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Nicaragua Looks to Russia in Bid to Add Military Muscle
by Benjamin Witte-Lebhar
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President Daniel Ortega’s deepening military ties with Russia, whose Defense Minister Sergey Shoygu made a personal visit to Managua last month, have raised eyebrows and more than a few questions, particularly in nearby countries involved in ongoing boundary disputes with Nicaragua and in the US, which would prefer Russia stay clear of the Caribbean basin.

Shoygu met with Ortega in mid-February as part of a three-nation tour that also involved stops in Havana, Cuba, and Caracas, Venezuela. The meeting reportedly produced an agreement allowing Russian naval vessels easier access to Nicaraguan ports. They also agreed on a joint training program that will allow an increased number of Nicaraguan officers to attend Russian military academies.

The meeting came just hours after a top Nicaraguan Army official, Maj. Gen. Adolfo Zepeda, confirmed claims that Nicaragua is interested in buying a fleet of Russian-made fighter jets. Observers presume the jets in question to be MiG-29s, combat fighters that cost a reported US$29 million each. Zepeda said the planes would be for "clearly defensive" reasons and used "to prevent the traffic of planes transporting drugs in our airspace."

Russia previously promised to supply Nicaraguan police with military helicopters, urban assault vehicles, and firearms, also for use stopping drug traffickers, The Nicaragua Dispatch, an English-language news site, reported last year. Reports have also surfaced that Nicaragua is procuring Russian-made patrol boats.

Speaking last April to a group of Army personnel, President Ortega staunchly defended his dealings with Russia, saying Nicaragua has every right to arm itself. "What’s so strange about developing relations with the Russian Federation with the same intensity and the same strength as the relations we’ve developed with the US military?" he said. "Who can complain about that? Is [the US] offering to equip our Army with modern weapons? We all know that the arms we have are decades old already."

That same week, lawmakers in Moscow made it public they were working on a bill to set up a satellite navigation monitoring station in Nicaragua. The station would be part of the GLONASS system, Russia’s version of the US-designed Global Positioning System (GPS). Three months later, during a surprise July 12 stopover in Managua by Russian President Vladimir Putin, Ortega personally approved the plan, according to Nicolai Vladimir, Russia’s ambassador in Nicaragua (NotiSur, Aug. 1, 2014).

Putin’s less-than-two-hour visit to Nicaragua (he never left the airport) also revived rumors that Russia wants to use the Central American nation to set up a military base. Sandinista military officials insist that’s not the case. But the "base" issue may be a question of semantics. Last month Russian Deputy Minister of Defense Anatoly Antonov said Moscow has no plans to establish military bases in Latin America but is looking to set up "supply and technical support points," way stations, in other words, to fuel and provision Russian navy vessels.
"Cold War tactics"

The wheeling and dealing is not going unnoticed by the US, which is at odds with Moscow about the latter’s decision early last year to annex the Crimean Peninsula and then lend military support to pro-Russian separatists fighting elsewhere in Ukraine. The US government responded to Russia’s advances in Ukraine by issuing an array of sanctions against Russian companies and government officials.

Many observers see Russia’s deepening involvement with Nicaragua—as well as with Cuba and Venezuela—as a way to poke back, to show that it, too, can nose around in what the opposing power considers to be its sole sphere of influence. Putin’s improvised visit last year, for example, showed that "they can also meddle in [the other’s] backyard," opposition Deputy Eduardo Montalegre Rivas, a former foreign affairs minister, told the daily La Prensa.

The head of the US Southern Command, Marine Corps Gen. John Kelly, addressed the issue earlier this month in a statement given to the Senate Armed Services Committee in Washington, DC. "Under President Putin," he said, "we have seen a clear return to Cold War tactics." Kelly went on to say that Russia is using Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua "to gain access to air bases and ports for resupply of Russian naval assets and strategic bombers operating in the Western Hemisphere."

Wary neighbors

The developments, particularly the possibility that Nicaragua could acquire a fleet of high-tech fighter jets, are also a source of concern for some of its Central American neighbors. Costa Rican Foreign Minister Manuel González, whose country has an ongoing boundary dispute with Nicaragua regarding the Río San Juan (NotiCen, Dec. 16, 2010, and April 7, 2011), told government colleagues late last month that he feels "serious uneasiness" about the arms purchases. The news is all the more threatening for Costa Rica given that it has no military of its own.

"The close relationship between the Ortega regime and Russia," González was quoted as saying by the Costa Rican daily Extra, "has demonstrated itself on numerous occasions, making it clear that the Central American nation has filled its shopping cart with high-caliber weapons."

Nicaragua also has a pending territorial disagreement with neighboring Honduras, which maintains competing claims over the Gulf of Fonseca, on the Pacific coast. Not surprisingly, authorities there have been openly critical of the Nicaragua-Russia military dealings as well. "This is destabilizing for the region," Romeo Vásquez Velásquez, a former Honduran armed forces chief, recently told reporters.

Observers in both countries are skeptical about Nicaragua’s claim that the jets and other weapons it hopes to procure are meant only to deter drug traffickers. "We all understand that the Russian planes in question are MiG-29s," said Vásquez. "These are attack-bombers. They’re not for going after drug traffickers. This is about increasing military strength."

The Colombia connection

Nicaragua is arguably the weakest military power in Central America, not counting Costa Rica, whose then President José Figueres (1948-1949, 1953-1955, 1970-1974) famously abolished the Army in 1948, and Panama, which did away with its standing Army in 1990 after being invaded by the US. In its annual Atlas Compartivo de la Defensa en América Latina y el Caribe (2014), the Red
de Defensa y Seguridad de América Latina, an Argentina-based organization, lists Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador as all having greater air power, more soldiers, and larger military budgets than Nicaragua.

Those military shortcomings are most apparent in Colombia, which, like Costa Rica and Honduras, also has an ongoing boundary dispute with Nicaragua. The issue was supposed to have been settled by a late-2012 International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruling that granted Nicaragua control of a huge swath of contested Caribbean waters (NotiCen, Dec. 13, 2012). Colombia, though, has so far refused to accept the decision, leaving the two countries in a delicate standoff (NotiCen, Oct. 10, 2013).

Nicaragua, for all intents and purposes, has international law on its side. The ruling by the ICJ, a legal body of the UN, is considered binding. But with no real military strength to speak of, the small Central American country can hardly enforce its claim against the much larger, stronger, and wealthier Colombia, which is loathe to lose the valuable maritime holdings (NotiCen, Oct. 12, 2013). The waters in question contain significant fishing resources and may also lie above petroleum deposits.

Dollars and sense

A fleet of Russian attack planes might, in that case, boost Nicaragua’s position. But at US$29 million apiece, are they something the country can really afford? The Web site defensa.com, which specializes in military-related information, claims that Nicaragua wants eight of the MiG-29s. That purchase order alone would cost more than US$230 million, an enormous amount of money considering that Nicaragua’s current Army budget is only US$82 million.

Elvira Cuadra, head of the nongovernmental organization Instituto de Estudios Estratégicos y Políticas Públicas (IEEPP), is among those who say Nicaragua would be better off investing that money in education or in poverty-reducing programs. "The country’s economic situation and especially the vulnerability of certain population groups suffering from poverty and extreme poverty make it necessary to direct all resources and efforts toward resolving this kind of challenge," she told the Inter Press Service (IPS) news agency earlier this month.

Ricardo De León, a dean at the American College University in Managua, agrees. "In a country like ours, which is the second-poorest in the hemisphere, this kind of spending should not be included in the budget and future debts like this shouldn’t be racked up," he said. "This kind of spending on arms will further reduce the already small budget dedicated to education, which should be one of the leading areas of the budget but which is cut every year."

The World Bank estimates that, as of 2009, the last time official data was compiled, 42.5% of Nicaragua’s 6.1 million people live in poverty. It calculates the country’s per capita gross national income (GNI) at US$1,790 (2013), the lowest in Central America. Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador, in contrast, have a per capita GNI of US$2,180, US$3,340, and US$3,720 respectively. Central America’s wealthiest countries in per capita GNI are Costa Rica (US$9,550) and Panama (US $10,700).