

Chávez Announces Venezuelan - Russian Naval Exercises in the Caribbean: The Next Cuban Missile Crisis?

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In a move that undoubtedly set off alarm bells in Washington, Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez announced that Venezuelan and Russian ships could soon hold joint naval exercises in the Caribbean. "Russia's naval fleet is welcome here," Chávez said on his weekly broadcast program. "If it's possible, we'll stage an exercise in our Caribbean waters." Russian naval vessels, including a nuclear cruiser, are due to call on Venezuelan ports in late November or December, Chávez said.

The Venezuelan leader is known for his rhetorical ripostes and once again he did not disappoint. "Go ahead and squeal, Yankees," he said, taunting the Bush White House.

Even before the April 2002 coup in Venezuela that sought to topple Chávez from power, diplomatic relations between the South American nation and the United States were tense. Chávez for example criticized U.S.-style free trade in the region and pursued a nationalistic oil policy. When it emerged that the United States had aided opposition forces involved in the coup, relations took a nosedive and never fully recovered.

Unfortunately the Bush White House has done everything in its power to provoke Chávez yet further. Last April, the Pentagon announced that it would revive its Fourth Fleet in the Caribbean. The fleet is based at the Mayport Naval Station in Jacksonville, Florida and answers to the U.S. Southern Command (Southcom) in Miami. Southcom has about 11 vessels currently under its command, a number that could increase in future.

An April 24 Bloomberg report claimed that the fleet would be lead by the nuclear aircraft carrier USS George Washington. But a subsequent report appearing in the Venezuelan newspaper El Universal quoted U.S. Admiral James Stavridis as saying that the force would not have an offensive capability. "We have no intention whatsoever to have an aircraft carrier as part of the Fourth Fleet," Stavridis said.

The Navy claims it resuscitated the Fourth Fleet to combat terrorism, to keep the economic sea lanes of trade free and open, to counter illicit trafficking, and to provide humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.

Such claims notwithstanding, it's no secret that the United States would like to head off the left wing-alliance between Venezuela, Cuba and Bolivia. And Chávez is probably correct in seeing the Fourth Fleet in Caribbean waters as a "shot across his bow."

In an interview with Cuban television, Bolivian President Evo Morales remarked that the U.S.

naval force constituted “the Fourth Fleet of intervention.” Cuba’s former leader Fidel Castro asked why the Pentagon sought to revive the Fourth Fleet at the current time. Writing in the Cuban newspaper Granma, Castro suggested that the move constituted a return to U.S. gunboat diplomacy. Castro, whose island nation confronted a U.S. naval blockade during the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, declared, “The aircraft carriers and nuclear bombs that threaten our countries are used to sow terror and death, but not to combat terrorism and illegal activities.”

Echoes of the Cold War

Like Castro, who sought out a diplomatic alliance with Russia to protect Cuba from the United States, Chávez is now cozying up to Moscow. For years, oil-flush Venezuela has been buying up Russian arms including Kalashnikov assault rifles and Sukhoi fighter jets. Chávez has justified the arms purchases as a necessary measure to dissuade the North American “empire” from invading his country.

Just two months ago, Chávez called for a strategic alliance with Russia to protect Venezuela from the United States. Caracas and Moscow agreed to extend bilateral cooperation on energy, with three Russian energy companies to be allowed to operate in Venezuela.

The Russian naval squadron and long-range patrol planes could arrive in the Caribbean for the exercises later this year. The deployment is expected to be the largest Russian naval maneuvers in the Caribbean, and perhaps the Western Hemisphere, since the Cold War.

Worryingly, the nuclear-powered guided missile cruiser Peter the Great, a vessel with massive firepower whose missiles can deliver nuclear or conventional warheads, will participate in the Caribbean maneuvers. The ship is armed with the Granit long-range anti-ship missile system, which is known in military circles as the Shipwreck missile. It also has a sophisticated air defense missile system capable of striking both air and surface targets.

Jon Rosamund, editor of Jane’s Navy International, a specialist maritime publication, said the Peter the Great is large and heavily armed with both surface-to-surface and around 500 surface-to-air missiles. “On paper it’s an immensely powerful ship,” he said. “We are not really sure if this is a show of force or if it poses a viable operational capability at this stage.”

Russian Foreign Ministry spokesman Andrei Nesterenko said the Admiral Chabanenko, Russia’s most modern anti-submarine destroyer, would also join the exercises, along with an unspecified number of anti-submarine naval aircraft. Venezuela’s naval intelligence chief, Admiral Salvatore Cammarata Bastidas, said that 1,000 Russian military personnel would take part in mid-November exercises with Venezuelan frigates, patrol boats, submarines, and aircraft.

Worst Case Scenario: McCain

Russian Foreign Ministry spokesman Andrei Nesterenko insisted that Russia’s decision to send a naval squadron and planes to Venezuela was made before Russia’s war with Georgia and is unrelated to the conflict. Last month, Russian forces fought a brief war with U.S.-ally Georgia over the breakaway province of South Ossetia. During the brief war and the ongoing standoff, Chávez has backed Russia’s calls for Abkhazian and South Ossetian independence in opposition to Mikhail Saakashvili’s government in Tbilisi, the Georgian capital.

U.S.-Russian relations hit their lowest point in years following the crisis in Georgia and even sparked fears of a new Cold War. Following the conflict, the Pentagon sent U.S. warships to the Black Sea to deliver humanitarian aid for Georgia. Hardly amused, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin warned that Russia would mount an unspecified response to the aid shipments. Asked what he thought about the U.S. naval presence near where the Russian Black Sea fleet was based, Putin said that Moscow would definitely respond with “calm.”

When asked about the possibility of Russian naval exercises in the Caribbean, U.S. State Department spokesman Sean McCormack mockingly responded, “If it is, in fact, true, then they found a few ships that can make it that far.”

Far from calming the situation, such flippant statements will only serve to further antagonize Russia, which is already angry about NATO expansion on its borders, not to mention the installation of U.S. missile defense systems in Poland. With tensions in the Caucasus and Eastern Europe already on the upswing, the last thing the world needs is a naval face-off in the Caribbean.

Judging from recent campaign statements, a John McCain administration would do little to calm the waters. During the war in the Caucasus, the Arizona Senator remarked, “Russia should immediately and unconditionally cease its military operations and withdraw all forces from sovereign Georgian territory.”

A sharp critic of the Putin government, McCain said, “The consequences of Euro-Atlantic stability and security are grave.” McCain also called for “a truly independent” international peacekeeping force for South Ossetia, and said the United States should work with the European Union to pressure Russia to halt its military efforts.

McCain is hardly a neutral arbiter when it comes to the conflict in the Caucasus. His top foreign policy adviser, Randy Scheunemann, works for lobbying firm Orion Strategies. According to the Washington Post, the company has provided “strategic advice” to the Georgian government. Scheunemann himself helped McCain draft a strong statement in support of Saakashvili during the war in South Ossetia.

If geopolitical tensions should spread to the Caribbean, McCain is surely the last politician one might want in the White House. Speaking in Miami’s Little Havana, McCain argued that “everyone should understand the connections” between Evo Morales, Castro, and Chávez. “They inspire each other. They assist each other. They get ideas from each other. It’s very disturbing.” McCain said Chávez breathed “new oxygen” into the Cuban government, and that Washington should do more to quell dictatorships throughout Latin America.

Time for Obama to Step Up

To his credit, Barack Obama has been somewhat less bellicose. At the height of the war in South Ossetia, the Illinois Senator called for an end to the violence but stopped short of assigning blame or making strong demands on Moscow. “I strongly condemn the outbreak of violence in Georgia, and urge an immediate end to armed conflict,” he said.

On Venezuela, Obama has been somewhat vague. Speaking with his supporters, Obama said Chávez had “despotic tendencies” and was using oil money to fan anti-U.S. sentiment. The Illinois Senator did however manage to stir the waters when he declared in a CNN-YouTube debate that he would open diplomatic channels to “rogue nations” such as

Venezuela. Though certainly mild, Obama’s remark quickly embroiled him in a political firestorm with his chief rival, Hillary Clinton, who labeled him “naïve.”

Obama is still a relative unknown on foreign policy but at least he hasn’t staked out hawkish stances like John McCain, a politician who would surely continue the Bush legacy by antagonizing, bullying, and pushing around smaller, poorer countries like Venezuela. In response, Chávez might deepen his relationship with Russia if McCain pursues Big Stick diplomacy in Latin America, ratcheting up tensions.

Obama has been eager to prove that he is “strong” on national security. And this could be his chance. But rather than try outflanking McCain by staking out a position further to the right, Obama would be wise to use escalating tensions with Russia to his advantage. He might declare, for example, that McCain has been reckless in dealing with the unfolding conflict in the Caucasus. U.S. voters, Obama might argue, have no desire to go back to the paranoid Cold War or to relive the hair-raising days of the Cuban missile crisis.

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