

## Russia & Latin America: which road toward multipolarity?

In late October 2009, Rafael Correa paid the first visit ever of an Ecuadorian President in Russia. Following Nicaragua and Venezuela, Ecuador might become the third Latin American country to recognize the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia – whereas no country of the CIS has done such a move, including a close ally as Belarus so far. The Russian analyst Alexander Rublev even draws a parallel between the ALBA and the GUAM, stating that Moscow should not underestimate the support of South American countries in the Caucasian geopolitics<sup>1</sup>.

Over the last few years, Latin America has arguably become a new focus of Russian foreign policy, after a long period of absence in the aftermath of the USSR collapse. Relationships with various countries of the region have been significantly upgraded recently, and Russia appears now as a desirable partner for diversification. The Russian – Latin American relations illustrate new dynamics emerging in the nexus between geopolitics and globalization.

Are these relations favouring a multipolarity based on a balance-of-power politics, or are they just an outcome of wider economic trends?

To answer this question, the rise of Russian influence in Latin America and the concept of ‘multipolarity’ should be put into perspective.

### *The rising Russian influence in Latin America*

Historically, Russia cannot be considered as a major power in Latin America. Many migrants have moved from Russia to Latin America, mainly in Argentina<sup>2</sup>, but this population does not play any major political role today. Starting in the 1960s, the Soviet Union established diplomatic relations with most Latin-American States, with an emphasis on Cuba, which was at the time a member of the Council of Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON)<sup>3</sup>. The USSR became a major client in grain trade for Argentina in the 1970s. In the early 1990s, Latin America was not considered as a priority in the Russian foreign policy until when Yevgeny Primakov was the acting Prime Minister, as the focus was laid on the post-Soviet space. The main goals for Russian elites are obvious: diversifying the partners, both on economic and political grounds.

The economic rationale of the Russian – Latin American relations is closely linked to the rise of the BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, China), a crucial group for the restructuring of the international economic system. This group first met in Yekaterinburg in May 2008 at the level of foreign Ministers, and the first full BRIC summit took place in June 2009. In this perspective, cooperation with Brazil seems relevant; in a joint article, Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov and his Brazilian counterpart Celso Amorim described Brazil and Russia as “natural allies” in October 2008<sup>4</sup>. A Russian – Brazilian joint working group<sup>5</sup> has been established to foster the relations between the two countries, based on economic and commercial ties and technological alliance in several domains: military – technical cooperation, space program or energy cooperation. In November 2008, Medvedev discussed energy cooperation with Petrobras, while Gazprom planned to open a representative office in Brazil<sup>6</sup>. In economic terms, Venezuela, Argentina, Cuba and Nicaragua lies behind, although the expanding trend is similar.

On the military side, Latin American markets have become increasingly interested for Russian arms exporters. According to Sergei Goreslavsky, head of marketing at Russian Technologies State Corporation, “*the arms market of Latin America is expansive and promising. Brazil holds a leading position among our partners in terms of its potential for the acquisition of [Russian] military hardware and equipment*”<sup>7</sup>. Venezuela has extensively developed with Russia in this domain, both under Putin and Medvedev presidencies. The relationship was upgraded notably during the second Putin mandate, when Moscow sold combat helicopters, fighters and defense missile systems, and future deliveries may include Amur-class diesel submarines, military transport planes and aerial tankers. According to some sources, Venezuela may spend as much as \$5 billion in the next decade to purchase all these equipments<sup>8</sup>. Moreover, Chavez has purchased 100,000 AK-103 (Kalashnikov), which have raised concerns in Washington D.C. since the weapons are thought to be given to the FARC guerilla movement in Colombia. More significantly, since 2008, military cooperation has developed quickly: Chavez declared in July that he would welcome Russian military bases. In September, two tu-160 bombers of the Russian air force landed in Venezuela while in December, the Russian Navy, with the presence of the destroyer Admiral Chabanenko, took part in naval exercises with the Venezuelan counterpart<sup>9</sup>.

The Russian elites’ approach may be considered as assertive, since ‘multipolarity’ generally means establishing a counterbalance to the USA power. Yet, it does not necessarily need to be assertive, since ‘multipolarization’ may simply be the result of wider trends.

*What kind of multipolarity? Assertive vs. de facto multipolarity*

The concept of ‘multipolarity’ in itself can mean various things to many actors. ‘Multipolarity’ can be opposed to ‘unipolarity’, as a geopolitical reaction to a perceived pseudo-imperial nationalism<sup>10</sup>; on the contrary, it can be an outcome of wider changes at the international level, and follow a current course of economic developments. Moreover, multipolarity does not necessarily go along with multilateralism: the existence of many powers do not necessary mean that they agree to work in concert together; they can simply follow a balance-of-power policy.

A geopolitical approach has been observed in the Iranian – Latin American relations, since Tehran has developed a series of agreements with Latin American countries. According to some authors, Iran and its proxy Hezbollah have realized a strategic penetration in Latin America, pushed by three converging factors: “(1) *Iran’s non-aligned position in foreign policy has compelled it to seek out countries with similar ideological outlooks. (2) US efforts to keep Iran in diplomatic and economic isolation have forced it to pursue an active foreign policy. (3) The election of a reformist President in 1997 made it possible for countries like Brazil to engage Iran with enough confidence to withstand pressures from the US.*”<sup>11</sup> Nowadays, there is a weekly direct air service linking Tehran, Damascus and Caracas, while Iran and Venezuela cooperate on several projects – an ammunition factory, a cementary plant, etc. The extension of the Iranian presence is portrayed as a way to challenge US influence, i.e. an ‘assertive multipolarity’. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton does not say anything else when she declared in December 2009: “*If people want to flirt with Iran, they should take a look at what the consequences might well be for them. And we hope that they will think twice.*”<sup>12</sup>

Another idea of multipolarity would be a “*de facto multipolarity*”, which is not thought as a geopolitical rivalry and a factor of tension, but a process of redistribution of wealth. In this perspective, Chinese leadership finds the concept interesting: Hu Jintao considers that multipolarity constitutes “*an important base for achieving a durable peace on this planet*”<sup>13</sup>. In this case, Chinese trade with all of Latin America has increase tenfold from 2000 to 2007. A similar trend high growth rate for Chinese exports has been observed in Africa, and may occur very soon in Eastern Europe.

As regards Russia, both trends can be observed. Roughly speaking, Russian foreign policy aims at encouraging the emergence of multipolarity, considering that Russia should be one of the powers around which the international system is organized. Among the set of ideas

favoring “*assertive multipolarity*”, Russian neo- Eurasianism seems among the most important ideology which stipulates that Russia should be one these poles at the global level, around which all the Eurasian partners should gravitate<sup>14</sup>. As the USA are seen as a rival, a power hostile to a reconstruction of Russian hegemony in Eurasia, intensification of relations with Latin America help to diminish US influence both regionally and globally. As Alexandr Dugin, a famous standard-bearer of neo-Eurasianism simply puts it, “*if the US insists on encircling Russia, why shouldn't we put our bases in Latin America?*”<sup>15</sup>. In the struggle between maritime and continental powers, “bolivarism”, as a set of ideas defending independence of Latin America against external interferences, constitutes an ally to Russian neo- Eurasianism. In this case, Russia’s increased interest for South America can be seen as a way to put the US off the track, a policy driven by a geopolitical rather than economic rationale. This analysis is shared by Jaime Daremblum, the director of the Center for Latin American Studies at the *Hudson Institute*, who wrote an article in the *Weekly Standard* in which he considered the Russian – Venezuelan relations as “worrisome”<sup>16</sup>.

Yet, the ‘de facto multipolarity’ approach is not totally abandoned. Even in his Munich Security Conference speech of February 2007, a harsh discourse against the Bush administration foreign policy, Putin offered an economic explanation of multipolarity through the development of the BRIC. As he put, “*there is no reason to doubt that the economy potential of the new centers of global economic growth will inevitably be converted into political influence and will strengthen multipolarity*”<sup>17</sup>. Russian economic actors may favour such a direction: Gazprom wants to make Latin America one of its future outposts in its foreign expansion<sup>18</sup>. Other industrialists might find their interests in developing links with the region. According to Vladimir Putin in September 2008, Latin America was “*an obvious link in the chain making-up a multi-polar world*”, concluding that Russia would “*allocate more and more attention to this vector of our economics and foreign policy*”<sup>19</sup>.

*Conclusion. Russia in the US' backyard, a rising but still limited presence overall*

Russia's approach to multipolarity was from the start very much linked to geopolitics, notably under the neo-Eurasianism influence and Primakov vision. The economic dimension of this policy is not marginal in the decision-making, although the current crisis might influence Russian foreign policy. Hence, *“beyond the triumphalism rhetoric of the Kremlin political leaders about the inevitable emergence of an authentic multipolarity, and the ostentatious and hypertrophied manifestations of some uncertain geopolitical alliances about to be articulated with some states from South America (namely Venezuela or Brazil), Moscow is highly vulnerable to the global economical perturbations which occurred in the last months.”*<sup>20</sup>

This road toward multipolarity in Latin America will not be eased by the US leadership, and should probably not go without tensions. The USA is still by far the most important economic actor in the region, and plays a major role in all the countries, including Venezuela. In fact, contrarily to what is something thought, the Obama administration does not seek multipolarity, but rather ‘multi-partnerships’ around US leadership<sup>21</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> The GUAM is a group of States (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova) which have started to cooperate in October 1997. The ALBA (*Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra America*) is an international cooperation organization composed of nine members, with three observers (including Iran). Both groups are seen as anti-hegemonic movements. See Alexander Rublev, “South America Helps South Ossetia”, 13 September 2009. Accessed on [www.rpmonitor.ru](http://www.rpmonitor.ru), 23 November 2009.

<sup>2</sup> While there are less than 30,000 Russians today in Argentina, there is a much larger community (around one million according to some sources) which arrived between the 1880s and the 1920s, composed more broadly by Ukrainians, Belarusians, Jewish, Armenians or Volga Germans. The Russian-rooted community in Brazil does not go beyond 200,000.

<sup>3</sup> The USSR had friendly relationships with some radical government – the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua, the Popular Unity government in Chile (1970-1973), the Velasco regime in Peru (1968-1975) and the New Jewel regime in Grenada (1979-1983).

<sup>4</sup> Sergey Lavrov, Celso Amorim, “Rossiâ i Braziliâ: druž’â i strategičeskie partnery”, [Russia and Brazil: Friends and Strategic Partners], *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, 3 October 2008, available at: <http://www.rg.ru/2008/10/03/lavrov-amorim.html>

<sup>5</sup> The High Level Cooperation Commission is led by PM Vladimir Putin and Brazilian Vice – President Jose Alencar.

<sup>6</sup> John C. K. Daly, “Analysis: Gazprom enters Brazil”, *Energy Daily*, 4 December 2008, available at: [http://www.energy-daily.com/reports/Analysis\\_Gazprom\\_enters\\_Brazil\\_999.html](http://www.energy-daily.com/reports/Analysis_Gazprom_enters_Brazil_999.html)

<sup>7</sup> “Russia aims to expand presence on Latin American arms market”, *Ria Novosti*, 13 April 2011, [http://en.rian.ru/military\\_news/20110413/163504009.html](http://en.rian.ru/military_news/20110413/163504009.html)

<sup>8</sup> Mark A Smith, “Russia & Latin America: Competition in Washington’s “Near Abroad”?”, *Russian Series*, August 2009, p.10.

<sup>9</sup> Mark A Smith, *op.cit.*, p.10.

<sup>10</sup> On this concept, see Didier Chaudet, Florent Parmentier, Benoît Pélopidas, *When Empire meets Nationalism: Power Politics in the US and Russia*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2009, p.78-81.

<sup>11</sup> Ely Karmon, “Iran and its Proxy Hezbollah: Strategic Penetration in Latin America”, *Elcano Royal Institute – Working Paper*, n°18, 8 April 2009, available at: [http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/wcm/connect/899558804f018ad7a79de73170baead1/WP18-2009\\_Karmon\\_Iran\\_Hezbollah\\_Latin\\_America.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CACHEID=899558804f018ad7a79de73170baead1](http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/wcm/connect/899558804f018ad7a79de73170baead1/WP18-2009_Karmon_Iran_Hezbollah_Latin_America.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CACHEID=899558804f018ad7a79de73170baead1)

<sup>12</sup> “Clinton: Latin America’s Iran Ties ‘A Bad Idea’”, *RFE / RL*, 12 December 2009, available at: [http://www.rferl.org/content/Clinton\\_Latin\\_Americas\\_Iran\\_Ties\\_A\\_Bad\\_Idea/1902009.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Clinton_Latin_Americas_Iran_Ties_A_Bad_Idea/1902009.html)

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Brantly Womack, “Asymmetry Theory and China’s Concept of Multipolarity”, *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol.13, n°39, May 2004, p.352.

<sup>14</sup> On the neo- Eurasianist ideology, see Didier Chaudet, Florent Parmentier, Benoît Pélopidas, *op.cit.*, pp.99-114.

<sup>15</sup> Fred Weir, “Moscow’s moves in Georgia track a script by right-wing prophet”, *The Christian Science Monitor*, 19 September 2008, available at: <http://www.csmonitor.com/2008/0920/p01s01-woeu.html>



<sup>16</sup> Jaime Daremblum, “The Bear and the Caudillo. Russia is feeding a dangerous arms building in Venezuela”, *The Weekly Standard*, 1 October 2009.

<sup>17</sup> Vladimir Putin, 43<sup>rd</sup> Munich Security Conference speech, 11 February 2007.

<sup>18</sup> Derek Brower, “Russian energy companies target foreign expansion”, *Petroleum Economist*, January 2009, pp.8-9.

<sup>19</sup> Derek Brower, *art. cit.*, p.8.

<sup>20</sup> Emanuel Copilas, “In Search of Multipolarity. Dimensions and Perspectives of the Russian – Chinese Partnership at the Beginning of the New Millennium”, *Strategic Impact*, n°1, 2009, p.81.

<sup>21</sup> Zaki Laïdi, “Obama does not want a multipolar world order”, *Financial Times*, 3 December 2009.