

THE CANNING BRIEF

Latin America reacts to Ukraine invasion



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Latin American countries have split into two main camps in their response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. On one extreme are Russia's closest allies: Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela. On the other extreme are Colombia, the closest ally of the US in Latin America, which issued a forceful condemnation of Russia's military action and support for international sanctions, and democrats across the region, with slightly different grades of response. Somewhere between these two camps, but closer to Colombia's position, are Argentina, Bolivia, and Brazil, which each gave a more tepid and confused reaction initially, and El Salvador, which has kept a guarded silence.

Days before the outbreak of war, authoritarian left-wing governments in the region blamed the US for the crisis. Cuba's President Miguel Díaz-Canel said that Russia had the "right to defend itself" and criticised the "sanctions and the expansion of Nato [the North Atlantic Treaty Organization]" towards Russia. Nicaragua's President Daniel Ortega said Russia was "simply defending itself" and denounced the "aggression of the Ukrainian army". Venezuela's President Nicolás Maduro said that Russia had Venezuela's "full support...in its struggle...to dissipate all threats", accusing the US and Nato of being intent on "attacking and destroying" Russia militarily and "ending the multipolar world", while blaming "the extreme right-wing government of Ukraine [for] never having been interested in resolving the conflict through

dialogue...or respecting Russia". Since the invasion, Maduro has called for diplomacy and "effective dialogue...to avoid an escalation".

In response to what it perceives to be the steady encroachment of Nato on its sphere of influence, Russia has sought to deepen relations with its allies in the US's backyard, reviving the Cold War strategy of the Soviet Union. It wrote off 90% of Cuba's US\$32bn Soviet-era debt in 2014 and earlier this month favourably restructured the outstanding US\$3.5bn debt. Senior Russian officials also publicly mooted the deployment of military assets to Latin America in January. The comments were seized upon by Maduro, who hailed the "powerful military cooperation between Russia and Venezuela for the defence of peace, of sovereignty [and] territorial integrity".

This prompted Colombia's defence minister, Diego Molano, to haul in Russia's ambassador in Bogotá, on 7 February to discuss the extent of Russia's military cooperation with Venezuela. This context, and Colombia's longstanding close relations with the US, explains the Colombian government's particularly firm response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which it denounced as "a threat to world peace" and "absurd colonialist nostalgia". It also expressed support for the full array of sanctions against Russia.

There were robust responses elsewhere in the region from Uruguay's President Luis Alberto Lacalle Pou, Chile's outgoing and incoming presidents, Sebastián Piñera and Gabriel Boric

respectively, Ecuador's President Guillermo Lasso, and Dominican President Luis Abinader. The 15-strong Caribbean Community (Caricom) issued a statement stressing that it "strongly condemns the military attacks and invasion of Ukraine...and calls for the immediate and complete withdrawal of the military presence and cessation of any further actions that may intensify the current perilous situation in that country".

Mexico's President Andrés Manuel López Obrador stressed that "We don't want invasions; we don't accept that a country invades another...it is contrary to international law..." Mexico's position is particularly significant not just because it is a regional heavyweight but also because it is currently exercising the rotating presidency of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).

The UNSC issued a resolution on 25 February, vetoed by Russia, that "deplores in the strongest terms" Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Brazil, the region's other geopolitical heavyweight, is also currently a non-permanent member on the UNSC, but its position was in some doubt ahead of the vote. Brazil eventually backed the resolution, but it had sought to dilute it and there were mixed messages emanating from Brasília in the days preceding the vote. The Brazilian government initially issued a statement calling for a peaceful solution that "takes into account the legitimate security interests of all parties involved".

There were differences at the top of government in Brazil. None other than Vice President Hamilton Mourão excoriated Russia's decision to invade Ukraine, insisting that Brazil was "not neutral" and, while calling for an end to hostilities, warned that sanctions might not be enough and that the use of force against Russia might be required, drawing a parallel between Russia's President Vladimir Putin and Adolf Hitler. President Jair Bolsonaro responded by

pulling rank on Mourão, insisting that the constitution made clear that only he was qualified to speak on these matters and that Brazil was neutral. He also criticised Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, saying that the country's people had "put the fate of their nation in the hands of a comedian".

Despite its vote on the UNSC resolution, in a separate forum on the issue, Brazil took a different stance. The Organization of American States (OAS) issued a declaration on the same day, denouncing "the unlawful, unjustified, and unprovoked invasion of Ukraine" and urging "the cessation of any further military actions in that country". Brazil did not sign up to the declaration. Neither did Argentina, Bolivia, or El Salvador.

Brazil's permanent representative to the OAS, Otávio Brandelli, said Russia's concerns about "the balance of troops and strategic weapons in the European context" should be taken into account; his Argentine and Bolivian peers rejected the use of force and loss of life but refrained from explicitly condemning Russia. El Salvador's President Nayib Bukele, whose relations with the incumbent US government of President Joe Biden have soured after his swift and decisive shift towards populist authoritarianism, has remained silent, having accused the US government days before the invasion of "losing all credibility" for constantly predicting an attack.

Bukele is scheduled to visit Russia this year. Brazil's President Bolsonaro and Argentina's President Alberto Fernández both went ahead with trips to Moscow when the Russian army had encircled Ukraine and western powers were warning that an invasion was imminent. They expressed solidarity with Russia; Fernández even offered to provide a "bridge into Latin America" for Russia, and called for much closer bilateral ties, lessening Argentina's "major dependence" on both the US and the International Monetary

Fund (IMF).

The timing of their visits was much-criticised at home, with the Argentine opposition describing Fernández's call for a diplomatic realignment as ill-judged. Although Fernández has since urged Russia to "cease military actions in Ukraine", his predecessor Mauricio Macri has led criticism of Argentina's response, calling for his government to condemn Russia, accompany international sanctions, and immediately annul military accords signed with Putin. Macri said the official response "shamed the majority of Argentines who have seen the terrible images of the invasion begun by Putin, filmed by defenceless civilians".

Despite the Ukrainian diaspora in Argentina being the seventh largest in the world (some 450,000 people), Fernández is reluctant to ratchet up the rhetoric against Russia. Argentina used the Sputnik V vaccine against Covid-19 extensively, and Fernández was the first South American head of state to be vaccinated. There is also the trade dimension: Fernández and Putin agreed during their recent Moscow meeting to "set in motion with full force" a bilateral strategic accord signed in 2015.

Unsurprisingly, the comparative importance of trade with Russia over Ukraine, however, is common to all Latin American countries. The most important import for many Latin American countries from Russia is fertiliser, while it is primarily agricultural commodities that go the other way. For instance, Brazil, Russia's most important trade partner in Latin America and the Caribbean, making up around a third of its total trade with the region, imported US\$5.7bn of goods from Russia in 2021 (fertilisers made up some 60% of that total), sending US\$1.59bn of products the other way. Brazil's exports to Ukraine in 2021 stood at US\$226.8m (aluminium and sugar cane were its top exports), while imports amounted to US\$211m (semi-finished products of iron, steel, and PVC were its top

imports).

In another trade comparison, involving a country that has been much more critical of Russia's military invasion, two-way trade between Chile and Russia amounted to US\$821m in 2021, up over 10% on the previous year, with Chile enjoying a US\$425m trade surplus. Chile's exports to Ukraine, meanwhile, amounted to US\$54m in 2021 (its single largest export, bringing in US\$14m, was mussels). It is a similar story for Peru, whose two-way trade in 2021 totalled US\$749m with Russia, up by 99% on the previous year, compared with US\$148m with Ukraine, up by 84% over the same period.

Mexico, in particular, has deepened trade relations with Ukraine in recent years to become its second most important trade partner in Latin America and the Caribbean. Two-way trade with Mexico totalled US\$291.3m in 2020, with Mexico enjoying a bilateral trade surplus of US\$152.3m. Mexico's main imports from Ukraine are metals and machinery, fertiliser, and barley and wheat.

Ukraine, previously known as the granary of Europe, is the second largest producer of barley in the world and fourth in terms of exports, leading the Federación de Cámaras de Comercio (Fecanaco) in Mexico's north-eastern state of Tamaulipas, to forecast this week that the price of beer in Mexico could go up by as much as 37% as a result of the conflict. Mexico's breadmaking giant Grupo Bimbo announced the suspension of operations at its plant in Dnipro, in eastern Ukraine, on 27 February.

Latin American countries forged diplomatic relations with Ukraine shortly after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Ukraine has embassies in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Cuba, Mexico, and Peru.

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