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Region: Little Evidence Of Arms Race Despite U.S.-Russian Competition

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In April, Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin visited Venezuela and US Defense Secretary Robert Gates traveled to Colombia and Peru. In addition, Brazil and the US signed a military-cooperation agreement and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev made a lightning stopover in Argentina. This quick succession of events caused many analysts to erroneously conclude that they were witnessing a replay on American soil of the Cold War waged by the US and the Soviet Union following World War II. In South America, Russia and the US compete even for the smiles of the region's leaders. But the erroneous interpretation of events, combined with a hasty or self-interested account of an imaginary arms race, is rooted in the fact that arms sales and defense matters were at the forefront of the dialogue between the visitors and their hosts and at the top of the agenda of other high-ranking US officials who also visited the region in April. Putin arrived in Caracas on April 2 and signed 31 cooperation protocols during his one-day stay. To those now-typical agreements on cultural, scientific, technology, and trade exchanges were added arms sales and, most important, the formation of a joint venture between Petróleos de Venezuela (PDVSA) and a Russian consortium to explore a rich field (see NotiSur, 2008-02-29) in the Faja Petrolífera de Orinoco (Orinoco oil belt, FPO). But what the media emphasized were the arms sales. Under the agreement, Venezuela will buy three Varshavianka submarines, 92 T-72 tanks, dozens of BMP armored vehicles, 10 M1-28N helicopters, patrol planes, multiple rocket launchers, and air-defense systems. Since 2005, Russia has sold Venezuela 100 tanks of various types, 24 Sukhoi jet fighters, an undetermined number of M1-17 helicopters, the S-300 anti-air defense system, and 100,000 Kalashnikov AK-103 assault rifles. Nevertheless, the most important part of the agreement was not what Venezuela bought but rather what it received. Russia promised to provide nuclear technology for peaceful use and electricity generation and, most importantly, it signed a formidable oil agreement. The joint venture between PDVSA and the Russian firms Rosneft (state-run) and Lukoil (private) will mean a US $20 billion investment, and, by the end of the year, the company could be producing 50,000 barrels of oil a day, reaching a maximum potential of 450,000 bpd in the next five years. Skepticism about Venezuela's arms purchases Although some military experts say Venezuela's arms purchases are strictly defensive, the US State Department, Peru, and Colombia (the two unconditional US allies in the region) charged that the government of President Hugo Chávez had unleashed a dangerous arms race. Radio Nederland and BBC Mundo quoted Philip Crowley, a spokesperson for US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, saying, "Why does Venezuela want to arm itself?" He added, "But our primary concern is that if Venezuela's going to increase its military hardware, we certainly don't want to see this hardware migrate into other parts of the hemisphere." Crowley said the South American country has many urgent problems to solve, and, in response to Chávez's comments that Venezuela and Russia might cooperate on a space program, he suggested, with no small dose of sarcasm, that perhaps the government's focus "should be more terrestrial than extraterrestrial." The State Department spokesperson had earlier said, "We can probably think of better things that could be invested on behalf of the Venezuelan people," but he insisted that the US was not concerned about whatever relations that Caracas and Moscow establish. However, in an implicit reference
to the type of arms bought by Venezuela, Crowley said, "We cannot avoid asking what legitimate defense needs Venezuela has for that equipment." The US diplomatic spokesperson's words were at odds with the opinions of Gates whose trip was filled with strictly political observations despite his position as defense minister. Reuters said Gates dismissed the possibility that Venezuela's ties with Iran could be "dangerous" for the region and said that he did not see Venezuela as a military threat. Gates' stops in Peru and Colombia served to reaffirm the commitment of the governments of Presidents Alan García of Peru and Álvaro Uribe of Colombia to White House policies. In both cases, however, there were requests for more aid and positive responses from Gates. Brazil-US sign fighter-jet deal The framework cooperation agreement signed by the Pentagon and Brazil does, however, have a profound political significance. Despite the friction caused by the deep differences regarding the realities of countries like Honduras, Colombia, and Iran, it now appears that Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva will finish his second presidential term with significantly closer relations with the US. The information-exchange and personnel-training agreement signed by Gates and Brazil's Defense Minister Nelson Jobim is the first between the two countries since 1977, when Brazil's de facto government unilaterally cancelled a military agreement that had been in effect since 1952. And, if that were not enough, the newfound closeness could resurrect US firm Boeing's dream of selling the South American giant a package of 36 F-18 Super Hornet fighter jets, a sale that would be worth US$8 billion. Last year, Brazil decided against purchasing F-18s and the Gripens made by Swedish company Saab, opting instead to buy Rafale fighter jets from the French company Dassault (see NotiSur, 2009-10-16). Now, says US Ambassador in Brasilia Thomas Shannon, the Lula government could reconsider that decision. While the Russian government has taken giant steps in Venezuela, it is moving slowly in the rest of the region. No one from Russia visited Bolivia, and it was Russian Ambassador Leonid Golubev who was put in charge of reviewing earlier agreements between the two countries. Russia will decide by late May what arms it will provide Bolivia under a US$100 million credit approved last year for that specific purpose. Argentina, however, received a top-level visitor Russian President Medvedev. It was the first visit by a Russian head of state in 125 years of bilateral diplomatic relations. The topic on the agenda was not arms but the globally sensitive issue of nuclear technology. One agreement Medvedev signed with Argentine President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner establishes Russian participation in constructing a nuclear-power plant, the fourth in the country, a megaproject that will cost US$3 billion. Few see cause for concern "None of the cooperation programs being seen in South America should raise fears because this is not an arms buildup but rather a replacement of arms that have become obsolete. I don't see any possibility of war in this region, there are tensions, just that, and that happens on all continents," said Ambassador Golubev in a brief statement to the Associated Press. Claudia Zilla, a German political analyst and researcher who focuses on Latin America at the Americas Division of the Berlin-based German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), had similar words. "Latin America is the most pacific region in the Third World, threats of aggression among the states do not exist, there is no risk that verbal aggressions will be transformed into acts of mutual violence," said Zilla, who also rejected the existence of an arms race in the region. BBC Mundo quoted Adam Isacson, director of the Latin America Security program for the Center for International Policy (CIP), and Mark Weisbrot, co-director of the Center for Economic and Policy Research (CEPR), as also pointing out the harmonious climate in the region, despite some localized points of tension. Argentine Luciano Anzelini, director of the master's program in national defense at the government-run Escuela de Defensa Nacional (EDENA), said it is a mistake to speak of the logic of an arms buildup. Anzelini said that "an arms race requires an interdependent relation in military purchases by two countries that previously had a high perception of mutual
threat, something that is not happening in Latin America. In addition, there must be a growing social and political sense of imminent war, which also isn't happening in our region." Not even increased numbers of troops or military spending the other two key variables in an arms race support the thesis of a Latin American arms buildup, said the Argentine expert. "A pattern of action-reaction is not seen in increased military personnel. From 2000-2005, Chile reduced its forces from 101,000 to 72,000, Peru from 115,000 to 80,000, and Bolivia increased its troops by barely 5%. In the Colombia-Venezuela case, there is an increase by both sides, although it is very unequal. Colombia has increased its troops by 35%, while Venezuela's increase is only 4%." The opinion of so many scholars discounting a supposed arms race is supported by hard evidence. South America's defense spending is half the world average, at a time when it is experiencing unprecedented cooperation and institutionalization in defense and security.

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