

The Destabilization of Venezuela? Applying Washington’s “Benghazi Formula”

US Nuclear-Powered Submarine in Venezuelan territorial waters

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On November 10, H. Chavez called Contragolpe host Vanessa Davies in the middle of the show to break the news that a US nuclear-powered submarine had been spotted in the country’s territorial waters. According to Chavez’s on-air account, an “unidentified” and “large-size” submarine appeared on the radars of the Venezuelan submarine fleet which was conducting regular exercise, but, being an extremely fast-moving vehicle, easily escaped the Venezuelan boats that took to trailing it. Chavez stressed that the Venezuelan navy responded to the provocation with due restraint and did not open fire during the incident.

As a matter of fact, this was not the first US submarine invasion of Venezuela’s territorial waters on record. In April 2002, on the eve of an attempted anti-Chavez coup, US Defense Intelligence Agency operatives were supposed to hold a coordination meeting with the perpetrators aboard a US submarine. In September 2005, the USS Virginia, a US attack submarine, left the Naval Submarine Base in Groton, CT, for a 70—day reconnaissance raid in the Caribbean Sea. The Virginia and other US submarines are known to have paid a number of uninvited visits to Venezuela’s territorial waters since the time.

Evidently, the objectives behind the US Navy’s missions were to explore the region of a potential military campaign and to polish the plans for suppressing the Venezuelan armed forces’ resistance, carrying out landing operations, dropping off sabotage groups, and supplying arms to anti-Chavez insurgents. The US Navy also likely made on-site efforts to refine the tactic of disrupting Venezuelan oil supplies to Cuba and other countries. Venezuelan security experts suspect that US undersea operations included bugging the Venezuela-Cuba fiber-optics line which came on-line in February, 2011. Cuba’s getting hooked up to global communications network angers Washington which, for example, disallowed the construction of a Florida-Cuba fiber-optics link on the grounds that it constituted a breach of the anti-Castro embargo.

The de facto demonstrative tours of the Venezuelan territorial waters by “unidentified” subs reflect a wider US strategy aimed at undermining Chavez’s regime. Considering the extensive deployment of US aircraft and naval bases across the region, the plan has a key military dimension. Citing the drug-trafficking problem, **Washington grabbed practically full control over the armed forces of its allies - Columbia, Guatemala, and Honduras - and planted on the Caribbean islands of Curaçao, Aruba, and Bonaire**

airbases which clearly pose a threat to Venezuela. The bases are also used to permanently monitor cargo transit via Venezuelan seaports and the Orinoco River.

Washington's hopes to displace Chavez by peaceful means may still be alive but are purely illusory. At the moment **polls give the Venezuelan leader 62% in the October 7, 2012 presidential election**, with no close challengers in sight. Former US envoy to the Organization of American States and Venezuelan regime's staunch opponent Roger Noriega, as a result, has to maintain that Chavez's current health problems leave him at most six months. Noriega calls the US to make serious arrangements for "the period of turbulence" which, according to his projections, awaits in the foreseeable future the country supplying 10% of the US oil demand. Noriega contributed a piece to the InterAmerican Security Watch urging the US Department of State to set up a work group of representatives from the Western Hemisphere countries in order to prevent the confrontation between Chavez's supporters and foes from escalating into chaos in Venezuela. From the perspective of Noriega and his camp, a US intervention in Venezuela would be a welcome act of propping up democracy and not letting Chavists retain the grip on power in the country.

A faction of Venezuelan watchers warn that Washington, emboldened by the absence of any limitations in international politics over the years of the "war on terror", can already in the early 2012 take radical steps to destabilize Venezuela in line with the "Benghazi formula"... Like Benghazi in Libya recently, Maracaibo, the main city of Venezuela's state of Zulia, appears to be the likeliest candidate for the role of an epicenter of mass unrest. Throughout the populist epoch, Zulia remained the radical opposition's political stronghold, with the US embassy in Caracas coordinating and unannouncedly supporting materially the activities of the regional leaders. Former Zulia governor Manuel Rosales competed against Chavez in the 2006 presidential race and later fled Venezuela amidst corruption charges. Zulia's present governor Pablo Pérez is an aspiring Venezuelan opposition leader and as such intends to rival Chavez in the 2012 election, but clearly lacks the charisma and reputation that could take him anywhere in the race. Ample evidence of Pérez's substance abuse being available on YouTube, the only reason why he emerged as the US intelligence community's bet is that the kind of character will under no circumstances defy his patrons' control. Pérez will no doubt do his best to feed to TV channels worldwide footage of Chavez's forces' alleged atrocities or let a mix of violence-prone urban lows, corrupt police forces, and Columbian paramilitary group members enter the stage. Then "the insurgents" would predictably take to self-organization, devise a transition government, confront Chavez with an ultimatum, and beg the US for help.

The world's tolerance to the US aggression against Libya created a situation whereby any country sitting on considerable energy resources - Syria, Iran, or Venezuela - became a potential target. Indications of US preparations for an aggression against Venezuela are multiplying. US SouthCom is massively enrolling students in Spanish-language programs emphasizing specifically Venezuelan aspects of the Spanish spoken in Venezuela. Graduates of the programs dressed in Venezuelan army uniforms would possibly be pulling off provocations when Chavez's regime comes under fire. Incidents of this type have been reported previously - in 2004 a Columbian group of some 100 people moved into the Daktari estate near Caracas, the plan being to attack Palacio de Miraflores, the official presidential residence, in the guise of rebel Venezuelan army servicemen.

A Frente Internacionalista Bolivariano analytical paper on the provocations involving US

nuclear-powered submarines listed Washington's hypothetical moves for the nearest future. Those include a boosted anti-Chavez propaganda campaign built around the human rights and freedoms theme plus media allegations of an imminent regional conflict that would be blamed on Venezuela, with mythical threat used as a pretext for a US military intervention. In the wake of the above, US special forces instructors and intelligence operatives would infiltrate Venezuela to help strengthen the opposition's paramilitary formations and secure contacts with an opposition coalition patterned on that in Libya. The fifth column would focus on exterminating Chavez's loyalists in the army command and, in anticipation of US air raids, sabotaging the Venezuelan air defense infrastructures.

The Venezuelan leadership is making maximal efforts to prevent the aggression. Currently UNASUR - the Union of South American Nations - is equipped with its own defense council. Brazil's military planners are no doubt mindful of the growing activity of the US Fourth Fleet and the maneuvers performed by US nuclear-powered submarines in the Atlantic Ocean. It is an easy guess that, on top of keeping the populist regimes at gunpoint, the Pentagon is keenly interested in the offshore energy resources in the proximity of the state of Rio de Janeiro and in the Espiritu Santo marine shelf deposits which, according to Petrobras, total 35 billion barrels of crude.

Therefore, Venezuela can count on the backing from its allies across the continent. Recently, Venezuelan defense minister Carlos Mata Figueroa attended a regular conference of the South American Defense Council, with establishing a zone of peace across the continent featuring on the agenda.

Recently the Venezuelan parliament instructed the country's defense agency to open a probe into the recent submarine invasion. Adm. Diego Molero announced synchronously that Venezuela's navy would hold a round of exercises meant to ensure better protection of the national territorial waters, one of the objectives being to improve coordination between the Venezuelan submarine fleet and drones in the hunt for intruders.

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