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Russia Returning to Nicaragua and the Region, Bearing Gifts and Bristling with Arms

by LADB Staff

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The Russians are back. Nicaragua's President Daniel Ortega's Sept. 2 statement that his country "recognizes the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia and fully supports the Russian government's position," was one of a series of moves to reignite the traditionally warm relationship between Russia and the Sandinistas. The USSR was their main backer in Nicaragua's war against the contras, a fully funded proxy force of the US administration of former President Ronald Reagan. The contra war was the main focus of US foreign policy during what proved to be the twilight of the Cold War.

Nicaragua was the first country after Russia to accord recognition to the breakaway states. Russia took the side of the two newly independent states after Georgia attacked them in an attempt to bring them back into the Georgian state, with which they had broken some years ago. Nicaragua's recognition was important diplomatically for Russia because of Russia's close and strategically important relationship with South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Ortega has further endeared himself by promoting recognition among other nearby countries. He said he had "talked the issue over with some of my colleagues in the region," but would not say which colleagues. Ortega said that, respecting the UN Charter, "There is no alternative but to recognize these countries." At the moment, he said, the countries he spoke with are studying the possibilities, a process that would take time.

They're on their way

Now, a leaner but richer Russia returns to the isthmus, its beachhead in Nicaragua, its anchor in Venezuela. That is not a metaphor. A Russian fleet with the nuclear-powered guided-missile cruiser Peter the Great, the anti-submarine warship Admiral Chebanenko, and a number of other vessels is headed for Venezuela from its Arctic base at Severomarsk, 24,000 km from its destination. The Peter the Great is one of the largest ships of its class afloat, carrying a mean array of weapons and missiles including the Granit, capable of packing a nuclear warhead.

According to Russian reports, the fleet will be followed by anti-submarine aircraft and nuclear-powered submarines with missiles aboard. Russian officials would not give an arrival date but said that, in November, the Russian fleet would engage in joint maneuvers with Venezuela, a clear message to the US that, as Russian Deputy Prime Minister Igor Sechin said in Caracas, "It would be wrong to talk about one nation having exclusive rights to this zone." The show of force is in response, say reports, to US reactivation of its Fourth Fleet, which is cruising the waters of Latin America and the Caribbean. Nicaraguan sources did not immediately announce whether the country would play a role in the coming exercises.

Sechin led a delegation to Nicaragua after stops in Venezuela and Cuba. In Cuba, he promised Russian aid in rebuilding the damage from the double wallops of Hurricanes Gustav and Ike (see other story in NotiCen, this edition). In Venezuela, the talk was about besides defense energy, manufacturing, and shipbuilding. In Nicaragua, it was oil prospecting, hydrothermal energy production, and a project that Russia is particularly interested in, the construction of an interoceanic canal across Nicaragua. Such a canal would compete with the Panama version; building it has been a Nicaraguan dream for more than a century.

Ortega has offered Russia access to offshore oil concessions as well as participation in constructing power stations, according to Russian reports. It is also clear that Ortega is aware of the potential for Nicaragua to return to the international spotlight as the nexus of competing worldviews, as it was in the 1980s. On a Russian newscast, he said, "The world needs balance. If there is none, the world faces the danger of collapse. Until quite recently the world's balance was provided by the socialist East and the capitalist West. But today again the world has more than one pole. I'm convinced that this is the only guarantee for humanity to survive. Russia plays a defining role in this process." It is unlikely that Nicaragua will return to center stage in any impending US-Russia rematch. That position will be occupied by Venezuela, in the opinion of Sergey Chemezov, director-general of Rostekhnologiya, the state technology colossus.

Asked about the inherent risks of playing inside traditional US turf, Chemezov told a reporter, "Yes, there are some, but who is afraid of taking risks?" Sechin confirmed the Russian policy position. He said, "I think that both we and the USA are working with Latin America, and this is how it should be. To say that an individual country has an exclusive zone would be wrong." As an indication of the importance with which Russia regards its return to the region, it was noted that, on the oil front, where Russia intends to move in to three of the US's most problematic neighbors, Russia's usually rival oil companies are cooperating for the first time. Rosneft, Lukoil, Surgutneftegaz, Gazpromneft, and TNK-BP have fused. "This consortium could work with projects in third countries," said Sechin, "including in this region. They are considering cooperation with Cuba, too. I see this as a very efficient structure."

The efficiencies work for Nicaragua as well. The Army and police still use Russian vehicles, equipment, and weapons. Russian technology is still at work in various industries. Many Russian geologists, biophysicists, energy specialists, and experts in other fields have experience in the country from the Sandinista years and familiarity with people and conditions that give them a competitive edge. But if Nicaragua is not to be center stage, it still hopes to be in the foreground.

Said Aldo Diaz Lacayo, ex ambassador to Mexico and Venezuela, "To approach Russia is to promote multilaterality over very dangerous unipolarity." He argued that Ortega is not seeking a return to a two-superpower world but rather to a multipolar world. As one of those poles, however minor, Ortega is looking toward an improved outlook for his country. Lacayo said that, in his brief visit, Sechin has promised a great deal, not only in the mentioned sectors but also needed cooperation in education and agriculture. Countries "as poor as Nicaragua need diverse friends, and to promote a world where the will of a single superpower is imposed...." With the commitment and philosophy firmly in place, the next job is to move toward getting concrete projects underway.

Russia's Ambassador in Nicaragua Igor Kondrashev said that in coming weeks a mission would arrive to begin preliminary assessments. "This year we are going to start concrete projects," he said. "We are not going to waste time." High on the agenda is to confirm some onshore oil deposits. "Nicaragua needs energy in sufficient quantity, and we are going to work together to resolve this problem," said Kondrashev. Kondrashev promised as well to provide agricultural machinery, supplies of fertilizers, which have become prohibitively expensive along with the oil from which they are derived. The package is also to include training in rural development. Ortega confirmed that the mission would arrive within a month.

None of this has eluded the watchful eye of the US or of Nicaraguan opposition parties. The opposition has repeatedly anguished at the prospect of angering the US and upsetting a relationship the country has depended on for sustenance since the end of the contra war.

The Russian overture did not spring forth in the past few weeks or days. In November 2007, Nicaraguan Foreign Minister Samuel Santos met with his counterpart Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in Moscow. In a post-meeting media conference, Lavrov told reporters, "Nicaragua has a plan for developing the country, and Russian companies would like to take part in fulfilling it. This includes the energy sector, transport infrastructure, and there is much interest in the building of the interocean canal." Santos said then that he wanted to modernize Nicaragua's aging Russian military hardware. "I'm referring to the helicopters we are using to suppress drug trafficking and to protect the population from natural disasters," he said.

Russian sources have reported that Ortega's Nov. 10, 2007, inauguration ceremony was pivotal not only for a Russian return to Nicaragua but also for a diffuse immersion in the region. In January, Russian Audit Chamber Chairman Sergey Stepashin, acting as then President Vladimir Putin's spokesperson, said that plans for a continent-wide presence were proceeding. "This is what we discussed with the presidents of 18 countries from the region who gathered in Managua for Daniel Ortega's inauguration ceremony," he said.

A consequence of US neglect

The US is clearly miffed. Ambassador Robert Callahan announced cancellation of a scheduled visit by US Secretary of Commerce Carlos Gutierrez because, he said, "circumstances have changed." Following that, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice announced the displeasure with which the White House views Russian influence in the countries Sechin visited. Among the countries of the region that Sechin did not visit, the US is almost certainly displeased with Russia's very recent intervention in Bolivia, where, just after having kicked the US ambassador out of the country, the government announced that Russia is their new ally in combating illicit drugs (see NotiSur, 2008-09-19).

The countries are to sign a bilateral agreement whereby Russia will supply everything from training to helicopters to authorities. The announcement came one day after the US released its blacklist, naming Bolivia as a country that has failed to carry out US-developed drug programs. Bolivian President Evo Morales said of the change of sponsorship that the US "does not have the moral standing to talk about drugs, to talk about certification or decertification. This awful drug, cocaine,

has been imported from the United States." For many analysts, it was not Daniel Ortega who opened the door to the Russians, nor was it Hugo Chavez, nor Evo Morales.

For all the US's posturing and posturing, for these analysts the blame can be laid at the US door. "One of the reasons the United States has lost a great deal of influence in Latin America is that the United States doesn't care," said George Friedman of the intelligence publication Stratfor. Julia Sweig of the Council on Foreign Relations noted, "Latin Americans are stepping in and managing their own crises, some of which the United States played a role in generating but not so much resolving." Friedman is of the opinion that the renewed Russian interest could revive US interest in the region. "If you want to see the United States' influence in Latin America increase, let the Americans start imagining a Russian threat in Latin America again."

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