

New Cold War Confrontation? Kremlin Establishes Military Cooperation Agreements in Latin America

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As Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov wraps up his tour of Latin America, Moscow is weighing its options in a turbulent region long dominated by American influence.

Although much of Lavrov's trip - which took him to Cuba, Nicaragua, Guatemala and Mexico - was dedicated to the promotion of Russian culture and pressing humanitarian issues, there were several announcements that may turn some heads in the region, and especially north of the border.

During Lavrov's one-day visit to Nicaragua on Sunday, it was announced that the two countries had agreed to work jointly in combating drug trafficking and organized crime.

"We have agreed on military and technical cooperation to jointly strengthen the potential of our army and police in fighting against drug trafficking and organized crime," Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega told reporters after his meeting with Lavrov.

The Nicaraguan leader then mentioned other areas of future cooperation between the two states, including transport, healthcare and education, as well as the possible introduction of air travel between the two countries with an emphasis on tourism.

"We are developing military-technological cooperation," Lavrov added. "We are interested in strengthening interaction that will help us fight drug trafficking, terrorism and organized crime."

The Russian foreign minister then said the two states "are preparing joint military drills," without providing further elaboration.

Where's the transparency?

On Monday, Lavrov was in Guatemala, where he took the opportunity to express his regret that the United States was failing to provide Moscow with any information regarding its "assessment of missile threats," and reminding Washington that Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and US President Barack Obama's "agreement on transparency" notwithstanding, Russia is forced to learn about America's plans "from media outlets."

"Dmitry Medvedev and Barack Obama have agreed to cooperate on assessment of missile threats and to start with the issue of missile proliferation," Lavrov said. "But when we have an agreement on transparency and we learn from media outlets that certain elements of US missile defense will be deployed in this or that country, we wonder how this matches the

reached agreements.”

“We hope to get explanations on that issue,” the minister added.

On Sunday, Lavrov also focused on this issue when he said in Managua that Moscow expects “more detailed explanations, and they have been promised to us.”

“We have already asked our American partners how this could be understood and why we are now having a ‘Bulgarian surprise’ after a ‘Romanian surprise’,” he asked.

(Latin) American Reset?

Although the Kremlin never actually acknowledged a direct connection between Lavrov’s announcement of “joint military drills” with Nicaragua, and America’s impetuous juggernaut activities throughout Eastern Europe, it is difficult to look at the present realities without making one.

To provide some essential background to Lavrov’s comments, it must be remembered that the United States first announced plans for an anti-missile defense system in Eastern Europe under the preceding administration of George W. Bush.

That system, which envisioned a battery of Patriot interceptors in Poland with a radar station in the Czech Republic, was vehemently opposed by Moscow on the grounds that such military technologies, in the words of a retired Russian general, “would destroy the fragile military balance in the region” (especially at a time when the United States and Russia are working to slash their ballistic missile arsenals according to the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty; US and Russian diplomats hope to sign a new version into force after the initial treaty expired on December 5, 2009).

Suddenly, all the hoopla over the United States and Russia hitting the so-called “reset button” in their mutual relations seemed to really mean something when Obama announced in September that he was, due to a “reassessment of the missile threat,” shelving the anti-missile system.

But there is yet another twist in this story. US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, speaking from the Pentagon immediately after the president’s announcement, denied the United States was “scrapping” missile defense, but rather introducing a different system.

Suddenly, it looked as if Lavrov should never have touched that mislabeled “reset” button.

“This new approach provides a better missile defense capability for our forces in Europe, for our European allies, and eventually for our homeland than the program I recommended almost three years ago,” said Gates, who was defense chief in the last two years of the Bush administration and remained in office after Obama became president.

Today, we can see where America’s reckless globetrotting is getting bilateral relations between Moscow and Washington. While the United States is constantly reminding Russia that ‘spheres of influence’ are a thing of the past, Russia has taken its show on the road and is now building solid relations with Latin America, a turbulent region that is demonstrating increasing disrespect for their big neighbor to the north.

The following news story, for example, which appeared last week, provides some insight into Venezuela's appetite for weapons, largely based on the fear of an American invasion.

"Venezuela's recent purchase of the most lethal shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles in the Russian arsenal is sharpening U.S. concerns that parts of President Hugo Chavez's massive weapons buildup could wind up in the hands of terrorists or guerrillas in neighboring Colombia," the Tribune News Service reported on Tuesday.

"We are concerned about Venezuelan arms purchases that exceed its needs and are therefore potentially destabilizing," State Department spokeswoman Sara Mangiaracina told the News Service. "The Man-Portable Air Defense Systems Venezuela have purchased from Russia are sophisticated weapons systems. It is important that these weapons systems be appropriately controlled to avoid the possibility of diversion."

The article went on to say that Chavez, bolstered by high oil prices, has been on a weapons-buying binge since 2006, purchasing more than \$4 billion worth of Russian Sukhoi jets, Mi helicopters and 100,000 Kalashnikov assault rifles in order to reform his 62,000-member armed forces and defend his "socialist revolution" from U.S. aggression.

Although this meager build-up of arms in Venezuela pales in comparison to NATO expansion, or the construction of an anti-missile system on Russia's doorstep, it presages possible troubles down the road, that is, unless the US and Russia agree soon to draw a red line under their military activities and finally agree to truly "reset" their relations as promised.

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