

The Return of the Bear?

Russian Military Engagement in Latin America

The Case of Brazil

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The Russian Federation has a military-industrial complex that runs a range of operations in more than one thousand companies, research institutes, and development agencies, operating in about seventy-two divisions and subdivisions of the country that directly employ approximately two million people.¹ In light of its range, this military apparatus has always played a key role in the country's economy, accounting for a large part of Russian exports.²

Due to the sophisticated technology involved in its production, Russian military equipment has achieved international recognition, with its cost being up to three times lower than equipment produced in the United States and western Europe.³ These facts attract a growing number of countries interested in purchasing such equipment, which in turn promotes military-technical cooperation between Russia and other trading partners.

Russian Federal Law of 19 July 1998 establishes the legal guidelines in the field of military-technical cooperation between Russia and foreign states. In its first article, military cooperation is defined as “an activity in the field of international relations related to export and import, including the delivery or purchase

of military products, as well as the development and production of military products.”⁴

According to this law, military cooperation with other countries is seen as one way of promoting national interests abroad, aiming to strengthen Russian military and political positions in other regions. In this sense, according to Sergey Ladygin, Deputy Director General of Rosoboronexport, “Latin America is one of the most promising regions for Russia in the development of technical-military cooperation.”⁵

Despite the structural constraints imposed by Washington, Russian inroads into Latin America have increased significantly in recent years. The nominal annual volume of exports of Russian military equipment to the region increased from US\$1.247 billion, in 2005, to US\$6.347 billion, in 2012.⁶ In light of these developments, the main goal of this article is to analyze the development of military cooperation between Russia and Latin American countries, with special attention to the Brazilian case.

In this regard, this article deals with the hypothesis, widespread in the American literature, of Russia's “geopolitical return” to Latin America. In order to do that, it is divided into two main sections. The first section presents a brief history of military-technical



cooperation between Russia and some Latin American countries after the Cold War. In this regard, it analyzes the development in Russian bilateral military equipment exports to Latin America.

The second section highlights the bilateral relations between Russia and Brazil regarding military cooperation. It offers an overview of their diplomatic relations, clarifying the context in which a “strategic partnership” was established between Moscow and Brasilia. In addition, it seeks to explore the main bilateral agreements on defense issues, and the obstacles hindering more effective cooperation in this area. The article closes with some final remarks.

Relations between Russia and Latin America in the Post-Cold War Period

Latin America has been a strategic region for both the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War—particularly in the economic and political

Brazilian President Michel Temer (*left*) takes part in a wreath-laying ceremony 21 June 2017 at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier by the Kremlin wall in central Moscow. Since the 1990s, Brazil and Russia have developed a close military and science technology relationship. (Photo by Sergei Karpukhin, Pool photo via Associated Press)

arenas. However, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russian diplomacy toward the region declined significantly throughout the 1990s. Russia resumed its efforts to approach Latin America in 1997, when the Minister of Foreign Affairs Yevgeny Primakov visited several countries in the subcontinent.⁷ It is worth noting that, in 1999, Russia’s influence in Latin America was revived due to its ties with the Venezuelan Bolivarian government and the increasing number of cooperation agreements on trade, energy, industrial, cultural, and military issues with certain countries in the subcontinent.⁸ Hence, with Putin’s rise to power in



2000 after Yeltsin's resignation, Latin America began to occupy an increasingly prominent role in the Kremlin's foreign policy priorities.⁹

These growing ties coupled with the increased Russian presence in Latin America, especially in Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Cuba, triggered discussions about Russia's return to Latin America.¹⁰ As a consequence, in the twenty-first century, Russia has revitalized its relations with Latin America and initiated an unexpected activism toward the region. In this scenario, Russia would establish a strategic partnership with Brazil, expand political and economic cooperation with Argentina, Mexico, Cuba, Venezuela, and other Latin American and Caribbean countries, as well as boost its exports to the region.¹¹ However, these increased commercial and political activities in the region are not comparable to those carried out during the Soviet era, which requires treating the idea of Russia's return to Latin America with care.¹²

A first element to be taken into account concerns the role arms exports occupy in the Russian economy, which accounts for a significant share of manufactured and technology-intensive exports. This makes the arms industry one of the leading sectors that integrate Russia into the global economy.¹³ Therefore, official visits to

The Russian Pantsir-S1 missile and artillery weapon system fires during a demonstration 6 September 2016 at the international military-technical forum "Army-2016" near Moscow. The Brazilian military long expressed interest in acquiring this system. Though budgetary problems have precluded purchase, news accounts imply that acquiring the Pantsir-S1 system remains of great interest to the Brazilian military. (Photo by Maxim Zmeyev, Reuters)

Latin American countries were carried out by Russian President Vladimir Putin, third Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Russian General of the Army Sergey Shoigu between 2000 and 2017 in order to discuss political ties, joint defense, military operations, expansion and strengthening of trade between countries, and mutual economic development through investment projects. In this context, some issues figured prominently in the activism of Russia's senior officers, including discussions over naval exercises against drug trafficking in the Caribbean, the potential establishment of Russian naval bases in the region, and the modernization of Latin American militaries.¹⁴

Russia was the second largest exporter of weapons in the world between 2012 and 2016, accounting for 23 percent of the world's arms trade; additionally, it

provided weapons to fifty-one countries in this period, with 70 percent of its exports directed to four main countries (India, Vietnam, China, and Algeria). According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, between 2012 and 2016, Latin America accounted for a share of approximately 6 percent of Russia's arms export market—Venezuela (4.92%), Peru (0.49%), Nicaragua (0.34%), Brazil (0.24%), and Mexico (0.06%).¹⁵ However, in the 2000–2016 aggregate, Latin America accounted for only 4.6 percent of Russia's arms exports.¹⁶ This indicates that Russia's interest in Latin America is part of the promotion of its military-industrial complex.¹⁷

In this sense, Russia's military cooperation with Latin America is not only technical, but also politico-military, in that it has an important political component.¹⁸ However, it is important to take into account the relative low volume of military spending across the region, as well as the tendency among most countries to buy armaments from the United States or Europe.¹⁹ For example, arms sales to Latin American countries accounts for less than 15 percent of Russian total arms exports and, in trade terms, countries like Nicaragua and Venezuela are not among the first destinations of Russian exports.²⁰

As highlighted, the sale of Russian armaments to the three main Latin American countries—Venezuela, Cuba and Nicaragua—has increased their need for Russian technical-military assistance.²¹ In February 2014, Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu announced progress in the talks with eight governments (Seychelles, Singapore, Algeria, Cyprus, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Egypt, and Iran) to establish a global network of air bases to extend the reach of maritime and strategic aviation, and thereby improve Russia's overall military presence.²² In February 2015, Shoigu traveled to Latin America to meet leaders and defense officials from these countries. Although the visit included Russia's participation in a Venezuelan military exercise, the focus of the meetings in

the three countries was access to ports and air bases to support Russian military operations in the region.

Technical-military cooperation with Venezuela, established during President Hugo Chávez's government and continued by President Nicolás Maduro, happened within the framework of the Venezuela-Russia Bilateral Intergovernmental Commission, and it was the product of a broader strategic alliance between the two governments.²³ In addition, there were discussions over the possibility of expanding exchanges between military teaching institutions in the countries and inviting children of Venezuelan officers to train in Russian military schools.²⁴ It should be noted that, one month after the Georgian War (2008), Russia sent two Tu-160 bombers to carry out military exercises with Venezuela. More importantly, in November 2008, Russia conducted war games with Caracas in which a small Russian fleet was sent to the Caribbean to participate in joint military maneuvers with the Venezuelan navy. This was an important symbolic act as it was the first time Russian warships visited the Caribbean since the Cuban Missile Crisis.²⁵ However, the future of Venezuela's defense budget is uncertain due to the economic difficulties that afflict the country, which may compromise the government's ability to maintain military expenditures in current levels.²⁶

Russian efforts in Cuba focused mainly on "maritime cooperation issues as well as training of Cuban military

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servicemen in Russia.²⁷ However, discussions were more fruitful with Nicaragua, where Shoigu signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) to facilitate Russian access to the ports of Corinto and Bluefields, as well as to strengthen antidrug cooperation and discussions over arms sales.²⁸ It should also be taken into account Nicaragua's announcement of the construction of a China-funded transoceanic canal and Russia's attempt to secure the canal's security contracts.²⁹ Finally, in addition to conducting joint patrols against drug trafficking with Russia, Nicaragua hosts a Russian monitoring satellite station, the GLONASS. With this, Russia hopes to improve its satellite navigation system—which competes with GPS—established in 2010, after the development of twenty-four satellites that allowed Russia to have total global coverage.³⁰

Russia has also been using antidrug trafficking activities as a means of engaging in the region's security affairs. This engagement has become a platform for the extension of Russian security cooperation with the subcontinent. Peru and Nicaragua, for example, share their intelligence with Russia and have conducted joint operations against drug trafficking.³¹ In this sense, the increase in arms sales not only generates foreign profit to the Russian government, but also opens the opportunity for long-term military relations, since the purchase of weapons includes training, maintenance, and renewal. Military training, particularly for antidrug operations, also offers a number of benefits to Russia. It challenges the prominence of the United States' role in combating the flow of drugs into the country and provides Russian experts with access to the region's intelligence and logistics networks, including U.S. strategies and tactics related to counternarcotics and counterterrorist activities.³²

In recent years, for example, Peru has continued to buy weapons from Russia, especially by acquiring Mi-171 and Mi-35 transport and combat helicopters, in order to increase the mobility and firepower of its counterterrorist and anticrime operations, including the case of Sendero Luminoso, in the Apurímac, Ene, and Mantaro valleys.³³ Also in June 2004, the Russian and Argentinian ministers of foreign affairs signed several joint documents, including a MoU for technical-military cooperation.³⁴ Bolivia and Russia signed MoUs for defense cooperation in August 2017, which signals broader arms transfers to Bolivia.³⁵ In Chile, the second center-left government of Michelle Bachelet

(2014–2018) opened the doors for military relations with Russia, including a MoU for naval cooperation.³⁶

However, in 2016, Russia lost important ground in the region. Mauricio Macri's election in Argentina sealed the fate of the already complicated purchase plans for the Su-24 interception aircraft, the construction of communication facilities for the GLONASS satellite, and the contract for the construction of a nuclear reactor at the Atucha nuclear complex.³⁷

In summary, Russia's return to Latin America was boosted by its economic and political recovery over the years 2000–2008, which validated Primakov's idea of a multipolar world.³⁸ In addition, it should be noted that, in contrast to Chinese activities in Latin America, Russia's engagement is focused on a limited number of countries and economic sectors—such as oil exploration, mining, some technology sectors, and the purchase of food products.³⁹ In light of this, the evidence does not seem to support the idea that Russia is encroaching on the United States' historical influence zone but instead points to the way Latin America and the Caribbean are forging new opportunities for international cooperation with countries other than the United States.⁴⁰

Military Cooperation between Brazil and Russia: From the Long Trajectory of Diplomatic Relations to the Establishment of the "Strategic Partnership"

When we analyze the official discourses between the Russian and Brazilian authorities regarding bilateral cooperation in defense, an idea is frequently repeated: the potentiality of the mutual benefits that this relationship can bring. However, in spite of the political will of the two players, which is registered by the diplomatic dynamism and the rapid growth of trade between the two countries in the last decade, the technical-military partnership is still much weaker than that of Russia and other Latin American countries. This section offers an overview of the diplomatic

Next page: Brazilian soldiers armed with the Russian-made Igla man-portable air-defense system (MANPADS) 5 August 2015 during an antiaircraft artillery drill. The SA-18/24 Igla system is widespread within the Brazilian military. (Photo by Gilberto Alves, Brazilian Ministry of Defense via Wikimedia Commons)

relations between Brazil and Russia in the context of the “strategic partnership” between Moscow and Brasilia.

The Early Stages of Russian-Brazilian Bilateral Relations

Brazil was the first country in South America to have its independence recognized by Russia; at the time, the Brazilian Empire was the only state in the region to have commercial relations with the Russian Empire. However, although the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries dates back to 1828, it was not until the early 2000s that there was a significant strengthening of bilateral relations between Russia and Brazil. Their geographic distance was not the only factor hindering their rapprochement; in fact, the two countries have often been on opposite sides of the political and ideological spectrum. Referring to Russian-Brazilian bilateral relations, Graciela Bacigalupo argued in 2000 that until the end of the 1990s they have been “old” but “distant.”⁴¹

This can be observed during the period of the proclamation of the Brazilian Republic, in 1889, at

which time the Russian Empire suspended diplomatic relations with the new republican government. The geopolitical design established during the Cold War, with an ideological antagonism between a capitalist Brazil and a socialist Russia, as well as the structural constraints imposed by the United States, also limited the conduct of a stronger bilateral relationship between the two countries.

Consequently, from the establishment of diplomatic relations until the end of the Cold War, the relationship between Russia and Brazil had a low political profile, marked by periods of approximation and distance, which were often the result of external, internal, conjunctural, and structural constraints.⁴² These characteristics certainly prevented the development of multiple partnerships, mainly in the military area.

Bilateral Relations between the Russian Federation and Brazil in the 1990s

The systemic changes that occurred after the collapse of the Soviet Union inaugurated a new dynamic



in Russian and Brazilian foreign policies. By opening their internal markets to international capital and adopting neoliberal guidelines, the path was open for an ideological alignment between the two governments in the economic and political fields—something that was being probed since Brazilian democratization in the 1980s. However, this expectation did not bring effective results to their bilateral relations, remaining in the realm of a “rhetorical optimism.”⁴³ Even though Brazil was one of the first countries in Latin America to recognize the new legal and political status of the Russian Federation, the actual volume of economic and political ties between the two countries after the end of the Cold War was significantly reduced.⁴⁴

On the other hand, the economic adjustments in Russia resulting from the process of adapting a planned economy to a market economy, and the commercial opening of Brazil in the 1990s, have brought numerous economic difficulties for the two countries. This conjuncture coupled with their institutional political weakness also reflected in their external behavior. Both Russian and Brazilian governments tied their foreign policies to developed countries, which was seen then as a priority.⁴⁵

According to Alexander Zhebit, in the early 1990s, Russia had abandoned relations with Latin America, fearing to upset the United States in its traditional area of influence.⁴⁶ The author recalls that the country’s international trade with the region was almost interrupted, a fact symbolized by the situation of Cuba, a traditional partner of the USSR, which was left completely adrift in the changing world. Noticeably, this assessment of Latin America left no room for cooperation with Brazil.

The limited cooperation between Russia and Brazil gradually began to follow a more positive path after the replacement of Andrei Kozyrev by Primakov as Russia’s foreign minister in 1996. In his first year as chancellor, Primakov paid special attention to Brazil-Russia relations. In this context, the creation of the Political Affairs Committee (CAP, in Portuguese) in Moscow, in October 1997, becomes relevant, since it formalized a political dialogue within an institutional framework. In addition, Primakov’s visit to Brazil in November was the first and only visit by an authority of the Russian high-ranking government to Brazil throughout the 1990s.

During Primakov’s visit, the constitution for the Brazil-Russia High-Level Cooperation Commission

was promulgated, establishing the Intergovernmental Cooperation Commission as its operational mechanism. However, internal disturbances in both countries were responsible for delaying the entire operation, with planned meetings between the Russian head of government and the Brazilian vice president within the scope of the Intergovernmental Commission being postponed at least five times until the year 2000.⁴⁷ As Bacigalupo argued, the acute political instability that Russia faced in the 1998–1999 biennium (culminating in Yeltsin’s resignation the following year) was one of the main factors influencing the low dynamism of the Commission in its early years:

Undoubtedly, this process led to deferments and suspensions of scheduled meetings with Russian high-ranks, who, in the face of new crises and transformations, were obligated to focus only on priority themes and relations.⁴⁸

Although the creation of the Brazil-Russia High-Level Commission demonstrates a clear interest of the two countries to intensify their bilateral relations, the turbulent political-economic framework registered in the 1990s obstructed the possibility of strengthening their diplomatic ties. This prevented the escalation of strategic issues on their bilateral agenda, such as cooperation in the area of defense. On the other hand, the resumption of the activities of the High-Level Commission coincided with the turn to developmentalism during President Fernando Henrique Cardoso’s second term.

Years 2000: the Russian-Brazilian “Strategic Partnership”

After the years of relative apathy in the bilateral relations between Moscow and Brasilia, in 2000, the High-Level Commission finally held its first meeting between the Russian prime minister and the Brazilian vice president, which marked a new phase in relations between the two countries. In this regard, during Cardoso’s official visit to Russia, in 2002, a “strategic partnership” was celebrated between the two countries. Since then, Russian-Brazilian relations have intensified, with growing trade and visits among the highest levels of government.

The rapid transition from the period of inertia experienced in the 1990s to the achievement of a strategic partnership in the following decade demonstrated the interest of both parties in making up for the “lost



time.”⁴⁹ This was the opportunity to advance relevant issues beyond the mere bilateral trade of commodities registered in the trade balance up to that moment.

In regard to defense cooperation, the signing in 2002 of the Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation in the Field of Military Technologies of Mutual Interest stands out. Although this memorandum had few practical results beyond stating their intentions, its celebration establishes the basic precepts that would guide the military-technical cooperation between Russia and Brazil in the coming years.

The progressive trajectory in the Russian-Brazilian bilateral relationship continued to play a central role in the foreign policy of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, elected in 2003. In his inaugural address, the Brazilian president emphasized the importance of deepening “relations with large developing countries: China, India and Russia.”⁵⁰

In this context, the first visit of Russian President Vladimir Putin to Brazil, in 2004, celebrated the

Nicaragua's President Daniel Ortega (left) presents the highest award of the Nicaraguan armed forces, the Nicaraguan Army Order, to Valery Gerasimov, vice minister of defense and chief of general staff of the armed forces of the Russian Federation 23 April 2013 at Casa de los Pueblos in Managua, Nicaragua. Left-wing governments like those governing Nicaragua and Venezuela have been especially receptive to Russia's aggressive efforts promoting arms sales throughout Latin America. (Photo by Cesar Perez, Nicaraguan Presidency via Agence France-Presse)

creation of a “technological alliance” and stipulated the strengthening and expansion of cooperation in the energy sector.⁵¹ According to Bruno Mariotto Jubran, Putin's visit had a strategic character for Moscow, because at the end of 2003, the Brazilian Air Force (FAB) reopened the bidding for the acquisition of military fighters.⁵² This official visit would be an opportunity for the Kremlin to “convince Brazilian authorities about the superiority of its SU-35s compared to its competitors.” This agreement, if

carried out, would represent the greatest advance in defense cooperation since the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries.⁵³

Although Russian aircraft were technically superior to their competitors, such an agreement never materialized.⁵⁴ In 2008, the FAB officially withdrew the Russian proposal from the final bidding phase. This decision was taken one week after the official visit of Russian President Dimitri Medvedev to Brazil, and during joint military training between Moscow and Caracas on the Venezuelan coast.⁵⁵ Still in this context, Boris Martinov argues that the reason for the Brazilian government's refusal to accept the Russian proposal is mainly due to the Russian manufacturer Sukhoi refusing to transfer advanced military technologies involved in the making of these aircraft.⁵⁶

On the other hand, during Medvedev's visit, the Brazilian government announced the purchase of twelve Mi-35 helicopters, worth US\$150 million, the delivery of which was initiated in 2010 and completed in 2014, despite Brazil's budgetary difficulties. This was the first and only sale of heavy military equipment between Brazil and Russia so far, and it can be considered the most relevant military cooperation between the two countries.⁵⁷ On this occasion, Brazil and Russia signed the Agreement on Military-Technical Cooperation and suspended visa requirements for tourists on visits of up to ninety days. In a press statement, Lula recalled that Brazil and Russia were in favor of a multipolar and just global order, and indicated that the two countries, together with China and India, should take advantage of the opportunities generated by the global economic crisis to further advance their development agendas.⁵⁸

The Military-Technical Cooperation agreement is the one-year mark of intense bilateral negotiations in this area. According to Brazilian press reports, in early 2008, Brazilian Defense Minister Nelson Jobim and Minister of Strategic Affairs Mangabeira Unger visited Russia in an attempt to conclude agreements on the construction of a Brazilian nuclear submarine and of a military vehicle factory in southern Brazil, but the visit did not bring results.⁵⁹ In April, however, Valentin Sobolev, vice president of the Russian Security Council, visited Brazil and signed a Cooperation Agreement with the Brazilian minister of strategic affairs for the launching of satellites and the construction of rockets and airplanes, providing for the

transfer of technology and the possibility of developing an alternative to the American localization system.⁶⁰

In the framework of the High-Level Commission, the joint declaration signed in Brasilia, in 2013, by the then Vice President of Brazil Michel Temer and the Russian Prime Minister Dimitri Medvedev established the beginning of negotiations for the acquisition of Russian antiaircraft artillery Pantsir S-1.⁶¹ However, due to the political-institutional crisis and the budgetary constraints that Brazil later faced, the agreement between the parties has not yet been signed. According to Vladimir Tikhomirov, head of the Russian Federal Service for Military-Technical Cooperation, such a project provides for the transfer of this technology to Brazil: "We agree with the unrestricted transfer of technology and the need for after-sales support. We will train Brazilian partners who will carry out this support. We are making progress."⁶²

According to Andrey Maslennikov, although Brazil is one of Russia's main partners in Latin America, and the one with the greatest potential for Moscow, the country is still a "nonconventional" partner for the Kremlin.⁶³ In this context, while there has been a number of attempts to bring the two countries closer over the last decade, it is necessary to emphasize that their relations are still very incipient and, to a large extent, based on the purchase and sale of primary products. As discussed above, the military partnership between Brasilia and Moscow is a recent one, articulated by specific governments, and sometimes hampered or boosted by internal political-economic factors that have influenced the changes in the foreign policy priorities of both countries.

Final Remarks

In light of the above, it is imperative to point out that Russia's increasing involvement in Latin America does not mean a return to the twentieth-century alliance system but instead offers alternative cooperation paths to the countries in the region. At the same time, this transformation institutes a multipolar international cooperation structure that allows large and small countries alike to participate in the processes of globalization, military cooperation, and economic integration.⁶⁴ Likewise, Moscow is less interested in demonstrating to the United States its potential military influence in the region than it is in opening

up new markets for its weapons and retaking previous military-technical cooperation efforts.⁶⁵

We can therefore infer that Russia's diplomatic strategy is not sufficient in size or in scope, nor does it reflect a quest for diplomatic-strategic relations that might include resorting to force or to an offensive military alliance that could considerably affect hemispheric security.⁶⁶ It is important to note that, although Russia has been sending warships to Venezuela or modernizing Peruvian military hardware, the Kremlin does not seek another alliance similar to the one with Cuba during the Cold War.⁶⁷ Russia's engagement in Latin America today is not a return to the Cold War's proxy conflicts but indicates instead Russian interest in finding markets and partners to buy its hardware, to set up joint ventures on energy products, and to gather votes at the United Nations General Assembly to support its political positions. In our view, Russia's engagement with the former Soviet allies in Latin America does not represent a return of the "Soviet bear" to the U.S. backyard. That is, although Daniel Ortega's Nicaragua and the Castros' regime in Cuba have politically approached Russia since 2008 to achieve limited economic and security support, none of the

regimes have developed military or economic ties that resemble those with the Soviet Union.⁶⁸

Finally, the nonconventional character of the Brazilian-Russian military cooperation summarizes the limited scope of Russian ambitions in the region. Hence, the political results barely go beyond general declarations reinforcing the Russian multipolar rhetoric. If Russia wanted to revive the Cold War confrontation with the United States, the fight to increase its influence in the biggest regional player would require more engagement and resources. It would also be different from the kind of "partnership by invitation" performed in the relation with other regional partners, like Venezuela and Cuba, that welcome the Russian presence due to regional disputes with the United States. However, after more than twelve years of rule by the PT Party (The Workers' Party, a left-wing organization led by former President Lula da Silva) and a strong identification of the Brazilian foreign policy circles with the multipolar rhetoric, the prospects of military cooperation are still incipient. Taking into account the recent changes in the Brazilian government after the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff, the prospects of further cooperation with Russia in military affairs are even less likely. ■

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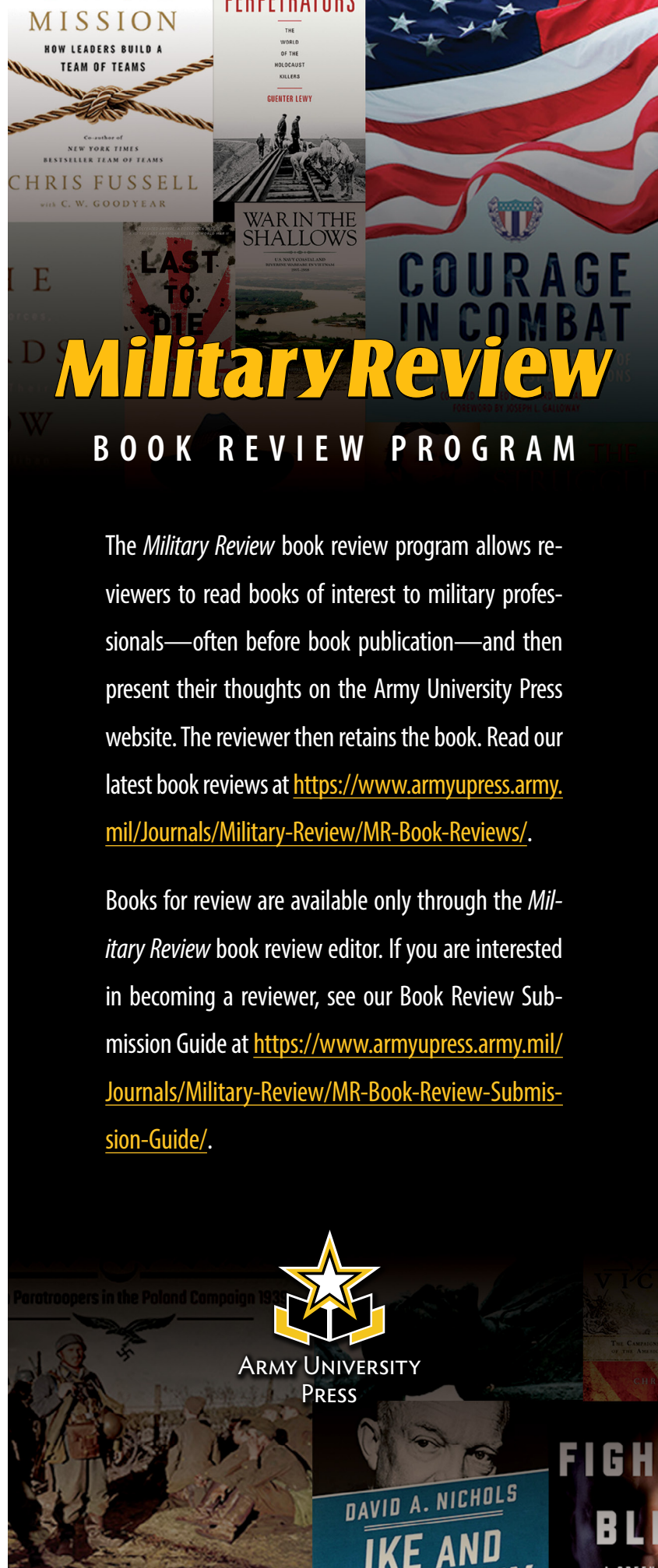
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