

Russian Influence in Venezuela: A Potential Spoiler for USSOUTHCOM

A Monograph

by

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2021

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REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE			<i>Form Approved</i> <i>OMB No. 0704-0188</i>		
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1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY) 20 05 2021		2. REPORT TYPE MASTER'S THESIS		3. DATES COVERED (From - To) JUNE 20-MAY 21	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Russian Influence in Venezuela: A Potential Spoiler for USSOUTHCOM			5a. CONTRACT NUMBER		
			5b. GRANT NUMBER		
			5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER		
6. AUTHOR(S) MAJ Philip J. McCormick			5d. PROJECT NUMBER		
			5e. TASK NUMBER		
			5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER		
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) U.S. Army Command and General Staff College ATTN: ATZL-SWD-GD Fort Leavenworth, KS 66027-2301			8. PERFORMING ORG REPORT NUMBER		
9. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) ADVANCED MILITARY STUDIES PROGRAM			10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)		
			11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)		
12. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for Public Release; Distribution is Unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT This monograph examines Russia's influence in Venezuela. The Russian presence in Venezuela presents a challenge to US security interests in the Western Hemisphere. The Russian approach resembles Soviet policy in the Western Hemisphere during the Cold War. In compliance with the Primakov Doctrine, Russia's foreign policy leverages its influence in Venezuela as part of a broader strategy to establish a multipolar world and challenge the United States. This monograph argues that Russia has overlapping strategic interests in Venezuela and may use asymmetric countermeasures to preserve its interests. This monograph encourages US operational and strategic planners to consider Russian courses of action to maintain influence in Venezuela. These considerations can drive and inform effective future US operations.					
15. SUBJECT TERMS Cuba, Gerasimov, New Generation Warfare, Nicaragua, Primakov Doctrine, Private Military Contractors, Russia, Syria, Venezuela					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON Philip J. McCormick
a. REPORT (U)	b. ABSTRACT (U)	c. THIS PAGE (U)			19b. PHONE NUMBER (include area code) 913 758-3300
			(U)	43	

Abstract

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Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Dr. Scott Gorman for his advice, encouragement, and time supporting this monograph. Thank you to my instructors Colonel Michael Kopp and Dr. Amanda Nagel, and my amazing peers from Seminar 9. *Muchas gracias a todos los de WHINSEC, especialmente a mis instructores y compañeros de Equipo Alfa.* Special appreciation to Ms. Bonnie Joranko for her assistance with the editing and formatting of this monograph. Finally, I am most grateful to my wife Jacquelyn and our boys Jaxson and Jaymason. Without your love, encouragement, and perseverance, none of this would have been possible. Love you infinity!

Abbreviations

ALBA	Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas (<i>Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América</i>)
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
FANB	National Bolivarian Armed Forces (<i>Fuerza Armada Nacional Bolivariana</i>)
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
PDVSA	Venezuelan State-owned Oil Company <i>Petróleos de Venezuela, S.A.</i> (<i>Sindicato Anónimo</i>)
PMC	Private Military Contractor
RSII	Russia Syria Iran Iraq (Coalition)
SAA	Syrian Arab Army
USSOUTHCOM	US Southern Command
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

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Introduction

Venezuela is the only failed state in South America.¹ The Venezuelan people suffer from food shortages, hyperinflation, and a public health crisis caused by the Maduro Regime's corruption and mismanagement. As of July 2020, over 5.2 million Venezuelans have fled the man-made disaster, while over 3.2 million remaining citizens face food insecurity.² The United States does not recognize the undemocratically elected Maduro Regime. Instead, the United States recognizes Interim President Juan Guaidó and considers the Venezuelan National Assembly, which he currently leads, to be the only legitimate federal institution according to the Venezuelan Constitution.³ The Venezuelan dictator, Nicolás Maduro, and fourteen other high-ranking government officials are under indictment by the US Justice Department on criminal charges of drug trafficking and corruption.⁴ The combination of a humanitarian disaster, illegitimate regime, and narco-terrorism in Venezuela presents a strategic challenge to the United States and partner nations in the Western Hemisphere. Russia exploits these challenges.

US economic sanctions, combined with declining oil prices, have isolated and weakened Venezuela. However, the current situation has made Venezuela increasingly dependent on Russia; Venezuela can be considered a *de facto* Russian client state. Although the United States is engaged in a "maximum pressure" campaign centered on economic sanctions to remove the Maduro regime, the United States is also considering its military options.⁵ The current US policy for using military force is reflected

¹ J. J. Messner De Latour, Nate Haken, Patricia Taft, Marcel Maglo, Charles Fiertz, Wendy Wilson, Sarah Cockey, Fiona Grathwohl, and Keenan Iuliano, *Fragile States Index Annual Report 2020* (Washington, DC: The Fund for Peace, 2020), 4.

² World Vision, "Venezuela Crisis Response – Situation Report, July 2020," ReliefWeb, September 10, 2020, accessed October 10, 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/report/venezuela-bolivarian-republic/venezuela-crisis-response-situation-report-july-2020>.

³ Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, "US Relations with Venezuela," Department of State, July 6, 2020, accessed September 27, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-venezuela/>.

⁴ "Nicolás Maduro Moros and 14 Current and Former Venezuelan Officials Charged with Narco-Terrorism, Corruption, Drug Trafficking and Other Criminal Charges," US Department of Justice, Office of Public Affairs, March 26, 2020, accessed September 7, 2020, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/nicol-s-maduro-moros-and-14-current-and-former-venezuelan-officials-charged-narco-terrorism>.

⁵ Robert Burns, "US Still Pondering Military Options in Venezuela," *Military Times*, May 5, 2019, accessed September 8, 2020, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2019/05/05/us-still-pondering-military-options-in-venezuela/>.

in Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's statement from 2019: "The President has been crystal clear and incredibly consistent. Military action is possible. If that's what's required, that's what the United States will do."⁶

Using qualitative research, this monograph analyzes how Russian influence in Venezuela could affect future US military planning and operations. The monograph hypothesizes that Russian influence and asymmetric operational approach can challenge and disrupt US military planning and future operations in Venezuela. The monograph explores four topics: Soviet history in the Western Hemisphere during the Cold War, contemporary Russian geopolitical theory, Russia's interests in Venezuela, and the recent Russian intervention in Syria. These topics will inform future understanding of how Russia might use its influence to react to US military operations in and around Venezuela.

The first section of this monograph examines the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics' (USSR) objectives and strategy in the Western Hemisphere. The Soviets viewed forays into the Western Hemisphere as low-cost means with potentially high-end returns. Contemporary Russian planners use the Soviet experience in the Western Hemisphere as a template for their current operations in Venezuela. The Soviets leveraged their client states, Cuba and Nicaragua, and a sophisticated propaganda campaign against the United States during the Cold War. The Russians, looking back at Soviet history, may leverage Venezuela in a similar fashion.

The second section explores Russia's Primakov Doctrine and new generation warfare. These theories have shaped Russia's approach towards Venezuela. The Primakov Doctrine seeks to replace a US-dominated unipolar world with a multipolar world. Russia's interventions in Georgia, Ukraine, Syria, and now possibly Venezuela originate from the Primakov Doctrine. To accomplish the Primakov Doctrine's objectives, the Russian Chief of the Armed Forces, General Valery Gerasimov, has advocated for a new generation of warfare. This theory of warfare utilizes preemptive operations employing a mixture of nonmilitary and military measures to achieve political goals, deploying all elements of society.

⁶ Alex Ward, "Pompeo Says 'Military Action is Possible' in Venezuela if Maduro Doesn't Step Down," Vox, May 1, 2019, accessed May 14, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/world/2019/5/1/18525806/venezuela-pompeo-military-guaido-maduro-trump>.

The chaotic nature of a potential crisis in Venezuela provides Russia an ideal environment to wage new generation warfare through asymmetric operations.

The third section analyzes the multifaceted Russia-Venezuela partnership. Russia has overlapping economic and geopolitical interests in Venezuela, thus having a great incentive to maintain influences there. The close relationship between Russia and Venezuela began in the early 2000s with the concurrent ascent of President Vladimir Putin in Russia and President Chávez in Venezuela. Driven by the Primakov Doctrine, Russia's interests in Venezuela were geopolitical, followed by financial gain. To illustrate, Rosneft, a giant state-owned and privately-owned Russian oil company, invested an estimated twenty billion dollars into Venezuela's oil sector during its operations in Venezuela.⁷ This transaction reflects the enormous investment and risk Russia has undertaken in Venezuela. Additionally, Venezuela owes the Russian government 3.1 billion dollars in arms sales.⁸ Consideration of the Russian "sunken cost dilemma" explains why Russia plans to maintain influence in Venezuela long-term.

The fourth section is a case study of Russia's military intervention in Syria from September 2015 to the present day. This case study is relevant to Venezuela because it provides a contemporary example of applying the Primakov Doctrine and new generation warfare outside Russia's "near-abroad." Understanding the Russian strategic calculations is essential for assessing any potential Russian calculations for intervening in Venezuela. Moreover, the Syrian intervention offers a hypothetical template of how Russia could employ military power in Venezuela.

The monograph concludes with an assessment of Russia's ability to affect future US military planning and operations. The conclusion includes recommendations of how the United States can shape the operational environment and achieve its military objectives when faced with potential Russian challenges and disruptions.

⁷ Paul Saunders, "Leveraging Venezuela: How Russia Sees Its Interests in US Backyard," *Russia Matters*, June 3, 2019, accessed September 28, 2020, <https://www.russiamatters.org/analysis/leveraging-venezuela-how-russia-sees-its-interests-us-backyard>.

⁸ Anatoly Kurmanaev, "Why is Russia Helping Venezuela?" *The New York Times*, March 8, 2019, accessed September 26, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/08/world/americas/russia-venezuela-maduro-putin.html>.

Section 1: Russia's Soviet Legacy in the Western Hemisphere

Understanding the current Russian approach to Venezuela first requires analyzing Soviet activities in Latin America during the Cold War. Russia's current influence in Venezuela is a continuation of Soviet strategy during the Cold War. During the Cold War, the USSR used Cuba and Nicaragua to disrupt US influence. Now, Russia similarly uses Venezuela. Thus, understanding the old Soviet strategy is instrumental to understanding the current Russian strategy.

At the onset of the Cold War, the Soviet Union saw Latin America as a region where American power severely limited communist opportunities for expansion. Historically, the Monroe Doctrine proclaimed US interests over the Western Hemisphere. It informed European powers that an encroachment would be viewed as "the manifestation of an unfriendly disposition toward the United States."⁹ Combined with the threat of communism during the Cold War, the United States considered Soviet encroachment as a double threat. The US-sponsored overthrow of the left-leaning Arbenz regime in Guatemala in 1954 enforced that premise.¹⁰ The United States' resolve and sheer distance blocked any Soviet potential moves in the Western Hemisphere; the communist phrase describing this dilemma was "geographic fatalism."¹¹ However, an unexpected or "black swan" event in 1959 drastically changed the Soviet outlook towards the Western Hemisphere.

Fidel Castro's successful revolution in Cuba in 1959 opened the door to a paradigm shift in Soviet policy in the Western Hemisphere. Castro, who at first presented himself as a reformist, gradually and then fully embraced communism. His partnership with the USSR provided the Soviets a foothold in the Western Hemisphere. The Soviets leveraged their newfound influence to counterbalance the United States in the European theater, disrupt US hegemony in Latin America, and amplify historic anti-American

⁹ James Monroe, "December 2, 1823: Seventh Annual Message (Monroe Doctrine): Transcript," University of Virginia Miller Center, 2019, accessed September 18, 2020, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/december-2-1823-seventh-annual-message-monroe-doctrine>.

¹⁰ Herbert S. Dinerstein, *Soviet Policy in Latin America* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, May 1966), 1.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

sentiment. The study of Soviet actions and objectives in Latin America demonstrates clear parallels with Russia's recent activities and objectives in Venezuela.

The Soviet objectives in the Western Hemisphere were not to install pro-Soviet regimes or acquire Soviet bases but rather to undermine US positions. Soviet planners considered Latin America as the US "strategic rear" and noted US dependence on Latin America for raw materials.¹² Furthermore, the Soviets feared the United States could use Latin America as a "voting machine" in the United Nations; thus, it was politically essential to weaken US influence.¹³ However, Soviet strategy had to consider the United States' geographic proximity and relative military strength in the Western Hemisphere. Therefore, Soviet actions in the Western Hemisphere avoided crossing any "red lines" that would bring them into direct military conflict with the United States. Although the Soviets exercised caution in the Western Hemisphere, they pushed American patience and resources to the limits.

Three years after Castro's revolution in Cuba, the Soviets made their first foray into Latin America to extract concessions from the United States during the Cuban missile crisis. The primary reason for deploying Soviet nuclear missiles to Cuba was to close the "missile gap" with the United States. Additionally, Soviet Premier Khrushchev also calculated the Soviets could gain an advantage over the United States in key contested geopolitical flashpoints. First, he could gain a bargaining chip against the Western presence in Berlin. This presence represented a threat to communist East Germany's legitimacy and posed a potential complication in the event of war in Central Europe. There is speculation that Khrushchev hoped an American diversion of attention to Cuba could cause a rift in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) alliance or even provoke the United States into taking military action in Cuba that could justify a Soviet seizure of West Berlin.¹⁴ Second, he thought the USSR could get a quid

¹² Robert S. Leiken, *Soviet Strategy in Latin America* (Washington, DC: The Center for Strategic and International Studies, Georgetown University, 1982), 22.

¹³ Nikolai Leonov, "Soviet Intelligence in Latin America During the Cold War," trans. Tim Ennis and Maria Teresa Miranda (lecture, Center for Public Studies, Santiago, Chile, September 22, 1998), 7, accessed September 21, 2020, <http://www.hacer.org/pdf/Leonov00.pdf>.

¹⁴ Don Munton and David A. Welch, *The Cuban Missile Crisis: A Concise History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 22.

pro quo deal removing the US Jupiter Intermediate Range Ballistic Missiles (IRBMs) from Turkey. The IRBMs deployed in May 1962 were part of NATO's effort to extend its nuclear umbrella throughout Europe.¹⁵

The United States responded to the Soviet's deployment of nuclear missiles with a naval blockade of Cuba combined with threats of military action. The Soviets decided to negotiate rather than risk a military confrontation. The negotiations resulted in the United States publicly agreeing not to invade Cuba. Also, behind the scenes, Khrushchev secured a deal to remove the Jupiter IRBMs from Turkey; however, the deal's secrecy denied the Soviets a major propaganda victory.¹⁶ Moreover, the Soviets failed to use the Cuban missile crisis to affect the US posture in West Berlin, falling short on an important objective. Overall, the Soviets came up short on a grand quid pro quo deal involving Cuba. However, they had secured a beachhead in the Western Hemisphere, which they exploited throughout the Cold War.

Cuba was an expensive investment for the Soviets, costing the USSR between four to five billion dollars per year.¹⁷ Despite the high cost, the Soviets maintained a presence in Cuba because of the strategic leverage over the United States and NATO. In a NATO-Warsaw Pact confrontation, half of all NATO resupply would depart from Gulf ports and pass by Cuba. Furthermore, the Caribbean was an economic lifeline for the United States. The Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico carried about 55 percent of imported petroleum into the United States and accounted for approximately 45 percent of all US seaborne trade.¹⁸ History shows Moscow was willing to pay a high price for an advantage in a conflict with the United States in Europe. Cuba provided the USSR the strategic flexibility to respond to any perceived US provocations near the Soviet border. Furthermore, Cuba gave the Soviets the ability to create multiple dilemmas for US policymakers. The expansion of Soviet influence into Nicaragua gave the Soviets additional opportunities.

¹⁵ Munton and Welch, *The Cuban Missile Crisis*, 22.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 82.

¹⁷ Director of Central Intelligence, *The Soviet-Cuban Connection in Central America and the Caribbean* (Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, March 1985), 1, accessed September 19, 2020, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP87M00539R001602440011-0.pdf>.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

In July 1979, a broad and popular coalition, the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), overthrew General Somoza's pro-US government, whose family dynasty ruled Nicaragua for over four decades.¹⁹ Although the new Sandinista government made numerous early overtures to the United States for military assistance, the United States was not interested in providing aid. By March 1981, the United States began actively organizing a counterrevolutionary war against the FSLN in Nicaragua. This escalation marked the beginning of Nicaragua's *contra* war. The Sandinista leadership then turned to Cuba and the Soviet Union for military assistance.²⁰ The Soviets used the *contra* war in Nicaragua as a wedge issue to disrupt the United States hegemony in Latin America and a distraction for US policymakers.

With Cuba already secure, Nicaragua was not crucial to Soviet essential strategic concerns. The largely covert character of Russian aid to Nicaragua made it possible for the Soviets to adjust their involvement without a significant loss of face. The Soviets realized they could use Central America as a bargaining chip in future talks with the United States.²¹ The USSR's general approach in Nicaragua, and later El Salvador, was to position itself in a more assertive role in the region while avoiding irrevocable commitments and keeping open alternative strategies.²² Soviet military aid to the Sandinista government was costly for the Soviets—an estimated \$400-500 million annually.²³ Despite the high cost, the USSR considered it a wise investment with high geopolitical returns.

The Soviets used the *contra* war negotiations to disrupt the United States' political sway over Latin America. The initial negotiating effort to resolve the *contra* war was the Contadora plan. The plan

¹⁹ Director of Central Intelligence, *The Soviet-Cuban Connection*, 9.

²⁰ Gary Prevost, "Cuba and Nicaragua," *Latin American Perspectives* 17, no. 3 (Summer 1990): 120; Susanne Jonas and Nancy Stein, "The Construction of Democracy in Nicaragua," *Latin American Perspectives* 17, no. 3 (Summer 1990): 35.

²¹ Director of Central Intelligence, NIE 11-9-83, *Andropov's Approach to Key US-Soviet Issues* (Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, August 9, 1983), 28, accessed September 21, 2020, https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000518054.pdf.

²² Ibid.

²³ Director of Central Intelligence, *Communist Military Assistance to Nicaragua: Trends and Implications* (Washington DC: Central Intelligence Agency, December 1987), 1, accessed September 21, 2020, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP97R00694R000800340001-5.pdf>.

grew out of an effort by Mexican President Lopez Portillo to mediate the US-Nicaragua dispute. It evolved into a regional initiative to negotiate a peaceful resolution of Central America's civil and international conflicts. The Contadora group included Mexico, Venezuela, Colombia, and Panama with a "support group" composed of Brazil, Argentina, Peru, and Uruguay formed in July 1985. These countries became known as the "Group of Eight." The Contadora plan challenged the United States because it *de facto* recognized the Sandinista government and called for a reduction in the region's US military footprint.²⁴

Moscow's endorsement of the Contadora peace process was part of the Soviets' attempt to strengthen the worldwide constituency of support for the Sandinista revolution. Moscow calculated the process would never be formalized. Still, Soviet rhetoric favoring the Contadora plan projected an image of solidarity with the regional Latin American countries involved in the process and assigned the blame to the United States.²⁵

The *contra* war ended with a peace treaty, the Esquipulas Declaration, signed in 1987 and was followed by free elections in 1990. However, the peace process represented a collective action that was unprecedented in Latin America for its level of multilateral cooperation and its sustained challenge to the "hegemonic presumption" of the United States.²⁶ In addition to disrupting US hegemony in Latin America, Soviet influence in Nicaragua indirectly resulted in the Iran-Contra scandal. The scandal could have potentially led to the impeachment of President Ronald Reagan in his second term. The scandal originated from covert arms deals with the Islamic Republic of Iran with the proceeds going to purchase weapons for the US-backed contra rebels in Nicaragua.²⁷

²⁴ Kenneth Roberts, "Bullying and Bargaining: The United States, Nicaragua, and Conflict Resolution in Central America," *International Security* 15, no. 2 (Fall 1990): 69.

²⁵ Director of Central Intelligence, *Soviet Policy Toward Nicaragua* (Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, November 1986), 6, accessed September 20, 2020, https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000499318.pdf.

²⁶ Roberts, "Bullying and Bargaining," 69.

²⁷ "The Iran-Contra Affair 20 Years On," National Security Archive, Electronic Briefing Book No. 210, November 24, 2006, accessed September 20, 2020, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB210/>.

Despite successes in Cuba and Nicaragua, Soviet military power remained in a precarious position due to geography combined with a powerful US military threat. To counter this military disparity in the Western Hemisphere, the Soviets used propaganda to disrupt US influence in Latin America. Soviet propaganda themes and objectives in Latin America spread distrust and resentment of the United States to undermine US hegemony in Latin America and disrupt inter-American military cooperation.²⁸

The Soviets assessed Latin American public opinion as both Catholic and patriotic, and thus, inherently anti-communist.²⁹ Instead of using communist rhetoric to influence Latin American audiences, the Soviets utilized anti-imperialist messaging. Even after the communist revolution in Cuba, the Soviets believed their most significant strategic asset in Latin America was their amplification of anti-American or "Yankee" sentiment, resulting from a history of US intervention in the region.³⁰ The Soviet Union's appeal to Latin American audiences was its distance and did not pose an immediate threat; additionally, they had no colonial or imperial history in the Western Hemisphere. Latin American nationalists welcomed a moderate Soviet presence as a counterweight to US influence.³¹

The objective of Soviet propaganda, similar to current day Russian information operations, was not necessarily to influence audiences to believe a Russian truth but to confuse audiences, priming them for misinformation.³² The Soviets spread false rumors that the United States was behind the death of Panamanian General Omar Torrijos in August 1981 and was involved in punitive actions against civilians in El Salvador, including the use of napalm and herbicides.³³ The Soviets used sophisticated forged documents to imply the United States was cooperating with the Pinochet government in Chile to deploy

²⁸ Director of Central Intelligence, ORE 16, *Soviet Objectives in Latin America* (Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, April 10, 1947), 5, accessed September 19, 2020, https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000256978.pdf.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

³⁰ Leiken, *Soviet Strategy*, 103.

³¹ Dinerstein, *Soviet Policy in Latin America*, 22.

³² Eric Kreitz, "Re-emerging Russian Influence in Latin America and US Foreign Policy Response" (master's thesis, US Army War College, University of Texas, Austin, TX, 2020), 7.

³³ US Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs, *Forgery, Disinformation Political Operations*, Special Report No. 88 (Washington, DC: US Department of State, October 1981), 3-4, accessed October 14, 2020, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP84B00049R001303150031-0.pdf>.

Chilean soldiers to El Salvador and Honduras.³⁴ The Soviet press ran stories that the United States trafficked Latin American children, butchering them, and using their body parts for organ transplants.³⁵

Soviet disruptions in the Western Hemisphere subsided at the end of the Cold War. In the immediate aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse, Russia did not have the resources or desire to continue meddling in the Western Hemisphere. However, an increasingly assertive Russia has embarked on a path to establish a multipolar world. In Venezuela, Russia has maneuvered into a position where it can play the role of spoiler in the Western Hemisphere, akin to the role the former-Soviet Union played during the Cold War.

Section 2: Russia's Vision of a Multipolar World: Theory and Practice

The Primakov Doctrine shapes Russia's confrontational approach towards the West. Russian actions and influence in Venezuela are a direct realization of the Primakov Doctrine. The Primakov Doctrine's objectives are Russian re-establishment of a multipolar world, Russian primacy in the post-Soviet space and integration of those regions, and opposition to NATO expansion.³⁶ The Primakov Doctrine first manifested in the traditional areas of Russian influence—the Balkans and the former USSR. However, as Russia gradually rebuilt its military capabilities, it expanded the doctrine into the Middle East and Western Hemisphere.

³⁴ US Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs, *Active Measures: A Report on the Substance and Process of Anti-US Disinformation and Propaganda Campaigns* (Washington DC: US Department of State, October 1981), 60, accessed October 16, 2020, <http://insidethecoldwar.org/sites/default/files/documents/Soviet%20Active%20Measures%20Substance%20and%20Process%20of%20Anti-US%20Disinformation%20August%201986.pdf>.

³⁵ Fletcher Schoen and Christopher J. Lamb, *Deception, Disinformation, and Strategic Communications: How One Interagency Group Made a Major Difference*, Strategic Perspectives 11 (Washington, DC: Institute for National Strategic Studies, June 2012), 63, accessed October 14, 2020, <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratperspective/inss/Strategic-Perspectives-11.pdf>.

³⁶ Eugene Rumer, "The Primakov (Not Gerasimov) Doctrine in Action," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 5, 2019, accessed September 10, 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/06/05/primakov-not-gerasimov-doctrine-in-action-pub-79254>.³⁷ Xronos, "Lavrov Predicts Historians May Coin New Term: The Primakov Doctrine," Itar-Tass Russian News Agency, October 28, 2014, accessed September 2, 2020, <https://www.kaos.gr/2014/10/lavrov-predicts-historians-may-coin-new.html>.³⁸ Mark N. Katz, "Primakov Redux? Putin's Pursuit of 'Multipolarism' in Asia," *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 14, no. 1 (2006): 145.

The doctrine is named after Yevgeny Primakov, who served successively as Russia's Foreign Minister and Prime Minister from the mid to late 1990s. Vladimir Putin, who succeeded Primakov as Prime Minister in August 1999 and was elected President in March 2000, continued pursuing the Primakov Doctrine. Current Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov described how the Primakov Doctrine set Russia on a new trajectory: "The moment Primakov took over the Russian Foreign Ministry heralded a dramatic turn of Russia's foreign policy. Russia left the path our Western partners had tried to make it follow after the breakup of the Soviet Union and embarked on a track of its own."³⁷ Before the Primakov Doctrine, Russia was on a pro-Western trajectory. During the latter part of the Gorbachev era and the first two years of the Yeltsin era, Russia and the United States experienced an unparalleled close relationship. With the Cold War over, the Russians expected Moscow and Washington to collaborate on managing world affairs.³⁸

The Russian expectations for a collaborative relationship with the West failed to come to fruition. After abandoning its communist economic system, the Russians expected substantial American economic assistance that never materialized. After disbanding the Warsaw Pact, the Russians thought the United States would reciprocate by advocating for disbanding NATO. Instead, the United States pushed for NATO expansion into the former-Soviet Union and onto Russia's borders. The Russians were also disappointed by the United States' criticism and lack of assistance for Russian efforts to contain the Chechen rebellion.³⁹

The Primakov Doctrine's watershed moment was NATO's 1999 Kosovo intervention, which targeted Serbia, a country with strong mutual cultural and historical affinity with Russia. When Prime Minister Primakov traveled to the United States for high-profile economic negotiations, he received a

³⁷ Xronos, "Lavrov Predicts Historians May Coin New Term: The Primakov Doctrine," Itar-Tass Russian News Agency, October 28, 2014, accessed September 2, 2020, <https://www.kaos.gr/2014/10/lavrov-predicts-historians-may-coin-new.html>.³⁸ Mark N. Katz, "Primakov Redux? Putin's Pursuit of 'Multipolarism' in Asia," *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 14, no. 1 (2006): 145.

³⁸ Mark N. Katz, "Primakov Redux? Putin's Pursuit of 'Multipolarism' in Asia," *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 14, no. 1 (2006): 145.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 145.

phone call from then-Vice President Gore, who stated that a barrage of air and missile strikes against Serbian targets was imminent. Primakov immediately ordered his plane to return to Russia in midflight.⁴⁰ This airborne maneuver, dubbed "Primakov's loop," was symbolic of Russia's strategic pivot away from the West and towards the creation of a multipolar world.⁴¹

The multipolar world envisioned by Primakov was a Russia-India-China troika that protected the security of nations not allied with the West.⁴² Vladimir Putin presided over Primakov's vision by reversing the Yeltsin-era drift away from India; he signed the "India-Russia Strategic Partnership" in October 2000.⁴³ Subsequently, Russia and China signed a "Friendship Treaty" in 2001, where both nations promised to establish a "just and rational new international order."⁴⁴ The impediment of the tripartite alliance was the India-China border dispute. Despite this, the Russians believed they were still better positioned to compete with the United States with partners in an unstable anti-hegemonic coalition rather than singlehandedly.

Vladimir Putin veered away from the Primakov Doctrine following the September 11, 2001 attacks against the United States. Putin overrode his defense minister's objections to the Americans establishing military bases in former-Soviet Central Asia. Furthermore, Russia closed its last remaining Cold War legacy facility in Cuba, the Lourdes Signals Intelligence Station, in January 2002.⁴⁵ Putin hoped Russia and the United States could embark on a renewed strategic partnership and cooperate

⁴⁰ John M. Broder, "Primakov, on Way to the US, Turns Back Home in Midair" *New York Times*, March 24, 1999, accessed September 2, 2020, https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/learning/general/featured_articles/990324Dwednesday.html.

⁴¹ Rakesh Krishnan Simha, "Primakov: The Man Who Created Multipolarity," *Modern Diplomacy*, June 30, 2015, accessed September 29, 2020, <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2015/06/30/primakov-the-man-who-created-multipolarity/>.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Mikhail Klimentyev, "India and Russia – Bilateralism and Multipolarity," Institut Montaigne, October 30, 2019, accessed September 26, 2020, <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/blog/india-and-russia-bilateralism-and-multipolarity>.

⁴⁵ Patrick E. Tyler, "Russia and China Sign 'Friendship' Pact," *New York Times*, accessed September 09, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/07/17/world/russia-and-china-sign-friendship-pact.html>.

⁴⁶ Mark N. Katz, "The Putin-Chávez Partnership," *Problems of Post-Communism* 53, no. 4 (2006): 4.

against the threat of Islamic terrorism to include Russian concerns over Chechen rebels.⁴⁶ However, Russian expectations for a collaborative relationship with the United States failed to materialize for a second time.

The Russians were taken aback by the United States' withdrawal from the 1972 Soviet-American Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and subsequent development of a ballistic missile defense program. The Russians then accused the United States of being behind the democratic "color" revolutions in Georgia in 2003, Ukraine in 2004, and Kyrgyzstan in 2005. The United States returned criticism at Russia for supporting Iran's atomic energy program. Finally, Russia opposed the United States' invasion of Iraq in 2003.⁴⁷ Russia had significant investments in Iraq. Putin sent Primakov to Baghdad in February 2003 to find a peaceful settlement to the crisis; nevertheless, the United States proceeded with its invasion.⁴⁸

Faced with these multiple disagreements with the United States, Putin grudgingly reverted to the Primakov Doctrine. In February 2007, Putin addressed the Munich Conference on Security Policy and stated, "I consider that the unipolar model is not only unacceptable but also impossible in today's world."⁴⁹ The speech was Russian strategic messaging to a global audience of Russia's intention to create a multipolar world.

While the Primakov Doctrine drives Russian foreign policy, Russia employs "new generation" warfare to accomplish its objectives. This whole-of-government concept fuses hard and soft power across multiple domains and transcends boundaries between peace- and wartime.⁵⁰ Russian Chief of the Armed Forces General Valery Gerasimov published an article, "The Value of Science is in Prediction," where he

⁴⁶ Katz, "Primakov Redux?" 147.

⁴⁷ Katz, "Primakov Redux?" 147.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 47.

⁴⁹ Vladimir Putin, "Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy," (Speech, Munich, Federal Republic of Germany, February 10, 2007), accessed November 10, 2020, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>.

⁵⁰ Rumer, "The Primakov (Not Gerasimov) Doctrine in Action."

explained how the rules of war have changed.⁵¹ The article was a reaction to the Arab Spring; however, its thesis that "the role of nonmilitary means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and, in many cases, they have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness" applies to the current situation in Venezuela.⁵²

Additionally, Gerasimov wrote, "In the 21st century, we have seen a tendency toward blurring the lines between the states of war and peace. Wars are no longer declared, and having begun, proceed according to an unfamiliar template."⁵³ He followed with "a perfectly thriving state can, in a matter of months and even days, be transformed into an arena of fierce armed conflict, become a victim of foreign intervention, and sink into a web of chaos, humanitarian catastrophe, and civil war."⁵⁴ Viewing the situation in Venezuela from Gerasimov's perspective, the current US "maximum pressure" campaign is in an undeclared war against Venezuela. Considering the Russian-Venezuelan strategic partnership, Russia and the United States are in the early stages of an undeclared war over Venezuela's future.

However, Russia is in a weak position relative to the United States. After the Soviet collapse in 1991, Russia lost almost a quarter of its territory, and its population shrank by 150 million inhabitants.⁵⁵ Faced with this dilemma, Russia must use an asymmetrical operational approach to accomplish its objectives. In 2018, the popular Russian military journal, *Military Thought*, defined asymmetric operations as a "strategy of the struggle of a weak side against a strong one. It is a strategy employed most often for conflicts between enemies unequal in economic development or the level of military force."⁵⁶

Russia uses its influence in Venezuela for two distinct but at times overlapping asymmetric counters to the West. First, Russia uses Venezuela as asymmetric leverage to counter the United States or

⁵¹ Mark Galeotti, "The 'Gerasimov Doctrine' and Russian Non-Linear War," *In Moscow's Shadows* (blog), *WordPress*, February 27, 2013, accessed October 10, 2020, <https://inmoscowsshadows.wordpress.com/2014/07/06/the-gerasimov-doctrine-and-russian-non-linear-war/>.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Galeotti, "The 'Gerasimov Doctrine' and Russian Non-Linear War."

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Mirosław Minkina, "Russia's Return to the Superpower Status," *Security and Defence Quarterly* 26, no. 4 (2019): 35, accessed September 23, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.35467/sdq/110335>.

⁵⁶ Thomas, *Russian Military Thought: Concepts and Elements*, 5-2.

NATO actions in Europe. Second, it bolsters the Venezuelan regime's ability to challenge the United States. In 2008, Russia deployed two Tu-160 strategic bombers to Venezuela after NATO promised Georgia and the Ukraine eventual NATO membership, and the United States conducted naval maneuvers in the Black Sea.⁵⁷ In 2018, Russia again deployed two Tu-160 strategic bombers to Venezuela. This time, the Russian press stated the deployment was "an opportunity to demonstrate its resolve to defend the nation against possible foreign military intervention, with the help from 'friends' if need be."⁵⁸

Former-Venezuelan President Chávez directed Venezuela's National Bolivarian Armed Forces (FANB) to develop a new military doctrine for contemporary conflict, saying, "I call upon everybody to start an effort to apprehend the ideas, concepts, and doctrine of asymmetric warfare."⁵⁹ The FANB prepared an asymmetric plan to repel an invasion by a hypothetical "Goliath" country. The asymmetric preparations include a "popular war of resistance" and "ideological offensive."⁶⁰

Russia has provided the FANB the weapons in preparation for a theoretical conflict against the United States. For example, Russia has supported the construction of a Venezuelan Kalashnikov factory, the largest outside of Eastern Europe and Russia, producing 25,000 AK-103 assault rifles and fifty million rounds of ammunition annually.⁶¹ The Kalashnikov factory is a critical requirement for Venezuela to conduct its "popular war of resistance." Besides small arms, Russia sold a plethora of high-tech weaponry to Venezuela which could aid an asymmetric conflict. An example is the S-300 surface-to-air missile (SAM) system. Russia sold the S-300s to Venezuela in 2009 at the height of Russian arms sales to Venezuela. Subsequently, as tensions escalated between the Maduro regime and US-backed

⁵⁷ Bryan Frederick, Matthew Povlock, Stephen Watts, Miranda Priebe, and Edward Geist, *Assessing Russian Reactions to U.S. and NATO Posture Enhancements* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2017), 104.

⁵⁸ Maria C. Werlau, *Cuba's Intervention in Venezuela: A Strategic Occupation with Global Implications* (Washington, DC: Free Society Project, 2019), 193.

⁵⁹ Max G. Manwaring, "The New Master of Wizard's Chess: The Real Hugo Chávez and Asymmetric Warfare." *Military Review* 85, no. 5 (September-October 2005): 44.

⁶⁰ "Venezuelan Military Doctrine," Global Security, accessed November 23, 2020, <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/venezuela/doctrine.htm>.

⁶¹ Diana Villiers Negroponte, "Russian Interests in Venezuela: A New Cold War?" *Americas Quarterly*, June 19, 2018, accessed October 15, 2020, <https://www.americasquarterly.org/article/russian-interests-in-venezuela-a-new-cold-war/>.

parliamentary leader Juan Guaidó in March 2019, Russia sent advisors to Venezuela to refurbish and assist in deploying the S-300 systems.⁶² Additionally, Russia has also sold approximately five thousand man-portable Igla-S (SA-24) surface-to-air missiles to Venezuela.⁶³

Perhaps more importantly, Russia provides information warfare support for Venezuela's "ideological offensive." In March 2019, Russia not only sent advisors to assist Venezuela with its conventional weapons systems but also cyber and information warfare experts.⁶⁴ Russia uses the Russia Today (RT) media network to spread strategic narratives supporting the Maduro regime. During the aforementioned March 2019 escalation, Russia Today used four salient storylines: "The US wants regime change;" "The US wants Venezuela's oil;" "The US will create provocations;" and "The US is hypocritical and caused the crisis." These themes were designed to rekindle long-running skepticism of US interventionism and increase information ambiguity.⁶⁵

Venezuela is an engagement area for Russian overlapping geopolitical and military theory. Russia uses Venezuela to advance the Primakov Doctrine's principles of establishing a multipolar world and countering NATO expansion. Venezuela's strategic location provides Russia operational reach in its Gerasimov-style "undeclared war" against the United States. Furthermore, the chaotic nature of a potential crisis in Venezuela gives Russia the ability to challenge the United States asymmetrically and indirectly.

⁶² Martin Arostegui, "Russian Missiles in Venezuela Heighten US Tensions," Voice of America News, April 29, 2019, accessed September 29, 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/americas/russian-missiles-venezuela-heighten-us-tensions>.

⁶³ Girish Gupta, "Exclusive: Venezuela Holds 5,000 Russian Surface-To-Air MANPADS Missiles," May 22, 2017, *Reuters*, accessed November 27, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-venezuela-arms-manpads/exclusive-venezuela-holds-stock-of-5000-russian-surface-to-air-manpads-missiles-idUSKBN18I0E9>.

⁶⁴ Sergey Sukhankin, "Behind the Scenes of Russia's Military Detachment to Venezuela," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 16, no. 46 (April 2, 2019), accessed November 18, 2020, <https://jamestown.org/program/behind-the-scenes-of-russias-military-detachment-to-venezuela/>.

⁶⁵ Sean P. Steiner and Sarah Oates, *Kennan Cable No. 43: Reading the RT Leaves: Foreign Policy Lessons from Russian International Media Coverage of Venezuela* (Washington, DC: The Wilson Center, Kennan Institute, August 2019), accessed October 10, 2020, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/kennan-cable-no-43-reading-the-rt-leaves-foreign-policy-lessons-russian-international>.

Section 3: Geopolitical Sunken Costs and the Russian-Venezuelan Partnership

Russia is inexorably economically and politically committed to Venezuela's uncertain and unstable future. The Russian dilemma is comparable to a "suitcase without a handle," hard to carry but difficult to throw away.⁶⁶ The primary motivation for Russia's massive investments in Venezuela is fundamentally geopolitical, not economical. The experience of the Russian state-owned oil company Rosneft and successive Russian ventures reflects this reality. The Russian-Venezuelan partnership is complex; although profit is not the primary motivation for investment in Venezuela, Russia's economic bottom-line remains a significant factor in Russia's future decision-making. Furthermore, ideological and diplomatic factors also play an essential role in the Russian-Venezuelan partnership. Understanding the extent of the Russia-Venezuelan partnership explains why Russia cannot easily leave Venezuela.

How did Russia gain influence in a country so far away from its borders where it has no cultural or historical connections? The answer to this question begins in December 1998 with the landslide election of President Hugo Chávez, who carried 78 percent of the vote. Chávez was a radical populist and former paratrooper who once led a failed coup attempt. His campaign rhetoric appealed to Venezuela's poor majority. He led an anti-establishment, anti-corruption platform that called for dramatic political and economic reforms.⁶⁷

President Chávez did not immediately turn Venezuela's foreign policy away from the United States; instead, he sought an amicable relationship with this powerful neighbor to the north. Notably, during a visit to New York in 1999, Chávez threw the opening pitch for a Yankees game and rang the bell

⁶⁶ Vladimir Rouvinski, *Russian-Venezuelan Relations at a Crossroads* (Washington, DC: Kennan Institute, February 2019), 2, accessed September 22, 2020, <https://www.almendron.com/tribuna/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/russian-venezuelan-relations-at-a-crossroads.pdf>.

⁶⁷ Serge F. Kovalski, "Populist Elected in Venezuela," *Washington Post*, December 7, 1998, accessed September 15, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/inatl/daily/dec98/07/venezuela120798.htm>.

to close the New York Stock Exchange.⁶⁸ Despite their early potential, positive relations between Caracas and Washington were short-lived.

Chávez, acting on his populist campaign rhetoric, replaced the old and politically connected management of the Venezuelan state oil company *Petróleos de Venezuela* (PDVSA) with individuals loyal to him and his revolution. As a result, the Venezuelan military, many of whom were still loyal to the old political establishment, launched a failed coup attempt to remove Chávez in April 2002. Chávez accused the United States of being behind the coup attempt and ended Venezuela's thirty-five-year military exchange program and partnership with the United States.⁶⁹

Furthermore, Venezuela and the United States became engaged in an increasingly escalating dispute over the future of trade negotiations in the Western Hemisphere. The United States advocated for the Free Trade Area for the Americas, an initiative resembling the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) for the entire Western Hemisphere (excluding Cuba). While Chávez proposed an agreement excluding the United States, his proposal eventually grew into the Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas (ALBA).⁷⁰

As relations between the United States and Venezuela soured, a new Russian politician, Vladimir Putin, was elected President of the Russian Federation in March 2000. Chávez and Putin shared two important beliefs: they adhered to a philosophy of "illiberal democracy" that blended authoritarianism and elections, and they desired a multipolar world.⁷¹ A mutual opponent—the United States—impeded their domestic and foreign agendas. The two new presidents gravitated towards one another, meeting in Moscow twice in 2001 where they signed "a framework agreement on arms sales" although no formal

⁶⁸ Brian Palmer, "Why Did Hugo Chávez Hate the United States So Much?" *Slate*, March 6, 2013, accessed September 10, 2020, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2013/03/hugo-Chávez-dies-why-did-the-venezuelan-leader-hate-the-united-states-so-much.html>.

⁶⁹ Werlau, *Cuba's Intervention in Venezuela*, 44.

⁷⁰ Franklin Foyer, "The Talented Mr. Chávez," *The Atlantic*, May 6, 2006, accessed September 19, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2006/05/the-talented-mr-ch-vez/304809/>.

⁷¹ Luis Fleischman, *Latin America in the Post-Chávez Era* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2013), 37.

accord was ratified. Even though both Chávez and Putin expressed opposition to a United States-led unipolar world, disagreements over oil production quotas kept them from a full embrace.⁷²

The combination of higher oil prices and Chávez's break with the United States set the conditions for Russia and Venezuela to sign their first major arms deal in 2005. From 2005 to 2007, Russia and Venezuela signed twelve arms deals worth \$4.4 billion dollars. These deals included a range of armaments from Kalashnikov rifles to MiG-29 fighter jets.⁷³ Chávez justified these massive procurements by alleging a need to fight off an American invasion. Chávez declared the "sacred mission" of his foreign policy was to "save humanity" from the "US threat" and to promote a multipolar world.⁷⁴

Venezuela's dependency on Russia increased further in 2006 when the United States banned weapons sales to Venezuela. The United States cited Venezuela's lack of support for antiterrorist efforts and providing sanctuary for Colombian narco-terrorists to justify the weapons ban.⁷⁵ Russia and Venezuela turned away from the United States and towards the notion of a multipolar world concurrently. These simultaneous paradigm shifts in foreign relations set the conditions for Venezuela to fall into Russia's orbit.

Further agreements were signed, expanding Russian investment into the lucrative Venezuelan energy and mining sectors.⁷⁶ In November 2008, a Russian delegation headed by then Deputy Prime Minister Igor Sechin, a close confidant of Putin, traveled to Cuba and Venezuela to negotiate forty-six joint development projects. The projects included military, energy, financial, industrial, telecommunications, and even nuclear energy. The visit marked the beginning of Russia's multi-billion-dollar investments in Venezuela, and Sechin declared the two nations had become "strategic partners."⁷⁷

⁷² Katz, "The Putin-Chávez Partnership," 5.

⁷³ Werlau, *Cuba's Intervention in Venezuela*, 189.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁷⁵ Chris Kraul, "U.S. Officially Bans Arms Sales to Venezuela," *Los Angeles Times*, May 16, 2006, accessed November 11, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2006-may-16-fg-venezuela16-story.html>.

⁷⁶ Katz, "The Putin-Chávez Partnership," 6.

⁷⁷ Werlau, *Cuba's Intervention in Venezuela*, 186.

This partnership has only grown stronger since President Chávez died of cancer in 2013. His successor, Nicolás Maduro, who lacks Chávez's charisma and leadership, relied increasingly on electoral fraud and physical force to maintain power in Venezuela. The United States has responded to the Maduro regime's oppression with punitive diplomatic, informational, and economic measures; however, the Maduro regime survives, albeit with external support.

These Russian investments did not yield positive economic gains. From 2010 until 2019, Rosneft invested around nine billion dollars in Venezuelan projects but failed to break even. Rosneft's local partner, Venezuelan state oil company PDVSA, could not account for 700 million dollars. PDVSA employees lacked minimal safety gear, and equipment procurement took months. Workers delayed drilling, and their labor was substandard. When other oil companies began divesting from Venezuela from 2012 to 2015 due to Venezuela's increasingly socialist administration and policies, Rosneft increased its Venezuelan investments.⁷⁸ Why did Rosneft continue investing in Venezuela while other companies were leaving? Geopolitics.

A Russian oil executive explained that "From the very beginning, it was a purely political project. We all had to contribute."⁷⁹ Russia was willing to sacrifice commercial profits for perceived geopolitical advantages, namely creating a multipolar world in line with the Primakov Doctrine. In August 2017, as Venezuela's political climate became increasingly unstable due to President Maduro's socialist party rewriting the Venezuelan constitution, Rosneft prepaid PDVSA six billion dollars. Rosneft Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Igor Sechin stated the firm would continue work in Venezuela and would never leave the country.⁸⁰ At the time, Venezuela was by far the largest overseas investment for Rosneft.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Christian Lowe and Rinat Sagdiev, "How Russia Sank Billions of Dollars Into Venezuelan Quicksand," *Reuters*, March 14, 2019, accessed October 02, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/venezuela-russia-rosneft/>.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ "Rosneft Says Lent Venezuela's State Oil Firm a Total of \$6 Billion," *Reuters*, August 8, 2017, accessed November 25, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-rosneft-essar/rosneft-says-lent-venezuelas-state-oil-firm-a-total-of-6-billion-idUSKBN1AO1RD>.

⁸¹ Rouvinski, *Russian-Venezuelan Relations at a Crossroads*, 10.

Rosneft is the Russian oil sector's leading company and the world's largest publicly traded oil and gas corporation. The company is one of Russia's strategic companies and is under state and private ownership.⁸² In January 2020, the Department of State's Special Representative for Venezuela, Elliot Abrams, stated Rosneft was acquiring and reselling 70 percent of Venezuela's oil, providing a "lifeline" to Caracas.⁸³ Rosneft was Russia's soft power tool for foreign policy, and by extension, the Primakov Doctrine, advancing the Kremlin's goal of a multipolar world.

Nonetheless, despite Rosneft's power, Russia's strategy of investing in an increasingly turbulent Venezuela was fundamentally vulnerable to Western sanctions. Sanctions targeting the Maduro regime, by extension, penalized Rosneft's ability to sell Venezuelan oil. The decision by Chinese state oil company Sinochem to stop buying crude from Rosneft was a significant setback and a forewarning that more companies would stop doing business with Rosneft due to US sanctions. Shortly after, Rosneft stated it wanted the sanctions lifted, saying the company had to protect its shareholders.⁸⁴ In March 2020, amid a major downturn in world oil markets, Rosneft announced it would leave Venezuela after ten years and billions of dollars in investments.⁸⁵ Western sanctions and record low oil prices took their toll on Russian investments in Venezuela and forced Russia to adjust its Venezuelan strategy. See Figure 1 for Rosneft oil operations.

⁸² "Rosneft at a Glance," 2020, Rosneft, accessed November 25, 2020, https://www.rosneft.com/about/Rosneft_today/.

⁸³ Andrey Pyantakov, *Russia and Latin America in the 21st Century: A Difficult Rapprochement* (Paris, France: Russie.NEI.Visions, July 2020), 28, accessed September 26, 2020, https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/pyantakov_latin_america_an_2020.pdf.

⁸⁴ 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, accessed September 21, 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-rosneft-ditches-venezuela-assets-u-s-sanctions-/30534209.html>.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

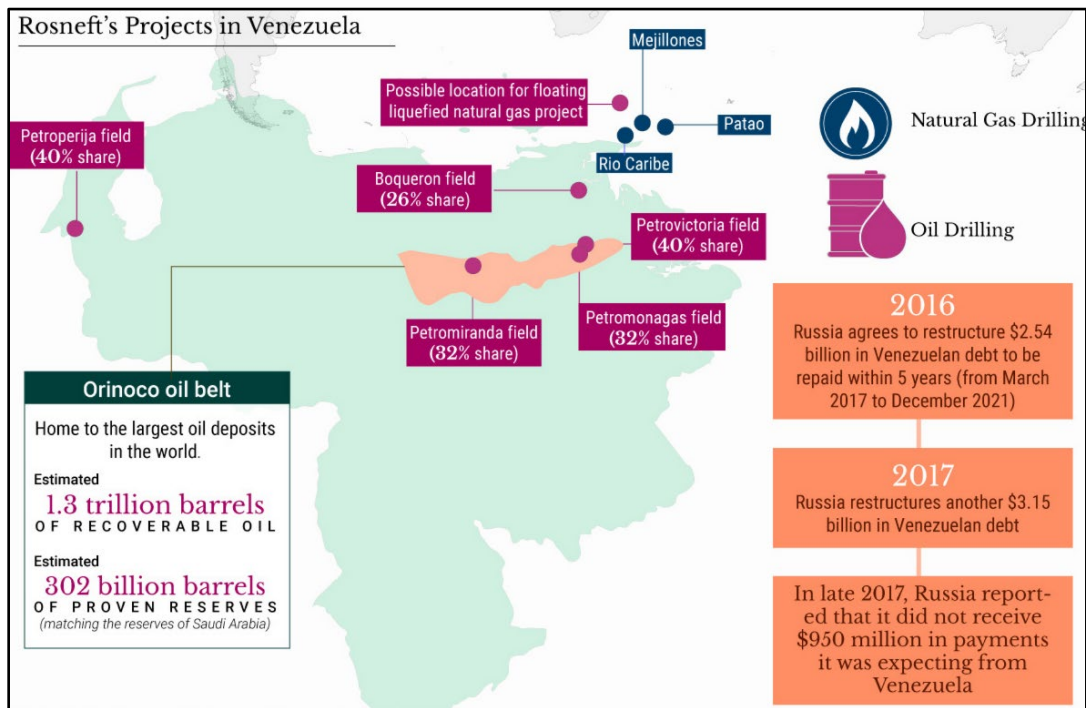


Figure 1. Economic Times Between Russia and Venezuela, December 2018. "Russia-Venezuela Economic Ties," Geopolitical Futures, December 21, 2018, accessed December 05, 2020, <https://geopoliticalfutures.com/russia-venezuela-economic-ties/>.

Despite the setback, Russia did not abandon the Venezuelan oil sector. Rosneft sold its Venezuelan assets to Roszarubezhneft, a newly established and entirely Russian state-owned oil company. The newly appointed CEO of Roszarubezhneft, Nikolai Rybchuk, is a former *Spetsnaz* special forces officer with no experience in the energy business and is entrusted to manage an operation valued at over four billion dollars. Rybchuk was stationed in Angola during its civil war in the 1980s, a proxy US-USSR Cold War conflict where opposing sides fought over oil and other natural resources.⁸⁶ The selection of a veteran of the Angolan war is notable since Cuban soldiers played a decisive role in the war; Cuba is currently one of Venezuela's few allies in the Western Hemisphere. Rybchuk's appointment as CEO signals Russia's desire for commitment and stability in Venezuela's oil market. Additionally, his military background and probable contacts with Russian private military contractors (PMC) and Cubans make him an ideal fit to secure Russian investments.

⁸⁶ Candace Rondeaux, "Why Russia's Oil Giant, Rosneft, Abruptly Cut Its Ties With Venezuela," *World Politics Review*, April 3, 2020, accessed November 25, 2020, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/28655/what-does-rosneft-cutting-ties-with-venezuela-mean-for-russia-venezuela-relations>.

Apart from the oil sector, Russian economic cooperation has declined significantly between the Chávez and Maduro eras. At its peak in 2013, bilateral trade was estimated at \$2.4 billion dollars but fell to just \$80 million dollars in 2018.⁸⁷ The decline in trade coincides with the collapse of Venezuela's economy. Thus, Russia is in a predicament: Russia still has a geopolitical incentive to invest and trade with Venezuela. However, with the Russian economy faltering, Russian businesses cannot take negative returns on their investments indefinitely. This economic reality is a key difference between Soviet relations with Cuba and Nicaragua during Cold War and contemporary Russian relations with Venezuela; Russia expects geopolitical plus financial returns on its investments.

Even the large Russian defense contractor, Rostec, drastically reduced its personnel from a high of around one thousand to a few dozen contractors, allegedly because Venezuela had fallen behind on payments.⁸⁸ Once one of the pillars of the Russian-Venezuelan partnership, the massive arms deals between Russia and Venezuela are no longer sustainable. Despite these setbacks, Russia still has other incentives to maintain its partnership with Venezuela.

A critical component of Russia's partnership with Venezuela is its symbolic significance and demonstration of Russia's return to its rightful leading role on the international stage. Not only is this strategic messaging directed towards the United States and international community, but also to the Russian population. Furthermore, Venezuela has diplomatically supported Russia. In 2008, Venezuela was one of the few countries to officially recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia's independence after Russia occupied the territories after its war with Georgia.⁸⁹ Moreover, Venezuela used its influence within ALBA to persuade Nicaragua to recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia officially.⁹⁰ Following Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea, Venezuelan President Maduro spoke out in support of Russia, stating, "What has happened in Crimea is a response to the format that made Ukrainian democracy

⁸⁷ Pyantakov, *Russia and Latin America*, 30.

⁸⁸ Werlau, *Cuba's Intervention in Venezuela*, 196.

⁸⁹ Pavel Felgenhauer, "Venezuela's Multibillion Dollar Abkhazia and South Ossetia Recognition Fee," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 6, no. 170 (September 17, 2009), accessed October 15, 2020, <https://jamestown.org/program/venezuelas-multibillion-dollar-abkhazia-and-south-ossetia-recognition-fee/>.

⁹⁰ Rouvinski, *Russian-Venezuelan Relations at a Crossroads*, 13.

collapse. And there is only one reason for this: the anti-Russian policy of the US and some European countries. They seek to encircle Russia to weaken and eventually destroy it.⁹¹ Venezuela, together with Syria, are the only countries openly supporting Russia's global military actions against its neighbors.

Russia has invested more than just money into Venezuela but also its prestige. A hasty Russian withdrawal from Venezuela would send the wrong signals to Russia's other partners in the Western Hemisphere, notably Cuba and Nicaragua, but also to the international community at large. The collapse of the Maduro regime without continued Russian influence in a successive government would significantly set back Russia's strategic objective of establishing a multipolar world and, in a Thucydidean sense, would blemish Russian "honor."

Section 4: A Case Study of the Russian Intervention in Syria

Like Venezuela, Syria is a Russian client state and an essential part of Moscow's strategic goal of constructing a multipolar world. Understanding Russia's strategic calculations behind its Syria intervention is critical for assessing Russian red lines in Venezuela. Furthermore, understanding Russia's operational design in Syria facilitates forecasting potential Russian military courses of action in Venezuela.

Russia intervened militarily in Syria on September 30, 2015, to save Bashar al-Assad's regime from collapsing under the pressure of an internal rebellion. Ostensibly, Russian President Vladimir Putin justified Russia's intervention as a fight against terrorism. Putin stated that Russia was acting "preventatively, to fight and destroy militants and terrorists on the territories they already occupied, not wait for them to come to our house."⁹² Yet, behind the scenes, Russia's strategic goal of constructing a multipolar world, rather than the tactical problem of terrorism, played an outsized role in the decision.

⁹¹ Joshua Keating, "Who's on Team Putin?" *Slate*, March 20, 2014, accessed September 27, 2020, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2014/03/the-small-group-of-countries-supporting-russia-s-position-in-ukraine-venezuela-syria-sort-of-china-maybe-india.html>.

⁹² Helene Cooper, Michael R. Gordon, and Neil MacFarquhar, "Russians Strike Targets in Syria, but Not ISIS Areas," *New York Times*, accessed October 23, 2020, September 30, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/01/world/europe/russia-airstrikes-syria.html>.

The Russians drew a red line in Syria. Instead of using diplomacy and information to prevent regime change, Russia used its military power to preserve a friendly regime and counter Western objectives.

Strategically, Russia had three primary goals for intervening in Syria. These were preventing US-backed regime change in Syria, breaking out of geopolitical isolation, and demonstrating domestically and internationally that Russia is a great power.⁹³ Operationally, Russian objectives were raising the morale and combat power of the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) and establishing control over key population centers.⁹⁴ There was no intention to conduct nation-building, reconstruction, or political transformation in Syria. The top priority was a successful military campaign followed by a political settlement, though the former would determine the latter's outcome.⁹⁵

Russia viewed the Assad regime's potential collapse as part of a Western line of effort to undermine and overthrow regimes that opposed the West's bidding. As evidence, the Russians cited NATO's intervention in Libya to overthrow Muammar Qaddafi, the invasion of Iraq to remove Saddam Hussein, the Taliban's ouster in Afghanistan, and the NATO campaign to remove Serbian forces from Kosovo.⁹⁶ The Russians saw this pattern of Western military interventions as a direct threat to Russia. From a Gerasimov perspective, the West was engaging in an undeclared war against the Assad regime. Therefore, since Syria is a Russian strategic partner, Syria is a battleground in a larger undeclared war against Russia. Thus, Moscow prioritized preventing regime change in Syria as a forward defense for Russia.⁹⁷

The decision to intervene in Syria was also motivated by a need to break out of geopolitical isolation following Russia's annexation of Crimea and intervention in Eastern Ukraine. The retaliatory

⁹³ Michael Kofman and Matthew Rojansky, "What Kind of Victory for Russia in Syria?" *Military Review*, (March-April 2018): 10.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁹⁵ Michael Kofman, *Syria and the Russian Armed Forces: An Evaluation of Moscow's Military Strategy and Operational Performance* (Philadelphia, PA: Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2020), 4, accessed December 01, 2020, <https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/syria-and-the-russian-armed-forces-kofman.pdf>.

⁹⁶ Samuel Charap, Elina Treyger, and Edward Geist, *Understanding Russia's Intervention in Syria* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2019), 5.

⁹⁷ Charap, Treyger, and Geist, *Understanding Russia's Intervention in Syria*, 6.

Western diplomatic and economic sanctions damaged Russia's prestige and economy. Borrowing a page from the Soviet Cold War playbook in Latin America, Russia sought a quid pro quo deal with the West and "use Syria as a bargaining chip in relations with the West."⁹⁸ A successful intervention gives Russia leverage. For example, having the ability to influence Syrian refugees' flow into Europe may give Russia leverage to bargain for relief from sanctions.⁹⁹ Another potential source of Russian leverage is their ability to roll back the Iranian military and proxy presence in Syria in return for the United States to reduce sanctions.¹⁰⁰

Besides gaining leverage, Russia's intervention in Syria sent a strategic message to both its domestic population and the international community that Russia is once again a major player in world affairs. Syria is held up as an example for current and future Russian client states, proving Moscow keeps its word and is a dependable partner. From an advantageous position in Syria, Russia presents itself as an alternative to the US hegemony. The Syrian intervention advertised Russia's latest weapons systems, including the SU-35 jet fighter and Kalibr cruise missile. These factors contributed to Russian arms exports to the Middle East increasing from nine billion in 2009 to \$21.4 billion in 2016.¹⁰¹ Furthermore, Syria provides an opportunity to increase its engagement and cooperation with Turkey, a prominent NATO member, thus weakening the Atlantic alliance.¹⁰²

Operationally, the Russians designed an adaptive and flexible campaign. Russia benefited from closely aligned military and political objectives, a lack of geopolitical constraints or alliance

⁹⁸ Ibid., 7.

⁹⁹ Joseph S. Nye Jr., "The Russian Connection Between Syria and Ukraine," *The National Interest*, February 17, 2016, accessed October 15, 2020, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-russian-connection-between-syria-ukraine-15237>.

¹⁰⁰ Firas Maksad, "The Illusion of a US-Russia Grand Bargain Over Syria and Ukraine," *The National News*, July 14, 2018, accessed October 27, 2020, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/opinion/comment/the-illusion-of-a-us-russia-grand-bargain-over-syria-and-ukraine-1.750035>.

¹⁰¹ Anna Borshchevskaya, *Russia in the Middle East: The Tactical Side of Russia's Arms Sales to the Middle East* (Washington, DC: The Washington Institute, 2017), 2, accessed October 15, 2020, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/opeds/Borshchevskaya20171222-Jamestown.pdf>.

¹⁰² Jonathan Marcus, "How Russia's Putin Became the Go-To Man on Syria," British Broadcasting Corporation, March 5, 2020, accessed October 05, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-51733595>.

considerations on their decision-making, and limited domestic opposition to the intervention.¹⁰³ Russia's major limitation was geography. To get from the Black Sea to Syria, Russia must traverse through Bosphorus and Dardanelle straits controlled by its rival Turkey. Adding to Russia's predicament was its lack of a blue water navy. Anton Lavrov, a defense analyst with Moscow's Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies, said, "Syria pushed Russian logistics to its limits," and Russia "does not have the ability to sustain forces far from the border."¹⁰⁴ Despite this, Russia extended its operational reach through the creation of the "Syrian Express." Using hastily purchased and antiquated merchant vessels combined with military shipping and airlift, Russia delivered tons of munitions and supplies to its Syrian task force.¹⁰⁵ Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu stated, "At the initial phase of our operation, about 1,000 tons of cargo per day were delivered to Syria, and at our peak, we delivered up to 2,500 tons of cargo per day."¹⁰⁶

In addition to logistical limitations, the Russian task force deployed to Syria was relatively small due to political considerations. Although supportive of the intervention, the Russian public was hesitant of a large deployment to Syria because of the USSR's Afghan experience.¹⁰⁷ Therefore, the Russians had to maintain a limited footprint and were always ready for a quick withdrawal if the campaign's costs became untenable.

¹⁰³ Kofman and Rojansky, "What Kind of Victory for Russia in Syria?" 10.

¹⁰⁴ John Grady, "Expert: Syria Deployment Pushing the Limits of Russian Military Capability," US Naval Institute, May 17, 2018, accessed November 28, 2020, <https://news.usni.org/2018/05/17/expert-syria-deployment-pushing-limits-russian-military-capability>.

¹⁰⁵ Jonathan Saul and Maria Tsvetkova, "Russia Supplies Syria Mission With Old Cargo Ships Bought From Turkey," *Reuters*, December 15, 2015, accessed November 15, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-syria-ships/russia-supplies-syria-mission-with-old-cargo-ships-bought-from-turkey-idUSKBN0TY2BG20151215>.

¹⁰⁶ Ruslan Pukhov, "The War Russia Won," *Izvestia*, October 13, 2017, accessed October 25, 2020, <https://iz.ru/652856/ruslan-pukhov/voina-kotoruiu-rossiia-vyigrala>.

¹⁰⁷ Paul Roderick Gregory, "Putin's Syria Narrative Must Win Russian Public Opinion--But It'll Be A Hard Sell," *Forbes*, October 20, 2015, accessed November 28, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/paulroderickgregory/2015/10/28/putins-syria-narrative-must-win-russian-public-opinion-but-itll-be-a-hard-sell/?sh=5b32e8614cb4>.

The Russian task force was tailored to accomplishing its military objectives and nothing more. The initial Russian deployment to Syria consisted of thirty-three aircraft and seventeen helicopters.¹⁰⁸ Russian airpower never exceeded thirty to fifty combat aircraft and sixteen to forty helicopters of various types, a deployment many times smaller than the combat aviation group the Soviet Union fielded in Afghanistan.¹⁰⁹ The Russian Army deployed around three thousand conventional troops. The force included armored companies fielding T-90A tanks, artillery batteries featuring MTSA-B towed artillery, specialized units including unexploded ordnance and military police, and Buk-M2, Pantsir S1, and S-400 air defense batteries.¹¹⁰

The Russian Special Operations Command (KSSO) deployed an estimated 230-250 *Spetsnaz* soldiers. The *Spetsnaz* conducted reconnaissance and special security missions; however, they avoided direct combat operations.¹¹¹ Russia's unwillingness to commit its *Spetsnaz* to direct combat reflected their aversion to taking tactical risk unless critical. However, Russia was willing to utilize Russian PMCs in combat. Russian PMCs played a large role on the battlefield and were a critical Russian innovation during the Syrian conflict. The operational-strategic benefit of these formations was their plausible deniability.¹¹² Following a battle near Deir Ezzor in February 2018, where a combined force of Syrian regime and PMC crossed a deconfliction line and attacked United States soldiers, the Russians saved face by claiming the PMC acted without the Russian military's knowledge.¹¹³ The PMCs gave the Russians the ability to take risks without facing the full strategic repercussions of confronting the United States or its allies.

¹⁰⁸ Saunders, "Leveraging Venezuela," 14.

¹⁰⁹ Pukhov, "The War Russia Won."

¹¹⁰ Kofman, and Rojansky, "What Kind of Victory for Russia in Syria?" 16.

¹¹¹ Mark Galeotti, "The Three Faces of Russian Spetsnaz in Syria," War on the Rocks, March 21, 2016, accessed November 05, 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/03/the-three-faces-of-russian-spetsnaz-in-syria/>.

¹¹² Dmitry Adamsky, *Moscow's Syria Campaign: Russian Lessons for the Art of Strategy*, Russie Nei Visions No. 109 (Paris, France: Russia/NIS Center, Institut français des relations internationales, July 2018), 29.

¹¹³ Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "How a 4-Hour Battle Between Russian Mercenaries and U.S. Commandos Unfolded in Syria," *The New York Times*, May 24, 2018, accessed October 28, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/24/world/middleeast/american-commandos-russian-mercenaries-syria.html>.

On the ground, Russia developed a restrained strategy due to its limitations of combat power and political sensitivity to casualties. This meant that the Syrian regime and their proxy militias did the fighting while Russian forces provided the support. During offensive operations, the order of battle was lower-tier SAA units, and militias sent into combat first, followed by mercenaries and other Russian proxies second, and Russian forces last when required for decisive effect on the battlefield.¹¹⁴ Russia's initial tactical objectives centered on regaining access to key roads, linking infrastructure, breaking isolated regime bases out of encirclement, and destroying opposition force weapons systems.¹¹⁵

As the intervention continued, the Russians assessed the SAA was depleted of combat power after years of non-stop civil war and close to collapse, even with Russian support. The Russians adapted to this development and began taking control over select SAA units. The Russians established the 5th Assault Corps from disparate fighting formations and volunteers, including approximately two thousand mercenaries, and organized the Corps into battalion tactical group formations. The Russians embedded complete battalion, brigade, and regimental staffs to command and control operations with their Syrian counterparts.¹¹⁶ The Russian approach paid off as the SAA, backed by Russian airpower, gradually isolated and seized population centers controlled by the opposition.

With the Assad regime firmly in control over most of Syria's main cities and lines of communication, the Russians can claim they achieved their operational objectives; however, the outcome of Syria's civil war is still to be determined. In March 2019, the Russian Ministry of Defense claimed 116 soldiers had died in Syria since 2015, although this number did not include PMC losses.¹¹⁷ While Russian casualties are likely underreported, they are much lower than Russia's recent conflicts in Afghanistan and Chechnya; therefore, the low casualty count is a positive talking point for Russia.

¹¹⁴ Kofman, and Rojansky, "What Kind of Victory for Russia in Syria?" 20.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 15.

¹¹⁶ Kofman, *Syria and the Russian Armed Forces*, 11.

¹¹⁷ Mariya Petkova, "What Has Russia Gained From Five Years of Fighting in Syria?" Al Jazeera, October 1, 2020, accessed October 25, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2020/10/1/what-has-russia-gained-from-five-years-of-fighting-in-syria>.

More importantly, Russia gained expeditionary combat experience during the intervention. General Gerasimov stated approximately 48,000 troops rotated through Syria.¹¹⁸ Russian Minister of Defense Sergey Shoygu claimed that 98 percent of transport aviation crews, 90 percent of operational-tactical and army aviation crews, and 60 percent of long-range aviation crews participated in the Syrian intervention.¹¹⁹ The Syrian intervention was a paradigm shift for the Russian military; their non-expeditionary military transformed into a military capable of sustaining and operating during a prolonged deployment outside its near abroad.

Russia achieved most of its strategic objectives during the Syrian intervention. It saved the Assad regime from collapse and became an indispensable powerbroker in Syria, which increased its prestige domestically and internationally. However, Russia has yet to capitalize on its Syria intervention for a diplomatic quid pro quo deal with Europe or the United States for sanctions relief.¹²⁰

Distinct differences exist between Russia's Syrian intervention and potential intervention in Venezuela. There is no threat of Islamic terrorism in Venezuela. Also, the distance from Russia to Venezuela is much greater. However, a closer analysis reveals more similarities than differences. The strategic goals of preserving a friendly regime and increasing Russian status on the domestic and international stage remain valid for a Venezuelan intervention. Russia could try resolving the "Ukraine issue" in a swap with the United States over Venezuela, a proposal the Russians allegedly have already floated.¹²¹ Operationally, a Russian deployment to Venezuela would borrow lessons learned from the Syrian intervention.

A RAND study, *Russia's Limit of Advance*, analyzed how far and fast Russia can deploy a capable ground force. The study concluded Russia could deploy a joint task force of seven thousand

¹¹⁸ Kofman, *Syria and the Russian Armed Forces*, 16.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹²⁰ Kofman, and Rojansky, "What Kind of Victory for Russia in Syria?" 22.

¹²¹ *Reuters*, "Russia Through Informal Channels Offered U.S. to Swap Ukraine for Venezuela – Ex-NSC Official," Ukrainian Independent Information Agency of News, November 11, 2019, accessed November 27, 2020, <https://www.unian.info/politics/10752894-russia-through-informal-channels-offered-u-s-to-swap-ukraine-for-venezuela-ex-nsc-official.html>.

personnel for stability operations supporting the Venezuelan regime.¹²² The deployment distance would exceed five thousand nautical miles and require airlifts for three to five days and sealifts for sixteen to eighteen days. This scenario would place high stress on Russia's organic airlift and exceed organic sealift capacity. As in Syria, Russia would likely need to rely on hastily acquired transportation assets to support a Venezuelan deployment.

An additional complication is Russia's lack of air and sea combat escorts for protection during movement, increasing this scenario's risk.¹²³ Even more daunting, the deployment would depend on in-transit movement authorities and refueling and, therefore, diplomatic support. Russia's lack of a network of alliances and international bases significantly increases the chance this deployment would experience setbacks or delays.¹²⁴ See Figures 2, 3, and 4 for Russian intervention planning factors.

¹²² Ben Connable, Abby Doll, Alyssa Demus, Dara Massicot, Clint Reach, Anthony Adler, William Mackenzie, Matthew Povlock, and Lauren Skrabala, *Russia's Limit of Advance: Scenarios* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2020), 25.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹²⁴ Connable et al., *Russia's Limit of Advance: Scenarios*, 30.

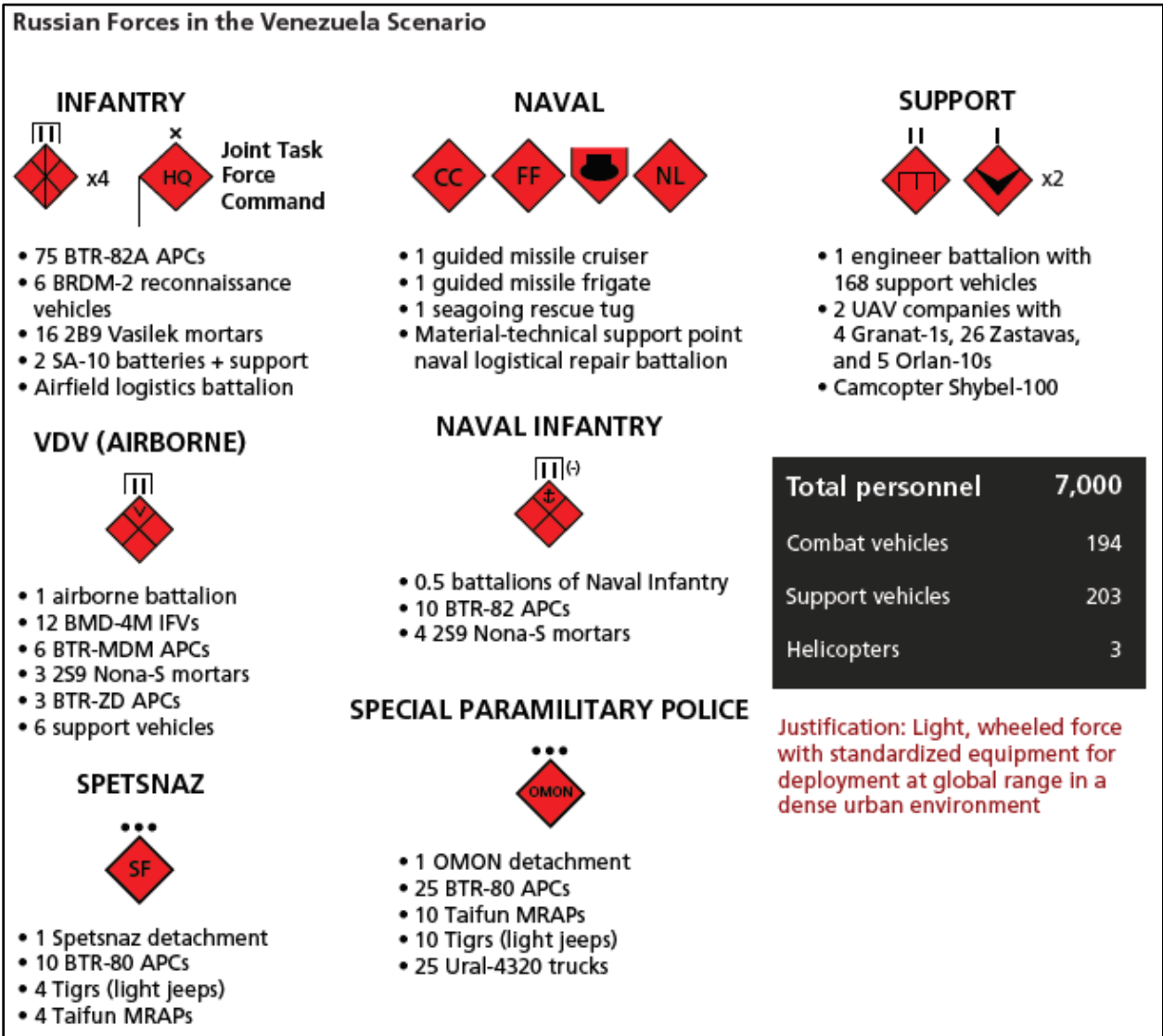


Figure 2. Russian Forces in the Venezuela Scenario. Ben Connable, Abby Doll, Alyssa Demus, Dara Massicot, Clint Reach, Anthony Adler, William Mackenzie, Matthew Povlock, and Lauren Skrabala, *Russia's Limit of Advance: Scenarios* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2020), 26.

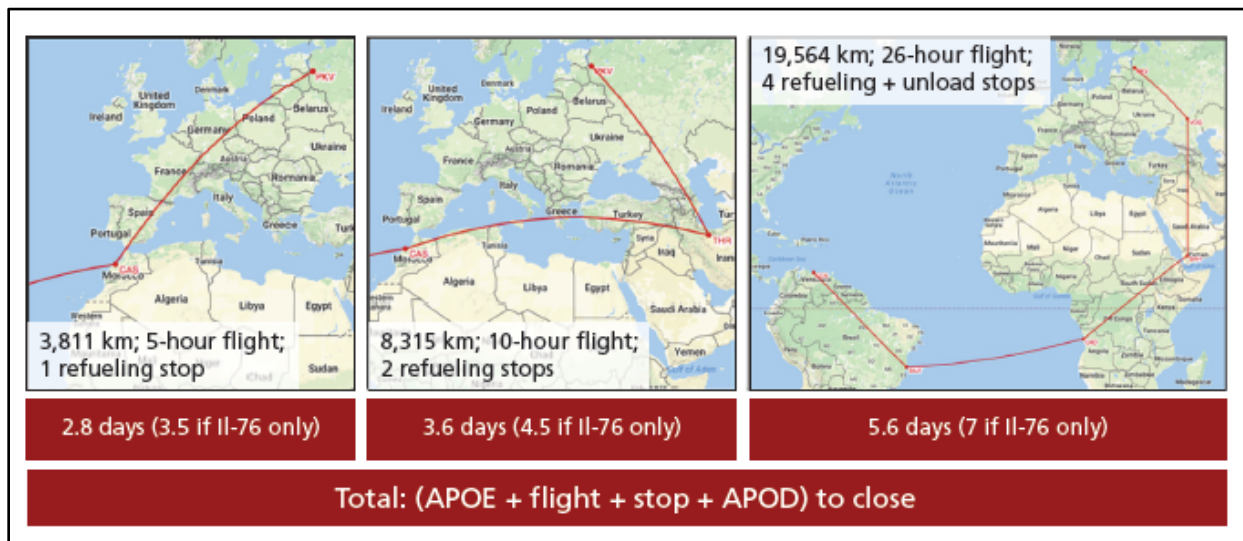


Figure 3. Venezuela Scenario Airlift Assumptions. Russian Forces in the Venezuela Scenario. Connable et al., *Russia's Limit of Advance: Scenarios*, 28.



Figure 4. Total Round-trip Steam Time. Russian Forces in the Venezuela Scenario. Connable et al., *Russia's Limit of Advance: Scenarios*, 29.

Despite the challenges, the RAND study demonstrates it is feasible for Russia to deploy a task force to Venezuela. Politically, Russia would likely be even more hesitant to take casualties in Venezuela than in Syria. The Russian public, already leery of accepting casualties to fight terrorism in Syria, would be even more resistant to accept casualties in Venezuela where the end state is not directly tied to the common citizen's security and interests.

Russia could reduce the stress of a potential deployment by deploying a smaller task force, perhaps just a *Spetsnaz* element. It is important to note that the Russians would not have to force their

way into Venezuela but be invited by the regime. Russia can also deploy just enough forces to secure a port of entry for another country to enter Venezuela or airlift in a third-party, such as Cuba. (Note: the USSR airlifted 11,000 Cuban troops to support Ethiopia during the Ogaden War in 1977).¹²⁵

As in Syria, any Russian intervention would be predicated on working with regional partners and irregular forces. Whereas Russia cooperated with Iran in Syria, it could collaborate with Cuba in Venezuela. Likewise, as Russia indirectly partnered with Hezbollah and other militia groups in Syria, it could do the same with the Venezuelan *colectivos* and other paramilitary groups. The Syrian intervention demonstrates the Russian task force does not need large numbers to preserve a friendly regime but instead requires adaptability and flexibility. In summary, despite the challenges and risks, a Russian military deployment to Venezuela cannot be discounted.

Section 5: Conclusion

Russia has successfully disrupted US efforts to diplomatically isolate, shape the information environment, and economically sanction the Venezuelan regime. Can Russian influence in Venezuela also affect future US military plans and operations? Yes, Russia could disrupt US operations through asymmetric means, albeit without directly confronting the United States.

Using lessons learned from its Soviet past, Russia understands that relatively small-scale incursions into the Western Hemisphere provide global strategic leverage. Russia's influence in Venezuela edges it closer to its main strategic geopolitical goal of establishing a multipolar world. Furthermore, Russia has invested billions of dollars into Venezuela and cannot afford to see its investments squandered. The successful Russian military intervention in Syria is evidence for decision-makers in the Kremlin that they can protect friendly regimes and Russian national interests far away from their borders. The amalgamation of these facts demonstrates Russia is committed to keeping its influence in Venezuela.

¹²⁵ Don Oberdorfer, "The Superpowers and the Ogaden War," *The Washington Post*, March 5, 1978, accessed November 28, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1978/03/05/the-superpowers-and-the-ogaden-war/00f60ef2-01b4-4cd3-8c5f-e545df388def/>.

A range of scenarios could prompt the United States to consider military options in Venezuela. These include a humanitarian crisis, internal strife initiated by a military coup, or an all-out popular uprising. Correspondingly, Russia may respond militarily to bolster the regime against internal competition or attempt to deter a foreign intervention from toppling the regime.

Russia could disrupt US military planning and operations in various ways using low-to-high-risk options. In a low-risk option, Russia could amplify its information warfare to spread disinformation over US objectives. For example, in February 2019, the Venezuelan regime blocked humanitarian aid shipments from Brazil, Colombia, and the United States from crossing its border. Russia supported the Maduro regime by claiming to have delivered three hundred tons of aid from Russia, therefore negating US aid. This coincided with a Russian disinformation campaign stating the United States was preparing for an invasion.¹²⁶ Russia could further expand its information warfare by targeting countries bordering Venezuela, like Colombia, to protect the Venezuelan regime.

In a medium-risk option, Russia could increase the number of PMCs in Venezuela. With a limited number of Russian PMCs allegedly already in Venezuela, Russia could recruit and facilitate additional PMCs.¹²⁷ Using PMCs in Venezuela gives Russia plausible deniability for any casualties incurred during operations, thereby reducing any domestic opposite or international repercussions of an intervention. Furthermore, PMCs can deploy using commercial transit, significantly reducing the strain on an already overburdened Russian logistics system.

In a high-risk option, Russia could take steps to increase its formalized military presence in Venezuela. During the Russian intervention in Syria, Russia established a joint intelligence program with Syria, Iraq, and Iran. The partnership, known as the Russia-Syria-Iran-Iraq (RSII) coalition, coordinated intelligence collection on Islamic State in Iraq and Syria through two operations centers in Baghdad and Damascus. The RSII centers were important for intelligence-sharing but also symbolized Russia's

¹²⁶ Jack Goodman, "Venezuela Crisis: How Much Aid is Getting In?" British Broadcasting Corporation, February 28, 2019, accessed December 03, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-47369768>.

¹²⁷ Sergey Sukhankin, "Are Russian Mercenaries Ready to Defend Venezuela's Maduro?" *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 16, no. 9 (January 28, 2019), accessed December 03, 2020, <https://jamestown.org/program/are-russian-mercenaries-ready-to-defend-venezuelas-maduro/>.

reemergence in the Middle East. Accordingly, Russia assigned flag officer-level staff personnel to the centers.¹²⁸ Russia could replicate this type of operation in Venezuela to reinforce the Maduro regime during a crisis. An RSII-type center could integrate other supporters of the Maduro regime, such as Cuba and China.

Considering Russia's potential challenges, US Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM) planners should prepare any contingency mission in Venezuela accordingly. First, taking a page from Central Command operations in Syria, preparations should include considerations for a United States-Russia deconfliction cell. This deconfliction cell could prevent a direct military confrontation between the United States and Russia. Furthermore, the cell could open the possibility of limited cooperation with Russia in countering criminal networks, preservation, or Venezuelan economic infrastructure.

Second, the United States must prepare for information operations to counter Russian information warfare efforts. The increased Russian presence in Venezuela has coincided with a decline in living standards and political freedoms for the average Venezuelan. This fact should be emphasized in US messaging to the Venezuelan people and regionally to prevent further Russian expansion into the Western Hemisphere. Furthermore, US information operations should exploit any gaps in interests between Russia and any potential partners in Venezuela, notably China and Cuba. Russia's ability to exert its influence in Venezuela would be degraded without regional support or coordination with other global powers.

Third, in close collaboration with US European Command, Russia's latest tactics, techniques, and procedures must be anticipated and prepared for in the Western Hemisphere. USSOUTHCOM should send observers and consider direct participation in NATO and US European Command training exercises. Russia's influence in Venezuela should not be viewed as a regional problem but part of a global competition between the United States and Russia. Ultimately, the United States cannot afford to take its security in the Western Hemisphere for granted and must continually prepare to counter malign influence.

¹²⁸ "Iraq Liaises With Syria, Russia and Iran to Bomb ISIL," Al Jazeera, October 14, 2015, accessed November 30, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/10/14/iraq-liaises-with-syria-russia-and-iran-to-bomb-isil/>.

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