This special edition of the VRIC Monitor sources more media reports than usual from state-owned or -controlled media outlets of VRIC nations. This was done to highlight the messaging and propaganda from VRIC nations as it relates to COVID-19. Whether it's legitimizing Cuban or Chinese medical diplomacy, or launching unsubstantiated and unverified claims against the United States, the state propaganda from VRIC surrogates is on overdrive. The VRIC Monitor is meant to help readers understand VRIC extra-regional influence in Latin America, thus, this special edition is focused on the disinformation campaign waged by the VRIC around the COVID-19 global health pandemic.

OVERVIEW

In March, the world woke up to the global health pandemic that is COVID-19. While the public embraces new mitigation measures to slow the spread of the virus, most governments are in a war against an "invisible enemy" that is stressing the public health infrastructure in their countries. China, however, is fighting another war, one laced with lies, half truths, and aggressive propaganda against a very visible enemy to the People's Republic of China (PRC) – the United States of America.

Not since two Chinese colonels warned in 1999 that the PRC was engaged in "Unrestricted Warfare" against America has the U.S. government been on alert to the threat posed by China's influence worldwide. In Latin America, this influence is shaped by its economic engagement, lending the region upwards of $142 billion in Chinese policy bank loans since 2007. Almost half of these loans went to the now bankrupt Maduro regime of Venezuela, who has joined other VRIC allies in accusing the U.S. of manipulating the virus as a biowarfare weapon. This belligerent behavior is followed by medical missions from China and Cuba, who are sending doctors, medical supplies, and PPE to various countries in its geopolitical orbit. Even Chinese philanthropist Jack Ma, founder of Alibaba and one of China's wealthiest citizens, is donating 2 million masks to 24 countries in Latin America.

The massive public relations effort by China is aimed at erasing the stigma it earned allowing the virus to spread around the world after covering it up. The PRC wants to convince Latin America that it's part of the solution in dealing with COVID-19 and not the source of the problem. It's debatable whether this will work given that China's "commodities super cycle" ended several years ago and they have rolled back loans to Latin America for the fourth consecutive year. But China is not alone. Russia, Iran, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela are all using their state-controlled media to propagate China's talking points about COVID-19 in Spanish, Portuguese, and other native languages in Latin America, including boosting conspiracy theories that the virus originated in the United States.

Meanwhile, Venezuela and Iran are capitalizing on the COVID-19 pandemic to insert a victimization narrative seeking support from the IMF and denouncing U.S. maximum pressure against its regimes while asking for sanctions relief during the public health crisis. Neither country has employed effective mitigation measures to slow the spread of the coronavirus but each has used the opportunity to implement countrywide crackdowns in the name of a quarantine or national lockdown. Unfortunately, even U.S. allies, such as the European Union, have joined the call to end sanctions on Venezuela and Iran, while Peru, Bolivia, and others ultimately succumbed to the medical diplomacy of China and Cuba.

Havana and Beijing have long standing biotechnology cooperation, including recent joint biopharmaceutical ventures created during the COVID-19 pandemic. The two regimes are determined to win global public opinion through aggressive outreach, propaganda, and public diplomacy. Yet, as the U.S. starts to understand the nature of this novel coronavirus, the VRIC sets its sights on Latin America as the next frontier in the propaganda "war within the war" around the COVID-19 pandemic.

MUST READS

- US Rivals Are Exploiting Coronavirus As A Weapon In Propaganda War by J.D. Gordon, The Daily Caller
- Briefing on Disinformation and Propaganda related to COVID-19 from Lea Gabrielle, Special Envoy and Coordinator of the Global Engagement Center, U.S. State Department
- Combatting China's COVID-19 Propaganda Offensive to Undermine the United States on the Global Stage by John Lee, Hudson Institute
- Coronavirus and disinformation in Latin America: A look at Venezuela by the Atlantic Council (content in Spanish w/ English translation)
- Russia Exploits Coronavirus as New Opportunity to Spread Disinformation by the Cipher Brief and The Soufan Center
- China's digital 'Wu Mao' army target Trump over coronavirus by Raheem Kassam, National Pulse
- China hijacks New Mexico mom's tweets for coronavirus propaganda campaign by Danielle Wallace, Fox News
- Pompeo says China, Russia, Iran are spreading disinformation about coronavirus by Olivia Beavers, The Hill
- China's Coronavirus Figures Don't Add Up by Lisa Beilfuss, Barrons
- With U.S. hit by virus, China courts Latin America with medical diplomacy by Cassandra Garrison, Reuters

- Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Cuba stop journalists from covering COVID-19 by Sonia Osorio, El Nuevo Herald (content in Spanish)

TRUMP ADMINISTRATION ON VENEZUELA

- TRANSCRIPT of Press Briefing where President Trump, SecDef Mark Esper announces enhanced counter-narcotics efforts in Caribbean from the White House, April 1, 2020
- FACT SHEET: Democratic Transition Framework for Venezuela from the U.S. State Department, March 31, 2020
- DOCUMENTS related to the Press Conference regarding the criminal charges against the former Maduro regime from the U.S. Department of Justice, March 26, 2020
- PRESS RELEASE: Maduro and Other High Ranking Venezuelan officials allegedly partnered with the FARC to Use Cocaine as a Weapon to “Flood” the United States from the U.S. Department of Justice, March 26, 2020


Up to 250 Metric Tons Annual Cocaine Trafficked from VENEZUELA
MARITIME COCAINE TRAFFICKING ROUTE TO CARIBBEAN
"AIR BRIDGE" COCAINE TRAFFICKING ROUTE TO CENTRAL AMERICA
GULF OF VENEZUELA
LAKE MARACAIBO
MAR CARIBE
HONDURAS
NICARAGUA
COSTA RICA
PANAMÁ
VENEZUELA
Antillas Neerlandesas
MAGDALENA
CESAR
SUCRE
CÓRDOBA
BOLÍVAR
NORTE DE SANTANDER
SANTANDER
ANTIOQUIA
CHOCÓ
BOYACÁ
ARAUCA
TOPONIMIA
ADMINISTRATIVA
GEOGRÁFICA





"Maximum Pressure March" resumed late in the month, when U.S. Attorney General William Barr unsealed a damning narco-terrorism indictment against Nicolás Maduro and 14 other regime officials and FARC dissidents, incuding two ministers and the chief supreme court justice. The indictments, accompanied by multi-million dollar rewards-for-

capture, provided the context for the U.S. to nearly double its counternarcotics capacity in the Caribbean to choke off the illicit revenue of the Maduro regime. This new approach came a day after the State Department offered one last off-ramp to Nicolás Maduro to accept a new "Democratic Transition Framework" that would have Maduro and Interim President Juan Guaidó step aside so the country can move to free and fair elections.

As expected, the Maduro regime rejected this proposal and has responded to the increased U.S. pressure with more internal repression and external propaganda. The so-called "Bolivarian Breeze" has turned into a "Bolivarian Fury" where the Maduro regime ramps up a countrywide crackdown on mid-level opposition figures and junior military officers while echoing an international victimization narrative asking the IMF for a $5 billion loan and the U.S. to lift sanctions due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

While the world adopts strong mitigation measures to slow the spread of the virus, Nicaragua opted to hold a massive public rally of "love in the time of COVID-19." The Ortega government currently only reports six cases despite having its first coronavirus related death on 26-MAR. Furthermore, President Daniel Ortega has not been seen for weeks, furthering speculation of his health, including rumors he may have contracted the virus himself and/or passed away.

Capitalizing on the COVID-19 pandemic, China and Cuba have reinserted themselves in Venezuela and the region, using medical diplomacy as a gateway for enhanced strategic positioning. Deploying to 14 countries worldwide, including Italy and Spain, China and Cuba are desperately trying to present themselves as part of the solution to COVID-19 using aggressive propaganda throughout Latin America. Part of this propaganda includes fake news that Cuba has the cure to the novel coronavirus and that the U.S. manipulated the virus as bioweapon; false narratives spreading in Spanish through social media and messaging platforms. Meanwhile, the Cuban Henry Reeve brigade sends medical missions and supplies from Havana to Panama, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Belize, Venezuela, Peru, Bolivia, Argentina, and Brazil.

- The Trump administration announced that the U.S. is moving newly-deployed naval ships toward the coast of Venezuela as it will be beefing up counter-narcotic operations in the Caribbean. – SOFREP on 04-APR
- The Trump administration is prepared to lift crippling sanctions on Venezuela in support of a new proposal to form a transitional government requiring both Maduro and opposition leader Guaidó to step aside in favor of a five-person governing council. – Associated Press on 31-MAR
- The PanAm Post has learned from two sources that money from drug trafficking

operations coordinated by Hugo Carvajal has financed Spain's Podemos Party, as well as Zapatero's recent maneuvers in Venezuela. – PanAm Post on 29-MAR

- Venezuelan state oil company Petroleos de Venezuela is trying to repair the catalytic cracker at its 146,000-barrel-per-day (bpd) El Palito refinery in an effort to restart gasoline production at the facility after years of inactivity, three people familiar with the matter said. – Reuters on 25-MAR
- Venezuelans confront COVID-19 without data from the government. – Poynter on 24-MAR
- Venezuela's first and only state-owned communications satellite has been out of service since March 13 when a series of maneuvers left it tumbling in an unusable orbit. – Space News on 23-MAR
- In order to combat the coronavirus outbreak in Venezuela, Nicolás Maduro has shut down Venezuela's national banking system. – Bitcoin.com on 19-MAR
- Venezuelan utilities have hiked fees and the government plans to raise taxes, as the economy deteriorates further due to the spread of coronavirus and the crash in global oil prices adds to the strain on public coffers. – Reuters on 19-MAR
- The Maduro regime's official press release states Executive Vice President Delcy Rodríguez met with members of the High Level Commission of the Cuba-Venezuela Comprehensive Agreement to evaluate the various strategic alliances between the two nations. – Bolivarian Government of Venezuela on 16-MAR (content in Spanish)
- The Maduro regime's official press release states as part of the work being carried out by the Presidential Commission for the Prevention of COVID-19, a technical delegation of Cuban specialists and doctors arrived at the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela to support the fight. – Bolivarian Government of Venezuela on 16-MAR (content in Spanish)
- Vitol Group, the world's biggest independent oil trader, is negotiating a purchase of Venezuelan crude. This would be the first time Vitol dealt with the Latin American nation's oil after the U.S. ratcheted up sanctions in January 2019 in a bid to oust Maduro – BNN Bloomberg on 13-MAR
- The company Libre Abordo S.A. claims that it is not violating the sanctions because it is sending humanitarian aid, but in exchange, it is trading Venezuelan crude oil. – PanAm Post on 11-MAR

VRIC RESPONSES TO U.S. MAX PRESSURE

- China urges the U.S. to abide by the UN Charter and basic norms governing international relations and stop meddling in Venezuela's domestic affairs. We call on all parties to put the Venezuelan people's welfare first, move towards each other, and

contribute to stability in the country and region and peaceful resolution. – China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 30-MAR
- Seyyed Abbas Mousavi said in a statement that no international law allows the U.S. to interfere in the domestic affairs of other countries and prepare the ground for a coup, overthrow or aggression against an independent state by abusing its judicial mechanisms. – Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 27-MAR
- At a time when the entire world is joining efforts in fighting the coronavirus pandemic, Washington is carrying on its political bullying of a sovereign state. – Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 27-MAR

THE BOLIVARIAN NETWORK

- Until April 5, Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega had not appeared publicly for 24 days. Contrary to other Central American presidents, who have placed themselves on the front line of coronavirus containment, Ortega has not said a single word about the epidemic that has led to six positive cases and one deceased in Nicaragua. – El País on 06-APR (content in Spanish)
- As most nations adopt strict quarantine measures to protect themselves from the coronavirus, the Nicaraguan government has taken quite the contrarian approach, declaring the pandemic risks overrated and encouraging citizens to go about their everyday lives. – Miami Herald on 02-APR
- Bolivia's ousted President Evo Morales has denounced U.S. aggression against Venezuela, saying the Trump administration was seeking to distract attention from its poor handling of the coronavirus pandemic. – Morning Star on 30-MAR
- Mexico's Libre Abordo and a related company plan to take some 15 million barrels of Venezuelan crude as part of a first oil-for-food contract with Maduro's government, the company told Reuters. – Reuters on 24-MAR
- The tens of billions of dollars the new Argentina government was supposed to restructure this month is now shut out in the quarantined world of the new coronavirus. – Forbes on 23-MAR
- 67-year-old Vice President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner leaves Argentina to visit her daughter in Havana – ignoring Alberto Fernández's call for all those aged over 65 to remain in self-isolation at home. – Buenos Aires Times on 17-MAR
- Foreign Minister of Uruguay Ernesto Talvi announced that the South American country will retire from the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) and return to the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance (TIAR) – EFE on 11-MAR (content in Spanish)

CUBA'S MEDICAL DIPLOMACY

- State media reports Japan MPs recognize Cuba's support for COVID-19, despite blockade. – Prensa Latina on 03-APR
- Heading to Andorra, the Cuban medical brigade receives cheers at Madrid's airport. – Cuba Debate on 29-MAR (content in Spanish)
- State media reports President of the House of Deputies of Bolivia Sergio Choque said that he had asked Cuba and China to assist his country in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, in letters sent to the embassies of those countries. – Prensa Latina on 26-MAR
- Belize welcomed 32 Cuban medical doctors on March 25 and a second group of 28 doctors on March 26 to assist Belize in combating the coronavirus pandemic. These doctors will assist the Cuban doctors already present in Belize. – Government of Belize Press Release on 25-MAR
- Cuba sent a brigade of 500 doctors to the province of Buenos Aires at the request of the Axel Kicilof government. – Ámbito on 24-MAR (content in Spanish)
- State media reports former Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa affirmed that the country needs Cuba's assistance in the battle to face and overcome the coronavirus pandemic. – Prensa Latina on 23-MAR
- State media reports the MAS party's candidate for the presidency of Bolivia, Luis Arce, confirmed Cuba's willingness to help the South American country to face COVID-19. – Prensa Latina on 18-MAR
- The Cuban medical brigade began a working session with officials from Nicaragua's Ministry of Health to share experiences and knowledge in the prevention of coronavirus. – El 19 Digital on 18-MAR (content in Spanish)
- State media reports Cuba will send virologists, epidemiologists, doctors, and pharmaceuticals to Nicaragua to face coronavirus, confirmed by Vice President Rosario Murillo. – On Cuba News on 17-MAR
- State media reports the government of El Salvador requisitioned some six thousand units of the Interferon Alpha 2B medicine, used successfully in China to treat COVID-19. – Prensa Latina on 16-MAR
- As Panama recorded the first case of COVID-19 on March 10, health authorities have expressed the possibility of using recombinant Interferon Alfa 2B, a drug patented and produced by Cuba. – Prensa Latina on 10-MAR



Since the start of COVID-19 there has been a lack of transparency from Beijing about the origin and characteristics of the virus. Launching a global propaganda campaign, the PRC and its VRIC allies, are aggressively attempting to convince the world that the U.S. is secretly the original source of the virus and that China is the only country that can save us. This state propaganda is enforced through a digital army of upwards of two million state-backed internet trolls dubbed the “Wu Mao” or “50 cent” army, named after how much the PRC reportedly pays per pro-China post.

Part of China’s propaganda strategy focuses on Cuba’s antiviral Interferon Alfa 2B drug as a potential cure for COVID-19. BioCubaFarma S.A., the biopharmaceutical company that produces the Alfa 2B drug, is part of ongoing biotech cooperation between Cuba and China. This propaganda has caused health authorities to warn against spreading unverified information on a cure for COVID-19.

For years, China and Cuba have extensive bilateral cooperation in biotech and established the first joint biotechnology innovation center this past February, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. This adds to at least three other biotech joint ventures between Cuba and China dating back to 2003, in what some analysts speculate could have alarming implications, including in military affairs. The PRC’s civil-military strategy highlights biology as a “new domain of warfare,” potentially placing the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) at the forefront of biotech joint ventures worldwide.

To this end, the more than a dozen countries in Latin America and the Caribbean that have welcomed China’s newfound medical diplomacy to tackle COVID-19 could be inadvertently opening the door for greater PLA presence in the region. The recent arrival in Caracas on 30-MAR, of a Chinese medical team to combat the COVID-19 spread in Venezuela could be the beginning of the political-military-medical fusion that wages asymmetric war against the United States from Latin America.

- As Latin America struggles to prepare its underfunded public health systems for a surge in coronavirus cases – the most challenging crisis in recent history – many are looking to China for aid. – Diálogo China on 06-APR
- China has won a seat on a panel on the controversial U.N. Human Rights Council, where it will help vet candidates for important posts — despite its decades-long record of systematic human rights abuse that the U.S. has said fueled the coronavirus pandemic. – Fox News on 04-APR
- China cashes in off coronavirus, selling Spain $467 million in supplies, some of them substandard. – Fox News on 27-MAR
- Venezuela has opened talks with China over possible financial support to cope with a sharp drop in oil prices and the arrival of the coronavirus, four sources familiar with the negotiations said. – Reuters on 25-MAR
- Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro patched up a diplomatic spat with China in a call with President Xi Jinping, with the two agreeing to fight the spread of coronavirus together, as Brazil's largest city went into its first day of lockdown. – Reuters on 24-MAR
- The global coronavirus pandemic originating in China is leading conservative Latin American leaders to question key tenets of the region's foreign policy. – Breitbart on 23-MAR
- The crisis triggered by the coronavirus pandemic has provided the impetus in Panama for the establishment of artificial intelligence (AI) in the public health sector, with support from China and the Government Innovation Authority (AIG) and engineers in Panama. – ANPanama on 21-MAR (content in Spanish)
- A new defense research agreement with Brazil can help the U.S. military counter China's space infrastructure ambitions in the Western Hemisphere, the U.S. Southern Command commander told Congress on March 11. – The Defense Post on 11-MAR
- Cuba's state media reports on the antiviral Interferon alfa 2B recombinant (IFNrec), a product leader of biotechnology in Cuba, is one of the medicines used today in China in treatments to those affected by the coronavirus epidemic. – Prensa Latina on 06-FEB (content in Spanish)

CHINA'S MEDICAL DIPLOMACY

- "Thank you China!!!" Mexican Foreign Minister Marcelo Ebrard wrote in a Twitter post, linking to a local news report about the donated supplies. The Jack Ma Foundation and the Alibaba Foundation gave 100,000 masks; 50,000 test kits; and five respirators, according to the Chinese Cultural Center in Mexico. – Reuters on 01-APR
- A team of Chinese medical and scientific experts arrived in Venezuela to help fight COVID-19, welcomed by Venezuelan Foreign Affairs Minister Jorge Arreaza and

Chinese Ambassador to Venezuela Li Baorong. – Xinhua on 30-MAR

- State media reports Maduro has tweeted his thanks to China for the country's support during the COVID-19 pandemic. A team of Chinese medical and scientific experts who arrived in Venezuela on March 30 to help fight COVID-19, were met by Venezuelan Foreign Affairs Minister Jorge Arreaza and Chinese Ambassador to Venezuela Li Baorong. – CGTN on 30-MAR
- Cuba's state media reports Haiti requested $18 million worth of medical supplies from China to treat the COVID-19 pandemic, as the country counts 15 positive cases in the country. – Prensa Latina on 30-MAR
- The Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Bolivia reported that international aid for the country from the People's Republic of China, consisting of 100,000 masks; 20,000 kits for viral tests; and five respirators, will serve to control the contagion and care for the patients with coronavirus. – Pagina Siete on 28-MAR (content in Spanish)
- From Argentina to Mexico and Brazil to Peru, Latin American nations have accepted offers of support from China as the number of cases across the region has climbed, amid growing fears about the preparedness of their healthcare systems. – Reuters on 26-MAR
- Panama received a donation of five million COVID-19 tests along with a donation of masks and ventilators from the Chinese government. – Ministry of Health in Panama on 24-MAR (content in Spanish)
- Cuba's state media reports Cuba is participating in a videoconference provided by China to Latin America and Caribbean countries to update them on fighting against the COVID-19 pandemic. – Prensa Latina on 24-MAR
- China wants to offer face masks to Paraguay according to the Taiwanese Foreign ministry. The Taiwanese government has agreed to provide one million masks to the South American ally. – Taiwan News on 23-MAR
- State media reports China will deliver sanitary supplies consisting of 100,000 masks; 50,000 reagent packs; and 10 respirators to Argentina, the Chinese embassy reported. – MBS on 21-MAR

CHINA & CUBA BIOTECH COOPERATION

- Health authorities have warned against spreading unverified information that a drug for curing Covid-19 has been found. The warning followed a statement from the National Education, Health and Allied Workers' Union (Nehawu), which called for the South African government to procure a vaccine from Cuba. – IOL on 18-MAR
- Cuba's state media reports Cuba and China will open a biotechnological innovative center with equipment and laboratories designed by specialists from the Cuban Center

for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology, the new scientific institution is the result of extensive bilateral cooperation and will be dedicated to developing 100% Cuban projects, the island's embassy in Beijing posted on Twitter. – On Cuba News on 05-JAN

- China's state media reports Cuba's biotechnology sector gained a lot from the recent China International Import Expo in Shanghai, including reviewing the work it's developing with different Chinese companies that supply raw materials to the Cuban pharmaceutical industry," said Mayda Mauri, vice president of the business group BioCubaFarma. – Xinhua on 27-NOV
- China's state media reports in November 2019, Cuba prioritized expanding its high-tech trade in China, including biotech with pharmaceutical conglomerate BioCubaFarma, making 10 technology transfers to China and setting up three joint ventures. – CGTN on 03-NOV
- Cuba and Syria confirm willingness to boost cooperation in the biopharmaceutical industry, as a business delegation from BioCubaFarma visited Aleppo. – Cuba Sí on 31-JUL (content in Spanish)

BACKGROUND READING

- Today's advances in biotechnology and genetic engineering have exciting applications in medicine – yet also alarming implications, including for military affairs. China's national strategy of military-civil fusion has highlighted biology as a priority, and the People's Liberation Army could be at the forefront of expanding and exploiting this knowledge. – Defense One on 14-AUG-2019
- The "50 Cent Army" is a group of state-backed internet commenters whose numbers have reportedly ranged from 500,000 to two million. The root of the nickname- the idea that the government pays 50 renminbi cents per pro-China post- has long been debunked. – Voice of America on 07-OCT-2016



Like Venezuela, Iran has used the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity to request $5

billion in support from the IMF and publicly called for the U.S. to lift sanctions against the Islamic Republic. Unlike Venezuela, the IMF has not rejected this request as Iran has been one of the countries hardest hit by the virus, with more than a 6 percent mortality rate. Despite being devastated by the virus, the Islamic Republic seems to be continuing its hostile aggression against the United States by launching proxy attacks against the U.S. military in Iraq and supporting a false conspiracy theory that the U.S. and Israel are behind the pandemic.

Both Iran and Venezuela have denounced the U.S. maximum pressure strategy against their respective countries while using Iran's state-owned Spanish language media network, HispanTV, to launch accusations that the U.S. is manipulating the virus as a bio-warfare weapon. The two totalitarian regimes, Venezuela and Iran, lack the public healthcare infrastructure and resources to curb the outbreak of COVID-19 rendering their citizens vulnerable to community spread. This has turned Iran into a net exporter of the virus to its neighbors in the Middle East and Venezuela as one of Latin America's top concerns for the novel coronavirus.

Seeing an opportunity to pivot global public support to its allies, both Venezuela and Iran have only accepted Chinese and Cuban medical support/supplies and are using the VRIC to anchor a sanctions resistance strategy. The nexus of this strategy is set in Syria, where Venezuela and Cuba are increasing cultural, economic, and diplomatic cooperation, in coordination with Iran and Russia.

- The Islamic Republic of Iran has requested a $5 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Were the IMF to approve this loan, the nature of the Islamic Republic would likely result in the misuse of these funds in a manner that benefits the regime, not the people. – Foundation for the Defense of Democracies on 26-MAR
- Tehran is lying to the international community about the number of citizens infected and killed by coronavirus and imprisoning dissenters for speaking out, the U.S. State Department tells the Washington Free Beacon. – Washington Free Beacon on 25-MAR
- Iran will carry out a biological defense drill on March 25 throughout the country to contain the COVID-19 epidemic, which so far has killed 2,077 people and infected more than 27,000 people. – Prensa Latina on 25-MAR
- Iran's clerical army, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, has launched a propaganda offensive aimed at characterizing the health emergency as the work of the country's main enemies: Israel and the United States. – Ilan Berman in Al Hurra Digital on 24-MAR
- Iran rejected coronavirus aid provided by Doctors Without Borders, an international medical humanitarian organization, which had sent a team of medical staff and a field

hospital to Iran. – ABC News on 24-MAR

- Supreme Leader Khamenei's fabrications regarding the Wuhan Virus are dangerous and they put Iranians and people around the world at greater risk. – U.S. State Department on 23-MAR
- Iran's state media reports Chairman of London Energy Club Mehmet Ogutcu believes that while the USA, Saudi Arabia, and the Persian Gulf countries can work together in the coming period to influence the markets, Russia can team up with important OPEC producers such as Iran and Venezuela and assume the leadership of non-OPEC producers. – Mehr News on 14-MAR
- State media reports studies on the genome of the lethal COVID-19, which appeared in China, suggest that this coronavirus could have originated elsewhere in the world such as the US. – HispanTV on 14-MAR (content in Spanish)
- Two sick jurors video conferencing from home helped convict Iranian national Ali Sadr Hashemi Nejad of a $115 million sanctions-evasion scheme that ran through Venezuela. – Courthouse News on 16-MAR

SYRIA

- Cuba's state media reports the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates has expressed solidarity with Cuba who is facing the US-imposed blockade and sanctions, and considered they hinder efforts to stop the coronavirus pandemic. – Prensa Latina on 19-MAR
- Venezuela is set to establish a cultural center in the Syrian capital Damascus, boosting bilateral relations between the South American country and the Syrian regime. – Middle East Monitor on 19-MAR
- Syria's Ambassador to Cuba, Idris Mayya, discussed with President of the Chamber of Commerce of Cuba Antonio Carricarte means of enhancing trade relations between the two countries. – Syrian Arab News Agency on 10-MAR
- Syria's state media reports the President of Prensa Latina News Agency Luis Enrique González underlined the importance of enhancing media cooperation between Syria and Cuba in light of the fierce media campaign launched against the two countries. – Syrian Arab News Agency on 10-MAR
- Cuba and Syria confirm willingness to boost cooperation in the pharmaceutical industry – Cuba Sí on 31-JUL (content in Spanish)



Despite China's lack of transparency on COVID-19, Moscow still stands by Beijing and its supposed "effective measures to not only contain the spread of the virus at home but also contribute to safeguarding the health and safety of people across the world," as expressed by Vladimir Putin. Accompanying Cuba and China, Russia also sent military medics to Italy in a medical mission to combat the virus in its European epicenter. Putin's solidarity is unwavering even as the global total surpasses one million confirmed cases of COVID-19. As countries are faced with growing public health crises, all eyes are off Russia and several important developments have gone by largely unnoticed. One of these is a landmark ruling that eliminates term limits and approves Putin's presidency until 2036, deepening his authoritarian grip over the country.

Russia has also reignited its oil war with Saudi Arabia after a deal between the two countries to cut production broke down, with devastating effects on the U.S. and global energy markets, as economies are already suffering under the strain of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, the U.S. and Russia have engaged in a tit-for-tat battle over the petrobusiness Moscow has conducted with the Maduro regime in Venezuela. After the U.S. sanctioned a Rosneft subsidiary for continuing to do business with Venezuela, Russia sold all of its assets to another firm that is owned entirely by the Russian government. This battle may come to a head in the coming months, as the U.S. has offered a power transition plan to Venezuela that would force Russia to leave the region.

- In the surprise statement, Rosneft said it concluded the sale of assets in the South American nation to an unnamed firm that is wholly owned by the Russian government after 10 years and billions of dollars in investments. – Radio Free Europe on 06-APR
- As the coronavirus crisis escalated in the United States, Moscow repeatedly sent Tu-142 long-range reconnaissance aircraft to probe America's homeland defenses. – The National Interest on 25-MAR
- In Russia, facial surveillance and threat of prison are being used to make coronavirus

quarantines stick. – The Washington Post on 25-MAR

- State media reports Russian military medics sent to Italy to assist that country in its fight against coronavirus have been spotted en route to Bergamo, the city which has become one of the global epicenters of the COVID-19 outbreak. – Sputnik on 25-MAR
- Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, during a phone conversation with his Iranian counterpart Mohammad Javad Zarif, said that Moscow urges Washington to immediately lift its inhumane sanctions against Tehran, the Russian Foreign Ministry said. – Xinhua on 25-MAR
- State media reports Venezuela has received the first shipment of humanitarian technical aid from Russia, to contribute to fight the spread of the coronavirus pandemic. – Prensa Latina on 24-MAR
- President Xi Jinping took a phone call from President Vladimir Putin of Russia on the evening of 19 March. Xi expressed China's readiness to work with Russia and other countries to fight the epidemic. – China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 20-MAR
- Dutifully performing its role in a highly-choreographed display of political theater, Russia's highest court approved constitutional changes that opened the way for President Vladimir Putin to crash through term limits and stay in power through 2036. – New York Times on 16-MAR
- The United States imposed sanctions on another subsidiary of Rosneft, ramping up pressure on the Russian state oil giant that the Trump administration said provides a financial lifeline to Maduro. – Reuters on 12-MAR
- Russian state media reports at a press conference broadcasted on Twitter, Maduro said Venezuelan authorities are discussing the oil price collapse with OPEC and Russia. – TASS on 12-MAR
- Mexico and other nations are seeking to mediate between Russia and Saudi Arabia to end a price war that has battered world markets, Mexico's finance minister said, citing his country's prior experience calming a feud. – Reuters on 10-MAR
- State media reports President Vladimir Putin appointed Sergei Melik-Bagdasárov, who was previously deputy director of the Latin America Department of the Russian Foreign Ministry, as the new Russian ambassador to Venezuela, according to an official decree. – TeleSUR on 17-FEB (content in Spanish)