

OPENING STATEMENT BY DR. CONSTANTINO URCUYO-FOURNIER

BEFORE THE UNITED STATES HOUSE SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE WESTERN  
HEMISPHERE

AT A HEARING CONVENED TO DISCUSS

RUSSIA'S ENGAGEMENT IN THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE

OCTOBER 22, 2015

Mr Chairman, Ranking Member Sires:

Thanks for the invitation to address the subcommittee on a matter of utmost importance both for the USA and Latin America.

The international order is undergoing a deep and accelerated change process that affects the major powers as well as medium and small-sized countries.

Latin America is engaged in this process and is affected both by external issues and internal transformations.

- 1- The engagement of extra-hemispheric actors (China, Iran, Russia) has become stronger and the shift to the left in several countries (Venezuela, Nicaragua, Ecuador, Bolivia) transforms Inter-American power relations..
- 2- Brazil's participation in the BRICS group and the G20 places the region in the dynamics of the emerging powers..
- 3- The trends towards a multipolar world has granted more autonomy to the external policies of many of the countries of the region.
- 4- There is a trend towards the shaping of sub-regional blocks, defined by political-ideological alignment. The Alliance of the Pacific (Colombia, México,

Peru and México) should be added to this panorama, this group is center-focused and interested in the TPP.

5- Also, there are geopolitical differences between the countries in the North and the South of the region. The first keep more intense relations with the USA than the second.

6- Russia has been present in the region in a new way since the last decade, although Moscow did have great activity during the Cold War supporting the Cuban regime and revolutionary guerrillas. This inheritance from the past will play a role in the current phase, because thousands of Latin Americans were trained in Russia and in countries like Cuba and Nicaragua. There are groups that speak Russian and are familiar with the Russian culture.

The Russian comeback is different from the Chinese presence. The Chinese have more involvement in the economic area even if they have long-term strategic interests. The Russians are more involved in military exchanges and security matters, especially since the falling prices of hydrocarbons and economic sanctions have hindered their economic revival.

Moscow's foray into the USA's traditional space is a challenge to US foreign policy. Why is Russia set on establishing these links and connections, marked by constant visits by its Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Defense, and capped by Putin's own presence in 2014.

These policies are linked to changes in the international order. Consider Dr. Henry Kissinger's statement in an appearance before the Armed Services Committee early this year:

- 1- The international order is being globally redefined;
- 2- The concept of order inside each region is being challenged or redefined;
- 3- Relations amongst world regions are being redefined;
- 4- "...for the first time in history, every region now interacts in real time and affects each other simultaneously."

This last aspect is key to explaining Russia's new presence. What is happening in what the Russians call their "near abroad" is interacting in real time with events in Latin America. Russia's diplomatic and military penetration is a response to what it sees as an excessive presence of the USA and NATO in what they consider their influence area.

Besides, Russia is nostalgic for having lost the Soviet Empire and wants to show the world that it is still a member of the major powers and capable of projecting power in its main adversary's backyard.

On the other hand, Putin plays to his domestic audience. The resurgence of great Russian nationalism is fostered by the audacity of a leader that enters the influence area of the United States of America.

From the perspective of Russian Grand Strategy, forays into the region may not provide significant immediate returns in terms of the global scenario, but in the event of a more generalized future conflict, they could enable Russia to use regional internal conflicts to its advantage, thus becoming a major distraction factor for US strategy.

The specific manifestations of the Russian presence have been diverse and vary from country to country.

The Russian connection with the region happens through old allies of the USSR; through countries willing to counteract US influence; or through neutral allies over which Russia has some strategic interest.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> R Evan Ellis. Russian Engagement in Latin America and the Caribbean: Return to the "Strategic Game" in a Complex- Interdependent Post-Cold War World?. Strategic Studies Institute. US Army War College. Carlisle. April 2015.

Russian activity is relevant in Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua, countries with which it keeps important links. It is also important in Ecuador, Bolivia, Argentina and Brazil, but today we need not elaborate on its presence in these countries. It is enough to say that it is focused on security issues—Russia lacks the economic resources and wherewithal to enter into meaningful economic cooperation or trade relations with these countries.

This reality elevates the profile of military cooperation with Nicaragua and Venezuela, which takes the form of weapons sales and the intent to establish a permanent military presence in both countries.

I will focus my presentation on Nicaragua, due to Russia's importance to this country as well as the potential consequences of its activity for Costa Rica and the rest of Central America.

### **Nicaragua: Russia's gateway to Central America.**

Russia has a historical background of close relations with Managua in terms of political, military and educational terms. Currently, though, collaboration links have become closer. The Russian ministers of Defense and Foreign Affairs visit frequently and a Russian antidrug training center has opened near Managua.

The reach of that training center is not limited to Nicaragua. Police forces from El Salvador and Guatemala have already been trained there by Russians. It is important to highlight the training received by Salvadorians, given the historic ties of their governing party, the FMLN, with the USSR during the guerrilla years.

Russia has also shown interest in deploying satellite stations in Nicaragua for their global positioning system (GLONASS).<sup>2</sup>

Russia's focus on antidrug cooperation is paradoxical if one considers that the drug-dealing routes that go through Nicaragua are not headed to Moscow. Some observers interpret it as a form of covert, strategic expansion. Russia's intention could be to obtain military bases as regional beachheads or to trade political military assets as it did during the Cuban missile crisis

The announcement of a potential sale of Russian frigates and of Mig-29s to Nicaragua, supposedly to combat drug trafficking, also raises suspicions. Such bellicose materiel is not precisely the best tool to fight this type of crime.

On the other hand, Nicaragua's ongoing maritime conflict with Colombia suggests that its rearmament is aimed more at the confrontation with this country than the fight against organized crime.

Such remilitarization has raised concern among countries in the Caribbean Basin. There is great unease about its consequences for the regional balance of forces, particularly as it will break the security treaties signed in the 80's at the end of the Central American wars.

The president of Costa Rica, Luis Guillermo Solís stated<sup>3</sup> during a trip to Europe:

"We are very concerned about the continuous presence of high authorities of the Russian government in Nicaragua such as the Minister of Defense, and the presence of armed vessels of the Russian Navy in the waters of that country".

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<sup>2</sup> <http://actualidad.rt.com/actualidad/173657-nicaragua-instalacion-estacion-sistema-ruso-qlonass>

A few months earlier, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Manuel González, had also expressed his apprehension about the Russian<sup>3</sup> Minister of Foreign Affairs while in Guatemala and to Secretary of State John Kerry<sup>4</sup>.

The link between Russia and Nicaragua goes beyond military issues: it involves the diplomatic arena, supported by the anti-American stance of the Sandinistas.<sup>3</sup>

Since 2008, Nicaragua recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia in alignment with Russian diplomacy. The alignment was repeated when voting against the disapproval of Crimea's annexation at the UN. Managua's position goes along with the Russian Doctrine that postulates the development of a multipolar world to counterbalance the hegemony of the United States.

Diplomacy has gone further in other ways. Russia donated 100,000 yearly tons of flour to Nicaragua between 2011 and 2014 as well as 500 cars to be used as taxis, 520 public-service buses and 41 million dollars for a new hospital in Managua.<sup>4</sup>

Recapitulating, the Russian military and diplomatic presence in Central America is a factor of regional instability because it disrupts the balance of forces. It is threatening for Costa Rica because the country does not have an army and has a border dispute with Nicaragua. If a conflict arises with Colombia, Bogota's level of armament and military training will escalate its dimensions, threatening peace throughout the Caribbean Basin.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations.**

- 1- Russia is trying to transfer its conflict with the USA to other regions of Latin America while profiting from weapons sales and challenging and provoking the USA.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://actualidad.rt.com/actualidad/166283-nicaragua-apoyar-iniciativas-putin-ucrania>

<sup>4</sup> Confidencial, Managua 12/2/2015

- 2- Latin American countries must be aware that they cannot be trapped in a Russian conflict.
- 3- Russia's regional old friends and new allies provide a haven for extra-hemispheric powers that seek to counterbalance the power of the USA, by strengthening anti-imperialist nationalism against Washington.
- 4- Russia's overtures revolve around the military and not around human development.
- 5- That Russian activity raises apprehension on the banks of the Potomac is understandable. However, the answer cannot be unilateral. It must emerge from a dialogue with Latin American countries that considers all national interests and defines multilateral political partnerships around mutual prosperity and human development.
- 6- China's active economic cooperation frees some of Moscow's Latin American allies from economic pressures, enabling Russian military and diplomatic penetration in the Western Hemisphere. Part of the conversations between USA and Peking should focus on raising awareness that, even though their involvement in Latin America is not in the area of security, it can have consequences for security.
- 7- The recent Chinese-Russian partnership could develop in the future through greater coordination of their policies in the hemisphere. There are speculations about the likely participation of Russia in the defense of the Nicaraguan Canal promoted by Chinese corporations.
- 8- Russian actions in Central America demand a more detailed accounting of its

intense military cooperation with Nicaragua. Nicaragua's rearmament, fostered by Russia, disrupts the balance of regional forces, achieved at a high cost after the end of the civil wars of the nineteen-eighties.

- 9- Some Latin American countries have given a positive response to Vladimir Putin's initiatives, which shows that Inter-American relations have shifted qualitatively. This demands the exploration of new cooperation paths with the US to ensure shared security in a context quite unlike that of the Cold War.
  
- 10- It is important to develop a shared strategic thought in the Americas, adapted to the new architecture of the international system. In it, all conflict scenarios interact in real time. It is no longer valid to act in an isolated manner, without taking the global panorama into account.
  
- 11- Challenges to Central American security are not restricted to the so-called War against Drugs. Excessive attention to this issue can blind us to the active presence of extra-hemispheric actors who could use regional conflicts to divert attention from their own conflicts in other spots around the globe.