Disclaimer: The VRIC Monitor does source a limited amount of media reports from state-owned or -controlled media outlets from VRIC nations. These media reports are carefully selected and solely intended to report on cultural, diplomatic, economic, or military activities that are not reported on by other media and relevant for understanding VRIC influence in the region. Given the inevitability that state propaganda will be mixed into these articles, we ensure that reporting from state-media outlets is no more than 20 percent of the overall VRIC Monitor and exclude any opinion pieces or anti-US (anti-West) declarations of any kind.

OVERVIEW

In the final weeks of the Trump administration, several last-minute policy actions are taken to weaken the VRIC alliance worldwide. Returning Cuba to the State Sponsor of Terrorism list, closing two consulates in Russia, revealing the Iran-Al Qaeda nexus, and elevating U.S. diplomatic ties with Taiwan, are actions advancing U.S. national security interests in the face of an increasingly dangerous world. But the internal chaos, namely the mob attack on the U.S. Capitol has sabotaged some of these efforts, emboldening our adversaries who have capitalized on the moment to weaken the image of America abroad. VRIC leaders and ministry spokesman were quick to propagandize the siege of the U.S. Capitol on January 6th:

> *"The electoral system in the United States is archaic, it does not meet modern democratic standards, creating opportunities for numerous violations, and the American media have become an instrument of political struggle."*
>
> *Russia's Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova on Twitter, January 7, 2021*

> *"What we saw in the U.S. last night and today really showed how brittle and weak western democracy is, and how weak its foundations are."*
>
> *Iran's President Hassan Rouhani in a televised speech, January 7, 2021*

> *"With this regrettable episode, the United States suffers from the same that it has generated in other countries with its policies of aggression."*

> *Venezuela's Foreign Minister Jorge Arreaza on Twitter, January 6, 2021*
>
> *"What words did they use on Hong Kong, and what words did they use [on storming the Capitol]? … such a difference and the reasons behind it is worth us reflecting on seriously."*
>
> *China's Ministry Spokeswoman Hua Chunying in a press conference, January 7, 2021*

The VRIC's joint propaganda and disinformation efforts are increasingly coordinated with its aggressive military actions, namely in the Asia-Pacific region. North Korea vows to advance its nuclear weaponry after China condemns the United States for its elevated diplomatic recognition of Taiwan. Meanwhile, Iran's Revolutionary Guards seized a South Korean-flagged tanker to pressure its government to release some $7 billion of frozen assets tied in the country's banks due to U.S. sanctions. And South Korea scrambled its fighter jets last month as Russian and Chinese bombers conducted another joint patrol on its Korea Air Defense Identification Zone (KADIZ).

The combined joint propaganda and military maneuvers active in the Asia-Pacific region could come to Latin America and the Caribbean in 2021. The expulsion of Russian spies from Colombia, as Iranian and Russian military and technical advisors continue to arrive in neighboring Venezuela, while China is exposed for its mass surveillance programs in the Caribbean, are subtle signs that the VRIC intelligence cooperation is on the move in the Western Hemisphere.

Moreover, Iran and China increase their diplomatic engagement with Mexico after the Mexican Congress passed a new law limiting U.S.-Mexico security cooperation. The new law requires a security panel to oversee any cooperation among U.S. and Mexican law enforcement agencies, curbing the trust-based information exchange among field agents that has led to the arrest of several cartel leaders in recent years.

Prior to the misguided violent mob attack on the U.S. Capitol, the preeminent threat in Washington D.C. came from Iran after federal authorities intercepted chatter on radio frequencies used by pilots that, according to CBS News, said an attack would avenge the death of Qods Force General Qassem Soleimani, following the first anniversary of his death. This is coupled with messaging from Tehran threatening President Trump, Secretary Pompeo, and others involved in Soleimani's death on January 3, 2020, by a drone strike in Iraq.

Despite constant threats and bullying on the global stage by the VRIC, President Trump's America First policies proved to weaken this anti-American alliance, further isolating it from U.S. allies while establishing coalitions built on bilateral interests rather than multilateral agencies. The recent tragic events on January 6th in Washington D.C. certainly hampered some of this progress but it does not define the Trump administration nor deny its success in the face of dangerous external state and non-state actors that are determined to defeat the United States. The incoming Biden administration will need to address the national security challenge from the VRIC in its first 100 days.

MUST READS:

1. Foreign Powers Seek to Destroy the Rule of Law and Social Unity of the United States interview of Joseph Humire by Sabrina Martín Rondon, *El American*
2. Iran seeks allies with criminal groups in Latin America interview of Joseph Humire by Juan Carlos Dos Santos, *La Nacion (content in Spanish)*
3. Hezbollah: Narco-Terror and Crime in Latin America by Emanuele Ottolenghi, *Jewish Policy Center*
4. Latin America and Israel, More than Friends by Mark Klugmann, *Jewish Policy Center*
5. Pirates of the Caribbean: The Dangerous Relationship Between Venezuela, Iran, and Hezbollah by Ximena Herrera, *Iranwire*
6. Timeline: Iranian Fuel Shipments to Venezuela by Alex Yacoubian, *United States Institute of Peace*
7. Iran May Be Providing Military Equipment to Venezuela by *Dialogo Americas,* digital military magazine by U.S. Southern Command
8. The dangerous Russia-Iran-Cuba-Venezuela axis by La Semana
9. Deals in the Dark: Russian Corrosive Capital in Latin America by the National Endowment for Democracy
10. An Ignored Canary in an Unknown Coal Mine: The Caribbean's Economic Engagement with China by Bradley J. Murg and Rasheed J. Griffith, *The Diplomat*

TRUMP ADMINISTRATION ON VENEZUELA

- TREASURY: Treasury Designates Venezuelan Officials Involved in Unjust Trial of the "Citgo 6"
- TREASURY: Treasury Continues Pressure on Maduro Regime for Role in Fraudulent Elections
- TREASURY: Treasury Sanctions CEIEC for Supporting the Illegitimate Maduro Regime's Efforts to Undermine Venezuelan Democracy
- JUSTICE: Former Venezuelan National Treasurer and Her Spouse Charged in

Connection with International Bribery and Money Laundering Scheme
- JUSTICE: More than 700 Members Of Transnational Organized Crime Groups Arrested in Central America in U.S. Assisted Operation
- JUSTICE: Acting Manhattan U.S. Attorney Announces Extradition Of Co-Founder Of Global Cryptocurrency Ponzi Scheme
- STATE: U.S. Announces Designation of Cuba as a State Sponsor of Terrorism
- STATE: The United States Condemns Venezuela's Fraudulent Legislative Elections
- COMMERCE: Commerce Department Will Publish the First Military End-User List Naming More Than 100 Chinese and Russian Companies
- COMMERCE: Commerce Tightens Controls to Prevent Support of Foreign Military-Intelligence and WMD Activities



Venezuela's year concluded with another sham election, sparking a "Venezuela Reset" aimed at breaking the international isolation of the Maduro regime. The new regime-controlled National Assembly of 277 deputies is headed by former communications minister Jorge Rodriguez, sanctioned by U.S. Treasury's OFAC for being part of Maduro's inner circle. Rodriguez now sits in the chair of Juan Guaidó, who held a symbolic virtual referendum to counter the sham legislative election and demonstrate Maduro's lack of legitimacy with the Venezuelan people.

Meanwhile, the Maduro regime deployed military and intelligence officers and National Guard troops around Caracas, stationing some of them at the homes of political opponents. Elsewhere, in Nicaragua, opposition forces are also being quelled. Maduro-ally Daniel Ortega recently instituted a countrywide crackdown on opposition movements, barring any from running for office. The new law gives the Ortega-Murillo regime the unilateral power to label citizens "terrorists," "coup-mongers," or "traitors to the homeland," banning Nicaraguan citizens from aspiring to political office.

2021 begins with Venezuela and Nicaragua solidifying their totalitarian regimes in each

respective country, to continue exporting more external conflict with its neighbors. Maduro openly accused Colombian President Ivan Duque of plotting an attack on Venezuela, in a ruse to distract that two Russian spies were expelled from Bogota while dozens of Russian military contractors arrived in Caracas in late December. The Maduro regime has also escalated tensions on its eastern maritime border laying claim to the water and seabed adjacent to Guyana's coast, west of the Essequibo River, after the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruled last month that the territory belongs to Guyana.

To further entrench its alliances, the Maduro regime, citing coronavirus concerns, closed its airspace to all countries except its "brother nations" Bolivia, Turkey, and Mexico. The latter seems to be of particular interest given that President Andrés Manuel López Obrador is curbing U.S.-Mexico security cooperation with a new national security law requiring all foreign agents to share information gathered in the country with a high-ranking panel in Mexico's Public Security Secretariat. The law is purported to be directed at the Drug Enforcement Agency and partner agencies, weakening the U.S. ability to tackle narcoterrorism networks along the U.S. southwest border. Mexico has also extended diplomatic ties with China and Qatar, an ally of Iran.

- The United States has reiterated its support for Guyana in light of the latest decree issued by Venezuela's Maduro in which he lays fresh claims to the water and seabed adjacent to Guyana's coast, west of the Essequibo River. – News Room on 10-JAN
- Nicolás Maduro has decreed the creation of a new "territory for the development of the Atlantic facade" of Venezuela in Esequibo, an area that has been contested for years with Guyana and which has large gas and oil reserves. – ABC Internacional on 08-JAN (content in Spanish)
- The Maduro regime announced that Jorge Rodríguez will be the next president of the National Assembly of Venezuela. Diosdado Cabello, who will assume the leadership of the Bloque de la Patria, reported that Iris Varela and Didalco Bolívar will be the first and second vice presidents, respectively. The new Parliament will be installed on January 5th. – Infobae on 04-JAN (content in Spanish)
- The U.S. Treasury Department issued a new license allowing certain transactions with Venezuelan opposition leader Juan Guaidó despite U.S. sanctions on the country, reaffirming Washington's support for the politician as Venezuela's legitimate leader. – Reuters on 04-JAN
- Venezuela's government is planning to move to a fully digital economy as hyperinflation has made worthless bolivar notes practically disappear and dollarization expands through the local financial system. – Bloomberg on 02-JAN
- Venezuelan opposition leader Juan Guaidó had the recognition of the United States

and the support of millions in the streets. But with Nicolás Maduro still occupying the presidential palace and commanding Venezuela's security forces, Guaidó's so-called interim government needed cash to project power abroad and undermine the president at home. Now two Miami entrepreneurs were offering a plan to get it. – Washington Post on 02-JAN

- Given the closure of borders in Venezuela to important markets such as Panama and the Dominican Republic, Venezuelan airlines turned their operations to one of the three countries allowed to carry out operations, previously authorized by the Bolivarian government. Avior Airlines, Conviasa, Estelar, LASER Airlines, Rutaca, and Turpial Airlines have changed their itineraries and began to offer flights to Cancun, Mexico, as the only international connection in their network, with the exception of the state-owned Conviasa which has started operations to Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia and Turkey, which is authorizing Turkish Airlines flights. – Aviacion Online on 28-DEC
- Venezuela's opposition-held National Assembly approved a statute extending its term into 2021, after a disputed election in which allies of Maduro's ruling socialist party won 91% of the seats in Congress. – Reuters on 26-DEC
- The commander of the Military Forces in Colombia, General Luis Fernando Navarro, reiterated that Venezuela is the "strategic backing of organized armed groups (GAO)," where within its ranks hide 18 leaders of the ELN and 20 of its dissidents. – El Tiempo on 20-DEC (content in Spanish)
- Venezuela's National Constituent Assembly, a pro-government legislature created in 2017 that was widely criticized for undermining democracy, will cease operations at the end of 2020, Maduro said. The all-powerful institution was officially designated to reform the constitution, but in practice ended up supplanting the opposition-controlled legislature and sacking public officials who challenged the government. – Reuters on 18-DEC
- Venezuelan state oil company Petroleos de Venezuela has begun transferring crude off of an offshore oil facility where governments in two neighboring countries have voiced concerns about a potential spill. The company this week began the first of several transfers from the Nabarima floating storage and offloading facility (FSO), anchored in the Corocoro oilfield off Venezuela's eastern coast, onto the Inmaculada barge. – Reuters on 15-DEC
- Venezuela's opposition says that 6.4 million people voted in a symbolic "anti-government referendum," organized as a protest against the Maduro regime. Results of the survey have no legal weight, but are intended to keep alive a spirit of resistance after the government regained control of the national assembly in elections last weekend. – Bloomberg on 12-DEC
- Brazil joined a group of nations questioning the legitimacy of legislative elections in

Venezuela, the Brazilian Foreign Ministry said. The ministry's statement said the other countries denouncing the election in a joint letter included Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Guyana, Haiti, Honduras, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, the Dominican Republic, and Santa Lucia. – Reuters on 07-DEC

- The Venezuelan Army had its Engineering Brigade officially inaugurate a new "Digital Assets Production Center of the Bolivarian Army of Venezuela," doing so through Instagram of all things. The video in question makes it clear that this center is home to ASIC mining equipment, the types used to mine in proof-of-work algorithms. – Inside Bitcoins on 01-DEC

THE BOLIVARIAN NETWORK

- The Trump administration is putting Cuba on the list of countries that are considered to be state sponsors of terrorism, according to a person familiar with the decision, rescinding the Obama administration's lifting of designation in 2015. – Wall Street Journal on 11-JAN
- Mexico's national guard is deployed in full riot gear. Guatemala and Honduras have now announced they're deploying their own troops, after news surfaced that new caravans of migrants are forming in Central America with the eventual goal of reaching the United States. – Yahoo News on 10-JAN
- Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador offered political asylum to WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, a move that could anger the United States, which is seeking his extradition. – Reuters on 04-JAN
- State media reports the Bolivian justice system announced that it will prosecute former government officials for supposedly pocketing money intended for COVID-19 supplies. The authorities will investigate members of Jeanine Áñez's executive team, Minister of Justice Iván Lima assured. – Prensa Latina on 31-DEC
- Gustavo Petro, leader of Human Colombia, senator, and presidential candidate, had a meeting with the vice president of Spain and leftist leader, Pablo Iglesias. – El Tiempo on 29-DEC (content in Spanish)
- State media reports Cuba and Mexico strengthened their ties by signing the 5th additional protocol to the Economic Complementation Agreement that simplifies the process of validating Certificates of Origin. – Prensa Latina on 25-DEC
- Nicaragua's ruling party-dominated Congress passed a law that would essentially ban opposition candidates from running in the 2021 presidential elections. The law gives the government of Ortega the power to unilaterally declare citizens "terrorists" or coup-mongers, classify them as "traitors to the homeland," and ban them from running as candidates. – Associated Press on 21-DEC

- State media reports the Meeting of Peoples and Organizations of Abya Yala towards the Construction of a Plurinational America begins in Cochabamba, Bolivia, to strengthen integration mechanisms and the unity of peoples. The debates will also deal with defining a new political agenda, strengthen the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) and recover the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) and the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America-Peoples' Trade Agreement (ALBA-TCP). – Prensa Latina on 18-DEC
- Trinidad and Tobago said it would impose stiffer penalties on those trafficking migrants from neighboring Venezuela, days after a Venezuelan boat headed to the Caribbean twin-island nation sank, killing at least 28 people. – Reuters on 17-DEC
- Mexico's House of Representatives passed a bill aimed at reining in the powers of "foreign agents." Critics say the move is intended to restrict the role of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency's (DEA) operations related to the country's drug war. The legislation is described as a series of "reforms" to the country's National Security Law. – The Daily Beast on 16-DEC
- Maduro proposed that the ALBA-TCP regional alliance finance a massive coronavirus vaccination campaign. – MENAFN on 16-DEC
- Young entrepreneurs in Cuba have found solutions for the country's payment problems through cryptocurrencies after the Trump Administration imposed new sanctions on the Island in November. According to a report published by Deutsche Welle, startups in the Island nation are using Bitcoin, Ethereum, and other cryptocurrencies to fill the gap created after Western Union closed more than 400 branches in the country amid financial restrictions. – Finance Magnates on 03-DEC

ALEX SAAB CASE

- A court in the African country of Cape Verde ruled that Alex Saab, a Colombian businessman who had been Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro's dealmaker, can be extradited to the U.S., where he was indicted on charges of laundering money for the authoritarian regime. – Wall Street Journal on 05-JAN
- In a new attempt to free Alex Saab, the Maduro regime appointed him as Venezuela's plenipotentiary ambassador to Africa. This move seeks to shelter Saab with international treaties and agreements granting him diplomatic immunity. He has been detained in Cape Verde since last June, accused of being a frontman for Maduro, money laundering, and illicit enrichment. – La Semana on 30-DEC (content in Spanish)
- For the past month, the Navy cruiser San Jacinto had sailed off the West African island nation of Cape Verde on a secret mission aimed at helping deal a major blow to Nicolás Maduro of Venezuela, an avowed adversary of the Trump administration. –

New York Times on 22-DEC

- Cape Verde announced that it will not grant Maduro's frontman, Alex Saab, with house arrest. Attorney General Luis José Landim affirmed that his country has no obligation to do so. – Infobae on 19-DEC (content in Spanish)



Colombia is the latest of six nations worldwide who, in 2020, have expelled Russian spies from their countries. The extent of the Russian espionage network based in Bogota allegedly reached both public and private sectors, particularly the energy industry, resulting in the first time in the region's history that a Latin American nation has expelled Russian "diplomats." In response, Russia expelled two diplomats from Colombia's embassy in Moscow.

Since 2017, Colombian authorities have detected an influx of Russian technical experts to the country resulting in no fewer than 44 officials in its embassy in Bogota in 2020. A number much larger than the diplomatic footprint the Kremlin has in other countries throughout the region. The two accused spies, Alexsandr Paristovm from Russia's external intelligence agency SVR and Aleksandr Belousov from its military affairs espionage counterpart the GRU, were allegedly tasked with acquiring sensitive information about Colombia's critical infrastructure, namely hydroelectric plants, oil rigs, electrical grids, mineral resources, and telecommunications. More concerning, the alleged Russian spies were recruiting assets from Colombia's military intelligence network and possibly coordinating with Venezuela. According to the country's National Intelligence Directorate (DNI), the goal of the Russian espionage network was to cause chaos and confusion in the lead up to the 2022 general election in Colombia.

As Russia secretly targets Colombia, the Kremlin has openly engaged others in South America. Uruguay's Foreign Minister looks to visit Russia in the near future after initiating discussions to advance economic cooperation. Next door, Argentina has deepened its engagement in Russia signing a new space exploration agreement and has become the first

country in the region to authorize the Sputnik V vaccine for COVID-19. After a rushed approval process, 25 million doses of the Russian vaccine arrived in Buenos Aires the night before Christmas and have been distributed throughout the country. Mexico is now considering acquiring 24 million doses of the Sputnik V vaccine.

- Mexico is considering acquiring 24 million doses of Russia's Sputnik V COVID-19 vaccine and will receive its first batch of AstraZeneca jabs from Argentina to finish production of them, a top Mexican health official said. – Reuters on 11-JAN
- Sputnik V, the Covid-19 vaccine developed by an arm of the Russian government, has been met with deep skepticism from regulators across the world. Except in Latin America. – Bloomberg on 07-JAN
- Venezuela has signed a contract with Russia to acquire enough of the Sputnik V coronavirus vaccine to inoculate 10 million people in a first phase, Vice President Delcy Rodriguez said. – Reuters on 29-DEC
- Colombia's recent expulsion of two Russian diplomats for espionage is not an isolated case. It is essential to analyze the historical context to understand the implications of this. – La Semana on 26-DEC (content in Spanish)
- Ivan Duque government's accused Russia of carrying out political and economic espionage work in different regions of Colombia. Local news sources point out that Russian intelligence agents Alexander Paristov and Alexander Belousov recruited informants and were collecting key data on mineral resources, electricity grids, oil infrastructure, and hydroelectric plants. – El Tiempo on 24-DEC (content in Spanish)
- La Semana learned the incredible story of a Colombian energy sector consultant who realized that Russia's Aleksandr Belousov wanted to recruit him as a human source. – La Semana on 24-DEC (content in Spanish)
- Colombia reported two Russian diplomats left the country in December for "acting contrary to the Vienna Convention," while local media said the men were carrying out espionage work. The action was "reciprocally responded to by the government of the Russian Federation, by ordering the withdrawal of two Colombian diplomatic officials accredited in Moscow." – La Nacion on 22-DEC (content in Spanish)
- State media reports the Russian President signed Federal Law on Ratification of the Protocol between the Government of the Russian Federation and the Government of the Argentine Republic on Cooperation in the Field of Space Exploration and the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space. – Kremlin Press Release on 08-DEC
- State media reports Maduro wants to visit Russia in April-June 2021 and meet with Russian leader Vladimir Putin. – TASS on 07-DEC
- State media reports Cuba and Russia agreed on the implementation of a comprehensive project for the supply of locomotives, modernization of workshops, and

the continuity of supply of Russian equipment. – Prensa Latina on 03-DEC

- State media reports Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov analyzed the deepening of bilateral ties and economic cooperation with his Uruguayan counterpart, Francisco Bustillo, who is on a working visit to Moscow. – Prensa Latina on 01-DEC



Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, in perhaps the final action of the Trump administration's maximum pressure campaign on Iran, revealed the Iran-Al Qaeda nexus confirming that the Sunni terror group's second in command, Abu Mohammad al-Masri, was killed in Tehran in August. The Iran-Al Qaeda nexus is an important element to analyze as Tehran continues to make aggressive moves in Latin America.

Last year, the Iran-Maduro-Hezbollah nexus drew global attention as the Islamic Republic continuously sent tankers to Venezuela to deliver gasoline and other materials. The largest fleet of ten tankers arrived in Venezuela in mid-December, using a variety of evasion tactics, such as re-flagging, re-naming, re-painting, and turning off transponders of the tankers in mid-voyage. Weeks before the latest delivery from Iran to Venezuela, SOUTHCOM Commander Admiral Craig Faller warned that Iran's revolutionary guards are active in Venezuela, highlighting the presence of the Qods Force.

But the IRGC's presence in Latin America goes beyond Venezuela. One of Iran's most historic commercial cover platforms to shield its intelligence activity is the beef trade. More specifically the Halal certification companies in Latin America are a covert network of Iranian spies and subversive actors throughout the region. A recent exposé by a Malaysian media outlet uncovered a massive multi-national counterfeit Halal business in Kuala Lumpur that sourced beef from numerous Latin American countries, including Brazil, Bolivia, Colombia, and Mexico. Iran has, through the return of the Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) to power, renewed relations with Bolivia, and is now engaging Mexico to boost economic ties. Mexico is also being courted by Qatar, which seeks greater socio-cultural cooperation.

- An Iranian ship arrived at the Venezuelan port of La Guaira on January 7th, according to Refinitiv Eikon data, in what appeared to be a continuation of the commercial alliance between the two countries targeted by U.S. sanctions. – Reuters on 07-JAN
- Federal authorities are investigating a threat against the U.S. Capitol that was broadcast over radio frequencies used by pilots. The message obtained @CBSNews said the attack would "avenge" the death of Iranian General Qassim Soleimani – Catherine Herridge on Twitter on 06-JAN
- The Federal Bureau of Investigation has determined that Iran is responsible for an online attempt to incite violence against FBI Director Chris Wray and federal and state officials who pushed back on election-fraud claims advanced by President Trump and some of his supporters. – Wall Street Journal on 22-DEC
- Senior officers from no fewer than four government agencies are believed to be working hand-in-glove with a cartel specialized in bringing non-certified meat into Malaysia and passing it off as halal-certified products. It is believed the cartel imports meat from non-halal-certified slaughterhouses in a few countries, such as Brazil, Bolivia, Canada, Colombia, Spain, and Mexico. – New Straits Times on 20-DEC
- State media reports the Iranian President Hassan Rouhani says the country is prepared to further enhance its trade, industrial relations, corporate cooperation, and collaboration in science and technology with Mexico. – Iran Front Page News on 15-DEC
- A tanker chartered by the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) is loading Venezuelan crude for export, documents from state-run PDVSA show, providing evidence of the two countries' latest tactics to expand their trade in defiance of U.S. sanctions. Names of scrapped vessels are being used by several PDVSA (Petróleos de Venezuela, S.A.) customers, including NIOC, to disguise the routes and identities of the tankers they use. – Reuters on 14-DEC
- State media reports Bolivian Foreign Minister Rogelio Mayta said that Bolivia wants to rebuild the relationship frozen by the government of Jeanine Añez with Venezuela, Mexico, Cuba, Argentina, Nicaragua, and Iran. In a statement, Mayta affirmed that the Bolivian state must have relations with all the countries within the framework of respect for sovereignty. – Tehran Times on 14-DEC
- State media reports Iran Plant Protection Organization and Brazil International Plant Protection Convention signed an agreement to accelerate and ease the trade of plant products between the two sides. The agreement was signed in the 2nd Advisory Committee of the Islamic Republic of Iran and Brazil. – Mehr News on 12-DEC
- "Iran may have begun providing military equipment to the Nicolás Maduro regime in Venezuela," says a November report by the Critical Threats Project, an initiative of the Washington D.C.-based think tank American Enterprise Institute. – Dialogo Americas

on 10-DEC

- State media reports the Ambassador of the Islamic Republic to La Paz Morteza Tafreshi voiced Iran's readiness to expand cooperation with Bolivia in the field of production in a meeting with the Minister of Productive Development of Bolivia Néstor Huanca. – Mehr News on 10-DEC
- According to an investigative report from RunRun.es, Venezuela intends to increase its use of Bitcoin to pay for imports to bypass financial sanctions imposed by the United States. RunRun.es cited anonymous sources from the country's central bank who claim that "payments to companies from allied countries such as Iran and Turkey have been made using Bitcoin". – CoinTelegraph on 09-DEC
- The Trump administration's special representative for Iran and Venezuela, Elliott Abrams, warned that the U.S. would act if Iran sends missiles to Venezuela. "I've made one very concrete statement about this: We will not accept, we will not tolerate, the placement in Venezuela of Iranian missiles that can reach the United States." – Business Insider on 06-DEC
- Iran is sending its biggest fleet of tankers to Venezuela in defiance of U.S. sanctions to help the isolated nation weather a crippling fuel shortage. Some of the flotilla of about 10 Iranian vessels will also help export Venezuelan crude after discharging fuel. – Bloomberg on 04-DEC
- Iran has sent arms and dispatched paramilitary operatives to help Nicolás Maduro maintain his hold on power, the top U.S. military commander for Central and South America said. – Wall Street Journal on 02-DEC

HEZBOLLAH

- Guatemala ratified the designation of Hezbollah as a global terrorist organization. The decision was added to the latest regional designation made by Honduras in January 2020 and those of Argentina, Paraguay, and Colombia, in 2019. – Infobae on 12-DEC (content in Spanish)
- Argentina's diplomatic delegation in the United Kingdom received an anonymous notice on their social network. The message said there was a possibility that "materials to build a bomb would cross the northern border of Argentina," from Paraguay, and that the target of the attack would be a "Jewish target." – Infobae on 21-NOV (content in Spanish)

THE NISMAN/AMIA CASE

- President Alberto Fernández said he was "convinced" that the death of prosecutor Alberto Nisman was "a suicide," during a long interview with Radio 10. – Clarín on 31-

DEC (content in Spanish)

- Argentine Jewish groups were expecting a long-awaited victory on Wednesday in the 26-year struggle for justice in the 1994 AMIA Jewish center terrorist bombing, figuring there was enough evidence to convict the car mechanic accused of preparing the deadly car bomb. But a federal court acquitted the defendant, Carlos Telleldin, in a second trial in the case. – Times of Israel on 24-DEC
- Carlos Telleldín was acquitted in the oral trial against him for delivering the van that was used as a car bomb in the attack on the AMIA. The decision was made by judges of the Federal Oral Court 3: Andrés Basso, Javier Ríos, and Fernando Cañero. – Infobae on 23-DEC (content in Spanish)

TURKEY

- Russia and Turkey to continue military cooperation despite U.S. sanctions. The Russian foreign minister says Moscow and Ankara will not be deterred by U.S. sanctions over the acquisition of the S-400 missile system – Middle East Eye on 29-DEC

QATAR

- Qatar Airways and Latam Airlines Brasil are expanding codesharing to cover 45 additional Latam flights within Brazil and throughout South and Central America as well as eight Qatar flights, largely to destinations in Asia. – Business Travel News on 04-JAN
- State media reports Ambassador of Costa Rica to Qatar Alvaro Mariano Segura Avila hailed the huge progress in Qatar in different fields and their high level of development thanks to the leadership of Qatar. – Gulf Times on 15-DEC
- State media reports Ambassador of Mexico to Qatar Graciela Gomez stressed that Mexico and Qatar have close political bonds and share a commitment for fighting inequality and corruption, promoting education and protecting the environment. – Gulf Times on 14-DEC
- For the first time, LATAM Airlines Group landed in Qatar, transporting perishables to Asia and returning to Latin America with electronic products. A few days later, on December 7th, LATAM sent another airline to Doha, transporting over 95 tons of fresh fruit. Then, its interline partner Qatar Airways grabbed the cargo and continued the journey towards Shanghai, China. – Simple Flying on 10-DEC
- State media reports a unique sculpture titled, Friendship, which depicts a fusion of the Cuban national bird, the Tocororo, and the Qatari falcon was formally inaugurated at Katara. – Gulf Times on 10-DEC

- State media reports Ambassador of Panama in Doha Musa Asvat hailed the existing bilateral friendship and co-operation between his country and Qatar, which spanned over 18 years. The ambassador pointed out that Qatari-Panamanian relations have strengthened as the two countries signed seven agreements in various fields as well as 16 other draft agreements, some of which are ready to be signed. – Gulf Times on 09-DEC
- State media reports the Mexican embassy in Doha is keen to strengthen bilateral relations with Qatar in the area of culture and arts as it considers organizing online activities amid the coronavirus pandemic, ambassador Graciela Gomez Garcia said. – Gulf Times on 29-NOV



China, known for its strategic use of telecommunications, is now being highlighted in the Western Hemisphere for mass surveillance and espionage efforts, while it continues to count on medical diplomacy to repair its reputation in the region.

Recently exposed is China's use of the Caribbean to subvert America's telecommunications. On December 3rd, the U.S. and Jamaica held their first virtual "Strategic Dialogue," where Washington addressed Beijing as a threat to sovereignty in the region, especially in terms of its 5G technology. Just weeks later, the Guardian released a report detailing how China uses Caribbean phone networks to actively surveil U.S. citizens. The alleged exploitation allows China to target, track, and intercept phone communications.

China's espionage efforts bleed across the U.S.-Mexico border. Allegedly, China has been using Mexico in a plot to take fake Chinese ballots across the U.S. southern border. This further raises concerns over China's budding relationship with Mexico, which has shown enhanced cooperation over the last month, especially in telecommunications. Chinese smartphone brand, Oppo, entered into the Latin American market for the first time through Mexico's America Movil.

At a time when overall international acquisitions are declining, China has found fertile ground for deals in Latin America. Its transactions in the region totaled $7.7 billion, more than North America and Europe combined. In December, China signed a multi-billion dollar agreement for an infrastructure project in Argentina along with purchasing CGE, Chile's largest energy distributor, for $3 billion dollars. This means the country will now control 57% of the electric power sector in Chile, sparking controversy but igniting no moves to oppose foreign investment.

While China skates forward in surveillance and infrastructure projects, the country might hit a snag in its fishing ventures. After more than half a year of illegal fishing in and out exclusive economic and sovereign zones of South American coastal countries, Chile, Ecuador, Peru, and Colombia are prepared to fight China's fishing abuses. With a joint statement condemning China's practices in their waters and increased resolve to fight back through the Permanent Commission to the South Pacific (CPPS), the four countries are bringing the issue to the next COMM9 meeting later this month.

- The Commerce Department effectively banned exports to China's state-owned oil company, adding the company that owns significant energy assets in the U.S. to its blacklist of foreign entities it says threaten U.S. national security. – Politico on 14-JAN
- BYD is proud to announce that it has exclusively won cumulative orders to supply 1,002-unit pure-electric buses to the capital of Colombia, Bogotá. This is the largest order for pure-electric buses outside of China to date, which sets a new record in sales volume for the overseas pure-electric bus industry. – Business Wire on 11-JAN
- Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Mexico's Foreign Affairs Minister Marcelo Ebrard voiced willingness to enhance bilateral cooperation in multilateral fields during a phone conversation. – China People's Daily on 01-JAN
- President Xi Jinping and his Chinese Communist Party (CCP) are implementing a multidimensional effort to reap economic, political, and potentially military gains a few miles from our shores — in the Caribbean, an area stretching from the Bahamas in the north to Suriname and Guyana in South America. – Newsmax on 28-DEC
- Overseas acquisitions by Chinese firms are heading for their fourth consecutive yearly decline, with a $31.1 billion tally that's the lowest since 2007, according to data compiled by Bloomberg. But transactions targeting Latin America totaled $7.7 billion, more than Europe and North America combined. – Bloomberg on 27-DEC
- Chinese smartphone companies are seeking to expand their presence in the Latin American market. According to market research firm Counterpoint Research, Chinese smartphone brand Oppo entered the Latin American market for the first time in August by forging a partnership with America Movil, Mexico's largest

telecommunications company. – Business Korea on 22-DEC

- VLCC Yong Le, former Carabobo from the state-owned PDVSA arrived at Jose Terminal, in #Venezuela from China. She will load ~ 2,000,000 bbl/crude for Sinopec an oil company of the Chinese Communist Party. They had Aruba listed as their "fake" destination – Armand Delon on Twitter on 20-DEC
- Chile's congress has tried to oppose a $3bn acquisition by China's State Grid International Development (SGID) of Chilean power distributor CGE, a transaction which was unveiled last month. The purchase will see the Chinese firm control 57% of Chile's regulated distribution segment. In June, SGID bought local distributor Chilquinta for $2.3bn. – BNAmericas on 16-DEC
- China appears to have used mobile phone networks in the Caribbean to surveil U.S. mobile phone subscribers as part of its espionage campaign against Americans, according to a mobile network security expert who has analysed sensitive signals data. – The Guardian on 15-DEC
- Rail companies from China have signed agreements worth $4.7bn with the government of Argentina, aimed at improving the country's rail system. Four deals were agreed on to electrify the network, replace diesel locomotives, and renew freight railways that connect Argentina's farmlands in the northwest, west, and south of the country with the eastern port region. – MercoPress on 15-DEC
- A group of Chilean legislators is proposing tighter rules on foreign investment in strategic industries after a Chinese state-owned company agreed to take control of over half of the South American country's power distribution. – Bloomberg on 14-DEC
- China has temporarily suspended meat imports from two Brazilian companies, Brazil's agriculture ministry said. China halted imports from privately-owned Naturafrig Alimentos Ltda and Plena Alimentos after detecting traces of the novel coronavirus in food packaging. – Reuters on 11-DEC
- An attorney reveals evidence showing that fake ballots printed in China were transported across the U.S.-Mexico border. This statement is consistent with a previous claim by a Chinese insider, who exposed that the printing plant involved was located in China's Guangdong Province. – The Epoch Times on 09-DEC
- United States authorities have admitted that China's role in the Caribbean region was a talking point during discussions on a range of bilateral and other issues of national interest between the US and its regional partners. – Jamaica Gleaner on 07-DEC
- State media reports Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc received outgoing Cuban Ambassador to Vietnam Lianys Tores Rivera in Hanoi on November 30th. Congratulating the ambassador on completing her term, the PM affirmed that the Vietnamese people always remember President Fidel Castro's statement: "For Vietnam, Cuba is willing to devote blood." – Vietnam+ on 30-NOV

ILLEGAL FISHING

- Chile, Ecuador, Peru, and Colombia issued a joint statement condemning IUU fishing and specifically calling out China's "large fleet of vessels." The countries are also expected to highlight the issue at the next meeting of the South Pacific Regional Fisheries Management Organization, COMM9, taking place between January 21 and 1 February 1, 2021. – Seafood Source on 05-JAN
- China's 'dark' fishing fleets are plundering the world's oceans and its fishing fleet is the largest in the world, easily outnumbering many countries' navies. – ABC News on 19-DEC
- A Chinese fishing fleet has been accused by conservation group Oceana of "pillaging" the waters off the Galapagos Islands for squid. The fleet is made up of more than 400 fishing vessels, of which 11 are currently in Chile's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), according to Chile's navy. – BBC on 15-DEC

VRIC MEDICAL DIPLOMACY

- The coronavirus vaccine developed by China's Sinovac Biotech showed a general efficacy of less than 60% in its late-stage trial in Brazil, a news website reported. – Reuters on 11-JAN
- The Provincial Government of Hubei in China has made a donation of 5,000 surgical and 2,000 N95 masks to the Regional Government of Madre de Dios, in eastern Peru. – Andina on 09-JAN
- Peruvian President Francisco Sagasti said his interim administration had negotiated a deal with China's Sinopharm to assure delivery of one million doses of its coronavirus vaccine by January. – Reuters on 06-JAN
- Xi Jinping says his country is "ready to work" with Argentina to boost cooperation and advance development of vaccines against coronavirus, as talks to acquire doses of Chinese shots continue. – Buenos Aires Times on 06-JAN
- State media reports Iran will receive its share of the COVAX vaccines, then the Pasteur Institute of Iran will co-produce a vaccine with a Cuban company, so finally, the domestically-made vaccine can be produced. – Tehran Times on 01-JAN
- State media reports Bolivia joined the nations that will administer Russia's Sputnik V vaccine against COVID-19, after signing an agreement for the purchase of it, President Luis Arce said. – Prensa Latina on 31-DEC
- State media reports Cuba, Turkey, and Equatorial Guinea announced a cooperation project to support Cuban health workers fighting COVID-19 in the African country with individual protection devices. – Prensa Latina on 30-DEC
- Panama's health ministry said that 220 Cuban doctors arrived to reinforce the Central

American nation's healthcare system and help in the battle against the COVID-19 pandemic. – Yahoo News on 24-DEC

- State media reports Venezuela received the ninth planeload of medical supplies from China to help the country combat the COVID-19 pandemic. – Xinhua on 23-DEC
- Argentine Health Minister Ginés González García explained what the step-by-step vaccination in Argentina will look like in an interview. The 300,000 doses of Sputnik V, manufactured by the Gamaleya Institute of Russia, arrived in the country on December 24th. – Ámbito on 22-DEC (content in Spanish)
- Azerbaijan invited doctors from Italy, China, Cuba, Russia, and Turkey to help fight the COVID pandemic, said President Ilham Aliyev in a video conference. – MENAFN on 19-DEC
- The Russian makers of the COVID-19 vaccine Sputnik V have submitted a request to carry out clinical trials in Mexico and obtain the corresponding authorization, Mexican Foreign Minister Marcelo Ebrard said. – Reuters on 14-DEC
- State media reports Russia and Cuba may carry out joint research and testing of drugs that can be used to treat COVID-19 patients, Russian First Deputy Health Minister Igor Kagramanyan said. – TASS on 14-DEC
- The Argentine government inks a deal for 10 million doses of Russia's COVID-19 vaccine and President Alberto Fernández said he would be the first person in Argentina to be injected to dispel public fears. – Buenos Aires Times on 12-DEC
- State media reports that amid a surge in infections and deaths, the Turkish Health Minister announced a plan to distribute the experimental Chinese vaccination, CoronaVac. Turkey has previously announced an agreement to purchase 50 million doses from Sinovac. – TeleSUR on 03-DEC
- São Paulo's Butantan Institute received one million doses of a Chinese COVID-19 vaccine developed by Sinovac Biotech Ltd that is undergoing late-stage testing at 16 locations in Brazil. – Reuters on 03-DEC