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## Latin America, the Caribbean and the War in Ukraine



Presencia de América Latina (Presence of Latin America, 1964–65). Photograph Source: Fotografía tomada por Farisori; Autor del mural: Jorge González Camarena, mexicano; Propiedad de la Universidad de Concepción, Chile – [CC BY-SA 3.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/)

As Russian President Vladimir Putin’s “special military operation” in Ukraine moves through its second month, its unconcealable economic impact continues to grow at the global level. Price rises in energy, food and fertilizer have driven up inflation to levels that haven’t been seen in decades, leading to higher interest rates that will stall economic growth. The International Monetary Fund’s latest report predicts slower growth in every region of the world, and the United Nations warns of a “hurricane of hunger.”

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Latin America and the Caribbean, the region hardest hit by the Covid-19 pandemic, is by no means removed from this phenomenon and its sharpening effect on the levels of violence and poverty. Yet its political leadership lacks proactive initiatives for confronting the coming wave and seems incapable of evaluating and coordinating joint approaches in the wake of recent events.

The region has lost relevance in recent decades as an international political actor in terms of its participation in world trade, its national capacities, and its involvement in multilateral organizations, among other activities. In 2019, its political leadership allowed the U.S. government to deactivate the South American Union of Nations (Unasur) and replace it with an entelechy called the Forum for the Progress and Integration of South America (Prosur). It was unable to prevent Mauricio Claver-Carone, then-U.S. President Donald Trump's national security adviser for Latin American affairs, from becoming the president of the Inter-American Development Bank in 2020, thus breaking the tradition of filling the post with a Latin American. Nor did it jointly back (as the African Union did) a proposal put forth by India and South Africa in the framework of the World Trade Organization to suspend the patents of Covid-19 vaccines until the entire world population was vaccinated.

It's hardly surprising, then, how at variance with each other the positions of the region's countries have been in the face of the war unleashed by Russia's military intervention in Ukraine. The disjointed postures reveal once again the Latin American and Caribbean nations' lack of a commitment to identifying common denominators that would give them a greater presence and a stronger negotiating capacity in the international agenda.

### **Positions in the International Forums**

The regions various foreign policies have long coincided in condemning the use of military weapons and war itself. Most of the governments have voted in favor of texts prepared by the OAS and the United Nations General Assembly in favor of such a position as it applies to the Ukraine crisis. A small number have abstained, but no Latin American or Caribbean country has opposed these resolutions condemning the war, even though they do not address the issue in its full context.

Although Argentina, Mexico and Brazil —the three largest nations in the region —voted in favor of the resolutions approved in the United Nations opposing the invasion of Ukraine, there are nuances in their positions regarding the Russian government. For example, Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador refuses to impose economic sanctions on that country, on the grounds that he wants to maintain good relations with all

the countries of the world. He has also condemned the censorship in Europe and some other countries of the Russia Today and Sputnik news networks.

Similarly, Jair Bolsonaro, president of Brazil, who visited his Russian counterpart days before the conflict broke out (ignoring opposition from Washington), has said that his country would remain “neutral” in the conflict.

The government of Argentina has also supported the United Nations resolutions but critics contend that its position has not been strong enough. Many remember President Alberto Fernández’s early-February visit with Putin, telling him that Argentina “must be the gateway” for Russia in Latin America and underlined his interest in breaking his country’s economic and commercial dependence on the International Monetary Fund and the United States. The government has also spoken out against economic sanctions and censorship of the Russian media.

### **The Organization of American States (OAS)**

The OAS General Secretariat was the first to issue a statement condemning Russia’s military intervention in Ukraine and calling for an immediate end to hostilities that Russia “has irresponsibly initiated.” According to the OAS, “Russian aggression constitutes a crime against international peace. The armed attack perpetrated against the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine is reprehensible and constitutes a very serious act in violation of international law.” The statement accompanied a declaration that also included a denunciation of the Russian Federation’s “illegal recognition” of Donetsk and Luhansk, two independent territories in eastern Ukraine, as “a violation of the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine.”

With observers from Ukraine and Russia in attendance, 21 countries backed the declaration, including Mexico (which is promoting replacement of the OAS with a new institution) and Juan Guaidó, the illegal president of Venezuela, whose true government, led by Nicolás Maduro, withdrew from the OAS in 2019. The delegations of Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia and Nicaragua did not support the statement but expressed their firm rejection of the use of military force to resolve the conflict. As the Bolivian representative, Héctor Enrique Arces, put it, “Nothing, absolutely nothing, justifies any form of violence or aggression when it leads to the unfortunate loss of human life.” In turn, Brazil’s representative, Otavio Brandelli, stated that his government “is very concerned about Russia’s decision to send troops on the ground (...) but its main concerns about the balance of troops and strategic weapons in the European context must be taken into consideration.”

OAS General Secretary Luis Almagro affirmed that “none of the reasons invoked by President Vladimir Putin can be an excuse for the acts that are being committed in Ukraine under his orders,” while the 21 representations that supported the statement demanded massive sanctions against Russia, along with granting more defensive weapons to Ukraine, and suspending Russia’s participation in international organizations.

As it has in other instances, the Russian representation said that while his country’s attitude is being condemned, the bloody war with civilian victims that has been waged in the independent Donbas region for eight years is being forgotten and that for “the entire time our Western colleagues have covered up for the Ukrainian regime, turning a blind eye to military crimes against civilians.”

### **The Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC)**

A day after the OAS pronouncement, CELAC, a regional organization created in 2010 that excludes the United States and Canada, was unable to issue a joint statement. It limited itself instead to accepting a proposal from Peru to create a Regional Consultative Assistance Network to coordinate the repatriation of Latin American and Caribbean citizens from Ukraine, since not all CELAC member nations have diplomatic representations in that country.

It should be noted that Russia, as well as China, maintains strong ties with CELAC, as it shares the geopolitical objective of building a multipolar and multilateral world. In 2015, CELAC and Russia signed a Permanent Mechanism for Political Dialogue and Cooperation, providing Russia with a way to gain global visibility through an international organization beyond its area of influence. In turn, the link with Russia gives CELAC an aura of multipolarity and relativizes its relationship with the United States in other international forums.

### **The General Assembly of the United Nations**

On March 2, the United Nations General Assembly convened an emergency special session – only the tenth in its seventy-year history – in which a resolution was approved that condemns the Russian military intervention in Ukraine, as well as all violations of international humanitarian law. The resolution urged an immediate peaceful resolution of the conflict through political dialogue, negotiations, mediation and other peaceful means. Days before, a similar resolution had been vetoed by Russia in the UN Security Council, made up of five permanent members (the United States, China, Russia, Germany and France) and 10 rotating members, currently among which are Brazil and Mexico. Both those Latin American countries voted in favor of the resolution, promoted by the United

States and Albania, as did nine other members, while China, India and the United Arab Emirates abstained.

In the General Assembly, five of the 193 UN member States — Russia, Belarus, Syria, North Korea and Eritrea — voted against the resolution, with 141 in favor. Among the 35 abstentions were four Latin American nations: Bolivia, Cuba, El Salvador and Nicaragua. Twelve countries did not participate in the vote, including Venezuela, which had voiced support for Russia's so-called "special military operation" during a telephone conversation between the two presidents hours earlier.

That support was no impediment to a visit to Caracas three days later by a high-level U.S. delegation, which was well received by President Maduro himself. The topic of discussion was U.S. access to Venezuelan oil. One result of the mission was the release in Caracas of two U.S. prisoners, one of them accused of terrorism.

Among the abstainers, Cuba's argument of March 2 should be highlighted. While declaring that its government "unambiguously opposes the use or threat of use of force against any State" the Cuban representation added that "it is not possible to rigorously and honestly examine the current situation in Ukraine without carefully assessing the factors that have led to the use of force. The U.S. determination to continue the progressive expansion of NATO towards the borders of the Russian Federation and the well-known military movements carried out by the United States and NATO in recent months towards regions adjacent to the Russian Federation, preceded by the delivery of weapons to Ukraine, have led to a scenario with implications of unpredictable scope, which could have been avoided."

Voicing its rejection of "hypocrisy and double standards," Cuba noted that "the United States and NATO, in 1999, launched a major aggression against Yugoslavia, a European country that they fragmented, with a high cost in lives, based on their geopolitical objectives, ignoring the UN Charter. The United States and some allies have used force on multiple occasions. They invaded sovereign States to provoke regime changes and intervened in the internal affairs of other nations that do not bow to their interests of domination and that defend their territorial integrity and independence."

As the war intensified, the General Assembly convened another special session on March 24, out of which Resolution A/ES-11/L.2 titled "Humanitarian consequences of the aggression against Ukraine," required an immediate cessation of hostilities by Russia. The result of the vote was similar to the previous one. The text, aligned with the United States and Ukraine, was sponsored by France and Mexico, and uses accusatory and undiplomatic

language that could be considered inappropriate if what is really being sought is to promote a cessation of hostilities.

For Russia's UN representative, the approved text "paints a false and one-dimensional image" of what is happening, ignoring the causes of the crisis in Ukraine and the role of the West in using the country as a pawn "in a geopolitical game against Russia." He also called on "all countries with the right mindset" to support the project proposed by South Africa, its fellow BRICS country.

In terms of content, the South African proposal was similar to the approved version promoted by Mexico and France in that it called for the immediate and negotiated cessation of hostilities. However, the call was aimed at "all parties to the conflict" rather than singling out Russia, and refrained from repeatedly accusing Russia throughout the text. It also encouraged political dialogue, negotiations, mediation and other non-violent ways to achieve lasting peace. When presenting the project to the plenary session of the Assembly, the South African ambassador to the UN pointed out that the political divisions among the member states show that political interests prevail over the humanitarian response.

Similar criticisms by some Latin American countries of the approved Mexico/France resolution are worth noting, even though they voted for it. Brazil's representative, for example, noted, "We would have preferred a fully humanitarian text elaborated with broad consultations and not a document presented as a *fait accompli* that clearly contains divisive language." Furthermore, he said, humanitarian crises should not be politicized.

China, again abstaining, agreed that South Africa's proposal was more conducive to addressing a ceasefire. It also took the position that developing countries, not being a part of this conflict, should not be dragged into it or forced to take sides. China's permanent representative, Zhan Jun, indicated that his country will continue to play a role in facilitating talks between the parties.

### **The Western Forums**

Parallel to the UN General Assembly special sessions, three important political events took place in Brussels: the special NATO summit and meetings of the Group of Seven and the European Council, to which U.S. President Joe Biden was invited. All of them condemned Russia's military intervention and blamed it for the economic impact it had on the world.

In its joint statement, NATO indicated that its member nations will provide "more political and practical support," as well as assistance in areas such as cybersecurity and protection



against threats of a chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear nature. In addition, they urged China to “join the rest of the world and clearly condemn the brutal war against Ukraine, and not support Russia, neither with economic support nor, of course, with military support.” For its part, the European Council resolved to intensify its support for Ukraine and Ukraine’s neighboring countries.

### **Peace as a Common Denominator**

Since the Ukraine crisis severely affects energy and food security in the region, Latin America and the Caribbean should play a leading role in favor of peace instead of mechanically following decisions taken by Western powers. It could, for example, support the mediation initiatives of governments or actors that are accepted by both sides in this tragic war. On March 7, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said he was “ready, if necessary, and together with the international community, to carry out the necessary mediation when necessary.” China maintains good trade relations with Ukraine, has sent it humanitarian aid, and also has influence over Russia, with which it has strong economic and strategic ties.

Days before, the Ukrainian government requested the intermediation of the Chinese government, which was supported by the head of diplomacy of the European Union, Josep Borrell. “There is no alternative,” he said. “We cannot be the mediators. And it can’t be the United States. So who else? It has to be China.” CELAC did not comment on the matter.

On March 14, Jake Sullivan, the Biden administration’s National Security Adviser, warned his Chinese counterpart that his government would not allow any country to get away with what China was alleged to be attempting, that is, to rescue Russia from sanctions imposed by foreign nations after the invasion of Ukraine. China replied that it would give a firm and forceful response if the United States imposed sanctions on Chinese companies or individuals, or harms its legitimate rights and interests in handling its relations with Russia.

The Chinese government has condemned the war, but demands that it be fully analyzed, taking into account “Russia’s legitimate demands for its national security.” It traditionally maintains a position of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries and respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of States, motivated in part by its claim over Taiwan. It believes that sanctions have never been an effective way to solve problems, which is why it strongly opposes any kind of unilateral sanctions. President Xi Jinping had expressed his country’s position on sanctions in a virtual meeting days before

to his peers from France and Germany, maintaining that such measures endanger global economic recovery after the pandemic and may have consequences on supply chains, energy, transportation and global financial operations, problems which are already having a devastating impact on most of the world's economies.

This is the area where Latin America can manifest itself from a position of equidistance from the actual combatants. The war deserves the strongest condemnation, but without failing to take into account the causes that have led to this brutal outcome. Behind the devastation and death of the war itself, there is a struggle for power in the reconfiguration of a new multipolar order that will impact the Latin American and Caribbean region. President Biden recognizes this and pointed out, on March 21, that "There's going to be a new world order out there, and we've got to lead it."

It is at this point that a strong Latin American voice is needed to defend its own interests, and the interests of world peace.

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