each country, available at Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, "Aid (ODA) Disbursements to Countries and Regions [DAC2a]," webpage, undated. For details on Russia's financial aid to Cuba, see Gurganus, 2018.

⁹ Rouvinski, 2017.

¹⁰ Gurganus, 2018.

¹¹ Nikolai Dobronravin and Victor Jiefets, "Beyond the BRICS: Russian-Brazilian Relations Since the Collapse of the USSR," *Pensamiento Propio*, No. 49–50, 2019, p. 213.

¹² Gurganus, 2018. Macri succeeded Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, who had forged a close relationship with Putin. When Macri became president, there were speculations that the strategic partnership with Russia would not be renewed.

¹³ Gurganus, 2018.

¹⁴ Joel D. Hirst, "A Guide to ALBA: What Is the Bolivarian Alternative to the Americas and What Does It Do?" *Americas Quarterly*, undated.

For China, the top countries of diplomatic interest in the region are a mix of some of the largest economies (e.g., Brazil, Chile, Peru, and Argentina)—which have engaged in the highest numbers of high-level diplomatic exchanges with China over the past two decades—and less developed economies (e.g., Jamaica and Guyana) and smaller nation-states (e.g., Costa Rica and Ecuador). China’s diplomatic engagement with Brazil is rooted in the 1993 strategic partnership between the two countries and has been amplified through their common membership in BRICS and Brazil’s growing oil exports to China.¹⁵ In 2020, China was the destination of 70 percent of Brazil’s oil exports.¹⁶ China’s diplomatic engagement with Chile and Peru also has economic roots, mainly in the exploitation of natural resources, such as copper (Chile) and iron (Peru), and fishing and agricultural resources.¹⁷ China’s diplomatic relations with less populous countries and smaller economies in the region involve the top recipients of Chinese foreign aid (i.e., Jamaica, Guyana, and Costa Rica), which have also become destinations of Chinese Belt and Road Initiative infrastructure investments in recent years.¹⁸

While the map in Figure 2.1 offers a snapshot in time of where the three great powers’ influence-seeking activities converge, Figure 2.2 and Table 2.1 show the evolution in the number of U.S., Chinese, and Russian high-level diplomatic visits involving Latin American countries from 2000 to 2020. The frequency of U.S. visits with Latin American countries remained relatively steady during the two decades for which we collected data, whereas the frequency of China’s visits with these countries increased from 2000 to 2019.¹⁹ Russia’s high-level visits with these countries also increased significantly during this period.

Not all of the data allow us to compare the relative extent of diplomatic involvement of the three competitors, but the data that do suggest that although the United States remains in

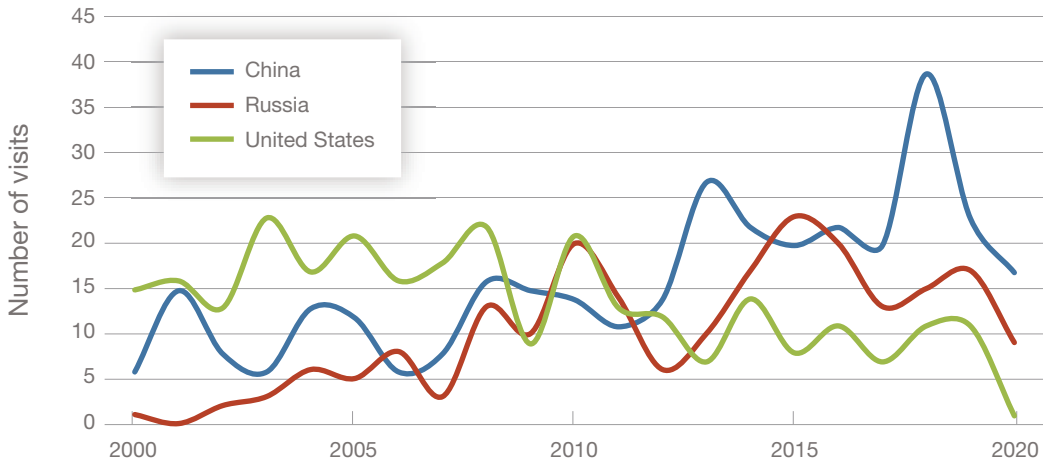
¹⁵ Harold Trinkunas, “Testing the Limits of China and Brazil’s Partnership,” Brookings Institution, July 20, 2020; and Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “China Maintains with Brazil Long-Term and Stable Strategic Partnership Based on Mutual Benefit,” webpage, undated-a.

¹⁶ Sabrina Valle and Marianna Parraga, “Brazil Boosts Oil Exports to Asia as Global Rivals Make Record Cuts,” Reuters, July 20, 2020.

¹⁷ For information on Chile, see Ellis, 2009, pp. 36–37; on Peru, see Ellis, 2009, pp. 150–151.

¹⁸ AidData, “China’s Development Finance,” webpage, undated; Alexis Monteith, “As Jamaica Signs onto China’s Belt and Road Initiative, the US Congress Takes a Closer Look,” *Jamaica Observer*, April 21, 2019; Tiffany Foxcroft, “Jamaica Has China to Thank for Much-Needed Infrastructure—But Some Locals Say It Has Come at a Price,” CBC News, last updated November 29, 2019; Evan Ellis, Ryan C. Berg, and Kristie Pellecchia, “China Reminds Us Why the Caribbean Is Vital to US Strategic Interests,” *The Hill*, June 12, 2021; and “Costa Rica and China Sign Agreement to Encourage Investment and Commerce,” *Tico Times*, September 5, 2018.

¹⁹ Chinese visits increased from six in 2000 to 11 in 2011 to 23 in 2019. By comparison, the number of U.S. high-level visits with Latin American countries has remained relatively stable, showing only a slight downward trend from 15 visits in 2000 to 11 in 2019, with the average being 14.25 visits per year. Data for 2020 are skewed because of COVID-19 travel restrictions; all three competitors had a significant decrease in high-level visits for that year. Hence, we consider 2019 to be the last comparable year for the number of high-level visits.

FIGURE 2.2**Evolution in the United States', China's, and Russia's High-Level Visits Involving Latin American Countries, 2000–2020**

SOURCE: Authors' analysis of sources in Table A.1 in the appendix.

the lead on some fronts, such as foreign aid,²⁰ China and Russia have engaged in more-active influence-seeking on others, such as the number of high-level visits. Because of differences in the three competitors' government structures—the United States, for example, lacks a prime minister—and the official statistics that each competitor keeps, we cannot track and straightforwardly compare the numbers of high-level visits for the exact same set of dignitaries for each great power. However, as shown in Figure 2.2 and Table 2.1, tracking visits by three high-level officials (such as the President, foreign ministers, and the Secretary of Defense) for each competitor suggests that China's and even Russia's high-level visits to the region from 2000 to 2020 might well surpass the United States' visits. Restricting the comparison to a similar set of dignitaries (President and Secretary of State or Minister of Foreign Affairs) for each power shows that, from 2010 to 2020, China engaged in almost twice the number of

²⁰ The U.S. foreign aid to the countries in our data set totaled \$2,067 billion in 2019, the last year for which data are available. Although our foreign aid data for the other powers are not directly comparable, the order of magnitude suggests that U.S. aid is far ahead of Chinese and Russian foreign aid, which, for the last year for which data are available, was US\$705 billion for China and US\$362 billion for Russia. (U.S. data are from the U.S. Agency for International Development [USAID], available as of August 27, 2021, at [ForeignAssistance.gov](https://www.foreignassistance.gov), homepage, last updated July 26, 2021. For China, we used Official Development Assistance data for the latest year between 2000 and 2014 available for each country, as calculated by Aid-Data [AidData, undated]. For Russia, we used Official Development Assistance [total net] data for the latest year available, in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, undated).

TABLE 2.1

United States', China's, and Russia's High-Level Visits to Latin America, 2000–2020

	Number of Visits					
	United States		China		Russia	
	2000–2020	2010–2020	2000–2020	2010–2020	2000–2020	2010–2020
Overall number of visits to Latin America	286 (100%)	116 (41% ^a)	334 (100%)	229 (69% ^a)	215 (100%)	164 (75% ^a)
Top-ranking countries in overall competition-potential index ^b						
Brazil	26	12	63	45	34	20
Argentina	25	11	27	21	19	15
Chile	24	10	36	22	8	5
Colombia	44	17	17	11	10	7
Cuba	3	3	28	15	29	23
Ecuador	7	2	20	16	10	7
Nicaragua	5	0	0	0	11	7
Peru	34	21	35	18	12	7
Venezuela	0	0	31	20	21	18
Subtotal	168	75	257	168	154	109

^a The percentage represents the proportion of the number of visits undertaken from 2010 to 2020 out of the total number of visits from 2000 to 2020. The overall number of visits captures high-level visits across the 23 Latin American countries included in our assessment: Argentina, Belize, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Guyana, Haiti, Honduras, Jamaica, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Suriname, Uruguay, and Venezuela. The numbers of visits by the United States consist of visits by the President, the Secretary of State, and the Secretary of Defense. The numbers for China and Russia consist of visits by the President, the Prime Minister, and foreign ministers.

^b *Overall competition-potential index* refers to the competition-potential index across the four domains (diplomacy, information, military, and economics), discussed in Chapter One.

high-level visits with the Latin American countries in our data set than did the United States: China recorded 193 visits, Russia had 163, and the United States had 99.²¹

Of all three competitors, Russia has the most reciprocal visa-free travel agreements (12 agreements) in place with countries in Latin America, including Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela.²² Chile is the only Latin American country with which the United

²¹ The total numbers of visits by the President and the Secretary of State or the Minister of Foreign Affairs with Latin American countries from 2000 to 2020 were 276 for China, 214 for Russia, and 250 for the United States. Although the United States' numbers over the two decades are not concerning overall, we cannot help but notice the concentration of high-level visits by China and Russia from 2010 to 2020.

²² Rouvinski, 2017.

States has a reciprocal visa-free travel agreement, and Ecuador is the only Latin American country in our data set with which China has such an agreement.

Information

Figure 2.3 illustrates the potential for competition in the informational domain for the United States, China, and Russia across Latin America.

In the informational domain, the potential for competition is strongest in Argentina, Cuba, Panama, and Uruguay. These are the four Latin American countries in our data set where all three competitors have some form of overt presence in the informational domain.

For Russia, we considered the broadcasting cooperation agreements it has in place with countries in Latin America (e.g., Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, Panama, Paraguay, and Uruguay). These agreements were signed between 2016 and 2019,²³ providing evidence of an increase in Russia's interest in informational influence-seeking activities in Latin America beginning in 2015.

For China, we considered the presence of China Central Television/China Global Television Network, China Radio International, and Xinhua bureaus. Argentina and Brazil are the only Latin American countries in our data set where all three outlets have bureaus. Xinhua has bureaus throughout the region and an editorial department in Rio de Janeiro for Portuguese content.²⁴ China Central Television/China Global Television Network and Xinhua bureaus are also present in Cuba and Venezuela. Interestingly, in terms of influence-seeking activities in the informational domain, China's approach closely resembles Russia's in the diplomatic domain: China concentrates its efforts on two of the largest economies in the region (Argentina and Brazil) and on two actors of geopolitical importance in the competition with the United States (Cuba and Venezuela).

For the United States, we considered the presence of Voice of America transmitters and affiliates in the host countries, as well as Radio Television Martí, a Miami-based broadcaster also known as the Office of Cuba Broadcasting, whose mission is "to promote freedom and democracy by providing the people of Cuba with objective news and information programming."²⁵ Both Voice of America and the Office of Cuba Broadcasting are part of the U.S. Agency for Global Media, whose overarching mission is "to inform, engage, and connect people around the world in support of freedom and democracy."²⁶ In essence, the U.S.

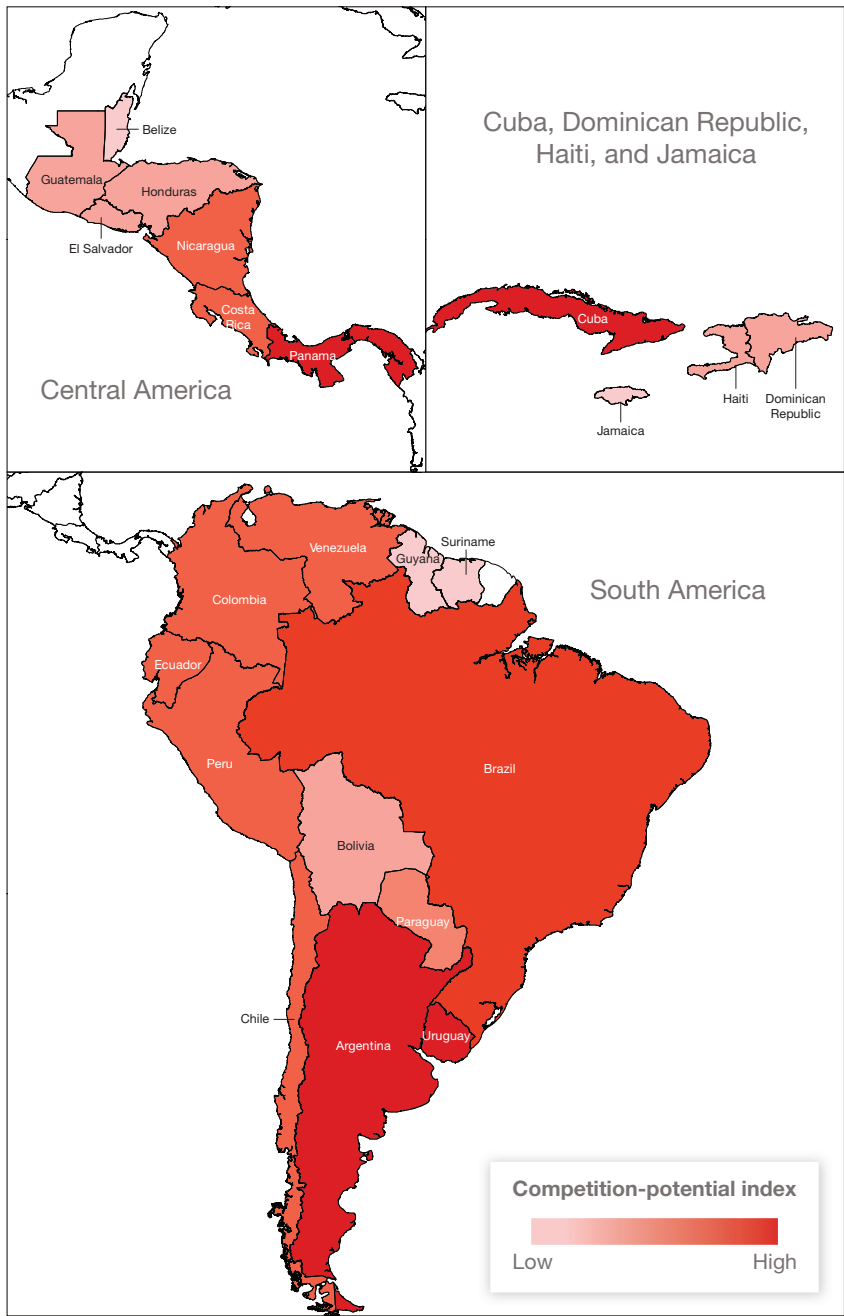
²³ George Barros, "Russia's Cooperation Agreements with Local Media Outlets," map, Institute for the Study of War, 2020.

²⁴ China.org.cn, "Xinhua Celebrates Its 70th," November 6, 2001; and "Mexican President Congratulates Xinhua Mexico Office for Its 30th Anniversary" ["墨西哥总统祝贺新华社拉美总分社成立30周年"], Xinhua, September 4, 2016.

²⁵ U.S. Agency for Global Media, "Mission," webpage, undated.

²⁶ U.S. Agency for Global Media, undated.

FIGURE 2.3
Information Competition Potential in Latin America



SOURCE: Authors' analysis of the influence-seeking measures described in this report; for data sources, see the appendix. Base map: Esri, Garmin, and CIA, 2019.

Agency for Global Media projects soft power to influence local populations to embrace and support democratic values and principles.

In practice, the diffusion of informational influence is broader than the countries where media outlet bureaus, affiliates, or transmitters are present. Most media outlets, including TV and radio outlets, also broadcast over the internet, which is increasingly accessible to populations worldwide. TV channels are included in cable television packages across the entire region, and broadcasting takes place in the two main regional languages, Spanish and Portuguese.²⁷

For instance, the Russian media outlet Sputnik launched its Spanish-speaking radio and web-based news broadcasts in 2014, continuing the expansion of Russia's media presence in Latin America that began in 2009, when RT Español (RT in Spanish) was launched. RT Español represents a Russian state-controlled propaganda platform that is present in almost every country in Latin America and has bureaus in Buenos Aires, Caracas, Havana, and Managua. Since 2014, RT Español has been available for free in Argentina as part of the country's public broadcasting platform.²⁸ RT Español is also broadcast on the state television networks in Venezuela and Cuba and is part of cable subscription packages throughout all of Latin America,²⁹ although all of its Spanish-language broadcasts can be accessed for free online. According to RT's website, the network's broadcasting reaches 18 million viewers in Latin America.³⁰

RT's programming for Latin America is tailored specifically to the local audiences in each country where the network broadcasts. For this reason, it is considered the most successful foreign channel in terms of getting new viewers. This success allows Russia to use RT broadcasts to portray its political model to Latin American audiences as a viable alternative to liberal democracy, simultaneously criticizing the United States and Western countries or institutions on the exact issues that are usually imputed to Russia: human rights violations, corruption, war crimes, and abuses of power. In addition, because Latin American populations are avid social media users, they are even more likely to fall prey to Russian online attempts to manipulate public opinion in a direction that goes against the United States' interests and objectives in the region.³¹

²⁷ China Radio International broadcasts Spanish programming from stations in Latin America, offers satellite broadcasts, and offers its content through local providers ("China Radio International Opens 50th Transmitter" ["中国国际广播电台境外第50家整频率电台开播"], *China Daily* [中国在线], November 2, 2010; and "China Radio International Began Broadcasting on September 11, 1941" ["1941年9月11日中国国际广播电台开播"], *Phoenix News* [凤凰], September 12, 2009).

²⁸ Gurganus, 2018.

²⁹ "RT Launched Broadcasting in the Package of One of the Largest TV Providers in Colombia" ["RT запустил вещание в пакете одного из крупнейших ТВ-операторов Колумбии"], *RIA Novosti*, July 19, 2021.

³⁰ RT, "About the Network" ["О канале"], webpage, undated.

³¹ Rouvinski, 2017; Gurganus, 2018.

Despite its limited successes in the informational domain, Russia likely suffers from a substantial shortfall in soft power. In opinion polls from 2017 and 2022, respectively, Latin American populations expressed low levels of favorable perceptions of Russia and low confidence in Vladimir Putin's leadership.³² In this context, such outlets as Sputnik and RT Español are likely to mainly support Russia's role as a spoiler in the region.

Like Russia, China goes to great lengths to ensure that its messages reach wide audiences across Central and South America. China works to make its programming available to Latin American audiences through coproduction deals and agreements with local channels or providers to offer its content, often for free and at least occasionally without proper attribution of the content's original creators.³³ The Chinese Communist Party's news, radio, and TV programs are all available online in Spanish, and both Xinhua and China Radio International offer online services in Portuguese.³⁴ Like their Russian counterparts, Chinese state-owned media companies have engaged in a variety of deals with private and public broadcasters across Latin America to ensure that their programming is available to a wide audience, although this often seems to involve the placement of individual columns, inserts, or programs into existing channels or publications. In doing so, these state-owned media companies are aided by their willingness to provide free content to cash-strapped media companies. Local media companies are often motivated to moderate their stances on China by a desire to attract advertising revenue from Chinese businesses or a fear that focusing on bad news could disrupt trade and investment.³⁵ In addition, to reach Latin American audiences, China has organized a variety of fora and events, such as the 2016 China–Latin America Media Leaders' Summit in Santiago (attended by Xi Jinping) and numerous all-expenses-paid trips for Latin American media leaders to visit China and see the country through the lens through which the Chinese Communist Party wants to portray China to the world.³⁶

³² Ramani, 2021.

³³ Koh Gui Qing and John Shiffman, "Beijing's Covert Radio Network Airs China-Friendly News Across Washington, and the World," Reuters, November 2, 2015; Juan Pablo Cardenal, "Navigating Political Change in Argentina," in National Endowment for Democracy and International Forum for Democratic Studies, *Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence*, Washington, D.C., December 2017b, pp. 42–45; and "Brazil's and China's Communication Firms Expand Cooperation," Agência Brasil, November 14, 2019.

³⁴ China Global Television Network, "About CGTN in Spanish: Welcome to the Spanish Language Channel" ["Acerca de CGTN en español: bienvenido al canal en español"], webpage, undated; China Radio International Español, homepage, undated; China Radio International Portuguese Homepage, "CRI," webpage, undated; Xinhua, "Xinhua Español," webpage, undated; and Xinhua Português, homepage, undated.

³⁵ Cardenal, 2017b, pp. 42–45; "Brazil's and China's Communication Firms Expand Cooperation," 2019; and Juan Pablo Cardenal, "Reframing Relations in Peru," in National Endowment for Democracy and International Forum for Democratic Studies, *Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence*, Washington, D.C., December 2017c, p. 80.

³⁶ Juan Pablo Cardenal, "China in Latin America: Understanding the Inventory of Influence," in National Endowment for Democracy and International Forum for Democratic Studies, *Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence*, Washington, D.C., December 2017a, pp. 30–31.

Of the three competitors, the United States relies the least on its state-sponsored media platform (Voice of America), mainly because private outlets, such as CNN Español, have a wide presence throughout Latin America.³⁷ Given the regional importance of Brazil, where Portuguese is the official language, it is perhaps surprising that Voice of America programs that broadcast in Portuguese are more tailored to the Portuguese-speaking countries in Africa (i.e., Angola and Mozambique) than Brazil. For Brazil, Voice of America Portuguese-language broadcasting is available via shortwave radio and internet.³⁸ Although Voice of America has affiliates in 17 of the 23 Latin American countries in our data set, state-sponsored U.S. informational presence in the region is rather underwhelming. However, this is understandable given the strong presence of private U.S. media outlets throughout the region, including CNN Brazil and CNN Chile;³⁹ once we account for privately owned U.S. channels, the United States is the leader of the three competitors in the informational domain.

Military

Figure 2.4 illustrates the potential for competition in the military domain for the United States, China, and Russia across Latin America.

As the map shows, Brazil, Colombia, Peru, Chile, Venezuela, Argentina, Ecuador, and Nicaragua are the countries with the most-intense competition potential in the military domain. Interestingly enough, with the exception of Venezuela and Nicaragua, these are the countries in our data set with the largest GDPs in Latin America and where the potential for economic competition is the most pronounced, as discussed in the following section. Venezuela and Nicaragua are among the top countries of interest in terms of military competition potential because of their geopolitical and strategic importance, mainly for Russia.

Overall, the United States leads in terms of military engagement across the entire region, while—at the opposite end of the spectrum—China has deliberately minimized its military arrangements with Latin American countries. It has done so to avoid being perceived as challenging the United States militarily in its own neighborhood, but also because the PLA lacks power-projection capabilities.⁴⁰ This shortcoming is a result of the PLA's limited expeditionary capabilities and the reduced ability of PLA Navy carrier strike groups to operate even for a short time in the Western Hemisphere. Conversely, Russia has made deliberate military incursions into the region in an attempt to project power and gain leverage against the United States at key junctures, such as the 2008 Russo-Georgian war and the 2014 invasion of Crimea, as previously discussed. However, Russia's military presence in Latin America has remained relatively limited and does not pose a major challenge to the United States for the time being.

³⁷ CNN Press Room, "CNN Worldwide Fact Sheet," webpage, last updated April 2021.

³⁸ Voice of America Public Relations, "VOA Broadcasting in Portuguese to Africa," webpage, undated.

³⁹ CNN Press Room, 2021.

⁴⁰ U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *2020 Report to Congress*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Publishing Office, December 2020, p. 16.

FIGURE 2.4
Military Competition Potential in Latin America



SOURCE: Authors' analysis of the influence-seeking measures described in this report; for data sources, see the appendix. Base map: Esri, Garmin, and CIA, 2019.

For the United States, Colombia represents the most important country in the region from a military standpoint. Given Colombia's role as the United States' closest security partner in South America, neither Russia nor China has military or defense cooperation agreements with the country, mainly because the Colombian government has not been amenable to endangering its security partnership by engaging with the United States' great-power rivals.⁴¹ Furthermore, in 2000, the U.S. Congress passed into law Plan Colombia, the counternarcotics and counterinsurgency initiative mentioned earlier.⁴² In the context of Plan Colombia, U.S. security assistance to the country amounted to some \$10 billion, appropriated between fiscal years 2000 and 2016.⁴³ The United States also had military forces temporarily stationed in Colombia, mainly to provide security assistance, military training, and support to counternarcotics operations.⁴⁴

For Russia, Nicaragua and Venezuela represent the two most important countries in the region in terms of military competition. Although Russia does not have military troops permanently stationed in Latin America, the Kremlin has had temporary military access agreements with Nicaragua and formal and informal agreements with Venezuela that grant Russian Navy vessels the right to make port calls on their territories. Besides port access, Nicaragua and Venezuela have given Russia access to airfields and military training and intelligence facilities, such as the Georgy Zhukov Training Center in Nicaragua.⁴⁵ Russia has used Nicaraguan and Venezuelan airspace to fly nuclear-capable bombers and, in some instances, violated Colombian airspace to project power in the competition with the United States and to support Nicaragua and Venezuela in their territorial and maritime disputes with Colombia.⁴⁶ Russia has had military trainers and maintainers of military equipment present on a rotating basis in both Nicaragua and Venezuela,⁴⁷ which rank among the top

⁴¹ R. Evan Ellis, *China–Latin America Military Engagement: Good Will, Good Business, and Strategic Position*, Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: U.S. Army War College Press, 2011, p. 28; and Ellis, 2015, pp. 50–51.

⁴² Jonathan D. Rosen, *The Losing War: Plan Colombia and Beyond*, Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 2014.

⁴³ Beittel, 2019.

⁴⁴ Juan Diego Posada, "The Controversial New Deployment of US Troops in Colombia," InSight Crime, June 2, 2020.

⁴⁵ Sergey Sukhankin, "Russian PMCs and Irregulars: Past Battles and New Endeavors," Jamestown Foundation, May 13, 2020a; Moises Rendon and Claudia Fernandez, *The Fabulous Five: How Foreign Actors Prop Up the Maduro Regime in Venezuela*, Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 2020; Michael Weissenstein, Andrea Rodriguez, and Vladimir Isachenkov, "What's an Advanced Russian Warship Doing in Havana Harbor?" AP News, June 24, 2019; and Kiersten Harris, *America's Newest Southern Neighbor? An Analysis of Russian Influence in Latin America*, Washington, D.C.: American Security Project, August 2018.

⁴⁶ "Colombia Says Russian Bombers Violated Its Airspace," Reuters, November 5, 2013; and "Colombia Had No Reason to Fear Russian Bombers in Venezuela, Ambassador Says," MercoPress, December 18, 2018.

⁴⁷ Andrew Roth, "Russia Acknowledges Presence of Troops in Venezuela," *The Guardian*, March 28, 2019.

three buyers of Russian weapons in Latin America from 2014 to 2020.⁴⁸ Russian PMSCs also have a presence in Nicaragua and Venezuela.⁴⁹

Brazil, Chile, and Argentina represent the top three countries in terms of China's security interest in Latin America, and Beijing has signed defense cooperation and military technical cooperation agreements with all of them.⁵⁰ Brazil and Chile are two of only five Latin American countries with which China conducted military exercises from 2003 to 2020, the other three being Colombia, Peru, and Venezuela. Argentina ranks among the top Latin American countries of military interest to China for two reasons: Chinese PMSCs have a presence—albeit limited—in Argentina,⁵¹ and, in 2015, China signed a defense cooperation agreement with Argentina in which Argentina committed to make several arms purchases from and engage in military-to-military exchanges with China. In turn, China was granted access to build a space tracking facility in Argentina in conjunction with satellite imagery sharing. The space station was inaugurated in 2016 in Patagonia and is managed by the China Satellite Launch and Tracking Control General, which reports to the PLA's Strategic Support Force.⁵² There is little to no oversight of the station from the Argentine government; the Chinese military-run space station is often described as a “black box.”⁵³ For these reasons, there are concerns that the space station is, in essence, a military base that also carries out intelligence-collection activities.⁵⁴ In a February 2019 congressional testimony, SOUTHCOM Commander Admiral Craig Faller issued a warning regarding the dangers of China expanding its reach “in key infrastructure such as a deep-space tracking facility in Argentina.”⁵⁵

In our analysis of military, defense cooperation, and military technical agreements, we observed that only a handful of Russia's agreements were signed in the 2000–2010 period. By

⁴⁸ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) Arms Transfers Database (trend-indicator value) data for 2014 to 2020 (SIPRI, Arms Transfers Database, web tool, undated-a).

⁴⁹ Sergey Sukhankin, “War, Business and Ideology: How Russian Private Military Contractors Pursue Moscow's Interests,” Jamestown Foundation, March 20, 2019b.

⁵⁰ Authors' analysis of several open-source documents to verify whether each great power–country pair had signed defense cooperation and military technical agreements.

⁵¹ Sukhankin, 2019b.

⁵² Jordan Wilson, *China's Military Agreements with Argentina: A Potential New Phase in China–Latin America Defense Relations*, Washington, D.C.: U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, November 5, 2015, p. 3.

⁵³ Cassandra Garrison, “China's Military-Run Space Station in Argentina Is a ‘Black Box,’” Reuters, January 31, 2019.

⁵⁴ Ernesto Londoño, “From a Space Station in Argentina, China Expands Its Reach in Latin America,” *New York Times*, July 28, 2018.

⁵⁵ Lara Seligman, “U.S. Military Warns of Threat from Chinese-Run Space Station in Argentina,” *Foreign Policy*, February 8, 2019.

contrast, most of Russia's agreements were concluded and renewed in the 2015–2020 period,⁵⁶ which speaks to the Kremlin's increased attention to the countries in immediate geographic proximity to the United States after 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea. Along similar lines, the majority of China's military and defense security cooperation agreements with the Latin American countries in our data set were signed between 2010 and 2020, showing Beijing's increased military interest in the Western Hemisphere over the past decade. China's agreements tend to be much shallower than those of the United States, focusing on military sales or limited training exchanges.⁵⁷ In the past two decades, as Congress imposed limits on the training the U.S. government can provide to Latin American countries, China stepped in and began to offer its own military training as an alternative to U.S. training. However, Latin American militaries have not been particularly interested in this option because of the lower quality of the training and the language barriers that exist.⁵⁸

Trends in arms sales during 2014–2020 show that the United States regained its place as “the main arms supplier for the Americas,”⁵⁹ after losing the leading place to Russia for a number of years. Between 2007 and 2014, Russian sales to the region increased significantly, while U.S. sales remained relatively constant.⁶⁰ Both Chinese and Russian arms sales to Latin America increased after 2000. As Latin American economies were improving as a result of high commodity prices from 2004 to 2014, many countries in the region tried to modernize their weapon and defense systems. As a result, the arms trade with the region intensified during this period, only to slow down after 2014, when commodity prices went down. Overall, global arms sales with the region went down from 10 percent for 2010–2014 to 5.7 percent for 2015–2019,⁶¹ including for Chinese and Russian sales.

⁵⁶ Authors' analysis based on RAND research and verification of the presence of military and defense cooperation agreements for each Russia-country pair using official state information and publicly available sources (presented in Table A.1 in the appendix).

⁵⁷ See, for example, Chinese agreements with Brazil, Bolivia, and Colombia (Huanqiu [环球网], “China and Brazil Issue Joint Proclamation (Full Text)” [“中国和巴西发表联合声明(全文)”], webpage, July 18, 2014; Cankao Xiaoxi [参考消息], “Foreign Media: China and Bolivia Sign an Agreement for 7 Million USD in Arms” [“外媒: 中国与玻利维亚签署协议 提供700万美元军备”], webpage, March 12, 2016; and “Liang Guanglie Visits Colombia and Signs Military Cooperation Agreement” [“梁光烈访问哥伦比亚 签署军事合作协议”], Phoenix News [凤凰], September 7, 2010). Some of the agreements, such as the Brazil agreement, are deeper than others, but they are generally much less comprehensive than the security engagement between the United States and its partners.

⁵⁸ We thank our reviewer, Mary Quinn, for pointing out this important aspect related to the military training China offered to Latin American countries in recent decades.

⁵⁹ Peter Cavanagh, *Russia Became an Important Arms Supplier for Latin America, but Its Sales Have Dropped*, Pamplona: Center for Global Affairs and Strategic Studies, Universidad de Navarra, ARS Report 2020, May 2020.

⁶⁰ Gurganus, 2018.

⁶¹ Cavanagh, 2020.

Trends in military presence and access show that China and Russia attempted to gain a foothold in some Latin American countries, but, of the three competitors, the United States maintains the most comprehensive military footprint and access to the region. In addition to military bases at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and Soto Cano, Honduras, the United States has military access to another nine countries in the form of access to airfields, cooperative security locations,⁶² radar sites, military offices, and military training centers.⁶³ The U.S. forces deployed to the U.S. military base at Guantanamo Bay are part of the Joint Task Force Guantanamo, while the U.S. military forces in Honduras are part of Joint Task Force-Bravo, located at Soto Cano Air Base.⁶⁴ The two task forces are part of the three task forces operating under SOUTHCOM,⁶⁵ the third being Joint Interagency Task Force South, which is located at Naval Air Station Key West, Florida.⁶⁶

However, despite the United States' overall dominance in military presence and access to Latin America, the number of U.S. military forces and bases has decreased since the late 1990s. One major decrease in troop numbers took place in 1999, when, in accordance with agreements in place, the United States handed over control of the Panama Canal to the Panamanians and closed down its military bases in the country. In 2009, the government of Ecuador "did not renew the agreement that authorized the maintenance of a US military base in the city of Manta," further reducing the United States' military footprint in the region.⁶⁷ In 2017, the U.S. Naval Support Detachment, São Paulo—the only U.S. military installation in Brazil—was closed at the request of the Brazilian government.⁶⁸

In contrast to the United States' military presence in Latin America, neither China nor Russia has permanent bases or military forces in Latin America that are acknowledged as such. From 2000 to 2020, Chinese military access was limited to naval port calls in nine Latin

⁶² Also known as *lily-pad bases*, cooperative security locations are "small military facilities governed by formal agreements" (Livia Peres Milani, "US Foreign Policy to South America Since 9/11: Neglect or Militarisation?" *Contexto Internacional*, Vol. 43, No. 1, January–April 2021, p. 124).

⁶³ Authors' analysis based on data available in Michael J. Lostumbo, Michael J. McNerney, Eric Peltz, Derek Eaton, David R. Frelinger, Victoria A. Greenfield, John Halliday, Patrick Mills, Bruce R. Nardulli, Stacie L. Pettyjohn, Jerry M. Sollinger, and Stephen M. Worman, *Overseas Basing of U.S. Military Forces: An Assessment of Relative Costs and Strategic Benefits*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-201-OSD, 2013; and several other open-source documents, which are presented in the "Military access" row of Table A.1 in the appendix.

⁶⁴ Joint Task Force-Bravo, "About Us," webpage, undated.

⁶⁵ Joint Task Force-Bravo, undated. The presence of Latin American representatives at Joint Interagency Task Force South—including from countries that do not have great relations with the United States at the strategic level—represents a significant advantage over the United States' competitors. We thank our reviewer Mary Quinn for this point.

⁶⁶ Joint Task Force-Bravo, undated.

⁶⁷ Milani, 2021, p. 124.

⁶⁸ "United States Naval Support Detachment, São Paulo," webpage, 2020.

American countries. The port calls were mainly carried out by hospital ships,⁶⁹ such as the *Peace Ark*. Although they seemed to be focused more on generating goodwill with local governments and populations,⁷⁰ they provided the PLA Navy with valuable operational experience sailing and replenishing far from Chinese bases.

Russia's military access over the past decade has been in Colombia, Cuba, Nicaragua, Panama, and Venezuela. While it has involved a lower number of countries than the United States' and China's access, it has had more hard-power components than China's. As opposed to China's naval port calls by the *Peace Ark*, Russia's access to Colombia, Panama, and Cuba in June 2019 involved port calls by the *Admiral Gorshkov*, one of Russia's most advanced ships.⁷¹

Another form of potential military access to the countries in the Western Hemisphere involves Russia's Global Navigation Satellite System (GLONASS) and China's BeiDou satellite system, as well as the use of space stations for allegedly civilian purposes. Between 2010 and 2020, Russia set up ground satellite-monitoring stations in various countries around the world. Multiple Latin American countries signed up to host GLONASS ground stations, including Brazil in 2013, Cuba in 2014, Nicaragua in 2015, and Argentina in 2020.⁷² Even if the GLONASS ground satellite-monitoring stations are set up for civilian purposes, the dual civilian-military nature of the technology raises concerns regarding potential military use of the stations, including for intelligence-collection purposes. China's BeiDou satellite system has expanded into Latin America, where it seems to provide local users with a better-quality internet and technology experience.⁷³ China has established satellite-tracking and -control stations in Santiago, Chile; Neuquén, Argentina; Alcântara, Brazil; and Kourou, French Guiana; it often shares the sites with the host nations.⁷⁴ Although China's ground stations are ostensibly under civilian control, the agencies that manage them generally report to the

⁶⁹ Katherine Koleski and Alec Blivas, *China's Engagement with Latin America and the Caribbean*, Washington, D.C.: U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, October 17, 2018.

⁷⁰ Glen Diehl and Solomon Major, "White Hull or White Elephant? Soft Power and the Chinese Hospital Ship, the *Peace Ark*," *Defense & Security Analysis*, Vol. 31, No. 4, 2015.

⁷¹ Weissenstein, Rodriguez, and Isachenkov, 2019.

⁷² GPS World Staff, "First GLONASS Station Outside Russia Opens in Brazil," GPS World, February 20, 2013; Ellis, 2015, p. 42; Matthew Bodner, "Cuba Agrees to Host Russian Glonass Navigation Stations," *Moscow Times*, June 18, 2014; "Nicaraguan Legislature Approves Russian Satellite Bases," *Tico Times*, April 29, 2015; and "Russia Ratifies Deal on Space Cooperation with Argentina," teleSUR, December 8, 2020.

⁷³ Namrata Goswami, "The Economic and Military Impact of China's BeiDou Navigation System," *The Diplomat*, July 1, 2020.

⁷⁴ Peter Wood, with Alex Stone and Taylor A. Lee, *China's Ground Segment: Building the Pillars of a Great Space Power*, Montgomery: China Aerospace Studies Institute, 2021, p. 69.

PLA Strategic Support Force, and, as noted earlier, there seems to be little to no host-nation oversight over the facility in Argentina.⁷⁵

To conclude, although the United States maintains military dominance in Latin America, its military footprint in the region seems to have gradually diminished. At the same time, Russia has engaged in overt, but rather modest, attempts to project power and intimidate the United States, while China has gradually and tacitly increased its military engagements with the region through an increase in defense cooperation agreements and arms sales and—more subtly—under the guise of civilian activities and peaceful operations, such as naval port visits by hospital ships, the standing up of a civilian space station in Argentina, and the development of critical infrastructure, which we discuss in the following section.

Economics

Figure 2.5 illustrates the potential for great-power competition in the economic domain for the United States, China, and Russia across Latin America.

In the economic domain, the potential for competition overlaps the most in Brazil, Chile, Argentina, and Peru. These are the four largest economies in the region and major exporters of natural resources, such as oil, copper, and iron, to name only a few. Our analysis of foreign investment data shows that these countries are also the preferred destinations for foreign investments in Latin America.⁷⁶

Currently, the United States is the largest trading partner with the countries of Latin America. Its total trade volume amounted to approximately US\$761 billion in 2019, the most recent year for which data are available.⁷⁷ In 2003, China became the second-largest trading partner in the region; its total trade volume reached some US\$315 billion by 2019. Russia has lagged significantly behind the two other competitors, with a total trade volume of some US\$14 billion in 2019.⁷⁸

Although the United States and China are Latin America's top trading partners, trade with Latin America carries more weight for Washington than for Beijing, representing a relatively small percentage of China's total global trade (7 percent).⁷⁹ In 2019, 18.5 percent of U.S. imports and 7.9 percent of Chinese imports came from Latin America; the same year, 25.3 percent of U.S. exports and 6 percent of Chinese exports went to Latin America.⁸⁰

⁷⁵ Wood, Stone, and Lee, 2021, pp. 67–68.

⁷⁶ The sources we used for this analysis are presented in the “Investment” row of Table A.1 in the appendix.

⁷⁷ World Integrated Trade Solution, undated-a. Data are for the entire region, including Mexico.

⁷⁸ World Integrated Trade Solution, undated-a. Data are for the entire region, including Mexico.

⁷⁹ Total and regional 2019 trade data for China are from World Integrated Trade Solution, undated-a.

⁸⁰ World Integrated Trade Solution, undated-a. Data are for partner import and export share for the entire region, including Mexico.

FIGURE 2.5**Economic Competition Potential in Latin America**

SOURCE: Authors' analysis of the influence-seeking measures described in this report; for data sources, see the appendix. Base map: Esri, Garmin, and CIA, 2019.

Brazil, Chile, and Colombia rank the highest for the United States in terms of economic influence-seeking potential. In 2019, they were the United States' top three trading partners in Latin America.⁸¹ The United States has had a free trade agreement in place with Chile since 2004 and a trade-promotion agreement in place with Colombia since 2012.⁸² In 2019, Brazil, Chile, and Colombia were among the top four destination countries for U.S. foreign direct investment in Latin America.⁸³

Over the past decade, China has increased the value of its trade with the main economic actors in the region: Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Peru, and Colombia. This increase coincides with the ramping up of Chinese diplomatic visits starting in 2010–2011, many of which were meant to promote economic engagement with Latin American countries.⁸⁴ For instance, China and Chile signed a free trade agreement in 2005,⁸⁵ and China has displaced the United States as Chile's leading foreign trading partner.⁸⁶

Chinese foreign direct investment is mainly directed to Brazil, Peru, Argentina, and Venezuela,⁸⁷ and Brazil has become the top destination for Chinese investments in the region in recent years.⁸⁸ Alongside countries with developed economies, such as Brazil, governments that have recently experienced political turmoil or financial crisis, such as Venezuela, have particularly welcomed Chinese investments.⁸⁹ In 2020 and 2021, China (and Russia) increased the purchase of Venezuelan oil, not only as a way to signal support for the Maduro regime but also to signal confidence in its survival.⁹⁰

Russia's trade with Latin American countries has fluctuated and slightly decreased over the past decade. From 2000 to 2011, Russia's total trade with Latin American countries increased from US\$2 billion to US\$17 billion, only to decrease to some US\$14 billion in

⁸¹ Authors' analysis based on data from World Integrated Trade Solution, "United States Product Exports, Imports, Tariffs by Country and Region 2019," webpage, undated-c.

⁸² Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, "U.S. Relations with Chile: Bilateral Relations Fact Sheet," U.S. Department of State, last updated April 25, 2019b; Office of the United States Trade Representative, "United States–Colombia Trade Promotion Agreement," webpage, undated.

⁸³ Bureau of Economic Analysis, U.S. Department of Commerce, "Direct Investment by Country and Industry, 2019," news release, July 23, 2020, Table 1.

⁸⁴ Michael D. Swaine, "Xi Jinping's July 2014 Trip to Latin America," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 5, 2014.

⁸⁵ China FTA Network, Ministry of Commerce, People's Republic of China, "China-Chile FTA," webpage, undated.

⁸⁶ Odette Magnet, "Chinese Investment in Chile Sparks Opportunities, Concerns," Al Jazeera, September 3, 2021.

⁸⁷ American Enterprise Institute and Heritage Foundation, "China Global Investment Tracker," webpage, undated.

⁸⁸ Cariello, 2021.

⁸⁹ Scobell et al., 2018, pp. xxi–xxii.

⁹⁰ Ellis, 2021.

2019.⁹¹ Between 2000 and 2019, the share of Russia's imports from Latin America remained relatively unchanged; there was a slight decrease, from 3.55 percent of Russia's total imports in 2000 to 3.18 percent in 2019. Russia's exports to Latin America increased from 0.95 percent of total Russian exports in 2000 to 1.46 percent in 2019.⁹² As these numbers show, in the period under scrutiny in this report, Russia has not been a significant trading partner with the countries in Latin America. Despite the increases in absolute and relative trade values, it is unlikely that Russia would become a key economic actor in the region in the foreseeable future.

In terms of economic competition, Russia is mainly focused on Brazil, Ecuador, and Argentina, which are Russia's main trading partners in the region. Russia's close economic ties to Brazil are rooted not only in their common BRICS membership but also in the increase in Russian imports from Brazil from 2000 to 2019. This increase in imports mainly involved food and agricultural products; 90 percent of Russia's pork imports came from Brazil. Russia's exports to Brazil also increased from 2000 to 2019; these involved fertilizers, mineral fuels, and metals.⁹³ Overall, bilateral trade between Russia and Brazil steadily rose from US\$646 million in 2000 to US\$4.6 billion in 2019, although it represents only 0.6 percent of Russia's global trade.⁹⁴ In terms of Russia's economic ties with Argentina, the strategic partnership between Moscow and Buenos Aires was renewed in 2018. The Kremlin aimed to reinject some vitality into the relationship by signing a memorandum of understanding that gave Rosatom the right to develop a nuclear power station and carry out joint exploration and mining of uranium with Argentina.⁹⁵

For now, the United States remains in the lead in the economic competition among the three competitors throughout the region, but it could be overtaken by China in the coming two decades. Since 2000, China has been catching up and has become the region's second-largest trading partner. Russia has been lagging far behind both competitors, despite an increase in absolute value in the total volume of trade with the region between 2000 and 2019.

Overall Competition Potential in Latin America

In this subsection, we present the overall potential for competition—that is, across the four domains (diplomacy, information, military, and economics). First, we examine the potential

⁹¹ World Integrated Trade Solution, undated-a. The 2000–2019 export and import data for the Russian Federation are for the entire region, including Mexico.

⁹² World Integrated Trade Solution, undated-a. The 2000–2019 export and import data for the Russian Federation are for the entire region, including Mexico.

⁹³ Gurganus, 2018.

⁹⁴ World Integrated Trade Solution, undated-a.

⁹⁵ World Nuclear News, “Argentina, Russia Expand Nuclear Energy Cooperation,” December 3, 2018; and Gurganus, 2018.

for competition for the three competitors. Then, we break down the potential for competition separately for (1) the United States and China and (2) the United States and Russia.

Figure 2.6 illustrates the overall competition-potential indices across Latin America. Table 2.2 presents the rankings for competition potential overall and shows how each country ranked for the U.S.-China competition and the U.S.-Russia competition specifically.⁹⁶

Figure 2.6 and Table 2.2 show that the top five countries on which the three competitors are focused are the same for both U.S.-China potential for competition and U.S.-Russia potential for competition: Brazil, Chile, Peru, Colombia, and Argentina. The fact that these are the top five countries reveals the so-called large country bias: The countries with the largest economies and populations are likely to draw the most interest. All three competitors have close diplomatic ties with the top five countries in support of their political and economic interests. Venezuela ranks sixth as a result of China's and Russia's ties to Caracas across all four domains of influence. Nicaragua ranks tenth in the overall combined competition index because of Russia's military and diplomatic interests in the country.

Despite the overlap in competition potential for the top five countries, there are differences in these countries' potential for bilateral competition: For the United States and China, potential for competition is strongest in Chile; for the United States and Russia, it is most intense in Colombia. Brazil ranks second for both U.S.-China and U.S.-Russia competition, mainly as a result of the prominent role it plays as the region's economic powerhouse and the strong strategic interest that both China and Russia place on the country.

Figure 2.7 presents a map of the countries with the highest potential for U.S.-China competition in Latin America. The United States' and China's interests and competition converge in Chile, Brazil, Peru, and Colombia. Not only do these countries have significant economic importance, but they also have significant political and diplomatic clout and impact in the informational domain at the regional level through media outlets that broadcast across the entire South American continent and beyond.

The United States' and China's interests in Chile converge in the economic and military domains. From a military standpoint, in recent years, Chile was one of five countries in Latin America with which China conducted bilateral naval exercises.⁹⁷ At the same time, Chile is a frequent participant in the multilateral military exercises the United States carries out with Latin American countries that it considers to be among its strongest partners and allies. Brazil and China have a strategic partnership, which was established in 1993, and Brazil was the first country in the region that Beijing recognized as a strategic partner, which speaks to its

⁹⁶ Competition between China and Russia, although present, is outside the scope of this report, which concentrates on U.S. competition with China and Russia. For this reason, we did not include measures for it.

⁹⁷ International Institute for Strategic Studies, *Military Balance Plus*, online database, undated; and "PLAN's Taskforce Conducts Maritime Joint Exercise with Chilean Navy," *China Military Online*, October 14, 2013.

FIGURE 2.6
Overall Competition Potential in Latin America



SOURCE: Authors' analysis of the influence-seeking measures described in this report; for data sources, see the appendix. Base map: Esri, Garmin, and CIA, 2019.

TABLE 2.2

The 15 Countries with the Highest Competition Potential Overall and Their Rankings for Bilateral Competition Potential

Country	Competition-Potential Ranking		
	Overall	U.S.–China	U.S.–Russia
Brazil	1	2	2
Chile	2	1	3
Peru	3	3	4
Colombia	4	4	1
Argentina	5	5	5
Venezuela	6	7	7
Cuba	7	9	9
Ecuador	8	6	11
Panama	9	10	6
Nicaragua	10	20	8
Uruguay	11	14	16
El Salvador	12	12	12
Costa Rica	13	8	17
Guatemala	14	16	10
Jamaica	15	13	21

NOTE: The rankings were calculated by adding the standardized indices capturing the involvement in each Latin American country across all four domains (diplomacy, information, military, economics) for the relevant combination of great powers specified in each column and ranking them from highest total (top ranking) to lowest.

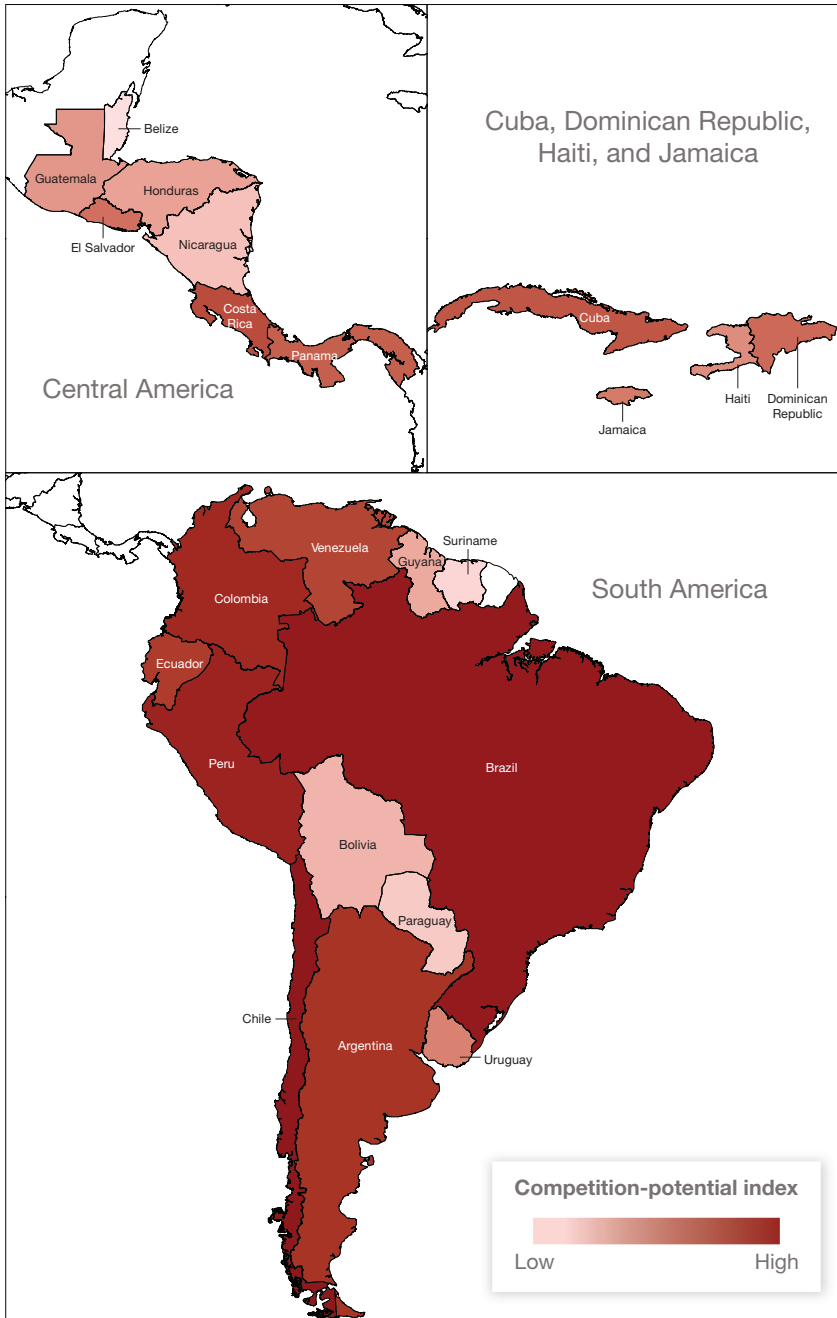
importance to China from a political standpoint and not just an economic one.⁹⁸ The United States' interests in Brazil are mainly commercial in nature; the United States is Brazil's second-largest trading partner after China.⁹⁹ The two competitors' interests in Peru converge on access to the country's domestic resources,¹⁰⁰ although, in addition to its focus on oil and mineral extraction,¹⁰¹ China has an interest in the development of critical infrastruc-

⁹⁸ Trinkunas, 2020; and R. Evan Ellis, "The Future of Brazil-China Relations in the Context of COVID-19," *Global Americans*, September 18, 2020a.

⁹⁹ Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, "U.S. Relations with Brazil: Bilateral Relations Fact Sheet," U.S. Department of State, last updated September 7, 2021d.

¹⁰⁰ Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, "U.S. Relations with Peru: Bilateral Relations Fact Sheet," U.S. Department of State, last updated July 30, 2021c; and R. Evan Ellis, "Peru's Multidimensional Challenge—Part 3: Engagement with China," *Global Americans*, November 20, 2020c.

¹⁰¹ Ellis, 2020c.

FIGURE 2.7**U.S.-China Competition Potential in Latin America**

SOURCE: Authors' analysis of the influence-seeking measures described in this report; for data sources, see the appendix. Base map: Esri, Garmin, and CIA, 2019.

ture projects in Peru, such as the Chancay port project, “a massive port complex north of Lima.”¹⁰² The United States’ activities with Peru include combating transnational organized crime and cooperating in the naval and space domains.¹⁰³ When it comes to Colombia, the United States’ interests span all four domains of influence. China’s interests in Colombia are focused on exploiting its natural resources, including minerals,¹⁰⁴ and developing critical infrastructure projects (such as a light rail system in Bogotá and the Buenaventura port).

Along similar lines, U.S.-Russia competition has the potential to be strongest in Colombia, Brazil, Chile, and Peru, as shown in Table 2.2 and Figure 2.8. These are the same countries where U.S.-China competition potential is the highest, but they are ranked in a different order given differences in Chinese and Russian involvement in the region. The reasons for U.S. involvement in these countries are discussed above; Colombia plays a more important role in U.S.-Russia competition because it is a long-standing U.S. security partner, and Russia has been more active in the informational domain in recent years in its attempts to weaken this U.S. partner.¹⁰⁵ Besides Russia’s involvement in information operations in Colombia, Russia’s attention to the country has been mainly centered on economic ties based on imports of food and agricultural products.¹⁰⁶

Political and economic ties dominate Russia’s relationship with Brazil, which—together with Mexico—makes up approximately 50 percent of Russia’s trade with the region.¹⁰⁷ Russia’s interest in Chile is mainly economic in nature and is focused “on the mining and energy sectors, with Russian state owned companies seeking to expand access to Chilean natural resources such as lithium.”¹⁰⁸ Russia’s interest in Peru is mainly based on trade and arms sales.¹⁰⁹

Although Venezuela ranks only seventh for U.S.-Russia competition potential, Russia has interests in the country that are based not only on ideological ties and the geopolitical considerations discussed earlier but also on economic ties related to arms sales and the energy

¹⁰² Gonzalo Torrico, “China’s Future Gateway to Latin America Is a Mega-Port in Peru,” *Worldcrunch*, May 31, 2021.

¹⁰³ U.S. Department of State, *Integrated Country Strategy. Peru*, February 7, 2020a; “U.S. 4th Fleet and Peru Kick Off Planning for UNITAS 2021,” *DVIDS*, March 19, 2021; and U.S. Space Command Public Affairs Office, “US, Peru Expand Space Data Sharing Partnership,” *U.S. Southern Command*, May 20, 2020.

¹⁰⁴ Grattan, 2020a.

¹⁰⁵ Adriaan Alsema, “Russia Using Disinformation Tactics to Disrupt Colombia Elections: Former US Official,” *Colombia Reports*, January 22, 2018.

¹⁰⁶ Trading Economics, “Colombia Exports to Russia,” webpage, undated.

¹⁰⁷ Gurganus, 2018.

¹⁰⁸ Luminae Group, “Chile,” webpage, last updated March 15, 2021.

¹⁰⁹ Sebastien Adins and Mildred Rooney, *The Relations Between Peru and the Russian Federation: Revision and Interpretation from an International Relations Perspective*, Lima: Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú Instituto de Estudios Internacionales and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, November 2019.

FIGURE 2.8**U.S.-Russia Competition Potential in Latin America**

SOURCE: Authors' analysis of the influence-seeking measures described in this report; for data sources, see the appendix. Base map: Esri, Garmin, and CIA, 2019.

sector. Russia's Rosneft has a presence in the country.¹¹⁰ Similarly, U.S. interests in Venezuela were for a long time commercial in nature and related to the energy sector: The United States was Venezuela's largest trading partner prior to the cooling of relations between the two countries and the nationalization of a series of companies under Hugo Chávez's regime.¹¹¹ Nicaragua ranks eighth for U.S.-Russia competition potential, and, of the three competitors, Russia has the strongest interests in the country. These are mainly centered on military cooperation, including counternarcotics training, and are based on Russia's and Nicaragua's historical ties from the Cold War period.¹¹²

In sum, the United States remains the dominant competitor in the region despite the advances that China and Russia have made over the past two decades, in part as a deliberate attempt to erode the influence of the United States in its own neighborhood. From a Monroe Doctrine perspective,¹¹³ China is maintaining the appearance of respecting, from a military standpoint, the United States' sphere of influence in Latin America and is focusing mainly on economic competition with the United States. Russia, with its decades of experience in overtly clashing with the United States in Latin America during the Cold War, is more comfortable challenging the United States rhetorically and militarily in its own neighborhood, although there are obvious limits to Russia's ability to sustain military engagement so far from home.

Regional Potential for Internal Conflict

As we observed in Chapter One, conflicts that draw in external powers require both motive *and* opportunity. To approximate the relative opportunity for great-power involvement in Latin American conflict, we assessed the potential for internal conflict erupting in each of the countries relative to the rest of the region.

Figure 2.9 depicts this potential for internal conflict across the 23 Latin American countries on which we focused in our analysis; darker shades represent a higher probability of conflict. Table A.6 in the appendix presents the underlying data for each country.

Our assessment of the potential for internal conflict across Latin America is based on two sources: the Janes internal conflict risk rating (as of early 2021) and the Center for Systemic

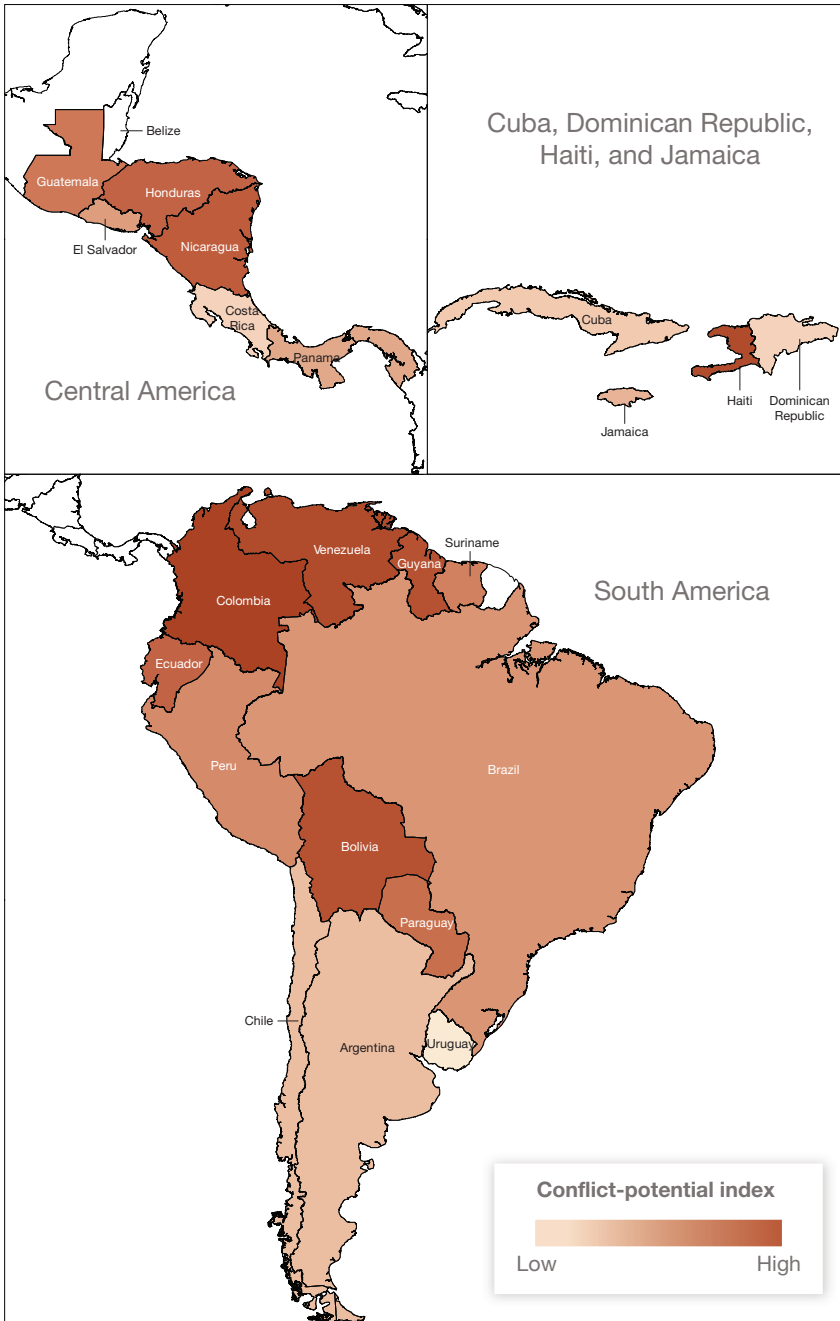
¹¹⁰ Gurganus, 2018.

¹¹¹ Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, "U.S. Relations with Venezuela: Bilateral Relations Fact Sheet," U.S. Department of State, last updated July 6, 2021a.

¹¹² Armando Chaguaceda, "Russia and Nicaragua: Progress in Bilateral Cooperation," *Global Americans*, March 28, 2019.

¹¹³ According to the Monroe Doctrine, which President James Monroe articulated in December 1823, "European powers . . . were obligated to respect the Western Hemisphere as the United States' sphere of interest" (National Archives, "Monroe Doctrine (1823)," webpage, last reviewed May 10, 2022). The doctrine "warned European powers not to interfere" with the United States' interests in the region.

FIGURE 2.9
Conflict Potential in Latin America



SOURCE: Authors' analysis of Janes Military and Security Assessments Intelligence Centre, 2020; and Marshall and Elzinga-Marshall, undated. Base map: Esri, Garmin, and CIA, 2019.

Peace's State Fragility Index.¹¹⁴ All of the top-ranking countries—Colombia, Haiti, Venezuela, Bolivia, Guyana, and Nicaragua—not only have a history of internal conflict but also have recently experienced or are currently experiencing some form of domestic turmoil and simmering internal violence.¹¹⁵ Table 2.3 highlights the countries with the highest conflict potential.

Colombia has been the theater of a Marxist insurgency since the early 1960s, and levels of internal violence were still elevated after the conclusion of a 2016 peace agreement with the FARC guerrillas. Haiti has experienced several waves of internal violence over the past two decades.¹¹⁶ It is still struggling with gang violence and a myriad of other challenges, includ-

TABLE 2.3
The Ten Latin American Countries
with the Highest Conflict Potential

Rank	Country
1	Colombia
2	Haiti
3	Venezuela
4	Bolivia
5	Guyana
6	Nicaragua
7	Ecuador
8	Honduras
9	Paraguay
10	Guatemala

SOURCE: RAND analysis of data included in Janes internal conflict risk rating, as of early 2021 (Janes Military and Security Assessments Intelligence Centre, 2020), and the Center for Systemic Peace's State Fragility Index (Marshall and Elzinga-Marshall, undated).

¹¹⁴ Janes Military and Security Assessments Intelligence Centre, 2020; Marshall and Elzinga-Marshall, undated.

¹¹⁵ Turkewitz, 2021; Herbert Villaraga, "Haitians Displaced by Gang Violence Face Bleak Future," Reuters, July 27, 2021; María Luisa Paúl, "Deadly Standoff in Venezuela Leaves over 20 Dead, Officials Say, in Latest Escalation of Gang Violence," *Washington Post*, July 10, 2021; Chloé Lauvergnier, "Armed Thugs Go After Protesters in Bolivia," *The Observers*, France 24, August 21, 2020; Nafeeza Yahya-Sakur and Anatoly Kurmanaev, "Killings Reignite Racial Tensions in Guyana," *New York Times*, last updated September 11, 2020; and "Downward Spiral: Nicaragua's Worsening Crisis," BBC News, July 16, 2018.

¹¹⁶ "Haiti's History of Violence and Disasters," Reuters, August 14, 2021.

ing the July 2021 assassination of President Jovenel Moïse and a recent wave of natural disasters.¹¹⁷ Venezuela has also experienced internal violence and turmoil over the past decade, and it is currently on the brink of collapse and facing an acute humanitarian crisis.¹¹⁸ Bolivia has witnessed its share of internal conflict, including, in 2008, “between indigenous people and descendants of European settlers, between western highlands and eastern lowlands, and between poor and rich.”¹¹⁹ This conflict has been a long-standing source of friction in the country, which explains why Che Guevara chose to focus on Bolivia in the 1960s. The election of Evo Morales to Bolivia’s presidency in 2008 gave the indigenous population power for the first time,¹²⁰ but Morales fled to Mexico in 2019 amid accusations of election fraud.¹²¹ That year, Bolivia also had one of the highest rates of femicide—i.e., “women being killed because of their gender”¹²²—in South America. Guyana has a history of ethnic violence that dates back to the 1960s, and ethnic conflict continues to loom over the country.¹²³ Nicaragua has witnessed internal conflict since the 1960s, including gang violence in recent decades, street protests in 2018 that the Nicaraguan government violently repressed, and government crackdowns on political opposition and potential presidential candidates in 2021.¹²⁴

Identifying Competition Flashpoints

As we noted in Chapter One, to identify the most-likely Latin American countries where the United States, China, and Russia might be drawn into conflicts, we combined the results of our conflict-potential assessment with those of our competition-potential assessment. Table 2.4 presents the top ten most-conflict-prone countries in the region ranked by their competition potential.

¹¹⁷ Dánica Coto and Evens Sanon, “Gangs Complicate Haiti Effort to Recover from Assassination,” AP News, July 11, 2021; Anthony Faiola, “Haiti Challenged by Violence, Poverty as It Buries Assassinated President Moïse,” *Washington Post*, July 23, 2021; and Center for Disaster Philanthropy, “2021 Haiti Earthquake and Tropical Storm Grace,” webpage, September 13, 2021.

¹¹⁸ International Crisis Group, *Violence and Politics in Venezuela*, Latin America Report No. 38, August 17, 2011; Harold Trinkunas, “Venezuela Breaks Down in Violence,” Brookings Institution, January 23, 2014; and “Venezuela Crisis: How the Political Situation Escalated,” BBC News, August 12, 2021.

¹¹⁹ International Crisis Group, *Keeping Violence in Check After Bolivia’s Political Rupture*, November 13, 2019.

¹²⁰ We thank our reviewer Mary Quinn for this point.

¹²¹ Patrick J. McDonnell, “Violence Spreads in Bolivia: Here’s What You Need to Know,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 18, 2019.

¹²² Anastasia Moloney, “Bolivia Declares Gender Killings a National Priority,” Reuters, July 16, 2019.

¹²³ Jason S. Calder, “Ethnic Conflict Threatens Democracy in Guyana,” *Foreign Policy*, March 26, 2020.

¹²⁴ Heather Hughes, “10 Facts About Violence in Nicaragua,” The Borgen Project, June 19, 2019.

TABLE 2.4
Latin America Case Selection

Country	Overall Conflict-Potential Ranking	Overall Competition-Potential Ranking
Colombia ^a	1	4
Venezuela ^a	3	6
Ecuador	7	8
Nicaragua ^a	6	10
Guatemala	10	14
Bolivia	4	16
Paraguay	9	18
Guyana	5	19
Honduras	8	20
Haiti	2	21

SOURCE: Conflict-potential ranking is based on Janes Military and Security Assessments Intelligence Centre, 2020; and Marshall and Elzinga-Marshall, undated. Competition-potential ranking is based on authors' analysis of the influence-seeking measures described in this report; for data sources, see the appendix.

NOTE: We ranked 23 countries in Latin America by conflict potential (1 = highest) and competition potential (1 = highest).

^a We selected this country for scenario analysis.

As the table shows, Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, and Nicaragua emerged as the top four countries in our data set that combined the highest potential for internal conflict and the highest potential for great-power competition. As discussed in Chapter One, in selecting cases from this set for more-in-depth analysis, we consulted research by regional subject-matter experts and our analyses of China's and Russia's approaches to supporting proxy actors (see the summary volume of this series¹²⁵) to select countries (1) where the likelihood of significant conflict, especially with transborder implications, is present and (2) that present at least theoretically plausible contexts for great-power involvement in conflicts, in view of what we know about how great powers have approached faraway conflicts in recent times. To validate our case selection, we conducted interviews with regional subject-matter experts with knowledge and deep understanding of great-power competition in Latin America.¹²⁶

We selected Venezuela, Colombia, and Nicaragua for our case studies. While Ecuador has a higher competition-potential ranking than Nicaragua, Nicaragua not only has a somewhat higher likelihood of internal conflict but also has a profile that is closer to the type of country

¹²⁵ Cohen et al., 2023, Appendixes B and C.

¹²⁶ Subject-matter expert, interview with the authors, July 22, 2021; subject-matter expert, interview with the authors, July 27, 2021; subject-matter expert, email exchange with the authors, July 18, 2021.

in which rivals of the United States, such as Russia, would get involved.¹²⁷ However, China's interest in Nicaragua seems to be relatively low compared with Russia's, and the Nicaragua case is more focused on U.S.-Russia dynamics and yields relatively limited insights regarding U.S.-China dynamics.

We decided to combine Venezuela and Colombia into one case study (presented in Chapter Three) because of the cross-border dynamics in play and the spillover effects from one country to the other, which render the two conflict scenarios with great-power involvement somewhat linked. We consider Nicaragua separately, in Chapter Four.

¹²⁷ Cohen et al., 2023, Appendix C.

Conflict Scenarios with Great-Power Involvement: Venezuela and Colombia

The fates of the territories that constitute today's Venezuela and Colombia have been closely intertwined ever since these territories became independent from Spain in the early 19th century. In 1819, under the leadership of Simón Bolívar, the two territories were incorporated into the so-called Gran Colombia, or the Republic of Colombia, which also included the territories that make up today's Panama and Ecuador.¹ Ultimately, Venezuela broke away from Gran Colombia in 1830.² Although the cultural and social ties between Venezuela and Colombia remain strong to this day, the two countries have maintained a political rivalry for most of the 20th and 21st centuries. All the while, the border between them has remained relatively porous, and events in one country spill over into the other.³ For instance, as of 2020, the humanitarian crisis in Venezuela had caused more than 1.5 million refugees to flee across the border into Colombia, and Colombia led humanitarian relief efforts with the United States and other countries in Latin America.⁴

Both countries are currently experiencing various degrees of internal political turmoil, which has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The current situation in Venezuela, in combination with several other geopolitical and economic factors laid out in this chapter, makes the country a plausible contender for a conflict in which the United States would support one side and China and Russia would support the other. Colombia is a less plausible candidate for a similar confrontation between the United States and Russia, in which China

¹ Matthew Brown, "Not Forging Nations but Foraging for Them: Uncertain Collective Identities in Gran Colombia," *Nations and Nationalism*, Vol. 12, No. 2, April 2006; and Robert Louis Gilmore, "Colombia: Revolution and Independence," webpage, Encyclopedia Britannica, undated.

² David Bushnell, *The Making of Modern Colombia: A Nation in Spite of Itself*, Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1993; and Edwin Lieuwen, John D. Martz, Jennifer L. McCoy, and Heather D. Heckel, "Venezuela: The Independence Movement," webpage, Encyclopedia Britannica, undated.

³ Steven Boraz, "Case Study: The Colombia-Venezuela Border," in Angel Rabasa, Steven Boraz, Peter Chalk, Kim Cragin, Theodore W. Karasik, Jennifer D. P. Moroney, Kevin A. O'Brien, and John E. Peters, *Ungoverned Territories: Understanding and Reducing Terrorism Risks*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-561-AF, 2007.

⁴ Jorge G. Castañeda, "Colombia Is Dealing with a Terrifying Refugee Crisis. Will Wealthy Nations Step Up to Help?" *New York Times*, March 10, 2020.

would likely wait in the wings for an outcome instead of throwing its weight behind one side or the other from the beginning. Either contingency would have major implications for the security of the United States.⁵

Venezuela

In this section, we first provide an overview of Venezuela's local political dynamics. Next, we present a comparative analysis of great-power interests and objectives, posture and access, and capabilities in Venezuela. We then describe how a conflict with great-power involvement might unfold in the country. Finally, we discuss why the United States, China, and Russia might get involved in such a conflict and which side each competitor would support.

Overview of Local Political Dynamics

Venezuela has a history of oscillating between democracy and authoritarianism. Most recently, in 1998, Hugo Chávez was democratically elected to Venezuela's presidency on a populist electoral platform "that promised to redistribute Venezuela's oil wealth and political power from corrupt elites to the people of Venezuela."⁶ However, once he became president, Chávez centralized power and transformed the country into a dictatorship, undermining "human rights, the separation of powers, and freedom of expression."⁷ Under Chávez, Venezuela provided support to the FARC, a Colombian guerrilla organization, mainly by serving as a safe haven across the border from Colombia.⁸

Furthermore, Chávez began Venezuela's rapprochement with China and Russia. Venezuela's rapprochement with China started in 1999, when Chávez first visited China, soon after assuming the presidency. He visited China five more times before his death in 2013.⁹ Economic relations between the two countries deepened. As the world's largest importer of oil,

⁵ We drew on a variety of sources to better ground these assessments and understand how China and Russia—as well as the United States—have approached recent proxy wars and limited conflicts. For details and sources, see Cohen et al., 2023.

⁶ Clare Ribando Seelke, Rebecca M. Nelson, Rhoda Margesson, and Phillip Brown, *Venezuela: Background and U.S. Relations*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, R44841, updated April 28, 2021, p. 1.

⁷ Seelke et al., 2021, p. 1. See also Thomas E. Skidmore, Peter H. Smith, and James N. Green, *Modern Latin America*, 8th ed., New York: Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 232; and Diego A. Zambrano, "The Constitutional Path to Dictatorship in Venezuela," *Lawfare*, blog, March 18, 2019.

⁸ Hakim, 2006.

⁹ Cheng Guangjin and Pu Zhendong, "Chavez Was a 'Good Friend of Chinese People,'" *China Daily*, March 7, 2013.

China entered with Venezuela into “loans-for-oil” agreements.¹⁰ In October 2008, China and Venezuela launched VeneSat-1 (also known as *Simón Bolívar*), a joint Sino-Venezuelan satellite.¹¹ Similar to the Sino-Venezuelan rapprochement, closer relations between Russia and Venezuela began when Chávez reached out to Putin in 2000. Three other meetings between them followed in three years.¹² By 2005, Russia was providing Venezuela with loans and arms sales, marking the beginning of Russia’s gradual reengagement with Latin America.¹³

After Chávez’s death in 2013, Nicolás Maduro became Venezuela’s acting president and subsequently won a narrow election marred by alleged irregularities. From the beginning, Maduro’s presidency was plagued by opposition protests, which were violently suppressed by security forces and local civilian militia groups loyal to the regime (known as *colectivos*).¹⁴ He continued to consolidate power, including by exercising military control over the economy.¹⁵ Maduro also kept tight reins on Venezuela’s domestic politics when the country’s economy collapsed in 2014 and the oil price fell 50 percent, with some 96 percent of Venezuelans living in poverty by 2019. The resulting humanitarian disaster only worsened in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and U.S.-imposed sanctions.¹⁶ Members of the Maduro government, including the military, have allegedly engaged not only in corruption but also in drug trafficking and other illicit activities.¹⁷ Some high-ranking officers in the Venezuelan Armed Forces are allegedly part of the Cartel de los Soles (in English, *Cartel of the Suns*).¹⁸ The involvement of some high-ranking officers in illicit activities and trade, and their fear of legal consequences and punishment under a different administration, provides one potential explanation for the Armed Forces’ continued loyalty to Maduro.¹⁹

¹⁰ Policy Planning Staff, Office of the Secretary of State, *The Elements of the China Challenge*, Washington, D.C., November 2020 (revised December 2020), pp. 24–25.

¹¹ National Aeronautics and Space Administration, “NSSDCA/COSPAR ID: 2008-055A,” webpage, undated.

¹² John E. Herbst and Jason Marczak, *Russia’s Intervention in Venezuela: What’s at Stake?* Washington, D.C.: Atlantic Council, September 2019.

¹³ Gurganus, 2018.

¹⁴ Seelke et al., 2021, p. 3.

¹⁵ Seelke et al., 2021, p. 4.

¹⁶ Seelke et al., 2021, p. 9.

¹⁷ In essence, Maduro continued Chávez’s policies that either aided or turned a blind eye to drug trafficking and enriched his political allies. We thank our reviewer Mary Quinn for this addition. See Seelke et al., 2021, pp. 1, 5.

¹⁸ InSight Crime, “Cartel of the Suns,” webpage, last updated January 14, 2021. The name is derived from the design of Venezuelan generals’ rank insignia (similar to the stars on U.S. uniforms, for example).

¹⁹ “Venezuela Crisis: Why the Military Is Backing Maduro,” BBC News, January 28, 2019.

Presidential elections took place in May 2018, but they were largely considered by many in Venezuela, the United States, the European Union, and others to be fraudulent.²⁰ In January 2019, the democratically elected 2015 National Assembly, which was controlled by the opposition, chose Juan Guaidó as its president. Guaidó offered to serve as interim president of Venezuela until new elections were held, and he took the oath of office on January 23, 2019. Nearly 60 countries, including the United States, recognized Guaidó, rather than Maduro, as the legitimate president of Venezuela.²¹ In January 2021, however, Maduro's party—the Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (PSUV), or United Socialist Party of Venezuela—took de facto control of the National Assembly, the last independent branch of Venezuela's government. In this way, the PSUV challenged Guaidó's legitimacy as president of the 2015 National Assembly.²² As of this writing, the U.S. government still considers the Guaidó-led democratically elected 2015 National Assembly to be the only legitimate federal institution according to the Venezuelan Constitution.²³

As of summer 2021, the Maduro government seemed to have lost control over most of Venezuela's territory and only had some control over Caracas and the area immediately outside it.²⁴ Even in Caracas, the government is losing ground to the gangs that have displaced government presence,²⁵ while in the border states Colombian rebels act as the de facto government.²⁶ According to the U.S. Department of State's *Country Reports on Terrorism 2019*, Venezuela has continued to provide “a permissive environment for known terrorist groups, including dissidents of [FARC], the Colombian-origin [ELN], and Hizballah sympathizers.”²⁷

The Maduro regime enjoys a close political relationship with both China and Russia. Relations between Venezuela and Russia have remained strong and have involved arms sales, although these deals subsequently collapsed because of corruption and mismanagement on both sides. Moscow also sent military advisers to Venezuela, and there have been numerous high-profile visits by dignitaries between the two countries.²⁸ By contrast, while Venezuela and China remain politically close, China's economic interest in Venezuela has diminished

²⁰ Clare Ribando Seelke, “Venezuela: Political Crisis and U.S. Policy,” Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, IF10230, last updated March 10, 2021a; and Seelke et al., 2021.

²¹ Seelke et al., 2021, p. 4.

²² Seelke et al., 2021, p. 1.

²³ Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, 2021a.

²⁴ Regional expert on Latin American politics and relations with the three great powers, interview with the authors, July 22, 2021.

²⁵ Kinoshian and Sequera, 2021; and Isayen Herrera and Anatoly Kurmanaev, “Bouncy Castles and Grenades: Gangs Erode Maduro's Grip on Caracas,” *New York Times*, May 30, 2021.

²⁶ Sarah Kinoshian, “Guns, Drugs, Jobs. In These Venezuelan Towns, Colombian Rebels Call the Shots,” Reuters, September 2, 2021.

²⁷ Bureau of Counterterrorism, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2019*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of State, 2019, p. 196.

²⁸ Herbst and Marczak, 2019.

as a result of the country's precarious economic situation, high levels of corruption, scandals, and mismanagement of foreign investments (especially Chinese ones).²⁹ By 2020, China was Venezuela's largest creditor and Venezuela was the largest South American recipient of finance, with over \$60 billion in oil-for-loans deals granted by the China Development Bank since 2007.³⁰

Given this background, internal upheaval in Venezuela is likely to be associated with the convergence of multiple factors: frustrated attempts to transition to democracy, deteriorating economic conditions, and increases in crime and criminal violence in the country. Were internal violence to escalate within Venezuela, the military and security forces would likely side with the government. Further government repression could increase the already dire humanitarian situation, and internally displaced people might overflow at the borders with Colombia and Brazil.

Comparative Analysis of Great-Power Interests and Objectives, Posture and Access, and Capabilities

In this subsection, we provide an overview of the objectives, posture and access, and capabilities of the United States, China, and Russia in Venezuela.

Interests and Objectives

United States' Interests and Objectives

The United States' interests and objectives in Venezuela fall into four categories: geopolitical, security and stability, economic, and ideological.

From a geopolitical standpoint, Russia's and—to a lesser extent—China's activities in the unfolding crisis in Venezuela have raised concerns about the two powers' more-assertive stances toward Latin America. According to SOUTHCOM's 2021 posture statement, in addition to prompting concerns about the refugees and migrants displaced during the crisis, the country represents the main foothold and access point in the region for China, Russia, and Iran; is a key enabler for the activities of transnational criminal organizations; and provides a safe haven for regional terrorist groups.³¹ Under Chávez and Maduro, Venezuela has been the Latin American country that has allowed Russia the highest level of access to its territory

²⁹ Angus Berwick, "How a Chinese Venture in Venezuela Made Millions While Locals Grew Hungry," Reuters, May 7, 2019.

³⁰ Policy Planning Staff, Office of the Secretary of State, 2020, pp. 24–25.

³¹ Faller, 2021, p. 8.

and resources to advance Russia's strategic objectives.³² (For example, Russian supersonic nuclear-capable bombers visited Venezuela three times between 2008 and 2019.³³)

Consequently, U.S. government officials and security practitioners have worried that Venezuela could be used as a base for Chinese, Russian, or even Iranian power projection in the immediate vicinity of the United States.³⁴ When Russia landed some 100 military personnel just outside Caracas in 2019, the United States issued a strong warning to external actors “against deploying military assets to Venezuela, or elsewhere in the Hemisphere, with the intent of establishing or expanding military operations,” as such an action would be considered a provocation and a “direct threat to international peace and security in the region.”³⁵ At the time, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo warned his Russian counterpart that the United States would “not stand idly by” if Moscow continued to send military personnel to Venezuela to support the Maduro regime.³⁶ Although the Biden administration's policies diverge from the Trump administration's approach,³⁷ discomfort over a Russian military presence in close proximity to the U.S. homeland is likely to remain.

Alongside its geopolitical objective related to reducing China's and Russia's influence in the Western Hemisphere,³⁸ the United States has objectives related to regional security and stability. These include the following: (1) Ensure regional stability by addressing the economic and food crisis inside Venezuela and by working with Colombia to address the flow of refugees and migrants from Venezuela into Colombia;³⁹ (2) contain the flow of Colombian cocaine to the United States through Venezuela, which currently acts as a transit country in which government officials and their relatives are involved in drug trafficking; (3) contain

³² R. Evan Ellis, “Russian Activities in Latin America,” in Nicole Peterson, ed., *Russian Strategic Intentions: A Strategic Multilayer Assessment (SMA) White Paper*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, Joint Chiefs of Staff, May 2019b, p. 78.

³³ William Courtney, “In Venezuela, a Potential U.S.-Russian Crisis?” *RAND Blog*, January 8, 2019.

³⁴ Alexander Brotman, “The Risks of American Military Involvement in Venezuela,” *Global Risk Insights*, February 6, 2019. See also Faller, 2021.

³⁵ Roberta Rampton and Lesley Wroughton, “White House Warns Russia over Troops in Venezuela, Threatens Sanctions,” *Reuters*, March 29, 2021.

³⁶ Karen DeYoung, “Pompeo Warns Russia About Its Military Presence in Venezuela,” *Washington Post*, March 25, 2019.

³⁷ The White House, “Background Press Call by Senior Administration Officials on Venezuela,” press briefing, March 8, 2021.

³⁸ Francisco Toro, “Opinion: The U.S. Can't Topple Venezuela's Regime, but It Could Change Its Behavior,” *Washington Post*, February 3, 2021.

³⁹ Migration plays a role in the United States' decisionmaking process related to a potential crisis in Venezuela. Also, because of the strong relationship between the United States and Colombia, in the case of an internal conflict in Venezuela or a border conflict between Colombia and Venezuela, the United States would try to provide support to Colombia to mitigate spillover effects.

the activities of non-state armed groups present in Venezuela; and (4) limit money laundering and other forms of illicit trafficking and crimes with impacts on U.S. national security.⁴⁰

In terms of economic interests, the United States was Venezuela's largest trading partner until it suspended diplomatic relations with the country in March 2019. Most U.S. imports from Venezuela consisted of crude oil, and U.S. exports to the country included petroleum and refined petroleum products.⁴¹ Venezuelan trade with the United States does not represent a significant proportion of total U.S. trade, but the void left by the United States could potentially be exploited by China given the inroads Beijing has already made into the country's economy.

Finally, the United States has a general, ideological interest in democracy and human rights, which are both at stake in Venezuela. Although the United States electorate overall is wary of democracy promotion as a U.S. foreign policy objective, this normative value still shapes U.S. foreign policy.⁴² Specifically, democracy in Venezuela matters to members of key demographic groups in the U.S. electorate. Florida, for example, has a large Venezuelan immigrant population, including asylum-seekers who moved to Florida during the Chávez and Maduro administrations. This group has been vocal about keeping democracy and human rights on the policy agenda, even as American interest on the topic overall has waned.⁴³

Ultimately, the combination of these four objectives has led the United States to pursue an aggressive policy toward the Maduro regime. In 2020, the U.S. government advanced a Democratic Transition Framework intended "to help Venezuelan society achieve a peaceful, democratic transition."⁴⁴ In this vein, the United States intensified pressure on the Maduro government, especially in the context of the Trump administration's maximum-pressure policy, when regime change in Venezuela became an explicit U.S. objective.⁴⁵ The United States also indicted Maduro and some of his key associates on drug charges in March 2020,⁴⁶ but to no

⁴⁰ Seelke et al., 2021, pp. 29–30.

⁴¹ Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, 2021a.

⁴² In a 2021 Pew Research Center survey, a mere 20 percent of Americans said that democracy promotion should be a "top priority" (Bruce Drake, "Americans Put Low Priority on Promoting Democracy Abroad," Pew Research Center, March 2, 2021).

⁴³ Sean Sullivan, "Debate on Venezuela Shakes Up Florida Politics," *Washington Post*, February 24, 2019; and Andrew Rosati and Maria Elena Vizcaino, "Florida's Venezuelan Diaspora Sees Trump as Best, Flawed Hope," *Washington Post*, September 26, 2020.

⁴⁴ Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, 2021a.

⁴⁵ Jorge Jraissati, "How Maduro Beat Sanctions," *Foreign Policy*, June 3, 2021.

⁴⁶ Daniel Tenreiro, "In Effort to Oust Maduro, U.S. Gives 'Maximum Pressure' a New Meaning," *National Review*, April 9, 2020; and Office of Public Affairs, "Nicolás Maduro Moros and 14 Current and Former Venezuelan Officials Charged with Narco-Terrorism, Corruption, Drug Trafficking and Other Criminal Charges," press release, U.S. Department of Justice, last updated March 27, 2020.

avail.⁴⁷ Instead, the Maduro regime became more closely aligned with China, Russia, and Iran, leaving Venezuela and the United States in a standoff that continues today.⁴⁸

China's Interests and Objectives

China, like Russia, recognizes and supports the Maduro government in Venezuela.⁴⁹ China's interests and objectives in Venezuela appear to be primarily economic in nature, but not exclusively so; Beijing's concern for Chinese citizens in Venezuela and geopolitical considerations also play a role. According to a 2020 report from the Asia Society, for China, Venezuela represents the centerpiece of its regional strategy in Latin America,⁵⁰ which intertwines geopolitical and economic considerations (as noted in Chapter One).

On the economic front, prior to the recent crisis, Venezuela made a desirable partner for China because the country needed capital and infrastructure projects, as well as technology, which China could provide. In exchange, Venezuela provided minerals, energy resources, and agricultural products for China's economy and a market for Chinese companies.⁵¹ Venezuela was part of China's push to diversify its oil suppliers and increase its energy security.⁵² To do so, China offered Venezuela a variety of investments, military materiel, and loans backed by future oil exports, under the assumption that the exports would still be possible despite Venezuela's economic collapse. Overall, Beijing supports the Maduro government, despite the country's economic collapse, not only "because there is money to be made and because Venezuela's ability to pay back many Chinese loans is dependent on continued commodity exports" but also because of the geopolitical considerations discussed in this section.⁵³ In addition, the corruption of the regime in Caracas presents China with opportunities for enrichment at the expense of Venezuelan citizens.⁵⁴

Over the past few decades, Venezuela has become home to some 400,000 ethnic Chinese immigrants, although some returned to China after the situation in Venezuela imploded in

⁴⁷ Matt Spetalnick and Luc Cohen, "Exclusive: As Trump Grows Frustrated on Venezuela, U.S. to 'Squeeze' Cuba, Scrutinize Russia," Reuters, October 9, 2019; and Jraissati, 2021.

⁴⁸ Toro, 2021.

⁴⁹ Seelke et al., 2021, p. 15.

⁵⁰ Russel and Berger, 2020.

⁵¹ Xu Ye [徐烨] and Wang Ying [王瑛], "Expansive Opportunities for China, Venezuela Cooperation" ["中国、委内瑞拉务实合作前景广阔"], *China Military Net* [中国军网], July 19, 2014.

⁵² Yan Shi Gang [闫世刚] and Liu Shuguang [刘曙光], "China's Energy Policy Under Its New Energy Security" ["新能源安全观下的中国能源外交"], China Institute of International Studies [中国国际问题研究院], March 26, 2014.

⁵³ Scobell et al., 2018, pp. xxiv–xxv.

⁵⁴ Berwick, 2019.

2017.⁵⁵ Beijing is likely to take an interest in the Chinese community in the country, especially in the context of increased tensions on the ground.

Beyond its economic interests and concerns for the well-being of Chinese citizens in Venezuela, China has a strategic and political interest in maintaining influence in a region where the United States is a dominant power. Like Russia, China opposes U.S. sanctions against members of the Maduro government and worries that the United States might attempt a military solution.⁵⁶ As part of its support for the Maduro government, China has provided the regime with technology that allows it to increase surveillance of ordinary Venezuelans and deny basic social services to those who oppose Maduro.⁵⁷ This speaks to China's political interest in supporting the authoritarian regime in power in Venezuela.

China recognizes that Maduro is in crisis, and Beijing is concerned that his fall might increase U.S. control over the region. Venezuela has traditionally provided aid and support to Latin American countries with anti-American stances.⁵⁸ It is also widely recognized as a "leftist" country that frequently opposes the United States and is a proactive contributor to organizations, such as ALBA, that are seen by the Chinese government as important forces to bring Latin American countries together politically and economically.⁵⁹ Beijing hopes that, through such regional integration, Latin American states can become less dependent on the United States and pursue a more independent foreign policy.⁶⁰

Russia's Interests and Objectives

Russia has two sets of interdependent objectives in Venezuela. First, geopolitically, Russia seeks to reestablish itself as a great power and undermine U.S. influence. Russia's second set of objectives is economic.

To support its geostrategic objectives, Russia seeks to cultivate relations with Venezuela. In keeping with its traditional support for anti-American authoritarian governments, Russia,

⁵⁵ He Huifeng, "As Venezuela Implodes, so Do the Dreams of Thousands of Fleeing Chinese," *South China Morning Post*, August 14, 2015.

⁵⁶ Yue Xiaoguang [岳小光], "Venezuela Closes Borders in Response to Provocations" ["委内瑞拉封锁边境回应挑衅"], *China Defense News* [中国国防报], February 27, 2019; and Bu Shaohua [步少华] and Zhang Jieyu [章婕妤], "New Trends Worthy of Note in Pompeo's Recent Trip to Latin America to Build Relations" ["蓬佩奥再访拉美 美拉关系新动向引关注"], *China Institute of International Studies* [中国国际问题研究院], September 28, 2020.

⁵⁷ Seelke et al., 2021, pp. 16–17.

⁵⁸ Yue, 2019.

⁵⁹ Wang Youming [王友明], "Building Sino-Latin American Comprehensive Cooperation Mechanisms: Opportunities, Challenges, and Approaches" ["构建中拉整体合作机制:机遇、挑战及思路"], *China Institute of International Studies* [中国国际问题研究院], May 30, 2014; and Hui Zhao [赵晖], "Latin America Regional Cooperation and China's Sino-Latin America Cooperation Strategic Options" ["拉美区域合作与中拉合作的战略选择"], *China Institute of International Studies* [中国国际问题研究院], March 27, 2020.

⁶⁰ Wang Huizhi [王慧芝], "Accomplishments, Questions, and Outlook for Building the China-Latin America Forum" ["中拉论坛建设成就、问题及前景"], *China Institute of International Studies* [中国国际问题研究院], October 29, 2018; and Hui, 2020.

together with China, Cuba, Turkey, and Iran, among other countries, has supported the Maduro government in Venezuela and its claim to power.⁶¹ Venezuela is important as a supporter of Russian foreign policy positions in international fora, such as during the 2008 and 2014 conflicts with Georgia and Ukraine.⁶² The Kremlin also relies on its ties to Caracas to obtain leverage in the neighborhood of the United States, mainly in response to what Russia sees as U.S. threats against its core interests.

On the international stage, Russia seeks to prevent U.S.- or Western-sponsored regime change, which Russian leaders view as threatening and destabilizing. As we detail in the summary volume of this series, Russia's intervention into Syria was in no small part motivated by an imperative to prevent the kind of U.S. interventionism that characterized the "Libya scenario."⁶³ In the case of Venezuela, Russia perceives U.S. support for Maduro's pro-democratic challenger, Guaidó, as the threat of another U.S.-sponsored regime change aimed at a Russia-friendly government. This perception was asserted plainly by high-ranking Russian officials, such as the Chief of the General Staff, General Valeriy Gerasimov.⁶⁴ Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov openly accused the United States of "supporting an attempted coup" and of "totally illegal interference in Venezuela's internal affairs," and he warned that "[t]he continuation of aggressive actions may result in the gravest of consequences."⁶⁵

Perhaps more important than the desire to prevent coups against faraway partners is Russia's continued perception that the United States is ready to support "color revolutions" close to Russia's borders. This creates an additional reason for Russia to demonstrate its capability to complicate the United States' goals in the Western Hemisphere.⁶⁶ In 2008, in reaction to U.S. support for Georgia, Russia sent TU-160 strategic bombers to Venezuela for a joint military exercise in the Caribbean Sea.⁶⁷ More recently, in 2019, Russia sent military personnel to Venezuela, allegedly to provide maintenance to Russian military equipment but in reality

⁶¹ Seelke et al., 2021, p. 15.

⁶² On the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states, see Luke Harding, "Chávez Pleases Russia by Recognising Georgian Breakaway Republics," *The Guardian*, September 10, 2009; and Alexander Gabuev, "Russia's Support for Venezuela Has Deep Roots," *Financial Times*, February 3, 2019. On support for Russia's annexation of Crimea, see Brotman, 2019.

⁶³ Cohen et al., 2023, Appendix C; and Samuel Charap, Elina Treyger, and Edward Geist, *Understanding Russia's Intervention in Syria*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-3180-AF, 2019.

⁶⁴ "Vectors of Military Strategy Development" ["Векторы развития военной стратегии"], *Red Star* [Красная звезда], April 3, 2019.

⁶⁵ Pavel Felgenhauer, "Russia Steps Deeper into the Venezuelan Battleground," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 16, No. 64, May 2, 2019.

⁶⁶ Herbst and Marczak, 2019.

⁶⁷ Simon Romero and Clifford J. Levy, "Russia and Venezuela Confirm Joint Military Exercises," *New York Times*, September 8, 2008.

intended to support the embattled Maduro regime against the U.S.-backed challenger and to substantiate those “gravest of consequences” threatened by Lavrov.⁶⁸

Regarding Russia’s second set of objectives, Moscow’s economic investments into Venezuela have been colored by geopolitical considerations, explaining the continued presence of Russian economic actors in Venezuela despite economic losses.⁶⁹ In recent years, Russia made loans and investments in Venezuela to support the Maduro regime. It also helped the government swiftly access much-needed cash through support of oil sales and financial transactions, in defiance of U.S. sanctions.⁷⁰

Over the past two decades, Venezuela has become an important market for Russian arms and energy companies. The country has the world’s largest proven oil reserves, and Rosneft, Russia’s main oil company, invested at least \$9 billion in Venezuelan assets between 2010 and 2019. Faced with U.S. sanctions imposed in 2019, Rosneft sold its Venezuelan assets to a new, Russian government-owned company in what Western analysts have described as a shell game to avoid sanctions, but it still retains a stake.⁷¹

Although Russia’s economic support to the Maduro regime has weakened amid sanctions, Venezuela appears to still hold Russian debt and economic promise for Moscow. Despite Venezuela’s economic collapse and the U.S.-imposed sanctions regime, Russian foreign policy expert Alexander Gabuev’s 2019 verdict—that Russia was “so deeply invested in the Maduro regime that the only realistic option is to double down”—might still apply.⁷² Cooperation deals signed in 2021, including in the oil sector, support the conclusion that Russia remains intent on recouping its losses and benefiting from a potential upswing in Venezuela’s economic fortunes.⁷³

Russian and U.S. objectives in Venezuela mainly clash when it comes to the democratic transition in Venezuela: Russia supports the Maduro government, and the United States supports the opposition government of Interim President Guaidó. Russia is strongly opposed to any potential military assistance that Washington could provide to support Guaidó, or to any pro-democracy forces in the country for that matter. In this vein, in UN Security Council sessions, Russia voiced its unease about the United States attempting to stage a coup in Ven-

⁶⁸ Seelke et al., 2021, p. 16.

⁶⁹ Christian Lowe and Rinat Sagdiev, “How Russia Sank Billions of Dollars into Venezuelan Quicksand,” Reuters, March 14, 2019; and Gabuev, 2019.

⁷⁰ Vladimir Rouvinski, “Russia’s Continuing Engagement with Venezuela in 2019 and Beyond—An Update,” Washington, D.C.: Kennan Institute, Wilson Center, February 2020.

⁷¹ Todd Prince, “A Sale or a Sham: Rosneft Ditched Venezuelan Assets, but Will It Shed U.S. Sanctions?” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, April 6, 2020.

⁷² Gabuev, 2019.

⁷³ Jon Adams, “Russian Foreign Minister Receives His Venezuelan Counterpart to Discuss Sputnik Vaccine,” *Foreign Brief*, June 22, 2021; and “Venezuela, Russia Renew Bilateral Ties,” *Argus*, March 31, 2021.

ezuela. As its concerns have become more acute, Russia allegedly “has flown private military contractors into Venezuela to help support Maduro.”⁷⁴

Posture and Access

United States’ Posture and Access

Under Hugo Chávez, relations between the United States and Venezuela significantly deteriorated. Currently, security relations between the two countries are very precarious. The United States does not have any military bases and troops stationed in Venezuela, and the International Institute for Strategic Studies’ Military Balance database shows no military exercises—not even multilateral ones—in which Venezuela and the United States participated from 2014 to 2020.⁷⁵

However, despite the very limited posture and access the United States has within Venezuela itself, should the United States decide to intervene militarily in the country, it could carry out the majority of its military operations in Venezuela from the continental United States (CONUS) if it needed to. The United States can deploy naval assets in the area with relative ease,⁷⁶ and Venezuela is a short flying distance from U.S. Air Force bases in the southern United States, including the U.S. military facilities in Key West and Special Operations Command South in Homestead, Florida.⁷⁷

The United States could also potentially rely on military access to Venezuela from the cooperative security location in Colombia,⁷⁸ and it could use Colombian airfields and military installations,⁷⁹ Soto Cano Air Base in Honduras,⁸⁰ and two other cooperative security locations that it has in El Salvador and in Aruba and Curaçao.⁸¹ Such access, although desirable, is not indispensable to the success of a limited military intervention. Access to U.S. partners’ military facilities could simplify the conduct of U.S. air operations in Venezuela by shortening the flight path of aircraft, shortening refueling time or eliminating the need for an aircraft tanker, and enhancing the loiter phase (that is, the time the aircraft can spend over the target). It could also facilitate ground access, the supply of any U.S. conventional military forces deployed on the ground, and the provision of humanitarian aid.

⁷⁴ Brotman, 2019; and Maria Tsvetkova and Anton Zverev, “Exclusive: Kremlin-Linked Contractors Help Guard Venezuela’s Maduro—Sources,” Reuters, January 25, 2019.

⁷⁵ International Institute for Strategic Studies, undated, “Exercises” data set.

⁷⁶ Matt Spetalnick and Phil Stewart, “Trump Doubles U.S. Military Assets in Caribbean, Bolstering Drug Fight After Maduro Indictment,” Reuters, April 1, 2020.

⁷⁷ We thank our reviewer Mary Quinn for this point.

⁷⁸ Faller, 2021, p. 10.

⁷⁹ John Lindsay-Poland, “Retreat to Colombia: The Pentagon Adapts Its Latin America Strategy,” North American Congress on Latin America, January 5, 2010; and Hugh Bronstein, “Colombia, U.S. Sign Military Cooperation Deal,” Reuters, October 30, 2009.

⁸⁰ Joint Task Force-Bravo, undated.

⁸¹ SOUTHCOM, “Cooperative Security Locations,” webpage, undated.

The United States also has a small military footprint in Puerto Rico that could potentially facilitate access to Venezuela. However, the current setup of the military installation and the nonoperational role that it plays are likely to limit its actual contribution in the case of a proxy confrontation in Venezuela.⁸² Although the installation is likely to play a limited military role, it might provide support for humanitarian purposes and other nonmilitary support for U.S. proxies in Venezuela.

China's Posture and Access

China's military posture and access in Venezuela are rather limited. According to Military Balance data from the International Institute for Strategic Studies, China does not have any military bases or troops deployed in the country.⁸³ It conducted four military exercises with Venezuela in 2016 and 2017, three of which were multilateral exercises that took place in August 2016. These three were likely part of a series of counterterrorism exercises involving special operations forces and a small number of troops, since that seems to be the type of exercise the PLA has mainly been interested in carrying out with countries in Latin America.⁸⁴ The fourth exercise took place in 2017, when Venezuela was "one of the only Latin American states to send personnel to the Chinese 'Clear Sky' military exercise."⁸⁵ Prior to Maduro's presidency, during the Chávez administration, China and Venezuela participated in Cooperation-2011, which was an urban anti-terrorism exercise between the PLA Air Force and Venezuelan airborne troops.⁸⁶

China also engaged in port calls in Venezuela in recent years, when the Chinese hospital ship the *Peace Ark* made stops in several other countries in the Caribbean.⁸⁷ Between 2014 and 2019, Chinese port visits to the region increased by 70 percent.⁸⁸ PLA Navy civilian port calls allow China to project soft power and expand its diplomatic interactions with countries whose ports and geographic locations are of high strategic value to Beijing. Next to broader strategic considerations, logistical ones, such as "distance to destination, harbor depth and space, [and] local security concerns," also play a role in the PLA Navy's decisions about which civilian ports to replenish.⁸⁹ In this context, given Venezuela's political affinity for China, it

⁸² MilitaryBases.com, "Fort Buchanan Army Base in Guaynabo, Puerto Rico," webpage, undated.

⁸³ International Institute for Strategic Studies, undated, "Deployments" data set.

⁸⁴ Kenneth Allen, Phillip C. Saunders, and John Chen, *Chinese Military Diplomacy, 2003–2016: Trends and Implications*, Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, China Strategic Perspectives 11, July 2017.

⁸⁵ Ellis, 2020b, p. 4.

⁸⁶ Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, "The Diversified Employment of China's Armed Forces," Beijing, April 2013.

⁸⁷ Adam Jourdan, "China Navy Ship Makes Maiden Visit to Venezuela After Maduro Visit," Reuters, September 23, 2018.

⁸⁸ Peltier, 2020, pp. 38–39.

⁸⁹ Peltier, 2020, p. 49.

is possible that the country's ports will become prime candidates for Chinese naval use on a commercial basis or perhaps even for the establishment of permanent logistics facilities, if Beijing ever decides to significantly increase its operations in the Caribbean.⁹⁰ However, at present, it is uncertain whether the PLA will seek any permanent facilities in the Western Hemisphere, and any such developments would be unlikely to happen soon.⁹¹

Russia's Posture and Access

Despite the lack of a valid military agreement between the two countries, Russia has developed some military posture and access in Venezuela over the years. Russia and Venezuela signed a military agreement in 2019, but it was never ratified by the democratically elected Venezuelan National Assembly of 2015, which was dominated by opposition forces.⁹² According to 2021 Military Balance data, Russia does not have any military bases or troops deployed in Venezuela,⁹³ except for some military advisers and "specialists" who are responsible for maintaining Russia-provided equipment,⁹⁴ whose numbers are not captured in the Military Balance data. Russia has had military access to Venezuela through naval visits and port calls and has allegedly had access to La Orchila military base and to airfields in the country.⁹⁵ Russian PMSCs are present in Venezuela,⁹⁶ and, in recent years, some "Kremlin-linked" private security contractors have been responsible for Maduro's security.⁹⁷

⁹⁰ Heath, Grossman, and Clark, 2021, p. 144.

⁹¹ Peltier, 2020, pp. 37–39.

⁹² "Rusia y Venezuela firman acuerdos para intensificar cooperación militar" ["Russia and Venezuela Sign Agreements to Intensify Military Cooperation"], *Voz de América* [Voice of America], August 15, 2019; "Rusia y Venezuela suscriben acuerdo de cooperación militar" ["Russia and Venezuela Sign Military Cooperation Agreement"], *teleSUR*, August 15, 2019; and "Venezuelan Parliament Says New Military Agreement with Russia 'Unconstitutional,'" *TASS*, August 26, 2019.

⁹³ International Institute for Strategic Studies, undated.

⁹⁴ Matt Spetalnick, "Russian Deployment in Venezuela Includes 'Cybersecurity Personnel': U.S. Official," *Reuters*, March 26, 2019; Reuters Staff, "Russian Military Specialists Arrive in Venezuela to Service Equipment: Interfax," *Reuters*, September 25, 2019b; and "Russia Slashes Number of Military Advisers in Venezuela, Reports Say," *Moscow Times*, June 3, 2019.

⁹⁵ Rendon and Fernandez, 2020; Weissenstein, Rodriguez, and Isachenkov, 2019; Harris, 2018.

⁹⁶ Johns Hopkins Applied Physics Laboratory, *Russian Private Military Companies: Their Use and How to Consider Them in Operations, Competition, and Conflict*, Fort Meade, Md.: Asymmetric Warfare Group, April 2020; Filip Bryjka, *Russian 'Contractors' in the Service of the Kremlin*, Warsaw: Warsaw Institute, August 13, 2019; Brian Katz, Seth G. Jones, Catrina Doxsee, and Nicholas Harrington, "Moscow's Mercenary Wars: The Expansion of Russian Private Military Companies," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, September 2020; Aleksander Kots, "What Is a PMC: Russian 'Soldiers of Fortune'—Mercenaries or Romantics" ["Что такое ЧВК: Русские 'солдаты удачи'—наемники или романтики"], *Truth of Komsomol* [*Komsomol'skaya Pravda*], August 5, 2020; and "El Kremlin salió a hablar de los mercenarios rusos en Venezuela: 'el miedo tiene ojos grande'" ["The Kremlin Came to Talk About Russian Mercenaries in Venezuela: 'Fear Has Big Eyes'"], *Mundo*, January 27, 2019.

⁹⁷ Tsvetkova and Zverev, 2019.

In the context of the internal political turmoil generated after the 2018 elections in Venezuela, Colombian armed forces went on alert and mobilized on the border between the two countries, and there was talk of a potential invasion of Venezuela by the Colombian armed forces.⁹⁸ Russia responded by violating Colombia's airspace, likely in support of its Venezuelan ally.⁹⁹ The Kremlin also made public statements supporting the Maduro government and warned Colombia not to cross the border into Venezuela and the United States not to intervene militarily in the country.¹⁰⁰

The Maduro regime and the Kremlin are likely to maintain a strong security and political relationship. Were Venezuela to be more stable internally, Russia would likely find a hospitable environment to reestablish a military base and intelligence station in the Western Hemisphere. However, given the current instability in the country and the costs the Kremlin would need to bear to set up a military installation so far from home, it is unlikely that Russia will stand up a military base and intelligence center in Venezuela, unless the Kremlin becomes hard-pressed to do so.

Capabilities

United States' Capabilities

Because of its geographic proximity to Venezuela, the United States can mobilize U.S. Navy and Air Force assets faster than the other two great powers. Even though Venezuela is not a permissive environment for U.S. military operations, the United States can make it difficult for China or Russia to deploy conventional military troops, heavy equipment, or any other military aid to Venezuela. However, the United States would likely face a challenge in controlling and containing the deployment of Chinese or Russian PMSCs or special operations forces flowing into Venezuela, most likely through Nicaragua and Cuba.

If support is needed on the ground in Venezuela, the United States would benefit from its security partnerships with friendly countries in the region, such as Colombia and Honduras, as discussed in the subsection on U.S. posture and access to Venezuela. In addition, the United States' experience jointly operating intelligence and military facilities with the Colombian Armed and Security Forces could prove useful in the context of a limited military intervention in Venezuela.¹⁰¹ However, because of the United States' naval and air dominance

⁹⁸ Anggy Polanco, "Colombian Military Calls Venezuela's Invasion Fears 'Ridiculous,'" Reuters, February 13, 2018; and Reuters Staff, "Colombia's Armed Forces on Alert over Venezuela Military Exercises," Reuters, September 11, 2019a.

⁹⁹ "Russia's FSB Aircraft Stirs Tensions Between Russia and Colombia," *Russia Monitor*, April 26, 2021.

¹⁰⁰ "Colombia Rejects Russia Warning Against Venezuelan Military Action," Reuters, April 2, 2019; and Ana Vanessa Herrero and Neil MacFarquhar, "Russia Warns U.S. Not to Intervene in Venezuela as Military Backs Maduro," *New York Times*, January 24, 2019.

¹⁰¹ Robert Gaddis, "Strategic Partnership: Building a Strategic Special Operations Partnership: U.S. SOF in Colombia," *Special Warfare*, Vol. 31, No. 3, July–September 2018, p. 73.

in the area, U.S. access to military assets in Honduras and Colombia would be desirable but not vital to carrying out the mission in Venezuela.

Furthermore, over the years, the United States has developed extensive experience in conducting military information support operations (MISO) and operations in the information environment.¹⁰² Although, in recent years, U.S. skills with such operations have been mainly perfected in the context of military activities in the Middle East, the United States has previous experience with conducting psychological operations in Latin America during the Cold War.¹⁰³ Although some of the knowledge and expertise are likely dated by now, they provide a starting point for the conduct of MISO in the current environment of great-power competition. More importantly, given the demographic composition of the United States and of the U.S. armed forces in particular, the United States will likely be able to tap into a pool of native Spanish-speakers and local cultural expertise to which its adversaries might not have access.

China's Capabilities

China has limited military capabilities to mobilize in Venezuela in case of a proxy confrontation that draws in Russia and the United States. Chinese military support to Venezuela to date mainly consists of arms exports, including aircraft and air defense systems or components. Venezuela's arms trade with China began during the Chávez regime; since 2010, Caracas has purchased large numbers of Chinese weapons, such as armored vehicles, trainer jets, and anti-ship missiles, which ultimately helped transform China into Venezuela's largest creditor.¹⁰⁴ Although China's arms exports to Latin America as a whole are rather modest, Venezuela is the top recipient.¹⁰⁵ From 2014 to 2020, Chinese arms sales to Venezuela amounted to some \$250 million,¹⁰⁶ although most of these sales took place early in Maduro's presidency, as the two regimes sought rapprochement.

Given the Maduro regime's close relations with China and Russia and willingness to provide them with military access, there is a good chance that a limited military intervention in Venezuela would be relatively permissive, as Caracas would welcome Chinese support. However, a deployment of combat troops (especially in the Western Hemisphere) would be a major departure from past Chinese practice and would likely be resisted by Chinese analysts

¹⁰² Doctrinally, in recent years, MISO have replaced what used to be known as *psychological operations*.

¹⁰³ William Yaworsky, "Like Cassandra, I Speak the Truth: US Army Psychological Operations in Latin America, 1987–89," *Low Intensity Conflict & Law Enforcement*, Vol. 13, No. 2, Autumn 2005.

¹⁰⁴ Peltier, 2020, pp. 38–39.

¹⁰⁵ Pieter D. Wezeman, Aude Fleurant, Alexandra Kuimova, Diego Lopes da Silva, Nan Tian, and Siemon T. Wezeman, "Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2019," Stockholm International Peace Research Institute fact sheet, March 2020.

¹⁰⁶ Authors' analysis of data from SIPRI, undated-a, data set on U.S., Chinese, and Russian arms sales to Latin America, in trade-indicator values, 2014–2020.

who fear Beijing getting drawn into a quagmire.¹⁰⁷ Furthermore, China's military access to Venezuelan ports and territory is likely to be limited by the activities of the U.S. Navy and Air Force, which could prevent the deployment and supply of Chinese troops and military assets in Venezuela. Along similar lines, Cuba could represent another permissive location and an enabler for Chinese military activities in Venezuela, assuming a dictatorial regime remains in power there and China is able and willing to deploy and sustain military capabilities in the area despite the efforts of the U.S. Navy and Air Force.

Venezuelan soldiers have received training in China in recent years, and some Chinese soldiers have periodically been stationed temporarily in Venezuela, most likely to assist with training on the Chinese weapon systems Caracas purchased from Beijing.¹⁰⁸ In addition, in light of China's previous supply of surveillance technology to Venezuela, China's expertise in this area is likely to represent a strong asset to the Venezuelan regime and facilitate its crack-down on opposition forces. China could also join forces with Russia to provide financial, cyber, intelligence, political, diplomatic, and other strategic support to its proxy.¹⁰⁹

Russia's Capabilities

Russia could bring to bear a variety of capabilities in Venezuela, but these are rather limited overall. Since the early 2000s, the security relationship between the two countries has involved Russian arms sales to Venezuela, part of Chávez's attempts to modernize Venezuela's military.¹¹⁰ As a result, Venezuela has become Russia's largest customer in the Western Hemisphere, having purchased some US\$20 billion in arms from Russia. Most of the sales were based on loans backed up by future Venezuelan oil exports.¹¹¹ However, Russian arms sales to Venezuela from 2014 to 2020 amounted to only \$79 million, and all of these sales took place in 2014.¹¹² After 2014, Russian arms deliveries to Venezuela came to an end because of Venezuela's economic crisis. The fall in oil prices affected the country's ability to repay its loans to Russia.¹¹³

¹⁰⁷ See, for example, the discussion of the United States' Middle Eastern entanglements in Liu Kun [刘昆], "Should We Take America's Gun? An Analysis of Chinese Military Interference in Iraq" ["接过美国的枪? 中国武力干涉伊拉克前景分析"], *Global Times* [环球], June 19, 2014; and Eyck Freymann, "Influence Without Entanglement in the Middle East," *Foreign Policy*, February 25, 2021.

¹⁰⁸ Ellis, 2020b, pp. 4–5.

¹⁰⁹ Jacques Neriah, "Chinese Troops Arrive in Syria to Fight Uyghur Rebels," Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, December 20, 2017.

¹¹⁰ "Hugo Chavez Says Russia Lends Venezuela \$4 Billion for Arms," Reuters, November 27, 2010.

¹¹¹ Cavanagh, 2020.

¹¹² Authors' analysis of data from SIPRI, undated-a, data set on U.S., Chinese, and Russian arms sales to Latin America, in trade-indicator values, 2014–2020.

¹¹³ Cavanagh, 2020.

Besides a limited number of military advisers, trainers, equipment maintainers, and private security contractors, Russia does not have troops deployed in Venezuela.¹¹⁴ From 2008 to 2020, Russia conducted only three military exercises with Venezuela: one in 2018 and two in 2008.¹¹⁵ Consequently, in a conflict, Russia might first quickly send in PMSCs and special operations forces with limited weapon supplies and would potentially mobilize air assets while it deploys naval support and more-conventional ground support. However, Moscow would likely face logistical and sustainment challenges were it to attempt any major deployment of military assets to the Western Hemisphere. Such a deployment to Venezuela would likely place a significant burden on Russian air- and sealift and prove to be unsustainable.¹¹⁶

Russia could also rely on its military and GLONASS satellite assets in Nicaragua and on military cooperation with Cuba,¹¹⁷ assuming both regimes remained friendly to Russia; given recent internal turmoil in both Cuba and Nicaragua,¹¹⁸ Russia should not take such support for granted. It could also conceivably try to provide support to remnants of Colombian guerrillas that operate on the border with Venezuela and destabilize the situation on the ground for the benefit of the authoritarian regime in Caracas.¹¹⁹

As these examples show, during a conflict in Venezuela, the set of local actors with whom Russia might partner consists of relatively weak non-state actors and countries in the region that have precarious internal political situations. This would make a large-scale regional mobilization of troops to support the regime in Caracas difficult. Instead of conducting such a mobilization, Russia, together with its partners in the region, could mount an information operations offensive and amplify a public campaign against the United States and any Latin American governments supporting it (including Colombia and Honduras).¹²⁰

Although China and Russia do not enjoy the advantage that geographic proximity provides to the United States, they have close relationships with the regime in power in Caracas

¹¹⁴ International Institute for Strategic Studies, undated.

¹¹⁵ Tom Phillips, "Venezuela Welcomes Russian Bombers in Show of Support for Maduro," *The Guardian*, December 10, 2018; Gurganus, 2018; Conor Sweeney, "Russia Says to Send Nuclear Warship to Caribbean," Reuters, September 8, 2008; and Augusto César Dall'Agnol, Boris Perius Zabolotsky, and Fabiano Mielniczuk, "The Return of the Bear? Russian Military Engagement in Latin America: The Case of Brazil," *Military Review*, Vol. 99, No. 2, March–April 2019.

¹¹⁶ This comes from analysis of a deployment of four battalion tactical groups to Venezuela (Ben Connable, Abby Doll, Alyssa Demus, Dara Massicot, Clint Reach, Anthony Adler, William Mackenzie, Matthew Povlock, and Lauren Skrabala, *Russia's Limit of Advance: Analysis of Russian Ground Force Deployment Capabilities and Limitations*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2563-A, 2020).

¹¹⁷ Sergey Sukhankin, "Will Nicaragua Become Russia's 'Cuba of the 21st Century?'" *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, August 7, 2018; and "Cuba and Russia Sign New Defense Agreement," teleSUR, December 9, 2016.

¹¹⁸ Frances Robles, "Cubans Denounce 'Misery' in Biggest Protests in Decades," *New York Times*, July 11, 2021.

¹¹⁹ "In These Venezuelan Towns, Colombian Rebels Call the Shots," Voice of America, September 4, 2021.

¹²⁰ C. Todd Lopez, "Southcom Commander: Foreign Powers Pose Security Concerns," U.S. Southern Command, October 6, 2019.

and with other regimes in the region, such as Nicaragua, Cuba, and Bolivia. In this way, given that China and Russia are likely to face challenges with mobilizing, deploying, and supplying conventional military capabilities to the Western Hemisphere (including in Venezuela), they could attempt to make up for these challenges through asymmetric military operations against the United States and its partners in the region. Such operations could be carried out by PMSCs and special operations forces and involve aggressive information operations.

How Might a Conflict Unfold?

Although competing great powers supporting opposite sides in a Latin American conflict in a manner harkening back to the Cold War remains unlikely, a Venezuela-based conflict scenario would be among the more plausible ones. The most likely path to internal war in Venezuela relies on existing internal drivers of conflict, such as economic collapse and the country's pro-democracy forces attempting to transition it back to a democratic form of government. Over the past decade, Venezuela has experienced internal violence and turmoil resulting from impunity and corruption,¹²¹ the mismanagement of the economy,¹²² and, more recently, the fraudulent reelection of Maduro to the presidency. The country is currently on the brink of collapse and facing an acute humanitarian crisis.¹²³ These internal drivers of conflict have led to domestic turmoil and government-led violence against protesters and are likely to be the source of future escalations in violence in Venezuela.

In addition, given that Venezuela has a rather tumultuous history with transitions to democracy, it would be likely to struggle with fully transitioning to and sustaining a democratic form of government even if the authoritarian forces were removed from power. This reality would likely render any U.S. efforts to support the democratization process in Venezuela a protracted and costly endeavor, were the United States to get involved in the internal conflict and support pro-democracy elements.¹²⁴ The transition to democracy would become even more difficult if China and Russia were to simultaneously provide support to the forces favoring an authoritarian regime in Caracas.

¹²¹ International Crisis Group, 2011.

¹²² Trinkunas, 2014.

¹²³ "Venezuela Crisis: How the Political Situation Escalated," 2021.

¹²⁴ Beatrice Christofaro, "All Roads Lead to Occupation? Here's What Would Happen If Trump Followed Through on Threats to Send Troops to Venezuela," *Insider*, June 14, 2019; Frank O. Mora, "What a Military Intervention in Venezuela Would Look Like," *Foreign Affairs*, March 19, 2019; Shannon K. O'Neil, "A U.S. Military Intervention in Venezuela Would Be a Disaster," *Bloomberg*, September 17, 2018; and A. Trevor Thrall, "Why the United States Should Not Send the Military to Venezuela," *Orlando Sentinel*, March 11, 2019.

Why Would the United States, China, and Russia Get Involved, and Whom Would Each Support?

China's and Russia's geopolitical objectives in Venezuela are aligned, and they clash with those of the United States. Although China's objectives in Venezuela are limited and focused on economic concerns, including the protection of Chinese workers in the country, China fears that the United States would put a more pliable government in place if the Maduro government were to fall.¹²⁵ As a result, both China and Russia would lose any influence they currently have in a major anti-American country in the Western Hemisphere, and, in the future, other regional states might feel deterred from opposing Washington.¹²⁶

By contrast, for the United States, a Venezuela in crisis and susceptible to Chinese and Russian overtures poses military and intelligence concerns likely to produce regional instability and diminish security in the Western Hemisphere. At a higher level, the clash over Venezuela is a clash over which great power will maintain influence, with the struggle over the country's path toward democratization being a limited objective that contributes to the higher-end competition over influence. In addition, as mentioned before, the pro-democracy movement in Venezuela has significant support within the United States.

If the economic situation in Venezuela were to continue to deteriorate, with no resolution of Venezuela's political difficulties, the country could experience renewed popular protests in the aftermath of contested regional elections,¹²⁷ followed by violent government crackdowns. In such a case, as in 2018 and 2019, the United States would likely continue to support pro-democracy forces and funnel aid to the Venezuelan opposition directly, as well as indirectly through Colombia. The Colombian government would likely use its own resources to support and reinforce the U.S.-provided aid. On the other side, Russia would likely continue to openly support the illegitimate Venezuelan government.¹²⁸ In this initial phase, China would likely limit its involvement to rhetorical political backing of the authoritarian government forces.

If Venezuelan security forces failed to stop the opposition, the government in Caracas would likely continue to lose the little remaining control it has over territory throughout the country, potentially leading to a more general collapse.¹²⁹ As a result, ELN members and FARC dissidents could try to take advantage of the chaos and increasingly take refuge in Venezuelan border towns, where they would act as the *de facto* local government.¹³⁰ In addi-

¹²⁵ Bu and Zhang, 2020.

¹²⁶ Zhao Zhuoyun [赵卓昀], Chen Jing [陈静], Jiang Qiaomei [姜俏梅], Xu Ye [徐烨], Wang Ying [王瑛], Zhang Yuan [张远], Zhang Xiao [张骁], Luan Hai [栾海], Pan Geping [潘革平], Zhu Wanjun [朱婉君], Mu Dong [穆东], and Ma Xiao [马骁], "America's Maximum Pressure Challenges International Law and Will End in Disaster" ["美国极限施压挑战国际规则将自食恶果"], *Qiushi* [求是], May 20, 2019.

¹²⁷ Luke McGee, "Europe on Collision Course with US over Venezuela Elections," CNN, October 13, 2021.

¹²⁸ "Colombia Rejects Russia Warning Against Venezuelan Military Action," 2019.

¹²⁹ Kinoshian and Sequera, 2021.

¹³⁰ Kinoshian, 2021.

tion to exploiting their control over territory to engage in drug trafficking, they could mount provocations into Colombia's La Guajira region, which borders Venezuela. Were the border situation to intensify, the Colombian government could order its military forces to mobilize on the border with a threefold purpose: to (1) respond to military incursions from ELN guerrillas and FARC dissidents into Colombia, (2) conduct raids into Venezuela to root out ELN and FARC safe havens across the border, and (3) control the flow of Venezuelan refugees into Colombia and maintain order in the border areas.

If Colombian troops were to mobilize on the border with Venezuela, in a situation similar to that of 2018–2019, the Russian government would likely warn Bogotá against any further attempts at violating the border with Venezuela.¹³¹ However, in a departure from the 2018–2019 situation, Colombian forces could stand their ground and engage in repeated raids into Venezuelan border towns to target ELN members and FARC dissidents, in retaliation for the provocations in La Guajira. At this point, the internal conflict in Venezuela could enter into a second phase and escalate to the inter-state level. To prove its resoluteness, besides siding overtly with the Venezuelan government, Moscow could deploy several hundred members of PMSCs and a small number of special forces on the ground in Venezuela. Furthermore, to support the Venezuelan government, Russia could provide weapons, send advisers and military trainers, and engage in aggressive information operations campaigns against the democratic opposition in Venezuela, the Colombian government, and their main backer: the United States.¹³² In another departure from the 2018–2019 scenario, the number of Russian forces on the ground might be higher.

Under these conditions, the United States would likely face pressure to escalate its own involvement. Many analysts and human rights activists have argued that the situation on the ground in Venezuela is a very complex humanitarian crisis,¹³³ which would likely become untenable if tensions were to escalate even further.¹³⁴ The United States would also be worried about regional destabilization as a result of the increasing flows of refugees that accompany such outbreaks in violence.¹³⁵ Furthermore, the United States might be concerned about Russia taking advantage of the crisis to establish an operational military presence (or even a

¹³¹ "Colombia Rejects Russia Warning Against Venezuelan Military Action," 2019.

¹³² "Trump Administration to Triple Democracy Aid to Venezuela," Voice of America, September 25, 2019; and Clare Ribando Seelke, "Venezuela: Political Crisis and U.S. Policy," Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, IF10230, last updated September 15, 2021b.

¹³³ Vanessa Cartaya Febres, Feliciano Reyna Ganteaume, and Geoff Ramsey, *Venezuela's Complex Humanitarian Crisis, Responses, and Challenges for Civil Society*, Washington, D.C.: Washington Office on Latin America, November 2020.

¹³⁴ R. Evan Ellis, "The Collapse of Venezuela and Its Impact on the Region," *Military Review*, Vol. 97, No. 4, July–August 2017.

¹³⁵ Alex Braithwaite, Idean Salehyan, and Burcu Savun, "Refugees, Forced Migration, and Conflict: Introduction to the Special Issue," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 56, No. 1, January 2019.

military base) in Venezuela. Such a move would be perceived as a direct threat to the United States' core interests in the region.¹³⁶

The United States might decide to ramp up its involvement, from indirect support for Venezuelan opposition forces to direct, limited military involvement on the ground to support both Venezuelan pro-democracy forces and the Colombian government, one of the United States' longtime security partners. The Colombian government could also provide military and security forces to the Venezuelan opposition to try to stabilize the situation in Venezuela. In this context, Russia and the United States could enter a spiral of conflict in which they deepen their involvement on the ground and ultimately end up in a proxy confrontation in Venezuela. China would likely be a bystander during most of the conflict. In addition to political support, China would be likely to quietly provide arms supplies, riot-control equipment, and, potentially, military advisers to the Venezuelan government. China might also consider sending one of its hospital ships to help with refugees and provide humanitarian relief as a means for Beijing to project soft power, and it is likely to use social media channels to spread and amplify disinformation disseminated by Russia.

In the first phase of a conflict, during which the conflict would remain centered on Venezuela, the United States' support to its proxies in Venezuela is likely to remain limited to humanitarian assistance provided overtly and political and military advice, military training, funding, and potentially weapons, which the United States could provide both overtly and covertly. Given that an overt military intervention in Venezuela is likely to become messy very quickly and is likely to become protracted,¹³⁷ the United States would likely try to limit its involvement to indirect support, to the extent possible. However, if Russia and, potentially, China were to become more aggressive in their involvement in Venezuela by increasing their on-the-ground military presence or stationing nuclear-capable bombers or submarines in Venezuela or close to its territory for longer than a temporary visit,¹³⁸ such moves would make it more apparent that the United States' core interests in the region were under threat and would complicate air defense considerations for the region. As a result, the United States might decide to engage in a limited overt military intervention.¹³⁹ Overall, the likelihood of such an intervention is low, but not zero, and it depends in part on the orientation of the U.S. presidential administration at the time. For example, the Trump administration sent some signals of willingness to intervene militarily in Venezuela in 2019 and 2020: After the United States condemned Russia's deployments of military personnel to Venezuela and bomber fly-

¹³⁶ Rampton and Wroughton, 2021; DeYoung, 2019.

¹³⁷ Subject-matter expert on Latin America, interview with the authors, July 27, 2021. In addition, several regional Latin American politics subject-matter experts' and foreign policy experts' assessments of a potential U.S. military intervention in Venezuela or at the Venezuela-Colombia border are aligned with our assessment that such an intervention would be protracted and not easy for the United States to extricate itself from once it begins its engagement (Christofaro, 2019; Mora, 2019; O'Neil, 2018; Thrall, 2019).

¹³⁸ Courtney, 2019.

¹³⁹ DeYoung, 2019; Courtney, 2019.

overs, it later ramped up its own naval and air presence in the Caribbean to counter drug smuggling and corrupt actors, such as the Maduro regime.¹⁴⁰ In the low-likelihood scenario of a direct and limited U.S. military intervention in Venezuela, the United States would contribute intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) and conventional military capabilities, as well as special operations forces, and would carry out advise, assist, accompany, and enable (A3E) operations.

Russia would support the authoritarian government forces, whether the regime is headed by Maduro or a like-minded successor (most likely a Maduro associate). In line with previous practices outlined in this chapter, in the initial stages of the internal conflict, Russia's involvement would likely remain limited to indirect support, both covert and overt. As discussed earlier, Russia has already sent military trainers and advisers, as well as PMSCs (such as the Wagner Group), to provide protection to Maduro.¹⁴¹ As part of its attempts to produce instability in close proximity to the United States, Russia "has used Venezuela as a platform from which to spread propaganda, disinformation, and Russia-related media."¹⁴² However, the situation on the ground could conceivably escalate to a limited overt military intervention, especially if tensions on the Colombia-Venezuela border elicit a military response from the government in Bogotá and if Russia introduces or signals an intent to station military assets in Venezuela in the long term.¹⁴³

In the second phase of the conflict, Russia would most likely provide direct military support to Venezuela by deploying PMSCs and special operations forces. Russia might find it challenging to provide other forms of military support in a timely manner. Although Russia has previously flown its nuclear-capable bombers to the region as a show of force, a RAND analysis of its sustainment capabilities concluded that any significant deployment of Russian troops to the Western Hemisphere—including to Venezuela—would place a significant burden on Russian air- and sealift.¹⁴⁴ Moreover, Venezuela is geographically closer to the United States than to Russia, which makes it easier for the U.S. Navy and Air Force to deny conventional Russian military assets access to the country. In the context of such an intervention, besides PMSCs and special operations forces, Russia could contribute ISR capabilities and limited military equipment. If the Maduro government (or its successor) continues to maintain only limited control of Caracas, it is likely that the Russian PMSCs and special operations forces would remain concentrated in the respective areas where Maduro has con-

¹⁴⁰ Rampton and Wroughton, 2021; Andrew Osborn, "Russian Nuclear-Capable Bomber Aircraft Fly to Venezuela, Angering U.S.," Reuters, December 11, 2018; "US Condemns Russia Troop Deployment to Troubled Venezuela," *Military Times*, March 31, 2019; and Spetalnick and Stewart, 2020.

¹⁴¹ Sergey Sukhankin, "Are Russian Mercenaries Ready to Defend Venezuela's Maduro?" *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 16, No. 9, January 28, 2019a; Spetalnick, 2019; and Reuters Staff, 2019b.

¹⁴² Seelke et al., 2021, p. 16.

¹⁴³ Courtney, 2019.

¹⁴⁴ The analysis specifically looked at a deployment of four battalion tactical groups to Venezuela (Connable et al., 2020).

trol. Such a limited engagement could be more sustainable for the Kremlin than a more comprehensive one across larger swaths of the country.¹⁴⁵

Like Russia, China would most likely support the Venezuelan government forces, especially if Beijing could work out a deal with the government in which China trades arms in exchange for oil and the prospects of future Chinese access to Venezuelan oil improve at the end of the confrontation. Such support could also be contingent on Venezuela's continued ability to pay for Beijing's support. China is almost certainly willing to sell Maduro (or a post-Maduro regime) all the weapons the Venezuelan government can pay for, but it is unlikely to be willing to give much for free.

China is even less likely than Russia and the United States to escalate to a limited overt military intervention, and Chinese military action would most likely be limited to Beijing sending in special operations forces to carry out noncombatant evacuation operations of the Chinese workers or other Chinese nationals still present in Venezuela.¹⁴⁶ China currently does not have PMSCs on the ground in Venezuela, but, as Chinese investments in the region (including part of the Belt and Road Initiative) increase, it is likely that in the next ten to 15 years China would set up PMSCs in Latin America to protect its investments and workers on the ground.¹⁴⁷ In addition, if Beijing decided to provide boots on the ground in support of its Venezuelan proxy, it could consider redeploying PMSC members from Africa or South Asia into Venezuela, similar to Russia's quick redeployment of Wagner Group members from Africa to Venezuela in 2019. China also might contribute various forms of military aid, including military training and advisers to support the authoritarian government forces, military equipment, and limited ISR capabilities.

Table 3.1 provides a summary of the interests and objectives, posture and access, and capabilities of the three great powers in Venezuela. In this table, by *external* reasons, we mean objectives that pertain to broader geopolitical or other concerns beyond the borders of Venezuela; by *internal* reasons, we mean objectives that pertain to concerns that are largely focused within Venezuela.

To conclude, in a proxy confrontation in Venezuela, an authoritarian host government would be highly likely to allow both Chinese and Russian military access to the country, as discussed in the subsections on posture and capabilities. However, both great-power competitors would need to surpass two major challenges: (1) the deployment and sustainment of military capabilities across large geographic distances and (2) the ability of the U.S. Navy and Air Force to deny access to Chinese and Russian military deployments to Venezuela. For these reasons, in a great-power confrontation centered on Venezuela, Russia and, to a lesser extent, China are more likely to consider deploying (or redeploying from other regions of the world) PMSCs and special forces than conventional ones.

¹⁴⁵ Regional expert on Latin American politics, interview with the authors, July 22, 2021.

¹⁴⁶ Although some Chinese nationals have fled the country as its situation has worsened, some remain, and many could return if the economy or political situation were to improve (He, 2017).

¹⁴⁷ Regional expert on Latin American politics, interview with the authors, July 22, 2021.

TABLE 3.1

Key Characteristics of Possible Conflict Scenarios with Great-Power Involvement in Venezuela

	United States	China	Russia
Why would each power become involved?			
External reasons	Strategic and geopolitical: Prevent competitors from establishing an operational base in the Western Hemisphere	Strategic and geopolitical (limited): Counterbalance U.S. influence	Strategic and geopolitical: - Undermine U.S. influence - Project military power
Internal reasons	Security and humanitarian: - Ensure regional stability - Prevent humanitarian disasters	Economic: - Secure access to oil - Protect critical infrastructure investments	Economic: - Protect investments in energy - Restore arms trade
Whom might each power support?	Pro-democracy opposition forces	Government	Government
What form would support likely take?	Indirect (covert and overt) support, with low likelihood of limited overt military intervention	Indirect (covert and overt) support, with low likelihood of escalation to limited overt military intervention (noncombatant evacuation operations)	Indirect (covert and overt) support, with low likelihood of limited overt military intervention
What capabilities would each power bring?	- A3E - ISR - Conventional military and special operations forces	- Training - Military equipment - ISR - Special operations forces - Naval ships	- PMSCs - Training and advising - Military equipment - ISR - Special operations forces

Colombia

As with the section on Venezuela, in this section, we first provide an overview of Colombia's local political dynamics. Next, we present a comparative analysis of great-power interests and objectives, posture and access, and capabilities in Colombia. We then describe how a conflict with great-power involvement might unfold in the country. Finally, we discuss why the United States, China, and Russia might get involved in such a conflict and which side each great power would support.

Overview of Local Political Dynamics

Colombia is one of the oldest established democracies in Latin America and a long-standing U.S. security partner in the region. Colombia has experienced internal conflict in many forms (including *La Violencia*, a period of civil war from 1948 to 1958; insurgency and terrorist attacks, and organized crime-related violence) for many decades. Since the mid-1960s, the Colombian government has confronted the threat of Marxist guerrilla groups, such as the FARC, the ELN, and the Ejército Popular de Liberación (in English, the *Popular Liberation Army*).¹⁴⁸

The FARC was the most prominent group among these insurgent organizations that challenged the Colombian government and aimed to replace it with one based on Marxist ideological principles. The Soviet Union and Cuba were strong ideological backers of the FARC prior to the end of the Cold War,¹⁴⁹ although whether the Soviet Union provided the FARC with any meaningful financial support is still a matter of debate.¹⁵⁰ In the context of the ideological confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, the U.S. government started providing military training and special forces assistance to Colombia to fight the Marxist insurgencies when they emerged in the early 1960s.¹⁵¹ Ultimately, as a result of the U.S. and Colombian governments' concerted efforts to decapitate the FARC, the organization's leadership began negotiations with the administration of Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos in 2012.¹⁵² In September 2016, the FARC and the Colombian government signed a historic peace agreement that brought the conflict to an end,¹⁵³ leaving the ELN and some 2,400 FARC dissidents as the only active organizations challenging the Colombian government.¹⁵⁴

Since the early 1980s, Colombia has also experienced internal violence associated with the rise and activities of drug-trafficking organizations, such as the Cali and Medellín car-

¹⁴⁸ Ricardo Vargas, *The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the Illicit Drug Trade*, Amsterdam, The Netherlands: Transnational Institute, June 7, 1999; and Alfredo Molano, "The Evolution of the FARC: A Guerrilla Group's Long History," North American Congress on Latin America, September 25, 2007.

¹⁴⁹ Thomas R. Cook, "The Financial Arm of the FARC: A Threat Finance Perspective," *Journal of Strategic Security*, Vol. IV, No. 1, Spring 2011.

¹⁵⁰ Jeremy McDermott, "Could Colombia's FARC Rebels Break Apart?" InSight Crime, May 21, 2013.

¹⁵¹ Briscoe, 2006; Beittel, 2021.

¹⁵² Annette Idler, *Borderland Battles: Violence, Crime, and Governance at the Edges of Colombia's War*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2019, p. 10; and Zachary Toll, "Terrorism in Colombia: The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia and National Liberation Army," *Journal of Mason Graduate Research*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2017, p. 17.

¹⁵³ "Colombia Peace Deal: Historic Agreement Is Signed," BBC News, September 27, 2016.

¹⁵⁴ Luis Jaime Acosta, "Exclusive: Some 1,900 Colombian Guerrillas Operating from Venezuela, Says Colombia Military Chief," Reuters, September 30, 2021b.

tels.¹⁵⁵ The internal violence associated with drug trafficking and other illicit activities has continued to plague Colombia even though the Cali and Medellín cartels were dismantled in the mid-1990s. The two organizations were succeeded by smaller and less powerful criminal groups, referred to as *cartelitos* (or “small cartels”), that fought among themselves for control over various segments of the drug trade.¹⁵⁶

Following several joint counternarcotics initiatives that the U.S. and Colombian governments undertook in the 1980s and 1990s, in summer 2000, the United States signed into law Plan Colombia, a \$2 billion counternarcotics initiative under which Colombia received military assistance, as well as economic and development assistance, to reduce coca cultivation and interdict drug trafficking.¹⁵⁷ After the 9/11 attacks on the United States, in the context of the global war on terrorism, President George W. Bush agreed to expand the scope of Plan Colombia beyond countering drug trafficking to include counterinsurgency operations against the FARC and other non-state armed groups that carried out terrorist attacks.¹⁵⁸

In addition to the guerrilla groups and drug-trafficking organizations, paramilitary groups opposing the Marxist insurgent organizations emerged in the early 1980s. These groups received tacit support from the U.S. and Colombian governments. In the second half of the 1990s, the various paramilitary organizations on the ground merged under the unified leadership of Carlos and Vicente Castaño and formed the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC), or the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia. Realizing the financial potential that the drug trade presented, the AUC stepped in to fill the void left after the takedown of the Cali and Medellín cartels, becoming one of the two most prominent actors in the drug trade, next to the FARC.¹⁵⁹ After the AUC demobilized in 2006, its place was taken by the so-called BACRIMs, which stands for *bandas criminales*, or *criminal bands*.¹⁶⁰ In 2016, the Santos government issued Ministry of National Defense Permanent Directive No. 015, in which it officially changed the name of the groups from *BACRIMs*, as they were known under the presidency of Álvaro Uribe and during the first Santos presidency, to *Grupos Armados Organizados* (GAO) and, for the smaller and less important groups, *Grupos Delictivos Organizados* (GDO).¹⁶¹ The BACRIMs, and later the GAO and GDO, continued the AUC’s involvement

¹⁵⁵ Patrick L. Clawson and Rensselaer W. Lee III, “The Medellín and Cali Cartels,” in *The Andean Cocaine Industry*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996.

¹⁵⁶ Jeremy McDermott, “The BACRIM and Their Position in Colombia’s Underworld,” InSight Crime, May 2, 2014; and Hannah Stone, “Colombia Elites and Organized Crime: Introduction,” InSight Crime, August 9, 2016.

¹⁵⁷ Connie Veillette, *Plan Colombia: A Progress Report*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, updated June 22, 2005.

¹⁵⁸ Rosen, 2014.

¹⁵⁹ InSight Crime, “Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia - AUC,” webpage, last updated November 17, 2015.

¹⁶⁰ McDermott, 2014.

¹⁶¹ For details, see Juana Valentina Cabezas Palacios and Leonardo González Perafán, *Informe sobre presencia de grupos armados en Colombia* [Report on the Presence of Armed Groups in Colombia], Bogotá: Indepaz,

in the drug trade and battled various FARC fronts and other criminal organizations on the ground for control over various aspects of the drug trade, perpetuating instability and the internal conflict in Colombia.¹⁶²

Despite the signing of the historic peace accords with the FARC in 2016, the Colombian government has since faced challenges regarding the implementation of the peace agreement and the integration of former guerrilla fighters into society.¹⁶³ Moreover, in spring 2021, as Colombia's economic situation worsened in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, many Colombians took to the streets to protest a proposed tax reform bill that would have raised taxes on ordinary Colombians.¹⁶⁴ Although the protests were initially largely peaceful, they spiraled out of control once the Colombian National Police began violently cracking down on protesters.¹⁶⁵ Subsequent protests demanded police reform as a means to prevent future similar abuses by the security forces.¹⁶⁶

Internal conflict in Colombia could result from violence spiraling out of control between government forces and disgruntled ordinary citizens joined by former guerrilla fighters who failed to reintegrate into society after the conclusion of the peace process, as well as by elements of the BACRIMs, GAO, and GDO and members of other non-state armed groups active in the country. Russia could take advantage of such violent dynamics and amplify their effect in the informational domain, but it is less likely to directly encourage the forces opposing the Colombian government to escalate violent dynamics on the ground. China is even less likely to deliberately encourage an escalation in violence given its appreciation of Colombia as a stable business environment, as discussed in the subsection on China's interests and objectives in Colombia.

Comparative Analysis of Great-Power Interests and Objectives, Posture and Access, and Capabilities

In this subsection, we provide an overview of the objectives, posture and access, and capabilities of the United States, China, and Russia in Colombia.

August 2020, p. 97.

¹⁶² InsightCrime, 2015.

¹⁶³ Grattan, 2020b.

¹⁶⁴ Luis Jaime Acosta, "Colombia Union Leader Vows Bigger Antigovernment Protests If Demands Not Met," Reuters, June 24, 2021a; and "Colombia Protests Mark 2 Months of Social Crisis," Voice of America, June 29, 2021.

¹⁶⁵ "Colombia Protests Mark 2 Months of Social Crisis," 2021; and International Crisis Group, *The Pandemic Strikes: Responding to Colombia's Mass Protests*, Brussels, Latin America Report No. 90, July 2, 2021.

¹⁶⁶ Turkewitz, 2021.

Interests and Objectives

United States' Interests and Objectives

The United States has two sets of objectives in Colombia. The first set consists of objectives related to maintaining regional stability, and the second set consists of economic objectives.

The most visible component of the United States' regional stability efforts in Colombia is focused on counternarcotics efforts, such as curbing coca production and interdicting the trafficking of cocaine out of the country. However, besides countering narcotics, the United States has several other objectives in Colombia that support its overall strategic goals in the Western Hemisphere. These are as follows:

1. Maintain Colombia as the United States' "most willing and capable ally in Latin America"¹⁶⁷ to support U.S. regional security and stability goals.¹⁶⁸ This includes Colombia's role as a partner to the United States in regional fora, such as the Organization of American States, and on matters related to the internal situation in Venezuela.¹⁶⁹
2. Keep Colombia stable and at peace, through measures that strengthen governance and rule of law in the country, so that it can continue to be a strong partner for the United States in South America.¹⁷⁰
3. Contain the threat that non-state armed groups (i.e., transnational terrorist, insurgent, and criminal organizations) pose to U.S. national security.¹⁷¹

U.S. counternarcotics efforts in Colombia are intended to reduce the flow of illicit drugs north, through measures that reduce cocaine production, dismantle criminal organizations, and prevent narcotrafficking and the corruption and violence traditionally associated with the illicit drug trade.¹⁷² Plan Colombia was the flagship U.S. counternarcotics initiative, and it had three main components: coca eradication, interdiction, and alternative development measures. The combined effect of the three lines of effort has been an improved security situation in the country. As a result, from 2000—when Plan Colombia was initiated—to the time of this writing, in 2021, "Colombia transitioned from being an aid recipient to a strategic ally of the United States and an exporter of security and political leadership in the region."¹⁷³

¹⁶⁷ U.S. Department of State, *Colombia*, Integrated Country Strategies, last updated March 4, 2020b, p. 3.

¹⁶⁸ U.S. Department of State, *Colombia*, Integrated Country Strategies, August 14, 2018, p. 7.

¹⁶⁹ U.S. Department of State, 2018, p. 3; U.S. Department of State, 2020b, p. 3.

¹⁷⁰ U.S. Department of State, 2018, p. 2.

¹⁷¹ Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, 2021b.

¹⁷² U.S. Department of State, 2018, p. 2.

¹⁷³ Atlantic Council, *The Untapped Potential of the US-Colombia Partnership: Creating a Modernized Plan for the Bilateral Relationship*, Washington, D.C., September 2019, p. 14.

However, although the U.S.-Colombia partnership has solidified in the context of the convoluted counternarcotics relationship between the two countries, Colombia has been the United States' closest security partner in South America in matters that extend beyond drug trafficking and cover the activities of insurgent and terrorist organizations, especially in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. In light of the U.S. strategic culture focused on playing an "away game," or, in other words, solving problems away from home before they reach U.S. borders,¹⁷⁴ having Colombia as a capable and reliable security partner in South America is seen as contributing to securing the U.S. homeland.¹⁷⁵ However, Colombia's ability to remain a capable security partner is connected to the activities of non-state armed groups that are active within its borders and the level of internal violence that it experiences. In this context, the United States has a direct interest in strengthening governance and rule of law in the country through various initiatives, including Plan Colombia.

The United States and Colombia are both part of several international and regional organizations in which Colombia supports U.S. efforts and initiatives related to U.S. interests, such as those pertaining to North Korea, Syria, Iran, and Ukraine (although, in 2014, Colombia did not back U.S. sanctions against Russia).¹⁷⁶ The partners have also worked together in the Organization of American States to respond to the crisis in Venezuela. The United States was able to funnel humanitarian aid to Venezuela with Colombia's support, and it is actively working with Colombia to find mechanisms to help the more than 2.1 million Venezuelan refugees and migrants into Colombia as of September 2021.¹⁷⁷

As Colombia's largest trade and investment partner, the United States aims to protect its economic interests in Colombia.¹⁷⁸ Although Colombia's share of the United States' total global trade and investment is not significant,¹⁷⁹ a strong Colombian economy based on an educated and growing middle class is likely to contribute to Colombia remaining a strategic U.S. security partner in the region.¹⁸⁰ The erosion of the economic situation for many Colombians has the potential to create internal turmoil and instability, as evidenced by recent street protests getting out of control and resulting in deadly clashes between police and protesters.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁴ Michael A. Marra and Douglas W. Bennett, "PLAN COLOMBIA: Learning from a Light-Footprint 'America Second' Military Strategy," *Small Wars Journal*, February 18, 2020.

¹⁷⁵ Atlantic Council, 2019.

¹⁷⁶ Atlantic Council, 2019; and David Salvo and Stephanie De Leon, "Russian Influence in Mexican and Colombian Elections," Alliance for Securing Democracy, January 4, 2018.

¹⁷⁷ Atlantic Council, 2019; and UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "Latin America and the Caribbean: Venezuelan Refugees & Migrants in the Region," infographic, September 2021.

¹⁷⁸ Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, 2021b.

¹⁷⁹ As of 2019, the share of U.S. exports to Colombia was 0.9 percent of total U.S. exports, and U.S. imports from Colombia represented 0.57 percent of total U.S. imports (World Integrated Trade Solution, undated-a).

¹⁸⁰ Atlantic Council, 2019.

¹⁸¹ Julie Turkewitz and Sofia Villamil, "Colombia's Police Force, Built for War, Finds a New One," *New York Times*, May 12, 2021.

While most of the United States' objectives in Colombia are currently focused on counter-narcotics in the context of regional stabilization efforts, Colombia has the potential to support U.S. objectives related to the great-power competition with China and Russia in South America. For example, the latest SOUTHCOM posture statement links Chinese and Russian activities to the activities of transnational criminal organizations and violent extremist organizations in the region. In this vein, it states that not only do these organizations "share the goal of [China], Russia, and other malign actors to advance their self-interests at the expense of our partners' sovereignty," but U.S. adversaries enable these organizations "to take hold in an attempt to weaken democracies and perpetuate corruption" in U.S. partner nations in Latin America.¹⁸²

China's Interests and Objectives

China's objectives in Colombia are limited and are mainly focused on economic and geopolitical considerations. Although military diplomacy and arms sales play some role in Beijing's interest in Latin America, military considerations are only secondary for now.¹⁸³ For China, Colombia is located in a strategic geographical position, with access to both the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. The country's economic and political stability, especially after the signing of the 2016 peace accords with the FARC, has made Colombia an attractive partner to China.¹⁸⁴ In this context, as with all of Latin America, trade and financial investments play an important role in China's attempts to build influence in Colombia.¹⁸⁵ Colombia is the fourth-largest economy in Latin America (after Brazil, Mexico, and Argentina)¹⁸⁶ and is a member of several important regional organizations, including the Pacific Alliance (or *Alianza del Pacífico*), a regional trade initiative in which Chile, Mexico, and Peru (all of which are Pacific nations) also participate.¹⁸⁷ As of March 2021, China and Colombia were negotiating a free trade agreement.¹⁸⁸ Since the 2016 Colombia-FARC peace agreement, for which President

¹⁸² Faller, 2021, pp. 11, 21.

¹⁸³ Ellis, 2020b; Heath, Grossman, and Clark, 2021, pp. 143–144.

¹⁸⁴ Grattan, 2020a.

¹⁸⁵ China Institute of International Studies Latin America Research Project Office [中国现代国际关系研究院拉美研究所课题组], "Sino-Latin American 'One Belt One Road' Cooperation: Challenges and Ways Forward" ["中拉'一带一路'合作: 挑战与深化路径"], China Institute of International Studies [中国国际问题研究院], March 27, 2020.

¹⁸⁶ Romero, 2021a; data are from 2020.

¹⁸⁷ Alianza del Pacífico, "What Is the Pacific Alliance?" webpage, undated.

¹⁸⁸ Hui, 2020.

Xi expressed support,¹⁸⁹ Chinese entrepreneurs and investors have started to make more-aggressive inroads into Colombia to “reap the peace dividend.”¹⁹⁰

Although Colombia has yet to become part of the Belt and Road Initiative, China has targeted various large infrastructure projects in Colombia that come with few political or human rights-related strings attached.¹⁹¹ From 2016 to 2020, the number of Chinese companies in the country increased from 20 to approximately 80,¹⁹² and China has become Colombia’s second-largest trading partner after the United States. China has also aimed to increase its involvement in the reconstruction process that started after the peace deal.¹⁹³

From a political standpoint, the relationship between Colombia and China is more convoluted, with the situation in Venezuela driving a wedge in political relations between the two countries. Colombia is a close strategic partner of the United States in the region and is strongly opposed to the Maduro regime.¹⁹⁴ China officially supports the Maduro government and is concerned that its replacement with a democratic government backed by the United States would consolidate U.S. influence in the region and flip Venezuela away from the club of authoritarian regimes throughout the world that are traditional partners for China and Russia.¹⁹⁵ However, China values Colombia’s political stability, which translates into a predictable business environment for Chinese investors and entrepreneurs in the country. Although Chinese business interests in Colombia (and perhaps the wider region) would be damaged by any instability in the country, Beijing may wish to encourage Bogotá to do less to support Washington’s initiatives in Latin America and likely wishes it to refrain from actively undermining the Maduro regime.¹⁹⁶ Ultimately, Beijing’s geopolitical interests in Latin America would be well served if China were to succeed in flipping Colombia away from the United States, but that might be a long shot (at least in the short term).

¹⁸⁹ Li Wenqing [李文清], “Colombian Government Signs Peace Agreement with Largest Opposition Group” [“哥伦比亚政府与最大反政府武装正式签署新和平协议”], *China Military Net* [中国军网], November 25, 2016.

¹⁹⁰ “China and Colombia: Building the Peace?” *Diálogo Chino*, November 23, 2017.

¹⁹¹ Grattan, 2020a; and Sergio Guzmán, “Colombia’s Geostrategic Challenge with China,” *Asia Power Watch*, July 15, 2020.

¹⁹² Grattan, 2020a.

¹⁹³ “China and Colombia: Building the Peace?” 2017, p. 6.

¹⁹⁴ Yue, 2019.

¹⁹⁵ Zhao et al., 2019; Yue, 2019; and “Does China Maintain That Maduro Is President of Venezuela? Foreign Ministry Responds” [“中方仍承认马杜罗是委内总统吗?外交部回应”], *Guancha* [观察网], January 29, 2019.

¹⁹⁶ Hui, 2020.

Russia's Interests and Objectives

Russia's objectives in Colombia are rather limited given the long-standing strategic partnership between Colombia and the United States and the internal divisions within Colombia,¹⁹⁷ where the government fought, for more than five decades, a Marxist insurgency in which non-state armed groups received various forms of support from the Soviet Union.¹⁹⁸ In this context, Russia's main objective in Colombia is geopolitical: Russia aims to weaken the United States' influence, partnerships, and power-projection capabilities in the Western Hemisphere. It also has some economic interests in Colombia, but these are very limited.

To achieve its geopolitical objective, Russia has chiefly focused on supporting Venezuela's and Nicaragua's authoritarian client governments that embrace anti-Western and anti-American rhetoric and values. Both Venezuela and Nicaragua have territorial and maritime disputes with Colombia.¹⁹⁹ Russia has breached Colombian airspace in an attempt to project power, intimidate Colombia, and send the message that it is likely to intervene militarily to defend its Venezuelan and Nicaraguan clients against potential Colombian military support for a U.S. intervention in either of the two states.²⁰⁰ There is also some evidence, although of variable strength, that Russia or Russian non-state actors have made efforts to internally destabilize Colombia. In the early 2000s, infamous Russian arms dealer Viktor Bout sought to sell sophisticated Russian weapons to the FARC.²⁰¹ Around 2014, there were allegations that the Russian mafia supplied weapons to the FARC in exchange for drugs.²⁰² More recently, Colombian officials suspected Russia of working through a Venezuelan proxy to carry out cyber intrusions into Colombia's voter-registration systems in the 2018 elections; at the same time, Russian media openly supported a Soviet-educated FARC candidate, the

¹⁹⁷ Gurganus, 2018.

¹⁹⁸ Cook, 2011.

¹⁹⁹ Daniel A. Tovar, "Colombia and Venezuela: The Border Dispute over the Gulf," Council on Hemispheric Affairs, August 13, 2015.

²⁰⁰ "Colombia Says Russian Bombers Violated Its Airspace," 2013; "Colombia Had No Reason to Fear Russian Bombers in Venezuela, Ambassador Says," 2018. Colombian support for a U.S. intervention in Venezuela is likely to be more extensive than for a U.S. intervention in Nicaragua. However, it is plausible that Colombia would at least provide military advisers and trainers in support of a U.S. intervention in Nicaragua. In recent years, Colombia has become a "net exporter of security," and Colombian military and police forces have provided training to many countries in Latin America and beyond (Jack Norman, "Colombia's Military Emerges as a Global Player in US-Led Alliance," Colombia Reports, September 6, 2018). For more details, see Arlene B. Tickner, "Colombia, the United States, and Security Cooperation by Proxy," InSight Crime, March 28, 2014.

²⁰¹ See discussion in Barnett S. Koven and Abigail C. Kamp, "Weaponizing Peace: Colombia's Demobilized FARC as a Lever of Russian Influence," 2019a, p. 124.

²⁰² Salvo and De Leon, 2018; and Charles Parkinson, "US-Colombia Operation Uncovers FARC, ELN Links to Russian Mafia," InSight Crime, February 17, 2014.

first member of the organization who was allowed to participate in elections.²⁰³ And in 2020, Colombia accused Russian diplomats of military and economic espionage.²⁰⁴

Were Russia to make further inroads into Colombia, it would not only gain influence over a country important to the United States but also potentially benefit economically from access to Colombian oil, emerald mines, and various agricultural products, such as coffee, cacao, bananas, and avocados. Although Russian imports of food and fresh vegetables amounted to only about US\$89 million in 2019,²⁰⁵ they have become more important to Russia since 2014, when restrictions were imposed on Russian imports from the European Union; the same is true for the energy and extractive industries.²⁰⁶

Posture and Access

United States' Posture and Access

As with Venezuela and the rest of the countries in the Western Hemisphere, the United States is able to carry out naval and air military operations to Colombia from CONUS. But on top of this, and as opposed to the situation in Venezuela, the United States' posture and access in Colombia itself are strong and are likely to remain so for the foreseeable future.

The United States and Colombia have a long-standing security relationship that dates back to at least the early 1960s, when the United States began to provide counterinsurgency training and assistance to the Colombian government in its fight against Marxist insurgent organizations, such as the FARC and the ELN.²⁰⁷ The United States and Colombia have several defense agreements in place, including a military assistance agreement and agreements regarding the exchange of military personnel and technical assistance in defense and security.²⁰⁸ For instance, in the context of Plan Colombia, the U.S. Congress approved an agreement allowing several hundred U.S. military advisers and trainers to be present in Colombia (not to exceed 800 military personnel and 600 contractors at any one time).²⁰⁹ Although the United States has military personnel at the U.S. embassy in Bogotá and military trainers and other military personnel on the ground who provide support to counternarcotics and counterinsurgency efforts, it does not have its own military bases in Colombia. However, it

²⁰³ Martin Arostegui, "Colombia Probes Voter Registration Cyberattacks Traced to Russia's Allies," *Voice of America*, March 15, 2018; and Salvo and De Leon, 2018.

²⁰⁴ "Colombia Expels Russian Diplomats on Spying Accusations—Reports," *Moscow Times*, December 23, 2020.

²⁰⁵ Authors' analysis of 2019 data for Colombia's and Russia's volumes of exports and imports, available at World Integrated Trade Solution, undated-a.

²⁰⁶ "Colombia Confirms Exit of Russian Officials, Local Media Alleges Spying," *Reuters*, December 22, 2020.

²⁰⁷ Human Rights Watch, *Colombia's Killer Networks: The Military-Paramilitary Partnership and the United States*, November 1996; and Nicholas Naquin, "Learning the Lancero Way: U.S. Helped Develop Elite Colombian Training," *Association of the United States Army*, March 2, 2020.

²⁰⁸ Office of Treaty Affairs, *Treaties in Force: A List of Treaties and Other International Agreements of the United States in Force on January 1, 2020*, U.S. Department of State, January 1, 2020, pp. 87–88.

²⁰⁹ Lindsay-Poland, 2010.

does have military access to airfields and cooperative security locations.²¹⁰ A 2009 agreement allows the United States to use several Colombian military bases: Apíay, Cartagena, Bahía de Málaga, Larandia, Malambo, Palanquero, and Tolemaida. Access to these bases is part of the United States' strategy of establishing cooperative security locations throughout several regions of the world. Cooperative security locations are "an alternative to large, expensive, and politically vulnerable fixed bases," and they provide the U.S. military with the ability to swiftly expand its presence in the event of a contingency that requires mobilization.²¹¹

Since at least 1999, often in conjunction with the cooperative security locations, the United States has operated several radar sites in Colombia, most of which were intended to provide tactical support to counternarcotics and other operations on the ground.²¹² Furthermore, in the SOUTHCOM area of responsibility, Colombia is the country with the highest level of participation in multilateral military exercises with the United States. From 2014 to 2020, Colombia participated in 20 military exercises with the United States, seven of which took place in the United States: RIMPAC (Rim of the Pacific), PANAMAX, Mobility Guardian, and Green Flag East.²¹³

In light of the strong security partnership between the United States and Colombia, U.S. military access to Colombia is likely to remain strong in the years ahead. However, given the Colombian government's concerns regarding the permanent presence of U.S. military personnel in the country and the previous rulings of Colombia's Constitutional Court "that it was not possible for non-Colombian military personnel to be permanently stationed in the country,"²¹⁴ it is unlikely that the United States will set up a permanent military installation in Colombia. Consequently, cooperative security locations, military trainers and advisers, and private contractors are likely to remain the prevailing forms of U.S. military access on the ground in Colombia and will only complement the capabilities that the United States can deploy from its own territory.

China's Posture and Access

China's military posture and access in Colombia are extremely limited for reasons concerning the strong security relationship Colombia has with the United States and China's reluctance—in addition to its limited ability—to project military power in the United States' sphere of

²¹⁰ Lostumbo et al., 2013; Lindsay-Poland, 2010; John Lindsay-Poland, "U.S. Military Bases in Latin America and the Caribbean," *Foreign Policy in Focus*, Vol. 9, No. 3, August 2004; and Ann Wright, "United States Military Bases in the Caribbean, Central and South America," presentation for the 4th International Seminar for Peace and Abolition of Foreign Military Bases, World Beyond War, November 23–24, 2015.

²¹¹ Lindsay-Poland, 2010.

²¹² Lindsay-Poland, 2004.

²¹³ Authors' analysis of military exercises from 2014 to 2020 involving the United States and the 23 Latin American countries in our data set, based on International Institute for Strategic Studies, undated.

²¹⁴ Wright, 2015.

influence. China does not have any military bases in or troops deployed to Colombia,²¹⁵ and the PLA Navy does not seem to have made any port calls in Colombia in the past two decades. According to the 2021 issue of *The Military Balance*, China has engaged in limited military exercises with Colombia, most of which were multilateral ones in which it was highly possible for China and Colombia to have not even operated together or interacted.²¹⁶

China's military posture and access to Colombia are therefore likely to remain limited in the near future. That said, in recent years, China has shown interest in developing the Colombian port of Buenaventura, and it has more than 50 civilian active port projects in the Western Hemisphere, which could enable it to use control of deepwater ports in the region to support future military deployments.²¹⁷ Although evidence is scant regarding China's true intentions behind the development of the Buenaventura port, it is possible that China could gain more naval access as it invests more in this infrastructure asset.

Russia's Posture and Access

Like China's posture and access, Russia's military posture and access to Colombia are extremely limited, given Colombia's strong security partnership with the United States and the support the Soviet Union offered Marxist guerrillas during the Cold War in their fight against the Colombian government. Russia does not have any military bases or troops deployed to Colombia.²¹⁸ Russian PMSCs also seem to be absent from the country, and Russia and Colombia have not conducted any military exercises from 2014 to 2020, even multilateral ones. In terms of Russian military access to Colombia in the 2014–2020 period, the most remarkable example is the June 2019 port call that the *Admiral Gorshkov* made in the country in the context of several stops in Caribbean ports.²¹⁹

Although Russia could consider gaining access to Colombia through Venezuela, Nicaragua, or Cuba, it would likely face logistical and sustainment challenges in any of these cases, as previously discussed. A significant deployment of military assets to any of the countries in the Western Hemisphere would likely be a major burden for Russian air- and sealift capabilities and, ultimately, would likely be unsustainable.²²⁰ Russian military access to Colombia or any of Russia's partners in the region would likely be restricted by U.S. Navy and Air Force access-denial operations. Given these challenges, Russia could attempt to deploy special operations forces or PMSC members to Colombia through Venezuela, Nicaragua, or Cuba, as

²¹⁵ International Institute for Strategic Studies, undated.

²¹⁶ International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance*, London, Vol. 121, 2021.

²¹⁷ Peltier, 2020, pp. 38–39.

²¹⁸ International Institute for Strategic Studies, undated.

²¹⁹ Weissenstein, Rodriguez, and Isachenkov, 2019.

²²⁰ Connable et al., 2020. The analysis looked at a deployment of four battalion tactical groups to Venezuela.

it did in 2019 with Wagner Group members who were flown from Africa into Cuba en route to Caracas.²²¹

As this subsection shows, Russia's military posture and access in Colombia are very limited. Although the *Admiral Gorshkov's* 2019 port call in Colombia speaks to Russia's power-projection ambitions in the Western Hemisphere, it is unlikely that the status quo in terms of military access to Colombia will change in the foreseeable future.

Capabilities

United States' Capabilities

There is no doubt that the United States is the best positioned of the three great powers in terms of capabilities available for proxy support. Not only does the United States enjoy the advantage of geographic proximity to Colombia and the ability to quickly deploy naval and air capabilities from CONUS, but it also has decades of close cooperation with the Colombian government on security and military matters. Furthermore, in the past two decades, the United States has engaged in significant arms sales and provision of military aid consisting of U.S. military equipment to Colombia,²²² which have increased the level of interoperability across U.S. and Colombian military services and facilitated cooperation across intelligence agencies. The intelligence fusion center established in 2007, a joint effort between the United States and Colombia that aimed to strike high-value targets within the FARC's leadership ranks,²²³ is an example of a successful intelligence-cooperation venture between the two countries that could be replicated in the context of a proxy confrontation. The various radar systems that the United States operated over the years to conduct tactical counternarcotics operations in Colombia could also be used in a proxy confrontation, assuming that the Colombian government acquiesced to repurposing the radars.²²⁴

Decades of security cooperation between the two countries also mean that many U.S. military personnel and private security contractors have gained familiarity with Colombia and forged close professional relationships with members of the Colombian Armed Forces and security forces.²²⁵ In addition, the demographic makeup of the U.S. military means that the United States likely enjoys additional advantages over China and Russia in terms of personnel with appropriate language skills and close knowledge of the region and its culture.

Furthermore, if the United States continues to maintain a military presence at Soto Cano Air Base in Honduras, the U.S. Air Force will be able to carry out air operations and refuel more easily in situations requiring air support for forces on the ground in Colombia. In addi-

²²¹ Sukhankin, 2019a.

²²² John Lindsay-Poland and Arlene B. Tickner, "De- or Re-Militarization in Post Peace-Accord Colombia?" North American Congress on Latin America, May 11, 2016.

²²³ Gaddis, 2018, p. 73.

²²⁴ John Lindsay-Poland, "U.S. Military Bases in Latin America and the Caribbean," Institute for Policy Studies, October 5, 2005.

²²⁵ Lindsay-Poland, 2010.

tion, the U.S. Navy could block activities and provision of military support by China and Russia to their allies on the ground, including through such proxies as Cuba or Venezuela. At the same time, although Colombia would be a permissive environment for U.S. military operations from a political standpoint, there would be several potential difficulties on the ground. For instance, the geography of the country, which is divided into four regions by three Andean Mountain ranges, is likely to pose a challenge to the successful conduct of military operations. In addition, the jungle regions that for decades have provided cover to guerilla fighters would make counterinsurgency operations more difficult.

China's Capabilities

China has no military capabilities to mobilize in Colombia to support any proxies in a conflict, and, according to the SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, there have been no arms sales from China to Colombia from 2014 to 2020.²²⁶ China is also unlikely to be drawn militarily into a conflict in Colombia; however, in the relatively unlikely event that it did consider getting involved militarily, its capabilities would depend on the nature of its proxy. Should China support the Bogotá government,²²⁷ its capabilities would be similar to those described in the section on Venezuela—that is, the ability to provide substantial economic, intelligence, and diplomatic aid, coupled with the ability to supply advanced military hardware, bounded only by the absorptive capacity of the Colombian military and China's willingness to donate whatever Bogotá cannot afford. It should be noted, however, that even if China were to provide abundant rhetorical support to the government, its material support would likely be limited, possibly including modest financial contributions.²²⁸ Were China to decide to support the opposition to the government in Bogotá, it could still provide substantial financial support to insurgents, as well as international diplomatic cover, intelligence, and cyber capabilities.²²⁹ However, such Chinese support for insurgent or opposition forces against the Colombian government would be a major departure from past practice.

Russia's Capabilities

Russia has very limited capabilities to deploy on short notice in support of proxies on the ground, which are likely to be weak and fragmented insurgent elements and other non-state armed actors, such as former FARC fighters and members of criminal organizations. More-

²²⁶ Authors' analysis of data from SIPRI, undated-a.

²²⁷ As discussed elsewhere in this report, at least low-level support for the Bogotá government is certainly possible, even if Colombia remains a U.S. ally. Although China likely hopes that Colombia will adopt a foreign policy that is more independent from the United States, its preference for stability in Colombia and its general preference for supporting governments over those who would overthrow them could lead it to support the Colombian government.

²²⁸ In past conflicts that had much greater bearing on China's interests, such as the wars against the Islamic State and the Taliban, Beijing was content to largely sit back and let other nations take responsibility for securing the Iraqi and Afghan regimes. See Liu, 2014; and Richard Weitz, "Why China's Free-Riding Is OK," *The Diplomat*, August 12, 2011.

²²⁹ Neriah, 2017.

over, there have been no arms sales from Russia to Colombia from 2014 to 2020.²³⁰ However, given Russia's close relationship with Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Cuba, Russia could potentially rely on military and intelligence assets that its allies in the region could provide during a conflict in Colombia.²³¹

Russia could deploy mercenaries or private security contractors and, potentially, special forces operatives. Also, given the history of transnational organized crime groups being present on Colombia's territory, Russia could use to its advantage some of the existing transnational criminal organizations operating in the country to destabilize the Colombian government. As mentioned previously in this report, the March 2021 SOUTHCOM posture statement notes that U.S. adversaries enable transnational criminal organizations "to take hold in an attempt to weaken democracies and perpetuate corruption" in U.S. partner nations in Latin America.²³²

Russian trainers and military advisers or "military specialists" present in Nicaragua and Venezuela could also make their way into Colombia or could coordinate the anti-American responses from their respective locations.²³³ Russia's GLONASS ground satellite-monitoring station in Nicaragua and Soviet-era intelligence assets located in Cuba could contribute to gathering intelligence on the U.S. and Colombian governments' intentions and military operations.²³⁴ Furthermore, with the support of its allies in the region, Russia could mount an information operations offensive and public campaign to misrepresent and denigrate actions taken by the United States and the Colombian government during the conflict.

How Might a Conflict Unfold?

A Colombia-based conflict involving competing great powers is not extremely plausible but is also not a completely improbable scenario. Colombia still experiences high levels of internal violence and a low-intensity conflict between the government and ELN insurgents, who have yet to put down their arms and agree to end the insurgency,²³⁵ and recent reporting from the country indicates that some former FARC leaders are considering taking up arms again because they perceive the Colombian government as having failed to keep its promises from

²³⁰ Authors' analysis of data from SIPRI, undated-a, data set on U.S., Chinese, and Russian arms sales to Latin America, in trade-indicator values, 2014–2020.

²³¹ Faller, 2021; and Craig S. Faller, commander, U.S. Southern Command, posture statement before the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee, Washington, D.C., February 7, 2019.

²³² Faller, 2021, p. 21.

²³³ Faller, 2021, p. 9; Spetalnick, 2019; Reuters Staff, 2019b.

²³⁴ Ellis, 2015, pp. 38, 40.

²³⁵ World Bank, "Intentional Homicides (per 100,000 People) - Colombia," webpage, undated-b; and Karen Arteaga Garzón, Gwen Burnyeat, Andrei Gómez-Suárez, and Germán Otálora Gallego, "Trump, Venezuela and the ELN: The Geopolitics of Peace in Colombia," *Americas Quarterly*, July 1, 2020.

the peace accords.²³⁶ In addition, the Colombian economy has suffered in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, and, since spring 2021, Colombia has witnessed protests and internal turmoil, revealing how fragile and volatile the situation is in the country.²³⁷

These elements suggest that an internal war in Colombia could be associated with two factors: (1) an escalation in the existing political turmoil and violence on the ground and (2) the presence of economic inequality and a deteriorating economic situation. These represent the most likely drivers of a possible escalation in internal violence in the country. Colombia has not been at peace for more than half a century, and the level of violence associated with the many layers of internal conflict that Colombia has experienced has varied over time.²³⁸ An escalation in violence in the country, especially between the government and various non-state actors, including civilian protesters and insurgents, could result in a renewed internal conflict. Criminal organizations in Colombia would likely benefit from such an escalation in violence because it would divert the government's attention and resources away from countering their activities and toward controlling citizen protests and insurgent actions.

Why Would the United States, China, and Russia Get Involved, and Whom Would Each Support?

A conflict scenario with great powers on opposite sides is plausible because of clashing Russian and U.S. preferences and objectives in Colombia. On the one hand, as discussed previously in this chapter, the United States has the most at stake in the context of an escalation in internal violence in Colombia. The United States has already shown a willingness to come to the Colombian government's aid, most recently with Plan Colombia, so it is not unreasonable to expect it to do so again. On the other hand, for Russia, but also for China, flipping Colombia away from the United States would be a major geopolitical win, if it were a real possibility. Because flipping Colombia is unlikely, Russia more likely views Colombia as a potential staging ground to retaliate against political and military involvement by the United States in their respective spheres of influence, which it could do by stirring up trouble and taking actions to destabilize the United States' purported sphere of influence.²³⁹ By contrast, China is the competitor with the least at stake in a proxy war in Colombia. China, after all, has a direct stake in a peaceful and stable Colombia with a business climate favorable to foreign investments. Still, like Russia, China may see unrest as an opportunity to expand its own influence in Colombia and to redirect U.S. attention away from its own region. Moreover, if the unrest in Colombia were to involve Chinese nationals or Chinese economic interests (for example, if

²³⁶ "Colombia Ex-Farc Rebel Iván Márquez Issues Call to Arms," 2019; Otis, 2020.

²³⁷ Acosta, 2021a.

²³⁸ World Bank, undated-b.

²³⁹ Barnett S. Koven and Abigail C. Kamp, "Divergent Axes of Russian Influence in Colombia and Latin America," in Gina Ligon and Robert Jones, eds., *The Age of Disruption: How Power Shifts Create More Conflict*, September 2019b.

there were protests against Chinese infrastructure projects), China might have a more direct reason to intervene in the conflict.

Like a conflict in Venezuela, a conflict in Colombia would likely start with a return of internal violence due to palpable economic downturn, a collapse of the peace agreement with the FARC, an uptick in the narcotics trade, spillover violence from neighboring Venezuela, or some combination of the above. Given the United States' long-standing security partnership with the Colombian government and the billions of dollars in security assistance granted to Colombia over more than six decades, in the context of escalating violence in the country, the United States is likely to intensify its support for the Colombian government's efforts to stabilize the country, providing indirect support involving military aid, training, and advisers, among other forms of support. If the situation were to stabilize at this stage and China and Russia decided not to intervene, then a proxy confrontation among great-power competitors would not occur.

If, however, China and Russia saw the escalation of violence in Colombia as an opportunity to deliberately weaken a key U.S. security partner in the region and distract U.S. strategic attention from their own regions, then a proxy confrontation would become more likely. Russia is likely to support the anti-government and insurgent forces. At least initially, Russian support would most likely be limited and remain mostly political and rhetorical, and it would potentially involve information operations targeting the activities of the U.S. and Colombian governments as a means to discredit them. While geographic distance and sustainment challenges make it highly unlikely that Russia would go beyond proxy support and engage in a direct military intervention in Colombia using conventional military capabilities, Russia could deploy PMSCs and special operations forces to aid the anti-government forces. From a material capabilities standpoint, the overall level of Russian support would likely remain moderate and limited to military training and advice, weapons, some limited funding, and potentially ISR, meant only to keep the conflict intensity low and Colombia unstable.

Such Russian support would likely intensify the conflict and might prompt increased U.S. intervention in Colombia. Although an overt direct military intervention is unlikely to be the United States' preferred option, in such a situation, the United States would rely on conventional military capabilities and special operations forces and would carry out A3E missions. In addition, the previous cooperation between the United States and Colombia to share intelligence for counterinsurgency and counternarcotics operations would make it easier for the United States to contribute ISR capabilities in support of the government in Bogotá.²⁴⁰

Whom China would support may be more difficult to assess. Unlike Russia, China might well be more likely to support the government in Bogotá. Although China has a clear interest in counterbalancing the United States in the Western Hemisphere, Beijing's calculation might be that it will benefit more from a relatively stable Colombia and from having a working relationship with the government in Bogotá than from supporting insurgent forces that have few realistic prospects of ever taking control. Whether China would actively support

²⁴⁰ Gaddis, 2018.

Colombia, however, is a different question. A Chinese intervention on behalf of the Colombian government would likely be very limited and remain restricted to indirect support, provided both covertly and overtly. China is likely to provide military training, advisers, weapons, and potentially ISR capabilities.

Chinese support for insurgents against the Colombian government would be a major departure from past practice for Beijing, which, since the Cold War, has almost never provided significant support for anti-government forces and has consistently condemned foreign attempts to topple distasteful governments.²⁴¹ This lack of experience in supporting rebels could present difficulties for Beijing, especially when it comes to providing training for rebel fighters, given the PLA's lack of experience in any type of warfare, much less anti-government insurgency.²⁴² That being said, if Venezuela were willing to allow China to use its territory to arm or train insurgents, Beijing could likely overcome some of these obstacles. Even without Venezuelan sanctuaries, China could provide invaluable financial support to insurgents, as well as international diplomatic cover, intelligence, and cyber capabilities.²⁴³ The PLA's ability to operate in the Western Hemisphere is quite limited, so direct action against the Bogotá government might not be practical, even if China were to decide that such action was desirable. As the PLA's expeditionary capabilities grow, it might become capable of launching more air and naval strikes against targets in Colombia (especially if Venezuela offers access to its air bases) and massing a larger ground force in Venezuela. The PLA Navy is busily building its carrier strike arm, and, in the coming years, its carrier strike groups might be able to operate at least for a short time in the Western Hemisphere. That being said, even as the PLA Navy develops further, it will, for the foreseeable future, have difficulty defeating a U.S. air and naval operation to interdict any large naval or ground force bound for Venezuela,

²⁴¹ See Cohen et al., 2023, Appendix B. While China has often bent its own rules on “non-interference” when it comes to compelling countries to adopt its preferred policies, it has rarely, if ever, attempted to undermine governments. The Burmese and Northeast Indian insurgents Beijing seems to be supporting pose relatively little direct threat to their host governments’ capitals and mostly operate only in border areas. Note that Taiwan may be an exception to this aversion to toppling ruling regimes, but this is a special case given Beijing’s long-standing claim that the island is and has always been a Chinese province.

²⁴² Note, for example, that while the United States and the Soviet Union were able to build rudimentary capabilities to support armed non-state actors in far-off countries, it took some time for them to do so to any particular effect. This is especially true of the United States, which, like modern China in Africa, did not have many existing relationships with armed groups on which to build. For details on earlier and less effective efforts by the United States to build its ability to support armed proxies, see Michael Warner, “Central Intelligence: Origin and Evolution—Historical Perspective,” in Central Intelligence Agency, *The Creation of the Intelligence Community: Founding Documents*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2009, pp. 6–7; and Tim Weiner, *Legacy of Ashes: The History of the CIA*, New York: Anchor Books, 2007, pp. 8–9, 12, 277. We extend special thanks to our colleagues for their research on this subject (see Watts et al., 2023).

²⁴³ Neriah, 2017.

although it might still be able to smuggle smaller numbers of troops or weapons through a blockade.²⁴⁴

Table 3.2 provides a summary of the interests and objectives, posture and access, and capabilities of the three great powers in Colombia. In this table, by *external* reasons, we mean objectives that pertain to broader geopolitical or other concerns beyond the borders of

TABLE 3.2

Key Characteristics of Possible Conflict Scenarios with Great-Power Involvement in Colombia

	United States	China	Russia
Why would each power become involved?			
External reasons	Strategic and geopolitical: Maintain Colombia as a capable strategic security partner in the region	Strategic and geopolitical (limited): Counterbalance U.S. influence	Strategic and geopolitical: - Undermine U.S. influence - Project military power
Internal reasons	Security: Ensure regional stability	Economic: Maintain stable business environment and critical infrastructure investments in a key strategic location	
Whom might each power support?	Government	Likely government forces, but insurgent support possible	Anti-government or insurgent forces
What form would support likely take?	- Indirect (covert and overt) support - Overt military intervention	Indirect (covert and overt) support	Indirect (covert and overt) support
What capabilities would each power bring?	- A3E - ISR - Conventional military and special operations forces	- Training - Weapons - Financial support - ISR - Special operations forces	- PMSCs - Training - Weapons - ISR - Special operations forces

²⁴⁴ At present, most of China's focus on high-end conventional confrontation with the U.S. Navy is centered on possible conflicts in East Asia, and China is building significant anti-access/area denial capabilities there that might not be applicable in any other theater. Furthermore, even if China's long-term plan to build four to six carriers is realized, there will still be a sizable quantitative and possibly qualitative gap with the U.S. Navy. Even if the PLA is able to close the gap in other areas, the ability to successfully sustain operations far away from China's shores and decisively defeat a U.S. naval blocking force in the Western Hemisphere will be one of the final capabilities the PLA achieves, and the PLA might never get that far. See Janes, "China: Navy," *World Navies*, last updated September 13, 2021b.

Colombia; by *internal* reasons, we mean objectives that pertain to concerns that are largely focused within Colombia.

The United States has several advantages over China and Russia, such as geographic proximity and the ability to conduct military operations from home bases; a strong security relationship with its partner, the Colombian government; and its use of a strategically located air base in Honduras. China and Russia do not enjoy similar advantages, but they could rely on such partners as Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua to gain access to their territories to conduct military and intelligence operations against the United States and the Colombian government. However, all of these countries face economic challenges and their own internal political turmoil. While China and Russia could potentially exploit to their advantage the precarious internal situations of Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua, the politically unstable domestic environments in all three countries would make it much more difficult for China and Russia to conduct successful military operations in the context of a conflict unfolding in Colombia, especially given the ability of the U.S. Navy and Air Force to frustrate their military initiatives in the Western Hemisphere.

What Factors Might Influence the Outcome of the Conflict?

There are a multitude of strategic, operational, and tactical factors that are likely to influence the outcome of a proxy confrontation or limited military intervention in Venezuela or Colombia. Some of these factors pertain to both scenarios, while others are specific to each scenario. In this section, we first discuss the common factors in the two scenarios and then discuss the factors specific to each.

Common Factors in the Venezuela and Colombia Conflict Scenarios

Both Venezuela and Colombia scenarios are likely to reflect the decades-long lack of strategic focus in U.S. foreign policy vis-à-vis Latin America. The Trump administration's Western Hemisphere Strategic Framework and the Biden administration's *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* do seem to consider the importance of the region from a competition perspective, beyond counternarcotics and illegal migration.²⁴⁵ Still, the absence of a long-term strategic vision for the region is likely to make difficult a timely and adequately resourced response to the onset of a proxy confrontation centered on either of the two countries.

While permanent U.S. military bases are not needed in the region per se, access to local partner military installations is highly desirable because it would likely make it easier for the U.S. Air Force to operate in the context of a conflict on the ground. As we mentioned earlier, the United States has the advantage of being able to deploy military assets to Latin America directly from CONUS, and the U.S. Air Force could operate from Florida in a Venezuela- or

²⁴⁵ National Security Council, 2020; Biden, 2021.

Colombia-based scenario, but this is not an ideal situation. The additional flight time for the aircraft to reach its destination and return means that, once the aircraft reaches its destination, it has less loiter time available over the target area. Furthermore, the time that gets added when operating from home bases is likely to cause problems in terms of pilot fatigue and drive up demand for additional air assets, such as aircraft tankers needed for aerial refueling.

In addition, because the U.S. government does not expect Latin America to be a theater of any major military conflict, SOUTHCOM is one of the least resourced geographic combatant commands.²⁴⁶ The lack of appropriate resourcing at the combatant command level means that existing SOUTHCOM staff in the region are not only overstretched and overworked but also unlikely to have the resources needed to keep pace with China's and Russia's advances in the region, especially China's. In a conflict in which rival powers become involved, this lack of appropriate resourcing is likely to affect the extent to which ISR capabilities will be available to support the forces on the ground, and the same is true of personnel and materiel availability.²⁴⁷

Furthermore, the U.S. military has not been involved in a proxy or conventional military conflict in Latin America for several decades, and geographic proximity might induce complacency and the feeling that victory will be easily attained with minimal effort. Such a mentality could leave the U.S. Air Force (as well as the other military services) ill equipped and ill prepared to prevail in the confrontation quickly and with the least effort possible.

However, unlike in other military confrontations that involved the United States in the recent past, in a confrontation in Latin America, the United States is likely to have an advantage over its competitors in terms of availability of personnel with the right language skills, cultural backgrounds, and relative familiarity with the region.

Because of its geographic proximity to the region, the United States would have a first-mover advantage in a confrontation with China or Russia in Latin America. Were the United States to have a long-term vision and strategy for the region, backed up by solid operational plans and well-resourced forces on the ground with adequate operational and tactical knowl-

²⁴⁶ Faller, 2021, p. 19; and Corey Dickstein, "Four-Stars Tell Senators More Resources Are Needed to Compete with China, Russia in Latin America, Arctic," *Stars and Stripes*, March 17, 2021. In the unclassified summary of the United States' 2018 National Defense Strategy, the Western Hemisphere ranked fourth—after the Indo-Pacific, Europe, and the Middle East—in terms of regional priorities and importance (DoD, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge*, Washington, D.C., 2018a, p. 4).

²⁴⁷ C. Todd Lopez, "Southcom Can Use More ISR Capacity, Security Cooperation," U.S. Southern Command April 15, 2021; and Aaron Mehta, "Senators Show Support for Increasing US Southern Command Intelligence Assets," *Defense News*, March 17, 2021. The dynamics of the current U.S. constellations for ISR collection also put SOUTHCOM (and U.S. Africa Command) at a disadvantage for coverage; most of the coverage for these regions is still provided by commercial satellites. We thank our reviewer Mary Quinn for this point. For a detailed analysis of SOUTHCOM's resources and the impact of the lack of appropriate resources, see Jason H. Campbell, Stephen Dalzell, Anthony Adler, Mary Avriette, Jalen Zeman, and Kevin J. Connolly, *U.S. Resourcing to National Security Interests in Latin America and the Caribbean in the Context of Adversary Activities in the Region*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A847-1, 2022.

edge, it should be in a position to prevail in a conflict in which competitors back opposite sides in Latin America.

Factors in a Venezuela-Based Conflict Scenario

Some factors that pertain to just the Venezuela scenario and are likely to affect the outcome of the conflict concern restrictions on the United States' ability to provide weapons to the opposition to the authoritarian regime in Caracas. China and Russia do not have any restrictions based on domestic legislation or opposition to an intervention and would face only logistical challenges related to transporting arms to Venezuela. Although from a logistical standpoint the United States could more easily transfer weapons to the opposition, Washington is likely to face considerably more internal legal restrictions and domestic opposition to such a situation than China or Russia would face. For instance, during the conflict in Ukraine that ensued after Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, based on President Barack Obama's decision at the time, the U.S. government limited the scope of its lethal support to Ukrainian government forces confronting Russia.²⁴⁸ This reluctance on the U.S. side, even if justified, and the absence of similar restrictions for China and Russia could provide an advantage to Chinese and Russian proxies on the ground.

A direct military intervention in Venezuela, even if limited in scope, is likely to face some level of domestic opposition in the United States. Such opposition might result in a slower U.S. response to the situation on the ground, and a slower U.S. response could allow Russia (and maybe China) to make up for the geographic disadvantages they have vis-à-vis the United States by rapidly deploying PMSCs and, potentially, special operations forces. In such a case, the United States could lose its first-mover advantage and forgo the opportunity to shape the situation on the ground to its advantage. In the absence of prior planning for a scenario of conflict in Venezuela, and if there were lengthy internal deliberations about the courses of action available, the window of opportunity for the United States to shape the situation on the ground in Venezuela could close.

Another element that might affect the outcome of a conflict in Venezuela is the ability of Washington and DoD to maintain their current security and political partnerships with various countries in Latin America. Although unlikely, losing the political and military support of key partners in the region, such as Colombia, would render an intervention in Venezuela more difficult for the United States. If the United States were unable to garner enough political support in Latin America and some of the countries in the region decided to support the regime in Caracas, there would be an impact on the operational and tactical aspects of the intervention. Lack of support for the intervention at the UN and the Organization of American States would give China and Russia an advantage in terms of their ability to con-

²⁴⁸ Ryan Browne and Holmes Lybrand, "Fact-Checking Trump's Claim That Obama Gave Ukraine 'Pillows and Sheets,'" CNN, September 26, 2019.

duct information operations against the United States and its proxy forces on the ground in Venezuela.

Another factor relevant to the outcome of a conflict in Venezuela is related to the weak and fragmented nature of the Venezuelan opposition forces. Guaidó has lost much of the initial support that he enjoyed in Venezuela, and he does not represent a unifying figure for the pro-democracy forces.²⁴⁹ The fractionalized status of the opposition would make it difficult for the United States to find a capable and strong opposition force on the ground with which it could work toward a successful outcome. In addition, the limited access that U.S. government personnel have had in recent years to Venezuelan territory has not only affected the United States' intelligence-collection efforts but also made it more difficult for Washington to identify and cultivate assets on the ground who have pro-democratic and pro-U.S. inclinations and on whom Washington could rely in a proxy confrontation.²⁵⁰

At the same time, the authoritarian government that Russia supports is a more cohesive force than the U.S.-backed opposition. In addition, were Russia to deploy more PMSCs and special operations forces, such Russian assets could harass and target members of the opposition and any U.S. troops or assets present in Venezuela. While these two factors are unlikely to turn the situation on the ground to Russia's advantage, they are likely to make it harder for U.S. forces to operate and would likely extend the duration of the conflict.

Factors in a Colombia-Based Conflict Scenario

We identified specific factors that pertain mainly to Colombia and could affect the outcome of a confrontation centered on the country. A shift in the United States' strategic approach to Colombia—away from the previous focus on counternarcotics missions and counterinsurgency operations and toward Colombia becoming a security partner in the context of the competition with China and Russia in the Western Hemisphere—would likely make it easier for the United States to respond quickly to a conflict scenario in Colombia. While the need for counternarcotics and counterinsurgency missions would remain, great-power competition also needs to be considered, together with the links between the presence of insurgent and transnational criminal organizations in Colombia and Chinese and Russian activities in the country. Although evidence linking insurgent and criminal activities to Chinese and Russian attempts to influence events in Colombia is not readily available, there are concerns that both China and Russia could use the presence and activities of non-state armed groups (such as insurgents, terrorists, and transnational criminal groups) to weaken and cor-

²⁴⁹ Angus Berwick and Mircely Guanipa, "Disappointed Venezuelans Lose Patience with Guaido as Maduro Hangs On," Reuters, July 1, 2019.

²⁵⁰ Jack Herrera, "The Last American Diplomats Have Left Venezuela. It's the Lowest Point in 20 Years of Fraught Relations," *Pacific Standard*, March 12, 2019.

rupt local governments and create damage to U.S. interests both at home and in the Western Hemisphere.²⁵¹

An additional factor that could have an impact involves potential human rights abuses by the Colombian government as it responds to protests in the country or to the activities of insurgent or other non-state armed groups. Were the Colombian government to engage in violent repression of civilian protesters and commit human rights abuses, as happened during the street protests that took place in Colombia in spring and summer 2021, the United States would be in a delicate position.²⁵² It would likely have to limit, and perhaps even outrightly end, its support and military aid to the Colombian government. The U.S. government would not want to support such actions, and the occurrence of human rights abuses could feed into Chinese and Russian anti-American narratives. Both competitors could easily exploit such narratives to conduct information operations against the U.S. and Colombian governments.

Yet another factor that could have an impact on how a conflict unfolds (but not necessarily on its outcome) is a situation in which the United States loses overflight rights above some Latin American countries and access to Soto Cano Air Base in Honduras, which could happen as a result of governments in the region disapproving of a U.S. intervention on the ground in support of the Colombian government. Although such a situation would not pose an insurmountable obstacle for the United States to conduct a successful intervention in Colombia, it would likely lengthen the time needed to deploy air assets, since the United States would have to deploy assets from its own territory instead of taking the shortest available flight paths and using Honduras as a launching pad for some missions and for responding quickly to specific events on the ground. In such a situation, there might be a delay in the United States' response, and additional pilot time and refueling capabilities would likely be needed, including more-frequent sorties to compensate for a shorter loiter time over targets when aircraft are flying from CONUS bases. As a result, DoD and the Department of the Air Force would need to consider contingency plans if Soto Cano Air Base and the airspace over Honduras and other Latin American countries were to become inaccessible.

China's decision regarding which side to support is likely to have an impact as well. Should China decide to leave geopolitical considerations aside and join the United States in its support for the Colombian government, such support might make it easier for the Colombian government to quickly and efficiently take control of the situation on the ground, and stability would likely return to the country sooner. However, if China ultimately decides to join Russia in its support for anti-government forces, the outcome of the conflict is likely to remain uncertain for a longer period. Alongside destabilizing Colombia, a proxy conflict reminiscent of the Cold War era in which China and Russia support the anti-government

²⁵¹ Faller, 2021. For a more detailed discussion of the links between the presence and activities of transnational criminal organizations in Latin America and great-power competition in the region, see Campbell et al., 2022.

²⁵² Washington Office on Latin America, "55 Members of U.S. Congress Urge State Department to Clearly and Unambiguously Denounce Police Brutality in Colombia," May 17, 2021.

forces and the United States supports the government is likely to bog down the United States in another protracted conflict.

Last but not least, an additional situation to consider is the United States being put in a position to abandon its support for the Colombian government due to human rights abuses while China stands quietly on the sidelines watching how events on the ground unfold. In this scenario, after the United States withdrew its support, China could step in and support the government in Bogotá against the insurgents. By doing so, the Chinese government could try to portray itself as the Colombian government's new "best friend." Once the United States was displaced from the proxy confrontation and had publicly abandoned the Colombian government, China and Russia could facilitate the conclusion of a peace agreement and exploit the outcome in the informational domain to further erode the United States' influence and image regionally and internationally.

Conflict Scenario with Great-Power Involvement: Nicaragua

Central American countries rarely receive any serious consideration in U.S. defense strategy. The most-recent strategic documents, such as the unclassified summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy, do not mention Central America, the Caribbean, or any of the associated countries, and the March 2021 *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* focuses on Central America from a migration and human insecurity perspective without considering its potential role in great-power competition in the Western Hemisphere.¹ Yet China has begun to take a geopolitical interest—alongside its economic one—in the countries in Central America. Russia has also started to reengage in recent years with Nicaragua, a Central American country that has had political and military ties to Moscow since the Cold War. In this context, Central America is emerging as a theater for great-power competition to which the United States needs to pay increasing attention, especially given Central America’s potential for internal—and possibly great-power proxy—conflict.

Nicaragua is the largest Central American country in terms of territory size,² has a population of 6,243,931 (as of July 2021),³ and is the second-poorest country, after Haiti, of the 23 countries in our data set, with a GDP per capita of US\$1,905 in 2020.⁴ The country has a history of internal violence. During the Cold War, it was the site of one of the most well-known proxy wars in the region, which pitted the Soviet-backed members of the FSLN against the anti-Communist and pro-American Somoza family regime,⁵ whose loyal members became known as the “Contras” after 1979, when the Sandinistas came to power. Nicaragua continues to experience political and social turmoil to this day.

The outbreak of internal conflict in Nicaragua in the coming years is a distinct possibility. If such a conflict does happen, it is possible that great powers would become involved and

¹ DoD, 2018a; Biden, 2021.

² One World - Nations Online, “Nicaragua,” webpage, undated.

³ Central Intelligence Agency, “Nicaragua,” *The World Factbook*, last updated September 7, 2021.

⁴ RAND analysis of World Bank data as of 2020. World Bank, “GDP per Capita (Current US\$) - Latin America & Caribbean, Chile, El Salvador,” webpage, undated-a.

⁵ U.S. Department of State, “Nicaragua (01/02),” webpage, archived content, undated-g.

the United States would support a side opposite to that supported by Russia and, to a lesser extent, China.

Overview of Local Political Dynamics

Nicaragua's internal political landscape is fraught with tensions resulting not only from the country's deteriorating economic situation in recent years but also from its decades-long struggle to incorporate democratic practices into its political system. Moreover, Nicaragua is no stranger to internal conflict, which it has experienced since the early 1960s, when the FSLN engaged in low-intensity guerrilla warfare against the dictatorial regime that Anastasio Somoza García inaugurated in 1936.⁶ Despite being highly corrupt and authoritarian, the Somoza leaders "were staunch anti-communists who maintained good relations with the United States."⁷

In 1979, the FSLN carried out a military offensive that ended over 40 years of Somoza family dictatorship,⁸ established an authoritarian regime, and supported left-wing guerrilla groups throughout Central America.⁹ In the following years, with U.S. support, the right-wing counterrevolutionary groups known as the Contras opposed the FSLN. The Contras were led mainly by former Somoza army officers and had limited military success.¹⁰ However, after the Contras entered negotiations with the Sandinista government, the latter agreed to hold national elections in February 1990,¹¹ and the 1990 Central American Peace Accords were signed, ending the civil war in Nicaragua.¹²

Also in 1990, Nicaragua established a democratic government structure, but its institutions were weak, affected by endemic corruption, and highly politicized, ultimately undermining the consolidation of the democratic process.¹³ Daniel Ortega, a former Sandinista leader who was first elected president of Nicaragua in 1984, came to power for a second time in 2007 and won reelection in 2011, 2016, and 2021 after persuading the FSLN-dominated National Assembly to change the Nicaraguan constitution and remove presidential term lim-

⁶ U.S. Department of State, undated-g.

⁷ Clare Ribando Seelke, *Nicaragua: Political Situation and U.S. Relations*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, March 17, 2008, p. 2.

⁸ "Nicaragua Profile – Timeline," BBC News, May 31, 2018.

⁹ U.S. Department of State, undated-g.

¹⁰ Skidmore, Smith, and Green, 2014, p. 95.

¹¹ U.S. Department of State, undated-g.

¹² Maureen Taft-Morales, *Nicaragua: In Brief*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, R44560, September 14, 2016, p. 5.

¹³ Maureen Taft-Morales, *Nicaragua: In Brief*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, R44560, updated January 30, 2017; and Seelke, 2008, pp. 1–2.

its.¹⁴ Since returning to power in 2007, Ortega has removed almost all institutional checks on presidential power, systematically undermined and removed political opposition, consolidated control over state institutions (including direct control over the police and armed forces), legislated by decree, and restricted freedom of expression using “threats, insults, physical attacks, detentions, arbitrary searches of documents, and forced closures” of media outlets.¹⁵ He has also maintained close ties to Venezuela, Iran, and Russia, and his authoritarian tendencies have long presented a concern for the U.S. government.¹⁶ Venezuela, in particular, has been a longtime backer of the Ortega regime and provided economic support to Nicaragua.¹⁷

Nicaragua’s democratic and economic struggles resulted in government crackdowns on street protests in April 2018 and on opposition members and candidates prior to the November 2021 election. The 2018 protests started soon after Venezuela, which had been experiencing its own precarious economic situation since 2014, pulled the plug in 2017 on aid it was providing to Nicaragua. As a result, the Nicaraguan government was unable to continue financing the extensive social programs that were in place at the time and had previously raised Ortega’s and the Sandinistas’ popularity among the poor.¹⁸ While Nicaragua has struggled economically, the Ortega family has amassed significant wealth and influence, drawing parallels to the Somoza family, which was ousted by the Sandinistas in 1979.¹⁹ This fact has contributed to the country’s social unrest. In the context of the 2018 protests, the National Police and armed pro-government groups violently repressed protesters, and many were arrested, detained, and subjected to torture and other ill treatment.²⁰ The internal unrest and government repression of protesters continued throughout 2019, and the repression of political opposition intensified prior to the 2021 presidential election; six presidential contenders were detained in the months prior to the November vote.²¹ Ortega made a deliberate effort ahead of the 2021 election to debilitate what was already a weak and fragmented opposition.²² By 2020, the main opposition movement in the country, the Coalición Nacional

¹⁴ “Nicaragua Profile – Timeline,” 2018; and National Democratic Institute, “Nicaragua,” webpage, undated.

¹⁵ Human Rights Watch, “Nicaragua: Events of 2019,” webpage, undated-a; and Taft-Morales, 2016, p. 1.

¹⁶ Seelke, 2008, p. 1; Taft-Morales, 2016, p. 3.

¹⁷ Seelke, 2008, pp. 1, 3, 6.

¹⁸ Rocio Cara Labrador, “Nicaragua in Crisis: What to Know,” Council on Foreign Relations, November 26, 2018; Salvador Martí, “The Impact of Nicaragua’s Crisis,” Italian Institute for International Political Studies, October 23, 2019; and Taft-Morales, 2016, p. 1.

¹⁹ Taft-Morales, 2016, p. 3.

²⁰ Human Rights Watch, undated-a.

²¹ Caitlin Hu, Natalie Gallón, and Mia Alberti, “Ortega Wins Again in Nicaraguan Elections Panned as ‘Parody’ by International Observers,” CNN, November 8, 2021.

²² Carrie Kahn, “Nicaragua May Be Holding Presidential Elections, but It Is Edging Toward Dictatorship,” NPR, November 7, 2021.

(National Coalition), which is a grouping of several political parties, almost collapsed as a result of internal divisions and long-standing rivalries.²³ To this day, opposition to Ortega remains highly fragmented and weak.²⁴ However, despite the current weakness of the opposition, the country's political and economic struggles could generate renewed social unrest with the potential to escalate in the future. In the context of increasing competition between the United States, China, and Russia in Latin America, Nicaragua offers a plausible scenario for a proxy confrontation involving at least one of the three competitors.

Comparative Analysis of Great-Power Interests and Objectives, Posture and Access, and Capabilities

In this subsection, we provide an overview of the objectives, posture and access, and capabilities of the United States, China, and Russia in Nicaragua.

Interests and Objectives

United States' Interests and Objectives

The United States' strategic and military objectives in Nicaragua are closely aligned with the objectives stated in the 2018 National Defense Strategy and the U.S. strategy for Central America, which is a key area for regional stability and U.S. national security.²⁵ In Central America, including in Nicaragua, the United States is interested in advancing "three overarching lines of action: 1) promoting prosperity, 2) enhancing security, and 3) improving governance"²⁶ as a means "to secure U.S. borders and protect American citizens by addressing the security, governance, and economic drivers of illegal immigration and transnational crime, while increasing opportunities for U.S. and other businesses."²⁷

In light of these interests, U.S. objectives in Nicaragua (as part of Central America) can be summarized as follows: (1) contain conventional (state-posed) threats to the United States, including the political and economic advances of near-peer competitors in Central America; (2) contain nonconventional threats posed by non-state armed groups; and (3) stop or reduce illicit flows of drugs and migrants to the United States.

²³ Ryan C. Berg, "The Case of 'Authoritarian Learning' in Nicaragua," American Enterprise Institute, October 2, 2020b.

²⁴ Claudia Torrens, "Nicaragua Ruling Party Ups Advantages in Run-Up to Elections," AP News, May 12, 2021.

²⁵ DoD, 2018a; and Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, 2018.

²⁶ Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, "U.S. Relations with Nicaragua: Bilateral Relations Fact Sheet," U.S. Department of State, last updated January 22, 2019a.

²⁷ Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, 2019a.

Increasing democratic governance in Nicaragua is one of several ways through which the U.S. government can advance its interests in Nicaragua.²⁸ Given the inroads that near-peer competitors could make into South and Central America, the presence of corrupt and non-democratic regimes, such as those in Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela,²⁹ provides opportunities for China and Russia to use ideological ties based on common authoritarian and corrupt practices to gain a foothold in the Western Hemisphere and erode U.S. influence in Latin America.³⁰

More specifically, Nicaragua, together with Cuba and Venezuela, is one of the countries that SOUTHCOM military leadership perceives as a threat to the security and prosperity of the Western Hemisphere. Nicaragua's ties to Russia and the presence of Russia's Counter Transnational Organized Crime Training Center in Nicaragua raise concerns that Nicaragua is a platform for Moscow's efforts "to recruit intelligence sources and collect information."³¹ Furthermore, Russia's foothold in the country is considered to be "giving Putin strategic options" and representing a way to increase Moscow's leverage vis-à-vis U.S. presence and actions in Europe by allowing Russia "to maintain asymmetric options, to include forward deploying military personnel or assets."³²

In addition, in 2013, Russian strategic nuclear bomber deployments whose main destination was Venezuela made a second stop in Managua. En route from Venezuela to Nicaragua and on their way back to refuel in Venezuela, the two TU-160 Blackjack strategic bombers violated Colombian airspace in a show of Russian support for Nicaragua. In this vein, they also flew over disputed waters where both the Colombian and Nicaraguan naval forces were engaging in posturing attempts.³³

In addition to U.S. geopolitical interests, U.S. interests related to regional stability and homeland security could be advanced by a democratic regime in Nicaragua. Because of high levels of violent crime, corruption, poverty,³⁴ political repression, and human rights abuses, Nicaragua—similar to the Northern Triangle countries of Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador—is a venue for the transit of illicit drugs and a source of illegal migration north to

²⁸ Joshua Partlow, "The Soviet Union Fought the Cold War in Nicaragua. Now Putin's Russia Is Back," *Washington Post*, April 8, 2017; and Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, 2019a.

²⁹ U.S. Department of State, 2019.

³⁰ R. Evan Ellis, "The U.S. Military in Support of Strategic Objectives in Latin America and the Caribbean," *PRISM*, Vol. 8, No. 1, February 2019a, pp. 28, 30, 31, 34.

³¹ Faller, 2019, p. 8.

³² Craig S. Faller, commander, U.S. Southern Command, posture statement before the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee, Washington, D.C., January 30, 2020, p. 5; and Faller, 2019, p. 9.

³³ Pavel Felgenhauer, "Russian Strategic Bombers Touch Down in Latin America," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 10, No. 200, November 7, 2013.

³⁴ USAID, "Nicaragua," webpage, last updated July 12, 2021.

the United States,³⁵ both of which pose security, health, and political concerns for the United States. The April 2018 sociopolitical crisis and the 2021 government repression of the opposition are key examples of how deteriorating democratic practices challenge U.S. interests not only in the region but also at home.³⁶

As a result of Nicaragua's worsening economic situation and the violent government crackdown against civilian protesters, members of the opposition, and those demanding that President Ortega resign, tens of thousands of Nicaraguans have fled the country in recent years. Approximately 80,000 took refuge in Costa Rica from 2018 to summer 2021,³⁷ while others have joined the flow of migrants making their way from the Northern Triangle to the United States. In fiscal years 2019 and 2020, U.S. border officials stopped some 32,300 Nicaraguans at the U.S. southern border who were trying to cross into the United States, and numbers soared in fiscal year 2021.³⁸

Alongside considerations associated with regional stability and homeland security, the United States has an interest in limiting China's economic advances in Nicaragua. For instance, in 2014, construction began for the Nicaragua Canal, a \$50 billion alternative to the Panama Canal. The Nicaragua Canal was supposed to connect the Atlantic and Pacific oceans through Nicaraguan territory and was to be built and financed by a private Chinese investor.³⁹ Besides reaping the economic benefits associated with the canal, China could have sent military vessels aimed to protect Chinese infrastructure and other economic interests in the area. The project has proved to be controversial, and construction has stalled in recent years.⁴⁰ However, this example shows how closely intertwined economic and security concerns can become and that the United States has interests in containing the economic advances, as well as the political advances, of its near-peer competitors.

In this light, for the United States, Nicaragua plays a part not only in a broader set of U.S. government initiatives related to stabilizing Central America and stopping the flow of illicit drugs and illegal migrants into the United States but also from a geopolitical perspective.⁴¹ Such considerations suggest that supporting a U.S.-friendly regime in Nicaragua that

³⁵ Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, "Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs: Nicaragua Summary," webpage, U.S. Department of State, undated; and Ellis, 2019a, p. 33.

³⁶ Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, undated.

³⁷ Alvaro Murillo, "Soaring Number of Nicaraguans Seek Refuge in Costa Rica amid Domestic Crackdown," Reuters, August 10, 2021.

³⁸ "With Turmoil at Home, More Nicaraguans Flee to the US," Voice of America, July 29, 2021.

³⁹ "Nicaragua Leaders Face Backlash After Forming Space Agency amid Human Rights Crisis," *The Guardian*, February 18, 2021.

⁴⁰ Scott Nicholas Romaniuk, "Nicaragua Canal: China's Strategic Presence in Central America," *The Diplomat*, June 28, 2015.

⁴¹ So far, most Nicaraguan refugees have fled to Costa Rica, but in recent years, an increasing number of Nicaraguans have joined the illegal migrants from Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador on their way

embraces democratic practices and U.S. values,⁴² including rule of law and human rights,⁴³ is one of several ways in which the United States could maintain an edge in the great-power competition with China and Russia in Latin America. Even though it seems unlikely, a change in government in Nicaragua to a pro-U.S. or neutral government would significantly undercut Russia's leverage.⁴⁴

China's Interests and Objectives

China's objectives in Nicaragua are to be considered in terms of China's three main objectives for Latin America: (1) to develop support for China's regional and international initiatives, (2) to expand trade and investment opportunities in support of China's economic growth, and (3) to weaken Taiwan's relations with the countries in the region and have the countries that recognize Taiwan withdraw their recognition of the government in Taipei.⁴⁵

China's political and economic ties to Nicaragua have been on the rise since 2013 despite Nicaragua's recognition of Taiwan (until December 2021). China's strategic objectives in Nicaragua have been twofold: (1) prior to December 2021, to convince the Managua government to end its recognition of Taiwan,⁴⁶ and, (2) more generally, to maintain Nicaragua's political support for China's positions in regional and global fora.⁴⁷ In terms of recognition of Taiwan, in 1985, President Ortega switched recognition from Taiwan to China. In 1992, the conservative coalition government of Violeta Chamorro reversed this decision.⁴⁸ Ortega was subsequently reelected president of Nicaragua several times, beginning in 2006,⁴⁹ and China had good reason to hope that Ortega might once again withdraw Nicaragua's recognition of Taiwan. He ultimately did so, soon after winning reelection in November 2021.⁵⁰

north to the United States. For details, see Human Rights Watch, undated-a; and Human Rights Watch, "Nicaragua: Events of 2020," webpage, undated-b.

⁴² USAID, 2021.

⁴³ Sullivan, 2021.

⁴⁴ We thank our reviewer Mary Quinn for this point.

⁴⁵ Scobell et al., 2018, p. xxi.

⁴⁶ Ralph Jennings, "Taiwan Loans Nicaragua \$100 Million in Ongoing Bonding Between Isolation Nations," *Los Angeles Times*, February 23, 2019.

⁴⁷ Xu Lei [许雷], "Latin American Press Praise Xi Jinping's Speech at the China-Latin America Media Leaders' Summit" ["拉美新闻界盛赞习近平在中拉媒体领袖峰会上的讲话"], China Military Network [中国军网], November 23, 2016.

⁴⁸ Robert A. Portada III, Steve B. Lem, and Uttam Paudel, "The Final Frontier: China, Taiwan, and the United States in Strategic Competition for Central America," *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, No. 25, 2020.

⁴⁹ Jennings, 2019.

⁵⁰ Andrew Sharp, "Nicaragua Severs Ties with Taiwan, Switches Allegiance to China," *Nikkei Asia*, December 10, 2021.

Politically, Nicaragua is one of many nations that provide support to China's positions at the UN, especially positions associated with enshrining the norm of noninterference.⁵¹ Like Cuba and Venezuela, Nicaragua is a member of ALBA. China considers ALBA an important venue for furthering its goal of increasing regional integration and for allowing countries in the region to achieve a greater degree of independence from the United States.⁵² Among the leftist countries in Latin America, Nicaragua was flagged by analysts in Beijing as one of the countries that are most likely to challenge the United States' dominance of such regional institutions as the Inter-American Development Bank.⁵³ The public anti-U.S. stance is a deliberate policy characteristic of the Ortega regime.⁵⁴ As a result, one of China's near-term objectives in Nicaragua is likely to be to keep Ortega and his followers in power and encourage them to continue advancing an anti-U.S. agenda in the region.

Although increasing trade and finance is one of China's key objectives in Latin America overall, gaining influence through the promotion of critical infrastructure projects and other economic and financial means may be less of a factor in the case of Nicaragua given its small economy. In 2013, Ortega approved the building of the Nicaragua Canal, mentioned earlier, which was to be financed by a Chinese investor.⁵⁵ However, progress on the canal's construction has been slow and seems to have stagnated in recent years; some sources report that it was abandoned in 2018 because of popular protests concerning the impact of the canal on the environment, indigenous rights, land use, and the country's sovereignty.⁵⁶

To conclude, China's interests and objectives in Nicaragua are rather limited, especially when compared with those in other countries in the region, such as Brazil, Colombia, and Venezuela, which have greater regional influence and economic power.⁵⁷

⁵¹ Xie E [谢锴], "Many Nations Call for an Immediate End to Unilateral Compulsion" ["多国呼吁立即取消单边强制措施"], China Military Network [中国军网], November 26, 2021.

⁵² Hui, 2020.

⁵³ Yan Jin [严谨], "Under U.S. Control, What Course Will the American Development Bank Take?" ["美国掌控下美洲开发银行将何去何从?"], China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations [中国现代国际关系研究院], October 16, 2020.

⁵⁴ Xu Lei [许雷], "News Analysis: Why the Nicaraguan President Won a Fourth Election," China Military Network [中国军网], November 8, 2011.

⁵⁵ "Nicaragua Leaders Face Backlash After Forming Space Agency amid Human Rights Crisis," 2021.

⁵⁶ Nicholas Muller, "Nicaragua's Chinese-Financed Canal Project Still in Limbo," *The Diplomat*, August 20, 2019. For a discussion of some of the negative impacts on Nicaragua, see Robert Nelson, "China's Fantasy Canal Doing Real Damage in Nicaragua," *The Diplomat*, March 17, 2016.

⁵⁷ On May 18, 2021, Nicaragua was mentioned in ten articles by the China Institute of International Studies, often in a list or in conjunction with other countries; Suriname also got ten mentions, Venezuela got 65, Colombia got 45, Brazil got 152, and Mexico got 99 mentions. On the same date, Huanqiu had 19 mentions for Nicaragua, nine for Suriname, 63 for Venezuela, 116 for Colombia, 338 for Brazil, and 202 for Mexico, and 81.cn had 109 mentions for Nicaragua, 88 for Suriname, 1,780 for Venezuela, 1,260 for Colombia, 5,160 for Brazil, and 1,930 for Mexico.

Russia's Interests and Objectives

Russia's interests in Nicaragua are primarily geopolitical. Although Russia is considered not to have any vital interests in Latin America,⁵⁸ Nicaragua's geostrategic location is of interest to Moscow because the country could provide an additional local partner and power-projection base in the United States' neighborhood. Russia's strategic and military objectives in Nicaragua are similar to those in Venezuela and are reminiscent of those for which the Soviet Union sought access to Central America during the Cold War.⁵⁹ They are mainly focused on three closely intertwined geopolitical elements:

1. gain and support allies in Latin America
2. project military power beyond Russia's near abroad⁶⁰
3. counterbalance the United States through military shows of force in its own sphere of influence in response to U.S. military presence and influence in Eastern Europe.⁶¹

Russian cooperation with Nicaragua has ramped up considerably since 2007. By 2017, the Russian ambassador to the country called it Russia's "main partner and ally in the Central American sub-region."⁶² To support its strategic objectives in Nicaragua, Russia has sought to provide political and military support to an authoritarian regime that promotes anti-American rhetoric and nondemocratic values and to gain military access and develop a base for Russian operations in close geographic proximity to the United States.⁶³ Moscow has done this by increasing military cooperation with the government in Managua, including in the intelligence and space domains and through arms sales; Russia provides Nicaragua with the vast majority of its arms imports.⁶⁴ However, Russia's arms sales to Nicaragua from 2014 to 2020 represented only 0.31 percent of Russia's total foreign arms sales.⁶⁵

⁵⁸ Peterson, 2019, p. 80.

⁵⁹ GlobalSecurity.org, "Nicaragua - Russia Relations," webpage, undated.

⁶⁰ Sanchez, 2017.

⁶¹ Gurganus, 2018.

⁶² Andrey Budaev, "Russian Presence in Nicaragua in Modern Times: Meaning and Particularities of the 'Soft Power' Factor in Bilateral Relations" ["Присутствие России в Никарагуа на современном этапе: значение и особенности фактора «мягкой силы» в двусторонних отношениях"], *International Affairs*, July 25, 2017.

⁶³ Ivelisse Gonzalez, "An Assessment of Russia's Military Presence in Latin America," Foreign Policy Research Institute, June 18, 2019; Brenda Fiegel, "Growing Military Relations Between Nicaragua and Russia," *Small Wars Journal*, December 5, 2014; and Gustavo Arias Retana, "Russia Seeks Strategic Positions in Central America," *Diálogo Américas*, October 18, 2019b.

⁶⁴ Partlow, 2017; Sukhankin, 2018.

⁶⁵ Authors' analysis of trend-indicator value data for Russia and Nicaragua for 2014–2020, available at SIPRI, undated-a.

A military foothold in Nicaragua would allow Russia to access local air bases and ports where Russian naval assets and strategic bombers in the Western Hemisphere could resupply.⁶⁶ It would also provide the Kremlin with a military power-projection platform in close proximity to the United States. While Russian influence-seeking activities in Latin America, including in Nicaragua, do not have the same high profile as those carried out in Europe and the former Soviet space, they are often meant to represent “payback” for what the Kremlin perceives as U.S. interference in Russia’s sphere of influence and to “show that it too can make a foray into its main global adversary’s backyard.”⁶⁷ Many of Russia’s power-projection efforts in the Western Hemisphere in the past two decades have been, in essence, mere shows of force aimed to impress domestic and international audiences by depicting a distorted and magnified image of Russia’s military capabilities, beyond what the Kremlin can actually deploy and sustain in the theater.

The provision of political support to the antidemocratic government of Daniel Ortega is part of Russia’s overall strategic approach to protect its authoritarian client governments worldwide from being overthrown by democratic forces with U.S. backing. It is rooted in the Soviet approach to the region in general and to Nicaragua specifically during the Cold War.⁶⁸

Until the eruption of street protests in 2018, Russia’s political partnership with Nicaragua was considered a more stable alternative to its partnership with Venezuela, which was experiencing a deteriorating internal situation.⁶⁹ Some analysts considered Nicaragua to be Moscow’s most reliable political and military partner in the Western Hemisphere at the time,⁷⁰ as Managua’s political support for the Russian position in the 2008 and 2014 conflicts in Georgia and Ukraine showed.⁷¹

Posture and Access

United States’ Posture and Access

The United States has several defense agreements in place with Nicaragua, including a military assistance agreement and an agreement related to the International Military and Educa-

⁶⁶ Gen John Kelly quote in Mason Shuya, “Russian Influence in Latin America: A Response to NATO,” *Journal of Strategic Security*, Vol. 12, No. 2, 2019, p. 22; and Fiegel, 2014.

⁶⁷ Gurganus, 2018, p. 2; Paul Stronski and Richard Sokolsky, *The Return of Global Russia: An Analytical Framework*, Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 2017, p. 6; and Peterson, 2019, p. 76.

⁶⁸ Peterson, 2019, p. 80; Gurganus, 2018.

⁶⁹ Sanchez, 2017.

⁷⁰ Gurganus, 2018.

⁷¹ Peterson, 2019, p. 78; Gustavo Arias Retana, “Nicaraguan Crisis Favors Russian Military Interests,” *Diálogo Américas*, January 17, 2019a; and “Nicaragua Recognizes Crimea as Part of Russia,” *Kyiv Post*, March 27, 2014.

tion Training Program.⁷² However, U.S. military posture and access in Nicaragua are rather limited, except for access from U.S. Navy and Air Force bases located in CONUS. The United States does not maintain any military bases, cooperative security locations, or troops in Nicaragua,⁷³ apart from a limited number of military personnel who are mostly associated with the U.S. embassy in Managua,⁷⁴ and it has no other form of military access to Nicaragua.

From 2014 to 2020, the United States conducted four military exercises with Nicaragua. One was a bilateral joint maritime security exercise in the Caribbean Sea in 2017, and the other three were multilateral exercises: PANAMAX 2015, 2017, and 2018.⁷⁵ Overall, military interaction between the United States and Nicaragua seems to have gradually degraded over the past few years, and there is little likelihood that relations will improve under the current Ortega regime. In light of this, for as long as Nicaragua has at its helm a Russia-backed regime, U.S. military posture and access in the country are unlikely to expand and improve. As a result, in a scenario in which the United States became involved in a proxy confrontation in Nicaragua, it would rely first on CONUS-based military installations and then on military access available in countries in close proximity to Nicaragua, such as Honduras, El Salvador, Colombia, and, potentially, Aruba and Curaçao, where the United States has a cooperative security location. As mentioned in the section on Venezuela in Chapter Three, access to Colombian airfields and military installations, Soto Cano Air Base in Honduras, and the cooperative security locations in El Salvador and in Aruba and Curaçao is not vital to the U.S. mission but would make carrying out military operations in Nicaragua easier and more expeditious for the United States. The fact that Nicaragua borders Honduras and is very close to El Salvador geographically could also facilitate ground access for U.S. troops, including special forces from across the border with Honduras (assuming everything else remains equal and the government in Tegucigalpa maintains its military engagement with Washington). Furthermore, U.S. access to Honduras, El Salvador, and Colombia could support efforts to supply any conventional military forces the United States might deploy on the ground in Nicaragua and the provision of humanitarian aid.

⁷² Office of Treaty Affairs, 2020, pp. 326–327. For several years after Ortega was reelected president in 2006, the Nicaraguan military was able to remain politically neutral and was one of the more capable forces in the region, maintaining good military-to-military relations with the United States. We thank our reviewer Mary Quinn for this point.

⁷³ International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2021.

⁷⁴ The number of military personnel permanently assigned to Nicaragua as of December 31, 2020, was nine active-duty military members: three from the U.S. Army and six from the U.S. Marine Corps. See “Active Duty Master File, Reserve Common Components Personnel Data System (RCCPDS) File, Appropriated Fund (APF) Civilian Master File,” available at DMDC, “DoD Personnel, Workforce Reports & Publications,” webpage, undated.

⁷⁵ International Institute for Strategic Studies, undated.

China's Posture and Access

Nicaragua maintained diplomatic relations with Taiwan until December 2021. As a result, prior to that date, Beijing did not have any official military access agreements or other types of military agreements or engagements with Nicaragua, nor did it have any military bases or military forces deployed in the country, including PMSCs.⁷⁶ China has not conducted any port calls in Nicaragua, and, according to *The Military Balance*, it did not carry out any military exercises with Nicaragua between 2014 and 2020.⁷⁷

Given Nicaragua's recent shift away from recognizing Taiwan, it is possible that the PLA Navy would start making port calls in Nicaragua and China could gradually expand its relationship with the country. This could include technological and economic initiatives, such as the provision of 5G technological equipment and BeiDou satellite system technology, and potentially even the establishment of a satellite ground station in the country.

Russia's Posture and Access

Russia's military engagement with Nicaragua goes back to the Sandinista Revolution. After the end of the civil war in 1990 and the end of the Cold War, Russia retained a military presence in the country to maintain military equipment provided to Nicaragua during the Sandinista period.⁷⁸ Russia does not have any military bases in Latin America, nor does it have any military forces deployed in Nicaragua, but over the past decade Russia has gained military access to a number of facilities, and it allegedly has a PMSC presence in the country.⁷⁹ Also, since Ortega became president in 2007, Russian arms transfers to Nicaragua took off, with 90 percent of Nicaragua's weapons coming from Russia.⁸⁰ According to data available in the 2021 issue of *The Military Balance*, Russia did not conduct any military exercises with Nicaragua from 2014 to 2020.⁸¹

In 2013, Russia stood up the Marshall Georgy Zhukov military training center in Nicaragua, and the two countries signed an agreement in which Russia committed to modernizing Nicaragua's military.⁸² The agreement advanced military relations between Moscow and Managua beyond military training and arms sales. In 2014, Nicaragua made an exception to its constitution to allow Russian naval and air forces temporary access to its territory for training purposes, and a second agreement allowed Russian and Nicaraguan forces to

⁷⁶ International Institute for Strategic Studies, undated, "Forces and Deployments" data set.

⁷⁷ International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2021.

⁷⁸ Armando Chaguaceda, "Russia and Nicaragua: Progress in Bilateral Cooperation," *Global Americans*, March 28, 2019.

⁷⁹ Sukhankin, 2019b; Sukhankin, 2018.

⁸⁰ Cavanagh, 2020.

⁸¹ International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2021.

⁸² Gurganus, 2018.

carry out joint anti-narcotics patrols until June 2015.⁸³ Furthermore, in 2015, the Sandinista-dominated parliament agreed on a resolution that permitted Russian warships to dock in Nicaraguan ports.⁸⁴

In April 2017, Russia inaugurated a GLONASS ground satellite-monitoring station just outside Managua, which has dual-use potential for military and signals intelligence purposes and could provide Russia with intelligence on U.S. activities in the region.⁸⁵ The Nicaraguan government relies on the station to monitor drug-trafficking activities, natural disasters, and other internal threats.⁸⁶

In addition, in times of increased tensions in U.S.-Russia relations, Russia has aired the idea of standing up a military base in Nicaragua. In a similar vein, in times of tensions between Nicaragua and Costa Rica, Nicaragua has mentioned that it might allow a Russian military base to be stood up on its territory.⁸⁷ To date, no concrete steps seem to have been taken in this regard.

Under the Ortega regime or a successor authoritarian regime, Russia could strengthen its military cooperation with Nicaragua and potentially increase its military presence in the country. In future years, and assuming that an authoritarian regime similar to the Ortega regime remains in power, Russia is the most likely candidate to establish a military base in Nicaragua—or, more likely, to seek to maintain reliable military access to the country, in view of the greater investment and risks associated with overseas bases.⁸⁸

Capabilities

United States' Capabilities

The United States has limited military capabilities that it could mobilize to support proxies in a conflict in Nicaragua, and no U.S. arms sales to Nicaragua were recorded from 2014 to 2020.⁸⁹ However, because of Nicaragua's geographic proximity to CONUS military bases, the

⁸³ Fiegel, 2014.

⁸⁴ Partlow, 2017; Dmitry Sudakov, "Russian Armed Forces Returning to Latin America," Pravda.Ru, February 17, 2015; Ivan Ulises Klyszcz, *Russia's Central American Engagements*, Philadelphia: Foreign Policy Research Institute, October 2019; Harris, 2018; and Xu Lei [许雷], "Russia and Nicaragua Sign Military Agreement Allowing Russian Ships to Operate Within Nicaraguan Waters" ["俄罗斯与尼加拉瓜签军事协议 俄军舰可进尼海域"], China Military Network [中国军网], February 13, 2015.

⁸⁵ Sukhankin, 2018; John R. Haines, "Everything Old Is New Again: Russia Returns to Nicaragua," Foreign Policy Research Institute, July 22, 2016; Nick Raffey, "Russian Nicaraguan Relations: Putin's Ally in the Western Hemisphere," NATO Association of Canada, January 28, 2017; and Cristina Silva, "New Cold War: Is Russia Spying on the U.S. from a Nicaragua Military Compound?" Newsweek, May 22, 2017.

⁸⁶ Silva, 2017.

⁸⁷ Fiegel, 2014.

⁸⁸ Dmitry Gorenburg, "Russia's Foreign Military Basing Strategy," PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 709, September 2021.

⁸⁹ SIPRI, undated-a (trend-indicator value data).

capabilities that the United States theoretically could bring to bear in a conflict are ample, and any direct employment of Chinese or Russian troops to support their proxy on the ground could probably be stopped by the U.S. Navy and Air Force. Also, as discussed previously in the section on posture and access, the United States could benefit from capabilities that its allies and partners in the region would be willing to contribute. For instance, Colombia could probably provide military and special forces training to pro-democracy forces. Colombian military support in the form of trainers or advisers to the Nicaraguan pro-democracy forces would be beneficial from four perspectives:

1. In terms of the optics of the intervention within Nicaragua, at the regional level, and at the international level, the Nicaraguan opposition could be more inclined to accept military training and support from a fellow Latin American country than directly from the United States, which many socialist players in the region brand as “imperialist.”⁹⁰
2. The Colombian military and security forces have been providing training to the other governments in the region for many years now.⁹¹
3. This approach would relieve some of the pressure on U.S. resources, which could be redirected toward other lines of effort in the context of the intervention.
4. A lighter U.S. footprint on the ground would be less likely to feed into Chinese or Russian anti-American narratives and information operation activities.

Apart from a direct military intervention, the United States retains the ability—reminiscent of its Cold War-era involvement in the region—at the regional level to provide both covert support to nongovernmental actors and overt military assistance through arms sales and transfers, intelligence and information-sharing, military training, and advising. Along these lines, Colombia, Honduras, and El Salvador could also provide indirect support to the pro-democracy forces in Nicaragua. This support could consist of funneling various forms of aid, including military aid, to the forces on the ground, but it could also include political support and advice to the opposition forces to increase their cohesiveness and political clout in opposing the Ortega (or a post-Ortega) regime.

China’s Capabilities

As of this writing, China has no military capabilities to mobilize in Nicaragua in case of a proxy confrontation. In our assessment, China has the least at stake among the three great-power competitors when it comes to militarily intervening in Nicaragua. However, in the unlikely case that it decided to do so, China could potentially gain military access to Nicara-

⁹⁰ Iñaki Sagarzazu and Cameron G. Thies, “The Foreign Policy Rhetoric of Populism: Chávez, Oil, and Anti-Imperialism,” *Political Research Quarterly*, Vol. 72, No. 1, March 2019.

⁹¹ Since fiscal year 2013, Colombia has provided security training to military and police forces in six Central American countries under the Colombia Action Program (Faller, 2020, p. 11). See also Tickner, 2014; and Norman, 2018.

gua to support the Ortega regime (or a post-Ortega FSLN-dominated military regime) and could also rely on Cuba and Venezuela, depending on the internal situations in these two countries, as additional locations where it could base some of its operations. China could provide military aid, including arms sales and military training, to the Ortega (or a post-Ortega) regime. China has previously exported armored vehicles and helicopters to landlocked Bolivia and has a history of arms exports to countries in the region, including aircraft and air defense systems or components.⁹²

In terms of direct military support, China has demonstrated the ability to maintain in Africa at least 1,000 to 2,000 ground troops, far from China in a permissive environment, mainly for peacekeeping operations and using logistics support provided by the UN peacekeeping missions. Overall, China has most of the building blocks it would need to assist the Nicaraguan government in a proxy conflict, including special operations forces and state-owned enterprises that could be repurposed to transport trainers or supplies. But the country's distance from China and the lack of supporting logistical infrastructure would make direct PLA deliveries of large volumes of supplies or trainers difficult, and much of the logistical burden would likely fall on civilian companies. However, over the next several decades, the PLA's ability to sustain larger deployments of ground forces overseas is likely to grow considerably.⁹³

China could also provide economic, cyber, intelligence, political and diplomatic, and other strategic support to its Nicaraguan government proxies,⁹⁴ and, in a permissive environment, China's expertise in surveillance technology could prove to be especially useful.⁹⁵ Although Chinese intelligence has not yet heavily featured in China's overseas involvement in conflicts, China has a robust clandestine intelligence capability that could be used to support certain parties. In addition, the integration of Chinese military and civilian space-based capabilities would lead to better surveillance and intelligence-gathering in the future. Similarly, China could augment its proxy's cyber capabilities to conduct information operations (e.g., propaganda and messaging).

Russia's Capabilities

Russia's capabilities available for direct military support to proxies in Nicaragua in the short term, in theater, are difficult to assess using open-source documents; notably, the actual numbers of Russian troops and potential PMSCs on the ground are not well documented publicly. However, the limited numbers of Russian military trainers in the country and, possibly, PMSCs could temporarily assist the Nicaraguan government and the Armed Forces

⁹² Ellis, 2020b, p. 4. The exports to Bolivia were quite low in volume, but, given its network of large state-owned shipping companies, China could likely ship military equipment in much greater quantities, especially to an ally with a port (Janes, "Bolivia: Army," *World Armies*, last updated February 28, 2021a).

⁹³ International Peace Institute, Peacekeeping Database, online database, undated.

⁹⁴ Neriah, 2017.

⁹⁵ Berg, 2020b.

with responding to an outbreak of internal conflict until further military support could arrive.⁹⁶ The presence of Russian military equipment and trainers in Nicaragua could potentially facilitate interoperability between Russian and Nicaraguan forces. The presence of Russian military equipment is the result of Russian arms transfers to Nicaragua, which from 2014 to 2020 amounted to some \$121 million.⁹⁷ The presence of Russian trainers is the result of the training Russia provided to Nicaragua in counternarcotics operations, as well as special forces training conducted at the Marshall Georgy Zhukov military training center.⁹⁸

Because of the geographical distance between Russia and Nicaragua, the deployment of naval reinforcements and troops—either conventional or nonconventional, such as special forces and PMSCs—poses logistical challenges for Russia, especially given the difficulties Russia faced when deploying troops to Syria, a much closer location.⁹⁹

The Russian GLONASS ground satellite-monitoring station could be used for intelligence-collection targeting U.S. military operations in the country and a means to spy on, control, and repress opposition forces in Nicaragua.¹⁰⁰ Along similar lines, Russia could rely on the Soviet-era intelligence facilities in Cuba and on using Cuban and Venezuelan territories and support for its proxy in Nicaragua, assuming the regimes in Havana and Caracas remained aligned with the Kremlin.

How Might a Conflict Unfold?

The potential outbreak of internal war in Nicaragua is likely to be rooted in such drivers as economic inequality and the country's attempts to fully democratize or remove authoritarian forces from power. The economic and political roots of a potential conflict bear some resemblance to those of the internal conflict Nicaragua experienced during the Cold War, which was rooted in unequal land distribution practices and had an ideological component. The ideological aspect was related to the context of the Cold War superpower confrontation pushing the United States and the Soviet Union to support opposing sides of the conflict. Along similar lines, a future conflict in Nicaragua would likely break out because of economic conditions and inequality, and pro-democracy elements would oppose the authoritarian forces in power.

⁹⁶ Sukhankin, 2018.

⁹⁷ SIPRI, undated-a (trend-indicator value data).

⁹⁸ Gonzalez, 2019; Sukhankin, 2018.

⁹⁹ For example, because of the limited capacity of Hmeimim Air Base in Syria during Russia's operations there, Russia had to resort to setting up five secondary air bases (Michael Simpson, Adam R. Grissom, Christopher A. Mouton, John P. Godges, and Russell Hanson, *Road to Damascus: The Russian Air Campaign in Syria, 2015 to 2018*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A1170-1, 2022, p. 35).

¹⁰⁰ Sukhankin, 2018; Haines, 2016; Raffey, 2017; Silva, 2017.

As with the Venezuela scenario discussed in Chapter Three, the combination of worsening economic conditions (including from natural disasters caused by hurricanes, in Nicaragua's case) and unsuccessful popular attempts to open up the political system to free and fair elections and other democratic practices is likely to result in further government repression of dissent and pro-democracy forces,¹⁰¹ leading to an escalation in violence that could ultimately lead to internal conflict, in which the military and security forces would back up the authoritarian government. Currently, the authoritarian government is embodied by the Ortega family, with the wife of the current president acting as vice president.

Why Would the United States, China, and Russia Get Involved, and Whom Would Each Support?

The United States' and Russia's objectives in Nicaragua are the ones most likely to clash overtly. While China's objectives in Nicaragua specifically and Latin America more generally are likely meant to gradually displace U.S. influence without overtly provoking the United States from a military standpoint, Russia's objectives in Nicaragua have clear military overtones. In addition, Russia's influence-seeking activities directly undermine the United States in its own neighborhood in retaliation for what the Kremlin perceives as U.S. interference in Russia's sphere of influence in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet space.

A path to internal conflict in Nicaragua could involve contested election results. Should the results of future elections be perceived as rigged and become contested, social turmoil could occur. With a population facing a worsening economic situation as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, popular protests could intensify in the aftermath of contested elections, resulting in an even stronger government crackdown than in the past. Under these circumstances, violence would likely escalate, and the government could increase its repressive measures against the opposition and human rights activists, who would be increasingly raising the alarm across the region about the government's abuses. As the situation on the ground grew in intensity and news about the government's abuses spread outside the confines of Central America, the United States would likely take a stance in support of those advocating for human rights and democratic practices in the country, and against the repressive government forces. In an attempt to cling to power, the government in Managua could try to rally support from fellow authoritarians not only throughout the region but also throughout the world, pulling to its side the governments of Cuba, Venezuela, China, and Russia (assuming all things remain equal in all four countries). Moscow could, on the one hand, aim to provide ideological and indirect support to an ally and fellow authoritarian regime, while, on the other hand, it could be inclined to take advantage of the turmoil in Nicaragua to increase its military presence in the Western Hemisphere and aim to counterbalance the United States.

¹⁰¹ AQ Editors, "Another 5 Years for Daniel Ortega?" *Americas Quarterly*, March 4, 2021.

Were Russia to decide to take advantage of the turmoil in Nicaragua and intervene on behalf of the authoritarian government forces, including by significantly increasing its military presence, strategic and balance-of-power considerations could force Washington's hand and push the United States toward considering a limited direct military intervention on the ground to contain any further Russian political and military advances.

Once such geopolitical considerations were injected into an internal conflict in Nicaragua, Russian military involvement would need to be significant enough to justify U.S. intervention, given U.S. reluctance to get involved in a Nicaraguan conflict. For instance, Russia establishing a strong military presence in Nicaragua—such as by setting up a military base or increasing the number of Russian military professionals on the ground to several hundred or thousand troops—would likely increase the level of threat to U.S. core strategic interests and elicit a response from Washington. In our assessment, if China or Russia were to threaten U.S. interests in the Western Hemisphere through increased military presence in Nicaragua over an extended period, Washington would be ready to use force and support pro-democracy forces on the ground in Nicaragua. However, the United States would try to limit its involvement as much as possible, especially from a military standpoint.

In this light, for the United States, an intervention in Nicaragua would be mainly motivated by both geopolitical and regional security and stability considerations. Additional reasons would be related to regional economic prosperity and homeland and border security. The escalation of an internal conflict in Nicaragua would likely result in a flow of migration that would destabilize Latin America and its economies, going against one of the top U.S. priorities in the Western Hemisphere: to ensure regional stability. Thus, the impetus for the United States to intervene in Nicaragua would be rooted not only in the need to deny Russia a military presence in the country but also in the need to bring the internal conflict to an end and thereby restore regional stability.

While the United States is the competitor with the highest geopolitical, regional, and domestic stakes in an intervention in Nicaragua and the competitor that is most likely to intervene in a proxy confrontation in Central America, the path to intervention is not likely to be short and straightforward. On the contrary, the path to intervention is likely to be contentious and tortuous. The difficulties associated with the decisionmaking process regarding the intervention in Nicaragua will have an impact on the intervention-planning process and, ultimately, the capabilities that the United States brings to the conflict. Overall, were the United States to ultimately decide to intervene, it would likely back up the pro-democracy opposition forces, while China and Russia would likely support the authoritarian government, both directly and through intermediaries, such as Cuba and Venezuela.

In an intervention in a conflict in Nicaragua, the United States could provide—both overtly and covertly—indirect support, such as funding and training, to pro-democracy forces and could carry out information operations. In a limited overt military intervention, the United States might prefer to keep a relatively light footprint, in line with its modest objectives in the country, and might deploy special operations forces and ISR capabilities to carry out A3E missions, potentially backed by airpower.

Of the three great-power competitors, China has the least at stake to justify supporting local actors in a Nicaraguan conflict. Nicaragua is not on China's high-priority list of countries in the region. China's reasons for getting involved are very limited. At most, they could represent a symbolic reward for the Nicaraguan government's withdrawal of its 2021 recognition of Taiwan. Should conflict break out in Nicaragua several years after this event, increased Chinese infrastructure investments in the country are likely to have taken place. With higher economic stakes and a stronger Chinese investor and worker presence in Nicaragua, China would be more likely to intervene in a proxy confrontation.¹⁰² However, in order for the stakes to become high enough for China to become involved, especially with the United States backing the opposite side, there would need to be changes and additional steps in the current economic relationship between China and Nicaragua.

If China were to become involved in a Nicaraguan conflict, it would most likely support the authoritarian government forces—which, depending on the time frame, could be either the Ortega regime or a post-Ortega FSLN-dominated military regime. China's support could be both covert and overt; it could also be indirect in nature, meaning that China would be providing the Nicaraguan government with loans, military sales, intelligence-sharing, other forms of military aid, and political support in international fora. China could also use special operations forces for noncombatant evacuation operations to extract the Chinese nationals on the ground at the start of the conflict. Overall, given the small size of the country, supporting a proxy in Nicaragua would not require especially large expenditures on Beijing's side.

As previously discussed, there are currently almost no Chinese PMSCs in Latin America. Most of their presence is in Southeast Asia and Africa, where there are more Chinese investments that they need to protect. However, according to a conversation we had with a subject-matter expert on Latin America, the presence of Chinese PMSCs in Latin America is likely to increase over the next decade, as Chinese investments in the region multiply.¹⁰³ Should this happen, it is possible that, a decade from now, China could bring to the fight its own version of Russia's Wagner Group in support of its Nicaraguan proxies, but expert consensus on this topic has yet to emerge.

For Russia, the main reasons it would intervene in an internal conflict in Nicaragua are related to balance-of-power considerations and protecting and supporting an allied authoritarian government. Supporting the Ortega regime or a post-Ortega authoritarian regime would allow the Kremlin to attempt to project military power in close proximity to the United States. However, there is disagreement regarding the extent to which Russia would be willing to back the Ortega regime. According to a subject-matter expert on Latin America with whom we spoke, it is unlikely that Putin would put his reputation on the line for Ortega, given how marginalized the Ortega regime has become internationally.¹⁰⁴ While there is value to

¹⁰² Subject-matter expert on Latin America, interview with the authors, July 22, 2021.

¹⁰³ Subject-matter expert on Latin America, interview with the authors, July 22, 2021.

¹⁰⁴ Subject-matter expert on Latin America, interview with the authors, July 22, 2021.

this logic and perspective, there is precedent when it comes to Russia's leadership putting their reputations on the line for even less savory international figures, such as Bashar al-Assad of Syria.

Russia's support to government proxies in Nicaragua is likely to initially take the form of covert and overt indirect support (e.g., military training and materiel, funding), and there would be a low probability of escalation to overt military intervention. Besides public support to the Nicaraguan government in the international arena and information operations revolving around the public denigration of the United States and its proxies on the ground, Russia could advise the Nicaraguan government during the internal conflict and could have PMSCs, such as the Wagner Group, provide support to the regime. Were the conflict to escalate to a limited direct military intervention, Russian special operations forces would most likely be present on the ground and Russia could contribute ISR capabilities to support the repressive efforts of the government in Managua.

Table 4.1 provides a summary of the interests and objectives, posture and access, and capabilities of the three great powers in Nicaragua. In this table, by *external* reasons, we

TABLE 4.1

Key Characteristics of Possible Conflict Scenarios with Great-Power Involvement in Nicaragua

	United States	China	Russia
Why would each power become involved?			
External reasons	Strategic and geopolitical: Contain political, military, and economic advances by near-peer competitors	Strategic and geopolitical: Support anti-American government	Strategic and geopolitical: Protect and support ally, project military power
Internal reasons	Security: Ensure regional stability	Economic (limited): Critical infrastructure investments	
Whom might each power support?	Pro-democracy opposition forces	Government	Government
What form would support likely take?	Indirect (covert and overt) support, with low likelihood of limited overt military intervention	Indirect (covert and overt) support	Initially indirect (covert and overt) support, with low likelihood of overt military intervention
What capabilities would each power bring?	- A3E - ISR - Conventional military and special operations forces	- Training - Military equipment - ISR - Special operations forces - Financial support	- PMSCs - Training and advising - Military equipment - ISR - Special operations forces

mean objectives that pertain to broader geopolitical or other concerns beyond the borders of Nicaragua; by *internal* reasons, we mean objectives that pertain to concerns that are largely focused within Nicaragua.

What Factors Might Influence the Outcome of the Conflict?

Several factors could influence the outcome of a proxy conflict in Nicaragua, such as U.S. domestic political dynamics, the status of the U.S. economy at the time the intervention is supposed to occur, the international situation, and the priorities of the United States' competitors at the time they need to decide whether to intervene, to mention just a few.

The use of overt military forces in Nicaragua by any of the great powers is unlikely. However, should overt military intervention become necessary, the United States has a significant advantage over its competitors: geographic proximity. Unlike in many potential crises in Europe or the Indo-Pacific, Russia and China—not the United States—face the challenge of greater time and distance in the Western Hemisphere. This means that the United States would have the opportunity to prevent a challenge, if U.S. policymakers chose to do so. Proactive responses to increased foreign military presence might be decisive in preventing the unlikely—but not impossible—situation of direct Russian military support for Nicaraguan proxies.¹⁰⁵ The United States might tilt the outcome of the conflict through prompt planning followed by focused and quick action in support of the pro-democracy forces, undercutting the Kremlin's efforts to support the authoritarian government.

That being said, several factors could complicate the ability of the United States to achieve its preferred outcome in Nicaragua. Notably, a direct military intervention—or even substantial overt indirect support—in a poor Central American nation could divide U.S. policy circles, especially in light of recent U.S. interventions in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, and Syria. Were the United States' participation to be limited to indirect overt support, parallels to the Cold War Iran-Contra scandal of the 1980s could create opposition to even such indirect support.

These divisions could limit the United States' options to those that are politically feasible and complicate the United States' attainment of its goals. Strong domestic opposition to the provision of indirect support—and even stronger opposition to a limited direct military intervention—might result in a delayed U.S. response, potentially squandering the United States' first-mover advantage. A delay in the U.S. response and intervention to support the

¹⁰⁵ U.S. actions following the Soviet deployment of missiles to Cuba in 1962, although in the context of a military challenge of a fundamentally different nature, are one example of such a proactive response. Although historians do not agree on a single factor that was responsible for the Soviet Union reversing its decisions and agreeing to remove the missiles, authoritative accounts suggest that the cumulative effect of U.S. actions during the crisis communicated a clear and credible deterrent threat that contributed to the resolution of the crisis. See, for example, Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, 2nd ed., New York: Longman, 1999, p. 110.

pro-democracy forces in Nicaragua would allow Russia time to quickly deploy PMSCs or special operations forces in support of its government proxies.

In addition, a traditionally underresourced SOUTHCOM and the fact that Nicaragua is not a top priority for the United States might mean that, once a conflict breaks out in Nicaragua, less human-capital resources and security infrastructure are likely to be available to tackle the issue in real time.¹⁰⁶

As importantly, a fragmented and weak Nicaraguan opposition is also likely to make it difficult for the United States to find a strong pro-democracy interlocutor on the ground that can rally Nicaraguans and mount a serious, well-organized opposition to the regime in power.¹⁰⁷ The near collapse in 2020 of the National Coalition, which is the main opposition movement in the country,¹⁰⁸ showed the difficulties the United States would encounter in terms of finding a strong and reliable partner on the ground.

Yet another factor that could affect the outcome of a proxy confrontation would be if the United States were to lose overflight rights over key countries en route to Central America, making it difficult for the United States to quickly deploy its air capabilities to their fullest. Such a situation could conceivably come to pass as a result of China's and Russia's aggressive and successful use of other levers of national power in the region. As discussed in the summary volume of this series,¹⁰⁹ China has previously used coercive economic power to accomplish its geopolitical objectives. More directly, Russia has used its influence to deny the United States basing and access in Central Asia, where the United States relied on access and transit points in support of its Afghanistan operations.¹¹⁰ Although it might be more difficult for China or Russia than for the United States to amass sufficient influence in and around Nicaragua to do so, the possibility should not be underestimated. In view of the fact that many countries in secondary theaters are part of the Belt and Road Initiative, including 19 Latin American countries at the time of this writing, one can imagine such diplomatic and economic coercion, backed by extensive information campaigns, occurring. Some countries, such as Cuba and Venezuela, are already likely to align themselves with the authoritarian forces in power. However, depending on the leanings of those at the helm of other countries in Latin America, Chinese and Russian activities meant to weaken support for the United States and the pro-democracy forces throughout Latin America might result in some countries, including Honduras, deciding to oppose the U.S. intervention and therefore deny the United States overflight rights or access to their military bases. They could also take domes-

¹⁰⁶ Dickstein, 2021; Faller, 2021, p. 19; Lopez, 2021.

¹⁰⁷ Ryan C. Berg, "The US Is Confronting Nicaragua's Dictator(s) Without a Game Plan," American Enterprise Institute, July 14, 2020a.

¹⁰⁸ Berg, 2020b.

¹⁰⁹ Cohen et al., 2023.

¹¹⁰ Akhilesh Pillalamarri, "The United States Just Closed Its Last Base in Central Asia," *The Diplomat*, June 10, 2014.

tic measures that would frustrate U.S. diplomatic and military efforts directed at responding to the situation in Nicaragua. As with a potential proxy conflict in Venezuela or Colombia, discussed in the previous chapter, such a reduction in or potential loss of access to the region would ultimately not represent a major handicap for the United States, since the U.S. Air Force would have alternative, although potentially longer, flying paths available to reach its targets in Nicaragua.

Conclusion

In the past two decades, the most visible lines of effort of U.S. foreign policy toward Latin America have been combating drug trafficking and illegal migration from the region to the United States. Except for drug trafficking and migration, Latin America has come across as largely relegated to the back burner of U.S. foreign policy and strategic thinking. After 9/11, this neglect seemed to deepen as U.S. attention was redirected toward combating terrorism and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and U.S. foreign policy became very focused on the Middle East. After the 2008 and 2014 Russian interventions in Georgia and Ukraine, U.S. foreign policy turned toward Europe. In recent years, the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command region has started to draw Washington's attention and resulted in a new shift in U.S. strategic approach. Latin America continues to be considered a region of secondary interest for the United States because no great-power competitor is located in the region and it is not the theater of any active military confrontation or inter-state war. In this context, besides the lack of attention needed to craft a long-term strategic approach for the region, resources were redirected to other regional theaters, and SOUTHCOM remains one of the least resourced geographic combatant commands.¹

In the current strategic environment, in which China's and, to a lesser extent, Russia's presence in close proximity to the United States is increasing, a shift in strategic focus toward Latin America seems to be taking place. Up to this point, the close geographic proximity of Latin America seems to have rendered Washington complacent in terms of its engagements with the region, as the United States relied on its military superiority and considered territories closer to home to be easier to defend than those in the Middle East or Europe. However, the March 2021 *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* lists the Western Hemisphere—which includes Latin America—third in terms of regional priorities, after the Indo-Pacific region and Europe.²

In this chapter, we synthesize the key lessons of the previous chapters and outline some of the key recommendations emerging from this project for the U.S. government, DoD, and the Department of the Air Force on how to maximize their abilities to compete in Latin America.

¹ Dickstein, 2021.

² Biden, 2021, p. 10. In the unclassified summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy, the Western Hemisphere ranked fourth—after the Indo-Pacific, Europe, and the Middle East—in terms of regional priorities and importance (DoD, 2018a, p. 4).

Findings

Our analysis shows that Latin America is increasingly becoming a locus of great-power competition. China is making significant inroads into the region, mainly through economic and diplomatic influence-seeking activities, but not exclusively so. To a lesser extent, Russia's involvement in the region has also increased. With SOUTHCOM being one of the United States' least resourced geographic combatant commands, and with the U.S. military footprint in the region having slowly eroded over the past two decades, China and Russia could gradually expand their influence-seeking activities in the military domain over the coming years.

The Potential for Great-Power Competition in Latin America Converges on the Most Populous and Economically Developed Countries in the Region

Great-power influence-seeking—and, thus, the potential for the most-intense competition in Latin America—is focused on Brazil, Chile, Peru, Colombia, and Argentina, which are five of the largest economies in Latin America (based on the data set of the 23 countries we considered in our analysis—see Chapter One). They are also the countries with the largest populations in the region. Moreover, these countries have significant political weight at the regional level and increasing strategic significance on the international stage, as shown by the strategic partnerships that China and Russia have in place with Brazil and Argentina, respectively. The three great powers' influence-seeking activities in these five countries most markedly focused on the economic and diplomatic levers of national power; however, influence-seeking in these countries is also increasingly relying on military and informational levers of power. The fact that diplomatic and economic attention is focused on countries of greater economic weight and, correspondingly, political significance is not too surprising: Because the most-common means of influence-seeking involve trade, investment, and diplomatic exchanges, larger and wealthier countries will almost always attract more attention than smaller and poorer ones, at least in these respects.

Among the Three Competitors, the United States Retains the Lead in Most Domains of National Power in the Region, but China Is Making Significant Advances

Across all four domains of national power, the United States' involvement in the region relative to that of China and Russia remains the most extensive for the time being, and the United States dominates the two other competitors economically and militarily. In terms of military capabilities, posture, and access to the region, the United States continues to lead despite its slightly reduced military footprint in Latin America over the past two decades. However, while the number of Chinese high-level diplomatic visits to the region increased from 2000–2010 to 2010–2020, the number of U.S. visits to the region decreased in the same period. The increase in the number of Chinese high-level visits reflects the increasing impor-

tance of Latin America to Beijing, as a result of both its proximity to the United States and China's hopes that it can grow to become a new locus of economic and geopolitical power. China's increased interest in Latin America is also reflected in the fact that China has become the region's second-largest trading partner. For Brazil and Chile, China has become the leading foreign investor and trading partner, respectively, displacing the United States. Overall, China's inroads in the region are becoming more and more obvious.

For the time being, China is still lagging significantly behind the United States in the military sphere. This allows Beijing to quietly amass influence, take advantage of the region's growing economies, and make use of its natural resources without coming into direct conflict with Washington. Although Latin America is less of an immediate priority for the PLA's distant sea power projection than the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean basin, as the PLA continues to secure its position in these two regions, it might come to look to Latin America as well. China has already established a satellite control center in Argentina that is likely under PLA control. PLA naval visits to the region are likely to become more common. If the PLA remains on its current trajectory of global expansion, it is likely to establish at least a logistics base in Latin America eventually, although the region still ranks relatively low on the PLA's list of priorities. New bases are likely to be seen in Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean basin first, and any major setback there could further put off the day when the PLA establishes permanent facilities in Latin America, perhaps indefinitely. Like China's small Argentine space center and Djiboutian base, any future PLA infrastructure in the Western Hemisphere is likely to be colocated with Chinese civilian projects.

Russia has also expanded its influence-seeking activities in Latin America, but to a lesser extent than China. This expansion in Russia's involvement is mainly focused on the diplomatic, informational, and military domains. Even if Russia is unlikely to significantly increase its influence-seeking activities in the region in the coming decades, it is likely to continue playing a "spoiler" role and aiming to deliberately divert Washington's attention and resources away from key U.S. domestic and international priorities through its actions in Latin America.

Although China's Influence-Seeking Is Growing Most Significantly, the Most-Plausible Conflict Scenarios with Great-Power Involvement That We Examined Involve Russia More Than China, At Least in the Near Term

As noted above, China's influence-seeking activities in Latin America are increasing. However, as presented in Chapters Three and Four, in the near term, the most-plausible conflict scenarios that could draw in competing powers involve Russia. Were a proxy confrontation to occur, it would more plausibly take place between the United States and Russia and would involve China to a much lesser extent. This is partly because Russia's influence-seeking—in Latin America but also elsewhere—tends to privilege the military or security levers of power and partly because Russia does not have extensive resources available for economic

influence-seeking. China's influence-seeking activities tend to focus on economic and investment ties, and China has maintained a limited military presence in Latin America so far. However, given the trajectory of its influence-seeking activities in the region, China might play a bigger role in the future, especially if it decides to expand its influence-seeking activities into the military and security spheres. China's influence-seeking activities in the military realm might accelerate in the coming decade, especially if Beijing reaches the peak of its rise in the international system. Should China prove to be a "once-rising power," it could become more aggressive militarily to compensate for overpromising and underdelivering in terms of its rise in the international arena.³

The Potential for the Three Competitors' Involvement in Latin American Conflicts Is Driven Primarily by Geopolitical Concerns Rather Than Economic and Security-Related Ones

All three competitors would get involved in a conflict supporting local actors in Latin America mainly for geopolitical reasons related to counterbalancing the influence-seeking activities of their rivals. Because of its geographic proximity to the region, the United States is the only competitor that has compelling reasons across a wider spectrum of geopolitical, economic, and homeland security-related concerns to intervene in an internal conflict in Latin America. On the one hand, the United States could be motivated by the need to deny China and Russia the opportunity to gain a military foothold in the Western Hemisphere and to counterbalance their attempts at projecting power and gaining influence in the region. On the other hand, the United States also has concerns associated with the domestic implications resulting from a politically unstable, economically impoverished Latin America. As discussed in earlier chapters, one of the United States' current strategic objectives in the region is focused on the region's prosperity and stability, since these are considered to be interconnected with the prosperity and stability of the United States.

China's and Russia's reasons for involvement in a conflict in the region are mainly geopolitical and are related to growing their own influence and counterbalancing U.S. power and influence in Latin America. One additional geopolitical reason for China is related to Beijing's interest in having countries in the region withdraw their recognition of Taiwan. While Russia has an economic presence in the region, the economic driver is unlikely to be strong enough on its own to justify substantial involvement in a local conflict, especially if it risks producing a proxy confrontation with the United States. In China's case, although Latin America's importance has been increasing for Beijing, especially in the economic domain, China's interests in any given Latin American nation are likely too peripheral to lead to substantial support to proxies and are even less likely to prompt military involvement. That being said, Beijing remains willing to sell military equipment to any country that can pay and may

³ Michael Beckley and Hal Brands, "The End of China's Rise," *Foreign Affairs*, October 1, 2021.

provide low-level aid to local proxies, mainly to reduce the risks of market instability and potential negative effects on Chinese economic interests.

A Reduction in the Level of U.S. Engagement in Latin America Could Create Conditions That Intensify Strategic Competition

Because of changing strategic imperatives, the United States has maintained a limited military footprint in Latin America over the past two decades. In addition, the United States' diplomatic engagement with the region has remained relatively constant overall and was surpassed by China's from 2010 to 2020. In terms of economic engagement, the United States has lost ground to China; although U.S. trade and investments in the region increased in absolute value from 2000 to 2020, China's economic relations with Latin America increased faster and in relative terms.

More specifically, the United States' inconsistent strategy for engagement with Latin America combined with the region's close geographic proximity likely offered an opening for Russia, which it willingly seized, especially to counter U.S. presence in Eastern Europe at critical moments, such as Russia's 2008 and 2014 incursions into Georgia and Ukraine. Russia began to conduct naval exercises with Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Cuba in 2008, and it has gradually increased its military access to the region, especially in these three countries, which have anti-American regimes in power. China's first major foray into the region was the PLA-operated space station in Argentina, which was allegedly set up for civilian purposes. With the increases in dual-use Chinese critical infrastructure projects, Chinese arms sales in the region, and PLA military-to-military diplomacy, it is possible that China's military presence in Latin America will gradually and subtly increase. In such a circumstance, the potential for competition among China, Russia, and the United States is likely to grow in the military realm. While the risk of proxy war—or an even more direct clash involving great-power competitors' own forces—may remain small, the United States' competitors would have more ample military capabilities available to draw on were an internal conflict to erupt in a country with high levels of military involvement. Should the competitors decide to become involved in such a conflict, a hypothetical great-power proxy war might present greater challenges for the United States.

The United States, China, and Russia Have Limited Appetites for Conventional Military Engagement in the Region, but the United States Is the Most Likely Competitor to Become Engaged and Sustain Support for Proxies Because It Has Higher Stakes in Latin America Than Its Rivals Do

None of the three competitors has a strong appetite to enter a limited conventional military intervention in Latin America on behalf of proxies in Venezuela, Colombia, or Nicaragua. While all three competitors are likely to provide indirect support to their proxies, a

direct military intervention—even a limited one—is likely to present challenges for them. China and Russia would likely face more logistical difficulties in mounting and sustaining a direct military intervention across large geographical distances. Moreover, neither China nor Russia has vital interests in Latin America, leaving the United States as the only competitor with core interests to defend in the region. In this context, to respond to an increase in Chinese or Russian military presence in the Western Hemisphere that would be considered a threat to U.S. core interests, the United States is more likely than China or Russia to become engaged in a limited conventional military intervention and potentially get bogged down in a proxy confrontation. China and Russia could provide indirect support to their proxies and more easily avoid a direct military intervention than the United States. Although post-Cold War China has yet to support non-state proxies outside Asia, it could do so in the future, especially if U.S.-China competition intensifies significantly.

In the Conflict Scenarios That We Examined, the United States and Its Competitors Could Plausibly Back Opposing Sides, in Dynamics Reminiscent of the Cold War

In Venezuela and Nicaragua, China and Russia are likely to support the authoritarian government forces rather than the pro-democracy ones, which the United States would support. The authoritarian nature and anti-American stances of the governments in Caracas and Managua make their alignment with Beijing and Moscow more natural, while U.S. support for pro-democracy forces in Venezuela and Nicaragua would closely align with U.S. objectives for both the individual countries and the region overall.

In Colombia, the United States is likely to support the Colombian government—assuming that the latter does not engage in grave abuses of human rights, which would make the continuation of U.S. support problematic. Such abuses would also provide ammunition to both China and Russia for information operations aimed to discredit the United States and its proxy in a Colombia-based scenario. In this case, Russia is likely to support the insurgent forces and any anti-government forces that would allow the Kremlin to foment dissent and propagate instability in a country that is a close U.S. security partner and, if possible, in the region. China would be likely to initially sit out a Colombian conflict and wait in the wings for its outcome. In line with its previous stance in similar situations, China would likely back the government if such a situation would result in increased influence with Bogotá. However, if U.S.-China competition intensifies significantly, China could also lend support to non-state proxies if doing so would advance its interests.

Recommendations

Our analysis and the resulting findings suggest several specific recommendations for the U.S. government, DoD, and the Department of the Air Force. These recommendations are intended to inform the ways in which the United States can (1) strengthen its position in

Latin America to maintain its lead among the three competitors, (2) deter both China and Russia from establishing military facilities from which they can launch or engage in military operations in the Western Hemisphere, and (3) allow the United States to best position itself to effectively support limited conventional military engagements in a conflict in the region.

Recommendations for the U.S. Government

The U.S. government's prioritization of the Middle East, Europe, and the Indo-Pacific region has had an impact on the design of strategic policy documents focused on the Western Hemisphere, including Latin America, and has left SOUTHCOM as one of the least resourced geographic combatant commands. For the U.S. government to be able to sustain competitive efforts across the four domains of influence to keep pace with China and, to a lesser extent, Russia, we make the following recommendations.

Acknowledge the Strategic Importance of Latin America and Design a Strategy for the Region Based on a Long-Term Vision That Promotes Sustained Engagement with Local Partners and Allies

As the U.S. government reshapes some of the policy documents that lay out the United States' strategic approach to various regions of the world and to salient national security issues,⁴ it is extremely important for the government to acknowledge the strategic importance of Latin America and design a strategy for the region based on a long-term vision that promotes sustained engagement with local partners. The August 2020 Western Hemisphere Strategic Framework and the March 2021 *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* are already moving in this direction by acknowledging the strategic importance of the Western Hemisphere and aiming to expand engagement and partnerships with the countries in the region.⁵ However, the 2021 guidance's prioritization of Canada and Mexico seems to relegate the rest of Latin America once more to a secondary role, neglecting the contribution that the region can make in supporting U.S. interests in the competition with China and Russia.

Assuming that China is playing the "long game" in international affairs and is crafting strategies that focus on the long term (even if their implementation seems to suffer from the impediments of short-term thinking, as Belt and Road Initiative investments in Africa and Southeast Asia have shown), the United States' approach to Latin America should also reflect long-term strategic thinking beyond the currently stated focus on Canada and Mexico. In this context, U.S. strategy toward the region should encompass an approach that promotes enduring engagements and allows the United States to maintain and cultivate close and lasting ties to a wider variety of existing and potential partners in Latin America.

A long-term strategy toward Latin America should also account for the fact that while the countries in the region are likely to want to continue trading with China and, for some of

⁴ See Biden, 2021.

⁵ National Security Council, 2020; Biden, 2021.

them, maintain security ties to Moscow, they are unlikely to want to become subservient to Chinese or Russian interests (or American ones for that matter). U.S. strategy should avoid confronting the countries in the region with a Manichean choice between engagement with Washington and engagement with Beijing and Moscow and should continue to position the United States, in the long run, as the partner of choice across the four domains of influence.

Furthermore, although China and Russia do not explicitly coordinate their strategies and approaches toward Latin America, there is inadvertent synergy in their activities in the region. For instance, Russia benefits from the investments that China makes in Latin America, while China ends up benefiting from the information operations and other psychological warfare activities that Russia conducts. For this reason, it is important that decisionmakers within the U.S. government consider Chinese and Russian activities in the region in tandem and not in isolation when it comes to designing strategic and operational plans.⁶

Better Resource U.S. Department of Defense and U.S. Department of State Offices, as well as Other U.S. Government Agencies That Work in Latin America, to Sustain Competitive Efforts Across Diplomatic, Informational, Military, and Economic Activities

A second logical step, after acknowledging the rising strategic importance that Latin America plays in the competition with China and Russia, is to improve the level of funding and personnel available to branches and offices of DoD, the State Department, and other U.S. government agencies that work in the region and focus on Latin American matters. It is important that the United States not only maintain its existing diplomatic, informational, military, and economic presence in the region but also expand it to the extent possible to sustain the competition with China, and to a lesser extent, Russia. Additional resources to SOUTHCOM and the State Department would improve the level of staffing at the diplomatic and consular missions in the region, as well as the cooperation programs in which they can engage at the local level, including human rights training for the armed and security forces in the region.

Increase Engagement with Countries Throughout the Entire Region While Prioritizing Those with the Highest Competition Potential

In addition to improving its strategic focus on Latin America and better resourcing government departments, agencies, and offices that work with the region, the U.S. government should increase high-level visits to all Latin American countries. Although the U.S. government should prioritize engagement with the countries that have the highest potential for competition (that is, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Argentina, and Peru), it should also increase U.S. government presence in and engagement with Central American and Caribbean countries, which China and Russia have more aggressively engaged with over the past decade. Given that the United States is unlikely to be able to develop extensive leverage in such countries as Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela in the short term, U.S. diplomatic, informational, military,

⁶ Subject-matter expert on Latin America, interview with the authors, July 22, 2021.

and economic efforts should be directed toward promoting stronger ties and engagement with the countries that are likely to have governments in power that are more receptive to engagement with the United States.

Closely Monitor the Region to Identify and Prepare to Respond to a Variety of Potentially Emerging Threats, Especially in Countries That Are Traditionally Hostile to the United States, Such as Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela

The U.S. government should closely monitor Latin America to identify in a timely manner emerging threats and changing political situations that could generate instability throughout the region. It should develop a variety of forms of engagement with the region, including from an intelligence perspective, in order to stay abreast of China's and Russia's advances in Latin America and avoid being caught by surprise by Chinese and Russian developments in the diplomatic, informational, military, and economic domains. While Nicaragua, Cuba, and Venezuela should be priorities, the U.S. government should not neglect the remaining countries in the region, including the other top-ranking countries in terms of competition potential. Besides identifying potential threats and Chinese and Russian developments, the United States should have, for each country, an in-depth and accurate understanding of (1) the political situation on the ground; (2) the main political actors and their propensities toward engagement with the three competitors; and (3) the presence or absence of viable local partners with whom the United States could engage, especially in countries with authoritarian, anti-American governments in power. A well-developed and accurate understanding of the situation and main actors on the ground would allow the United States to tailor the narrative and improve its ability to establish and maintain dominance in the informational contest with China and Russia.

Recommendations for the U.S. Department of Defense

The U.S. government's overall lack of focus on Latin American and Western Hemisphere affairs has affected DoD's approach to the region. As has been mentioned several times in this report, SOUTHCOM has consistently been one of the least resourced geographic combatant commands in recent years, and this has had an impact on the extent of military engagements with the region. In addition, most of the security engagements with Latin America were focused on the drug trade and illegal migration, not on great-power competition. With these considerations in mind, we make the following recommendations for DoD.

Maintain Cooperation and Capabilities Related to Counternarcotics and Migration While Developing Capabilities and Security Relations to Support Success in Great-Power Competition

Latin America's importance to the United States goes beyond countering the production and flow of drugs across the region and into the United States. Also, the region—especially Central America—should not be treated as only a source of illegal migration. DoD (and the U.S.

government in general) needs to recognize the fact that countries in Latin America have the potential to support U.S. security efforts in the great-power competition with China and Russia. Instead of considering these countries as potential liabilities and weak points in great-power competition, the United States should consider developing their capabilities and forging security relations that move beyond cooperation on combating drug trafficking and illegal migration to transform Latin American countries into assets from a great-power competition perspective. In this vein, DoD should work with traditional security partners, such as Colombia, but also with such countries as Brazil, Chile, Argentina, and Peru, which have high potential for competition, in order to help strengthen their capabilities in the informational domain. In this way, they would become less vulnerable to Chinese and Russian attempts to manipulate their societies and political systems to create domestic cleavages and unrest from which Beijing and Moscow could benefit.

Strengthen Security Cooperation with Existing Key Partners and Allies in Latin America and Try to Engage with Less Friendly Governments Where Possible to Maintain Access in the Region and Limit Competitors' Influence

In a continuation of the previous recommendation, DoD should consider strengthening security cooperation with key countries in the region, such as Colombia, Brazil, Chile, Argentina, and Peru, and acknowledge their potential to become contributors to U.S. efforts in the great-power competition with China and Russia. Although the United States would have a harder time flipping traditionally hostile governments, such as Cuba, to its side, DoD can still attempt to develop and cultivate improved military relations and cooperation on security matters with governments that are less friendly to the United States.

As part of strengthening security cooperation with countries in the region, DoD can increase the training provided to partner countries as a way to counter increasing Chinese and Russian influence and the inroads that Beijing has made in getting more Latin American officers to attend training and military education programs in China. To avoid the Cold War-era concerns associated with what was known at the time as the “School of the Americas,” DoD should limit the training to classroom instruction focused on military strategy, leadership, and human rights courses and avoid providing kinetic training that involves counternarcotics and counterinsurgency tactics that could be used against local populations in times of domestic turmoil.

Prepare to Identify Chinese Dual-Use Assets in the Region and Be Ready to Deter or Deny Their Use for Military Purposes

As discussed throughout this report, in recent years, China has started to develop dual-use infrastructure assets throughout the region. Although such assets could be used strictly for civilian purposes, they could also be used by Beijing for military purposes in the context of a confrontation with the United States. As a result, DoD needs to develop—both internally and cooperatively with other, civilian agencies—the intelligence capabilities to identify and keep track of the respective dual-use assets. As a next step, DoD needs to develop operational- and

tactical-level plans for how to deter or deny Beijing's use of these assets on the ground in the context of a proxy war or conventional military confrontation with the United States in Latin America.

Recommendations for the Department of the Air Force

Some of the recommendations made for the U.S. government and for DoD also have applications for the Department of the Air Force, so we do not reiterate them here. In this subsection, we present the recommendations that are predominantly relevant to the Department of the Air Force.

Maintain and Develop Military Access Agreements and Overflight Rights with the Countries in the Region

Strengthening security cooperation with existing partners in the region to maintain existing military access agreements and developing security engagements with less friendly governments in the region, ideally with the aim of gaining military access to their territories, would likely become important in the context of a confrontation on the ground. In the case of a proxy confrontation, the Department of the Air Force would need to rely on access to the air-space of countries in Latin America to carry out a successful military intervention. Although maintaining overflight rights might be less vital in Latin America than in other secondary theaters of the world, where there are many landlocked countries and the potential conflict regions are farther from CONUS, from a logistical point of view it is still important for the Department of the Air Force and the U.S. government to be able to keep open the shortest and most-efficient routes of access to the region. Also, maintaining and developing various forms of military access to the countries in the region is likely to support the Department of the Air Force's efforts to conduct successful air operations in the context of a proxy confrontation.

Prepare for Increased Demand for U.S. Air Force Assets in Theater and Train and Invest Accordingly in Developing the Capabilities Needed for Victory

For the past few decades, U.S. Air Force assets have been mainly deployed in overseas conflicts and have conducted significantly fewer missions close to home territory. U.S. involvement in a conflict in Latin America, especially if it becomes a limited military intervention, will likely involve a significant level of reliance on U.S. Air Force assets. With most of the missions likely to be conducted from home territory, the Department of the Air Force needs to train accordingly and develop the capabilities needed to win what is likely to become an asymmetrical conflict close to the homeland: ISR capabilities (specifically with the ability to see through dense jungle); Air Force Special Operations Command capabilities (to insert and extract Army special operators); lift capabilities (to deploy forces and send military aid); and sustainment capabilities (to build and maintain airstrips). Geographic proximity might induce complacency and the feeling that victory will be easily attained with minimal effort. Such a mentality could leave the U.S. Air Force ill prepared and ill equipped to prevail in the confrontation quickly and with the least effort possible.

In this context, the Department of the Air Force should consider preparations for conducting and supporting other U.S. military services and partner military services in asymmetric warfare. Asymmetric warfare in Central or South American countries would likely involve unfavorable terrain, including remote and jungle areas, as well as densely populated urban areas where it is more difficult to disentangle friend from foe. The ability to conduct asymmetric warfare in unfavorable terrain would become particularly important if—in countries with authoritarian governments, such as Venezuela or Nicaragua—the democratic forces were to prevail quickly and the authoritarian government forces turned themselves into insurgents challenging a newly established democratic government. Considering these potential dynamics, the Department of the Air Force should be prepared for increased demand for U.S. Air Force assets in Latin America, and it should train and invest accordingly in developing the capabilities needed for victory.

Final Thoughts

China's economic and diplomatic presence in Latin America has significantly increased over the past decade, and, in recent years, China has started to develop infrastructure projects throughout the entire region. For some of these projects, such as port developments and China's operation of port terminals, DoD has concerns regarding their potential dual use for military purposes in the future. For the time being, China's military presence and engagement in Latin America remains very limited, and the United States remains the leading competitor from a military standpoint. However, U.S. presence in the region is gradually eroding across all four domains of influence, and, in the diplomatic, information, and economic domains, the United States is losing ground to both China and Russia. In this context, the most-plausible scenarios that we examined show that, in the near term, the United States and Russia would be on opposing sides in potential proxy conflicts in Latin America. In addition, over the next two decades, China's rise will likely translate to a stronger military presence and increased engagement with the countries in the region. Should this indeed become the case, and should competition intensify further, the likelihood of a conflict that pits competing powers against each other would increase—notably, in a region where the United States has vital interests but with which it has inconsistently engaged in recent decades.

To address the challenges and the risks that would arise if competing great powers were to become involved in conflicts in Latin America, the U.S. government needs to devise a long-term strategy that accounts for the inadvertent synergy between Chinese and Russian activities in the region. Furthermore, SOUTHCOM, the State Department, and the other branches of the U.S. government that work on the ground in Latin America need to be better resourced to support the implementation of a long-term strategy for the region. Last but not least, the Department of the Air Force needs to be prepared to fight and win asymmetrical conflicts that take place closer to home rather than thousands of miles away.

Details on the Competition-Potential and Conflict-Potential Indices

This appendix presents more-detailed information about the competition-potential index and the conflict-potential index discussed in Chapter Two.

Competition Potential

Table A.1 summarizes the data and sources used to measure each of the three great powers' involvement or influence-seeking in each country, across each of the four instruments of national power (diplomacy, information, military, economics). Binary variables—such as the existence of an embassy in a country—were assigned a value of 1 if the variable was present or 0 if it was absent.

To synthesize this broad set of variables, we constructed metrics, or *indices*, measuring great-power involvement in each of four domains (i.e., diplomacy, information, military, and economics) and combined them into an overall index for competition potential.¹ Next, we describe how we constructed the five indices for competition potential—that is, for each domain and overall.

Standardizing Variables

Each variable was standardized—that is, converted into *z*-scores for each country and great-power pair in the region for any given variable—as follows:

$$Z_{ij} = \frac{x_{ij} - \mu}{\sigma}.$$

That is, for each country and great-power pair *ij*, a *z*-score for a given variable *x* measures standard deviations (σ) above or below a mean value (μ) of *x* across all countries *i* in the

¹ For a similar approach, see Daniel Kaufmann, Aart Kraay, and Massimo Mastruzzi, “Governance Matters VIII: Aggregate and Individual Governance Indicators, 1996–2008,” World Bank Policy Research Working Paper No. 4978, June 29, 2009, pp. 7–19.

TABLE A.1

Measuring Influence-Seeking and Potential for Competition: Summary of Variables

Variable	Description	Sources
Diplomacy		
Foreign aid and assistance	Total aid or assistance reported to the country for the most recent year available (\$)	
	U.S.: 2019 disbursements of total foreign assistance, including military and economic assistance	ForeignAssistance.gov, “Data Download,” webpage, last updated December 9, 2022.
	China: Official Development Assistance for the latest year available between 2000 and 2014	AidData, undated.
	Russia: Official Development Assistance (total net) for the latest year available between 2012 and 2019	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, undated.
High-level diplomatic visits	Total visits by heads of state, top foreign policy officials, and top military officials (for the U.S.) between 2000 and 2020 (aggregated number of visits)	
	U.S: Visits by the President, Secretary of State, and Secretary of Defense	Office of the Historian, “Travels Abroad of the Secretary of State,” webpage, U.S. Department of State, undated-d; and DoD, “Releases,” webpage, undated.
	China: Visits by the President, Prime Minister, and Minister of Foreign Affairs, supplemented with Chinese and regional news sources	Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, undated-c; we supplemented that search by searching Chinese and regional news sources.
	Russia: Visits by the President, Prime Minister, and Minister of Foreign Affairs	Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, “Russia in International Relations,” webpage, undated-b; and President of Russia, “Events,” webpage, undated-a.
Presence of embassy	Existence of an embassy in the country (binary)	
	Verified for each country and great-power pair individually using official state information	Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “Chinese Embassies,” webpage, undated-b; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, undated-b; and USEmbassy.gov, homepage, U.S. Department of State, undated.

Table A.1—Continued

Variable	Description	Sources
Visa-free travel	Visa-free travel from each great power to and from the country (two binary variables) Verified for each country and great-power pair individually using official state information and other public sources	Henley & Partners, “The Henley Passport Index,” webpage, undated; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, undated-b; USEmbassy.gov, undated; VisaGuide.World, “Worldwide Travel Visa Guide,” webpage, undated; and VisitRussia.org, “Who Does Not Need a Visa to Russia?” webpage, undated.
Information		
State-sponsored media	Presence of each great power’s state-sponsored media (binary) - U.S.: Presence of Middle East Broadcasting Networks bureaus, Voice of America bureaus, transmitters, FM frequencies, or contracts with local radio or television affiliates that retranslate - China: Presence of the China Global Television Network (i.e., China Central Television’s international division), China Radio International, or Xinhua Bureaus - Russia: Presence of cooperation agreements signed by state-controlled media (RT, Sputnik, or TASS) with local media outlets and news agencies	Voice of America Public Relations, “VOA Around the World,” webpage, November 13, 2017. China Radio International Español, undated; Peilei Ye and Luis A. Albornoz, “Chinese Media ‘Going Out’ in Spanish Speaking Countries: The Case of CGTN-Español,” <i>Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture</i>, Vol. 13, No. 1, 2018; and China Culture, “Xinhua News Agency,” webpage, undated; and CCTV.com English, webpage, undated. We supplemented these sources with media reports. Barros, 2020.
Military		
Involvement in post–Cold War conflicts	Participation in intra- or inter-state conflicts in the country between 1991 and 2021 (binary)	

Table A.1—Continued

Variable	Description	Sources
	Based on data on actors in conflicts between 1991 and 2021	Uppsala University Department of Peace and Conflict Research, “Independent Variables,” webpage, undated; Uppsala University Department of Peace and Conflict Research, “About ViEWS,” webpage, last modified April 25, 2022; Uppsala Conflict Data Program, web tool, Uppsala University Department of Peace and Conflict Research, undated (data are from 1975 to 2020)—in particular, the External Support Dataset provides data on the existence, type, and provider of external support for all warring parties (actors) coded as active in Uppsala Conflict Data Program data, on an annual basis from 1975 to 2009 (see Stina Högbladh, Therése Pettersson, and Lotta Themnér, “External Support in Armed Conflict 1975–2009, Presenting New Data,” paper presented at the 52nd Annual International Studies Association Convention, Montreal, Canada, March 16–19, 2011)—and Dangerous Companions Project, homepage, undated. ^a
Arms exports	Volume of exports to the country based on SIPRI’s trend-indicator value of exports - U.S.: 2014–2019 - China: 2014–2018 - Russia: 2014–2018	SIPRI, undated-a; SIPRI, “SIPRI Arms Transfers Database—Methodology,” webpage, undated-b; and SIPRI, “Sources and Methods,” webpage, undated-c. ^b
Presence of military forces and bases	Each great power’s force presence in the country between 2014 and 2020 (number of person-years)	International Institute for Strategic Studies, <i>The Military Balance</i> , London, Vols. 114–120, 2014–2020.
Military agreements	Presence of active military or defense cooperation agreements (binary) ^c	Brandon J., Kinne, “Defense Cooperation Agreement Dataset,” <i>Journal of Conflict Resolution</i> , Vol. 64, No. 4, 2020; Office of Treaty Affairs, 2020; Government of the Russian Federation, “International Agreements of the Russian Federation” [“Международные Договоры Российской Федерации”], database, undated; various articles and sources in <i>Janes Defence Weekly</i> , <i>Defence Industry</i> , <i>Intelligence Weekly</i> , and <i>Country Risk Daily</i> Report publications; and country-specific data available at Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “Resources,” webpage, undated-d. We supplemented these sources with English-language and Chinese-language news sources.

Table A.1—Continued

Variable	Description	Sources
Military exercises	Total number of exercises performed with the country between 2014 and 2020	International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2014–2020; we supplemented this source by searching for news sources in English, Mandarin, and Russian.
PMSCs	Presence of PMSCs in the country (binary) - U.S.: Compiled based on the websites of major PMSCs and various news sources - China and Russia: Compiled for each country and great-power pair based on various research, investigative, and news sources	Allied Universal, “Allied Universal Office Location,” webpage, undated; Constellis, corporate brochure, undated; Continuity Global Solutions, “Continuity Global Solutions Past Performance Map,” webpage, undated; Inter-Con Security, “Contact Us,” webpage, undated; and Military Professional Resources Inc. Helena Legarda and Meia Nouwens, “Guardians of the Belt and Road: The Internationalization of China’s Private Security Companies,” <i>Mercator Institute for China Studies</i>, August 16, 2018; Sergey Sukhankin, “Chinese Private Security Contractors: New Trends and Future Prospects,” <i>China Brief</i>, Vol. 20, No. 9, May 15, 2020b; Katz et al., 2020; Mikhail Khodarenok, “Private Armies Want Legitimacy” [“Частные армии желают узакониться”], <i>Gazeta.ru</i>, June 26, 2017; Candace Rondeaux, “Decoding the Wagner Group: Analyzing the Role of Private Military Security Contractors in Russian Proxy Warfare,” <i>New America</i>, November 7, 2019; Zhu Lu, “A Bridge Too Far: China’s Overseas Security and Private Military and Security Companies,” <i>China: An International Journal</i>, Vol. 18, No. 3, August 2020; and Pavel Luzin, “Russian PMCs: Dotting the I’s” [“Российские ЧВК: точки над i”], <i>RIDDLE Russia</i>, February 20, 2019.
Military access	Access to the country (standing agreement or access granted in practice) (binary) - U.S.: Presence of publicly known U.S. cooperative security locations - China: Port visits by the PLA Navy - Russia: Naval port calls, access to ports, or access to airfields	Lindsay-Poland, 2004; Lostumbo et al., 2013. We supplemented these sources by reviewing media reports. DoD, <i>Assessment on U.S. Defense Implications of China’s Expanding Global Access</i>, Washington, D.C., December, 2018b; and Koleski and Blivas, 2018. Ellis, 2015. We identified naval port calls and access to ports by searching English- and Russian-language press for each country.
Economics		
Trade volume	Trade volume (\$)	

Table A.1—Continued

Variable	Description	Sources
	World Bank's World Integrated Trade Solution, merchandise trade, for 2018, which was the most recent common year available	World Integrated Trade Solution, undated-a, data set on U.S., Chinese, and Russian trade activity in Latin America, 2000–2019.
Investment	Foreign direct investment position (U.S. and Russia), foreign investments (China) (\$)	U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, "U.S. Direct Investment Position Abroad on a Historical-Cost Basis," 2019; American Enterprise Institute and Heritage Foundation, undated (aggregate data for 2005–2020); and International Monetary Fund, "Coordinated Direct Investment Survey," webpage, undated (data for most recent year available, either 2018 or 2019).
Critical infrastructure	Presence of major Russian companies in critical infrastructure sectors (binary) Russia only: Investigated for each country individually through news reports and public corporate information, focusing on key Russian companies operating in the relevant sectors (energy, raw materials, transport, financial services, communications)	We reviewed news and research reports on Russian companies in Latin America and supplemented that research by reviewing the websites of key Russian companies—notably, Rosatom, Lukoil, Gazprom, Transneft, Alrosa, Rusal, Norilsk Nickel, Severstal, Nordgold, Ferrum Mining, and Uralkali. In addition, we reviewed news sources in English, Russian, and Spanish.

^a The Dangerous Companions Project captures data on international support for non-state armed groups that are "engaged in violent conflict against one or more governments within or outside the state(s) they live." This support

takes many forms, such as funds, safe havens, sanctuary, arms, logistics, and transportation of such resources as well as diplomatic support from states, diaspora groups, non-governmental organizations (NGO), inter-governmental organizations (IGO), non-state armed groups, and foreign political parties (Dangerous Companions Project, undated).

^b SIPRI's trend-indicator value is

based on the known unit production costs of a core set of weapons and is intended to represent the transfer of military resources rather than the financial value of the transfer. . . . SIPRI calculates the volume of transfers to, from and between all parties using the [trend-indicator value] and the number of weapon systems or subsystems delivered in a given year. This data is intended to provide a common unit to allow the measurement [of] trends in the flow of arms to particular countries and regions over time (SIPRI, undated-b).

^c To determine what counts as a military agreement, we sought to follow the Correlates of War Project's Defense Cooperation Agreement Dataset, which defines *bilateral defense cooperation agreements* as "treaties that coordinate and institutionalize routine, day-to-day defense co-operation between signatories" (Kinne, 2020). Where we sought to identify such agreements outside this data set, we excluded agreements limited to arms sales and matters pertaining more to law enforcement than military cooperation.

region for that great power j . For example, the z -scores for trade between Peru and China indicate how much trade there is between those countries, relative to China's trade with all other countries in Latin America. We then converted the z -scores into percentiles, for easier interpretation.

Although our selection of data sources and variables was driven in part by the need to minimize missing data, some missingness is inevitable. Missing data were handled as follows: In the few cases when it was highly likely, based on other sources, that the value should be zero—for example, because we located no references to China or Russia sending foreign aid to a particular country—the missing value was treated as zero.² In all other cases, missing values remained missing, and the observation was excluded from generating the z -score for observations on that variable.

Constructing the Influence-Seeking Indices

All standardized variables capturing influence-seeking activities in *each domain* (diplomacy, information, military, and economics) for each of the three great powers were then aggregated into an influence-seeking index, and each variable was accorded an equal weight, subject to some exceptions. That is, the z -scores were multiplied by the reciprocal of the number of variables in each dimension and summed for each country and great-power pair.³ For example, each of the four variables in the diplomatic domain was weighted equally—as one-fourth—in the index that captures relative diplomatic involvement for each power in each country.

All standardized variables *across the four domains* were also combined into an index that captures overall influence-seeking *for each great power*, also weighting each variable equally.

Missing data for any variables for any country and great-power pair reduced the number of variables employed to construct the weighted index for that pair. For example, if foreign aid data from China were missing for a given country, the index was produced by averaging z -scores for the three nonmissing variables (i.e., high-level visits, presence of an embassy, visa-free travel) equally. However, for the countries for which foreign aid was present, all four z -scores were averaged.⁴

² For example, we treated Chinese foreign aid to Paraguay as a zero because Paraguay recognizes Taiwan and maintains no official relations with Beijing.

³ In the diplomatic domain, we counted (1) the visa-free travel from each competing power to each country and (2) the visa-free travel in the reverse direction together as one variable. That is, the two sets of z -scores were weighted as one. For Russia, its direct investment position and critical infrastructure investments were also weighted together as a single variable. This is because both U.S. and Chinese direct investment data include critical infrastructure, whereas Russia's official direct investment position data are less reliable or complete.

⁴ Although this introduces a degree of non-comparability in the indices for each domain and great power, we concluded that this solution was preferable to the alternatives, such as imputing values, assigning zero to the missing cell, or not using otherwise informative data because such information was not available for every single country in a region.

We chose to weight *each variable* equally—rather than *each of the four domains* equally—for the following reasons: Overall, we do not have strong theoretical reasons to prejudge that any single variable matters more than any other in creating the potential for competition. That is, we want to avoid assumptions that, for example, the volume of trade matters more or less than the volume of diplomatic visits or military exercises in shaping the intensity of strategic competition in the future. Thus, we did not weight the diplomacy, information, military, and economics categories equally, as this would, in effect, suggest that each military variable is less informative about great-power interests than the single variable in the informational domain is. Therefore, our overall index is most influenced by military variables (of which we had seven) and least influenced by informational variables (of which we had only one). The emphasis on military or security forms of influence seeking is partly a function of data availability, reflecting the fact that we were able to gather more-quantifiable information about the military domain than about the informational domain. However, given that the focus of this study is ultimately on the potential for involvement in conflicts, an index that is more influenced by military factors appears justifiable. The analysis of each of the four domains separately helps ensure that we do not simply neglect countries where the potential for economic or informational competition, for example, is relatively high but military competition is low.

Constructing the Competition-Potential Indices

For *each domain*, the index that captures the potential for competition in each country was calculated by summing the influence-seeking indices for involvement in that domain for each of the three great powers. For example, in Table A.2, the diplomatic influence-seeking indices for the three great powers add up to produce a competition-potential index of 1.94 for Brazil in the diplomatic domain.

Tables A.2 through A.5 report results for each of the four domains, respectively. Specifically, the tables show the influence-seeking indices for each Latin American country and great-power pair, as well as the competition-potential index for each Latin American country in that domain. The countries are sorted from highest to lowest potential for competition.

Summing the influence-seeking indices for *all three powers* across *all four domains* produces the overall competition-potential index for each country in the region. We do not list these scores separately in this appendix, but the results are shown in Figure 2.6.

TABLE A.2
Diplomatic Influence-Seeking and Competition Potential in Latin America

Country	Influence-Seeking Index, by Great Power			Competition-Potential Index
	United States	China	Russia	
Brazil	0.61	0.61	0.71	1.94
Colombia	0.78	0.52	0.58	1.88
Peru	0.70	0.58	0.60	1.87
Cuba	0.42	0.58	0.85	1.85
Chile	0.64	0.59	0.59	1.82
Argentina	0.58	0.57	0.61	1.76
Ecuador	0.48	0.67	0.53	1.68
Jamaica	0.42	0.72	0.42	1.56
Uruguay	0.44	0.52	0.59	1.54
Costa Rica	0.46	0.63	0.43	1.52
Panama	0.54	0.41	0.52	1.47
Venezuela	0.20	0.57	0.69	1.46
Bolivia	0.35	0.56	0.53	1.44
Guyana	0.41	0.58	0.43	1.42
Nicaragua	0.45	0.25	0.64	1.33
El Salvador	0.60	0.41	0.32	1.32
Guatemala	0.59	0.24	0.48	1.31
Dominican Republic	0.47	0.43	0.38	1.27
Haiti	0.62	0.36	0.25	1.22
Paraguay	0.37	0.24	0.55	1.15
Suriname	0.32	0.44	0.26	1.02
Honduras	0.51	0.24	0.26	1.00
Belize	0.40	0.24	0.18	0.83

TABLE A.3
Informational Influence-Seeking and Competition Potential in Latin America

Country	Influence-Seeking Indices, by Great Power			Competition-Potential Index
	United States	China	Russia	
Argentina	0.95	0.70	0.83	2.47
Cuba	0.95	0.70	0.83	2.47
Panama	0.95	0.70	0.83	2.47
Uruguay	0.95	0.70	0.83	2.47
Brazil	0.95	0.03	0.83	1.81
Chile	0.28	0.70	0.83	1.80
Colombia	0.28	0.70	0.83	1.80
Costa Rica	0.28	0.70	0.83	1.80
Ecuador	0.28	0.70	0.83	1.80
Nicaragua	0.28	0.70	0.83	1.80
Peru	0.28	0.70	0.83	1.80
Venezuela	0.28	0.70	0.83	1.80
Paraguay	0.95	0.70	0.15	1.80
Bolivia	0.28	0.70	0.15	1.13
Dominican Republic	0.28	0.70	0.15	1.13
El Salvador	0.28	0.70	0.15	1.13
Guatemala	0.28	0.70	0.15	1.13
Haiti	0.28	0.70	0.15	1.13
Honduras	0.28	0.70	0.15	1.13
Belize	0.28	0.03	0.15	0.47
Guyana	0.28	0.03	0.15	0.47
Jamaica	0.28	0.03	0.15	0.47
Suriname	0.28	0.03	0.15	0.47

TABLE A.4**Military Influence-Seeking and Competition Potential in Latin America**

Country	Influence-Seeking Indices, by Great Power			Competition-Potential Index
	United States	China	Russia	
Brazil	0.60	0.65	0.58	1.83
Colombia	0.80	0.45	0.52	1.77
Peru	0.61	0.64	0.53	1.77
Chile	0.69	0.64	0.44	1.77
Venezuela	0.47	0.54	0.69	1.71
Argentina	0.52	0.64	0.44	1.60
Ecuador	0.49	0.55	0.44	1.48
Nicaragua	0.39	0.36	0.71	1.46
Cuba	0.36	0.55	0.53	1.45
El Salvador	0.54	0.36	0.52	1.42
Panama	0.48	0.36	0.53	1.37
Honduras	0.54	0.36	0.44	1.33
Guatemala	0.53	0.36	0.44	1.33
Dominican Republic	0.59	0.36	0.34	1.29
Jamaica	0.36	0.55	0.34	1.25
Paraguay	0.43	0.36	0.44	1.23
Costa Rica	0.42	0.46	0.34	1.22
Haiti	0.41	0.46	0.34	1.21
Uruguay	0.31	0.46	0.44	1.20
Guyana	0.41	0.46	0.34	1.20
Suriname	0.31	0.46	0.44	1.20
Bolivia	0.28	0.48	0.44	1.20
Belize	0.35	0.36	0.33	1.05

TABLE A.5

Economic Influence-Seeking and Competition Potential in Latin America

Country	Influence-Seeking Indices, by Great Power			Competition-Potential Index
	United States	China	Russia	
Brazil	1.00	1.00	0.78	2.78
Chile	0.85	0.78	0.65	2.27
Argentina	0.58	0.69	0.67	1.93
Peru	0.58	0.80	0.55	1.93
Ecuador	0.44	0.52	0.71	1.68
Colombia	0.70	0.46	0.51	1.67
Venezuela	0.54	0.62	0.44	1.60
Guatemala	0.42	0.34	0.61	1.37
Panama	0.42	0.41	0.44	1.27
Paraguay	0.31	0.33	0.60	1.24
El Salvador	0.39	0.32	0.45	1.16
Cuba	0.29	0.33	0.52	1.14
Dominican Republic	0.48	0.33	0.32	1.14
Jamaica	0.32	0.35	0.46	1.13
Bolivia	0.30	0.38	0.44	1.13
Nicaragua	0.34	0.33	0.45	1.12
Costa Rica	0.44	0.34	0.31	1.09
Guyana	0.29	0.34	0.44	1.08
Honduras	0.42	0.33	0.28	1.03
Uruguay	0.31	0.35	0.31	0.97
Haiti	0.31	0.32	0.27	0.90
Belize	0.29	0.32	0.27	0.88
Suriname	0.23	0.32	0.27	0.82

Internal Conflict Potential

To assess the potential for internal conflict erupting in each of the countries relative to the rest of the region, we relied on a combination of two complimentary sources. The first is the Janes qualitative, intelligence-driven *internal conflict risk* measure, which is produced by the IHS Markit Economics and Country Risk team and “based on their own expert understanding of the countries’ political, economic, social, and security environment, using economic

models, information from open sources, and structured intelligence gathered by a network of thousands of in-country personnel.”⁵ This assessment produces qualitative text-based forecasts alongside its numeric scores, which are intended to be comparable across countries and range from 0.1 to 10 with steps of 0.1 on a logarithmic scale.⁶ Janes produces risk scores for different types of risks, including external and economic risks, as well as multiple dimensions of domestic risk. Its internal conflict risk is an assessment of the “likelihood . . . of intra-state military conflict (in the form of an organized insurgency, separatist conflict or full-blown civil war where rebels/insurgents are attempting to overthrow the government, achieve regional independence or at least heavily influence major government policies).”⁷ Janes internal conflict risk assessments focus on risk of violence involving non-state armed groups, which have “a relatively organised military force, exercise de facto authority over the population within a determinate portion of the national territory and have an organisation purporting to have the characteristics of a state (borrowing from the [International Committee of the Red Cross’s] definition.)”⁸

We combined the Janes rankings with ratings from the State Fragility Index, an older measure produced by the Center for Systemic Peace.⁹ This index does not produce real-time estimates of conflict risk but instead assesses state fragility based on durable factors that have been demonstrably related to conflict and do not change easily—such as history of prior conflict, discrimination against particular ethnic groups, and the Human Development Index.¹⁰ In particular, the index

scores each country on both Effectiveness and Legitimacy in four performance dimensions: Security, Political, Economic, and Social, at the end of the year 2018. Each of the . . . indicators is rated on a four-point fragility scale: 0 “no fragility,” 1 “low fragility,” 2 “medium fragility,” and 3 “high fragility” with the exception of the Economic Effectiveness indicator, which is rated on a five-point fragility scale (including 4 “extreme fragility”). The State Fragility Index, then, combines scores on the eight indicators and ranges from 0 “no fragility” to 25 “extreme fragility.” A country’s fragility is closely associated with its state capacity to manage conflict, make and implement public policy, and deliver essential services, and its systemic resilience in maintaining system coherence, cohesion,

⁵ S&P Global, “Risk Quantification: Country Risk Management Frequently Asked Questions,” webpage, undated.

⁶ This means that “a score increase from 8.1 to 8.2 represents a larger increase in risk than a move from 1.1 to 1.2” (Janes Military and Security Assessments Intelligence Centre, 2020). However, in this study, we do not make finer-grained distinctions in terms of the distance in risk that separates any pair of countries that are ranked consecutively on the list.

⁷ Janes Military and Security Assessments Intelligence Centre, 2020.

⁸ Janes Military and Security Assessments Intelligence Centre, 2020.

⁹ Marshall and Elzinga-Marshall, undated.

¹⁰ For full detail, see Marshall and Elzinga-Marshall, 2017.

and quality of life, responding effectively to challenges and crises, and sustaining progressive development.¹¹

Because we are most interested in identifying which countries are at *relatively greater risk* of conflict than others—rather than by *how much* one country's risk is greater than another's—we converted the numeric ratings into ordinal rankings and combined the two (the Janes internal conflict risk rankings and the state fragility rankings) for a single ranking of countries from most to least potential for conflict. Table A.6 presents the scores and the rank of countries by scores from both sources—as well as the combined conflict-potential ranking that we employ in our risk assessment.

¹¹ Marshall and Elzinga-Marshall, 2017, p. 51.

TABLE A.6
Conflict Potential

Country	Janes		State Fragility Index (Center for Systemic Peace)		Overall Conflict- Potential Ranking ^a
	Internal Conflict Score	Rank	Score	Rank	
Colombia	2.7	1	11	2	1
Haiti	2.5	2	11	2	2
Venezuela	2.3	3	14	1	2
Bolivia	1.8	4	11	2	4
Guyana	1.5	6	8	5	5
Nicaragua	1.8	4	7	8	6
Ecuador	1.5	6	7	8	7
Honduras	1.5	6	7	8	7
Paraguay	1.4	10	8	5	9
Guatemala	1.2	12	8	5	10
Suriname	1.5	6	5	13	11
Peru	1.4	10	6	11	12
Brazil	1.2	12	6	11	13
El Salvador	1.0	14	4	15	14
Panama	0.9	15	3	16	15
Jamaica	0.8	16	3	16	16
Argentina	0.7	17	3	16	17
Chile	0.7	17	3	16	17
Cuba	0.5	21	5	13	19
Dominican Republic	0.6	20	3	16	20
Costa Rica	0.7	17	1	22	21
Uruguay	0.3	22	2	21	22

^a The overall ranking is based on the sum of the Janes ranking and State Fragility Index ranking, ordered from highest to lowest conflict potential.

Abbreviations

A3E	advise, assist, accompany, and enable
ALBA	Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América (Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America)
BACRIMs	bandas criminales (criminal bands)
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa
CONUS	continental United States
COVID-19	coronavirus disease 2019
DoD	U.S. Department of Defense
ELN	Ejército de Liberación Nacional (National Liberation Army)
FARC	Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia)
FSLN	Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (Sandinista National Liberation Front)
GAO	Grupos Armados Organizados
GDO	Grupos Delictivos Organizados
GDP	gross domestic product
GLONASS	Global Navigation Satellite System
ISR	intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PMSC	private military and security company
SIPRI	Stockholm International Peace Research Institute
SOUTHCOM	U.S. Southern Command
UN	United Nations

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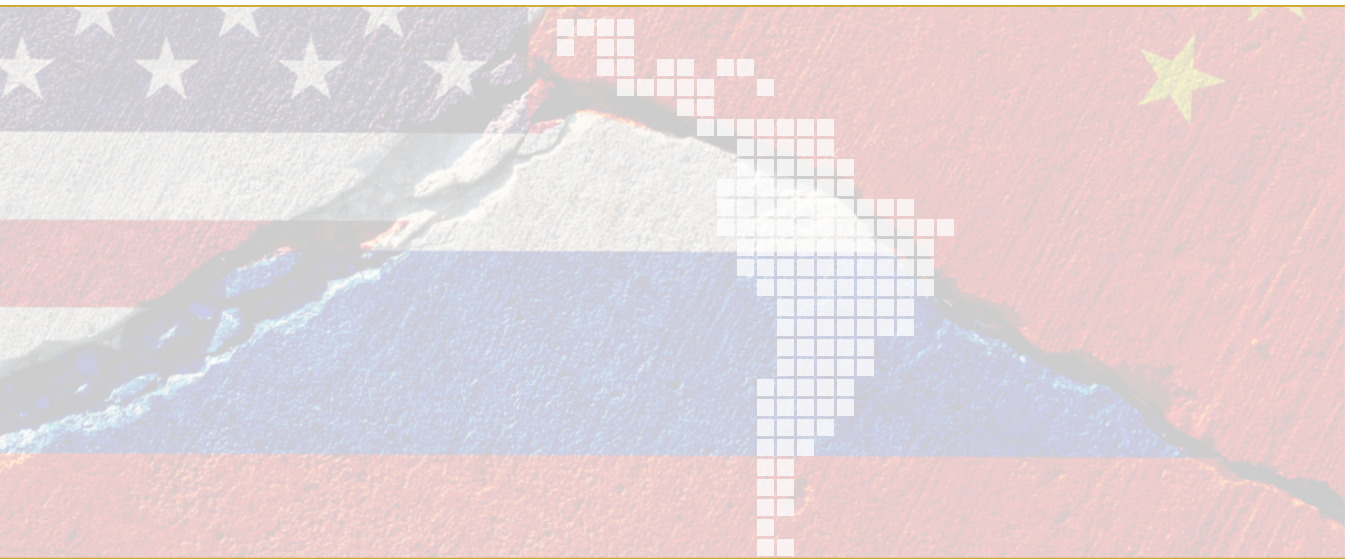
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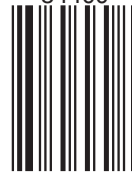
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