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STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS AS A TOOL FOR GREAT POWER POLITICS IN VENEZUELA

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Abstract

Since the Cold War, Latin America has escaped any confrontation between the great powers. However, in the last decade, this scenario appears to have changed because of the increased presence of extra-regional actors. Recent developments in Venezuela dramatically illustrate this. China and Russia have become defining actors in Venezuela's domestic dispute, using it as a platform for their global interests. The current crisis involves not only the power resources of traditional international competition—diplomatic, economic, and military—but also new means in the informational and cyber environment. This paper analyses the balancing strategies of China and Russia in Latin America and the role of their strategic communications. It argues that China and Russia employed two divergent balancing strategies to counter US regional hegemony in the Americas, and that each state projected strategic communications particular to each type of balancing. Consequently, China employs communications to ensure resources for its economic development, and to gain influence, presenting itself as a credible and responsible non-Western great power. Russia, meanwhile, employs information campaigns as part of hybrid warfare to promote hard balancing, to pressure United States hegemony in the Americas, and to reduce NATO's influence in Eastern Europe.

Keywords—*Latin America, Venezuela, China, Russia, US, great powers, balancing, strategic communications*

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Introduction¹

In recent years, there has been much debate around the growing competition between the great powers. Analysts tell us that we are entering an uncertain period when competition could surpass cooperation as the main trait of global governance.² For many, geopolitics has returned to centre stage in international politics³ at a moment when the great powers are employing not only the power resources of traditional international competition—diplomatic, economic, and military—but also new means in the information and cyber environments. Traditional and social media have become the new battleground for old disputes among the great powers, rendering strategic communications⁴ and cyberspace⁵ central to current balancing strategies. Until now, few studies have connected great power politics, balancing strategies and information activities. This article seeks to address this gap in the literature.

Confrontations over the distribution of power now affect regions that have not been subject to such disputes since the Cold War. This is the case in Latin America, and Venezuela in particular, which has been experiencing an internal

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1 I would like to thank Diego Lopes, Pedro Barros, Sofia Escobar and two anonymous reviewers for helpful contributions and suggestions.

2 Michael J. Mazarr et al., 'Understanding the Emerging Era of International Competition' (RAND Corporation, 2018).

3 Walter Russell Mead, 'The Return of Geopolitics', *Foreign Affairs*, 17 April 2014.

4 I understand the concept of strategic communications as a tool of grand strategy. Thus, it has a strong correlation with international action. Bolt provides the following definition: 'the projection of foreign and security policies aimed at changing attitudes and behaviour of targeted audiences, using words, images and actions and non-actions in the national interest of a political community'. Neville Bolt, 'Foreword', *Defence Strategic Communications* 5 (2018): 3–11.

5 According to Nye, cyberspace is a unique hybrid space of both physical and virtual properties. Joseph S. Nye Jr, 'Cyber Power' (Harvard Kennedy School Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, May 2010), 3.

struggle for power. Over the past decade, China and Russia have been increasing activity in the region and strengthening ties with Venezuela. This has led to gridlock with the US as the domestic crisis in Venezuela deepened. Since early 2015, the government of Nicolas Maduro has been expanding its hold on political power in the country, bypassing the legislative branch. The lack of opposition in the 2018 elections also raised doubts about their legality. It resulted in an internal struggle for power, with the leader of the National Assembly declaring himself interim president in early 2019. The US and several other Western countries claimed the elections were illegal and recognised the Assembly's president as the legal chief of state. China and Russia, however, increased their support for Maduro. The political divide has galvanised these three great powers to court public opinion both locally and globally through social media, public diplomacy, official discourses, humanitarian operations, and military manoeuvres.

This article will provide a structured and focused comparison⁶ of the balancing strategies and strategic communications China and Russia employ in their relations with Venezuela.⁷ My primary hypothesis is that each country has its own strategy to check the power of the US in Latin America, which is also reflected in its strategic communications. I apply the concepts of *offensive realism*, *balance of power theory*, and *strategic communications* to test my hypothesis. I analyse the grand strategies of Russia and China and their bilateral relations with Venezuela considering diplomatic, economic, military, and informational means,⁸ and highlight their strategic communications efforts.⁹

The article is organised into four parts. In the first section, I discuss the theoretical framework, presenting the concepts of balance of power, balancing strategies, and alliance formation, and how these relate to strategic communications. In the second section, I present the developments of Venezuela's Chavist regime and its relationship with the US. In the third and fourth sections, I discuss the grand strategies of China and Russia and how these lead to different balancing

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6 According to George and Bennett, the method is 'structured' in that the researcher writes general questions that reflect the research objective and that these questions are asked of each case under study to guide and standardize data collection'. It is "focused" in that it deals only with certain aspects of the historical cases examined'. Alexander L. George et al., *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (MIT Press, 2005).

7 They are, in this context, theory-guided case studies, which 'aim to explain and/or interpret a single historical episode rather than generalize beyond the data', although results may raise important theoretical questions. Jack S. Levy, 'Case Studies: Types, Designs, and Logics of Inference', *Conflict Management and Peace Science* Vol. 25, No 1 (1 February 2008): 4.

8 I have employed documental analysis—mainly national security policies and defence strategies and have analysed diplomatic, economic, and military data.

9 In the realm of strategic communications, I have analysed diplomatic and military statements, interviews, and actions regarding media related to Venezuela.

strategies in Venezuela. I conclude by comparing the behaviour of the two countries and the role strategic communications plays in their relations with Venezuela, and by discussing some political and theoretical implications.

Great powers, balance of power, and balancing strategies: strategic communications as a grand strategy resource

Balance of power is one of the oldest and most important concepts in international relations literature, also one of the most ‘ambiguous and intractable’.¹⁰ *Balance of power* might be defined as the ‘conditions of power equilibrium among key states’¹¹ with outcomes at the global (systemic) and regional (subsystemic) levels. Structural realists argue that the distribution of power in an anarchic international system creates pressures in world politics,¹² where states can only achieve security by maximising their own power and preventing other states from realising regional or global hegemony. To do this, states employ the foreign policy strategy of *balancing*, focusing on their own military build-up or on forming coalitions.

Both liberals and realists have criticised this perspective¹³ for its excessive emphasis on military aspects and for overlooking other manifestations of power.¹⁴ Some authors have, therefore, advocated the need to rethink balance of power theory to consider alternative means of power and introduce a graduated understanding of balancing strategies that better reflect the international system after the Cold War. In 1985, Stephen Walt argued that states do not seek balance against power but rather against the most threatening power, as determined by aggregate power, proximity, offensive capability, and offensive intentions.¹⁵ He saw threat level as one of the main drivers for alliance formation in international politics. In 2004, Randall Schweller focused on the problem of why some states do not engage in balancing strategies when faced with rising aggressors. He introduced the concepts of overbalancing, appropriate balancing, underbalancing, and non-balancing, arguing that domestic factors influence leaders’

10 Jack S. Levy, ‘What Do Great Powers Balance against and When?’, in *Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century* (Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 29.

11 T. V. Paul, ‘Introduction: The Enduring Axioms of Balance of Power Theory and Their Contemporary Relevance’, in *Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century* (Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 3.

12 Daniel H. Nexon, ‘The Balance of Power in the Balance’, *World Politics* 61, Issue 2 (April 2009): 330–59, p. 335–36.

13 Some authors criticise Eurocentrism and the bias toward the great powers in balance of power theory.

14 T. V. Paul, ‘Introduction: The Enduring Axioms’, p. 3.

15 Stephen M. Walt, ‘Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power’, *International Security* Vol. 9, № 4 (1985): 9.

decisions to balance or not to balance.¹⁶

Despite the merits of these propositions, T. V. Paul's typology has been chosen for this study because it provides a more nuanced view of balancing strategies and alliance formation¹⁷ (see Table 1). Paul defines three types of balancing behaviour: (1) *hard balancing*, referring to intense interstate rivalry that represents a moment when states build formal alliances or modernise their military capabilities to deal with peer competitors; (2) *soft balancing*, describing a limited military build-up, ad hoc security cooperation exercises, and resistance in international institutions;¹⁸ and (3) *asymmetric balancing*, relating to efforts to contain indirect threats from sub-national actors, such as terrorist groups or guerrillas.¹⁹

Balancing strategies might include an individual change of position or the formation of coalitions or alliances—'formal (or informal) commitments for security cooperation between two or more states, intended to augment each member's power, security, and/or influence'.²⁰ These relationships are motivated by balancing efforts to enhance security, albeit may be made more effective by intervening factors such as foreign (economic and military) aid and indirect manipulations by external powers (also known as penetration).²¹

Balancing strategies can also vary in their geographical reach, being either *onshore* or *offshore*. *Offshore balancing* is used by geographically distant states to affect balance of power in other regions by indirect (diplomatic, economic influence, and military support) or direct means (military intervention).²² This is more difficult to achieve because it is harder to project power overseas and to build expeditionary forces due to the 'primacy of land power' and the 'stopping power of water'.²³

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16 Four main variables affect balancing decisions: (1) elite consensus, (2) regime/ government vulnerability, (3) social cohesion, and (4) elite cohesion. Randall L. Schweller, 'Unanswered Threats: A Neoclassical Realist Theory of Underbalancing', *International Security* Vol. 29, № 2 (2004): 167–69.

17 T.V. Paul, 'Introduction: The Enduring Axioms', p. 13.

18 For other perspectives that relate soft balancing strategies to unipolar systems, see Robert A. Pape, 'Soft Balancing against the United States', *International Security* Vol. 30, № 1 (2005): 7–45; Stephen M. Walt, 'Alliances in a Unipolar World', *World Politics* Vol. 61, № 1 (2009): 86–120.

19 I will focus mainly on hard and soft balancing strategies because my case study does not hold traits of asymmetric balancing. Venezuela does have groups, such as the *Militias Bolivarianas* and the *Colectivos* (Chavist state-supported paramilitary), that could become an important part of future asymmetric balancing strategies for Russia and China if a transition occurs in terms unfavourable to the current Venezuelan government.

20 Walt, 'Alliances in a Unipolar World', p. 86.

21 Walt, 'Alliance Formation', p. 27–33.

22 For a debate on the concept in US grand strategy, see: Christopher Layne, 'Offshore balancing revisited', *The Washington Quarterly* Vol. 25, № 2 (June 1, 2002): 233–48, 2; John J. Mearsheimer e Stephen M. Walt, 'The Case for Offshore Balancing', *Foreign Affairs*, 13 June 2016; Hal Brands, 'Fools Rush Out? The Flawed Logic of Offshore Balancing', *The Washington Quarterly* 38, № 2 (April 3, 2015): 7–28.

23 John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics (Updated Edition)* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2003).

	Nature of rivalry	Key strategies
Hard Balancing	Intense, open, often zero sum. Relative gains matter most.	Open arms build-up, formal alliances, or both.
Soft Balancing	Submerged, non-zero-sum. Relative gains of limited concern for now.	Limited arms build-up. Informal, tacit, or ad hoc security understandings among affected states, within or outside of international institutions. Preventive strategy.
Asymmetric Balancing	By state or non-state actors (e.g., terrorists). Rivalry intense, although latter are elusive actors.	Non-state actors and their state sponsors pursue asymmetric strategies; state actors follow mixture of traditional and non-traditional strategies to counter threat.

Table 1: *Balancing behaviour. Source: Paul (2004:13).*

This concept of *offshore balancing* becomes more useful for analysing the presence of extra-regional powers in Latin America when combined with the theory of *offensive realism*, which sheds light on the behaviour of the great powers²⁴ and their interactions with regional hegemony. The theory states that the great powers have a number of goals related to maintaining their place in an anarchic international system: achieving regional hegemony, controlling the largest possible percentage of global wealth, dominating the balance of land power in the region, and achieving nuclear superiority.²⁵ Once a great power achieves regional hegemony at home it will aim to protect its position and check potential aggressors in other regions,²⁶ thus influencing its foreign policy strategies.²⁷

24 Within the realist tradition, great powers are militarily powerful and economic wealthy states. See: Mearsheimer, p. 5; Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2010).

25 Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics (Updated Edition)*, p. 140–47.

26 Another is buck-passing: 'attempts to get another state to bear the burden of deterring or possibly fighting an aggressor' in Mearsheimer, 158.

27 Strategies are divided into three groups: (1) *for gaining power*: war, blackmail, bait and bleed, bloodletting; (2) *to check aggressors*: balancing and buck-passing; (3) *to avoid conflict*: bandwagoning and appeasement. Mearsheimer, p. 138–64.

Balancing and *buck-passing* are the two main strategies used to achieve this goal. The first refers to engaging directly with an aggressive state to alter the balance of power, while the second refers to inducing another great power to check an aggressor while remaining on the sidelines.²⁸ Other strategies include *appeasement*, defined as conceding power to an aggressor in hopes of a change in behaviour, and *bandwagoning*, or joining forces with a more powerful opponent so to share the spoils together. These strategies call for ceding power to a rival state and thus increase the insecurity of the state that employs them.²⁹

The theory of *offensive realism* offers insight for this study because, as John Mearsheimer says, regional hegemony is quite difficult to acquire and to maintain. In the Americas, for instance, the region is subject to conceptual disputes between, on the one hand, the US approach to Latin America as part of its larger sphere of influence—the Western Hemisphere—and, on the other hand, seeing Latin America as an autonomous area as do other powers such as Brazil,³⁰ China, and Russia. This conceptual dispute conceals a power struggle within the region that places the offensive realism of geopolitical localisation in the centre of the study of the offshore behaviour of the great powers.

Understanding balancing strategies also requires a solid understanding of *grand strategy*, defined as a ‘political-military means-ends chain, a state’s theory of how it can best cause security for itself’,³¹ in other words how the great powers coordinate their economic, diplomatic, cultural, and military resources to attain political objectives in the international arena,³² which may mean altering the balance of power at the global or regional levels. Hence, *balancing* might be a foreign or defence policy strategy, which is part of a larger *grand strategy* seeking to achieve (hard, soft, or asymmetric) balancing effects.³³

As this more nuanced view of *balancing strategies* is still a relatively recent addition to *balance of power theory*, more work needs to be done on how non-

28 Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p. 157–59.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 161–63.

30 Brazil also focused on the concept of South America. See: Alcides Costa Vaz, Alexandre Fuccille, an Lucas Pereira Rezende, ‘UNASUR, Brazil, and the South American Defence Cooperation: A Decade Later’, *Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional* Vol. 60, No 2, 18 January 2018.

31 Barry R. Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany Between the World Wars* (Cornell University Press, 2014), 13.

32 This definition is influenced by the classic Liddell Hart formulation: ‘to co-ordinate and direct all resources of a nation, or a band of nations, towards the attainment of the political object of the war—the goal defined by fundamental policy’. B. H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy* (Editorial Beni Noaj, 2009), p. 353.

33 Mearsheimer and Walt, for instance, propose a US grand strategy based on the logic of offshore balancing foreign policy strategy instead of a liberal hegemony strategy. Mearsheimer and Walt, ‘The Case for Offshore Balancing’.

traditional aspects such as the cultural, cyber, and information domains relate to balancing strategies and how they affect the balance of power at the global and regional levels. Echoing Carr and Morgenthau's recognition of the role of propaganda and persuasion in balances of power, Daniel Nexon has argued that power involves a great deal more than military force, and that sometimes actors may 'lose political autonomy without organized armies firing a shot'.³⁴ For example, as a result of the rapid evolution of communications, social media, and interconnectedness between countries, the information and cyber domains are now essential to both warfare and grand strategy.

The growing concept of hybrid warfare,³⁵ which refers to the use of both asymmetric and conventional means of warfare³⁶ (i.e. information operations, cyber campaigns, proxies, and economic influence),³⁷ reinforces how important these domains are to ensuring political victory without employing military means. Hence, the *information environment*³⁸ has become an important new dimension of grand strategy building and balancing strategies. Yet terminology regarding state efforts in the information environment is still being debated. In the late 2000s, Christopher Paul noticed that the terms 'strategic communications', 'public diplomacy', and 'information operations' were being used interchangeably.³⁹ The confusion was further complicated as 'strategic communications' was also used in a number of other fields such as management and communication theory with quite broad definitions.⁴⁰

Despite these conceptual difficulties, *strategic communications* must be understood as tool of grand strategies. Authors such as Paul and Farwell, for instance, relate strategic communications to the coordination of symbols, actions, words, and images towards targeted audiences in support of national interests, policies, or

34 Daniel H. Nexon, 'The Balance of Power in the Balance', *World Politics* 61, № 2 (April 2009): 343.

35 Hybrid warfare is a widely contested concept. For instance, Gray understands the concept may lead to confusion about the difference of regular and irregular war. Colin S. Gray, *War, Peace and International Relations: An Introduction to Strategic History* (Routledge, 2013).

36 Williamson Murray and Peter R. Mansoor, *Hybrid Warfare: Fighting Complex Opponents from the Ancient World to the Present* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 2–3.

37 Christopher S. Chivvis, 'Understanding Russian' (Rand Corporation, 2017), p. 3–4.

38 Defined as the 'dynamic physical and/or virtual settings interpreted by the mind' in Neville Bolt, 'Foreword', *Defence Strategic Communications* 5 (2018): 3–11.

39 Christopher Paul, *Strategic Communication: Origins, Concepts, and Current Debates* (ABC-CLIO, 2011), p. 33; C. Paul, 'Whither Strategic Communication? A Survey of Current Proposals and Recommendations', Occasional Paper (RAND Corporation, 2009), p. 1–3.

40 Holtzhausen and Zerfass use this approach, defining the concept as 'communicating purposefully to advance (the organization's) mission'. Derina Holtzhausen and Ansgar Zerfass, *The Routledge Handbook of Strategic Communication* (Routledge, 2014), p. 4.

goals.⁴¹ This approach sees the means as the defining element and does not focus on the ends. A complementary approach focuses on both ends and means, and clarifies the grand strategy goals to which these efforts should be directed. According to Bolt, *strategic communications* refers to coordinated efforts for ‘the projection of foreign and security policies aimed at changing attitudes and behaviour of targeted audiences, using words, images and actions and non-actions in the national interest of a political community’.⁴²

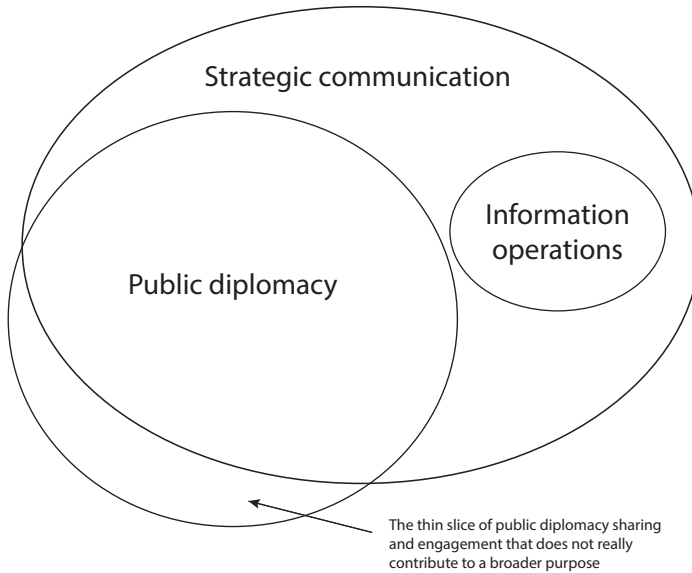


Figure 1. Diagram of the relationship between strategic communications, public diplomacy, and information operations. Source: Paul (2011).

This is quite different from public diplomacy or information operations. *Public diplomacy* can be understood as a dimension of international relations that goes beyond traditional diplomacy and involves promoting the national interests of a state through such actions as the cultivation of public opinion abroad, dialogue with private companies, and cultural and educational exchanges, although there

41 James P. Farwell, *Persuasion and Power: The Art of Strategic Communication* (Georgetown University Press, 2012), p. xviii–xix; C. Paul, *Strategic Communication*, p. 3.

42 Bolt, 'Foreword'.

is no single agreed-upon definition.⁴³ The concept is deeply intertwined with soft power, defined as indirect influences such as culture, values, and ideologies.⁴⁴ Public diplomacy contributes to strategic communications efforts, but also contains a small aspect that does not reinforce a strategic purpose as it might foster understandings and promote engagement with foreign audiences that are not necessarily related to national policy goals,⁴⁵ as shown in Figure 1. *Information operations* mainly refers to military operations, although other governmental agencies use them as well. The term relates to integrating the capabilities of electronic warfare, computer network operations, and psychological operations to achieve political goals against an adversary.⁴⁶ Information operations aim to coordinate and integrate information efforts mainly at the level of the defence sector, not the whole government.⁴⁷

I use the concepts of *grand strategy* and *balancing strategies*, and their connection to *strategic communications* as understood in the theoretical framework of *offensive realism* to explore the balancing strategies Russia and China have employed in their bilateral relations with Venezuela, and whether strategic communications fit coherently into those strategies. Although this is not a theoretical discussion, it may provide some insight into how actions in the information sphere may connect to balancing strategies. I base my argument on the assumption that to better understand nuanced balancing behaviour one must consider not only military, economic, and diplomatic means, but also efforts in the information environment. As Gray puts it, the character of warfare may change, but never its nature.⁴⁸

Venezuela: counter-hegemonic foreign policy and the re-emergence of great power politics in Latin America

Venezuela's large oil reserves and strategic position have always made it an interesting asset for great powers. The country has so many natural resources that it is a founding member of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting

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43 'Public diplomacy—what it is and is not'. [Accessed 3 April 2019].

44 Nancy Snow, 'Rethinking Public Diplomacy' in *The Routledge Handbook of Public Diplomacy* (Routledge, 2008), p. 3–11; Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Soft Power: The Means To Success In World Politics* (PublicAffairs, 2009).

45 C. Paul, *Strategic Communication*, p. 41.

46 Definition based on the US Department of Defense, Joint Chiefs of Staff, 'DoD Dictionary for Military and Associated Terms' (US Department of Defense, April 2019).

47 Arturo Munoz, *US Military Information Operations in Afghanistan: Effectiveness of Psychological Operations 2001–2010* (RAND Corporation, 2012), p. 10.

48 Colin Gray, 'Clausewitz Rules, OK? The Future Is the Past: With GPS', *Review of International Studies* Vol. 25 (1999): 161–82.

Countries (OPEC) and relies greatly on its state-owned oil company *Petróleos de Venezuela S.A.* (PDVSA). Yet since the second half of the twentieth century, it has been a close US ally in Latin America, an important oil supplier, and a significant regional outpost for the US. Unlike its neighbours in South America, Venezuela has enjoyed one of the most stable democracies in the region and was a great defender of American liberal values in Latin America from the establishment of the *Punto Fijo* pact in 1958⁴⁹ until the early 2000s. The US has played a significant, although controversial, role in Venezuelan governments and foreign policies over time.

Thus, foreign powers' interests in the country are deeply connected with recent changes in US-Venezuela bilateral relations, which created an opportunity for disrupting the status quo of the balance of power in the Americas. When Hugo Chávez came to power in 1998, bilateral relations with the US became subject to realignment. In the years that followed, Chávez decided to push through constitutional reform, direct nationalist and non-liberal economic policies, and a non-Western approach to participative democracy.⁵⁰ However, it was not until 2002, following a coup attempt to oust Chávez and replace him with Pedro Carmona, president of *Fedecamaras* business federation, that the US and Venezuela began to drift apart. Washington's recognition of Carmona as the legitimate president significantly affected bilateral relations. After Chávez returned to power and the 'Group of Friends of the Organization of the American States (OAS) Secretary General'⁵¹ supported negotiations between the opposition and the government, Venezuela's new government increased its anti-American rhetoric, accused the US of interventionism, and appealed to resentment against the US domestically.

The US used this rivalry politically to push tougher anti-terrorism, narcotics, and guerrilla policies in Latin American countries in the context of the 'global war on terror', particularly in Colombia, and to pressure Venezuela for democratic change in its national politics. An important moment for this policy occurred in 2006. The US Secretary of State declared an arms embargo against Venezuela, allegedly for not cooperating fully with anti-terrorism efforts pursuant to Section

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49 *Punto Fijo* pact was a series of political and economic pacts among political elites that assured Venezuelan democratisation in 1958 and the maintenance of its democracy in the twentieth century. David J. Myers, 'The Normalization of Punto Fijo Democracy' in *The Unraveling of Representative Democracy in Venezuela* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 11–13.

50 Carlos A. Romero et al., 'From Chávez to Maduro: Continuity and Change in Venezuelan Foreign Policy', *Contexto Internacional* 38, No 1 (June 2016): 171–74,
51 Brazil, the US, Chile, Mexico, Spain, and Portugal.

40A of the Arms Exports Control Act (AECA). Later, in 2008, the US Treasury Department imposed further sanctions against two Venezuelan nationals for their financial connections to terrorist groups.⁵²

This was when extra-regional powers saw an opportunity to develop closer relations with the country, and the Chavist regime opted to develop an increasingly counter-hegemonic foreign policy. At this moment, Venezuela used the rise in petroleum prices to push forward a policy of greater influence in the Caribbean and to deepen ties with Cuba in an attempt to create a counter-hegemonic regionalism under the *Alternativa Bolivariana para las Américas* (ALBA),⁵³ and provide oil to several countries through soft loans under the *Petrocaribe* agreement.⁵⁴ These efforts aimed to gain the support of smaller countries in the region and allies among international organisations, such as the OAS and the United Nations, thus soft balancing US influence in the area.⁵⁵

Since the early 2010s, political polarisation has risen dramatically in Venezuela. After Chávez's death in 2013 and the rise of Vice-President Nicolás Maduro in the following presidential election, the country deteriorated politically and economically. In 2015, Venezuela held legislative elections. The opposition won the majority of seats in the National Assembly and yet the Supreme Court blocked several opposition legislators from taking office. Still under the Obama administration, the US was already changing its position towards the country, approving an Executive Order that imposed sanctions on persons⁵⁶ responsible for the erosion of human rights guarantees, the persecution of political opponents, the curtailment of press freedoms, the use of violence and human rights violations and abuses in response to anti-government protests, the arbitrary arrest and detention of anti-government protestors, and corruption.⁵⁷ The US, however, did not pressure Venezuela unduly as it was pursuing an agenda with Cuba, a close ally of Venezuela.

52 Clare Ribando Seelke et al., 'Venezuela: Background and U.S. Relations', Congressional Research Service, Updated 21 January 2019, p. 34.

53 Established in 2006, it is composed of Antigua & Barbuda, Bolivia, Cuba, Dominica, Grenada, Nicaragua, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and Venezuela.

54 Established in 2004, *Petrocaribe* involved Cuba, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Belize, Guiana, Antigua and Barbuda, the Bahamas, Dominica, Grenada, Jamaica, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname, Haiti, and Venezuela. Asa K. Cusack, *Venezuela, ALBA, and the Limits of Postneoliberal Regionalism in Latin America and the Caribbean* (Springer, 2018), p. 153–90.

55 Javier Corrales, Carlos A. Romero, and Carlos A. Romero, *U.S.-Venezuela Relations since the 1990s: Coping with Midlevel Security Threats* (Routledge, 2012), p. 15–62.

56 For more on the first round of sanctions, see: Javier Corrales and Carlos A. Romero, 'U.S.-Venezuelan Relations after Hugo Chávez' in Jorge I. Domínguez and Rafael Fernández de Castro (eds) *Contemporary U.S.-Latin American Relations: Cooperation Or Conflict in the 21st Century?* (Routledge, 2016), p. 213–35.

57 Mark P. Sullivan, 'Venezuela: Overview of U.S. Sanctions', Congressional Research Service, Updated 8 May 2019.

Two years later, in 2017, Maduro called for National Constituent Assembly elections and, as a result, the new pro-government National Assembly declared itself the official holder of legislative power in the country, banning the opposition from power and thus reducing the legitimacy of the Assembly. This movement was consistent with Trump's foreign policy to increase pressure on Cuba and Venezuela and counter extra-regional influence in the Americas.⁵⁸ The US even invoked the Monroe Doctrine and consistently declared that 'all options are on the table', including military intervention in Venezuela,⁵⁹ then gradually imposed a number of economic sanctions against the country.⁶⁰

At this point, international pressure to find a solution increased significantly, but there was no consensus among the great powers as Russia and China rejected the West's approach to the problem. Latin America also faced political division, since it failed to reach consensus in such regional institutions as the OAS and the Union of South American States (UNASUR).⁶¹ In 2017, twelve countries came together to pressure the Venezuelan regime for a peaceful exit from the crisis through an ad hoc organisation called the Lima Group.⁶² These states did not recognise the legitimacy of the Constituent Assembly, condemned human rights violations in Venezuela, offered humanitarian assistance, and supported regime change.⁶³

The crisis deepened further after the results of the presidential election in late 2018. The opposition boycotted the election and Maduro won amid allegations of fraud and manipulation. In early 2019, the president of the National Assembly, opposition leader Juan Guaidó, declared himself the legitimate president while alleging the election had been fraudulent. More than 50 countries recognised Guaidó as the legitimate interim president and increased pressure on the

58 'National Security Strategy of the United States of America' (The White House, December 2017), p. 51.
59 'Donald Trump Says Military Option for Venezuela's Nicolas Maduro on the Table', Deutsche Welle, 12 August 2017.

60 Mark Weisbrot and Jeffrey Sachs, 'Economic Sanctions as Collective Punishment: The Case of Venezuela', CEPR Report (Washington: Center for Economic and Policy Research, April, 2019).

61 Oliver Stuenkel, 'How South America Ceded the Field in Venezuela', 31 January 2019.

62 Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay and Peru; 'Joint statement on the second meeting of the Lima Group on the situation in Venezuela—New York, 20 September 2017'.

63 Elizabeth Melimopoulos, 'Venezuela: A simple guide to understanding the current crisis', *Al Jazeera*, 2 February 2019.

Maduro regime.⁶⁴ Since then, growing domestic polarisation, a refugee crisis, a deteriorating economy, the regional political divide, and great power gridlock with China and Russia on one side and the US and European powers on the other, have made it difficult to resolve the Venezuelan crisis.

China-Venezuela relations and strategic communications: traits of a soft balancing strategy

Offensive realism theory suggests that a rising power will aim towards regional hegemony and eventually try to check potential threatening great powers through balancing strategies. If this formulation is correct, China's grand strategy would intend first to achieve hegemony in the Indo-Pacific region to counter regional competitors, and then aim to check the US and other great powers offshore. This is consistent with China's grand strategy shift in the 1990s. Since then, the country has tried to promote the image of itself as a rising power with benign intentions while creating mechanisms to assure its regional hegemony through new institutions, partnerships, and support for its energy policy. During this period, China promoted a strategic partnership policy, engaging with its neighbours and with states in other regions to develop a new cooperative, regional multilateralism through organisations such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).⁶⁵

As the country expanded economically so did its grand strategy. From 2007–08, China initiated a global campaign to extend the benefits of its economic expansion and gain political influence beyond East Asia.⁶⁶ As a result, Chinese grand strategy has been focusing its efforts on building a multi-polar world in which China holds a special place. Part of this agenda entails creating opportunities abroad—particularly in developing countries—to benefit both host country and Chinese entrepreneurs. Such countries become trade partners, providing resources for China's development strategy, mainly by securing

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64 Andorra, Argentina, Australia, Austria, the Bahamas, Belgium, Brazil, Bulgaria, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Denmark, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Kosovo, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Macedonia, Malta, the Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Montenegro, Morocco, the Netherlands, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

65 According to Zhongping and Jing, China has a loose policy of strategic partnerships. It did emerge as an important resource for engaging new partners. It does not necessarily reflect the country's closest friends over time.

66 Feng Zhang, *Chinese Hegemony: Grand Strategy and International Institutions in East Asian History* (Stanford University Press, 2015), p. 185.

Chinese access to natural and energy assets, thus reinforcing its position as a rising global power.

China's grand strategy is not openly aggressive towards the US, although it still adopts balancing strategies adapted to different regions. Globally, it has adopted a soft balancing strategy based on an interest to reform current international organisations and to build a parallel world order that boosts China's strategic autonomy, reducing its dependency on Western-led institutions.⁶⁷ Among these parallel efforts are: in finance, the Asian Infrastructure Bank (AIIB), the BRICS⁶⁸ New Development Bank (NDB), and the BRICS Contingency Reserve Agreement (CRA); in security, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA); and in infrastructure, the One Road, One Belt (OBOR) initiative, the Nicaragua Canal, and the Trans-Amazonian Railway.⁶⁹

In the Indo-Pacific region, however, the characteristics of a more traditional balancing strategy have gradually appeared, such as Chinese military build-up and concerns over US 'hegemonism, power politics and neo-interventionism'.⁷⁰ The US 'pivot to Asia', Japan's new openness to acquiring military potential, sovereignty disputes with several neighbouring countries in the South China Sea, and the goal of reunification with Taiwan are some of the issues related to China's regional hegemony interests. These concerns were expressed in China's 2008 Defence White Paper⁷¹ and in its 2015 Military Strategy,⁷² becoming more assertive over time. Thus, China is gradually presenting itself as more willing to use military force in support of its national interests abroad, for example, safeguarding the country's security interests in new domains (including the cyber and informational domains), protecting its interests overseas, and reunifying with Taiwan.⁷³

Both China's Indo-Pacific and global strategies have a key strategic communications component. The more global China's interests become, the more its communications strategy seems to follow. Since 2012, for example, the country developed political narratives about 'the Chinese Dream' and 'national rejuvenation', presenting a political myth to both domestic and international

67 Oliver Stuenkel, *Post-Western World: How Emerging Powers Are Remaking Global Order* (Wiley & Sons, 2017), p. 120–21.

68 An international coalition comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa.

69 Stuenkel, *Post-Western World*, p. 122–23.

70 China, 'China's Military Strategy 2015' (Chinese Government, 2015), p. 4.

71 China, 'China's National Defense in 2008' (Chinese Government, 2008).

72 China, 'China's Military Strategy 2015', p. 5.

73 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

audiences to justify China's rise as a prosperous and powerful nation.⁷⁴ The myth lays out a multi-layered policy agenda in which strategic communications plays a major role, both domestically and globally. It focuses on multiple objectives, such as (1) raising the per capita income of its citizens, (2) strengthening social welfare to maintain internal stability, (3) projecting culture to promote the country's values, and (4) improving environmental conditions, all ensuring the continuity of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).⁷⁵ However, changing the international community's perception of China to avoid the formation of balancing coalitions in reaction to its new expansion is at least as important as achieving great power status.

Since its grand strategy shift of 2007–08 China has increasingly made inroads into other regions to fulfil its strategic intents. Latin America and the Caribbean now hold a special place in this effort as the region is where the US most directly exerts hegemony. Thus, Chinese engagement with these regions aims to ensure access to abundant natural resources and markets, to obtain support for its foreign policy objectives (the one China policy), to reshape the region's perception of Chinese hegemony as benign, and to obtain geopolitical gains in Washington's traditional sphere of influence through diplomatic, economic, and cultural means.⁷⁶ In the diplomatic and economic spheres, China has been boosting bilateral relations, creating joint funds with countries, and aiming towards regional institutions where the US is absent. In 2014, it supported a joint forum with the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), the China-CELAC Forum, aiming to deepen relations with these countries. China has chosen to move away from a traditional hard balancing strategy and adopt a soft strategy. This is consistent with the thesis that China's goals are not only economic but also geopolitical.⁷⁷

Chinese-Venezuelan bilateral relations are thus part of this soft strategy towards Latin America, as can be seen in official documents in 2008⁷⁸ and 2016.⁷⁹ Chinese attitudes towards Venezuela evolved from mere diplomatic, economic,

74 Lingzi Zhong and Juyan Zhang, 'Political Myth as Strategic Communication: Analysis of Chinese Dream's Rhetoric and English News Media's Interpretation', *International Journal of Strategic Communication* Vol. 10, No 1 (1 January 2016): 56–57.

75 Timothy R. Heath, Kristen Gunness, and Cortez A. III Cooper, 'The PLA and China's Rejuvenation', Product Page, 2016.

76 Katherine Koleski and Alec Blivas, 'China's Engagement with Latin America and the Caribbean', *U.S.-China Economic and Security Commission*, 17 October 2018, p. 4.

77 R. Evan Ellis, 'China's Growing Relationship with Latin America and the Caribbean', *Air & Space Power Journal* (2015): 6.

78 China, 'China's Policy Paper on Latin America and the Caribbean' (Chinese Government, 2008).

79 China, 'China's Policy Paper on Latin America and the Caribbean' (Chinese Government, 2016).

cultural, and military efforts to clearly separating China's position from that of the US. Venezuelan-Chinese relations grew closer as Hugo Chávez rose to power and adopted an increasingly anti-US political discourse after the coup attempt against him in 2002. Over the years, this has proven mutually beneficial: the Chavist regime receives support for its goal of retaining power, and China obtains primary resources, mainly oil, exports products with high added value, and gradually gains geopolitical leverage in an important region.⁸⁰

Between 2007 and 2018, Venezuela became China's most important partner in Latin America, where it made major diplomatic, economic, and military efforts. On the economic side, China has made several infrastructure investments in Venezuela, especially in oil extraction, automobile manufacturing, and construction. One of the main pillars of this relationship was bank loans. Venezuela was China's number one borrower in Latin America, accounting for approximately \$67 billion in Chinese lending between 2005 and 2018, far ahead of Brazil, in second place with \$27 billion.⁸¹ These loans had no macroeconomic conditions attached and were commodity-guaranteed to collateralise China's banking policy; with each new loan, the Venezuelan government increased its oil supply commitments.⁸² Although Chinese banks have recently been more cautious towards Venezuela, Beijing still supports the government politically, and continues to renegotiate repayment of its loans over the long term.

On the military side, since the US arms embargo in 2006, China has grown to be the second most important arms supplier to Venezuela, increasing both the complexity and the volume of defence material exported. From 1998 to 2018, Venezuela accounted for 88.7% of Chinese arms exports to Latin America; these exports occurred mainly from 2006 to 2016.⁸³ The two countries strengthened diplomatic ties. Venezuela recognised China as a market economy in 2004 and the countries formed a 'strategic alliance' in 2006, while China considered elevating the country to 'comprehensive strategic partnership' status in 2014.

Like other Chinese activities in Latin America, China-Venezuela relations seem to fit into the category of a soft balancing strategy, albeit with greater engagement

80 Yanran Xu, *China's Strategic Partnerships in Latin America: Case Studies of China's Oil Diplomacy in Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, and Venezuela, 1991–2015* (Lexington Books, 2016), p. 63–64.

81 Margaret Myers and Kevin Gallagher, 'Cautious Capital: Chinese Development Finance in LAC, 2018' (The Dialogue, February 2019), p. 3.

82 Stephen B. Kaplan and Michael Penfold, 'China-Venezuela Economic Relations: Hedging Venezuelan Bets with Chinese Characteristics' (Wilson Center. Latin American Program. Kissinger Institute on China and the United States, February 2019), p. 18.

83 Data from SIPRI Arms Transfers Database.

than with the rest of the region. China also holds a tacit security understanding with Venezuela supported by a limited arms build-up, substantial foreign (economic and military) aid, and diplomatic support. Although these are the traits of a loose alliance, China's strategy is still that of a (soft) offshore balancer because the country does not engage in direct confrontation with the US, but rather aims to affect the Latin American balance of power in a gradual and indirect manner.

This is demonstrated by China's position as the Venezuelan crisis deepened. China's diplomatic manifestations demonstrated that strategic communications followed a soft balancing strategy. Discourses, interviews, and position statements in international organisations all reinforced China's indirect goal of presenting itself more as a veto player than as a hard balancer. Indirect foreign aid was a more important strategic activity than direct military involvement or consistent alliance building. Since early 2019, for instance, the Chinese government consistently refused to recognise Juan Guaidó's claim to the presidency and defended a non-interventionist solution, opposing economic sanctions. According to Beijing, 'history has taught us that external interference or sanctions, instead of helping solve problems, can only complicate matters'.⁸⁴

Beijing also spread this message by opposing US-led coalitions in international organisations as expected from a soft balancer. China opposed attempts to pass Security Council resolutions against Venezuela, blocked Juan Guaidó's nomination to the board of the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB),⁸⁵ and rejected the actions of the Lima Group, which aimed to oust Maduro. The Chinese foreign spokesperson consistently maintained that 'Venezuela's affairs should be resolved by the Venezuelan people under the framework of its Constitution and laws and through peaceful dialogue and political means'.⁸⁶ Another example of strategic communications being used as part of a soft balancing strategy was the case of a humanitarian aid delivery supported by the US and the Lima Group in late February 2019. China responded by stating that the US was using 'the so-called humanitarian aid to serve political ends and stir up instability and even turmoil',⁸⁷ and then reduced the pressure on the Maduro regime by offering its own share of humanitarian aid.⁸⁸

84 China, 'Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Geng Shuang's Regular Press Conference on January 29, 2019'.

85 James Politi, 'IDB Scraps Annual Meeting after China Excludes Venezuela', *Financial Times*, 23 March 2019.

86 China, 'Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Remarks on the Inaugural Conference of the International Contact Group on Venezuela', 8 February 2019.

87 China, 'Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Lu Kang's Remarks on the Situation in Venezuela', 25 February 2019.

88 CGTN, 'China Provides 65 Tons of Medical Supplies for Venezuela', 30 March 2019.

These examples show that Chinese strategic communications have been consistent with changes in China's grand strategy and its balancing strategies in Latin America and Venezuela; strategic communications is not employed aggressively but rather preventively, and as a loose alliance, combined with an understanding regarding mutual security. These positions become even clearer when compared to Russian strategies regarding the same issues.

Russia-Venezuela relations and strategic communications: traits of a hard balancing strategy

Russian strategic concerns differ substantially from those of China. Since the end of the Cold War, Russia has been gradually losing influence in Eurasia, in contrast to China's rise in the Indo-Pacific region. This is the result of the defeat of Serbia (supported by Russia) and the fall of Milošević in the Kosovo War, the NATO military intervention in Yugoslavia (1999–2001),⁸⁹ the colour revolutions in Eastern Europe, and NATO's military transformation process⁹⁰ and expansion eastward, embracing several former Warsaw Pact members⁹¹ (a process widely debated in the scholarly literature).⁹²

This is a textbook case of offensive realism. Theory proposes that states first seek regional hegemony in order to then be able to check aggressors in other regions. Thus, as the US and European great powers expanded eastward, Russia had four possible strategies: balancing, buck-passing, bandwagoning, or appeasement. Since there was no other great power to 'pass the buck' to, and bandwagoning and appeasement are strategies to avoid because they signal subordination, balancing was Russia's only option for enhancing its security. Moscow began to move forward with this strategy in the early 2000s, when Vladimir Putin came to power. Like China, Russia adopted a grand strategy to develop a multi-polar world and protect its borders from wars and territorial claims.⁹³ This process gained momentum following the Russo-Georgian war

89 Augusto W. M. Teixeira Júnior, 'Postura Estratégica da Rússia e Uso da Força no Século XXI', *Centro de Estudos Estratégicos do Exército: Análise Estratégica* 10, No. 4 (14 November 2018): 7.

90 This refers to reform focused on new operational concepts, organisational reforms, and informational capabilities. Theo Farrell, Terriff Terry, and Osinga Frans, *A Transformation Gap?: American Innovations and European Military Change* (Stanford University Press, 2010).

91 Since the end of the Cold War the following countries have become NATO members: the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland (1999), Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia (2004), Albania and Croatia (2009), Montenegro (2017).

92 Russia alleges that the US broke a no-NATO enlargement pledge sealed during the German reunification negotiations. Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrinson, 'Deal or No Deal? The End of the Cold War and the U.S. Offer to Limit NATO Expansion', *International Security* 40, No 4 (April 1, 2016): 7–44; Mark Kramer, 'The Myth of a No-NATO-Enlargement Pledge to Russia', *The Washington Quarterly* 32, No 2 (April, 2009): 39–61.

93 The Russian Federation, 'Russian National Security Concept' (Russia, 2000).

in 2008, when the country announced its goals of ‘transforming the Russian Federation into a world power’ and of ‘active participation in the development of the multipolar model of the international system’ while achieving ‘strategic deterrence’ through a range of political, diplomatic, military, economic, and informational measures.⁹⁴

In contrast to China, Russia was facing greater security threats and, consequently, reacted in a tougher manner. Russia perceived itself as not fully able to realise its national interest because of the West’s stance on the European integration process,⁹⁵ and feared its borders might be threatened by military aggression.⁹⁶ Its main concerns were aggression from a state or group of states (the US and NATO), and from separatist groups (such as the Chechen separatists) or separatists supported by other states. Thus, it was imperative for Russia to maintain strategic parity with NATO and to ensure a credible deterrence capability. To do this, it invested in transforming its armed forces into high mobility, high speed units with precision-guided munitions, and adopted tactics of disorganising, confusing, and affecting enemies’ will to fight instead of eliminating them.⁹⁷

These processes are synonymous with traditional military build-up and characteristic of hard balancing strategies in a dispute over regional hegemony and geopolitical limits (Eurasia for Russia, and an extended Europe for NATO and the European Union). Strategic communications was comprehensively integrated into the kind of balancing strategy the Kremlin chose to employ. Russia’s, more aggressive, military posture has also resulted in more offensive strategic communications—weaponising the information sphere for military intent and opposing narratives from the West. Although information and psychological operations had been central to Soviet geopolitical thinking,⁹⁸ their role diminished in the 1990s, only to be reintroduced into military schools, warfare techniques, and Russia’s grand strategy under Putin’s administrations.

94 The Russian Federation, ‘Russia’s National Security Strategy to 2020’ (The Russian Federation, 19 May 2009), Sections 21, 24, and 26.

95 Russia had the following documents on this period: National Security Strategy (2000, 2009, and 2015), Military Doctrine (2010, 2014), Foreign Policy Concepts (2013, 2016), Information Security Doctrine (2000, 2016).

96 Katri Pynnöniemi, ‘Russia’s National Security Strategy: Analysis of Conceptual Evolution’, *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 31, № 2 (3 April 2018): 249.

97 Andrey Sushentsov, ‘The Russian Response to the RMA: Military Strategy towards Modern Security Threats’, in *Reassessing the Revolution in Military Affairs: Transformation, Evolution and Lessons Learnt* (Springer, 2015), 112–13.

98 Jolanta Darczewska, *The Anatomy of Russian Information Warfare. The Crimean Operation, a Case Study* (Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich im. Marka Karpia, 2014).

This was done to balance a new generation of Western military concepts,⁹⁹ and to counter what Russia perceived as the spread of disinformation surrounding its foreign and domestic policies.¹⁰⁰

From 2008, after information operations and strategic communications failed to create favourable conditions for its military operations, Russia changed the way in which it operated in the information sphere. The outcome of the Russo-Georgian war triggered military reforms that introduced an 'asymmetric approach' into Russia's official position,¹⁰¹ what Western analysts called hybrid warfare.¹⁰² In other words, the current Russian hard balancing strategy towards NATO combines both military and non-military approaches, such as the use of informational and cyber measures, to achieve its political goals.

This revised approach was put into practice during Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and was central to Russia's ensuing grand strategy documents. In its 2015 National Security Strategy, the Kremlin declared the need for a hard balancing strategy by arguing that the 'role of force as a factor in international relations is not declining'¹⁰³ and restated the need to develop new forms of power in its Foreign Policy concept of 2016:

Alongside military might, other important factors allowing States to influence international politics are taking centre stage, including economic, legal, technological and IT capabilities. Using these capabilities to pursue geopolitical interests is detrimental to efforts to find ways to settle disputes and resolve the existing international issues by peaceful means on the basis of the norms of international law.¹⁰⁴

99 According to Darczewska, Russia taught the subject 'special propaganda' in the Military Institute for Foreign Languages from 1942 to 1990 when it was removed from the curriculum. In the early 2000s, the country reintroduced it after the reorganisation of the institute. Jolanta Darczewska, *The Anatomy of Russian Information Warfare. The Crimean Operation, a Case Study* (Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich im. Marka Karpia, 2014), p. 7–9.

100 The Russian Federation, 'Information Security Doctrine of the Russian Federation', 9 September 2000.

101 From the Russian perspective, an asymmetric approach employs 'interrelated political, military, military-technical, diplomatic, economic, informational, and other measures' to achieve strategic deterrence and avoid military conflict. Pynnöniemi, 'Russia's National Security Strategy', p. 252–53.

102 Sushentsov criticises the Western focus on Crimea on the combination of non-military methods in achieving political and strategic goals since Russia had imitated Western approaches in Europe, at the Colour Revolutions in the post-Soviet sphere, and in the Middle East. Sushentsov, 'The Russian Response to the RMA: Military Strategy towards Modern Security Threats', p. 124.

103 The Russian Federation, 'Russian National Security Strategy', 31 December 2015.

104 The Russian Federation, 'Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation', 5 December 2016.

In other words, a more aggressive use of the informational sphere accompanied the construction of a hard balancing strategy from a Russia increasingly prone to respond decisively to security threats.

As it adopted this more substantially hard balancing foreign policy strategy towards the US and its NATO allies in the Eurasian space, Russia also began to show an interest in regaining its influence in the Baltic states and in other territories offshore. Disrupting the balance of power in countries where the US and NATO hold interests was a means of diverting Western efforts and of reinforcing Russia's goal of achieving greater influence in Eurasia. Thus, Russia adopted a more assertive relationship with countries that could help advance its grand strategic goals in areas such as the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America, especially with those states that had anti-US foreign policies.¹⁰⁵ Russian engagement in Latin America was not as deep as that of the Chinese, and was concentrated mainly on: (1) allies of the former Soviet Union, such as Cuba and Nicaragua; (2) states that did not play a major role in the Soviet era but were ready to assume political risk by countering US influence in Latin America, such as Venezuela and, to a lesser degree, Ecuador and Bolivia (these states share an anti-US foreign policy discourse and aim to soft-balance the US presence in their region); (3) countries neither opposed to the US nor allied with Russia but of great commercial interest, such as Brazil and Mexico.¹⁰⁶

Venezuela, with its anti-American foreign policy discourse, was of special interest as a potential centre for Russia's balancing strategy in Latin America, where the US enjoys regional hegemony. Applying pressure there could lead to gains in the European theatre, a movement Russia would embrace from 2006 onwards by tightening its relations with Venezuela. When the US imposed an arms embargo on Caracas forcing it to acquire elsewhere spare parts for its F-16 fighter aircrafts, Russia stepped in to become Venezuela's major arms supplier. Over time, it exported a variety of military equipment to Venezuela, including SAM systems, mortars, tanks, anti-tank missiles, missile systems, and fighter aircraft.¹⁰⁷ From 1998, when Chávez first came to power, to 2018, Venezuelan imports accounted for 76.5% of all Russian arms exports to Latin America;

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¹⁰⁵ Paul Stronski and Richard Sokolsky, 'The Return of Global Russia: An Analytical Framework', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, December 2017, pp. 5–6.

¹⁰⁶ R. Evan Ellis, 'The New Russian Engagement with Latin America: Strategic Position, Commerce, and Dreams of the Past', 2015, p. 10.

¹⁰⁷ SIPRI Arms Transfer Database.

an impressive number compared to the second and third largest arms importers in the region, Peru and Mexico, with 8.1% and 4.1%, respectively.¹⁰⁸

Venezuela has also demonstrated its willingness to support Russia's grand strategy interests on several occasions: the Chavist regime recognised the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008 and the annexation of Crimea in 2014, defending Russia's position against the Western powers. Venezuela also allowed Russian military naval and aerial manoeuvres in its territory on several occasions, a tactic Russia has used to pressure the US and divert attention during times of crisis and growing pressures on it in the European theatre. In 2008, after the war with Georgia, Russia sent warships and two *Tupolev Tu-160* strategic bombers (aircraft capable of transporting nuclear devices) to Venezuelan territory as part of its military exercises.¹⁰⁹ In the same year, Venezuela became the first Latin American country (followed by Cuba and Nicaragua) to receive a Russian flotilla led by the nuclear-powered cruiser Peter the Great, for naval exercises.¹¹⁰ In 2009, Russia was the only extra-regional country to participate in the annual meeting of Chávez's regional project, ALBA, seeking support for independence in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. In 2014, following the Crimean war, Russia sent bombers for a second time, and then a third time in late 2018 when the US imposed sanctions on Venezuela again.¹¹¹ In March 2019, following increasing international pressure on the Maduro regime, Russia sent a military cargo plane and a smaller jet to Venezuela carrying military specialists who, according to the Kremlin, were linked to the discussion of cooperation in the military-technical sphere.¹¹² The country thus has been using its military assets to demonstrate support to Venezuela.

These events show that Russia has successfully adopted a strategy of offshore balancing in Latin America, using the traditional hard balancing strategy. Although Russia and Venezuela have not made a formal alliance, offensive realism and alliance theory suggest they have formed a *de facto* alliance. Their mutual interest in balancing US power in the Americas to gain security and influence led them to make informal mutual security commitments and, in the case of Russia, to mobilise military assets to communicate support. Other

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108 Ibid.

109 Mark Tran and agencies, 'Russia Sends Warplanes on Venezuela Training Mission', *The Guardian*, 10 September 2008.

110 BBC News, 'Russian Navy Sails to Venezuela', 22 September 2008.

111 BBC News, 'Spat over Russian Bombers in Venezuela', 11 December 2018, Latin America & Caribbean.

112 Tom Balmforth and Maxim Rodionov, 'Russia Says It Sent "Specialists" to Venezuela, Rebuffs Trump', *Reuters*, 28 March 2019.

factors indicating an alliance are also present. For instance, thanks to Russia's investments in the oil sector, Venezuela has received military and economic aid. For years, the commercial losses Russian oil and gas companies suffered outweighed their gains. In the early 2010s, *Lukoil* and *Gazprom* expressed their desire to leave Venezuela. Nevertheless, the Russian government chose to reinforce its economic commitment to the country and to concentrate efforts on the 50% state-owned oil company, *Rosneft*, which invested a net of 17 billion US\$ in Venezuela from 2006 to 2018.¹¹³ Thus, in addition to providing arms in support of the informal alliance, Russia has also been using its state-owned oil companies to provide direct economic aid to the Venezuelan government, reinforcing its offshore balancing strategy through this extra-regional outpost.

Russian mobilisation of military assets to alleviate US pressure on Venezuela and to use it as an outpost to divert tensions against Russia in Europe are already important evidence of a hard-balancing position. Other evidence of an alliance, indicating more aggressive behaviour, is *penetration*. Defined as 'the covert or indirect manipulation of a state's political system',¹¹⁴ this intervenient factor can reinforce the effectiveness of alliances in various ways, such as lobbying and foreign propaganda. If the hypothesis that strategic communications is a resource for a Russian hard balancing strategy in Venezuela stands correct, then Russia should also be engaging in more aggressive informational actions there, as it does in Europe.

The expansion of the Moscow-based and government-supported media company *RT* (formerly *Russia Today*) on YouTube is striking evidence of Russia's penetration into Venezuela. *RT* operates its original English-language internet news channel and seven other channels targeting different audiences with different content—*RT America*, *RT UK*, *RT France*, *RT Español*, *RT на русском*, *RT Deutsch*, *RT Chinese*, and *RT Arabic*. A recent study has concluded that *RT* mixes professional journalism with support for Russia's interests while disseminating negative coverage of the West, undermining and portraying as hypocritical the very values the Western powers, especially the US, NATO, and the European Union, are built upon.¹¹⁵ *RT*'s Spanish channel, intended for a Latin American audience, has one of the fastest growing subscriber bases (from approximately

113 Vladimir Rouvinski, 'Venezuela: A Dead End for Russia?', *The Moscow Times*, 25 January 2019.

114 Walt, 'Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power', p. 30.

115 Elizabeth Nelson, Robert Ortung, and Anthony Livshen, 'Measuring RT's Impact on YouTube', *Russian Analytical Digest*, No 177 (December 2015): 8.

348,000 in 2015 to 2.3 million in 2019).¹¹⁶ Both Venezuela and Russia have been using the digital space to advance their cooperation agendas. In early 2015, the Venezuelan state-owned media company *TeleSUR* joined RT in a joint venture to present international news about Russia and Venezuela.¹¹⁷ Similarly, Russia's penetration into Venezuela can also be seen in the fact that relations between the two countries are widely present in the political system, and media coverage of this relationship has grown over time. For example, Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has been increasingly mentioning Venezuela in statements and interviews. The Ministry website registered 58 mentions from 2009 to 2018 compared with only 10 from 2000 to 2008.¹¹⁸

On the diplomatic side, the hard balancing strategy and the alliance with Venezuela affected Russia's positions on the issue, and Russian use of strategic communications to reinforce them. Russia has consistently positioned itself against military intervention, and against the positions of the US and the Lima Group towards Venezuela. Ever since Juan Guaidó declared himself acting president, Russia has accused the US of 'clearly trying to apply a tried and tested regime change scenario in Venezuela' and has rejected foreign interference there.¹¹⁹ This echoes the position adopted after the US, Brazil, and the Lima Group attempted to provide humanitarian aid. At the time, Brazil and the US delivered an aid truck convoy to the Brazilian border and faced a blockade by Maduro's security forces; only some of the foreign aid made it through to Venezuelan territory.¹²⁰ Responding to these movements, Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs adopted a tougher stance in its official statements, opposing aid and US sanctions. In early 2019, a Russian spokesperson compared the efforts to the American delivery of arms to the Contras disguised as aid in Nicaragua in 1986.¹²¹ Russia then responded by sending its own humanitarian aid to Venezuela in late March 2019,¹²² along with military experts.¹²³ These efforts aimed to

116 The 2015 issue is based on the Elizabeth Nelson, Robert Ortung and Anthony Livshen study, published in December 2015. The 2019 issue is based on a visit to the channel on 7 April 2019.

117 *Russia Today*, 'RT and Venezuela TeleSUR Journalists Unite to Provide Fresh Perspective on News', RT International, 30 March 2015.

118 In 2019, the website already registered 11 mentions to Venezuela. See: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation.

119 The Russian Federation, 'Foreign Ministry Statement on the Developments in Venezuela', 4 April 2019.

120 Nicholas Casey, Albinson Linares, and Anatoly Kurmanaev, 'Some Aid From Brazil Pierces Venezuela's Blockade, but Deadly Violence Erupts', *New York Times*, 23 February 2019.

121 The Russian Federation, 'Statement by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova', 18 February 2019.

122 The Moscow Times, 'Venezuela Accepts Shipment of Russian Humanitarian Aid—Reports', *The Moscow Times*, 20 February 2019.

123 The Russian Federation, 'Comment by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova Regarding US Policy towards Venezuela', 30 March 2019.

show up the contradictions of Washington's position, at the same time, provide ambiguous signs of Moscow's military willingness to support the Venezuelan regime, ensuring that Russia remains a key actor in Venezuela in the future.

Considering this evidence, one can argue that Russian strategic communications follow their balancing strategies as they reinforce the formation of an informal alliance, indicating hard balancing behaviour. Over the years, Russia emerged as an offshore balancer in Venezuela aiming to disrupt the balance of power in the Americas, to re-emerge as a great power, and to counter NATO efforts on its borders. Thus, Venezuela became an important new ally in achieving this end and evolved to become Russia's main outpost in Latin America. As Russian grand strategy resources grew to include informational capabilities in a more aggressive manner, so did its alliance with Venezuela. As a result, strategic communications became central to both Russia's balancing efforts in Europe and its offshore balancing strategy in Latin America.

Conclusion

Great power politics is on the rise and gridlock in the Venezuelan crisis is a symptom of this new moment in international politics. In the current state of the world order, national power and grand strategy resources are based not only on traditional economic, military, and diplomatic dimensions, but include cyber and informational capabilities as primary resources. This article set out to analyse what kind of balancing strategies China and Russia have been employing in their bilateral relations with Venezuela, and how strategic communications and the information sphere speak to their strategies. I have observed how these two countries employ different offshore balancing strategies towards the US, albeit with a similar goal of changing the balance of power in the Americas.

For China, bilateral relations with Venezuela are part of a soft balancing strategy that aims to check the US in the Americas and support China's rise. China pursues soft, not hard balancing, because it aims to affect the balance of power in a gradual and indirect manner. Although the country has become more assertive in its positions since early 2019, it appears intent on communicating to the global community an image of a responsible and credible emerging great power, while rejecting external intervention. There is more of an informal and tacit security understanding with the Chavist regime, intended to advance Chinese balancing goals in Latin America, than an alliance. Strategic communications presents itself as an effort to shift Latin American and international public

opinion towards China's view, and simultaneously to counter the US position in the region. It forms, nonetheless, part of a larger toolkit for grand strategies, along with economic, military, and diplomatic relations.

Russia has also employed an offshore balancing strategy with the US in the Americas. The country has deliberately used its national resources to provide economic aid and military support, and to penetrate the Venezuelan regime, not to mention offering ambiguous signs about its willingness to use its military capabilities to maintain its position and support an ally against the US, while also seeking political leverage in Eastern Europe. Russia intends to weaken NATO allies' positions in its immediate neighbourhood, and to maintain geopolitical space for its growing stature through strategic communications that embrace ambiguous military signals, diplomatic messages, and social media efforts to change the narrative about its actions. Russia's relationship with *TeleSUR* and the *RT Español* YouTube channel are but a few examples of its engagement in the region. Overall, strategic communications is a key element in today's Russian toolkit in support of its grand strategic goals.

The findings of this article have two policy implications and one theoretical implication. First, it contributes to the understanding of the actors' interests in the Venezuelan crisis and shows that, even in the long term, states will have to deal with the opposing interests of China and Russia as offshore balancers with risks of miscalculation in the great power game. Second, it illustrates how even a region that is not traditionally involved in great power politics can be used as leverage for great power interests in the current context of rising competition. Finally, it has theoretical implications regarding how strategic communications might provide important insights to balancing strategies. According to this study, hard balancing strategies may result in a more aggressive effort, such as information campaigns and hybrid warfare, whereas soft balancing results in a more cautious communication position, trying to change narratives and perceptions. These conceptual relationships might prove fruitful for future research.

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