

Ghosts of Alignments Past: Understanding Latin American Proposals for ‘Mediation’ in the War against Ukraine

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As the continent continues to reel from the effects of a seemingly distant conflict, certain Latin American diplomatic actors have surprised their partners abroad by issuing calls for mediation to end the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine. While these proposals have often been dismissed as naïve or cynical, I argue that they ought to be understood in the context of a decades-long Latin American uneasiness with notions of alignment in international relations. To understand the conundrums of this continental foreign policy strategy, I contextualise the history and theory of this uneasy project of active neutrality or non-indifference.

Keywords: diplomatic history, Latin America, Russian’s war of aggression against Ukraine, theory and history of International Law.

While the Bandung Conference had brought a relatively small number of leaders from mainly recently independent nation-states in Asia in order to stake out a non-aligned position in the Cold War, the 1966 Tricontinental Conference in Havana involved delegates from throughout Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Latin America. (Berger, 2004:20)

Furthermore, despite all efforts towards a peaceful settlement, a mediator may not be able to prevent a conflict from freezing over rather than being resolved. The example of Ukraine has demonstrated, once again, that there is no quick solution, and even the most competent mediator cannot, on his own, undo the geopolitical entanglement and colliding political interests which frame and shape the conflict. (Schläpfer, 2016:340)

‘Peace must become irreplaceable [... t]his is why evil must lose’, urged the Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy (2023). His audience? The General Congress of the United Mexican States, on 21 April 2023. This online intervention – organised neither by the Mexican Government nor the dais of its Legislative Branch, but by the ‘Friendship Group Mexico-Ukraine’ led by the opposition – was remarkable for several reasons. Indeed, a member of the ruling-party MORENA was quick to clarify that the position of this Friendship Group did not represent the official position of the Mexican Congress as a whole – let alone the Government (Redacción El Popular, 2023). On the one hand, it marked the first time that Zelenskyy directly addressed an audience of Latin American policymakers. But most importantly, it offered a counterpoint to the four-country tour in Latin America that the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov embarked on during that same week (Randolph, 2023). The, seemingly distant, war of aggression has now arrived at the Latin American diplomatic shores. As both countries jostled for influence, foreign policy specialists sought to make sense of where the loyalties of Latin American countries really lied.

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At the heart of Zelenskyy's intervention was the question of peace. He noted that, while the Russian Federation claimed it wanted peace, in practice, the only serious option for peace was the ten-point 'Peace Formula' his government had put forward before the G-20 in Indonesia some months earlier (Reuters, 2022). This argument, as many in the room must have clearly noted, was not only a critique of Russia but also a rather oblique dismissal of other peace proposals put forward by other countries – Mexico and Brazil amongst them. Shortly before the Ukrainian 'Peace Formula' was issued, the Mexican Foreign Ministry had suggested before the United Nations (UN) General Assembly the creation of a 'high-level diplomatic delegation to mediate between Russia and Ukraine' (UN Affairs, 2022). This proposed commission would include the Catholic Pope Francis I, the Indian Prime Minister and the UN Secretary-General. Some months later, the Brazilian President Lula would issue a similarly spirited proposal for mediation – a sort of 'G-20 for peace' (Vilela, 2023; see also Marcondes and de Almeida Silva, 2023).

These proposals for mediation have, in many ways, baffled outsiders – exasperating observers from Ukraine and the 'Western European and Others' Group. Ukraine, for instance, has consistently argued that these measures place the victim and the aggressor on the same footing at the negotiation table (Al Jazeera, 2023). For that reason, it is not surprising that these initiatives have often been dismissed as naïve or cynical vis-à-vis longstanding Russian interests in the region. Instead, in this intervention, I argue that they ought to be understood in the context of a decades-long Latin American uneasiness with notions of alignment in inter-polity relations. This also explains why regional governments have also cautiously hesitated avoided a fully fledged commitment in favour of Ukraine in this conflict – much to the chagrin of their North Atlantic partners. To understand the conundrums of this continental foreign policy strategy, I contextualise the history and theory of this uneasy project of 'non-indifference' or 'active neutrality' (Wojcikiewicz Almeida, 2013); (Fortín, Heine and Ominami, 2023). For this allows us to understand that these proposals – however limited and perhaps impossible in practice – are not simply motivated by blissful ignorance or self-serving considerations. I argue they are instead rooted in a vision, perhaps idealised, of the continent's commitment to the so-called rules-based international order – at both the regional and global scales. To be sure, there are many different Latin American foreign policy approaches to this war of aggression – a fact that can be best seen by the diametrically opposed positions taken by Venezuela depending on whether you ask the Caracas or the Guaidó regime. For that reason, I will focus mostly on the Mexican and Brazilian proposals for diplomatic mediation, instead of offering a comprehensive map of the region's position (Harrison and Wilkinson, 2022).

For both Mexico and Brazil – among, no doubt, other countries in the region – the drive for mediation comes from a deeply rooted commitment to the principle of non-intervention in international law. In a speech delivered by the President Andrés Manuel López Obrador in the context of Mexico's 212 years of independence (days before his Foreign Minister presented the mediation proposal at the UN), the Head of State noted that his country had been the victim of five foreign interventions: the Spanish Conquest, two French interventions and two US invasions (AMLO, 2022). It is well worth noting that one of these interventions of United States was, in fact, a war of conquest which ended in 1848 with a partial territorial annexation not too dissimilar from the current situation in the war of aggression against Ukraine – with the caveat, of course, that conquest was still allowed under international law in 1848 (Gotberg, 2008: 55–84). For that reason, his government condemned Russia's invasion – but at the same time, it wanted to stay true to the lessons learned from its decades-long commitment to non-intervention. But this did not mean that Mexico, Brazil or other regional states did not necessarily care about the war. This, for instance, can best be seen in the way the Brazilian foreign policy establishment tied the principle of non-intervention to what they call an 'attitude of non-indifference' (Ministério das Relações Exteriores, 2007:19). The problem, in their eyes, is alignment.

For many decades, Latin American lawyer-diplomats did not see alignment as contrary to their commitment to non-intervention. In fact, these two foreign policies were quite entangled in the first decades of the twentieth century – in the framework of the codification efforts undertaken by the Pan American continental cooperation platform (Scarfi 2016, 2017). For instance, the Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States, adopted in 1933, enshrines both a strong conception of the legal equality of states (Article 4) and the obligation of all American states to align together and deny recognition of illegal conquests or any 'special advantages obtained by force' (League of Nations

Treaty Series, 1933). In fact, as I have argued more extensively elsewhere, during a long time many Latin American states thought that alignment with their Northern ‘Good Neighbour’ was indeed the best way to ensure non-intervention from European powers – a hope contained in the ambiguous ‘Monroe Doctrine’ issued two centuries ago (Quiroga-Villamarín, forthcoming).

This trend reached its high-water mark with the adoption of the Tratado Interamericano de Asistencia Recíproca (TIAR, Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal of 1947, also known as the Rio Pact in the historiography), which tied the Americas together in a ‘hemispheric defence doctrine.’ The TIAR was, in fact, an institutional experiment that laid the groundwork for the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation 2 years later (Long, 2020). But in the eyes of many Latin Americans, the US unilateral actions undertaken in the early Cold War – think of Guatemala 54’, Cuba 61’, or the Dominican Republic 65’ – signalled the betrayal of the TIAR’s promise of linking non-intervention with hemispheric alignment (Slater, 1969). Ever since, there has been a sense of uneasiness of linking the foreign policy strategies in a common continental position, as had proven to undermine the principle of non-interference and the sovereign equality of states. But at the same time, the Latin American states are far from embracing what has been called (in the US context) a particular form of ‘isolationism’ or diplomatic disengagement. The result then, is, ‘non-indifference’ or ‘active neutrality’ – as a strategy that attempts to remain seized of the matter without being reducible to alignment with US foreign policy. Contemporary calls for mediation respond to this logic. They offer a form of ‘non-intervention’ plus while at the same time remaining short of aligning clearly with either side.

Any attempt to understand Latin America’s position vis-à-vis Ukraine must take seriously the lasting effects of the TIAR’s unfulfilled promises and the disappointments with the Cold War’s demands for military alignment. I do not argue that these proposals offer a silver bullet. In fact, one can, and should, raise many questions about the prospective composition of these diplomatic spaces – among them, are the Catholic Pope or the Indian Prime Minister the right figures to arbitrate this Eastern European controversy? Or, is the solution to the inequities of having a ‘Group of Seven’ dominating international affairs to create an expanded ‘G-20 for peace’ instead of embracing a more multilateral diplomatic setting? I do not have answers for these, and other, difficult questions that haunt these Latin American proposals. I do conclude, however, that North Atlantic policymakers cannot expect that the gravity of the current conflagration will be able to make their peers south of the *Río Bravo* magically turn back their clocks to the world before 1947. For not only the North but also the South, remembers.

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Data Availability Statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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