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LATIN AMERICA: A NEW MARKET FOR IRANIAN DRONES

Amal Mokhtar

Researcher on Latin American affairs

Abstract

Iranian drones have emerged as significant players in various conflicts, including the Russia-Ukraine conflict and indirect confrontations in the Middle East involving Iran, the United States, and Israel. This presents Iran with an opportunity to capitalize on its advancements and expertise in drone technology, potentially boosting sales in a market where it poses a tangible threat, especially following the lifting of restrictions on Iranian arms sales. Latin American countries, particularly those with leftist governments fostering ties with Iran, have increased their demand for these drones, prompting inquiries into the implications of such partnerships. This research article addresses these questions, shedding light on the Iranian presence in the global drone market, heightened interest from Latin American nations in Iranian military technology, and the mutual benefits arising from collaboration in this domain. It also examines the repercussions of such cooperation for Iran and the involved countries, offering insights into the evolving dynamics of international arms trade and regional security.

Keywords: Iran, Latin America, Iranian drones, military alliance, Venezuela, Cuba, Bolivia, Brazil

Introduction

Iran's proactive stance both within and beyond its regional sphere, particularly in areas offering opportunities to bolster alliances against the United States and counter the isolation imposed on the government, has become a central tenet of Iranian foreign policy. Of particular note is Iran's significant and growing presence in Latin America, particularly among leftist governments with adversarial relationships with the United States. What is particularly striking is the progression of Iranian-Latin American cooperation from diplomatic, cultural and commercial ties to the signing of military agreements and the sale of Iranian military technology, notably drones, to nations in the region.

In the past, Iran primarily supplied drones to select allies in the Middle East. However, recent developments indicate a concerted effort to broaden the scope of drone sales to new countries and groups worldwide. This expansion follows extensive testing and development efforts, particularly during the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Iran has transitioned from being solely a regional supplier to emerging as a global exporter of advanced weaponry. From Belarus in Eastern Europe to Venezuela in South America, Iran has introduced drones boasting ranges of up to 1,000 kilometers.

Consequently, the surge in demand for Iranian military equipment raises significant concerns for the United States, particularly amidst the increasing interest in military cooperation and procurement of Iranian weaponry by Latin American countries — which represent a critical region for US national interests and security.

Over the past five years, Iranian-made drones have proliferated across battlefields, fundamentally altering the landscape of modern warfare. This research article delves into the evolution of Iranian drone production and sales, examining the implications of this expansion. Additionally, it explores the burgeoning ties between Iran and Latin America, particularly the recent surge in military cooperation. Understanding the ideological underpinnings of leftist movements in many regional countries is crucial in comprehending this trend, as is identifying the mutual interests driving both parties towards enhanced military collaboration. Lastly, the research article assesses the broader repercussions of this rapid proliferation of drones in armed conflicts, with a specific focus on Iranian drones. Analyzing these developments comprehensively offers insights into the shifting dynamics of contemporary warfare and the geopolitical ramifications of Iran's growing influence in global military affairs.

Signification and Importance of the Evolution of Iran's Drone Industry

According to the CIA's projections for 2022, Iran is poised to possess the largest arsenal of missiles and drones in the Middle East, signaling its potential to wield significant influence in any conflict it engages in. Iran's interest in expanding the market for its drones extends beyond the Middle East and conventional

state actors to include non-state entities. A report from the Washington-based Institute for the Study of War, dated July 20, 2023, noted that a former Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) commander boasted in October 2022 about 22 countries, including Algeria, Armenia, Serbia, Tajikistan and Venezuela, formally requesting Iranian drones. The pace of drone production has accelerated, with the establishment of factories in allied countries further bolstering Iran's capabilities. This trend underscores Iran's strategic efforts to extend its influence globally through the proliferation of advanced military technology.⁽¹⁾

Iran's possession of advanced, domestically produced ballistic missiles and drones with superior capabilities at a low cost can be attributed to the challenging circumstances it faced during the eight-year war with Iraq in the 1980s. Throughout this conflict, Iran struggled to acquire advanced weaponry and relied primarily on outdated missiles from the Assad government in Syria and the Gaddafi government in Libya. Faced with limited access to modern armaments, Iran turned to local experts to develop its own weapons, prioritizing cost-effective solutions. Central to this effort were the production lines for unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), commonly known as drones. Today, according to NATO assessments, Iran has emerged as a significant arms supplier, surpassing countries like Russia in this regard.⁽²⁾

"The demand for Iranian drones is growing at a record rate," remarked James Rogers from the Cornell Institute for Technology Policy. The Russia-Ukraine conflict has provided a significant marketing opportunity for Iranian drone technology in numerous countries. The effectiveness demonstrated by Iranian drones, notably the Shahed 136 and Shahed 131 models, in assisting Russian military objectives during the war has heightened interest and demand for these products. This newfound recognition of Iranian drone capabilities has contributed to their increased popularity among potential buyers worldwide.

Amid stringent US sanctions restricting trade between Russia and Iran, particularly in the realm of weapons purchases, alternative strategies are being explored. Plans are emerging to establish Iranian drone manufacturing facilities within Russia and Belarus, effectively transferring technology, manufacturing capabilities, and training personnel instead of directly selling the final product. This approach has already been initiated in Venezuela, where a drone production factory was established over a decade ago during Hugo Chavez's tenure. Furthermore, Iran has extended its unmanned aircraft systems to Ethiopia since 2021 and later to Sudan following the outbreak of civil conflict between army forces and the Rapid Support Forces. This trend underscores the expanding proliferation of unmanned aircraft systems in Latin American countries.⁽³⁾

While Iran is not alone in the market for unmanned aircraft systems, its proactive approach to marketing its products across diverse geographical regions, extending beyond the Middle East, sets it apart. Additionally, Iran's supply of armed drones to non-state actors introduces a new dimension to military confrontations

worldwide. This raises questions about the threat potency and efficacy of Iranian drones. Key considerations in evaluating this include:

Swarming Tactics

Iranian drones distinguish themselves by their affordability compared to Western counterparts. Additionally, Iran's expansion strategy sets it apart from other drone-producing countries, as it carefully selects regions, countries and actors to which it sells its products. In a nutshell, a significant aspect of Iran's defense policy in its ongoing confrontation with the United States is its utilization of swarming tactics, facilitated by its diverse array of drone products. This underscores the emphasis placed by Iranian diplomacy on promoting the sale of its drone technology. These drones, available at competitive prices, are particularly appealing to countries and actors perceived as direct threats to the United States or Israel.

Multiple Categories of Iranian Drones

Among the notable Iranian drone models are the Ababil-3, Mohajer-6, Saegheh UAV (Thunderbolt), Shahid, H-110, Fotros, Karrar, and Kaman-22 drone. However, it is the Shahed drone series that has garnered the most attention from international media, particularly due to its utilization by Russian forces in the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. Reports from the Ukrainian Air Force at the close of 2023 suggest that Russia deployed approximately 3,700 Shahed drones over the course of the two-year conflict.

Moreover, both US and Israeli press reports highlight the use of Shahed-136 aircraft by Houthi forces in strikes targeting locations in the Red Sea and Eilat. Additionally, during Israel's war on Gaza, armed Shiite groups in the region launched attacks on US bases in Iraq, Syria and Jordan employing Iranian-made Shahed drones.⁽⁴⁾

The Sale of Iranian Drones: Legal Dimensions

Following the conclusion of the nuclear agreement between Iran and six countries — the United States, Russia, China, Britain, France, and Germany — in 2015, Security Council Resolution No. 2231 was issued. This resolution prohibited Iran from exporting ballistic missiles and drones with a range exceeding 300 kilometers and a payload exceeding 500 kilograms until October 2020. Consequently, all sales conducted between Iran and various countries and armed groups from July 2015 until October 2020 were in violation of the United Nations resolution. However, after October 2020, Iranian transactions in this regard became legally permissible.⁽⁵⁾ Despite the legality of these transactions post-October 2020, challenges exist including the financial restrictions on financial transactions that impede sale payments and the difficulties in shipping and transporting this military equipment. This is primarily attributed to ongoing US economic sanctions on Iran, which complicate financial dealings with a significant number of buyers of Iranian military products, including Russia and Venezuela. These restrictions continue

to impact Iran's ability to fully capitalize on the legal framework established by Security Council Resolution 2231.

Russia-Ukraine War: A Theater for Iranian Drones

Russia has historically been a primary source of arms sales for numerous countries in the Global South. However, the invasion of Ukraine drained significant Russian resources and prompted a wave of sanctions, resulting in a vacuum in the arms and military equipment sales landscape during a period of global instability. Consequently, Iran emerged as a more appealing option for countries that previously depended on Russian military supplies. Moreover, the current scenario could pave the way for a joint venture between Iran and Russia, leveraging their respective high production capabilities to bolster mutual conventional arms sales.⁽⁶⁾

The battlefield itself served as a dynamic testing ground for Iranian technology, providing opportunities for further development and potential promotion of sales to other countries. Following the onset of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Iran agreed to supply Russia with Shahed 136 drones, which made their debut on the battlefield in the fall of 2022. Within a short span, Shahed drones were extensively deployed across Ukraine. Distinguished by their lightweight carbon fiber structure and impressive range of over 1,500 miles, Shahed 136 drones enabled Russia to conduct operations from Belarus in the north to occupied areas in the south, targeting Ukrainian cities. With a payload capacity of 20 kilograms to 40 kilograms of explosives — twice that of the 131 model — these drones were capable of inflicting significant damage to both buildings and military equipment. In November 2022, Russia launched a targeted attack on the Ukrainian capital, Kyiv, employing 75 Shahed 136 drones. Despite Ukrainian air defense efforts, which successfully downed approximately 71 of the aircraft, the attack underscored the potency of these drones in modern warfare. Building on insights gleaned from the Russia-Ukraine conflict, Iran further refined its drone technology. In November 2023, Iran unveiled an upgraded version named the Shahed 238, equipped with a faster jet engine. This new model, capable of flying at more than twice the speed of its predecessor, the 136, is believed to have been deployed over Ukraine in January 2024.⁽⁷⁾

Based on the foregoing, the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war has served not only as a marketing opportunity for Iranian arms to countries worldwide but also as a real-world laboratory for the development of Iran's drone technology. By observing the performance of their drones in combat scenarios and analyzing the outcomes of their deployment, Iran has been able to refine and enhance its products within the aerospace industry.

Leftist Governments: A Key Conduit for Forging Military Alliances With Iran in the Southwestern Hemisphere

For decades, the United States has been vigilant about curbing the military influence of other countries in Latin America. The Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962, a pivotal event during the Cold War, marked the closest the United States

and the Soviet Union came to nuclear conflict. Rooted in US opposition to the Soviet Union's military presence in Latin America, particularly in Cuba, the crisis underscored the region's significance in global power dynamics. In contemporary times, with the rise of leftist parties to power in numerous Latin American countries following democratic transitions, Iran has established a notable commercial, cultural and military presence in the region. This has brought Iran into close proximity with the United States, triggering geopolitical complexities reminiscent of the Cold War era.⁽⁸⁾

The leftist surge in Latin American countries began with the ascent of Hugo Chávez to the presidency of Venezuela in 1999, followed by the rise of two influential leftist governments, led by Lula da Silva in Brazil and Néstor Kirchner in Argentina in 2003. Subsequently, other leftist administrations emerged in Chile, Nicaragua, Bolivia and Ecuador, among others. The first decade of the 21st century came to be known as the "pink tide"⁽⁹⁾ era for Latin American countries. This period coincided with Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency in Iran. Given Ahmadinejad's active foreign policy, the clear leftist orientation of Latin American governments to counter US hegemony, and the United States' focus on conflicts in the Middle East, this became a golden period for deepening Iranian cooperation in the region. This collaboration spanned commercial partnerships, cultural exchanges and political coordination to a significant degree. Additionally, signs of military cooperation between Iran and select Latin American countries began to emerge over the two-decade period. This collaboration varied in nature and scope across different countries.

One notable aspect of this cooperation was in the field of Iranian aircraft technology, particularly drones, as detailed below:

Venezuela

In late 2022, during Nicolas Maduro's visit to Tehran, the Venezuelan and Iranian governments affirmed significant cooperation in the defense sector. Maduro conveyed to his Iranian counterpart, Ebrahim Raisi, during this visit, "I believe that between the two of us, an indestructible friendship is going to grow for the future of our peoples."⁽¹⁰⁾

Venezuela's economic and political crisis escalated, reaching its zenith in 2019 with the self-declaration of Juan Guaidó — who was at the time speaker of the National Assembly — as the legitimate president, replacing elected President Maduro. The United States recognized Guaidó and froze Venezuela's assets abroad. Following these developments, Venezuelan-Iranian relations, already robust, transitioned to a new phase. Iran and Venezuela established a mutually beneficial strategic partnership aimed at shoring up the Maduro government amidst internal collapse precipitated by the severe economic crisis and acute shortages of essential goods. Venezuela's state institutions faced significant challenges in fulfilling their responsibilities, exacerbating the plight of the populace and leading to a surge in displacement. Against the backdrop of US support for Guaidó's coup

during the Trump administration, aimed at ousting Maduro and completely dismantling the legacy of Hugo Chávez, Iran and Venezuela deepened their collaboration to withstand external pressures and safeguard their respective interests.

In 2020, Tehran and Caracas witnessed notable trade cooperation, highlighted by the shipment of up to 2.35 million barrels of gasoline to the Maduro government in Venezuela. In exchange, Venezuela provided Iran with at least 9 tons of Venezuelan gold, valued at approximately \$500 million. Many observers at the time speculated that this exchange represented not just commercial cooperation but also potentially had military dimensions.

On November 6, 2020, Maduro announced the establishment of a new military scientific commission within the Venezuelan armed forces, tasked with modernizing the country's weapons systems. Although specific military systems were not mentioned, Maduro noted that the new council would enlist advisors from Russia, China, and Iran. Tehran's recent 25-year strategic agreement with Beijing, alongside a 20-year extension of its arms deal with Moscow, is poised to benefit Venezuela's newly formed defense commission. This development is anticipated to contribute to the creation of a multipolar military force in Venezuela, bolstering the Maduro regime. Iran, in particular, is positioned as a central pillar of this emerging multipolar power structure, evident in its efforts to establish air and sea bridges to Venezuela. This strategic partnership with the Maduro government is increasingly viewed as one of Iran's most successful investments beyond the Middle East.⁽¹¹⁾

In the fiscal year 2022-2023, Venezuela emerged as the primary destination for Iran's exports in Latin America, with goods worth \$118 million sent to the country. In return, Iran imported goods from Venezuela valued at \$816,000. These figures mark a nearly 200% increase compared to the value of bilateral trade in the preceding year.⁽¹²⁾ Additionally, data from Commodity Intelligence, Kepler, reveals that Iran has dispatched 28 million barrels of gas condensate to Venezuela as of January 2023.⁽¹³⁾

These commercial and military agreements help Iran circumvent international sanctions and the 2007 UN arms embargo, providing an avenue for Iranian companies affiliated with the IRGC to establish a presence beyond Iranian borders, notwithstanding the sanctions. For instance, Parchin Chemical Industries, prominently listed in UN Security Council Resolution 1747 for its alleged involvement in Iran's nuclear weapons development program, expanded its operations abroad. Additionally, Iran's Quds Aviation Industry Company is now situated adjacent to the El Libertador Air Base in Maracay, within the Venezuelan state of Aragua. Its purpose is to train the Venezuelan army in drone production techniques, illustrating the extent of military cooperation between Iran and Venezuela.⁽¹⁴⁾

Venezuela stands out as the sole country thus far to possess drones equipped for combat operations. In March 2021, reports surfaced indicating that the Venezuelan armed forces deployed these drones to target dissidents from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in the state of Apure, bordering Colombia.

While Venezuelan authorities have not officially acknowledged the use of military drones in this incident, a few months later, during a military parade, the Maduro government publicly showcased drones outfitted with attack capabilities.

During this military parade, the Venezuelan army unveiled the types of drones in its possession, emphasizing that they are domestically designed and manufactured equipment — including:

- Antonio José de Sucre 100 (ANSU 100): Equipped with surveillance, reconnaissance and attack capabilities, this drone features anti-tank and anti-personnel capabilities.

- Antonio José de Sucre 200 (ANSU 200): Boasting high stealth capabilities, this drone is equipped for surveillance, reconnaissance, and attack operations. It also has the capacity to suppress enemy air defense systems.

According to many experts, the Venezuelan ANSU 100 drone bears striking resemblance to the Iranian Mohajer 2 drone, suggesting it is a modern replica. This connection dates back to an agreement between Iran and Venezuela during the Chavez era in 2007, which allowed Venezuela to assemble 12 units of the Mohajer 2 drone. In 2010, US satellite imagery revealed a facility within the headquarters of the Venezuelan arms and ammunition production company (Cavim) where the Mohajer 2 drones were being manufactured. Subsequently, in June 2012, during a televised broadcast, Chavez publicly demonstrated the Mohajer 2 drones for the first time. It was revealed that Venezuelan personnel involved in the project had received training in Iran.

In November 2020, Maduro made a televised announcement revealing Venezuela's plans to produce multi-purpose combat drones. He stated that these drones would be manufactured using Venezuelan aluminum and expressed intentions to export them.⁽¹⁵⁾ Additionally, amidst the border crisis between Venezuela and Guyana in the disputed Escubio region,⁽¹⁶⁾ it was disclosed on December 28, 2023, that Venezuela possesses Iranian-made combat boats known as Zulfighar boats. These fast patrol boats have the capability to reach speeds of up to 52 knots per hour.

Despite the earlier announcement by the presidents of Venezuela and Guyana in mid-December 2023 that they had agreed not to resort to the use of force against each other, tensions escalated on December 28, 2023 when Maduro initiated military maneuvers. These maneuvers involved the deployment of approximately 5,600 soldiers to the Escubio region. Maduro characterized this move as a response to what he termed as a “response to provocation” by the United Kingdom, following the deployment of the British warship HMS Trent to Guyana.⁽¹⁷⁾

Bolivia

The lifting of the arms embargo on Tehran in October 2020 coincided with the return of Evo Morales, the former socialist president of Bolivia, from exile to his home country. Subsequently, Morales, representing the current Bolivian socialist President Luis Arce, engaged in discussions with Iranian officials in Caracas to

finalize the ongoing defense agreement between Tehran and La Paz.⁽¹⁸⁾

Morales, a socialist and vocal critic of the United States, has often described himself as “Washington’s nightmare.” During his initial visit to Tehran in 2008, he hailed Iran and Bolivia as “two friendly and revolutionary countries” who are “staunchly opposed to US hegemony.” Under Morales’ leadership, Bolivia emerged as a steadfast supporter of Iran in the international arena. At the United Nations, La Paz consistently voted against or abstained from annual resolutions condemning Iran, a trend that has persisted since 2009. Moreover, Bolivia has endorsed Iran’s nuclear program since 2010. However, bilateral relations between the two nations experienced a downturn in 2019 and 2020 following Morales’ ousting as president and the ascent of President Jeanine Anez, a right-wing figure with pro-US inclinations who closed Bolivia’s embassy in Iran. Nonetheless, Iranian-Bolivian ties swiftly mended following the election of socialist Luis Arce. In 2023, Tehran and La Paz further solidified their partnership by signing a joint defense agreement.⁽¹⁹⁾

On July 20, 2023, the defense ministers of Iran and Bolivia signed a memorandum of understanding outlining cooperation in various shared areas. Initially, the contents of this memorandum were not made public by either side, leading to speculation and conjecture regarding its details.

The memorandum of understanding between Iran and Bolivia sparked significant concern from the United States, Israel, and regionally from Argentina. At the time of the agreement’s conclusion, Argentina’s right-wing party was the opposition, which vehemently criticized the deal as it was perceived as against Argentina’s interests. They called on the government in Buenos Aires to condemn the agreement and demand its annulment. This stance aligned with the Argentine right’s longstanding opposition to Iran, often accusing various Peronist governments (representing the Argentine left) of forming alliances, and sometimes even colluding with Iran. Consequently, the leftist Argentine government at the time sought clarification from Bolivia regarding the nature and scope of the agreement.⁽²⁰⁾

A week following the signing of the framework agreement between Iran and Bolivia, Bolivian Defense Minister Edmundo Novillo disclosed that the agreement entailed provisions for acquiring drones and boats aimed at monitoring regional borders, combating drug trafficking, and bolstering cyber protection. Additionally, the agreement allowed for the exploration of opportunities in nanotechnology and geomatics, albeit without delving into specific details.

The defense minister clarified that concerns voiced by the United States and Argentina regarding the agreement were largely based on misinformation. He emphasized that Bolivia’s primary objective in acquiring this equipment is not aggressive action against neighbors or combat operations, but rather securing borders and combating drug trafficking, which poses a significant threat. Particularly noteworthy is Iran’s offer of advanced equipment tailored to navigate Bolivia’s challenging mountainous terrain and rugged geography effectively. Defense

Minister Novillo highlighted the demonstration of drone models capable of conducting border surveillance even in high-altitude regions.

Furthermore, Bolivia expressed interest in acquiring advanced Iranian boats and navigation equipment to patrol rivers and combat smuggling and drug trafficking effectively. The minister also underscored Bolivia's need for maintenance services for its aircraft and helicopters, acknowledging the technical expertise offered by Iran in this regard.

Former Bolivian Minister of Government Carlos Sanchez Berzain condemned the agreement, labeling it a "grave betrayal" of the country. He asserted that Bolivia's payment for the military equipment would be in the form of lithium metal, a resource abundant in Bolivia.⁽²¹⁾

In response to internal, regional and international objections and fears, Novillo defended the agreement, stating, "This agreement is part of our efforts to address our scientific and technological lag, and it does not pose any threat to regional peace or security."⁽²²⁾

Two days after Novillo's remarks, John Kirby, spokesperson for the US National Security Council, expressed the Biden administration's apprehension regarding any export of Iranian technology that could potentially contribute to destabilization.⁽²³⁾

Brazil

Following Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's inauguration as Brazil's president, Brazil authorized the docking of two Iranian warships, the IRIS Makran and the Iris Dina, at a port in Rio de Janeiro from January 23 to January 30, 2023. The Makran, originally a crude oil tanker, had been refurbished into an exploratory naval base, making it the largest vessel in the Iranian navy. It had previously embarked on a maiden voyage to the South Atlantic in 2021 before heading north to the Baltic Sea en route to St. Petersburg, Russia. The second ship, Dina, is a Moudge-class frigate equipped with advanced weapons systems including anti-ship missiles, naval guns, and torpedo launchers. Both ships are part of the Iranian navy's 86th Fleet.

Initially, the two Iranian warships were observed traversing near Chilean coastal waters before entering the Drake Passage, which links the southeastern Pacific Ocean to the southwestern Atlantic Ocean near Antarctica. Chile reportedly intervened to prevent the Iranian naval fleet from entering its territorial waters. The Drake Passage, devoid of sovereign territorial waters, serves as the sole interoceanic channel in the Western Hemisphere. Subsequently, the two vessels docked in Rio de Janeiro's port from January 23 to January 30, as previously mentioned. However, the Iranian warships vanished from the South Atlantic Ocean in early February as they approached Argentina's exclusive economic zone and the 201 nautical mile boundary, only to resurface near Uruguay's territorial waters a few days later.

According to some US analysts, there are suspicions of Chinese-Iranian coordination regarding the passage of Iranian warships through the Atlantic Ocean near South American ports and shores. Maritime organizations monitoring illegal, un-

reported and unregulated (IUU) fishing have identified around 433 Chinese vessels near Argentina's 201-nautical-mile boundary, with nearly 700,000 hours of covert activity reported in Argentina's extended exclusive economic zone (EEZ) since January 2018. US analysts suggest that this extensive Chinese fishing presence could provide ideal cover for Iranian warships to conceal any covert activities before entering Brazilian territorial waters.⁽²⁴⁾

The Lula government's inclination toward South-South relations and its emphasis on independence from the United States, coupled with its previous experience in relations with Iran, could drive enhanced cooperation with Iran. As Iranian drones become more prevalent in the countries of the ALBA (Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas), this will help in raising the Brazilian government's interests, potentially opening avenues for collaboration in the field of drone technology.

Iranian and Latin Interests Gained From Forging Military Alliances

During his visit to Caracas in 2023, Iranian President Raisi outlined his vision and motivations for Iran's engagement with Latin America in an interview with Venezuelan media. He highlighted Latin America as a crucial element among nations seeking independence in the face of US hegemony. Raisi emphasized the potential effectiveness of cooperation between Iran, Latin America and other Global South countries in reshaping the global geopolitical order favorably for nations with independence aspirations. Additionally, he characterized US economic sanctions as tantamount to military aggression against targeted countries, advocating for strengthened relations and cooperation among sanctioned nations to mitigate the impact of such measures.

Given the strained relations with Washington, it is unsurprising that Latin American countries such as Cuba, Nicaragua, Bolivia and Venezuela, all part of ALBA, are keen to strengthen ties with Iran. These nations not only share a mutual antipathy toward the United States but also face or anticipate economic sanctions from Washington, particularly Bolivia.⁽²⁵⁾

Within this context, the convergence of foreign policy objectives between the Iranian government and leftist Latin American governments, especially those in the Bolivarian Alliance, is evident. This alignment has facilitated increased military coordination between Iran and several Latin American countries, a trend that has accelerated, as outlined in the study.

Through collaboration in sharing Iranian drone technology with allies in Latin America, several mutual interests emerge for both parties:

Iran's Interests

In the realm of Iranian drone production and sales, economic gains constitute a significant driving force. The profitability of this industry for Iran is evident, particularly considering the estimated costs associated with manufacturing popular models like the Shahed 136 aircraft, which range from \$20,000 to \$40,000 per unit. Reports indicate that Iran has conducted substantial sales, with over

2,000 drones sold to Russia alone. These transactions translate into substantial financial returns for Tehran, amounting to millions of dollars in revenue from these lucrative deals.⁽²⁶⁾

Iran's burgeoning expertise in drone manufacturing has positioned it as a formidable competitor to Western nations and Israel in the global market for exporting drone technology. Previously, Israel held a dominant position, exporting an estimated 60% of the world's drones between 1985 and 2014, with a customer base spanning Africa, Asia, Europe, North America and South America, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.⁽²⁷⁾ However, the landscape has shifted significantly in recent years, particularly following Russia's extensive reliance on Iranian drones during its conflict with Ukraine since 2022. This transformation underscores Iran's growing influence and its potential to challenge established players in the drone technology market.

By selling or providing Iranian drones to certain countries and groups aligned with Iran, Tehran is actively advancing its foreign policy objectives and regional influence. For Iran, its domestic drone and weapons industry serve not only as lucrative economic assets but also as strategic tools for fostering what it terms an "Axis of Resistance" against the United States, Western powers, and Israel.⁽²⁸⁾

Furthermore, the sale of Iranian drones to diverse countries globally, as an alternative to Western or Israeli technology, aligns with Iran's efforts to circumvent the isolation imposed by economic sanctions. By offering competitive drone technology, Iran aims to establish itself as a viable player in the international arms market while mitigating the impact of sanctions on its economy and defense industry.

Lastly, the introduction of Iranian military technologies into the vicinity of the United States also serves Iran's strategy in managing its conflict with the United States.

Latin American Interests

The leftist Latin American nations are actively seeking to bolster their trade and military ties with Iran as a means of breaking free from the isolation imposed by the United States and mitigating the economic losses incurred due to sanctions.

Given the challenging economic conditions faced by the Bolivarian Alliance countries, exacerbated by political and economic mismanagement, along with their strained relations with the United States and its repeated attempts to undermine leftist regimes, these nations view countries like Russia, Iran and other great powers outside of US influence, such as China, as vital allies in offsetting the impact of economic decline.

Given the challenging circumstances within the Bolivarian Alliance countries, they have struggled to develop products and technologies with advanced capabilities, whether in the military sector or in manufacturing and mining. Consequently, Iran presents an opportunity for them to acquire advanced technologies and skilled personnel to enhance their performance in various domains, including the operation of local oil companies. For instance, Venezuela, despite boast-

ing the world's largest oil reserves, faces challenges in managing exploration, extraction and refining operations following the nationalization of oil companies and a shortage of qualified personnel. Furthermore, drone technologies offer significant utility in reconnaissance missions, border control and tracking and combating cross-border organized crime, particularly drug cartels, which pose significant challenges for Latin American nations.

Trade between leftist, economically challenged Latin American countries and Iran, whether commercial or military in nature, is often easier compared to dealings with Western nations. Iran may facilitate these transactions through various financial arrangements, such as swaps for essential minerals it requires, thereby bypassing the complications associated with transactions involving the dollar due to US sanctions. This approach aims to streamline the process for both parties involved.

The Proliferation of Iranian Military Technology — Regional and International Implications

For over two decades, Latin America has served as a significant arena for the convergence of interests between leftist governments in the region and nations opposed to US foreign policy, notably Iran and Russia. This convergence has manifested in various forms of cooperation, including trade, investment, political coordination in international forums, voting patterns at the United Nations, as well as cultural, intelligence, and military collaboration. Such cooperation varies from overt to covert, and from strong to tepid, depending on the specific leftist government in power and the prevailing circumstances at different points in time.

Iranian foreign policy is resolutely committed to pursuing an active, continuous and enduring strategy aimed at bolstering and expanding its presence in the Western hemisphere. The key actors in this strategic theater include Cuba, Venezuela, Bolivia, and Nicaragua. These nations have long been governed by leftist movements, resulting in a stable and firmly established relationship with Iran. This relationship is primarily characterized by cooperation and solidarity, particularly in confronting US policies directed toward these countries as well as Iran itself.

Iranian relations with countries like Brazil, Argentina and Chile have experienced periods of advancement and decline, largely influenced by the political orientation of the respective governments in power. Under Lula da Silva's presidency in Brazil from 2003 onwards, there was strong support for Iran, particularly concerning its nuclear program. However, with the rise of the far-right Bolsonaro administration from 2019 to 2022, this dynamic shifted significantly. Yet, Argentina's relations with Iran have fluctuated depending on the ideological alignment of its leadership. While left-leaning governments under the Kirchners displayed a more amicable stance toward Iran, the right-wing Macri government adopted a different approach, particularly in the context of the investigation into the 1994

bombing of the AMIA Jewish Society in Buenos Aires, where Iran and members of its government, as well as the IRGC, were implicated.

Some analysts express concerns regarding the Iranian presence and its potential impact on US interests, particularly in light of the growing Chinese port network across South America and Central America. China has undertaken approximately 40 port projects in the region, primarily concentrated in the Pacific Ocean. While these ports are primarily intended to facilitate commercial transport, some analysts fear that they could also provide channels for covert Iranian military movements.

On September 8, 2023, Nicolas Maduro embarked on a significant journey to Beijing, where he engaged in discussions with Chinese President Xi Jinping. Their deliberations culminated in the signing of a pivotal agreement termed a “strategic alliance against all odds.” During the visit, Xi Jinping extended his backing to Caracas, affirming China’s commitment to maintain Venezuela’s sovereignty.⁽²⁹⁾

Revisiting Argentina’s concerns about Bolivia potentially acquiring Iranian drones, and the United States’ apprehensions about this possibility alongside its previous concerns regarding Venezuela’s possession of Iranian drone technology, it is notable that Argentina has pursued its interest in drone technology but has opted for Israeli UAVs instead. On December 27, 2022, Argentina and Israel formalized an agreement to procure the Israeli Hero-120 and Hero-30 UAVs. This deal marks Argentina as the first country in Latin America to acquire this series of UAVs from Israel.⁽³⁰⁾

The aforesaid suggests that Latin America could potentially become a battleground for navigating both the Iran-US conflict and the competition between China and the United States. Moreover, it might evolve into a reflection of the historical conflicts seen in the Middle East, as evidenced by the significant attention Israel is devoting to monitoring the rise of Iranian influence in the region. This dynamic is being observed not only at the governmental level but also in academic and research circles.

The recent surge in the production and sale of Iranian drones reflects a broader Iranian strategy, with Latin America emerging as a significant target region. By 2024, Iranian military factories had manufactured thousands of advanced drones for various purposes, including surveillance, reconnaissance, and combat. These Iranian drones have found their way into numerous conflict zones involving both state and non-state actors. For instance, in January 2024, an attack on Tower 22, a US military base in Jordan near the Iraqi and Syrian borders, resulted in the deaths of three US soldiers and the injury of over 40 others. Additionally, in the same month, Houthi forces in Yemen launched 18 Iranian-made drones at ships in the Red Sea.

In earlier developments, Iran-backed militias initiated the use of drones against US military and diplomatic targets in Iraq and Syria in 2021. Over the course of 2021 and 2022, approximately 20% of attacks by militias associated with Tehran

were executed through drone strikes. Furthermore, Iran began supplying Russia with hundreds of drones starting in 2022.⁽³¹⁾

Conclusion

In the contemporary landscape of armed conflict, drones emerge as a paramount threat due to their affordability, wide accessibility and plausible deniability, given their capacity to obscure their origins through convoluted flight paths. Consequently, the unregulated proliferation of military drones presents a transnational hazard, significantly influencing the nature and trajectory of conflicts worldwide. Iran has made substantial strides in technological research and development within the realms of ballistic missiles and drones. This progress has endowed Iran with a considerable comparative advantage, particularly evident in its ability to field-test numerous drone models in conflicts such as the Russia-Ukraine war, subsequently refining its production capabilities based on battlefield analysis. Moreover, the degree of coordination between Iran and Russia in this domain merits consideration, exemplified by the operation of factories within Russia and Belarus dedicated to the production of Iranian drones. Additionally, the extent of collaboration between Iran and China serves as a navigational and commercial facade for the dissemination of Iranian military products. Collectively, these factors position Iran as a significant determinant in the dynamics of numerous ongoing and prospective conflicts, extending beyond the confines of the Middle East to encompass diverse regions worldwide, notably the Global South, including Latin America.

Endnotes

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