

Russian Navy Squadron heads to Venezuela: Deployment to Western Hemisphere unprecedented since Cold War

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A Navy squadron set off for Venezuela on Monday, an official said, in a deployment of Russian military power to the Western Hemisphere unprecedented since the Cold War.

Navy spokesman Igor Dygalo said the nuclear-powered Peter the Great cruiser accompanied by three other ships sailed from the Northern Fleet's base of Severomorsk on Monday. The ships will cover about 15,000 nautical miles to conduct joint maneuvers with the Venezuelan navy, he said.

Dygalo refused to comment on Monday's report in Izvestia claiming that the ships were to make a stopover in the Syrian port of Tartus on their way to Venezuela. Russian officials said the Soviet-era base there was being renovated to serve as a foothold for a permanent Navy presence in the Mediterranean.

The deployment follows a weeklong visit to Venezuela by a pair of Russian strategic bombers and comes as Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez plans to visit Moscow this week. It will be Chavez's second trip to Russia in about two months.

The intensifying contacts with Venezuela appear to be a response to the U.S. dispatch of warships to deliver aid to Georgia that angered the Kremlin.

Chavez said in an interview with Russian television broadcast Sunday that Latin America needs a strong friendship with Russia to help reduce U.S. influence and keep peace in the region. In separate comments on his Sunday TV and radio program, he joked that he will be making his international tour to Russia and other countries this week aboard the "super-bombers that Medvedev loaned me," a reference to President Dmitry Medvedev. "Gentlemen of the CIA, to be clear, I'm joking," Chavez said with a laugh.

He has repeatedly warned that the U.S. Navy poses a threat to Venezuela.

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