*The VRIC Monitor is a one-of-a-kind, monthly report from the Center for a Secure Free Society tracking extra-regional influence in Latin America. VRIC stands for **V**enezuela, **R**ussia, **I**ran, **C**hina where Venezuela represents the Bolivarian Revolution and the broader Bolivarian Network. Likewise, Iran represents the Iranian Revolution and a growing presence of Middle Eastern actors in Latin America, namely its chief proxy, Hezbollah. The monitor is comprised of open source information selected by SFS researchers and fellows. This is not a complete list of media reports on VRIC presence in Latin America, but a snapshot of open-source media highlighting the major areas of VRIC influence.*

OVERVIEW

February marked an important advancement in the United States’ “maximum pressure” policy on the Maduro regime in Venezuela– focused on the extra-regional actors propping up the regime. For the first time, the Trump administration sanctioned an important subsidiary of Russia’s state-owned oil giant, Rosneft, for its role in controlling the Venezuelan oil industry. As the pressure mounts, however, the VRIC allies continually find ways to evade sanctions through a maze of companies and increased collaboration. To skirt oil sanctions the Maduro regime transferred its exports to another Rosneft subsidiary, then restructured PDVSA and placed it under the purview of the Venezuelan Vice President for the Economy, Tareck El Aissami.

For its part, Iran is also ramping up its covert operations, as the Venezuelan state- owned airline CONVIASA was sanctioned by the U.S. in early February. A specific CONVIASA flight, known as “Aero-Terror,” was recently spotted traveling throughout the region for the first time in many years with Iranian pilots from Mahan Air flying the Venezuelan Airbus 340. Meanwhile, the second suspicious case surfaced of Iranian nationals entering the region with fake Israeli passports, this time in Ecuador, in a similar fashion to a previous case last year in Argentina.

While Maduro continually constructs counter-measures to what has been dubbed “Maximum Pressure March” by Trump administration officials, the United States, Colombia, and Brazil begin to coordinate new methods of pressuring the regime. Brazil recently downgraded its diplomatic relationship with Venezuela by removing its diplomatic corp from the country. President Bolsonaro visited U.S. Southern Command in Florida to sign several defense agreements bolstering military cooperation with the U.S. after President Duque visited President Trump at the White House in early March. These high-level, impromptu meetings between the three countries suggest a more multilateral and coordinated effort to force Maduro to resign. The VRIC, on the other hand, seems to be strengthening its capacity to

upend the region’s stability in the near future.

MUST READS

- Brazil’s leader promises to restore “north-south” alliance with U.S. in Miami speech by Nora Gámez Torres, Miami Herald
- Joint Statement from President Donald J. Trump and President Jair Bolsonaro from the White House
- Remarks by President Trump and President Duque of Colombia Before Bilateral Meeting from the White House
- Trump National Security Official Eyed for Latin America Bank Job by Eric Martin and Ben Bartenstein, Bloomberg
- Where Is the Coronavirus in Latin America? by Luisa Horwitz and Paola Nagovitch, AS/COA
- Alberto Fernández eyes China in bid to alleviate Argentina’s debt crisis by Fermin Koop, Buenos Aires Times
- Lawmakers raise concerns over Russia’s growing influence in Venezuela by Rafael Bernal, The Hill
- Putin’s spy wanted the best for his town, Oaxaca by Elías Camhaji, Jacobo García, and María Sahuquillo, El País (content in Spanish)
- Despite Utility, Bitcoin Cannot Fix Venezuela by David Hollerith, Bitcoin Magazine
- Bolivia Is Still Stuck on Evo Morales by Brendan O’Boyle, Americas Quarterly



The U.S. is entering “Maximum Pressure March,” hosting impromptu meetings with President Ivan Duque of Colombia and President Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil to discuss plans to ratchet up pressure on the Maduro regime in Venezuela. This comes after the Trump administration sanctioned the Russian oil brokerage firm, Rosneft Trading S.A., for helping bankroll the Maduro regime. The maximum pressure campaign on Venezuela has elicited a VRIC response; the Maduro regime held an emergency meeting following the sanctions and

appointed Tareck El Aissami to lead the state-owned enterprise, PDVSA, pivoting Venezuela’s oil industry closer to Syria. Meanwhile, another company that isn’t sanctioned and is affiliated with the Moscow-based oil giant Rosneft, is increasing shipments from Venezuela. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov issued a statement from Mexico condemning the sanctions shortly before traveling to Venezuela to meet with top Maduro officials.

Other South American countries are on alert as subtle warnings from Maduro insinuate that March could be the beginning of another flare-up of region-wide protests, namely in Chile. Signs of another “Bolivarian breeze” are surfacing in Santiago, where police detained 283 people for ensuing violence early in March that forced several metro stations to close. The Dominican Republic and Haiti also experienced recent protests, while movements are unifying in opposition to Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua. Lastly, Bolivia is battling internal divisions that are fracturing the Añez government in the lead up to presidential elections in May.

VENEZUELA AID TRACKER

United States	**$213 million dollars**
Argentina	**Help unit**
Canada	**$53 million dollars pledged**
Chile	**17 tons of food & medical supplies**
China	**200 tons of medicine & supplies**
Croatia	**$100,000 for medical purposes**
Cuba	**Medical aid to transplant patients**
EU	**€65 million euros + €120 million euros pledged**
Germany	**€5 million euros**
Iran	**Unspecified pledge & medical aid**
Italy	**€2 million euros & medical aid to transplant patients**
New Zealand	**$500,000 dollars**
Palestine	**Surgical team**
Russia	**335 tons of food & medical supplies**
South Korea	**$3 million dollars**
Spain	**€2 million euros**
Sweden	**$7 million dollars**
Taiwan	**$500,000 dollars**

Turkey	**Medical aid to transplant patients**
UAE	**Dh10 million**
UK	**£6.5 million pounds**

- The electoral council in Venezuela says a fire in its main warehouse near the capital, Caracas, has destroyed most of the voting machines held there. – BCC on 09-MAR
- Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro visited U.S. Southern Command to meet with Adm. Craig Faller, in a historic visit that marks the first time a Brazilian president has visited USSOUTHCOM. The leaders discussed the growing defense-cooperation partnership between Brazil and the U.S. – U.S. Southern Command on 08-MAR
- U.S. President Donald Trump said he will meet with Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro in Florida on March 7th. – Financial Post on 06-MAR
- Brazil’s government has begun to pull its diplomats out of the embassy and consulate in Caracas as it moves to downgrade relations with Venezuela’s Maduro regime. – Reuters on 05-MAR
- Rosneft Trading S.A., the top buyer of Venezuelan crude last year, was sanctioned on February 18th for helping sell the commodity that bankrolls the Maduro regime. Now, another company affiliated with Moscow-based oil giant that isn’t sanctioned, is ramping up shipments from Venezuela. – Bloomberg on 24-FEB
- The newly appointed commissioner against terrorism and organized crime for the Guaidó government, Carlos Paparoni, announced that on March 3rd he will present the evidence linking Maduro’s dictatorship to terrorist groups at the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance (TIAR) summit. – República Bolivariana de Venezuela Asemblea Nacional on 23-FEB
- Members of the Lima Group– Canada, Argentina, and Peru– are in talks with Cuba to look for a solution in Venezuela – Diario Las Americas on 21-FEB (content in Spanish)
- Trump administration officials are discussing whether to renew their unsuccessful campaign to oust Maduro by persuading some ruling party members to temporarily share power with opposition leaders, according to people familiar with the matter. – Bloomberg on 19-FEB
- Nicolás Maduro said he would create a presidential commission to restructure the country’s beleaguered oil industry, which will be led by Vice President for the Economy Tareck El Aissami. – Reuters on 19-FEB
- The long-awaited trial of the Citgo Six– oil executives, including five U.S. citizens, detained in Venezuela on corruption charges for more than two years– failed to open as scheduled, leaving fearful family members calling on the U.S. government to do more. – Washington Post on 19-FEB
- Venezuela conducted military and civilian exercises on February 15th and 16th for the

first time since the civilian militia was incorporated into the official defense force. The two-day manoeuvres were aimed at fending off “terrorist aggression” from Washington and regional enemies seeking to undermine the Bolivarian revolution. – Morning Star on 16-FEB

- Venezuela’s state-run oil company PDVSA plans to discharge nearly 1 million barrels ($57 million) of crude stranded for over a year at sea over U.S. sanctions against the company and an ownership dispute with its refining unit, Citgo Petroleum, according to internal documents viewed by Reuters. – Reuters on 13-FEB
- Venezuela asked the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court to investigate U.S. officials for what it called crimes against humanity resulting from sanctions imposed by Washington, Foreign Minister Jorge Arreaza said. – The New York Times on 13-FEB
- Venezuela has designated its civilian militia as part of the country’s military, according to the nation’s official gazette, an administrative change that on paper at least will vastly expand the armed forces that have been crucial in keeping Maduro in power. – Reuters on 11-FEB
- Treasury pressures illegitimate Maduro regime by identifying blocked national airline, CONVIASA – U.S. Department of Treasury OFAC on 07-FEB

THE BOLIVARIAN NETWORK

- A resurgence of violence ripped across Chile, leading to hundreds of arrests, according to the interior ministry, and temporarily shutting down some public transportation in the capital Santiago. – Reuters on 03-MAR
- A right-of-center president took office in Uruguay, promising to crack down on crime and tighten government finances after a 15-year string of left-leaning governments. – Associated Press on 01-MAR
- President Sebastian Pinera called on Chileans to help the country “live in peace” ahead of an anticipated fresh outbreak of protests in March. – Reuters on 24-FEB
- Violent clashes erupted in the Haitian capital, with two Reuters witnesses observing shots being fired until late at night, as police stepped up their protest over pay and conditions. – Reuters on 23-FEB
- Hundreds of Dominicans took to the streets in protest after the abrupt suspension of municipal elections that unleashed a political crisis months before the Caribbean island votes for a new president. – Reuters on 22-FEB
- For more than a year, Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega held up roughly half a million dollars of newsprint and ink in customs, an action widely viewed as retaliation for La Prensa’s coverage of anti-government protests that erupted in 2018 and were brutally repressed by police. – Los Angeles Times on 21-FEB

- Bolivia’s Supreme Electoral Tribunal rejected the candidacy of former President Evo Morales for a Senate seat in May’s elections because he does not reside in the country, a decision the ousted leader called a “blow to democracy.” – Washington Times on 20-FEB
- Bolivia’s public prosecutor has opened an investigation into “electoral fraud” against former President Evo Morales and some of his closest allies, the attorney general said. – Voice of America on 20-FEB
- In Nicaragua, the Contra and the National Coalition join together to defy Daniel Ortega. – DW on 17-FEB
- About 6,000 people demonstrated in front of Congress in Buenos Aires, shouting “IMF get out!” as negotiations over debt restructuring begins. – Buenos Aires Times on 13-FEB
- State media reports Ecuador’s National Court of Justice suspended the trial hearing against former President Rafael Correa, former Vice President Jorge Glas and 19 other people involved in the Bribes Case. – Prensa Latina on 13-FEB
- President Donald Trump met with the President of the Republic of Ecuador, Lenín Moreno, signaling the historic turn in bilateral ties between the two countries. The two leaders discussed Ecuador’s leadership role in advancing security, prosperity, and democracy in the Western Hemisphere. – The White House on 12-FEB
- On February 9th, Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele led scores of heavily armed troops and police into a meeting of the Legislative Assembly. He acted after legislators balked at his demand for immediate approval of a $109 million loan to buy more supplies for the counter-gang campaign. – The Washington Post on 12-FEB



March is marked by a U.S. effort to counter Russia’s influence in Venezuela by sanctioning subsidiaries of the Moscow-based oil giant Rosneft, which controls upwards of 70-80% of Venezuelan oil exports. Quick counter-measures made by Moscow and Caracas helped skirt U.S. sanctions by shifting its oil business to another subsidiary TNK Trading International

S.A., which has loaded three times more barrels of Venezuelan crude in the first two months of 2020 than in all of 2019, according to shipping reports compiled by Bloomberg. The threat of U.S. sanctions also applies to other regional Maduro allies working with Russia, namely Mexico. The recent visit and remarks by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov to Mexico furthered concerns that President López Obrador could be considering purchasing helicopters from Rosoboronexport, the state-owned Russian agency responsible for exporting defense products. The statement from Lavrov prompted Trump administration officials to suggest that such a purchase could trigger sanctions against Mexico through the Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act (CAASA), passed in 2017.

As Mexico may acquire military equipment from Russia, a recent arrest of a Oaxacan man charged as a Russian agent spying against U.S. officials, highlights the Kremlin's efforts to use Mexico to enhance its espionage and intelligence activities against the United States.

- The Russian Embassy in Peru posted on Facebook for the commemoration of the 102nd founding of the Red Army in the Soviet Union. – Russian Embassy in Peru, Facebook on 23-FEB
- State media reports Cuba commemorated the 102nd founding of the Red Army in the Soviet Union on February 23rd. The political and military ceremony was chaired by Army Corps General Álvaro López Miera. There were also high-ranking representatives from the embassies of Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan. – Prensa Latina on 23-FEB
- The U.S. government announced new sanctions on Rosneft Trading S.A., the trading subsidiary of the Russian energy conglomerate, along with Chairman Didier Casimiro, in a major blow to Maduro's regime. Rosneft Trading handled about half of Venezuela's 875,000 barrels a day of crude oil exports in January. – Newsmax on 20-FEB
- Hector Alejandro Cabrera Fuentes, a Mexican citizen residing in Singapore, was arrested based on a Complaint charging him with acting within the United States on behalf of a foreign government (Russia), without notifying the Attorney General, and conspiracy to do the same. – U.S. Department of Justice on 18-FEB
- The U.S. has warned numerous countries that they could be sanctioned if they buy military hardware from Russia. That includes Mexico, a U.S. State Department official told lawmakers this month, though Mexican officials have denied reports their country is negotiating with Russia to buy helicopters. – Business Insider on 17-FEB
- State media reports Russian authorities hope Argentine President Alberto Fernandez or Vice President Cristina Kirchner will visit Russia this year, Russia's Ambassador to Buenos Aires Dmitry Feoktistov told reporters. – TASS on 14-FEB

- State media reports Moscow is ready to study Havana’s possible offers on further strengthening the Cuban defense potential, Russian Ambassador to Cuba Andrey Guskov said. – Sputnik on 13-FEB



As the U.S. increases its maximum pressure campaign against Iran and Venezuela, the two countries increasingly rely on one another for sanctions evasion and other schemes. On February 7th, U.S. Treasury’s OFAC sanctioned Venezuela’s state-owned airline CONVIASA and identified several aircraft added to its Specially Designated Nationals (SDN) list. A week later, one of these CONVIASA aircraft, an Airbus 340 with tail number YV1004, was spotted in Montevideo before taking off to Panama City and Managua, before returning back to Caracas. This specific aircraft is known as “Aero-Terror” for its critical role in years past (2007-2012) allegedly shuttling narcotics, weapons, and suspected terrorists in a bi-weekly flight between Caracas-Damascus-Tehran. Despite that CONVIASA is Venezuela’s national airline, the recent YV1004 flight was staffed by Iranian pilots from Mahan Air who appear to have a military background.

The apparent reactivation of “Aero-Terror” signals Iran may be ramping up its regional operations, despite U.S. sanctions. The CONVIASA flight to Uruguay took place just weeks before the inauguration of new President Luis La Calle Pou, and days after the 41st anniversary of the 1979 Iranian revolution.

- A leading Jewish group has filed a lawsuit against the Canadian government for failing to enforce a House of Commons motion to list Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) as a terrorist organization. – Algemeiner on 23-FEB
- The Conviasa airbus known as the “Aero Terror,” which offered transportation support to terrorists and had been dormant for a year, was recently seen in Uruguay. – Leonardo Coutinho, Twitter on 16-FEB (content in Portuguese)
- State media reports the Head of the Food and Drug Administration of Iran says the country is bartering medicine produced in the country with food imported from South

America. – Iran Daily on 12-FEB

- Venezuelan state media reports Iran’s revenge for the assassination of Major General Qassem Soleimani remains to be seen and will be accompanied by the final U.S. expulsion from the region, high representatives of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps’ (IRGC) Quds Force said. – TeleSUR 12-FEB
- State media reports Vice President of Nicaragua Rosario Murillo and Nicolás Maduro congratulated Iran on the 41st anniversary of the Islamic Revolution victory. – IRNA on 12-FEB
- Two Iranian citizens were arrested in Ecuador after trying to enter the country using fake Israeli passports. – CNW Twitter on 10-FEB
- Recently sanctioned aircraft added to OFAC’s Specially Designated Nationals list. – U.S. Treasury Department on 07-FEB

NISMAN & AMIA CASE

- The AMIA and DAIA will evaluate dismissing their accusation against Cristina Kirchner for the cover-up of the 1994 attack in Buenos Aires, while discussing ways to have a better link with the administration. – La Nacion on 09-MAR (content in Spanish)
- Argentine President Alberto Fernández announced that he will order the declassification of all intelligence information related to the 1994 attack on the AMIA. – Aurora on 03-MAR (content in Spanish)
- One more disk from security cameras at Le Parc, Nisman’s residence, was discovered, containing 27,000 more photos of the complex for prosecutors to analyze. – Clarin on 19-FEB (content in Spanish)
- Argentine judicial authorities seeking to prosecute officials suspected of covering up Iran’s alleged role in a 1994 Buenos Aires terrorist attack have suffered another setback with the death of a judge who led the legal battle. – Voice of America on 09-FEB

QATAR

- Qatar Airways CEO Akbar al-Baker said “when the right opportunity comes, and at the right price, we will look at increasing our investment in LATAM” to the same stake Delta has, or 20% ownership. – Finance Colombia on 11-FEB



With the spread of the Coronavirus (COVID-19), China has kept a low profile in Latin America this past month. As reported in our last monitor, VRIC allies in Latin America quickly began to issue advisories and suspend travel to China following the outbreak. As the virus continues to spread, it poses a serious risk for countries without the necessary health infrastructure to handle the outbreak. Despite this, China is still making moves in cyberspace and economic engagement with Latin America. In Argentina, increasing opposition to the International Monetary Fund’s help to solve the financial crisis has led to favoring Chinese intervention for a bailout. Brazil, too, is pending a major Chinese intervention, where President Bolsonaro’s national security adviser will make the decision on whether Huawei will have a major role in installing Brazil’s 5G network. Additionally, China has purchased one of the region’s largest Brazilian-owned, Paraguay-based Bitcoin mines.

- Last November, in a first for Latin America, Ecuador became a fully-fledged member of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the China-led multilateral bank that began operating in 2015 with a mandate to finance development projects around the world. – Dialogo Chino on 24-FEB
- With money tight and funding scarce, Argentine President Alberto Fernández is looking to China- a move that could see key infrastructure projects restarted and a bolstering of Central Bank reserves. – Buenos Aires Times on 22-FEB
- Brazilian meatpacker JBS has agreed to supply WH Group, a Hong Kong-based meat processor with access to retail outlets across China, with meat products worth around $687 million a year, beginning in 2020. – Mongabay on 20-FEB
- The Brazilian telecoms regulator preparing to auction bandwidth for 5G mobile data said any decision on the security risks of using Chinese technology will ultimately be taken by the president’s national security advisor. – Reuters on 18-FEB
- A Chinese group is looking to buy one of Latin America’s largest Bitcoin Mines of a Brazilian-owned, Paraguay-registered mining farm. The entire mining plant in

Paraguay will be sold to a Chinese group that already operates similar farms in China. – CoinTelegraph on 13-FEB
- The Panama City metro expansion will now go through a tunnel under the canal instead of alongside a bridge. The bridge is under contract to a Chinese consortium and the metro line to a South Korean company. – ABC News on 13-FEB

CORONAVIRUS

- Costa Rican President Carlos Alvarado said at a press conference that mass gathering events in Costa Rica are being suspended for at least two weeks and until further notice. These include concerts, topes (horse parades) and regional festivals. – Tico Times on 09-MAR
- It turns out it was just a matter of time. The coronavirus landed in Latin America on February 26th, when Brazil confirmed a case in São Paulo. Since then, the memes have given way to action, as governments across the region seek to protect their citizens and contain COVID-19’s spread. – AS/COA on 09-MAR
- A 32-year-old Paraguayan who arrived from Ecuador on March 3rd, is the first infected by the new coronavirus in the country, Paraguayan Health Minister Julio Mazzoleni confirmed. – El Comercio on 07-MAR (content in Spanish)
- Mexican authorities said they have identified a sixth person infected with coronavirus, a 71-year-old man who recently traveled to northern Italy. – Reuters on 06-MAR
- Colombia’s ministry of health confirmed the country’s first case of novel coronavirus, according to a statement. The patient, a 19-year-old woman, traveled to Milan, Italy, and upon her return presented symptoms related to the virus. – CNN on 06-MAR
- Mexico’s exports could decline by $1.37 billion due to the outbreak of the novel coronavirus known as COVID-19, according to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). – Mexico News Daily on 06-MAR
- The first confirmed cases of coronavirus are being reported in the Caribbean, after authorities in the Dominican Republic confirmed that an Italian national was checked into a Santo Domingo hospital. – WLRN on 02-MAR
- Ecuador has confirmed five additional cases of the new coronavirus, Health Minister Catalina Andramuño said. – BBC on 02-MAR
- Latin America saw its first confirmed case of the new coronavirus spreading worldwide when Brazil’s government announced that a 61-year-old man who traveled to Italy had the virus. – Associated Press on 27-FEB
- The Ministry of Health has stepped up its precautionary health measures at Lima’s Jorge Chavez airport, following a statement by the World Health Organization that the coronavirus COVID-19 could become a pandemic. – Peruvian Times on 25-FEB

- China’s economy has come to a sudden stop. For Latin America, which counts China as its largest trade partner overall, the risks are also piling up. – Americas Quarterly on 20-FEB
- Argentina’s beef exports to China stumble due to coronavirus – Buenos Aires Times on 18-FEB
- The Government of Peru has expressed its solidarity with the Government and citizens of the People’s Republic of China following the efforts they are undertaking to contain the spread of COVID-19. – Pan Pacific Agency on 11-FEB

NORTH KOREA

- State media reports a Latin American regional internet seminar “the Juche idea and self-reliance” was held in Brazil on February 14th to mark the Day of the Shining Star (birth anniversary of Chairman Kim Jong Il). – KCNA Watch on 24-FEB
- State media reports the DPRK mission in Brazil, Venezuela, and Mexico celebrated the birth anniversary of Chairman Kim Jong Il. – KCNA Watch on 24-FEB