Russia Extends Ties with Venezuela, Other Latin American Countries

Guest Author

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur

Recommended Citation
Russia Extends Ties with Venezuela, Other Latin American Countries

by Guest
Category/Department: Region
Published: 2008-10-24

[Andres Gaudin is an Uruguayan journalist living in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Among the publications he writes for are Noticias Aliadas/Latinamerica Press in Lima, Peru, Africa 21, and the Argentine publications Veintitres, Chacra, and Accion.]

The Venezuelan and Russian governments have reached several cooperation agreements, including in the especially sensitive nuclear and military areas. Various analysts say that the two countries are consolidating a strategic alliance that will play a weighty role in relations between Latin America and the US. The agreements were announced after a visit by Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez to Russia and amid renewed gestures of friendship from Venezuela toward Iran.

Through these actions, Venezuela is trying to make a place for itself among the major players of the political world. Moscow, in turn, is looking to "crash" a region that is outside its sphere of influence, as it was during the years of the existence of the Soviet Union. From that time, Russia has inherited the technology that it is now putting at the disposal of one of the Latin American governments that is often at odds with Washington.

"The problem is that the world scene in which these agreements have been made is conflictive, with Russia looking to regain its role as a world power and Iran embarking on a nuclear plan that seems suspicious," said Julio Cesar Pineda, a former president of the Inter-American Nuclear Energy Commission (IANEC), as reported by BBC Mundo.

Chavez announces military, nuclear agreements

Between July and September, Chavez visited Moscow twice, with an interest in buying arms and planes. On his return from the last visit, he surprised the country with two spectacular announcements. He confirmed and announced the date for joint military maneuvers in the Caribbean, to take place Nov. 10-14. He also revealed that, within the framework of a cooperation plan whose details were still being negotiated, Russia would provide Venezuela with a reactor, which would be used for peaceful purposes.

"Russia is ready to help us develop nuclear uses for medicine, to generate energy," said Chavez during the kickoff of the campaign of his Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (PSUV) for the regional and municipal elections scheduled for Nov. 3. "Let no one read anything into this other than what I am saying. Venezuela has the same right and will follow the same path as Brazil and Argentina, to name two countries in the region that are our friends and that have been using nuclear power for years for peaceful purposes," said Chavez, aware of the impact that his announcements would have.
Regarding the military maneuvers, a spokesperson for the Russian Navy said they would be limited to joint search and rescue exercises at sea, as well as telecommunications tests. Chavez said, "What we are looking for is to increase our defensive capability, we are not going to invade or attack anyone." To date, the number of Venezuelan military who will participate in the exercises has not been disclosed, but it has been announced, without precise details, that the Navy will deploy its missile-carrying frigates, patrol and transport squadrons, and submarine units.

Russia will supply some 1,000 personnel and at least four ships, including the cruiser Piotr Veliki, which "is equipped with a nuclear reactor that does not fall under the prohibitions in a treaty that declares Latin America an area free of nuclear arms," said Russian Navy Capt. Igor Digalo, who added that "these joint exercises are not aimed at third countries, and they have no aggressive function. There is no need to look for political undercurrents."

While the fleet was in route from the Mediterranean to the Caribbean, a spokesperson for the Russian Foreign Ministry, quoted by the Colombian daily El Espectador, was unequivocal. "Everyone can be absolutely calm," he said. "There are no tactical nuclear arms on any of these ships." Colombia, which shares a border with Venezuela, is the most concerned about Venezuela's military-upgrading plans and the naval maneuvers with the Russian fleet.

The two countries have had bad diplomatic relations given the diametrically opposed ideologies of Chavez and his counterpart, President Alvaro Uribe (see NotiSur, 2007-12-07). The topic was finally broached on Oct. 17 in Caracas by the ministers of foreign relations of both countries, Venezuela's Nicolas Maduro and Colombia's Jaime Bermudez. "No topics were off the table, and we can assure you that we are leaving in good spirits," said Bermudez to the Associated Press at the end of this latest chapter of fluid bilateral dialogue that both countries keep going despite the prickliness of their relations.

**US actions blamed for region’s turn toward Russia**

The Brazilian daily O Estado de Sao Paulo found various political reasons that, in its judgment, explain the "good accords" that Venezuelan and Russia have made. First, a US arms embargo, announced by the US State Department in May 2006, which prohibits the sale of US arms or weapons components or spare parts to Venezuela. At present, Spain and Sweden, as allies of Washington, have suspended military equipment sales that had been lucrative for their respective arms industries.

Second, the aggressive presence of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) ships in the Black Sea in August, just as the conflict between Russia and Georgia was becoming more serious. Finally, both the Brazilian newspaper and Cuban news agency Prensa Latina said that the maneuvers were a response to the US decision last July to reactivate its Fourth Fleet, with jurisdiction in the waters of the Caribbean and the Atlantic from Miami to Tierra del Fuego. The Fourth Fleet had been disbanded 57 years ago and nothing explains, according to O Estado, the reasons for its return to the world military stage.

According to Bloomberg news service, the Russian-Venezuelan agreements include creating a joint oil venture to develop projects in Latin America (especially in Bolivia, Cuba, and Ecuador) and
other regions of the world, a US$1 billion credit for Venezuela to buy arms from Russia, and the creation of a binational bank to finance the joint projects. "Russia, which is conducting joint military exercises with the South American country, is forging closer ties amid worsening US relations with the two energy exporters," said a Bloomberg analysis.

That analysis sees in these accords the beginning of a new outbreak of the Cold War, which lasted from the end of World War II until 1991 and saw continual confrontation between the US and the former Soviet Union. O Estado de Sao Paulo reported that Venezuela is the main Latin American client of the Russian arms industry. Through 12 contracts for US$1.4 billion, it received, among other weaponry, 24 Sukhoi fighter bombers, 50 helicopters, and 100,000 Kalashnikov AK-103 assault rifles.

Although Belarus has sold Venezuela US$1 billion in electronic systems for aerial defense and training, and China has sold it 10 long-distance radars worth US$350 million, Bloomberg maintains that "Russia seems to be the only country in the world ready to sell arms to Chavez." In mid-October, the head of strategic command of the Venezuelan Army Gen. Jesus Gonzalez confirmed that, during Chavez's last trip to Russia, he made a deal to buy an unspecified but significant number of Russian armored vehicles to replace Venezuela's now obsolete French AMX-30 tanks.

Like Sweden and Spain, France has stopped providing military equipment to Venezuela since the US embargo took effect. Where Venezuela goes, others are following. Something is amiss in the relationship between the US and the countries in its natural sphere of influence, because many of those countries are following Venezuela in seeking various types of agreements with Russia, noted a columnist for Prensa Latina (see NotiSur, 2005-05-13, 2007-07-20). The writer was referring to Bolivia, Colombia, and Mexico. Bolivia decided to approach Moscow after the administration of US President George W. Bush eliminated it from the preferential trade pact known as the Andean Trade Promotion and Drug Eradication Act (ATPDEA), by which the US allowed products from Andean countries to enter the US duty free in exchange for their cooperation in the effort to fight drug trafficking. For Bolivia, it is a sensitive issue, because it means US$270 million in exports and the guarantee of work for 50,000 people.

The government of Bolivian President Evo Morales has negotiated with Moscow to purchase five helicopters for use against drug trafficking and a package of technological assistance for its natural-gas industry. What Russia got from the deal was an alliance between its oil company Gazprom and Bolivia's Yacimientos Petroliferos Fiscales Bolivianos (YPFB) to develop joint exploration and extraction projects. In the first week of October, it was Colombia that sent to Moscow its Defense Minister Juan Manuel Santos, the first official to make that trip in the history of diplomatic relations between the two countries. He went to buy combat helicopters and radar systems and to advance a cooperation agreement in efforts against the drug trade.

Finally, Mexico, the only Latin American country bordering the US and part of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), announced Oct. 3 that it would send Foreign Relations Secretary Patricia Espinosa to Russia to "move forward with the analysis of various bilateral cooperation agreements," said an official communiqué from the government of Mexican President Felipe Calderon. Mexico and Russia already have some cooperation agreements in energy and other areas (see SourceMex, 2004-06-16). Bloomberg expressed concern regarding these movements on the
regional chessboard and wrote, "Russia is reviving its Cold War influence in Latin America [the influence the former Soviet Union had], as it challenges the US in its traditional backyard."

-- End --